My Own Private Dante: Tom Phillips' Symbolic *Inferno*[1]

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When it comes to medievalism, few texts are literally edgier than the *Divine Comedy*, not least because it may not be medieval. It has been seen as a descendant of the mid-twelfth-century *Vision of Tundale*, late-thirteenth-century mosaics in the baptistery of Florence, and many other works from well after Antiquity and well before the Renaissance; fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentators translated, interpreted, and critiqued it according to long-standing medieval conventions; and it fits safely within many descriptions of the Middle Ages, including the one embedded in *Studies in Medievalism*'s mission to serve as "an interdisciplinary medium of exchange for scholars [. . .] concerned with any aspect of the post-medieval idea and study of the Middle Ages and the influence [. . .] of this study on Western society after 1500."[2] Yet Dante was professionally and personally close to Giotto, who Vasari celebrates as the first Renaissance artist; the *Commedia* famously foregrounds Renaissance individualism (even as Dante condemns those who would put themselves above others); and, in having his "*pien di sonno*" narrator problematize responsibility for a potentially heretical text, Dante foreshadows the slipperiness of (post-)modern authorship.[3] Indeed, owing to these traits, as well as the *Commedia*'s other textual complexities and the tremendous influence of its vernacular approach, it is often seen as not just a, but *the* cultural cornerstone of contemporary Italy.[4]

That credits Dante with far more significance and innovation than anyone has probably ascribed to Tom Phillips, but in the 1970s, few British painters, much less illustrators, were closer than Phillips to the cutting edge of art. Constrained by illustration's inherent need to describe, by being born in 1937 to a generation that attempted to disown but never fully escaped the waning Empire, and by the conventions of an Oxford education, not to mention such patrons as the Imperial War Museum

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[1] This paper derives from my talk of the same name at The 30th International Conference on Medievalism, "Mapping Medievalisms," which was held in Pittsburgh, PA, October 2-3, 2015, and hosted by Lauryn Mayer of Washington & Jefferson College.

[2] On the relationship of the *Commedia* to *The Vision of Tundale*, begin with *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante*, ed. Eileen Gardner (New York: Italica, 1989), and Gardiner's *Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell: A Sourcebook* (New York: Gardner, 1993). The influence of the baptistery mosaics on the *Commedia* are discussed by countless surveys of the baptistery, Dante, the *Commedia*, Florence, Italian medieval architecture, and so on. One fairly recent starting point is E. D. Karampetsos's *Dante and Byzantium* (Boston: Somerset Hall, 2009), esp. 45. On the manner in which both fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentators treated the *Commedia*, begin with Paola Rigo, "Commenti danteschi," in *Dizionario critic della letteratura italiana*, ed. Vittore Branca, 4 vols (Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1986), 2:6-22.

[3] On Dante's relationship to Giotto, begin with Corrado Gizzi, *Giotto e Dante* (Milan: Skira, 2001). For Giorgio Vasari's assessment, see his essay "Giotto," in *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1987); *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Jean Paul Richter, 2 vols (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850). Dante's treatment of individualism has perhaps been discussed most often and most clearly in relationship to his politics, for which a good starting point is Charles Till Davis's "Dante and the Empire," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 67-79. For how Dante foreshadows the slipperiness of (post-)modern authorship via the ambiguity of his narrator's consciousness, begin with Karl Fugelso, "Illuminating Thresholds: Depicting Dante *pien di sonno* in Musée Condé MS 597," *Word & Image* 29 (2013): 443-55.

[4] On the cultural significance of the *Commedia*, particularly its vernacular approach to such a lofty subject, begin with John Beldon Scott's tenth chapter, "The Poet of the *Comedy*," in his *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 261-308.

and Westminster Abbey, he faced tremendous pressure to conform to academic standards, which even as late as the 1970s and 80s did not allow much of what could be called postmodernism.[5] Yet the 138 *Inferno* illustrations he began in 1976 and completed in 1983 for a *livre d'artiste* published that year by his Talfourd Press are extraordinarily personal and highly symbolic.[6] Though all but the general frontispiece and half-title face relevant passages from his translation of the *Inferno*, even an expert in *Commedia* images might be hard pressed to determine precisely which aspects of the text are represented in these collages of engraving, etching, graphite drawing, watercolor painting, newspaper, photographs, and silkscreen transfer, not to mention the occasional bit of take-out-food containers. Though the illustrations are rarely blurry in a visual sense, their iconography is often so ambiguous and so personal that, in the spirit of post-modernism, they open themselves to a vast array of interpretations that question the very ability to convey meaning.

