

The Great Poets.

SHAKESPEARE.

WITH a reverence as deep as honesty or manliness permits for the master-genius of our race—a reverence nourished by the fond and never intermitted study of their works—I may say that I catch, from this very study of their writings and characters, a conception, that, high as they rose, they might have risen higher. I in sometimes behold the soil of the world upon their snow-white robes, and the rust of human passion upon the glittering edge of their wit. It was long ago said by the great Roman critic, that the great Homer sometimes nods;—and Shakspeare, the most brilliant example unquestionably, of a triumph over the defects of education—mental and mortal—too often exhibits traces of both. As he floats on eagle's wings along what he nobly calls 'the brightest heaven of invention,' he is sometimes borne, by an unchastened taste, into a misty region where the understanding endeavors in vain to follow him; and sometimes, as he skims, with the swallow's ease and swiftness, along the ground, too confident of his power to soar, when he will, up to the rosy gates of the morning—he stoops, and stoops, and stoops, till the tips of his graceful pinions are sadly daggled in the mire.

HOMER.

Not a ray of pure spiritual illumination shines through the sweet vision of the father of poetry. The light of his genius, like that of the moon, as he describes it in the eighth Iliad, is serene, transparent, and heavenly fair; it streams into the deepest glades and settles on the mountain tops of the material and social world; but for all that concerns the spiritual nature, it is cold, watery, and unquickening. The great test of the elevation of the poet's mind, and of the refinement of the age in which he lives, is the distinctness, power, and purity, with which he conceives the spiritual world. In all else he may be the observer, the recorder, the painter; but in this dread sphere he must assume the province, which his name imports; he must be the *maker*:—creating his own spiritual world by the highest action of his mind, upon all the external and internal materials of thought. If ever there was a poetical vision, calculated not to purify, and to exalt, but to abase and sadden, it is the visit of Ulysses to the lower regions. The ghosts of the illustrious departed are drawn before him by the reeking fumes of the recent sacrifice; and the hero stands guard with his drawn sword, to drive away the shade of his own mother from the gory trench, over which she hovers, hankering after the raw blood. Does it require an essay on the laws of the human mind, to show that the intellect which contemplates the great mystery of our being, under his ghastly and frivolous imagery, has never been born to a spiritual life, nor caught a glimpse of the highest heaven of poetry?

DANTE.

In Dante, for the first time, in an uninspired bard, the dawn of a spiritual day breaks upon us. Although the shadows of a superstition rest upon him, yet the strains of the prophets were in his ears, and the light of the truth—strong, though clouded—was in his soul. As we stand with him on the threshold of the world of sorrows, and read the awful inscription over the portal, a chill from the dark valley of the shadow of death comes over the heart. The compass of poetry contains no image which surpasses this dismal inscription in solemn grandeur;—nor is there anywhere, a more delicious strain of tender poetic beauty, than that of the distant vesper bell, which seems to mourn for the departing day, as it is heard by the traveller just leaving his home. But Dante lived in an age, when christianity—if I may so speak—was paganized. Much of his poem, substance, as well as ornament, is heathen. Too much of his inspiration is drawn from the stormy passions of life. The warmth with which he glowed, is too often the kindling of scorn and indignation, burning under a sense of intolerable wrong. The holiest muse may string his

lyre, but it is too often the insouled partizan that sweeps the strings. The divine comedy, as he calls his wonderful work, is much of it more mortal satire.

MILTON.

In *Paradise Lost*, we feel as if we were admitted to the outer courts of the Infinite. In that all-glorious temple of genius, inspired by truth, we catch the full diapason of the heavenly organ. With its first choral swell, the soul is lifted from the earth. In the *Divina Comedia*, the man, the Florentine, the exiled Ghibeline, stands out from first to last, breathing defiance and revenge. Milton, in some of his prose works, betrays the partizan also—but in his poetry, we see him in the white robes of the minstrel, with upturned, though sightless eyes, wrapt in meditation, at the feet of the heavenly muse. Dante, in his dark vision, descends to the depths of the world of perdition; and, homeless fugitive as he is, drags his proud and prosperous enemies down with him, and buries them—doubly destroyed—in the flaming sepulchres of the lowest hell. Milton, on the other hand, seems almost to have purged off the dross of humanity. Blind, poor, friendless, in solitude and sorrow, with quite as much reason as his Italian rival to repine at his fortune, and war against mankind, how calm and unimpassioned is he in all that concerns his own personality! He deemed too highly of his divine gift to make it the instrument of immortalizing his hatreds. One cry alone, of sorrow at his blindness; one pathetic lamentation over the evil days on which he had fallen, bursts from his full heart. There is not a flash of human wrath in all his pictures of woe. Flating nothing but evil spirits, in the childlike simplicity of his heart, his pure hands, undefiled with the pitch of the political intrigues in which he had lived, he breathes forth his inexpressibly majestic strains—the poetry not-so much of earth as of heaven.

Can it be hoped, that under the operation of the influences to which we have alluded, any thing superior to *Paradise Lost* will ever be produced by man? It requires a courageous faith in general principles to believe it. I dare not call it a probable event; but we can we say it is impossible? If, out of the wretched intellectual and moral elements of the commonwealth in England—imparting, as they did, at times, too much of their contagion to Milton's mind—a poem like *Paradise Lost*, could spring forth; shall no corresponding fruit of excellence, can be produced when knowledge shall be universally diffused, society elevated and equalized; and the standard of moral and religious principle in public and private affairs, raised far above its present level? A continued progress in the intellectual world, is consistent with all that we know of the laws that govern it, and with all experience. A presentiment of it lies deep in the soul of man, spark, as it is, of the divine nature. The craving after excellence, the thirst for truth and beauty, has never been—never can be—fully slaked at the fountains, which have flowed beneath the touch of the enchanter's wand. Man listens to the heavenly strain, and straightway becomes desirous of still loftier melodies. It has nourished and strengthened instead of satiating his taste. Fed by the divine aliment, he can enjoy more, he can conceive more, he can himself perform more.

Should a poet of loftier muse than Milton hereafter appear, or to speak more reverently, when the Milton of a better age shall arise, there is remaining yet one subject worthy his powers—the complement of *Paradise Lost*. In the conception of this subject by Milton, then nature in the experience of his great poem, we have the highest human judgment that this is the cue remaining theme. In his uncompleted attempt to achieve it, we have the greatest cause for the doubt, whether it be not beyond the grasp of the human mind, in its present state of cultivation. But I am willing to think that this theme, immeasurably the grandest which can be contemplated by the mind of man, will never receive a political illustration, proportioned to its sublimity. It seems to me impossible that the time—doubtless far distant—when another Milton, divorcing his heart from the delights of life; purifying his bosom from its angry and its selfish passions; relieved by happier fortunes from care and sorrow; pluming the wings of his spirit in solitude, by abstinence and prayer, will address himself to this only remaining theme of a great christian epic.