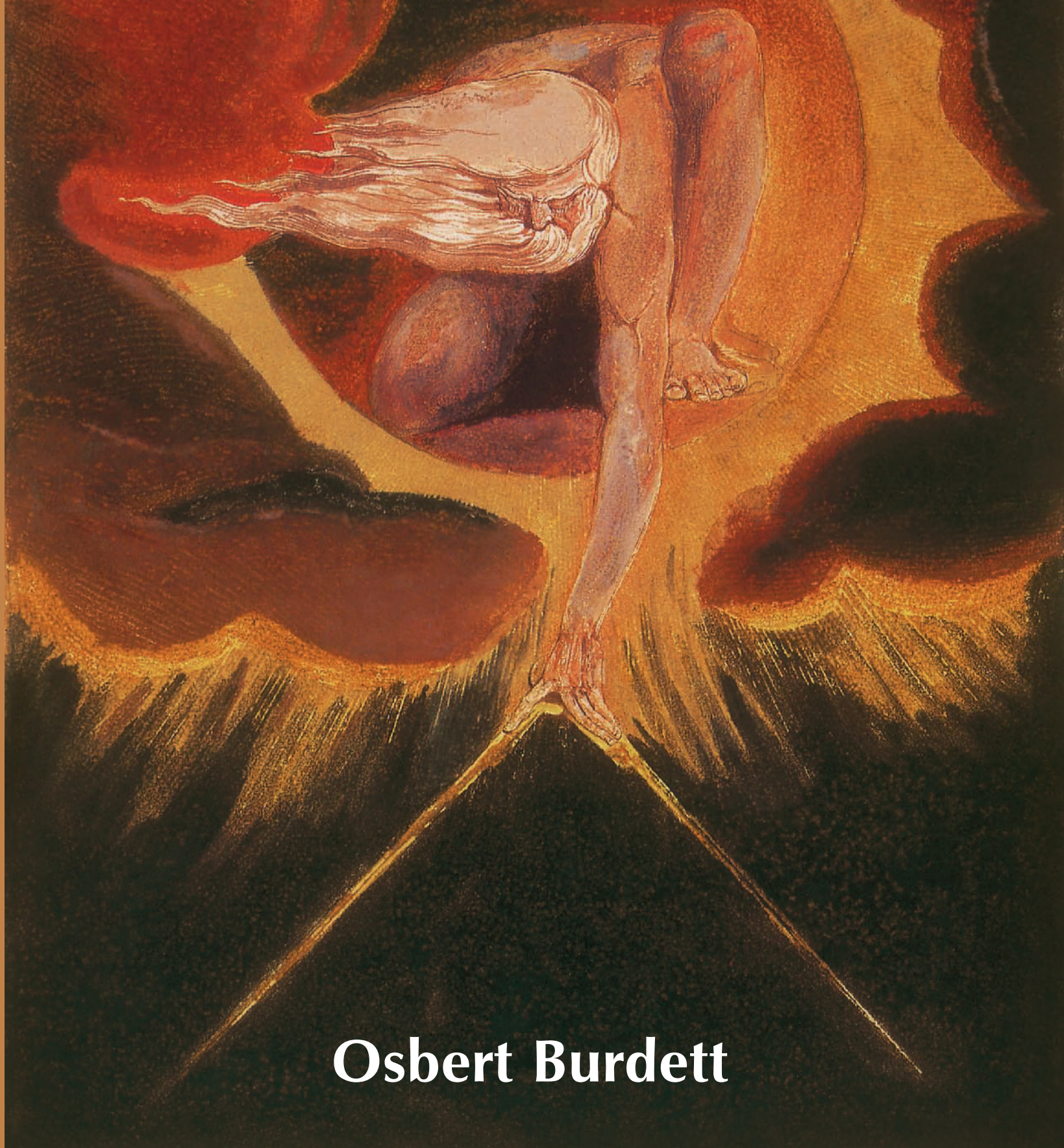


WILLIAM BLAKE



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OSBERT BURDETT

WILLIAM BLAKE

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I. An Early Revelation

Boyhood, 1757-1771

In August 1827, confined to a couple of rooms in Fountain Court, an alley off the Strand, William Blake's death passed unnoticed, save by a small but gradually extending circle of friends. These were young artists who revered him and regarded themselves as his disciples. Blake aroused such interest in all the finer spirits who chanced to discover his character and his work, and his legacy quickly began to be communicated to the world. In 1828, 1830, and 1832, J. T. Smith, Allan Cunningham, and Frederic Tatham published their recollections on the poet and artist. In the great span of time that divides these enthusiasts from ourselves, the interest in Blake has grown substantially; now, there are volumes written about him, and libraries and museums all over the world devoted to housing his work. The canon of Blake's published writings is, even now, incomplete, and there is still a chance that some of his unrecovered works may emerge from their oblivion. We have come to see in him a prophet of the nineteenth century; the precursor, independently of Chatterton and the Lake Poets, of the Romantic Movement; the asserter of the principle of energy that is most valid in Nietzsche, whose mind and aphoristic manner curiously resembles Blake's; and the recoverer of the spirit of forgiveness. Blake was a poet, an artist, a seer, and an eccentric, whose later writings tantalise scholars in their eager search for intelligible and apprehensible truths. Blake will forever remain a poet and a puzzle; indeed, his reputation has been strengthened by its extraneous, non-artistic peculiarities.

