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A Key to Blake's Job: Design XX

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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. 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.

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.

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,
the design in which God reveals himself to Job in the whirlwind. On either side of the central panel, in circular frames, 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. 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.” 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.
appropriate. 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. Kari
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. 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." 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. Destruc­
tion 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 Illus­
tration 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 per­
spective, 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 composi­
tional as well as thematic. The numerous entrances from the left in vari­
sous 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 bet­
ter. 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

11. Damon, Blake's Job, p. 5.
Fig. 2. Blake's *Job*, Pl. 1. Huntington Library.
So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job
more than the beginning
After this Job lived
an hundred & forty years
& saw his Sons & his Sons Sons
even four Generations
So Job died
being old & full of days

At the Smithy by the Sea
three last had no Pleasure
W. Blake inv. & sculp.
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 cloud­encircled 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 tent­shaped 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 hu-
manized 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 any-
thing they did. The passing of time marked in the fallen world by move-
ments 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 pre-
vious visual art. 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 fea-
tures is maintained throughout, however, the picture space in about
one-third of the designs is flattened. The horizon bounding the Mun-
dane 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 over-
whelmed 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 con-
sidered the boundary of reality. When that boundary becomes the cir-
cumscribing 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,
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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