A World to See the Comedy by: Tom Phillips's Transmediations of Dante

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Between 1976 and 1989, the production of British visual artist Tom Phillips (b. 1937) found its main source of inspiration in Dante and particularly in his *Inferno*. This article aims to provide a new approach to the question that drives, directly or indirectly, most of the scholarship on Phillips's reception of Dante: how can we best describe the relation between the text of the *Comedy* and the images by Phillips that accompany it? Rather than relying on notions such as "adaptation" and "illustration"—which might prove inadequate to account for the text-image relations in Phillips's works—I would propose to interpret Phillips's reception of Dante as an attempt to create "a world to see the *Comedy* by." More specifically, the analyses that follow will have four objectives. First, I will provide an overview of the transmediation strategies deployed by Phillips across his Dante-related projects. Second, I will attempt to explain the system of relations that shapes Phillips's Dante-inspired visual world and to show, more in general, how this world 'works' by drawing on Georges Poulet's phenomenology of reading and Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. Third, I will argue that *Dante's Inferno* should not be seen as an illustrated book but rather as a *livre d'artiste* in which Phillips transmediates his aesthetic experience of the *Inferno* into a visual world whose unique iconography needs, in turn, to be explained to the reader-viewer in the form of a commentary. Fourth, I will show how Phillips's Dantesque visual world and, more in general, Phillips's very identity as an artist depend on his identification with Dante himself—or, rather, on his 'absorption' of certain traits of Dante's otherworldly journey into the conceptualization of his own life journey.

Keywords: Dante, Adaptation, Illustration, Transmediality, Intermediality, Inferno, Tom Phillips

Introduction

Between 1976 and 1989, the production of British visual artist Tom Phillips[1] (b. 1937) found its main source of inspiration in Dante and particularly in his *Inferno*. The two best-known (and most

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[1] A detailed profile of the artist's life and work can be found on the Royal Academy of Arts's website: https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/tom-phillips-ra#cv (last access: July 2022).

researched) outputs of this artistic phase are *Dante's Inferno*—an artist's book published in three volumes for Talfourd Press in 1983, featuring the text of the *Inferno* translated into English by Phillips himself and 139 illustrations[2]—and the first eight episodes of *A TV Dante*, directed by Phillips and British director Peter Greenaway as part of a fourteen-episode miniseries commissioned by Channel 4 and aired in Britain between 1990 and 1992. These two products, however, are part of a much larger body of Dante-inspired works that has rarely been taken into account when discussing Phillips's deep involvement with the *Inferno*.

The artist began to be seduced by the idea of creating his own version of the *Inferno* in 1975, when he submitted some preliminary designs for an illustrated edition of the *Cantica* to the Folio Society. The publisher found them too far removed from Dante's narrative to be even considered as illustrations[3] and rejected them. Phillips then devoted most of his energies to what would become *Dante's Inferno*, as well as to a number of Dante-inspired works that gravitate around this massive endeavor, each with its own function and meaning. Such works include the painting *Beginning to think about Dante* (1976/78), the *Dante heads* drawing series (1977), *A Dante diary* (a series of mixed-media works begun in 1977 and completed in 1983 with the publication of *Dante's Inferno*), the 1978 painting *Dante in his study* (that would later become the cover of *Dante's Inferno*), the 1982 painting *The Dante binding*—a portrait of Pella Erskine-Tulloch, with whom Phillips designed the binding for the Talfourd Press edition of *Dante's Inferno*—and the print series *I drove my big Mercedes from Stuttgart down to Hades* and *Dante: A Comedy of Errors*, published as artist's books by Talfourd Press respectively in 1989 and 1992.

While several critical works have explored *Dante's Inferno*, *A TV Dante*, and the transmedial processes that catalyzed the passage from the former to the latter,[4] this article demonstrates that it

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[2] A single-volume trade edition of the book was published in 1985 (Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno: The First Part of the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985). All references to Dante's *Inferno* in this article will be based on the trade edition.

[3] See Tom Phillips, *Works and Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 227.

[4] A quick bibliographical survey would include, in chronological order: Alan Woods, "A New 'Inferno': Tom Phillips's Dante," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1989): 98–104; Huston Paschal, *Tom Phillips: Selections from the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, November 17, 1990 - January 13, 1991* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1990); Jean-Pierre Barricelli, *Dante's Vision and the Artist: Four Modern Illustrators of the "Commedia"* (New York: Peter

could be possible to shed new light on Phillips's reception of Dante by examining it from a wider perspective, that is, by looking at *Dante's Inferno* from the viewpoint of all the works that gravitate around and interact with it.[5] More precisely, I will build on Kerstin Blum's 2016 monograph—which has been, so far, the only attempt to provide a wide-ranging overview of Phillips's Dante-inspired works—to provide a new approach to the question that drives, directly or indirectly, most of the scholarship on Phillips's reception of Dante: how can we best describe the relation between the text of the *Comedy* and the images by Phillips (or, in the case of *A TV Dante*, by Phillips and Greenaway) that accompany it?

Lang, 1992); Nigel Wheale, "Televising Hell: Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway's TV Dante," in *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Nigel Wheale (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 163-187; Lucy Shortis, "Eroding the Darkness: The Art of Tom Phillips," *Letter Arts Review* 14, no. 1 (April 1997): 2–13; Joachim Möller, "Dante, Englisch," in *Dantes Göttliche Komödie. Drucke Und Illustrationen Aus Sechs Jahrhunderten*, ed. Lutz Malke (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2000), 153–82; Annick Bergeron, "Quand La Lecture Se Donne En Images," *Image & Narrative* 3 (2001), http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/illustrations/anickbergeron.htm (last access: July 2022); Mary A. Caws, "Tom Phillips: Treating and Translating," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 34, no. 3 (2001): 19–33; Andrew Taylor, "Television, Translation, and Vulgarization: Reflections on Phillips' and Greenaway's *A TV Dante*," in *Dante, Cinema, and Television*, ed. Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 145-152, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442673700-010; Luisa Calè, "From *Dante's Inferno* to *A TV Dante*: Phillips and Greenaway Remediating Dante's Polysemy," in *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), 177–92; Karl Fugelso, "Tom Phillips' Dante," in *Makers of the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of William Calin*, eds. Richard J. Utz and Elizabeth E. Calin (Kalamazoo: lulu.com, 2011), 85–88; Kerstin F.M. Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort: Tom Phillips' illustrativ-poetische Dante-Rezeption* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2016); Monika Schmitz-Emans, "Im Wald der Zeichen, im Dickicht der Interpretationen," in *Komparatistische Perspektiven auf Dantes "Divina Commedia": Lektüren, Transformationen und Visualisierungen*, eds. Stephanie Heimgartner and Monika Schmitz-Emans (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 157–82, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110488036-007; Massimo Fusillo and Mattia Petricola, "Into the Video-Inferno: Vertical Television, Experimental Seriality and the Moving Collage in *A TV Dante*," *Between* 10, no. 20 (2020), https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/4226; Nick Havely, "Cerchi che si allargano. Traduzione e divulgazione dell'*Inferno* di Dante nella cultura anglofona," *Italianistica* 49, no. 2 (2020): 89-101; Giorgio Bacci, ed., *Tom Phillips. Dante's Inferno* (Pisa: ETS, 2021); Alberto Casadei and Paolo Gervasi, *La voce di Dante. Performance dantesche tra teatro, tv e nuovi media* (Rome: Luca Sossella editore, 2021); Angela Krewani, "'A good old text is always a blank for new things' – Funktioniert Dante im Fernsehen?," in *Dante intermedial: die "Divina Commedia" in Literatur und Medien*, ed. Irmgard Scharold (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2022), 301–16.
[5] So far, the only intertextual and intermedial interactions that have been explored are those between *Dante's Inferno* and *A Humument*, Phillips's longest-lasting project, which will be discussed in Section 2. See, among others, Calè, "From *Dante's Inferno* to *A TV Dante*," 180–81; Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 67–68.

