

# WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE DIVINE COMEDY

## II. HIS OPINIONS ON DANTE



AS Blake sat bent over the great drawing-book, in which he made his designs to "The Divine Comedy," he was very certain that he and Dante represented spiritual states which face one another in an eternal enmity. Dante, because a great poet, was "inspired by the Holy Ghost"; but his inspiration was mingled with a certain philosophy, blown up out of his age, which Blake held for mortal and the enemy of immortal things, and which from the earliest times has sat in high places and ruled the world. This philosophy was the philosophy of soldiers, of men of the world, of priests busy with government, of all who, because of their absorption in active life, have been persuaded to judge and to punish; and partly also, he admitted, the philosophy of Christ; who, in descending into the world, had to take on the world; who, in being born of Mary, a symbol of the law in Blake's symbolic language, had to "take after his mother," and drive the money-changers out of the Temple. Opposed to this was another philosophy, not made by men of action, drudges of time and space, but by Christ when wrapped in the divine essence, and by artists and poets, who are taught by the nature of their craft to sympathize with all living things, and who, the more pure and fragrant is their lamp, pass the further from all limitations, to come at last to forget good and evil in an absorbing vision of the happy and the unhappy. The one philosophy was worldly, and established for the ordering of the body and the fallen will, and, so long as it did not call its "laws of prudence" "the laws of God," was a necessity, because "you cannot have liberty in this world without what you call moral virtue"; the other was divine, and established for the peace of the imagination and the unfallen will, and, even when obeyed with a too literal reverence, could make men sin against no higher principality than prudence. He called the followers of the first

philosophy pagans, no matter by what name they knew themselves ; because the pagans, as he understood the word pagan, believed more in the outward life, and in what he called "war, pryncedom, and victory," than in the secret life of the spirit : and the followers of the second philosophy Christians, because only those whose sympathies had been enlarged and instructed by art and poetry could obey the Christian command of unlimited forgiveness. Blake had already found this "pagan" philosophy in Swedenborg, in Milton, in Wordsworth, in Sir Joshua Reynolds, in many persons, and it had roused him so constantly and to such angry paradox, that its overthrow became the signal passion of his life, and filled all he did and thought with the excitement of a supreme issue. Its kingdom was bound to grow weaker so soon as life began to lose a little in crude passion and naïve tumult ; but Blake was the first to announce its successor, and he did this, as must needs be with revolutionists who also have "the law" for "mother," with so firm a conviction that the things his opponents held white were indeed black, and the things they held black indeed white ; with so strong a persuasion that all busy with government are men of darkness and "something other than human life" ; with such a fluctuating fire of stormy paradox, that his phrases seem at times to foreshadow those French mystics who have taken upon their shoulders the overcoming of all existing things, and say their prayers "to Lucifer, son of the morning, derided of priests and of kings." The kingdom that was passing was, he held, the kingdom of the Tree of Knowledge ; the kingdom that was coming was the kingdom of the Tree of Life : men who ate from the Tree of Knowledge wasted their days in anger against one another, and in taking one another captive in great nets ; men who sought their food among the green leaves of the Tree of Life condemned none but the unimaginative and the idle, and those who forget that even love and death and old age are an imaginative art.

In these opposing kingdoms is the explanation of the petulant sayings he wrote on the margins of the great sketch-book, and of those others, still more petulant, which Crabb Robinson has treasured in his diary. The sayings about the forgiveness of sins have no need of further explanation, and are in contrast with the attitude of that excellent commentator, Herr Hettinger, who, though Dante swooned from pity at the tale of Francesca, will only "sympathize" with her "to a certain extent," being taken in a theological net. "It seems as if Dante," Blake wrote, "supposes God was something superior to the Father of Jesus ; for if he gives rain to the evil and the good, and his sun to the just and the unjust, he can never have builded Dante's Hell, nor the Hell of the Bible,





