



Frontispiece. Robert Rauschenberg. *Canto III: The Vestibule of Hell, the Opportunists.* Illustration for Dante's *Inferno* (1959–60). Transfer drawing, torn and pasted paper, watercolor, pencil, and wash. 14 5/8 x 11 3/8" (36.7 x 29.1 cm) (slightly irregular). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously. © 1996 Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph © 1996 The Museum of Modern Art.

Passage through Hell

*Modernist Descents,
Medieval Underworlds*

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Preface

How do you illustrate Dante's *Commedia*? Robert Rauschenberg suggests a strategy of reflection: his silkscreen montage of canto 3 of *Inferno* includes the photograph of a skyscraper with the inscription from the Gate of Hell superimposed along with the word "WELCOME." Reflected through the transfer process of Rauschenberg's silkscreening, theological certainty is translated into the infernal irony of capitalist society. It is a no less ominous greeting than Dante's, for Rauschenberg's *Inferno* is populated by images clipped out of the the late fifties: Nixon, Kennedy, and Adlai Stevenson, soldiers in gas masks, Olympic wrestlers, astronauts, and televisions; the character of Dante is a man with a towel wrapped around his waist, Everyman measured up by a height scale in a series of advertisements for golf clubs. We can call this the beginning of postmodernism, pop culture taking over the classics, Dante for the video era; but Rauschenberg is an equally relevant starting point for positing a more complex, more contextualized appropriation of the weight of the past accumulated behind the façade of the Gate of Hell we see flattened onto a skyscraper.

By suggesting in the *Thirty-Four Drawings for Dante's "Inferno"* (1959-64) that illustration—an illustration moreover based solely on a montage of borrowed images periodically scribbled over as in a graphite rubbing—is as significant an art form as Dante's poetry, Rauschenberg did not simply support a pop art *reductio ad absurdum* of high culture. Rather, he implicitly claimed that such an apparently parasitic medium was able accurately to reflect the textual complexity of its model within the entirely alien context of America in the fifties. Just as Dante's *terza rima* introduced trinitarian structure into the very fabric of the poem, so Rauschenberg's transfer process—in which a collage of printed images is transferred (in reverse image) onto a flat surface—introduced structures of ideology into the visual texture of the illustration. Pop art prided itself on flattening all levels of art onto a single plane of aesthetic value; Rauschenberg flattened contemporary society into the system of Dante's

hell as mirror images of itself. So, for example, the inscriptions on the Gate of Hell are reversed: reflection changes meaning without changing anything else.

Hell is the place of those who in life chose *not* to reflect (as Dante's Vergil puts it, those who have lost "the good of the intellect" [*Inf.* 3.118]). Rauschenberg's technique of illustration decodes the signs of hell, representing Dante's imagery by reflecting the raw material of contemporary society onto a silkscreen. The doctrines of the death of the artist (Rauschenberg strictly delimits his creative control over the work) and the illusory nature of truth (society is simply reflected) are already here, but allegorically, as products of their culture. Dante and his oeuvre are not the father to be killed in the art of the son but a site for reflection on the mediation between history and myth, a metaphorical structure within which to compile a critical inventory of contemporary culture. If meaning can be generated out of reflection on the material of present-day society, so can an authorial voice emerge by reflecting the disappearance of the artist within the work, and so an image of truth can emerge from the artistic reflection of its negation.

This is a key lesson of Dante's hell: critical reflection on the loss of hope engenders hope, immersion in images of falsehood reveals truth, descent leads to return. The distinction lies in Vergil's "ben de l'intelletto"—in the conversion undergone by the pilgrim. Conversion is the narrative structure of the mythic descent to the underworld, and Dante's *Inferno* has immeasurably conditioned its modern reception. Rauschenberg's drawings remind us of the historical complexity that the *Commedia*'s mediation interjects into any attempt to give a simple reading of this myth. When he reminds us of the obvious, "[Dante] was the hero *and* the author, the man who made the world he described," Rauschenberg stresses both the allure and the contradictions of the descent to the underworld.¹ On the one hand, by going into the past, the artist recreates whatever has gone before her. On the other hand, in order to validate the recreated history as myth, the artist must represent herself as divinely authorized. These are the stakes, I argue, that persist in determining the secular translation of divine authorization: the artist must either elevate the aesthetic sphere beyond the realm of artifact or remove the artifact beyond the aesthetic sphere.