Little is known of the history of his family. The parish registers, unearthed by Mr. Arthur Symons, reveal that William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, and that he was the third child of James and Catherine Blake, who were then living at 28 Broad Street, in the Golden Square neighbourhood of London. These registers further show that

the future poet had two elder and two younger brothers, and that both the second and the fourth were christened John. Mr. Symons infers that the first John died before the age of five, and that his name was passed on to the fourth son, who, consequently, must be the John that Blake was to name "the evil one." The fifth son is registered under the name of Richard, and was Blake's favourite brother. These five boys were followed by a little girl, Catherine Elizabeth.¹

On December 11, When William Blake was a fortnight old, his parents carried him to St. James's in Westminster, one of Christopher Wren's churches; here, with five other infants, Blake was baptised. Also at this time, the Italian sculptor Canova was born; Blake's future friends, the English painter and engraver Stothard and the sculptor and draughtsman Flaxman, were two years old; and the poet Thomas Chatterton was a little boy of five in Bristol. The atmosphere of Blake's childhood is preserved for us in an anecdote recorded by the diarist Crabb Robinson, which recounts how in the poet's wife would remind him of his earliest vision. "The first time you ever saw God," she would say when her husband was describing his peculiar faculty, "was when you were four years old, and He put his head to the window and set you ascreaming." By the time Blake was a child of eight his visions were becoming habitual.

At that time Camberwell, Dulwich, Sydenham, and Newington Butts were still villages, and an active child who lived in Golden Square could quickly reach the open fields from London. On his return from one of these rambles, Blake ran home to tell his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel under a tree. Though the good woman beat the boy for this assertion, and was doubtless scandalised that any of the prophets should be more real to her child than to herself, she seems to have felt compassion for him, for a year or so later when Blake came home from Peckham Rye with the news that he had seen a tree filled with angels, and his father was about to whip him for telling a fib, his

William Blake,
David Delivered Out of Many Waters, 'He Rode upon the Cherubim', c. 1805.
Pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 41.5 x 34.8 cm.
Tate Gallery, London.

mother interceded. On a third occasion, one bright morning in early summer, watching the haymakers at their work, the child saw angelic figures walking among them. How this was received at home we are not told, but it is evident that both parents were growing aware of the boy's peculiarities and had begun to tolerate them. Thus his father refused to send him to school, having learned from experience that young Blake had a temper. There had probably been explosions at home; his parents, having abandoned the rod themselves, and hesitating to punish him, did not care to entrust him to strangers who might be less patient than their puzzled selves. The child's imagination and his impulsive expression of feeling were probably the worst faults they would find.

Blake's schooling, therefore, took place at home, where he learned to read and to write, but nothing more. His precocious poetry proves that these skills must have come easily to him. Moreover, with his active imagination, the sprawling environment, and the religious imagery of the conversation of his father and his father's friends, it seems that Blake needed other companionship or a schoolmaster. If he had studied Greek and Latin in his boyhood, then the serious study of this literature and of the history that accompanies it might have given a valuable contrast to the exclusively religious interests in his home circle. Another mythology, another set of symbols, would thus have been presented to his mind. As things happened, the eccentric influence of Swedenborg² was uncorrected by any other standard of comparison. Blake's father suspected no loss in this for the future of his boy since reading and writing were sufficient to equip him for helping his elder brother in the family's hosery shop, to which their father naturally destined the pair of them.

William, however, would draw and scribble on the backs of the customers' bills and make sketches on the counter; it soon became a question whether he would make a good hosier and what to do with him if he would not. Allan Cunningham, who supplies these details, suggests the anxious discussions that went on, and the various sides taken by different members of the family, when he adds that the boy's love of art was "privately encouraged by his mother," and that "Blake became an artist at the age of ten, and a poet

at the age of twelve." The order in which these two talents developed is significant. The only formal instruction that Blake was to receive was inevitably designed for an artist, not for a man of letters. Of his twin dispositions toward art and poetry, the artistic was cultivated and the literary left alone. His observation was fed by watching nature and men in the fields and in the streets; his imagination, already stimulated by these, was nourished by looking at pictures; his intelligence was aroused by religious discussion, the sharing of opinions, and the entirely uncritical reading of books.

According to scholars, Blake's favourite studies were Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, *Tarquin and Lucrece*, and his Sonnets, together with Jonson's *Underwoods* and his *Miscellanies*. About this time Blake probably began to write, but his tendency to draughtsmanship was even more precocious, and as there is no formal apprenticeship to letters, his father, who was becoming more resigned to Blake's evident desires, sent him at the age of ten to a drawing school kept by Mr. Henry Pars, a drawing-master and draughtsman himself, in the Strand. This decision had been confirmed from observing how the boy would spend his free time. When he was not rambling in the countryside or reading at home, he would visit such private picture galleries as were open to the public or attend auction sales of old prints at Longford's and Christie's. Longford, says Malkin, "called him his little connoisseur, and often knocked down to him a cheap lot with friendly precipitation. He copied Raphael and Michelangelo, Martin Heemskerck and Albrecht Dürer, Giulio Romano and the rest of the historic class, neglecting to buy any other prints. His choice was for the most part condemned by his youthful companions, who were accustomed to laugh at what they called his mechanical taste." There was no one, alas, to criticise his father's literary models, and the severity of his own taste in design was the exact opposite of his taste in literature. He never changed either of these opinions. "I am happy," wrote Blake long afterward in his notes to Sir Joshua Reynold's *Discourses*, "I cannot say that Raphael ever was from my earliest childhood hidden from me. I saw and knew immediately the difference between Raphael and Rubens." Blake made an idol of consistency, and thus

William Blake,
The Crucifixion, 'Behold Thy Mother', c. 1805.
 Pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 41.3 x 30 cm.
 Tate Gallery, London.

