

# **RICHARD GARNETT**

WILLIAM  
BLAKE

Richard Garnett

**William Blake**

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**Richard Garnett**  
**William Blake / Painter and Poet**

WILLIAM BLAKE

*PAINTER AND POET*

*By*

RICHARD GARNETT, LL.D.

*Keeper of the Printed Books in the British Museum*



LONDON

SEELEY AND CO. LIMITED, ESSEX STREET, STRAND

NEW YORK, MACMILLAN AND CO.

1895

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The Sons of God. Design from the Book of Job.

WILLIAM BLAKE  
PAINTER AND POET

By

RICHARD GARNETT, LL.D.

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## CHAPTER I

### **Preliminary observations – Blake's Birth – Education – Marriage – Early Poems – Drawings and Engravings**

The position of William Blake among artists is exceptional. Of no other painter of like distinction, save Dante Rossetti, can it be said that his fame as a poet has fully rivalled his fame as a painter; much less that, in the opinion of some, his fame as a seer ought to have exceeded both. Many painters, from Reynolds downwards, have written admirably upon art; in some instances, notably Haydon's, the worth of their precepts greatly exceeds that of their performance. But, Rossetti always excepted, perhaps no other painter of great distinction, save Michael Angelo alone, has achieved high renown in poetry, and the compass of Michael Angelo's poetical work is infinitesimal in comparison with his work as an artist. Again, the literary achievements of an Angelo or a Reynolds admit of clear separation from their performances as artists. The critic who approaches them from the artistic side may, if he pleases, omit the literary side entirely from consideration. This is impossible with Blake, for not only do the artistic and the poetical monuments of his genius nearly balance each other in merit and in their claim upon the attention of posterity, but they are the offspring of the same creative impulse, and are indissolubly fused together by the process adopted for their execution. A study of Blake, therefore, must include more literary discussion than would be allowable in a monograph on any other artist. The poet and painter in Blake, moreover, are but manifestations of the more comprehensive character of seer, which suggests inquiries alien to both these arts; while the personal character of the man is so fascinating, and his intellectual character so perplexing, that the investigation of either of them might afford, and often has afforded, material for a prolonged discussion. In the following pages it will be our object, whenever compelled to quit the safe ground of biographical narrative, to subordinate all else to the consideration of Blake as an artist; but the Blake of the brush is too emphatically the Blake of the pen to be long dissociated from him, and neither can be detached from the background of abnormal visionary faculty.

From a certain point of view, artists may be regarded as divisible into three classes: those who regard the material world as an unquestionable solid reality, whose accurate representation is the one mission of Art; those to whom it is a mere hieroglyphic of an essential existence transcending it; and those who, uniting the two conceptions, are at the same time idealists and realists. The greatest artists generally belong to the latter class, and with reason, for a literal adherence to matter of fact almost implies defect of imagination; while an extravagant idealism may be, to say the least, a convenient excuse for defects of technical skill. It is difficult to know whether to class the works of the very greatest artists as realistic or idealistic. Take Albert Dürer's *Melancholia*. It is a hieroglyph, a symbol, an expression of something too intense to be put into words; a delineation of what the painter beheld with the inner eye alone. Yet every detail is as correct and true to fact as the most uninspired Dutchman could have made it. Take Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, and observe how separate details which the artist may have actually noticed, are combined into a whole which has never been beheld, save by the spiritual vision, since the last thyrsus was brandished by the last Mænad. Yet, though the creators of such scenes are the greatest, some realists, such as Velasquez, have in virtue of surpassing technical execution asserted a nearly equal rank. The case is different when we come to the enthusiasts and visionaries, whose art is wholly symbolic, who have given us little that can be enjoyed as art for art's sake, without reference to the ideas of which it is made the vehicle. In many very interesting artists, such as Wiertz and Calvert and Vedder, and in many isolated works of great masters, such as Giorgione's *Venetian Pastoral*, the feeling is so much in excess of the execution – admirable as this

may be – that the result is rather a poem than a picture. But only one artist who has deliberately made himself the prophet of this tendency, who has avowedly and defiantly discarded all purpose from his works save that of spiritual suggestiveness, seems to have ever been admitted as a candidate for very high artistic honours, and he is our countryman, William Blake.

