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*«Walking among the fires of Hell».
William Blake, Los and Christ*

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WALKING AMONG THE FIRES OF HELL WILLIAM BLAKE, LOS AND CHRIST

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RIASSUNTO: L'analisi del sistema estetico, simbolico ed epistemologico di Blake getta luce sulla figura archetipica di Los, un personaggio interpretabile come l'*alter ego* dell'autore. Los, un fabbro al lavoro nella propria fucina, e la sua consorte Enitharmon, una tessitrice impegnata al telaio, rappresentano il potere creativo, la dimensione maschile e quella femminile, tempo e spazio, linea e colore, parola e immagine: secondo la tradizione emblematica, essi stanno anche per anima e corpo e impersonano gli aspetti indivisibili dell'arte multiforme di Blake e della sua filosofia. Queste pagine si propongono di dimostrare che Los il fabbro e Blake l'incisore sono una stessa *persona*, identificabile con la figura dell'alchimista, con il sole e con Cristo.

ABSTRACT: The analysis of Blake's aesthetic, symbolic and epistemological system sheds light on the archetypal figure of Los, a fictional character interpretable as the author's *alter ego*. Los, a blacksmith busy at his furnace, and his consort Enitharmon, a weaver engaged in her looms, represent the power of creation and stand for the male and female principles, time and space, line and colour, word and image: according to the emblematic tradition, they also stand for body and soul and personify the indivisible aspects of Blake's composite art and of his philosophy. These pages will try to demonstrate that Los the blacksmith and Blake the engraver are a unique *persona* identifiable with the figure of the alchemist, with the sun and with Christ.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Incisione, arte del fabbro, alchimia, Los, fuoco, sole, Cristo

KEY WORDS: Engraving, Smithery, Alchemy, Los, Fire, Sun, Christ

WALKING AMONG THE FIRES OF HELL
WILLIAM BLAKE, LOS AND CHRIST

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I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's
The author within his own composite art

William Blake is universally known as a Pre-Romantic or Romantic poet even though his originality and ingenuity make him elude any formal and conventional literary and aesthetic movement and category: it is true, however – as these pages will try to demonstrate –, that his habit of plunging into his work and depicting himself as an active character within, and even involved in, his artistic creations is a distinctive Romantic attitude and mode. The choice of using the verb ‘depict’ and the adjective ‘artistic’ aims to highlight both Blake’s Humanistic idea of the authentic artist and the quality of his composite art, i.e., his combining word and image in all his works:¹ in *The Laocoön*, one of his last productions, Blake identifies imagination and the creative power with Jesus Christ² and, utterly rejecting mimetic art, praises the visionary and spiritual faculties of the true, complete artist by arguing that «a Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect; the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian».³

The very Blake concentrates all the features that, in his opinion, make an authentic artist: he is a poet, a philosopher, a painter, an engraver and, respecting Renaissance customs, often sets to music and sings his own lyrics – he defines ‘songs’ many of his short poems, as attested by his well-

1 For Blake’s combined art, see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art. A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978.

2 «The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination, that is, God himself The Divine Body, Jesus [...]. It manifests itself in his Works of Art» (William Blake, *The Laocoön*, 1820, in Id., *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979 [1966], p. 776). Hereafter Blake’s *Complete Writings* will be quoted as K. followed by the page number. For Blake’s complete composite works, see *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books with an Introduction by David Bindman*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2000.

3 William Blake, *The Laocoön*, cit., K. 776.

known lyrical collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Albeit he is not an architect, Blake is aware that in ancient times lettering, engraving, smithery and sculpture were closely linked to each other and, above all, is convinced that creating and constructing a philosophic system, as he has done, can be equated to creating and constructing a building. With the fictional figure of Los, a blacksmith endowed with poetic genius that functions as his alter ego, Blake embraces the traditional identification of poetry and smithery and highlights the 'plastic' and 'architectural' substance of creation. In Blake's last «prophetic book» *Jerusalem*, Los declares

I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.
 I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create.
 [...] I go forth to Create
 States, to deliver Individuals evermore! Amen.
 (*Jerusalem*, 10: 20-21; 35: 15-16. K. 629, 662)

Convinced that also the creation of language is an 'architectural' act, Blake then explains that

Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against
 Albion's melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair.
 (*Jerusalem*, 40: 59-60. K. 668)

Job, one of the biblical figures most studied and appreciated by Blake,⁴ utters words that corroborate the concept of the act of creation as a construction: his exclamation «O that my words [...] were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!» (*Job*, 19: 23-24)⁵ is habitually interpreted as a reference to the traditional identification of writing, engraving, smithery and sculpturing.

As much as his whole production is marked by a close interpenetration of word and image, Blake's innovative and revolutionary etching technique is tightly connected to his philosophic, symbolic and epistemolog-

4 From 1805 to the 1820s Blake makes several sets of designs illustrating *The Book of Job*, one of his favourite biblical texts since it deals with the question of theodicy, innocence and experience. For Blake's assimilation and treatment of the Bible, see, among others, Harold Fisch, *The Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton and Blake*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999.

5 *The Bible. Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

ical system: the above-mentioned *Laocoön* and *Jerusalem*, both printed in 1820, are two of his last original hand-made creations that conjoin text and illustration. In 1788 Blake invents an etching technique that, drawing inspiration from Medieval manuscripts, he calls «illuminated printing», a method he gradually refines by creating what he will eventually define «relief etching», a reversal of traditional engraving: if conventional line engraving implies an intaglio etching of the design into copperplates, his technique, conversely, scrapes away the background in order to leave the words and images as standing up in relief. Blake first draws and writes with brushes and a quill pen directly onto the copperplate by using an acid-resistant ink and, when the acid-resistant liquid has dried and hardened, he exposes the plate to the acid that etches away the free parts of the copper and leaves words and images in relief. He then inks the plates with one or more colours and prints them with an etching press: he inks the raised parts of the copperplate, but often also the scraped-away areas. Eventually, when the plates are printed – generally on millboard –, they are hand-coloured with watercolour washes by the very Blake or, most frequently, by his wife Catherine.⁶

I have defined Blake's technique as 'revolutionary' because it is an actual reversal of traditional etching and a proper reflection of his upside-down philosophy: orthodox engravings present thin and slight lines in intaglio, whereas the plates produced with Blake's technique have broad and sometimes rough lines in relief, thus resembling woodcuts. Etching implies an even subtler reversal if considering that printing overturns both text and design: the need to write the words backwards, close to Leonardo's mirror-writing, and to draw the illustrations in a mirroring way in order to make them appear correctly when printed has always been regarded by Blake as the tangible evidence of the double reversal inherent in his technique and, above all, in his vision of the world.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, etched about 1790-1793 and one of his early prophetic books, Blake explicitly associates his innovative printing technique with his unconventional philosophic system. With the words «I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius»,⁷ on plate 6 (an almost full-text page) Blake starts a verbal description of himself actively involved in his printing workshop and

6 For Blake's printing technique, see, among others, W.J.T. Mitchell, *op. cit.*; Ruthven Todd, *The Technique of William Blake's Illuminate Printing*, «The Print's Collector's Quarterly», 29, November 1948, pp. 25-37.

7 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-1793, plate 6 (K. 150).

then represents himself in the pose and attitude of a «Devil folded in black clouds» preparing to engrave a copper surface:

On the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock: with corroding fires he wrote the following sentence [...].⁸

The «abyss of the five senses» is a metaphor for the copper plate that has to be etched; the «flat sided steep» is the working desk; the «corroding fires» are the vapours of the acid and other corrosive liquids Blake needs to create his relief etchings; the «mighty Devil folded in black clouds» is Blake's mirroring image, busy at work wrapped in a black smock in order to protect himself from the toxic materials he uses. On the frontispiece to *Jerusalem*, Blake's last and longest poem and the summa of his complex philosophic system, the blacksmith Los is wearing the same smock and broad-brimmed hat used by the author in his engraving workshop to find protection from toxic vapours and «corroding fires» (see plate 1).



Plate 1.
William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820,
plate 1. Public domain

8 *Ibid.*, plates 6-7 (K. 150).

The frontispiece to *Jerusalem* shows the «Prophetic Poet» Los – Blake’s alter ego – entering a gothic door to reach his furnace while carrying in his right hand the «Eternal Sun of Imagination», the means that endows him with poetic inspiration: by looking and directing his journey to the right, Los-Blake points to the plates that compose the poem, as if to invite the reader to follow him. As most works of Blake’s last phase, this plate combines traditional intaglio engraving and relief etching.

