between them, whatever might be the decision of the arbiter; and kindly feelings would take the place of that estrangement which, most unfortunately for the interest of both, the present discussion is but too well calculated to produce."


The interest in the life of the Middle Ages which has been so widely felt during the last fifty years, the zeal with which the study of mediæval art and literature has been pursued, and the better knowledge of them which has been acquired during this period, have naturally turned the attention of men more than ever before to the works of Dante. For in them the mediæval spirit found its highest and completest expression. From his works better than from any others — better, indeed, than from all others — may be learned the prevailing characteristics, the mental and spiritual conditions, which made the period which his life closed one of the most important epochs in the progress of civilization. At a time in which faith in some kind of invisible realities — in something beyond this world and other than this
world, in something to complete and account for this life — was powerful as at no other time, not only on thought but as a motive of action and a guide to conduct, his faith was deeper, more imaginative, and more controlling than that of other men. When inquiry had begun to investigate the causes and sequences of things with fresh and ardent activity, he pushed out farther into the unknown world, and caught stronger hold of truth than any other questioner, his predecessor or contemporary. He was the profoundest and most imaginative of mystics. Among students he was the student of most varied learning. Among poets he was the poet so supreme that no rival approached him. After a period during which the fancy of the world was exalted and its imagination productive as at no other modern epoch, he came to surpass all other men in fancy, and to set bounds beyond which imagination has never gone. When the sensibilities of men were touched by hitherto unfelt or unrecognized emotions, and there was a new birth of true and tender sentiment in their hearts, Dante put this sentiment into forms which set the perfect model for the expression of the most refined and the most intense feeling. The passions of men in that day swayed them with a force strange to our self-conscious and indifferent generation, and Dante, with passion deeper and more exalted than that of others, yet controlled it by the supreme power of will.

In his varied experience he comprehended all the forms of contemporary life: he was soldier, scholar, citizen, ruler, ambassador, exile, dependant. He knew riches and festivities; he knew also poverty and the salt bread of other men’s tables. He knew what it was to be courted; he knew also what it was to be scorned. Through his large and sensitive nature he sympathized with the moods of the men he lived with, and was susceptible to every breath of emotion which swayed them. He was, by turns, in his inner life, all that other men were. But as all other poets in some degree, so Dante in full measure, not merely reflected the qualities of his own time, but through his works brought those qualities into relations with universal humanity. Every poet in proportion to his genius has a relation not only to his own age and race, but to all the world. He gives to the transient permanence, to the narrow and special
breadth and generality; he turns the particular into the universal. He sees, and he opens to the sight of others, the truth and essence of things. Dante and Shakespeare, perhaps we should add Homer and Goethe also, are the only poets who have thus won for themselves universal citizenship,—who belong to all the nations of the world alike.

The Divine Comedy is the most intensely individual poem ever written; but it is in great part through this individualism, through its truth to an individual nature and experience, that it asserts and proves its claim to the interest of all men. It is in this the very opposite to the dramas of Shakespeare. Shakespeare, as a man, as himself, is nothing in his plays. Dante is the central figure, the very soul, of his Divine Comedy.

The form and construction of the Divine Comedy perfectly correspond with the spirit of the poem. They are its natural expression. In all works of art, form is the link between the spiritual and the material elements of its composition. The perfection of form is the perfection of art. The more perfect the form, the more enduring is the work. No poem surpasses the Divine Comedy in this respect; none exhibits the artistic sense in fuller measure. In its general proportions, in the balance and harmony of its parts, in the subordination of its detail to the main effect, in freedom of expression within the limits of construction, the Divine Comedy stands supreme. But in these qualities it shows not only the genius of its author, but the influence of a spirit that was prevailing in the development of other arts in Italy at this period.

It is not a mere analogy, there is a real parallel, between the construction of the Divine Comedy and that of a building in the contemporary style of Florentine architecture; between the expression given to the artistic sense in building, in painting, and in sculpture, and the expression here given to it in verse. Nor is it a mere coincidence that the noblest Gothic design ever accomplished in Italy, the building which stands among the few most beautiful in the world, "the model and mirror of perfect architecture,"—the Campanile of Giotto at Florence,—was built, not merely in Dante's day, but by his friend, and represents a similar power, a like sense, to that which is shown in the stately and beautiful form of the work of the divine poet.
It was by no mere freak of nature that Dante and Giotto were contemporaries. They were the natural results of such life as had been flowing in the veins of the world for the two centuries preceding their birth. They gathered it all into themselves, and beyond them the current slowly ceased to flow. And it was by an association, not of chance, but of the highest fate, that these two men, each in his own way of unsurpassed genius, each an innovator and a prophet, each the master of masters, were friends; that they knew, honored, and loved each other, so that, while one gave of his own immortality to his friend in matchless verse, the other bestowed an equal gift upon the poet by a portrait which even yet preserves the face of the young Dante, the Dante of the New Life.