This circumstance alone should render Blake an interesting object of study, even for those who can see no merit in his works: indeed, the less the merit the more remarkable the phenomenon. He is, moreover, a most peculiar and enigmatical character, both intellectually and morally. As an art critic he is of all the most dogmatic, trenchant, and revolutionary. As a poet, were nineteen-twentieths of his compositions to be discarded as rubbish, lyrics would remain not only exquisite in themselves, but possessing the incommunicable and Sapphic quality that a single stanza, even a single phrase, would often suffice to make the writer immortal. The question of his sanity is as well adapted to furnish the world with an interminable subject of discussion as the execution of Charles I. or the assassination of Cæsar. Finally, it is very significant that while no man ever wilfully put more obstacles into the way of his success than Blake, whether as artist, thinker, or poet, and he did in fact succeed in condemning himself to poverty and obscurity, the verdict of his contemporaries is now so far reversed that the drawings which a kind friend overpaid, as he thought, at fifty guineas, are worth a thousand pounds.

What manner of man was he to whose shade the world has made this practical apology?

William Blake was born on November 28th,<sup>1</sup> 1757, at 28, Broad Street, Golden Square. By a singular coincidence this was the very year which a still more celebrated mystic, Swedenborg, had announced as that of the Last Judgment in a spiritual sense, which was by no means to preclude the world from going on in externals pretty much as usual. Blake's father, James Blake, was a hosier in moderately prosperous circumstances, whose father is stated by Blake's most elaborate commentators, Messrs. Ellis and Yeats, to have been originally named O'Neil, and to have assumed his wife's name as a means of escape from pecuniary difficulties. This wife, however, was not the mother of James. This genealogy is not supported by any strong authority, and is at variance with another, also indifferently supported, according to which the artist's family were connected with the admiral's. We must leave the question where we find it, merely remarking that Blake's parents were certainly Protestants, and that we can detect no specifically Irish trait in his character or his works. He had three brothers – one, James, mild and unassuming like his father; another, Robert, who died young, apparently with more affinity to William; the third, John, a scapegrace. There was also a sister who never married, and is described as a thorough gentlewoman, reserved and proud. None of the family except William and Robert seem to have shown any artistic talent. With William it must have been precocious, for, ere he had attained the age of ten, his father, who as a small tradesman might rather have been expected to have thwarted the boy's inclinations, placed him at "Mr. Pars' drawing school in the Strand." Here he learned to draw from plaster casts – the life was denied him – and with the aid of his father and a friendly auctioneer collected prints, then to be picked up cheap, showing from the very first, as he afterwards related, a complete independence of the pseudo-classic taste of the day. At four he had had his first vision, when "God put his forehead to the window, which set him screaming." At eight or ten he saw a tree filled with angels, and angelic figures walking among haymakers. "The child is father to the man."

At the age of fourteen Blake was apprenticed to the engraver Basire. Ryland had been thought of, but Blake, according to a story which he must have narrated, but may not improbably have imagined, demurred, declaring that the fashionable engraver looked as if he would one day be hanged, as he actually was. Basire's practice lay chiefly in engraving antiquities, and the last five years of Blake's apprenticeship were chiefly spent in drawing tombs and architectural details in Westminster Abbey a most advantageous discipline, which imbued his mind with the Gothic spirit, an influence

<sup>1</sup> November 20 has been stated as the date, but the above is shown to be correct by the horoscope drawn for November 28, 7.45 P.M. in *Urania, or the Astrologer's Chronicle*, 1825, published therefore in Blake's lifetime, and undoubtedly derived from Varley.

