A Key to Blake's Job: Design XX

Diane Filby Gillespie

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by DIANE FILBY GILLESPIE

ONE PROBLEM in the discussion of Blake's illustrations is the overshadowing of the visual designs and even the text by some version or stage of his complex visionary system. A shift in emphasis to Blake's visual medium enables us, on the one hand, to avoid reducing his designs to his visionary scheme and, on the other, to understand his ideas better.[1] What Blake makes us do with the physical eye is analogous to what he would have us do with the inner eye, the Imagination; it unites all the senses, Blake says, in the Human Form Divine. While this perceptual activity has implications for Blake's verbal as well as his visual art, and while it could be documented in a number of ways, one way takes us directly into the *Job* illustrations.[2]

At least some of the visual elements in Blake's art are related to his

1. Several series of Job illustrations preceded the engraved set. For the best reproductions of all five sets of designs see Laurence Binyon and Geoffrey Keynes's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935). Three of the series are in watercolor; according to Binyon and Keynes, the one in pale colors was done in 1820 for Thomas Butts, and the one in darker colors was done for John Linnell a year or two later. One controversial set emerged in New Zealand in 1928 where it is supposed to have been taken by a pupil of Linnell's. This third watercolor set is on a smaller scale and is thought by Binyon and Keynes to have been done prior to a set of pencil sketches (also on a smaller scale) which were then used as guides for the engraved series (published in 1826). Others, however, question both the dating of the first set and the authenticity of the third. See, for example, Martin Butlin, "Cataloguing William Blake," in *Blake in His Time*, eds. Robert N. Essick and Donald Pearce (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 85–86, 79. The border designs and Biblical texts appear only on the engraved sets. In addition to these five sets of illustrations, Blake executed a number of individual sketches and paintings on themes from Job. He also echoed the book's images, themes, and style widely in his written work.

2. The major early commentaries on Blake's *Job* are Joseph Wicksteed, *Blake's Vision of the Book of Job* (London: Dent, 1910) and S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1924) as well as *Blake's Job: William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job* (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1966). Later discussions include Jean H. Hagstrom, "Illustrations: The Book of Job," *William Blake, Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 119–35; Northrop Frye, "Blake's Reading of the Book of Job," *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 221–34; Emily S. Hamblen, *Interpretation of William Blake's Job: Its Ancient Wisdom and Mystic Ways* (N.Y.: Haskell House, 1965); Ben F. Nelms, "Text and Design in Illustrations of the Book of Job," *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 336–58; and Jenijoy LaBelle, "Words Graven with an Iron Pen: The Marginal Texts in Blake's *Job*," *The Visionary Hand: Essays for the Study of William Blake's Art and Aesthetics* (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1973), pp. 527–50. Andrew Wright, in *Blake's Job: A Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), describes in an appendix some similarities and differences among several of these studies and provides his own illustration-by-illustration synthesis. Bo Lindberg in his careful study, *William Blake's Illustrations to the Book of Job* (Turku, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1973), shares some of my assumptions, if not my approach. He emphasizes the need to see Blake's illustrations as visual art works. A more recent commentary is provided by Michael Marqusee in his "Introduction" to *The Book of Job: Illustrated by William Blake* (N.Y.: Paddington Press, 1976).