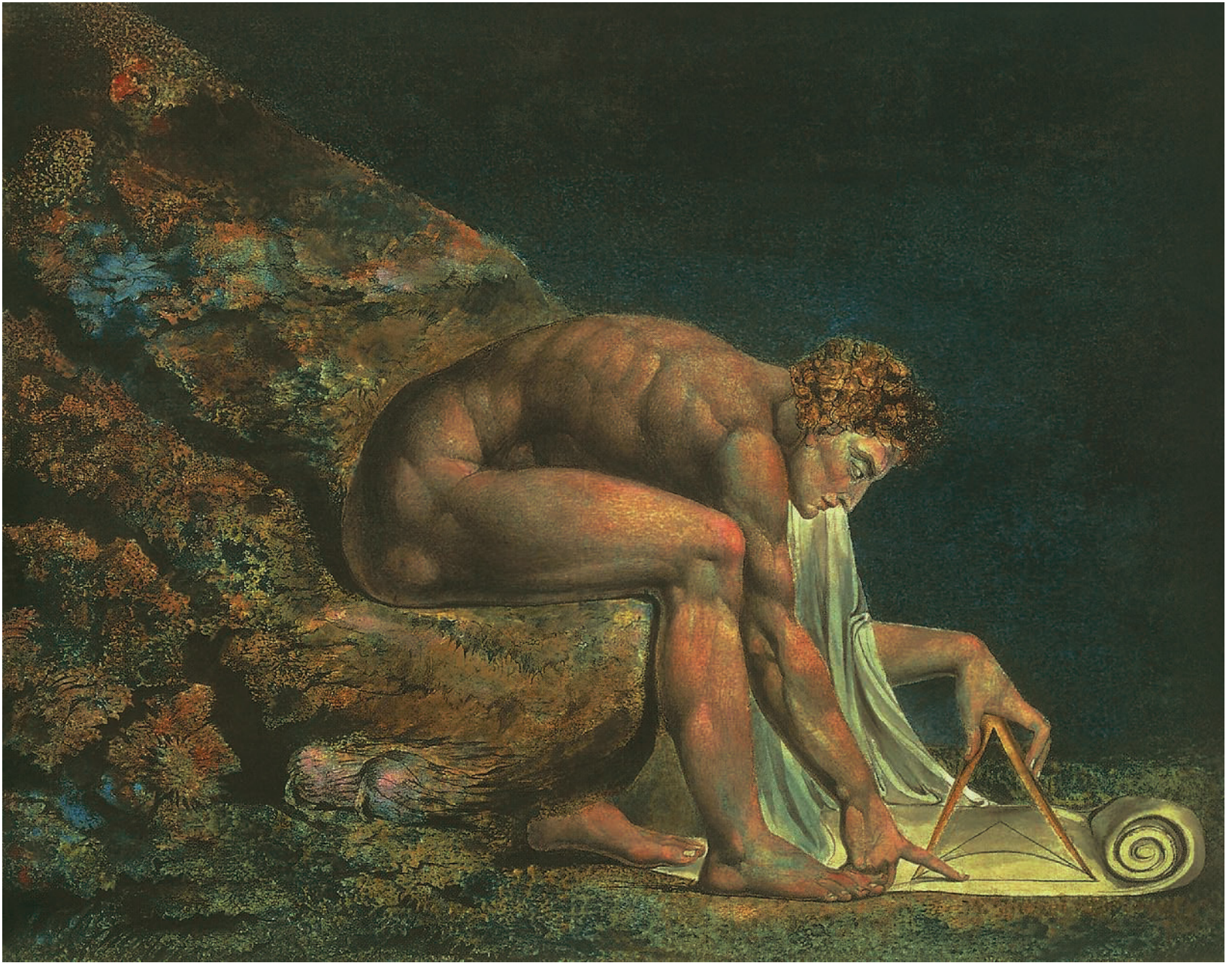




William Blake,
Pity, c. 1795.
Colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 42.5 x 53.9 cm.
Tate Gallery, London.



William Blake,
The Night of Enitharmon's Joy (formerly called *Hecate*), c. 1795.
Colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 43.9 x 58.1 cm.
Tate Gallery, London.



hindered the development and sympathy of his mind. According to Gilchrist³, the auctions permitted threepenny⁴ bids, and thus we can guess how Blake was accustomed to spend his pocket money.

Mr. Pars' establishment was the recognised preparatory school for the Academy of Painting and Sculpture in St. Martin's Lane, an outgrowth of the Incorporated Society of Artists which Hogarth had helped to found. The Royal Academy itself was not started until 1768, a year later. William Shipley, the painter, had founded this preparatory school, and on his retirement Pars took it over. Thanks to the generosity of his younger brother William, a portrait painter much in request at the time, Pars had previously visited Greece to study its ruins. He returned with portfolios of drawings, which were doubtless instructive to the pupils in his school, and from the hints contained in them Blake probably won the precarious knowledge that he was to assume so confidently later in his career. Mr. Pars's pupils were taught to draw from their master's plaster casts of the antique models. There was no life-drawing class, and its absence led Blake's father to present his son with copies of the Gladiator, the Hercules, and the Venus de Medici, so that his son could continue his drawing at home. At the same time, Blake was anxious to enlarge his little collection of prints; his father gave small sums to him for this purpose. His parents were encouraging and helpful once they had come to understand where his heart and talents lay.

