



WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS ILLUSTRATIONS TO THE DIVINE COMEDY

III. THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF DANTE

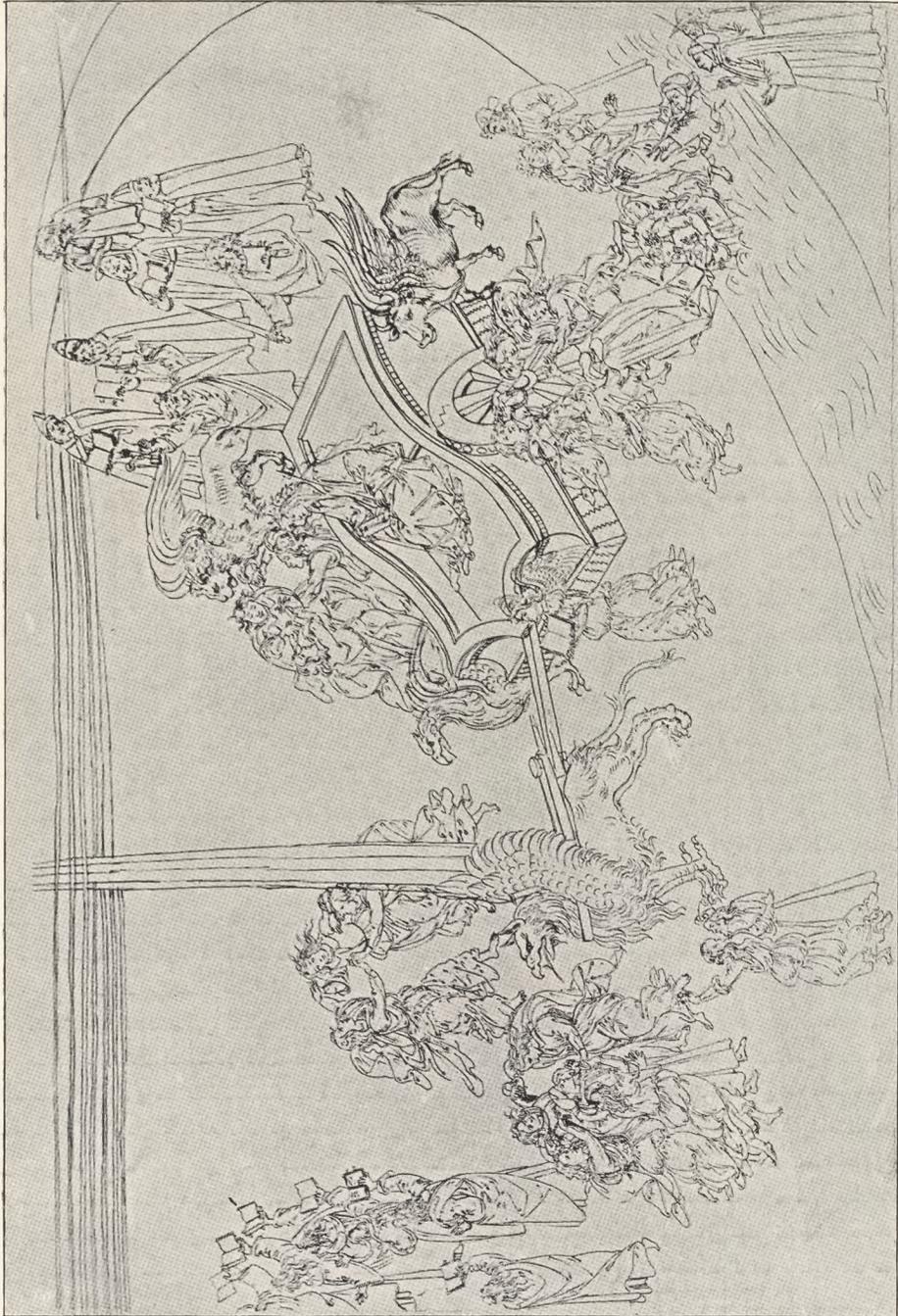


THE late Mr. John Addington Symonds wrote ; in a preface to certain Dante illustrations by Stradanus, a sixteenth century artist of no great excellence, published in phototype by Mr. Unwin in 1892 ; that the illustrations of Gustave Doré, " in spite of glaring artistic defects, must, I think, be reckoned first among numerous attempts to translate Dante's conceptions into terms of plastic art." One can only account for this praise of a noisy and demagogic art, an art heavy as with the rank breath of the mob, by supposing that a temperament, strong enough to explore with unflinching alertness the countless schools and influences of the Renaissance in Italy is of necessity a little lacking in delicacy of judgment and in the finer substances of emotion. It is more difficult to account for so admirable a scholar not only preferring these illustrations to the work of what he called " the graceful and affected Botticelli " although " Doré was fitted for his task, not by dramatic vigour, by feeling for pure beauty, or by anything sternly in sympathy with the supreme poet's soul, but by a very effective sense of luminosity and gloom," but preferring them because " he created a fanciful world, which makes the movement of Dante's *dramatis personæ* conceivable, introducing the ordinary intelligence into those vast regions thronged with destinies of souls and creeds and empires." When the ordinary student finds this ordinary intelligence in an illustrator, he thinks, because it is his own intelligence, that it is an accurate interpretation of the text, while the work of extraordinary intelligences is merely an expression of their own ideas and feelings. Doré and Stradanus, he will tell you, have given us something of the world of Dante, but Blake and Botticelli have builded worlds of their own and called them Dante's : as if Dante's world were more than a mass of symbols of colour and form and sound which put on humanity, when they arouse some mind to an intense and romantic life that is not

theirs ; as if it was not one's own sorrows and angers and regrets and terrors and hopes that awaken to condemnation or repentance while Dante treads his eternal pilgrimage ; as if any poet or painter or musician could be other than an enchanter calling with a persuasive or compelling ritual, creatures, noble or ignoble, divine or dæmonic, covered with scales or in shining raiment, that he never imagined, out of the bottomless deeps of imaginations he never foresaw ; as if the noblest achievement of art was not when the artist enfolds himself in darkness, while he casts over his readers a light as of a wild and terrible dawn.