Two virtues which belong to the highest order of mind, and distinguish real genius from all that pretends to the name, are found in these two men as they are scarcely found in any others,—truthfulness and simplicity. A stern and just respect for truth is, indeed, at the foundation of their works,—the source of their power and their inspiration. It is the truthfulness of Dante’s imagination that gives to his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise its absolute reality. It is his confidence in truth that gives his step firmness in the darkest and most dreadful passages, and which enables him to preserve his self-reliance even in the very Holy of Holies. Such truthfulness cannot exist without a corresponding simplicity. He who is possessed by the spirit of truth will not seek for false effects, and will make no false pretences. The sense of strength which flows from the perception and strong grasp of the truth exhibits itself in quietness and dignity of manner. No poet is less rhetorical than Dante. None produces his effects with less expense of means; he has the moderation of strength conscious of itself.

The love and respect for truth leads to the study and observance of nature. As Giotto put an end to the conventionalisms that had usurped the place of reality of representation in painting, so Dante utterly discarded those poetic conventionalisms which had formed the chief stock in trade of the earlier Italian and Provençal poets, and given to their productions a cold constraint and universal mannerism. The words which
Mr. Ruskin uses in respect to Giotto apply with equal force to Dante: "It was simply by being interested in what was going on around him, by substituting the gestures of living men for conventional attitudes, and portraits of living men for conventional faces, and incidents of every-day life for conventional circumstances, that he became great and the master of the great. . . . [He was] a daring naturalist, in defiance of tradition, formalism, and idealism."

The subject of the Divine Comedy is man, — *subjectum est homo*. The whole spiritual history of man — the history of man in his spiritual relations to this world and to eternity — is unfolded in it. It is the allegory of human life and immortality. For to Dante life had no significance save as it was eternal. He longed, with an intensity which only the word *Dantesque* will express, to realize an ideal upon earth. Continually baffled in actual experience, disappointed and misunderstood, he concentrated and poured out his longing in his poem, and "wrought his life into an epic which justifies the mercy and goodness of the ways of God to man."

Dante, indeed, accepted all the dogmatic teaching of the Roman Church. He embodied dogma and superstition in his poem. He took the material conceptions which the Church afforded to her children, and clothed upon them his own spiritual imaginations. He reverently received the husks of a false creed, and changed them by the miracle of faith into the pure wheat of truth. He gave to mankind the most vigorous realization of the Romish hell and heaven, but he used this material groundwork as the foundation of a spiritual structure. The first heaven and the first earth passed away, and he saw a new heaven and a new earth. His insight pierced through the dark veil of human traditions and devices, and his vision sounded the clear deeps of the Divine counsel. The poet rises above the creed of his time, and his work gives form and expression to the immutable truths of the ideal world, to the religious instincts, longings, and aspirations of mankind.

Thus the Divine Comedy has a double nature. Unsurpassed in its own kind as a literary composition, as the highest effort of the purely poetic genius, it has a deeper interest as a religious work. It deals with the dearest concern of every man
in a spirit of utmost sincerity and earnestness; and it is not strange, therefore, that for five centuries and a half it has exercised an influence on thought and character such as no other poem has ever exerted.

The regard in which it has been held has varied greatly from age to age, and the measure of this regard is one of the best tests of the prevailing temper of any special generation, and of the culture of any special period.

It is a curious and striking fact, that in England, from Chaucer down to this century, the Divine Comedy seems hardly to have been known. Milton indeed translates three lines of the Inferno for a controversial purpose, in his tract of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England,* and refers to a beautiful passage in the Purgatorio, in his Sonnet to Henry Lawes, in which he says, in verse worthy of the association:

"Dante shall give fame leave to set thee higher
Than his Casella, whom he woed to sing,
Met in the milder shades of Purgatory."

The hold that Dante's thought and language took of him is obvious in many passages of the Paradise Lost. But Milton is the only one of the great poets of his century who shows any real acquaintance with the Divine Comedy.