Which is, of course, not to say that they are the first works of art to be less than perfectly comprehensible. In fact, they are not even the first highly ambiguous works within the history of Dante illustrations. In contrast to the thousands of formulaic fourteenth- and fifteenth-century *Commedia* miniatures and to the extremely literal depictions by Gustave Doré and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century illustrators, Salvador Dalí filtered the *Commedia* through his paranoiac-critical method to produce 101 highly personal, symbolic, and surreal illustrations in the early 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg translated *Inferno* in 1959-60 into a series of 34 hazy, silkscreen transfers that only hint at Dante's narrative, and in 1970 Leonard Baskin published a series of etchings that, via such synecdoches as the monster representing *Inferno* 14-17's Violent against Nature, radically veer from Dante's plot.[7] Clearly, Phillips had ample precedent for departing from literal depictions of the *Commedia*.

His iconographic ambiguity, moreover, may have been mitigated for many of his early viewers if, as seems likely, they knew his earlier work, and perhaps him, before they paid the *livre d'artiste*'s £10,000 subscription fee. Yet even extended acquaintance with Phillips may have left many questions

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[5] For more on Phillips, see his *Works and Texts*, intro. by Huston Paschal (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992); Lucy Shortis, "Eroding the Darkness: The Art of Tom Phillips," *Letter Arts Review* 14 (1997): 2-13; and, for the most current information, albeit not professionally edited, his website, http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/, or the entry for him in Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Phillips_(artist).

[6] For discussion of Phillips' *Commedia* illustrations, see A. Woods, "A New *Inferno*: Tom Phillips's Dante," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 18 (1989): 98-104; Joachim Möller, "Dante, englisch," in *Dantes* Göttliche Komödie*: Drucke und Illustrationen aus sechs Jahrhunderten*, ed. Lutz S. Malke (Berlin: Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2000), 153-82, esp. 168-82; Fugelso, "Neomedievalisms in Tom Phillips' *Commedia* Illustrations," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 26 (2011): 27-35; Fugelso, "Tom Phillips' Dante," in *Cahier Calin: Makers of the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery (Kalamazoo, MI: Studies in Medievalism, 2011), 47-55; and "Tom Phillips" in Fugelso's catalogue "Post-Medieval Illustrations of Dante's Sodomites," *Wordpress* , 2012, https://illustratingdantessodomites.wordpress.com.

[7] For more on these artists, particularly the relationship among their *Commedia* illustrations, begin with Fugelso, "Modern Artistic Responses to Pre-Modern Miniatures of the *Divine Comedy*," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 15 (2001): 85-106, and his "*Commedia* Images in the Neo-Gothic Age(s)," *Studies in Medievalism* 14 (2005): 173-97. For examples of repetitive *Commedia* miniatures, see the approximately 1200 included in the second volume of Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton's *Illuminated Manuscripts of the* Divine Comedy, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

unanswered about the illustrations, for rather than merely refract the *Commedia* through sexual subconsciousness, as did Dalí; through the happenstance of reactions to newspapers and magazines, as did Rauschenberg; or through the broadest of readings, as did Baskin, Phillips refracts the *Inferno* through the most obscure details of his own thoughts and experiences. Indeed, one could argue that he refracts himself through the *Inferno*.

Certainly, the publisher Thames and Hudson seems to have thought so, for when they commissioned a mass-market edition in 1985, they had Phillips supplement each image with a paragraph detailing not only his material and processes but also his sources and intentions, as in the third of four illustrations for Canto 29[8]:

> The painter now reappears, regressed to childhood, his painting (still one of my own Union Jack pictures) becomes even more irrelevant as the Bomb destroys Hiroshima. Around him also explodes another catastrophe, this time of his own finances as he strives to make a book of unprecedented lavishness and as he drives himself deeper into stupendous debt. The bank statement is genuine (being my own) and the bank's name is thinly disguised by an anagrammatisation (though its symbol has appeared before in Canto XVII/2). Here the extravagance of the lunatic spenders of the Sienese Club is joined to the strange prodigality of artists. Cappochio who ends this Canto was reputed to have painted exquisite scenes from the life of Christ on his fingernails, only to lick them off when requested to show them to anyone he felt unworthy to see them. The freedom of the printing process allows one to recall the splendid redness of overdraft statements in my student years (I have had an overdraft all my life). The collage elements include an excerpt from a *Sunday Times* Colour Magazine and a fragment of a card depicting my own flag images published by the Department of the Environment.

