POETRY AND CIVILIZATION.

It is an interesting question, whether poetry flourishes best in a dark age—whether imagination, the parent of true poetry, necessarily declines as civilization advances. Robert Hall, in one of his early essays, expressed this view of the matter:—Mr. Macaulay propounded it in his essay on Milton, in the "Edinburgh Review," with great self-sufficiency and dogmatism; and a later critic, when reviewing Scott's edition of Dryden, enlarges upon it more calmly and logically, and at greater length. They are all, we imagine, in some degree of error, and we shall here attempt, so far as our limits will allow, a vindication of our modern poets from the charge of degeneracy, brought against them and their more civilised ages as affecting their art, by the great sticklers for the universal supremacy of the ancients.

The modes and systems of tuition—the classical curriculum—all the associations of university education, impress and give a bias to the mind, which marks its course through after life. And students cannot, perhaps, be blamed because in their minor years they imbibed the seeds of prejudices, listened to the biassed instructions of their tutors, or followed the invariable fashion of the colleges in their
worship of the ancient, to the partial eclipse in their halls of modern classics. This, before their minds have reached maturity, cannot be a theme of wonder. Dead languages must be taught—translating must be practised—and where such fitting themes for study and exercise?—what more calculated to temper and discipline the mind of the student, and add ornament to the scientific acquirements of the accomplished scholar? But when the rage for antiquity is so great, the thirst for converse with the minds of past generations so excessive, and the impression that all true greatness can alone be found in their productions so decided and conspicuous, it is plain that the student views modern productions through the fogs of an almost incurable prejudice. No one can be blamed for admiring the beauties of the ancients, for with beauties they are replete. No one can be censured for making them the subjects of imitation and study, as their excellencies may be admired and studied, without their ignorant and revolting doctrines. But, should not the mind of the student remain unbiased and impartial when judging the character and claims of contemporary literature? They are to blame who, wielding the critic’s pen, constitute themselves the one-eyed censors and not the guardians of the press, who, by an almost general and indiscriminate censure of modern poetical productions, crop the tree of genius of some of its brightest buds and blossoms, and quench in night stars which might otherwise irradiate the universe of thought, and show the critic his own intellectual inferiority, and the fallacy of his oracular judgments and pompous announcements.

We cannot, and neither do we affirm that poets
of modern ages have received no meed of praise from the oracles of the press; but we do affirm that but few of them have received their just reward. Their genius may be great, their productions magnificent, their just claims to applause and world-wide fame undoubted, but—if we may believe the critics—they have come too late upon our globe—they have not the stamp of antiquity to draw down admiration, nor a doubtful identity to excite wonder and critical wrangling about the creation and birth of their intellectual progeny. The authors of our own age move amongst us, and are seen by us, and in their conversation, and through their actions, display their weakness as well as strength; and hence, however great and comprehensive may be their genius and talent, the very nearness of our frequent views and contact, diminish our estimate of that intellectual greatness which we imagine belongs to those who are viewed through the magnifying telescope of time. Milton himself doubted, two hundred years ago, whether he had not been born an age too late. But Milton was no egotist. He was proverbially composed and humble, and, like most truly great men, given to under-estimate his powers; and hence, might see, or think he saw, little in common between the creations of Homer and Virgil, and his own more sublime production.

"We think," says Mr. Macaulay, "that as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines." "We hold that the most wonderful and splendid proof of genius is a great poem, produced in a civilized age." "The magic lantern acts best in a dark room; poetry effects its purpose best in a
dark age." Here we have the assertion in three different forms. The reasonings in support of this paradoxical theory are, upon the whole, plausible; but the accuracy of the whole question may be disputed. A theory of mind, to be correct in its foundations, must have universal application; and to this view of Mr. Macaulay's there are many exceptions; therefore, the presumption is, that it must be fallacious. Because poetry has run through many cycles, and its subjects been selected according as its authors followed the tastes and manners of their respective ages, if verging upon the light of civilization, the critic denounces it as essentially defective, or otherwise a great phenomenon, seemingly not perceiving that human nature has in all ages been the same, and that the mere shiftings of society, by altering the currents of public taste, produces simply a change in some of the forms and aspects of literature, without diminishing the fund of natural talent, or dimming human perceptions to the beauties of the material universe, or stifling the natural emotions of the heart. Each cycle or epoch has thus been productive of its own caste of subjects, which have run their destined lengths, and yielded at length to more attractive innovations. A heroic poem of twenty-four books, founded upon a half-fabulous event narrated, or hinted at, in ancient history, and wrought with the machinery of the Greek mythology, though possessing all the attractive splendour of Homer, could no more suit the taste of the present reading public, than could the scholastic philosophy of the middle ages, if revived in all its dialectical splendour, gain an ascendancy in our
colleges, and extinguish the inductive method of Bacon. It is the audience which helps to form the orator, and it is the taste of the public which thus helps to form the poet, and, in so far as he follows nature, makes the notes of his melody successful.

* The natural character of any people or country, the form and condition of its government, the nature of its laws, the prevailing religion or superstition of its people, and the nature and extent of ecclesiastical domination, naturally impresses the mind with a distinctive character, which is again transmitted to posterity through its literature. The poetic vein thus running through the creations of pastoral poets, tinged them with all the hues and beauties of the external universe, will, undoubtedly, surpass the productions of an artizan ignorant of such associations; whilst the artizan, in commemorating the nature of his art or calling, would eclipse the attempts of the herdsman, only conversant with the associations of external nature. The early superstitions of Greece, when her people, after wandering from the true God, found relief in unhallowed rites and sacrifices, were quite in keeping with the dark age when Homer, sightless, sung the wrath of Achilles and the downfall of Troy. And it may be—in those early ages when the legislation of infant monarchies was wielded by irresponsible factions, and the people were sunk in ignorance—that the imagination, more free from the restraints of reason and unshackled by the forms of more conventional communities, could revel more at random amidst its own creations;—that, untrammelled by temporary or long-established precedents, or critical
rules of composition, and without fear of being charged with the sins of the plagiarist, it could revel undisturbed through Elysian fields and the gloomy regions of Erebus—hurl mountains with the Gods and Titans, or wander with Orpheus through the regions of death in search of his Eurydice.

But, even though we should admit, that when the mind has fewer demonstrable facts, and probable speculations, to engage its reasoning faculties, greater scope is given to the imagination, it surely does not follow that a fervid imagination cannot exist and act amidst learning and civilization. Reason may be cultivated until the imagination is weakened. But so may imagination be indulged to the weakening of the reasoning faculties. Facts and arguments cannot blunt, but rather sharpen the perception; and admitting it true that imagination must be subdued, when pursuing a logical argument or solving a geometrical problem, the very dialectical and mathematical exercises give additional vigour to the mind, as well as present truths hitherto unknown to its view, instead of touching its fervid springs with the benumbing chill of a torpedo. And though it may be more confined than the mind of an ignorant heathen, as it traverses the more palpable regions of tangible and speculative existence, the musings appear only less pregnant with beauty and sublimity, because more within the bounds of known reality—less fitted than the heathen to startle with its flights, because more upon a level with the knowledge and comprehension of all—void of the crude vagaries and superstitions of the ancients, and so unfit to
minister to the vitiated appetites of the wonder-loving, and not hallowed by being borne down the stream of time, and, hence, undeserving of the veneration poured by the sage classic critics of the day upon the mouldering remains of all distant ages.

The fact is, the present generation is distinguished for its love of truth and investigation, and hence the critical dogma, that ignorance and superstition wing the imagination with greater freedom, whilst the knowledge of systematic moral truths and science, prostrates its energies wholly at the shrine of reason. What then? Is truth less strange than fiction? Is history less strange and striking than romance? Or, is science, with its manifold wonders and discoveries, less surprising than the wildest dreams of heathen imaginations? Is truth less adapted for poetry than fiction? Or, is a mind alive and active with a knowledge of truth and science less able, on that account, to grapple with the beauties and sublimities of the universe, than the more benighted and wondering heathen? Here the critic should show us more clearly than he has yet done, by mere assumption, how the minds of the present generation of mankind, endowed with the riches of science and the truths of philosophy, and thus comprehending more of the scale of creation, and better able than bygone ages to construct theories, are, by knowing more, less able to create, or produce a poem capable of standing the measurement of patent excellence by the longestablished rules of Longinus and Aristotle. Because, through the eye of science, we have pierced
the recesses of nature and read the lights of the firmament, have we plunged into infinity that our imaginations are more cramped in their range? Is it not a fact, that the longings of the mind grow more intense in proportion as its appetite for each succeeding variety of intellectual food is gratified? It revels, unchecked, within its limited region of thought, and, from its inability to pierce the veil of futurity or traverse the regions of infinity, is more ambitious in its aims—more lofty in its flights; and even, through unquenchable ambition and speculative daring, striving to fathom the councils of the Ruler of the Universe. Vain is it, therefore, to assert that imagination is eclipsed by reason, or that a civilized age must necessarily be barren in sublime poetry; as if the tittle of learning we can boast had satisfied our minds, or "the vast, the unbounded prospect," covered with clouds and darkness to the heathen,—had been made all clear before us, and we introduced to a boundless view of the real, and hence, according to the critic, unimaginative and unpoetical universe of being.

Truth is not all poetical, nor is all poetry literal truth. There is a vein of moral beauty, which has run through creation since it swept in harmony through space—a beauty reflected from the mind of the Eternal Creator, glowing through the universal frame, from an atom to a constellation—from a worm to an angel; a beauty which all have ever owned, which every conscience has inwardly admired—a beauty indestructible as Deity himself—and that is Truth; and the poet intent upon wearing the halo of true and living fame, whatever the
fiction he may invent, or the brilliance with which he may clothe it, must, like Shakspere, remain true to living nature, from thence draw all his scenes and portraits, and then, like the roses of a celestial paradise, his creations may live for ever. He has regions of his own to tread, but always let him follow nature, the great teacher. Truth he will find in every ray of light; and poetry in every exalted thought and ennobling sentiment — in music, in painting and sculpture, as well as in language. The noblest poems the world ever saw contain the essence of the sublimest truths, infinitely surpassing the creations of Homer and Eschylus, without the mixture of one jot or tittle of superstition, but which are, nevertheless, so familiarised to our minds through the medium of Revelation, that we lose, in some degree, the impression of their majesty and grandeur. — But who will declare that those truths are, by being thus known, robbed of their inspired sublimity? or less fitted, through our knowledge, for foundations for noble poems? or that our minds, by such additional enlightenment, are rendered incapable of rising to Homeric heights of splendour? If so, then the telescope has robbed astronomy of its arousing sublimities, and we must believe the exploded Ptolemaic system more capable of exalting the imagination, than the infinitely enlarged view of its solar and starry glories, presented to human view through the avenues of later science. Comets and solar eclipses, in darker ages, carried terror and amazement, wherever they appeared; but is the ominous comet less sublime in its eccentric sweep, or the solar orb in its faded splendour, because
science has, in some degree, pointed out the nature and causes of the phenomena.

The causes of this predilection of our critics for all ancient productions, we have noticed as springing partly from educational bias and early associations. There are, however, other causes apart from those, which go far towards showing the origin of their prejudices. The association of ideas, or, as Dr. Brown terms it, the law of suggestion, is a wonderful thing, and operates upon the emotions, through the judgment, the imagination, and memory, with marvellous subtlety and power. In the matter of literary taste or bias, we apprehend, it exercises supreme sway over minds of every calibre, temperament and bent; and rules, without our ever suspecting it, the whole empire of our affections and passions.

Admitting, then, that our ideas of beauty and sublimity are inherent qualities or emotions of the mind, which existing objects and occurring events—the suggestions of memory and the feelings thence aroused—bring into active operation, let us apply more fully this law of association to the case of literary preference for the ancient over all modern classics.

When taste, as determined in its character by the nature of our predominant associations, is, in its minor points, if not in its essential principles as diversified as the minds of the intelligent beings influenced by its dictates, we cannot but expect a vast diversity of opinions in the public judgment when such questions as we are now considering are entertained and discussed. Still, if it could be
ascertained how many, upon such subjects, think for themselves, the number, we imagine, would be but few. When an oracle, conspicuous in the public eye for learning and ability, propounds his dogmas, the many believe and wonder or remain indifferent about the question.

Antiquity, long since merged into the abyss of infinity, presents before them an awful veil of darkness. Thebes, in its state — Babylon, in its pride — Athens, in its learning — Tyre, in its commercial greatness — and Rome, in its glory and magnificence, with their trains of monarchs, warriors, legislators, philosophers and poets, impress the minds of both the learned professor and the intelligent citizen with undefinable feelings of awe and veneration, which extend even to the literary relics handed down to our own age. Thus, the associations connected with them influence, in no mean degree, the nature of our decisions upon the literary merits of their authors; and hence, we apprehend, is one of the greatest causes of modern predilection for the works of heathen ages. All are viewed through the telescope of mythology or half-fabulous history. All impress the imagination. All awaken interest. The crumbling ruins — the towering pyramids — the mouldering inscription, sarcophagus and mummy — excite the mind, as well as the song of battles and the siege of cities. And the critic thus feeling the value of ancient literary remains enhanced by their far distant associations, carries forward his regard and veneration to the fragmentary literature itself, and enlarges the dimensions of its merits through the haze of time, whilst all of recent production,
void of such alluring accompaniments, though often of transcendent merit, is cast, in a great measure, down the river of oblivion.

