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# A DIVINE GRAPHIC COMEDY

*Notes on the History of Dante's Adaptations in English*

**ABSTRACT:** The *Divine Comedy* is one of the most famous and timeless narrative poems. It is still being translated into numerous languages and inspiring movie adaptations (from Pasolini to Greenaway), pop and rock music, advertisement, videogames, and graphic novels. The transformations the text has undergone throughout the years reveal several different interpretations of Dante's work and of its meaning. This essay traces a brief history of visual adaptations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the Anglo-American tradition. The last part is devoted to postmodern influences upon contemporary graphic works (in particular, Birk and Sanders' *Dante's Inferno* and Seymour Chwast's *Dante's Divine Comedy A Graphic Adaptation*) and to how these deserve their place in the history of the visual reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

**KEYWORDS:** Dante, Divine Comedy, Adaptation

The translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* into images is a long-established practice, from the oldest dated and illuminated exemplar of the Trivulzio funds (cod. Triv. 1080) written in 1337/1338 to the postmodern visual 'translations,' and even the contemporary graphic novels and comics. Unfortunately, as Lucia Battaglia Ricci underlines in her precious volume *Dante per immagini. Dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri* (2018), there is no exhaustive record of this tradition, leaving the history of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* fragmented and discontinuous (Battaglia Ricci 2018, xv). Most critics focus on Dante's literary translations, on their adequacy and accuracy, or on their 'unfaithfulness' to the source text, leaving a void with regard to how Dante's work, filtered by a variety of forms and contexts, continues to reach us in unexpected ways.

This relationship and still productive dialogue between Dante and posterity is possible because the *Divine Comedy* retains its visual and visionary power and its universality thanks to Dante's highly poetic voice, his astonishing creative power, and preciseness in describing the human soul and the body politics through his great "economy of words" (Eliot 2015, 712). The economy of style leads him to that attention to detail that, in Eliot's words, is essential to the creation of those *visual images* in which lies the *Divine Comedy's* power to make the reader feel the poet's ideas: "[Dante's] struggle to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange,

something universal and impersonal.” (Eliot 2015, 246). Eliot’s remarks on Dante’s *visual imagination* are the starting point for the brief history of the contemporary visual reception of Dante’s *Inferno* in the anglophone world that I outline here. Lucia Battaglia Ricci has divided the history of ‘visual translations’ or ‘visualizations’ of the *Divine Comedy* into two main categories: illustrated *Commedia* and picture books, and paintings or artworks. These two main categories imply two different kinds of addressee: the former is a kind of visual translation realized on the basis of the artist’s knowledge of the source text and, for that reason, a dialogue with Dante’s original and text is always established and images are always associated with the text; while the latter are autonomous works of art which assume a competent viewer who has to know the *Comedy* in order to decode them correctly. The scholar calls these two categories respectively: *cohabitations* and *relocation* (Battaglia Ricci 2018, xvii). While in the interplay between *cohabitations* and *relocations* she examines the re-readings each century has made of the *Divine Comedy*, I focus here on how the contemporary ‘visualizations’ lead to a merging of the two categories and, in so doing, address a new audience of viewers and readers able to recall – not through the mediation of the source text but thanks to the interplay between the artists’ word and visual ‘rewritings’ – that impressive repertoire of enduring human traits (Casadei 2021, 11) that the *Divine Comedy* depicts.

As regards the British reception of Dante, it comes as no surprise that in England (after British humanism had espoused Boccaccio and Petrarch rather than Dante and the Renaissance), where the fear of Dante had led to his falling into a sort of oblivion (Boitani 2011), Dante re-emerges at the end of the eighteenth century thanks to a painter, Joshua Reynolds. The latter’s famous painting *Count Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon* (1773) was the catalyst for what has been called *Ugolino fever* and paved the way for the first unabridged literary translation of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>1</sup> From Joshua Reynold’s *Count Ugolino* onwards, the history of the literary translations of the *Divine Comedy* becomes strictly linked with its visual translations.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in the nineteenth century the *Divine Comedy* relocates from its ‘house’ of words to its ‘house’ of images assuming a competent viewer able to access his or her cultural memory. A century later, the Texan artist Robert Rauschenberg gets back to the idea of relocating Dante but at the same time lets him cohabit with a text, a novel sort of ‘third path.’