Happily for us, Chaucer — the truest representative of the other side of the mediæval genius from that which Dante exhibits — had felt the power of his great predecessor, and has left to us, not merely the expression of his admiration, but some passages of translation which have hardly been surpassed. He refers to Dante in so many of his works as to give proof that he was really a student of his poem. There are references to him, or bits of translation from him, in the Canterbury Tales, in the House of Fame, in the Assemble of Foules, in the Troilus and Creseide, and in the Legende of Good Women. This frequent recurrence of Chaucer to Dante brings the two


"Dante in his 19 Canto of Inferno hath thus, as I will render it you in English blank verse: —

Ah Constantine, of how much ill was cause
Not thy conversion, but those rich demaines
That the first wealthy Pope received of thee.

So in his 20 Canto of Paradise he makes the like complaint."
chief poets of the Middle Ages into a personal relation which charms the imagination. It throws a cheerful light back upon the sombre pages of Dante, it deepens with a solemn seriousness the gay lines of Chaucer. To have had such appreciation as Chaucer gave him, makes up to Dante for the neglect of all other poets beside.

For four hundred years, then, from Chaucer's death to the beginning of this century, is almost a blank in respect to the knowledge of Dante in England. That great intellectual movement in Europe, which may be termed the romantic revival or reaction,—for it was alike a reaction against the spirit of Puritanism in morals and of so-called classicism in literature, and a revival of naturalism and romanticism in art and letters,—began just a hundred years ago with the publication of Percy's Reliques, of which the first edition appeared in 1765, and speedily displayed itself, not only in a new interest in the works of Dante in his own country, but in fresh study of them in other lands. The full force of this great movement is by no means even yet exhausted; and with its progress the zeal in Dantesque studies and the influence of Dante upon modern thought have steadily increased.

The earliest printed translation into German of the Divine Comedy was that of Bachenschwanz, which appeared in 1767–1769, and is a work of considerable merit. This was followed, in 1776, by a poor translation in French prose by Moutonnet de Clairfons; and this in its turn, in 1783, by a prose translation of the Inferno by the lively, versatile, and accomplished Rivarol, whom Burke somewhat oddly styled the Tacitus of the French Revolution. The translation, and the notes with which it is accompanied, are by no means without excellence. Buffon declared that it was “une création perpetuelle.” But Rivarol had little sympathy with the essential genius of Dante; and though his remarks often display acute and just critical perception, he sometimes shows a want of appreciation of the qualities of Dante's work as complete as one might expect from a countryman of Voltaire.∗

∗ It is amusing to find Rivarol, in his Preface, complaining that the Inferno is so full of horrible and low images, that “la langue française chaste et timorée s'effarouche à chaque phrase.” And yet just afterwards he says finely: “Quand il est
A year before Rivarol published his translation, the first translation of the Inferno into English was printed at London. It was in blank verse; and its author, whose name did not appear in the title, was Mr. Charles Rogers. This was followed, in 1785, by what was called “A Translation of the Inferno in English Verse,” by the Rev. Henry Boyd; and in 1802 Mr. Boyd published a translation of the whole Divine Comedy. This work was reviewed with praise in the second number of the Edinburgh Review, in January, 1803; the Reviewer declaring that, “upon the whole, Mr. Boyd has done as much for Dante as can well be done in English rhyme.” This judgment affords a curious instance of the low state of English criticism at the period, for a more unsuccessful attempt at translation is hardly to be found. The work is a mere fluent paraphrase, undistinguished by a single quality characteristic of the original. The essence of the poem has evaporated, and nothing is left of its native virtue. A short passage will show what the Reviewer considered “doing as much for Dante as can well be done.” Among the most beautiful episodes of the Inferno is that in which Dante describes Fortune, ending with the lines,—

“Quest’è colei, ch’è tanto posta in croce
   Pur da color che le dovrian dar lode,
   Dandole biasmo a torto e mala voce.
Ma ella s’è beata, e ciò non ode:
   Con l’altri prime creature lieta
   Volve sua spera, e beata si gode.”

“This is she who is so crucified, even by those who ought to give her praise, giving her blame amiss, and ill repute. But she is blessed, and she hears this not: with the other primal creatures joyful she turns her sphere and blessed she rejoices.”