as our parsons explain it. It must have been framed by the dark spirit itself, and so I understand it." And again, "Whatever task is of vengeance and whatever is against forgiveness of sin is not of the Father but of Satan, the accuser, the father of Hell." And again, and this time to Crabb Robinson, "Dante saw devils where I saw none. I see good only." "I have never known a very bad man who had not something very good about him." This forgiveness was not the forgiveness of the theologian who has received a commandment from afar off; but of the mystical artist-legislator who believes he has been taught, in a mystical vision, that "the imagination is the man himself," and believes he has discovered in the practice of his art, that without a perfect sympathy there is no perfect imagination, and therefore no perfect life. At another moment he called Dante, "an atheist, a mere politician busied about this world, as Milton was, till, in his old age, he returned to God whom he had had in his childhood." "Everything is atheism," he had already explained, "which assumes the reality of the natural and unspiritual world." Dante, he held, assumed its reality when he made obedience to its laws the condition of man's happiness hereafter, and he set Swedenborg beside Dante in misbelief for calling Nature, "the ultimate of Heaven," a lowest rung, as it were, of Jacob's ladder, instead of a net woven by Satan to entangle our wandering joys and bring our hearts into captivity. There are certain curious unfinished diagrams scattered here and there among the now separated pages of the sketch-book, and of these there is one which, had it had all its concentric rings filled with names, would have been a systematic exposition of his animosities, and of their various intensity. It represents Paradise, and in the midst, where Dante emerges from the earthly Paradise, is written, "Homer," and in the next circle, "Swedenborg," and on the margin these words: "Everything in Dante's Paradise shows that he has made the earth the foundation of all, and its goddess Nature, memory," memory of sensation, "not the Holy Ghost. . . . Round Purgatory is Paradise, and round Paradise vacuum. Homer is the centre of all, I mean the poetry of the heathen." The statement that round Paradise is vacuum is a proof of the persistence of his ideas and of his curiously literal understanding of his own symbols; for it is but another form of the charge made against Milton many years before in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." "In Milton the Father is destiny, the son a ratio of the five senses," Blake's definition of the reason which is the enemy of the imagination, "and the Holy Ghost vacuum." Dante, like the Kabalists, symbolized the highest order of created beings by the fixed stars, and God by the darkness beyond them, the *Primum Mobile*.

Blake, absorbed in his very different vision, in which God took always a human shape, believed that to think of God under a symbol drawn from the outer world was in itself idolatry; but that to imagine Him as an unpeopled immensity was to think of Him under the one symbol furthest from His essence; it being a creation of the ruining reason, "generalizing" away "the minute particulars of life." Instead of seeking God in the deserts of time and space, in exterior immensities, in what he called "the abstract void," he believed that the further he dropped behind him memory of time and space, reason builded upon sensation, morality founded for the ordering of the world; and the more he was absorbed in emotion; and, above all, in emotion escaped from the impulse of bodily longing and the restraints of bodily reason, in artistic emotion; the nearer did he come to Eden's "breathing garden," to use his beautiful phrase, and to the unveiled face of God. No worthy symbol of God existed but the inner world, the true humanity, to whose various aspects he gave many names, "Jerusalem," "Liberty," "Eden," "The Divine Vision," "The Body of God," "The Human Form Divine," "The Divine Members," and whose most intimate expression was Art and Poetry. He always sang of God under this symbol:

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is God Our Father dear;  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is man, His child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart;  
Pity a human face;  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine—  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

Whenever he gave this symbol a habitation in space he set it in the sun, the father of light and life; and set in the darkness beyond the stars, where light and life die away, Og and Anak and the giants that were of old, and the iron throne of Satan.

By thus contrasting Blake and Dante by the light of Blake's paradoxical wisdom, and as though there was no great truth hung from Dante's beam of the balance, I but seek to interpret a little-understood philosophy rather than one incorporate in the thought and habits of Christendom. Every philosophy has half its truth from times and generations; and to us one half