In 1958 Rauschenberg embarked upon the project of creating thirty-four illustrations for the thirty-four cantos of Dante’s *Inferno*. He spent two years working on his ‘combines’ in complete solitude in a “shack that sticks out over the water”<sup>3</sup> in Florida.

<sup>1</sup> See Bugliani-Knox 1997; Wallace 2007.

<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, one need only think of the drawings by Füssli, Flaxman, and Blake of Ugolino in the Torre della Fame and of the Paolo and Francesca story.

<sup>3</sup> “Dear Maxime, I wanted you to know that I finished the 34 (last) canto last nite [sic] and thank you for likeing [sic] the ones you saw. It was an exciting boost. I’ve just been working very hard. Live in a shack

Soon after his return to New York, his Dante drawings were displayed at the Leo Castelli Gallery (on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1960), where each plate was accompanied by a summary of the canto written by Michael Sonnabend (Krcma 2017, 23). The intention of ‘illustrating’ the *Commedia* and of creating an immediate link between the illustrations and what we have called ‘the cultural memory’ of the viewer was manifest. The role of the viewer is, in fact, of primary importance in Rauschenberg’s artwork, his art ‘combines’ common objects (such as chairs, pillows, or stuffed animals) with graphic signs, paint, and watercolor: “this refuse collected from the streets of New York was Rauschenberg’s ‘visual archive’, ‘his public art of collective memory’.” (Francini 2011, 323). A ‘collective memory’ which he creates through a process of collaboration “among the various elements, between artist and, notably, between all of the above and viewers.” (Hunters in Francini 2011, 324) The language he used to ‘translate’ Dante has been called “polysemic language” because it is “abstract and referential at the same time” (Francini 2011, 325); echoing the Dantean language in the final vision of the third canticle, in which we see *res* and *verba* linked in a non-rational logic dimension but, rather, by analogies and symmetries in a two-way movement, from the idea to its last actual manifestation and vice-versa (Casadei 2010, 64-65). Various registers and worlds clash together in Rauschenberg’s vision: “canonical authority and popular culture, ancient and modern, Christian and secular, structural order and improvised contingency” (Krcma 2017, 34) are found in the same plate and, in a way, they represent the artist’s effort to “make whole what has been smashed.” (Benjamin 2003, 392).

This attempt to recreate the unity of the *Commedia* and, in so doing, to create a brand-new ‘whole’ in a pop vision also underlies Tom Phillips’ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Inferno. A Verse Translation by Tom Phillips with Images & Commentary* (1983). While Rauschenberg chose to accompany each drawing with Sonnabend’s summary, in order to encourage “the viewer towards a readerly engagement” (Krcma 2017, 23), Phillips, twenty years later, produced an *artist book*, in which he did everything himself (the translation, the illustrations, and the scheme of the three volumes). Phillips explicitly chooses to dialogue with Dante and with the whole tradition of visual translation that separates him from Dante (with particular reference to Doré). He uses collages and balloons to produce a divine pop comedy where the vision of and the world described by the Florentine poet are mixed up with the icons and visual imagination of our contemporary world.<sup>4</sup> Phillips uses a heterogeneous

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that sticks out over the water. Lots of sun and slosh. I’ll be home soon. Love, Bob.” A postcard to Maxime Groffsky, 12 November 1960, in Krcma 2017, 23.

