

**THE CONTRASTS IN DANTE;
A LECTURE DELIVERED AT
THE UNIVERSITY ON 24TH
OCTOBER, 1906**

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The contrasts in Dante; a lecture delivered at the University on 24th October, 1906 by William Warren Vernon

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WILLIAM WARREN VERNON

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The Contrasts in
Dante

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY

ON 24th OCTOBER, 1906

BY THE

HONBLE. WILLIAM WARREN YERNON, M.A.

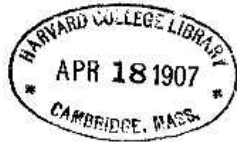
Accademico Corrispondente della Crusca in Italy.

MANCHESTER

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The University.

The Contrasts in the Divina Commedia,
and especially that between

Count Guido da Montefeltro, the father, lost, } and { Buonconte da Montefeltro, the son, saved,
(*Inf.* XXVII., 1-132.) } (*Purg.* V.).

INTRODUCTION.

THERE is no question which students of Dante oftener put to each other than this: "Which do you like best, the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, or the *Paradiso*?"

The enquiry is a very natural one, for what greater contrast can there be than between the dark and hopeless terrors of the *Inferno*, the tender consolations of the *Purgatorio*, and the serene splendours of the *Paradiso*, the very Holy of Holies of the Divine Comedy, where hope is no longer needed, because it has been already realized? In the *Purgatorio* alone does Hope exist, for be it remembered that Dante's examination on Hope by St. James in the *Paradiso* does not refer to either of the three Kingdoms of the dead, but only to Man living on earth. My answer then to the question would be the counter-question: "When you look at a grand landscape by Cuyp, by Ruysdael, by Rubens, or by Hobbema, which do you most admire, the dark shadows, the brilliant highlights, or the free and spirited middle-tints?" My questioner would of course retort: "How can one separate a complete picture into the various *strata* which go to make up one single and harmonious entirety? In a perfect whole there must of necessity be contrasts; variety, not sameness. In music, discords in one place bring out beauties and harmonies in another." It is this natural law that Dante has evidently wished to follow in the *Divina Commedia*, which is the mighty conception of such a master mind as has rarely been observed in the

whole history of the human race. As we move from the *Inferno* to the *Purgatorio*, and pass on to the *Paradiso*, we read the record of the wandering, the awakening, the disciplining, and the emancipation of a soul.

I find it difficult, if not impossible, to believe that Dante ever sat down to write, first the whole *Inferno*, then the whole *Purgatorio*, and finally the whole *Paradiso*, consecutively one after the other. It is far more likely that when he began to write the first Canto of the *Inferno*, he had already decided, in his symmetrical mind, that there were to be one hundred Cantos in the *Commedia*, thirty-three to each *Cantica*, with Canto I. of the *Inferno* as the Introduction to the entire subject-matter of the Poem.

He had probably composed many hundreds of verses, including the leading passages, before he took the work in hand as a whole, during the last ten years of his life. In this way some of the now disputed readings may have originated in Dante himself; the earlier reading having been composed during the period of preparation, and the variant substituted later on by himself as better expressing the meaning of the passage. A notable instance of this is to be found in *Inf.* XIII., 63, where Pier delle Vigne tells Dante that he so gave up his whole being to the faithful discharge of the duties of his great office of Chancellor to the Emperor Frederick II., that he lost his veins and his pulses (*le vene e i polsi*). But veins and pulses are practically synonymous terms, and the variant (*lo sonno e i polsi*) is considered by Dr. Moore to be by far the preferable reading, as it gives a much more appropriate sense to Pietro's speech. His devotion to his noble office was such as to destroy, not his life (*le vene e i polsi*), but his repose by night, and his strength and mental power by day. Let us suppose then that *le vene e i polsi* may have been composed by Dante during his period of preparation, and *lo sonno e i polsi* substituted by himself later, as better expressing the special point of his narrative.

During the twenty-four hours I have been in Manchester, I have seen another variant, *i sensi e i polsi*, in two magnificent manuscripts, the one in the Rylands Library, and the other at the house of my kind host, Dr. Lloyd Roberts, which belonged to Mr. Hughes.

We may also notice the remarkable way in which at times the number of a Canto in one *Cantica*, corresponds with the number of a Canto in another *Cantica*, when the subjects in both offer a parallel or a contrast. Take, for instance, Canto VI. of the *Inferno*, where Ciaccio censures the inner condition of Florence; Canto VI. of the *Purgatorio*, where Dante declaims against the intestine feuds which rendered Italy powerless in the world; and contrast these with Canto VI. of the *Paradiso*, where the Emperor Justinian extols the glories of the Roman Eagle, which had of yore carried the pre-eminence of Italy over the whole world. Take the darkening of night in Canto II. of the *Inferno*, and contrast it with the lovely dawn in Canto II. of the *Purgatorio*. Take the bad Pope in *Inf.* XIX., and contrast with that passage, the description of the good Pope in *Purg.* XIX.

Take also the following contrasts:—

The Forest of Hell (<i>Inf.</i>)	} versus	{ The Divine Forest
XIII.)		{ (<i>Purg.</i> XXVIII.).
The pathetic tale of the impure woman (<i>Inf.</i>)	} versus	{ The pathetic tale of the
V.)		{ pure and saintly wo- man (<i>Par.</i> III.).
The Demon Pilot of	} versus	{ The Angel Pilot of
Hell (<i>Inf.</i> III.).		{ Purgatory (<i>Purg.</i> II.).
The Proud Florentine	} versus	{ The Proud Florentine
in Hell (<i>Inf.</i> X.).		{ in Heaven (<i>Par.</i> XV., <i>et seq.</i>).

And greatest of all contrasts: that of the two Montefeltros, of which more anon.

Who would venture to affirm that these are mere coincidences of figures and facts, and not designedly a

Every word of his great poem had a set purpose, and must be investigated from the Tuscan point of view, rather than from that of the poorer language of Piedmont and Lombardy. The most homely utensils of domestic furniture in Tuscany were brought in to serve the purpose of his simile. Take one instance,--the familiar *conca*, the well-known earthenware vessel used in every Tuscan household, either for washing clothes, or for storing oil, or as a vase for orange or lemon trees, the conical shape of which serves him to describe the shape of Hell (*Inf.* IX., 16). Take the *rosta*, the wattle-screen used on the Pistoian hills, which guards the chestnut crop in the woods from being swept away by a sudden mountain flood, but which in the Forest of Woe (*Inf.* XIII., 117) is represented as insufficient to withstand the unhappy shades of the Society of Spendthrifts (*Brigata Spendereccia*), the wanton squanderers of their own substance. These are but two instances taken at hazard, the one from the domestic life of the townspeople, the other from that of the peasantry of Dante's ever-remembered, ever-regretted country. In *Inf.* XXIX., 74, he compares the fever-stricken shades of the Falsifiers of Metals, propping themselves one against the other, to a group of saucepans (*tegghe*) standing close together over the fire. This simile is not borrowed from the kitchens of great people. Dante did not write for such as Lucullus and Apicius only, and his comparisons had to be taken from the most common objects. Again, when describing the grievous torment these shades were undergoing from the irritation of skin disease, he likens their frantic efforts to get relief, to the curry-combing of a horse by a groom, or to the scaling of a fish by a cook. The familiar aspect, existing to this day in Italy, of blind beggars sitting on the ground outside the doors of the churches, leaning against each other, comes back to his mind when in *Purg.* XIII., 61--63, he depicts the blinded spirits of the Envious sitting in that very attitude. The *malaria* of the Tuscan Maremma, and the futile attempts (of those days) to cure it by drainage, are