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Publisher: Routledge
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English Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713634227>

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Online Publication Date: 01 February 2008

To cite this Article: Stähler, Axel (2008) 'Writ(h)ing Images. Imagination, the Human Form, and the Divine in William Blake, Salman Rushdie, and Simon Louvish', *English Studies*, 89:1, 94 — 117

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/00138380701770951
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138380701770951>

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Writ(h)ing Images. Imagination, the Human Form, and the Divine in William Blake, Salman Rushdie, and Simon Louvish

Axel Stähler

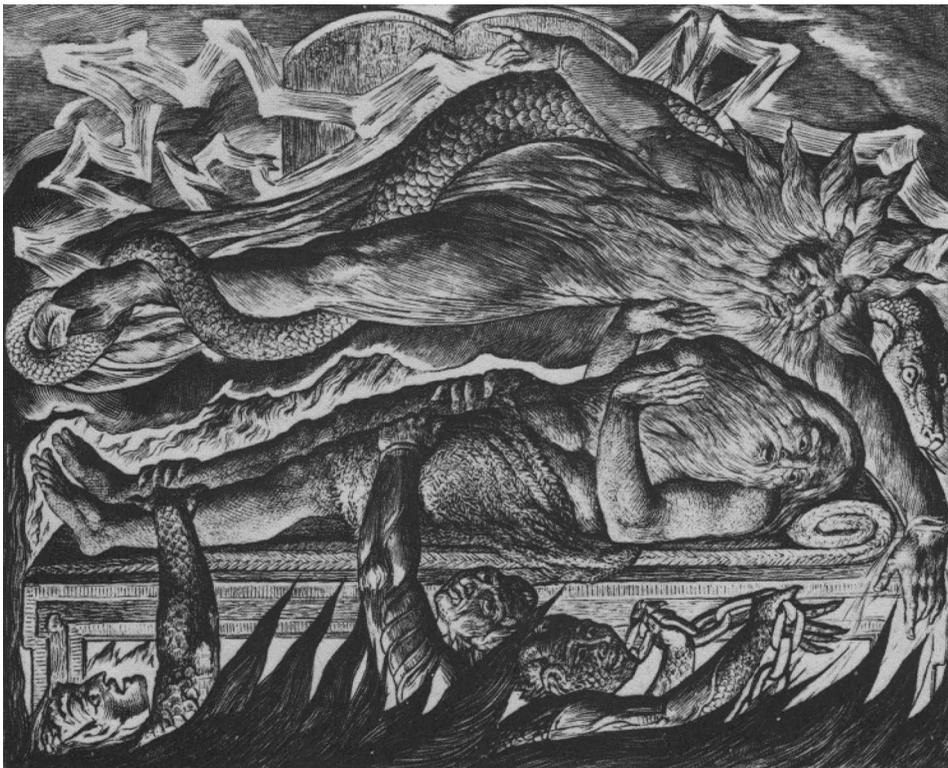


Figure 1 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), detail of plate 11. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

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An earlier version of this article was delivered at the international conference on “Literature as Resistance: Challenging Religious, Linguistic, Casteist, Racist and Sexist Essentialisms” at the University of Mumbai, India, early in 2006. The conference was organised by Professor Nilufer Bharucha in cooperation with the international research project “Fundamentalism and Literature” under the direction of Professor Dr. Klaus Stierstorfer and based at the University of Münster, Germany.

...now Gibreel, who has been hovering-above-looking-down, feels a confusion, *who am I*, in these moments it begins to seem that the archangel is actually *inside the Prophet*, I am the dragging in the gut, I am the angel being extruded from the sleeper's navel, I emerge, Gibreel Farishta, while my other self, Mahound, lies *listening*, entranced, I am bound to him, navel to navel, by a shining cord of light, not possible to say which of us is dreaming the other. We flow in both directions along the umbilical cord.¹

The words are extracted from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), where they are used to describe the first of several revelatory processes in Gibreel Farishta's dreams in which he sees himself, transformed into the archangel Gibreel, bound to the Prophet Mahound; the image preceding them is taken from William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* of 1825 (detail; see Figures 1 and 2). It is the eleventh and pivotal of altogether twenty-one etchings and it depicts Job's confrontation with a falsely imagined God which marks the nadir and turning-point of his trajectory.

Considering Rushdie and Blake together, it is usually the latter's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790–93) that is cited as an inter-textual reference of *The Satanic Verses* since this poem is actually mentioned in the novel (SV, 304, 305 etc.). Yet it seems to me that it is Blake's last major work, the illustrations of the biblical Book of Job, which provides the proper foil for some aspects of Rushdie's text—particularly with respect to the conception of revelatory processes, the indeterminacy of their Satanic or Divine provenance, and—most obviously—the iconography of the prophetic encounter.

In this article I aim to enquire into the different ways in which imaginative processes appear to be construed as ambivalent strategies of resistance to what has been called by Blake “mind-forg'd manacles” (*SongsExp* K, 217). For this purpose I will consider Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* in relation to, and as an epitome of, his thoughts on revelatory processes and will explore some of the ways in which Rushdie engages in *The Satanic Verses* in a dialogue with the pictorial epic and the Blakean idiosyncrasies it embodies. Simon Louvish's *The Days of Miracles and Wonders* (1997) appears to be a response to, and in many ways a continuation and extrapolation of, Rushdie's novel, not least by addressing the interrelation of fundamentalisms and literature and thus also referring to the function of imaginative processes as ambivalent strategies of resistance. I will therefore conclude this article with a discussion of Louvish's novel and the corrective it suggests with a view to Rushdie's conceptions.² It will emerge that—although in agreement on the notion that imagination as the source, or perhaps the medium, of visions, due to its very nature, is an ambivalent vehicle of both domination and resistance—all three texts provide a slightly, yet significantly, different perspective on its function which

¹Rushdie, 110. Subsequently referred to parenthetically as *SV*.

²Quotations from Louvish are referred to parenthetically as *DMW*.



Figure 2 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 11. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

hinges on the inclusion or exclusion of a moral dimension and the divinity as a point of reference.

The Human Form Divine and the Casting Away of Satan

After having suffered all the tribulations visited on him, Job, in William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), realises in a vision—which is an addition of

the artist's to his biblical source³—that the law-giving God he serves is in truth Satan. In this vision his God reveals himself to Job, lying on his bed, as the frightfully distorted mirror image of himself. The apparition is identified with Satan by the traditional Christian attributes of the cloven hoof and the snake, which winds itself around his body, as well as—in Blake's idiosyncratic system of thought—by the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which he irately indicates with his right hand, and by the condemned and the flames of hell to which he points with the left. Both, laws and hell, are, in Blake's system of thought, inventions and tools of Satan, the accuser, and they are mutually dependent on each other as defining offence and penance.

Job turns away in terror from the hideous apparition staring at him, “hovering-above-looking-down”, and desperately tries to ward off its threatening proximity. It is not before he suffers this vision that a process of spiritual cognition is set in motion in Job, for up to this moment he had been blind to his error and had been unconditionally obedient to the idol created by himself (cf. plates 2–7) even until, finally, himself having turned into a victim of the arbitrary and relentless laws through the indictment of his friends turned accusers,⁴ in the misguided certainty of his offended righteousness, he had challenged God Himself. Ironically, it is Satan who initiates this process of spiritual cognition in Job with his horrifying apparition (SV, 125), while (the true) God appears to him later in the whirlwind—as Satan's ultimate other, but at the same time once again as the, albeit no longer frightening, mirror image of Job himself (Figure 3).

