

## Dante Revisited

### The Vision of Paolo and Francesca in Blake's and D. G. Rossetti's Interpretation

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's interest in and enthusiasm for William Blake's poetry and art can be seen as one of the most important stimuli behind the history of the critical assumptions of the second half of the nineteenth century. Blake's clarity of form and mystic idealism exercised a profound influence on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's plastic imagination whose enthusiastic interest in Blake was one of the crucial motifs that shaped the aesthetic norms of "Rossettiism" (to be distinguished from Pre-Raphaelitism proper: from 1857 to 1882), and the emergence, at the end of the century, of Aestheticism. And it is also through the Pre-Raphaelite experiment that a continuity from Blake to the Symbolist Movement can be established.

It was in 1847, the year of the ascendancy of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, that D. G. Rossetti bought Blake's *Notebook*, "a varied collection of his writings, interspersed with drawings and sketches"<sup>1</sup> which was in his possession till his death in 1882, and came to be known as *The Rossetti MS*.<sup>2</sup> In his brother's, William Michael Rossetti's view, "His ownership of his truly precious volume [...] conduced to the Pre-

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<sup>1</sup> G. Keynes, *Blake Studies. Essays on his Life and Work*. (2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> He writes the following about the circumstances of the purchase which I quote with Bentley's added notes: "I purchased this original MS of [Samuel Palmer's brother William] Palmer, an attendant in the Antique Gallery at the British Museum, on the 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1847. Palmer knew Blake personally, and it was from the artist's wife that he had the present MS which he sold me for 10 S. [and for which Dante's brother William supplied the cash]." G. E. Bentley, ed., *William Blake. The Critical Heritage* (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.), p.243.

Raphaelite movement [...] and its contents] were balsam to Rossetti's soul, and grist to his mill. The volume was moreover the origin of all his after-concern in Blake literature."<sup>3</sup> The role of the MS proved to be instrumental in the nineteenth century history of Blake's legacy. For his biography of Blake, *Life of William Blake, Pictor Ignotus*' (1855-1863, published in 1863), Alexander Gilchrist collected all the data from Blake's admirers and from direct witnesses of his life, among them "a kind of syndicate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers."<sup>4</sup> D.G. Rossetti not only lent the MS to Gilchrist but he also selected Blake's lyrics for the second volume of Gilchrist's biography, which was the first critical statement on Blake that made his name as a poet known to a wider audience.

D.G. Rossetti's reading of Blake's work as a poet and artist is an area that needs further research. His poem "William Blake" is in the view of R. N. Essick "one of the more explicit and distinguished responses by the Pre-Raphaelites to their most important British precursor as a poet/artist."<sup>5</sup>

This is the place. Even here the dauntless soul,  
 The unflinching hand, wrought, on; till in that nook,  
 As on that very bed, his life partook  
 New birth, and passed. Yon river's dusky shoal,  
 Whereto the close-built coiling lanes unroll,  
 Faced his work-window, whence his eyes would stare,  
 Thought-wandering, unto nought that met them there,  
 But to the unfettered irreversible goal.  
 This cupboard, Holy of Holies, held the cloud  
 Of his soul writ and limned; this other one,  
 His true wife's charge, full oft to their abode  
 Yielded for daily bread the martyr's stone,  
 Ere yet their food might be that Bread alone,  
 The words now home-speech of the mouth of God.<sup>6</sup>

The poem with its emphasis on a "dauntless soul" and "unflinching hand" defines

<sup>3</sup> See W. M. Rossetti himself in *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*. Quoted by Bentley p. 243

<sup>4</sup> Bentley, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Robert N. Essick, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederic Shields, and the Spirit of William Blake" *Victorian Poetry* 1986 Summer V. 24. (2) p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> "William Blake (To Frederick Shields, on his sketch of Blake's work-room and death-room, 3 Fountain Court, Strand)" D. G. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. (London: Ellis & Elvey, 1903), p. 338.

Blake as a devout soul, completely absorbed in his visionary world, completely cut off from the reality of his time. Essick also calls attention to the fact that “there is the substitution of the life for the works: the ‘dauntless soul’, not the productions of that soul, provides both motivation and subject.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the poem’s religious terminology (Holy of Holies, Bread, mouth of God) seems to suggest that in Rossetti’s view for Blake, just as for himself, art is an expression of a quasi-religious experience.