It is hard to recognize such verses in Mr. Boyd’s disguise:—

“The murmurs deep of yonder moody sphere
   In vain aspire to reach her hallowed ear;
   Forever listening to the choral song
   Of those who turn the mighty mundane wheel,
   Not doomed the thrilling shaft of woe to feel,
   And urging still their flaming orbs along.”
It is plain that a translation of the Divine Comedy was still required in English, and this want the Rev. Mr. Cary undertook to supply. This excellent and scholarly gentleman published the first part of his well-known version in 1806, and eight years afterwards his complete translation of the poem. It was a work of far higher merit than that of his predecessor, and certain qualities, which are hardly, however, to be reckoned among its merits, have secured for it a wide and long-continued popularity. Mr. Cary had more culture and attainment than originality; and he did not so much translate Dante, which at that time would have required a certain native boldness, as Anglicize his poem by giving it a Miltonic form and fashion. The strangeness of Dante to the English mind was thus smoothed away. His tone and accent were made familiar, and he was accepted with that sort of half sympathy which is accorded to a foreigner who has taken out his papers of naturalization. Mr. Cary's version is not infrequently smooth, harmonious, and accurate; but had the original been better known, the translation would hardly have held the place it has so long occupied. No one who reads Cary alone can well understand or feel the powerful charm of Dante's verse, or the concentrated and regulated force of his imagination. The poem, which, in the original, makes a stronger impression of reality than any other existing work of imagination, and which was, indeed, in the strictest sense, the expression of what was to its author the most positive reality, seems, in this artificial English style of Mr. Cary, to be little better than a work of fancy, unreal, remote, insincere; its poetry has become rhetoric.

Moreover, Mr. Cary, although not without poetic feeling, having been bred into the liking of such an artificial manner in poetry, appears often to have been shocked by the simplicity of Dante, and to have regarded it as a defect in art. The more delicate qualities of Dante's style escape him, and his ear, accustomed to the swell of English blank verse, captivated by the *lenocinia verborum*, fails to find satisfaction in the compressed force of Dante's lines. The version is of the kind which Don Quixote so well says "is like viewing a piece of Flemish tapestry on the wrong side, where, though the fig-
ures are distinguishable, yet there are so many ends and threads that the beauty and exactness of the work are obscured.” One or two brief illustrations will show what sort of “ends and threads” there are in Mr. Cary’s work. We open at the eighteenth Canto of the Paradise, where Dante, speaking of the change wrought in Beatrice in their ascent from the sphere of Mars to that of Jupiter, describes it as being “such as is the change in little space of time in a pale lady when her countenance disburdens itself of the burden of shamefastness.” This simple phrase is thus improved by Mr. Cary:—

“Like the change
In a brief moment on some maiden’s cheek,
Which, from its fairness, doth discharge the weight
Of pudency that stained it.”

So in a previous Canto, (we take the instances as our eyes happen to fall on them,) Dante, speaking of his ascent to Mars, says (Par. XIV. 88–93): “With all my heart and with that speech which is one in all men, to God I made a holocaust such as was befitting for the new grace; and the glow of the sacrifice was not yet exhausted in my breast when I knew that offering had been accepted and auspicious.”

Mr. Cary renders this as follows:—

“With all the heart, and with that tongue which speaks
The same in all, an holocaust I made
To God, befitting the new grace vouchsa’f’d,
And from my bosom had not yet upstream’d
The fuming of that incense, when I knew
The rite accepted.”

We might cite a great number of instances of this sort from Mr. Cary’s pages, but these are enough to illustrate our criticism. Passages of great excellence are, indeed, to be found in his work, and it will always deserve to be held in respect, as showing that its author had far juster notions of what a translation ought to be than had been prevalent among previous English translators; so that the Edinburgh Review was not altogether extravagant in speaking of it “as executed with a fidelity almost without example,” and Southey in declaring that it was “executed with perfect fidelity and admirable skill.”

Translation after translation has in late years competed with
Cary's for pre-eminence, but none has succeeded in pleasing the public taste so well. During the past thirty years, not even Homer has found more translators; not even Homer is so difficult to translate. We have not space to discuss the merits of these many attempts.* The most interesting among them, and the completest in aim and execution, is the translation in the measure and rhyme of the original by Mr. Cayley. We shall have occasion to speak hereafter of what we conceive to be the insuperable difficulties attending this mode of translation; but there are portions of Mr. Cayley's version the excellence of which it might be difficult to surpass.

Dr. Carlyle's prose version is of a very different order. It "attempts to combine the virtues of a grammatical interpreta-

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* The following list comprises all the English translations of the whole poem, or of either of its three main divisions, with which we are acquainted.

1812. " " " W. Hume. Blank verse.
1850. " " " Patrick Bannerman.
1859. " " " Bruce Whyte. Triple rhyme.
1865. " " " " J. Dayman. Triple rhyme.
1865. " " " " W. M. Rossetti. Blank verse.

To these may be added: —

1843. " " " I. to X. T. W. Parsons. Rhyme.
1865. " " " I. to XVII. T. W. Parsons. Rhyme.

