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Bestial Metamorphoses: Blake's Variations on Trans-human Change in Dante's Hell

Due nature mai fronte a fronte
 Non tramutò sì ch'amendue le forme
 A cambiar lor matera fosser pronte
 Dante, Inf. XXV, 91-94

Never face to face
 Two natures thus transmuted did he sing,
 Wherein both shapes were ready to assume
 The other's substance.
 Cary, I, 220.¹

Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria
 Dante, Par. I, 68

Words may not tell of that transhuman change
 Cary, III, 8.

At the beginning of Paradise Dante describes the experience of the supernatural as something that exceeds language. The immediate context is his sight of Beatrice, in whom is reflected the beatific vision of God. To express the effect of this encounter Dante resorts to the transformation of Glaucus into a river god in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the analogy only goes as far as words can take it. To grasp such an ineffable experience Dante coins an active verb in the unrestricted infinitive mode: 'trasumanare' (Par. I, 68). However, the action that Dante seeks to capture is contained in translation. Turned from verb to adjective, an accessory qualifier within a noun group, the ineffable, beatific experience of Dante's paradise becomes a subspecies of change in Henry Francis Cary's English version: 'words may not tell of that transhuman change' (Cary, III, 8). The critical apparatus Cary brings to his English Dante shifts the coordinates of Dante's transformation. While Dante uses Glaucus to explain the upward movement of the soul, Cary adds a footnote that records his downward trajectory. Drawing on Ovid, Plato, and Proclus, he focuses on the tension between the immortality of the soul and the decaying materiality of the body. A long quotation from George Berkeley's *Siris* emphasizes underwater transformations: 'Proclus compares the soul, in her descent, invested with

¹*The Vision; or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, of Dante Alighieri. Translated by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, 3 vols, 2nd edn (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819), III, 8; hereafter abbreviated as Cary and followed by volume and page number in text.*

growing prejudices, to Glaucus diving to the bottom of the sea, and there contracting divers coats of sea-weed, coral, and shells, which stick close to him, and conceal his true shape'.² Jean Jacques Rousseau also focuses on degradation. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality*, 'the Statue of *Glaucus* which Time, the Sea and Storms had so much disfigured that it resembled a wild Beast more than a God' stands as an allegory of the soul 'altered in the Bosom of Society', which 'has in a manner lost so much of its original Appearance as to be scarce distinguishable'.³ Glaucus does not appear in William Blake's visual corpus, but the degrading and demonic outlines of transhuman change were central to his approach to Dante's *Commedia*.

Blake's interest in Dante dates back to the 1780s, when he chose Ugolino as his first subject from the *Commedia*. Ugolino's plight exemplifies Dante's power of invention in the profile portrait Blake painted for William Hayley's Library (ca 1800-1805) as part of the series of Heads of the Poets. Blake's reading of the text is recorded in his marginalia to the *Inferno* translated by Henry Boyd (1800). Blake spent the last years of his life illustrating Dante's *Commedia* 'in a folio volume of a hundred pages, which Mr. Linnell had given him for the purpose'.⁴ Alexander Gilchrist mentions that at the age of sixty Blake started to learn Italian in order to read Dante, which makes sense given his claim, in his marginalia to Boyd, that 'men are hired to Run down Men of Genius under the Mask of Translators' (E 634). However, when Henry Crabb Robinson visited him in 1825, he found him working on Dante with Cary's translation.⁵ In a sketch of the architecture of retribution in Hell Blake denounces the book written 'for Vengeance of Sin' as a book 'of Satan the Accuser & Father of Hell'; yet the *Inferno* occupies 72 out of Blake's 102 Dante watercolours. Eight of these scenes are devoted to the reversible serpent metamorphoses that negotiate the bestial condition of the thieves in Cantos XXIV and XXV; and two of them are among the only seven Dante illustrations that Blake engraved. The multiplication of images Blake devotes to this case of transhuman change indicates its key place in the interminglings between man and beast in Blake's approach to the *Commedia*. Dante's frame of punishment suggests that his bestial metamorphoses represent a series of transgressions of boundaries. However, Blake's versions bring to light alternative possibilities in the handling of species, showing coexistence or overlaps, intermediate steps in a continuum, fusion through commingling. This chapter explores Blake's serpent sequence and his engagement with metamorphosis as an act of translation between languages, genres, and media.

² Cary, III, 8; George Berkeley, *Siris* (Dublin and London: Innys and Hitch, 1744), 151.

³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* (London, 1761), xlvii.

⁴ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1863), I, 332; Blake mentions 'my book of drawings from Dante' in a letter to Linnell dated 2 July 1826, E 778.

⁵ Gilchrist, *Life of Blake*, 342.

Pseudomorphosis: Classical Forms, Demonic Transformations, and Hybrids

In capturing metamorphosis through a series of watercolours, Blake had to give shape Dante's medieval inventions and the classical worlds in visual form. His translations of words into watercolours were mediated by a corpus of sculpture, painting, and engraving from different sources and styles. To explore his complex negotiations with tradition I will turn to the concept of pseudomorphosis. This term was coined by Oswald Spengler 'to denote the unwilling conformity of a new and dynamic culture to the forms and formulas of an older culture. For example, the basilica "employs the means of the Classical to express the opposite thereof, and is unable to free itself from those means"'.⁶ Erwin Panofsky took up the concept to investigate divergences in form and content between text and image in the medieval translation of classical literature and visual culture.⁷ Against Spengler's antagonistic take on cultural forms and Panofsky's recuperation of medium divergence in cultural translation, Theodor W. Adorno read pseudomorphosis as a medium's imitation of another medium, an uncritical 'stage in the process of convergence'.⁸ This chapter draws on the debated concept of pseudomorphosis as a dialectic tension between assimilation, parody, and disintegration of form to analyse Blake's reinvention of Dante's visions of hell.

A poetics of deformation informs Dante's *Inferno*, where the damned are seen as reflections of God's image diverted by sin. As an arresting example of Dante's monstrous poetics consider Cerberus, the classical figure Dante places as guardian of Hell. 'Fiera crudele e diversa' (*Inf.* VI, 13; 'Cerberus, cruel monster, fierce and strange', Cary, I, 50), this three-headed dog-bodied demon is a bestial inversion of the Trinity. Placed at the threshold of *Inferno*, he exemplifies the dynamism of 'diverted' forms, their uncontrollable combination and proliferation. Bestial outgrowths, misshapen forms, and crossings of species transgress distinctions between supernatural, human, and animal forms, challenging the Horatian rule of composition according to which the form of a woman should not end with a fishtail. In Dante's Christian underworld the fabulous hybrids of classical literature represent the disorders of the human form to convey allegories of sin. Blake's monstrous poetics activates the corpus of classical art to find visual forms that can embody the infernal shapes of Dante's medieval underworld and bring them to the eyes of the reader. Reinventing Dante's *Inferno* adds a Romantic layer to Dante's medieval pseudomorphoses.

⁶ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, 'Towards a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism', *The Art Bulletin*, 87:3 (September 2005), 403-15: 412, quoting from Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918; New York: A Knopf, 1927), I, 209; II, 189-90.

⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 70-71.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Some Relationships between Music and Painting', trans. by Susan Gillespie, *Musical Quarterly*, 79:1 (Spring 1995), 66-79: 67.

