

William Blake, Dante and Images of Inversion in *Inferno*

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In the final year of his life, William Blake received a commission from John Linnell to complete a series of illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Although Blake died before he finished the project, he left 102 pencil sketches and watercolors and seven completed etchings. By all accounts, Blake enthusiastically dove into the work, even attempting to learn Italian so he didn't have to read Dante's *Divine Comedy* in translation. Blake grappled with the ways in which Dante's ideas about humanity and its connection to the Divine differed so profoundly from his own. In particular, Blake rejected Dante's traditional understanding of the Fall, his belief in God as punisher, and his concept of Hell as a physical place. Since one third of Dante's epic poem is predicated on the belief not just in Hell's materiality, but also in the fact that it is a space of "eternal sorrow" made by "divine power" (*Inferno* III.2-5), it would be easy to conclude that Blake found little redeeming value in Dante's theological perspective. But as aesthetic philosopher Eric Pyle has argued, Blake would never have devoted so much energy to illustrating Dante's work if he had not found something compelling in it. What Blake discovered was a shared contempt for a contemporary Christianity which corrupts the teachings of Christ and a penchant for using the imagery of inversion to symbolize that corruption. By examining instances where Blake has used images of physically inverted bodies in key cantos of *Inferno*, it is possible to trace both when Blake is rejecting Dante's vision of Hell and when he is in unison with Dante's criticism of the Christian Church.

Blake rejected the concept that God the Father would create a punitive structure of the type Dante envisioned. For Blake, a God of retribution is no true God at all. On a rough sketch of the nine concentric circles of Dante's *Inferno*, Blake wrote that, "Whatever Book is for Vengeance for Sin & whatever Book is

Against the Forgiveness of Sins is not of the Father but of Satan the Accuser & Father of Hell" (Object 22). Here we see Blake's rejection of the concept of God as punisher. Blake's opposition is partly rooted in his aversion to stasis; he rejects any vision of the afterlife which disallows spiritual growth and the possibility of Divine forgiveness. Blake's God could never warn anyone to "abandon all hope, ye who enter here" (*Inferno* III.9) as is written on the entrance gate of Dante's Hell.

Blake's religious critiques extended to modern Christianity, which he accused of manipulating religious teaching and texts in order to establish punitive structures similar to those found in *Inferno*. Blake famously rejected the Bible as the word of God. Instead, he argued it was both a political and poetic text created and crafted by men to assert power over their community through religious laws. These Biblical stories, he asserted, were then used to legitimize the authority of these same religious figures because the books contained the "word" of the very God the authorities had constructed. As literary historian Stephen C. Behrendt argues, "It is a circle whose center and circumference are defined by what it 'contains' - which is precisely a reflection of those who fabricate the container in the first place" (39).

Blake's rejection of the Christianity practiced by this religious Establishment was so complete that he wrote in "A Vision of the Last Judgement," that "the Modern Church Crucifies Christ with the Head Downwards" (Erdman 564). In Blake's estimation, the values and actions of modern religious authorities were so antithetical to the actual life and Gospel of Christ, it was akin to not only a second crucifixion, but one in which Jesus' actual person was inverted.

Blake incorporated this religious observation about the inversion of proper Christian values into a recurring symbol in his illustrations. In one of the versions of the Rosenwald drawing of "The Last Judgment," Blake scholar S. Foster Damon notes that Blake includes a cross with a serpent coiled around it. Blake rejected the cross as a symbol of Christianity, believing that it was "an instrument of

execution, of the Vengeance for Sin, and therefore, should not symbolize the true religion of Forgiveness" (Damon 95).

In Blake iconography, the serpent has several meanings, including hypocrisy, the material world, and materialism. He frequently uses the image of Druid serpent temples to depict natural worship and refers to "the vast form of Nature like a serpent" (Damon 98, 102) in the "Night, the Third" section of *The Four Zoas*. In the Revolution section in "Night the Seventh" of *The Four Zoas*, Orc, the enemy of religion, is forced by Urizen to ascend the Tree of Mystery in serpent form (164). There, Orc loses his humanity and descends into what Blake calls "that state called Satan" (Damon 95). Orc encircles man with false churches, in essence becoming his own opposite.

