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**Blake's Inflammable Gass**

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solitude and study, plus the Neoplatonic equation with genius, make the connection a strong possibility. Perhaps Blake, knowing of the medieval associations, made his own link.

Thus the illumination of plate 78 is multi-layered in its meaning. It is the figure Los, the creative imagination, surrounded by the sea of time and space, enveloped in Urizen's "clouds of reason" which obscure the mind, accompanied by his sun symbol, in a mood of sullen contemplation. The figure is also the melancholy artist, surrounded by the waters of Saturn or waves of black gall, gazing at the inspirational sun, but unable to use his genius as he broods on the lonely shore. He is St. John as well, but without (or before) inspiration, exiled to Patmos, lethargically looking upon God's sun with his eagle eyes, unable to act. Together, plate 78 represents all of these elements in one image, as they were in Blake's mind--not to be differentiated, but ultimately perceived as one unit infinitely meaningful.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Wicksteed, *William Blake's Jerusalem* (London: The Trianon Press, n.d.), p. 226. Mr. Wicksteed's further identification of the figure, however, I feel is incorrect. The bird's head shown is not that of a cock. This is made obvious through a comparison with the bird's head in Blake's illustration of *Comus with the Lady Spellbound*, which does show a cock's head. John Beer, in *Blake's Visionary Universe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1969) also identifies the Bird-Man as an "Eagle-headed guardian visionary," pl. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Kilbansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1964), pp. 286-87; see also Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, 2 v., (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University, n.d.), v. I, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 421-22.

<sup>4</sup> Bentley, p. 565, fn. 3.

<sup>5</sup> I have relied heavily upon Panofsky's analysis here, *Albrecht Dürer*, v. I, pp. 156-71.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Kilbansky, et al., *Saturn and Melancholy* for a discussion of the evolution of melancholy in the 16th century's Neoplatonic thought.

<sup>7</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence, R. I.: Brown University Press, 1965), p. 246.

<sup>8</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, vol. 1, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Damon, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> F. Edward Hulme, *Symbolism in Christian Art* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1891), p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> Damon, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> Damon, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 9:15.

<sup>14</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 147-48; for a discussion of the symbolism of lighting conventions and their meanings in Renaissance art.

<sup>15</sup> Damon, p. 246.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, included in his discussion of Dürer's *Four Apostles*, p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> A representation such as *St. John* sculpted by Jacobello e Piaroallo Delle Masegne in the Basilica di S. Marco, which shows the apostle characteristically with his hand to his cheek, in a melancholic pose.

## Blake's Inflammable Gass

BY RODNEY M. AND MARY R. BAINE

Although he may well be a type as well as a caricature,<sup>1</sup> one of the characters in William Blake's *Island in the Moon* whose original has so far defied satisfactory identification is Inflammable Gass the Wind-finder. The various scientists so far proposed for this friend of the Philosophers have been too far from Blake's scene, too elderly, too eminent, or too conventional. Probably the most popular identification is that proposed by S. Foster Damon--Joseph Priestley (1733-1804).<sup>2</sup> This suggestion has been accepted by a number of Blake scholars. Serious questioning of the identification by Nancy Bogen, however, led David Erdman to change his mind,<sup>3</sup> and with reason: since Priestley was twenty-four years older than Blake, was eminent in his profession, and lived in Birmingham from 1780 to 1791, he does not fit into the picture at all. Other identifications have been no more satisfying. In 1951 Palmer Brown suggested Gustavus Katterfelto (d. 1799). Although Erdman seems to accept this identification in part, the Philosophers would surely have been repelled by this conjuror and quack doctor, who was ultimately committed to prison in Shrewsbury as an impostor and who for decades lingered in popular memory among "the most celebrated professors in natural magic." In his own opinion the greatest philosopher in Great Britain since Newton, Katterfelto was about the time of *An Island* moving in eminent circles, in 1784 attracting even the Royal Family to his exhibit. Not a bumbling amateur like Inflammable, he was a smoothly operating professional exhibitor.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 Stanley Gardner proposed Dr. George Fordyce (1736-1802) or Henry Cavendish (1731-1810),<sup>5</sup> but each was at least twenty years older than Blake and eminent in his profession. Fordyce was a physician; Inflammable is not so characterized. Cavendish was an unsociable millionaire.

The portrait of Inflammable Gass as presented in *An Island in the Moon* seems to us to suggest most strongly William Nicholson (1753-1815), who was only four years older than Blake, lived nearby, shared his political and religious views, and could have met Blake through either John Flaxman or Thomas Holcroft. Blake is almost certain to have known Nicholson in the 1800's<sup>6</sup>; but he could have met him in the late 1770's or early '80's. In 1776 Nicholson was serving as an agent for the Wedgwoods, and Flaxman was already designing for

that firm. If Blake did not meet Nicholson through Flaxman, he may have done so later through Thomas Holcroft. In 1784 Blake was contributing monthly a featured engraving to Holcroft's *Wit's Magazine*, and he probably knew Holcroft before then. If he visited Holcroft in the early 1780's at the Southampton Buildings he would probably have met Nicholson there, for Nicholson had rooms with Holcroft at the time and collaborated with him in his first complete novel, *Alwyn* (1780).<sup>7</sup> Later in the 1780's Nicholson lived even closer to Blake, at Red Lion Square. Or Blake may have met Nicholson through Joseph Johnson, the liberal publisher who planned to publish *The French Revolution*; indeed Blake engraved for Johnson this same year (1782) the plate for a mathematical volume of Bonycastle. He may have also engraved during this same year some of the twenty-five unsigned plates for Nicholson's *Introduction to Natural Philosophy*, published, again, by Johnson.

