

The Body in the Line: “Trasumanar” in Blake’s Dante

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This article honors the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri.

1 D ANTE’S journey in the otherworld has introduced generations of readers to the consequences of the divine judgment, the architecture of sin and salvation, the moral condemnation of materialism, and the pilgrim’s encounter with God. God is the “somma luce” (*Par.* 33.67) (“eternal beam,” Cary 3: 293),¹ which cannot be grasped by means of human understanding. The blinding light of redemption thus remains a mystery untold in the *Commedia*.

Special thanks go to Nick Havely for his valuable comments on earlier versions of this essay. For their insightful advice, my appreciation also extends to the editors of this journal, Morris Eaves and Morton Paley, and the reader they chose. Gratitude is due to Tate Britain (London) and the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford) for permission to examine Blake’s illustrations to the *Commedia*. The numbering of Blake’s Dante illustrations follows the sequence in the *William Blake Archive*. References to Blake’s writing are taken from Erdman’s edition (Blake, *Complete Poetry and Prose*), abbreviated as E.

1. Quotations are from the Petrocchi edition of the *Commedia* (1966–67). Cary’s 1819 version is the reference edition for the translations.

Blake owned the 1564 Landino and Vellutello edition of the *Commedia* and both Henry Boyd’s 1785 *Inferno* and Henry Francis Cary’s 1819 translation of the poem (Tinkler-Villani 344n27). According to John Thomas Smith, Blake considered *The Vision* to be “superior to all others” (Bentley, *Records* 625). While the artist’s familiarity with Boyd’s translation is uncertain, his 1800 annotations in the introduction show his disapproval of its moralizing tone (Keynes 150 and Bentley, *Writings* 2: 276). Paley comes to the conclusion that Blake “no doubt consulted Vellutello from time to time, but his main source must have been the Cary translation” (*Traveller* 112). On the reception of Dante in nineteenth-century England, see Havely, Pite.

Toward the end of his life, the sixty-seven-year-old William Blake approached Dante’s incommunicable experience by revisiting his poetics of line versus color. For his illustrations to the poem,² he worked back and forth on 102 designs, leaving them in various stages of development. From *Inferno* to *Paradiso* through *Purgatorio*, Blake captured the condition of the fallen against the purity of the redeemed. Though the two are treated with the same medium, there is ambiguity in the conception of the human frame. Are the density and articulation of colors and contours in the Dante designs accidental modifications of form, or do they spell out the artist’s own judgment upon the souls?

2 The unfinished nature of the designs and the “breathtaking freedom of pencilwork” are especially relevant in assessing the artist’s own response to the *Commedia* (Bindman, *Commedia* 15). Blake’s artistic maturity permeates his lines, which gain semantic relevance in his graphic translation of the poem. Examining the artisanal aspects of representing the human form in its fallen and saved conditions may shed light on the way that the artist projected abstract meaning into line and color. Central to both Dante’s and Blake’s work is the treatment of the human body,³ which in relation to the illustrations to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* remains mostly underexplored. Tristanne Connolly notes that in Blake we can see “the human body exceed its present capabilities in two opposite directions, toward the hell of pain and contortion, and the heavenly beauty of flexible grace” (24). While Connolly refers to the illuminated books, her claim is also significant for the Dante illustrations. A study of Blake’s theory against his practice may define the unutterable phe-

2. Blake produced 72 illustrations for *Inferno*, from which he derived 7 engravings (Essick, *Printmaker* 250–54, and “The Printings”), 20 for *Purgatorio*, and 10 for *Paradiso*. The series was commissioned by John Linnell in 1824 and kept in the Linnell private collection until 1918. Since then, it has been dispersed and never exhibited as a whole (Tinkler-Villani 261). Today the series is divided among the following museums: Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria (36 pieces); Cambridge, MA, Harvard Art Museums (23); London, Tate Britain (20); London, British Museum (13); Birmingham, Museum and Art Gallery (6); Oxford, Ashmolean Museum (3); Truro, Royal Institution of Cornwall (1) (Bindman et al. 31n34). A number of the designs were displayed during the Blake exhibitions at the Tate of 9 Nov. 2000–11 Feb. 2001 and 11 Sept. 2019–2 Feb. 2020.

In his seminal contribution to the study of Blake’s Dante, Paley points out that the hermeneutics of the watercolor series is “a contested subject,” referring to the views presented by Albert Roe and Milton Klonsky against David Fuller, which see the illustrations as esoteric and literal respectively (*Traveller* 116). Valeria Tinkler-Villani both accepts and criticizes some aspects of Roe’s and Fuller’s methods (241–88). See also Baine. Paley does not attempt to impose coherence over the illustrations to Dante and invites us to accept contradictions within the series (*Traveller* 101–77). This essay develops from his insight.

3. On Dante and anatomy, see Barnes and Petrie, Kirkpatrick. On Blake and the body, see Connolly, Heppner, Mellor, *Human Form Divine*, and Warner.

nomenon of “Trasumanar,” the act of overcoming the mortal form of the body, in his pictorial lexicon. In *Paradiso* I Dante coins this term, interpretable as going beyond the *humus* (earth) and the *homo* (corporeality). The word appears only once in the entire poem, when the poet explains that such an experience is inexpressible through the medium of language: “Trasumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria” (*Par.* 1.70-71; italics in the original) (“Words may not tell of that transhuman change,” Cary 3: 8). What follows will examine the way that Blake’s line and color evoke “Trasumanar”—what Dante’s language fails to convey—in the sense of a divine, beatific experience and discuss how Blake’s artisanal aesthetics of the body enables such a phenomenon, in the *Commedia* possible only in *Paradiso*, to occur across the three *cantiche*.

- 3 Graphic lines are the most basic form through which Blake’s own ideas are embodied in his style. In *A Descriptive Catalogue*,⁴ the artist articulates his thoughts on artistic practice:

How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements? ... Leave out this l[i]ne and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist. (E 550)

Through this analogy, Blake urges us to focus on the very marks and lines that shape form and content out of the initial chaos of blurs of material execution. Accordingly, in the watercolor series, the human body is distinguishable in both its fallen and transcended conditions. The graphic difference between the two states can be observed by comparing the outlining in *The Stygian Lake, with the Ireful Sinners Fighting* (no. 16, illus. 1) against *Dante at the Moment of Entering the Fire* (no. 88, illus. 2). In the first design, the sheer nudity of the sinners dominates the composition. Limbs,

