

SILVIA DE SANTIS, *Blake & Dante: A Study of William Blake's Illustrations of the Divine Comedy Including his Critical Notes*



It was autumn of 1824 when the poet William Blake began his illustration of the *Commedia*. He was sixty-seven years old, and he would die three years later without completing the project. His fellow painter friend, John Linnell, commissioned the whole series of Dante illustrations to Blake, an idea that came to Linnell as a result of his own fascination towards the classics. He realized the poet was gathering around him a group of admiring young artists, who called themselves the “Ancients” and were deeply concerned with Blake’s divine and cosmological vision. They often compared him to an elderly Michelangelo. Regardless of his frail state, Blake produced more than one hundred pencil sketches and watercolors and seven engravings, and these constitute, with the exception of his series of 116 illustrations to the poems of Thomas Gray in 1797-1798, the largest series ever undertaken by Blake, according to Alexander Gilchrist’s *The Life of William Blake* (1907).

Blake scholarship has essentially considered these illustrations as interpretative and symbolic, based on W.B. Yeats’ commentary on them and on Albert S. Roe’s analysis of the whole series in 1953, followed by the contributions of Rodney Baine (1987) and David Fuller (1988) that seek a more literal interpretation of Blake’s Dantean corpus. More recently, Eric Pyle’s study on William Blake’s illustrations on the *Commedia* (2015) suggests that he undertook an aesthetic exercise to complete Dante’s theology, and in particular, Blake’s notion that God and man are indivisible.

Silvia De Santis has gathered all of these debates around Blake’s work on the *Commedia* in a beautiful, succinct and well-written book that makes the poet-artist vision comprehensible to an informed general reader as well as to a specialist. Understanding Blake’s corpus on Dante involves an unfathomable immersion in his poetry, and De Santis does not shy away from it. She defines Blake’s pictorial work as “the result of dialectics involving and questioning the very premises – political, theological and poetic – of the *Commedia*” (p. 7) and this allow us to gauge as readers-viewers the way Blake captures an image that translates the poetic word. Several questions emerge so as to what an

extent Blake is challenging the viewer into his own reading of Dante – whom he considered an “atheist” for his belief in “vengeance for sin” and “his Hell a creation not of God but of Satan” (Ward 2003: 33) – or whether he is in any way faithful to Dante’s original composition. Is Blake rewriting Dante not only aesthetically, but also theologically? De Santis tackles Blake’s *Commedia* as his own particular *lectura dantis*: the work of a poet, a crafter of words and meanings, as well as the achievement of an artisan who is skillful enough to use innovative pictorial techniques, with colors of special brilliance, and, above all, produce a composition in which texts and images complement, not simply ‘match’ each other.

Conceptually, De Santis confronts us with dozens of Blake’s plates that aim at retrieving from Dante’s text the truth of his poetic vision, regardless of their political or religious differences. “However,” adds De Santis, “the imaginative re-formulation in pictorial terms of that same informing vision, opens the way to an independent creative act capable of revisiting and amending Dante’s text” (p. 8). This allows for a series of “problematic issues” that De Santis’ work aims at addressing, while leaving aside any comprehensive analysis of the illustrations proper. To this purpose, she undertakes a summary of Dante’s reception in England, from Geoffrey Chaucer *imitatio* of the *Commedia* in his *House of Fame* (1384) to the Protestant appropriation of Dante’s works in the 16th century by Elizabethan poets and John Milton alike, both with ambivalent views on whether Dante’s attacks on religion are more in line with Protestant reform or a defense of old Christian values. While in the 18th century, Dante’s recounting of Count Ugolino’s story in *Inferno* XXXIII, 1–90, fueled the gothic taste for dark and obsessive stories, which prompted artist and art theorist Jonathan Richardson to offer his own translation of this canto of the *Inferno* to show “how a great poet could carry the story further than the historian could do by narrating what passed in the prison” (p. 25). In other words, Richardson was already realizing the narrative, visual, and spiritual impact of Dante’s episode, and with this, the fact that a single piece of art could be explained from a narrative and visual perspective. Henry Boyd translated the whole *Commedia* into English in 1802, and it was most likely this version and an earlier translation of *The Inferno* also by Boyd that the early British Romantics, including Blake, had read.