In Rossetti’s allegorical tale *Hand and Soul* what the apparition (which is usually taken to symbolise the artist’s soul) says to Chiaro in this allegorical tale seems to be very close to Blake’s own concept of art:

Chiaro, servant of God, take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me: weak, as I am, and in the weeds of this time; only with eyes which seek out labour, and with a faith, not learned, yet jealous of prayer. Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more.<sup>8</sup>

Blake also classifies spiritual perception/imagination as the only way to true art. “Knowledge of Ideal Beauty is Not to be Acquired. It is Born with us ... Passion & Expression is Beauty itself ... Inspiration & Vision... will always Remain my Element, my Eternal Dwelling place.”<sup>9</sup>

For Rossetti it must have been a revelation when he became familiar with Blake’s works in the British Museum as early as 1845. Blake’s style is a hybrid style as W.J.T. Mitchell defines it.<sup>10</sup> The flat plane, the more primitive perspective than that of the Classical age, are indicative of the Gothic influence, while human figures – usually symbolising some spiritual quality or condition – are very often classical. This Romantic Classicism could very easily have inspired Rossetti to create a new style. Blake’s influence, in the form of a direct transfer of motifs in Rossetti’s paintings has been pointed out by many critics<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Essick p. 170. Rossetti’s preference for his forefathers’ life to their work is a characteristically Victorian approach, which can be noticed in his devotion to Dante’s *Vita Nuova*.

<sup>8</sup> D. G. Rossetti, *Poems & Translations 1850-1870. Together with the Prose Story ‘Hand and Soul’* (London: Oxford University Press Humphrey Milford, 1926), p. 168.

<sup>9</sup> See Blake’s 1808 text “Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynold’s *Discourses*” in W. Blake, *The Complete Writings of William Blake* ed. G. Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 459., 466., 477.

<sup>10</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art. A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> In analysing Rossetti’s *Hist! said Kate the Queen* (1851) Hilton (p. 97) notes that “the most satisfactory part of the picture is the line of attendants behind the maid servants who comb out the Queen’s hair. These

In the following analysis of Blake's and Rossetti's recreation of Dante's vision of Paolo and Francesca, however, it is not the continuity between the two artists I would like to focus on, but the essential difference of their conceptions of human and divine reality which determines their own very specific interpretation and rendering of the concept of love central to the philosophy of Dante as well as Blake and Rossetti. It might be most fruitful to employ W. J. T. Mitchell's distinctions in the definition of Blake's uniqueness, who suggests that Blake's concept of *ut pictura poesis*, or the sister arts is different from that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Firstly, Mitchell points at the difference between visual translation and visionary transformation; secondly, he shows what great a distance there is between pictorialist-descriptive poetry (verbal painting) and visionary prophecy; thirdly, he shows the distance between narrative, allegorical and purely visionary (symbolical) approaches in illustration. He states that Blake's work should be distinguished from the simple and direct methods of traditional illustration. Blake does not give a translation of the text in his illustration, neither is he pictorial: "he always avoids luring sirens of description."<sup>12</sup> His work is not narrative-like, neither is it allegorical. His poetry and painting are independent component parts of the whole invisible text (the complex whole), whose imagery has been derived from sacred literature where "the scene is indistinguishable from the narrator's consciousness."<sup>13</sup> Blake strives to unify the separate meanings: that of the poem and that of the picture. The contemplation of the state of the fallen world (and word) leads often enough to infertile nostalgia; in Blake's analysis, however, the Fall is the result of erroneous perception and the fallen world is to be described in dramatic

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figures, derived surely from Blake, exhibit Rossetti's nice sense of rhythm, of artistic interval, when composing on a flat plane rather than in depth." The patterning as an atmospheric device and flat plane is also a significant element in *Paolo and Francesca* (1855) especially in the third panel. Another aspect reminiscent of Blake's world can be seen in *La Donna della Fiamma* (1870), where a grotesque mediaeval figure appears in a flame on the lady's palm and creates a surreal montage. "The winged figure of Love within the flame is possibly adopted from the fiery spirits and angels of William Blake ... [who was] an obvious source for sprites," writes David Rodgers, *Rossetti* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 104. The montage technique is used by Rossetti as in the haunting *Beata Beatrix* (1864-70) or the odd *Dantis Amor* (1860). In *The Blessed Damsel* (1875-80), beside the heavy symbolism, Rossetti employs a wide range of devices thus producing an extremely crowded space (separate boxes of pictorial space, the symmetrically arranged angels, and the patterns of embracing lovers). The idea of separation expressed in boxes and the embracing lovers in Heaven, particularly, are reminiscent of Blake's illustration to Dante's story of Paolo and Francesca for us.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, p. 21.