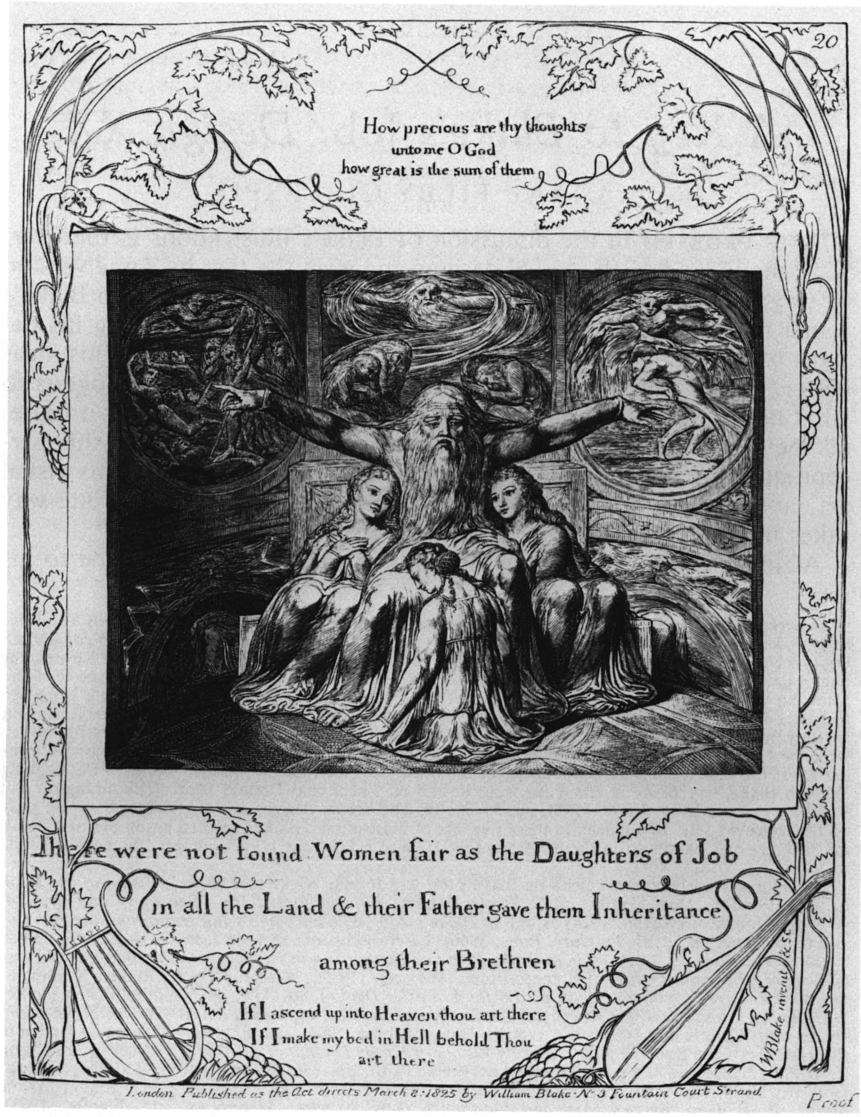

Fig. 1. Blake's *Job*, Pl. 20. Huntington Library.

metaphysics. They are not related in the sense that they stand passively for some idea abstracted from this system; they are related, instead, as vision is to Vision, sight to Insight. A fundamental visual form in the *Job* illustrations, in addition to the human figure, is the circle. Blake's circles, however, are not lifeless abstractions. Instead of assigning rigid significance, positive or negative, to the circle in Blake's visual art, the viewer must not only consider the visual or verbal context but must become, in one sense, a geometrical shape, circumscribing the individual work and Blake's total work, seeing it from all angles at once. In this sense the circle in the *Job* illustrations is significant.[3] As viewers we encircle the illustrations as the angels on the title page encircle the title, yet that "circumference is Within" (*J*, 222).[4] We see as much from Illustration XX (see fig. 1), which embodies a reading of Blake's *Job* designs.