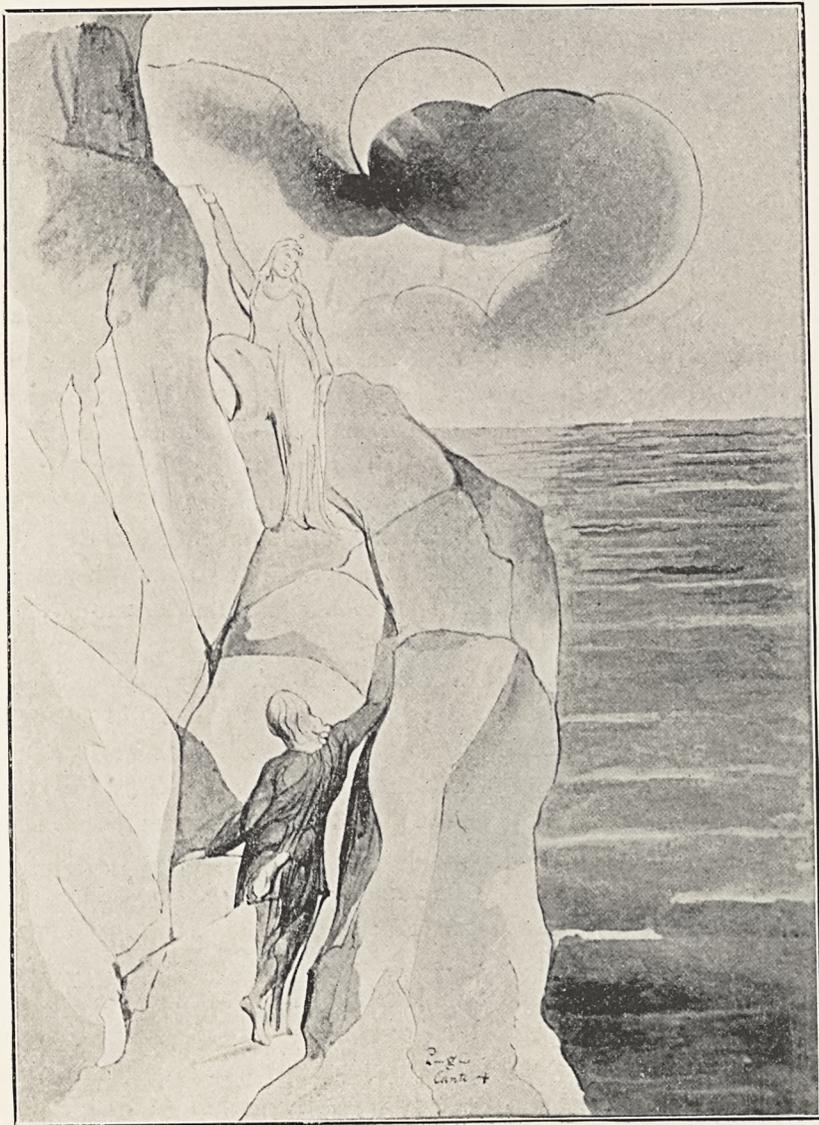


of the philosophy of Dante is less living than his poetry; while the truth Blake preached, and sang, and painted, is the root of the cultivated life, of the fragile perfect blossom of the world born in ages of leisure and peace, and never yet to last more than a little season; the life those Phæaciens—who told Odysseus that they had set their hearts in nothing but in “the dance, and changes of raiment, and love and sleep”—lived before Poseidon heaped a mountain above them; the lives of all who, having eaten of the tree of life, love, more than the barbarous ages when none had time to live, “the minute particulars of life,” the little fragments of space and time, which are wholly flooded by beautiful emotion because they are so little they are hardly of time and space at all. “Every space smaller than a globule of man’s blood,” he wrote, “opens into eternity of which this vegetable earth is but a shadow.” And again, “Every time less than a pulsation of the artery is equal in its tenor and value to six thousand years, for in this period the poet’s work is done, and all the great events of time start forth, and are conceived: in such a period, within a moment, a pulsation of the artery.” Dante, indeed, taught, in the “Purgatorio,” that sin and virtue are alike from love, and that love is from God; but this love he would restrain by a complex external law, a complex external Church. Blake, upon the other hand, cried scorn upon the whole spectacle of external things, a vision to pass away in a moment, and preached the cultivated life, the internal Church which has no laws but beauty, rapture, and labour. “I know of no other Christianity, and of no other gospel, than the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the divine arts of imagination, the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow, and in which we shall live in our eternal or imaginative bodies when these vegetable mortal bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other gospel. What are all their spiritual gifts? What is the divine spirit? Is the Holy Ghost any other than an intellectual fountain? What is the harvest of the gospel and its labours? What is the talent which it is a curse to hide? What are the treasures of heaven which we are to lay up for ourselves? Are they any other than mental studies and performances? What are all the gifts of the gospel, are they not all mental gifts? Is God a spirit who must be worshipped in spirit and truth? And are not the gifts of the spirit everything to man? O ye religious! discountenance every one among you who shall pretend to despise art and science. I call upon you in the name of Jesus! What is the life of man but art and science? Is it meat and drink? Is not the body more than raiment? What is mortality but the things relating to the body which dies? What is immortality but the things