Byron, Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Hayley, Lord Houghton, Mr. Merviere, and Mr. Gladstone are among the writers who have translated brief portions of the poem.
tion for the Italian student and a literary version for the general reader, and achieves this twofold object, perhaps, to nearly the utmost compatible extent."

During the last year all European and American students of Dante were moved to take part in the great national festival at Florence in honor of the six-hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth. New translations of his Divine Comedy appeared in Germany, France, England, and America. In England, Mr. W. M. Rossetti and the Rev. Mr. Ford each issued a version of the Inferno; while the Rev. Mr. Dayman published a complete translation of the poem, of the first part of which there had been an edition some years since. In America, Dr. Parsons, who had printed, twenty-two years before, a version of ten cantos of the Inferno, now issued a revised edition of these Cantos, adding to them seven more. If Dante is ever to be successfully translated, one might fancy that, among so many attempts, the right one might be found.

But there is no agreement among the translators as to the mode in which the work is to be best accomplished. These four recent versions offer us three distinct forms of translation. Mr. Dayman and Mr. Ford have each attempted to reproduce the poem in the triple rhyme of the original; Dr. Parsons gives us a version with alternate rhymes, in the measure of Gray's Elegy; and Mr. Rossetti aims at unconditional literality in phraseology, and at line-for-line rendering, keeping to the metre, but not to the rhyme of the original. Here is wide choice, and the differences in these versions open the whole question of the proper method and aim of a translation.

An ideal rendering of such a poem as the Divine Comedy would of course be one which should render its effect while giving its literal meaning in a form as nearly corresponding to that of the original as the genius of the language would permit. There is no other poem in which measure, rhythm, and rhyme contribute so much to the general effect upon the imagination as in the Divine Comedy,—none in which the diction and style are so intimately connected with the meaning,—none in which language is so completely correspondent to the thought. Every word is minutely appropriate. "Poetry," says William Blake, "admits not a letter that is insignificant." It is this which is at
once the allurement and the despair of the translator. It is in vain to hope to succeed in transferring such a poem from its own language to another, and to preserve in the process all its primal qualities and sources of power. The literal translator has lost the music and melody which delight him, and the fine, absolute relation of sound and sense; while the free translator, even if, like Dr. Parsons, himself a poet, is forced not infrequently to change the perfect expression of his author into one less direct, simple, and natural. However skilful he may be, whatever mastery he may possess over his native tongue, he feels the charm of his original vanishing in his verse. He seeks to clasp the flying Muse: she leaves but her robe in his hand. He tries to reproduce an ineffable, inexpressible beauty: he fails in the attempt. Dante himself declares, that, in the highest sense, poetry is not capable of translation. In one of the early chapters of the Convito he says: "Let every one be aware that nothing harmonized by the bond of poetry can be transferred from its own tongue to another without breaking all its sweetness and harmony."*

And in addition to the difficulty, it might well be said the impossibility, of translating any poetry, owing to the indissoluble union of its spirit and the form which that spirit takes on and moulds to its own likeness, there is a special difficulty in the case of a poet who, like Dante, writes in an early stage of language. For Dante not merely chose a form of verse of unexampled beauty and intricacy, and well suited only to his own tongue, but the nature of language itself has changed since he wrote, so that the same words no longer convey the same ideas or produce the same impressions. The change is that from an ancient to a modern tongue, or, in truer phrase, from a fresh and young language to one worn and aged. It is the difference between a coin fresh from the mint, with its device clear, sharp, and perfect, and the same coin after years of use and currency, its device half obliterated by the rubbing and service of years. In our modern tongues the original meaning of words has become defaced by wear; they no longer have the sharply defined outline of their early days. Modern language has become more abstract; our words are no longer in living

* Book I. c. vii.
connection with their roots; many of them, which originally had a distinct significance, have been reduced to little more than conventional signs; they have become literary characters, and have lost their speaking quality. The thirteenth century had a new language, the nineteenth century has only old ones. Thought has changed with language. What was natural to Dante is often unnatural to us. His simplicity is sometimes what we should call quaintness; his directness, what would seem to us, in a modern, like want of art; his style is of his age, and not of ours.

Mr. Rossetti, losing sight, as it seems to us, of this fact, has excused certain singularities and oddities of phrase in his version with the plea "that generally I am odd to the English reader for one only reason, that Dante also is odd to the Italian reader in the same passage." No doubt, to the modern uncultivated Italian reader, Dante may often be odd; but there is no ground for believing that Dante, however startling he may have been, was odd to his contemporaries. His poem, if truly translated, may be strange to our modern temper of mind, but will not be odd to our ears. The very nature of the case creates a dilemma. If we translate Dante in the antique style, we run into the affectation of archaism; if we translate him in our modern style, we change his characteristic air and manner.

