The Life of William Blake

Alexander Gilchrist

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THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BLAKE

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY

FROM nearly all collections or beauties of "The English Poets," catholic to demerit as these are, tender of the expired and expiring reputations, one name has been hitherto perseveringly exiled. Encyclopædias ignore it. The Biographical Dictionaries furtively pass it on with inaccurate despatch, as having had some connexion with the Arts. With critics it has had but little better fortune. The *Edinburgh Review*, twenty-seven years ago, specified as a characteristic sin of "partiality" in Allan Cunningham's pleasant *Lives of British Artists*, that he should have ventured to include this name, since its possessor could (it seems) "scarcely be considered a painter" at all. And later, Mr. Leslie, in his *Handbook for Young Painters*, dwells on it with imperfect sympathy for awhile, to dismiss it with scanty recognition.

Yet no less a contemporary than Wordsworth, a man little prone to lavish eulogy or attention on brother poets, spake in private of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* of William Blake, as "undoubtedly the production of

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insane genius," (which adjective we shall, I hope, see cause to qualify), but as to him more significant than the works of many a famous poet. "There is something in the madness of this man," declared he (to Mr. Crabb Robinson), "which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."

Of his *Designs*, Fuseli and Flaxman, men not to be imposed on in such matters, but themselves sensitive—as Original Genius must always be—to Original Genius in others, were in the habit of declaring with unwonted emphasis, that "the time would come" when the finest "would be as much sought after and treasured in the portfolios" of men discerning in art, "as those of Michael Angelo now." "And ah! Sir," Flaxman would sometimes add, to an admirer of the designs, "his poems are grand as his pictures."

Of the books and designs of Blake, the world may well be ignorant. For in an age rigorous in its requirement of publicity, these were, in the most literal sense of the words, *never published* at all: not published even in the mediæval sense, when writings were confided to learned keeping, and works of art not unseldom restricted to cloister-wall or coffer-lid. Blake's poems were, with one exception, not even printed in his life-time; simply *engraved* by his own laborious hand. His drawings, when they issued further than his own desk, were bought as a kind of charity, to be stowed away again in rarely opened portfolios. The very copper-plates on which he engraved were often used again after a few impressions had been struck off; one design making way for another, to save the cost of new copper. At the present moment, Blake drawings, Blake prints, fetch prices which would have solaced a life of penury, had their producer received them. They are thus collected, chiefly because they *are* (naturally enough) already "RARE," and "VERY RARE." Still hiding in private portfolios, his drawings are there prized or known by per-

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haps a score of individuals, enthusiastic appreciators,—some of their singularity and rarity, a few of their intrinsic quality.

At the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition of 1857, among the select thousand water-colour drawings, hung two modestly tinted designs by Blake, of few inches size: one the *Dream of Queen Catherine*, another *Oberon and Titania*. Both are remarkable displays of imaginative power, and finished examples in the artist's peculiar manner. Both were unnoticed in the crowd, attracting few gazers, fewer admirers. For it needs to be *read* in Blake, to have familiarized oneself with his unsophisticated, archaic, yet spiritual "manner,"—a style *sui generis* as no other artist's ever was,—to be able to sympathize with, or even understand, the equally individual strain of thought, of which it is the vehicle. And one almost must be *born* with a sympathy for it. He neither wrote nor drew for the many, hardly for work'y-day men at all, rather for children and angels; himself "a divine child," whose playthings were sun, moon, and stars, the heavens and the earth.

In an era of academies, associations, and combined efforts, we have in him a solitary, self-taught, and as an artist, *semi*-taught Dreamer, "delivering the burning messages of prophecy by the stammering lips of infancy," as Mr. Ruskin has said of Cimabue and Giotto. For each artist and writer has, in the course of his training, to approve in his own person the immaturity of expression Art has at recurrent periods to pass through as a whole. And Blake in some aspects of his art never emerged from infancy. His Drawing, often correct, almost always powerful, the *pose* and grouping of his figures often expressive and sublime, as the sketches of Raffaelle or Albert Dürer, often, on the other hand, range under the category of the "impossible"; are crude, contorted, forced, monstrous, though none the less efficient in conveying the

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visions fetched by the guileless man from heaven, from hell itself, or from the intermediate limbo tenanted by hybrid nightmares. His prismatic colour, abounding in the purest, sweetest melodies to the eye, and always expressing a sentiment, yet, looks to the casual observer slight, inartificial, arbitrary.

Many a cultivated spectator will turn away from all this, as from mere ineffectualness,—Art in its second childhood. But see this sitting figure of *Job in his Affliction*, surrounded by the bowed figures of wife and friend, grand as Michael Angelo, nay, rather as the still, colossal figures fashioned by the genius of old Egypt or Assyria. Look on that simple composition of *Angels Singing aloud for Joy*, pure and tender as Fra Angelico, and with an austerer sweetness.

It is not the least of Blake's peculiarities, that instead of expressing himself, as most men have been content to do, by help of the prevailing style of his day, he, in this, as every other matter, preferred to be independent of his fellows; partly by choice, partly from the necessities of imperfect education as a painter. His Design has conventions of its own; in part, its own, I should say, in part, a return to those of earlier and simpler times.