From the age of ten to fourteen Blake remained with Mr. Pars, and out of school was busily occupied with drawing, collecting prints, and looking at pictures. He also read and had apparently begun to write verses. The Advertisement to the *Poetical Sketches*, printed by his friends in 1783 and presented unbound to the young author to distribute as he liked, states that they contain "the production of untutored youth, commencing in his twelfth and occasionally resumed by the author till his twentieth year." At the age of twelve, Blake had still two more years to remain at Pars's school, and the lovely song "How sweet I roam'd from field to field," which, Malkin says, was "written before the age of fourteen," must, therefore, have been composed during his schooldays. If we accept this date, the song becomes the lyric of his

childhood with its rambles and its visions, to remind us independently of the Elizabethan lyrics that the boy had been reading with delight. While the early works of genius are invariably inspired by memories, those of Blake emphasise how susceptible he was, and how important it was, especially for him, to fall under the best influences. He had, to an exceptional degree, the desire to surpass every one of his chosen models, and it is hardly too much to say that the influences that came his way were—for better or for worse—the determining factors in his work. If his father had been a man with different tastes, and Swedenborg had been an accidental discovery, Blake's work might have been very different, for he was easily influenced by his environment. Under the spell of the Elizabethans, Blake's produced many works illustrating his love of nature, and in his early poetry this nature can be found, although it is slightly transfigured. In his drawings, for which he went to school, he had to work to control his exuberant fancy. In his writings, which were at the mercy of his boyhood's casual reading, his imagination at first tended toward more traditional, though unfashionable, themes. When he outgrew this earliest influence, he had no standard but his own waywardness to guide him. He was at the mercy of his loneliness and chance, and thought that the best way to move forward was to cherish and to emphasise his idiosyncrasies. Had he been born in the humanistic age, he would have allowed himself to be disciplined by a school sympathetic to his imagination, but finding himself a lonely voice he grew to insist on its peculiarities as if they were additional virtues. The result to literature was to be an outburst of experiment rarely successful in itself, if never to be neglected for its implications. Few men succeed in two arts. Fewer still have an equal capacity for two of them. When, like Blake, an artist happens to possess this dual faculty, it is not to be wondered that the better disciplined of the two shall be the greater glory.

The *Poetical Sketches* show Blake at the only period of his life when he read books simply as works of art. Already his artistic zeal was being transferred to drawing; left entirely to his own devices in his intellectual studies, for which the atmosphere of his home supported his peculiarity of opinion, he soon came to read only to confirm, and never to

William Blake,

Newton, c. 1805.

Colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 46 x 60 cm.

Tate Gallery, London.



William Blake,
 Illustration for *The Book of Thel*, frontispiece, 1789.
 Relief etching, watercoloured by hand, 296 x 23.2 cm.
 Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (Massachusetts).



III.

Then Thel astonish'd view'd the Worm upon its dewy bed.

*Art thou a Worm? image of weakness, art thou but a Worm?
I see thee like an infant wrapped in the Lilys leaf:
Ah weep not little voice, thou canst not speak, but thou canst weep:
Is this a Worm? I see thee lay helpless & naked: weeping,
And none to answer, none to cherish thee with mothers smiles.*

*The Clod of Clay heard the Worms voice, & rais'd her pining head:
She bend'd over the weeping infant, and her life exhalt
In unky fondness, then on Thel she fix'd her humble eyes.*

*O beauty of the vales of Har, we live not for ourselves,
Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed;
My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark,*

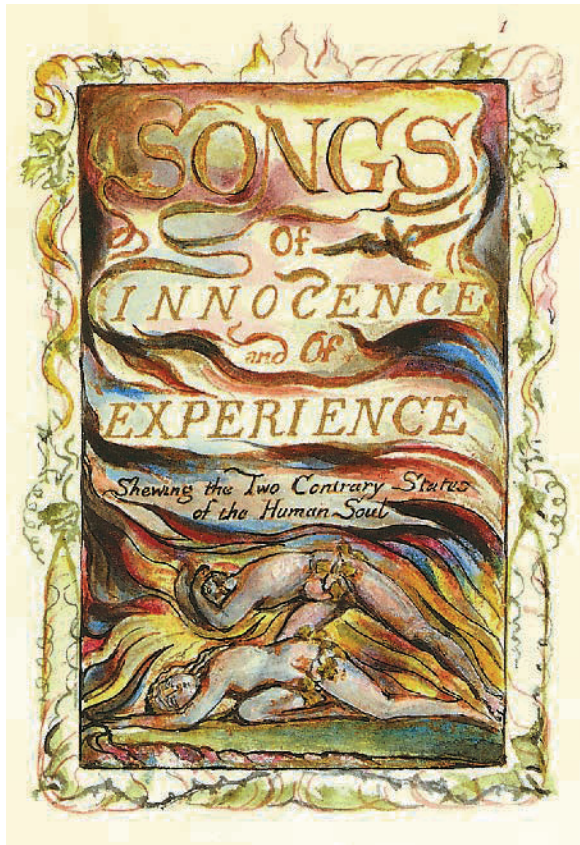
But

William Blake,

Illustration for *The Book of Thel*, plate 4, 1789.

Relief etching, watercoloured by hand, 296 x 23.2 cm.

Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge (Massachusetts).



William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 1, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

correct, his eccentric views. His voluntary apprenticeship to literature ended with his departure from Pars's school. After Blake's boyhood was over, he read to justify his visionary intuition, not to learn how best to reach his readers by adapting his ideas to their expectations. He sometimes wrote so well in spite of his unpredictability; perhaps, in circumstances more favourable to his development, he might have become of equal accomplishment in letters as in art had he been taught the art of writing as thoroughly as the art of design. It is his glory as a writer to have evoked the age of innocence and the dawn of reflection. His latest works were fated to be the monument of a genius in intellectual ruin, and perhaps it took an intuitive energy as fierce as Blake's to remind the world that the excesses of insight and private judgment are no less disastrous than the formalism against which he was protesting. He was perfectly equipped with talent and skill to write the *Songs of Innocence*. He was sufficiently equipped to divine the age of experience that lies immediately ahead. He was not equipped at all to create a new literary form for his profounder imaginings, and he remains a warning that genius which disdains the tools of tradition and all critical discipline risks being punished for its beauty. To endeavour, as Blake was to endeavour, to make the sublime the foundation instead of the crown of poetry is to sacrifice the means to the end, to rebuild the Tower of Babel, and to incur the penalty of confusion. In place of the epic temple that he promised, we have sublime ruins, only less artificial and picturesque than those visible constructions that beguiled the fancy of ambitious noblemen on the country estates of the time.