Almost all the marginal glosses of the illustration of the earlier confrontation with the false God refer directly to Satan. Immediately above the picture is inscribed: “Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of Light & his Ministers into Ministers of Righteousness”, a paraphrase of the second letter to the Corinthians.⁵ In the original context of the Pauline letter this passage refers to false apostles, heretics, who preach “another Jesus” and “another gospel”.⁶ To Blake, this kind of heretic is embodied by whoever preaches rigid moral laws and follows the letter but not the spirit. “Their end”, as St Paul has it, “shall be according to their

³Blake took the image's caption, Job 7:14, out of its context and rearranged the chronology of the biblical narrative where the horrifying vision is not at all described. Indeed, Satan does not appear any more in the biblical Book of Job after the second chapter. Subsequently, with the exception of Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* which are quoted from the 1976 facsimile edition, all other excerpts from Blake's works and letters are quoted parenthetically from Geoffrey Keynes's edition as indicated by a “K” preceding the page number or, as in the case of *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, the abbreviated title, the plate number and, if applicable, the line; abbreviations are used as follows: *AllR* (*All Religions are One*, c. 1788), *AnnBerk* (*Annotations to Berkeley's Siris*, c. 1820), *AnnSwed* (*Annotations to Swedenborg's Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, c. 1788), *AnnWat* (*Annotations to Watson's Apology for The Bible*, 1798), *J* (*Jerusalem*, 1804–20), *Laoc* (*The Laocöon*, c. 1820), *LJ* (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, 1810), *MHH* (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, c. 1790–93), *Mil* (*Milton, A Poem in 2 Books*, 1804–08), *NNR* (*There Is no Natural Religion*, c. 1788), *SongsExp* (*Songs of Experience*, 1789–94).

⁴Cf. Raine, 92 who also mentions a similar pictorial rendering in Blake's *Jerusalem* (J 93).

⁵Cf. 2 Cor. 11:14–15.

⁶Cf. 2 Cor. 11:4.

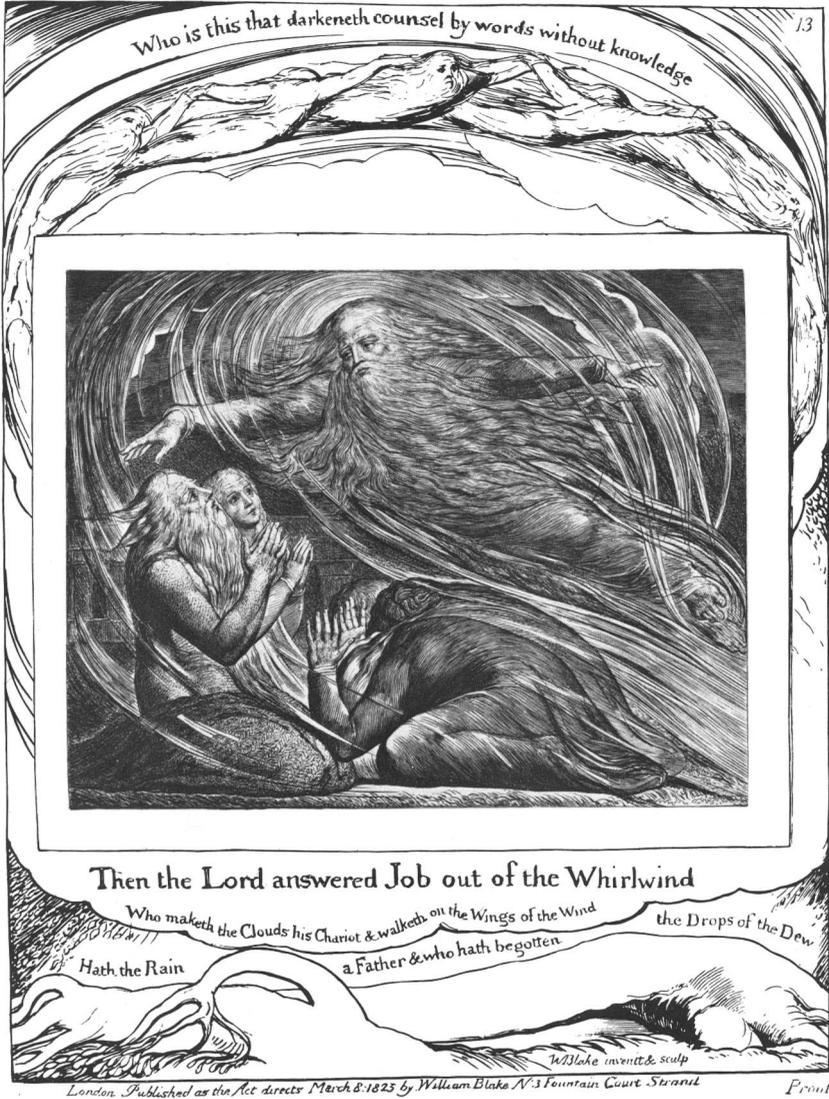


Figure 3 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 13. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

works”.⁷ Yet in addition to this, in the context of the illustration, the Pauline quote assumes another meaning. For Satan really turns into an “Angel of Light” for Job, since the apparition in the guise of the terrible God initiates the afore-mentioned process of spiritual cognition in the stricken Man.⁸

⁷2 Cor. 11:15.

⁸Lindberg, 268.

That the horrifying vision already implies the beginning of a reversal is suggested by Blake's paraphrase of Job 19:25–7, prominently inscribed in the plate immediately below the image:

For I know that my Redeemer liveth & that he shall stand in the latter days upon the Earth & after my skin destroy thou this body yet in my flesh shall I see God whom I shall see for Myself and mine eyes shall behold & not Another tho consumed be my wrought Image.

For one, this passage refers to the quotes from Scripture in the upper margins of the etching, Job 30:17 and 30:30, whose subjects are the torments of the flesh. But both passages are also being re-evaluated here, because for the first time in the sequence of illustrations, redemption is envisaged, more particularly, spiritual redemption, which manifests itself in the resurrection in the flesh, into a mystical-spiritual body, after the worldly body has been destroyed for ever.⁹

By way of the textual changes Blake effected with regard to the Authorised Version,¹⁰ he implies here at the same time the opposition of God-Satan and God-Jesus. Added by Blake to the biblical text, the direct address—"thou"—obviously refers to the God Job sees in his vision, that is to Satan, for it is he who besets and torments him in the illustration. Equally, the "wrought Image", the created image or idol, refers to the apparition of God-Satan, although initially, it appears to signify Job himself, his corporeality, "This body", and, within it, his *Selfhood*, the Satan within Man, who negates everything and who sets himself up above the true God. For the quote from the Book of Job is conjoined with another text from the Bible: "... tho consumed by my wrought Image Who opposeth & exalteth himself above all that is called God or is Worshipped."¹¹ Finally, the "wrought Image" refers also to the image Job had created of his God—an image formed according to his own likeness. Thus Satan appears to be one, at the same time, with Man and with Man's image of God.

This is contrasted by the certainty expressed by the inscription that "my Redeemer liveth". Job's direct address of Satan ("thou") may thus imply his increasing awareness of Satan's existence and consequently denote already the first rejection of, or perhaps even rebellion against, the idol created by himself. For: "The triumphing of the wicked is short, the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment".¹² However, Job

⁹Lindberg, 127, points out that it was in particular this passage which was used to support the Christological reading of the Book of Job. For spiritual resurrection in the flesh, see *ibid.*, 268.

