

William Blake's Illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*

A STUDY OF THE ENGRAVINGS,
PENCIL SKETCHES AND WATERCOLORS



ERIC PYLE

R E V I E W

Eric Pyle. *William Blake's Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy: A Study of the Engravings, Pencil Sketches and Watercolors*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015. vi + 283 pp. 8 pp. of color plates. \$65.00, softcover.

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1 THE *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri is a poem thematically concerned with all possible modes of vision—physical as well as metaphorical—and some parts are so richly imagistic that it has been the object of illustrators' work from its earliest distribution in manuscript to the present day. Recent visual artists inspired by the poem include

Robert Rauschenberg and Salvador Dalí. Few of its illustrators, however, have been visionary poets themselves, so there is something intrinsically unique and engaging about Blake's project, undertaken at the very end of his life, to illustrate the *Comedy*.

- 2 Before Eric Pyle's book, the only full-length, comprehensive consideration of Blake's Dante had been Albert S. Roe's *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton University Press, 1953).¹ The date of that study alone suggests a reassessment of the subject is in order, and Pyle makes it his primary objective to refute many points of Roe's analysis, which saw Blake vigorously negating Dante's imputed theology at every turn. Pyle, for his part, advocates a complex, nuanced relationship toward the work in which Blake undertook the more congenial enterprise of "correcting" Dante, a poet whom he admired but whose religious views were at odds with his own antinomianism.
- 3 Pyle's method throughout this book is to identify in Blake's drawings the expression of theological differences between the two poets that drove Blake to "complete" the Florentine's visionary narrative. As Pyle describes it, Blake saw the relationship as "a partnership" (14), "a respectful engagement, full of loving corrections, the development of opportunities missed in the original poem, and the fulfillment of those parts where Dante, through his more restricted view of God, fell short" (267-68). One consequence of this approach, however, is that by operating in a primarily negative mode focused on Blake's disagreements with Dante, Pyle largely fails to explore the remainder of Blake's admiring relationship to the *Comedy*.
- 4 The book is organized in four parts: "Blake, His Masters and Rivals," "English Dante," "Blake's Criticism of Dante," and "The Illustrations." However, it might be better understood as divided into two major portions, nearly equal in page allocation: the first discursive, in which Pyle offers via survey the historical and philosophical contexts for Blake's work, and the second ekphrastic, wherein he describes Blake's images and corresponding episodes from the *Comedy*, with occasional importation of the salient philosophical points explicated in the book's first half. Pyle clearly has an intimate knowledge of the philosophical movements contributing to Blake's romanticism, as he does with the intri-

1. Morton Paley devoted a substantial chapter to the subject in *The Traveller in the Evening* (2003). Less ambitious books than Pyle's about the designs include Ursula Hoff, *William Blake's Illustrations to Dante's Divine Comedy* (1961); Milton Klonsky, *Blake's Dante* (1980); David Bindman, *William Blake: The Divine Comedy* (2000); and the huge new Taschen edition, *William Blake: The Drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy* (2014), with text by Sebastian Schütze and Maria Antonietta Terzoli.

cacies of Blake's own mythological system and the whole of his poetic oeuvre. Indeed, the readings he offers of various works in Blake's canon are on a par with the most insightful comments he has to offer regarding Blake and Dante.

- 5 The most significant division Pyle sees between Dante and Blake is marked by the historical shift in cosmology and metaphysics initiated by thinkers such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) and Jacob Boehme (1575–1624). That transition left Dante on one side, within the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmos, and Blake on the other, amid general acceptance of post-Cusan infinity. But the point of greatest difference between the two poets is Dante's isolation of transcendent divinity from the created universe, whereas Blake adhered to a philosophy of divine immanence (67–68). For Blake, one's inability to perceive the presence of God was the result of faulty perception, and it was the revolutionary purpose of his art—both poetic and visual—to render the imagination capable of such perception. Furthermore, Blake couldn't endorse the notion that God would condemn anyone to perpetual damnation, so the very premise of Dante's *Inferno* is flawed (80). And finally, a related point: the infernal condition, such as it might be, could exist for Blake only as a state and not as an intrinsic characteristic of an individual. This position puts Blake and Dante, in Pyle's estimation, on opposite sides regarding the dynamics of fall and redemption.
- 6 Appropriately, then, the distribution of Blake's drawings relative to Dante's three canticles is proportionate to the areas of his concern. While the Butlin catalogue inventories 102 images for Blake's Dante project, Pyle counts 100. There are seventy-two illustrations for the *Inferno*, compared to the twenty for *Purgatorio*, where Dante and Blake were most in agreement—especially regarding the Terrestrial Paradise. And Blake devoted only eight illustrations to *Paradiso* because “Blake's main theme as an artist is the Fall and redemption of mankind, not what mankind does after it is redeemed” (247). Among the targets that remain are Dante's interest in empire and monarchy, his advocacy of an Aristotelian mean (against Blake's enthusiasm for spiritual extremes), his emphasis on reason and law (consistently an instrument of oppression in Blake's eyes), and his opinion that art is inadequate to express divinity, evident mostly through his use of ineffability topoi in *Paradiso*.
- 7 The artistic magnitude of the *Comedy*, as well as its own extravagant imagery, compels most illustrators toward a literal rendering of what Dante describes of his otherworld. Blake is among the few to innovate freely with the narrative, and for Pyle this means that any novelty in the illustrations is attributable solely to Blake's impulse to correct the *Comedy*. However, the degree to which Blake's innovations might not actually be departures from the Dantean text or