In this design, we see that Job is an artist and, therefore, in Blake's view, a Christian. He is seated with his lips parted and his arms spread in the center of his three daughters. They listen presumably to tales of his experiences since these are illustrated on the wall behind him, just as in another outdoor version, visions among the clouds suggest Job's words. With the musical instruments appearing below among the grape vines in the border, the verbal, visual, and aural arts are all represented. Moreover, Blake gives the arts an architectural dimension. Whereas in other versions of the design Job and his daughters sit either outside or in a setting which combines interior and exterior details,[5] in the engraved set they appear in an interior setting.[6] In a square central panel directly behind Job we see a version, not an exact duplicate, of Illustration XIII,

3. See the diagrams in E. J. Rose's " 'Mental Forms Creating': 'Fourfold Vision' and the Poet as Prophet in Blake's Designs and Verse," *JAAC*, XXIII (1964), 174–75. See also John Grant, "You Can't Write About Blake's Pictures Like That," *BS*, I (1969), 193–202. Grant warns that "the kind of associative hop from the underlying geometry of a painting to its significance is much too long for all but the most expert interpreters. Like any thorough symbolist, Blake was aware of something against (or something for) all the common geometrical figures. Since the arrangement of masses in every picture is bound to suggest some geometrical figure or other, any such compositional element can always be singled out as an excuse for decanting. But it is only the Spectre who looks for significance in the empty spaces between the stars" (p. 195). Grant is correct in his warning, yet the value of such critical ventures cannot be dismissed so easily from our attempts to come to terms with Blake's art. For a more recent consideration of the problems of discussing geometrical forms in Blake's work see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978). "It is important to recognize," Mitchell says, "that the spiral, S-curve, circle, and inverted U are *not* symbolic forms in the iconographical sense, but rather the schematic constituents of a pervasive symbolic style" (p. 63).

4. All parenthetical references are to the *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1970). The last number within the parentheses is always the page number in Erdman's edition. Titles, shortened titles, or obvious abbreviations are used to designate individual works.

5. See W. Graham Robertson, *The Blake Collection of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Faber, 1952), plate 47. Lindberg describes in detail the different versions of this design (pp. 339–47). Butlin also examines the variations among the versions and tries to date them. Because Butts already had a "Job and His Daughters" in tempera, Butlin speculates that Blake did not include this design in the first engraved set; rather, he added it to Butts's series after including it in Linnell's. The earliest version of the design, in Butlin's opinion, is the one in tempera which depicts Job and his daughters in an interior setting; the second, a watercolor, has details of both interior and exterior scenes; the third, the engraved version, is considerably more detailed and the setting is an interior; a fourth, from around the same time as the engraved version or perhaps later, is an outdoor scene again in which the daughters not only listen to Job but also take down his words (pp. 86–88).

6. Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 333.

the design in which God reveals himself to Job in the whirlwind. On either side of the central panel, in circular frames,[7] are scenes depicting two of the catastrophes which befell Job's household. Neither resembles any of the preceding designs although both are recognizable from the Biblical text. Below these circular designs is a deity's head and arms surrounded by lightning bolts. Below these, in rounded arches forming "cells" above the floor, are crouching figures perhaps suggesting Job and his wife in despair.[8] The floor is a large circle made up of a design of interlocking circles. Circles are formed by the hems of the three daughters' garments and the daughters themselves form a circle around Job. These interlocking circles within the larger circle plausibly but not exclusively suggest to S. Foster Damon "the communion of the heaven of art: the smaller circles represent individuals entering each other's bosoms (the inscribed portions being significantly four-sided), all of them being contained in the one great circle, who is the One Man, Jesus himself."[9] We also can read them as a visual representation of the individual designs in the series and their relation to each other and to the whole, an alternate visual representation to the designs drawn on the wall of the circular room.

Illustration XX serves a function similar although not identical to "The Past Recaptured" section of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In that novel, we experience with the developing artist all that enables him to write the novel which, in the final section, we discover we have just read. So with Blake's Job, whom we can see in Illustration XX recreating for his daughters what we have just seen. Blake maintains his autonomy, however, by making clear that Job's artistic creation is not the equivalent of Blake's. Blake and his Job, united in Genius, yet remain individuals, just as the *Book of Job* and Blake's Vision interact but remain independent. Nevertheless, like Marcel and like Blake and Blake's Milton, Blake's Job had to recognize and cast out all pretense of art encrusting and oppressing the Divine Imagination, in order to create the true art which both defines itself and makes falsehood visible. Finally, as in the case of Proust's novel where we have the mature perspective and technical skill of the older Marcel operating simultaneously with his re-creation of the immature perception of the younger Marcel, so in Blake's *Job* illustrations we see Job's Error with all the clarity of Blake's and ultimately Job's Divine Imagination.