Even in the *Poetical Sketches* we observe the conflict between Blake's wild imagination and his fragile technique. Before his technique was overwhelmed by an urgent inner message, Blake's literary gifts were at their nearest, short-lived moment of equilibrium. Too specific in their content, they may be studied briefly for their form, and for ominous indications of his later manner. Every characteristic of Blake's ultimate achievement in letters — his music, his magic, his flashes of imagination, his sudden insensitive lines — is somewhere or other to be discerned in them. In the earliest song to be approximately dated:

William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 3, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

How sweet I roam'd 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!

these last two lines are already a picture, a vision clear in outline which seems designed for such a draughtsman and engraver as the boy Blake was about to become. This pictorial quality is characteristic of all the *Poetical Sketches*. It is not merely that the metaphor becomes a symbol, but that the symbol is an image vivid enough to possess an independent life of its own. This song and its companions might almost belong to an Elizabethan songbook, were it not for a mysterious gleam that makes the poem more than a song and less than a hymn by some supernatural note of ecstasy. Already the Elizabethan directness, its natural innocence of eye, is shot with something from afar, an eerie hint of magic more subtle than the simpler wizardry of Spenser's⁵ time and without Donne's⁶ metaphysical grotesquerie. I find a suggestion of this transfiguration in the third stanza:

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

The aura of enchantment here hints at more than the white magic of childhood or Elizabethan fancy. It is a shadow in the sunlight of a mysterious presence from the void beyond his beams. The poet is already possessed and distraught by a demon.

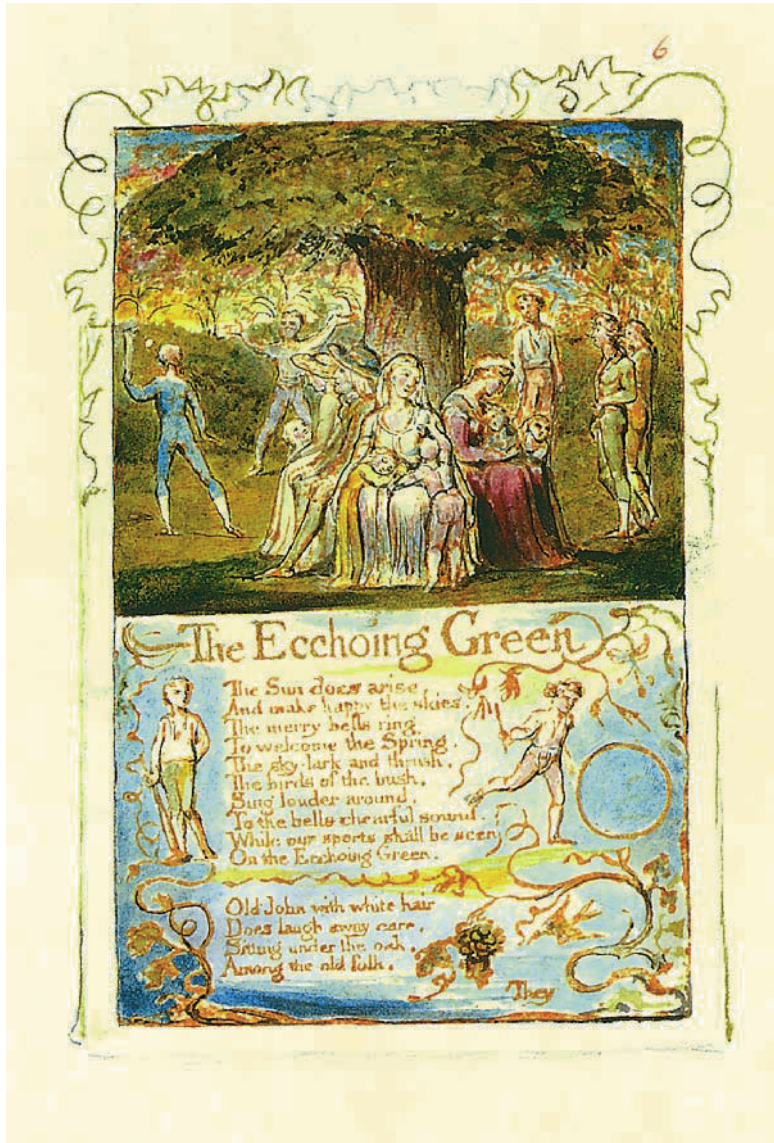
These lines already carry the echoes of Fletcher⁷ and Chatterton.⁸ Let us examine part of another poem, the "Mad-Song" and its beautiful fellow:

Memory, hither come,
 And tune your merry notes:
 And while upon the wind
 Your music floats,
 I'll pore upon the stream,
 Where sighing lovers dream,
 And fish for fancies as they pass
 Within the watery glass.

William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 5, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).



William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 2, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).



These lines suggest similar comparisons, with an intricacy that is usually the sign of a recovered, not simply original, form. There was a lot of impulse at this time in the English imagination, for, though Blake could hardly have known of him before 1777, we know that Chatterton also was possessed by it. His “Sing unto my Roundelay” might be its brother. Chatterton had died in 1770, and the first collection of the “Poems supposed to have been written at Bristol by Thomas Rowley”⁹ did not appear until Blake was twenty years old, by which time, according to the Advertisement to the *Poetical Sketches* printed in 1783, the contents of Blake’s earliest book had been already written.