<sup>4</sup> In 1990, Tom Phillips embarked on a TV series project with the director Peter Greenaway, *Inferno* (A TV Dante) where his illustrations would become electronic and linked with photographs of real landscapes and actual events, inspiring in the TV viewer unexpected associations between the Dantean imagination and our current life and reality. Their aim was to produce a video version of the first canticle

variety of materials from his everyday world: postcards, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc. and, in this way, he shows us a sort of journey which is his personal journey both through life and through Dante's cosmos. Although, like Rauschenberg, he uses a set of materials from his own world, he does not create an alternative history as Rauschenberg does by referring to contemporary politics, but he, as Ciccuto points out, searches for "internal meanings" in order to bring "to light features of the original." (Ciccuto 2021, 9).<sup>5</sup> It is interesting here to note how Phillips links the language of the comics to Dante, in particular, in the panels XXII/2 and XXII/4 where the reference to American comics is explicit. In XXII/2 the British artist reads Dante as a *war reporter* and chooses to use a page layout typical of comics in which the image of a devil (*Inf. XXI*) is positioned at the center. Most of the elements are taken from «Combat» comics: the march, the assault, the retreat described by Dante in the first lines of the canto are 'translated' into comic images of a trench war with soldiers, helmets and firearms. Dante's own recollection of the battle of Campaldino (1289) has been turned into the contemporary viewer's memory of World War II. In XXII/4, Phillips' indebtedness to comics becomes crystal-clear. The artist reproduces William Blake's watercolor of the quarrel between the devils Alchino and Calcabrina, who fall into pitch (*Inf. XXII*), using the typical comic style, and, through the help of Paul Tupling, creates a panel in which the two devils resemble Superman and Batman clashing with one another and producing a loud "Shooooom".<sup>6</sup> In this way he creates a link between the *Commedia* and comics. In line with Lichtenstein's, Warhol's and Ramos's "appropriation of superhero, war, and romance comics for their Pop Art" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 27), Phillips transforms comic heroes – at that time still associated mostly with younger readers – into a piece of fine art aimed at an educated viewer, thus paving the way for adaptations of the *Divine Comedy* in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

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of the *Divine Comedy*, a sort of video journey through Dante's netherworld. In the project, the soundtrack plays an important role: being juxtaposed to the framed images, it forms a sort of contemporary commentary to the text.

<sup>5</sup> A similar strategy is employed in Rachel Owen's artwork (Illustration for Dante's *Inferno*), where the artist tries to create a juxtaposition of Dante and the viewer of her images and of her, the artist, and the pilgrim's guide. She achieves her goals on the one hand through the removal of the figure of Dante from her pictures to create a first-person viewing experience and, on the other hand, by assimilating Virgil and Beatrice into her own self-portrait. See Bowe 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "This image takes as its starting point not Doré's often plundered illustrations but Blake's eccentric version, and develops the latter's naive comic-book characteristics? : SHOOOOM! is of course an inversion of the standard WOOOOSH!", <https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/shop/from-dantes-inferno/item/6327-canto-xxii-4-fighting-devils>

<sup>7</sup> In particular, if we embrace the definition of comics McCloud gives us in *Understanding Comics*: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, 9), where letters and words are "images arranged in deliberate sequence" as well as drawings. That is to say, the boundaries between comics and graphic adaptations are blurred since both are examples of sequential art (Eisner, 1985).

Phillips' and Rauschenberg's legacy affects reworkings of Dante in our contemporary world. In fact, it seems to me that the never-ending web of 'postmodern' quotations and allusions and the cohabitation between the verbal and the visual have engendered two fine works of adaptation of *The Divine Comedy*: the three-volume *Dante's Divine Comedy* (2004, 2005) by Birk and Sanders and *Dante's Divine Comedy. A Graphic Adaptation* (2010) by Seymour Chwast. Both, in line with Rauschenberg and Phillips, blend the high culture to which the *Commedia* is usually linked and *mass culture* (Baronti Marchiò 2014), addressing a sort of in-between audience of readers and viewers who are neither highly cultivated nor wholly unversed. Birk and Chwast rework the postmodern lesson in two very different ways. The former revives the typical Pop Art transformation of popular culture into something new and significantly different and uses everyday objects, motel signs or advertising boards as "statements on society, indicators of the emptiness of America, signifiers of the banality of culture" (Baetens and Frey 2015, 42). Seymour Chwast, on the other hand, produces a much less 'disturbing' book, which draws on a 1930s America depicted in his peculiar *push pin* style, and the web of quotes he creates is not intended as a critique on our contemporary world but a refined, humorous take on the graphic novel genre.