¹⁰In the Authorised Version, Job 19:25–7 is translated as follows: "For I know *that* my Redeemer lieth, and *that* he shall stand at the latter *day*, vpon the earth: **And though after my skin worms destroy this body**, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shal see for my selfe, and mine eyes shall beholde, and not another **though my reines bee consumed within me**" [bold print identifies the passages altered by Blake]. In the biblical context, "reines" refers to the "seat of the feelings or affections" (*OED*). Blake's substitute, "wrought Image", therefore points to his interpretation of the apparition as originating in Job's inner being.

¹¹Cf. 2 Thess. 2:4.

¹²Job 20:5. Lindberg, 267, suggests that "wicked" is used here in the singular and therefore refers to Satan. He supports this reading with a reference to Gregorius's *Expositio in Job*.

does not yet know the redeemer, Christ, the “Human Form Divine” (*J* 27:58). The prerequisite process of spiritual cognition which coincides with the ultimate rejection of Satan and of *Selfhood*, is the subject of the following illustrations.

Only after Job experiences the abject terror of the confrontation with his idol, is it possible that the true God reveal Himself to the sufferer. He does so in the whirlwind in plate 13 (Figure 3). Again, God is Job’s mirror image, but now the image is not that of the usurping Satan. The harshness of the angled lines and the jagged edges of the lightning are softened in this etching to the fluid motions of the whirlwind. In the subsequent illustrations Job is being taught through the visions the newly revealed true God sends him.¹³ Job recognises the greatness and harmony of the creation (cf. plate 15)¹⁴ and is led by God into timelessness, for all time is coincident and eternal (*LJ* K, 605), from the beginning (cf. plate 14) to the end of times (cf. plate 16).

Plate 16 (Figure 4) represents the Last Judgment. Again, it is initially a vision which God sends to Job—and a vision which has no equivalent in the biblical Book of Job. In the centre of the picture, Satan and, next to him, two smaller figures are precipitated within a dark flame, limned by lightning, into the flames of the abyss. God is enthroned above; Job and his wife sit next to the abyss and witness Satan’s Fall in awe. This is the Last Judgment: “Thou hast fulfilled the Judgment of the Wicked”.¹⁵ Yet at the same time it is Job’s own judgment: he recognises his error and rejects his Satan and his *Selfhood*. For, as Blake wrote in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* in 1810: “Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth, a Last Judgment passes upon that Individual” (*LJ* K, 613). Indeed, it is not only Job who has realised his error but also his wife. It is both their Satans who are hurled into the abyss next to their avatar, since both Job and his wife are now purified from their *Selfhoods*.

The Human Form and Satan Re-Admitted

The initial indeterminacy of God, Satan, and Man, so central to Blake’s system, was adapted by Rushdie to his own conception, although in his novel the presence (but not the existence) of God is denied categorically, and the triad transformed into one of Angel, Shaitan, and Man. Another essential difference is that in *The Satanic Verses* the indeterminacy and ambivalence of the triad—which, in Rushdie, is really a triple binary of Gibreel/Shaitan, Gibreel/Mahound, and Shaitan/Mahound—is never resolved, as it is in Blake. Shaitan is hurled “hellbelow” in *The Satanic Verses* too, yet he is never dissociated in Rushdie’s novel from Gibreel

¹³For visions of God and visionary instruction see Blake’s *The Last Judgment*: “If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination [...] then he would arise from his Grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy” (*LJ* K, 611); this is what happens to Blake’s Job.

¹⁴Raine, 229, for instance, interprets the representations of Behemoth and Leviathan in plate 15 as “the eternal contraries [...] reconciled.”

¹⁵Job 36:17.

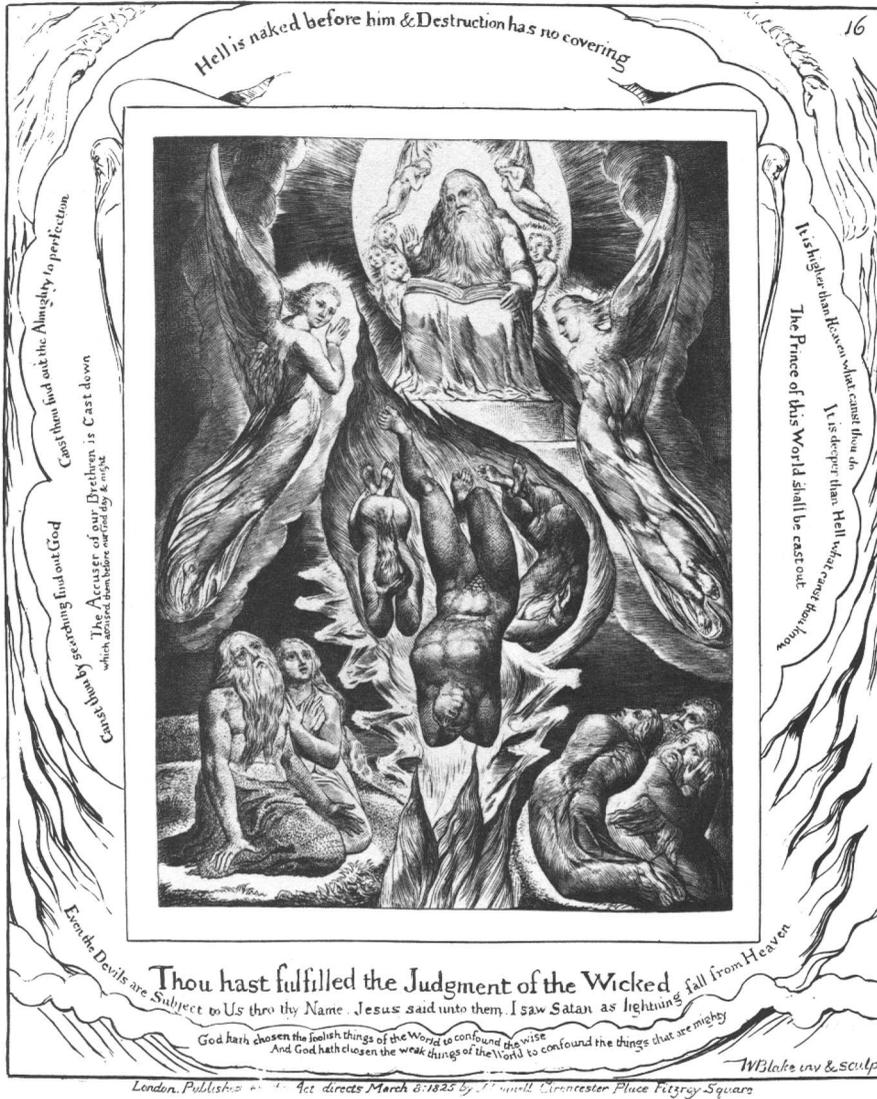


Figure 4 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 16. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

or Mahound. He is never completely cast away and is allowed to continue with his “seductive verses”:

In the early dreams he [i.e. Gibreel] sees beginnings, Shaitan cast down from the sky, making a grab for a branch of the highest Thing, the lote-tree of the uttermost end that stands beneath the Throne, Shaitan missing, plummeting, splat. But he lived on, was not couldn't be dead, sang from hellbelow his soft seductive verses. (SV, 91)

However, Blake's visual representation of the visionary process was quite clearly adopted by Rushdie and is evoked time and again in his novel, including the horizontal sandwich-composition and the mirrored identities:

The Supreme Being keeps away; what keeps returning is this scene, the entranced Prophet, the extrusion, the cord of light, and then Gibreel in his dual role is both above-looking-down and below-staring-up. (SV, 111)

Rushdie's evocation of Blake's *Job* includes also the violence of the encounter, and the doubt about the truth of the revelation, when Gibreel and Mahound wrestle with each other in the cave on Mount Cone:

the moment I [i.e. Gibreel] got on top he started weeping for joy and then he did his old trick, forcing my mouth open and making the voice, the Voice, pour out of me once again, made it pour all over him, like sick. (SV, 123)

Mahound craves for revelations—in contrast to Job¹⁶ and to Gibreel, who so loathes his dreams that he denounces them, “Mother-fucking dreams”, as the “cause of all the trouble in the human race, movies, too, if I was God”, he asserts, “I'd cut the imagination right out of people and then maybe poor bastards like me could get a good night's rest” (SV, 122).

