

Ed Douglas:
The Lure of Unrealised Desire



University of South Australia Art Museum

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The Lure of Unrealised Desire

*Midway this way of life we're bound upon
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.*

Dante's fearful sentiments expressed in the opening lines of *The Divine Comedy* emotionally charges the reader for an epic narrative which travels down to the twenty-four circles of Hell, through the world and out again under the Southern stars, up Mount Purgatory, high over the sea and stars to the Earthly Paradise, from sphere to sphere of the singing Heavens, beyond the Primum Mobile and into the Empyrean, there to behold God. Dante's *Comedy* is a religious and political allegory written within the context of a Europe "which had much in common with our own distracted times".¹ Dante Alighieri, a man of letters, poet and politician fell from grace during one of the interminable conflicts between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions which plagued thirteenth century Florence for over fifty years. Exiled in 1302 and stripped of possessions, citizenship and public office, he looked out at the corruption of church and state and saw a vision of hell.

In the early years of the fourteenth century he began to write *The Comedy*, with its subject no less than the drama of the soul's choice and the return of all things by the Way of Self-Knowledge and Purification to the Beatitude of the Presence of God. *The Comedy* was once viewed as the work of an embittered man, determined to restore reputations and to damn his enemies. But the breadth and richness of the visual metaphors, its sub-plot of real life, unattainable love (Beatrice) and the timeless spectacle of the pilgrim charting a course through troubled waters have ensured that *The Comedy* transcends its historical framework and speaks directly to hearts searching for comparable states of peace and self-knowledge. It was constructed on the eschatological teachings of the Catholic Church but recognised principles of courtly, unattainable love and individual moral choice. As such it anticipated and was recognised by the Romantic sensibility.

Consider the odyssey of the human soul within Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and the cosmic settings of William Blake's allegories with the individual soul cast into fathomless and boundless deeps. The Romantic movement's interest in psychology and psychological imagination found particular expression in William Wordsworth's poetry which entertained the idea of attaining a higher state of existence through self-purification. Consider also the solitary, those daffodil dreaming, lakeside wanderers surrendering their steps

and thoughts to Nature. These become the pilgrims of a new age, united in belief with Dante in the redemptive powers of suffering but distrustful of closures which signalled attained desires. The Romantic movement developed a solid masculinity, dark and Byronic, and gave little attention to developing a feminine ideal. The Pre-Raphaelites and nineteenth century French Symbolists however actively pursued an ideal which favoured pallid, death-haunted beauty which re-presented a flight from, rather than reconciliation with, the feminine. Dante Gabriel Rossetti created a distinctive body of work based on his infatuation with Elizabeth Siddal and his close identification with the plight of Dante and Beatrice. But these exquisitely orchestrated states of longing or sense of incompleteness were impeded by the chains of their historicisms and their messages lost in a mechanised world marching towards modernity.

Cut to Max Ernst, manufacturing his collages and frottages with an imagination shaped in part by the ideas of Sigmund Freud as found in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. His preoccupation with Freud's theories influenced the artist's iconography and techniques. And his fantastical landscapes became exemplars of Freud's 'manifest dreams'. For successive generations of viewers, looking at these blobs, textures and randomly scattered lines brought into play a series of projective techniques which in their broadest sense, and in relation to Ed Douglas' recent work, can be described as the means by which an individual 'projects something of him or herself into everything he or she does'.

Douglas has continued to 'project' himself around the world in recent years, travelling to various archaeological sites. The observation of petroglyphs made within a similar time-frame but on different sides of the globe confirmed for the artist the existence of a collective unconscious. He was particularly attracted to the chance factor in operation at ancient art sites where weathering had rendered rock faces palimpsests composed of natural and human inscriptions. Products of pure chance but for some reason chance which appeared to follow logical lines. More recent reading related to chaos theory has illuminated his understanding of non-linear, self-regulating processes which work in "a seemingly miraculous way". "I'm someone", Douglas states, "who picks up stones on the beach",² a reference to his attuned sense of significance recognised in randomly formed patterns and structures.