To illustrate this a little further we may observe that the great tract of time which has elapsed since Homer and Hesiod the first profane poets of antiquity flourished, is a space within which the whole, or nearly the whole, of the profane history of the world is circumscribed; and in looking back over that vast field, studded thick with events important to then existing nations and all posterity, the memory feels loaded with the long succession of scenes and associations, and almost sinks beneath the weight. When the chain which reaches downwards is traced back, link by link, to its fountain head, and while entertaining by its narrative of action, and instructing by the philosophy deducible from the action and the impelling motives, the facts recorded will always appear, as we range further back, more misty and questionable—more apt to weaken the belief from want of evidence, and hence, more liable to rouse the imagination of the reader and aid the pen of the historian by his own additional fancies. Thus our belief is not only shaken with regard to the accuracy of some portions of history, but we absolutely become sceptical whether some recorded events actually took place,—and events too, which are attractive in its pages, and even dazzle the minds of successive generations. Who now gives credit to all the wonders so imposingly stated by the garrulous Herodotus? and he too an historian who flourished, at least, five hundred years after Homer is supposed to have existed. Are all the events narrated in
Livy's pictured pages to be implicitly believed? The mists of age break our faith in their actual reality, whilst the mixture of mythology with real facts, so confounded together and interwoven, prevents us from separating the truth from the fable. Thus, the productions of the most ancient Greek and Roman authors, receive, through the mystery attached to their own existence and identity, a degree of sublimity, like great objects seen indistinctly through a magnifying mist, independently of the intrinsic excellence of the productions themselves. Could we trace them from the uncertain period of their birth to modern ages when they became the ornaments of European literature, we should wonder at the mystery of their preservation, even as much as at the existence, uncorrupted in their descent, amidst storm, and peril, and persecution, of the sacred oracles. But the wonder seems the greater when all concurring circumstances are considered. The very existence of Homer himself is mythical, the place of his nativity a mystery, and the existence of such a city as Troy unauthenticated. And whilst the Jews had great interest in preserving inviolate the oracles of God, because they contained the history of their favoured race and the tables of the law, the Greeks had no interest, save that of literary pride in preserving the productions of their oldest poets, so that their existence until now seems strange and unaccountable. And while thus no certainty can be clearly attained with regard to either the author, the subjects, the collection of the poems by Pisistratus, or the strange preservation of the jewels themselves,—we naturally set higher value upon them—are
partial even to their defects, and look upon them as venerable for their antiquity,—wonderful in their preservation amidst the rise and the wreck of nations,—mysterious in the accidents of their parentage and birth,—amusing and instructive by their mythological doctrines, and the truth and beauty of their allusions,—beautiful and sublime by their limpid clearness and majestic march—the terror of the Trojan wars and the frowning horrors of the infernal shades.

It appears clear, therefore, that a prejudice which they themselves perhaps, do not suspect, exists in the minds of classic scholars and students, against modern productions, created and fostered by some or all of the causes glanced at in the preceding remarks. It is certain that in proportion as Homer and Virgil are worshiped, the moderns must pay for the adulation. The immense mass, so indiscriminately cast upon the world, amidst the whirlpool of which, the excellent is mixed up with a goodly share of the feted and insipid, may, in some degree, create a loathing in the minds of those who measure all by the standard of Longinus, and the beauties of Homer. Thus in fostering prejudices they cast a shade over truth, and forget, while launching forth their dogmas against modern works and genius, how thinly the great poets of first-rate excellence are scattered over centuries; and that during the last six centuries, a greater number of poets have arisen as stars in our European literature, than ever arose in a similar length of time in the heathen world. We cannot forget that Dante existed—that Tasso reigned. And when we look upon the list of our own honoured
poets and remember from their bequeathed remains, the mighty minds which, even when allowing Homer and Virgil, Eschylus and Sophocles, all their honours rose upon pinions of equal, at times of surpassing power and brilliance, into regions of the loftiest thought. Shakspere has sojourned in this world, and by his intellectual greatness, and the natural simplicity, strength and beauty of his thoughts and expressions, covered Eschylus and his successors with the shade of his brightness. Milton though living in troublous times, outsung, by surpassing sweetness, by loftier sternness and majesty, and sublime grandeur, all the poets of antiquity. And who shall deny the excellence of the firm knit, well compacted strength and lofty sweep of Dryden,—the vigorous, well sustained and tuneful harmony of Pope, and the original swell and massive compass of Thomson?

That Homer is the most natural and original of poets has been generally considered undeniable. We, however, demur to the justice of the criticism. But waiving this question partially aside, to what does the declaration of his originality amount but to this,—that he, so far as can be known, was the earliest of profane poets, and produced pictures at once brilliant and original, in both design and execution, and as regards men, manners, and things, and resembling the great exemplar from which he drew the likeness—Nature. And, when it is further affirmed that no nations of the world have ever produced poets comparable to him, and that those who approach nearest his elevation, have from him drawn all their ideas, imitated his plans, and followed his rules,—what is it but saying, in other words, that Homer
copied nature in its external course and magnificence, and that as men were all alike, and nature had but one universal aspect, but one correct view of it could be taken, and that thus, all other poets appear to have borrowed from him, whereas, they, as well as Homer, himself, may have transcribed from the open volume of nature? Nature, by no succeeding poet, could be pictured more natural and beautiful than it really exists. But mighty as was the genius of Homer, of Eschylus, of Lucretius and Virgil, who, while the dramas of Shakspere, and "Paradise Lost" exist, can subscribe to the justice of that criticism, which places the Iliad at once upon the apex of the literary pyramid of all ages and nations.

That the Iliad possesses in wonderful combination all the requisite elements for making a lasting impression upon the world, has been amply proved by its universal precedence, and its yet immortal youth. Virgil, possessing most of the qualities of Homer, and building his great poem upon a broad foundation and following the rules of the Grecian, is destitute of a portion of the fire, while he possesses the tender and pathetic in greater proportion. Homer is more distinguished for lofty sublimity and strength; Virgil is, throughout more steady and uniformly magnificent. Homer, existing in an age of presumed literary infancy, was compelled to rely upon his own inherent strength, and gave unconfined scope to his clear and dazzling fancy; Virgil, existing in a age of philosophic refinement and luxury, and amidst the magnificence of an Augustan court, stands much in the same relation to Homer,
as Cicero to Demosthenes,—he had more philosophy—more models, and it may be, relied less upon nature to originate, inflame, and add wings to the sweep of his genius. Homer already, the free, the untram-melled, had laid all nature under contribution to heighten the charms of his pictures and diffuse wonder among those to whom he sung. What was deficient in Homer, Virgil supplied, whilst he may almost be said, even in Homer's element of the sublime, to stand in equal stature by his side and claim an equal crown.

Do we here, then, concede the point, that poetry flourishes best in a dark age, simply because we have said that Virgil had more acquired learning, and less native fire than Homer? No such thing. It lies with the theorists on the other side of the question to prove, that Virgil, had he lived in the same age with Homer, would have been more fiery and sublime.

We must allow, however, that the natural beauty and sublimity of any subject, or object, upon which the poet or orator may diffuse his charms, determines in a great degree, the extent to which his genius will soar in its delineation, and the reception it will receive from the world. Thus Homer soared as high into the regions of mythological fiction,—drew as clear, and perhaps, as true pictures of the horrors of war, and of then existing modes of life, as any succeeding poet; but his paintings, even when a less clearly defined outline of his subjects would have imparted a more sublime impression, are drawn in lines of light. Untaught by the revelation of after days, his pictures of deified existences,
which we are taught to believe spiritual, and hence incomprehensible by us, are, in the highest degree, gross, sensual, and material. What is Olympus as the throne of Deity? What are the thunders and lightnings of Jupiter and Juno, the horrors of Erebus, and the dire character of Pluto, when weighed in the balance with the overwhelming themes of "Paradise Lost?"

Should it here be affirmed that the subject of "Paradise Lost" is in itself, immeasurably great and sublime, and therefore, no proper subject of comparison with the theme of the Iliad,—then, in strict accordance with the critics doctrine, we may answer that the exuberant erudition of Milton reconciles the difference between them. If Milton's subjects be inherently more awful and sublime,—according to their own poetical theory, his learning is against his success,—whilst Homer, through his very presumed ignorance, possessed infinitely greater facilities for dressing his more earthly scenery in robes of equal beauty and sublimity.

When Mr. Macaulay says, that no poet ever had to contend with, or overcame greater obstacles than Milton, he, we imagine, undermines the pillars of his own theory. He clearly admits what he endeavours to disclaim, by allowing that the obstacles placed in the way of great poets by learning and civilization may be removed, or that the poet, despite their opposition, may be successful in his efforts. If in the case of Milton, the force of his genius, by breaking through the immense mass of his learning, or by irradiating and inflaming all, succeeded in the production of a great and sublime poem, surely there
is a possibility of equal genius doing so in the case of another. True, no second Shakspere, nor Milton, has as yet appeared, but where is the impossibility that men of equal genius may arise? Nearly a thousand years rolled away after the death of Homer, before the Mantuan bard essayed to rival his Grecian master, and produced the second epic poem in the ancient world; thus dividing the heroic laurels solely between Greece and Rome. And who knows but from the very hotbed of civilization, spirits of equal daring and genius may arise to divide the dramatic empire with Shakspere, and the epic sublime with Milton and Homer?

But, after all, what evidence have we to prove that the age of Homer was one of darkness and barbarism? The mythic and legendary chronicles of Greece previous to the year BC. 776, are wholly void of any substantial foundation on which to build an accurate theory of the true character of the Homeric age, or the wars of Troy. Gazing thus through the struggling twilight, pervading the dawn of more illustrious epochs in the history of that wonderful people, we must conjecture much which we cannot prove regarding those early ages. But the connecting links of circumstantial evidence may form a chain so strong as to turn mere conjecture into certainty; and, thus, we think, the Homeric poems contain within themselves sufficient evidence to prove that the age of their author, or authors, was an age of considerable civilization.

An age of heathen barbarism cannot surely be one in which the forms, or idioms, of a language are fixed, and engrafted by acknowledged symbols in the midst
of a whole people, and made subservient for the copious and flowing expression of a refined sentimentalism, — the elevated descriptions of the external universe, and the conflicts of opposing armies, or the emphatic enunciation of dialogue between interlocutors of various descriptions, in the council, the household, and the camp. Nor can the poet who expresses his creations in such a language, have reached his elevated position among men, without some degree of refinement among the people to whom he sings being continually manifest. As the exponent of their feelings, he must certainly be in advance of the bulk of the people, but not so much as to lead to the conclusion, that he is refined and they are barbarous, — that he alone has risen in stature, like the Gods, and left mankind far below. He must know their habits, and think with them, and feel with them, before he can speak their language of universal passion, — breathe out their loves in words of tender fondness, or elevate, by strokes of skilful, but unpremeditated art, their devotions to the skies.

Yet, when Homer sung, the language of Greece was formed and polished so as to be the fitting instrument for expressing the noblest poetic inspirations in the loftiest style in which that language had then, or has since been capable. And no language has yet been refined so highly, and made the standard instrument of such flexible and varied expression without a corresponding advance of the people that use it, in the scale of civilization. Language, among every people, is formed by degrees, and can only be so established as to become the outward exponent of the whole people's mind, after long usage and uni-
versal adoption. Hence, before it can become rooted and fixed, some advance in civilization must be made. And if civilization be essential for only forming and arranging the language, as adapted to thought, how much more essential is it, and all its necessary adjuncts, for enabling the poet to rise to the height of his great argument, and to apply his art with that skill and dexterity necessary for complete success. The elements of true poetic success do not, therefore, as we perceive, exist in barbarism and intellectual darkness, but in advanced civilization, and amidst spreading knowledge. Were it otherwise, may we not ask, where are the poets of the American Indians,—the African tribes,—the Sandwich Islanders, or the Polynesian groups? How is it, if dark ages are most favourable for the growth of poetry, that none of those peoples in a state of ignorance, with which we come in contact, have yet displayed high poetic achievements, and rivalled Greece and Rome in intellectual fertility and splendour?

But mere incidental expressions in the Iliad and Odyssey, having reference to the arts and customs of life, and which seem to have run universally through the common language of the people,—the skill exhibited in delineating character,—the universal belief in fate or destiny, as influencing all actions and shaping all characters, and the very fact that the beginning of the Trojan war itself, arose from an act of heinous immorality,—all tend to prove that the age of Homer was not one of barbarian ignorance. Nor could the arts be wholly unknown;—on the contrary, their very chariots and weapons of war,—the
shield of Achilles, and its marvellous devices,—the construction of the wooden horse containing the warriors who first entered the walls of Troy, and the impregnable defences of the city itself, negative the conclusions of those who would make Homer the bard of a barbarous age. The infant colonies of Greece, we are certain, were not ignorant of the fame of Egyptian learning, Syrian riches, or Babylonian splendour, though we know not whether any intercourse took place between them. But whilst the nations of the east had reached their culminating point and were descending from their elevation, Greece had risen, and was still rising in the scale of refinement towards the dazzling climax of her after magnificence.

We are apt to judge erroneously from our present mount of vision, of the extent and character of the civilization of any former age. Comparing its features with our own advanced condition, we are apt to conceive all as dark which does not, in a great degree, rival our own transcendent light. It is difficult for us to conceive how ancient peoples achieved their architectural wonders, and rose to such eminence in the arts, without the facilities which we now possess for universal improvement. How poems, histories, and philosophy were written and circulated, previous to the discovery of paper and the invention of the printing press, seems a problem which we cannot fully comprehend, and on which all the known records of the world can throw no additional light to that which we already possess. The mythic age had its recorded wonders; and whatever positive truth is contained in poetic narra-
tive, or fable, is so artfully interwoven with fiction, as to form a web of truth and error, in which the two elements are inseparable by us. And even much of ancient history, after the commencement of chronological eras, is so void of anything like proof of the events recorded, that, though we read of actual personages and events, and can discriminate between what seems sober truth and exaggerated fiction, we are often at a loss to know the exact extent of each, and unable clearly to separate the fact from the interwoven mythus—the pure ore of truth from the accompanying legend or fable.

Though this be the case, however, in the more accredited portions of Grecian history, the authenticity of the narrative is, of course, much greater than of the previous untraceable ages. All the evidence which can be produced in favour of the Homeric age being one of civilization, is, as stated, contained within the poems, whilst the evidence which proves the refinement and splendour of the age of Æschylus, of Euripides, and Sophocles, is altogether independent of their works, and inwoven in the history of their country. The aesthetic and poetical faith with which we gaze through the mist of ages upon the Homeric poems, as the offspring of no mere wandering pagan, but of a highly cultivated mind, immortalizing, with fictitious embellishments, some incidents in the wars of his country—has little in common with the interest which we attach to the more recent productions of the Athenian dramatists. When Æschylus rose, and dragged before the world the proud and indomitable Titan of a past creation, unconsumed with the fierceness of his own internat
fire, chained to the Caucasian rock the vulture's prey, and the sport of the gods, Athens was near the climax of its refinement and the summit of its glory. Sophocles and Euripides, still more than Æschylus, enjoyed the refinements of philosophy, as personated and taught by Socrates, and afterwards enunciated by Plato; and yet, despite the highest cultivation which the age could boast, Æschylus raised the drama to its highest pitch of ancient excellence; and Euripides, "sad Electra's poet," seemed to stand on the turning point whence the literature of Grecce began to descend from its meridian splendour; whilst the nation itself, declining in virtue and power, at length sunk in twilight darkness at the foot of an iron power, destined to grasp the world, and, in its turn, sink into decay and disastrous ruin.