That Job's experiences are depicted visually on a circular wall is ap-

7. Compare #80 of the illustrations to Dante in Albert S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953). Roughly hewn circular frames enclose sculptured scenes illustrating the recovery of the ark and the annunciation. Consider also Karl Kroeber, "Graphic-Poetic Structuring in Blake's *Book of Urizen*," *BS*, III (1970), on the restrictions of the rectangular frame. I doubt that Blake, with his firm grounding in the tradition of the visual arts, felt the limitations of the rectangular frame all that much. The use of the border designs in the *Job* illustrations, however, may represent a successful attempt to overcome such restrictions.

8. Damon's suggestion, *Blake's Job*, p. 50. Wright does not think these figures can be identified. See his footnote 3, p. 49. Lindberg thinks that both figures represent Job's wife (p. 340).

9. Damon, *Blake's Job*, p. 50.

propriate. In a room such as this, we come closest to seeing all of the designs together as a unit, simultaneously vital, reverberating with echoes and corrections of each other, emphasizing the fact that the casting out of Error is a continuous occurrence in the fallen world. Karl Kroeber says that Blake's pictorial art delineates "psychological 'states' " which are common to all people and which are timeless, one within the other rather than one after the other.[10] It is important in viewing the *Job* designs to de-emphasize process or progression. While S. Foster Damon does not de-emphasize it, his explanatory chart does attempt to group the designs as "contraries."[11] Such an attempt forces us to break away from our tendency to read them only as a narrative in time. Error is destroyed in Job's experience as Blake illustrates it. That Error is what Blake calls Negation. Negation denies or seeks to destroy half of what is vital to existence in the fallen world: innocence without experience or vice versa; reason without energy or vice versa. Destruction of Error, however, consists not in obliterating what predominated in the past, but in obliterating its predomination. Destruction of Error means putting opposing forces in their places where they can interact as equals. Thus, not only are Illustrations I and XXI contraries (see figs. 2 and 3), reversals of each other which reverberate within the whole and simultaneously exist as Deistic reason and creative energy, but so are Illustrations II and XVI, the Accuser and the Accuser cast out. Further examples are Illustration VII, Job's friends bringing false comfort and Illustration XIX, other people bringing true comfort, as well as Job's friends mocking him in Illustration X and Job praying for them in Illustration XVIII and so on. The first of each pair is negative, or a Negation only when it does not exist in creative interaction with the second. When it exists as a contrary, it is no longer tyrannical; rather, it provides perspective, balance, wholeness, progress not in time but beyond time. Moreover, several of the designs have more than one contrary. A design may interact with several others for different reasons, some compositional as well as thematic. The numerous entrances from the left in various designs is one example.

Therefore we should dismantle, if only mentally, our books of the *Job* illustrations and range them around us, not necessarily in the order printed, until we can see at once as many of the pictures as possible. Each one is an independent entity which does not deserve to be seen only as something in Job's past which has given way to something better. Blake presents a sequence of events in Job's life; simultaneously, however, he delineates the forces which have become Negations, and their opposing forces, with equal care, vigor, and delight.