The habit of ‘entering’ his own work – both verbally and visually – and participating in the dramatic action is something Blake frequently does, from the very beginning of his artistic career to his last works. He inaugurates his composite art precisely by providing a visual representation of himself and, thus, by explicitly exhorting the reader to dwell on the act of producing his illuminated prints: on the frontispiece to *All Religions Are One*, his first experiment in his original etching technique,⁹ he portrays himself as a naked biblical prophet «crying in the Wilderness»,¹⁰ pointing with his two arms to the right in order to signal the message of the following nine plates (see plate 2).



Plate 2.

William Blake, *All Religions Are One*, 1788, plate 1. Public domain

- 9 Blake’s first experiments in his method of illuminated printing are the two brief and tiny series of aphorisms entitled *All Religions Are One* and *There Is No Natural Religion*, both etched about 1788.
- 10 «The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness» (William Blake, *All Religions Are One*, 1788, plate 1. K. 98).

Considering that in all the four Gospels the words «the voice of one crying in the wilderness» are uttered by Isaiah to refer to John the Baptist,¹¹ Blake's choice of introducing himself to his audience with a self-identification with the Jewish prophet presented in the Gospels as the precursor of Jesus sheds light both on his idea that «Imagination [is] The Divine Body, Jesus»¹² and on his subtle identification, as we will see, with Jesus Christ.

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul
The union of opposites

Blake refers to his writing and drawing method and, obliquely, to himself also in other passages from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. On plate 14 he claims that «the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged» and announces that he will confute this erroneous theory «by printing in the infernal method», i.e., by means of his relief etching:

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.¹³

With these lines Blake alludes both to his printing technique and to its intrinsic symbolism. When arguing that he is able to «display the infinite which was hid» (the words and images in relief) «by corrosives, [...] melting apparent surfaces away» from the copper plate, he provides another description of the relief-etching technique he has recently invented, whereas by rejecting «the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul» I think he is indirectly referring to a central concept inherent in the Renaissance emblematic tradition and, of course, in his composite art. The identity of soul and body is a concept so central in Blake's philosophy that some pages above, in a plate entitled «The voice of the Devil», he has already disproved what he considers as one of the errors of «All Bibles or sacred codes»:¹⁴ «Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd

11 *Matthew*, 3: 3; *Mark*, 1: 3; *Luke*, 3: 4; *John*, 1: 23.

12 William Blake, *The Laocöon* (K. 776).

13 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14 (K. 154).

14 *Ibid.*, plate 4 (K. 149).

Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the Five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age».¹⁵

Moving from the assumption that Blake, as I believe, is to be regarded as the epigone of Renaissance emblematisers, the structure and meaning of emblems can shed light on his composite works. Emblems consist of an image and a text – generally a poem – that illustrate each other: the poem that matches and verbally explains the visual image is traditionally known as *significatio* and is defined as the «soul» of the emblem, whereas the image, or *pictura*, is traditionally defined as the «body» of the emblem. The two different media that compose emblems, moreover, are traditionally associated with the male and female gender respectively: the text, identified with the soul and time, is male, whereas the image, identified with the body and space, is female.¹⁶ In modern times Lessing confutes the classical theory of *ut pictura poesis*, i.e., the parallel between the visual arts and literature, by conjecturing that the subject of poetry is time and action whereas the object of painting is space and the body.¹⁷ Embracing both the emblematic tradition and Lessing's ideas, in the visionary prose *A Vision of the Last Judgment* Blake defines in sexual terms the temporal and spatial modalities in which poetry and painting are created: «Time & Space are real beings, a Male & a Female. Time is a Man, Space is a Woman».¹⁸ In *Jerusalem* he explicitly equates images to space and femininity and words to time and masculinity:

She [the Female] Creates at her will a little moony night & silence
With Spaces of sweet gardens & a tent of elegant beauty
[...] And the Male gives Time & Revolution to her Space.
(*Jerusalem*, 69: 19-20, 23. K. 707)

Exactly as in his composite art, in Blake's epistemological and philosophic system all the elements should be united in harmony as a reflection and restoration of their original condition: for Blake it was the original sin

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For the relationship between word and image in the emblematic tradition, see Loretta Innocenti, *Vis Eloquentiae. Emblematica e persuasione*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1983; Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture*, London, Longman, 1994.

¹⁷ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon. Oder über die grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, Berlin, Christian Friedrich Voss, 1766.

¹⁸ William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, 1810 (K. 614).

and the consequent Fall that provoked the inception of categories which in eternity did not exist such as, for example, man and woman, body and soul, time and space, word and image, line and colour, spirit and matter, innocence and experience, heaven and hell.

Plate 14 from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* faithfully reproduces the pattern of emblems. Its main illustration depicts a naked woman in ruddy flames hovering above a blue-grey male body, naked as well, in the act of uniting with him in order to restore the original 'marriage' of all the categories divided by the Fall (see plate 3).



Plate 3.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-1793, plate 14. Public domain

With her outstretched arms and legs in a lively attitude of expansion and extension, the woman shows a recurring posture in Blake's designs that stands for the act of self-sacrifice and forgiveness. In the light of Blake's colour symbolism and language of forms¹⁹, this illustration is to be read as the woman's attempt to reunite all the divided elements by infusing life and fire to the seeming dead male body, in a sort of Christological and salvific self-sacrifice: the drawing is placed, not by chance, above the words «the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged» (ll. 11-12). Red and yellow, the colours of the sun, gold, day and fire, stand for masculinity, life and «Energy», whereas blue and grey, the colours of the moon, silver, night and water, stand for femininity, death and «Passivity». By representing the female dimension with male colours and features – and vice versa –, this plate displays a further reversal, a fusion of opposite categories and a concretization of Blake's theories: at the very beginning of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the poet proclaims that

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.²⁰

Considering that, on the one hand, Blake identifies words, lines, time with man and the soul, and, on the other, he associates images, colours and space with woman and the body, his choice of merging text and illustration makes explicit the concept that «Man has no Body distinct from his Soul» and the need to recover the original union of all the categories: also the choice of combining intaglio and relief etching in the works of his last phase is interpretable as a further way to express the idea that «Without Contraries is no progression». Deeply indebted to Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, alchemy and Jakob Böhme's theories, Blake believes that in the original state of eternity the sexes were not divided and, thus, that the

19 For Blake's visual symbolism, body language and vocabulary of forms, cf. Janet Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art*, Kingston-Montreal-Gloucester, Alan Sutton-McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984; Ead., *Blake's Use of Gesture*, in David V. Erdman and John Grant (eds.), *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 174-195.

20 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3 (K. 149).

essence of humanity was androgynous, complete and perfect in itself: in *Jerusalem* he declares that «Humanity knows not of sex», that «In Eternity they neither marry nor are given in marriage», that «Sexes must vanish & cease / To be when Albion arises from his dread repose»²¹ and that, after the Fall, all the opposed dimensions and contrary states of body and mind have to coexist and cooperate in order to retrieve their original unity.

According to Neoplatonic, Gnostic and alchemic doctrines, the very biblical word testifies that the first human being created in the image of God was androgynous:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. [...] Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam. (*Genesis*, 1: 27; 5: 2)

As noticed by David V. Erdman, on the left and right sides of the title of plate 15 from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake has depicted a tiny representation of body and soul endeavouring to recover their original union.²² The title of the plate («A Memorable Fancy») is identifiable with the *motto* of the emblematic tradition (see plate 4).

21 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, 30: 33; 34: 15; 92: 13-14 (K. 636, 660, 739).

22 Cf. David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake. William Blake's Complete Illuminated Works with a Plate-by-Plate Commentary*, New York, Dover, 1974, p. 112.



Plate 4.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790-1793, plate 15. Public domain

At the bottom of this plate appear an eagle and a snake, two animals believed to fight against each other and traditionally associated with height and lowness, spirit and matter, heaven and hell respectively: they function as a concrete representation of the union of opposites and have a central role in alchemy. According to alchemic theories, the snake stands for raw matter and the eagle stands for mercury: thanks to the transmuting power of mercury, also known as 'Christ' because it undergoes numerous 'deaths' and 'resurrections', the alchemist can achieve his end, an end eloquently called «marriage of king and queen» because it implies, as Blake's «marriage of heaven and hell», the recovery of the original union of all elements.

In the first lines of this plate Blake alludes once more to his reversed printing process by explaining that he has learnt his relief etching technique from a devil:

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation. In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave's mouth.²³

If the «Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave's mouth» is a devil-engraver – the mirroring image of Blake himself busy at scraping the surface of the copper plate –, the minute anthropomorphic burin or graver endowed with head, arms and legs that can be individuated at the left side of line 4, just before the words «In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man»,²⁴ is interpretable as a further reference to Blake's etching technique.