The question is made extremely relevant by the fact that, as even a cursory look at *Dante's Inferno* makes clear, the text-image relations constructed by Phillips are much more complex not only than those established in the figurative illustrations of the *Comedy*—a tradition of illustrations that today finds in Gustave Doré its prototypical point of reference[6]—but also more than those elaborated in avant-garde or non-figurative approaches to the *Comedy*, like Dalì's or Rauschenberg's. The Dante-inspired works by these artists,—among many others—albeit being more or less removed from the illustrative tradition, are highly consistent with the two artists's respective styles and are immediately recognizable as illustrations belonging to one coherent series. Phillips's non-figurative (and sometimes even anti-figurative) illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*, on the other hand, are so incredibly diverse in terms of technique, style, and inspiration that those unfamiliar with Phillips's *oeuvre* might even doubt that they were all created by the same artist. The aesthetic experience of *Dante's Inferno* thus requires a greater effort on the part of the reader in interpreting the illustrations than in understanding Phillips's translation of the *Cantica*—which, by contrast, is generally regarded as highly readable and enjoyable.[7] To help unravel the complexity of these image-text relations, Phillips added to the 1985 trade edition of *Dante's Inferno* a 29-page appendix entitled *Iconographical notes and commentary on the illustrations*, in which the artist himself explains the networks of meanings and references behind each of the 139 illustrations. These networks are often quite complex and a number of illustrations would be almost completely unintelligible without a comment.

As mentioned earlier, there have been quite a few attempts to describe the image-text interactions in Phillips's Dante-inspired works, especially in relation to *Dante's Inferno*. The artist himself defined the illustrations for his artist's book as "analytic and exegetic images" aimed at providing a "visual commentary"[8] of the *Cantica*. Alan Woods saw them as a prolongation on the *Inferno* in an era

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[6] See Deborah Parker, "Doré's Dante: Influence, Transformation, and Reinvention," in *Dante Alive: Essays on a Cultural Icon*, eds. Francesco Ciabattoni and Simone Marchesi (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 3–21.

[7] See, among others, Peter Holland, "Peter Holland Describes the Exciting Adventure that is Tom Phillips's *Dante's Inferno*," *Royal Academy Magazine*, 1985; Caws, "Tom Phillips," 26.

[8] Phillips, *Works and Texts*, 237.

where figurative illustration has become impossible.[9] Drawing on the notions of polysemy and remediation,[10] Luisa Calè interpreted *Dante's Inferno* and *A TV Dante* as translations of Dante's four-tiered hermeneutic system into images.[11] According to Huston Paschal, the *Inferno* illustrations could be defined as an exegetic study of the *Cantica* in pictures, conducted using an iconographic system of its own.[12] Nigel Wheale proposed a compelling study of the image-text relations in *Dante's Inferno* and *A TV Dante* based on the key notion of *visual response.*[13] In an article from 2001, Annick Bergeron articulated one of the most complex and convincing descriptions of the *Inferno* illustrations by defining them as a *lecture en images.*[14]

Each of these interpretations illuminates fundamental aspects of the question and its transmedial complexity; at the same time, however, each of them risks falling short in accounting for this elaborate set of text-image relations *as a whole*. In order to do so, I would propose a new framework for interpreting this issue, based on a statement by Phillips himself which, in its aphoristic brevity, could provide a new theoretical foundation for exploring his *oeuvre*: "'Art's purpose', in one of Phillips's formulations, 'is to give us a world to see the world by'."[15] In the light of this affirmation, I

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[9] "Roger Chastel remarked of his illustrations for Eluard's *La Bestiaire*, 'on n'illustre pas un livre on le prolonge . . . dans un autre domaine possible'. The traditional narrative approach of Gustave Dore's illustrations is no longer seriously available—for one thing, it leaves out too much." Woods, "A New 'Inferno,'" 98.

[10] See Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

[11] "Phillips uses polysemy not only as a means of signification, but also as a mode of production that tests the boundaries, complementarities and metamorphoses of the arts." Calè, "From Dante's Inferno to A TV Dante," 179.

[12] "More thoroughly than Robert Rauschenberg did in his thirty-four drawings for the *Inferno* […], Phillips invents his own iconography. Forsaking the literalism of Botticelli and Blake, he deploys analysis and allegory. More exegesis of the poem than mere description of its anecdotal incidents Phillips's authoritative analogues require—and reward—close study." Paschal, *Tom Phillips*, 13–14.

[13] "Phillip's *Dante's Inferno* is [...] an extraordinarily involved and involving dialogue between the poem and the illustrations which are in fact graphic interventions and commentaries, rather than mute picturings of the text. The volume is an extremely elaborate sequence of laminations created by the superimposition of visual response to verbal text." Wheale, "Televising Hell," 172.

[14] "Cette lecture est hautement hétéroclite, allant de l'interprétation à l'extrapolation, à la fois réponse au texte, mais aussi posture critique et émotive à son égard." Bergeron, "Quand La Lecture Se Donne En Images."