Of Blake, as an Artist, we will defer further talk. His Design can ill be translated into words, and very inadequately by any engraver's copy. His Poems, tinged with the very same ineffable qualities, obstructed by the same technical flaws and impediments, are as it were a semi-utterance snatched from the depths of the vague and unspeakable. Both form part in a Life and Character as new, romantic, pious—in the deepest natural sense—as they: romantic, though incident be slight; animated by the same unbroken simplicity, the same high unity of sentiment.

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CHAPTER II

CHILDHOOD. 1757–71

WILLIAM BLAKE, the most spiritual of artists, a mystic poet and painter, who lived to be a contemporary of Cobbett and Sir Walter Scott, was born 28th November, 1757, the year of Canova's birth, two years after Stothard and Flaxman; while Chatterton, a boy of five, was still sauntering about the winding streets of antique Bristol. Born amid the gloom of a London November, at 28, Broad Street, Carnaby Market, Golden Square, (market now extinct), he was christened on the 11th December—one in a batch of six—from Grinling Gibbons' ornate font in Wren's noble Palladian church of St. James's. He was the son of James and Catherine Blake, the second child in a family of four.[1]

His father was a moderately prosperous hosier of some twenty years' standing, in a then not unfashionable quarter. Broad Street, half private houses, half respectable shops,

[1] Of the origin of William Blake's family practically nothing is known.

Mr. Alfred Story, in his *William Blake* of 1893, and Messrs. Ellis and Yeats, in their *Works of William Blake* of the same date, provide their hero with two separate family trees, neither of which seem to have very firm roots. The first theory connects him with Admiral Blake through a Wiltshire branch of the family. The second claims him as an Irishman, stating that the original family name was O'Neil, the name Blake having been adopted by his father and grandfather on the latter's second marriage to one Ellen Blake.

Neither of these somewhat improbable genealogies have been supported by documentary evidence.

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was a street (only shorter) much such as Wigmore Street is now. Dashing Regent Street as yet was not, and had more than half a century to wait for birth; narrow Swallow Street in part filling its place. All that Golden Square neighbourhood,—Wardour Street, Poland Street, Brewer Street, held then a similar status to the Cavendish Square district say, now: an ex-fashionable, highly respectable condition, not yet sunk into the seedy category. The Broad Street of present date is a dirty, forlorn-looking thoroughfare; one half of it twice as wide as the other. In the wider portion stands a large, dingy brewery. The street is a shabby miscellany of oddly assorted occupations, —lapidaries, pickle-makers, manufacturing trades of many kinds, furniture-brokers, and nondescript shops. "Artistes" and artizans live in the upper stories. Almost every house is adorned by its triple or quadruple row of brass bells, bright with the polish of frequent hands, and yearly multiplying themselves. The houses, though often disguised by stucco, and some of them refaced, date mostly from Queen Anne's time; 28, now a "trimming-shop," is a corner house at the narrower end, a large and substantial old edifice.

The mental training which followed the physical one of swaddling-clothes, go-carts, and head-puddings, was, in our Poet's case, a scanty one, as we have cause to know from Blake's writings. All knowledge beyond that of reading and writing was evidently self-acquired. A "new kind" of boy was soon sauntering about the quiet neighbouring streets—a boy of strangely more romantic habit of mind than that neighbourhood had ever known in its days of gentility, has ever known in its dingy decadence. Already he passed half his time in dream and imaginative reverie. As he grew older the lad became fond of roving out into the country, a fondness in keeping with the romantic turn. For what written romance can vie with the substantial one of rural sights and sounds to a town-bred boy?

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Country was not, at that day, beyond reach of a Golden Square lad of nine or ten. On his own legs he could find a green field without the exhaustion of body and mind which now separates such a boy from the alluring haven as rigorously as prison bars. After Westminster Bridge—the "superb and magnificent structure" now defunct, then a new and admired one,—came St. George's Fields, open fields and scene of "Wilkes and Liberty" riots in Blake's boyhood; next, the pretty village of Newington Butts, undreaming its 19th century bad eminence in the bills of cholera-mortality; and then, unsophisticate green field and hedgerow opened on the child's delighted eyes. A mile or two further through the "large and pleasant village" of Camberwell with its grove (or avenue) and famed prospect, arose the sweet hill and vale and "sylvan wilds" of rural Dulwich, a "village" even now retaining some semblance to its former self. Beyond, stretched, to allure the young pedestrian on, yet fairer amenities: southward, hilly Sydenham; eastward, in the purple distance, Blackheath. A favourite day's ramble of later date was to Blackheath, or south-west, over Dulwich and Norwood hills, through the antique rustic town of Croydon, type once of the compact, clean, cheerful Surrey towns of old days, to the fertile verdant meads of Walton-upon-Thames; much of the way by lane and footpath. The beauty of those scenes in his youth was a life-long reminiscence with Blake, and stored his mind with lifelong pastoral images.

On Peckham Rye (by Dulwich Hill) it is, as he will in after years relate, that while quite a child, of eight or ten perhaps, he has his "first vision." Sauntering along, the boy looks up and sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars. Returned home he relates the incident, and only through his mother's intercession escapes a thrashing from his honest father, for telling a lie. Another time, one summer morn, he sees the haymakers at work, and amid them angelic

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figures walking. If these traits of childish years be remembered, they will help to elucidate the visits from the spiritual world of later years, in which the grown man believed as unaffectedly as ever had the boy of ten.

