

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

N O T E

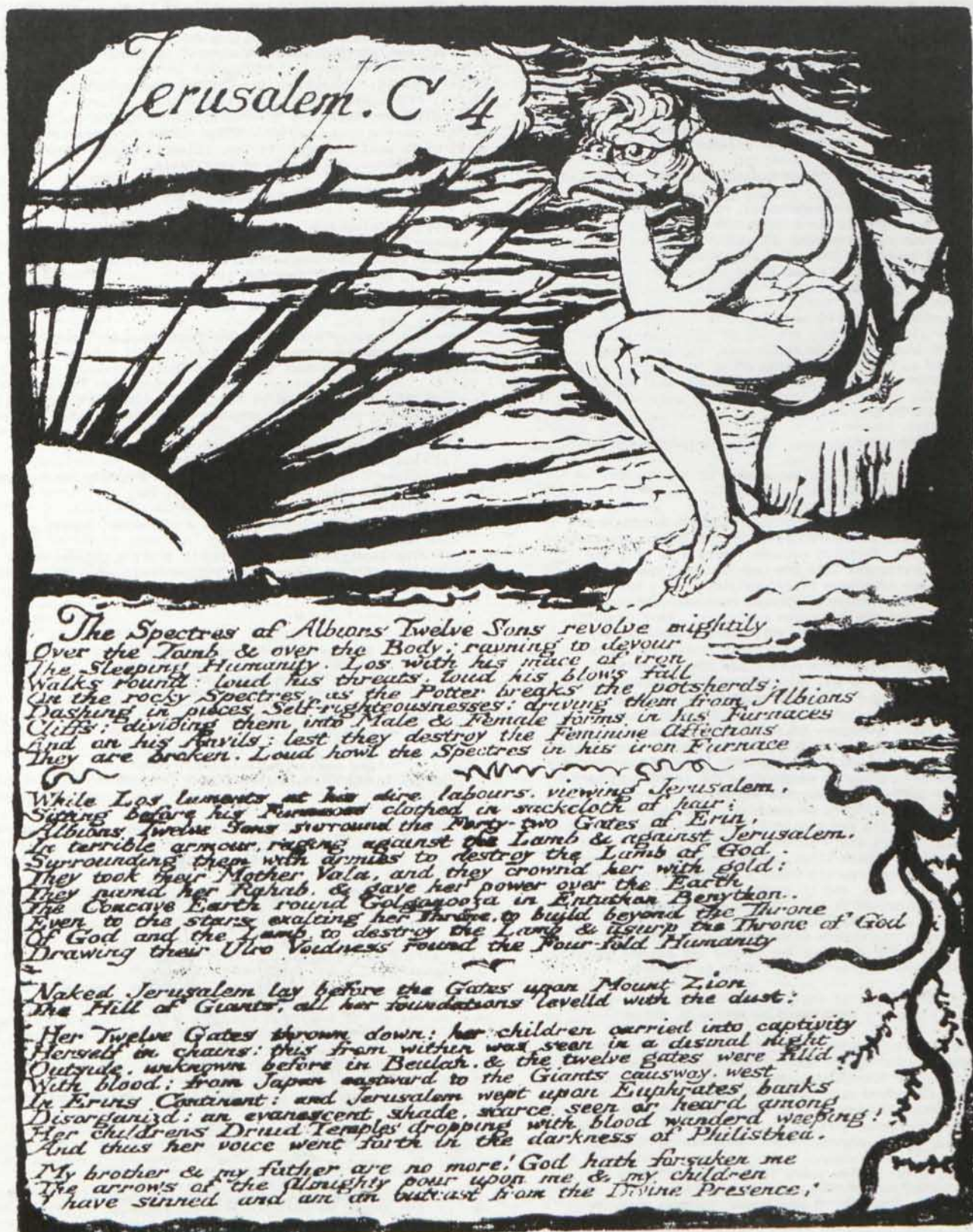
The Bird-Man of William Blake's Jerusalem

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NOTES



The Spectres of Albions Twelve Sons revolve mightily
Over the Tomb & over the Body; raving to devour
The Sleeping Humanity. Los with his mace of iron
Walks round: loud his threats, loud his blows fall
On the rocky Spectres; as the Potter breaks the potsherds
Dashing in pieces Self-righteousnesses; driving them from Albions
Cliffs; dividing them into Male & Female forms in his Furnaces
And on his Anvils; lest they destroy the Feminine Affections
They are broken. Loud howl the Spectres in his iron Furnace

While Los laments at his dire labours, viewing Jerusalem,
Sitting before his Furnace clothed in sackcloth of hair;
Albions Twelve Sons surround the Party two Gates of Erin,
In terrible armour, raging against the Lamb & against Jerusalem.
Surrounding them with armies to destroy the Lamb of God:
They took their Mother Vala, and they crown'd her with gold;
They ruin'd her Rahab, & gave her power over the Earth
The Concave Earth round Golgotha in Entr'actan Benytan.
Even to the stars exalting her Throne, to build beyond the Throne
Of God and the Lamb to destroy the Lamb & usurp the Throne of God
Drawing their Ulro Voidness round the Four-fold Humanity

Naked Jerusalem lay before the Gates upon Mount Zion
The Hill of Giants, all her foundations level'd with the dust:

Her Twelve Gates thrown down; her children carried into captivity
Herself in chains: this from within was seen in a dismal night
Outside, unknown before in Beulah, & the twelve gates were fill'd
With blood; from Japan eastward to the Giants causway west
In Erins Continent; and Jerusalem wept upon Euphrates banks
Disorganiz'd; an evanescent shade, scarce seen or heard among
Her Childrens Druid Temples dropping with blood wander'd weeping:
And thus her voice went forth in the darkness of Philisthea.