In the absence of this paragraph or any other explanation by the artist, viewers may be able to identify the mushroom cloud as an atomic explosion, to see the figure at the easel as a stand-in for Phillips, and perhaps to interpret the numbers as a bank statement, but presumably they would be harder pressed to relate these symbols to Dante's discussion of the Falsifiers, much less to connect them to Phillips' past, much less to see the relevance of that past to the Falsifiers.

This image and its explanation therefore provide a wonderful opportunity to test the limits and potential of communication, specifically with regard to medievalism. As the image obfuscates a famously medieval(ish) text—particularly when, as is often the case on the Internet, the illustration appears without the text it faces in the *livre d'artiste* and mass-media editions—Phillips problematizes the degree to which medievalism depends on the identification of medieval sources by their

[8] For a reproduction of this image, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/images/work/P/P07/P07874_8.jpg>, last accessed November 3, 2016.

interpreters and by their interpreters' interpreters. Moreover, he invites a re-examination of the role medievalism scholars can and should play in identifying and characterizing the influence of a source. He encourages them to ask how they can more effectively perform that role, particularly the degree to which they should give the history of the source and of its post-medieval adaptation.

While this investigation could take many forms, Phillips' cutting-edge illustration of a marginally medieval text calls for an edgy approach—in this case one steeped in sociology. This discipline is sometimes denigrated as a pseudo-science relying on highly subjective responses from untrained amateurs, but that characterization rests on problematic interpretations of professionalism, ignores the subjectivity inherent in every academic field, and underestimates the rigor and rationalism that can go into designing the survey instrument and selecting participants.[9] In this instance, an anonymous on-line mailbox was established for each of three categories of respondents. Then, Phillips' illustration and the following letter were sent by a Towson University administrator to all majors in the Department of Art + Design, Art History, and Art Education, by several art historians at other universities to all of their friends in their field, and by several literary historians to all *dantisti* with whom they were acquainted:

> Dear Potential Survey Participant:
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> Because my identity may indicate the source of the attached illustration, I have asked an intermediary to contact you with a request that you supply as sincere and complete an interpretation of that image as possible. If you choose to participate in this survey, I would ask that you please shape your responses around the five questions below:
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> 1) Do you recognize this image?
> 2) Do you recognize any pictorial or textual sources for it?
> 3) What are they, or what might they be? Please be as specific as possible.
> 4) How do you interpret this image? What might it mean?
> 5) How confident are you that your interpretation matches the artist's intentions?
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> Thank you for considering my request, and best wishes.

The results are enlightening in various respects. Perhaps the most obvious lesson is that people are reluctant to answer surveys, especially if they do not profit directly from them or if the surveys do not come from a colleague, friend, and/or mentor who directly acknowledges the recipient and explicitly asks for a response. Of the 976 surveys that were sent to Towson students, only 11 were completed and returned. Of the approximately 30 that were mailed to Dante scholars, the

[9] For a survey of typical attacks on sociology, and for counterarguments, see Earl Smith and Bonny Berry, "Problems Real and Imposed in the Discipline of Sociology," *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 24/1 (May 1996): 77-83.

percentage vastly increases but the total number drops to 6. And of the approximately 30 that were delivered to professional art historians the percentage and number plummet from there to 2 responses.

A second revelation was the degree to which people, particularly professional academics, are skilled at "gaming" the system, at evading the purpose of such a survey and finding correct answers by looking beyond the illustration. For example, in response to question one, "Do you recognize this image," one professional scholar, who understandably chose to remain anonymous, wrote, "Sorry I'm not a Dante illustrations expert. So I cheated. I did a [G]oogle search on '49930.80', found the fifth item, 'The postmodern arts: an introductory reader' (by Nigel Wheale) that discusses Tom Phillips." Despite questionable scruples, however, even this sleuth had to admit, "The little figure in the middle at the easel looks vaguely familiar, but I haven't figured out the source of that—one of my mother's childhood books, perhaps."