Blake argues that in our fallen and split condition any concept, image and symbol does not convey a unique or absolute meaning but implies a contrasting and multivalent reading. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he expounds this idea with the above-mentioned declaration «Without Contraries is no progression» and with the words that conclude the work: «One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression»²⁵. The subtitle to his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, etched in 1794, eloquently illustrates this theory: *Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Since contraries are necessary and everything encompasses its reversed meaning, the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen*, a prophetic book printed in 1794 as well, should not be so puzzling as it could seem at first sight (see plate 5).

23 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 15 (K. 154).

24 See David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake*, cit., p. 112.

25 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plates 3, 24 (K. 149, 158).



Plate 5.

William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, plate 1. Public domain

This full-design plate is another example of self-portrayal since its lower half presents Blake, identified with the character of Urizen, busy at creating one of his illuminated books. Here the author is writing his own

book with a quill in his right hand and is illustrating it with an etching needle in his left hand: with the quill he is writing numerous times the letter W, a letter resembling the first letter of his name that appears in the line below his self-portrait.

If Blake's self-representation is something not infrequent throughout his work, the surprising choice of projecting himself onto the character of Urizen, the paradigm of sterile rationality and unimaginative scientific thought, needs an interpretation. With his syncretistic and unconventional philosophy, Blake prophetically anticipates modern studies on human psychology by arguing that every human being is composed of the four fundamental features of individuality: imagination, emotions, instincts and reason. At the core and start of Blake's fourfold theory on the human psyche is the myth of Albion, the «Universal» and «Cosmic» man, the original human being, the archetype of humanity: Albion is composed of «Four Zoas», the four fundamental aspects of human personality that co-existed and cooperated in a harmonious and equilibrated balance within his brain before the Fall and its separating force. The four Zoas, «Four Mighty Ones» that «are in every Man»,²⁶ are respectively named Urthona (imagination), Tharmas (emotions), Luvah (instincts) and Urizen (reason). The Zoa of imagination – Urthona – is «Los's eternal form».

In the uncompleted prophetic poem *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, composed about 1795-1804, Blake expounds the theory that before the Fall humanity was a perfect and harmonic unity consisting of a fourfold essence:

Four Mighty Ones are in every Man; a Perfect Unity
Cannot Exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden,
The Universal Man, to Whom be Glory Evermore. Amen.
(*Vala, or the Four Zoas*, «Night the First», ll. 9-11. K. 264)

The bluish, stony and cold colours that dominate numerous versions of the titlepage to *The Book of Urizen*, the dry branches of the weeping willow forming a round archway utterly opposed to Los's gothic door (see plate 1), the biblical tablets of the Law, Urizen's heavy gown, his closed eyes and his contracted posture are unequivocal signals that in Blake's symbolic and aesthetic system refer to spiritual blindness and death: Urizen is crouched and squatted on the ground in a pose of contraction that in the poet's language of the body stands for materialism, selfishness, nar-

26 William Blake, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, 1795-1804, «Night the First», l. 9 (K. 264).

row-mindedness and despair. Albeit Urizen concentrates a series of negative features and his clothing and pose are the visual and symbolical opposite of nakedness and of the above-mentioned outstretched Christological posture, this rational Zoa is a necessary tessera for the complex mosaic that composes humankind and the whole world: here Urizen undoubtedly concentrates signs of desolation, but, at the same time, he is trying to open his arms as if to outstretch them and give birth to his creation in an act of generous self-sacrifice.

Blake has elaborated this crouched posture several times throughout his work, as testified, for example, by a colour-printed drawing entitled *Nebuchadnezzar*, a figure portrayed also on the last plate of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* above the words «One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression»; as testified by the gigantic naked angel on the frontispiece to *America: A Prophecy*; by his most renowned and re-elaborated *The Ancient of Days*, or God creating the universe with his golden compasses (see plate 18); by *Newton*, the paradigm, for Blake, of sterile scientific thought and a personality that can be associated with Urizen; by the crouched posture of Vala, the goddess of nature and Albion's spouse, on plate 51 from *Jerusalem*. Plate 41 from *Jerusalem* displays a majestic figure in a contracted posture that recalls Urizen crouched on the floor and provides an interesting occurrence of a Blakean self-representation (see plate 6).



Plate 6.
William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820,
plate 41. Public domain

Whereas the statuesque huddled figure, called «Humanity asleep», is in a womb-position that for Blake means mental enclosure and death, the tiny and relaxed man writing in reverse on a scroll is the very author engaged in the composition of a short poem entitled «The Letter that kil-leth». Blake seldom presents reversed writing in his plates and when he does it is because he wants to announce deep truths or a vision of particular relevance: since this plate deals with the awakening of humanity, the author has even decided to introduce himself into it in his real aspect, not projected onto Los or 'disguised' as a devil or as a Zoa. Albeit in *Jerusalem* there are only three occurrences of reversed writing, I believe that all the images and visions of the poem are arranged in a specular way: a thorough and attentive observation of Blake's last work reveals that the seeming, and bewildering, visual inconsistencies assume coherence if regarded as specular representations of his cosmogony.²⁷ Strongly imbued with Neoplatonism, Blake has always considered our mortal or «vegetal» life as a mere reflection or mirror of true existence: as he announces in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, «There Exist in that Eternal world the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature».²⁸ The very New Jerusalem Blake aspires to construct with his last prophetic poem *Jerusalem* can be associated with a mirror since, as stated by John, «the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass» (*Revelation*, 21: 18).

I am convinced that plate 41 from *Jerusalem* is indebted to *Silence*, a painting by the Swiss visionary artist Johann Heinrich Füssli (better known in England as Henry Fuseli), living in London for several years and profoundly admired by Blake. The negative quality of the crouched posture portrayed in *Silence* is corroborated by *Melancholy*, another painting by Fuseli now destroyed but known thanks to an engraving by William Sharpe: in *Melancholy* the figure of Anguish, laying with the genius of Terror at the feet of Melancholy, is a slight variation of the figure of Silence.²⁹ If not the original *Silence*, created by Fuseli between 1799 and

27 For a reading of *Jerusalem* as a specular poem, see Milena Romero Allué, *The Permanent Realities and the Glass of Nature: Jerusalem as a Specular Poem*, «Annali di Ca' Foscari», 1-2, 1993, pp. 295-321.

28 William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (K. 605).

29 *Silence* is an oil on canvas produced by Fuseli between 1799 and 1801, now in the Zurich Kunsthaus; *Melancholy* is an oil on canvas created between 1799 and 1800 and now lost. See, among others, Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli*, London, Tate Publishing, 2001; Martin Myrone (ed.), *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imag-*

1801 in London, Blake undisputedly knows very well its engraved reproduction since in 1801 he is involved in the publication of the *Lectures on painting, delivered at The Royal Academy, by Henry Fuseli, P.P.; with additional observations and notes*. The tailpiece to Fuseli's *Lectures*, entitled a «Fantasy portrait of Michelangelo before the Roman Coliseum», is engraved by the very Blake after Fuseli's pen-and-ink preliminary sketch, the frontispiece to the *Lectures* is a portrait of the Swiss artist engraved by R.W. Sievier after a miniature by Moses Haughton the younger, whereas the titlepage vignette displays precisely *Silence* engraved by John Burnet after Fuseli.

On plate 5 from *The Book of Urizen* the eponymous character has concluded his work, is depicted in the traditional iconography of God the Father, has his eyes wide open and is presented in the benignant posture of outstretched arms, utterly opposed to the crouched figure of the titlepage: with the «Sun of Inspiration» behind his head, he is now able to stretch out his hands to reveal his newly engraved book (see plate 7).

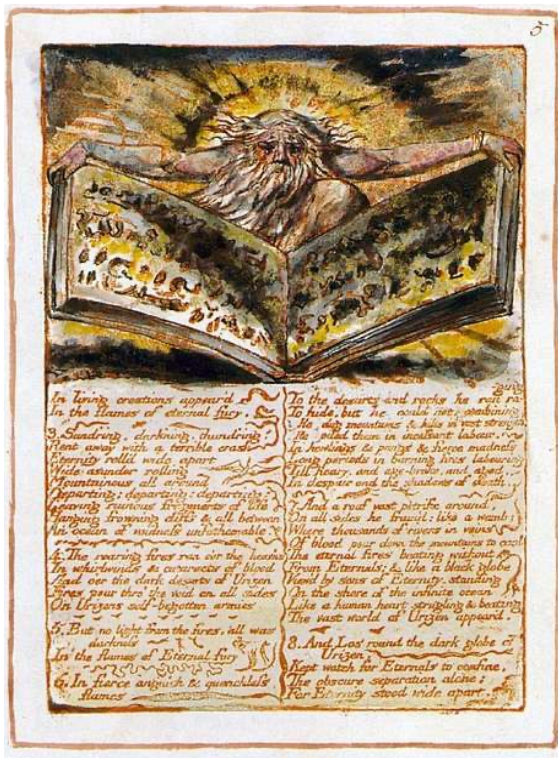


Plate 7.