terms where the tension is fed by the recognition of division, in the light of which the perceiver is cut off from the invisible, transcendent reality, a reality which is separated from him as a reality outside or beyond him. Blake sees the world in its paradisaical unity of "ideas-reality," which can be reached through artistic activity. Art based on the mimetic theory of Plato or on Lockean empiricism is the greatest error in Blake's view.<sup>14</sup> And, indeed, this seems to be one of the main differences between Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites: the latter in their allegorical representations give an enhanced importance to the realism of historical and natural details. As far as the human body, nature and historical accessories are concerned, they employed models for drawing human face and body, painted naturalistic images of the countryside on the spot staying close to the original scene; and used costume books in order to stay faithful to the given historical age.<sup>15</sup>

The Dante illustrations were equally significant in Blake's and Rossetti's careers. It was in 1824, when he was 67 and still unknown to the wider public, that Blake received his last major commission through John Linnell to make illustrations to the *Divina Commedia*. *The Circle of the Lustful* (watercolour and engraving), or *The Whirlwind of Lovers From Dante's Inferno Canto V* (Paolo and Francesca) provide a kind of summary of his ideas on human life. The fact that he was commissioned for this task implies that his earlier works must have been interpreted by J. Linnell as "something similar to Dante."<sup>16</sup> He was weak and ill, working in bed when Samuel Palmer went to see him;<sup>17</sup> but still quarrelling with and correcting the traditional Christian jurisdiction. "Every thing in Dante's Comedia shews That for Tyrannical Purposes he has made

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Hilton, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> To characterise his absorbing interest in Dante we may note he studied three different translations of Dante's *Commedia* during his life: Henry Boyd's translation of the *Inferno* (published in 1785), Henry Cary's translation (published in 1805-6 and in 1814) and an original in Italian (published in 1564). See Keynes p. 150 and Bentley pp 146, 166. However, "his illustrations were made mainly under the guidance of Cary's work," states Tinkler-Villani (*Visions of Dante in English Poetry. Translations of the Commedia from Jonathan Richardson to William Blake*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989, p. 244). It is quite probable that Blake was also familiar with the earliest English translation, that of Jonathan Richardson's made to the Ugolino incident (*Inferno III*) published in 1719. M. Klonsky (*Blake's Dante. The Complete Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980, p. 30) writes that "none other than Sir Joshua Reynolds sent a painting of Ugolino in the tower to the annual Royal Academy Exhibition, where the twenty-year-old Blake no doubt saw it." Blake was surrounded by friends/rivals who were also affected by Dante, such as Flaxman and Fuseli, who knew Italian well and stayed in Italy for long periods, unlike the poet.

<sup>17</sup> Bentley, p. 145.

This World the Foundation of All & the Goddess Nature Memory is his Inspirer & not Imagination the Holy Ghost," he wrote on one unfinished watercolour.<sup>18</sup> Present criticism still often uses this comparison, since he always dealt "with the atmospheric potentialities of Dante's vision of Hell,"<sup>19</sup> not only when he painted his watercolours for Dante. He used traditional mediaeval emblems to express his own internal conflicts. Similarly to Dante himself, he applied the method of "inward-looking memory drawing."<sup>20</sup> The description of outer history goes hand in hand with the inner history of his own 'psycho-biography'.<sup>21</sup>

As for Rossetti, his Dante experience was a life-long obsession from 1849 on, that stemmed from his family background and heritage. Rossetti identified himself with Dante, and although he also made some illustrations to the *Divina Commedia*, he preferred the overtly autobiographical *Vita Nuova* to the dramatic *Commedia*. While Rossetti entered Dante's world as a historical-real-practical world, the soil of personal nostalgia – he never visited, though he forever longed to visit, Italy –, Blake entered the *Commedia* as a spiritual treasure house which had its own iconographical ornaments sanctioned by mediaeval theological traditions. "An admiration for the Italians becomes a measure of the role of sublimity and imagination in English poetry," states Tinkler-Villani,<sup>22</sup> and that is especially true in relation to the Dantesque influence on Blake and Rossetti.