One day a traveller was telling bright wonders of some foreign city. "Do you call *that* splendid?" broke in young Blake; "I should call a city splendid in which the houses were of gold, the pavement of silver, the gates ornamented with precious stones." At which outburst, hearers were already disposed to shake the head and pronounce the speaker crazed: a speech natural enough in a child, but not unlikely to have been uttered in maturer years by Blake.

To say that Blake was born an artist, is to say of course that as soon as the child's hand could hold a pencil it began to scrawl rough likeness of man or beast, and make timid copies of all the prints he came near. He early began to seek opportunities of educating hand and eye. In default of National Gallery or Museum, for the newly founded *British* Museum contained as yet little or no sculpture, occasional access might freely be had to the Royal Palaces. Pictures were to be seen also in noblemen's and gentlemen's houses, in the sale-rooms of the elder Langford in Covent Garden, and of the elder Christie: sales exclusively filled as yet with the pictures of the "old and dark" masters, sometimes genuine, oftener spurious, demand for the same exceeding supply. Of all these chances of gratuitous instruction the boy is said to have sedulously profited: a clear proof other schooling was irregular.

The fact that such attendances were permitted, implies that neither parent was disposed, as so often happens, to thwart the incipient artist's inclination; bad, even for a small tradesman's son, as at that time were an artist's outlooks, unless he were a portrait painter. In 1767, (three years after Hogarth's death), Blake being then ten

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years old, was "put to Mr. Pars' drawing-school in the Strand." This was the preparatory school for juvenile artists then in vogue: preparatory to the Academy of Painting and Sculpture in St. Martin's Lane, of the "Incorporated Society of Artists," the Society Hogarth had helped to found. The *Royal* Academy of intriguing Chambers' and Moser's founding, for which George the Third legislated, came a year later. "Mr. Pars' drawing-school in the Strand" was located in "the great room," subsequently a show-room of the Messrs. Ackermann's—name once familiar to all buyers of prints—in their original house, on the left-hand side of the Strand, as you go citywards, just at the eastern corner of Castle Court: a house and court demolished when Agar Street and King William Street were made. The school was founded and brought into celebrity by William Shipley, painter, brother to a bishop, and virtual founder also, in 1754, of the still extant Society of Arts,—in that same house, where the Society lodged until migrating to its stately home over the way, in the Adelphi.

Who *was* Pars? Pars, the Leigh or Cary of his day, was originally a chaser and son of a chaser, the art to which Hogarth was apprenticed, one then going out of demand, unhappily,—for the fact implied the loss of a decorative art. Which decadence it was led this Pars to go into the juvenile Art-Academy line *vice* Shipley retired. He had a younger brother, William, a portrait painter, and one of the earliest *Associates* or inchoate R.A.'s, who was extensively patronized by the Dilettanti Society, and by the *dilettante* Lord Palmerston of that time. The former sent him to Greece, there for three years to study ruined temple and mutilated statue, and to return with portfolios, a mine of wealth to cribbing "classic" architects,—contemporary Chambers, and future Soanes.

At Pars' school as much drawing was taught as is to be learned by copying plaster-casts after the Antique, but no

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drawing from the living figure. Blake's father bought a few casts, from which the boy could continue his drawing-lessons at home: the *Gladiator*, the *Hercules*, the *Venus de Medici*, various heads, and the usual models of hand, arm, and foot. After a time, small sums of money were indulgently supplied wherewith to make a collection of Prints for study. To secure these, the youth became a frequenter of the print-dealers' shops and the sales of the auctioneers, who then took *threepenny* biddings, and would often knock down a print for as many shillings as pounds are now given, thanks to ever-multiplying Lancashire fortunes.

In a scarce, probably almost unread book, affecting—despite the unattractive literary peculiarities of its pedagogue author—from its subject and very minuteness of detail, occurs an account, from which I have begun to borrow, of Blake's early education in art, derived from the artist's own lips. It is a more reliable story than Allan Cunningham's pleasant mannered generalities, easy to read, hard to verify. The singular biography to which I allude is Dr. Malkin's *Father's Memoirs of his Child* (1806), illustrated by a frontispiece of Blake's design. The Child in question was one of those hapless "prodigies of learning" who,—to quote a good-natured friend and philosopher's consoling words to the poor Doctor,—"commence their career at three, become expert linguists at four, profound philosophers at five, read the Fathers at six, and die of old age at seven."

"Langford," writes Malkin, called Blake "his little connoisseur, and often knocked down a cheap lot with friendly precipitation." Amiable Langford! The great Italians,—Raffaelle, Michael Angelo, Giulio Romano,—the great Germans,—Albert Dürer, Martin Hemskerk,—with others similar, were the exclusive objects of his choice; a sufficiently remarkable one in days when Guido and the Caracci were the gods of the servile crowd. Such a choice was "contemned by his youthful companions, who were ac-

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customed to laugh at what they called his *mechanical* taste!" "I am happy," wrote Blake himself in later life (*MS. notes to Reynolds*), "I cannot say that Raffaelle ever was from my earliest childhood hidden from me. I saw and I knew immediately the difference between Raffaelle and Rubens."