already in the air, evincing itself in Götz von Berlichingens, Rowley Poems, Percy Relics, and Castles of Otranto; and, by directing him to English history and Shakespeare, powerfully stimulated and felicitously guided the poetical genius of which he was shortly to give proof. He drew, Malkin tells us, the monuments of kings and queens in every point of view he could catch, frequently standing on them. The heads he considered as portraits, and all the ornaments appeared as miracles of art to his Gothicised imagination. Nor could a better environment for a mystic be desired than the venerable and generally solitary temple, “the height, the space, the gloom, the glory,” with its music, its memories, and its constant sense of the presence of the dead. The bent of his mind at the time is shown by his first engraving, *Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion*, copied, as he states, from a scarce Italian print. If this was indeed the case, it may be queried whether the title at least was not his – Joseph, according to the legend, having been the first missionary to Britain. The original, if original there was, certainly was not the work of Michael Angelo, to whom Blake chose to attribute it. Scarcely was he out of his articles than he produced (1779) two engravings from the history of England, *The Penance of Jane Shore* and *King Edward and Queen Eleanor*. These were after two water-colour drawings, selected from a much greater number with which he had amused the leisure hours of his apprenticeship. Mr. Gilchrist says that these and other works of the period have little of the peculiar Blakean quality, except the striking design *Morning, or Glad Day*, dated 1780, a facsimile of which is given here. This, indeed, is Blake all over, and would have made an excellent frontispiece for the poems with which he was about to herald the dawn of a new era in English poetry, though in all probability designed as an illustration of the lines in *Romeo and Juliet*;

Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

A naked Apollo-like figure, wearing the dawn for a halo, in whom one fancifully traces a resemblance to Goethe, alights throbbing with joy and victory on the peak of a mountain, while the waning moon, as would seem, sets behind him, and a winged beetle scuds away.

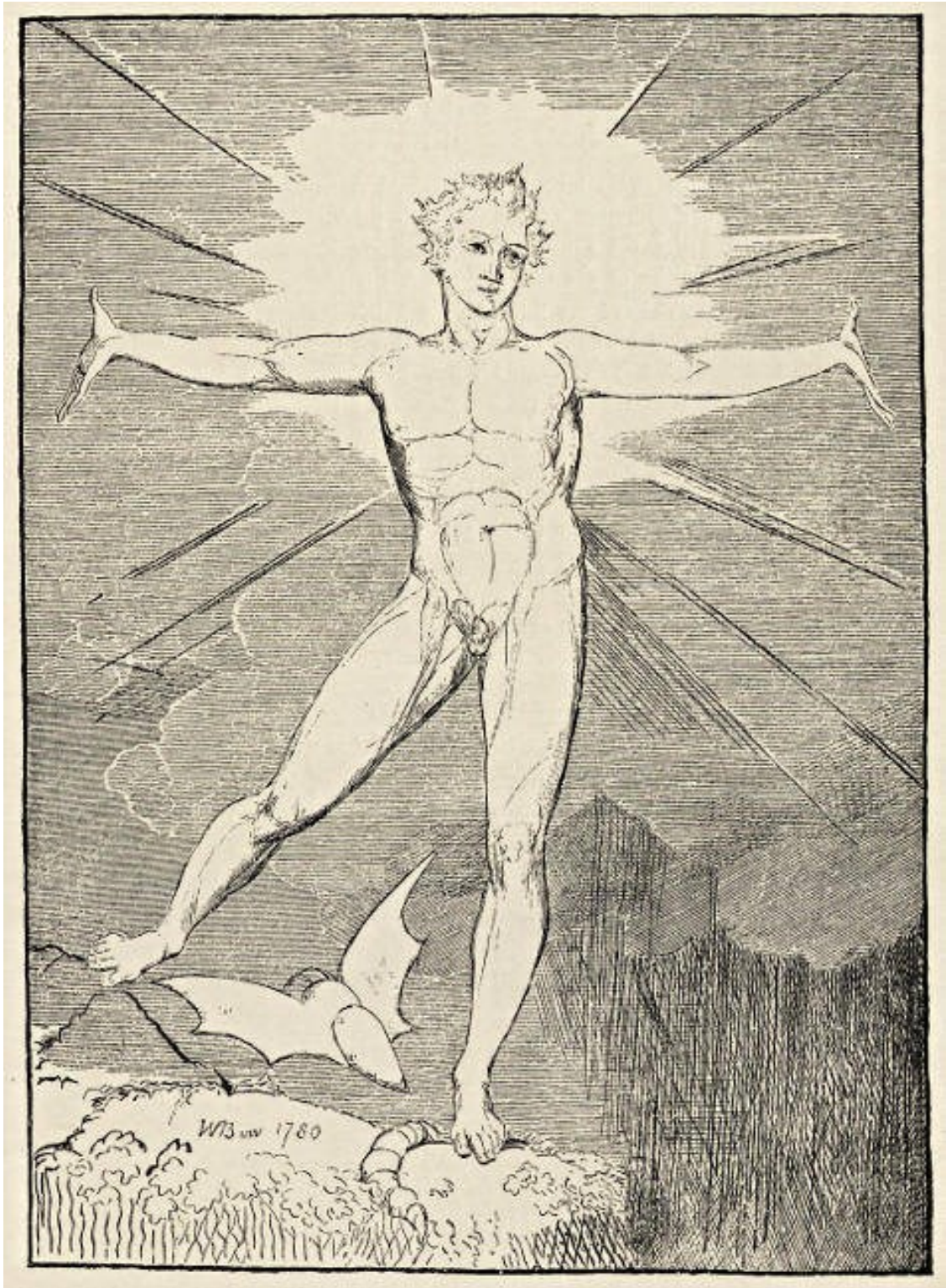
The poems to which reference has been made had meanwhile been slowly accumulating; if the language of the advertisement which heralded their publication is to be taken literally, they were now complete. Before appearing as a poet, however, Blake had to undergo his probation as a lover. He became enamoured of a pretty girl variously called Polly or Clara Woods. She rejected him. He fell into a melancholy, and was sent to Richmond for change of air. There he lodged with a nursery gardener named Boucher. The daughter of the house, Catherine, had been frequently asked whom she would like to marry, and had always replied that she had not seen the man. Coming on the night of Blake’s arrival into the room where he was sitting with the rest of the family, she grew faint from the presentiment that she beheld her destined husband. On subsequently hearing of his disappointment with Clara Woods, she told him that she pitied, and he told her that he loved. They were married on August 18, 1782, Blake having, it is said, proved their mutual constancy by refraining from seeing her for a year, while he was toiling to save enough to render their marriage not utterly imprudent. His first care afterwards was to teach her to read and write, to which he afterwards added enough of the pictorial art to enable her to colour his drawings. A more devoted wife never lived, though her devotion wore in the eyes of strangers an aspect of formality, and was always tinged with awe.

