

LECTURES AND ADDRESSES

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Lectures and Addresses by Frederick W. Farrar

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FREDERICK W. FARRAR

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AND ADDRESSES**

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BY

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CANON OF WESTMINSTER.



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DANTE.

I wish this evening to speak to you about the life and teachings of one of the greatest, perhaps I should say the greatest, religious poet who ever lived. Of the multitudes of poets who have in all ages been inspired to teach us the noble in conduct and the pure in thought, few only have deserved the high Latin title of *Vates*, a name which means not a poet only, but also a bard and a seer. And of these are there still fewer who impress us with the sense of something peculiarly sublime in their personality. Indeed, I hardly know of more than three whom I should name as exercising this magnetic effect on the imagination. Those three, are Æschylus, Dante, and Milton;—and of these three, neither of the others in so supreme a degree as Dante.

Wordsworth, that pure and lofty poet whose soul was akin to Milton's own, has expressed this aspect of Milton's character.

“Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free;
So didst thou travel on life's common way
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.”

And again, in his Preface, he calls him,

“Soul awful, if this world has ever held
An awful soul.”

Now with all this eulogy, lofty as it is, I fully agree; and if there be any other poet

whom it belongs, in even fuller measure, it is Dante Alighieri. His very names sound like a prophetic intimation of his greatness. Dante is said to be an abbreviation of "Durante"—the lasting, the permanent; Alighieri, one (that is) of the "wing-bearers," of whom his coat of arms—an eagle's wing in an azure field—is the most fitting symbol.

Gray, in his ode on the "Progress of Poesy," spoke of Milton as

" he who rode sublime
Upon the seraph-wings of ecstasy,
The secrets of the abyss to spy,
He passed the flaming bounds of time and space,
The living throne, the sapphire blaze,
Where angels tremble while they gaze
He saw, but blasted with excess of light,
Closed his eyes in endless night."

The last lines are but a fanciful allusion to Milton's blindness; but of Dante it may be said that he saw with eagle's eye undazzled. No poet's soul ever showed the same heroic dauntlessness. He trod, with unseared feet, the very depths of Hell, in all its agony and ghastliness; he toiled up the mountain terraces of Purgatory; he moved as unfalteringly over heaven's azure as over the burning marble; he mingled on equal terms among its living rubies and topazes; he saw the whole rose of Paradise unfolded; he gazed on the mystic triumph of Christ, and on the Beatific Light of the Triune God; and in every scene, lurid or celestial, before every personage, demonic or divine, whether he be speaking to lost souls, or giants, or coarse fiends, or beatified spirits of the redeemed, or apostles, or "thrones, dominations, virtues, principedoms, powers," he retains before them all and everywhere the royal Priesthood, the immortal dignity of a man—of a man made in the image of God, and for whom Christ died.

It is because such a poet seems to me peculiarly fitted to teach, and elevate this age.

and to make it blush for its favorite vices, that I have ventured to speak of him. There is no function which poets can fulfil comparable to their high posthumous privilege of permanently enriching the blood of the world, and raising humanity to higher levels. Nations that possess such poets as Dante and Milton ought never to degenerate. But they belong not to nations only, but to all the world. If any young men should chance to be among my audience to-night, I would earnestly invite them to hold high and perpetual companionship with such souls as these. And if there should be any here who have hitherto found their chief delight in meaner things, which dwarf the intellectual faculties and blunt the moral sense, I would fain hope that, here and there, one of them may be induced to turn away from such follies, to breathe the pure, difficult, eager air of severe and holy poems like the "Divina Commedia," and the "Paradise Lost."

For, indeed, the "Divine Comedy," is, as has been said, "one of the landmarks of history. More than a magnificent poem, more than the beginning of a language, and the opening of a national literature, more than the inspirer of art, and the glory of a great people, it is one of those rare and solemn monuments of the mind's power which measure and test what it can reach to; which rise up, ineffaceably and forever, as time goes on, marking out its advance by grander divisions than its centuries, and adopted as epochs by the consent of all who come after. They who know it best would wish others also to know the power of that wonderful poem; its austere yet subduing beauty; what force there is in its free and earnest and solemn verse to strengthen, to tranquillize, to console. Its seriousness has put to shame their trifling; its magnanimity their faint-heartedness; its living energy their indolence; its stern and sad grandeur

has rebuked low thoughts; its thrilling tenderness has overcome sullenness, and assuaged distress; its strong faith quelled despair and soothed perplexity; its vast grasp imparted the sense of harmony to the view of clashing truths. After holding converse with such grandeur, our lives can never be so small again."*

He was born in Florence in 1265, and I shall not now dwell upon his biography. Suffice it to say that the outline of his life may be summed up under the four words, Love, Philosophy, Politics, Exile.

1. First, Love. He was but a dreamy, poetic boy of nine years old when he first saw and loved Beatrice, the daughter of Folco Portinari. The story of his love is told in his "Vita Nuova." Love was his earliest idol, and God—whose hand is so visible in this poet's life—early shattered it. Beatrice, at twenty, married another, and at twenty-five she died.

"Death, the great monitor, oft comes to prove
'Tis dust we dote on when 'tis man we love."

And yet let us not say that Dante's love came to nothing. It came to something far more divine than could have been the disenchantment of any mere earthly satisfaction. He might have said, with the modern poet:

"He who for love hath undergone
The worst that can befall,
Is happier, thousand-fold, than one
Who never loved at all.
A grace within his soul hath reigned
That nothing else can bring;—
Thank God for all that I have gained
By that high suffering."

By that absolutely pure, noble, ideal, ethereal love the youth's whole soul was elevated. The sweet child, the lovely maid, the pure and noble woman, gave to Dante's soul those wings of

* Dean Church.