We need scarcely do more than merely advert to the age of Virgil and Horace. Rome, indeed, borrowed from Greece—as what succeeding age or country has not?—But, in her greatest epic and lyric poets, Rome, according to the doctrine of the critic, can boast of twin intellectual prodigies—prodigies indeed, by a twofold right of title—by their own exalted genius and power, and by their having produced their poems in the days of Rome's highest intellectual refinement and civilization. If, therefore, Homer was a prodigy in the legendary age of Grecian civilization—which the critic declares to have been one of darkness—surely Virgil, with whom he must ever divide the empire of his fame, must be a greater prodigy still. All the alluring refinements of Roman society—the effeminating and debasing influences of an Augustan court, and active
intercourse with the giddy whirl of Rome's ever-buzzing population—were unable to cloud Virgil's transcendant imagination, or tame down its soaring wings to a level with the muse of Tibullus or Propertius. As the type or moulding of his own age, Virgil reflects its light and its features in his Georgics and his Eneid, as Homer has done his own age in his twin creations; and in the same degree as Dante and Tasso, our own Shakspere and Milton, gives an emphatic disclaimer to the assertion, that all great poets have been the productions of barbarous ages.

Passing over the commencement of Rome's degeneracy, and its subsequent decline and fall, during the whole of which dreary period Ovid, and Lucan, and Juvenal the burning satirist, have been awarded the garland of immortality, we come to the dark or Gothic ages. Amidst the mental twilight which then enveloped the world, we should have expected, had such darkness been favourable for poetry, productions of the highest order of genius to enlighten the gloom; but yet, until the Provencal bards poured forth their original and glowing effusions, the muse was wrapt in slumber. The Crusades, like an electric shock, startled Europe, as from a trance, and stirred the depths of thought in the bosoms of millions. Men began to inquire; discoveries were made; literature began to revive; and the first poet of a mighty band, Dante, the original, the daring, and the sublime, arose, and gave expression to his thoughts, his feelings, and his hitherto unattempted creations, in a new, and what seemed at that age a barbarous language.
If it be said that the age of Dante, immediately following the Crusades, was one of darkness, it can only be so considered in a spiritual sense, as all nations during the despotic ascendancy of the Church of Rome, must be considered. Amidst the deluge of barbarism which swept over Europe after the fall of the Roman empire, and existed during the middle ages, Italy was, by a combination of circumstances, raised high in rank and influence above other states and kingdoms. When Dante brought forth his divine comedy, Florence and Milan, Pisa and Genoa, and other cities of North Italy, together with the republic of Venice, had reached a high state of refinement. Venetian galleys swept the Levant, exchanging commercial commodities. Florence supplied other nations with woollen cloths. Milan manufactured arms and armour. Banks for the circulation of money were established at Genoa. The Canary Isles were discovered, and gunpowder was invented and brought into use. Amidst this tide of prosperity Dante composed his immortal poem, and fixed the era of that new language, grafted like a graceful and beautiful creation, on the corruptions of the old. An exile from his native city, his beloved Florence, whose ambassador he had been, whose magisterial duties he had performed, whose benefactor he was, he felt his banishment most deeply, and expressed his allusions to his native city with an asperity as keen as was his hatred of the factions which had expelled him.

Following Dante, arose Petrarch and Boiardo in Italy, and Chaucer in England. Then, amidst many of lesser note, Ariosto and Tasso, two of the most
brilliant poets of any age, adorned a period of considerable civilization. The Reformation was advancing, and knowledge and refinement in letters, had, amidst civil commotions and national conflicts, spread more generally and sunk more deeply in the European mind, during the days of Tasso, the spread of the Jesuits, and the rivalry of Geneva and Rome. And, as if produced by repose, after the fierce struggles of the Reformation; the cause of science, literature, and extended freedom took deep root in England during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. It was, indeed, the first golden era of English literature, remarkable for its imposing grandeur and extent. The drama had commenced its brilliant career, and Elizabeth was its patron. Spenser, full of allegory and romance, was charming with his "Faery Queen." Bacon, with the line and plummet of truth, was exploding the vague philosophy of ages. Raleigh was attracting by his courtier's dash and his dreams of Eldorado. Drake was circumnavigating the globe, and the mighty Spanish Armada, equipped for the conquest of England, was hurried to destruction. A succession of events were quickly following each other, which cast around that age a halo, if not of pure glory, at least of interest and importance in the history of the nation.

The days of Milton, still advancing nearer our own age, were greatly different, and in some respects comparatively free. Amidst the collision between Charles and his subjects, the muse gave way to the more iron-tempered exercise of robust controversy. Imagination, in the prolific regions of fiction, had its wings laid prostrate, and only served to illustrate
speculation and truth; yet, immediately following that age, and amidst darkness and many troubles "Paradise Lost" was brought forth.

Supposing, according to the critic's doctrine, that Milton had, from his vast erudition, great obstacles to surmount, it must also be admitted that Shakspere was not altogether without them. He may not have been a classic scholar, or so profoundly erudite as Bacon the philosopher, or Raleigh the courtier, but was he an ignorant man? Was he unacquainted with the mythic Homer?—or Virgil, the ornament of the Augustan court? Did he live in an uncivilized age? No such thing. Yet with all the giddiness, refinement, and civilization of that age, Shakspere, the poet and dramatist, soars above all ancient, all modern competition. But, whilst his supremacy is admitted in point of universality, it cannot be denied that, compared with his brilliant and often unexpected flashes, the muse of Milton burns with a more steady, dignified, and intense blaze. If, in the creative and amusing, the thrilling in incident and passion, the attractive in beauty and grace, Shakspere outrivals the stately magnificence of Milton, the latter has, on the other hand, concentrated all the powers of his mind, and all the stores of his erudition in one great work—a rival to the greatest productions of ancient and modern times. If Shakspere has poured out his various soul, and created a number of intellectual monuments, unrivalled for their intrinsic excellencies, then Milton, out of the materials which he had been gathering for years, threw all his skill and vigour into one eternal pyramid. If Milton appears more colossal
in his magnificence, and more suggestive in awakening the ideas of intense sublimity and omnisic grandeur than Shakspere, it is only because the latter has not converged all the lines of his scattered rays, and cast them forth in one blaze of light; as he, to all appearance, possessed in a greater degree than even Milton, all the requisite characteristics of genius for the epic style of writing. He only wanted that continuity of thought—that patience and elaboration necessary for the successful completion of so great a work. His dramas seem almost as if spontaneously thrown off in the impulse of the moment, so happily, despite his faults, has he made all his arrangements; amidst superabundant imagery, so clear and distinct are his similes, never overloading, yet ever profuse—never elaborate, yet always profound. In the natural and the affected, where affectation is essential to character,—in the stern and pathetic, the creative and real—the calm in Hamlet, and the impassioned in Lear—the beautiful and the sublime in sentiment and nature, he wanders, disports at will, never trammeled for want, yet never laborious in search. The whole world of thought was open to his intuitive glance. The whole world of nature was to him as the garden of the Hesperides, and he wantoned voluptuously amid its flowers and its streams, "stealing and giving odour."

We imagine that it would here be superfluous further to enumerate a list of names, to prove that the highest poetry is no far fetched, sickly exotic in modern ages, and amidst spreading civilization. We still think that this iron, utilitarian age, has not extinguished the poetic faculty in human nature, nor
rendered the production of another Homer, Shaksperé, or Milton a thing impossible. At present there may be a pause in the progress of poetry, and few poems of a superlative character may have of late been brought forth; but a pause in its progress need not necessarily suggest the prophecy of its annihilation. We have faith in its re-invigoration, and its its yet resplendent triumphs—conscious that imagination can never be extinguished by reason, and certain that civilization can never be fatal to its full expansion and success.

Mr. Macaulay has made a curious remark which, in a great measure, explains the causes of literary predilection among the learned. In speaking of Dr. Johnson he says, "he had studied the bad writers of the middle ages till he had become utterly insensible to the Augustan elegance, and was as ill qualified to judge between two Latin styles, as a habitual drunkard to set up for a wine taster." Now, if we allow this to be the case with one literary character, there is every reason to think it may be the same with others. And it is, perhaps, therefore, as near the truth to say that the minds of Mr. Macaulay and his reviewing brethren are so warped with Greek and Roman literature, that they are no more fit justly to appreciate the excellencies of modern poetry than are "habitual drunkards to set up for wine tasters." They have erected their standard as set up in the universities, and it belongs to antiquity, and by its measurement they gauge all ancient beauties; but are lenient in marking their defects. Mr. Macaulay certainly gives Milton his due, and when sounding his praises condemns his own critical
standard. But, perhaps, Milton is only an exception to the rule. If so, where is Dante? Where are Shakspere and Tasso—the erratic Ariosto—the charming Spenser, and our own Dryden, in whose single mind the critical and the poetical were so strongly blended as to overthrow, by the example, the assertion that the two were immiscible? Or, in coming down to our own age, let us ask where the beauties of Burns and Byron are entombed? For assuredly they are replete with splendours unsurpassed by any poet in any language. Or, where are the splendours of Scott's creations? For amidst all his carelessness and his quantity, and despite the rapidity of his execution, there are scenes of the utmost power and beauty profusely scattered which Homer never eclipsed; and amidst the busy scenes of war in which the soul of the poet seems inflamed, and the strings of his harp are swept with matchless power, the poetic grandeur of the Trojan war is equalled if not surpassed. But here it is unnecessary further to multiply instances to prove that the critics standard is one of false dimensions, supported by prejudice—reverenced by habit, and zealously watched and learnedly defended, lest the flames of modern genius should consume, or the assaults of antagonistic principles should overthrow it.
JOHN MILTON.

HIS AGE—HIS INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL
CHARACTER.

The many learned essays, criticisms, lectures, and
sketches, to which the writings and, public character
of Milton have given rise, might:well preclude any
unlearned adventurer from entering the ample field.
But the great are not alone ambitious. Milton is a
"household word," and his poems, however under-
stood or appreciated, are household treasures. We
love to contemplate the man in his youth; in his
active manhood, amidst stirring and tumultuous
events; and in his latter days, in blindness, under
the ban of persecution, and dictating to his daugh-
ters his imperishable poems. Had he lived in other
times, amidst high prosperity, courted by the great,
and admired and loved by all, he had not so well
fulfilled his mission. Though it is impossible to ad-
mire suffering as Milton suffered, or to admire blind-
ness as Milton endured it, or to admire persecution
as it howled around his path, yet it is impossible
for us to dissociate from all these the monuments of
genius he has left behind him. Had his vision been
uneclipsed, "Paradise Lost" would not have been
what it is—if, indeed, it had ever been composed. From his external blindness he could more firmly concentrate his internal vision upon the dread realms of spiritual light and darkness spread out before him. To the revolutionary turbulence of his times we owe his noblest prose productions, and to his domestic losses and personal trials and afflictions many of his sweetest and most pathetic bursts of poetry. In his younger days, amidst civil broils and discord, society was making giant throes for freedom against worse than Papal tyranny and Jesuitical cunning; in his latter days tyranny and licentious looseness had again resumed the seat of power, and enthralled the nation in moral and political bondage.

But though Milton was old, and blind, and poor, it was some consolation for him to have lived for a time in comparative freedom, and to have laboured that the rights and liberties of the kingdom might be consolidated on a basis of right and truth, to set the example to other nations;—and to have lived contemporary with Cromwell, and Pym, and Hampden, the scourges of priestly despotism and oligarchical tyranny. And though he had now fallen upon evil days and evil tongues, and passed his remaining years in darkness and obscurity, he could calmly repose on a pure conscience and an anticipated worldwide fame; and though, like many others who have moulded the minds of their eras more thoroughly to the bent of freedom, and passed unrewarded, or met obloquy and reproach for their high endeavours, he received not his own from those he served and honoured,—he had done his duty, had been steadfast, like his own Abdiel, amidst temptations, and
bold amidst dangers, and could drop into the grave honoured, though denounced; and lamented and eulogised, though obviously, by those in authority, hated and scorned.

The missionary, whether political or religious, of any age, must always partake of the spirit of that age, which, as a child, he may follow, or which, as a daring innovator, he may successfully lead and guide. Still he must be of it, and partake of its spirit, while tutored by it, and clearly decipher its tendencies and capabilities before he can fully perform his arduous duties, and leave his heart and genius indelibly impressed upon it. The age itself, and the people which require and hail such bold and penetrating spirits, must be labouring with high and sacred destinies before they can realise their own powers, comprehend the grandeur of the unfolded schemes for a social and political regeneration, or valiantly grapple with the many foes upstarting around them, fearful of change, to defend wrong and oppression, ignorance and slavery. The more crushing the oppression and galling the chain, the more deeply have the minds of the liberators been diffused through enfranchised society, and hence the more fervent should be the gratitude of unborn ages for their gigantic struggles in snapping asunder the iron fetters which had been wrapped around the national soul and paralysed it.

The age which thus gave birth to Milton was one of the most momentous ever recorded—an age prolific of great schemes and changes, mighty spirits and daring heroic actions—forming an episode or parenthesis in the line of regal story, and compris-
ing within a few years events productive of consequences to after days more important than ever took place in our country within so limited a period.

Nearly all histories treat chiefly of kings and queens, courts and courtiers, the intrigues of wily statesmen, and the war and bloodshed which seem as if almost a necessary part of the machinery of human governments, and rarely indeed treat of the people themselves, for whom in the aggregate, kings and statesmen exist and act. In the days of Milton the scenes began to change. Men—the men, and not the mere statesmen of that age—began to question the acts of the despotic king, and showed a disposition to confront him in his aggressions, and withstand his tyranny with an equal or superior power. They then became actors in a great drama; and while the kingdom was seething with the convulsions of a civil war, the current of our history for the first time seems changed; royalty is eclipsed in its splendour by the daring ascendancy of the plebeian power; the basis of the great pyramid is inverted, and the royal apex, reverenced by the homage of ages, is humbled in the dust. Men, who under a just government had never been heard of, now that the elements of tyranny were thick, and mustering their forces to crush the infant Hercules of rising liberty, girt on their armour and became centres of a crusade for a nobler freedom. Men, and not kings, then became attractions in our own histories, and claimed, while they drew down, the admiration and gratitude of posterity. It is not King Charles but Oliver Cromwell who then becomes the most prominent character in the group of that
ages heroes. Not the gifted Strafford, nor the supple Laud, but the less courtly Pym, and Hampden, and John Milton. The age, such as no age in England had ever before been, was eminently democratic, and yet conservative. It warred not against men and institutions simply as such, but against the improper use of that might which threatened to extinguish or trample upon all human right to justice and equality. The cry of men was not against Church and State and aristocracy, but the active spirit and determination was to be without them all as then existing, rather than with them to wander back to the Stygian night of the middle ages, to forsake, in fact, their very manhood by giving up their rights and claims to think and be free. Thus thinking and feeling, a new and irresistible current of healthy vitality rushed, as it were, into the heart of the nation. Its tendencies and its actions were onward. Placing their trust upon the immutable Rock of Ages, with these men there was life and activity in every motion, strength and vigour in every stroke, enterprise, skill, and victory in every successive struggle. They had, on going to war, either to rid themselves from a hated tyranny, or, being conquered, to prostrate themselves beneath the cloven hoof long upraised to crush them. In the battle for the rights of nature and nations they conquered; and we of the present day enjoy the fruits reaped, after years of growing maturity, from the seeds of the noble principles they then planted and watered with their blood.