Let us therefore put away the designs to "The Divine Comedy," in which there is "an ordinary intelligence," and consider only the designs in which the magical ritual has called up extraordinary shapes, the magical light glimmered upon a world, different from the Dantesque world of our own intelligence in its ordinary and daily moods, upon a difficult and distinguished world. Most of the series of designs to Dante, and there are a good number, need not busy anyone for a moment. Genelli has done a copious series, which is very able in the "formal" "generalized" way which Blake hated, and which is spiritually ridiculous. Penelli has transformed the Inferno into a vulgar Walpurgis night, and a certain Schuler, whom I do not find in the biographical dictionaries, but who was apparently a German, has prefaced certain flaccid designs with some excellent charts ; while Stradanus has made a series for "The Inferno" which has so many of the more material and unessential powers of art, and is so extremely undistinguished in conception, that one supposes him to have touched in the sixteenth century the same public Doré has touched in the nineteenth.

Though with many doubts, I am tempted to value Flaxman's designs to the "Inferno," the "Purgatorio," and the "Paradiso," only a little above the best of these ; because he does not seem to have ever been really moved by Dante, and so to have sunk into a formal manner, which is a reflection of the vital manner of his Homer and Hesiod. His designs to "The Divine Comedy" will be laid, one imagines, with some ceremony in that immortal waste paper basket in which Time carries with many sighs the failures of great men. I am perhaps wrong, however, because Flaxman even at his best has not yet touched me very deeply, and I hardly ever hope to escape this limitation of my ruling stars. That Signorelli does not seem greatly more interesting, except here and there, as in the drawing of the Angel, full of innocence and energy, coming from the boat which has carried so many souls to the foot of the mountain of purgation, can only be because one knows him through poor reproductions from frescoes half mouldered away with damp. A little known series, drawn by Adolph



Stürler, an artist of German extraction, who was settled in Florence in the first half of this century, are very poor in drawing, very pathetic and powerful in invention, and full of most interesting pre-Raphaelitic detail. Certain groups of figures, who, having set love above reason, listen in the last abandonment of despair to the judgment of Minos, or walk with a poignant melancholy to the foot of his throne through a land where owls and strange beasts move hither and thither with the sterile content of the evil that neither loves nor hates; and a Cerberus full of patient cruelty; are admirable and moving in the extreme. All Stürler's designs have, however, the languor of a mind that does its work by a succession of delicate critical perceptions rather than the decision and energy of true creation, and are more a curious contribution to artistic methods than an imaginative force.

The only series that compete with Blake's are those of Botticelli and Giulio Clovio, and these contrast rather than compete; for Blake did not live to carry his "Paradiso" beyond the first faint pencillings, the first thin washes of colour, while Botticelli only, as I think, became supremely imaginative in his "Paradiso," and Clovio never attempted the "Inferno" and "Purgatorio" at all. The imaginations of Botticelli and Clovio were overshadowed by the cloister, and it was only when they passed beyond the world or into some noble peace which is not the world's peace, that they won a perfect freedom. Blake had not such mastery over figure and drapery as had Botticelli; but he could sympathize with the persons, and delight in the scenery of "The Inferno" and "The Purgatorio" as Botticelli could not, and could fill them with a mysterious and spiritual significance born perhaps of a mystical pantheism. The flames of Botticelli give one no emotion, and his car of Beatrice is no symbolic chariot of the church led by the gryphon, half eagle, half lion, of Christ's dual nature, but is a fragment of some mediæval pageant pictured with a merely technical inspiration. Clovio, working in the manner of the illuminators of missals, has created a marvellous vision, a paradise of serene air reflected in a little mirror, a heaven of sociability and humility and prettiness, the heaven of children and of monks; but one cannot imagine him deeply moved, as the modern world is moved, by the symbolism of bird and beast, of tree and mountain, of flame and darkness. It was a profound understanding of all creatures and things; a profound sympathy with passionate and lost souls; made possible in their extreme intensity by his revolt against corporeal law, and corporeal reason; which made Blake the one perfectly fit illustrator for the Inferno and the Purgatorio: in the serene and rapturous emptiness of Dante's Paradise he would find no symbols but a few abstract emblems; and he had no love for the abstract;

and with the drapery and the gestures of Beatrice and Virgil, he would have prospered less than did Clovio and Botticelli.

The drawing of the car of Beatrice, following the seven candlesticks in slow procession along the borders of Lethe, is from a tracing made many years ago by the late John Linnell and his son, John Linnell also, from a drawing which is too faint for reproduction. The Botticelli is reproduced with the permission of Messrs. Lawrence and Bullen from their admirable edition of his designs to "The Divine Comedy."

W. B. YEATS.

A SONG



ALL that a man may pray,

Have I not prayed to thee?

What were praise left to say,

Has not been said by me,

O ma mie?

Yet thine eyes and thine heart,

Always were dumb to me:

Only to be my part,

Sorrow has come from thee,

O ma mie!

Where shall I seek and hide

My grief away with me?

Lest my bitter tears should chide,

Bring brief dismay to thee,

O ma mie!

More than a man may pray

Have I not prayed to thee?

What were praise left to say,

Has not been said by me,

O ma mie?

ERNEST DOWSON.