The songs “Love and Harmony combine” and “I love the jocund dance” are full of a childlike simplicity, peculiar to Blake himself, an unspoilt modern child still living in Eden. In the songs written for the four seasons, we find his first experiments in unrhymed verse, perhaps attempted after reading Milton’s preface. The faint irregularity of these pieces, wavering from the normal measure, is captivating for its variation upon a never abandoned but continually modulated rhythmic strain. The opening line of the song, “O Winter, bar thine adamantine doors,” evokes another picture, scarcely needing Blake’s engraver to become an image visible to the eye. In the following stanza, again, the creature, “whose skin clings / To his strong bones [and] strides o’er the groaning rocks,” is the father of all Blake’s monsters, a monster invented by a creator already in love with the muscular anatomy of Michelangelo. These four songs pause at the end of each stanza. Each is a quatrain or sestet, and the effect of this pause is to make the absence of rhyme almost unfelt. “To the Evening Star” and “To Morning” are blank verse, with a magical lyric difference. The “lion’s glare” first appears in the former, and the coming of the tiger is foreshadowed in this song. Only “Fair Elenor” and “Gwin, King of Norway” suggest uninspired imitations. The admiration that Blake was later to confess for Ossian¹⁰, who was given to the world in 1760, and the probable effect of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765) need no more than passing mention. Save in these two pieces and in the imperfect burlesque in the current fashion, called “Blind Man’s Buff,” Blake’s *Poetical Sketches* are beyond, rather than the product of, his age.

William Blake,

Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 6, 1789 and 1794.
Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
King’s College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

The Muse was growing weary of tripping to formal measures. She wanted to feel herself free from the apron-strings of the couplet, to play, to dance, to be enthusiastic once more. She envied the Elizabethans for their “barbarous” energy, for their adventurous spirit, for the easy grace of their songs, for their natural music, to which she turns as does the townsman when he leaves the dusty city for green hills. Between herself and the Jacobean singers, however, the Reformation had intervened, and she could not recapture the humanist delight in natural life, in the world that we know, in the simple pleasure of the healthy senses. The old order of belief had been invaded by doubts, by facts, by science. Energy had been replaced by enthusiasm, and few any longer accepted delight in visible beauty as sufficient to stifle the desires of the heart. Merry England had gone for ever, and men were finding a trouble in the soul, a trouble which bewitched the old refrains even when played by those who took most delight in them. The desire to escape was the motive of the coming poetry. Blake takes leave of the eighteenth century in the beautiful criticism contained in his own address “To the Muses”:

Whether in Heaven ye wander fair,
Or the green corners of the earth,
Or the blue regions of the air
Where the melodious winds have birth;

How have you left the ancient love
That bards alone enjoy’d in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move!
The sound is forc’d, the notes are few.

We feel that “Blind Man’s Buff” convinced Blake that he could do nothing with the eighteenth century couplet until he had transformed its pedestrian pace to a running rhythm, and changed its goal from prosaic reality to some everlasting gospel of poetic life. For that, his time had not yet come. He is less unhappy in his “Imitation of Spenser,” though its second line, “Scatter’st the rays of light, and truth’s beams” might have seemed as rough to Edmund Spenser as we know its similars did to those who apologised for printing the *Poetical Sketches*.

William Blake,

Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 10, 1789 and 1794.
Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
King’s College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

The two songs which introduce us to “my black-eyed maid” are probably among the latest of the *Sketches*; in these, only love—or rather a boy’s expectation of love from the companionship of woman—occurs for the first time. The charm of the friendship between a boy and girl, the delight that comes of country walks together, is rendered in the lines:

So when she speaks, the voice of Heaven I hear;
So when we walk, nothing impure comes near.
Each field seems Eden, and each calm retreat;
Each village seems the haunt of holy feet.

How boyish it all is: this romance that can flush with pleasure, but hardly stammer its greeting or good-bye! There is as much inexperience as innocence in it, and we know it for the redeeming moment of the awkward age.

Enough has been quoted to remind us of the promise, strictly incalculable, of Blake’s first printed book; enough to show that he was at the mercy of his influences. In beauty and strangeness and precocity only Chatterton, who died at the age of seventeen, can be compared with him. In precocity Chatterton surpassed him, because the Bristol boy was content with one art, whereas Blake was already deserting literature, almost as soon as he had proved his powers, for the drawings on which he must have spent the greater part of his education.

Apprenticeship and Marriage, 1771-1787

Blake left the drawing school at the age of fourteen to become formally apprenticed to the engraver James Basire,¹¹ and to adopt this profession as his own. It was during this apprenticeship that most of the *Poetical Sketches* must have been written; we have lingered over them already partly because the earliest were written at the drawing school, but mainly to illustrate what Blake’s writings might have become had he followed his talent with poetry and literature. Writing, however, became the private satisfaction of his leisure, and we turn to Frederick Tatham¹² to learn how Blake arrived, and how he spent his apprenticeship, at Basire’s:

William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 14, 1789 and 1794.
Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
King’s College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

His love for art increasing, and the time of life having arrived when it was deemed necessary to place him under some tutor, a painter of eminence was proposed, and necessary applications made; but from the huge premium required, he requested, with his characteristic generosity, that his father would not on any account spend so much money on him, as he thought it would be an injustice to his brothers and sisters. He therefore himself proposed engraving as being less expensive, and sufficiently eligible for his future avocation. Of Basire, therefore, for a premium of fifty guineas, he learnt the art of engraving.