A third lesson from the survey is that such shortcuts were not always necessary to arrive at correct identification of Phillips, his sources, and his stated meaning. Though one anonymous Dante expert claimed, "I don't have the time to respond to the iconographic survey [you sent]," he added: "but, if I'm not mistaken, it seems to me that [the image] was in fact made by Tom Phillips." Another dantiste, Fabian Alfie of the University of Arizona, professed not to be very confident in his interpretation and admitted, "I don't quite see how the painting of the Union Jack fits in to my interpretation, nor why the person is painting on the beach. Further, I can't make sense of the 'incredible purple penciling.'" But he went on to say:

> The reference to "spending in Siena" (with the sums on the receipt) along with the word "ape" make me think of *Inferno* 29. Capocchio describes the Sienese *brigata spendereccia*, who burned through astronomical sums of money showing off their wealth. He then asks Dante to identify him because he was "an ape to nature." I would take the person on the beach to be like one of the spendthrifts, and the mushroom cloud to indicate destruction.

A third Dante scholar, who asked to remain anonymous, admitted she did not recognize the child planting (sic?) and did not know Maddnil Bank but claimed that this name "does trigger the mind to see the words 'mad' (crazy or angry) and 'nil' (nothing)." Moreover, while she says "the numbers themselves do not mean anything to me," she adds "I do see, though, that this account [. . .] is in heavy debit (too much spending?!)." And she claims, that "spending in Siena" may refer to line 109 in Canto 29 of *Inferno*, as that line mentions a falsifier-alchemist, Griffolino, who was burned by someone from Siena, for falsely promising to teach Albero how to fly and perhaps for trying to make gold and falsify gold or coins. Indeed, though that interpreter says that the phrase "incredible purple penciling of an ape" makes her think of the children's book *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, she notes that Capocchio is punished in Canto 29 of the *Inferno* for "aping nature" as an artist and an alchemist.

Of course, she and the other dantisti may have had an interpretative advantage in receiving the survey from another scholar in their field, but even if they did approach the illustration with a suspicion that it related to Dante, they clearly demonstrate extraordinary creativity in their interpretations, as do many of the other recipients. Though one professional art historian opined that this may be a randomly generated image created by a computer program, she saw in the boy a combination of two figures from Gustave Courbet's *Studio of the Artist*: the artist himself and the little (?) boy on the ground.[10] She also claimed to see a "VERY" loose connection to the self-portraits of On Kawara,[11] but then went on to say that "these are clever connections, not actual sources at all," and "I honestly do not think that any of these interpretations are valid or keys to this work [. . .]. If it was 'real' I would say that it might be a reference to the (very clichéd) idea of art in our time being reduced to money—'The pure pleasure and innocence of art (represented by the child) corrupted by the art market'. But this is a feigned interpretation since I don't think this is a work of art."

The dantista who was reminded of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* claimed:

> With the bomb (mass annihilation) in the background, and a child (the future) painting ("penciling" like a mere ape?) there is a sense that economic forces ("spending in Siena" and the bank statement itself) copy and repeat themselves, leading to destruction of past, present, and future. There is angry, insanity, and nothingness (Madnill). The "islands" of words indicate a bird's eye view of the planet (archipelago) and from which a comet or space ship is departing (although the round yellow image could also be the sun connecting to the islands--but the blue throws me off here).

And other dantisti, none of whom connected the image with the falsifiers, found meanings even further afield. Though one joined other respondents in seeing allusions to Courbet's *The Artist's Studio*, to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to bank accounts, he or she thought the painting on the easel invokes "a typical [Roy] Lichtenstein 'comic' work enlarged to tremendous extent" and speculated that Phillips' illustration was from Robert Rauschenberg. And another Dante scholar claimed:

> If I were to interpret the image I would suggest that the marginalia represent the material expenditures—the literality of time in Tuscany. The internal image that is being "glossed" by time and money spent is one in which the artist has drawn himself as a child, ignores the fading day (the golden light)—substituting instead primary colors of his own youth (the

[10] For a reproduction of this image, see <https://www.wikiart.org/en/gustave-courbet/the-artist-s-studio-1855?utm_source=returned&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=referral>, last accessed November 3, 2016.
[11] As one can see from an on-line search of "On Kawara's self-portraits," they come in many forms, and it is not clear to which the respondent is referring.