Thus, the cross with the serpent coiled around it in the Rosenwald drawing of "The Last Judgement" can be read as a symbol of a Christian church steeped in hypocrisy and materialism. The figure directly in front of the cross in the inverted cruciform position brings to mind Blake's previous quote about crucifying Christ with his head downward. As Damon argues, the fact that the cross is being expelled from heaven (95), signifies the rejection of both the material world and the organized Christian Church.

Blake also uses inverted images in *The Book of Urizen* to denounce an inversion of values and priorities (Behrendt 47). In Blake's mythological system, Urizen is the embodiment of reason and conventional law, which Blake sees as limiting creative energy. Behrendt cites Plate 6 of Copy D, in particular, which depicts a single inverted human figure in the cruciform position, a serpent coiled around the length of the body, falling among vibrant orange, red and black flames (*The Complete Illuminated Books* 207). In all other copies of the plate, except copy J, the central figure is flanked by two additional bodies (Object 9). Behrendt describes the scene as "a grotesque visual recasting of... the crucifixion (Jesus flanked by the thieves) ..." (47). The cruciform body position and coiled serpent are reminiscent of the inverted crucifix in the Rosenwald "The

Last Judgement.” In addition, the pattern of the serpent's skin echoes the pattern on the pages of the book *Urizen* is holding in plate 5, as if to suggest that the Priestly Law itself is restricting the figure (Object 4).

Blake sees much of Dante's *Inferno* as governed by reason and the Urizenic religious laws he critiques in the Rosenwald “Last Judgement” and *The Book of Urizen*.” His inclusion of inverted figures in the cruciform position, as seen in Canto 5, “The circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini” (Object 10), signals his rejection of Dante's vision of Divine punishment. In the image, Dante Pilgrim is lying unconscious, having just fainted after hearing Francesca's tale. Virgil stands watch over him, as Paolo and Francesca are swept back up into the whirlwind. On the far left of the illustration, a horde of naked sinners are swept along by another powerful tempest. Directly to the left of Dante Pilgrim's prone figure, his hand almost touching Dante Pilgrim's foot, is a sinner in the same inverted cruciform position as the figure in plate 6 of *The Book of Urizen* (Object 9). Although Dante Poet has placed the lustful on the highest level of Hell, indicating that he sees the sins of appetite as the least offensive to God, the souls in this level are still receiving eternal judgment. By including this figure in the illustration, along with an image of Paolo and Francesca's passion in the “sun of forgiveness,” as literary critic Jeanne Moskal terms it, Blake is signaling his disagreement with Dante Poet's theology (162). The sinner's position references both the cross that Blake associates with vengeance and his belief that any religion that teaches that God would exact punishment for sin is an inversion of proper Christian values.

However, Blake's illustration for *Inferno* Canto 13, “The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides” (Object 25), is an exemplar of how Blake can find points of convergence with Dante's viewpoint while still including his own commentary on the text. The contrapasso for this circle of Hell is that the sinners who rejected the gift of life are now transformed into barren, poisonous trees. They embody an anti-tree of life, of sorts, and Dante Poet begins the

canto with a series of negations to emphasize the way in which suicide is a repudiation of life and hope. The trees have “not green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth/ branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there,/ but thorns with poison” (4-6). The sinners moan in agony as harpies tear their limbs, as if to underscore that the suicidal can only express themselves through pain. Blake has made the mutilation of one of the tree's branches the focal point of the scene. The broken branch forms an arch that frames the head of Virgil and draws the eye to the figure of Dante Pilgrim. Blood wells up in the crook of the branch, then runs down the arch in large droplets that fall between the two poets, leading the eye downward to the severed end of the branch and a pool of blood on the ground. Blake's choice to draw attention to the broken, bleeding branch forces the viewer to recognize the pain of the Suicides.

However, his inclusion of an inverted female figure in the tree to the left of Dante Pilgrim signals Blake's rejection of Dante Poet's vision of Divine justice. There is a suggestion that the woman's arms, which morph into the roots at the base of the tree, are in the cruciform position. Several other trees contain the outlines of human figures, but none of those figures are upside down, implying that Blake wants to draw the viewer's focus to this specific tree. Once again, Blake is using an image of inversion to critique what he sees as the inversion of Christian values. Literary and art critic Morton D. Paley points out that Blake's decision to include the suggestion of human forms in the trees is not based in the text of *Inferno* (132). By sketching even these rough suggestions of the human form, Blake reminds the viewer of the essential humanity of the Suicides.

