

## William Blake's *Divine Comedy*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a new interpretation of William Blake's illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The only full-length study of these pictures was published by Albert S. Roe in 1953, and since that time much new research has illuminated Blake's thought and the semiotic strategies he used to express it. I will make use of the work of Robert Essick and Morton Paley, among many others, to construct a view of Blake's Dante that is, I think, both more comprehensive than older interpretations and more in line with what we know of Blake's other works. In the end I hope to show that the *Comedy* illustrations, though left unfinished at his death, deserve to be ranked among Blake's most important work. Contrary to earlier interpretations of the series, I will argue that Blake had great respect for his Italian predecessor, and did not intend to condemn the *Comedy*'s message entirely. Where Roe, for example, sees Blake's watercolor of Beatrice's appearance in the Earthly Paradise as a symbol of Albion's fall into the world of materialism, I show that the painting gives the opposite meaning: that the pilgrim has achieved spiritual reintegration and is ready to ascend to Eternity.

The first section of this paper will prove that Blake intended his illustrations as a correction or "update" of Dante's work. A brief examination of the illuminated poem *Milton* will describe Blake's dialectical method of engaging with the respected poets of the past, and will introduce the main objections that Blake had to the work of both

John Milton and Dante. I will point to selected examples from earlier scholars' work on *Milton* to demonstrate Blake's methods of creatively engaging with his honored predecessors, and show how the same process is at work in the *Comedy* illustrations.

In the second section I will examine the background that was in place when Blake began his series of pictures for the *Comedy*. This will include a brief sketch of Dante's reputation in England, the various translations that were available in Blake's time, and the artistic traditions that were already growing up around certain scenes from the *Comedy*. I will also describe all of the instances when Blake made use of themes from the *Comedy* in his earlier work, some of which were directly connected to Dante's poem and some of which were not. Finally in this section I will discuss Blake's relationship with his last patron, John Linnell, their work together, and the circumstances surrounding the commission for the final set of Dante illustrations.

I will use Blake's recorded criticisms of Dante as a jumping-off point, in the third section of this book, to analyze the incompatible points of their theology. These criticisms were pencilled into the margins of books, left as memos on unfinished drawings, or recorded in diaries by friends after conversations. Though little such documentation survives, that which we have is pithy enough to get a sense of Blake's strong opinions. Of particular importance here are fundamental differences

between Blake and Dante on the subject of God's presence in our world, the nature of the higher world, and the means necessary to "rise" towards it. Dante's theology holds to the traditional Catholic dogma that God is transcendent, and only partly immanent in our world. Blake, on the other hand, is firmly in the tradition of Jacob Boehme, and, following Boehme, Hegel, in insisting that God is absolutely immanent in the world we inhabit — that, in fact, God is present in his entirety in each grain of sand. This theological viewpoint gives rise to Blake's views on the abilities of language and artistic expression, which Dante could not have shared. Whereas a theology in which God is transcendent means that he can never be fully comprehended or described by man, the absolute immanence in Blake's system means that not only is God visible to those whose doors of perception are properly opened, but that art itself is the means of making the immanent God manifest to us.

The fourth part of my book will be devoted to a close examination of nearly all the pictures from Blake's *Comedy*, applying the lessons of the previous chapter to illuminate the details of each illustration. In particular I will examine cases in which Blake intentionally differs from Dante's textual descriptions. Examples of such differences are particularly obvious in the first watercolor, for the opening canto in the dark forest. Blake has reset this scene into a parklike glade at the seaside. Moreover, he has changed the appearances of the main characters so that they no longer appear to be middle-aged male poets, but androgynous and innocent souls. Such deviations give us the ability to perceive the corrections and "updates" Blake intended to make to the *Comedy*. With these changes in mind, we may then look freshly at those illustrations which seem to follow Dante more closely, and see that even in these pictures, Blake has interpreted them in his own way.