4. Along with “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” the annotations to Reynolds’s *Discourses*, and “Public Address,” *A Descriptive Catalogue* is a main source for Blake’s thoughts on style. On Blake’s aesthetic theory expressed in these works, see Eaves, *Theory*, which examines his statements in the context of the visual and the literary arts, discussing artistic and ethical principles in relation to his line, as well as the concept of identity. According to Eaves, Blake’s eighteenth-century advocacy of line (the language of the intellect) over color (the language of the senses) is romanticized in that imagination replaces reason as a measure of intellect (19). On Blake’s theory and practice of line, see also Bindman, *Artist* 102-04, 125-31, et passim; Butlin 14-17; Essick, *Printmaker* 5-7, 190, et passim; Mitchell 44-53, 96-97; and Paley, *William Blake* 49-56. See also Eaves, *The Counter-Arts Conspiracy*, and Rose. While Rose does not test Blake’s theory against his practice, Eaves discusses, among other works, “Public Address” and *A Descriptive Catalogue* in light of the history of print technology and engraving techniques.

feet, and hands are exposed in great detail and dramatically marked by thick and solid strokes. The expressions of anger and lineaments of the face substantiate what Johann Caspar Lavater defines as “the relation between the exterior and the interior—between the visible surface and the invisible spirit which it covers—between the animated, perceptible matter, and the imperceptible principle which impresses this character of life upon it—between the apparent effect, and the concealed cause which produces it” (1: 20).⁵ According to the Swiss theologian and physiognomist, a person’s face could mirror the soul’s virtue and vice, a sentiment that is echoed by Blake in “A Vision of the Last Judgment”:

Every Man has Eyes Nose & Mouth this Every Idiot knows but he who enters into & discriminates most minutely the Manners & Intentions the [*Expression*] Characters in all their branches is the alone Wise or Sensible Man & on this discrimination All Art is founded. I intreat then that the Spectator will attend to the Hands & Feet to the Lineaments of the Countenances they are all descriptive of Character & not a line is drawn without intention & that most discriminate & particular <as Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand or a Blade of Grass <Insignificant> much less an Insignificant Blur or Mark>. (E 560)

Blake shows a particular affinity with the physiognomic tradition in his poetics of the bounding line, whose execution in the Dante series achieves a clear distinction between the bodies of the damned and those of the saved. His use of watercolor further characterizes the condition of the souls through their bodily mass. The sinners in the Stygian lake are densely colored and contrasted. In the second design, the same combination of media results in a different effect. As opposed to contortion and opaqueness, the continuity of thin lines merging the elongated bodies with veils and flames, combined with the mild blue and magenta tones, suggests an ethereal sense of translucency. The purity of the souls is directly proportionate to the transparency of their corporeal density and the gradual thinning of the body line. The female spirits free themselves from the bonds of sin and gravity in their ascent along the wall of purgatorial fire, performing their ritual of purification. The angrily contorted sinners, on the other hand, are immersed in marshy waters. Christopher Heppner notes that “Blake, in inventing figures who explore and create a world

5. Blake was familiar with late eighteenth-century theories of physiognomics and had some exposure to Lavater, mostly through his friendship and artistic collaborations with Henry Fuseli. He engraved “Head of a Damned Soul” after Fuseli (c. 1788–90) and produced a series of “Visionary Heads” for John Varley, which Eaves defines as “a species of imaginative physiognomy” (*Theory* 66n). See also Mellor, “Physiognomy,” and Erle.

of torment, drew support from Michelangelo's portrayal of contorted and weightless figures" (38). The bodies of the wrathful resemble one of those cases where "the schema of a floating torso and legs" was borrowed from the Italian master (35).⁶ Though presented in "an aerial rather than terrestrial condition" (35), they are bound to their stagnant self-division at the bottom of the lake.

- 4 The graphic appearance of the bodies in *Inferno* seems to strengthen Eric Pyle's claim that "the people in all the states of Hell have lost their ability to see infinity of which they are a part, and they believe that the boundary of themselves stops at what they call the body" (123). Blake refers to this condition as Selfhood. Selfhood is a question of perception rather than of morality. Milton calls it both "a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal / Spirit" and "Satan"—"I in

Luogo è in inferno detto Malebolge,
tutto di pietra di color ferrigno,
 come la cerchia che dintorno il volge.

 e come a tai fortezze da' lor sogli
 a la ripa di fuor son *ponticelli*,
 così *da imo de la roccia scogli*
 movien che ricidien li argini e ' fossi
 infino al pozzo che i tronca e raccogli.
 (*Inf.* 18.1-3, 14-18; my emphasis)

Noi discendemmo in su l'ultima riva
 del *lungo scoglio*, pur da man sinistra;
 e allor fu la mia vista più viva
 giù ver' lo fondo, là 've la ministra
 de l'alto Sire infallibil giustizia
 punisce i falsador che qui registra.
 (*Inf.* 29.52-57; my emphasis)

In the designs, Blake's stone metaphors powerfully evoke in watercolor the apocalyptic imagery of Satan's degeneration to Selfhood implied in *Milton*:

His bosom grew
 Opaque against the Divine Vision: the paved terraces of
 His bosom inwards shone with fires, but the stones be-
 coming opaque!
 Hid him from sight, in an extreme blackness and darkness,
 And there a World of deeper Ulro was open'd, in the
 midst
 Of the Assembly.
 (*Milton* 9.30-35, E 103)

6. Blake's encounter with Michelangelo occurred mainly through engravings, which often consisted of single, unidentified figures (Heppner 25-27).

my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One! / He is my Spectre!" (*Milton* 40[46].35-36, E 142; 14[15].30-31, E 108). Selfhood prevents humans from seeing beyond material surfaces to the Eternal World within. The bodies of the ones confined in their fallen condition appear thus enclosed in themselves by means of the soul, which is "the source for its own constriction and obstruction" (Quinney 130). The closure of their senses is graphically reflected in their bodily outlines, dense materiality, and contracted postures, to the extent that it is difficult to discern human bodies from clusters of nonhuman matter. The body line resembles rock formations, as, for instance, in the stony bridge made of giant human fragments in *The Devils under the Bridge* (no. 39, illus. 3) and the body-compound column to the left side of *The Pit of Disease: The Falsifiers* (no. 61, illus. 4). In Dante, both bridges originate from a natural substance:

There is a place within the depths of hell
 Call'd Malebolge, *all of rock* dark-stain'd
 With hue ferruginous, e'en as the steep
 That round it circling winds.

 and as like fortresses,
 E'en from their threshold to the brink without,
 Are flank'd with *bridges*; from *the rock's low base*
 Thus flinty paths advanc'd, that 'cross the moles
 And dikes struck onward far as to the gulf,
 That in one bound collected cuts them off.
 (Cary 1: 152-53; my emphasis)

We on the utmost shore of the *long rock*
 Descended still to leftward. Then my sight
 Was livelier to explore the depth, wherein
 The minister of the most mighty Lord,
 All-searching Justice, dooms to punishment
 The forgers noted on her dread record.
 (Cary 1: 254; my emphasis)

The opacity of the stones obstructs Satan's sight of the divine way color density characterizes the condition of the fallen and the rocky architecture in the illustrations to *Inferno*.