My brother & my father are no more: God hath forsaken me
The arrows of the Almighty pour upon me & my children
I have sinned and am an outcast from the Divine Presence;

Of the major works of Dürer in 1514, *Melancholia I* is the most involved iconographically.⁵ It symbolizes one of the four humors, or temperaments, popular in the Middle Ages--specifically, the dreaded melancholy humor. The Florentine Neoplatonists, in particular Marsilio Ficino, gave the melancholic a much more favored position than previously assigned him.⁶ By transposing the idea that all geniuses are melancholics into the statement that all melancholics are geniuses, this humor became associated with high thought. This kind of melancholic is the one that Dürer represents. His engraving is, in Neoplatonic terms, of a "melancholia artificialis," or artist's melancholy. For Dürer, and possibly for Blake as well, *Melancholia I* was a visionary image of the melancholy artist he was himself.

Plate 78 therefore has an implicit connection with the melancholy artist. In Blake's system Los is the "creative imagination," the deepest Zoa and the center of each individual.⁷ Dürer's angel, lapsed into a state of gloomy inaction, represents Theoretical Insight, for she thinks but cannot act--so Los broods in inactivity. Melancholia, representing architecture and carpentry, has about her elements which are of Los' trade. They are both seated near water as murky as the black gall which afflicts melancholics and both have the characteristic "earthlike" complexion of melancholics.⁸ As Dürer's angel is the embodiment of the tragic unrest of human creation, Los--the creative imagination--is the origin of that restless creation, and his son Orc is the revolutionary spirit itself.

Another element in plate 78, traced to its artistic source, provides the next level of meaning in Blake's image. That is the figure of a man with a bird's head. Again this is a commonly used, ancient motif traceable to representations of the Egyptian sun god Horus, shown with the head of a hawk. As both Los and Horus are associated with the sun, Los probably being an anagram of "Sol," there is a connection even here.⁹ Yet the head of Blake's Bird-Man is not a hawk and his artistic source may well be not from his early work for the Society of Antiquaries, but from his knowledge of early medieval Christian motifs.

That Blake chose an eagle's head for his Bird-Man can be seen through a comparison with the eagle-head of the griffin in his illumination to Dante, *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*. Blake was familiar with the Christian tradition that associated the four evangelists with the four beasts of the Apocalypse (in Blake's system, the Four Zoas). In this tradition St. John was represented by the eagle. Medieval illuminators chose to depict St. John in one of three ways: with an eagle, as an eagle, or as a man with an eagle's head (illus. 4).¹⁰

Aside from the fact that an eagle-man is St. John's traditional symbol, he is also often shown, as in plate 78, alone on the island of Patmos writing the Book of Revelation. Thus Blake's figure is not only a direct reference to the evangelist, but to the event of divine inspiration for which he was known. Again, it seems pertinent to ask why Blake chose this allusion.

According to Blake's system, Los is "the 'Prophet of Eternity,' who reveals the basic truths . . . He directly inspires Blake himself . . . " ¹¹ Thus St. John, who wrote the Apocalypse--a book exclusively meant to reveal future truths--proves an appropriate parallel figure. St. John's visions, especially of the Last Judgment, were also a great inspiration in Blake's writings. As Blake identified with Los, so too he must have identified with the great visionary evangelist. With Blake as the common link, Los and St. John became fused, in plate 78, into one image.

Traditionally, the eagle was the one bird who could soar on high and look directly at the sun.¹² A symbol of genius, he was an appropriate symbol for St. John, who wrote of the highest mysteries of faith. As Blake said, "When thou seest an eagle, thou seest a portion of Genius; lift up thy head!"¹³ Thus the symbolism surrounding St. John, the sun and the eagle are linked. In plate 78, the sun is not only the link with Los as his "golden orb," but with St. John as his source of Divine Inspiration.

Blake's quarter-sun is divine because he shows it on the left side of his Bird-Man plate. In Renaissance tradition, the sun shown on the left, or sunlight from the left in a picture, was a northern sun.¹⁴ Northern light, as an unnatural phenomenon, was considered divine--a well-known artistic convention even in Blake's time. Los and the eagle, both in Blake's northern quaternary, further identify the region as northern.¹⁵ Thus the sun is not only a symbol for Los, and of St. John's inspiration, but an equation of the two. Blake, the visionary, saw his inspiration and that of St. John as originating in the same way--from imagination.

But do the motifs of St. John and Melancholia have a common linkage? The four evangelists were equated with the four humors in medieval literature.¹⁶ Dürer himself made this connection and, using age as the key, showed St. John--according to northern custom--as a young man and therefore the sanguine. But, as Panofsky implies, this does not necessarily reflect a fixed association. St. John was often represented as an old man with a white beard in the Eastern tradition and could have been also associated with the melancholic humor. Certainly some representations of St. John suggest just such an association.¹⁷ The melancholic's inclination for



4 Man with an eagle's head

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.

¹ 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.

² 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.

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

⁴ Bentley, p. 565, fn. 3.

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

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

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

⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, vol. I, p. 163.

⁹ Damon, p. 246.

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

¹¹ Damon, p. 247.

¹² Damon, p. 112.

¹³ *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 9:15.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Damon, p. 246.

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

¹⁷ 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,¹ 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).² 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,³ 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.⁴ In 1968 Stanley Gardner proposed Dr. George Fordyce (1736-1802) or Henry Cavendish (1731-1810),⁵ 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's⁶; 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