*Poetical Sketches*, 1783, were the first-fruits of Blake’s genius, composed, as asserted in the advertisement prefixed by his friends, between 1768 and 1777.<sup>2</sup> They are the only examples of his literary work devoid of artistic illustration; we ought not, consequently, to spend much time upon them, yet they are the most memorable of his works, for they are nothing short of miraculous, and

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<sup>2</sup> If, however, the “Kitty” of “I love the jocund dance” is Catherine Boucher, this poem at least must be later than 1780, unless the name has been substituted for another, as has been known to happen.

alone among his productions mark an era. For a hundred and thirty years English poetry had been mainly artificial, the product of conscious effort ranging down from the superb art of *Paradise Lost* to the prettinesses of Pope's imitators, but seldom or never wearing the aspect of a spontaneous growth. This young obscure engraver was the first to show that it was still possible to sing as the bird sings; he and no other was the morning star which announced the new day of English poetry. Had even the verses been of inferior quality, such inspiration would have sufficed for fame, but Blake is as exquisite as original, and warbles such nightingale notes as England had not heard since Andrew Marvell forsook song for satire. The songs of Dryden, indeed, have great merit, but how they savour of the study compared with the artless melody of a strain like this!



Morning, or Glad Day. From an engraving by W. Blake.

How sweet I roamed from field to field,  
And tasted all the summer's pride,  
Till I the Prince of Love beheld,  
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He showed me lilies for my hair,  
And blushing roses for my brow;  
He led me through his gardens fair,  
Where all his golden pleasures grow.

With sweet May dews my wings were wet,  
And Phœbus fired my vocal rage;  
He caught me in his silken net,  
And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and hear me sing,  
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;  
Then stretches out my golden wing,  
And mocks my loss of liberty.

This is such a song as Marlowe might have written, but for a delicate eighteenth-century suggestion in the style, whose aroma is not quite that of the Elizabethan era. It is none the less one of the pieces which none but Blake could have produced. The characteristics of his style, indeed, are much less apparent in this early volume than in his subsequent productions. They are most conspicuous in the *Mad Song*, but a more pleasing if less intense example is the following:

### SONG

Love and harmony combine,  
And around our souls entwine,  
While thy branches mix with mine  
And our roots together join.

Joys upon our branches sit,  
Chirping loud and singing sweet;  
Like gentle streams beneath our feet  
Innocence and virtue meet.