- 5 While Dante describes the underworldly topography with peculiar realism, Blake conceptualizes the geology of the first *cantica* around the human body. Connolly comes to a similar conclusion when comparing the Gothic door in the frontispiece of *Jerusalem* with the infernal gate: "Like Dante's, this is an entry into the world of the dead. While Dante's inferno is a terrain which culminates in the body of the devil as a place to be tortured, for Blake the body plays a greater role in shaping the geography of hell" (21). The occurrence of anatomical parts amalgamated with rock formations is distinctive to Blake's imagery. The artist incorporates



1. William Blake. *The Stygian Lake, with the Ireful Sinners Fighting*. Pen and ink and watercolor over pencil and traces of black chalk with sponging, 1824–27. 52.7 × 37.1 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 992-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



2. William Blake. *Dante at the Moment of Entering the Fire*. Pen and ink and watercolor over black chalk and pencil, with sponging and touches of gum, 1824–27. 52.6 × 36.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 1018-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



stone and flesh also in *The Primaeval Giants Sunk in the Soil* (no. 63, illus. 5), where the five figures possibly stand for the five senses (Bindman, *Commedia* 144), “the chief inlets of Soul” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* plate 4, E 34). For Blake, the senses are “windows, inlets, doors, gates, portals, or chinks in a body which is a wall, cave, shell, or building” (Mitchell 62). They may be “cleansed, enlarged, opened, multiplied, decorated, even passed through” and become “avenues of vision” (62) revealing “portions of the eternal world” (*Europe* iii.4, E 60). They may also be “locked and barred, bricked up, narrowed, or dirtied” (62), as in the en-

capsulation of the giants in the shape of a rock. The senses are “fluxile” (*Europe* 10.11, E 63) and may be contracted or expanded:

every Word & Every Character
Was Human according to the Expansion or Contraction,
the Translucence or
Opakeness of Nervous fibres such was the variation of
Time & Space
Which vary according as the Organs of Perception vary
(*Jerusalem* 98.35-38, E 258)



3. (previous page, top) William Blake. *The Devils under the Bridge*. Pen and ink and watercolor over black chalk and pencil, 1824–27. 37.3 × 52.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 1000-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

4. (previous page, bottom) William Blake. *The Pit of Disease: The Falsifiers*. Ink and watercolor, 1824–27. 37.2 × 52.7 cm. Tate, purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the National Gallery and donations from the Art Fund, Lord Duveen, and others, and presented through the the Art Fund, 1919. N03362. Photo: Tate.

5. (this page) William Blake. *The Primaeval Giants Sunk in the Soil*. Pencil, chalk, ink, and watercolor, 1824–27. 37.2 × 52.7 cm. Tate, purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the National Gallery and donations from the Art Fund, Lord Duveen, and others, and presented through the the Art Fund, 1919. N03363. Photo: Tate.

Blake shows the potential of the senses across the *cantiche*. On the one hand, the “Contraction” and “Opakeness of Nervous fibres” regulate contracted perception, or the limited condition of the material body, constrained within the laws of time and space. On the other hand, the “Expansion” and “Translucence” of “Nervous fibres” control expanded perception. Such a difference is rendered through the earthy and opaque matter of stone against air and fire, the elements that Blake combines instead with the cleansed souls. It also results in the predominance of bare and distorted frames in *Inferno* as opposed to the veiled figures in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which evoke the medieval aesthetics of an ethereal body.

- 6 Figures merging with their thin garments mirror Blake’s claim that “the Drapery is formed alone by the Shape of the Naked [next word cut away in binding]” body (Annotations to Reynolds’s *Discourses*, E 650). “Eloquence and significance in drapery cannot exist except in relation to a body,” Northrop Frye observes. “This is why all the human figures in Blake’s paintings are either naked or clad in the filmiest of nightdresses” (107). Instead of a realistic rendering of a clothed human figure, where one can discern the lines of the body and those of the clothes, the overall impression is that of an “aesthetic whole” (Lundeen 137). The line of the veiled body is especially pervasive in the illustrations to the second and third *cantiche* and acquires a semantic relevance in light of the entire poem. As opposed to confinement, it signifies transcendence of material form. This graphic phenomenon is noticeable even in sketchy drawings such as *The Angel in the Boat Departing after Wafting Over the Souls for Purgation* (no. 75, illus. 6), where “figures are now graceful rather than contorted” (Bindman et al. 164). From these barely penciled lines, we can infer the vertical development of veiled and elongated shapes, as we do in *The Terrace of Envious Souls* (no. 86, illus. 7).
- 7 The somatic difference between the fallen and the saved seems to be embedded in Blake’s line from the early conception of his pieces. Neither obscure nor unartistic, bodies that may appear puzzling are visual statements about his view of the condition of the soul. As Eaves points out, “Blake’s idea of the line in art is that it is the ultimate artistic act, an act with overtones of seeking the truth and making final judgments” (*Theory* 22). It is precisely through the bodily contours that Blake grants Dante⁷ and his guide, Vir-

7. Instead of illustrating the historical Dante, Blake focuses on the allegorical aspect of the *Commedia* and chooses the look of an ordinary man. As Paley observes, “Although in Blake’s first design Dante’s nose is rather pointed, this is not carried further” (*Traveller* 120). Blake was familiar with the traditional iconography of the Italian poet. The portrait of Dante for the “Heads of the Poets” series, commissioned by William Hayley in 1800, includes the laurel crown, the aquiline

gil, the faculty of transcending their material forms prior to *Paradiso*. The presence of the veiled line can accordingly be traced in *Inferno*, where the two figures exhibit different strokes compared to the bulky mass of the sinners. In *The Inscription over the Gate* (no. 4, illus. 8), the lower part of their vestures becomes one with their legs and feet. The fading red and blue tints enhance a sense of translucence. Dante and Virgil appear as two light, elongated entities who are almost levitating as they approach the infernal gate. This quasi-ethereal effect signals a fundamental difference between the ways in which Dante and Blake envisioned the bodies of the two poets in *Inferno*. While in the *Commedia* “Dante-personaggio possesses a body that is heavy and opaque (it cannot be penetrated by rays of sunlight) and whose members allow him to breathe and move objects” (Gilson, “Anatomy” 11),⁸ in the watercolor series he appears to lose his material form even in some early designs.