In reviving the tension between the Olympian, the Titanic, and the demonic Blake draws on the underground, demonic survival of classical forms that Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin have read as part of a Janus faced cult of antiquity.⁹ In the *City of God* Augustine recognized the forms of pagan Gods enshrined in classical sculpture.¹⁰ Their wandering in a Christian world is captured in Milton's catalogue of demons, 'godlike shapes and forms / excelling human' (PL I, 358-9), Egyptian 'wandering gods disguised in brutish forms / rather than human' (PL I, 481-2). Association with idolatry is key to histories of sculpture. Writing for Abraham Rees' *Cyclopaedia*, John Flaxman defines sculpture as 'the art of imitating visible form by means of solid substances' and records its early associations with idolatry, from the Golden Calf to the Tabernacle: 'the deliverance from Egypt was the deliverance of man, both as to his bodily and mental faculties, from slavery'.¹¹ Blake was employed to engrave specimens of sculpture for Flaxman's entry, but his Dante illustrations subvert the idealizing narratives that had used the medium to codify the ideal shape of the human form divine. Reading Dante through Milton, Blake evokes demonic impersonations of classical forms to capture man's bestial inclinations instead.

Benjamin argued that the survival of the ancient gods depends on the 'allegorical metamorphosis of the Pantheon'.¹² While humanist culture had to free classical forms from their demonic afterlives in Christian exegesis, Blake traps them in the circles of Dante's Christian hell, where they flesh out figures from classical myth and literature that Dante encounters in the other world. Such is the blasphemer Capaneus, whom Dante sources from his favourite poem, Statius's *Thebaid*, and turns into an example of classical pride. In *Inferno* XIV Dante represents him lying 'torto e dispettoso' (*Inf.* XIV, 47; 'writen in proud scorn', Cary, I, 119). His words translate ethical deviance into a pathos formula. For Sebastian Schütze Blake's model is the Dying Gaul,¹³ a celebrated classical sculpture of which Blake could see a copy in the Antique Room at the Royal Academy. However, the orientation of the head and limbs in the semi-recumbent posture of Capaneus points to other visual sources such as the river god Ilissus from the Elgin Marbles or the monumental figure of the River Nile, titanic personifications of the might of the elements associated with the origin of religion. Compare Blake's engraving after Fuseli's drawing of the annual flooding of the Nile for Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1791). Their illustration turned the scene into a confrontation between the Dog-Headed

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 225-226.

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of Gods*, VIII, 23, quoted in Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 225.

¹¹ Augustine, *City of Gods*, VIII, 23, quoted in Benjamin, *German Tragic Drama*, 225. *Literature*, 39 vols (London, 1819), XXXII:i, n.p.

¹² Benjamin, *German Drama*, 226.

¹³ Sebastian Schütze, 'Two Masters of "Visibile Parlare": Dante and Blake', in Sebastian Schütze and Maria Antonietta Terzoli, *William Blake. The drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy* (Köln: Taschen, 2014), 49.

Egyptian God Anubi and the incipient figure of Urizen as bound of the horizon.¹⁴ Seeing Capaneus embodying the powerful river god, therefore, endows the blasphemer with dialectical energy. Blake's sculptural allusion undermines Capaneus's pagan challenge to the invisible power of the Christian god, by embedding him into the idolatric phase of religion in which men abstracted 'mental deities from their objects' (MHH, 11). Blake seems to ennoble the classical anti-hero by association with a classical prototype of sculpture, yet subsumes both to the Christian cause just as Dante had done with classical literature. Pseudomorphosis here plays up the contradiction between form and content in an act of Christian repurposing.

Classical sculpture takes on a comic turn in the circle of *baratteria*, the crime of corruption in public office, where *Barbariccia* takes on the attitude of the torchbearer, another celebrated classical sculpture.¹⁵ In this case, the contrast between classical form and Christian content does not work as an act of assimilation. Nor is it a pseudomorphosis in the Panofskyan sense of a decomposition of classical culture in which classical form is separated from classical subject matter and used to give visual expression to a new literary type. For the ideal of beauty embodied by the torchbearer is not used to promote *Barbariccia* as a new ideal of the male body. Through the incongruous juxtaposition of the heroic classical male nude with the comic anti-world of modern *baratteria* Blake deflates and ridicules the classical form. Dante's Hell offers a powerful showcase for his ambivalent canonisation of classical culture. By sourcing classical sculpture in the underworld, as far as possible to the Christian ideal of the human form divine, Blake subsumes it to the Christian message. His use of classical sculptures to embody the figures of the damned in Hell indicates their demonic, idolatric, and ultimately bestial condition. Blake's sculptural quotations spell out the antagonism between classical form and Christian subject.

Human-animal hybrids abound in Dante's Hell, from frequent appearances of bat-winged demons to a gallery of classical and christian specimens. Many come from Virgil's account of the underworld in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, from those combining a male torso with animal limbs such as the Minotaur and the Centaurs (Inf. XII and XXV) to the human-headed and bird-bodied harpies encountered in the wood of suicides (Inf. XIII, 11-15). Among them Geryon illustrates the divergence of form involved in Christian pseudomorphosis. Virgil

¹⁴ William Blake after Henry Fuseli, *The Fertilization of the Nile*, published by Joseph Johnson on 1 December 1791 to illustrate Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, 2 vols (London: Johnson, 1791), I, 126-127 and footnote. The astronomical association of the flooding with Sirius, the dog star, leads Darwin to a reference to the Egyptian Dog Anubi, which Fuseli represents from behind; through his parted legs the viewer can make out the source of the Nile as a Urizenic figure of the bound of the horizon, which is barely traced in Fuseli's drawing, but more clearly delineated in Blake's engraving, inspired by the figure of Jupiter Pluvius in Bernard de Montfaucon, *Antiquity Explained*, trans. by David Humphreys, 5 vols (London, 1721), II.1, 28.

¹⁵ The Torchbearer Ludovisi, Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano di Palazzo Altemps, Inv. 8601.

evokes him as a three-bodied phantom ('forma tricorporis umbrae', Aen. VI, 289), which Dryden translates as 'Geryon with his triple form'. Christian iconography offered Dante the elements required to flesh out this ghostly form into the allegory of fraud, a human hybrid composed of a benign-looking human head conjoined to a serpent body and lion-like paws (Inf. XVII, 10-12). Dante's composite form harks back to the serpent of temptation. Yet Blake's Geryon has none of the grace, variety, and dynamism associated with the phallic form selected by Satan to seduce Eve in Eden. His heavy body is incompatible with the sinuous flowing movements that lured Eve's eye and inspired William Hogarth to advocate the serpentine line in his *Analysis of Beauty*.¹⁶ To understand the visual challenges and possibilities offered by Dante's Geryon, let's compare Blake's to Flaxman's 1793 illustration.¹⁷ Flaxman's choice of outline drawing and line engraving facilitates the assimilation of the parts into a whole by producing a continuous serpentine line, which sutures the juncture between the animal and the human. Dante's writing compensates for the potential disarticulations of the monster's composite form through a comparison with a ship and animal analogies with the eel and the falcon (Inf. XVII, 100, 104, 127). To express the kinetic qualities of Geryon, Flaxman adopts a different animal analogy: he extends his lion paws in an elongated attitude that evokes the rearing hooves of a horse. Flaxman's dynamic Geryon conveys his role as the infernal means of transport that carries Dante and Virgil to Malebolge, the eighth circle of Hell. By contrast, Blake's Geryon is an awkward, clumsy, static figure; his limbs are critically short, closer to a seal's limbs (Butlin 812.31). Blake focuses on alternative anatomical features in Dante's description. Building on Dante's reference to the monster's chest (Inf. XVII, 103), he emphasizes the figure's muscular pectoral area as the point where the human and the animal are incongruously yoked together. While Flaxman's line engraving absorbs the human figure in a predominantly animal form and enhances the monster's role as a vehicle, Blake spells out Geryon's role as an arresting allegory. Suspended in mid-air, stationed at the threshold of Malebolge, the monster functions as a mnemonic device. The lack of assimilation between the parts suggests that each might be dissected as a distinct signifying unit. As a hybrid Geryon's triple form exhibits coexistence in the crossing of species, rather than an organic living organism.

