Anti-Classicism in Blake's Illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*

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In the summer of 1824, William Blake (1757-1827) accepted a commission from the English landscape and portrait painter John Linnell (1792-1882) to carry out a series of watercolor illustrations of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Blake started this commission with great enthusiasm and ambition. However, he did not finish the whole project before his death in 1827, leaving 102 drawings in varying degrees of completion. Blake focused significantly on *Inferno*, the first part of the *Comedy*: 72 of the drawings illustrate *Inferno*, 20 illustrate *Purgatorio* and 10 illustrate *Paradiso*.[1] There have been many studies of these illustrations, especially those for *Inferno*, and scholars have disagreed about whether they convey Blake's highly critical interpretation of the *Comedy*. In *William Blake's Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy: A Study of the Engraving, Pencil Sketches and Watercolors*, Eric Pyle synthesize the previous studies, positing that the illustrations are interpretive and that Blake shaped the message of the pictures through "subtle changes in emphasis or unexpected visual decisions."[2] Pyle argues that Blake used the illustrations as a way to correct what he saw as the errors of pagan morality and rational materialism. I want to focus on his discussion of Blake's visual reinterpretation from the perspective of anti-classicism and anti-Christian morality. What

[1] Michael Phillips, Colin Harrison, and Martin Butlin, *William Blake: Master & Apprentice,* (Ashmolean
[2] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy: A Study of the Engravings, Pencil Sketches and Watercolor* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), 12-16.

this paper will do is to examine and build on Pyle's analysis, and to offer an alternative account of the visual evidence in Blake's images.

Dante was born in Florence around 1265 and was well educated in Latin and the classics.[3] Actively involved in the political scene in Florence, Dante was accused of corruption and sentenced to exile by his political opponents who conspired with the Pope.[4] During his exile, Dante wrote the epic poem, *Divine Comedy*. As an imaginative poem depicting the afterlife, the *Comedy* is firmly rooted in the classical, especially in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Just as Virgil's Aeneas descends to the underworld, so too the *Comedy* depicts Dante's own allegorical pilgrimage through Hell, Purgatory, and finally up to Heaven. Dante's attempt to transpose the classical world can be further seen in the parallelism between ancient and biblical figures in the *Comedy*.[5] In most cases, a figure from Greco-Roman mythology can be found with its biblical or modern counterpart. For example, the ancient Greek mythological hero Jason and the Bolognese panderer Venedico Caccianemico were punished together for their sins of fraud.[6] Dante rewrote and broadened Virgil's Latin epic poem from the perspective of Christian epic in order to surpass it.[7] Superimposing Christian ideology on the Greco-Roman world, Dante has his pagan figures punished in the Christian Hell together with the modern figures. The *Comedy* was first fully translated into English by Henry Boyd, and then by Henry Francis

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[3] Barbara Reynolds, *Dante: The Poet, the political thinker, the man* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, an imprint of Avalon Publisher, 2006), 1-12.
[4] James R. Lowell, "Dante," in *Annual Reports of the Dante Society,* No. 5 (May 18, 1886, The Johns Hopkins University Press), 20-21.
[5] Ernst R. Curtius, "Dante," in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 362.
[6] Ronald R. Macdonald, *The Burial-Place of Memory: Epic Underworlds in Vergil, Dante, and Milton* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 101.
[7] Michelangelo Picone, "Dante and the classics," in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Amilcare A. Iannucci, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 61-67.

