

Leigh Hunt, "Dante", *Stories from the Italian Poets. With Lives of the Writers*, 1846.

Dante entitled the saddest poem in the world a Comedy, because it was written in a middle style; though some, by a strange confusion of ideas, think the reason must have been because it "ended happily!" that is, because, beginning with hell (to some), it terminated with "heaven" (to others). As well might they have said, that a morning's work in the Inquisition ended happily, because, while people were being racked in the dungeons, the officers were making merry in the drawing-room.

For the much-injured epithet of "Divine," Dante's memory is not responsible. He entitled his poem, arrogantly enough, yet still not with that impiety of arrogance, "The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by nation but not by habits." The word "divine" was added by some transcriber; and it heaped absurdity on absurdity, too much of it, alas! being literally infernal tragedy. I am not speaking in mockery, any further than the fact itself cannot help so speaking, I respect what is to be respected in Dante; I admire in him what is admirable; would love (if his infernalities would let me) what is loveable; but this must not hinder one of the human race from protesting against what is erroneous in his fame, when it jars against every best feeling, human and divine. Mr. Cary thinks that Dante had as much right to avail himself of "the popular creed in all its extravagance" as Homer had of his gods, or Shakspeare of his fairies. But the distinction is obvious. Homer did not personally identify himself with a creed, or do his utmost to perpetuate the worst parts of it in behalf of ferocious inquisitorial church, and to the risk of endangering the peace of millions of gentle minds.

The great poem thus misnomered is partly a system of theology, partly an abstract of the knowledge of the day, but chiefly a series of passionate and imaginative pictures, altogether forming an account of the author's times, his friends, his enemies, and himself, written to vent the spleen of his exile, and the rest of his feelings, good and bad, and to reform church and state by a spirit of resentment and obloquy, which highly needed reform itself. It has also a design strictly referential. The author feigns, that the beatified spirit of his mistress has obtained leave to warn and purify his soul by shewing him the state of things in the next world. She deposes the soul of his master Virgil to conduct him through hell and purgatory, and then takes him herself through the spheres of heaven, where Saint Peter catechises and confirms him, and where he is finally honoured with sights of the Virgin Mary, of Christ, and even a glimpse of the Supreme Being!