> American red white and blue?)—ignoring the confusion of shades and tones, the absence of certainty that this confusion represents and as well as the liminal nature of his existence.

That scholar grounded this interpretation on four observations:

1) The numbers on the margins look an awful lot like cash[-]register receipts.
2) When I look at the little painter on the shore, I am reminded of an image I once saw of Goethe in a very large hat reclining above some ruins. I couldn't help for some reason but think also of *Death in Venice*.
3) The clouds up to the left seem to contain a face—but I have difficulty seeing "the man in the moon" so I may be imagining this.
4) And as a Dante scholar any time I see an image on a shore from the opening of last season's ["]Mad Men" to commercials for Corona beer I cannot help but think of the opening cantos of *Purgatory* . . . *sulle sponde* . . ..

If, after that interpretation, one still doubts that a viewer's experiences may greatly influence their perception of the image, one has only to read a Towson student's response:

> I interpret the image to mean that the artists depicted, and in addition all artists, accrue a large amount of debt while creating art (making a painting in this case), but sometimes (hopefully) the efforts pay off in the end (literally) and balance out the money or effort put forth to create the work. The image of the painter/painting appears in the credit section, implying the making of the image or the image itself is a bonus.

or that of another Towson student, who wrote:

> I would consider this [image] to imply the spending in Siena [. . .] was not[,] as most would consider[,] a debt, but actually a positive force. Given the child-like artist in the picture, who appears very vulnerable, those of us entering the Art [. . .] Major [. . .] feel very vulnerable. However, what we will go through, even though taxing and caus[ing] us much debt, is actually something that will leave us with a balance of much more value.

Along those same lines, other Towson students chose broader interpretations, such as: "I believe the artist is trying to say that doing what they love is more important than money," and "I interpret this image as making a com[m]entary on the state of economics based on the bill statement. I also think it could be making a commentary on people willfully ignoring these troubles. Or maybe it's discussing war, since it appears the person painting is sitting and observing a mushroom [cloud]." And some students, even while admitting a lack of confidence in their interpretation, nevertheless found very particular, concrete, and creative meanings that are substantially further from Phillips' stated intentions. For example, one student said, "I am not confident at all that my interpretation is

correct. I've changed what I have thought of this image about three times within the past ten minutes and am still unsure. The 'Siena' referenced in the text may ground the image's context to that of Tuscany, in which case I would be completely wrong in my interpretation. It is very possible that I misinterpreted each of the pictorial and textual references due to my own bias." Yet, that same student claimed:

> Because the image's background is what appears to be an old, discolored bank statement, I assume that everything within the image is some sort of a fragmented memory. The piece seems to be discreet [sic] and disconnected [from] me. Perhaps the artist wished to communicate the wealth of a particular family from an earlier time. The piece is very deliberate. The items in the image seem random. Actually, rather than portray wealth, maybe the artist is showing the frugality of consumers. This young boy does not seem to be painting in the decadence and means of a luxurious mansion. I am reminded of the dry, dusty lands to the west of the United States. Could this piece be referencing the Dust Bowl of the 1930's? The text "spending in Siena, incredible purple pencillings of an ape" in juxtaposition with the seemingly poor little boy painting an abstract painting leads me to believe that people of the area have been irresponsible with their money (dare I go as far to say) in the arts.

And in another comment by that same student may lie the most important lesson of all from this project: "[. . .] every artist is aware that their work can be open to interpretation. You can lay out the clues, but someone, somewhere, will find it in themselves to look at the piece in a completely different way than initially intended. I may have missed the mark completely." Though she and all of the other respondents to this image may indeed have missed the mark, their interpretations are no less valuable for it, because it is precisely through the ability of interpreters to remake a work, within their perception of the artist's parameters, that their responses become, in effect, art too. Though Phillips' illustrations open themselves up to a vast array of interpretations that are often completely disconnected from the *Commedia* or any other pre-modern, much less medieval, content, though these illustrations may, in those instances, call into question the identity and agency of medievalism, on other occasions, when the interpreters do tie the illustrations to their own and/or Phillips' reading of Dante's text (and perhaps even when they do not), they reveal the enduring power of the Middle Ages to inspire profound art and analysis.