Many other special difficulties beset the English translator of Dante, in the matter of form, even supposing him to overcome those attending the choice and use of words. Our language is very poor in rhymes as compared with the Italian, and lends itself unwillingly to repeated consonances. It is only by straining that it can accomplish a succession of triple rhymes, which in Italian, at least in Dante's Italian, flow continuously, without apparent effort or exhaustion. Dante is reported to have said, that no word ever compelled him to say what he did not will; but the translator who tries the triple rhyme in English is constantly compelled by his words to say what he would not.

"It is almost impossible," said Dryden in one of his admirable critical prefaces, "to translate verbally [that is, word for word and rhyme for rhyme] and at the same time to translate well. The verbal copier is encumbered with so
many difficulties at once, that he can never disentangle himself from all. He is to consider, at the same time, the thought of the author, and his words, and to find out the counterpart to each in another language; and besides this, he is to confine himself to the compass of numbers and the slavery of rhyme. It is like dancing on ropes with fettered legs. A man can shun a fall by using caution, but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected; and when we have said the best of it, it is but a foolish task, for no sober man would put himself into a danger for the applause of escaping without breaking his neck.”

The numerous attempts at rendering the Divine Comedy with the rhyme of the original are, after all, even the best of them, only more or less successful intellectual tours de force. We doubt if any English reader would ever read for its poetic quality Mr. Dayman’s or Mr. Ford’s laborious and often curiously ingenious version. Even the best passages in them are faint copies of the text. They are like chromolithographs of Raphael’s Madonnas; the colors are the same in name, but not in quality or tone. The translator who chooses the triple rhyme must curtail, must amplify, must transpose, in every verse.

The difficulties which await a translator who chooses another system of rhyme, even though it be one more manageable in English, are hardly less numerous. If he translate freely, he runs the risk of giving a modern air and an English tenor to the poem; and if he aim at literality, he runs the risk of stiffness, and of using forms of construction averse to the poetic style. He either gives us a poem which is not Dantean, or a series of verses which are not English.

In choosing the measure and rhyme which he has used, Dr. Parsons chose with the instinct of a genuine poet. He felt, with Sir John Denham, that it is not the translator’s “business alone to translate language into language, but poesy into poesy; and poesy is of so subtle a spirit, that, in pouring out of one language into another, it will all evaporate; and if a new spirit is not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a caput mortuum.”* Dr. Parsons has rendered in this sense many passages with great force and

* Preface to the Second Book of Virgil’s Æneid.
beauty, and the whole of his work may be read with pleasure as a poetic composition; but he has not succeeded in doing the impossible, by giving in English the effect of Dante's Italian poetry. For, in fine, it is impossible to transfuse the spirit of Dante into English rhyme. As a work of highest literary art, its original form is essential to it, and in another language than its own,

"la forma non s' accorda
Molte fiate alla intenzion dell' arte,
Perch' a risponder la materia è sorda."

A brief extract from the Divine Comedy, and a comparison of it with the various versions before us, will illustrate what has now been said. We choose some lines from the Tenth Canto of the Inferno, beginning with the address of Farinata to Dante. Let the reader notice the simplicity and straightforwardness of the construction of the original, and observe what force and dignity these qualities give to the style. It is as direct as prose; each verse is vigorous and compact; there are no words to spare, no more required. It is a specimen of the noblest diction.

"O Tosco, che per la città del foco
Vivo ten vai così parlando onesto,
Piaciati di ristare in questo loco.
La tua loquela ti fa manifesto
Di quel nobil patria natio
Alla qual forse fui troppo molesto.
Subitamente questo suono uscio
D' una dell' arche: però m' accostai,
Temendo, un poco più al Duca mio.
Ed ei mi disse: Volgiti; che fai?
Vedi là Farinata che s' è dritto:
Dalla cintola in su tutto il vedrai.
Io avea già il mio viso nel suo fitto;
Ed ei s' ergea col petto e colla fronte,
Com' avesse lo Inferno in gran dispetto."

Inf. X. vv. 22–36.

Literally translated this passage reads as follows:—

"O Tuscan, who through the city of fire goest alive, speaking thus decorously, may it please thee to stop in this place. Thy speech makes manifest that thou art native of that noble country to which perhaps I was too harmful. Suddenly this
sound issued from one of the chests, wherefore I pressed, fearing, a little closer to my guide. And he said to me: Turn thee. What doest thou? Behold there Farinata, who has raised himself upright. From the girdle upwards wholly thou shalt see him. I had already fixed my look on his; and he rose erect with breast and front, as though he had Hell in great despite."