William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*,
1794, plate 5. Public domain

ination, London, Tate, 2006; Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825*, Zürich - München, Berichthaus - Prestel, 1973; Peter Hannig, *Füssli*, Dresden, VEB, 1986.

Also the warm colours of this plate, in contrast to the cold pigments of numerous versions of the titlepage, express Urizen's evolution. It should be noticed that each copy of the works created by Blake is unique in its tints and dyes since it is hand coloured in a different style and with different pigmented materials.

A plate from the long poem *Milton*, printed in 1808 and one of Blake's mature works, can be interpreted as an elaboration of the two above-mentioned plates from *The Book of Urizen*: on plate 18 from *Milton* (plate 16 according to Keynes) Urizen is portrayed with his book – or with the biblical tablets –, with his eyes open but unable to see, with his legs immersed in the water and his arms almost outstretched in an awkward attempt to expand his posture (see plate 8).



Plate 8. William Blake, *Milton*, 1808, plate 18 (plate 16 according to Keynes).

Public domain

Blake, «in naked majesty»,³⁰ identifies himself with John Milton in the act of taking «of the red clay» and «filling up the furrows»³¹ of Urizen, that is to say, in the act of saving the cerebral Zoa from mere rationality by infusing him with a spiritual and imaginative life. Here Blake as Milton explicitly equates his etching work to sculpturing and constructing («moulding», «building») and identifies himself with the Maker («creating new flesh [...] as with new clay»):

But Milton took of the red clay of Succoth, moulding it with care
Between the palms and filling up the furrows of many years,
Beginning at the feet of Urizen, and on the bones
Creating new flesh on the Demon cold and building him
As with new clay, a Human form in the Valley of Beth Peor.
(*Milton*, 19: 10-14. K. 500)

Considering that on this full-design plate Urizen is visually depicted as knee-deep in the river Arnon as a negative version of John the Baptist³² and remembering that on the frontispiece to *All Religions Are One* Blake represents himself as John the Baptist, the identification of Blake with Urizen contrived on the frontispiece to *The Book of Urizen* assumes consistency in the light of the Hebrew prophet.

In the upper part of this plate from *Milton* appear four dancing musicians and, in the middle, a young bard with a halo, illuminated by the sun of inspiration and holding a harp: this group of young artists alludes to the fourfold essence of humanity and represents the radiant future augured and enacted by Milton, a poetic and imaginative society «Displaying Naked Beauty, with Flute & Harp and Song».³³ As much as on plate 14 from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the naked woman and man exchange their traditional features and roles (see plate 3), here the young women are wearing blue garments whereas the bard is in a pink, adherent and trans-

30 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV: 290.

31 William Blake, *Milton*, 1808, 19: 10, 11 (K. 500).

32 In the following plate the lyrical voice explains «That Milton labour'd with his journey & his feet bled sore / Upon the clay now chang'd to marble; also Urizen rose / And met him on the shores of Arnon & by the streams of the brooks» (William Blake, *Milton*, 19: 3-5. K. 500).

33 *Ibid.*, 4: 28 (K. 484).

parent robe³⁴ that does not hide his «Naked Beauty displayed».³⁵ The poet always opposes «Naked Beauty» to long and heavy clothing since he is convinced that «Art & Science cannot exist but by Naked Beauty display'd» and that «Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed»:³⁶ in a letter to his friend George Cumberland he exclaims «I cannot paint Dirty rags & old shoes where I ought to place Naked Beauty or simple ornament».³⁷

Los had enter'd into my soul

Blake, Los and the sun

If on the last plate of the prophetic poem *Milton* Blake identifies himself with the author of *Paradise Lost* and depicts himself as overwhelmed and enlightened by the latter's spiritual force and poetic flame³⁸, in his last works he always projects himself onto the fictional character of Los, an extremely complex figure that at times seems ambiguous and even contradictory. In the first prophecies Los is still presented in an embryonal form and seems subdued by conventional moral, in the last «Nights» of *Vala, or the Four Zoas* he experiences a radical change and in Blake's mature works he becomes the author's double and the main agent in the programme of restoring the primeval harmony: the subtle and oblique parallels between Los and Jesus that can be perceived in some early books become almost explicit in *Jerusalem*.

The poet projects himself onto Los and always identifies his wife Catherine with Enitharmon, Los's female counterpart. A couple of lines from *Vala, or the Four Zoas* unequivocally alludes to Blake's household artistic activity, i.e., to his writing, drawing and etching and to his wife's colouring the printed plates. Acting as an assistant to Blake, Catherine («my

34 Blake endows colours, as any element, with a multivalent symbolism. As noticed when dealing with plate 14 from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he often identifies the colour blue with the moon, night, femininity and «Passivity» and red with the sun, day, masculinity and «Energy». In his illustrations of Dante's *Comedy*, for example, he dresses himself in red and Virgil in blue.

35 William Blake, *The Laocoön* (K. 776).

36 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 36: 49; *The Laocoön* (K. 663, 776).

37 William Blake, letter to George Cumberland, 26 August 1799 (K. 795).

38 «Terror struck in the Vale I stood at that immortal sound. / My bones trembled, I fell outstretch'd upon the path / A moment, & my Soul return'd into its mortal state / To Resurrection & Judgment in the Vegetable Body, / And my sweet Shadow of Delight stood trembling by my side» (William Blake, *Milton*, 42: 24-28. K. 534).

sweet Shadow of Delight [...] trembling by my side»³⁹ helps her husband in the realization of his illuminated etching by painting with watercolours the engraved plates:

And first he [Los] drew a line upon the walls of shining heaven,
 And Enitharmon tinctur'd it with beams of blushing love.
 It remain'd permanent, a lovely form, inspir'd, divinely human.
 Dividing into just proportions, Los unwearied labour'd
 The immortal lines upon the heavens [...].
 (*Vala, or the Four Zoas*, «Night the Seventh», ll. 467-471. K. 332)

Besides overtly associating Los with Blake and Enitharmon with Catherine, these lines dwell on the central symbolism connected with man and woman in the poet's system. The adjectives «permanent» and «immortal» that define Los's work shed light on the distinction between line and colour in Blake's philosophy and aesthetics, a distinction that implies the contrast between permanence and evanescence: whereas colours change drastically on each and unique version of a Blakean illuminated print, outlines persist «permanent» and «immortal» through time. In a lyric from *Epigrams, Verses, and Fragments from the Note-Book* (1808-1811) Blake highlights the long duration and incorruptibility of his lines:

Re-engrav'd Time after Time,
 Even in their youthful prime,
 My designs unchang'd remain.
 [...] There they Shine Eternally.
 (poem 90, ll. 13-15, 20)⁴⁰

In the poem «To Venetian Artists», conversely, he attacks colouring and the vogue of chiaroscuro crying

[...] Generalizing Tone!
 Outline! There's no outline! There's no such thing!
 All is Chiaro Scuro, Poco Pen, it's all colouring!
 («To Venetian Artists», ll. 9-11. K. 554)⁴¹

39 *Ibid.*, l. 28.

40 William Blake, poem 90 from *Epigrams, Verses, and Fragments from the Note-Book*, 1808-1811 (K. 558).

41 The lyric «To Venetian Artists» is also included in *Epigrams, Verses, and Fragments*.

As much as in his *Public Address* Blake firmly asserts that «in a work of Art it is not fine tints that are required, but Fine Forms. Fine tints without, are loathsome»,⁴² in *A Descriptive Catalogue* he expresses his aversion to chiaroscuro and shadowing by opposing them to the «Imaginative Power» of lines: «labouring to destroy Imaginative Power, by means of that infernal machine called Chiaro Oscuro, in the hands of Venetian and Flemish Demons».⁴³

Plate 40 from *Jerusalem*, a page almost utterly devoted to its textual dimension, visually concretizes the double identification of the blacksmith and his spouse by representing on its right border Los-Blake and Enitharmon-Catherine engaged in their respective work, obviously in «Naked Beauty» and in an expanded posture (see plate 9).