in opposition to it, but rather readings of it, might be worth more attention than Pyle affords. This shortcoming in the book arises most often in the latter section, where the illustrations are discussed in the mode of a descriptive catalogue rather than a critical investigation.

- 8 Few texts come to the reader with a critical tradition and apparatus quite so formidable as does the *Comedy*. Among the perils facing its readers is the tendency to reify its poetic fiction into an expository theological treatise closed off to substantial critical engagement because it has already been thought through. Moreover, a work like the *Comedy* is particularly susceptible to a kind of ossification for the way in which it seems to embody the spirit of its time, even though it might have been written in resistance to many of the assumptions of its own age. Yet, for a poet like Blake, the radical element in the work of a Dante or Milton would seem to be what's most attractive—the core of its visionary potential that needs to be emphasized. Dante's poem forthrightly addresses theological topics, but it does so by way of a fantastic, highly metaphorical poetic fiction. Therefore, to read the *Comedy* as an exposition of orthodox theological discourse poses a particularly complex hermeneutic challenge. Pyle at one point acknowledges that Blake recognized Dante as a fellow writer of poetic fiction, but throughout his discussion the *Comedy's* fantastic otherworld is assumed to posit an invariably orthodox theology. Its imposing structure might invite this sort of reading, but there are enough anomalies to indicate that Dante was thinking around the very structures he represented. (For example, what *is* the Trojan Ripheus doing in *Paradiso*? What do readers have to question about the poem's theological assertions in order to normalize such an exception to its own rules?) At a certain point the reader has to ask whether Blake was indeed rescuing the *Comedy* from itself or offering an interpretation of the work that was at least potentially and radically heterodox.
- 9 For example, Blake's first image depicts the moment in *Inferno* 1 when the pilgrim, fleeing the three allegorical beasts in the woods, encounters an angelic, levitated Virgil. This is where Pyle establishes his fundamental opposition to Roe, because Roe sees the watercolor as consistent with Dante's description of the opening scene. Pyle is right to note that the leafy setting, the cuddly countenances of the beasts, and the androgynous depictions of Dante and Virgil strike a very different register from that of the *Inferno's* “selva oscura.” But a point at which he finds greatest fault in Roe (see p. 14) is in respect to the conspicuous presence of an ocean in the background. Pyle insists that there is no ocean in the opening of canto 1, and this is true if one restricts the scene to a reified place where the action occurs. However, the *Comedy* rarely supports such readings, and Dante is never averse to fostering an ambiguous relationship between the

poem's own rhetoric and the thing it describes. If one pays attention to the poetry, however, it is quite clear that there is an ocean, or its equivalent, in the epic's very first simile:

And as a man, with difficult short breath,
Forespent with toiling, 'scap'd from sea to shore,
Turns to the perilous wide waste, and stands
At gaze; e'en so my spirit, that yet fail'd
Struggling with terror, turn'd to view the straits,
That none hath pass'd and liv'd.
(*Inferno* 1.21-26, trans. Cary [1814])

Here Dante introduces a motif that the poet will return to often, as he does, for example, in the initial appearance of Geryon as a swimmer coming up from the deep (16.128); both of these images suggest an analogy to certain of Blake's metaphorical waters, such as the "sea of time & space" in the letter to Butts dated 10 January 1802, or the element in which Isaac Newton is immersed in Blake's color print.

