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R E V I E W

Corrado Gizzi, Blake e Dante, an exhibition

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REVIEWS

Blake e Dante, an exhibition organized by Corrado Gizzi, Casa di Dante in Abruzzo, Torre de' Passeri, Pescara, 10 September-31 October 1983. Catalogue edited by Corrado Gizzi. 191 pp, 23 color plates, 132 illustrations in black and white. Italian L40,000.

Reviewed by Martin Butlin

The Castello Gizzi già Mazara in the little village of Torre de' Passeri, some 35 kilometers from Pescara, will always hold an honorable place in the history of Blake studies as the first place in Italy to present an exhibition devoted to Blake's works. The location is not perhaps quite as surprising as it may seem. This is the fifth year in which the Casa di Dante in Abruzzo has presented an exhibition of works of art related to the poems of Dante and, some 55 kilometers down the coast the small town of Vasto honors the birthplace and home for many years of *the* Rossetti, as he is for the Italians, Gabriele, a Dante scholar whose exile to England from Italy led to the happy chance that his sons, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, were born in London and played a leading part in the rediscovery of Blake in the middle of the nineteenth century. Without this connection one wonders how much longer it would have taken for Italy to have discovered, in an alien land, one of the greatest illustrators of their greatest poet. As it is, nothing could exceed the enthusiasm, devotion and magnificence with which this exhibition was mounted and publicized.

The exhibition consisted of a selection from Blake's watercolor illustrations to Dante. Fifteen examples came from the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, six from the Tate Gallery and two from the Ashmolean Museum. In addition there was a British Council didactic display of photographs and texts (in English but accompanied by a leaflet in Italian) and an audiovisual show covering Blake's life and artistic career.

In an area in which the name Rossetti appears at almost every corner, if only as the title of an English language school, one should not perhaps have been so surprised at the presence of posters (well named "manifesti" in Italian) on every advertising site along the

seafont in Pescara, in practically every other shop window, and as far afield as L'Aquila and Rome. The image chosen, the giant Antaeus leaning from the cliff, was one that no passerby could miss. The presentation, by Enrico Valeriani, was discreet and ideally suited to the scale of the works with a subtly but simply achieved effect of luxury, produced by narrow gold strips round dull green screens, that together with the setting of the basically eighteenth-century Castello added a distinct sense of occasion. The sense of occasion was re-doubled at the opening, attended by among others two ambassadors and leading national and local politicians, literary and artistic figures.

The catalogue is a sumptuous affair. All twenty-three exhibits are reproduced in color, ranging in quality from good to exceptional. The whole series of Blake's illustrations to Dante is also reproduced in black and white, accompanied by the relevant texts and a commentary, and prefaced by a short introduction, "Una lectura Dantis visionaria e immaginativa," by Corrado Gizzi. In addition there were eight prefatory essays discussing both Blake's illustrations to Dante and his more general place in European art. Among the former is a reprint of Ursula Hoff's introduction to the National Gallery of Victoria handbook on Blake's illustrations to Dante, Ferruccio Ulivi's "William Blake tra i 'messaggeri celesti' e Dante," and Fortunato Bellonzi's "Blake spiritualista visionario e il suo incontro con Dante," which placed the illustrations in the context of Blake's work as a whole. Renato Barilli, in "Blake e il 'gran rifiuto' dell'età moderna" claimed Blake as the first of the Moderns, even though his revolutionary achievement both in thought and art did not really find a successor until a hundred years later. Luigi Paolo Finizio's "Precorrimenti della cultura inglese del primo Romanticismo" put Blake into the context of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century art in England, though he perhaps overemphasized the romantic aspect as opposed to the neoclassical beginning. Two papers set out two important aspects of Blake's thought, Corrado Gizzi's "La stampa miniata e *Il matrimonio del Cielo e dell'Inferno*" and Claudia Corti's "William Blake scrittore e poeta: il sistema numerologico," a discussion of single, twofold, threefold and fourfold vision and its reflection in Blake's mythology. Finally there was a short paper by myself on "La fortuna di William Blake," an examination of the growth of Blake's reputation (not all the faults of which should be blamed on the original English text!).

The catalogue is indeed an unashamedly Italian production. Even for myself, with only an incomplete knowledge of the language, it gives a fascinating picture of a newcomer's outside view of an artist, the intricacies of whose work and thought have become perhaps all too familiar in certain Anglo-Saxon centers. The attitude is sane, well founded and refreshing. Only minor criticisms can be made. Albert Roe's fundamental interpretation of the way in which Blake criticized Dante's text is given on-