- 8 *Dante at the Moment of Entering the Fire* (no. 88, illus. 2) offers an example of this phenomenon from *Purgatorio*. Dante is urged by Virgil and the angel above to enter the flames animated by female spirits. The sense of incorporeality is conveyed by graphic lines thinning gradually and merging with other forms, as if the figures were translucent. Clothes, bodies, and flames flow harmoniously upward, evoking the sense of “Trasumanar” introduced by Dante in *Paradiso* 1. In this canto, Dante draws an analogy between the Ovidian metamorphosis of Glaucus and his own experience of elevation toward God: “tu ’l sai, che col tuo lume mi levasti” (*Par.* 1.75) (“Thou know’st, who by thy light didst bear me up,” Cary 3: 8). The poet is unable to tell whether he is in or out of his body; the boundaries between the physical and the non-physical space are blurred. While for Dante this phenomenon occurs only in *Paradiso* and is incommunicable to the reader except through the mythical *esempio* of Glaucus (“l’esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazia serba” [*Par.* 1.71-72] [“Let the example serve, though weak, / For those whom grace hath better proof in store,” Cary 3: 8]), Blake envisions a transcendence of the material condition regardless of the place in the otherworld—whether *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, or *Paradiso*—and makes this phenomenon graphically visible. For Blake, “Hell is a state and not a place” (Pyle 123), and his line embodies this view fully.
- 9 Dante’s belief in the absolute transcendence of God is the inherent reason for his poetic limitations. He cannot de-

nose, the red cap, and the severe expression. See, for comparison, the Thomas Stothard portrait of Dante that appeared in Henry Boyd’s *Commedia* (1802). William Wells suggests that Blake’s source of the poet in profile was an engraving by Paolo Fidanza of the portrait in Raphael’s *Disputa* (17-18, 32, 40).

8. For a list of references to Dante’s body in the *Commedia*, see Gilson, “Anatomy” 11n1.

scribe his vision experienced in the highest *Paradiso* as, for him, it is beyond expression. For Blake, vision is instead the active process of creation. In a passage referring to his painting of the Last Judgment, the artist invites us to immerse ourselves in the images rendered in this work to gain access to the divine vision of God:

If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought if he could Enter into Noahs Rainbow or into his bosom or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder which always intrtreats him to leave mortal things as he must know then would he arise from his Grave then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy. (E 560)⁹

This passage is crucial to understanding Blake's view of the great potential of his art and his belief that God is accessible via imagination. How, then, does his fundamental disagreement with Dante on the absolute immanence of God take the form of a visual statement in the watercolor series? A comparative analysis of the two poets' beliefs may help to define this line of inquiry.

- 10 Until Dante's entrance in *Paradiso*, his experience in the afterlife is regulated by his senses. He is "the only living character in the *Commedia* and the only one to possess a human body, a fleshy exterior that is liable to change and corruption" (Gilson, "Anatomy" 11). Dante undergoes a journey through his material body and forms an understanding of his encounters on the basis of his sensory inputs, growing in awareness and learning to recognize his limits.¹⁰ His con-

9. As the spectator would enter these images "in his Imagination," the question remains whether Blake is referring to the actual images in the painting or the mental images that the same evoke. According to Gerda Norvig, the passage can be interpreted in both ways; she points out that when we read "the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination," Blake "suggests that the imagination is on the one hand a place of origination (modifying the noun *Images*) and on the other a vehicle of transformation (modifying the verb *Enter*)" (15; italics in the original). For Diane Piccitto, "Blake's images and allusions point to an entrance that is a full-bodied, sensory act, as well as a mental one, occurring when the spectator shifts his/her conventional understanding and use of perception to see the world of the imagination as something present to step into and inhabit fully" (63). This notion of entering a work of art may remind us of Wallace Stevens's claim that a long poem "comes to possess the reader and ... naturalizes him in its own imagination and liberates him there" (*Angel* 50).

10. The approach to Crispin's Atlantic voyage in Wallace Stevens's "The Comedian as the Letter C" has some interesting echoes of the voyage motif in the *Commedia* and its allegorical intent. The poem's concern with the process of dissolving or annulling the former self shows possible allusions to Dante's experience recounted in his epics ("Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved. / The valet in the tempest was annulled," lines 52-53, *Collected Poems*). Stevens's biographer Joan Richardson suggests that the author had an "epic desire to rival Dante's *Divine*

ception of physical responses is consistent with the medieval Aristotelian view that all human knowledge originates in sense perception (Durling 116). Sense perception is then developed in images through imagination, memory, and "possible intellect." These images are turned into abstractions in order to be processed by the "active intellect" (116). According to Dante, it is the combination of perception, imagination, and memory regulated by intellect that originates poetic *ingegno* (virtue), of which he avails himself in order to produce poetry. Nevertheless, and closer to a Neoplatonic view, poetic *ingegno* is regulated by the stars of Gemini in *Paradiso* 22.112-23, where he seeks their support to write about the "passo forte" ("hard emprise," Cary 3: 203). Notably, Dante also finds dreams (*Purgatorio* 27) and supernatural inspiration (*Paradiso* 33) to be sources of knowledge. Eventually, he realizes that the body should be inhabited as a place of relationship and transition.¹¹ It is under this condition that Dante can witness various corporeal forms. The sinners he encounters in *Inferno* appear to him as material bodies. The materiality of the souls relates to the notion of evil as immersion in matter in line with the Neoplatonic tradition. According to this view, the human being is the result of the union between the body and the divine soul and represents a fall into materiality (Durling 116-17). The bodies of the sinners are described as injured, deformed, and mutilated. In *Purgatorio*, the reconciled, airy figures of the souls are described in their meekness and rediscovered communion, as Statius explains in *Purgatorio* 25.¹² In *Paradiso*, the human outlines of the blessed, except for Beatrice, initially recede from Dante's sight behind the spiritual light¹³ of their eternal joy. It is only in *Paradiso* 33 that Dante experiences the divine vision, after Bernard

Comedy," which he manifests in the "attitude of the comedian" (29). According to Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, Stevens wanted to "write a modern and secular *Divine Comedy*, one which could relieve the anxiety about linguistic mutability—indeed, offer a sanction in life—but without recourse to the absolute Logos to which Dante could appeal" (122). She calls up Stevens's aphorism: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (*Opus Posthumous* 158). On Dante's influence in Stevens's work, see also Cook (202-05, 273-76, 311) and Wentersdorf.