- 10 In Pyle's reading, Blake's evident sympathy for certain individuals among the damned marks a distinct departure from Dante, as in his illustrations of *Capaneus* (canto 14) and the thief *Vanni Fucci* (canto 25). Yet Dante, too, exhibits compassion for and sympathy with some of the shades he encounters. In certain cases the nature of his relationship is left ambiguous. (Why *does* he swoon at the end of Francesca's story? The debate on that topic continues.) But elsewhere his admiration is quite clear, as in his evident respect for *Farinata* among the Epicureans of canto 10. There is no doubt, though, that he finds the three Florentine sodomites to be so attractive that he is compelled to jump in among them (16.47-52), and even Virgil advises the pilgrim to treat them with courtesy (16.13-15). Regarding Blake's depiction of the three Florentines, Pyle notes Blake's free thought on sexuality and his refusal to moralize sexual behavior. Granted, the superstructure of the *Inferno* can qualify Dante's enthusiasm here—the three are incontrovertibly among the damned—but the genuine affection and admiration on display, despite the force of place, here affords a moment for the reader to question facile assumptions about the nature of sin and punishment. Nor should we ignore the fact that this encounter in canto 16 is immediately preceded by the very affectionate reunion the pilgrim has with *Brunetto Latini*. The point is that Blake might actually have read Dante's fiction in a way that doesn't require quite the degree of redemptive assistance Pyle imagines. Blake might be foregrounding aspects of the *Comedy* he finds appealing and that Dante requires his readers to rethink.
- 11 Pyle's descriptions of Blake's illustrations would be enhanced if they were integrated with engaged readings of the *Comedy*. This is equally the case with the drawings for *Par-*

adiso, the canticle that supposedly held the least interest for Blake, and which many artists deemphasize. A notable exception is Giovanni di Paolo (British Library Yates Thompson MS 36), who created for it an ambitious program of illustrations. Most distinctive about di Paolo's approach is the way that he frequently renders rhetorical elements of the poem, such as similes and metaphors, in the same pictorial space as the narrative events, suggesting his recognition that the significance of the *Comedy* exceeds that of the mere adventure recounted. Blake would seem capable of a similarly adventurous approach, and indeed it is in his drawings of Dante's heaven that he departs from the narrative most conspicuously, when he includes his *Recording Angel* as a substitute for the sphere of Jupiter and its imperial eagle. Blake was a forthright opponent of imperial power, and Pyle presents a convincing reason why Dante's spectacular eagle might be rendered as a comparatively doltish, earthbound scribe: Blake had no use for the idea of divine justice relative to the power of a direct vision of God (251). But his explanation here sidesteps consideration of the most prominent thematic feature in this episode in the *Comedy*, which is among the most visually stunning of Dante's imagining; namely, the conspicuous role of writing, an activity that the eagle, the Recording Angel, Dante, and Blake all have in common. In Dante, the sphere of Jupiter presents an episode with metapoetic resonance. Could Blake have noticed that? Might his illustration, even in the way that it displaces Jupiter's eagle, foreground concerns both poets had about the nature of their craft?

- 12 To conclude his reading of *Paradiso*, Pyle offers a final refutation of Roe when he considers Blake's image of a chained Bible in *The Queen of Heaven in Glory* (*Paradiso* 31-33) against the canticle's concluding image of the "one volume" of the universe "clasp'd of love" (33.81). Roe interprets the chained Bible as evidence that for Blake the souls there depicted had rejected true religion (chains being Blake's visual metaphor for Newtonian mechanics and rationalism generally). Pyle holds Blake's sketch to be far less oppositional and directly related to the transcendent, unifying codex that concludes the canto. Where Blake does see a problem with Dante's conclusion, he says, is in Dante's irremediable estrangement of the human and the divine. Blake's God, as noted above, is absolutely immanent, whereas Dante's is always separate from man (260). However, if Pyle were to continue his reading beyond the image of a single volume bound by love, which appears early in the final canto, he would find a concluding vision (immediately before the ultimate ineffability topos of the squared circle) of a human face precisely where one would expect the ultimate vision of the divine:

Thou smiledst; on that circling, which in thee
Seem'd as reflected splendour, while I mus'd;

For I therein, methought, in its own hue
Beheld our image painted: steadfastly
I therefore por'd upon the view.
(*Paradiso* 33.118-22, trans. Cary)

“*Pinta de la nostra effige*” (line 121)—painted with our image—that is, the shared image of God and humanity. Upon reaching this quasi-Blakean vision that fuses the human and the divine through art, the vision of the poet-narrator Dante fails, in part as a practical narrative device to conclude the poem but also as a gesture of thematic conclusion, which is to say Dante’s visionary progress goes no further not because of inability alone, but perhaps in acknowledgment, at least in Blake’s reading, that there might in fact be nothing more to be seen.

- 13 Pyle’s treatment of these illustrations lays some important critical groundwork and offers an overdue reassessment of Blake’s Dante. An approach to the *Comedy* as poetry that addresses theological problems rather than as a theological treatise in verse might reveal more areas in which Blake found commonality with his visionary predecessor and yield a different sense of what the illustrations reflect. With this book, Pyle has opened the door to further reassessment of Blakean intertextuality. The book’s prose is stylistically accessible to undergraduate readers, generally well edited, and adequately illustrated with ninety-six mostly small images (twelve of which are in color).²

2. Pyle provides no images for seven illustrations that he discusses: Fortune (p. 162), Cacus (198), Ulysses (206), Nimrod (211), Cato (221), the envious (235), and the first image of *Paradiso* (246).