Between the ages of eleven and twelve, if not before, Blake had begun to write original irregular verse; a rarer precocity than that of sketching, and rarer still in alliance with the latter tendency. Poems composed in his twelfth year came to be included in a selection privately printed in his twenty-sixth. Could we but know which they were! *One*, by Malkin's help, we *can* identify as written before he was fourteen: the following ethereal piece of sportive Fancy, "Song" he calls it:—

> 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!
>
> He shew'd 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 fir'd 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 may surely be reckoned equal precocity to that so much lauded of Pope and Cowley. It is not promise, but fulfilment. The grown man in vain might hope to better such sweet playfulness,—playfulness as of a "child-angel's" penning—any more than noon can reproduce the tender streaks of dawn. But criticism is idle. How analyse a violet's perfume, or dissect the bloom on a butterfly's wing?

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CHAPTER III

ENGRAVER'S APPRENTICE. 1771–78. [ÆT. 14–21]

THE preliminary charges of launching Blake in the career of a Painter, were too onerous for the paternal pocket; involving for one thing, a heavy premium to some leading artist for instruction under his own roof, then the only attainable, always the only adequate training. The investment, moreover, would not after all be certain of assuring daily bread for the future. English engravers were then taking that high place they are now doing little to maintain. Apprenticeship to one would secure, with some degree of artistic education, the cunning right hand which can always keep want at arm's length: a thing artist and *littérateur* have often had cause to envy in the skilled artisan. The consideration was not without weight in the eyes of an honest shopkeeper, to whose understanding the prosaic craft would more practically address itself than the vague abstractions of Art, or those shadowy promises of Fame, on which alone a mere artist had too often to feed. Thus it was decided for the future designer, that he should enter the to him enchanted domain of Art by a back door as it were. He is not to be dandled into a Painter, but painfully to win his way to an outside place. Daily through life, he will have to marry his shining dreams to the humblest, most irksome realities of a virtually artisan life. Already it had been decreed that an inspired Poet should

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be endowed with barely grammar enough to compose with schoolboy accuracy.

At the age of fourteen, the drawing-school of Mr. Pars in the Strand, was exchanged for the shop of engraver Basire in Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields. There had been an intention of apprenticing Blake to Ryland, a more famous man than Basire; an artist of genuine talent and even genius, who had been well educated in his craft; had been a pupil of Ravenet, and after that (among others) of Boucher, whose *stipple* manner he was the first to introduce into England. With the view of securing the teaching and example of so skilled a hand, Blake was taken by his father to Ryland; but the negotiation failed. The boy himself raised an unexpected scruple. The sequel shows it to have been a singular instance—if not of absolute prophetic gift or second-sight—at all events of natural intuition into character and power of forecasting the future from it, such as is often the endowment of temperaments like his. In after life this involuntary faculty of reading hidden writing continued to be a characteristic. "Father," said the strange boy, after the two had left Ryland's studio, "I do not like the man's face: *it looks as if he will live to be hanged!*" Appearances were at that time utterly against the probability of such an event. Ryland was then at the zenith of his reputation. He was engraver to the king, whose portrait (after Ramsey) he had engraved, receiving for his work an annual pension of 200*l.* An accomplished and agreeable man, he was the friend of poet Churchill and others of distinguished rank in letters and society. His manners and personal appearance were peculiarly prepossessing, winning the spontaneous confidence of those who knew or even casually saw him. But, twelve years after this interview, the unfortunate artist will have got into embarrassments, will commit a forgery on the East India Company—and the prophecy will be fulfilled.

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The Basire with whom ultimately Blake was placed was James Basire, the second chronologically and in merit first of four Basires; all engravers, and the three last in date (all bearing one Christian name) engravers to the Society of Antiquaries. This Basire, born in London, 1730, now therefore forty-one, and son of Isaac Basire, had studied design at Rome. He was the engraver of Stuart and Revett's *Athens* (1762), of Reynolds's *Earl Camden* (1766), of West's *Pylades and Orestes* (1770). He had also executed two or three plates after some of the minor and later designs of Hogarth: the frontispiece to Garrick's *Farmer's Return* (1761), the noted political caricature of *The Times*, and the portrait sketch of Fielding (1762), which Hogarth himself much commended, declaring "he did not know his own drawing from a proof of the plate." The subjects of his graver were principally antiquities and portraits of men of note,—especially portraits of antiquaries: hereditary subjects since with the Basire family. He was official engraver to the Royal as well as the Antiquarian Society. Hereafter he will become still more favourably known in his generation, as the engraver of the illustrations to the slow-revolving *Archæologia* and *Vetusta Monumenta* of the Society of Antiquaries,—then in a comparatively brisk condition,—and to the works of Gough and other antiquarian big-wigs of the old, full-bottomed sort. He was an engraver well grounded in drawing, of dry, hard, monotonous, but painstaking, conscientious style; the lingering representative of a school already getting old-fashioned, but not without staunch admirers, for its "firm and correct outline," among antiquaries; whose confidence and esteem,—Gough's in particular,—Basire throughout possessed.