However, Blake's approach to Geryon's anatomy can also be read through temporal paradigms of transhuman change. What analogies could

¹⁶ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. by Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 51. On everyday sightings, mythical and miraculous serpent forms, see Bethan Stevens, 'News from the Thames (Blake! There's Something in the Water)', in this volume.

¹⁷ *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri, cioè lo Inferno, il Purgatorio ed il Paradiso Composto da Giovanni Flaxman Scultore Inglese, ed Incisa da Tommaso Piroli Romano. In possesso di Thomas Hope Scudiere, Amsterdam (n.p., n.d., 1793), No. 18; John Flaxman: The Illustrations of the Divine Comedy, ed. by Francesca Salvadori (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2004), 86-7, H17.*

Blake draw on to think about the hybrid forms he found in Dante? How could he bring Geryon to the eye of the reader? Analogies from natural history might help make sense of his hybrid form. The point where the animal is conjoined to the human form, where the muscular structure of the human chest turns into the rough skin of the serpent might be represented as a clash of forms - Geryon's human chest struggling to break free from the attack of a reptile. Alternatively, Geryon can be compared to an intermediate form captured in the awkward middle point of transformation, bursting out of its reptile skin like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon. Comparisons between the insect and the human are recurrent in Blake's work as a way to think about the human form as part of the cycle of nature, from 'The Fly' in *Songs of Innocence* onwards. The frontispiece of Blake's emblem book *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (1793) is captioned 'What is Man!' and illustrated by an image of the insect life cycle with a peaceful image of a baby head swaddled in an insect cocoon.¹⁸ While the life cycle of insects helps understand human gestation, Blake's Geryon refuses organic models of transformation by assimilation. Unlike Flaxman's organic approach to subsume the human within the animal, unlike the peaceful repose of the caterpillar-baby, Geryon's human parts break the horizontal axis of his reptile ending: the opposite, verticalizing orientation of the monster's head expresses the upward effort of a figure trapped into an alien body. His triple body resists the transformation of one species into another.

Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that hybrids and metamorphoses 'express different rhetorical strategies and different ontological visions. [...] The hybrid expresses a world of natures, essences, or substances (often diverse or contradictory to each other), encountered through paradox; it resists change'.¹⁹ Geryon illuminates the allegorical metamorphosis of a classical form. As a hybrid that trespasses the boundaries of form advocated by Horace, Geryon is a classical palimpsest rewritten to stand as a mnemonic emblem of sin in Dante's world. His changing form and attributes signal the alterity of classical forms within the medieval text and the alterity of the medieval text in Blake's visual imagination. While Geryon's paradoxical juxtaposition of body parts retains the difference of species within the format of a hybrid, Dante explores the intermingling and crossing of species in the serpent metamorphoses of Cantos XXIV and XXV.

Eight Serpent Variations

The perversion and progressive loss of human form, which is the principal theme of hell, finds a powerful emblem in the circle of thieves (Cantos XXIV and XXV).

¹⁸ On insect analogy in Blake's corpus see Edward J. Rose, 'Blake's Human Insect: Symbol, Theory, and Design', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, X:2 (Summer 1968), 215-32. On the life cycle of insects, see Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79-94.

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 29-30.

In Dante's logic of retribution these scenes work on privation as a punishment for theft. A crime against personal property is paid with a peculiar form of corporal punishment, in which human anatomy progressively loses its distinctive features in a series of animal metamorphoses. Instead of offering an escape from a supernatural aggression, instead of a transformation that leads to human extinction, these infernal metamorphoses produce an eternal scene of punishment effected through the repetition of a series of experiments in reversibility. While Flaxman singles out a pregnant moment to translate this punishment in one memorable illustration, Blake explores the boundaries between human and animal forms in eight variations on the clash, intermingling, and metamorphosis of species.

Dante's initial scene is set up in direct competition with Lucan's description of Libya in the *Pharsalia*:

E vidivi entro terribile stipa
 Di serpenti, e di sì diversa mena
 Che la memoria il sangue ancor mi scipa.
 Più non si vanti Libia con sua rena
 Inf. XXIV, 82-85.

I saw a crowd within
 Of serpents terrible, so strange of share
 And hideous, that remembrance in my veins
 Yet shrinks the vital current: of her sand
 Let Libya vaunt no more
 Cary, I, 209.

Allusions to the Virgilian episode of the Laocoon shape a number of the serpent scenes of Cantos XXIV-XXV. In the Virgilian source Neptune, who took the part of the Greeks in the Trojan war, sends marine serpents to strangle the Trojan priest Laocoon, punished for attempting to avert the Greeks' attack on Troy (Aen. II, 201-24). Dante comes closest to Virgil in the punishment he devises the blasphemy of Vanni Fucci (Inf. XXV, 4-9). Since the early sixteenth century this celebrated Virgilian description has been compared with the sculptural group of the Laocoon, which was discovered in the early sixteenth century and placed in the Capitol, where it stands as a masterpiece of classical sculpture and a paradigmatic example of the comparison and boundaries between the arts.

Both Henry Fuseli and Flaxman read Dante's serpent metamorphoses through the Laocoon sculptural group. As a verbal and visual subject, it offers them the opportunity to test their technique through variations on a classical touchstone, capturing a three-dimensional art form that requires circumambient appreciation on the flat medium of paper. In *The punishment of the Thieves* (1772), one of the subjects chosen from Dante during the Roman period, Fuseli gives emphasis to the more finished and marked grouping of Virgil and Dante

seen in profile to the left. Facing them in the right foreground is a faintly traced foreshortened side view of the Laocoon sculpture; behind it a confusion of human and animal limbs degenerates into a mass whose component parts are progressively harder to make out as they lose their distinct shapes absorbed into the background. Flaxman uses the Laocoon to represent an earlier moment in another virtuoso experiment with alternative aspects of sculpture.²⁰ He breaks down the sculptural group into distinct bodies and rearranges two of the Laocoon figures seen from opposite points of view in order to illustrate the following lines: 'Ed ecco a un ch'era da nostra proda, / S'avventò un serpente che 'l trafisse / Là dove 'l collo a le spalle s'annoda' (Inf. XXIV, 97-99: 'and lo! On one / Near to our side, darted an adder up, / and, where the neck is on the shoulders tied, / Transpierced him, Cary, I, 210). At the centre of the engraving Vanni Fucci takes on the attitude of the Trojan priest Laocoon attacked by the serpents seen from behind, combining Dante's initial scene, in which the damned are shown with hands bound behind their backs by serpents (Inf. XXIV, 94), with a subsequent moment in which the serpent attacks the damned in the place where the shoulders meet the neck (Inf. XXIV, 99). Next to Fucci on the right Flaxman places another one of the damned attacked by a serpent in the posture of one of Laocoon's sons seen from the front. Although Blake had great familiarity with the Laocoon group, for his eight variations on serpent metamorphoses he chose alternative sculptural and iconographical models.²¹