Cary in the early nineteenth century. Blake consulted Cary's translation when producing his illustrations and he annotated Boyd's introductory essays.[8]

Even though we have Blake's own writings and his comments on the *Comedy*, his thoughts are difficult to elucidate because of his opposition to both Christian morality and classicism. In Blake's antinomian theology, "God does not punish, and laws of condemnation are mistakes, attributable to the pre-Christian system of the fallen world, including the Greeks and those who follow Mosaic Law."[9] For Blake, the fall of man is not caused by breaking God's moral code, but by following the conventions and thus closing up the possibility of perception and imagination. Blake's anti-paganism comes from his belief in the Old Testament-based history that Hebrew culture was the origin of Greco-Roman culture; Greco-Roman works of art were merely poor copies, and Greeks and Romans stole the ideas from the Hebrews.[10] Following these two points, Pyle argues that the major disagreement between Dante and Blake is their attitude towards Greco-Roman classicism: the *Comedy*'s greatest debt to classicism is "the use of reason itself."[11] In the opening of Blake's article *On Virgil*, Blake regards the Aristotelian aesthetic in the classical poem as harmfully reductive, and he claims that the classical poets "took infinite vision and reduced it to the level of their rationalistic understandings."[12] In Blake's own mythology, he ascribed this fallen condition - vision bounded by reason - to the false God Urizen, who tried to dominate through conventional reason and law. By contrast, he views the figure of Orc as rebellious and fighting with revolutionary force against the

[8] Hazard Adams, *Blake's Margins: An Interpretive Study of the Annotations* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publisher, 2009), 98.
[9] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 9.
[10] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 8.
[11] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 47.
[12] Richey, William, *Blake's Altering Aesthetics*, (Columbia, Missuori: University of Missouri Press, 1984), 141-142.

control of Urizen. In this way, although he still regarded Dante as a great poet, Blake's own religious view was incompatible with the classicism and Christian morality established in the *Comedy*.

How, then, we might ask, would Blake execute the illustrations of the *Comedy*, whose ideology is rooted in classicism and Christian morality? Roe sees a "rewriting" of Dante's *Comedy* into Blake's own mythology. Pyle too thinks that Blake's illustrations visually remake the mythology, transforming several scenes of punishment into scenes of brave revolution. "It is primarily in Dante's final inability of manifest God that Blake sees a failure... [And] his illustrations then were not made to abolish the Comedy, but to fulfill it."[13] Blake replaced the God in Dante's underworld with his own mythological character Urizen, the false God responsible for the fallen world, and he depicted some sinners as playing the role of Orc, the rebellious protagonist fighting against the illegitimate dominant power.[14]

According to Pyle, the illustration *Capaneus the Blasphemer* (Fig.1) is one of the images that depicts the revolution set in motion by this defiant figure. However, I want to re-examine Pyle's analysis because this part of his argument is not convincingly supported by the visual evidence. I do not intend to argue that Pyle is necessarily wrong about his analysis of Blake's attitudes towards the *Comedy*, but I want to offer an alternative visual analysis to challenge Pyle's conclusions. While Pyle argues that Capaneus' imagery is an embodiment of rebellious force towards the power of reason, I want to suggest that the image shows a powerless and passive pagan hero.

[13] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 2.
[14] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 179-180.

The illustration *Capaneus the Blasphemer* is a watercolor drawing and one of the finished and most beautiful illustrations in the series.[15] Capaneus is a minor figure in Greco-Roman mythology, and his story is told in Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides' *The Phoenissae*, and Statius' *Thebaid*. Capaneus, an earth-born giant with tremendous strength, was one of the seven kings who besieged the city of Thebes. When he climbed up the ladder against the city wall of Thebes, Capaneus boasted that even Zeus was unable to stop him from conquering and destroying the city. As Capaneus mounted the ladder, Zeus smote him with a thunderbolt as punishment for his arrogance.[16] In the *Inferno,* Dante takes Capaneus out of the context of Greco-Roman mythology and condemns the pagan hero as an irreverent sinner in his Christian Hell. In Dante's Hell, Capaneus is punished as one of the blasphemers in the Seventh Circle: his soul has to suffer eternal burning by huge flames incessantly falling from the sky. According to Dante's account, unlike other desperate blasphemers, Capaneus "seems not to heed the fire, and lies disdainful and scowling, so that the rain seems not to ripen him."[17] Having perceived that Dante is asking Virgil about him, Capaneus cries out, maintaining his disdain towards Zeus without any repentance:

> What I was living, that am I dead. Though Jove weary out his smith, from whom in anger he took the sharp bolt by which on my last day I was smitten; and though he weary out the others, turn by turn, in Mongibello at the black forge, crying 'Good Vulcan, help, help!' even as he did at the fight of Phlegra, and hurl at me with all his might, he would not have thereby glad vengeance.[18]

[15] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 180.
[16] Euripides, *The Phoenissae*. Translated by E. P. Coleridge.
[17] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno,* trans., with a commentary, by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), 143.
[18] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 145.

