

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86)

A Conversation

Charles Theodore Greve

A. Hello, B. How did you enjoy Canon Farrar? I saw you at the Dante lecture.

B. I enjoyed it of course. But I suppose you want my usual objections.

A. Yes, you never seem to be entirely satisfied with anything. What was the matter with Farrar and his lecture?

B. If we were always satisfied, you know the world would stand still. But as to Farrar. The man himself was charming, but he did not know how to read; and as to his lecture, it was not suitable to the audience or any part of it.

A. What was the trouble?

B. It was pitched too high in tone for some, and not high enough for others.

A. Why, I thought he struck the happy medium. He gave a sort of running analysis of Dante's poetry, touched upon a few striking incidents in his life, and concluded with a short general estimate of his work, quoting or rather alluding to a few of the more striking passages. What more do you want?

B. I don't want any more at all. He gave too much. In other words, he tried to please too many kinds of people, and therefore failed to meet the exact wants of any of them.

A. What special difficulties do you suggest?

B. Well, there was a certain number of people in the audience probably who were more or less familiar with Dante and his works; and such people did not therefore want any of the narrative part of Canon Farrar's lecture, but desired merely a critical essay which would take for granted some

knowledge on the part of the listener, touch upon the various phases of the work, its political, social and philosophical bearing, the influence it had and still has, and the relation it bears to literature in general.

Such an essay by a man with the ability of Canon Farrar would have been of great value. For the other class of people who knew little or nothing of Dante, the analysis of the Canon was entirely inadequate. It is impossible in any case to gain any approach to an adequate conception of a great poem by hearing merely a narrative of the plot. The plot as you well know is but a very small part of the poem especially of such a poem as Dante's *Divina* (sic) *Commedia*.

Imagine a man listening to an aesthetic criticism on Hamlet who had only read the argument prefixed to the poem in many editions. In fact, a lecturer on such a subject must assume that his audience is familiar with the work of the author he is criticizing, and leave aside the didactic and stick to the aesthetic side of criticism.

A. Well then, what should Farrar have done in this case then, knowing that there were many of the audience who did not know the poem.

B. He should have chosen another subject or given purely a criticism which would inspire his hearers to read the poem. There is very little space left unoccupied on the subject of Dante by our own Russell Lowell, and unless the Canon had something new to say, he should have said nothing.

A. According to your view then, a didactic lecture upon the works of an author who is not well known, is fruitless.

B. Yes, the works of an author can only be known by being read. An essay should try to induce one to read, or it should comment on various phases of the poem; it can never take its place.

A. Well, I'll think over your suggestions. Goodbye. I must be going