Blake's first scene, *The Thieves and the Serpents* (Butlin 812:47) has none of the claustrophobic multiplication of bodies and serpents suggested by Dante and Fuseli. Among the damned, a single running figure conveys the dynamism of fear that Dante had chosen as a dominant first impression ('correa genti nude e spaventate': Inf. XXIV, 92; 'amid this dread exuberance of woe / ran naked spirits wing'd with horrid fear', Cary, I, 89-90). The serpents restrict the actions of the damned by tying their hands backwards; they are distinct and alien forms. Yet a figure in the left-hand corner tells a different story about hybridity and the blurred boundaries between species. It is an erect serpent with female breasts and a hybrid, half-human physiognomy advancing in the middle ground. As Paley has noted, this figure evokes the grotesques that occupy the margins of page 26 of Blake's *Four Zoas* manuscript.²² The text reads: 'When I called forth the Earth-worm from the cold & dark obscure / I nurturd her I fed her with my rains & dews, she grew / a scaled Serpent' (FZ, 26:7-9, E 317); 'She became a Dragon winged bright & poisonous' (FZ, 26: 13, E 317), then 'a little weeping Infant a span long' (FZ, 27:2, E 317). Blake's imagery uses the earthworm as an analogue for the foetus and its development into a dragon

²⁰ Flaxman, *Divina Commedia*, no. 26; John Flaxman, 102-3, H24.

²¹ On Blake's reproduction of the Laocoon to illustrate Flaxman's entry on sculpture for Rees' *Cyclopaedia* (1816) and his later separate plate and marginalia, see Rosamund A. Paice, 'Encyclopaedic Resistance: Blake, Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, and the *Laocoön's Separate Plate*', *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 37:2 (Fall 2003); Morton Paley, *Traveller in the Evening*, 53-100.

²² Paley, *Traveller in the Evening*, 138.

and a child.²³ Crossings between insect and reptilian imagery are key to the proliferation of grotesque creatures that crowd the margins of the *Four Zoas* page: a winged female form with exaggerated breast and the beginning of a parting of the lower limbs, which separate in a subsequent image; a flying vulva with scaly fishlike ending, and a tentacular generously-breasted female dragon form. Depending on the line of sight, these images of polymorphous sexual ambiguity can be read as a story going towards greater sexual differentiation, or towards hermaphroditism and androgyny, as Christopher Hobson has argued.²⁴ In *The Thieves and the Serpents* the breasted snake advancing from left to right brings sexual polymorphism into the picture. Behind it, further in the background, a faintly sketched serpent figure with a human head opens up a potential hybrid world.

After the first panoramic scene, Blake's second watercolour, *The Punishment of the Thieves*, offers a closer view on a group of contorted half-bust human figures that occupy the entire space of the composition (Butlin 812:102).²⁵ Blake uses black and blue wash to convey their Michaelangelesque sculptural qualities. Sprightly serpents crawl beneath them, over their bodies, between their legs. Writing about serpents, Johann Caspar Lavater argues that 'the changeableness of their colours, and the whimsical arrangement of their spots, suggest the idea of deceit'.²⁶ Bright blue, red, and yellow spots mark the serpents Blake envisions in Dante's scene. Their dynamic postures function as relays to draw attention to the anatomies of the damned. Their eyes cue the viewer to enter the field of the drawing adopting a perspective from below. Through the anthropomorphic mediation of the serpents' eyes, the viewer takes on a position of virtual participation and becomes a voyeur. The serpents' dynamic forms

²³ On the life cycle of worms to understand human gestation, see Tristanne Connolly, *William Blake and the Body* (Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan, 2002), 111.

²⁴ Christopher Z. Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 56-8.

²⁵ This plate was numbered out of sequence in William Blake, *Illustrations to the Divine Comedy of Dante*, ed. by Emery Walker (London: National Art-Collections Fund, 1922), which followed the title and order established by Alexander Gilchrist in his *Life of Blake*, while correcting some discrepancies compared to the list provided in the sale catalogue of John Linnell's Collection (Christie's, 15 March 1918). The sequence established by the National Art-Collections Fund was adopted by Albert Roe in *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) and Martin Butlin in *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 555. This plate was rearranged as the second scene of Canto XXIV by Milton Klonsky in *The Complete Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980), whose revised sequence was adopted by Corrado Gizzi in *Blake e Dante* (Milan: G. Mazzotta 1983), catalogue of the exhibition held at Torre de'Passeri, 10 September-31 October 1983, by David Bindman in *William Blake La Divina Commedia*, edited by David Bindman (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Image, 2000), and by Schütze and Terzoli, *The drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy*.

²⁶ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, 3 vols (London: Murray, 1789-1798), II, 127; Rodney M. Baine, *The Scattered Portions: William Blake's Biological Symbolism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 104. On Blake and Lavater see Sibylle Erle, *Blake, Lavater and Physiognomy* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

animate the scene with a sense of impending action. Their heads point towards the full breasts of one figure and the buttocks of another, whose anus is worked up as a dark recess and placed close to the centre of the composition.²⁷ The lines of sight of the composition suggest erotic scenarios to come.

The third scene focuses on the fate of Vanni Fucci (Butlin 812.48; Inf. XXIV, 97-126). The thief's transformations are set up by Dante through two allusions: the first presents the snake attacking the point where the neck is tied to the shoulders (Inf. XXIV, 99), severing the head, as a symbol of the soul, from the body. This action inevitably calls to mind Virgil's Laocoon (Inf. XXIV, 98-99); second comes the analogy with the Phoenix, which catches fire, disintegrates, and then rises again (Inf. XXIV, 100-102). As a Christian symbol, the metamorphosis of the phoenix promises the restoration of a purer form of identity through resurrection. Of the transformation Dante retains the first, destructive part: in Hell the body is reduced 'to a heap of particles without a trace of spiritual residue',²⁸ dust to dust. The phoenix is perverted to a form of eternal repetition of the reversible transmutation of the human into serpent and back.²⁹ In *The Serpent attacking Vanni Fucci* (Butlin 812.48; Inf. XXIV, 97-126) Blake embodies the damned in the posture of Myron's Discobulus. A Roman copy of the lost Greek original was excavated in 1791 from Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli outside Rome, bought by Charles Townley and on display in his London gallery in Park Street from 1794, then acquired by the British Museum in 1805.³⁰ Blake's sculptural choice is a parodic act of pseudomorphosis. His visual analogy calls into question the dynamics of the classical attitude, abstracts the downward thrust of the movement from its subsequent upward gesture, and takes it instead as the climactic moment that precedes a fall. While the Discobulus is a sublime prototype of human motion at its most athletic, in focusing on its loss of verticality Vanni Fucci's impersonation blurs the boundaries between humans and quadrupeds. A textual anchoring for this kinetic image can similarly be produced by merging two downward movements extracted from Dante's comparisons. Take the destructive moment in which the phoenix's 'falling' coincides with 'becoming ashes' ('e cener tutto / convenne che cascando divenisse' (Inf. XXIV, 102).³¹ Join it with the comparison with a fall used to convey Vanni Fucci's reaction to the serpent's attack ('e qual

²⁷ On buttocks placed 'in the visual centre, aligning the reader's eye with the figure's anus', see Elizabeth C. Effinger, 'Anal Blake: Bringing up the Rear in Blakean Criticism', in Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, eds, *Queer Blake* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63-73: 65, 68, 69.