If we compare the depictions of Capaneus in Greco-Roman mythology, this defiant personality remains the same, and in Dante's Hell, Capaneus even retains his great strength to endure the burning torment.

Pyle and others argue that Blake's illustration visualizes Capaneus' pride, obduracy, and physical strength. Milton Klonsky argues that Blake regarded Capaneus with respect and admiration, which he claims is corroborated by Blake's depiction of Capaneus as a sanctioned defiant who did not deserve punishment: "Oblivious to the bolts of lightning. . .Capaneus gazes defiantly before him, reclining at his ease on the fiery sand as if it were the steam room of a Turkish bath. There is even the suggestion of a halo about his head."[19] Albert S. Roe also describes Blake's Canapeus as majestic and sinister, "oblivious to these torments and [staring] steadily and proudly before him."[20] Expanding upon Klonsky and Roe's visual analysis, Pyle pushes the conclusion further and sees the image as the transposition of Blake's own myth onto Dante's. Pyle argues that Blake's portrayal of Capaneus glorifies him as an Orc-type revolutionary spirit poised against the Urizen-type God of the Christian underworld. Admittedly, Klonsky, Roe, and Pyle reveal how Blake may interpret Dante's *Comedy* according to his own personal ideology. But I want to suggest that their analyses do not entirely correspond with the visual evidence. Blake's illustration of Capaneus actually shows a sense of ambivalence. Rather than a defiant figure retaining his force against the 'false god,' Capaneus is depicted as a resigned pagan hero whose passivity is expressed by his facial expression and body gestures.

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[19] Milton Klonsky, *Blake's Dante: The Complete Illustrations to the* Divine Comedy (New York, NY: *Harmony Books*, a division of Crown Publishers, Inc, 1980), 143-144.
[20] Albert S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 82-83.

Blake's Capaneus is significantly different from the loud and irritable figure described by Dante and earlier poets because Blake's Capaneus is more resigned and even mournful. In the image, the two figures standing on the left are Virgil and Dante. Capaneus is the figure on the right, who occupies a large portion of the image. His facial expression shows a sense of pain. Pyle describes Capaneus' facial expressions as long-suffering as well. With his eyes looking up in vain and not in reassurance, he has a slight frown and his eyebrows twist together, as if bearing a great deal of paint, but incapable of speaking out. Capaneus lies with his left leg on the ground in a reclining position. His left arm supports his body and his right arm rests on his stretching right leg. He is surrounded by flames burning on the ground and he is struck by jagged thunderbolts from the above. With a straight neck, Capaneus looks up to the place where the flames descend. While Capaneus has a muscular body, his shoulders are drawn down, without any gesture, suggesting an attempt to get up. Although this pose can easily be read as relaxing or indifferent to the torment, I believe that the image actually shows his utter passivity while receiving his punishment, unable to stand up to take truly revolutionary actions. Pyle's interpretation of the flames is also untenable. Pyle argues that this image is a turning point and that Capaneus is the first in Blake's underworld to retain revolutionary fire emanating from himself. The flames are therefore not flames of punishment, but flames of passion provoking revolution.[21] If we take a look at the previous plate, *Dante and Virgil Among the Blasphemers* (Fig. 2), there is also fire encircling the sinners, but Pyle does not recognized their fire as "revolutionary."

Consider, too, the illustration for *Inferno*: *Vanni Fucci "Making Figs" Against God* (Fig. 3). As we discussed before, the *Comedy*'s structure parallels both classical and

[21] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations,* 180-181.