In my opinion, they succeed in producing fine art-products for mature readers<sup>8</sup> which deserve their place in the history of the visual reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

In analyzing these two graphic adaptations, I embrace Baetens and Frey's starting point, namely that the *graphic novel* (and graphic adaptations in a broader sense) is both a genre and a medium, and as a consequence I take into consideration the crucial role played by form, content, and publication format (Baetens and Frey 2015, 8).

Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders<sup>9</sup> produced a beautiful edition of the *Commedia*, in which the illustrations depict a contemporary urban hell. Birk organizes his panels in single-page format; each is centered on a page parallel to the text adaptation, in line with

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<sup>8</sup>In the twenty-first century, the *Commedia* has been 'remediated' (Baronti Marchiò 2014, 121) through a variety of literary genres and media, thus epitomizing a perfect example of a never-ending debate with the past which produces a fertile dynamic between "immutability and change" (Baronti Marchiò 2014, 125). As mentioned above, the number of rewritings in the anglophone world is vast and includes numerous wonderful pieces of work, from John Agard and Satoshi Kitamura's *The Young Inferno* (2008) to Patrick Waterhouse and Walter Hutton's *The Divine Comedy: A Natural History* (2010), and many comics, as for example Jimbo's trilogy (1988, 1997, 2004) by Gary Panter, Gary Reed's *Sin Eternal. Return to Dante's Inferno* (2016), and Joseph Lanzara's *Dante's Inferno* (2016). I will not take account of these interesting adaptations since they are addressed to a younger or less cultivated audience and, as a consequence, often lose the complexity of the source text, demoting Dante to a 'brand'.

<sup>9</sup>Sandow Birk is a painter and visual artist. In 1999 he was awarded a Getty Fellowship for painting, which was followed by a City of Los Angeles (COLA) Fellowship in 2001. He was an artist in residence at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC in 2007 and at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2008. Marcus Sanders is a contributing editor to *Surfing* magazine, and assisted on *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*.

the tradition of illustrated editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In fact, referring in particular to the first volume, *Dante's Inferno*, the authors establish right from the beginning "an ironic relationship with the austere Doré engravings" (de Rooy 2017, 102). Together with Dante, Doré is thus the reference point, for Birk and Sanders in their actualization and vivification of *The Divine Comedy*. The content matter is 'adult' and the intended readers are middle-aged people, stuck in-between adulthood and a sense of nostalgia for their previous life; in fact, the pilgrim is a young American man with a sweatshirt and torn jeans who "about halfway through the course of" his "pathetic life" wakes up and finds himself "in a stupor in some dark place" and is "not sure how" he "ended up there", guessing "I had taken a few wrong turns." The *dark wood* has become a not well-defined *dark place*, the pilgrim's life is *pathetic*, and the right road is lost and gone because of "a few wrong turns" taken by a "pretty tipsy" Dante. The whole *livre d'artiste* is made through a skillful combination of images and a brand-new version of the original text. The free-verse 'translation' is a successful attempt to actualize Dante's poetry into what has been called "a linguistic vernacular accessible to a contemporary American audience" and, in this way, the authors succeed in reflecting Dante's *volgarizzamenti* thanks to the use of "American slang"<sup>10</sup> mixed with a selection of contemporary historical references" (Olson 2013, 149). While the text, to quote only one example, mentions Jimmy Swaggart<sup>11</sup> among the sinners that Minos has assigned to the second circle, where the souls of Lustful are tossed forever upon a howling wind, and Dante exclaims: "What the fuck! [...] I mean, I thought love was supposed/to be the best thing in the whole world. How can they deserve/this kind of punishment just for being in love with each other?" (V, vv. 100-103) listening to Francesca's story, Birk's drawing shows Virgil and Dante embracing, with the former's reassuring arm around the latter's back as they observe the sadly ever-floating couple. The pilgrim and his guide, like the damned couple and the souls of the Lustful, are taken from Doré's 1861 illustrations.<sup>12</sup> Birk 'quotes' the French artist's engravings in almost all his drawings and, in so doing, declares his indebtedness both to Dante's poem and also to Doré's illustrated edition of the *Commedia*. If Doré's main achievement was the new and emotional depiction of the landscape, which prevails over the characters, this is also Birk's goal. The American artist aims to use the *Commedia* to show his audience a world where globalization and consumerism have prevailed over human beings. Birk's *Dante's*

<sup>10</sup> It is important to underline that Birk asked Sanders to help him with this project precisely because he is a surf journalist and, as a consequence, would be able to enrich the American vernacular with a hint of Californian surf language.