Now let us compare the versions of Mr. Dayman and Mr. Ford.

**Dayman.**

"'Tuscan, who thus, of honest parlance true, Dost living way make through the Place of flame, Tarry awhile, an't like thee: well I knew — For well the accents of thy voice proclaim — Thee native of the goodly land, which found Perhaps too bitter cause to curse my name.' From a sepulchral cave sudden the sound Came rushing, that I crept, my blood all cold, Close sidling to my leader. 'Turn thee round,' He cried, 'What dost thou? Turn thee and be bold; See where Farinata lifts himself upright; From the waist upward thou mayest all behold.' With eye confronting his, I met his sight, And he his breast and face with many a strain Upheaved, as holding Hell in fierce despite.'"

**Ford.**

"'O Tuscan, who alive dost wend thy way Through the Fire-city thus discoursing fair. Be it thy pleasure at this place to stay. The accent of thy voice bespeaks thee clear Of that right-noble country native sprung, To which, it may be, I was too severe.' — Fort from a vault the sepulchres among Came suddenly these words; whereat, more nigh A little to my Guide I drew and clung. 'Turn thee about! what dost thou now?' said he: Ris'n, of himself, Lo! Farinata's shade: Him from the waist all upward thou shalt see.' Already on his look mine own was stayed; And he was lifting high his face and breast, As one, of Hell who little reckoning made.'"

Elaborate as both of these versions are, it is obvious that neither of them reproduces the poetry of the original. No one would select either of them as specimens of noble diction. The hard necessity of rhyme has destroyed simplicity of expression, and changed the whole effect of the narrative.

Now let us take Dr. Parsons's translation of the same passage: —

"'O Tuscan! thou who com'st with gentle speech, Through Hell's hot city breathing from the earth,
Stop in this place one moment I beseech,—
Thy tongue betrays the country of thy birth.
Of that illustrious land I know thee sprung,
Which in my day perchance I too much vexed.'
Forth from one vault these sudden accents rung,
So that I trembling stood, with fear perplexed.
Then as I closer to my master drew:
'Turn back! what dost thou?' he exclaimed in haste;
'See! Farinata rises to thy view,—
Now mayst behold him upward from his waist.'
Full in his face already I was gazing,
While his front lowered and his proud bosom swelled,
As though even there, amid his burial blazing,
The infernal realm in high disdain he held."

This is spirited and powerful poetry; and though far less literal than either of the preceding renderings, it does more justice to Dante in its freedom than the others in their constraint. The Divine Comedy rendered in this manner remains at least a poem. But its tone is not that of Dante's poem; its merits are its own.

'Is the Divine Comedy, then, not to be translated at all? If its spirit cannot be transfused into English rhyme, can it be better brought into unrhymed verse? It is a sad conclusion to reach, that all the beauty and sweetness and subtile association of rhyme, on which so much of the charm of the original depends,—that this element of its form with which its spirit is so intricately involved,—that this concord of sound and sense,—must be forfeited before we can hope to render satisfactorily into English what remains of the original after this loss. And yet to this conclusion we are forced. The loss is greater in any other process. We must be content to retain only so much of the original as may be preserved in a translation which prefers to cling to the features of most significance,—to those which are general, essential, universal, and capable therefore of transference into another tongue,—than to those which are special, and belong to the external form more than to its interior substance. It is not necessary to go with Dr. Carlyle to the extreme of rendering the poem into prose. A translation may be made in verse which shall retain more of the characteristics of the poem than the noblest prose version can give.