[15] David Jennings, "A World to See the World By," Tom Phillips website, https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/publications/item/5457-a-world-to-see-the-world-

would propose to interpret Phillips's reception of Dante as a whole as an attempt to create 'a world to see the *Comedy* by.' Since notions such as 'adaptation' and 'illustration' might prove inadequate to account for the text-image relations in Phillips's works, I will refer to them using the more general term 'transmediation' as defined by Lars Elleström.[16] More specifically, the analyses that follow will have four objectives. First, I will provide an overview of the transmediation strategies deployed by Phillips across his Dante-related projects. Second, I will attempt to explain the system of relations that gives shape to this world and to show, more in general, how this world 'works' by drawing on Georges Poulet's phenomenology of reading and Stanley Fish's reader-response theory. Third, I will argue that *Dante's Inferno* should not be seen as an illustrated book but rather as a *livre d'artiste* in which Phillips transmediates his aesthetic experience of the *Inferno* into a visual world whose unique iconography needs, in turn, to be explained to the reader-viewer in the form of a commentary. Fourth, I will show how Phillips's Dantesque visual world and, more in general, Phillips's very identity as an artist depend on his identification with Dante himself—or, rather, on his 'absorption' of certain traits of Dante's otherworldly journey into the conceptualization of his own life journey.

1. *Phillips's strategies of transmediation from* Beginning to think about Dante *to the 'freak sheets'*

Between 1976 and 1978, Phillips's early ideas on Dante and his larger Dante-inspired project took shape in *Beginning to think about Dante* (fig. 1), a painting whose visual richness and complexity sharply contrasts with its straightforward and colloquial title.[17]

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by-by-david-jennings (last access: July 2022). This piece was commissioned to Jennings especially for Phillips's website.

[16] "I use the term 'mediate' to describe the process of a technical medium of distribution that realizes presemiotic (potentially meaningful) sensory configurations. For instance, a piece of paper is able to mediate visual sensory configurations that are (once perceived and rudimentarily interpreted) taken to be a food recipe, a bar chart, a scientific article or a musical score. If equivalent sensory configurations (sensory configurations that have the capacity to trigger corresponding representations) are mediated for a second (or third or fourth) time and by another type of technical medium, they are transmediated." Lars Elleström, "Transmediation: Some Theoretical Considerations," in *Transmediations: Communication across Media Borders*, eds. Niklas Salmose and Lars Elleström (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 4–5.

[17] Phillips describes the painting as "a complicated and ruminative picture into which I crammed all my thoughts about the poem." Phillips, *Works and Texts*, 219.

Being the only work in which Phillips does not focus exclusively on the *Inferno,* but rather transmediates into pictures his experience of the *Comedy* as a whole, it represents an invaluable (and under-researched)[18] source of images, information, and meanings for the exploration of Phillips's reception of Dante. At first glance, the painting's style seems to oscillate between late surrealism and pop art. Only very few elements can be immediately recognized, notably the modernized versions of the *tre fiere* at the bottom of the painting—the lion, for example, is based on one of the lions in London's Trafalgar Square—and the four portraits of Dante in the top-right area. On the other hand, the catalogue *Works and Texts*—curated and written by Phillips himself—contains four pages in which the artist painstakingly describes every single element of the painting. One thus discovers that each image in *Beginning to think about Dante* contributes, in a very specific way, to describing Dante's journey from the *selva oscura* to Paradise.

The *selva* itself is represented by the area in the left half of the painting with green and grey letters on a black background. In a style reminiscent of certain works by American artists Jasper Johns and Larry Rivers,[19] Phillips paints the letters that make up the words "una selva oscura" with a great number of overlays to enhance the visual features of the letters over their semantic value. In this way, the linguistic meaning of the letters is almost completely lost and they appear as 'pure' images. The dark wood in which Dante gets lost, then, becomes an indecipherable maze of words under which an impenetrable darkness lurks. Through this representation, the *selva* takes on a meta-referential meaning: Phillips's 'wood of error' is language itself, and the artist gets lost in the very act of semiosis, that is, in the act of assigning meanings to images. Phillips returned time and again to this representation of the *selva*. In 1980, for example, he painted a large-scale work in this same style entitled *Una selva Oscura*, and ultimately used it in more than one occasion in *Dante's Inferno.*

The artist's commentary on another area of *Beginning to think about Dante* demonstrates how the transmediation of his experience of the *Comedy* into images also incorporates his original approach to the poem's exegesis. In the upper half of the painting, Phillips portrays actress Lee Remick as an alter-ego of Beatrice

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[18] With the only exception of Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 222–25.
[19] See Phillips, *Works and Texts*, 80.

"enclosed within a nine-sided variant of an octagon."[20] In Phillips's words, this figure represents

> a metaphor for the difficulty Dante experienced in reconciling the intransigent date of her [Beatrice's] death (in which eight was so prominent) to the three- and nine-based numerological role he had already cast her in (I have a personal suspicion that he was in fact covertly announcing her new identification with the Virgin Mary, whose death date was popularly thought to be the eight of the eight).[21]

While the artist's representation of Beatrice draws on his original interpretation of the *Comedy*, another area of the painting puts Phillips's art to the service of a rather peculiar representative of the history of the poem's exegesis. At the right of Beatrice, one can see four portraits of Dante over a ladder. According to Phillips, here

> is seen Dante himself passing through the alchemical phases of Nigredo (the dark wood), Albedo (Hell), Citrinitas (Purgatory) and Rubedo (Paradise). [...] The trials of alchemy are a surrogate for Dante's alleged initiation into the arcana of heretical sects in his search for Christian truth (if one accepts the assertions of Aroux and others).[22]

The artist sees *Beginning to think about Dante* as "a House of Memory reflecting a greater (perhaps the greatest) House of Memory, Dante's *Comedy.*"[23] However, by examining this painting from the perspective of Eugène Aroux's esoteric interpretation of the *Comedy*,[24] it could also be interpreted as an alchemical-esoteric representation in which every image hides a secret meaning. From this point of view, then, reading Phillips's description of his painting in *Works and Texts* could function as a journey of initiation in which the artist guides the viewer through the secrets of his images, ranging in scope from American conceptual painting to Hollywood stars through modern London and alchemy.

The last area of the painting whose analysis is relevant to one of the arguments I would like to develop is the one on the far right

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[20] *Ibid.,* 221.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*, 222.
[23] *Ibid.*, 219.
[24] Eugène Aroux, *Dante Hérétique, Révolutionnaire et Socialiste. Révelations d'un Catholique Sur Le Moyen Âge* (Paris: Jules Renouard et Cie, 1853). For a profile of Aroux, see Remo Ceserani, "Aroux, Eugene," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/eugene-aroux_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/ (last access: July 2022).

featuring three self-portraits of the artist. Even without any external source of information, it is easy to imagine that they signal Phillips's desire to figuratively partake in Dante's journey. Such an impression is reinforced by the visual analogy between these three portraits and the four portraits of Dante mentioned above. As I will show in the next sections, this is only the first occurrence of a fundamental trope that will find expression even beyond Phillips's Dante-inspired works.