Plate 9.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 40. Public domain

42 William Blake, *Public Address*, 1810 (K. 591).

43 William Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, 1809 (K. 582).

The vine that frames the page and intertwines itself on the left border of the plate graphically evidences the necessary cooperation of all the opposed and divided categories consequent on the Fall. This vegetal representation evokes Hermes's caduceus with its two snakes intertwining around it, a symbol of peace and, above all, an alchemic visual metaphor for the *coincidentia oppositorum*: Moses, identified by alchemists with Hermes and regarded as one of the fathers of their art, also possesses a serpent rod (*Exodus*, 4: 2-3; 7: 10).

Los is a blacksmith busy at his furnace and his consort Enitharmon is a weaver engaged in her looms, tools of creation and generation regarded by Blake as female furnaces and as metaphors for the womb: in the beginning and end of *Jerusalem* the poet repeats that «the Male is a Furnace of beryll; the Female is a golden Loom» and declares that «every Female is a Golden Loom».⁴⁴ Los and Enitharmon represent the male and female principles of creation and symbolize, as already said, time and space, line and colour, word and image, body and soul – the indivisible aspects of Blake's own composite art.

On the above-mentioned frontispiece to *Jerusalem* (see plate 1) Los as Blake is entering a gothic door ready to start his task within his furnace, that is to say, ready to begin his redemptive «passage through Eternal Death» in order to attain «the awakening to Eternal Life». Two lines in the very beginning of *Jerusalem* concentrate the theme of the poem, i.e., Los's redemptive journey:

Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through
Eternal Death! and of the awaking to Eternal Life.
(*Jerusalem*, 4: 1-2. K. 622)

Los's descent into «Eternal Death» to redeem the world explicitly mirrors Jesus's harrowing of hell, as attested by plate 35 from *Jerusalem*:

So spoke the voice from the Furnaces, descending into Non-Entity.
To Govern the Evil by Good and abolish Systems.
(*Jerusalem*, 35: 17-18. K. 662)

Called by Blake the «Eternal Prophet» or «Inspired Poet», Los is a sort of «Mental Traveller» that, enlightened by his «Sun of Imagination», un-

44 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 5: 34; 90: 27; 67: 4 (K. 623, 736, 704).

dertakes an arduous search for truth and endeavours to restore the original harmony and unity previous to the Fall. In the lyric «The Mental Traveller», included in *Poems from the Pickering Manuscript* (1803), Blake embraces the Platonic concept of the inversion of time and cyclicity of life⁴⁵ by representing the circular existential path performed by a mental traveller that resembles Los:

For as he eats & drinks he grows
 Younger & younger every day;
 [...] Till he becomes a wayward Babe.
 («The Mental Traveller», ll. 73-74, 85. K. 426)

Los's cyclic path is closely linked to the transmuting power of mercury, to the course of the sun and to Christ's death and resurrection: if in a private poem Blake claims that «'Twas outward a Sun: inward Los in his might»⁴⁶ and on plate 22 from *Milton* writes «and Los behind me stood; a terrible flaming Sun»,⁴⁷ in *Jerusalem* he frequently represents Los, both verbally and visually, as carrying his «Sun of Inspiration»: «Los took his globe of fire to search the interior of Albion's / Bosom [...]».⁴⁸ Towards the end of the poem Blake exhorts his alter ego to take on his sun and endure his task of redemption:

[...] O Los come forth, O Los
 Divide us from these terrors & give us power them to subdue.
 Arise upon thy Watches, let us see thy Globe of fire.
 (*Jerusalem*, 84: 25-27. K. 729)

On plate 18 from *The Book of Urizen* Blake visually represents himself as Los in a Christological posture, holding his sun and working in his flaming furnace with hammer and anvil: Los's instruments are metaphors for the engravers' tools and a reference to alchemists,⁴⁹ whose end, like Blake's, is restoring the primeval unity of all things and whose work, like

45 For Plato's idea of the inversion of time, see *Statesman*, 270e.

46 William Blake, l. 58 from a poem included in a letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802 (K. 818).

47 William Blake, *Milton*, 22: 6 (K. 505).

48 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 31: 3-4 (K. 656).

49 For the identification between smiths and alchemists, see Mircea Eliade, *Alchimistes et forgerons*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977.

Los's, is a never-ending cycle (see plate 10). Los's Latin-cross gesture can be interpreted as an oblique allusion to the alchemic *ars sacra* if considering that alchemists such as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Robert Fludd include among their great philosophers and masters Hermes-Moses, Pythagoras, Apuleius, Solomon and the very Christ.⁵⁰ Moreover, alchemists call mercury, the vital and essential 'tool' for their never-ending deaths and rebirths, precisely 'Christ', as already noticed.



Plate 10.

William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, plate 18. Public domain

⁵⁰ See Paolo Rossi (ed.), *La magia naturale del rinascimento. Testi di Agrippa, Cardano, Fludd*, Torino, Utet, 1989.

On this plate Los is busy at creating and giving life to his wife Enitharmon, the female dimension of humanity. Since one of the central goals of alchemy is the creation of a human being – the *homunculus* –, it is clear why in *Jerusalem* Los is explicitly presented as an alchemist when involved in creating women (or, better, when separating them from the male dimension): «dividing [...] into Male & Female forms in his Furnaces and / On his Anvils».⁵¹

The trembling «globe of life blood»⁵² Los is holding in his right hand stands for his sun, i.e., his creative and quasi-divine power, and, at the same time, it represents the product of his work at his furnace, thus functioning as a visual anticipation of Enitharmon's birth (portrayed on the following full-design plate). If Los's expanded pose plastically highlights his generous act of creation, his Christological self-sacrifice and altruistic self-division, the «soul» of this plate explains how he gives birth to his spouse Enitharmon:

The globe of life blood trembled
 Branching out into roots,
 Fibrous, writhing upon the winds,
 Fibres of blood, milk and tears,
 In pangs, eternity on eternity.
 At length in tears & cries imbodyed,
 A female form, trembling and pale,
 Waves before his deathly face.
 All Eternity shudder'd at sight
 Of the first female now separate,
 Pale as a cloud of snow
 Waving before the face of Los.
 (*The Book of Urizen*, 18: 1-12. K. 231)

Plate 19 from *The Book of Urizen* is a full-design plate that visually illustrates the text of the previous page by depicting Los's labours and the birth of his spouse (see plate 11).

51 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 78: 7-8 (K. 719).

52 William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, 18: 1 (K. 231).



Plate 11.

William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, plate 19 (plate 17 in copy G). Public domain

While Enitharmon, «the globe of life blood», is coming out from Los's head, the seat of divine inspiration, Los is surrounded by the sacred fire of the sun of imagination and of his furnace: he is depicted with his body and hair marked by red veins and holding his hands against his ears in order to extrude the placental globe of blood.

Considering that for Blake one of the consequences of the original sin is the separation of the sexes, Los's labours and giving birth to his wife allude both to the coveted retrieval of the primeval state of androgyny and to the tragic origin of the split categories consequent on the Fall: as announced by the text of plate 18,

All Eternity shudder'd at sight
 Of the first female now separate.
 [...] Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment
 Petrify the eternal myriads
 At the first female form now separate.
 (*The Book of Urizen*, 18: 9-10, 13-15. K. 231)

With Los's contracted posture (see plate 11) Blake stresses both the dramatic act of separation and his ambivalent attitude towards women, a wavering attitude that is to be read in the light of his multi-perspectival philosophy.⁵³ Whereas his first prophetic book, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, composed in 1793, is a homage to Mary Wollstonecraft, to feminism and free sexuality, his last one, *Jerusalem*, is – or seems to be – a condemnation of the power acquired by women. If in Blake's first prophetic poem the daughters of Albion try to get free from their oppression and cry against jealousy and possessiveness («Father of Jealousy, be thou accursed from the earth!»),⁵⁴ in his last poem they torture man and are presented as a tribe of sadistic amazons who are even more dangerous than their male counterparts: they are represented as «dancing to the Timbrel / Of War», passing the «knife of flint [...] over the howling victim»⁵⁵ and reducing men to slaves of women.

Reversing logical expectations, on plate 19 from *The Book of Urizen* Los's female counterpart is physically and graphically created by Los's

53 See, among others, Susan Fox, *The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry*, «Critical Inquiry», 3, 1977, pp. 507-519; Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980.

54 William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, 7: 12 (K. 194).

55 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 58: 2-3; 66: 20 (K. 690, 702).

head, by his mental activity and poetic inspiration. In his inverted vision of the world, Blake conceives of physical birth in spiritual, mental terms, and, conversely, conceives of mental birth in physical, sexual terms. Whereas on this plate Los becomes the agent of creation and birth by means of his head and his poetic power, plastically showing how words can create images, on a plate towards the conclusion of the poem *Milton* the very Blake undergoes a spiritual rebirth by entering the loins of Los. On plate 47 from *Milton* Blake depicts himself as «becoming One Man» with Los and inscribes the prophetic poet in the globe of his «Sun of Imagination», burning in the flames of his furnace (see plate 12).