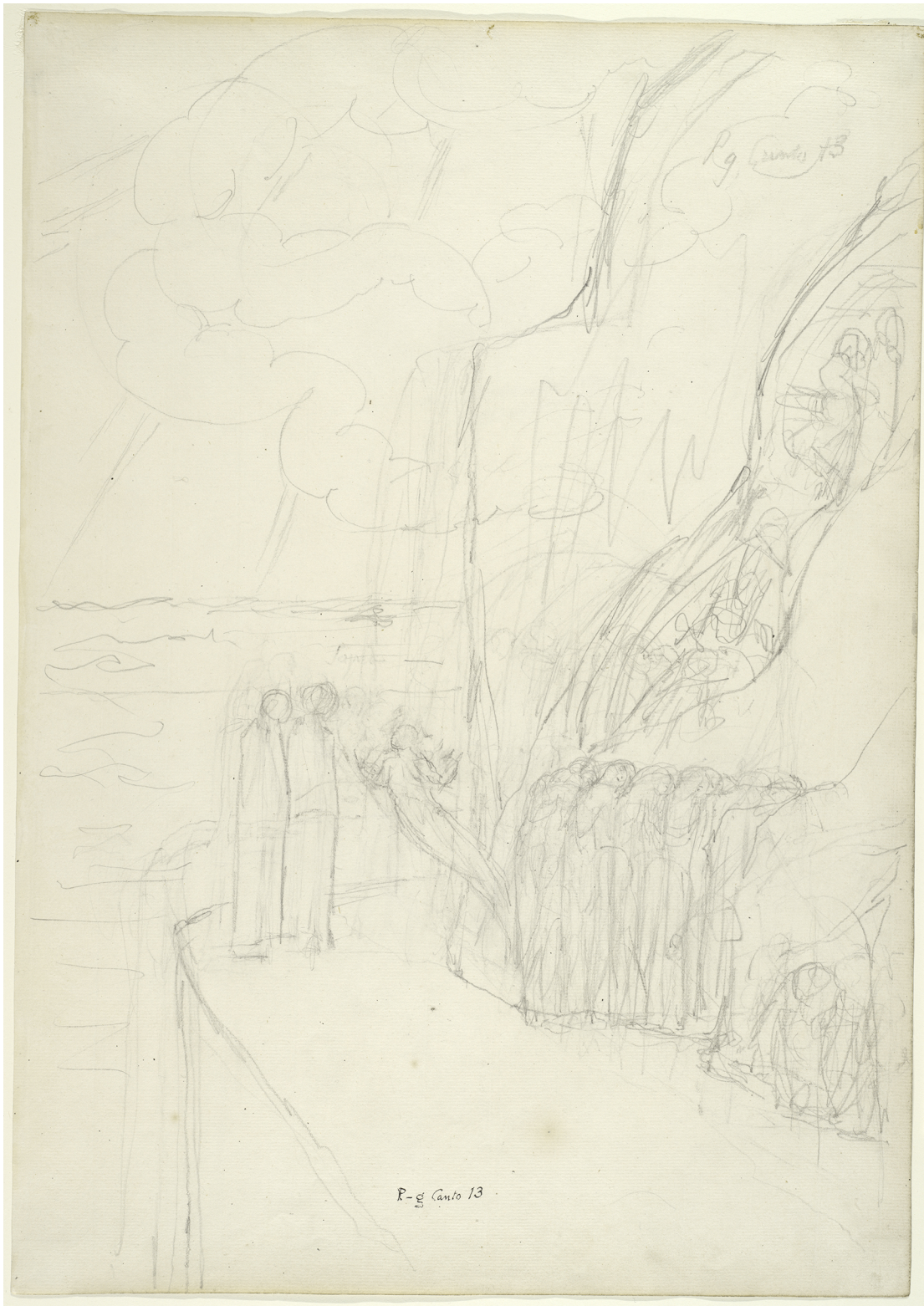
11. Dante accepts the medieval adaptation of Aristotle's doctrine, explained by Robert Durling as follows: "The soul is the form, the active shaping principle, of the body: every 'physical' aspect of the body ... is not only governed by the soul but created and shaped by it, matter being in itself a completely neutral receptivity to form and essentially nonexistent until united with form. ... Though the body is good in itself, the body of fallen humanity is mortal, and its relation with the soul is infected and problematic" (115-16).

12. For a discussion of the adaptation of Aristotelian (and Averroist) doctrine about the soul in *Purgatorio* 25, see Boyde.

13. On Dante and light, Simon Gilson observes that the "interest in luminous and optical phenomena," contemporary to Dante's time, is central in his work. It ranges "from his early lyric production which celebrates the lady's luminosity to the *Convivio* in which he outlines a theory of vision, and onto the *Paradiso* with its references to optical



6. William Blake. *The Angel in the Boat Departing after Wafting Over the Souls for Purgation*. Pencil, pen and ink, with watercolor, 1824–27. 52.1 × 36.5 cm. British Museum. 1918,1012.6. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



7. William Blake. *The Terrace of Envious Souls*. Pencil and black chalk, 1824–27. 52.7 × 37.0 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop. 1943.661. Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



8. William Blake. *The Inscription over the Gate*. Pencil, ink, and watercolor, 1824–27. 52.7 x 37.4 cm. Tate, purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the National Gallery and donations from the Art Fund, Lord Duveen, and others, and presented through the the Art Fund, 1919. N03352. Photo: Tate.

asks the Virgin Mary to allow Dante's sight to see the divine light. Note that the Virgin Mary intercedes through sight and not through actions. Dante is able to gaze into the light

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che 'l parlar mostra, ch' a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.
(*Par.* 33.55-57)

- 11 Blake was skeptical of Dante's mimetic approach to poetry and the assumptions of his poetic *ingegno*. Imagination was not, as Dante believed after Aquinas, "like a treasure house of images received by the senses" ("est enim phantasia sive imaginatio quasi thesaurus quidam formarum per sensum acceptarum," 1.78.4). According to Blake, mere reflections of nature are devoid of creative effort. Imagination is the artist's tool in overcoming such pitfalls of creation, as he "could visualize things not actually before his eyes" (Damon 436)¹⁴ and his "artistic line is the expression of personal identity ... the direct expression of imagination" (Eaves, *Theory* 175). Blake's task as an artist is therefore

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. the Human Imagination

(*Jerusalem* 5.18-20, E 147)

He makes this process visible by rendering the phenomenon of expanded perception through bodily outlines that extend themselves out of the human frame and merge with other forms, such as veils and flames in *Dante at the Moment of Entering the Fire* (no. 88, illus. 2) and veils in *The Souls of Those Who Only Repented at the Point of Death* (no. 78, illus. 9). This unfinished piece shows the souls of the late repentant as if they were clothed in their expanded aura of perception. The graphic treatment of the body creates material ambiguity, which results in a non-objective space. The third soul from the bottom left exhibits folds of tissue or fabric developing from the lower part of the body to the feet. The left hand is graphically connected to that of the next soul through thin lines. The visual continuity between the two figures is reinforced by the negative space created by the absence of blue wash. Color highlights the perceptual aura of the soul on the bottom left, where we

lore and its vast proliferation of light imagery. ... Dante was not at the forefront of thirteenth-century thought on optics and light but ... he relied instead on information which was available in more general medieval sources" (*Medieval Optics* 2). On Dante's representation of reality and instances of empirical evidence in the *Commedia*, see "Farinata and Cavalcante" in Auerbach (174-202).