Minds are thus moulded in accordance with the spirit and tendency of their age; and while they act are re-acted upon by the innumerable influences sur-
rounding them. But few outstrip time in their views or acquirements; and fewer still receive their just meed of applause or reward from the generation whose spirit they surpass by an earnest, far-reaching, prophetic view of coming events, whose types or shadows are beheld as forerunners, and beyond the interpretation of the great mass of mankind. Amidst such as these, Milton held and must ever hold a conspicuous place. Though never amidst his compatriots engaged in the field, he was yet an admirable fencer. Others were, perhaps, better adapted for subtle diplomacy, or the field of actual war; he was best adapted for the field of contemplation; for advancing and defending principles, and, frequently, arresting the public mind by throwing over it, like an intellectual arch, new views and illuminations of great and pressing truths, then seething in and urging on the national mind to crush despotic tyranny for ever. The mind of the man, as distinct from the poet, was cast in the largest and noblest mould. All the elements of greatness there met and harmonised. No single faculty or quality was eclipsed by others of a more celestial brilliancy. Like an ancient Grecian temple, chaste in its adornments, and simple in its splendour, its magnificence consisted not in detached portions of superior workmanship, but in the simple beauty and noble symmetry of the whole. The broadest comprehension was united to the greatest plainness and child-like simplicity. "Logical acuteness was linked to the most vivid and creative imagination, and the most dazzling fancy; and, even with these in their wildest moods and workings, there existed subtle discrimination and exquisite tact in
delineating character or enforcing argument. The highest reach of human conception was united with the minutest knowledge of the mind in its ordinary moods—the deepest speculations on human interests with the profoundest knowledge of matters of fact. If it be said that in the exact sciences he was not profoundly versed, what is it but saying that he was not perfect? And be it remembered that the Baconian philosophy had not then progressed over Europe, nor had the discoveries of Newton then simplified the complex riddles of creation. His prodigious acquirements did not press upon his tenacious memory so as to repress his creative originality. The smoke and dross of human learning could not dim the flame of the intellectual furnace burning within, and maturing all its elements to burst forth in one broad blaze of irradiation;—it pierced through and impregnated the solid mass, and converted all into its own ethereal essence.

Amidst all his seriousness, his wit in vain seeks concealment. His sarcastic raillery breaks forth amidst the proudest triumphs of his reason. When he breaks Salmassius upon the wheel, or argues for the removal of hirelings out of the Church; or for the freedom of the press, his sweeping rhetoric, his lofty eloquence, and inflamed invective, majestic in their ocean-like rush, astonish while they enchain the mind of the reader, and fix its energies with silent admiration and reverent awe. Nor, when it suits his purpose, does he disdain to assume the armour and do the work of the sophist. In none of his works is he more sincere than in his pleas in
favour of divorce; and, as is quite natural, in none is he more eloquent and impressive. His heart is in the subject; but with all his uncurbed strength and vehemence, his splendour of diction and passionate-ness of appeal, he is only the brilliant sophist still, whose feelings and desires belie his sober judgment. Throughout the whole argument, it is plain he feels his want of a solid foundation; and the whole superstructure, like the frostwork of a night upon a transparent surface, melts before the sunshine of truth and reason.

Qualities or faculties apparently of an antithetical nature, and which, in ordinary minds, often eclipse or paralyse each other, seemed in Milton, by the contrast, to exhibit each other with greater brilliancy. With all his simplicity, his mind is to many of the world a splendid paradox. Surveyed on all sides, he does not seem simply one, but many men united. Most kinds of composition he attempted, and in all he was in his own age unequalled, and in some unequalled in all ages of the world. He who could indite poetry and logic—grammar, historic, and history—polemics and pleas for education—politics and pleas in favour of divorce—must have possessed versatility of no common order, even though singly, in each department, of but mediocre powers; but when in Milton's mind all these qualifications met, what must have been the height, the depth, and comprehensiveness of its grasp! Like his own angels tearing up the mountains in their warfare—a task unfit for creatures of earth's mould—he seizes subject after subject, and investing each
with a splendour all his own, leaves it a Titanic monument for the after-world's admiration.

The mental, in its gigantic proportions, was strengthened, adorned, and hallowed by moral heroism and meek and unaffected piety. However he was employed, or however he moved, or whatever weapons he wielded against this world's powers of darkness, the majesty and simplicity of truth shone around him—formed at once his panoply and shield, his ground of attack or defence. He threw himself, and for ever, by the side of religion; and, by chivalry the most pure and exalted, devoted all his powers for its disenthralment from state chains and superstition, and moved unflinchingly, in darkness as in light, beneath its standard. For him, in a religious sense, the brick conventicle had more charms than the lofty-domed cathedral—the plain preacher of peace, than the surpliced priest. Shut out in material darkness from the teeming splendours of this visible creation, the spiritual Milton could not conceive of the glories of redemption, and symbolic sublimities and prophetic scenery of the Apocalypse, as being heightened in impressiveness and grandeur, by exposition and enforcement within Gothic walls, and by carved galleries, apostolic images, and many-coloured windows, more than in the square and unadorned building. The internal enforcement of truth upon the conscience—the sublimation of the soul by assimilation through Christ to God was the great aim and end in view. With no mere external impressions, or play of the senses, could the mighty soul of Milton be satisfied. Like the dove which disported above the waters of the
deluge, and returned to the ark—unable to find rest for its foot—he alone, when rising from the clouded tabernacle of his own spirit, could find an ark of eternal rest amidst the glories shadowed forth darkly to our earthly perceptions when realised and sublimated in God.

We mean not, in truth, to say that Milton had no perception of the beauties of architecture and sculpture, or veneration for the ecclesiastical edifices of our own and other lands. No mind, in fact, can be wholly void of such perceptions and feelings; and in Milton himself, the mould of elegance, whatever in nature or in art was beautiful or sublime, or calculated to elevate and inspire, or be suggestive of the great, the free, the holy and eternal, found an admirer or worshipper. His was not the sickly sentimentalism which abjures the world on purpose to worship God; the altar of his soul was not alone in the tabernacles of men, in the solitude of the monk, or the mountain cell of the hermit. Like Byron, he could make altars of

"The mountains and the ocean,
Earth, air, stars, all that see through the great whole,
Who hath produced and will receive the soul;"

Inspire the soul with love, wing its devotions with faith, and lay all its offerings at the foot of the Cross, humbly depending upon Him who endured it; and wherever the altar may be placed, and the offering poured from the full heart, it will be received and treasured by the Holy One. This Milton knew. He saw that our noblest edifices were occupied by a hireling church and a time-serving
ministry — enemies to freedom and panderers to court profligacy; and finding simple truth in conventicles, when banished from cathedrals, he exerted all his powers to elevate and spread the truth taught in the former; by writing against the abuses of the latter. Religion, he saw, was felt and elevated in the one, installed by law, and bound down by forms and ceremonies to suit expediency, in the other. The one was a moral and religious nursery for training minds to a knowledge of Scripture truth, and raising the heart to its Maker; — the other was a State machine, sublime in its liturgical service, and pleasing to many in its easy ritual, but cold and stiff in its pageantry, and appealing more to the outward senses than the inward conscience; from whose consecrated altars the divine right of kings to govern wrong was boldly proclaimed, and where, amidst moral coldness and soul-freezing divinity, all the vials of the Apocalyptic wrath were threatened to be poured upon the heads of the malignant heretics, who openly dared to patronise the incubus of Dissent, in defiance of the mingled terrors of episcopacy and the courts of law.

We in our own country, at the present time, have but a faint idea of the nature and extent of the ecclesiastical domination carried on on the Continent in the sixteenth century. By reading we learn much of its operations, but vainly attempt fully to comprehend the nature of its subtle, insolent, and domineering spirit. Great as it is now, it must have been still much greater when, in his youth, Milton visited Italy and exchanged greetings with a kindred spirit— the "starry Galileo." If, in
Florence, he was attracted by the triumphs of art—and in Rome gazed with awe-struck wonder upon the desolation which ages had scattered around him—he was no doubt repelled by the priestly tyranny he witnessed, and sickened at the thought that his own country, though the flower of Christendom, and the so-called bulwark of the truth, still laboured in some degree under the same benumbing spell, and was even then travelling backward to Rome. To stay it in its course, and prevent it from gaining unlimited ascendency, as in other countries, and scattering its plagues, was his lofty aim. By so doing he would draw down courtly wrath and priestly persecution, and write himself demagogue in the parti-coloured annals of his country; but he preferred duty to interest, and threw himself in the breach to defend truth and holiness from the rough grasp of rampant intolerance and regal duplicity. He felt himself called upon to prosecute a high and sacred work, and, ever in "his great Taskmaster's eye," calmly pursued his onward career amidst the turbulence of opposing elements.

It were vain to affirm that none of his sanguine expectations were realised. He saw much more completed than he ever probably dared to hope would be done in his day. The Temple of Freedom was being raised; but the top stone had not been elevated amidst the shoutings and the great joy of the people, when the death of Cromwell opened up the way for the return of the exiled Prince. And when, in their fresh impulse of loyalty, the people opened their arms to receive him, they unconsciously embraced a serpent, who, before the national jubilee at his resto-
ration was well over, had begun to spread his loathsome and contagious venom over the kingdom—had crawled into the recesses of the affections which cherished and restored him, and left the hateful slime of his profligacy and hollow ingratitude behind him.

But during the ascendancy of Charles II. and his ribald Court, freedom was only obscured for a season, not extinguished. The minds of men had been elevated into an atmosphere of purer freedom, and could not now, as formerly, believe in the doctrines of kingcraft so absolute and foul as were spreading from the Circean sty of Whitehall. The Pilgrim Fathers carried their principles to a further shore, and there sowed the now ripening seeds of extending empire. The glorious prose productions of Milton had pierced the intellect of the nation, and their truths were felt and condemned in high places—a sure sign of their onward tendency; and the Act of Conformity, seemingly then so triumphant for the intolerant Church, laid, in fact, a broader basis for the future progress of Dissent.

Milton's prose productions, so unanswerable in his own day, have never become popular in ours. Great and interesting as are most of the subjects of which they treat, the style and language are, in many respects, above the reach of the popular mind. We have seen a small volume, entitled "The Poetry of Milton's Prose," consisting of the most glowing extracts, which, like the selected beauties of some authors, might give some feeble conception of his powers, were it not that their extent and universality defy compression within such narrow limits; and that
such can no more give the reader a view of the whole intellectual vast, than can a glance of a land-bound creek of the sea give the spectator an idea of its boundless immensity. Mere skimmers of periodical literature, or hunters after the morbid of fiction, need never expect to find amusement from his weighty prose, or gratification from any looseness of sentiment they may think to discover. In every respect they are a colossal study, calculated, when well understood and appreciated, to elevate the studious artizan as well as the man of science and erudition—to arouse the slumbering feelings to a love of the true, the beautiful, and the free—and in every way to foster the growth of ennobling sentiment, holy aspiration, and fraternal love.

The knowledge that we possess of ancient literature is merely fragmentary. We have only the light shining from a few of its intellectual beacons; and there is no doubt but that the republic of letters in Greece had its many feeble lights as well as its eclipsing suns, even as is the case in all lands in our own day. In the gifted mind originality is intuitive, and produces its riches without that severe labour required from lesser minds. The difficulty is in directing its energies well, and expending them upon proper subjects, so as to strike and be felt at the core of the public heart and soul. The ancients were thus necessarily original, because they had no predecessors. No matter how strikingly original may be the moderns, their originality is called in question, because they had the ancients and all preceding literature before them to mould their ideas of things and store their memories. But, we would ask—was
Bacon less original than Aristotle?—was Shakspere less original than Eschylus?—was Milton less original than Homer or Virgil?—was Burke or Fox less original than Demosthenes or Cicero?—who had Scott for a prototype? Originality, in truth, depends on neither country nor age. That form or condition of society best adapted for its development, and in which it can best be felt, will inevitably draw it forth, wherever, or however existing. And one great and remarkable fact will always be found connected with it:—no great original minds have yet appeared as oracles of their respective epochs, or discoverers of hidden truths or principles, but have arisen at those very epochs when their voices were most required to utter great truths; and their discoveries were of most benefit to the world. And so of great poets. Chance has not the direction of genius, any more than the direction of the planets round the sun, or the ominous comet in his eccentric sweep through space. Events and circumstances shape minds and precipitate other great events. Dante's original muse was matured in adversity, and uttered its voice in bitterness and grief; but thus his misfortunes prompted his great poem. Milton's was also matured amidst convulsions, and drew back the veil from other worlds in affliction and darkness. We know more of these and other modern authors than we know of the ancients, and hence some value their productions less. They do not gaze upon them through the dense mist of antiquity, enlarging their dimensions, and so lower them to their own standard. Such seem to favour the absurd notion that intellect degenerates in every successive age, and that of old
there were intellectual giants such as no modern age has produced. Also, for such faith in the capacities of our race!

Milton more highly appreciated man. Bacon saw prophetically into futurity, and realised, in anticipation, the onward progress of society through his own method of philosophic induction; but yet, great as was his mind, and universal as were his talents and genius, his expectations of the world's progress were more through material calculations and physical improvements than the spiritual elevation and majesty of mind. Imaginative though he was, he seldom ranged through the upper regions of poetic thought and feeling; and his general view of man and his destinies is that of a cold, reasoning philosopher. How different from Milton!