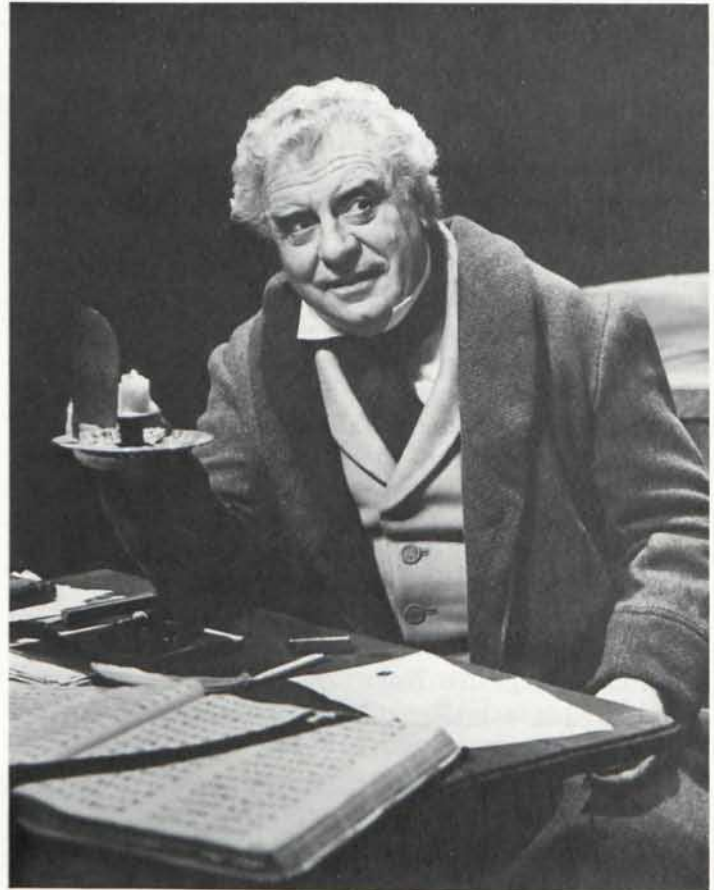
ly one, passing mention. The essays, set out by me in the previous paragraph in a fairly logical order, are arranged in alphabetical order of author. The complete series, in illustration, text and commentary, is renumbered to follow Dante's text more closely. In one case, the reversing of the accepted numbers 90 and 91 in fact reverses the text order, at least as given in the catalogue (on the other hand, number 70 is not moved to put it in its correct place after number 71). An identification is suggested for number 100, the passage in *Inferno* XIV, 1-24, where Dante sees the violent against God, some lying on the ground, some sitting all crouched up, and some condemned to roam incessantly.

"Blake: Innocence and Experience," a play written by Elliott Hayes. Stratford Festival of Canada, production. Directed by Richard Monette with Douglas Campbell as William Blake. Stratford Festival Third Stage, 18 June-13 August 1983.

Reviewed by V. A. De Luca

The rich, gentle farmland surrounding Stratford, Ontario, and its famed Shakespeare festival might pass as a reasonable facsimile of the restored "green & pleasant Land" of Blake's vision. In the summer of 1983 a living facsimile of Blake himself might be found there, aptly chanting the lyric "And did those feet. . . ." The occasion was the Stratford Festival's production of a one-man play *Blake: Innocence and Experience*, with the distinguished Canadian actor Douglas Campbell in the title role. Campbell achieved a remarkable physical likeness and delivered the many Blakean passages in his script with eloquence, force, and clarity. Indeed there was much in this production to beguile the eye and ear. But all through it admirers and students of the poet would have done well to be on guard. Stratford, Ontario, after all, is not England's green and pleasant land, and this *Blake* is not Blake.

The play makes a nice first impression, as Blake enters his workshop, outfitted with the frock coat, broad hat, and lantern of Los in the frontispiece of *Jerusalem*. The simply-furnished thrust stage includes a fine period recreation of an engraver's work table. In these convincing surroundings for the next hour and a half Campbell/Blake rambles, reminisces, and recites. He even sings, for there are lovely melodies (composed by Loreena McKennit) accompanying some of the *Songs of Innocence* and stand-



Douglas Campbell as William Blake. Photo by Robert C. Ragsdale. Courtesy, Stratford Festival of Canada.

ing in for the lost tunes that Blake is said to have actually composed. Campbell's Blake is, in the first act at least, cheerful, reflective, and given to quiet recollective musing. As he patters about the workshop, he becomes a loveable eccentric, a Dickensian "character." What one misses here is Blake's awesome tone of authority, of a passion that arises not from personal eccentricity but from an impersonal commitment to truth. Passion flares in the second act, during a long medley composed of passages on political revolution, but, as directed by Richard Monette, Campbell's reading gives to the passion more than a little hysteria; attention is thus deflected from the political content of the text to the private frenzy of the bard. Not all of this need be faulted. If we are presented an image of a smaller, more daunted Blake than the one that comes through his works, we should not rule out utterly the possibility that this image captures some actual biographical truth.

An accurate picture of Blake, however, cannot emerge out of an inadequate representation of what he wrote, what he meant, and what was important to his life. Here the playwright Elliott Hayes bears a heavy burden of responsibility. His text is largely an achronological pastiche of passages from Blake's writings, loosely arranged,