Biblical sources. In *Inferno*'s text, there is an evident juxtaposition of Capaneus and Vanni Fucci, who both defy the God. Capaneus defies a pagan God. I want to compare the image of Vanni Fucci with the one of Capaneus. Capaneus is indeed depicted as a restrained figure compared to his counterpart, while both figures have the robust and muscular body type.

In the *Comedy*, Dante refers to Capaneus in his depiction of Vanni Fucci of Pistoia,[22] who was a "violent partisan of the Neri in the blood-feud which raged in that city and [a thief] who in 1293 had plundered the treasury of San Jacopo in the church of San Zeno."[23] Fucci is also depicted as irreverent to God by making insulting gestures:

> At the end of his words the thief raised up his hands with both the figs, crying 'Take them, God, for I aim them at you!'...Ah, Pistoia, Pistoia! Why do you not decree to turn yourself to ashes and to last no longer, since you surpass your own seed in evil-doing? Through all the dark circles of Hell I saw no spirit so proud against God, not him who fell from the walls at Thebes.[24]

With the last sentence, Dante makes a clear correlation between Fucci and Capaneus. Pyle also argues that Fucci is depicted as the Orc-type defiant figure, and, in this case, I think that the visual evidence supports his argument. Almost capable of escaping from his punishments,[25] Fucci's heroic appearance is created by his straight posture, his vehement gesture, and his expressive facial expressions. Fucci is able to stand on his feet. Looking up steadily, he raises his arms, making a profane hand gesture to the God above. He is not afraid or affected by the attacks from the serpents or the flames and thunderbolts from the above. Compared with Capaneus, Fucci is a far better representative of the revolutionary Orc. Virgil and Dante are also more engaged in this scene; their hand gestures show that

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[22] Alighieri Dante, *The Inferno*, trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander, introduction & Notes by Robert Hollander (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 432
[23] Albert S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, 104.
[24] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 259.
[25] Eric Pyle, *William Blake's Illustrations*, 198.

they are discomforted by Fucci's highly inappropriate actions. By contrast, in the illustration of Capaneus, Virgil and Dante seem uninterested in the situation. Their blank facial expressions detach them from any interaction with Capaneus, whereas in the *Comedy* Virgil was irritated by Capaneus' exacerbating words and cursed him back.[26] From the visual evidence, I want to suggest that Blake twists Dante's parallelism of Capaneus and Fucci, and Capaneus is specifically depicted as resigned to his punishment from God in this Christian Hell.

This interpretation sheds a different light on our understanding of Blake's complex blend of theology, politics, and aesthetics in his illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Blake's images convey more ambivalence than what he himself said about his thoughts on classicism and Christian morality. The problematic aspect of Pyle's argument is that an apparent contradiction in Blake's attitude to paganism is ignored: why would Blake choose a pagan hero as the catalyst for a revolution when he had a low opinion of Greco-Roman culture? The image itself shows contradictory visual elements. Capaneus is punished by flames from God and thunderbolts from Jove. However, Dante does not mention Jove's punishment in the *Comedy* at all, and the inclusion of the thunderbolt is Blake's deliberate choice. It is therefore difficulty to determine which God Capaneus defies. Do these images conflate anti-classicism with anti-Christian morality by breaking down the schematic distinction between the classical underworld and the Christian Hell? It is difficult to answer this question with any certainty. However, I think that reading the image in the context of Blake's anti-classicism enriches our understanding of his illustrations. Borrowing Roe's argument about Blake's work: "A vast storehouse of the thought of one of the most psychologically perceptive minds that the world has produced,

[26] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 145.

it is as resistant to excavation as a diamond mine." His last series, the illustrations for the *Divine Comedy*, is a riddle with intriguing clues, leaving many unanswered questions.

Fig 1: William Blake, *Capaneus the Blasphemer*, watercolor, 1824-1827.

Fig 2: William Blake, *Dante and Virgil Among the Blasphemers*, watercolor, 1824-1827.

Fig 3: William Blake, *Vanni Fucci "Making Figs" Against God*, watercolor, 1824-1827.

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