The circles, or associative chains, as structure, are important in the original story written by Dante, which can also be seen in Paolo and Francesca's love story. Paolo and his brother's wife, Francesca fell in love with each other as a consequence of reading (and interpreting) a famous chivalric romance about Lancelotto's love for Geneveva. The lyrical hero, Dante, faints and falls as a corpse because he has been struck by pain, associating himself with the lovers (interpreting Paolo and Francesca's story).

Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse,  
l'altro piangëa; sí che di pietade

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in D. Bindman, ed. *William Blake. His Art and Times*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982), p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Bindman, ed., *William Blake. His Art and Times* p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> K. Clark, *Blake and Visionary Art*. (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1973), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Tinkler-Villani, p. 296.

io venni men così com'io morisse.  
E caddi come corpo morto cade.<sup>23</sup>

Dante discovers his own fate in the fate of the lovers and similarly to Paolo and Francesca, interprets a story which is emblematic of his own life

Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace,  
noi udiremo e parleremo a voi,  
mentre che'l vento, come fa, ci tace.<sup>24</sup>

Interpretation is the definitive framework of the *Commedia*. For a guide Dante chooses Virgil, an *anima naturaliter christiana*, whose great popularity in the Middle Ages was due mainly to his *Messianic Eclogue* (the fourth) which has been regarded as the prophecy of the birth of Christ, in this sense he was thought to be able to see “present, past and future.” Dante himself, however, though a cosmic traveller, still lives in a state of constant interpretation, the past, during his journey through Hell. Explaining what he considers a basically hermeneutic relationship between the character and the author of a work of fiction, Paul de Man writes that it “is (...) governed (...) solely by an act of understanding ..., [and] when another is chosen as a model of literary identity, as in the case of certain literary influences, the relationship takes on the form of an encounter (as between Dante and Virgil) and a recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the other as a temporal precursor.”<sup>25</sup> The poet Dante’s text will be the story of passion and resurrection only in the scope of the whole of the three parts: Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, or rather the past, the present and the future. Carnal sinners are sentenced to constant separation, so Paolo and Francesca have been deprived of the hope of liberation, and will stay in a static eternity, suffering forever.

Blake’s picture, on the other hand, shows a dynamic moment. There are three sources of energy. First of all, the sun is radiating light in the distance in the right corner. This is the most abstract and spiritual emblem of radiating power, as “the sun is

<sup>23</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*. (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1975) p. 24, *Inferno* V.139-142. “And all the while one spirit uttered this, / The other one did weep so, that, for pity, / I swooned away as if I had been dying, / And fell, even as a dead body falls.” Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, transl. H. W. Longfellow (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1867).

<sup>24</sup> Dante, *Inferno* V.94-96. In Longfellow’s translation: “Of what it pleases thee to hear and speak, / That will we hear, and we will speak to you, / While silent is the wind, as it is now.”

<sup>25</sup> Paul de Man, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism. The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers* ed. Burt, Newmark, Warminsky. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 21-22.

the symbol of the imagination... associated with the Divine Vision and the Divine Family” in Blake’s system.<sup>26</sup> In his poem to Thomas Butts Los himself appears to him when the sun rises. Imagination is creative vision which transcends time.

Then Los appear’d in all his power:  
 In the Sun he appear’d, descending before  
 My face in fierce flames; in my double sight  
 ‘Twas outward a Sun: inward Los in his might.  
 (...)Los flam’d in my path, & the Sun was hot  
 With the bows of my Mind & the Arrows of Thought –<sup>27</sup>

Another form of energy is indicated by the whirlwind which breaks in at the foreground of the picture, as a river, under a thorny bank, and leaves the picture as a wind, after taking a whole swirl in the far corner. This is a concrete physical power. The central movement is a projection, coming out of the body of the “mental traveller,” Dante. He is clothed in red. This is an imagined supernatural vision: a flame encloses Paolo and Francesca. They, as an emanation, leave Dante’s body as the soul leaves the body at the moment of death. The plane of light is separated from the stream and from those who are being torn apart, other men and women. There is one standing figure at the lying figure’s head who can be identified with Virgil. He is another aspect of the same human figure, but he is clothed in blue. Red and blue are the dominant colours in the watercolour. While red dominates in the bottom-left triangle where Classical bodies are being tossed, and a yellowish bloody river flows, blue characterises the upper-right corner where the bright sun is placed in a dark patch and the elongated Gothic bodies of Paolo and Francesca (painted in bluish-red) emanate from the protagonist’s body. Some black and yellow give a change in both parts in front of a dark blue background. Every human figure has its own other self. Dante complements Virgil, Francesca belongs to Paolo, and every male figure has a female opposite, though only those in the sun are unified in a harmonious embrace, kissing each other, enjoying each other’s presence. The others are separated or threatened with separation. Virgil is the intellectual witness, the only one in the state to recognise clearly the horror of the scene, with his back to the sun. Dante has lost consciousness, he is at the boundary of life and death in the state of a dream-vision, while the men and women are in constant