Plate 12.

William Blake, *Milton*, 1808, plate 47. Public domain

The design of this plate graphically illustrates words uttered by the poet on plate 22:

And I became One Man with him arising in my strength.
 'Twas too late now to recede. Los had enter'd into my soul:
 His terrors now possess'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength.
 (*Milton*, 22: 12-14. K. 505)

On this full-design plate Blake experiences a spiritual rebirth «becoming One Man with Los» by entering the latter's loins, the seat of sexual power and, in his philosophic system, the source of creative energy. It is worth noticing that Los creates Enitharmon, «the first female form now separate», in a squatted pose, whereas when giving birth to Blake he is inscribed in his golden sun in a posture of expansion, thus highlighting the idea of poetic labour and generous creation. As already noticed, Los is always associated, and even identified, with the sun of inspiration, both verbally and visually: as if to highlight Los's identification with the sun, the last plate from *The Song of Los*, an early short work printed in 1794, presents the poet as a blacksmith, or Blake as Los, in «Naked Beauty displayed», holding his hammer and resting from his intellectual, poetic and creative labours on a setting sun (see plate 13). As the ruddy setting sun obliquely alludes to the end of the day, so Los's melancholic expression and contracted posture allude to the end of work.



Plate 13.
 William Blake, *The Song of Los*, 1794, plate 8.
 Public domain

And the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los Blake, Los and Christ

Los the blacksmith and Blake the engraver, both working with the creative fire of their spiritual furnaces, are identifiable with alchemists, with the sun and even with God, or, better, with Jesus Christ. As much as Blake identifies imagination with Christ, alchemists define mercury as 'Christ' because of its transmuting power and because the never-ending and circular process of their work evokes Christ's death and resurrection: the cyclic process of the *opus alchymicum*, eloquently known as *rota* ('wheel'), consists of infinite dissolutions and coagulations, or 'deaths' and 'resurrections', called *solve et coagula*. Exactly as the alchemists' work, as mercury, as Christ, as the sun, Los rises and dies without an end, «continually building & continually decaying».⁵⁶ The idea of perpetual birth, death and rebirth expounded in the above-quoted lyric «The Mental Traveller» is reiterated throughout Blake's macrotext and is often related to Los: «Man should Labour & sorrow, & learn & forget, & return / To the dark valley whence he came, to begin his labours anew»; «as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same»; «ever building, ever falling»; «incessantly labouring and incessantly spoiling what I have done well».⁵⁷ On plate 72 from *Jerusalem* a circular drawing representing the Earth is surrounded by the words «Continually Building. Continually Decaying because of Love».⁵⁸

Blake develops the idea of the cyclical *rota* also in a passage that explicitly refers to Los and alchemy:

The Spectre builded stupendous Works [...]
Repeating the Smaragdine Table of Hermes to draw Los down
Into the Indefinite [...].
(*Jerusalem*, 91: 33, 35-36. K. 738)

What Blake calls «Smaragdine Table of Hermes» is the so-called *Tabula smaragdina* or *Emerald Tablet*, an emerald text found according to legend in a cave in the hands of the statue of Hermes Trismegistus, the father of the alchemists' *ars sacra*: the *Tabula smaragdina* represents the 'sacred'

56 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 53: 19 (K. 684).

57 William Blake, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, «Night the Eighth», ll. 574-575; *Milton*, 6: 2; *A Descriptive Catalogue*; letter to William Hayley, 23 October 1804 (K. 355, 485, 567, 852).

58 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 72 (K. 712).

text of alchemists and, more in general, of Hermetic culture. Blake identifies himself with Los, and Los with Jesus, since – as the seasons, as the alchemic *rota*, as the natural cycle of nature, as the circular course of the sun – his own labour rises and dies endlessly, as if he were a sort of mystic phoenix: in his *Allegoria dell'immortalità*, a majestic oil on table created in 1540 circa, Giulio Romano represents the goal of the alchemic process precisely portraying a phoenix wrapped in ruddy flames and hovering in the sky.

In *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, Los is obliquely identified with the phoenix, with the sun and with Jesus:

His fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity:
His fall into the Generation of decay & death, & his
Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead.
(*Vala, or the Four Zoas*, «Night the First», ll. 21-23. K. 264)

With his conviction that Los-Jesus will soon redeem the world, Blake elaborates the chiliastic or millenarian faith in the nearness of Christ's second advent, a theory broadly and enthusiastically acclaimed in the seventeenth century: John Foxe's popular *Book of Martyrs*, for example, argues that the Britons, mistreated by official religion, are identifiable with the Israelites and that Great Britain will soon become the new earthly paradise in which Christ will dwell for one thousand years.⁵⁹ According to these widespread millenarian theories, the life of the world will last six ages since the seventh will be the millennium, the peace of God after the destruction of the globe: for Luther, like for most chronologists, the world began in 4000 B.C. and, if permitted to run its original course of six thousand years, must perish no later than A.D. 2000.⁶⁰

The theory of the six ages of the world is diffusedly expounded throughout Blake's production: if in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the poet announces that «the ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard from

59 Foxe's Protestant *Actes and Monuments*, popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*, is first published in 1563 and reprinted in the light of the Gunpowder Treason in 1610 and again in 1632.

60 See, among others, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle. Studies in the Effect of the 'New Science' upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1960; Margarita Stocker, *Apocalyptic Marvell. The Second Coming in Seventeenth Century Poetry*, Brighton, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1986.

Hell»,⁶¹ in *Milton* Los as Christ enters Blake's soul⁶² crying

I am that Shadowy Prophet who Six Thousand Years ago
 Fell from my station in the Eternal bosom. Six Thousand Years
 Are finish'd. I return! both Time & Space obey my will.
 I in Six Thousand Years walk up and down [...].
 [...] every fabric of Six Thousand Years
 Remains permanent [...].
 (*Milton*, 22: 15-18, 20-21. K. 505)

Paraphrasing the above-mentioned lines from *Milton* and highlighting the idea of Los's never-ending and cyclic labours, in *Jerusalem* Los exclaims «I walk up and down in Six Thousand Years» and few lines below the poet explains that «Los in Six Thousand Years walks up & down continually».⁶³

Los-Blake is identified with Jesus also because the latter embodies imagination: if, as already said, in *The Laocoön* Blake argues that «Imagination [is] The Divine Body, Jesus»,⁶⁴ in *A Vision of the Last Judgment* he declares that «The divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, [is] The Human Imagination»⁶⁵ and in *Jerusalem* states that «Imagination / [...] is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed for ever».⁶⁶ In some Blakean works the identification Los-Jesus is explicit: in *Vala, or the Four Zoas* the daughters of Beulah define Los as «the Saviour, Even Jesus: & they worshipped»,⁶⁷ as much as in a passage from *A Descriptive Catalogue*, Urthona – Los's eternal form – appears «like the Son of God».⁶⁸ Towards the end of *Jerusalem* Jesus manifests himself in «the likeness & similitude of Los»:

Then Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the Good Shepherd
 By the lost Sheep that he hath found, & Albion knew that it

61 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14 (K. 154).

62 «[...] Los had enter'd into my soul: / His terrors now possess'd me whole! I arose in fury & strength» (William Blake, *Milton*, 22: 13-14. K. 505).

63 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 74: 19, 75: 7 (K. 714, 716).

64 William Blake, *The Laocoön* (K. 776).

65 William Blake, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, p. 70 (K. 606).

66 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 5: 58-59 (K. 624).

67 William Blake, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, «Night the Eighth», ll. 44 (K. 342)

68 William Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue* (K. 578).

Was the lord, the Universal Humanity; & Albion saw his Form
 A Man, & they conversed as Man with Man in ages of Eternity.
 And the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los.
 (*Jerusalem*, 96: 3-7. K. 743)

The connection between Los and Jesus is visually presented on plate 35 from *Jerusalem*, a plate that regards the birth of the sexes as an actual separation from the original and perfect androgyne (see plate 14). The last line of this plate explicitly equates Los's descent into «Eternal Death» to Jesus's harrowing of hell, as already said: «So spoke the voice from the Furnaces, descending into Non-Entity».⁶⁹



Plate 14.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 35. Public domain

⁶⁹ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 35: 17 (K. 662).

