



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Calè, Luisa (2019) Book illustration. In: Haggarty, S. (ed.) William Blake in Context. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 56-69. ISBN 9781107144910.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/20154/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

CHAPTER 6

*Book Illustration**Luisa Calè*

Blake's career as a poet and artist coincides with the emergence of 'illustration'. Since the end of perpetual copyright in 1774 engravings became a common bibliographic element of cheap reprints of British poets.¹ Before the current visual meaning of 'illustration' was crystallized in the 1810s (as 'pictorial elucidation', whether of 'any subject', or 'a literary or scientific article, book, etc.'), it was recorded in book titles through terms such as 'embellished with superb engravings', 'etchings', or 'figures'.² This terminology emphasizes the composite nature of the book, pointing to the separate processes involved in producing different book parts: illustrations were pulled in different printing workshops and added to the book later. Blake's corpus challenges this division of labour, its distinctions between the classical writer and the modern artist, and between invention and reproduction.

In his 1793 prospectus 'To the Public' Blake advocated relief etching as a 'method of Printing both Letter-press and Engraving in a style more ornamental, uniform, and grand, than any before discovered, [...] a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet' (E 692-3). To distinguish his productions from reproductive engravings and emphasize the connection between writing, miniature, and the medieval aesthetic of the illuminated manuscript, Blake called this method 'illuminated printing'. Blake's prospectus lists each item by title, genre ('a prophecy', 'a poem', *Songs*), mode of production, and size. His works 'in illuminated printing' are entered 'with' the number of designs; yet, unlike commercial illustrated editions, this bibliographic detail does not identify something superadded to the letterpress, for the number of 'designs' correspond to the number of pages; in other words,

the illuminated books are identified as visual productions and the texts subsumed under the designs. The corpus of the painter and poet is unified through the engraver's book productions, sandwiched between two subjects presented as 'Historical Engraving', and the final two items tagged 'a small book of Engravings' (E 693). However, in his commissions to illustrate the works of other poets Blake moves away from the uniform poetics of illuminated printing. This chapter explores Blake's approaches to book illustration, focusing on his visual responses to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1796-7), Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808), *The Book of Job* (1805-6, 1821-7), and Dante's *Commedia* (1824-7).

Blake's illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1796-7) and Thomas Gray's *Poems* (1798) emphasize the division of labour between writer, artist, and publisher through a book composite that staged the separation of media and modes of production. In early 1796 the publisher Richard Edwards disbound the pages of first and second editions of Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-45), and 'inserted the letterpress close cut' into large sheets of paper, so that Blake could illustrate the wide margins in watercolours.³ Blake illustrated Young's nine Nights page by page, producing five hundred and thirty seven watercolours around the letterpress. Out of his two volumes of watercolours, forty three designs were chosen to be engraved in an edition of the first four Nights published by Edwards in 1797.⁴ The watercolour volumes can be considered as interim objects comparable to the altered books used in preparing a new edition of a work, where expanded margins allowed authors and editors more space to write around the text. Collectors also used such extended pages to obtain more space on which to paste prints, drawings, watercolours, and other extraneous materials, hence the term 'extra-illustration'. Although Blake's *Night Thoughts* watercolours share the process of customizing books with the practice of extra-illustration, they are quite different for their consistent intervention on each page and for the uniform choice of medium. Blake's process of illustration emphasizes the tension between text and image. Some of his

designs enhance the volumetric effects of the page by placing sleeping figures on top of the text panel or drawing decorative frames around it that call attention to the point where the page of letterpress meets the illustrated margin. However, other compositions fail to accommodate the text and seem to compete for the centre of the page. In such cases, Young's text seems to have been superadded: the text panels seem to have been cut through the designs to insert the letterpress in the middle of Blake's designs, and the illustration reclaims primacy over the words. However, the pages of letterpress inserted into the centre of the designs also remind the reader that a book has been dismantled in order to recycle its pages and cover the holes in the book of watercolours. By contrast, in the 1797 edition the text seems superimposed on the engraving, and the reader is encouraged to imagine the composition continuing beneath the page of letterpress.