The way in which the harpies—who serve as the instruments of God's divine justice—are characterized further supports this interpretation. Their bodies are squat and large breasted, with stubby wings and thick claws that look more like fat fingers than menacing talons. Their faces are disproportionately large and have sharply curved beaks. The lone exception is the harpy to the far left, which has a beak that looks more like a prominent nose. Paley observes that the

harpies are a “strange combination of ludicrousness and menace” (132n82). Their bizarre and farcical appearance undercuts the seriousness of their purpose. In Blake’s conception of the canto, the viewer is left mocking God’s representatives and feeling empathy for the sinners instead.

However, Blake may be in agreement with Dante Poet’s opinion of the canto’s focus sinner, Pier della Vigna. Della Vigna, whose punishment is a play on his name, which means “of the vineyard,” was a chancellor to Emperor Frederick II. Della Vigna was falsely accused of plotting to assassinate the Emperor, imprisoned for a year, and blinded. Unable to defend himself against the charges, della Vigna killed himself by dashing his head repeatedly against the stone wall of his cell. In Hell, he presents himself to Dante Pilgrim and Virgil as “he who held both the keys to the heart of/ Frederick and turned them, locking and unlocking, so/ gently/ that I excluded almost everyone else from his/ intimacy” (XIII.58-62). His imperious depiction of himself as the gatekeeper to the halls of power is an ironic juxtaposition to what and where he currently is—a dark, knotted, barren tree in a desolate part of Hell.

Even more revealing of della Vigna’s self-conception is the way in which he implies that some intrinsic quality he possesses, rather than the office he held in Frederick’s court, inspires envy in others. He speaks of envy as an allegorical abstraction that turned the hearts of the courtiers and Frederick against him, leaving him with no choice but “by death to flee disdain” making him “unjust against my just self” (XIII.70-72). Della Vigna may claim that envy is the reason he fell, but his own story is undercut by the fact that when his office is taken away, he has nothing left for anyone to envy.

Both Dante and Blake may be less sympathetic to della Vigna because, like all sinners in Hell, he continues to exhibit the same behavior that led to his damnation: an inflated perception of his own importance, a sense of aggrieved self-pity, and an inability to see past material concerns. Even in death and eternal torment, he remains focused on his reputation and his relationship to

Frederick. He swears to Dante Pilgrim, “by the strange new roots of this wood,” that he “never broke faith with [his] lord” (XIII.73-74). Of course, in swearing by the roots of the tree in the Wood of the Suicides, della Vigna is actually swearing by himself, and the Lord he refers to is Frederick, not God. The irony that he did break faith with his Lord—God—by rejecting the gift of life and committing suicide is completely lost on him.

Blake’s illustrative choices in Canto 13 indicate that he is more sympathetic to Dante’s treatment of its focus on the sinner. The outline of Pier della Vigna’s face, which appears in the tree directly to Virgil’s left, bears a resemblance to the Urizen figure that frequently appears in Blake’s artwork. By highlighting the shading and lines in the bark of the tree, the distinctive brows, mustache and beard of Urizen become visible. There even appears to be the outline of della Vigna’s knees, reminiscent of Urizen’s pose on the title page of *The Book of Urizen*. The visual allusion makes sense, since della Vigna shares a number of characteristics with Urizen; as the chancellor to the Emperor, della Vigna is a lawmaker, and through his gatekeeping power, a limiter of the reforming energy within Frederick’s empire. Della Vigna’s self-presentation in his conversation with Dante Pilgrim betrays his pride and ambition; even in Hell, he can’t see past his own ego, power, and status. His world is the “charter’d” world that Blake writes of in his poem “London,” one in which della Vigna was both the recipient and grantor of liberties and privileges in Frederick’s kingdom (Thomson 8). Unfortunately, once della Vigna loses his access to that power, he falls into despair because, Blake would argue, his perception is circumscribed by the boundaries of Frederick’s court. He is compelled to take his own life because he literally cannot imagine a life beyond the material boundaries that he has known. Here is a man who suffers from the “mind-forg’d manacles” (8) of “deceit, self-interest, absence of love, of law, repression, and hypocrisy” (Thomson 15).