²⁸ Harold Skulsky, *Metamorphosis: The Mind in Exile* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 116.

²⁹ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, 182-187.

³⁰ Vicky Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain since 1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108-10.

³¹ Cary does not capture Dante's association of 'falling' with 'becoming ashes': 'he kindled, he bun'd, and chang'd / to ashes all, pour'd out upon the earth. / where dissolv'd he lay, the dust again / uproll'd spontaneous, and the self same form / instant resum'd': Cary, I, 210-211.

è quei che cade, e non sa como': Inf. XXIV, 112; 'As one that falls, he knows not how, by force demoniac dragg'd / to earth': Cary, I, 211). The resulting image captures the loss of balance and fall of the damned.

The visual focus of the last two illustrations seems to work towards a crescendo in what is beginning to look like a sexual choreography of the back-side.³² From the crowded group scene to the isolated figure of Vanni Fucci, from a frontal to a side view, Blake's use of black again directs the viewer to the buttocks. The protruding bottom of the thief is here finished in chalk, concentrating the energy and materiality of the sign. Both illustrations play with the possibilities of the climactic moment, representing the scene that precedes the action and leaving the rest to the viewers' imagination. The visual allusions involve a play of anticipation on what the next scenes might reveal (Butlin 812.49 and 812.51). Hobson has observed the disjunction between the visual and the verbal in the erotic choreography of *The Four Zoas*, pointing out that what is condemned in words is figured with alternative, utopian connotations in visual form in the margins.³³ Here, by contrast, Dante's verbal account of penetration from behind is literally obscene, outside the frame, implied through the choreographies of the damned.

As Dante's text shifts from third to first person, Fucci's account shifts the serpent theme from a clash between species to an experience of identification and metamorphosis:

Vita bestial mi piacque, e non umana
Si com'a mul ch'io fui; son Vanni Fucci
Bestia, e Pistoia mi fu degna tana
Inf. XXIV, 124-6.

"...Me the bestial life
And not the human pleas'd, mule that I was,
Who in Pistoia found my worthy den."
Cary, I, 212.

The rhyme 'umana': 'tana' (human: den) crystallizes the form of bestial life articulated by 'Vanni Fucci / bestia'. Bestiality here is the outcome of the genealogy of an illegitimate child. His extramarital birth is identified with the crossing and perversion of species. For the post-Miltonic reader the words pronounced by Fucci in a scene riddled with snakes recall Satan's self-reflection

³² On Blake's anal scenes: see Peter Otto, 'Re-Framing the Moment of Creation: Blake's Re-Visions of the Frontispiece and Title Page to *Europe*', in Jackie di Salvo, G.A. Rosso, and Christopher Z. Hobson, eds, *Blake, Politics and History* (New York: Garland, 1998), 235-46: 239; Elizabeth Effinger, 'Anal Blake', in *Queer Blake*, 65, 68-69; Bethan Stevens, "'Woes & Sighs': Fantasies of Slavery in Visions of the Daughters of Albion', in *Queer Blake*, 148-50; Peter Otto, 'Drawing Lines: Bodies, Sexualities and Performance in "The Four Zoas"', in *Queer Blake*, 57-8.

³³ Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality*, 167.

upon his impending metamorphosis into the serpent of Eden, a 'foul descent' that degrades a form created to contend with gods 'constrained / Into a Beast, and mixt with bestial slime, / This essence to incarnate and imbrute' (PL IX, 163-7). For Satan in Eden metamorphosis is a protean exercise in disguise, surveying and trying out different animal forms: 'himself now one, / now other as their shapes served best his end / neerer to view his prey' (PL IV, 347-50). By virtue of seeing, 'he became what he beheld' (Blake, *Milton*, pl. 3: 29, E 97). In Satan's case, the encounter between supernatural and animal form is not an act of mystical enthusiasm, but a parody of Christ's incarnation, the religious parameter for becoming other. Satan's demonic imitation conflates Christ's act with its pagan counterpart: Zeus's becoming animal to seduce mortal women unseen. By adopting the form of the serpent to tempt Eve, Satan's pagan incarnation is an act of mimicry that calls into question the distinction between the supernatural and the natural, the soul and the body. If Christ's becoming human renews man's identity as a creature made in God's image, the fallen angel's becoming animal tests the limits of the interspecies continuum and invokes the possibility of intercourse between different species in Eden.

Punishment intervenes to reject Satan's pagan pseudomorphosis as a demonic inversion of the incarnation, one that uncouples the action from its intended meaning and moral. Punishment restores the diversity of species and declares society with beasts and animal love incompatible with the divine essence and the human face divine. Satan's becoming other turns into an act of 'horrid sympathy':

They saw, but other sight instead, a crowd
Of ugly serpents, horror on them fell,
And horrid sympathy; for what they saw,
They felt themselves now changing.
PL X, 538-41.

'Horrid sympathy' involves 'crossing the boundaries separating individuals or species' argues Jonathan Lamb. For Lamb the horror of being like a serpent consists in feeling 'absolutely unlike oneself and without the least trace of social or moral value', an experience of difference in which there is consciousness of the demarcation between identities in the moment of exchange.³⁴ Yet the horror of Dante's scene consists in a point of no return. The dissolution of identity that results from God's punishment condemns the actor to become prisoner of his impersonation, trapped in a performance of moral character that reduces

³⁴ Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), 114; Jonathan Lamb, 'Imagination, Conjecture, Disorder', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45:1 (Fall 2011), 53-69: 55-56.

him to an emblem of his sin.³⁵ Dante's counterpass pushes the Ovidian structure one step further: while Ovid's transformation is a single event that marks the character's death, escape, or survival in a new form, Dante's infernal characters act in a scene of infinite punishment. They are forever condemned to repeat their act of horrid sympathy, forever turning into serpent form and back. The performance of their sin has no ending and no repose. When Milton described the demons' punishment, confronted with 'a crowd / of ugly serpents', he clearly had in mind Dante's 'terribile stipa / di serpenti'. Cary remembers Milton in translating Dante's passage as 'a crowd within / of serpents terrible, so strange of shape / and hideous' (Cary, I, 209), a Miltonic mediation that informs the verbal and visual dynamics of Blake's serpent metamorphoses.

The Miltonic inflection of the serpent theme may help us to understand Blake's Satanic interpretation of Fucci's blasphemous gesture in the fourth illustration, *Vanni Fucci Making the Figs against God*, which opens canto XXV (Butlin 812.49). Dante's words evoke an obscene gesture of defiance: 'le mani alzò con amendue le fiche' (Inf XXV, 2), which consists in shaping two fingers into the form of a hole, while using the index finger of the other hand to mimic the act of penetration. While Dante's figs are feminine, a common reference to the female sexual organ, the horticultural noun's male gendering suggests gender ambiguity, while the Latin source, *ficus*, was used as a technical term for anal ruptures. In the context of the sodomites, the anal potential of the anatomical reference cannot be avoided. Cary adopts a strategy of indirection: 'the sinner rais'd his hands / pointed in mockery' (Cary, I, 215). The obscene gesture is muted in his translation, but dislocated to a footnote, where bibliographic reference enables the connoisseur to piece together an iconography of classical erotica to illustrate a range of possibilities for Dante's scene.³⁶ Blake's illustration offers a vertical frontal view of the heroic male body, his hands performing the gesture that Cary had shielded from the English reader.