14. On Blake and eidetic images, see Burke.

but is unable to recount his experience, as words as well as memory are not sufficient to describe it:

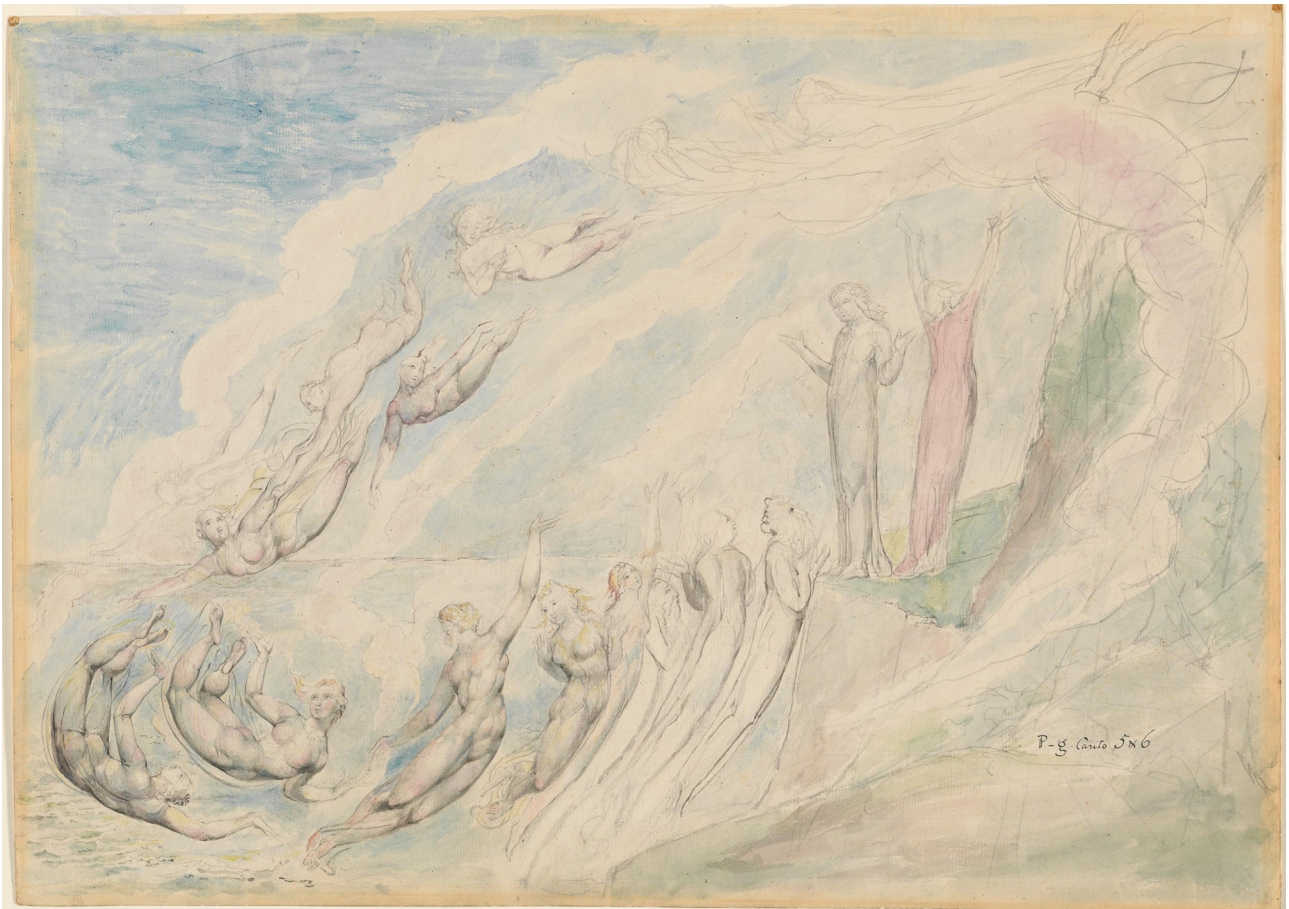
Thenceforward, what I saw,
Was not for words to speak, nor memory's self
To stand against such outrage on her skill.
(*Cary* 3: 293)

- distinguish yellow threads of luminescence interlacing the anatomical lines and diffusing into the air. The function of color, "the language of the senses," is here subordinate to the line, "the language of the intellect" (Eaves, *Theory* 12).
- 12 As observed in *The Inscription over the Gate* (no. 4, illus. 8), traces of translucency may also be identified in the first *cantica*, *Inferno* being a state rather than a place. In *The Circle of the Lustful* (no. 10, illus. 10), Blake likewise grants Paolo and Francesca the capacity to transcend their material forms. Unlike the other transgressors, the two souls are locked together. The lines of the lovers define two veiled figures blending together as they flutter in the air. Their aura of expanded perception is suggested by wavy patterns developing from and into their limbs, torsos, and hair. A projection of the embracing couple is also represented in the shining sun above the two poets. This piece shows that Blake was following the text closely—a senseless Dante on the ground, the gentle couple detached from the sinful crowd, the strong wind blowing across the circle of the lustful¹⁵—yet challenging it. The episode of Paolo and Francesca, along with that of Ugolino, was well known in Romantic England.¹⁶ In Dante we read of his encounter with the noble couple in the second circle of *Inferno*, where the sinners are incessantly tossed around in a whirlwind. In the celebrated passage, Francesca recounts the moment of falling in love in stilnovistic terms:¹⁷

15. Paley brings to our attention the similarities between Blake's piece and the third illustration in Vellutello's edition, suggesting that "although Blake drew upon a number of sources in executing this series, 10 is one of the few instances in which he may have been indebted to another illustrator of Dante" (*Traveller* 127). David Bindman observes that "the larger whirlwind apparently shows the progress of sexual desire as it passes from physical existence into higher union" (*Artist* 217). Both Claudia Corti and Luisa Calè discuss the infernal serpentine line of the lustful in relation to *The Analysis of Beauty*; Corti uses Hogarth's theory as a way into the style of *Inferno*, while Calè refers to it in relation to the bodily transformation in the serpent metamorphoses.

16. On Blake's response to the episode of Ugolino, see Yates, Tambling. On the Romantic reception of Francesca da Rimini, see Toynebee.

17. The condition of love that imposes itself upon the loved one and demands to be reciprocated is one of the two main precepts of Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* (1185). The second precept states that authentic love should always take place out of wedlock. This treatise had a significant influence on Provençal poetry and the Sicilian school. Some



9. William Blake. *The Souls of Those Who Only Repented at the Point of Death*. Pen and ink and watercolor over pencil and black chalk, 1824–27. 37.2 × 52.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 1015-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Amor, ch'âl cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
 prese costui de la bella persona
 che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.
 Amor, ch'â nullo amato amar perdona,
 mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
 che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.
 Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
 Caina attende chi a vita ci spense.

(*Inf.* 5.100-07)

Love, that in gentle heart is quickly learnt,
 Entangled him by that fair form, from me
 Ta'en in such cruel sort, as grieves me still:
 Love, that denial takes from none belov'd,
 Caught me with pleasing him so passing well,
 That, as thou see'st, he yet deserts me not.
 Love brought us to one death: Caina waits
 The soul, who split our life.