Regarding with becoming respect all the productions of science and art, Milton still considered the material elevation of men and society as only secondary to the sublimer elevation of the soul and heart through freedom, education, and religion. Knowing that mind must always keep pace with, or rather lead philosophy and the arts, he would still make these only the stepping-stones, or the scaffolding, for elevating man to a higher and purer existence, and drawing him in all his aspirations nearer to God. Nor was all this a purely poetical view of the question. It was the poetical after truly just and noble view of man's genuine nature and greatness based upon the practical and real. Man, he saw, to be really free must be magnanimous, just and good. To be truly taught, he must teach himself, and not be alone dependent on government schools and uni-
versities. To be truly great, and write well on great and laudable things, he must unite in himself all the characteristics of virtue capable of making him a pattern of wisdom and goodness to other men and nations and ages.

Holding such views, Milton longed to see a nation—nay, more, a world—of such men; and anxious to show them their true position in society, he strips disguise after disguise, from the corrupt conventionalism of courts, the decrees of tyrannical rulers, and rapacious, persecuting priests, and then points them to the remedies for eradicating the social disease from the mind and heart of the nation, and preparing the way for a healthier tone of morals and a nobler freedom. And while thus arousing and directing the national mind, his own life corresponded in many respects with his great doctrines and precepts. He was his own exemplar. He sought to elevate man, that through men nations might be elevated, the rigours of law relaxed, humanity cherished, the temple of freedom reared and universally admired, and moral justice and truth, based upon religion, influencing all the acts and negotiations of enlightened and enfranchised man throughout the world. Thus, though Milton the poet be great, Milton the man, is equally great. He fears no human power in his advocacy of human right. No court frown appals him; no priestly anathema stings him; no obloquy, however keen, deters him from performing his duty. Ever "in his great Taskmaster's eye," and erect in his own manhood and internal strength, he travels through the wilderness of this world, enlightened in his darkness, and
strong in his weakness, with an unseen light and power—until at last the weary body, overcome, can no longer contain the spiritual mind within, and sinks, a shattered but once beautiful casket, into its original elements; while the triumphant spirit, free from its earthly bonds, waves its triumphant wings among the angels and archangels whom once he sung; and now, illumined with eternal light, rejoices with the myriads that circle his throne.
JOHN MILTON AS A POET.

Having glanced, in a preceding paper, at the age, and the intellectual and moral qualities of Milton, a consideration of his claims to supremacy as a poet naturally follows.

The greatness and popularity of "Paradise Lost" has, in a great measure, had the effect of throwing the earlier and lesser poems of Milton into the shade; and to many ignorant of the more unbounded extent of his universal genius, he seems only the author of the sublimest poem in the world. "Paradise Regained" we might imagine had been composed to calm down and soothe the excitement under which some portions of "Paradise Lost" were written, did we not know that even in scenes, and amidst events the most arousing, the mind of the writer was habitually mild and unruffled. Portions of "Paradise Lost" may have been composed when under the dominion of agitated feelings, aroused by persecution, which unconsciously found fitting expression in the verse. He was

"In danger, and with darkness compassed round;"

and hence the spirit in which his self-reflecting episodes in his great epic were written was more
nervous and bitter than when he composed "Paradise Regained." Then his once bitter feelings were mellowed and softened down, and the storm of tyranny blew past unheeded. So, also, as if springing forth in accordance with the changed mind of the poet, the Satan of "Paradise Regained" can bear no comparison with the Satan of "Paradise Lost." He bursts forth before us no more the great though fallen archangel, menacing heaven with his thunders, but the subtle Jesuit, employing fraud, falsehood, and cunning, to prevent his own head from being eternally bruised, and the kingdoms of the world ultimately wrenched from his grasp. He is there the crushed rebel, conscious that all his powers of retaliation by force of arms were vain, acting the wily diplomatist, and endeavouring to vitiate all the conqueror's victories, by turning their results in his own favour, and thus overreaching his antagonist by a stratagem of words.

Milton's preference of this poem to "Paradise Lost" need be no theme of wonder; it was the natural result of the change in his own mind. In sorrow, and often in danger, he sung of the fall and its dire consequences in both worlds. With a subdued spirit, and a steadfast faith and hope, he sung of the triumphs of redemption; and modest and simple, as became him in dealing with the stupendous subject, he makes no attempt to pierce the inscrutable mysteries of the incarnation or of the cross; and only in scattered fragments of beauty and sublimity, seems to emulate his former energy and greatness, and show that, though subdued, he is the giant still.

If the reader of "Paradise Lost," however, be
comparatively ignorant of "Paradise Regained"—of "Lycidas;" the noblest elegy ever dedicated to the manes of the dead—of the "Hymn to the Nativity," the sublimest in the language upon the subject, and of his other minor, though splendid, efforts, the loss is compensated by the feeling of entire veneration which possesses the mind after the first perusal of his great work. The subject itself, of such an awfully sacred character, naturally awakens feelings of veneration, but when seen through the light of grandeur which the poet flings around it, we identify the sublimity with his own mind, and transfer our veneration to him. He then seems to stand upon a sacred eminence above the height of the less gifted, but yet distinguished brotherhood of poets of all ages, nations, and languages. The very darkness in which, to a great portion of his readers, his similes and allusions are hid, tends to strengthen the awe with which he is contemplated; for while he arouses wonder by the force and splendour of his descriptions, he creates an equal wonder at the boundlessness and diversity of his attainments, which, when converged into one burning focus through the refining and transforming glass of his imagination, clothes his creations with a more superhuman glow. It is thus that, to understand him aright, without wading through commentaries, his readers should bring to the task a mind furnished in some degree like his own. In Homer, all is clear to the simplest, because composed in the infancy of the heroic age, ere learning, according to some, had taken root in the soil of curiosity, and flung its sunshine over half the globe. And it is thus that Homer is, in some degree, considered
superior to Milton, and worthy of more universal homage; for in the "Iliad" all appears to spring clear, fresh, and vigorous, from the ever-salient well of his invention, without effort or elaboration, and simple to the simplest reader; while in Milton we imagine we perceive, though quite natural to him, an elaboration of display, in no way required to exhibit his powers, because, wholly unfettered by the weight of his learning, his genius naturally soared in the loftiest elements, and shaped its most glorious visions from themes unknown to the heathen, and attainable only through exuberant erudition, but which, though aiding his powers and firing his muse, he had no need so ostentatiously to exhibit.

And it is through the great extent of his learning that Milton gives a successful disclaimer to the superficial dogma, that poetry flourishes best in an age of superstitious darkness; or else how is it that he, with a mind so richly stored, could yet revel in the regions of infinite beauty, and draw from his unconfined imagination visions and creations of the most diffusive magnificence? His passions may have been subdued; he may, as Dryden expresses it, have "read nature through the spectacle of books;" but his love of truth, as drawn from the volume of nature in all its changing phases, and from the volume of Nature's God in all its depths, was still the same. In all his aspirations after freedom, in all his controversial labours—amidst every excitement, every peril—amidst misfortune and misery, surrounded by darkness, and assailed by the howlings of persecution, he strictly and, martyr-like, adheres to the tenor of his early resolutions; and liberty, based upon the im-
mutable foundations of eternal truth, was the grand and prominent object which, in his active life, he sought to establish—the one absorbing feeling of his earnest soul. His feelings may have been hushed, so that the ordinary passions of men had for him but little inspiration; and the passionate eloquence of the heart, instead of spending its burning thoughts and visions in anticipations of unexisting happiness, gave birth to the holy and the pure, the sublime and the beautiful, in strains of brighter originality and fervour. His "Comus," the bright dream of his youth, is almost void of any exciting passion; but tenderness and sensibility are exquisitely mingled with unaffected power; and the measured cadence and music of the verse is only equalled by the beauty of the varied imagery and the moral purity of the sentiments. Of a like nature, and grouped like stars apart from the crowd, are his other lesser poems. He may not be a Petrarch among sonneteers, but, despite the sneers of Dr. Johnson, who among his English competitors can stand by his side? His imagination clothes its favoured offspring, of whatever kind, in ethereal forms and robes; and exquisite in harmony of numbers as in sentiment, both of mirth and melancholy, his "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" partake of all the characteristics of his mind, and rank among the most delightful of his creations.

Considering the subject of "Paradise Lost" in all its immensity, it appears, at first sight, too high, too broad, and too deep for human comprehension to grasp. If the themes of the fall and the redemption are so deep and glorious, and in all their mighty meanings are only so far disclosed in the heavens
above us to arouse the desire of angels for a still deeper knowledge of their mysteries, how daring must have been the human intellect which, on more than archangels’ pinions, attempted to pierce the thick darkness of that excessive light circling the throne and the councils of God! And if the very attempt, to human apprehension, seems to border upon the blasphemous, with what wonder must we gaze upon its successful completion! and, standing upon the earth as upon the great archway of time, hear from the very Godhead the fiat for the creation of hell and the punishment of the rebel angels, and the unfolding, after the fall, of the grand scheme for the redemption of the world through his Son!

The battles of the Gods and the Titans in “Hesiod” we at once feel to be wild and grotesque, though ambitious—the outpourings of a dark mythological mind—which leave but a faint impression behind. The “Prometheus” of Æschylus, chained to the Caucasus, and in his proud disdain inveighing against fate and the tyrannous gods who thus, amidst the tortures of the consuming vulture, make him their sport and prey, grows upon the mind like a terrific incubus, sublime even in the clearness of its outlines, and seems to transport us into some antemundane world, ruled by destiny and thunder-awed by the bolts of Jove.

Still, amidst all the grandeur of the poem, the mind of the reader, like “Prometheus” himself, is bound to the earth, and feels a lack of that ethereal quintessence which leaves such an undescrivable richness upon the intellectual palate in Milton’s higher creations.
Dante's "Hell" is earth transformed and perpetuated, amidst torments clear, palpable, and tangible. The "Inferno" is a transparent analysis of the scenes and tortures of Erebus, of every kind and degree. The "Paradise" and "Purgatory" are distinguished by the same characteristics. In them all we perceive material scenes around us and before us, with all their kindred associations—often sublime, indeed, in their pictured horrors, and beautiful in their robes of light, but wanting in that transcendental gloom and glory, and indefinite vastness, so attractive in its very sublimity in Milton's regions of sorrow and of joy. Dante created his "Hell" and his "Heaven" to people them with his foes and his friends, and what characters he chose from history and the Greek mythology;—to Milton was reserved the more gigantic task of entering the spiritual eternal world before time was—of picturing before us creation in its birth and progress from primeval chaos—the expulsion of the thunderblasted angels from the battlements of heaven into the flaming abyss below, henceforth the dominion of Satan and his host—the fiery lake stretched out amidst eternal darkness, with its sulphury shores, volcanic mountains, and regions bitten with eternal frost, and lashed with perpetual storms—the projected revenge of Satan against the Most High, by drawing from their allegiance the young Adam and Eve, sole inintelligent inhabitants of the new world, ere sin had transformed its sweet serenity and clouded its smiles with tears.

His hell, unlike Dante's, is thus no mere superaddition to our earth, filled with erring mortals
undergoing eternal punishment. Angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, form and swell the concourse of the mighty lost, great in their fallen majesty, though plunged in penal flames, and terrible in their wrath, when again threatening to wage war against the thrones of heaven. His Satan is no mere grotesque, superhuman monster, as has often been pictured to our imaginative boyhood. The fallen archangel

"Had not lost 
All his orginial brightness, nor apareed 
Less than archangel ruined and the excess 
Of glory obscured."

In hell he loses not his distinctiveness of character; and though, unlike the fierce Moloch, he sees how vain were any attempt to regain heaven by force of arms, he still triumphs in the hope of being able to thwart the purpose of God by seeking the new-formed world and blasting its bliss. His pride, his envy, and his malignity against heaven at his defeat and doom, uncurbed, rankle in and exasperate his heart of adamant, knit with frowns his thunder-blasted brow, distend his nostrils with pale and livid rage, and curl his lip with haughty and unconquerable hate. When he rises from the fiery lake where he lay "floating many a rood," the liquid flames, sinking beneath his spiritual might,

"Driven backward, slope their pointed spires, and rolled 
In billows, leave i' the midst a horrid vale."

When, in Pandemonium, in council with his legions, he unfolds his project of seducing Adam and
Eve in Eden, and asks who will undertake the enterprise, the assembled hosts are mute. When he mounts upward through the undisturbed realms of chaos and old night, and meets such signal rebuffs from the anarchs of old, Orcus, and Hades, and Demogorgon, he again, superior in power,

"Mounted upward, like a pyramid of fire."

Sin and death, his own monstrous offspring, cannot dismay him, or prevent him from leaving the gates of hell to survey the new world and blast its prospects. Then, when he lights upon the earth's outermost convex—when he soliloquises the sun, or o'erhangs the wall of Eden, and thinks of the glory he has lost and the hell of unextinguishable horrors he has gained—his deep malignity and despair, and his thirst for revenge, are reboudled in fury, and taint, as with a mildew, the whole celestial region; and, thus armed with all the evil passions predominant in hell, he addresses himself to the work of ruin, and completes it, when

"Earth trembled from her entrails, as again  
In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan;  
Sky lowered, and muttering thunder, some sad drops  
Wept at completing of the mortal sin."

This magnificent conception—this vast and tremendous creation, so perfect in both outline and filling up (if that which is so vast and indefinite can be said to have any outline)—is the most attractive in the poem. Tender and beautiful as are some of the scenes in Eden, and gloriously magnificent as is the scenery and the angelic host surrounding the
throne of the eternal, bathed in intolerable splendour, Satan, and "the deep tract of hell," are more attractive from their very repulsiveness. His iron and indomitable will, his spiritual vastness and supremacy, though fallen, which even the Deity cannot crush into annihilation—his proud and lofty menace, as he rises from the lake of fire armed at all points as he fell, with spear and javelin, and strides towards the shore, hurling defiance at heaven, and exclaiming—

"Farewell, happy fields,
Where joy for ever reigns! Hail, horrors! hail
Infernal world! and thou, profoundest hell,
Receive thy new possessor! one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
Here we may be secure; and in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in hell:
Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven"—

give him an awful pre-eminence over every other character ever drawn and embodied by human genius.