By analyzing *Beginning to think about Dante*, it becomes possible to trace the complexity of the text-image relations that are central to *Dante's Inferno* back to the very beginning of Phillips's involvement with the *Comedy*. Even more radically than in *Dante's Inferno*, in *Beginning to think about Dante* Phillips's images do not illustrate, explain or comment on the *Comedy*. On the contrary, they construct a system of figures, symbols, and allegories, thus transmediating the experience of the *Comedy* into a network of visual references that can be fully accessed and enjoyed only with the help of the artist's own commentary.

The hermeneutic and aesthetic strategies on which *Beginning to Think about Dante* depend are, however, far from being the only ones adopted by Phillips in transmediating Dante and the *Comedy*. The *A Dante Diary* series, in particular, could be seen as hermeneutically opposite to the 1976/78 painting; while the latter carefully constructs a complex system of references to transmediate the experience of the *Comedy* into pictures, the former attempts to capture with monomaniac attention the unexpected references to Dante and the *Comedy* in the artist's everyday life: "wherever I happened to go [...] I followed the trail of the hatchet-faced Florentine who, like Moriarty, manifested himself in the unlikeliest places."[25] While the aesthetic experience of *Beginning to think about Dante* is based on meticulously elaborated networks of meanings, *A Dante diary* relies on free association, wit, chance, and *objets trouvés*. One of the pictures in the series, for example, features the dust jacket of a romantic novel by Frances Turk entitled *The Dark Wood*, in which the reference to the *Comedy*'s *selva* is humorously taken out of context.

In other cases, the creation of a Dante-inspired artwork—and, consequently, its aesthetic experience—depends only on the

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[25] Phillips, *Works and Texts*, 247.

material circumstances of its production and is determined by nothing but chance. The so-called "freak sheets"[26] collected in the series *I drove my big Mercedes from Stuttgart down to Hades* and *Dante: A Comedy of Errors* are a case in point. The circumstances that led to the creation of the first series, whose title suggests a sense of childlike playfulness and witty absurdism, are described by Phillips in a passage from *Works and Texts* that is worth quoting at length:

> when I was [...] in Stuttgart supervising the color balance of each plate in the Thames & Hudson edition of *Dante's Inferno*, the trial sheets were identical in size and weight to the paper currently going through the same presses to print the new Mercedes-Benz brochure. Sheets of one or the other were used indiscriminately. Dante fell on top of Dante, Dante on Mercedes, Mercedes on Dante, in all combinations and juxtapositions; so that ghostly trucks were seen driving through Hell, Virgil was seen at the wheel [...] and an Autobahn ran towards medieval Florence.[27]

In Phillips's artistic practice, nothing gets wasted. The very process of creation of an artwork, with all its accidents and by-products, becomes itself an artwork. In the final stages of production of the trade edition of *Dante's Inferno*, then, the *Comedy* becomes part of a surrealist *cadavre exquis*, whose meaning is ultimately freed from any control and intent.

2. *A world to see the* Inferno *by*

2.1 *A* Comedy *of one's own: interpreting the tondo*

The second image one sees when opening *Dante's Inferno*—right after *Dante in his study*, one of Phillips's most famous works, whose iconography and meaning have been extensively researched[28]—reminds us of a Renaissance *tondo* (fig. 2). It is the only circular image in the whole book—all the others are rectangular. The background is painted in a pattern analogous to that of the marbled paper traditionally used in book binding. Against this backdrop, one can see/read a poem whose style is evocative of visual poetry. The poem reads: "my stories of a soul's surprise / a soul / which crossed a chasm in / whose depths / I find / I found myself / and nothing

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[26] *Ibid.*, 270.

[27] *Ibid.*, 269.

[28] See, among others, Bergeron, "Quand La Lecture Se Donne En Images"; Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 257–61.

more than that."[29] One does not need to be familiar with Phillips's *oeuvre* or rely on additional sources of information to associate the "soul which crossed a chasm" with Dante crossing the boundary which separates the living from the dead. It is reasonable to assume, then, that the entity to which the adjective "my" refers ("*my* stories") is Phillips himself.

By comparing this image-poem with *Beginning to Think about Dante*, one can see how the artist's desire to partake in Dante's journey has evolved over the years. More specifically, this desire has been radicalized to the point that the roles between Dante and Phillips are now reversed. The *tondo* makes clear that the "stories" in this book do not belong to Dante; rather, they are Phillips's own "stories" ("*my* stories of a soul's surprise").[30] While the experience of the *Comedy* relies on the interplay between Dante-character and Dante-poet, *Dante's Inferno* dramatically changes the rules of the game: Dante is still the character (the "soul" to which Phillips's poem refers), but the role of the poet-artist has been taken on by Phillips. By positing himself as Phillips-poet (or, rather, as Phillips-artist), then, the artist claims a sort of spiritual ownership of the *Inferno*. This is reinforced by the poem's following lines, in which the poem's speaker affirms that, in the depths of the chasm crossed by Dante, he found himself "and / nothing / more than that." Therefore, at the very beginning of the book, the whole "story" that the reader is about to experience is cast as an odyssey of self-discovery. By transmediating the journey of Dante-character into pictures, the artist found his own artistic identity. At the same time, the lines "and / nothing / more than that" appear

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[29] Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, 7.

[30] An analogous system of meaning can be found, on a smaller scale, in *The Dante Binding* (1981-2), Phillips's portrait of Pella Erskine-Tulloch (fig. 3). On the left wall behind the portrait's subject there is a painting featuring the first two verses from Dante's *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*. The area of the painting which most attracts the viewer's attention is its center, where, right above Erskine-Tulloch's forehead, the words "la mia donna" from the *canzone*'s second verse stand out. This is another instance in which Phillips operates a complex transmediation of Dante's work to express a sense or desire of possession. More precisely, he creates a painting made of words within a painting to characterize Pella Erskine-Tulloch as *his* woman. This is by no means the only portrait of hers made by Phillips. In the catalog of his 1989 exhibition of portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in London, he described his relation with Pella Erskine-Tulloch as follows: "[t]hen came infatuation with a particular face, which I suppose has been the cause of so many of the portraits in museums throughout the world. Over a period of about ten years I must have made almost a hundred images of Pella Erskine-Tulloch" (Tom Phillips, *Tom Phillips: The Portrait Works* [London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1989], 94, quoted in Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 35).

to cast a shadow of disappointment or failure over this whole journey. In affirming that he found nothing more than himself, the poem's speaker could imply that he was actually looking for something more than just himself. Furthermore, the dichotomy between past and present in the verses "I find / I found" seems to suggest a sense of hesitation, as if the poem's speaker was unsure as how to define the meaning of his involvement with the *Comedy* in the present. At the very beginning of the reader's experience of *Dante's Inferno*, then, Phillips-artist not only connotes his own experience of the *Comedy* as haunted by failure and disappointment; he also opens a rift in time that multiplies the artist's identity by separating his past and present selves—a separation that mirrors the dichotomy between Dante-character and Dante-poet.[31] As I will show in the conclusion, this 'pessimistic' reading of the *tondo* is supported by one of the most important works painted by Phillips after the completion of his Dante-inspired projects.