The imaginative nature of these visions and revelations, their poetic, that is to say, fictional character is reflected upon in the novel also by means of the various binaries. Of particular interest is in this context another mirroring: that of the poet Baal with Mahound.

In his younger years a poet of renown among the poemophile people of Jahilia, Baal defined the poet's work quite unequivocally: “To name the unnamable [*sic*], to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep” (SV, 97). A quarter of a century later, having grown old, fat, myopic and hard of hearing, the poet whose inspiration has long since run dry, has to go into hiding for his one-time convictions and lampoons, once Mahound and his followers take control of Jahilia. In the guise of a Circassian eunuch, he takes refuge in the city's labyrinthine brothel with its twelve prostitutes who—initially as a commercial ruse—assume the mirror identities of Mahound's twelve wives. Baal becomes their husband and, in turn, develops into a counter image of Mahound's; but not only that—he also recommences to write poetry: “he had fallen prey to the seductions of becoming the secret, profane mirror of Mahound; and he had begun, once again, to write.” Even more: “The poetry that came was the sweetest he had ever written” (SV, 384).

Baal explains his new-found poetic potency in the image of an almost schizoid confrontation that is reminiscent once more not only of the revelatory processes between Gibreel/Shaitan and Mahound but also between Job and his God/Satan: “It is as if I see myself standing beside myself. And I can make him, the standing one,

¹⁶Blake's Job, horrified by his encounter, wants to extricate himself from Satan, and he finally succeeds in doing so by the help of the true God and the visions sent by him.

speak; then I get up and write down his verses” (SV, 385). When finally the brothel is closed down and all the prostitutes are apprehended for their “immoral” acts, Baal openly praises them in his poems in front of the prison. Himself arrested, he announces boldly: “I am Baal, . . . I recognize no jurisdiction except that of my Muse; or to be exact, my dozen Muses” (SV, 391). The inspiration of his poetic work is thus deferred to a higher authority—and a pluralistic one, at that—and this is, in the true sense of the word, a perversion of Mahound’s claim to the inspirational authority of his visions. In their final confrontation the mirror image is made explicit: “Baal stood face to face with the Prophet, mirror facing image, dark facing light” (SV, 391).

Another mirror image in the novel is centred on the figure of Salman the Persian. He is Mahound’s scribe, and this relation already is reminiscent of Baal’s scriptorial other; yet more importantly, Salman, the sceptic among Mahound’s followers, tests the authenticity of the revelations by surreptitiously changing the words of the Prophet. He thus manifests himself as an immediate counterpart in the revelatory text. Mahound, after some time having become alert to the unfaithfulness of his scribe, confronts him: “Your blasphemy, Salman, can’t be forgiven. Did you think I wouldn’t work it out? To set your words against the Words of God” (SV, 374). The implicit assertion of the inspirational authenticity had been challenged earlier by Salman: “It’s his Word against mine” (SV, 368), he had explained to Baal, meaning: not God’s word, but Mahound’s. And Mahound himself, by his nickname—“the Devil’s synonym” (SV, 93)—is likened in *The Satanic Verses* to Shaitan and it is certainly no coincidence that he turns into a law-giver and thus, by implication, becomes a simulacrum of the Satanic idol of Job’s in Blake’s *Illustrations*:

Mahound . . . became obsessed by law. Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation. (SV, 363)

There is, of course, still another binary inherent in the figure of Salman. Quite obviously his name is a reference to the author who, through Salman the Persian, construes himself and his text as another mirror image to Mahound and his revelations. After having been granted mercy by the Prophet, Salman—in the novel—becomes “a letter-writer and all-purpose scribe” (SV, 385). His reflections on his unexpectedly lucrative business may be meant to be read as a meta-fictional comment not only on Rushdie’s own novel but on all literary endeavours under which may be subsumed also the writing of revelations:

People write to tell lies. . . . So a professional liar makes an excellent living. My love letters and business correspondence became famous as the best in town because of my gift for inventing beautiful falsehoods that involved only the tiniest departure from the facts. (SV, 385–6)

The implication is that all literature is the product of the imagination and, in consequence, lies.

Worlds of Vision and the Human Form Divine in Blake

“I must Create a System or be enslav’d by another Man’s” (*J* 10:20–1), thus William Blake in his prophecy *Jerusalem* (1804–20). In his idiosyncratic “System”, God is Jesus (cf. *Laoc* K, 777); and Jesus is the human God, at the same time human and divine: “the Human Form Divine” (*J* 27:58)—and Jesus is *Imagination* (*J* 5:58–9), which is proper to both, Man and God: “Man is All Imagination. God is Man & exists in us & we in him” (*AnnBerk* K, 775). Thus *Imagination* is, to Blake, the fundamental principle common to all existence (*J* 69:25, 49:13): “Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably” (*LJ* K, 604), and *Imagination* is “the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, & in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more” (*J* 77). But Man’s *Vision* is corrupted by the Fall. Man renders homage to himself, full of pride and self-righteousness. *Selfhood* is the egotism hereditary to Man. It needs to be overcome as Jesus overcame it, and this is the reason why God reveals Himself in the “Human Form Divine”, so that Man may experience the mystical union with God: “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (*NNR* ii K, 98).

Religion is another of the fundamental principles of human existence to Blake: “Man must & will have some Religion” (*J* 55). For religion derives immediately from the *Poetic Genius* whom Blake identifies with “true Man” (*AllR* K, 98). Thus, as Blake argues, there is only one religion. For although “The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation’s different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is every where call’d the Spirit of Prophecy”, it still holds true that: “As all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various), So all Religions &, as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius” (*AllR* K, 98).

Yet although all religions derive from the universal *Poetic Genius*, whom Blake identifies elsewhere with God Himself (*AnnSwed* K, 90), Man—whose visionary capacity is corrupted since the Fall and who follows his Satan—perverts this one true religion with his oppressive moral laws (*MHH* K, 151, 158; *J* 27). Moral laws suffocate the *Imagination*; they are the work of Satan, the accuser: thus to precipitate Man to everlasting death. Satan tempts Man to eat from the Tree of Knowledge: to distinguish between good and evil, to judge his neighbour (*LJ* K, 616). Yet God knows no sin, God is forgiveness:

Such is the Last Judgment—a deliverance from Satan’s Accusation. Satan thinks that Sin is displeasing to God; he ought to know that nothing is displeasing to God but Unbelief & Eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil.