(Cary 1: 45-46)

traces can also be found in the *Dolce Stil Novo*. In *Inferno* 5, Dante introduces the concept of *Gentilezza* as noble-mindedness and *Amore* as love, according to the concepts of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. The first expression is credited to Guido Guinizzelli and his poem "Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore," which is echoed and recontextualized by Dante in "Amor, ch'âl cor gentil ratto s'apprende" (*Inf.* 5.100) ("Love, that in

gentle heart is quickly learnt," Cary 1: 45). In the seventh circle of *Purgatorio*, Dante meets his master Guinizzelli and addresses him as "il padre / mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai / rime d'amor usar dolci e leggiadre" (*Purg.* 26.97-99) ("a father to me, and to those / My betters, who have ever us'd the sweet / And pleasant rhymes of love," Cary 2: 238).



10. William Blake. *The Circle of the Lustful*. Watercolor, 1824–27. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, presented by the Trustees of the Public Picture Gallery Fund, with assistance from the National Art Collections Fund and the John Feeney Charitable Trust, 1919. 1919P2. Photo: Birmingham Museums Trust.

Paolo's "gentle" heart was enraptured by Francesca, whose living character¹⁸ was deprived of her noble heart when she could not deny love—the same love leads Paolo and Francesca to death and eternal suffering. Even though Dante faints, overwhelmed by compassion—"come corpo morto cade" (*Inf.* 5.142) ("like a corpse fell to the ground," Cary 1: 48)—he sees no hope for the couple to be redeemed in accordance with the sentiment set by the inscription before the infernal gate: "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate" (*Inf.* 3.9) ("All hope abandon, ye who enter here," Cary 1: 21). Regardless of the infernal dictum, Blake allows Paolo and Francesca to leave their mortal bodies, since he sees the pleasures of the flesh as a means to overcome the fall of humankind and to make the world "appear infinite.

18. Note that the expression "bella persona" in *Inf.* 5.101 has almost the sense of "body" and is translated by Cary as "fair form."

and holy whereas it now appears finite & corrupt. This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment" (*Marriage* plate 14, E 39). Blake disagreed with the system of punishments in *Inferno*, as it did not reflect the doctrine of forgiveness preached by Jesus, but rather an alignment with tyrannical attitudes. Although he called Dante "an Emperors <a Caesars> Man," he nevertheless appreciated the Italian poet among the "Men of Genius" (E 634)¹⁹

19. The unfinished piece *Homer Bearing the Sword, and His Companions* (no. 7) reveals the underdrawing comments about the artist's view of Dante's work: "Every thing in Dantes Comedia shews That for Tyrannical Purposes he has made This World the Foundation of All & the Goddess Nature & not the Holy Ghost" (E 689). In seeing Dante as a follower of the Goddess Nature in his quest for Beatrice, Blake disliked the poet's materialism and Catholic veneration for the Virgin Mary (Damrosch 225) and was critical of his perspectives on politics and theodicy.

and remarked to Henry Crabb Robinson that “Dante (tho’ now with God) lived & died an Atheist—He was the slave of the world & time—But Dante & Wordsw: in spite of their Atheism were inspired by the Holy Ghost” (Bentley, *Records* 437). As Paley comments, *The Circle of the Lustful* “reminds us that some of Blake’s greatest achievements are as a straightforward illustrator, but one who interprets the text imaginatively and uses his own pictorial vocabulary” (*Traveller* 128-29). The expanded perception rendered through graphic lines in the bodies of Paolo and Francesca pertains to his lexicon.

- 13 Perceptual contraction and expansion may thus occur at various stages in the watercolor series, as “Trasumanar” is not locked within one dimension only. If we avail ourselves of our “infinite senses” by “expanding” our perception, “we behold as one” (*Jerusalem* 34[38].16-18, E 180). We see one being or process in a multitude, we interconnect instead of disconnecting. In Blake’s words:

My Eyes more & more
Like a Sea without shore
Continue Expanding
The Heavens commanding
Till the Jewels of Light

The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination. that is God himself
The Divine Body } “Jesus we are his Members

(E 273)

Dante identifies the divine intervention necessary for “Trasumanar” in God himself, whereas Blake sees it in the divine power of imagination—that is God. As a result, in Dante’s allegory such an experience is only possible in *Paradiso*, the realm where God dwells, and incommunicable outside of this place. In Blake’s view, *Paradiso* is a state rather than a place. Via imagination, we may find God within us at any stage of our journey.

- 14 Blake’s pictorial “Trasumanar” culminates in the highly evocative piece of *Dante Adoring Christ* (no. 94, illus. 11). The fine work of line-making unifies the bodies of Dante and Christ with their veiled garments and dynamic auras. Bindman accurately observes that the “glitterance of Christ’ is wonderfully suggested by Blake’s use of watercolour” (*Commedia* 206). The artist skillfully combines pencil and watercolor to achieve a sense of immateriality, which stands in stark contrast to the corporeality of Vanni Fucci “*Making Figs*” against God (no. 52, illus. 12). The outlines of the muscular physiques of Vanni Fucci and Christ

Heavenly Men beaming bright
Appeared as One Man

(E 713)