All ideas of the shop had been abandoned and, if we are to believe J. T. Smith, the boy had been “sent away from the counter as a booby [foolish lad].” Nonetheless, Blake’s father seems to have continued to support his son. First of all he took his son to work with Ryland¹³, who introduced the stipple technique to England and was then engraver to the king. Blake must have not liked him, for on leaving Ryland’s studio he remarked: “Father, I do not like the man’s face; it looks as if he will live to be hanged.” Twelve years later, after falling into difficulties, Ryland committed a forgery on the East India Company and was condemned to the gallows. Blake’s father followed the boy’s wishes and took him next to James Basire. This James, the best known of four engravers, kept his shop at 31 Great Queen Street, and was retained professionally by the Society of Antiquaries. He was a man of fifty-one when Blake became his apprentice, and had been warmly esteemed by William Hogarth and many others. Basire had studied in Rome, and was particularly admired for his dry style, which no doubt recommended him to those, like the Society of Antiquaries, who were concerned with ancient monuments.

Indeed, Basire’s chief patrons were antiquaries who had every reason to appreciate the precision of his plates. Basire’s severe style solidified Blake’s insistence on strict form and severe outline in all drawing. Basire was a good teacher and a kind master, and the seven years that Blake

William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 7, 1789 and 1794.
Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
King’s College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).



The Little Boy Found

The little boy lost in the lonely fen,
Led by the wandering light,
Began to cry, but God ever nigh,
Appeared like his father in white.
He kissed the child & by the hand led
And to his mother brought,
Who in sorrow pale thro' the lonely dale
Her little boy weeping sought.



They laugh at our play,
And soon they all say,
Such such were the joys,
When we all girls & boys,
In our youth time were seen,
On the laughing Green.

All the little ones weary
No more can be merry
The sun does descend,
And our joys have an end:
Round the departed their mothers,
Many sisters and brothers,
Like birds in their nest,
Are ready for rest:
And soon no more seen,
On the darkening Green.



William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 28, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).



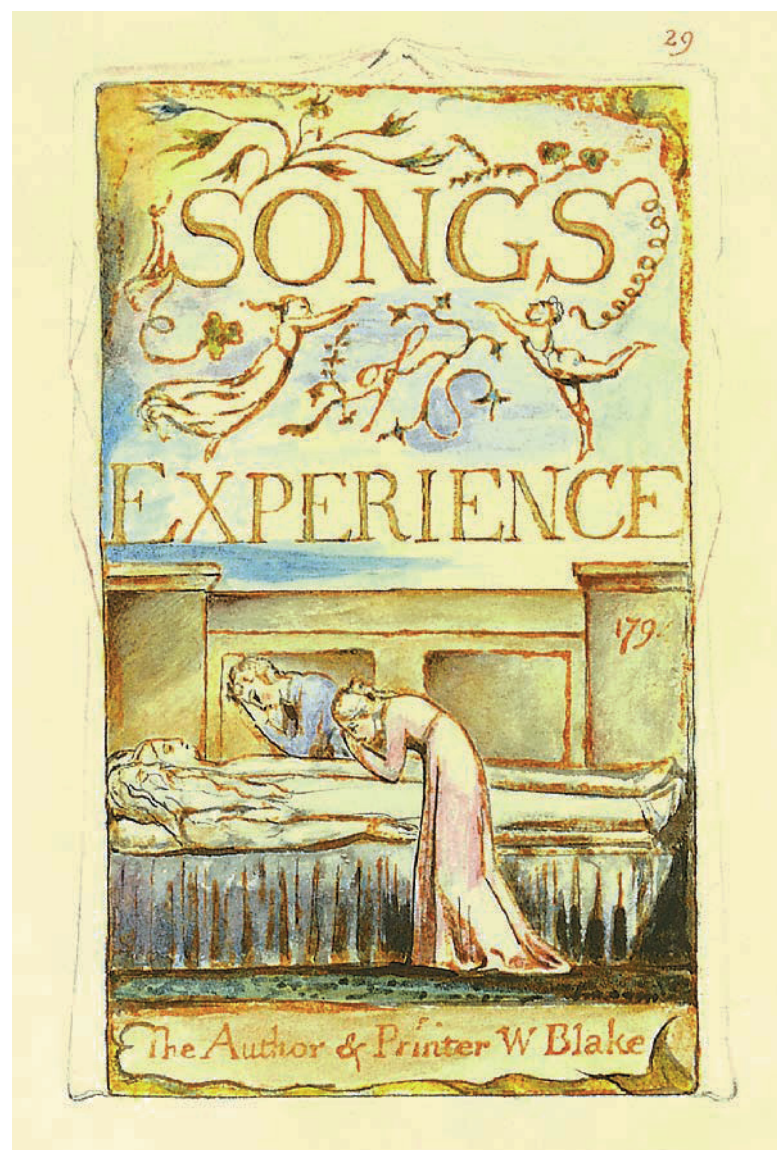
William Blake,
Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 17, 1789 and 1794.
 Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.
 King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).

spent with him were extremely formative. Blake's exuberant imagination accepted this controlling influence, without which his execution might never have equalled his creative power of design.

The boy proved an apt and industrious pupil, who soon learned to copy to Basire's satisfaction whatever work he was set to perform. The shop, too, had its exciting moments, for it was frequented by all sorts of people, including Emanuel Swedenborg, who was then living in London, where he remained until his death in 1772. The sight of the famous novelist is the only external recorded incident of Blake's first three years at Basire's, but a casual occurrence of great importance that interrupted his placid course after he had been working in the shop for two years.