The question of the artist's identity as expressed in the *tondo* becomes even more complex when the viewer-reader realizes, through Phillips's commentary or through their familiarity with the artist's *oeuvre*, that the poem in this image is borrowed, in turn, from Phillips's *A Humument*.[32] Begun as a simple game in 1966 under the inspiration of William Borrough's cut-up poems,[33] *A Humument* progressively became a massive endeavor, based on the meticulous treating of multiple copies of a Victorian novel by William H. Mallock entitled *A Human Document*.[34] The book's treatment involves transforming each page into a mixed-media artwork; at the same time, single words or phrases on each page in the novel are left untreated and connected with one another to form a visual poem. Over the course of the years, Phillips's treatment of *A Human Document* infiltrated several of his other works until, *in Dante's Inferno*, such infiltrations became systematic. Mallock's

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[31] I am grateful to one of this article's anonymous peer-reviewers for this suggestion.

[32] See Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, final edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 176.

[33] Tom Phillips, "Notes on a Humument," in *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, final edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016).

[34] The very title of Phillips's work is a product of the novel's treatment: "The book's rechristening [from *A Human Document* to *A Humument*] resulted from another chance discovery. By folding one page in half and turning it back to reveal half of the following page, the running title at the top abridged itself to A HUMUMENT, an earthy word with echoes of humanity and monument" (Phillips, "Notes on a Humument").

novel thus became a fundamental source of meaning (in the form of visual poems) for the elaboration of Phillips's Dante-inspired visual world.[35] Since the poem in the *tondo* is borrowed from *A Humument*, its speaker, as well as the speaker of all the many visual poems that constellate *Dante's Inferno*, can be better understood as an alter ego of Phillips himself who only communicates with his reader-viewer indirectly, that is, through the proxy of the narrator of *A Human Document*, whose words, in turn, are mediated by Phillips's treatment of the novel.[36]

2.2 *Beyond the adaptation/illustration paradigm: a reader-response-oriented approach*

Given the complexity of the interplay between identities, narrators, characters, and speakers constructed in the *tondo*, the plates that accompany the text of the *Inferno* in Phillips's artist's book could not possibly fall under such categories as 'adaptation' or 'illustration.' While Phillips himself sees them as illustrations that translate into pictures the crisis of Dante's soul rather than the events narrated in the *Inferno*,[37] I would argue that the transmedial relations between texts and images in *Dante's Inferno* (as well as in all the other Dante-inspired works by Phillips) can be accurately accounted for only by dispensing with the illustration/adaptation paradigm altogether. In a paradoxical sense, the people at the Folio Society who rejected Phillips's sketches were right in affirming

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[35] "Having once boasted that Mallock's turgid text was an inexhaustible mine I here put it to its sternest test, to parallel the visual commentary of the plates with verbal glosses that might act as an alternative line of markers as the reader follows Dante's journey" (Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, 284). In the 2016 postface to the sixth and final treatment of *A Human Document*, Phillips affirmed: "I have so far extracted from his [Mallock's] book well over a thousand segments of poetry and prose and have yet to find a situation, sentiment or thought which his words cannot be adapted to cover" (Phillips, "Notes on a Humument").

[36] The relation between Phillips's identity and his work on *A Humument* has been thoroughly investigated in James L. Maynard, "'I Find / I Found Myself / and / Nothing / More than That': Textuality, Visuality, and the Production of Subjectivity in Tom Phillips' *A Humument*," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 36, no. 1 (2003): 82–98, https://doi.org/10.2307/1315400. On Phillips's use of multiple identities and alter-egos see also Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 51–54; Schmitz-Emans, "Im Wald der Zeichen," 174.

[37] "I felt that most illustrated versions [of the *Inferno*] merely repeated, however skillfully, the action and circumstances that the poet already so vividly describes [...] instead of the human soul in crisis as it faces the world in all its painful complexity" (Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, 283).

"[t]hese aren't illustrations at all,"[38] since the pragmatics of Phillips's Dante-inspired works do not coincide with the pragmatics of an illustrated book, no matter how far removed from the figurative tradition. Rather than illustrating the *Inferno*, Phillips's plates transmediate into pictures the artist's own aesthetic and hermeneutic experience of the *Cantica*. In other words, *Dante's Inferno* does not transmediate a text, but rather *a very specific experience of a text* made from a very specific reader. The result of this transmediation is, to paraphrase Phillips's aphorism quoted in the introduction, "a world to see the *Inferno* by," that is, an intermedial system of interrelated signs whose meanings emerge from the encounter between the text of the *Inferno* and Phillips's unique identity. His artist's book thus demonstrates in visual terms one of the fundamental tenets of reader-response criticism according to which, to borrow from Stanley Fish, meaning is not "embedded in the text." On the contrary, "meaning develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judgements, and assumptions;" therefore, the reader's cognitive activities that the text stimulates "are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential, and the act of description must both begin and end with them."[39]

One could counter-argue that, from the perspective of reader-response criticism, every aesthetic experience is, by definition, the encounter between a text and an individual's unique identity. Since an aesthetic experience can only unfold in the relation between a text and a reader, an illustrator can only transmediate a text into pictures by drawing on their own experience of the text itself. The question, then, remains: how can we account for the specificity of Phillips's experience of the *Comedy* against those of other artists?

I would propose to solve this impasse with the help of Georges Poulet's phenomenology of reading. According to Poulet, since the nature of the aesthetic experience is inherently relational, it implies a fluidification of the cognitive boundary separating the subject–reader from the object–text:

> A book is not shut in by its contours, is not walled-up as in a fortress. It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in

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[38] Phillips, *Works and Texts*, 227.
[39] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2–3.

it. In short, the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either outside or inside.[40]

[S]ince everything has become part of my mind, thanks to the intervention of language, the opposition between the subject and its objects has been considerably attenuated.[41]

In the light of these affirmations, the text–image relation in Dante's *Inferno* could be described as the result of an aesthetic experience in which the boundary between the subject (Phillips as a reader and artist) and the object (the text of the *Inferno*) has become so fluid that the latter has often become difficult—if not impossible—to recognize on the part of another subject (that is, from a reader-viewer of *Dante's Inferno*). What the reaction from the Folio Society ("these are not illustrations") exemplifies is precisely the perception of this lack of recognizability.