<sup>11</sup> Jimmy Lee Swaggart is an American evangelist who, in the 1960s started transmitting a weekly telecast that, in the course of a few years, became a daily TV-program which, by 1983, was broadcast by more than 250 TV stations. In 1988 Swaggart was involved in a series of sex scandals involving prostitution.

<sup>12</sup> Gustave Doré attached great importance to the first canticle (75 illustrations for the Inferno, 42 for the Purgatory and only 18 for the third canticle), and Birk follows Doré in paying more attention to the Inferno than to the other two canticles.

*Inferno* – but also his *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio* – gives the reader a contemporary urban landscape overfilled with trash containers, gas stations, laundromats, and fast-food logos. In this way, on the one hand he engages our critical judgment by forcing us to look at our own dystopian world<sup>13</sup>; on the other hand he follows the path taken by Pop Art, which had reshaped understanding of mass consumer products. Advertising boards, traffic signs, commercial logos together with abandoned strollers and cash machines here are invested with meanings and permeated with criticism of hypercommercialism. As the art critic Doug Harvey has underlined (Harvey 2004), Birk follows the French artist not only by referencing his engravings, but also by following Doré’s path as an artist. What I mean is that Doré has been labelled as the first author of narrative pictorialism, accomplishing, in so doing, a double goal: on the one hand that of producing an artwork, on the other that of telling a story. Doré’s visual storytelling has been seen as a sort of first graphic narrative, able, like contemporary graphic novels, to address both the highbrow and the lowbrow. In this way, the nineteenth century French artist laid the foundation for the contemporary graphic novel aesthetics and created the basis for a reception theory where the audience contributes to the meaning of the text by their reading and interpretation. Moreover, Doré’s illustrations were widely distributed but to a wealthy middle-class public of connoisseurs, a previously unimagined market at that time. The French artist “wanted to produce a lavish, expensive edition using high-quality materials and craftsmanship, with a final price almost ten times higher than his previous most expensive title” (Harvey 2004, VIII). Birk followed this path by creating a multifaceted art product where highly expensive materials and luxurious binding enclose a treasure trove of images of poverty, decay, disruption, and homelessness. His *Inferno* describes a disturbing, polluted world in a permanent state of war, which is inhabited by outsiders and misfits, while the wealthy reader able to afford the expense of the finely bound book is a spectator who, if he listens to this warning, could still opt for action and even change the world he or she inhabits.

Seymour Chwast’s *Dante’s Divine Comedy* is not a dystopian warning. It was published in 2010, and it is a more ‘classic’ graphic novel. As regards form, to a certain extent Chwast follows the fundamental structure of comic books: the “images are juxtaposed in a grid, which intertwines horizontally and vertically organized images that are supposed to be read in sequential order” (Baetens and Frey 2015, 8); but, it is worth noting, he rises above these ‘rules’ with the help of some graphic ‘wit’ (characters that leap from one panel to the other, the two-page spread drawing of the thieves entangled with the reptiles of the Seventh Bowge, and the ever-changing layout of each page). Chwast’s drawing style is minimalist – in line with his *push pin style* which involves

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<sup>13</sup> With reference to Canto V, for example, Dante and Virgil are on the edge of a cliff that overlooks a destroyed metropolis, surrounded by helicopters and a sinister smoke trail that reminds us of the war scenes we have become accustomed and even inured.