There were, we are told, several apprentices beside Blake, and the harmony of the place depended on the ease with which the youngsters worked together. In 1773, two new apprentices arrived who indulged in frequent quarrels with Blake "concerning matters of intellectual argument." These quarrels created disorderly scenes, and when, according to Malkin¹⁴, Blake refused to side with his master against his fellow-apprentices, Basire's kindly comment was: "Blake is too simple and they too cunning." In order to restore harmony without sacrificing either party, Basire sent Blake, whose industry could be trusted not to abuse the privilege, out of the shop to draw the Gothic monuments in Westminster Abbey and other old churches, monuments which Basire's patrons, the antiquaries, were always wanting to have engraved. Blake would spend the summer making these drawings, and the winter sometimes in engraving them. Lost in the corners of these old churches, Blake's romantic imagination was completely Gothicised, and for the future he closed his mind to every other influence or interpreted it by the light of these impressions, for which he had been unconsciously prepared by the religious atmosphere of his home.

We have only to imagine Blake transplanted from Westminster Abbey to the ruins of the Parthenon, walking the road to the Piraeus, and apprenticed at the same age to a sculptor occupied in classical studies, to see a different development for him, and to admit that his future was as nearly now a foregone conclusion as that of any boy of

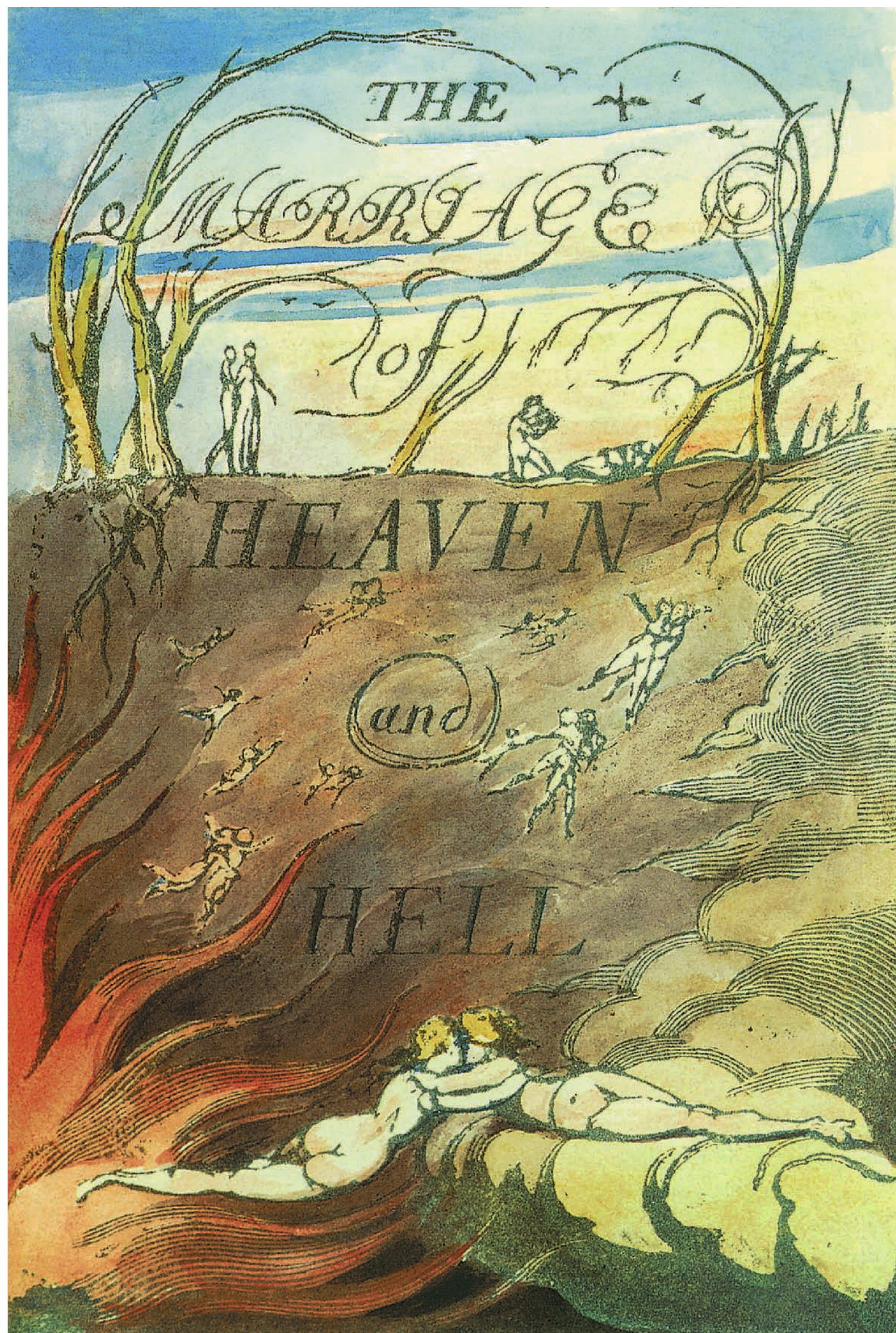


William Blake,

Songs of Innocence and of Experience, plate 29, 1789 and 1794.

Relief etching, with pen and watercolour, touched with gold.

King's College, Cambridge (United Kingdom).



The Argument.

Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air;
Hungry clouds swag on the deep

Once meek, and in a perilous path,
The just man kept his course along
The vale of death.

Roses are planted where thorns grow,
And on the barren heath
Sing the honey bees.

Then the perilous path was planted;
And a river, and a spring
On every cliff and tomb;
And on the bleached bones
Red clay brought forth.

Till the villain left the paths of ease,
To walk in perilous paths, and drive
The just man into barren climes.

Now the sneaking serpent walks
In mild humility,
And the just man rages in the wilds
Where lions roam.

Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the
burdend air;
Hungry clouds swag on the deep.