In the circular room of Design XX we have pictures within pictures, circles within circles, wheels within wheels. Every design is an eye

10. Kroeber, p. 12.
11. Damon, *Blake's Job*, p. 5.

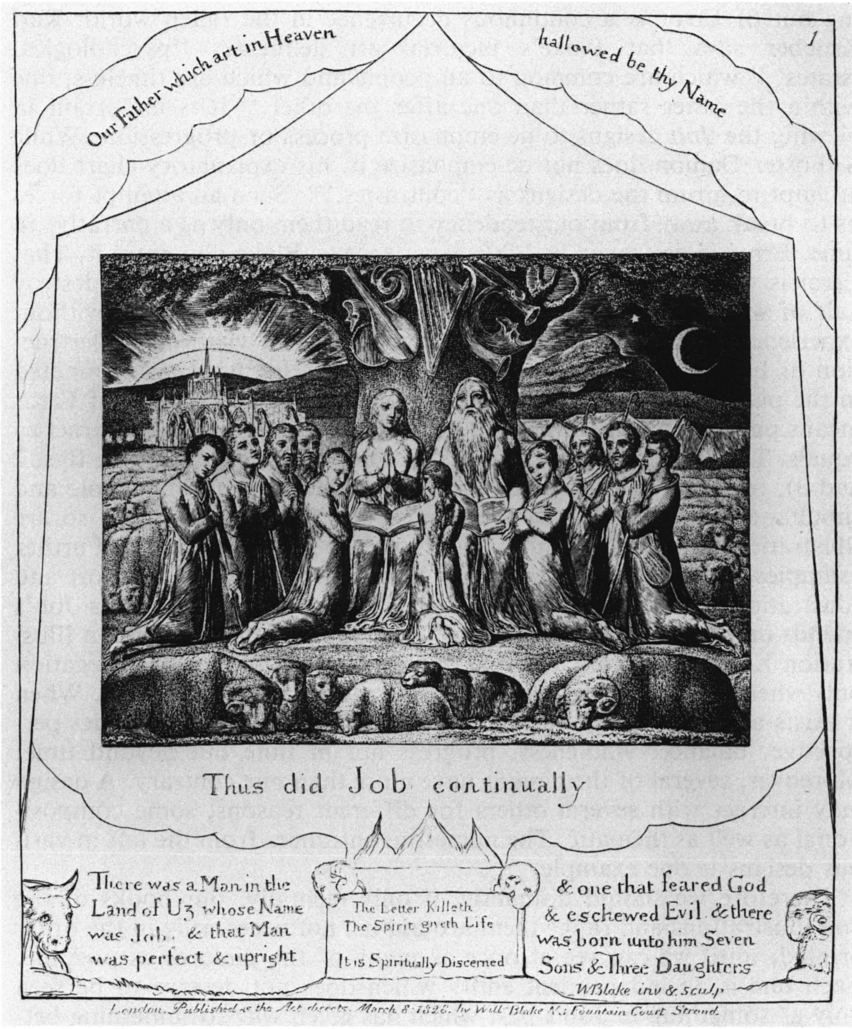

Fig. 2. Blake's *Job*, Pl. 1. Huntington Library.