Given this definition, Phillips's commentary to the plates should not be considered as an informative appendix to *Dante's Inferno*, but rather an integral part of the reader-viewer's aesthetic experience. On the one hand, Phillips's plates result from his desire to transmediate his aesthetic experience of the *Inferno* as a process that engages a subject's identity as a whole, including their memories, their free associations, their personal constructs, and many other elements that are often inaccessible to others. On the other hand, Phillips wishes to make the visual contents of the plates intelligible to his viewers-readers. By providing information that would otherwise be inaccessible to the reader, the commentary resolves the tension between subject, object, and readers. In so doing, the experience of Phillips's artist's book on the part of the viewer-reader becomes somewhat similar to a modern reader's experience of the actual text of Dante's *Cantica*. In both cases, a commentary is needed in order to fill those information gaps that would otherwise render certain elements of the experience obscure or even unintelligible.

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[40] Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 54, https://doi.org/10.2307/468372.
[41] *Ibid.*, 55.

2.3 *An anatomy of Phillips's Dantesque world*

Now that a general framework for understanding the text-image relations in *Dante's Inferno* has been established, a more practical question remains: how does Phillips's "world to see the *Inferno* by" concretely work? What is this world made up of?

I have argued that, in the context of this research, the notion of 'world' could be defined as an intermedial system of interrelated signs whose meanings emerge from the encounter between the text of the *Inferno* and Phillips's unique identity. This premise could be further elaborated by affirming that such a system of signs is made up of a number of conceptual poles and visual archives whose interactions are different for each plate (or set of plates). The visual and semiotic structure of each plate, then, can be seen as the result of a specific set of interactions between certain poles and archives, a number of which have already been investigated over the course of this article.

Among the conceptual elements and visual repositories that play a major role in shaping Phillips's plates can be listed: (1) the history of the exegesis of the *Inferno*; (2) Phillips's own interpretations of certain *loci* or aspects of the *Cantica*; (3) the history of the illustration of the *Inferno*; (4) the entire development of Phillips's artistic career, that is, his *oeuvre* as a whole; (5) the attention to the sheer materiality of certain objects and production processes; (6) the relation between Phillips and Mallock as it emerges from *A Humument*, which serves as a basis for interpreting the visual poems in the plates and has been analyzed above in relation to the *tondo*; (7) the history of art and media across human history as a whole, from African masks[42] to illuminated manuscripts,[43] from the *Laocoon* statue in the Vatican Museums[44] to stenciled letters,[45] from Eadweard Muybridge's *Animals in motion*[46] to film and television as sites for the production of cultural icons. In each given plate, one or two among these sets of meanings are usually predominant.

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[42] See, for example, Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, plate III/1. Plates are conventionally cited using a Roman number (indicating the *Canto*) followed by an Arab numeral (indicating the position occupied by the plate in the *Canto*). Plate III/1 is thus the first plate of *Canto* III.

[43] See plate I/3.

[44] See, among others, plates XXV/1 and XXV/4.

[45] See the representation of the *selva oscura*, discussed above, in plate I/1.

[46] See, for example, plates V/3 and XXXII/3.

A few examples will briefly clarify how this taxonomy could help understand the mechanisms that regulate Phillips's Dantesque visual world. Plate I/4 (fig.4), one of the most analyzed artworks in *Dante's Inferno,*[47] gives a visual representation of the "four-tiered architecture of [Dante's] symbolism."[48] At the same time, Phillips's commentary to this plate provides information on Dante's letter to Cangrande, the hermeneutic system sketched in that same letter, and the *Veltro* prophecy. Plate V/4 (fig. 5) features visual manipulations of two images of Adam and Eve from the Sistine Chapel and the following visual poem "eve / again. / put down the story of this / see exactly what it comes to. / Eve / again, / in / all / ages / eve." In his commentary, Phillips proposes an original interpretation of the figure of Francesca by affirming: "It is no accident that in Hell proper Francesca is the first person to speak […]. Thus it is that Dante implies that she represents the first of all sinners, Eve, though he never mentions her name."[49] Plate XXII/4 (fig. 6) is a pop-art re-elaboration of William Blake's *The Circle of Corrupt Officials: The Devils Mauling Each Other*, his 1825–27 illustration for the same *Canto.*[50] Plates III/1 and XXXII/1 feature manipulations of etchings made by Phillips in 1979 and influenced by African art and the observation of diatoms under a microscope.[51] A key element of the artist's iconography for *Dante's Inferno* comes from *A Walk to the Studio*, a set of prints which Phillips describes as cataloguing

> all the stop-cock box-lids (for such is their proper name) that lay beneath my feet as I walked from my home to my studio. They always have represented to me a kind of memento mori, announcing death with their lugubrious colour and skull-like shape.[52]

Blum noted that the aesthetic effect of certain plates depends on the thematization of their very production.[53] A case in point is

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[47] See, among others, Bergeron, "Quand La Lecture Se Donne En Images"; Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 316–18; Schmitz-Emans, "Im Wald der Zeichen," 175–80.
[48] Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, 285.
[49] *Ibid.*, 288.
[50] "Alone of Blake's pictures after Dante this, with its energetic but rather clumsily realized figures, seemed to have a naïve, comic-book aspect" (*Ibid.*, 299).
[51] The etchings are part of a series entitled *I had not known death had undone so many*, "T.S. Eliot's beautiful translation of a line from this canto" (*Ibid.*, 287).
[52] *Ibid.*, 308.
[53] Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 270–76.

represented by plate XXIX/2, which Phillips comments as follows: "[t]he plate for the original etching was scratched and scored by my own fingernails as the inhabitants of this Bolgia forever scratch themselves."[54] In plate XXI/3 (fig. 7), Dante and Virgil are visually associated with Laurel and Hardy, thus humorously casting them as protagonists of a 20th-century comedy film—a comedy without a capital 'C.' In plate XXXI/3 (fig. 8) the giant Antaeus is represented as King Kong.

I would argue that this taxonomy, together with the reader-response-oriented theoretical framework that supports it, allows us to develop a condensed theory of transmediality and visuality in *Dante's Inferno*, thus providing an accurate description of the relation between the text of the *Cantica* (and, more in general, of the *Comedy*) and the images that Phillips created over the course of the thirteen years that marked his deep involvement with Dante's work.

Conclusion: out of the wood?