As mere illustrations, however, Rauschenberg's drawings invert this structure: they remain faithful to the narrative and textuality of the *Inferno* while paradoxically rendering it nearly unrecognizably modern.

¹ Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of His Time* (New York, 1980), 160.

Rather than the myth of creation, Rauschenberg plays on its converse, the myth of reflection: the myth that his drawings affect neither the aesthetic nor the artifact, but that they precisely mirror Dante's poem in their content and precisely mirror society in their form (transferred images out of magazines and newspapers). They remain highly self-conscious of their mythmaking and remind us that Dante's text may be equally so; they stress the double meaning of *reflection*, asking that we reflect on the myth of unmediated reflection, the myth that translation, illustration, compilation, and allusion involve the unmediated transference of meaning.

What follows is a reevaluation of the *descensus ad inferos*, the descent to the underworld, in medieval and modern literature. Although structured around a repeated motif, it is not a motif study; even less would it claim to be a history of the genre of the *descensus*. Rather, it explores the means by which motifs are constantly revised and transformed, and influences constantly rewritten and configured, how history is made into myth and myth into history. Classical and medieval literature are interpreted through the lens of their construction in and by modernism, and modernism is viewed anew in light of a medieval model freed of that construction. The book follows a series of paths back and forth between modern and medieval in order to trace the reciprocal effects of each descent on its past and on its future. It maintains that Louis-Ferdinand Céline's reading of Dante revises our reception of the latter, and equally that Christine de Pizan's reading of Dante transforms our reception of Virginia Woolf. This is particularly the case with Dante, the book's center of gravity, the nadir of its descent, for he takes what had become the Christian structure of *descensus* and gives it the form in which it would be legible to the historical exigencies of modernism. He provides the vehicle whereby the world may be remade and described in the same moment of descent through the underworld: the autobiographical voice, the voice that can say simultaneously "this is what I see as history" and "this is what I am creating as myth."

Here is the transcendent narrative of the *descensus ad inferos*; Rauschenberg reminds us that at the same time, there is another, nonlinear, non-narrative movement documented by the work of illustration, compilation, commentary, translation, allusion. In the drawing for *Inferno* 25, where the thieves, who in life stole the substance of others, are punished by having constantly to steal and then guard their own forms from others, he illustrates the transformations with a progression of images from left to right: a photo of a man, a technical drawing of a hermit crab, and a lizard. A space is created for the illustrator within the supposedly unmediated transference from text to image. The hermit crab has no shell of its own

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but makes its home in whatever abandoned shell it may find. Just so, the illustrator, along with fellow practitioners of marginal activities, moves into the abandoned shell of Dante, picks up the cast-off material of society like a beachcomber in order to adorn the newly discovered home. The thief's hellish punishment is recreated as the illustrator's artistic strategy. Needless to say, the illustration also points back to the presence of the same strategies in Dante's text; for does not the poet preface his virtuoso descriptions of transformation with a gesture toward the predecessors he will efface with his creation: "Be silent Lucan . . . be silent Ovid" (25.94-97)?

The figures of Dante and Vergil are present at the top of the drawing, encased in scuba diving gear out of a sporting goods advertisement. Like the hermit crab's shell, the suits give protection, in this case from the depths to which they have descended in the eighth circle. This is the suit of creative authority, for diving deeply into the creation of a master narrative; the illustrator, who merely moves along the shore, describes what is already at hand. Writers at work in marginal genres or with the motif in a partial manner—in this book we see the examples of Bernard Silvestris, Céline, Christine, and Woolf—appear to refuse or disallow the deep descent; like Rauschenberg, they prefer the myth of the shore dweller, the commentator, the one who reflects.