The formal disposition of this page, with the text dividing the two drawings, graphically highlights the act of separation and, at the same time, the necessary reunion of the two dimensions. Albeit Los is wearing a long robe, his expanded posture when throwing himself in the flames of his creative furnace to give birth to his female counterpart is utterly opposed to his contracted pose when giving life to Enitharmon (see plate 11): on this plate from *Jerusalem* Los's generous and salvific act of creation is evidenced by his pierced foot and hand and by his Latin-cross gesture, unequivocal allusions to Christ's crucifixion.

On plate 76 from *Jerusalem* the specular identification of Los with Jesus crucified on an oak tree, Blake's «Druid tree of error», is even more explicit (see plate 15).



Plate 15.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 76. Public domain

Interpreting this plate as a visual illustration of the text of plate 96, actually Los *is* Jesus and the figure before him is Albion, the archetype of humanity:

Then Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the Good Shepherd
 [...] And the Divine Appearance was the likeness & similitude of Los.
 (*Jerusalem*, 96: 3, 7. K. 743)

This plate can be regarded as another example of Blake's self-representation if considering that the man before the cross in a pose echoing that of Christ is interpretable as the very author. A couple of lines at the beginning of *Jerusalem* depicts Jesus-Los – overtly associated with poetic and creative power – exactly as he was seen by the author:

[...] I see the Saviour over me
 Spreading his beams of love & dictating the words of this mild song.
 (*Jerusalem*, 4: 4-5. K. 622)

Whereas Los starts his labours wrapped in a smock and plunges into the flames of his furnace to give birth to women wearing a long robe⁷⁰ (see plates 1 and 14), on this plate he is in a Latin-cross posture and is «Displaying Naked Beauty», as Jesus. The «beams of love» of the sun behind Christ on the cross are a further reference to the identification Los-Jesus-sun: it is worth observing that there are two sunrises on the plate – one on the left horizon, close to Los-Blake, the other behind and around Jesus-Los's head. Considering that etching implies writing and drawing on the plates in a reversed way, Blake has to write the name Los as *sol*, a Latin term that means 'sun'. Associated with divinity and life in all cultures, the sun concentrates the circle and the square, the two geometrical figures that represent the universe: in the Western world this planet is traditionally regarded as number four because according to the Bible it was created in the fourth day and, at the same time, it is associated with the circle because of its circular eternal journey, its never-ending cycle of birth-death-rebirth, or, better, its «continually building & continually decaying».

Los-*sol*, as a consequence, should function as a symbol of circularity and quadruplicity simultaneously in Blake's fourfold and cyclic phil-

⁷⁰ On plate 19 from *The Book of Urizen* Los gives birth to Enitharmon, «the first female now separate», in a contracted pose (see plate 11).

osophic system: the idea that Los, as the sun, concentrates a circle and a square is corroborated by the presence of a cross and by the organization of this full-design plate from *Jerusalem*. The cross represents the central phase of the alchemic *quinta essentia* and symbolizes both the square and the circle: if the intersection of the arms of the cross coincides with the centre of the circle in which it is inscribed, the line that unites its extremities forms a circle that, in its turn, is divided in four sections. The cross represents the union of opposites and is frequently associated with the Pythagorean *tetraktys*, or number four, a number regarded as perfect because it contains 10 and, therefore, all numbers: $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$.⁷¹

Also the iconographic disposition of plate 76 from *Jerusalem* latently concentrates a circle and a square: it evokes Los's posture on plate 18 from *The Book of Urizen* (see plate 10) and, above all, it mirrors *Albion Rose*, a colour-printed line engraving created by Blake in 1794-1796 and also known as *The Dance of Albion* and *Glad Day* (see plate 16).

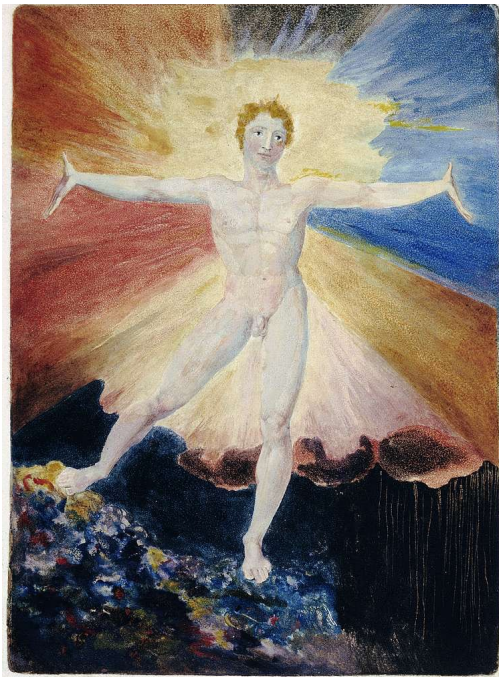


Plate 16.
William Blake, *Albion Rose*,
1794-1796 circa. Public domain

71 For the importance of number four in the Renaissance, cf. Simeon Kahu Heninger, *Some Renaissance Versions of the Pythagorean Tetrad*, «Studies in the Renaissance», 8, 1961, pp. 7-33. For the symbolism of numbers, see Alastair Fowler (ed.), *Silent Poetry. Essays in Numerological Analysis*, London, Routledge, 1970.

If Anthony Blunt argues that Blake has based this portrayal of Albion on illustrations of a Roman bronze of a dancing faun from Herculaneum⁷², I am convinced that the poet has drawn inspiration from the classical proportion diagrams, such as Leonardo's celebrated *Vitruvian Man*, representing the human body inscribed in a circle and a square: Raymond Lister claims that Blake has based *Albion Rose* on a specific Vitruvian diagram included in Vincenzo Scamozzi's treatise *Dell'idea dell'architettura universale*, published in Venice in 1615⁷³. According to Vitruvius (*De Architectura*, III, I: i), the human body is a model of perfection and mirrors the macrocosm because with arms and legs extended it fits in the two perfect geometrical forms that constitute the whole world – the circle and square. The earliest Vitruvian diagram known appeared in Francesco di Giorgio Martini's *Trattato dell'Architettura* (1470 circa), a copy of which was owned by Leonardo da Vinci: four decades later fra Giocondo da Verona devoted two plates of his illustrated edition of Vitruvius's *De Architectura* (1511) to the graphic representation of *homo ad quadratum et ad circulum*⁷⁴. It should be noticed that Vitruvian architecture was related to emblematics and mnemotechnics by Renaissance Neoplatonists⁷⁵. By referring to Vitruvius, I think Blake is obliquely paying a homage both to the emblematic tradition and to John Dee, Elizabeth Tudor's alchemist: strenuously supporting a spiritual reform imbued with alchemy, Hermeticism and Vitruvian Neoplatonism, in his *Preface to Euclid* (1570) Dee proclaims that arts and sciences should be based on number, proportion, music, painting, mechanics, perspective, i.e., on the principles that reflect the geometric structure of man and the world⁷⁶.

On plate 100, the plate that concludes *Jerusalem*, Los is once more depicted as Jesus and his spouse Enitharmon evokes a Vitruvian diagram.

72 Anthony Blunt, *The Art of William Blake*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1959, pp. 34-35.

73 See, by Raymond Lister, *Infernal Methods. A Study of William Blake's Techniques*, London, G. Bell & Sons, 1975; *The Paintings of William Blake*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, (1986) 1991.

74 Cf. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, London, Academy, 1962; Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History*, London, Anchor Books, 1955.

75 See Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London, Routledge, 1966.

76 See Peter French, *John Dee. The World of an Elizabethan Magus*, London, Routledge, 1972; Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts*, London, Routledge, 1994; Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, London-New York, Routledge, (1972) 2002.

The last plate of Blake's last and longest prophetic book represents the resolution and completion of the aim and goal of humanity and, at the same time, displays Blake's philosophical, symbolical and aesthetic summa (see plate 17).



Plate 17.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1804-1820, plate 100. Public domain

Jerusalem is a poem in which artistic creation is one of its central themes: if in his early works Blake proudly describes the invention of his reversed etching technique, in his last prophetic book he dwells on the deep philosophic implications inherent in the «System» he has created. The three figures portrayed on this plate are Los-Blake with his blacksmith's, engraver's, or alchemist's tools, in the centre of the composition; his wife Enitharmon-Catherine, with her moon and her weaving or colouring tools, on the right; Urthona – the Zoa of imagination and Los's eternal form – carrying the «Eternal Sun of Imagination» in his gravity-free ascending movement, on the left. Since Urthona is the eternal form of Los, Los is the manifestation in time of imagination and Enitharmon

is the «Emanation» of Los⁷⁷, on this conclusive plate Blake has managed to devise the simultaneous representation of the eternal, spatial and temporal dimensions of imagination. The reunion of time and eternity is visually symbolized by the circular pattern of the design and by the architecture of Stonehenge in the background. According to Blake, the temple of Stonehenge combines a sun and a snake, or the circle of eternity and the serpent of time⁷⁸, and thus represents the alchemic *coincidentia oppositorum*: what Blake calls «the Rocky Circle & Snake of the Druid»⁷⁹ also embodies his idea of life as a cycle, or as a *rota* «continually building & continually decaying», «ever building, ever falling».