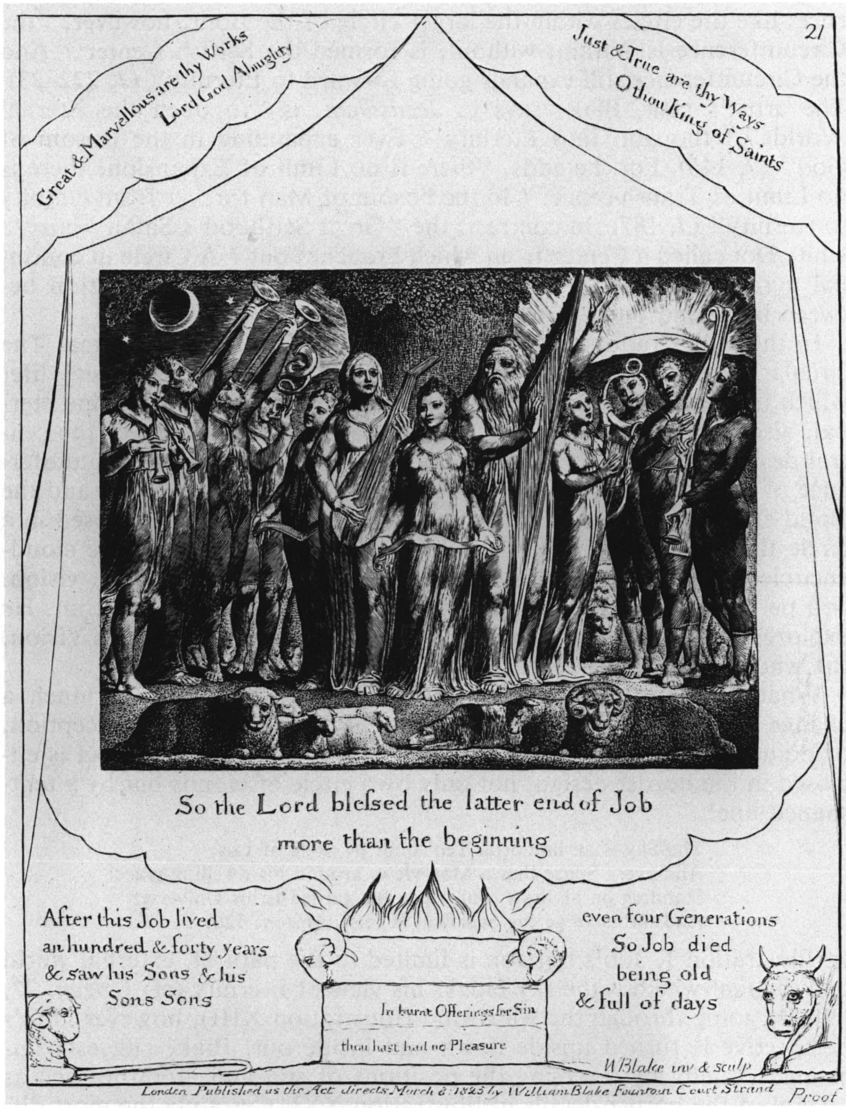

Fig. 3. Blake's *Job*, Pl. 21. Huntington Library.

through which we see. Blake's circular room is a reversal of Shakespeare's "wooden O" where the scenes are in the center with the audience seated around them. Instead, Blake's scenes are on the circumference; like the circles within the larger circle of the floor, however, "the Circumference is Within: without, is formed the Selfish Center / And the Circumference still expands going forward to Eternity" (*J*, 222–23). The artist's task, Blake says in *Jerusalem*, is "to open the Eternal Worlds of thought: into Eternity / Ever expanding in the Bosom of God" (*J*, 146). For, he adds, "there is no Limit of Expansion! there is no Limit of Translucence. / In the bosom of Man forever from eternity to eternity" (*J*, 187). In contrast, the "Great Selfhood / Satan" has "a white Dot called a Center from which branches out / A Circle in continual gyrations" (*J*, 173), wheel without wheel. Blake's distinction between inner and outer circles is related to his *Job* illustrations.

In these illustrations, Blake makes visible Job's internal drama. The circular cloud forms that enclose, cartoon-like, Job's spiritual life, which in the early designs is thought of as something separate and eternal, also appear in the borders and enclose most of the rest of the central designs. Blake thus offers the visual suggestion that the circumference of reality, which to Job is the horizon of the fallen world and the cloud-encircled heaven of an external God, must both be enclosed in a circle that reveals their identity. Job's narrow horizon and the cloud-encircled Jehovah are the inseparable products of Job's fallen vision. Job perceives, however, that the circumference of reality is within. He explores with Blake and with us, clothed in the clarity of Blake's Vision, the whole range of perceptual states.