Thou the golden fruit dost bear,  
I am clad in flowers fair;  
Thy sweet boughs perfume the air,  
And the turtle buildeth there.

There she sits and feeds her young,  
Sweet I hear her mournful song;  
And thy lovely leaves among,  
There is Love: I hear his tongue.

There his charm'd nest he doth lay,  
There he sleeps the night away,  
There he sports along the day,  
And doth among our branches play.



Not the least remarkable of the *Poetical Sketches* are “Samson” and other short pieces in blank verse. They are marvellously Tennysonian; if imitation there was, it obviously was not on Blake’s part. Who would have hesitated to ascribe these lines, addressed to the Evening Star, to the Laureate?

Let thy west wind sleep on  
The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering eyes,  
And wash the dusk with silver.

Even more marvellous than the sentiment is the metre, which cannot be judged by a short passage. Well might it be said, “Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes,” when the secret of melodious blank verse, withheld since the Civil War from all the highly cultured and in many respects highly gifted bards of England, is disclosed on the sudden to this half-educated young man. It is exemplified on a larger scale by the accompanying fragments of an intended tragedy on *Edward the Third*, which proves two things: first, that Blake was destitute of all dramatic faculty; secondly, that, notwithstanding, few have so thoroughly assimilated Shakespeare. Shakespeare stands almost alone among great poets in having had hardly any direct imitators. Every one, of course, has profited by the study of his art; but those most deeply indebted to him in this respect have felt the least disposed to reproduce his style. The reason is evident. Other writers are partial, Shakespeare is universal; the model is too vast for study. A deliberate imitation of Shakespeare would assuredly be a failure: imitation is only practicable when it is not deliberate but unconscious, the effluence of a mind so saturated with Shakespeare that it can for the time only express itself in Shakespearian numbers, and think under Shakespearian forms. Blake must have been in such a situation when he attempted *Edward the Third*, the direct fruit of his roamings among the regal tombs in the Abbey with Shakespeare’s historical plays in his hand. The drama is childish, but the feeling approaches Shakespeare as nearly as Keats’s early poems approach Spenser. The imitation, being spontaneous and unsought, is never senile, but every line reveals a youth whose soul is with Shakespeare, though his body may be in Golden Square. Yet the reproduction of Shakespeare’s manner is never so exact as to conceal the fact that the poet is writing in the eighteenth and not in the sixteenth century. The following passage may serve as an example both of the closeness of Blake’s affinity with Shakespeare and of the *nuances* of difference that serve to vindicate his originality.

Last night beneath  
The moon I walked abroad when all had pitched  
Their tents, and all were still.  
I heard a blooming youth singing a song  
He had composed, and at each pause he wiped  
His dropping eyes. The ditty was “If he  
Returned victorious he should wed a maiden  
Fairer than snow and rich as midsummer.”  
Another wept, and wished health to his father.  
I chid them both, but gave them noble hopes.  
These are the minds that glory in the battle,  
And leap and dance to hear the trumpet sound.

This is beautiful description, sentiment and metre, but these beauties sum up the attractions of Blake’s dramatic fragment. The dramatic element is wanting, there is no action. This deficiency runs through his whole work, pictorial as well as literary, and explains why one capable of such sublime conceptions was nevertheless incapable of taking rank with the Miltons and Michael Angelos. His productions are full of tremendous scenes, the strivings and agonies of colossal unearthly powers

realised by his own mind with a vividness which proves the intensity of his conceptions. Yet he seldom impresses the beholder with any sentiment of awe or terror. The cause is not solely the fantastic character of these conceptions, for the effect is the same when he deals with mankind, and represents it in the most thrilling crises of which humanity is capable. His representation of the plague, for instance, engraved in Gilchrist's biography, excites strong interest and curiosity, but nothing of the shuddering dismay with which we should view such a scene in actual life, and which is so powerfully conveyed in such works as Géricault's *Wreck of the Medusa* and Poole's *Solomon Eagle*. The reason seems to be that Blake was not only a visionary but also a mystic, and that mysticism is hardly compatible with tragic passion. The visionary, as in the instances of Dante and Bunyan, may realise every detail of his ideal conceptions with the force of actual perception, but it is the very essence of the mystic's creed that things are not what they seem, and the man who knows himself to be depicting a hieroglyphic will never grasp his subject with the force of him who feels that he is dealing with a concrete reality. The Hindoos are a nation of mystics who regard existence as an illusion, and their art labours under the same defects as Blake's; their drama especially, with all the charm of lovely arabesque, makes nothing of the strongest situations, save when these are of the pathetic order. For although the mystic cannot be exciting, he can be tender: and while Blake's efforts at the delineation of frantic passion or overwhelming catastrophes usually (there are exceptions) leave us unmoved, nothing can be more pathetic than some of his delineations, such, for example, as the famous illustration to Blair, of an old man approaching the grave.