In the days of Strange, Woollett, Vivares, Bartolozzi, better models, if more expensive in their demands might have been found; though also worse. Basire was a superior, liberal-minded man, ingenuous and upright; and

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a kind master. The lineaments of his honest countenance (set off by a bob-wig) may be studied in the portrait by his son, engraved as frontispiece to the ninth volume of Nichols's *Literary Anecdotes.* As a Designer, Blake was, in essentials, influenced by no contemporary; as engraver alone influenced by Basire, and that strongly—little as his master's style had in common with his own genius. Even as engraver, he was thus influenced, little to his future advantage in winning custom from the public. That public, in Blake's youth, fast outgrowing the flat and formal manner inherited by Basire, in common with Vertue (engraver to the Society of Antiquaries before him), and the rest, from the Vanderguchts, Vanderbanks, and other naturalized Dutchmen and Germans of the bob-wig and clipped-yew era, will now readily learn to enjoy the softer, more agreeable one of M'Ardell, Bartolozzi, Sherwin.

His seven years' apprenticeship commenced in 1771, year of the Academy's first partial lodgment in Old Somerset Palace—and thus (eventually) in the National Pocket. As he was constitutionally painstaking and industrious, he soon learned to draw carefully and copy faithfully whatever was set before him,—altogether to the Basire taste, and to win, as a good apprentice should, the approval and favour of his master. One day, by the way (as Blake ever remembered), Goldsmith walked into Basire's. It must have been during the very last years of the poet's life: he died in 1774. The boy—as afterwards the artist was fond of telling—mightily admired the great author's finely marked head as he gazed up at it, and thought to himself how much *he* should like to have such a head when he grew to be a man. Another still more memorable figure, and a genius singularly german to Blake's own order of mind, the "singular boy of fourteen," during the commencement of his apprenticeship, *may* "any day have met unwittingly in London streets, or walked beside: a placid, venerable, thin man of eighty-

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four, of erect figure and abstracted air, wearing a full-bottomed wig, a pair of long ruffles, and a curious-hilted sword, and carrying a gold-headed cane,—no Vision, still flesh and blood, but himself the greatest of modern Vision Seers,—Emanuel Swedenborg by name; who came from Amsterdam to London in August, 1771, and died at No. 26, Great Bath Street, Coldbath Fields, on the 29th of March, 1772." This Mr. Allingham pleasantly suggests, in a note to his delightful collection of lyrical poems, *Nightingale Valley* (1860), in which (at last) occur a specimen or two of Blake's verse. The coincidence is not a trivial one. Of all modern men the engraver's apprentice was to grow up the likest to Emanuel Swedenborg; already by constitutional temperament and endowment was so: in faculty for theosophic dreaming, for the seeing of visions while broad awake, and in a matter-of-fact hold of spiritual things. To *savant* and to artist alike, while yet on earth, the Heavens were opened. By Swedenborg's theologic writings, the first English editions of some of which appeared during Blake's manhood, the latter was considerably influenced; but in no slavish spirit. These writings, in common with those of Jacob Boehmen, and of the other select mystics of the world, had natural affinities to Blake's mind, and were eagerly assimilated. But he hardly became a proselyte or "Swedenborgian" proper; though his friend Flaxman did. In another twenty years we shall find him freely and—as true believers may think—heretically criticising the Swedish seer from the spiritualist, not the rationalist point of view: as being a Divine Teacher, whose truths however were "not new," and whose falsehoods were "all old."

Among the leading engravings turned out by Basire, during the early part of Blake's apprenticeship, may be instanced, in 1772, one after B. Wilson (*not* Richard), *Lady Stanhope as the Fair Penitent*, (her *rôle* in certain amateur theatricals by the Quality); and in 1774, *The Field of the*

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Cloth of Gold and Interview of the two Kings, after a copy for the Society of Antiquaries by "little Edwards" of Anecdote fame, from the celebrated picture at Windsor. The latter print was celebrated for one thing, if no other, as the *largest* ever engraved up to that time on one plate —copper, let us remember,—being some 47 inches by 27; and paper had to be made on purpose for it.

"Two years passed over smoothly enough," writes Malkin, "till two other apprentices were added to the establishment, who completely destroyed its harmony." Basire said of Blake, "*he* was too simple and they too cunning." He, lending I suppose a too credulous ear to their tales, "declined to take part with his master against his fellow-apprentices"; and was therefore sent out of harm's way into Westminster Abbey and the various old churches in and near London, to make drawings from the monuments and buildings Basire was employed by Gough the antiquary to engrave: "a circumstance he always mentioned with gratitude to Basire." The solitary study of authentic English history in stone was far more to the studious lad's mind than the disorderly wrangling of mutinous comrades. It is significant of his character, even at this early date, for zeal, industry, and moral correctness, that he could be trusted month after month, year after year, unwatched, to do his duty by his master in so independent an employment.

The task was singularly adapted to foster the romantic turn of his imagination, and to strengthen his natural affinities for the spiritual in art. It kindled a fervent love of Gothic,—itself an originality then,—which lasted his life, and exerted enduring influences on his habits of feeling and study; forbidding, once for all, if such a thing had ever been possible to Blake, the pursuit of fashionable models, modern excellencies, technic and superficial, or of any but the antiquated essentials and symbolic language of imaginative art.