experimentation with the revival of historical graphic styles (from Victorian to art deco) -<sup>14</sup> and led to his graphic novel receiving a mixed critical response when it was released: its detractors see in it a sort of ‘summary’ of the original poem compressed into little more than one hundred pages, an extreme simplification and concentration of the original narrative, while enthusiasts underline its interesting rearrangement of the original in a new and humorous way (Paladin 2006). The drawings are organized in multi-panel pages and the word-image combination gives much more space to images (words are used just for labelling each canto, or as extremely short lines in the mouth of each character or, to quote Magritte, as the captions to some drawings). In this way, the author seems to rely on drawings more than on words to give his graphic novel a narrative dimension, even if the creative interaction of images and words is of crucial importance. In fact, organization of words and balloons is always part of the drawing; the word layout is embedded in the images or reflects the panel structure. The two basic elements of the graphic novel, the narrative and the composition (Baetens and Frey 2015, 108), are perfectly blended and combine to produce the final result.

Humor pervades the book thanks to graphic devices (such as arrows and drawings spilling out of the frames and into the gutters) which link the panels but, in particular, the key to this humorous but incisive remediation is the association of Dante the pilgrim with the stereotype of the hard-boiled detective: with his trench coat, sunglasses, pipe and fedora, Chwast’s Dante reminds us of Philip Marlowe, the protagonist of *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler (de Rooy 2017, 104) or a Dashiell Hammett detective (Biasolo 2017, 100), that is a man searching for the truth; while Virgil, with his bourgeois suit and his bowler hat is a sort of Magritte character ready to investigate the perilous zone which lies beyond our everyday logic.<sup>15</sup> This game of associations broadens to include the entire world of Chwast’s *Divine Comedy*, passing through “speakeasies, burlesque theatres, and carnivals, encounters dapper dons, pug-nosed thugs, and gangster molls” (Fugelso in de Rooy 2017, 104).<sup>16</sup> In *Inferno V*, for example, Paolo and Francesca become two anonymous lovers discovered by a Gianciotto Malatesta in vest and underpants who is squeezing a beer-can in one hand and holding a sword in the other, directly recalling a gangster film. Chwast loses all the complexity that permeates the episode and flattens (or crushes, in line with his graphic style) the

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<sup>14</sup> Seymour Chwast is an American illustrator and graphic designer. In 1954, together with Milton Glaser, he founded the Push Pin Studios in New York. Chwast is famous for his commercial artwork, which includes posters, food packaging (the first McDonald’s Happy meal packaging), magazine covers (The New Yorker, The New York Times), and publicity art; he is also a prolific children’s book illustrator, see Heller 2020; Chwast 2004.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that René Magritte chose Fantômas, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre’s character, as a sort of alter ego in most of his mature artworks.

<sup>16</sup> Chwast chooses the Thirties not by chance, but because they are far from and at the same time similar to the Middle Ages depicted by Dante, sharing with it the sins of the Dantean characters, see Biasolo 2017, 100.



web of responsibility, choice, and human tragedy. We could list a large number of examples of this kind, from *Inferno VII* where the Hoarders and the Spendthrifts roll huge rocks against one another while a man in a car – that looks like a 1930s convertible – throws away bundles of banknotes to *Inferno XXX* where Adam of Brescia is portrayed as a sort of Rockefeller with a moustache and plaid jacket while he is struggling of thirst in a sort of pool of money (resembling that of Disney’s Uncle Scrooge).<sup>17</sup> The American artist thus gives the public a sophisticated yet accessible book where Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and in particular the first canticle, is no longer a hell on our earth (as in Birk and Sanders’ adaptation), nor a commentary on our contemporary history, but one of the infinite afterlives<sup>18</sup> available to the *Divine Comedy* thanks to its extraordinary ability to combine reality and vision, and thus to achieve what Walter Benjamin called *fame*: “The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame”. (Benjamin 2000, 71)

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<sup>17</sup> The illustration omits the quarrel between him and Sinon of Troy but is able to capture the terrible rancor gnawing at the forger’s soul and his unfulfilled desire for revenge.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as a process, “as an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new. [...] it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own.” (Hutcheon 2006, 20).

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