

M. Sismondi also justly ascribes the invention of the Mysteries, the first modern efforts of the dramatic art, to the French; but the inference which he draws from it, that this was owing to the great dramatic genius of that people, must excite a smile in many of his readers. For, certainly, if there ever was a nation utterly and universally incapable of forming a conception of any other manners or characters than those which exist among themselves, it is the French. The learned author is right, however, in saying that the Mystery of the Passions, and the moralities performed by the French company of players, laid the foundations of the drama in various parts of Europe, and also suggested the first probable hint of the plan of the *Divine Comedy* of Dante; but it is not right to say that the merit of this last work consists at all in the design. The design is clumsy, mechanical, and monotonous; the invention is in the style.

[...]

M. Sismondi seems to have understood the great poet of Italy little better than his other commentators; and indeed the *Divine Comedy* must completely baffle the common rules of French criticism, which always seeks for excellence in the external image, and never in the internal power and feeling. But Dante is nothing but power, passion, self-will. In all that relates to the imitative part of poetry, he bears no comparison with many other poets; but there is a gloomy abstraction in his conceptions, which lies like a dead-weight upon the mind; a benumbing stupor from the intensity of the impression; a terrible obscurity like that which oppresses us in dreams; an identity of interest which moulds every object to its own purposes, and clothes all things with the passions and imaginations of the human soul, that make amends for all other deficiencies. Dante is a striking instance of the essential excellences and defects of modern genius. The immediate objects he presents to the mind, are not much in themselves;—they generally want grandeur, beauty and order; but they become everything by the force of the character which he impresses on them. His mind lends its own power to the objects which it contemplates, instead of borrowing it from them. He takes advantage even of the nakedness and dreary vacuity of his subject. His imagination peoples the shades of death, and broods over the barren vastnesses of illimitable space. In point of diction and style, he is the severest of all writers, the most opposite to the flowery and glittering—who relies most on his own power, and the sense of power in the reader—who leaves most to the imagination.

Dante's only object is to interest; and he interests only by exciting our sympathy with the emotion by which he is himself possessed. He does not place before us the objects by which that emotion has been excited; but he seizes on the attention, by showing us the effect they produce on his feelings; and his poetry accordingly frequently gives us the thrilling and overwhelming sensation which is caught by gazing on the face of a person who has seen some object of horror. The improbability of the events, the abruptness and monotony in the *Inferno*, are excessive; but the interest never flags, from the intense earnestness of the author's mind. Dante, as well as Milton, appears to have been indebted to the writers of the Old Testament for the gloomy tone of his mind, for the prophetic fury which exalts and kindles his poetry. But there is more deep-working passion in Dante, and more imagination in Milton. Milton, more perhaps than any other poet, elevated his subject, by combining image with image in lofty gradation. Dante's great power is in combining internal feelings with familiar objects. Thus the gate of Hell, on which that withering inscription is written, seems to be endowed with speech and consciousness, and to utter its dread warning, not without a sense of mortal woes. The beauty to be found in Dante is of the same severe character, mixed with deep sentiment. The story of Genevra, to which we have just alluded, is of this class. So is the affecting apostrophe, addressed to Dante by one of his countrymen, whom he meets in the other world.

*Sweet is the dialect of Arno's vale!
Though half consumed, I gladly turn to hear.*

And another example, even still finer, if anything could be finer, is his description of the poets and great men of antiquity, whom he represents 'serene and smiling,' though in the shades of death, —

*because on earth their names
In fame's eternal records shine for aye.*

This is the finest idea ever given of the love of fame. Dante habitually unites the absolutely local and individual with the greatest wildness and mysticism. In the midst of the obscure and shadowy regions of the lower world, a tomb suddenly rises up, with this inscription, 'I am the tomb of Pope Anastasius the Sixth':—and half the personages whom he has crowded into the *Inferno* are his own acquaintance. All this tends to heighten the effect by the bold intermixture of realities, and the appeal, as it were, to the individual knowledge and experience of the reader. There are occasional striking images in Dante—but these are exceptions; and besides, they are striking only from the weight of consequences attached to them. The imagination of the poet retains and associates the objects of nature, not according to their external forms, but their inward qualities or powers; as when Satan is compared to a cormorant. It is not true, then, that Dante's excellence consists in a natural description or dramatic invention. His characters are indeed 'instinct with life' and sentiment; but it is with the life and sentiment of the poet. In themselves they have little or no dramatic variety, except what arises immediately from the historical facts mentioned; and they afford, in our opinion, very few subjects for picture. There is indeed one gigantic one, that of Count Ugolino, of which Michael Angelo made a bas-relief, and which Sir Joshua Reynolds ought not to have painted. Michael Angelo was naturally an admirer of Dante, and has left a sonnet to his memory.

The Purgatory and Paradise are justly characterised by M. Sismondi as 'a falling off' from the *Inferno*. He however points out a number of beautiful passages in both these divisions of the poem. That in which the poet describes his ascent into heaven, completely marks the character of his mind. He employs no machinery, or supernatural agency, for this purpose; but mounts aloft "by the sole strength of his desires—fixing an intense regard on the orbit of the sun!" This great poet was born at Florence in 1265, of the noble family of the Alighieri—and died at Ravenna, September 14th, 1321. Like Milton, he was unfortunate in his political connexions, and, what is worse, in those of his private life. He had a few imitators after his death, but none of any eminence.