Blake's illustrations to Young are an act of parody in the literal sense of a composition that is placed next to Young's poem. Sometimes literalising Young's allegories, sometimes extending or amplifying his metaphors and similes into actions and episodes, Blake creates a cast of characters out of Young's abstractions and produces a counter-poem in the margin of the page. Asterisks penciled in the margins of the text identify the illustration's textual source. For instance, in *Night III* Young identifies night as his poetic domain, inviting bards to take the sun for themselves, inebriated by a 'wilderness of joy; / Where *Sense* runs Savage, broke from *Reason's* chain' (p. 46; WBA Copy 1, obj. 25). Blake's surround illustration inverts the negative connotations of Young's text: joy is embodied in the figure of a naked woman advancing with arms held up; her unchained anklet suggests that she stands for emancipation, hailing the reader to break loose from Reason's chain, associated with slavery. Hovering above her a personification of Night represented as a faceless blind figure with disproportionately big masculine hands lifts a dark mantle ready to capture and hide her in darkness. While the impending action evokes the rape of Proserpine,

its meaning is inverted. Blake's personification of sensual joy will not be suppressed. Against Young's call to reject pleasure, her body can transform the dark world under the mantle of Night into an implausibly radiant realm of light. This arresting image offers an alternative to Young's Miltonic poetics of blindness.

How to represent literary texts in visual form was a pressing problem for eighteenth-century theorists, who contrasted painting, the art of placing bodies one next to the other in space, to writing, which represents the development of actions in time. Yet illustration complicates the distinction between verbal and visual media, as it embodies abstract notions of painting and poetry in the form of the book as a support for reading and viewing. As a tool for ordering and turning pages, the book has the potential to become a pre-cinematic medium. Blake experimented with the book's capacity to convey the impression of movement by illustrating a body represented in different moments of an action. In his illustrations to Young the reader sees impending actions develop as the elongated figure of Time strides across a page opening and encircles the letterpress upon turning the page (pp. 25-26; WBA Copy 1, obj. 15-16). More conventional approaches to illustration involve selecting one action isolated in its pregnant moment; bringing together multiple scenes in one composition known as a poly-scenic narrative; or producing a series of illustrations.

Blake's illustrations to Robert Blair's *The Grave*, from a watercolour drawing produced for Thomas Butts to the series of designs engraved by Luigi Schiavonetti for Robert Cromek's edition of *The Grave: A Poem. Illustrated by Twelve Etchings executed from Original Designs* (1808), present different solutions to the problem of visual narrative. In the watercolour drawing, Blair's metaphor of life as a journey offers the narrative device to impart linear form on a miscellany of episodes, as a downward path subsumes the polyscenic composition of episodes set in caves opening out on the sides (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1, *The Descent of Man into the Vale of Death*, c. 1850 (British Museum 1894,0612.15)

No lateral scenes are found in the corresponding illustration published in the 1808 volume, where some of those scenes are developed into independent illustrations (p.21; WBA Copy 1, obj. 8). A page number on the top right margin of the plate identifies the facing page of letterpress, and a short quotation is added in the caption at the bottom: ‘Tis here we all meet!’. Instead of being anchored to the text, the illustration reveals the extent of Blake’s ‘invention’: no steps or caves can be found in the facing letterpress, which focuses on ‘this world... a spacious burial-field unwall’d, / Strew’d with Death’s spoils, the spoils of animals...’ (p. 21). The short title *The Valley of Death* inscribed as a caption under the etching alludes to Psalms 23. 4, a source of Blake’s invention also not found in Blair’s text; the longer title *The descent of Man in the Vale of Death* listed in the paratext adds the downward trajectory.⁵ These added layers reveal the creative work of titling in reinventing a subject or revealing its field of allusions.