Dante's account of the serpents approaching the blasphemer play up the analogy with the Laocoon. His allusion to Virgil invites the reader to consider Fucci as a version of the priest of Apollo on the shore of Troy. In repurposing a classical epic source to describe actions in the circles of hell, Dante emphasizes the incongruity between classical and medieval worlds. The parodic effect has ethical and canonical implications, as he moves the matter of Troy from the threshold of Limbo to the depth of bestial life, seeing the epic's scope for comic situations. Blake read the scene through Milton: his choice of attitude associates Vanni Fucci with Satan calling up his demons from book II of *Paradise Lost*. He drew this scene a number of times, starting with the emblematic image of 'Fire'

³⁵ Kenneth Gross, 'Infernal Metamorphoses: An Interpretation of Dante's "Counterpass"', *MLN*, 100:1 (January 1985), 42-69: 53.

³⁶ Francis Douce, *Illustrations of Shakespeare, and of Ancient Manners*, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1807), I, 492-9; Martin Myrone, 'William Blake's Sodomites', *Burning Bright: Essays in Honour of David Bindman*, ed. by Diana Dethloff, Tessa Murdoch, Kim Sloan, Caroline Elam (London: UCL Press, 2015), 136-145: 140-3.

he engraved for *The Gates of Paradise* (1793; c.1820), the watercolour illustrations to *Paradise Lost* in 1807-8 (Butlin 529.1, 536.1), and the tempera version at Petworth House (1805-1809). The parting of Satan's legs in the Petworth and Butts versions (Butlin 536.1) alludes, in reverse, to the elegant step of Apollo Belvedere. Depicted after the defeat of the Python, the earth dragon of Delphi, Apollo Belvedere marks the distinction between species, between Apollinean order and monsters. Apollo's mastery is only temporary in 'The Overthrow of Apollo and the Pagan Gods', Blake's illustration to Milton's *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (Butlin 538.3), where the Greek god and his serpent share the fate of idols in a narrative of Christian triumph. In the Dante illustration, Blake reverses the story, for the scene represents the impending attack of the serpents, while flames from above may be signalling the impending punishment of idols in a Christian world.³⁷ However, Blake's design communicates implausibility and incongruity. Unlike the strong entanglements of humans and beasts in the Laocoon group, the muscular detailing of the heroic male nude stands in opposition to the barely outlined, tenuous forms of the serpents. Juxtaposition indicates an impending action, but there is no sense that the serpents in Blake's illustration can pose a threat, let alone usher the transformation of man into beast.

The male nude associated with classical sculpture stands as the highest prototype of the human in Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789-1799), for which Blake provided engravings. How could such a figure exchange natures with the serpent? 'What figure has less physiognomy than the serpent?' asks Lavater. 'The judgement of God is imprinted on their flattened forehead'.³⁸ The juxtaposition of the heroic male nude and the serpent seems to function as an example of 'prodigious dissimilitude'. Elaborating on this physiognomical paradigm, Blake draws on a classical sculptural model to emphasize the plight of classical forms used as coordinates for the damned. He repurposes the visual type he had chosen for Milton's Satan as a supernatural exemplar from an outdated Classical Pantheon. Pseudomorphosis here enacts the dialectic of classical and christian, animal and human forms through a further, extreme identification. In a powerful application of Dante's counterpass, Blake inflicts the punishment by emphasizing the contrast between species, using the highest prototype of the human form to mark his degradation into the lowest exemplar of the animal species.

In Blake's next scene, the entwining of animal and human takes on more aggregated forms verging towards metamorphosis with the appearance of a fantastical hybrid creature, half man and half horse, the centaur Caucus enveloped in snakes and with a dragon on its back (Butlin 812.50, XXV 16-33).

³⁷ On 'Ophiolatreaia, or Worship of the serpent', see Jacob Bryant, *A New System: Or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, 2nd edn (London, 1775), II, 161, discussed by David Fallon, *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), Chapters 4 and 5.

³⁸ Lavater, 1789, II, 127-8.

Like Geryon and other monsters repurposed from classical myth, in the economy of Dante's *Inferno* Cacus is turned into a demon to guard a particular circle of hell, his hybrid form functioning as an allegory of a particular kind of sin. Vanquishing Cacus was one of the labours of Hercules, who was repurposed as a pseudomorphic figure of Christ in the middle ages.³⁹ Freed from the Hercules narrative, no longer kept in check by such a prototype of the heroic human form, Cacus here stands for a classical crossing of species, a symptom of incongruous composition, formal disorder, intermingling and confusion of species. Unlike Geryon, Blake's Cacus is a strong dynamic form; his animal human contours are drawn with a continuous outline that emphasizes his coherent organic form. The theme of the punishment of the thieves is represented by a mythological pet perched on his head and shoulder, a dragon spouting fire.

The violence of species intercourse is animated in the episode of *The Six-Footed Serpent attacking Agnolo Brunelleschi* (Butlin 812.51):

E un serpente con sei piè si lancia
 Dinanzi a l'uno, e tutto a lui s'appiglia.
 Co' piè di mezzo li avvinse la pancia
 E con li anterior le braccia prese;
 poi li addentò e l'una e l'altra guancia'
 li diretani a le cosce distese,
 e miseli la cosa tra 'mendue
 e dietro per le ren sù la ritese.
 Ellera abbarbicata mai non fue
 Ad alber sì, come l'orribil fiera
 Per l'altrui membra avviticchiò le sue.
 Poi s'appicciar, come di calda cera
 Fossero stati, e mischiar lor colore,
 né l'un né l'altro già pareva quel ch'era.
 Inf. XXV, 50-63.

A serpent with six feet
 Springs forth on one, and fastens full upon him:
 His midmost grasp'd the belly, a forefoot
 Seiz'd on each arm (while deep in either cheek
 He flesh'd his fangs); the hinder on the thighs
 Were spread, 'twixt which the tail inserted curl'd
 Upon the reins behind. Ivy ne'er clasp'd
 A dodder'd oak, as round the other's limbs
 The hideous monster intertwin'd his own.

³⁹ Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, 'Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art', *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, 4:2 (1933), 228-30: 228.

Then, as they both had been of burning wax,
 Each melted into other, mingling hues,
 That which was either now was seen no more.
 Cary, I, 218.

Limb after limb this scene of intermingling becomes more and more sexual. In his claim to outdo Ovid Dante invokes the parallel of Cadmus (*Inf.* XXV, 97; *Met.* IV, 563-603). While Dante takes on Cadmus's serpent fight and his subsequent transformation into a serpent, the sexual unfolding alludes to another Ovidian scene: the bisexual fusion of Hermaphroditus with the nymph Salmacis (*Met.* IV, 356-88).⁴⁰ Like a snake, like cuttlefish, like ivy, the tentacular limbs of Salmacis are entangled with the body of Hermaphroditus to the point where their close embrace fuses into a two-fold form: 'that which was either now was seen no more'. The temporal medium of language morphs the attack into a sexual scene. The visual characteristics of the animal are progressively lost in Dante's depiction of the creature's penetration from behind, then the power of the scene is domesticated through vegetal analogies whose actions are conveyed with technical verbs that take the reader into agricultural domains. The vaguer verb choices of Cary's translation undo Dante's agricultural distraction and thus reiterate and emphasize the sexual aspects of the scene.