His interest in chance and its revelatory possibilities led him to 'find' his own archaeological dig-site in the rubbish bin in the photography darkroom at the University. Here lay abandoned test strips which had been put into the bin after being exposed under the enlarger and partially developed. These 'image-shards', as he describes them, are further acted upon by random processes within the bin as chemicals react, papers stick together and light continues to play on exposed surfaces. Colours appear - pinks, blues, magentas and yellows - emanating from the silver halides suspended in the emulsion of the photographic paper.

Enlarging these images involved technical experiments with first a laser copier then a bubble jet colour copier (to achieve acceptable colour and contrast qualities) before the final print on a bubble jet colour copier (which allowed a continuous feed image on an A1 width roll of paper). Douglas had the technical means but not the structure to link these intriguing but as yet unrelated images. While reading a book by the Melbourne based Jungian analyst Dr. Peter O'Connor, *Understanding the Mid-Life Crisis*, his eyes fell on the opening lines of Dante's *Comedy*. In Dante he found a key and a soul mate.

"As I read particular passages in *The Divine Comedy*, certain image-shards would come to mind and resonate like image and sound in a well constructed movie. I was now quite comfortable in the realm of myth and allegory. This was the appropriate place for the distilled associations which led me to the word *longing*. My fascination with the ancient past, Jungian based depth psychology, and contemporary culture - film, the family snapshot - now had a workable language system and form".³

Douglas had come to this series from a position of self-analysis. His perspectives and methodologies were broadly Jungian in that they paid due attention to feelings and instincts. The stimulus for this body of work and the essence of its narrative can be distilled into one word, *longing* - the lure of unrealised desire. But desire for what? Reading Jungian based authors informed his understanding of this sense of longing as something which has a masculine base and which expresses the anxieties accompanying a transitional integration of the masculine, intellectual, and feminine, emotional, self.

Dante's journey, Douglas sees as a metaphor for the enlightened path, leading to a marriage of the dualities - dark and light, unconsciousness and consciousness, masculine and feminine. His longing may be seen as psychological or spiritual, the boundaries are easily

blurred when the issues concern concepts of unity and wholeness.

The works are hung in an order which takes the viewer through transitional phases. The narrative begins with a combined pair of works, *The Dark Wood / The Still Pond*, then moves slowly through a series of dark, sombre images which encompass inner and outer turmoil. *The Visionary*, heralds a seeing into another world (Virgil, Dante's eyes - the visionary). Strong yellow tones appear in the second set of images, denoting purpose and promise. This group includes *The Pilgrim's Feet* (walking on fire or illuminated from within), *The Evolving Pilgrim* (with its sea-land counterpoint signposting an evolution of consciousness from unconsciousness), *A Vision of Easter Music* (a vision of ecstasy denoting the connection between music, life force and rhythm). *A Vision of the Divine Feminine*, refers to the possible inner marriage of masculine and feminine which comprises the Jungian idea of wholeness.

In Douglas' series, *The Pilgrim* faces *The Guide*. In *The Comedy*, Virgil, the masculine guide, is replaced by the feminine, Beatrice, who leads Dante into Paradise. The final group of works are more frivolous in nature and suggest the lures that may divert from the higher self. The images include a fragment of a female figure which Douglas admits is a reference to a personal 'Beatrice' worshipped from afar at the age of seventeen. As Dante projected auto-biographical details and real personages into his visionary narrative so Douglas has projected onto both *The Divine Comedy* and these chance images, his own pilgrimage through the darkness, taking heart in the closing lines of *The Divine Comedy's* Second Canticle, Purgatory,

*From those most holy waters, born anew
I came, like trees by change of calendars
Renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through,
Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars.*

John Neylon

March 1994

1. Dorothy Sayers, introduction to *Dante, The Divine Comedy: Hell*, Penguin Classics, 1967, p. 10. Both *Comedy* quotations are taken from this edition.
2. Taped interview by John Neylon with the artist, Adelaide, 10 January 1994. A number of artist's perspectives in this essay are drawn from this interview.
3. Ed Douglas, exhibition project proposal, 1993.

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