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<sup>26</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary. The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 390.

<sup>27</sup> Blake, p. 818.



motion, striving to find each other. They are engaged in physical strife, trying to reach each other by physical strength. Probably, the picture can be seen as the description of physical (the lovers), emotional (Paolo and Francesca), intellectual (Virgil) and imaginative (the pair in the sun) faculties, most painfully separated from each other.

The lovers seem to be unified towards the upper part,<sup>28</sup> though some of them fall and lose their companion. Where the whirlwind is broken, Dante's body seems to be touched by one of the unfortunate, so he has a link to the main whirlwind beside the smaller one, where Paolo and Francesca are tossed and float helplessly. They soar *upwards* (heavenward), in the opposite direction to the "male figure, shown in a *reversed* cruciform position."<sup>29</sup> Only the sun indicates security and permanence. While Paolo and Francesca represent Dante's own inner division, or Dante's imagination, the pair in the sun projects the vision of a more general consciousness, "Imagination, the Holy Ghost." It has the separateness of the future where the pairs are headed, and also the past where harmony had been. It is emblematic of "innocence" and the original unity of Adam and Eve in Paradise, and also of harmony regained in Eternity, the condition of reintegration, that can be attained after the sphere of the present, represented by the two travellers. The viewer sees the Past, the Present and the Future together which suggests that the Past and the Future are equally present, and should be seen in every moment of our personal life.<sup>30</sup>

In his compassion Dante identifies himself with the tormented lovers. On the one hand, Dante's inner world is an internalised outer hell, that is, he is capable of offering us a survey of the history of mankind. On the other hand, the narrative is an externalised inner hell where Paolo and Francesca are tormented. Thus this particular episode, very much in the same way as the whole *Commedia*, can be read as Dante's own psycho-biography. The story of Paolo and Francesca is as much an outer (time-and-space specific) experience as a frame to express a generic, though personal psychic event.

In the Paolo and Francesca episode Dante is concerned with passion that is forbidden by traditional moral law, and the punishment meted out to the transgressors will never be lifted, while Blake interprets the story as emblematic of the fallen world that seeks redemption which is sure to come. He introduces the power of art, "holy imagination," that redeems and gives new life, and opens the future of conversion to a

<sup>28</sup> Bindman, ed., *William Blake. His Art and Times* p. 180.

<sup>29</sup> Klonsky, p. 139.

<sup>30</sup> Correct perception can bring redemption at any moment. It triggers the state of the redeemed Albion where all the Zoas are "delighting in their brotherhood" (Klonsky p. 26).

true religion: Dante is seen in his picture as fallen into division as if he had been the sexless Albion of primeval unity. Dante's fallen state is reflected in the position of Paolo and Francesca, who correspond in my interpretation to Adam and Eve, the sexual contraries. The series of division in Blake's *Paolo and Francesca* can be seen as the story of man thrown into matter, who seeks a higher paradise of organised innocence. This is the theological design, that a true Christian follows in his journey in life from matter to spirit through the help of true art, in Blake's opinion. This is why the sun emblem is the goal of the movement of the return, and not only the "episode of Paolo and Francesca, represented in a kind of sun," as Bindman writes.<sup>31</sup> In his interpretation, the emblem of the initial sinful act, the sun, irradiates the whole picture.<sup>32</sup> Virgil is a viewer at first remove from Dante, Blake, the artist, is positioned at the second remove, thus he is able to correct the error of Dante's view of human history.<sup>33</sup>

In *The Circle of the Lustful* Blake seems to emphasise his own theory of imagination. In it the visual associations, practically speaking, destroy its ties with the original text and they create a view of the human condition which calls Dante's world view radically into question. In Dante the lovers are doomed to eternal punishment, whereas Blake definitely acquits them, interpreting their sin of adultery as if it was not a deliberate choice of theirs, and the fallen world can be corrected after undergoing experience. Blake ardently seeks Christ, which manifests itself in his illustration: the faculties of mercy and love dominate over tyrannical impersonal judgement. The power of imagination goes hand in hand with the remission of sins in his world.

did he [Jesus Christ]... turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery?  
 ... I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking (these) ten commandments.  
 Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules,

wrote Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* at the beginning of his career.<sup>34</sup> He did not believe in sin later either. Jesus as the Forgiveness of sins, perhaps, is the only motif that does not change its meaning during his career.

