

**THE SPIRITUAL SENSE
OF DANTE'S "DIVINA
COMMEDIA"**

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The spiritual sense of Dante's "Divina Commedia" by W. T. Harris

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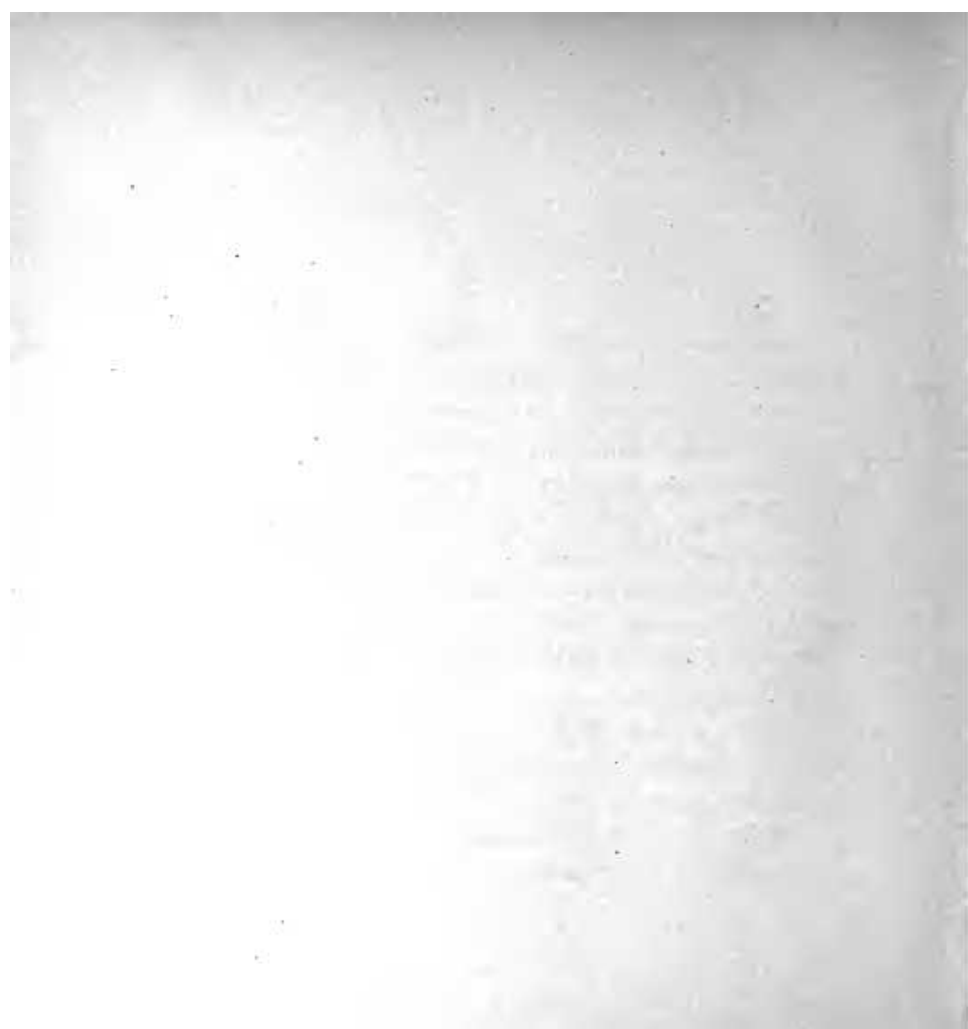
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Presented by Nellie C. Goss,
in memory of her husband Edwin B. Goss,
B. A. July 1877

TO
MRS. BEVERLY ALLEN,
OF ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI,
IN MEMORY OF THE HOSPITABLE ENTERTAINMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT
THAT SHE EXTENDED TO THE ST. LOUIS ART SOCIETY
AND TO KINDRED ENTERPRISES
IN THE YEARS WHEN THESE STUDIES BEGAN,
THIS BOOK IS GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED
BY THE AUTHOR.



P R E F A C E .

To this essay on the spiritual significance of the "Divina Commedia" I prefix a few words, interesting only to the few who study works of literature for spiritual insight. Such insight is of very slow growth, and though I cannot be permitted to claim anything more than a very feeble approach to it in the reflections which I bring forward here, yet I know that the theme dignifies the writer, and that the circumstances of a struggle to attain a high object are worthy of mention, even if the success of the struggle is not great.

My first reading in Dante began as early as 1858, and continued at intervals for four years, by which time I had completed only the "Inferno," studying it superficially in the original and using Carlyle's translation as a sort of dictionary and general guide to its meaning—perhaps better described in college slang as a "pony" or "crib." I read also the translations of Wright and Cary of the "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso" at this time.

The poem had attractive poetic passages for me at the time, but as a vision of the future state of any portion of mankind I could not accept it. Its horrors repelled me. After this I began to look for some point of view whence I could see a permanent truth in the poem. The possibility of an inner meaning that would reconcile me to the outer form of a work of art I had already learned in 1861 by studying landscape painting and afterward by a like study of Beethoven's masterpieces and, more especially, of Schumann's "Pilgrimage of the Rose" and Mendelssohn's "Song of Praise."

The "Last Judgment," by Michel Angelo, I had begun to study as early as 1863 in an outline engraving, and by 1865 a permanent meaning had begun to dawn upon me. I saw that the picture presented symbolically the present condition of the saints and sinners, not as they seem to themselves and others, but as they are in very truth. It placed them under the form of eternity, to use the expressive phrase of Spinoza, "*Sub specie eternitatis.*" At once Dante's "Inferno" also became clear, as having substantially the same meaning. I saw that the great sculptor and painter had derived his ideas from the poet. The ideas of Thomas Car-

lyle, in his chapter on "Natural Supernaturalism" in the "Sartor Resartus," seemed to me to offer a parallel thought to the "Last Judgment." Remove the illusion of time, and thus bring together the deed and its consequence, and you see it under the form of eternity. So, too, paint the deed with colors derived from all its consequences, and you will picture its final or ultimate judgment. This interpretation I wrote out in 1868 and read to a circle of friends, sometimes called "The St. Louis Art Society," and it was published in the April number of the "Journal of Speculative Philosophy" for 1869, under the title "Michel Angelo's Last Judgment." I quote below the passage in which I connected the views of the sculptor and the poet.

It was about this time (1869) that it occurred to me that there is a threefold view of human deeds. First, there is the deed taken with the total compass of its effects and consequences—this is the picture of the "Inferno."

Secondly, there is the evil deed seen in its secondary effects by way of reaction on the doer—a process of gradual revelation to the doer that his deed is not salutary either for himself or for others. The evil doer at first does not see that his being is so