What happens between Illustrations I and XXI is not so much a change in time, which implies narrative, as an expansion of perception, of point of view. The setting or space we see in both I and XXI is enclosed in the border design, not only by a circle of clouds but by a tent-shaped line:

> The Sky is an immortal Tent built by Sons of Los
> And every Space that a Man views around his dwelling-place:
> Standing on his own roof, or in his garden is his Universe;
> And on its verge the Sun rises & sets. (*Milton*, 126)

In Illustration I, Job's horizon is limited to the natural, external world and the tent which is the sky blocks his view of Eternity (cf. *Urizen*, 77, 79). By going through the whirlwind (Illustration XIII), however, Job's perspective is turned upside down and inside out. Blake suggests this change visually by reversing the positions of sun and moon as well as several of the border details in Illustration XXI. Certainly the most difficult of Job's trials are in night-time and nightmare settings, and a resurgence of sunlight follows his casting out of error. We who circumscribe the entire series with Blake, however, are not to mistake for reality the movements of the sun and moon which mark the passing of

time in the fallen world. We are to see sun and moon balanced and humanized as they are in Illustration XIV; neither replaces the other. Blake suggests visually, in the tradition of reversers of perception like Galileo, that Job moves from the center which is without to the circumference which is within, that Job's perception expands inward. The fallen world and everything in it are perceived differently, but not because of anything they did. The passing of time marked in the fallen world by movements of sun and moon is less important than the transcendence of time through the Imagination.

When such Vision is attained, we see that Blake's picture space in the Job designs is the inside of the Mundane Shell, or, on another level, of Job's head. Blake rarely uses linear perspective to create the depth which seems considerably more important here than in much of his previous visual art.[12] In creative tension with the fourfold frame, his picture space in about two-thirds of the Job designs is concave, or convex, or both. While the sculptural effect of human figures and geographical features is maintained throughout, however, the picture space in about one-third of the designs is flattened. The horizon bounding the Mundane Shell is upset and obliterated by the triangular composition, jagged lines, and flames of Illustration III, and the true narrowness of Job's horizon is reduced to the coils of the serpent around a god with a cloven foot in Illustration XI. The narrow circle of Job's perception is overwhelmed also as his perception clears. The whirlwind overwhelms his former circle of reality (Illustration XIII). So does the new realm of the Divine Imagination (Illustration XIV). Finally, Job's former world is turned on end and revealed for what it is, the realm of Behemoth and Leviathan, tyrannous only so long as the circle surrounding them is considered the boundary of reality. When that boundary becomes the circumscribing Imagination, Satan, the god of that tyrannous world, is cast out. The horizon of the fallen world remains, but no longer is it limiting and oppressive. It is seen for what it is, a mere shadow of the reality that resides within and is expressed in creative activity.

The circular room of Illustration XX, therefore, gives us a sense of the visual vitality which should animate our viewing of the entire series of designs. We are sensitized visually to circles not so much as abstract geometric forms as perceptual activities. Vitalized and humanized, they echo and contain each other, create and re-create each other, and engage our eyes in perceptual motion. This motion is, in miniature, that of the Divine Imagination in general, which unites the activity of all faculties,

12. One exception may be the Druid arch in Illustration V, which seems drawn along a line suggesting a vanishing point. More often, however, these Druid and other architectural forms are drawn with little regard to perspective. Compare Illustrations VI, VII, VIII.

Also more important in the *Job* designs, perhaps, are lighting and shading. Ruskin praised them already in 1825 for "expressing conditions of glaring and flickering light" even better than Rembrandt, a compliment Blake might not have taken as such (quoted in Gilchrist, p. 335). Most commentators on the style and technique of the *Job* engravings agree that they are in general more straightforward and less mannered than much of Blake's previous visual art.

all senses, all art media. The various combinations of circular forms which comprise Illustration XX and a majority of the Job designs are neither positive nor negative; they are symbolic neither of good nor evil. Instead they are compositional elements, parts of the common vocabulary of the visual arts which Blake uses and humanizes in order to encourage, even to teach, the kind of circumscribing perception he advocates and his art embodies. His visual art activates our eyes, engages them around and within his clear delineations of fallen as well as unfallen perception, until vision becomes Vision and sight Insight.

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