The number of characters in "Paradise Lost" are necessarily limited, and, except the young Adam and Eve, are either above or beneath our sympathies, except such as are always drawn forth by the contemplation of virtue struggling with ensnaring vice, intent on ruin. There our first parents, however, in their naked, unblushing innocence, and even after their fall, concentrate our love and admiration. In them we behold the first created of the innumerable tribes and nations of the earth, and containing in themselves the quintessence of the excellencies of all. From the countenance of the unfallen Eve radiated
all the rays of human beauty, of female prudence, holiness, and love, which have ever distinguished the sex. In Adam, as in an original fountain, was concentrated all the perfection of human intelligence and intellectual greatness which has since dignified the minds of the world's sages and poets.

The heroes and heroines of all other great poets are merely human, and, in their fallen condition, are naturally swayed by all the passions incident to humanity. Milton, in drawing our first parents, had emphatically to create a new order of beings, and place them in a new creation, externally adapted to their internal perceptions of moral beauty and holiness. His great object was to represent them human, and yet immortal—young, and yet matured in understanding—beautiful, and yet unconscious of pride—free, and yet following the divine will—humble, and yet elevated— Influenced by hope, yet without fear or despair—devout and reverential, yet deputed rulers of the new creation— Influenced by passions and desires, yet all these subordinated to that divine passion in which their whole souls were wrapt—their love. The difficulties attending this he overcame, and Adam and Eve, in all their naked and unadorned beauty and grace, unconscious of shame, rose up before us, as from the wand of an enchanter, the mortal types of Deity himself—the mortal and the immortal, the pure spirit with the gross elements of earth.

In strict conformity with their characters, Eden, the scene of their first habitation, was to be drawn,—a beautiful tract of country, where mingled in profusion all the sweets and riches necessary for their
wants and happiness, and where was to be performed the first momentous scenes in the great drama of time and the universe.

The absence of human passions, as we now understand them, in "Paradise Lost," we consider negatively a beauty, as the introduction of those kinds of human emotion most natural to ourselves, even into the most tender scenes between the wretched apostates of our race, before and after the fall, and ere they were aware of the nature of their love, or of that misery they brought upon the world, would appear forced and unnatural.

All the other characters are either above or below human emotion. Angels, perceiving the justice of God, could not weep over their fallen brethren, or sympathise with them in the excess of their unutterable woes. Gazing from the crystal battlements of heaven into the regions of despair, they might wonder at the fatality of the angelic revolt, and their expulsion thence, and desire to fathom still deeper the profound mysteries of the stupendous scheme thus far disclosed; but the great gulf was yawning between them, and they could as soon pass its depths as manifest sorrow at the rebels' doom, or unholy triumph at having themselves withstood and conquered the temptation. There might be amazement and joyous triumph, but all was tempered and winged with devotion; and, gazing upon the resplendent brow of the Messiah, returned victorious over his foes, the mighty song which burst from their hallowed lips swept in breezes of harmony through the infinite empyrean.

In contrast to this, look again and yet again to the passions which reign dominant in hell, and by
their intensity deaden the consuming fierceness of the liquid fires encircling the fallen legions. Look again upon the great archfiend, as he stands like a tower, with outspread wings, o'erlooking the illimitable abyss. How fierce is the glare of his now dimmed but yet flashing intellectual orbs! How charged is that brow with thunder! How deep and fixed is the scorn—how intense the all but omnipotent emotions with which he apostrophises hell, and addresses the sun! How iron and resistless the will with which he tramples upon fate or destiny itself, and with spiritual might endures, and by enduring conquers, the torments of the flames! The restlessness of earthly ambition, we know, yields but little repose to the mind under its influences; and the burning heat of an implacable revenge, absorbing all the better feelings, and arming the soul with the attributes of a fiend, has not been unfelt upon earth; but in Satan the grasping ambition is for the universe—the revenge scorching the fallen archangel's indomitable spirit is against the Most High, whose thunders he aims at hurling back, and, usurping his sovereignty, adorning his scarred brow with the diadem of eternity. What a vast conception is embodied in the character! Yet the whole seems easy and familiar to the gifted mind of the poet. He enters the regions of woe with a consciousness of his mighty energies to create and picture its horrors, and fill the rebellious minds of its blasted inhabitants with all the terrible passions which revenge can prompt when goaded by a ruthless despair.

Splendid as is the imagery of Homer, and boundless as is the exhibition of character and scenic
display in Shakspere, there are no scenes or characters in the creation of either poet comparable to these. All the deities of Homer possess few attributes above the merest mortals. No spiritual might is by them exercised in wielding the sceptre of the universe, and conducting its affairs; no mental energy, beyond human, is aroused or displayed, to repel by its awfulness, and yet attract by its power, the worshippers at the Olympian mount. Even in the sublimest scene in the "Iliad"—that in which the gods descend to swell the fight beneath the Trojan walls—the effect is marred by the incongruity apparent in the deities leaving their supernal abodes and mingling in the warfare among men, but certainly not more so than is the effect represented as being wrought upon external nature—the streams arrested in their course, the mountains shaking, and redoubling peals of thunder rending the poles, while, from the terror occasioned by the noise and confusion of the conflict, Pluto, in his infernal caverns, leaps from his throne. The incongruity, however, so obvious to us, would not strike the minds of those to whom the poet sung, as such representations accorded with the dark system of their mythology.

The incongruity pointed out by some critics, between the spiritual agents of Milton and their spheres and modes of action, does not, and indeed cannot, strike so strongly as this, even though, in contradistinction to the gods of Homer, the angels of Milton are truly represented in their spiritual character; as a great portion of the poem is taken up by the speeches and actions of those beings in a
manner which we are taught to believe consistent with their commission from on high; and, as is well known, all human knowledge of spiritual beings, and their modes of agency, can only be comprehended by material symbols and analogies; and, hence, no other method of description could have been adopted than that so well employed. The fatal rock upon which he, like other poets, might have split, and wrecked his impressive sublimity,—that of attempting exactly to define the limits, forms, and relative proportions of what in reality can admit of no definition,—he has well avoided; for though the idea that we are conversing with pure spiritual agents in visible material forms, jars with the evidence of the senses, yet the indefinite obscurity and murky grandeur enwrapping Satan and his host, and the incomprehensible splendour investing the spirits of heaven, while filling the imagination—almost to bursting, throws over all a robe of tremendous interest and mystery, and sets all measurement by any human standard at defiance. Even in the awful descriptions of the angelic war, the same indefinite and swelling grandeur invests the whole and overwhelms the imagination. All the confusion and desolation which we can conceive war capable of engendering to a whole world in arms and contention, and the results of which in a lesser degree is often witnessed, appears melancholy among men; but here rebellion is waged against heaven itself by the revolted offspring of its eternal Monarch, aiming at his dethronement. Squadrons of cherubim and seraphim meet in awful conflict with legions innumerable of the unhallowed apostates, and the common weapons of war, feeble in
the hands of the mighty combatants, are superseded by the hills, which they pluck from their foundations and hurl in the air, until, to end the war, the Messiah leaving the mount of his glory, enters his chariot, rushes to the conflict, and, grasping the thunders of omnipotent wrath, consigns them to their eternal prison, amidst convulsions which shake all but the throne of God. In human wars death rages triumphant. In these wars death, as familiar to us, is not introduced, as spiritual existence is intolerable, and the conqueror

"Meant not to destroy, but root them out of heaven;"

but, spiritual death, which dies not, then commenced that gloomy reign which spreads its baleful horrors throughout eternity.

For the successful creation and embodiment of such stupendous scenes and characters, Milton, of all men that ever existed, was alone competent. His mind, a centre around which the departed spirits of all ages slumbered, but ready at the call of the conjuror, Memory, to start into life, instead of being clogged by their imparted riches, conscious of its own inherent strength, rose more triumphant; and through the very excess of that varied erudition, seemed in its outpourings, an intellectual volcano belching streams of molten gold. When it is said by Pope that in "Paradise Lost" he burns throughout with the force of art, the character of his mind is lowered, and his genius misunderstood. No poet was ever more artless or less given to study effect. Much as he had studied the art—lofty, in his early productions, as he had already proved the standard
of his genius to be, he never lowered his natural dignity by making himself the slave of art, further than was necessary for the combination of his subject into the one great theme. He possessed an art, indeed, inseparable from his great learning,—the art of naturally exhibiting those intellectual stores through the magnificent dress of his thoughts; but he possessed not that art often practised by lesser minds, of colouring tinsel with the hues of gold. His mind was in itself a depository of the richest ores. Into his native element—the sublime, contemplating objects the most tremendous or magnificent—he wings his way with a power at once instinctive, easy, and unconfined—full at once of dignity and grandeur. He did not give birth at times to solitary though brilliant flashes of genius, and then sink enervated into more profound inactivity. Always upon the wing, and even amidst the services he rendered to the struggling Commonwealth, and to the cause of liberty in after ages by his controversial labours, "Paradise Lost," the grand production of his after solitude, was being moulded in the womb of his mind—was arranging itself into form, and combining all its scattered elements, all its glorious visions, to be re-cast by the great poetical Alchemist into one unrivalled creation. Inspired in as high a degree as human nature can perhaps be inspired by a uniformly steady faith in Scripture and in God, his genius became tinged with a celestial glow; and while a pantheistic admirer of nature, he was thus a pure and sincere theist in the truths of the Godhead. The great elevation to which he rises in the sublime and the magnificent arouses our
wonder, and tends, in some degree, to dim our perception of those parts where beauty, mingled with the tones of kinder feeling, succeed those scenes of terrific grandeur, those representations of the deep abyss, of whose secrets he made himself the great mystagogue. Ordinary themes adapted to common minds, and which often engage the pens of lesser poets, found no worshipper in him. He rose at once to the supernal. The glories of the beatific vision,—the mysterious communion with celestial intelligences, of which souls less elevated than his see but the shadow and feel but the hallowed import,—were seen by him with a clearer vision, and felt with a more palpable certainty. And if he seldom gives utterance to those gentler feelings and emotions of our nature, which, from passions subdued were more etherealised, it is because his spirit, weary of the turbulent whirlpool of politics, and the absorbing interests of common minds, and, by the darkness of his outward vision, more intensely lighted up within, was fixed in its gaze upon the worlds of interminable being, and seemed, in rearing its immortal superstructure, to be only disporting amidst the bright realms of its own creation. The passions which yield to the pens of other poets all their depth and inspiration, in his mind became purged of their material grossness, and sublimed in the furnace of a loftier contemplation. He passed the range of human thought—he gazed into eternity, and peopling its awful profounds with his own creations, his vision, unimpressed with emotion, gazed steadily into its depths and became in reality—a sense. And thus it is that many look upon his great work like some
gigantic pyramid which awakens in all their suggestive trains the emotions of the sublime and the beautiful; whilst its hieroglyphical carvings carry the mind backward to far distant ages, and resuscitate the beings who reared the mighty pile designed for eternity. The view may be cold, but it is grand and imposing; its vast proportions awing, while expanding the mind; its beauties awakening our admiration; and, though the softer emotions be undisturbed, filling the mind with spectre-like visions, distant, dim, and fluctuating, and awakening the sublime in all its majesty.

It has been observed that the subject of Milton's great poem is, in point of natural sublimity, immeasurably above all that can exercise the imagination. Homer's subject belongs to earth—to life—but these in their associations he clothes with a prodigality of beauty and splendour which excite the mind to the highest pinnacle of earth. In fiery impulse, in clearness and vigour of description, and in the mould, expression, and action of character, the mind of Homer resembles that of Shakspere more than Milton—though it must be admitted that Shakspere, in fertility and variety of invention, eclipses all intellectual suns. Milton's subject, if requiring less invention in the construction of his plot, required, on the other hand, a vast extent of Scripture erudition and philosophy, and a fire of genius to illuminate and inflame all, and raise still higher the standard of uninspired sublimity; acquirements and attributes which he alone could boast, and by which he reached the highest summit of literary ambition,—gained the garland of immortality vouchsafed by all
succeeding ages of an admiring world. Well has Cowley sung:—

"He passed the bounds of flaming space,
The living throne, the sapphire blaze,
Where angels tremble while they gaze:
He saw, till blasted with excess of light—
He closed his eyes in endless night."
ON MILTON AS COMPARED WITH DANTE AND TASSO.

Dante arose amidst the night of superstition. Borne-down, like Milton, with accumulated sufferings and woes, he first, as a poet, broke the seal of gothic darkness,—gazed through the mist of ages upon the shores of antiquity and their intellectual wonders,—through the glass of inspiration upon the realms of light and darkness shrouded from mortal eyes; and daring to climb the bewildering mount, where Homer and Virgil struck their lyres, borrowed from oracles more divine than the Grecian, a spirit of kindling power and prophetic energy. Blasted by the wreck of his hopes, robbed of his deserts and surrounded by an ocean of sorrow, he seems to have given vent to the bitterness of his soul with regard to his earthly expectations, when he wrote upon the portals of hell, "here there is no hope." His poem as the first which arose amidst gothic darkness, and almost, it is said, brought a new language into existence, would, from these circumstances alone, command a high degree of attention. It stands amidst the dark circumstances of its birth like a brilliant rainbow upon an ebon firmament without a neighbouring star to dim the lustre of its mingling hues; —a circlet of solitary light amidst a globe of gloom.
Those who read the productions of great authors only through translations, naturally lose much of the fire and power of the original. That which should be a copy is too often a paraphrase, and they who criticise it thus, often receive and circulate false impressions and estimates. We thus often feel in perusing ancient and foreign authors; and never felt so more fully than when perusing Cary's translation of Dante's "Divine Comedy," and Wright's translation of the "Inferno," and attempting a comparison between Dante and Milton. A translator may possibly, indeed, add to, as well as detract from, the merit of the original, when he surpasses the author in mental vigour and genius;—but the translators of Homer and Dante, we apprehend, were in little danger of adding to the merits of the originals by any additional creations of their own. Mr. Cary's translation is allowed to possess great merit; its greatest drawback being an attempt at imitating, too closely, the massive style of Milton, and exhibiting his author in a dress, unfit for any but Milton to wear. Mr. Wright's translation of the "Inferno," the noblest part of the work, into the terza rima, is said to be more close and faithful, preserving more of both the spirit and form of the original.