For:

Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed & govern’d their Passions or have No Passions, but because they have Cultivated their Understandings. (*LJ* K, 615)

The Bible, too, is not a moral code to Blake, but “The Whole Bible is fill’d with Imagination & Visions from End to End & not with Moral Virtues . . . The Moral Virtues are continual Accusers of Sin & promote Eternal Wars & Dominancy over others” (*AnnBerk* K, 774). And because the Old Testament, no less than the New, is “Eternal Vision or Imagination of All that Exists” (*LJ* K, 604), a vision of the only true and ahistorical, because eternal, reality, to Blake the historical authenticity of the Bible is meaningless (*AnnWat* K, 390, 392–4); for the Bible, as Blake wrote in a letter to Dr. Trusler of 23 August 1799, is “addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation, & but mediately to the Understanding or Reason” (K, 794).

The visionary character of the inspired Bible (*AnnWat* K, 390, 392) implies that it may be added to.¹⁷ Divine revelation is not a singular occurrence in the past but happens time and again anew and occurs individually for every human being. Against Richard Watson’s observation that it must be considered strange that God revealed Himself to man only during the early ages, Blake therefore argues: “It is strange that God should speak to men formerly & not now, because it is not true”, for “Every honest man is a Prophet” (*AnnWat* K, 390, 392).

Vision and *Imagination* are vehicles of the Revelation as well as of knowledge—and the prophet discovers to Man in his visions eternal truths:

The Nature of Visionary Fancy, or Imagination, is very little Known, & the Eternal nature & permanence of its ever Existent Images is consider’d as less permanent than the things of Vegetative & Generative Nature; yet the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce, but Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed; just . . . so the Imaginative Image returns . . . by the seed of Contemplative Thought; the Writings of the Prophets illustrate these conceptions of the Visionary Fancy by their various sublime & Divine Images as seen in the Worlds of Vision. (*LJ* K, 605)

Blake asserts: “The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative” (*LJ* K, 605). And—with the self-assurance of the inspired prophet¹⁸—he assumes the task to discover to Man the “Worlds of Vision”:

¹⁷However, any addition to the Bible needs to be authorised by inspiration. The significance ascribed by Blake to the visionary experience may be gauged from the following quote: “If historical facts can be written by inspiration, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is as true as *Genesis* or *Exodus*; but the Evidence is nothing, for how can he who writes what he has neither seen nor heard of be an Evidence of The Truth of his history” (*AnnWat* K, 392). Blake seems to refer primarily to factual truth which is of no import to visionary truth. In this context it may be of interest that Blake—who himself experienced visions from early childhood onwards (see Lindberg, 151; Bindman, 11)—saw himself justified to correct the errors and the only partially truthful visions he found in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in his *Milton* (1804–08). For Blake’s earlier criticism of Milton see *MHH* K, 150; *Mil* 1, Preface.

¹⁸Cf. Blake’s letter to Thomas Butts of 10 January 1802: “I am not ashamed, afraid, or averse to tell you what Ought to be Told: That I am under the direction of Messengers from Heaven, Daily & Nightly” (K, 812). See also *Jerusalem*, which Blake claimed to have written with “inspiration”: “. . . I see the Saviour over me/Spreading his beams of love & dictating the words of this mild song” (*J* 4:4–5); see also *J* 3.

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me,
 Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task!
 To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
 Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
 Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, The Human Imagination.
 O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love!
 Annihilate the Selfhood in me: be thou all my life! (*J* 5:16–22)

Vehicle of the prophetic vision is art. For art is generated by *Imagination* and is, conversely, at the same time the key of the eternal vision. Art is the creative and perceptive medium of knowledge and of becoming one with God (*Laoc* K, 775–7):

If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination, approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought, if he could Enter into Noah's Rainbow or into his bosom, or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder, which always intreats him to leave mortal things (as he must know), then would he arise from his Grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy. (*LJ* K, 611)

Art is, to Blake, prayer and praise, it is “the Tree of Life” and therefore he believes: “The unproductive Man is not a Christian, much less the Destroyer” (*Laoc* K, 777).

Imagination, the Arts, and Revelation in Blake's *Job*

“Thus did Job continually”—the first of William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* shows the old patriarch surrounded by his family and chattels sitting underneath a huge tree in prayer (Figure 5). On Job's and his wife's knees are balanced open books, unused musical instruments are strung up high in the boughs of the tree. One of the various inscriptions of the illustration reads, as quoted from the second letter of St Paul's to the Corinthians: “The Letter Killeth/The Spirit giveth Life”.¹⁹ The last of the twenty-one etchings, after all the tribulations have been visited on Job, a man “perfect & upright/& one that feared God/& eschewed Evil”, shows the day—a day that is really a spiritual night as is suggested by Blake's use of light and darkness—to have run its course: The sun, rising in the first illustration on the left, is now setting on the right (Figure 6).²⁰

Again, the family and chattels of the patriarch, now restored to the firm believer in the true God, are gathered around the tree. But, gone are the books. A scroll has

¹⁹2 Cor. 3:6.

²⁰For Blake's light symbolism, cf. the diagram in Lindberg, 73. I do not concur, however, with Lindberg's interpretation of the “nocturnal” scheme: he sees the illustrations commence with the setting of the sun and continue with the night getting ever darker, in plate 11 “the night has darkened even the fire; notice the black flames in the foreground” (*ibid.*), and it is only with Elihu's vision that stars reappear; at the end of the illustration cycle Lindberg sees the sun rise in all its splendour. Cartographic logic would rather expect the sun to rise in the East, that is on the left, and set in the West, or right, in the etchings. In fact, the increasing spiritual darkness of the day seems to me to be an even more powerful image than the blackness of the night. In addition, I would understand the biblical assertion that “the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than the beginning” to support this “diurnal” reading.