The internal evidence from these two volumes suggests that Nicholson may well have been the original of Inflammable. A dedicated scientist like Nicholson, Inflammable cannot conceive that any man can be a fool if he is "desirous of enquiring into the works of nature" (E 441). Blake's name for him is surely apt for Nicholson. In his *Introduction* Nicholson included an extended discussion of inflammable gas and specifically noted the inflammable nature of the air found in privies: "Putrescent animal matters emit this fluid [inflammable gas], as has been observed in church-yards, houses of office, and such. . ."<sup>8</sup> Inflammable boasts, "Heres a bottle of wind that I took up in the bog house [privy]" (E 452). As wind-finder (probably not so much wind-measurer as wind-locator) Nicholson not only described and illustrated instruments which he perfected for measuring the "elasticity" and weight of air (II, 42-44; figs. 105, 106), but he also included a chapter "Of Winds, and their Causes," locating many winds (II, 63-76). Here is a typical example: "Between the parallels of 28 and 40 south latitude, in that tract which extends from 30° West to 100° East longitude from the meridian of London, the wind is variable, but by far the greater part between the N.W. and S.W. so that the outward bound East India ships generally run down their easting on the parallel of 36° south" (II, 64-65). Not only does Inflammable's name fit Nicholson, but so do Inflammable's actions, except that the biological demonstrations using microscope and slides do not appear in the *Introduction*. Here, however, are Inflammable's air pump, his camera obscura, and "Flogiston." In Chapter 10 of *An Island* the air pump which Tilly Lally and Little Scopprell break must have been fitted with a glass receiver, for "Smack went the glass" (E 453). "The most useful of all philosophical instruments, whose actions depend on the properties of the air" (II, 110), Nicholson's model is equipped with a "glass-receiver, out of which the air is to be exhausted" (II, 111). "By the help of this machine," Nicholson remarked, "all that has been shewn concerning the weight and elasticity of the air, is demonstrated in the most simple and elegant manner" (II, 110). When Inflammable remarks suddenly, "I have got a camera obscura at home" (E 443) and

later has "magic pictures" (E 452) to exhibit to his guests, Blake may again have had Nicholson in mind. Nicholson described and illustrated both the darkened room, the literal camera obscura, and the "Magic Lanthorn" (I, 359, 368; figs. 83, 87). Moreover, in an episode which he had just written for Thomas Holcroft's *Alwyn* he had one of the young heroes frighten a Methodist minister up the chimney (Ch. XIV) by using a magic lanthorn to show a picture of the Devil. Again, Inflammable boasts, "I have got a bottle of air that would spread a Plague" (E 442), and he later warns his guests when some of the bottles are broken, "our lungs are destroyed with the Flogiston" (E 453). In his detailed study of phlogiston, Nicholson noted, "With regard to the effect of phlogisticated air . . . an animal plunged in a vessel of noxious air dies much more suddenly and irrecoverably than in the vacuum of an air-pump" (II, 335-36). He then cited the fatal effects of the long exposure of miners to "phlogistic emanations" (II, 339).

A final suggestion of Nicholson may lie in Inflammable's defense of Voltaire, whom he praises as "the Glory of France" who had "found out a Number of Queries in Philosophy" (E 442, 441) and in Inflammable's desire to "see the parsons all hangd a parcel of lying--" (E 443). This anti-ecclesiasticism sounds very like the militant deism of *The Doubts of the Infidels* (1781), in which Nicholson anonymously attacked Biblical inconsistencies and contradictions, continuing Voltaire's Biblical attacks in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Martha W. England, "The Satiric Blake: Apprenticeship at the Haymarket?" *BNYPL* 73 (1969), 440-64, 531-50, and in *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 3-29.

<sup>2</sup> S. Foster Damon, *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1947), p. 33, and *A Blake Dictionary* (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1965), p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Bogen, "William Blake's 'Island in the Moon' Revisited," *Satire Newsletter* 5 (1968), 110; David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 93-94, n. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Erdman, pp. 93-94, n. 13. Giuseppe Pinetti, *The Conjuror's Repository* (London: T. and R. Hughes, [1795?]); *The Whole Art of Legerdemain, or the Black Art Laid Open and Explained, by Katterfelto . . .* (London: T. Hughes, [1826?]); Robert Chambers, *The Book of Days* (London, [1864]) I, 511-12; W.C., "Who was Katterfelto," in *The Mirror*, XVII, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Gardner, *Blake* (1968; rpt. New York: Arco, 1969), pp. 63, 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Blake Records*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Rodney M. Baine, *Thomas Holcroft and the Revolutionary Novel* (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1965), pp. 12, 115.

<sup>8</sup> William Nicholson, *An Introduction to Natural Philosophy* (London: Johnson, 1782), II, 351-59; II, 351. Subsequent citations, incorporated in the text, cite this first edition.

<sup>9</sup> This work, unattributed to Nicholson in his brief biographies and in the BM catalog, was reprinted in the first volume of Richard Carlile's periodical *The Deist*.