Moving from the polyscenic watercolour to the illustrated edition of Blair's poem, Blake isolates key turns or episodes in the text as cues for visual inventions. Opening the volume the reader finds to the left of the first page a frontal image, with a caption including the title *Christ descending into the Grave* and lines from the facing text: 'Eternal King! Whose potent Arm sustains / the Keys of Hell and Death' (WBA, Copy 1, obj.3). The exclamation mark turns the identifying words into an invocation, although the authorial element that precedes them in the text ('Thy succours I implore'; p. 3) is left out, thus repurposing the words to fit the composition. Its perspective from below places the reader among the damned in the flames of hell. The position at the beginning of the poem suggests that Christ, whose eyes are averted sideways, needs to be invoked by the reader: his arms thrust open and slightly forward, bearing the keys of salvation, offer proleptic hope and a way up towards the illuminated space behind him. Since the image faces the beginning of the poem at the beginning of the book, we can take this illuminated space as an allegory for the space of reading. Representing the reader as *Viator* is a frequent device in Blake's works from *Night Thoughts* to *Jerusalem*, where the traveler is seen from behind entering a door leading to a dark interior. Here we are invited to think of the reading experience as an exit to the journey of life, prepared by the deathbed scenes, which multiply the one found in the polyscenic watercolour into a series of illustrations placed in interiors punctuating the reading experience.

Other ways of translating poetic actions in visual form are exemplified by Blake's illustrations to Job, a repeated effort that produced two series of watercolours, the Butts set (c.1805-6, 1821-7) and the Linnell set (1821); reduced versions in a sketchbook (1823); and finally *Illustrations of the Book of Job, in Twenty-one Plates, Invented and Engraved by William Blake* (1826). Blake's Job combines experiments in the episodic rhythm of the series with polyscenic compositions that capture different temporal layers within individual plates.

The first and last plates share the setting, characters, and broad composition, so they can be read as a pair. The viewer is encouraged to apply the logic of before and after and infer the action occurring between the point of time captured by each plate, noticing the changes that visually sum up the narrative from beginning to end. In the fourth illustration (WBA Copy 1, obj. 6), a messenger is fast approaching Job and his wife seated in the foreground, while a smaller messenger can be seen approaching in the background. These messengers seem to be different instantiations of the same figure captured in different moments of the same action, while perspective provides a structure that conveys the temporal arc of the story from the past foreshortened in the background to the present moment at the centre. However, the text inscribed under the 1826 engraving contradicts this visual impression. The first line, presented in larger font, reads ‘and I only am escaped alone to tell thee’ (Job 1. 15); below it in smaller font, Blake excerpts the subsequent line: ‘while he *was* yet speaking / there came also another’ (Job 1. 16). The text added around the illustration clarifies that the two figures represent different messengers and perspective is used to arrange two actions in the same illustration. What the first messenger has to say is written in yet smaller font above the illustration. In the Job plates, Blake inverts the page layout explored in the Young illustrations, where the design encircles a rectangle of letterpress. Here the composition of text and image on the page is shaped by the visual logic of the engraver. The expectation of uniform lines of letterpress arranged in a rectangular panel is subverted by the variation in font size, irregular spacing, and curved lines as the text is broken up into captions arranged around the illustration, turned into elements of design. The reader’s eye is attracted to the dark mass of the illustration at the centre of the page, then invited to read the line beneath the image first, and probably follow down the page, before turning back up to the top. Blake’s visual syntax breaks linear habits of reading.

In *Illustrations of the Book of Job* Biblical excerpts and additional scenes from different biblical sources are used to illustrate the actions presented in the engravings in the centre of the page, while sentences from the text of Job are arranged in new sequences interspersed with quotations from other books of the Bible. This practice of composition evokes Biblical exegesis engaged in reading the life of Jesus combining sentences taken from different books of the Gospels, or allegorical reading practices training the reader to interpret Old Testament episodes as foreshadowing events in the New Testament. Blake's illustrations translate these reading practices into adventurous polyscenic compositions. Consider plate 14 (Fig. 2), a composition that divides the engraving in three parts with a Urizenic image of God the father as master of the elements in the centre, seated on a cloud-shaped frame, marking the bound of the horizon above Job and his family.