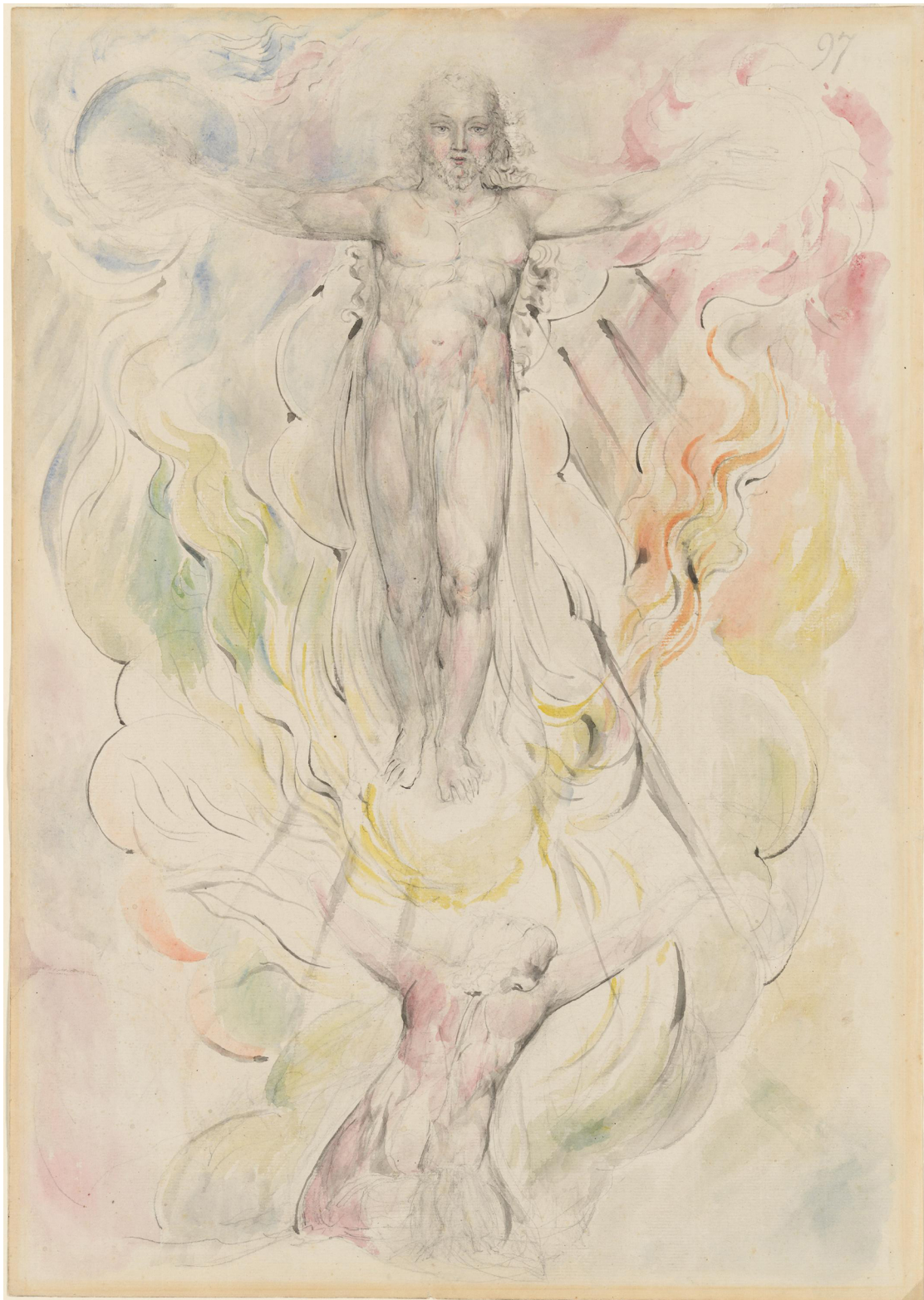
Brightness and light characterize the “Heavens,” where “Men” appear “as One Man.” The union between God and humans embodies Blake’s idea of subjectivity, according to which the condition of the self is not individual in essence but rather a fluid state of being, or a version of what Tim Ingold terms “in-betweenness.” In-betweenness is “a movement of generation and dissolution in a world of becoming where things are not yet given ... but on the way to being given. ... *Where between is liminal, in-between is arterial; where between is intermediate, in-between is midstream.* And the in-between is the realm of the life of lines” (147; italics in the original). By expanding the boundaries among living beings and making this process visible, Blake seeks unity between “Men” and God. For him, unlike for Dante, God is thus immanent in all of us: “All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the Divine body of the Saviour the True Vine of Eternity The Human Imagination” (E 555). The fundamental difference between Blake’s and Dante’s approaches to “Trasumanar” therefore lies in the two poets’ underlying assumptions and means of representation. While Dante does not regard imagination as a divine power, Blake believes that

are strikingly different. With regard to engraving, Connolly specifies that “if Blake wished to make his representations of muscles more subtle, he could have done so, avoiding the hardness of printed lines by drawing or painting in musculature at a later stage” (29). Blake’s practice of designing the musculature within the copperplate could not occur in the watercolor designs. Nevertheless, the artist exposes his subjects by overmarking the internal muscles with pencil and watercolor, yet distinguishing bold contours for the damned versus light and flexible lineaments for the blessed. While the anatomy of Christ becomes one with the veils developing from his torso in thin pencil strokes and touches of color, the body of the thief is heavily contrasted, rendering the effect of what Blake refers to as “temptations and perturbations, labouring to destroy Imaginative power, by means of that infernal machine, called Chiaro Oscuro, in the hands of Venetian and Flemish Demons” (E 547). The use of color also matters in the respective backgrounds of the designs. *Inferno* is rocky and clouded by clusters of dense, opaque matter exhibiting a dramatic juxtaposition

of red and yellow, as opposed to the the airy, light-toned aura enveloping the body of Christ in *Paradiso*. Both Vanni Fucci and Christ are similarly depicted, in a standing position with outstretched arms. Janet Warner identifies in this posture and its variations an ambiguous archetype, which can be interpreted as a demonic impulse or its regenerative counterpart (87-105). Vanni Fucci and Christ seem to substantiate this ambiguity—while the former delivers a blasphemous gesture to the sky, the latter evokes the iconographic tradition of self-sacrifice and invites us to “enter Blake’s *Paradiso* with the worship of the Human Form Divine” (Paley, *Traveller* 165). The two illustrations exhibit a noticeable difference in the use of the same medium. The opacity of Vanni Fucci’s body resembles the effect of those watercolor pieces described by Anthony Blunt as “almost as if he [Blake] was painting in tempera” (89). Christ’s translucency is, instead, about minimal touches of pigment. The artist seems to suggest a visual hierarchy among the inhabitants of Dante’s otherworld in accordance with his advocacy for line over color.

- 15 In the three years before his death, Blake returned to his poetics of line versus color and defined it as a point of access into the experience of the beyond in his Dante illustrations. He challenged the architecture of sin and salvation, “seeking to understand the poem by discovering his disagreements with it” (Pite 62). The mystery of God, untold in the *Commedia*, thus finds its graphic manifestation in the watercolor series. The artist achieved the ineffability of mystical experiences via his eidetic images, as “when the influence of the imagination is at its maximum, they [optical perceptual (or eidetic) images] are ideas that, like after-images, are projected outward and literally *seen*” (Jaensch 2; italics in the original). In Blake’s words, “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see does not imagine at all” (E 541). He gave lineaments and form to Dante’s linguistic impossibilities through a skillful articulation of the medium across the three *cantiche*. While high color density and solid contours may signify the condition of the fallen and the opacity of “a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal / Spirit; a Selfhood” (*Milton* 40[46].35-36, E 142), the veiled line and subtle strokes of color bring us closer to what Dante’s “words may not tell”—“Trasumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria” (*Par.* 1.70-71). The incorporated manifestations of the body in the line allow us to conceptualize the range of meanings generated by Blake’s practice in light of his aesthetic theory. By acknowledging the semantic value of contours and color density, we move beyond anatomical discrepancies on a merely representational level and access the artist’s use of line and color as instruments for revealing the Eternal World within. The soul’s journey toward God, in the poem achieved in the third *cantica* exclusively, be-

comes in Blake’s designs a journey within ourselves, for *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* are not places but rather states where God, by means of imagination, is within us.



11. William Blake. *Dante Adoring Christ*. Pen and ink and watercolor over black chalk, with touches of gum, 1824–27. 37.2 × 52.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 1020-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



12. William Blake. *Vanni Fucci "Making Figs" against God*. Pen and ink and watercolor over pencil and traces of black chalk, with sponging, 1824–27. 37.2 × 52.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1920. 1005-3. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

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