

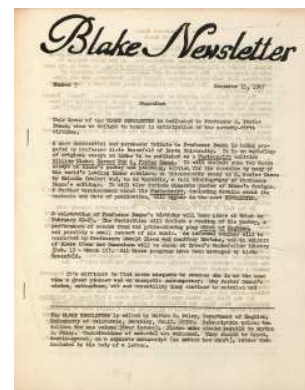
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N O T E

The Crested Cock

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NOTES

1. The Crested Cock

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Blake's obscurities are not to be resolved by guesses, however inspired; in almost every case there is a key that fits the lock, which opens easily to the right combination. One puzzle which no-one so far as I know has solved is "the crested Cock" who in Milton 28: 24 (K. 515) terrifies the Spectres into incarnation. The passage is:

They contend with the weak Spectres, they fabricate soothing forms.
The Spectre refuses, he seeks cruelty: they create the crested Cock.
Terrified the Spectre screams & rushes in fear into their Net
Of kindness & compassion, & is born a weeping terror.
Or they create the Lion & Tyger in compassionate thunderings:
Howling the Spectres flee: they take refuge in Human lineaments.

In my forthcoming book I wrote as follows:

It is hard to know what was in Blake's mind in this image of the People of Dreams frightened into generation by the crowing of a cock, image of resurrection; perhaps the folk belief that the dead must return to their graves at cock-crow, whether Hamlet's kingly ghost or the three sons of the Wife of Usher's Well: 'Then up and crew the red, red cock/ And up and crew the grey.' Another, and perhaps more likely, source is the cock of Odin, described in a passage quoted by Macpherson in his Introduction to the History OF Great Britain and Ireland: 'A cock, with a crest of gold, crows every morning in the presence of the Gods. He awakes the heroes to battle before Odin the father of armies. They rush, armed and clothed, to the field and slay one another with mutual wounds. These deaths, however, are only temporary. The power of Odin revives the slain.' If this fine image lies behind Blake's 'crested cock' the myth of the specters is again brought into the context of reincarnation.

Since writing this I have come upon another interesting passage relating to the cock, which Blake might have seen, for it occurs in the first volume of Thomas Taylor's Plato (1804), p. 65. It is an extract from Proclus' Dissertation on Magic, quoted by Taylor in his notes to the First Alcibiades:

... There are many solar animals, such as lions and cocks, which participate, according to their nature, of a certain solar divinity; whence it is wonderful how much inferiors yield to superiors in the same order, though they do not yield in magnitude and power. Hence, they report that a cock is very much feared, and as it were revered, by a lion; the reason of which we cannot assign from matter or sense, but from the contemplation alone of a supernal order: for thus we shall find that the presence

of the solar virtue accords more with a cock than with a lion. This will be evident from considering that the cock, as it were, with certain hymns, applauds and calls to the rising sun, when he bends his course to us from the antipodes; and that solar angels sometimes appear in forms of this kind, who, though they are without shape, yet present themselves to us, who are connected with shape, in some sensible form. Sometimes too, there are daemons with a leonine front, who, when a cock is placed before them, unless they are of a solar order, suddenly disappear; and this, because those natures which have an inferior rank in the same order, always reverence their superiors.

2. The Meaning of Los

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The traditional reading of 'Los' as an anagram for 'sol' has been long established, though other sources have been suggested. Frye, for instance, cites 'los or loos' from Chaucer's House of Fame as a possible analogue.¹ Though I do not discount the possibility that Blake may have had several sources in mind at once, as with the names of many of his major figures, like Orc and Vala, I think 'los' means literally and metaphorically something more than 'sol.' I do not intend or even suggest that 'sol' be abandoned because Los is too often associated with the sun in both the verse and the illustrations for 'sol' to be ignored. Los is, of course, the 'more bright Sun of Imagination' in the L'Allegro designs and not the fiery guinea-disk of economics and nature. What I think 'los' means is 'look' or 'behold' in the traditionally shortened form of the interjection, 'lo,' only in the third person singular of the verb -- perhaps, with all the same implications as Ferlinghetti's very Blakean "fourth person singular."² Los is aware, he watches, looks, sees, and beholds. His is vision. He los all the time and all Time. Los is the word within the word, a visionary verbal wheel within a wheeling verbal universe, a moving vision or visionary (a seer) within the vision. Los is a perennial proclamation in the present tense, the ever-present tense, a seeing word in an iconographical drama. He is his own ejaculation, an infinite 'lo.' The s in Los should be pronounced as a voiced sibilant in contrast with the voiceless sound uttered by the serpent. 'The Song' or 'The Book' of Los, like all of Blake's work, is a song or a book of los. We see through Los, not with him. Before this suggested interpretation of the meaning of Los is dismissed as fanciful, I only ask that several of Blake's works be re-read with the ear attuned to the metaphorical sound of Los pronounced as lo with a voiced sibilant. Such phrases as the 'Gate of Los' or 'head of Los' which appear repeatedly and other phrases, such as 'Scribe of Los', or building of Los, or power of Los, or 'they gave their power to Los, Naming him the Spirit of Prophecy,' take on a new and important dimension, which once entertained, is not easily ignored. No serious critic of Blake or of the Bible can afford to ignore the aural metaphors or what Buber calls 'A bold visual metaphor for an acoustical event' when he discusses the 'voice of thin silence' from I Kings 19:21, which he says 'is a silence, but not a thick and solid one, rather one that is of such veil-like thinness that the Word shines through it.'³ 'Lo is the recurrent ejaculation of God and his

¹"Notes for a Commentary on Milton," The Divine Vision (London, 1957). pp. 100-101; cf Fearful Symmetry (Princeton, 1947), p. 445 n.2 and p. 417.