The mainspring of the greatest works of many great authors may be traced throughout their individual history, as well as through the mental conformation which gives shape and color to their creations. Dante and Milton are thus enshrined in their country's histories. Dante was a Florentine, born in 1265, of a rich and noble family. He had been a keen and able politician, and shone at various
times as an ambassador, and was even elevated to the seat of Priore, or President of the Republic. He had been a Guelph, or an adherent of the Pope, but became involved with the Ghibellines, an opposite party, friendly to the claims of the German Emperor, and then, amidst the sanguinary discords and struggles which took place between them, Dante was condemned to perpetual exile, lost all his estates and property, and never more beheld his wife and family; but wandered up and down Italy a refugee, and dependent upon patrons; learning meanwhile how "hard it is to climb other peoples stairs, and how salt is the bread that is given in charity." "

The whole of the "Divine Comedy," is a vision. Dante loses himself in a dark forest. Three wild beasts rush past him. Virgil appears, and offers to conduct him through the nine circles of hell, and the expiatory abodes of purgatory. Dante accepts the offer, and they journey onward; and having passed the gate, with the awful inscription, survey with searching minuteness the regions of sorrow and of expiation. Virgil is not, however, empowered to conduct the poet through paradise, the residence of the blessed; but Beatrice, his early love, wanders with him through all the regions of beauty, happiness and bliss, and with her own eye makes the glory more bright, and with her own presence enhances its degrees of happiness.

It is clear from the life and misfortunes of Dante, that this poem was composed less for a solace of his wandering life, and a thirst for immortal fame, than as a means of revenge upon his enemies; by placing them in the various circles of hell, and recounting
their histories; and a method of immortalizing his friends by translating them into heaven. The tyrants, traitors, and factious demagogues which at that time, by their rival claims and discords, distracted Italy, and filled it with rapine and bloodshed, he places with his enemies, the Guelphs, in the lowest regions of the abyss; and, even, those of his own adopted party, the Ghibellines, who had betrayed their country, or been profligate in their lives, or acted with cruelty or duplicity to their enemies, he consigns to the same circles. The placing of some of the then living characters of his country into that region, and disposing of them in circles of torment, intensified according to their degrees of guilt, and the placing of those, at the same time, friendly to his political schemes for regenerating Italy, in eternal bliss among patriots and legislators, and the benefactors of mankind in all ages, might, had the poem been widely known in his own age, have drawn upon him a wrath, and edged a persecution, even more deadly than that which already pursued him. But, in truth, in thus consigning his foes and his friends to endless woes and beatitudes, he found some solace for his many troubles, and a method of perpetuating the memory of his wrongs, and his oppressors, to a far posterity. It is obvious that in the very depths of hell he gloats with something of a fiend-like ferocity among his imprisoned foes, with other innumerable victims undergoing eternal torments, and with a minute picturesqueness of delineation places all so clearly before us, as to render them in appearance not fanciful, but real. So intense, indeed, is his appetite for the horrible and so vividly
has he pictured all, that Purgatory, after rising from the Stygian lake, seems dull, tame, and spiritless; and even heaven, with all its splendour and angelic beauty and variety, seems so far deficient in interest, after passing through the infernal regions, that many readers hurry through it, without pausing to mark its many beauties, or wonder at many of its absurdities, displaying less genius.

Thus he displays and expresses the depth of his soul-wrung anguish, the intensity of his passion for heaping revenge upon his malignant enemies; and the strength of that political partizanship which whetted the hatred of his opponents, the Guelphs, and his own anger, until it all but transformed him into the lion, powerless indeed in his exiled rage, but unsubdued in spirit, though in chains.

Dante's mind was more practical than the mind of Milton. Though both mingled greatly in the strifes of men, in the civil wars and commotions of their respective countries, and were both rewarded with proscription and obloquy by the people and the generation they served, and by their service honoured, yet Dante had less of the true sublime, and more of the clear matter of fact in his composition than Milton, and was, hence, better calculated for practical statesmanship, and the control of parties. Milton had in his youth deeply engraved his name as a poet on the literary pyramid of ages. Dante, until after his exile, had poured forth but little that is known, if any, poetry to distinguish him. In politics, in some other branches of science, and in general learning, he was far in advance of his age. He was likewise a noted soldier in the ranks of the
Florentine cavalry, and was practically, in every respect, a thorough man of the world. Even at the beginning of the fourteenth century he held the doctrine, the extremely dangerous, if publicly expressed, that the people were not made for kings, but kings for the people. A doctrine which in Milton's day, and partly by his advocacy, received a summary and bloody realization in the execution of King Charles.

The practical and business-like constitution of Dante's mind is fully evinced throughout all his descriptions, and in all the figures of his great poem. A man of science describing an engine, an anatomist lecturing upon a body, or a Belzoni describing an Egyptian pyramid, or an obelisk of eternal granite, could not be more clear and picturesque in their outlines and diagrams, than is Dante in describing Ugolino in the tower of Hunger feasting upon the skull, — the soothsayers walking along and weeping with their faces turned between their shoulders,—Capaneus, proud, sullen, and malignant, in his unconquered rage, as he lies beneath the eternal shower of fire,—Geryon with his human face, and dragons body lying on the precipice overlooking the fiery gulf,—and Lucifer himself, repulsive from the very clearness of his monstrous and shaggy outline. We have thus paintings distinct in every feature and every scene, so that the reader becomes familiar with every cursed spot. and woe-struck figure in hell, with the trials and patient purifications of purgatory, and the celestial raptures of heaven. An inductive philosopher could not make an analysis more complete and striking, than does Dante of the Infernal world, and
the beatitudes of bliss. But it is this very distinctness and business-like manner of proceeding which detracts from its sublimity, as much as Milton's indefinite gloom and vastness increases it. Milton, while dazzling with magnificence and horrifying with gloom, leaves an immensity of undefinable grandeur in both worlds to swell the imagination and baffle its powers. When Dante attempts the same, he is less fortunate. While painting hell and its woes, and victims, and heaven and its untold glories, the tortures and the horrors of the one, and the light and happiness of the other, pass all before us, though themselves supernatural, as though earth was the actual scene of their embodied realities. Still this method of drawing out his world of sorrow best suited the purpose of Dante. He had not, like Milton, to climb the vast of Heaven, and dive into the profound of hell on purpose to depict the overthrow of angels, the ruin of worlds, and justify the ways of God to man. His hell and his heaven were more personal matters, and in peopling both he was only emptying his own mind, surcharged with wrath and the memory of love, and making both answer his own ends and political speculations and desires.

This subordination of playful fancy,—this severity and precision of his style, heightening the clearness of the naked outlines and visioned forms of his beings, until they seem to start into living realities before us, produces a greater effect, than if rhetorically written with the intention of being effective. The style is not that of Milton in "Paradise Lost," so much as that of Milton in "Samson Agonistes." In "Paradise Lost" Milton suggests more than he describes. With a single
metaphor he crowds the fancy and the imagination, and masses his metaphors, as in his description of Satan, in such successive clusters, that the mind often labours to comprehend the magnificent whole. In "Samson Agonistes," all is stern, severe, and cold, as if cast in an iron mould to draw forth our wonder, more than our admiration. But all is simple. So it is in the naked strength and sculptured exactness of the scenes and figures in the "Inferno" of Dante. His heaven is, indeed, more diversified and flowery, and often sublime, but it is only earth dressed in robes of greater splendour. With the exception of his angels, which unite the spiritual and the natural, in a beautiful and attractive manner, the celestial figures and outlines of heaven have all the exactness of the living, loathsome scenery of hell. But for the arousing and splendid imagery required for such great supernatural visions of bliss he wanted the enlightened faith and erudition of Milton,—an erudition which, drawn from every source, while strengthening his mind, gave an additional energy to the calm and steady purpose animating his bosom. But Luther had not then appeared, and the age of Dante was one of darkness. Theology was cloistered secure from searching eyes in the cells of monasteries,—not in the heads and hearts of the worshippers of the cross; so that even the knowledge of revelation he possessed, though little, and that little perverted by priestly cunning and gothic superstition, was more than many of the most learned fathers of the church could boast.

To the fanciful reader, therefore, who delights in abundance of tropes and metaphors, much of Dante’s
poetry will seem void of the necessary qualities for genuine popularity. Yet when he chooses to be pathetic, or beautiful, or sublime, or to elevate the moral and spiritual above the material, no poet can be more effective. We find no tale of love and passionate guilt more affectionately sorrowful, than that of Francesca of Rimini. "That day we read no more," she says, ending her story, after telling how, at first, her lips and the lips of Paulo clung into a kiss, thus leaving the reader by the abrupt but modest breaking of, to surmise the sequel of their loves, still continued, though in hell amidst despair and punishment. Nothing can possibly be more pathetic than the story of the Suabian Prince Manfred, whom the poet meets in purgatory, and who relates to him the circumstances of his death and the exhumation of his bones; and requests him to visit his "fair daughter" on his return to earth, and inform her of all. No poet ever surpassed him, if indeed any can equal him in the beautiful figures he draws of his angels, and the varieties of the costume in which they appear to him and his guide. And when he sinks the material in sublimity and grandeur, and forgets himself in his subject, none can more arouse our wonder and draw forth our admiration. His description of the awful noise and confusion, the cries of woe and distress, the groans and curses, the smiting and clasping of hands and the accents of despair, echoing throughout that dark and starless region, as he and Virgil drew near the river Acheron, and found Charon ferrying over the lost in his boat, can find few parallels.
"Here sighs with lamentations and loud moans,
Resounded through the air pierced by no star,
That e'en I wept at entering. Various tongues,
Horrible languages, outcries of woe,
Accents of anger, voices deep and hoarse,
With hands together smote, that swelled the sounds,
Made up a tumult, that for ever whirls
Round through that air by solid darkness stained,
Like to the sand that in the whirlwind flies."

_Inferno, Cary. Canto III_

With the moral errors, theological absurdities,
and scholastic philosophy, which he has at times introduced into his poem, we have nothing to do. These were crotchets and dogmas peculiar to his age, and though blemishes in the work, must, along with it, go down to posterity. We look upon him as a great poet, not a moral or political teacher;—and whatever questionable points may be enunciated in his creed, or whatever may be his intolerance in promulgating his political faith, should be set down to the man and the age, and not to the poet.

Milton's heaven and hell are represented as they existed, when only inhabited by the stedfast and apostate angels; and hence it has been said, that he had less than Dante a plot to construct, requiring less ingenuity in filling all consistently up, and delineating with greater perfection the various characters engaged. Now, the great events in "Paradise Lost" were certainly drawn from Scripture; as the fall and its consequences, and the nature of the agents engaged, were alone circumstantially narrated by the inspired penman. Still, Scripture supplied him with but mere hints of the great subject; and he had thus, still to form his plot,—to construct and har-
monize the great theatres of action,—to draw out in full relief the great performers in the many scenes; and to give such breadth, compactness and unity to each individual character and action, that each might appear distinct, and one, though yet the same. Did he find in Scripture the materials for the erection of pandemonium? Did he turn plagiarist for the character of Satan? for the meeting of sin and death at the gates of hell? or the coming forth of the Messiah, "grasping ten thousand thunders" to destroy the rebel angels? In fact there are in "Paradise Lost," as minute lines and delicate touches of the artist in delineating the rebels Moloch and Belial, Beelzebub and Mammon, and the angels Michael and Raphael, as ever were drawn by the greatest painters in their masterpieces on canvas. Milton well knew, that in the great family of earth no two human beings were ever in all respects alike, and that endless diversity would likewise obtain throughout the spiritual kingdom of God among his unfallen angels and the apostates of hell, and hence he drew each angelic character, whether true or fallen, with clear lines of distinction.

This is one of the greatest charms in the genius of Shakspere. He never clothes an abstraction with human attributes, and yet he never drew two characters wholly alike. This indeed in both epic and dramatic composition is the distinguishing feature of true originality; and Milton's genius was too creative, and his intellectual stores too universal and abundant to induce him to build upon any foundation but his own. Out of Scripture, we know, he could possess no knowledge of angels fallen and upright, of the
true character of Jehovah, or the mission and work of his son. But they were all beyond the reach of his senses. He had seen them not;—he had handled them not;—he only knew of the existence of spirit in a negative sense; and as mere abstractions alone he had to deal with them; and by symbols and analogies alone could he clothe them, and make visible to the understanding, or imagination, what was invisible to sense. Thus sprung forth amidst gloom and penal woe, Satan and his host; and thus the towers and battlements of heaven beaming with eternal light, inhabited by an innumerable company of sinless, and hence, mighty and happy beings, rose before us;—and thus, we are almost led to think, "Paradise Lost," instead of drawing all its grandeur from the Bible, a noble addition to the established canon of Scripture itself; a something which must by mankind in all ages be venerated and admired, as towering a degree higher than mere human genius, and all but flowing from the pen of divine inspiration.

To form a great plot, therefore, to be successfully carried out by actors, types of which the poet nor human vision had ever seen; and to create platforms in regions into which human eye had never pierced for the consummation of a great drama in which God Himself was to figure, was surely more difficult than the construction of a plot made up of events of frequent occurrence, or of materials drawn from history, however great and attractive. "Paradise Lost" we therefore imagine the greatest poetical wonder of the world: In purpose, plot and execution, it is complete in all its parts; like the human body, a system in itself;—great, God-like, original, one.
Dante, too, had to create; but as his mind was more earthly and less spiritual than Milton's, every scene of his poem partook of the attributes of his mind. The whole, like a volume of beautiful extracts woven into a variegated web, is formed of detached fragments from mythology, from history, from politics, from contemporary incident and character; and from his own individual emotions as influenced by his sufferings, hopes and fears,—as rugged and stormy as his own hell, and scarcely subdued among the freshening dews of paradise. His Satan it must be confessed loses much of its terribleness from the grotesqueness of the shaggy outline; and seems rather the figure of a fantastic monster raised from the vasty deep by the art of a conjuror, than the deliberate creation of so sublime a poet as Dante. His introduction into Heaven of a throne and crown for Henry of Luxembourg, he hoped and expected would be truly prophetic of that prince's being instrumental in restoring Italy to its former greatness,—a prophecy not destined to be fulfilled. Mighty as is the poem; full of grandeur, beauty, sublimity, and often of tender pathos, it is deficient in aim and end. It has no great and noble purpose running through and drawing around it all events and characters, bringing all to a climax, and presenting it to the world,—a magnificent whole.