relating to the spirit which lives eternally? What is the joy of Heaven but improvement in the things of the spirit? What are the pains of Hell but ignorance, idleness, bodily lust, and the devastation of the things of the spirit? Answer this for yourselves, and expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labours of art and science, which alone are the labours of the gospel. Is not this plain and manifest to the thought? Can you think at all, and not pronounce heartily that to labour in knowledge is to build Jerusalem, and to despise knowledge is to despise Jerusalem and her builders? And remember, he who despises and mocks a mental gift in another, calling it pride, and selfishness, and sin, mocks Jesus, the giver of every mental gift, which always appear to the ignorance-loving hypocrites as sins. But that which is sin in the sight of cruel man is not sin in the sight of our kind God. Let every Christian as much as in him lies engage himself openly and publicly before all the world in some mental pursuit for the building of Jerusalem." I have given the whole of this long passage, because, though the very keystone of his thought, it is little known, being sunk, like nearly all of his most profound thoughts, in the mysterious prophetic books. Obscure about much else, they are always lucid on this one point, and return to it again and again. "I care not whether a man is good or bad," are the words they put into the mouth of God, "all that I care is whether he is a wise man or a fool. Go put off holiness and put on intellect." This cultivated life, which seems to us so artificial a thing, is really, according to them, the laborious re-discovery of the golden age, of the primeval simplicity, of the simple world in which Christ taught and lived, and its lawlessness is the lawlessness of Him "who being all virtue acted from impulse, and not from rules,"

And his seventy disciples sent  
Against religion and government.

The historical Christ was indeed no more than the supreme symbol of the artistic imagination, in which, with every passion wrought to perfect beauty by art and poetry, we shall live, when the body has passed away for the last time; but before that hour man must labour through many lives and many deaths. "Men are admitted into heaven, not because they have curbed and governed their passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect, from which the passions emanate, uncurbed in their eternal glory. The fool shall not enter into heaven, let him be ever so holy. Holiness is not the price of entering into heaven. Those who are cast out are all those who, having no passions of





their own, because no intellect, have spent their lives in curbing and governing other people's by the various arts of poverty and cruelty of all kinds. The modern Church crucifies Christ with the head downwards. Woe, woe, woe to you hypocrites." After a time man has "to return to the dark valley whence he came and begin his labours anew," but before that return he dwells in the freedom of imagination, in the peace of "the divine image," "the divine vision," in the peace that passes understanding, and is the peace of art. "I have been very near the gates of death," Blake wrote in his last letter, "and have returned very weak and an old man, feeble and tottering, but not in spirit and life, not in the real man, the imagination, which liveth for ever. In that I grow stronger and stronger as this foolish body decays . . . Flaxman is gone and we must all soon follow, everyone to his eternal home, leaving the delusions of goddess Nature and her laws, to get into freedom from all the laws of the numbers," the multiplicity of nature, "into the mind in which everyone is king and priest in his own house." The phrase about the king and priest is a memory of the crown and mitre set upon Dante's head before he entered Paradise. Our imaginations are but fragments of the universal imagination, portions of the universal body of God, and as we enlarge our imagination by imaginative sympathy, and transform, with the beauty and the peace of art, the sorrows and joys of the world, we put off the limited mortal man more and more, and put on the unlimited "immortal man." "As the seed waits eagerly watching for its flower and fruit, anxious its little soul looks out into the clear expanse to see if hungry winds are abroad with their invisible array; so man looks out in tree, and herb, and fish, and bird, and beast, collecting up the fragments of his immortal body into the elemental forms of everything that grows. . . . In pain he sighs, in pain he labours in his universe, sorrowing in birds over the deep, or howling in the wolf over the slain, and moaning in the cattle, and in the winds." Mere sympathy for all living things is not enough, because we must learn to separate their "infected" from their eternal, their satanic from their divine part; and this can only be done by desiring always beauty; the one mask through which can be seen the unveiled eyes of eternity. We must then be artists in all things, and understand that love and old age and death are first among the arts. In this sense, he insists that "Christ's apostles were artists," that "Christianity is Art," and that "the whole business of man is the arts." Dante, who deified law, selected its antagonist, passion, as the most important of sins, and made the regions where it was punished the largest. Blake, who deified imaginative freedom, held "corporeal reason" for the most accursed of things, because it makes the imagination revolt from the sovereignty of beauty and pass under the sovereignty