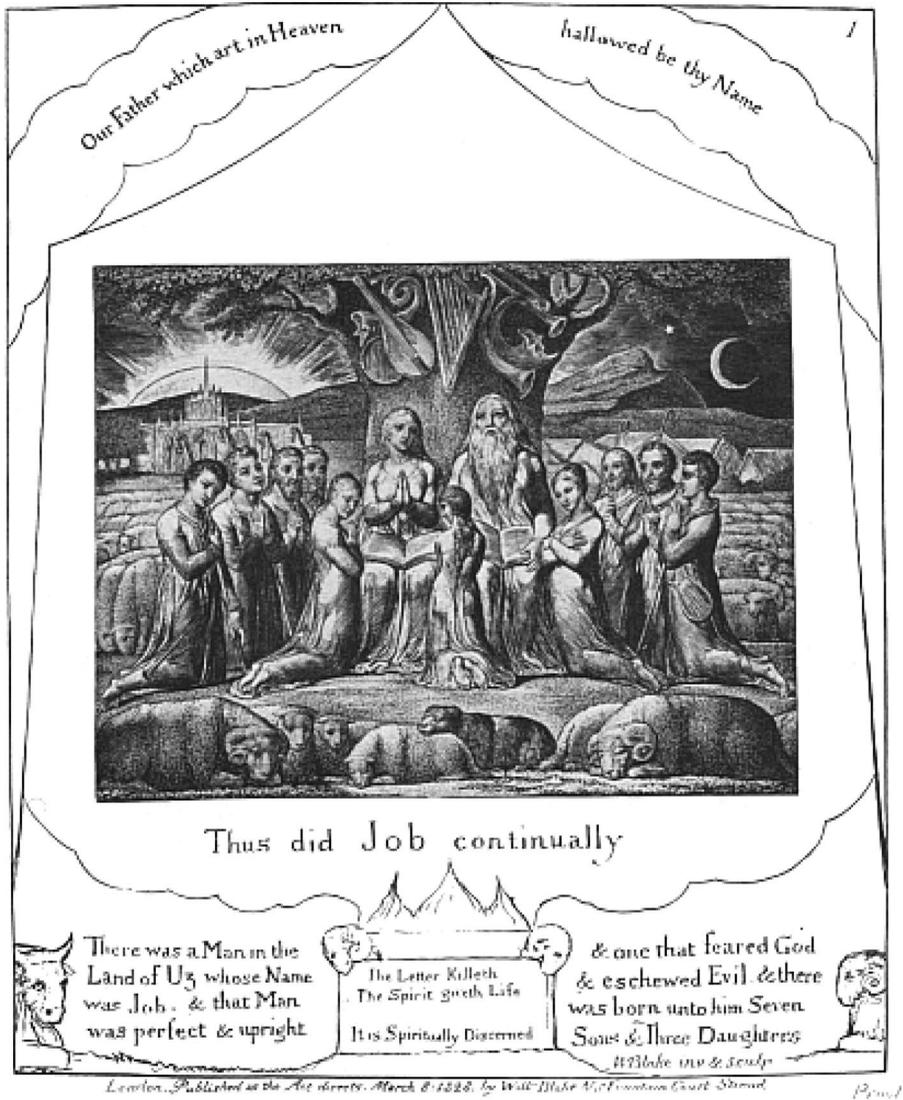


Figure 5 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 1. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

taken their place, and the musical instruments are no longer silently hung in the boughs of the tree, but sounded jubilantly—the main inscription of the etching reads: “So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job/more than the beginning”. To Blake it was not, however, the restoration of his material goods to Job which appealed to him, but—as suggested before—the spiritual (self-)knowledge the sufferer gained from his confrontation with the falsely imagined God (see plate 11; Figure 2), which marks the nadir of his delusion.



Figure 6 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 21. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

The sequence of Blake's etchings follows both a linear and a cyclical narrative, as Bo Lindberg remarks:

Blake's Job is developed from materialism into spirituality. In this respect the composition of Blake's pictorial epic is linear. But in another respect it is cyclical: his Job is shown progressing from happiness through unhappiness to new happiness.²¹

²¹Lindberg, 56.

Both of these narratives are parallelised already in the Bible, yet, as Lindberg continues, with a significant difference:

[The] linear story is the same in the Bible and in Blake's illustrations. But the cyclic one is different. In the Bible we have the story of a rich man who becomes poor and then rich again. To Blake, this is nothing but the treadmill of the affairs of this world, and, therefore, he made Job's new riches spiritual ones: art, literature and music.²²

The three daughters restored to Job in plate 20 appear to symbolise the three "sister arts" (Figure 7).²³

They should not, however, be confused with the muses of classical antiquity, whom Blake denotes as "daughters of Memory . . . which are not Inspiration as the Bible is" (*LJ K*, 604–5). Intriguingly, to Blake, *Memory*, along with *Reason*, constitutes the repressive opposite to *Imagination*. In the *Illustrations*, Job, and this is another of Blake's additions to the biblical narrative, has decorated his new dwelling with murals which recount his spiritual experiences—central among them the revelation of the true divinity—and which he now expounds to his daughters. Blake, as Lindberg suggests, "has made Job an artist, who expresses his experience and faith in paintings and spoken literature. The instruments of the third art, music, wait in the margin, to be used in pl. 21".²⁴ The vines represented in the margins next to the musical instruments are interpreted by Lindberg as an expression of Job's love for his family. Yet Blake himself uses the image of the vine in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810) to express the one-ness of Christ and the human *Imagination*: "All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination" (*LJ K*, 605–6). The association of the vines and the musical instruments thus once more emphasises the significance of the *Imagination* for the practice of the arts and the significance of art as an imaginative medium of the process of becoming one with Jesus in God.

The Human Form and the Snares of the Creative Urge

The "creative urge", originating in the Imagination and manifesting itself in visions, is also the subject of another novel which quite obviously refers back to *The Satanic Verses* and which—in cognisance of the reception history of Rushdie's text—probes the interrelation of fundamentalism and literature. In the apocalyptic vision of Simon Louvish's *The Days of Miracles and Wonders. An Epic of the New World Disorder* (1997),²⁵ both fundamentalism and literature appear to be articulations of the creative urge which, in turn, is suggested to be part and parcel of the "human

²²Ibid., 71.

²³For a perceptive reading of this plate see Gillespie.

²⁴Lindberg, 342.

²⁵Louvish completed his novel in 1992 but did not, at the time, find a publisher. The author, as quoted in a review by Teddy Jamieson, attributed this reluctance to the effects of the *fatwa* pronounced on Salman Rushdie

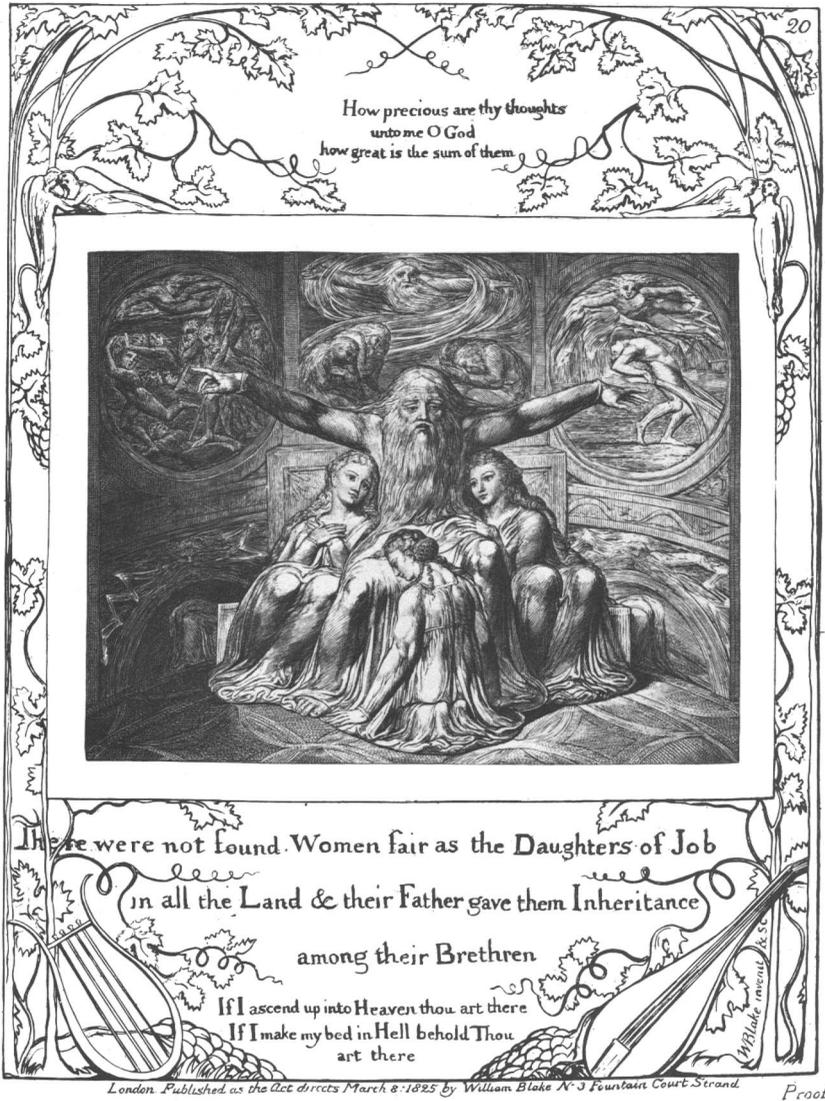


Figure 7 William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), plate 20. By permission of The British Library (K.T.C. 7. b. 4).

condition”. This, “[t]he fucked-up fate of our species”, is caustically attributed in Louvish’s novel by the Greek-American “terrorist” doctor Petros Angelopoulos, known as “Angel”, to “an imbalance in the brain”. Like Gibreel, the schizophrenic dreamer in Rushdie’s novel, who yearns to “cut the imagination right out of people”

in 1989: “I think that in the wake of the Rushdie affair, people didn’t want to touch something which dealt with the Middle East and its conflicts. Anything to do with an Islamic theme was immediately verboten” (91).