<sup>31</sup> Bindman, ed., *William Blake. His Art and Times* p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> D. Bindman, ed. *William Blake. The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> However, Blake's attitude to Dante had been changing during his forty-year career (this is the main subject of Tinkler-Villani's book), so it is a kind of oversimplification to pinpoint Blake's disagreement with Dante only. She distinguishes between Blake's experience during his writing *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), making his portrait of Dante (1801-1802), and the illustrations to the *Comedy* (1824-1827).

<sup>34</sup> Blake, p. 158

He [Jesus] laid His hand on Moses' Law:  
 The Ancient Heavens, in Silent Awe  
 Writh with Curses from Pole to Pole,  
 All away began to roll (...)  
 To be Good only, is to be

A God [Devil *in pencil*] or else a Pharisee. (...)

Hide not from my Sight thy Sin,  
 That forgiveness thou maist win.(...)<sup>35</sup>

Thy Sins are all forgiven thee.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus is sympathy and co-suffering which equals imagination according to *The Everlasting Gospel*, his very last poetic statement.

Rossetti has painted his figures of *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855) in a different pose from that of the Blake picture. The lovers are holding each other, which is only one tiny aspect of the conception that Blake indicated in the sun emblem. Rossetti's illustration reminds the viewer of Renaissance boxes and the decorative details of mediaeval illuminated codices. The nostalgically mediaeval, and, at the same time, religious form, the triptych, compels the viewer to be ready to worship as the triptych formation, and invokes immediately an image of an icon on an altar.

Rossetti's couple in the first panel are sitting on a bench in a crowded historical interior. The colourful codex and the Rosette provide a characteristic accessory to create a mediaeval atmosphere. The viewer has a suspicion, however, that it is only a fake mediaeval scene in the interpreting mind of late posterity. Paolo and Francesca have individualised faces, painted after models. The painting is extremely bright, unlike Blake's watercolour. Rossetti's colours (the mixture of brown and red, blue and yellow, green and yellow, black and yellow, etc.) are "intense but not pure, because it is not altogether seen in the *luce intellettuale, piena d'amore*."<sup>37</sup> The whole scene recalls some painfully beautiful memory, set in front of a window, made to substitute the "real" sun, presented in Blake's picture, transmitting positive and redemptive energy. Here it separates this claustrophobic space from everything which is behind it: ordinary people and normal life. In the third panel the pair stay close, never to leave each other. They

<sup>35</sup> Blake, p. 754.

<sup>36</sup> Blake, p. 758.

<sup>37</sup> N. Gray, *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), p. 26.

cling to each other, and press their faces together in gentle affection. With closed eyes they are carried along in the whirlwind or watery current, compelled to surrender to outside physical forces completely. Their enforced surrender, however, does not suggest separation, on the contrary, they will stay together forever in an eternal desperate carnal embrace; here their relationship, compared to the first panel, seems to be more permanent. They are among beautifully arranged rows of flames or fish swimming in unity, flying and floating and filling the empty space completely to make it as confined as is possible. The middle panel shows two male figures with wreaths on their heads in a moving pose. Virgil and Dante are struck with awe, seeing the lovers, and are turning their heads in the direction of the sorrowful, melancholy pair. The passive witnesses are more disciplined than those in Dante's and Blake's works, moreover, the main characters are not they but the lovers, Paolo and Francesca. It is a typical Rossetti painting, N. Gray claims, as many elements (the setting in a shut-in-room with a window where there is no space to stand up, the employment of a chorus of emotionally detached figures, and the tense atmosphere) are known from his many other paintings. The three panels – in the order they are in – stand for temporal and causative relationships. The first panel is the cause in the past, the middle panel shows the viewer-interpreter in the present, and the third panel is the consequence: the state from which there is no release, consequently it is the eternal future.