of corporeal law, and this is "the captivity in Egypt." True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalyzable, imaginative essence. False art is not expressive but mimetic, not from experience, but from observation; and is the mother of all evil, persuading us to save our bodies alive at no matter what cost of rapine and fraud. True art is the flame of the last day, which begins for every man, when he is first moved by beauty, and which seeks to burn all things until they "become infinite and holy."

Blake's distaste for Dante's philosophy did not make him a less sympathetic illustrator, any more than did his distaste for the philosophy of Milton mar the beauty of his illustrations to "Paradise Lost." The illustrations which accompany the present article are, I think, among the finest he ever did, and are certainly faithful to the text of "The Divine Comedy." That of Dante talking with Uberti, and that of Dante in the circle of the thieves, are notable for the flames which, as always in Blake, live with a more vehement life than any mere mortal thing: fire was to him no unruly offspring of human hearths, but the Kabalistic element, one fourth of creation, flowing and leaping from world to world, from hell to hell, from heaven to heaven; no accidental existence, but the only fit signature, because the only pure substance, for the consuming breath of God. In the man, about to become a serpent, and in the serpent, about to become a man, in the second design, he has created, I think, very curious and accurate symbols of an evil that is not violent, but is subtle, finished, plausible. The sea and clouded sun in the drawing of Dante and Virgil climbing among the rough rocks at the foot of the Purgatorial mountain, and the night sea and spare vegetation in the drawing of the sleep of Virgil, Dante and Statius near to its summit, are symbols of divine acceptance, and foreshadow the landscapes of his disciples Calvert, Palmer, and Linnell, famous interpreters of peace.

The faint unfinished figures in the globe of light in the drawing of the sleepers are the Leah and Rachel of Dante's dream, the active and the contemplative life of the spirit, the one gathering flowers, the other gazing at her face in the glass. It is curious that Blake has made no attempt, in these drawings, to make Dante resemble any of his portraits, especially as he had, years before, painted Dante in a series of portraits of poets, of which many certainly tried to be accurate portraits. I have not yet seen this picture, but if it has Dante's face, it will convince me that he intended to draw, in the present case, the soul rather than the





body of Dante, and read "The Divine Comedy" as a vision seen not in the body but out of the body. Both the figures of Dante and Virgil have the slightly feminine look which he gave to representations of the soul.

W. B. YEATS.

## "VENITE, DESCENDAMUS"



LET be at last : give over words and sighing,  
Vainly were all things said :  
Better, at last, to find a place for lying,  
Only dead.

Silence were best, with songs and sighing over ;  
Now be the music mute :  
Now let the dead, red leaves of autumn cover  
A vain lute !

Silence is best : for ever and for ever,  
We will go down to sleep,  
Somewhere, beyond her ken, where she need never  
Come to weep.

Let be at last : colder she grows, and colder ;  
Sleep and the night were best ;  
Lying, at last, where we cannot behold her,  
We may rest.

ERNEST DOWSON.