(SV, 122), the doctor perceives the root of all the trouble to be in the imaginative faculty. And yet, he rejects Gibreel's merely surgical solution:

Maybe the pituitary body has been placed in the wrong position, I don't know, but there is definitely a flaw in the design. You take it apart and put it together again, but you can't mend that original fault. Of course, you can try a prefrontal lobotomy, if you're willing to destroy the personality, and reduce us all to robots. Maybe that would be the kindest way. But who would lobotomize the lobotomizers? I'm afraid we have to deal with what is. (*DMW*, 131)

Set for the most part on the brink of the Gulf War of 1991, but "ranging across history's follies, past and present" (as the blurb has it), Louvish's multi-faceted novel is an exploration of the vicissitudes of the human condition. It revels in postmodern narrative pyrotechnics, interweaving myth, historiography and newspaper clips, and resurrecting to life not only Richard *Coeur de Lion* (if without the heart and entrails), but also the early Christian saint Simon the Stylite and the tenth-century founder of the Druze religion, the Caliph Abu Ali Mansur al-Hakim, whom the author conflates with the apocalyptic Hidden Imam expected by Shi'ites to return at the End of Time from his occultation.²⁶

High up on his column the Stylite garrulously shares with the reader the advantage of his enhanced vision as well as his bleak reflections on humanity and its passage through time: "All the quarrelling little people were spread out naked to my gaze. I could see into the future and the past, though often it was difficult to distinguish between the two. The depredations of men, their folly, mendacity, shadiness, heresy and corruption, are timeless, spanning the ages" (*DMW*, 94). History is felt by the Stylite to be but "a great roiling confusion, a seething mass of the condemned, dreaming their dreams" (*DMW*, 219).

One of these dreamers in the novel is the Caliph. Metamorphosing into an ever younger self on his wanderings through the parched desert he finally reaches the pillar of the Stylite, who forcefully intervenes in his hallucinatory visions. Having climbed the 1001 steps to the pillar's top, in a scene suggestive of Satan's temptation of Jesus,²⁷ the Caliph is shown the "blue and golden globe" of the earth by the ragged hermit who then announces to him:

When you stand outside Creation, ... there is a clarity which otherwise is lost. All divisions fall away and all base metals transmuted [*sic*]. You may call me Hermes Trismegistus. Or Melchizedek, or Pythagoras, or Simon of the Pillar, or the Caliph Abu Ali Mansur al-Hakim. I am He of many faces but one nature. The bearer of the simplest message of all. That which was sundered must be brought together. The Tower of Babel must be rebuilt. Satan, who made the world in his image, terrified of the encroachment of Man, cast down the tower

²⁶For the related concepts of the "Hidden" or "Last Imam" and the "Mahdi" see, e.g., Cook, 232–3; Kaplan, 291–2.

²⁷Matt. 4:5–9.

and confounded the tongues and works of Man. It is up to us to repair the damage. (*DMW*, 284)

In what appears to be a near blasphemous perversion of the biblical narrative,²⁸ creative power, and indeed the Creation itself, are attributed to Satan by the Stylite and Man, as the ever aspiring encroacher, the creature turned creator, is likened, and thus set in opposition, to the Satanic creature/creator—again, if less visually striking than in Blake or Rushdie, as in a mirror image.

In Genesis the architecturally minded “children of men” are scattered and their edifice destroyed because the divinity fears that “now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do”.²⁹ The Tower of Babel therefore is a symbol of the unbounded power of the human imagination, recast in Louvish’s novel as Satanic. Its rebuilding, urged by the Stylite, thus seems to signify no less than Man’s reaffirmation of his imaginative and Satanic nature.

In his dream, the Caliph is hurled by the Stylite—whose pillar, grown out of all proportion, has itself become a symbol of the Tower of Babel—into the abyss, his descent reminiscent of Gibreel Farishta’s fall no less than Satan’s. “Go now and spread the word!” (*DMW*, 284) the Stylite commands the Caliph who, after his fall, finds himself stunned on a hillock of sand in the Arabian desert. Indeed, taken prisoner by US soldiers, the force of his charisma proves to be so great that he later not only converts his captors, black Muslim soldiers, but an entire unit of the US Air Force, “three hundred young men of all races” (*DMW*, 311),³⁰ to whom he announces the End of Time. They, along with some journalists, follow him on a long march through the burning desert towards the holy city of Mecca with the Caliph spreading the “word” to them.

The Caliph’s prophetic authority is derived from non-scriptural revelations whose origin even so is ascribed by him to the divinity:

For does the Divine reveal itself to us directly or by its hidden signs and codes? It is called heresy, that the Koran is not the only Book. But there are other forms of Revelation. For believers are often blind in their devotion, satisfied in one face of The Truth. But I bring you a new mirror in which to see the shining of the light. (*DMW*, 311)

There are, then, facets of the Truth which are mediated through the “mirror” of the messenger through which the blind become seeing.

Blindness and seeing, sensory and imaginative perception and their interrelation with the material and the spiritual, so prominent in Blake’s *Job* and Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, are recurring concerns also in Louvish’s novel. In it is critiqued not only the

²⁸Cf. Gen. 11:1–9.

²⁹Gen. 11:6.

³⁰According to Shi’ite apocalyptic beliefs the Last Imam will “appear in Mecca, at the Ka’ba, and gather a band of 313 followers to himself” (Cook, 232).

reductive view of the fundamentalist (“satisfied in one face of The Truth”) but also the indiscriminately expansive grasp of modern (Western) civilisation. The flood of sensory stimuli in the age of information technology is revealed to be blunting the visionary capacity and, in effect, the imagination: “They see all and they see nothing” (*DMW*, 352). At the same time, the vaunted technological progress is shown to have failed to ameliorate the “fucked-up fate” of the human species. “New ideas”, the Stylite denounces the ambivalence of the creative urge: “How they used to torment me with them, on my column. The crap machine, the Loggie-Bird. Offers to extend my senses just that wee bit farther. But now they go around the world in forty-eight hours, eating reheated pasta with plastic spoons.” Yet, in spite of all this, the human condition remains as ever: “And still they build Gods in their own image, all evidence to the contrary” (*DMW*, 412–13).

The apparent inability to create a spiritual entity that is not at the same time merely an image of the material points to the limitations of the human imagination. At the same time, it exposes the human yearning to bridge the “incomprehensible gulf” (*DMW*, 116) between the spheres of otherness as it had been observed earlier in the novel by a sandworm on the Lothian shore. Itself the incomprehensible object of the musings of Louvish’s (anti-)hero Blok, the unthinking existence of the sandworm is as unimaginable to humankind—“The word cannot imagine the naked act. Just being” (*DMW*, 115)—as is the divine.