How could Blake translate this transformation in the medium of watercolour? Reading the *Inferno* illustrations through Blake's poetic corpus, Albert Roe sees Brunelleschi as "'Man in his Spectre's power', that is wholly overwhelmed by the material aspect of his dual nature'.⁴¹ For Morton Paley representations of Cadmus's fight with the dragon offer Dante an iconographical starting point. The dragon form keeps the beast's attack in full focus, presenting the erotic potential of the scene as a bestial crossing of species. Unlike the verbal description, the boundary between animal and human is kept distinct, although the dragon's neck bite suggests an attempt to sever head from shoulders, thus undoing the point where mind and body connect. Paley also observes the form's analogy with a big human insect.⁴²

The beastly embrace with a figure turning into a dragon was an apocalyptic sign. If we could imagine the back of *The Six-Footed Serpent attaching Agnolo Brunelleschi* (Butlin 812:51), it would look something like *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (Butlin 519), an illustration of Revelations composed for Thomas Butts's Bible series around 1803-5. The dragon had a currency as an alchemical symbol of fire, a figuration of sulphur and mercury in an alchemical myth of creation through the separation

⁴⁰ Skulsky, 118; Gross, 'Infernal Metamorphoses', 61-62; Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, 183.

⁴¹ Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, 107.

⁴² Paley, *Traveller in the Evening*, 139, mentioning Ursula Hoff's reference to Hendrik Goltzius's *The Dragon Devouring the Fellows of Cadmus*.

of the elements.⁴³ As an image of bound energy striving to be released from its alchemical compound, the element of fire takes on the Christian iconography of Satan. His transformation into a 'dark Hermaphrodite' is marked by scales spreading across his skin in the second version of Blake's emblem book, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* (1793/1818).⁴⁴ In *The Four Zoas* both Orc and Urizen turn into hermaphroditic dragon forms.⁴⁵ This iconography marks the fallen form of the hermaphrodite, 'a hideous form / seen in the aggregate a Vast Hermaphroditic form', a sign of the separation of male and female emanations.⁴⁶ The human dragon assemblage is the degraded fallen counterpart of the utopian form fleshed out in Plato's *Symposium* and the 'multivalent gender potentiality for beings "in eternity" that is largely or entirely blocked in the present world'.⁴⁷

Metamorphosis marks the boundary between the arts for G.E. Lessing, who saw it as a quintessentially verbal form that visual images cannot translate. Thus it becomes a supreme test of the powers of painting and sculpture. So far Blake has approached the task of translating metamorphosis into visual form by arresting actions into a series of points in time, turning them into choreography, signifying change through the positions of bodies in space and attitudes that suggest a climactic moment. The subsequent metamorphosis, *Agnolo Brunelleschi Half Transformed by the Serpent*, tests the power of text and image (Butlin 812.52; Inf. XXV, 71-78):

Ogni primaio aspetto ivi era casso:
Due e nessun l'immagine perversa
Parea
Inf. XXV, 76-78.

The two heads now became
One, and two figures blended in one form
Appear'd, where both were lost.
Cary, I, 219.

Comparative physiognomy identifies character through the emblematic resemblance of human and animal profiles placed next to one another on the same page. By contrast, here animal and human features merge, forcing the contours of the human form to the point of loss of identity. This 'perverted

⁴³ Edward Larrissy, "'Self-Imposition", Alchemy, and the Fate of the 'Bound' in Later Blake', in Steve Clark and David Worrall, *Historicizing Blake* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 59-72: 64.

⁴⁴ Larrissy, 64-67.

⁴⁵ *FZ*, VIII, p. 101, 7-20 and p. 115, 23-28, 36, 40, 44-45; E 373, 380-2; G.A. Rosso, 'The Last Strumpet: Harlotry and Hermaphroditism in Blake's Rahab', in Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly, eds, *Blake, Gender and Culture* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 28-30.

⁴⁶ *FZ*, VIII, p. 104, 19-20, E 377; Hobson, *Blake and Homosexuality*, 167-9.

⁴⁷ Christopher Z. Hobson, 'Blake and the Evolution of Same-Sex Subjectivity', in *Queer Blake*, 34.

image' pushes the boundaries of identity beyond caricature. In his section on animals Lavater expresses skepticism for Giovan Battista della Porta's fanciful juxtapositions of animal and human profiles: what might Plato and his dog have in common?⁴⁸ Yet bestiality is an acceptable marker of the human in other contexts. In a section on the measurements of the skull as a physiognomical indicator of character, Lavater praises Peter Camper's work in comparative anatomy and compares the Nomad Tartar to a monkey.⁴⁹ Later in the text, Lavater's volume includes Henry Fuseli's 'Three Heads from Dante's Inferno' to represent the bestial qualities of the damned by forcing their facial traits to evoke animalistic features.⁵⁰ Camper made his case for the evolutionary continuum of species through juxtapositions of skull types, arranging specimens into sequences that helped identify the emergence of the human form through the gradual transition from ape to Apollo. As David Bindman points out, 'Lavater, by contrast with Camper, offers not a series of different species or races, but a frog that evolves by stages into an ideal human being'.⁵¹ These studies of the gradual transformation of one form into another open up formal possibilities for thinking about how to transform a serpent into a human.

While the transformation of a reptile into a human was a common analogy to understand the metamorphic journey of the foetus, Blake's experiment in bestial metamorphosis consists in turning that trajectory backwards. Instead of Satan's 'foul descent' into the sinuous form of the serpent, here we see the dragon incarnated. Through a form of demonic possession, the reptile forces its way through the human body and puts pressure on its figure. Imagining the internal structure of the human body was part of the artist's training, which is captured by the pedagogical form of the *Écorché*, a sculptural model whose skin has been flayed to reveal the system of organs, muscles, and tendons that lie beneath the body's outer layer. The artist's work would consist in representing the outer surface in such a way as to convey the volume enclosed within its lines.⁵² In his discussion of proportion Hogarth engages in an exercise that involves changing the proportions of the male nude found in celebrated classical sculptures: juxtapose the airy form of Mercury with the unwieldy weight of Atlas, add and cast off bulk from their respective forms, and the two sculptures will reach the ideal median form of the Antinous.⁵³ This process of transformation helps understand Blake's metamorphosis of Brunelleschi.

⁴⁸ Lavater, II, 108.

⁴⁹ Lavater, II, 160, 162.

⁵⁰ Thomas Holloway after Henry Fuseli, *Three Heads from Dante's Inferno*, British Museum, 1863, 0509.86, see Lavater, II, 290, issued in Part XX, published in 1791.

⁵¹ David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 201-11.

⁵² Hogarth, *Analysis*, 44, 58, 60

⁵³ Hogarth, *Analysis*, 69.