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From this time forward, from 1773 that is, the then "neglected works of art, called Gothic monuments," were for years his daily companions. The warmer months were devoted to zealous sketching, from every point of view, of the Tombs in the Abbey; the enthusiastic artist "frequently standing on the monument and viewing the figures from the top." Careful drawings were made of the regal forms, which for five centuries had lain in mute majesty,—once amid the daily presence of reverent priest and muttered mass, since in awful solitude,—around the lovely Chapel of the Confessor: the austere sweetness of Queen Eleanor, the dignity of Philippa, the noble grandeur of Edward the Third, the gracious stateliness of Richard the Second and his Queen. Then came drawings of the glorious effigy of Aymer de Valence, and of the beautiful though mutilated figures which surround his altar-tomb; drawings, in fact, of all the mediæval tombs. He pored over all with a reverent good faith, which, in the age of Stuart and Revett, taught the simple student things our Pugins and Scotts had to learn near a century later. "The heads he considered as portraits,"—not unnaturally, their sculptors showing no overt sign of idiocy;—"and all the ornaments appeared as miracles of art to his Gothicized imagination," as they have appeared to other imaginations since. He discovered for himself then, or later, the important part once subserved by *Colour* in the sculptured building, the living help it had rendered to the once radiant Temple of God,—now a bleached dishonoured skeleton.

Shut up alone with these solemn memorials of far-off centuries,—for, during service and in the intervals of visits from strangers, the vergers turned the key on him,—the Spirit of the past became his familiar companion. Sometimes his dreaming eye saw more palpable shapes from the phantom past: once a vision of "Christ and the Apostles," as he used to tell; and I doubt not others. For, as we

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have seen, the visionary tendency, or faculty, as Blake more truly called it, had early shown itself.

During the progress of Blake's lonely labours in the Abbey, on a bright day in May, 1774, the Society for which, through Basire, he was working, perpetrated, by royal permission, on the very scene of those rapt studies, a highly interesting bit of antiquarian sacrilege: on a more reasonable pretext, and with greater decency, than sometimes distinguish such questionable proceedings. A select company formally, and in strict privacy opened the tomb of Edward the First, and found the embalmed body "in perfect preservation and sumptuously attired," in "robes of royalty, his crown on his head, and two sceptres in his hands." The antiquaries saw face to face the "dead conqueror of Scotland"; had even a fleeting glimpse—for it was straightway re-enclosed in its cere-cloths—of his very visage: a recognisable likeness of what it must have been in life. I cannot help hoping that Blake may (unseen) have assisted at the ceremony.

In winter the youth helped to engrave selections from these Abbey Studies, in some cases executing the engraving single-handed. During the evenings, and at over hours, he made drawings from his already teeming Fancy, and from English History. "A great number," it is said, were thrown off in such spare hours. There is a scarce engraving of his dated so early as 1773, the second year of his apprenticeship, remarkable as already to some extent evincing in style—as yet, however, heavy rather than majestic—still more in choice of subject, the characteristics of later years. In one corner at top we have the inscription (which sufficiently describes the design), "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion"; and at bottom, "engraved by W. Blake, 1773, from an old Italian drawing"; "Michael Angelo, Pinxit." Between these two lines, according to a custom frequent with Blake, is engraved the following characteristic effusion, which reads like an addi-

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tion of later years: "This" (he is venturing a wild theory as to Joseph), "is One of the Gothic Artists who built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages, wandering about in sheepskins and goatskins; of whom the World was not worthy. Such were the Christians in all ages."

The 'prentice work as assistant to Basire of these years (1773–78) may be traced under Basire's name in the *Archæologia*, in some of the engravings of coins, &c., to the *Memoirs of Hollis* (1780), and in Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*, not published till 1786 and 1796. The Antiquaries were alive and stirring then; and enthusiastic John Carter was laying the foundations in English Archæology on which better-known men have since built. In the *Sepulchral Monuments*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (1796), occurs a capital engraving as to drawing and feeling, "Portrait of Queen Philippa from her Monument," with the inscription *Basire delineavit et sculpsit;* for which, as in many other cases, we may safely read "W. Blake." In fact, Stothard often used to mention this drawing as Blake's, and with praise. The engraving is in Blake's forcible manner of decisively contrasted light and shade, but simple and monotonous manipulation. It is to a large scale, and gives the head and shoulders merely. Another plate, with a perspective view of the whole monument and a separate one of the effigy, accompanies it. In Part I. (1786) are similar "Portraits" of Queen Philippa, of Edward III., &c.