The divine and creating power of Los is reinforced by the architect's compasses he is holding in his left hand: the triangle formed by Los's callipers, placed before the *rota* of Stonehenge, in the exact centre of the design, wittily evokes the Christian iconology of God, traditionally represented as a circle and a triangle. It should be also observed that Blake's favourite drawing, the already-mentioned *Ancient of Days*, is a representation of God creating the universe with his golden compasses (see plate 18). *The Ancient of Days*, originally created as the frontispiece to the prophetic book *Europe*, etched in 1794, is a composition Blake is so fond of that he reproduces and elaborates it during all his life, to the point that he will colour a copy of it even on his deathbed⁸⁰.

77 Blake has assimilated the Gnostic theory of emanations: in *Jerusalem* he argues that «Man is adjoin'd to Man by his Emanative portion» and that «Man divided from his Emanation is a dark Spectre, / His Emanation is an ever-weeping melancholy Shadow» (45: 38; 53: 25-26. K. 675, 684). For Blake and Gnosticism, see, among others, Sergio Givone, *William Blake. Arte e religione*, Milano, Mursia, 1978.

78 Blake is deeply indebted to Bryant's *Mythology* for his reading of Stonehenge. See Jacob Bryant, *A New System, or, an Analysis of Antient Mythology wherein an attempt is made to divest tradition of fable, and to reduce the truth to its original purity*, London, J. Walker, 1807³, 6 vols.

79 «Where the Druids rear'd their Rocky Circles to make permanent Remembrance / Of Sin, & the Tree of Good & Evil sprang from the Rocky Circle & Snake / Of the Druid [...]» (William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 92: 24-26. K. 740).

80 See, among others, James King, *William Blake: His Life*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992; Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies: Essays on his Life and Work*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971²; Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake*, New York, Cooper Square Publishers, (1969) 1971; Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, Pictor Ignotus. With Selections from His Poems and Other Writings* (1863), London, Dent, New York, Dutton, 1945.



Plate 18.

William Blake, *Europe, A Prophecy*, 1794, plate 1. Public domain

As if to further complicate the compound personality of the prophetic poet, the presence of the compasses on the last plate from *Jerusalem* suggests a latent association of Los with Urizen: this seeming inconsistency reinforces the identification Los-Blake since, as already observed, on the frontispiece to *The Book of Urizen* the very Blake identifies himself with the rational Zoa, squatted when creating an illuminated book (see plate 5), in the same pose as Los when creating his wife (see plate 11) and the «Ancient of Days» when creating the universe with his compasses (see plate 18).

In *The Book of Urizen* the eponymous character is identified with Los holding his sun («Urizen explor'd his dens / Mountains, moor & wilderness, / With a globe of fire lighting his journey»)⁸¹ and is overtly modelled on Milton's God: if in *The Book of Urizen* the Zoa of rationality «[...] formed golden compasses, / And began to explore the Abyss»⁸², in *Paradise Lost* God

[...] took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
In God's Eternal store, to circumscribe
This Universe, and all created things.
One foot he center'd, and the other turn'd
Round through the vast profundity obscure.
(*Paradise Lost*, VII: 225-229)

For Milton the material creator of the universe is not God but Jesus, God's «effectual might». As the Father addresses Jesus with the words «[...] Son who art alone / My Word, my wisdom, and effectual might»⁸³, so the lyrical voice explains that «the Filial Godhead, gave effect»:

So spake th' Almighty, and to what he spake
His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.
(*Paradise Lost*, VII: 174-175)

The Christological features of Los displayed on the last plate of *Jerusalem* are corroborated by Medieval iconology, an immense source of inspiration for Blake⁸⁴. A tiny ivory tablet produced in Amalfi at the end of the

81 William Blake, *The Book of Urizen*, 20: 46-48 (K. 234).

82 *Ibid.*, 20: 39-40 (K. 234).

83 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III: 169-170.

84 For Blake's apprenticeship among the tombs and monuments of Westminster Abbey and his profound admiration of Gothic art, see, among others, Cathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1968, 2 vols.

eleventh century and now at the Bode Museum of Berlin documents the vogue of representing Christ between a sun and a moon and illuminates Blake's choice (see plate 19).



Plate 19.

Ivory tablet (27,3 cm x 12,4 cm), Amalfi, end of the eleventh century. Berlin, Bode Museum

At the top of this Medieval tablet appear a moon on the left, a sun on the right and Christ – here named ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ – in the centre, as a mirroring pattern of plate 100 from *Jerusalem*. The term *SOL* is written in reverse (*LOS*), thus coinciding with the name of Blake’s prophetic poet, always written in a mirroring way on the copperplates before printing them. The reversed writing of *sol* is a device not uncommon in the Middle Ages aiming to make the two planets, *luna* and *sol*, symmetrically converge in the image of Christ, who consists of both.

Presumably referring to Medieval iconology, plate 100 from *Jerusalem* depicts Los-Jesus between a *luna* and a *sol* that converge in him since, after passing «through Eternal Death» and attaining «the awakening to Eternal Life», he has reunited all the split dimensions and now consists of both planets. As the last plate of Blake’s last prophetic poem represents the perfection of Los’s goal and the summa of the main themes of Blake’s cosmogony, so the convergence of *luna* and *sol* in the Saviour highlights, as illustrated by Vittorio Formentin, the supreme moment of redemption:

nei due angoli superiori, a destra e a sinistra del Crocifisso, sono effigiati la Luna e il Sole, [...] affiancati sul lato interno dai *tituli* «LUNA» e «SOL», quest’ultimo a lettere specularmente invertite, a sottolineare fin dalla disposizione della scrittura la convergenza del creato verso il Salvatore nel momento supremo della redenzione⁸⁵.

Considering Los’s activity in his furnace and the links with the alchemist’s work, it is worth noticing that the alchemical *conjunctio*, or union of opposites, is symbolically represented by the marriage of a red king and a white queen and by the union of a sun and a moon, as majestically shown by a plate from *Rosarium philosophorum*, an anonymous alchemical text attributed to Arnau de Vilanova (see plate 20).

85 Vittorio Formentin, *Volgare o latino? Le “didascalie identificative” d’età romanica tra grammatica e storia*, «Studi di grammatica italiana. A cura dell’Accademia della Crusca», 34, Firenze, Le lettere, 2015, pp. 1-20: 8. For a historic-artistic study of this ivory tablet, see Ferdinando Bologna, *Avori medievali da Amalfi a Salerno, senza enigmi*, in Id. (ed.), *Lenigma degli avori medievali da Amalfi a Salerno*, Napoli, Paparo, 2008, 2 vols., vol. I, pp. 21-97: 35.



Plate 20.

Alchemical wedding, from *Rosarium philosophorum*, Frankfurt, 1550
(second part of *De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum*)

As if to highlight the alchemic wedding between Los and Enitharmon, on the conclusive plate of *Jerusalem* Los's wife is in a pose that evokes a Vitruvian diagram and, therefore, is assimilable to Los as Jesus before, or on, the cross (see plates 15, 16, 17). The last page of *Jerusalem* – plate 100 – implies Christological features also from a numerological perspective if considering that number 100 is the squared multiplication of number 10: moving from the assumption that 10 is a number associated with the perfect Pythagorean *tetraktys* – and thus with the cross –, the plate that concludes *Jerusalem* is interpretable as a witty evocation of the circle, the square and Christ's salvific sacrifice. Interestingly enough, the plate that concludes *Rosarium philosophorum* depicts the completion and perfection of the *opus alchymicum* by representing Jesus Christ's resurrection and his leaving the sepulchre.

The last plate of *Jerusalem*, thus, concentrates Blake's philosophic and aesthetic «System» by assimilating and elaborating Christian iconology, alchemic symbolism and ancient philosophies: it depicts the coveted reunion of opposites – *sol* with *luna*, circle with square, eternity with time and space, man with woman, soul with body –, advocates the necessary cooperation of word and image and points out the creative, Hermetic, divine and Christological role of Los-Blake. It should not be forgotten that, as announced throughout Blake's macrotext and at the very beginning of *Jerusalem*, the divine power of imagination is «the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus, blessed for ever»⁸⁶.

86 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, 5: 58-59 (K. 624).