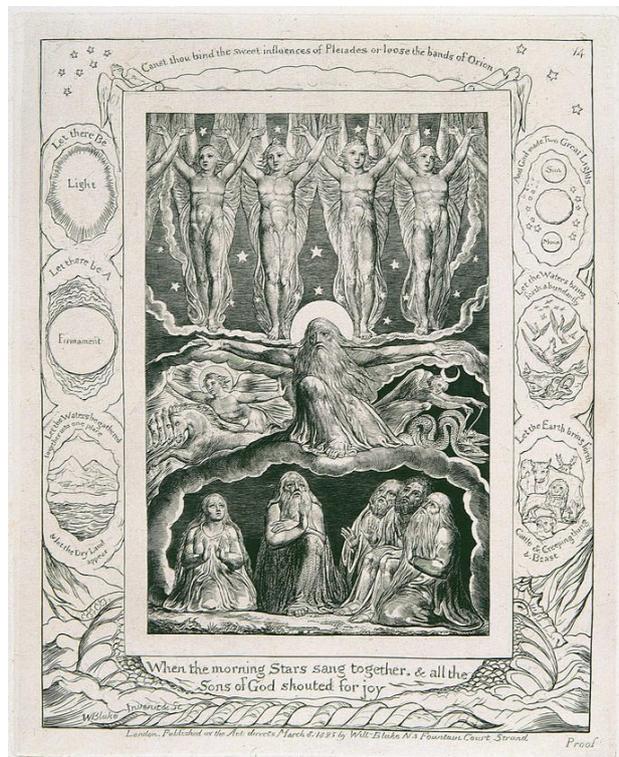


Fig. 2, *When the Morning Stars Sang Together*, pl. 14, in *Illustrations of the Books of Job* Copy 1 (composed 1823-6) (Collection of Robert Essick)

The Lord's head is inscribed in the Sun and above him the reader can visualize the time 'When the morning Stars sang together, & all the Sons of God shouted for joy' (Job 38. 7). The Lord's outstretched arms structure the composition, providing two more partitions for additional scenes, and pointing to a further layer of narrative outside the main composition. In the framing border the story of the days of creation is presented in roundel illustrations and excerpts from Genesis. These roundels evoke the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, and the page layout of parallel Old and New Testament scenes in the *Bible Moralisée*.⁶ This device is here used to convey elements in the speech of the Lord answering Job out of the whirlwind (featured in plate 13, WBA, Copy 1, obj. 15), asking him where he was at the time of Creation. The outstretched arms posture returns in plate 20 (WBA, Copy 1, Obj.22), where Job takes on the Lord's Urizenic stance to point at miniaturized episodes of his story hanging on the walls around him, including a small version of the Lord answering Job in a whirlwind (plate 13) placed right behind him to mark the lesson learned and the change undergone. From being the suffering subject of a hermeneutic drama, Job has mastered and appropriated the Lord's visionary power. It is his turn to frame the narrative.⁷ In this powerful self-reflexive engraving, Blake recreates a classic polyscenic device, which consisted in the architectural arrangement of key moments in a story captured in pictures hung along the walls of a gallery or a church.

In the late eighteenth century Blake produced series of watercolour illustrations without any textual reference, from the *Paradise Lost* series for Butts and Joseph Thomas (1807-8), to the Dante illustrations (1824-27), which he left unfinished at his death. John Linnell gave Blake 'a folio volume of a hundred pages',⁸ in which he sketched one hundred and two illustrations. Unlike the typographical layout arranging the text at the centre of the page in the *Night Thoughts* watercolours, Blake's Dante has the horizontal layout of a 'book