From Basire, Blake could only acquire the mechanical part of Art, even of the engraver's art; for Basire had little more to communicate. But that part he learned thoroughly and well. Basire's acquirements as an engraver were of a solid though not a fascinating kind. The scholar always retained a loyal feeling towards his old master; and would stoutly defend him and his style against that of more attractive and famous hands,—Strange, Woollett, Bartolozzi. Their ascendancy, indeed, led to no little public injustice being done throughout, to Blake's own sterling

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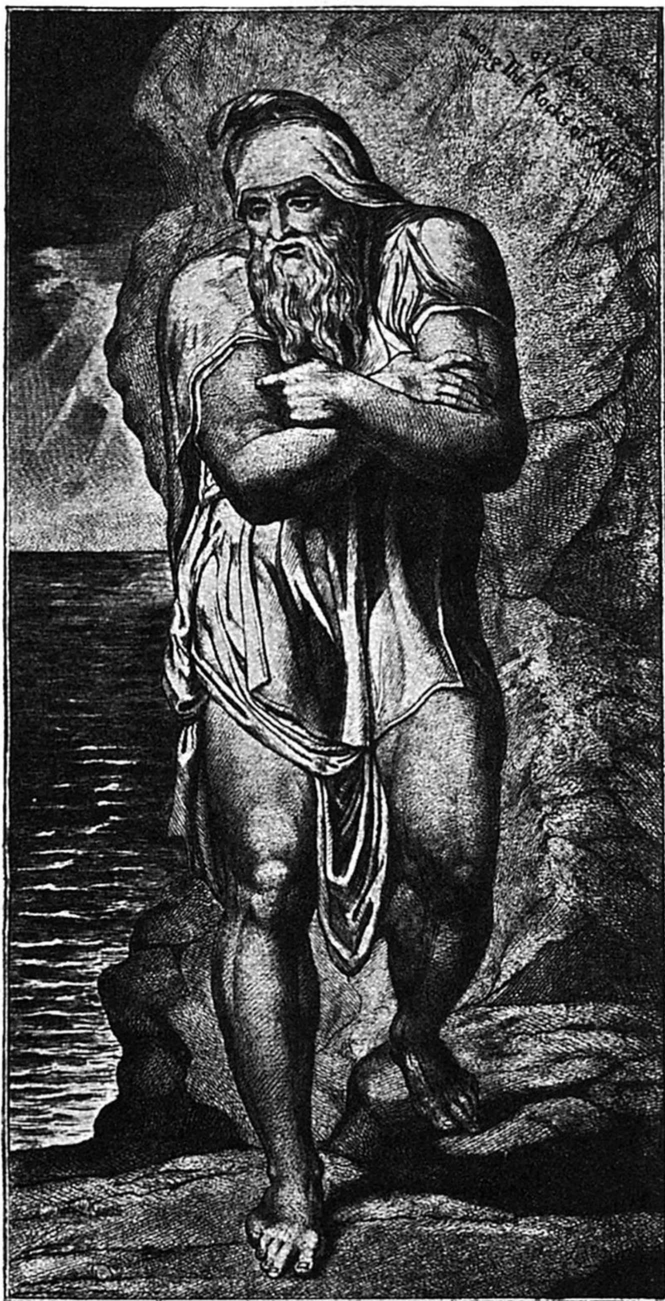

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA AMONG THE ROCKS OF ALBION (1773)
Engraving

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style of engraving; a circumstance which intensified the artist's aversion to the men. In a MS. descriptive *Advertisement* (1810) to his own *Canterbury Pilgrimage* (the engraving not the picture), Blake expresses his contempt for them very candidly—and intemperately perhaps. There, too, he records the impression made on him personally, when as a boy he used to see some of them in Basire's studio. "Woollett," he writes, "I knew very intimately by his intimacy with Basire, and knew him to be one of the most ignorant fellows I ever met. A machine is not a man, nor a work of art: it is destructive of humanity and of art. Woollett, I know, did not know how to grind his graver. *I know this.* He has often proved his ignorance before me at Basire's by laughing at Basire's knife-tools, and ridiculing the forms of Basire's other gravers, till Basire was quite dashed and out of conceit with what he himself knew. But his impudence had a contrary effect on me."—West, for whose reputation Woollett's graver did so much, "asserted," continues Blake, "that Woollett's prints were superior to Basire's, because they had more labour and care. Now this is contrary to the truth. Woollett did not know how to put so much labour into a hand or a foot as Basire did; he did not know how to draw the leaf of a tree. All his study was clean strokes and mossy tints. . . . Woollett's best works were etched by Jack Brown; Woollett etched very ill himself. The *Cottagers*, and *Jocund Peasants*, the *Views* in Kew Gardens, *Foot's Cray*, and *Diana and Actæon*, and, in short, all that are called Woollett's were etched by Jack Brown. And in Woollett's works the etching is all; though even in these a single leaf of a tree is never correct. Strange's prints were, when I knew him, all done by Aliamet and his French journeymen, whose names I forget. I also knew something of John Cooke, who engraved after Hogarth. Cooke wished to give Hogarth what he could take from Raffaelle; that is, outline, and mass, and colour; but he

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could not." Again, in the same one-sided, trenchant strain:—"What is called the English style of engraving, such as proceeded from the toilettes of Woollett and Strange (for theirs were Fribble's toilettes) can never produce character and expression." Drawing—"firm, determinate outline"—is in Blake's eyes all in all:—"Engraving is drawing on copper and nothing else. But, as Gravelot once said to my master, Basire, '*De English may be very clever in deir own opinions, but day do not draw.*'"