It seems almost strange that verses, as contrary to the spirit of the age that gave them birth as prophetic of the ideals of the age to come, should have found friends willing to defray their cost. If, however, it is true that Flaxman was among these friends, Blake had met with one congenial spirit. A clergyman named Matthews, incumbent of Percy Chapel, Charlotte Street, is mentioned as another patron, and as the writer of the well-meaning but too apologetic preface. Through him Blake seems to have become acquainted with Flaxman. To the few then able to appreciate the poems, they might well have seemed indicative of a great poetical career, for they are exactly the sweet, wild, untaught, prelusive music wherewith youth, as yet unschooled by criticism and unawakened to its really profound problems, is wont to essay its art. Why was it that Blake, though rivalling these early attempts in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, never progressed further; and in by far the greater part of his subsequent poetry went off altogether upon a wrong track, so far at least as concerned poetry? Partly, we think, because his mind was almost entirely deficient in the plastic element. He could reproduce a scene ready depicted for him, as in his illustrations to Job; he could embody a solitary thought with exquisite beauty, whether in poetry or in painting; but he could not combine his ideas into a whole. His faculty was purely lyrical, and when this evanescent endowment forsook him, devoid as he was of all plastic literary power, he had no Oenone or Ulysses to replace his Claribels and Eleanores. His verse became a mere accompaniment of his pictorial art, and harmonising with its vagueness and obscurity, necessarily lacked the symmetry with which a colourist can dispense, but which is essential to a poet. Even more remarkable than the music of Blake's early verses, unparalleled in their age, is the fact, vouched for by J. T. Smith, the biographer of Nollekens and Keeper of Prints at the British Museum, that he had composed tunes for them, which he could only repeat by ear from his ignorance of musical notation. Some of these, Smith says, were exquisitely beautiful.

At the appearance of the *Poetical Sketches* (1783), Blake had for a year been a married man, and was actively striving to make a living as an engraver. Most of his work of this nature at this time was executed after Stothard. It cannot be disputed that this graceful artist largely influenced Blake's style in its more idyllic aspects; whether, as he was afterwards inclined to assert, Stothard's invention owed something to him is not easy to determine. In 1784 he lost his father, a mild, pious man, who had well performed his duty to his son. Blake's elder brother James took his business, and the artist, who had probably inherited some little property, returned from Green Street to Broad Street, and,

establishing himself next door to his brother, launched into speculation as a print-seller in partnership with a former fellow apprentice named Parker, taking his brother Robert as a gratuitous pupil. In 1785 he sent four drawings to the Academy. Three, illustrative of the story of Joseph, were shown in the International Exhibition of 1862, and are described by Gilchrist as “full of soft tranquil beauty, specimens of Blake’s earlier style; a very different one from that of his later and better-known works.” This is probably as much as to say that he then wrought much under the influence of Stothard, after whom he engraved the subject from *David Simple* given here; for the earlier design illustrative of the passage in *Romeo and Juliet* is characteristically Blakean. Mr. Gilchrist adds, “the design is correct and blameless, not to say tame (for Blake), the colour full, harmonious and sober.” Mr. Rossetti says that the figure of Joseph, in the third drawing, “is especially pure and impulsive.”



Illustration from “David Simple.” Engraved by W. Blake after T. Stothard, R.A.