What poetic form, then, shall the translator choose, and
what qualities of the original may he hope to preserve in his version? Rhymed verse being excluded, he may choose, with Mr. Cary, blank verse fashioned after the manner of Milton or of Tennyson. But the very fact that it is after the manner of an English poet indicates that it is an unfit vehicle for rendering a poet so un-English in style as Dante. The object of the translator should be to reproduce as much as possible the effect of Dante; but this cannot be done if in the structure of his verse he remind us of the cadences of our native poets. His metre and his diction, his vocabulary and his style, must all be Dantessque, to enable him to fulfil this condition. A blank verse, based in its rhythm upon the verse of Dante, aiming to present all the qualities of this verse except its rhyme, would seem to be the proper instrument of the English translator. If he possess such feelings and cultivation as fit him truly to appreciate the qualities of Dante's poem, and such genius as is required to render them, he will find it possible to reproduce in English more of the effect of Dante by this than by any other method. A literal, line-for-line translation, in the metre of the original, will afford him the means of rendering the substantial characteristics of the thought and of the language of the poem. No poet suffers more from the amplification of a poor translator than Dante; for there is none more uniformly concise and choice in his expression. His style is exceedingly various in other respects, but his words are invariably chosen with distinct purpose. At times he is as clear in thought, as straight-forward in expression, as simple in his vocabulary, as Homer himself; at other times, as involved in meaning, as subtile in expression, and as unusual in vocabulary, as any of the mediæval poets. But he never, even in his most metaphysical passages, or those most imbued with purely individual or mediæval sentiment, loses control over his words, or selects an expression at hap-hazard, or simply to accommodate his verse. The range of his style is as wide as that of his imagination and his thought, and his vocabulary is always sufficient for his intention. He deals with the grotesque or with the sublime with equal ease. He lifts himself from the humblest image to the loftiest reality, and draws his material with equal power from earth and stars, — this world and the other.
To render the effects of such a poet even imperfectly, the translator himself should be a poet. "No man," we cite again the great authority of Dryden, "is capable of translating poetry, who, besides a genius to that art, is not a master both of his author's language and of his own; nor must we understand the language only of the poet, but his particular turn of thoughts and expression, which are the characters that distinguish, and, as it were, individuate him from all other writers. When we are come thus far, it is time to look into ourselves, to conform our genius to his, to give his thoughts either the same turn, if our tongue will bear it, or, if not, to vary but the dress, not to alter or destroy the substance."

The earliest attempt to render Dante in English verse, line for line, and in measure like his own, was made, so far as we are aware, by Mr. Longfellow, in some brief but beautiful translations from the Purgatorio, published in 1839. Mr. Pollock adopted this method, with moderate success, in his translation of the whole poem, published in 1856; and Mr. Rossetti, in his version of the Inferno, has taken the same course. Possessing many of the best qualifications for his work, Mr. Rossetti has accomplished his task in a manner which, if not wholly satisfactory, is at least deserving of high praise. He has preserved the substance, and in good measure the spirit, of his original. As a specimen of his work we give his translation of the same passage we have quoted from the other recent versions.

"O Tuscan, who along the city of fire
Go'st living, speaking thus decorously,
Be pleased awhile to tarry in this place.
Thy form of speech doth make thee manifest
A child unto that noble native-land
Which I was over-troublous to, perchance."

"Upon a sudden this sound issued there
From one o' the cinctures; wherefore I approached,
In fear, a little nearer to my guide.

"And he said to me: 'Turn; what doest thou? See Farina there, who's got upright:
From the waist upwards thou wilt see him all.'

"Already had I fixed mine eyes on his:
And he was raising him with breast and brow,
As 't were that he had hell in great disdain."
This retains far more of the directness and force of the original than are preserved in the versions already cited, and confirms all that we have said in favor of this mode of translation. But it also shows defects which are more evident in some other portions of Mr. Rossetti's work, in a certain tendency toward the use of expressions more quaint than exact, as, for instance, in the use of such a word as "cinctures" as a rendering of the original arche, and a certain want of rhythmic grace and harmony in the structure of the verse.

It would be easy to select passages from Mr. Rossetti's volume free from such faults; but we speak the more freely of them, because the merits of his work are conspicuous, and, if not completely successful as a rendering of the Inferno, it at least indicates the way to success.

It is not to be expected that even the best possible translation should make the Divine Comedy a popular poem; in any proper sense, among English readers. Its fundamental conceptions are too remote from modern thought to be easily apprehended, or readily accepted, by those whose intellectual life is bounded by the limits of present time. It requires, to be justly appreciated, not merely a general literary culture, but something of special study. It demands of the student more thoughtfulness and more imagination than most men possess. The mass of its readers get no farther than to the end of the Inferno; and this partial acquaintance with the poem gives rise to, and perpetuates, not only a completely incorrect and unjust conception of the character of the poet, but also a not less completely false notion of the scope and intention of the poem. The mere lover of poetry, who cares not to study the Divine Comedy as a whole, may yet take pleasure in special famous episodes, in the exquisite felicity of its imagery, in the truth and tenderness of certain passages of sentiment; but such a reader will know little of the deep and abundant sources of spiritual delight and invigoration which the poem reveals to him who gives himself to its study with due preparation and fit temper of mind. There is nothing of the false pretence of dilettanteism, or of purely professional admiration, in the feeling which it awakens in such a student.