Beside the brilliant colouring it is the rhythm of the composition which is the most charming pictorial means in Rossetti's lyrical painting. As it was mentioned before, his mastery of exploiting his genuine sense of rhythm in painting is exhibited particularly when he composes on a flat plane as in the case of painting the story of Paolo and Francesca. The patterning, (fish/flames), and the altar-form (with the idea of separation in boxes) produce a surrealistic montage. The montage brings out and emphasises the intensity of the original narrative, which has been called into life as a symbol of emotional absorption (that of the lovers, that of Virgil and Dante, and that of the painter himself), according to Rossetti's own artistic will.

Rossetti illustrates the episode by translating the text into visual experience but his picture can hardly be classified as a vision in Blakean sense. In spite of their similar concepts of art and the same source, Rossetti's illustration has no relation with Blake's. Rossetti, in all probability, made his illustration to the story of Paolo and Francesca independently from the Blake illustration. Considering the work as frame or interpretation,<sup>38</sup> the attachment behind the picture can be said to be twofold; on the

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<sup>38</sup> See P. Schwenger, "Blake's Boxes, Coleridge's Circles, and the Frame of Romantic Vision" *Studies in Romanticism*, 35 (1996), p. 114.

one hand, it shows Rossetti's attraction to the Florentine master, on the other hand, his attraction to the model, Elisabeth Siddal. Thus it seems to be an inspiration that helps him to define himself as a modern Dante:

it has often seemed to me that all work, to be truly worthy, should be wrought out of the age itself, as well as out of the soul of the producer, which must needs be a soul of the age

he writes in *Saint Agnes of Intercession* in 1848.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, in the story of Paolo and Francesca, Rossetti, the modern Dante, interprets love differently from the way the Florentine master interpreted it. Spiritual love merges into carnal love in the concept of love in Rossetti's interpretation.<sup>40</sup> For Dante, the mediaeval poet, however, carnal love is the aspect of the Past, which is inevitable Death and Hell; though this consequence cannot be accepted by Dante, the protagonist. (This clash between Dante the theologian and Dante the poet is the challenge Blake seems to respond to by resolving it through his own emphases.) Spiritual love is the aspect of Future Redemption which is Eternal Life in Heaven to Alighieri Dante. (For Blake sex "is an ascent into an ideal, which opens the way into Eternity."<sup>41</sup>) It is carnal love, the state of the Past only (without its growing into Future), which he embellished nostalgically in the presentation of the love between Paolo and Francesca. From it there is no way out; there is no Redemption which would bring Happiness. Rossetti identifies himself with Dante, the protagonist, not with Dante, the poet, and he cannot accept the gruesome fate to which Paolo and Francesca have been sentenced. The consequence of his co-suffering with the lovers is eternal melancholy. Rossetti's enthusiasm for early Italian, mediaeval art, the Florentine Renaissance, expresses a basically Platonic view of reality. His emphasis on the momentariness of human life is expressed in his most beloved poetic form, the sonnet,

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Gray p. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Art for Rossetti is a mixture of sacred and profane elements. Rossetti's most characteristic picture, *The Annunciation* (1849) has Blake-like symbolic dimensions, and it plays the text and design against one another by adding the profane-sexual overtone, the reference to rape. It introduces a Victorian bedroom as a pictorial space. Though the picture is very powerful, the scope of the narrative stays within the scope of an everyday event. Mary is not dressed in decorated clothes, on the contrary, she is in a white underwear. The figure of the angel recalls a handsome lover rather than a proper apparition, so there is an element of sexual threat in his appearance. Rossetti reduces the sacredness of the biblical meaning by means of actualisation.

<sup>41</sup> Damon, pp. 367-368.

the “moment’s monument, – / Memorial from the Soul’s eternity. / To one dead deathless hour.”<sup>42</sup> Rossetti’s *Paolo and Francesca* is a realistically observed authentic moment in the life of the soul of the artist. It is a personal document: human love immortalised by art. Claustrophobic space may express the fear of the intense pain of loss as well as the fear of the cruelty and derision of a callous, artless world. Fulfilment is not within the reach of modern man or woman: universal sorrow and loss rule in the human world, which, however, can be transmuted into Beauty. But the “platonic ideal” is impossible to apprehend in the Present, and probably it will not be disclosed in the Future either.

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<sup>42</sup> Rossetti, *The Poetical Works* p. 176.