In 1787 Blake’s experiment in print-selling came to an end, through disagreements, it is said, with his partner; but as neither appears to have afterwards pursued the calling, it is probable that it had never been profitable. Parker obtained some distinction as an engraver, chiefly after Stothard, and died in 1805. In February, 1787, Blake had sustained a severe loss in the death of his brother and pupil Robert. Blake himself nursed the patient for some weeks, and when at last the end came, it is not surprising that he should have beheld his brother’s spirit “arise and clap its hands for joy.” Not long after, as he asserted, the spirit appeared to him in a dream, and revealed to him that process of printing from copper plates which, as we shall see, had the most decisive influence upon his work as an artist. Writing to Hayley in 1800, he says, “Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in remembrance in the regions of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictate.” “The ruins of Time,” he finely subjoins, “build mansions in Eternity.”

From this time Blake’s sole assistant was his wife, whom he carefully instructed, and who tinted many of the coloured drawings which henceforth form the more characteristic portion of his work. After giving up his business as a print-seller, he removed from Broad Street to 28, Poland Street. Messrs. Ellis and Yeats conjecture that this may have been to escape the blighting influence of his commercial brother next door, but it is more probable that his venture had impoverished him, and that he was obliged to give up housekeeping.

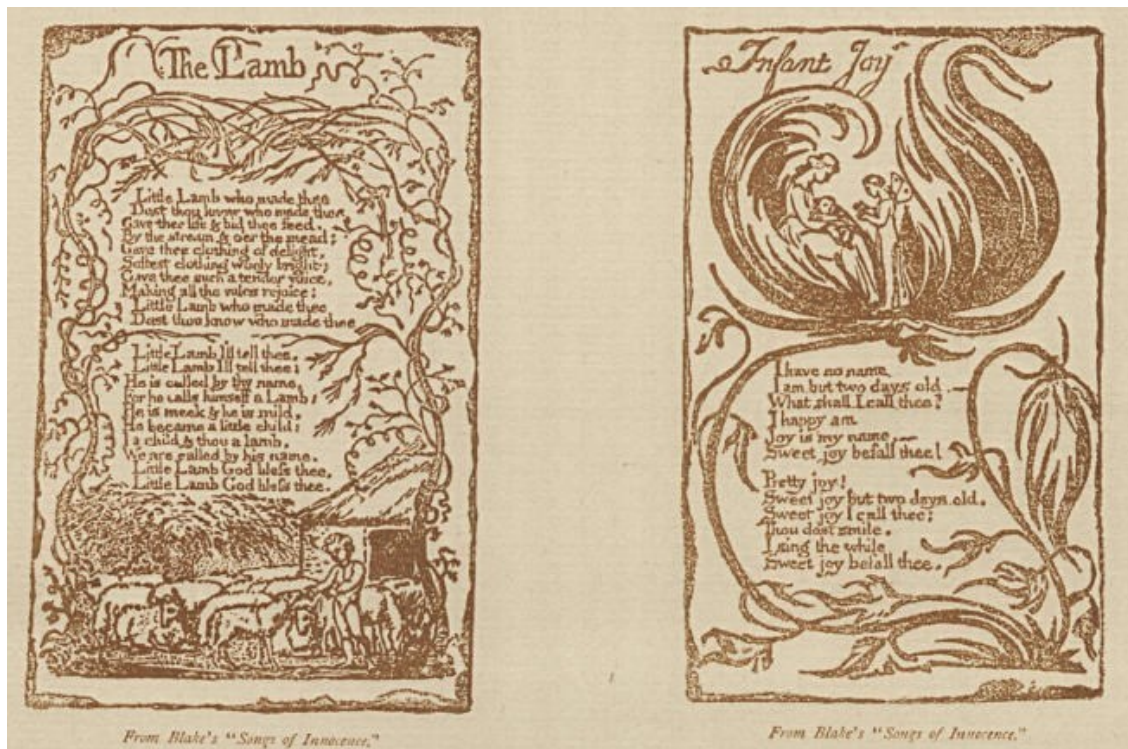
## CHAPTER II

### **Blake's Technical Methods – “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience” – Life in Poland Street and in Lambeth – Mystical Poetry and Art**

It was during his residence in Poland Street that Blake first appeared in that mingled character of poet and painter which marks him off so conspicuously from other painters and other poets. Painting has often been made the handmaid of poetry; it was Blake's idea, without infringing upon this relationship, to make poetry no less the handmaid of painting by employing his verse, engraved and beautified with colour, to enhance the artistic value of his designs, as well as to provide them with the needful basis of subject. The same principle may probably be recognised in those Oriental scrolls where the graceful labour of the scribe is as distinctly a work of art as the illustration of the miniaturist; but of these Blake can have known nothing. Necessity was with him the mother of invention. Since the appearance of *Poetical Sketches* he had written much that he desired to publish – but how to pay for printing? So severely had he suffered by his unfortunate commercial adventure that when at length, as he firmly believed, the new process by which his song and his design could be facsimiled together was revealed by his brother's spirit in a dream, a half-crown was the only coin his wife and he possessed between them in the world. One shilling and tenpence of this was laid out in providing the necessary materials.