Whether it is the creation or the description of the narrative that is stressed, the same issues of myth and history, descent and return, rewriting as remaking are involved. The narrative does not explicitly change—it remains the myth of descent to the underworld. What does change is the history that determines what is to be retrieved by the descent. And there is a final element that is perhaps the most compelling: the undertow, the retrospective recreation of the purportedly eternal myth that occurs every time the historical object of descent changes. By telling us what it is looking for, the autobiographical voice simultaneously recreates its past as the place in which such a thing could have come into being.

In Chapter 1 I establish the necessary context for a reading of the descent to the underworld and the autobiographical voice as they are constructed between the poles of myth and history, past and present. The *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* form the core of an introductory exposition of the descent in antiquity and in contemporary criticism; Augustine and Bernard rewrite that exposition within a Christian framework, revealing in each other the intertwining myths of divine authority and of simple reflection, each constituting itself as history by mythifying its predecessor as opposite. The subsequent example of Céline in Chapter 2 problematizes the ambiguous moral and political stance of the descent, arguing that its

efficacy as a device for historicization is inseparable from its efficacy for mythification. Consequently, any reading of the allegory of conversion and descent to the underworld must account for both effects together. In Chapter 3 the pairing of Peter Weiss and Dante addresses the modernist construction of the descent from the vantage points of hindsight and foresight. The postwar writer Weiss outlines the contours of a modernist Dante by casting him as part of the same *entre-deux-guerres* past to which he must descend in order to rewrite a present that is no longer modernist. Once removed from a modernist context, Dante's negotiation of myth and history as a tension between poetry and Scripture becomes legible in a form unavailable to the polarizations of a stubbornly modernist critical reading. The pairing of Christine and Woolf in Chapter 4 suggests further possibilities of the *descensus ad inferos* as a site for critical reflection on the transmission of the past. Christine's creation of an authorial voice out of opposition to a monolithically constructed Dantean tradition of descent helps decipher Woolf's staging of her equivocal role within the traditionally received critical accounts of modernism. In Chapter 5 I propose Walter Benjamin's work on Paris, allegory, and contemporary literature as starting point for a reading of modernism able to account for the issues raised by the previous chapters. In the concluding chapter I address the implications of this reading for present-day literature and criticism, focusing on recent work by Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott. The postwar mythicization of modernism as its past suggests that postmodernism is less a historical development of the last decades than the flip side of the modernist master narrative. Consequently, modernism must itself be reinterpreted in light of such a simultaneous, not sequential dialectic, and postwar literature must be accounted for as something other than simply postmodern.

In *Passage through Hell* I attempt to escape from the morass of competing claims to formalism on the one hand and historical relevance on the other. I argue that what we need now are strategies of reading that establish unforeseen connections and associations. Fundamentally a means for negotiating the antinomies of the past, the descent to the underworld suggests ways of incorporating insights of recent theory without dissolving the literary text altogether. This is the Vergilian image of "rousing the world below": furious at Aeneas's audacious descent to the underworld, successful return, and arrival at Latium, and seeing the Trojan leader now armed with everything necessary for the conquest of Italy and establishment of the Roman empire, the goddess Juno has lost the patience to go through proper diplomatic channels in order to petition Jove to change his plans. Instead, she exclaims, "If I can sway no heavenly hearts, I'll rouse

the world below."² She summons the fury Allecto to wreak havoc all around. Following on the destined, eschatological march of history embodied in Aeneas and his descent to the underworld in book 6, Juno's fury presents a counterblast of protest that, if not able to change the end result, is instrumental in obstructing, and thus determining, the narrative leading to it. This is the story of the last six books of the *Aeneid*. It is no accident that Freud placed these verses as the epigraph to his epoch-making modernist text *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), suggesting the realm of the unconscious as a power to be reckoned with in the master narratives above. Here is the compelling double valence of the topos of the underworld: it encompasses within the inflections of its metaphors both the master narratives and their countercurrents, both the will to transcendence and the movement toward entropy. The pages that follow plot this double movement at work within the antinomies of modernism and the Middle Ages and suggest the means for interpreting it.

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² "Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo." Virgil, trans. H. R. Fairclough, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 7.312; Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1990), 7.423-26.

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