Blake is even more in harmony with Dante Poet in Canto 19, the canto of the “Simoniac Popes” (Object 36). Simony is the act of buying and selling church offices or privileges. Blake’s illustration for this canto stays mostly faithful to the description in Dante’s text, implying that here Blake has greater sympathy with Dante’s religious critique than he does in other sections of the poem. In the upper third of the picture, Virgil is carrying Dante Pilgrim so that the latter can get a closer look at the sinner. A naked male figure, representing Pope Nicholas III, is suspended, head downwards, inside a round font filled with flames. Nicholas’ feet are on fire, and the viewer can see his body through the walls of the font.

In this case, Nicholas’ inverted body position is not a Blakean addition to the text; Dante Poet, himself, has incorporated inversion as the major governing principle of the canto. The inverted symbolism in Canto 19 reflects Dante Poet’s belief that the popes and clergymen in this circle of Hell are guilty of “trampling the good and raising up the wicked” (XVIII.104-105). That Blake has made relatively few illustrative changes in his depiction of the canto reflects that both Blake and Dante, “felt that the church of their own day had strayed so far from Christ’s true message that its teachings could be described as upside down,” as aesthetic philosopher Eric Pyle asserts (187).

Dante’s text uses Christian imagery to emphasize the way in which the Simoniac popes have corrupted Christ’s teachings. The font in which Nicholas is placed is intended to invoke those in the San Giovanni baptistery in Dante’s hometown of Florence. Instead of emerging from the waist up submerged in water, however, Nicholas is submerged from the waist down in flame. The inverted iconography of baptism reminds the viewer that as a clergyman, Nicholas was charged with leading the Church away from sin, but instead has immersed himself in it. The flames on his feet are an allusion to the Pentecost, the moment when the Apostles received the power of the Holy Spirit via tongues of flame on their forehead. If Pentecost is the actualization of the Church—the

continuing presence of the Holy Spirit which gives the clergy its spiritual authority—then Simony is the perversion of that authority. The power conferred upon the Apostles at Pentecost has descended in an unbroken line from Christ, through each of the popes, to Nicholas himself, via the Apostolic Succession.

Nicholas' inverted position is a reference both to the saint he should have emulated and the sinner he actually mirrored. His posture recreates that of Simon Magus, the first Simonist, as he plunged headfirst to his death. The visual allusion reminds the viewer of the exact nature of Nicholas' sin. The fact that Simoniacs are driven head first into the rock is also a reference to the Apostle Simon, who Jesus renamed Peter and made the head of his Church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Of course, the name Peter comes from the Greek Petros, which means "stone" or "boulder." The fact that Nicholas and the other Simoniac popes are driven headfirst into rock is a reminder of the way in which they failed to follow the example of St. Peter, the first pope. St. Peter famously refused to sell his apostolic power to Simon Magus in *Acts* 8:20-22.

The allusion to St. Peter may explain Blake's decision not to depict Nicholas in the cruciform position. Instead, the Simoniac's pose is indicative of someone falling: his back curved slightly to the side, his knees bent, his arms braced for impact. Nicholas' posture evokes Simon Magus more than Simon Peter. Blake's artistic choice may be meant to underscore Dante's point about Nicholas' unworthiness in comparison to St. Peter's example. St. Peter reportedly requested that he be crucified upside down because he was unworthy to die in the same way as Christ. In Dante's text Nicholas' inverted position is also meant to remind the reader of St. Peter's crucifixion. Unlike Peter, however, Nicholas did not choose his upside posture in order to honor Christ; instead, his posture was inflicted on him as punishment for choosing the sins of Simon Magus. Since Blake has included inverted, cruciform figures in illustrations of cantos in which he

believes Dante himself has inverted Christian values, his decision not to do so here indicates that in this canto, at least, his theological opinions are in accord with the Italian poet.

In the end, however, while Blake is in fundamental agreement with Dante about the corruption of the institutional Church, Blake is much more willing to critique the foundations upon which those institutions are built. Dante is willing to critique religious institutions, but he's not willing to eradicate them entirely. Like Blake, he condemns the institutional Church for the ways in which it has strayed from the teachings of Jesus and what he sees as its proper spiritual role, but he still accepts the essential validity of the Bible as God's word and the necessity of religion in general. He also unquestioningly accepts the role of God as Divine Punisher, a construct that Blake finds fundamentally incompatible with the message of Christ. As Blake told Henry Crabb Robinson, "Dante saw devils where I see none. I see good only" (27).

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