The technical method to which Blake now resorted is thus described by Mr. Gilchrist: “It was quite an original one. It consisted of a species of engraving in relief, both words and designs. The verse was written and the designs and marginal embellishments outlined on the copper with an impervious liquid, probably the ordinary stopping-out varnish of engravers. Then all the white parts or lights, the remainder of the plate that is, were eaten away with aquafortis or other acid, so that the outline of letter and design was left prominent, as in stereotype. From these plates he printed off in any tint, yellow, brown, blue, required to be the prevailing or ground colour in his facsimiles; red he used for the letterpress. The page was then coloured up by hand in imitation of the original drawing with more or less variety of detail in the local hues. He ground and mixed his water-colours himself on a piece of statuary marble, after a method of his own, with common carpenter's glue diluted. The colours he used were few and simple: indigo, cobalt, gamboge, vermilion, Frankfort-black freely, ultramarine rarely, chrome not at all. These he applied with a camel's-hair brush, not with a sable, which he disliked. He taught Mrs. Blake to take off the impressions with care and delicacy, which such plates signally needed; and also to help in tinting them from his drawings with right artistic feeling; in all of which tasks she, to her honour, much delighted. The size of the plates was small, for the sake of economising copper, something under five inches by three. The number of engraved pages in the *Songs of Innocence* alone was twenty-seven. They were done up in boards by Mrs. Blake's hand, forming a small octavo; so that the poet and his wife did everything in making the book, writing, designing, printing, engraving, – everything except manufacturing the paper; the very ink, or colour rather, they did make. Never before, surely, was a man so literally the author of his own book.”





The Lamb. Infant Joy. From Blake's "Songs of Innocence."

The total effect of this process is tersely expressed by Mr. Rossetti, "The art is made to permeate the poetry." It resulted in the publication of *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, two years after its discovery or revelation. Other productions, of that weird and symbolic character in which Blake came more and more to delight, followed in quick succession. These will claim copious notice, but for the present we may pass on to *Songs of Experience*, produced in 1794, so much of a companion volume to *Songs of Innocence* that the two are usually found within the same cover. Neither attracted much attention at the time. Charles Lamb says: "I have heard of his poems, but have never seen them." He is, however, acquainted with "Tiger, tiger," which he pronounces "glorious." The price of the two sets when issued together was from thirty shillings to two guineas – an illustration of the material service which Art can render to Poetry when it is considered that, published simply as poems, they would in that age have found no purchasers at eighteenpence. This price was nevertheless absurdly below their real value, and was enhanced even during the artist's lifetime. It came to be five guineas, and late in his life friends, from the munificent Sir Thomas Lawrence downwards, would commission sets tinted by himself at from ten to twenty guineas as a veiled charity.

Of the poems and illustrations in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* Gilchrist justly declares that their warp and woof are formed in one texture, and that to treat of them separately is like pulling up a daisy by the roots out of the green sward in which it springs. One essential characteristic inspires them both, and may be defined as childish fearlessness, the innocent courage of the infant who puts his hand upon the serpent and the cockatrice. Any one but Blake would have feared to publish designs and verses apparently so verging upon the trivial, and which indeed would have been trivial – and worse, affected – if the emanation of almost any other brain, or the execution of almost any other hand. Being his, their sincerity is beyond question, and they are a valuable psychological document as establishing the possibility of a man of genius and passion reaching thirty with the simplicity of a child. Hardly anything else in literature or art, unless some thought in Shakespeare, so powerfully conveys the impression of a pure elemental force, something absolutely spontaneous, innocent of all contact with and all influence from the refinements of culture. They certainly are not



as a rule powerful, and contrast forcibly with the lurid and gigantic conceptions which if we did not remember that the same Dante depicted *The Tower of Famine*

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