Earlier in the novel, the Stylite had therefore rejected “The Mirrors of the I”, suggested to him by the inventor Loggie-Bird as a means of transporting his “words” and his “visage” to all of his followers with the aid of an elaborate optical-mechanical device (*DMW*, 219),³¹ because any such contraption were to corrupt the immediacy of the divine revelation: “Salvation brought on a plate, or on a glass, is no salvation at all. There must be the hot breath of contact, with no intervention except the spirit of God. The mirror is the satanic icon of vanity. I have no need to know myself. I am vile. And thus I am a mirror of all” (*DMW*, 219).

When the Caliph sets himself up as a “new mirror”, the Satanic provenance of this aggrandisement of the self may be guessed at. With this assertion of what may perhaps be styled the human form Satanic the old order of things has been subverted. The Caliph remembers: “To every being, master and slave, bird of the heavens or beast of burden or creatures that crawled upon the earth, there was assigned a place in the scheme of things.” Yet, once again, in a dream he

fell into the depths of that abyss, and there I saw, above me, in a ghostly light, the underpinnings of all the shrines of Mankind. The mansions of worship erected on mountains, in desert plains, in deep forests. And I saw that all their foundations were rotten, yet the worshippers in them venerated their Lords in a thousand and one different tongues, and each Lord was separate. And the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw these Gods as false idols, and a voice cried: Let there be light! And a white light shot through the rotting beams and cracked pillars. And the voice cried: Let

³¹This is a reference to John Logie-Baird, the inventor of the television.

there be fire! And the buttresses and timbers and spars of the buildings burst into a great ball of flame. And the voice cried: Let there be wind! And a great storm rushed down out of the sky, fanning the flames, and burning all within the false shrines to ash. And lo, I listened to that voice and I realized that it was none other than my own. (*DMW*, 383–4)

Yet, in the end, the iconoclastic destruction of the idols appears to be no more than their substitution with another image, the very *Selfhood* that had finally been cast off by Blake's Job: "Ana Akbar! I Am Great! The ultimate heresy trembles on the still haze" (*DMW*, 384).

In view of this heresy, it may seem to be no more than poetic—or even divine—justice when, although his progress is entirely peaceful, the Caliph and his followers are blasted to smithereens in the Arabian desert by all the firepower the US Air Force can muster. Yet Louvish's description—evoking painful images of the media coverage of the destruction of Iraqi columns during the Gulf War—suggests an enactment of the clash of civilisations and of fundamentalisms³² in an apocalyptic vision of the Time when "everyone can hear the beat of the drums and the thunder of the chariots of war, and the clash of infidel against infidel, transgressor against transgressor, false *jihad* against false *jihad*" (*DMW*, 311–12), a Time when, for the plethora of contending certainties and egos, all certainty has been lost.

Gazing into the "intellectual confusion, moral vacuity and delusional fugues" (*DMW*, 238) of the mind of a Maronite warlord, which may be paradigmatic of this age of fundamentalisms, this is what Simon the Stylite sees, before he withdraws in disgust.³³

the end justifies the means and the end is nigh. He has noted all the usual signs and portents. Ingathering of the Jews. Collapse of the communist Antichrist. Resurgence of the Caesaropapist hordes. Collapse of all morals, disintegration of the family, the loss of faith in reason. The iron needs of dog eat dog. Now, our rival eschatologies face each other naked on an open battlefield. Good versus evil. Gog and Magog, the only question being, which is which? (*DMW*, 237–8)

The question, so easily settled according to the various fundamentalist truths, and strongly reminiscent of the indeterminacy in *The Satanic Verses*, remains, quite deliberately, I think, unresolved also in Louvish's text. Yet the ending of the novel—a quote from the biblical book of Genesis—may, perhaps, be read as a sort of answer:

And it came to pass, in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth, and Noah removed the covering of the Ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. . . . And the Lord said in his heart: I will not again curse the ground any more

³²For these terms see Ali and Huntington.

³³This and some of the following paragraphs are based on an earlier article on "The 'Aesthetics' of Fundamentalism"; cf. Stähler, 69–70.

for man's sake, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth, neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease... (*DMW*, 415)³⁴

This answer to the question of good and evil, if answer it is, bodes no good. The evil inclination of humankind seems to be allowed to run free, its playing ground the Armageddon for which the unconcerned and innocent world provides the stage.

Some measure of relief is, however, projected in the novel by characters like the terrorist doctor Angel, who performs his own kind of medical miracles in the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut.³⁵ Yet Angel himself—his nickname possibly another reference to Rushdie's novel (*SV*, 122)—is painfully aware of the inadequacy of the merely physical. As the inescapable quandary of our times he diagnoses that:

People have to redefine themselves. That's the horrific challenge. How to find the magic equilibrium. To be true to your origins, your culture, your roots, but also to a non-conformist reality. The mind and the heart. How to connect them. The nerves, the arteries, the veins. I've done the physical route, cutting and repairing. Like reasphalting the roads. But beyond that?

"It's a job for poets and writers", he answers himself, only to continue: "but who has any time for them?" For:

There are also powerful people who hear Voices, and then hire enforcers to make sure those Voices don't fade away. They mold and sculpt the Voices into convenient forms, ironing away the ragged edges, leaving an efficient tool. It's the abuse of the creative urge, that's all. The superego gone wrong. (*DMW*, 81)

The direct competition of literature and fundamentalisms in providing orientation to a humanity that has lost its bearings, it is suggested by Angel's reflections, rests on their common, yet irreconcilable nature—the Caliph's "*Ana Akbar!*" and the superego, the ultimate manifestation of the *Selfhood*, "gone wrong", Gibreel and Shaitan, Baal and Mahound: based on the "creative urge", both literature and fundamentalism in effect appear to be narrative practices, which, since the narrative or discursive turn, are understood to "provide fundamental devices that give form and meaning to our experience".³⁶ To distinguish between literature and fundamentalism as aids to human orientation, Angel introduces a moral dimension, of good and evil, when he suggests that fundamentalisms are the product of abuse. But it is not the morality of the lawgiver, of the fundamentalist mindset, that is envisaged by Angel but rather a pragmatic morality that is both human and humane.

³⁴Cf. Gen. 8:13–22.

³⁵Angel is modelled to some degree on the Greek-Canadian physician Christopher Giannou, whose account of his work in Shatila refugee camp was published in 1990.

³⁶Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 10.

Conclusion

William Blake felt no danger in the “creative urge” but rather in its suppression. His writings as well as—more pertinent in the present context—his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* appear to be not only a defence of the imagination but an affirmation of its function in resisting mental domination and moral coercion and as a true link to the divinity. In Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which in many respects seems to be dialoguing with the *Illustrations*, this moral dimension appears to be suspended. It is here that the ambivalence of the imagination as a vehicle of both domination and resistance is most fully explored in the face of the conspicuous absence of the divinity. In Simon Louvish’s *The Days of Miracles and Wonders* it is, perhaps, Angel’s peace-seeking Israeli girl-friend Naomi, who, in a letter to the terrorist doctor, comes closest to the solution of the dilemma, by reducing the “superego” to its common humanity, re-admitting Gibreel and Shaitan into the human—and emphatically not divine!—form:

Of course, we no longer believe in opposites, since Freud everything is in the same pot. So keep on in your contradictions, Petros. The world does not need saints, just human beings, stop. Not Beyond Good and Evil, but realizing our capacity to be both. This is getting too heavy. But we’ll have to let trauma pass into memory before we can try a lighter note. Keep up the good work! KEEP THOSE MIRACLES COMING! Love from all, angel, in friendship. (DMW, 404)

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