of drawings' (E 778). The literary source is limited to a notation of the relevant Canto in the corner of the page. Freed from the words on the facing page and the partitions of the book that shaped the encounter with Young and Blair, Blake has more scope to reinvent and rearrange Dante's inventions, revealing his interests through an uneven selection of subjects (72 for Inferno, 20 for Purgatorio, 10 for Paradiso). Illustrating Canto I of the Inferno, Blake frames the wood and the allegorical beasts as a picturesque margin in the foreground, and redirects the eye towards the dynamic blue sky encounter with Virgil (WBA, Copy 1, obj.1). His political connotations as the apologist of the Roman empire, and the historical coordinates of Dante's writing are moved to Canto II, compressed in a powerful Urizenic portal framed by the temporal power of God and empire above and two captive giants on the sides (WBA, Copy 1, obj.2). This framing brings to view allusions to empire from a range of places in Dante's work to mark the oppressive bound of the horizon that the reader has to negotiate before entering the door to hell in Canto III (WBA, Copy 1, obj.3). Metamorphosis and the boundaries of the human form provide the greatest artistic challenge in a series of eight illustrations dedicated to the punishment of thieves transformed into serpents and back in Inferno XXIV-V (WBA, Copy 1, obj.49-57). Blake's response to Dante's scenes of metamorphosis reveals the fundamental approach of the artist interested in literature as a testing ground for the possibilities and limits of visual invention.

Focus on the materiality of the book restores Blake's illustrations to a wider context of Romantic print culture. In addition to patterns of reiteration and reuse of iconographical motifs across illuminated books and commercial illustrations,⁹ the alternative sequencing of full plate illustrations in the illuminated books has its correlative in the mobility of illustration within commercial editions even when page numbers prescribe an illustration's specific position facing a relevant page of text. An alternative sequence is proposed at the back of the 1808 edition of *The Grave*, where the designs are declared 'of themselves a most interesting

Poem' (p. 33), suggesting they may be detached and enjoyed as a portfolio of prints. Alternatively, they can be repurposed as illustrations to other books, indicating illustrations' additional or independent iconographies. Blake's illustrations to Blair and Job were inserted in extra-illustrated Bibles alongside reproductive engravings of the Old Masters and Romantic period print series.¹⁰ Placed alongside reproductive engravings that miniaturized frescoes and historical paintings into the hand-held format that could be inserted into a book, Blake's illustrations connect writing to painting, and the order of books to the field of art.

¹ W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 134; F. Bonnell, *The Most Disreputable Trade: Publishing the Classics of English Poetry 1765-1810* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). On the shifting semantics of 'illustration', see S. Matthews and I. Haywood, 'Romanticism and Illustration: Introduction', in *Romanticism and Illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2019).

² 'illustration, n.', 4a and b, OED Online, Oxford University Press, June 2017, www.oed.com/view/Entry/91580.

³ A. Flaxman, 16 March 1796, British Library, Flaxman Papers, Add. MS 39780, fol. 212r-v; L. Calè, 'Blake, Young, and the Poetics of the Composite Page', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 80. 3 (2017), 453-479. For the watercolours, see British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, 1929, 0713.1-270.

⁴ E. Young, *The Complaint, and the Consolation; or, Night Thoughts, by Edward Young* (London: Edwards, 1797). All Young references will be quoted from this edition, and page numbers entered in the text.

⁵ R. N. Essick and M. D. Paley, *Robert's Blair's The Grave Illustrated by William Blake: A Study with Facsimile* (London: Scolar, 1982), pp. 64, 62.

⁶ On the Bible Moralisée and the Introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, see M. Phillips, *William Blake: Apprentice & Master* (Oxford: Ashmolean, 2014), pp. 111, 260.

⁷ H. Fish, *The Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 317; M. D. Paley, *Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 256-58.

⁸ A. Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863), I, 332.

⁹ Consider *Death's Door*, from Blake's *America* (1793) to his illustration of Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808), discussed in S. Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 181-4.

¹⁰ Plates from Blake's *Grave* and *Job* illustrations extra-illustrated in the Kitto and Douai Bibles, now at the Huntington Library, are catalogued by Robert N. Essick, *The Works of William Blake in the Huntington Collections: A Complete Catalogue* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, Art Collections, Botanical Gardens, 1985).