Though some critics may therefore be right in placing Dante in juxtaposition with Milton, as far as regards their misfortunes in ambition and in love, we cannot subscribe to the justice of that criticism which places him as a poet upon an equal scale.
If he, at times, can boast an equal power, the more ethereal attributes of poetic genius, if ever clearly existing, are smothered in his mind, with now and then a fitful gleam protruding through the gloom, and shewing in bolder relief the uncontrolled ascendency of his sorrowing emotions, entering into and impregnating and tingeing all objects with their impressive workings. Milton seldom indulges in outbursts of personal feeling. He, indeed, when rising from the Stygian lake into the blooming light of Heaven, makes a beautiful, tender, and holy allusion to the loss of his outward vision,—an allusion, it may be observed, entirely in keeping with the sudden transition from infernal gloom to supernal light, and tending to heighten the effect so powerfully made upon the mind by the magnificent contrast presented by the two opposing worlds. His blindness, perhaps, enabled him to see more clearly the circling gloom of hell without arousing his mournful lamentations; but was it not natural, when drawing a region of holy life and light, that he should feelingly deplore the loss of that important sense, which barred him from all visible access to that world from whose beauties he had to borrow all his analogies! His memory was hence his world; and seldom before had memory been so nobly stored with the golden fruit of erudition, or so able to amalgamate all its riches with the living hues of immortality. "Paradise Lost" is, thus, in itself a Cyclopædia of learning, but not delivered to the world as oracles of morals, as treatises of science, as transcripts of history, or a dictionary of classic lore, but bound up as a casket of diamonds,
through the light of which volumes of universal knowledge are transmitted into the reader's mind. Dante, on the other hand, more sparing of magnificence, resembles, at times, the sullen lurid gloom of a heated volcano, and at other times the same volcano flinging from its scorched crater streams of lava and showers of ashes. Ambitious, and, in his active life, the agent of ambition, his passions and his prospects were elated; and now that he was driven into exile and compelled to eat the ashes of bitterness, to feed upon disappointed hopes, and mourn over his idols perished, the whole tenor of his soul was unstrung, and, like a harp out of tune, sent forth the distressing notes of lamentation and woe.

A few words with regard to Tasso, and we conclude. Dr. Blair asserts that his "Jerusalem Delivered" is the third epic poem in the world. Would he not have done well had he shewn in what tier of the gallery of poets Milton should take his seat? or, after him and the two ancient fathers, shew, at what altitude upon the apex of the pyramid Dante ought to be placed? Addison somewhere speaks of Tasso's tinsel and Virgil's gold;—a great depreciation, and certainly undeserved; for although Tasso may not have equal gold with Virgil, he is nevertheless rich with beauties and brilliant with gems. Uniting deeply the genius of the artist with the sensibilities of the poet, he succeeded in the construction and execution of a great poem,—not indeed an original creation,—suited to the taste of his age and country, and destined to command the suffrages of immortality. Clear and graphic in his descriptions, he moves along with mild dignity and-
grace, laying his fancy under contribution for abundant imagery, but seldom overpowering with successive clusters, or covering his ideas with redundant verbiage, yet ever beautiful and flashing with brilliance. By no poet is he surpassed in clearly and exactly defining the individualities of his various characters. His celestial creations are drawn upon a scale of great splendour; but when he attempts to draw out in clear relief the lower regions of the wicked, and their dire habitants, he parts with much of his fire and trifles with insignificant, and often burlesque puerilities.

Perhaps little ever hazarded in the shape of criticism, tended more flagrantly to traduce the character of Milton's Satan, than Dr. Blair's assertion that he, doubtless, had Tasso's Lucifer before him as a prototype. Dr. Blair was a cold reasoner and not very imaginative man, and could enter but little into the feelings and aspirations of poets; but as those very qualities of mind were, according to some, in his favour as a critic, we wonder at his want of discrimination and taste, in thus awarding such boundless eulogy to Tasso. Dante's Lucifer we have said, is a grotesque monster of enormous stature, with outspread wings, in texture like those of a bat, to each of his treble-sided body, and which by their motion freeze up the river Cocytus,—with three faces, and three mouths, which foam bloody gore, and champing between his teeth Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot, where, as in a mill, they are, says the poet,

"Bruised, as with ponderous engine"

Tasso is less exact in his description of the same
being than Dante, but nevertheless he seems to have gained upon him in the art of conjuring, when he makes Lucifer's eyes two fiery beacons, and his mouth a volcanic Etna, belching kindled coals and sparks. Here is his description from Fairfax's translation, a work which, with all its obsolete phrases and roughness, we prefer, in its racy strength, to the more polished but insipid translation of Hoole, a man who is said by Sir Walter Scott to have been an adept in transmuting gold into lead.

"The tyrant proud frowned from his lofty cell,  
And with his looks made all his monsters tremble;  
His eyes, that full of rage and venom swell,  
Two beacons seem, that men to arms assemble;  
His feltred locks, that on his bosom fell,  
On rugged mountains, briars and thorns resemble;  
His yawning mouth that foamed clotted blood,  
Gaped like a whirlpool wide in Stygian flood.

"And as mount Etna vomits sulphur out,  
With cliffs of burning crags, and fire, and smoke,  
So from his mouth flew kindled coals about,  
Hot sparks and smells that man and beast would choke:—  
The knarring porter durst not whine for doubt,  
Still were the furies, while their sovereign spoke,  
And swift Cocytus, staid his murmur shrill  
While thus the murderer thundered out his will."

Now, nothing can be more unlike Milton's Satan, than either of those gigantic figures. Milton drew him as he fell,—an angel still, obscured in glory, but not shorn in power. Wings he had, as all angels are represented having, but he had no horns, no tail, no club feet, no grotesqueness of either limb or
feature to add terror to his might and fallen, gloomy grandeur. Certain it is that he can change himself into an angel of light, as easily as he turned himself into the serpent at the fall, or into the figure of a man at the temptation of Christ in the wilderness; and it may be possible that he could assume such shapes, as those drawn by Dante and Tasso; but in all his appearances before men, we should suppose that he shows himself in his most attractive forms; while in his own kingdom among his own angels and victims, he needs no artificial aid to deepen his degradation or increase his misery. He is the lion going about roaring and seeking whom he may devour, yet nothing terrible in his wily approaches to men. He is the prince of fallen spirits, the dweller in outer darkness, the tempter, the adversary, the enemy of God and man. Luring millions to ruin, he is yet unseen. Subtle as the pernicious sweets of his own sins, we recognise him not in all his whisperings and insinuations to arouse and inflame our destructive passions. 'He travels, like light, from region to region, and drinks in the groan of creation's travail.' Leagued with, while directing, millions of his confederate spirits, he girdles the globe as with a zone of death, and scatters despair and desolation in the hearts and among all the habitations of men. And we imagine that to attempt to caricature a being, though fallen and evil, of such powers and attributes, a ruined archangel, a living, thinking, acting spirit, is at once to prostrate imagination beneath its true dignity in poetry, and plunge into the ridiculous, instead of rising to the sublime. This
Milton alone, with admirable tact and judgment, has clearly avoided.

It is true that in no great poem extant are the incidents free from improbabilities. But when, as in Tasso's great poem, enlightened as he was in some degree by revelation, the machinery of spiritual agency is glaringly absurd, and in direct opposition to every principle of sense and sound theology; it is apt to raise the smile of ridicule, which a century ago it was the fashion both in France and England to pour upon it. The introduction of Gods and Goddesses into the Iliad is in perfect consistency with the age of Homer, and the Grecian mythology, however ridiculous the whole may appear to us. And if Tasso intended faithfully to paint, even amidst war, the superstitions of the age in which his poem is laid, he had been more effective, if he had kept within the bounds of natural probability; as it is well known, that in that age, though extremely dark and superstitious, no such fables as those he relates about the meeting of the consistory of devils in hell, and the speech of Lucifer, could receive implicit belief. When such meetings in the infernal world are represented in "Paradise Lost" as being held before the fall of man, we assent to their possibility; but enlightened as we are by revelation, we look upon Tasso's spiritual machinery as only absurd imitations of pagan mythology. In attempting to unite the classic of former ages, with the romantic and chivalrous of his own, he erred grossly, as far as nature was concerned, in mingling harmoniously pagan fable with Christian faith. None knew better than he, that in wandering
from the truth of nature, and indulging in improbabilities, he was overstepping the limits of that law of truth, or at least apparent truth, within which the flights of imagination ought to be confined; and that too in an age, among the learned at least, comparatively enlightened by the sacred oracles, when men's minds were aiming at a still further projection into that region of truth hitherto to them a region of barrenness and darkness. In mixing historical truth with imaginary fable, the greatest aim ought to be consistency with the ordinary appearances of nature and the events of the world; for when, as in Tasso, this rule is overpassed, though the execution be excellent, the style and trappings soft and brilliant, and calculated to dazzle and attract, there can be little doubt but that those gross blemishes, will, among the thinking at least, impede, in some degree, its circulation.

Dante may be said to have made a successful inroad upon truth and nature; but all Dante's improbabilities are shielded from the storms of criticism, by taking the form and character of vision, and thus, like the "Pilgrim's Progress," partaking in part of the allegorical character, and rendering its most glaring absurdities, and horror-striking incidents and narrations, attractive and entertaining,—while Tasso's most violent representations are displayed more in the garb of reality and as incidents and scenery of actual life. But regardless of the age, and the natural trueness of the scenery of his poem, Virgil was his model, and him he followed; and having no doubt read of Julian's attempt to re-construct the temple of Jerusalem being rendered abortive by balls of fire
bursting from the ground and dispersing the workmen, so he, of course, could see no great poetic absurdity in using supernatural machinery in the fanatical warfare for the conquest of the holy city. But though these may be absurdities, they are no balance for his beauties; and though he cannot much boast of originality, it is allowed that, with few exceptions, he is no very servile imitator of Homer and Virgil. What he borrows he analyses and recombines. The subject of his poem being indisputably great, and comparatively of recent occurrence, and of a spirit and character supplying him with scenes and incidents little, if anything, inferior to the warlike age of Homer and the siege of Troy; and by being solely awakened and supported by devotees of a religion numbering in its ranks the majority of Europe, was calculated, one would think, to be more popular, and more generally admired. But to rank with giants, we ourselves must be gigantic. Tasso, though a noble poet, is not, according to the canons of criticism, ranked among this class, though in his own country the greatest favourite, among her greatest poets. He possesses the expressive but not the creative and original, the highest attributes of imagination. Besides this, his subject is a matter of authentic history, which, when interpolated with incidents foreign to probable veracity, usually receives a condemnation more sweeping and severe than if all were absolute fiction.

The far remote, the shadowy and the mystic,—though the incidents be no more thrilling,—strike more powerfully than any well authenticated facts of modern history; and the subject of the "Jerusalem
Delivered’’ is of the latter class, while the subject of the Iliad, and the very existence of Troy itself, is wrapt in dark traditionary mysticism. Still if any subject connected with the history of Europe for the last two thousand years, was well calculated to form the basis of an heroic poem, the striking episode of the crusades was the subject. Jerusalem had many grand and solemn associations; and the pious aims of the eloquent and fanatical Peter, who aroused Europe to the warlike enterprise which deluged with blood the plains of Palestine,—though fading in the lustre of its poetic glories before the devouring flames of Troy,—was still, if any song of war could have equalled or eclipsed that sung by the Grecian poet, every way calculated as a theme upon which to lavish the most splendid exuberance of genius. Tasso, we therefore think, though not rivalling the brightest stars in the galaxy of poets, yet occupies a lofty station. Like Homer and Virgil, he is more amusing than Milton, and is clearly comprehended with infinitely less pains,—a circumstance which, if allowed to decide the palm of superiority between these poets, would undoubtedly place Milton below them all. But Dr. Johnson affirms that Milton’s poem is not the best, only because it is not the first; an observation which strengthens the argument for affirming, that the ancients will receive the palm of superiority whatever be the legitimate claims of the moderns. Nay, in fact, it is the observation itself, that, were Homer and Milton reversed in the order of time, the crown would be placed upon the brows of the latter.

It is sometimes difficult to account for the sudden fame and popularity of some authors; but we may
rest assured that such fame can never last unless based upon a secure foundation. The homage universally, and in all ages paid to Homer as a poet, is no greater than that paid to Demosthenes as an orator. This has, no doubt, arisen from their intrinsic qualities; but much of it has, no doubt, also arisen from the known utterances of many great oracles deeply learned in classical literature, and unconsciously prejudiced in favour of old Greece; and whose voices and judgments form and sway the borrowed opinions of the many-voiced public. Those judgments also which have descended from of old have been reverently regarded by millions in their descent; and still increase in weight and interest as they receive additional responses by increasing millions of admirers. The fashions in halls and colleges thus become or influence the fashions of the literary and reading world without. If in earlier years of poetry and the arts, the greatest masters arose, it was not simply because those were the early ages, but because the development of human genius depends greatly upon climate and scenery, society and associations; and these in Grèce were favourable in early ages for the warlike rhapsodies of Homer, and in the latter days of its glory for the arousing orations of Demosthenes; and because human genius soon reaches the climax of its limited capacities which in no succeeding ages can be surpassed. Nor need we imagine that the human intellect in early ages possessed greater grasp or loftier comprehension than it does now. Originally the powers of mind of all men, are more on a level than is generally supposed. Circumstances favoured the development of genius in Homer and
Phidias, in Eschylus and Demosthenes, in Plato and Aristotle; and, hence they are by after ages baptised great, as distinguished from many, equally as great, who have had fewer opportunities for cultivation and refinement.

The convulsions and griefs amidst which so large a portion of the lives of Milton and Dante, and even of Tasso, were passed, could not repress, as we have seen, but seemed rather to give fresh wings to their genius. The early age of Milton, indeed, was more favourable for the cultivation of the muse than that of Dante. The latter lived in a darker age and among darker and fiercer spirits, and was himself of a less happy temperament than Milton. The consolations of religion, also, were wanting to soothe the natural irritation of his excited mind, driven to excess of bitterness by want and a subsistence upon charity. He possessed much of the moral daring of Milton; and a love of freedom was congenial to the minds of both. The madman's dungeon of Tasso was as melancholy an incident as can be found in the lives of either poet; and his death in the monastery of St. Onofrio in the suburbs of Rome, on the eve preceding his intended coronation with the laurel, leaves a deep and settled impression of melancholy on the mind of the susceptible reader, which time can seldom wholly efface. The lives of men of genius, indeed, seem so often chequered with lines of darkness, that the lifelong prosperity of a great original poet would be truly proverbial. The rough, warlike, political and commercial minds of the world recognise not their claims. Their productions do not directly influence the markets, or raise the price of stocks, or
subserve the interests of material utility; and hence, the hard bargain-making sons of earth frown upon the more refined and susceptible-minded poet, as a worthless thing,—not knowing, in their profound ignorance, that the literary men of the world can do better without their patronage, than their utilitarian schemes and productions can progress without the influence and patronage of those who subsist upon the produce of literature.