In 1992, after the conclusion of all his Dante-inspired projects, Phillips completed the twentieth and last painting in a series of large-scale works entitled *Curriculum Vitae*. All the paintings in the series have the same visual structure, with two richly decorated painted frames encasing a long text, written by Phillips himself, in which he reflects on his past and his identity. The text written for the final painting in the series, entitled *A Song of Myself*,[55] aims "to list the various identities that go to make a single artistic life."[56] In the text, the artist constructs his own identity through those of a number of characters, both real and fictional. Towards the end of *A Song of Myself* one reads: "I who longed to be Marlow, artist at the heart of darkness, master of mean streets, am Dante Poliphilus, the bleak comedian, lost in the wine-dark wood, a Jekyll rejecting the Hyde that he seeks." In this short passage, Phillips assumes the double identity of "Dante Poliphilus," that is, part author-protagonist of the *Comedy* and part protagonist of Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Poliphilo's Strife of Love in a Dream)*,

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[54] Phillips, *Dante's Inferno*, 305.

[55] For the relation between Phillips's text and Whitman's *Song of myself* see Blum, *Im Anfang war das Wort*, 44–54.

[56] Tom Phillips, "Word Sculptures: Wire Sculptures," in *Tom Phillips. Sacred and Profane / Drawing to a Conclusion* (London: South London Gallery, 1997), 129. In 1995, Phillips would transmediate the text from *Curriculum Vitae 20* into a wire sculpture.

a work whose influence Phillips recognizes several times in his *Works and Texts.*

Both the *Comedy* and Colonna's mysterious masterpiece narrate an otherworldly journey in which "l'ardua problematica filosofica e teologica è tradotta narrativamente in un iter sapienziale dalle tenebre alla luce."[57] Both journeys unfold through three stages, the three otherworldly realms of the *Comedy* and the three "stati psicoerotici"[58] that guide Poliphilus towards the knowledge of true spiritual love. More importantly, both Dante and Poliphilus begin their journey by getting lost in a dark wood.[59] Phillips elaborates on his condition of Dante Poliphilus "lost in the wine-dark wood" by contrasting it with that of Marlow, the protagonist of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Contrary to those of Dante and Poliphilus, Marlow's journey goes from the light, symbolized by British civilization, to the darkness of the Congo jungle. The identity of Marlow, for which Phillips longed, is also construed as similar to that of a "master of mean streets." This expression, in turn, evokes Martin Scorsese's 1973 film *Mean Streets,* in which the experiences of Italian-American *mafiosi* are transfigured through the use of religious imagery, through references to William Blake and Francis of Assisi, and through the visual construction of Brooklyn as a dark jungle. On the other hand, Phillips's Dante Poliphilus is rendered analogous by juxtaposition to "a Jekyll rejecting the Hyde that he seeks." The basis for a similarity between the *Inferno* and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* could be found in the

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[57] Mino Gabriele, "Il viaggio dell'anima," in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, by Francesco Colonna, eds. Marco Ariani and Mino Gabriele, vol. 2 (Milan: Adelphi, 2004), LX.

[58] Marco Ariani, "Il sogno filosofico," in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, by Francesco Colonna, eds. Mino Gabriele and Marco Ariani, vol. 2 (Milan: Adelphi, 2004), XXXI–LXI.

[59] "Et cusì dirrimpecto d'una folta silva ridrizai el mio ignorato viagio. Nella quale alquanto intrato non mi avidi che io cusì incauto lassasse (non so per qual modo) el proprio calle. Diqué al suspeso core di subito invase uno repente timore, per le pallide membre diffundentise, cum solicitato battimento, le gene del suo colore exangue divenute. Conciosia cosa che ad gli ochii mei quivi non si concedeva vestigio alcuno di videre, né diverticulo. Ma nella dumosa silva appariano si non densi virgulti [...] che al roscido solo non permettevano, gli radii del gratioso Sole integramente pervenire. [...] Et in questo modo me ritrovai nella fresca umbra, humido aire, et fusco Nemorale" (Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, eds. Mino Gabriele and Marco Ariani, vol. 1 [Milano: Adelphi, 2004], 13). According to Mino Gabriele, the dark wood described in this passage "[è] la selva, già dantesca, cha abbuia la psiche come gli adunchi rovi dell'oscuro bosco abbranchiano le vesti di Polifilo, smarrito e lordo di sporcizia" (Gabriele, "Il viaggio dell'anima," X).

fact that both texts thematize, in very different ways, the encounter and confrontation with monsters, criminals, and sinners.

Through this dense network of references, the final image that Phillips constructs of himself in relation to Dante is that of a soul that is still lost and searches for his dark half while rejecting it at the same time. The "pessimistic" hypothesis posited earlier in this article thus finds its confirmation. Unlike Dante, Phillips never gets out of the wood, and the association between Dante Poliphilus and Jekyll "rejecting the Hyde that he seeks" could suggest that Phillips's journey through the *Comedy* was not about getting out of the wood in the first place. Maybe, the journey's meaning was about confronting darkness itself, and nothing more than that.

FIGURES

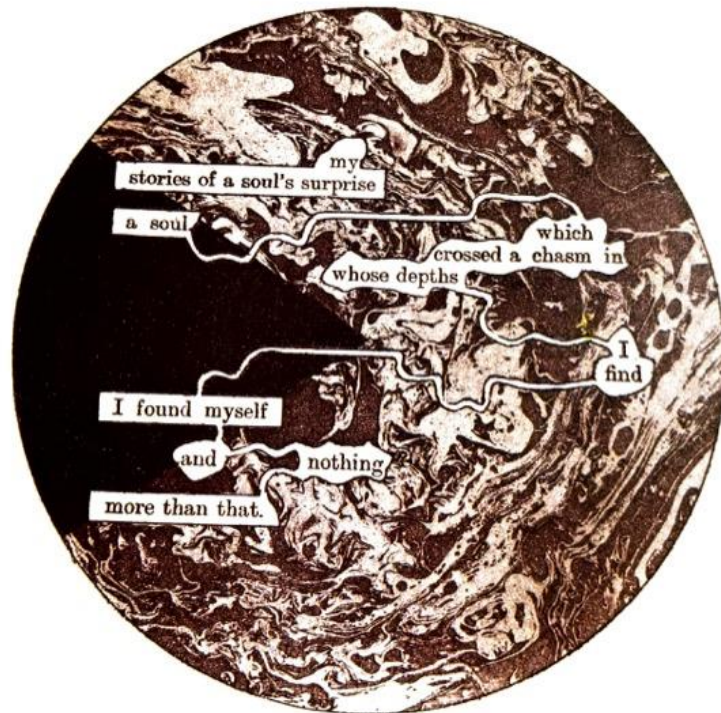Fig. 1: Tom Phillips, *Beginning to think about Dante*, oil on canvas, 1976-78.