Exceeding the excess of a Hercules, Blake's Brunelleschi pushes the human figure to the point of impending formal disintegration. The reptile fights to express its hybrid identity constrained within a human body bag; the multiplied volume of the multifarious double being forces its outlines, whether to mould them from within, or to break through its boundaries. From god to titan to monster, the form swells out of proportion, loses the harmony of its parts and their fitness for motion to such an extent that the new assemblage subverts its human character.⁵⁴ The resulting human hybrid has excessive musculature, very tenuous and barely visible genitalia, parted rather than joined limbs, scales spreading through the skin. The slightly turned attitude reveals the slimmer and sinuous form of a serpent tail attached to the back at scapular level, evoking a misplaced umbilical cord. The reduced dragon wings suggest a process of becoming in which the human body bag progressively absorbs the reptile into the new bestial hybrid, expanding its outer surface to encompass the voluminous body as if emulating the way serpents digest other animals. The reptile fights back from within the constraints of its new human body, trying to shape its outer surface by exerting pressure from within. Blake's experiment in the deformation of the human body offers a grotesque inversion of birthing and a monstrous version of the pregnant body. At what point does the swelling of a human body cease to express a human character?

After this experiment in animal incarnation, Blake translates into visual form what Dante considered his boldest experiment in metamorphosis, one that will reduce Lucan and Ovid to silence (Inf. XXV, 94-7):

Ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte
 Non trasmutò sì ch'amendue le forme
 A cambiar lor matera fosser pronte.
 Inf. XXV, 102-4.

For never face to face
 Two natures thus transmuted did he sing,
 Wherein both shapes were ready to assume
 The other's substance.
 Cary, I, 220.

Dante's double act involves two simultaneous and reverse metamorphoses: his lines tell of the loss of tail, of skins softening or hardening into a rind, of arms retracting into the arm pits, of the respective elongation and shortening of the lower limbs to the point of becoming 'the part that man conceals, which in the wretch / was cleft in twain' (Inf. XXV, 103-135). While Dante employs the analogy of the snail's horns to describe the human ears absorbed into the emerging serpent head, Cary adds a Miltonic turn as the human form acquires

⁵⁴ Hogarth, *Analysis*, 61, 63, 66.

a 'sharpen'd visage'. For Cary and the English reader Milton's postlapsarian transformation of the demons into snakes mediates Dante and his classical predecessors.⁵⁵ Dante's 'face to face' transformation steps up the challenge of metamorphosis by mastering the simultaneous account of a simultaneous and reverse transformation in which animal and human exchange body shapes. This virtuoso performance gives a strong sense of the radical instability of the human form in the bestial states of Hell.

How could Blake recreate this experiment in visual form? If *Brunelleschi Half Transformed* captures a middle point in the intermingling and crossing of species, the last two illustrations of serpent metamorphoses attempt to translate Dante's simultaneous transformation into two successive scenes in which human and animal form exchange shape. In *The serpent attacking Buoso Donati* (Butlin 812.53; Inf. XXV, 79-93) the exchange of man and serpent is marked by their shared blueish black and grey washes, which are carefully applied to reveal the muscular volumes of the human form, whereas they tend to convey the serpent by linear strokes that are less worked up into volumes. The following illustration has the impossible task to represent a double transformation, which is summed up in its complex double title: *Buoso Donati Transformed into a Serpent; Francesco De' Cavalcanti Retransformed from a Serpent into a Man* (Butlin 812.54; Inf. XXV, Inf. XXV, 103-135). This scene translates Dante's simultaneous metamorphosis by representing the two characters fixed in the instant when each has reached full definition in its respective species. Blake uses grey and blue, black, and faint red washes to express the sculptural qualities of the heroic male body, and pen and ink for its outlines; the winding form of the snake almost recedes in the background as a sinuous serpentine bounding line traced in pencil and ink, unfinished. While it would be hard to grasp the simultaneous transformation of man and serpent in this scene, their respective metamorphoses can be inferred from reading the last two illustrations as part of a narrative sequence. If painting can represent actions by the position of bodies in space, the exchanged positions of man and serpent in these last two illustrations invite us to read them as representing two moments in the same action in which the animal and human forms metamorphose into each other. The dynamic attitudes of each figure suggest that species are reversible, shapes incessantly shifting between animal and human character.

Blake does not represent the last exchange in Dante's serpent metamorphoses, a serpent-shaped soul leaving the scene in its bestial character:

L'anima ch'era fiera divenuta,
Suffolando si fugge per la valle,
E l'altro dietro a lui parlando sputa.

⁵⁵ Cary, I, 221, footnotes PL X, 511 as a source for the image; see also Ovid, *Met.* IV, 572-603 and Lucan, *Phars.* IX, 700ff.

Inf. XXV, 136-8.

The soul, transform'd into the brute, glides off,
Hissing along the vale, and after him
The other talking splutters.
Cary, I, 221-2.

Dante's parting gesture is to reduce the human form to its most distinctive essence as a soul, then to incarnate it into the bestial skin of the serpent. Such is the state of the circle of the thieves.

'Mutare e Trasmutare': Fluctuating Forms and the Unsteady Ballast of Translation

Così vid'io la settima zavorra
Mutare e trasmutare
Inf. XXV, 142-4.

So saw I fluctuate in successive change
The unsteady ballast of the seventh hold.
Cary, I, 222.

Translation changes the nature of metamorphosis. Reversible transhuman change becomes a matter of point of view in Dante's concluding eye-witness statement. Cary's translation reads the bestial metamorphoses of the *Commedia* through metaphors about the volatile state of substances, drawing on mechanics and gravity to convey instability of form. 'Unsteady ballast' compares Dante's incessantly reversible transformations to a ship that may capsize. 'Fluctuate' also draws on nautical experience to convey the unsteady motion of its inner parts, evoking the movement of waves to suggest an alternating change that stretches the possibilities of form. Cary's translation imparts an expectation of order on Dante's text. His choices silence Dante's predominant point: in 'mutare e trasmutare' ("mutate and transmutate") the repetition of the root and the addition of the suffix indicate repeated and destabilizing acts of crossing. Thinking about 'transhuman change' involves more than the translation conveys.

In confronting Dante's metamorphoses Blake could figure out the distinctive characters of a species. Drawing on classical and medieval hybrids he could think about the coexistence of disparate identities congealed in their separate forms within one figure. From natural history he learnt to think about transformation through the life cycle of insects. From comparative anatomy he worked out how to imagine a series of specimens ordered in a sequence that tracked intermediate forms in the shift from animal to human, from frog to Apollo, from Atlas to Antinous. The practical knowledge of the artist taught him

to think through bounding lines and forms filled from the inside to the skin surface, bulged out of proportion, until their distinctive character is lost. Different divisions of knowledge identified specific orders of being, isolating the coordinates of change within their respective taxonomies, and marking out the distinctive characters that stabilized specimens as disciplinary objects.⁵⁶ However, thinking about transformation meant breaking through emerging divisions of knowledge, finding overlapping characteristics that questioned their categories, forms that escaped or forced their grids. In repeating, inflecting, and extending the verb 'mutate', the 'transmutating' forms that shape Dante's 'transhuman change' offer Blake a language with which to question and transgress the boundaries between species.

⁵⁶ On 'the dispersal of metamorphosis across the disciplines' and the forms of 'poetic thinking' that preceded 'the gradual institution of disciplines which split wolf from werewolf', see Susan Wiseman, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 13, 206.