De Santis reminds us that Blake’s interest in Dante was not limited to the illustrations he produced at the end of his life but was a “constant feature of the artist’s life” (p. 57), even in his youth. Already in 1793, Blake drew in *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* a figure of Count Ugolino in prison surrounded by his four starving children, and more famously, as an engraving of the Count and children as sleeping giants in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). Around 1800, the sculptor John Flaxman introduced Blake to

the writer William Hayley, who commissioned him to make a portrait of Dante for Hayley's library, based on Raphael's portrait of Dante. For De Santis, Dante's head "constituted a paradigmatic example of Blake's adherence to that interpretative vein that adopts Count Ugolino as the symbol of Dante's poetry" (p. 66). In the background of Alighieri's image, Blake represented Ugolino's agony in prison, and this is, for De Santis, a development in Blake's conceptualizing of the *Commedia* away from the usual "anthologisation" to a "greater awareness of the poem and the intentions of its author" (p. 66). Thus, Blake's series of drawings were "done at a time in which an understanding of the *Divina Commedia* was undergoing a decisive turn in England" (p. 68), but one in which Blake was more attentive to than others.

This turn is no better noticed (and noted) than in Blake's drawing for *Inferno*. To this end, De Santis analyses the complex inscription written in Blake's hand on his preliminary sketch for Canto IV of the *Inferno*. By being one of the longest and more descriptive comments left by Blake on the *Commedia*, it helps understand "Blake's aesthetic concept in which poetry and theology are one and the same", since the interpretation of a work of art can be seen through several layers of meaning, such as in the exegesis of the Bible (p. 77). The critic Northrop Frye remarked in 1947 that "Blake's idea that the meaning and the form of a poem are the same thing comes very close to what Dante appears to have meant by 'analogy' or fourth level of interpretation" (p. 77). That should eventually be the real impact of any work of art, which would include both its superficial meaning and all the other possible meanings stemming from it. For Blake, Christianity meant a true revolution in the sense that it recognized the divinity of Man and taught the universal forgiveness of sins. This is consistent with Blake's well-known affinity with the ideas of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, which were so fundamental in his own theology: "The idea of the human form of God and of Christ (the God-man) the one and only God" (p. 81). Hence, God is not an abstract entity external to man who distributes rewards of punishments according to a set of moral rules. If heaven and hell are not physical places where we go to, according to Blake, then these are mental states. Hell is men's inability to transcend in his imagination the semblance of nature (p. 85), De Santis writes, and here is also where Dante and Blake differ. For the latter, Dante is a follower of a false divinity (*Urizen*) who boils down religion to an ethic code, and so it behooves to the artist to "expose a false divinity and to reveal to men Christianity's real message" (p. 88). But if representing these concepts comes naturally for Blake in his allegorical and symbolic artistic universe, identifying certain images of the Dante series is not always obvious to the viewer or critic, according to De Santis. The difficulty arises from the fact that these images "were not drawn from the diegetic structure of the *Commedia*, from where they are sought, but

from its rhetorical structure” (p. 113). This is how the poet fuses and uplifts both artistic languages, the poetic and the pictorial, to create a single blended vision. “Blake decided to illustrate certain similes thus devoting equal iconographic consideration to Dante’s *ornatus* as to the narrative itself” (p. 113). De Santis concludes that this unusual approach accounts for the failure to recognize figures that are traditionally Dantesque, which critics have mostly attributed to Blake’s alleged syncretism.

De Santis is correct, though, in spelling out the essence of Blake’s hand in depicting the literality of Dante’s meaning, and in his sacrificing of narrative sequence, dualistic comparisons or metaphors devoid of a larger allegorical substance. By depicting the actual message of Dante in its conceptual literality, Blake is showing both the artistic genius of Dante and his own theological distance from it, particularly in Hell with its two “diaphanous images of Dante and Virgil” (p. 114). De Santis prefers not to tell us whether Blake’s painter eye wins over his theology; and rightly so, because as a dialectic relation between two falsely opposing movements – form and content –, these become fully and finally liberated from any dualistic constraints.

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