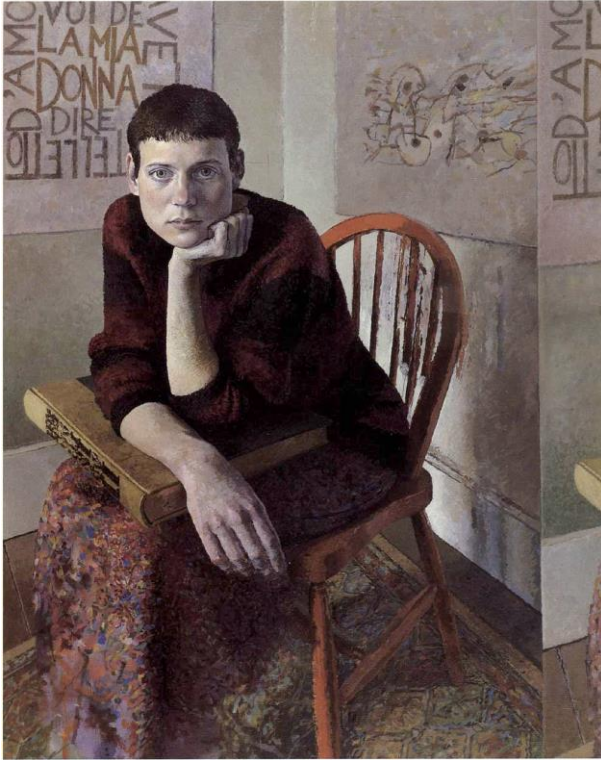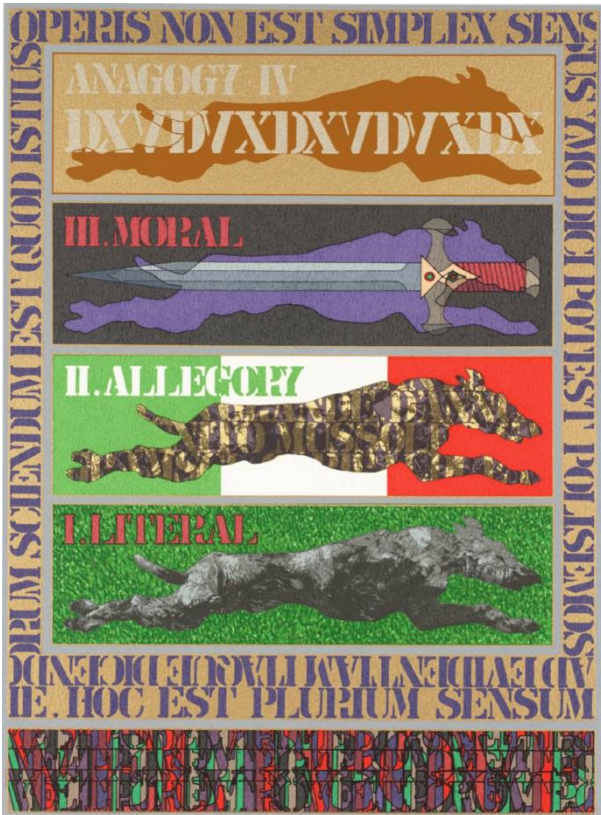Fig. 2: Tom Phillips, the *tondo* serving as the half-title of *Dante's Inferno*.

Fig. 3: Tom Phillips, *The Dante Binding*, oil on canvas, 1981–82, Ruth & Marvin Sackner Archive.

Fig. 4: Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno I/4*. Screenprint on paper, 1981, Tate Collection.
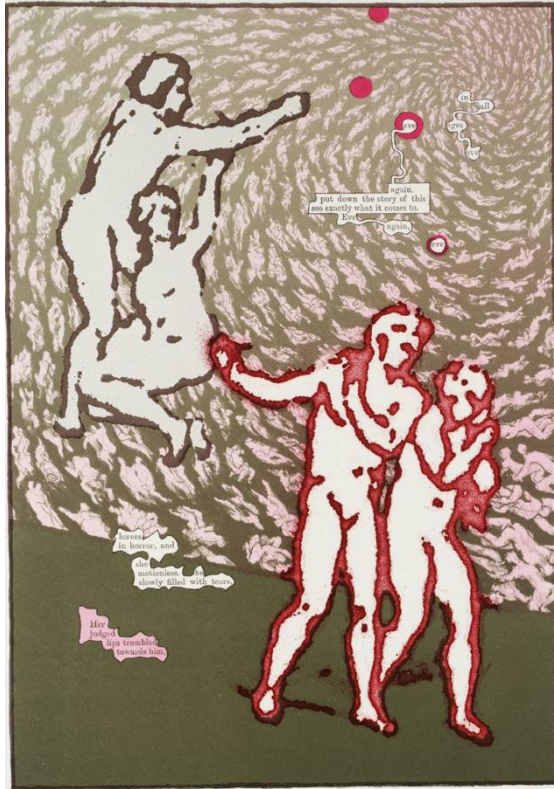
Fig. 5: Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno V/4*. Screenprint on paper, 1981, Tate Collection.

Fig. 6: Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno XXII/4*. Screenprint on paper, 1982, Tate Collection.
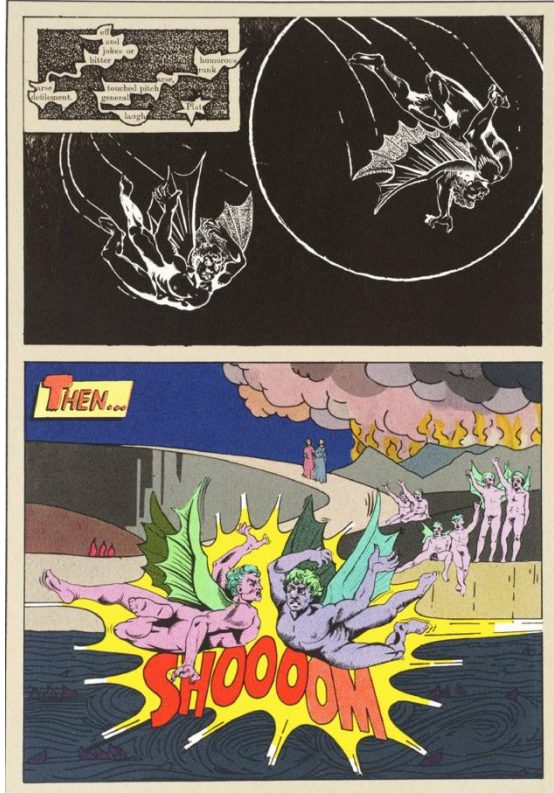
Fig. 7: Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno XXI/3*. Screenprint on paper, 1982, Tate Collection.

Fig. 8: Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno XXXI/3*. Screenprint on paper, 1983, Tate Collection.