Before taking leave of Basire, we will have a look at the house in Great Queen Street, in which Blake passed seven years of his youth; whither Gough, Tyson, and many another enthusiastic dignified antiquary, in knee-breeches and powdered wig, so often bent their steps to have a chat with their favourite engraver. Its door has opened to good company in its time, to engravers, painters, men of letters, celebrated men of all kinds. Just now we saw Goldsmith enter. When Blake was an apprentice, the neighbourhood of Lincoln's Inn Fields, though already antique, was a stately and decorous one, through which the tide of fashionable life still swayed on daily errands of pleasure or business. The house can yet be identified as No. 31, one of two occupied by Messrs. Corben and Son, the coach-builders, which firm, or rather their predecessors, in Basire's time occupied only No. 30. It stands on the northern side of the street, opposite—to the west or Drury Lane-ward of—Freemasons' Tavern; almost exactly opposite New Yard and the noticeable ancient house at one side of that yard, with the stately Corinthian pilasters in well-wrought brick. Basire's is itself a seventeenth-century house refaced early in the Georgian era, the parapet then put up half hiding the old dormer windows of the third story. Originally, it must either have been part of a larger mansion, or one of a uniformly built series, having continuous horizontal brick mouldings; as remnants of the same on its neighbours testify. Outside, it remains pretty

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much as it must have looked in Blake's time; old-fashioned people having (Heaven be praised!) tenanted it ever since the first James Basire and after him his widow ended their days there. With its green paint, old casements, quiet old-fashioned shop-window, and freedom from the abomination of desolation (stucco), it retains an old-world genuine aspect, rare in London's oldest neighbourhoods, and not at war with the memories which cling around the place.

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CHAPTER IV

A BOY'S POEMS. 1768–77. [ÆT. 11–20]

THE poetical essays of the years of youth and apprenticeship are preserved in the thin octavo, *Poetical Sketches by W. B.*, printed by help of friends in 1783, and now so rare, that after some years' vain attempt, I am forced to abandon the idea of myself owning the book. I have had to use a copy borrowed from one of Blake's surviving friends. In such hands alone, linger, I fancy, the dozen copies or so still extant. There is (of course) none where, at any rate, there should be one—in the British Museum.

'Tis hard to believe these poems were written in the author's teens, harder still to realize how some of them in their unforced simplicity, their bold and careless freedom of sentiment and expression, came to be written at all in the third quarter of the eighteenth century: the age of "polished phraseology and subdued thought,"—subdued with a vengeance. It was the generation of Shenstone, Langhorne, Mason, Whitehead, the Wartons; of obscurer Cunningham, Lloyd, Carter. Volumes of concentrated *Beauties of English Poetry*, volumes as fugitive often as those of original verse, are literary straws which indicate the set of the popular taste. If we glance into one of this date,—say into that compiled towards the close of the century, by one Mr. Thomas Tompkins, and which purports to be a collection (expressly compiled "to enforce the

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practice of Virtue") of "Such poems as have been universally esteemed the first ornaments of our language,"—who are the elect? We have in great force the names just enumerated, and among older poets then read and honoured, to the exclusion of Chaucer and the Elizabethans, so imposing a muster-roll as—Parnell, Mallett, Blacklock, Addison, Gay; and, ascending to the highest heaven of the century's Walhalla, Goldsmith, Thomson, Gray, Pope; with a little of Milton and Shakspere thrown in as make-weight.

Where, beyond the confines of his own most individua mind, did the hosier's son find his model for that lovely web of rainbow fancy already quoted? I know of none in English literature. For the *Song* commencing

"My silks and fine array,"

with its shy evanescent tints and aroma as of pressed rose-leaves, parallels may be found among the lyrics of the Elizabethan age: an alien though it be in its own. The influence of contemporary models, unless it be sometimes Collins or Thomson, is nowhere in the volume discernible; but involuntary emulation of higher ones partially known to him: of the *Reliques* given to the world by Percy in 1760; of Shakspere, Spenser, and other Elizabethans. For the youth's choice of masters was as unfashionable in Poetry as in Design. Among the few students or readers in that day of Shakspere's *Venus and Adonis*, *Tarquin and Lucrece*, and *Sonnets*, of Ben Jonson's *Underwoods* and *Miscellanies*, the boy Blake was, according to Malkin, an assiduous one. The form of such a poem as

"Love and harmony combine,"

is inartificial and negligent; but incloses the like intangible spirit of delicate fancy: a lovely blush of life as it were, suffusing the enigmatic form. Even schoolboy blunders against grammar, and schoolboy complexities of expression,

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fail to break the musical echo, or mar the naïve sweetness of the two concluding stanzas; which, in practised hands, might have been wrought into more artful melody, with little increase of real effect. Again, how many reams of scholastic Pastoral have missed the simple gaiety of one which does not affect to be a "pastoral" at all:—

"I love the jocund dance."

Of the remarkable *Mad Song* extracted by Southey in his *Doctor*, who probably valued the thin octavo, as became a great Collector, for its rarity and singularity, that poet has said nothing to show he recognised its dramatic power, the daring expression of things otherwise inarticulate, the unity of sentiment, the singular truth with which the key-note is struck and sustained, or the eloquent, broken music of its rhythm.

The "marvellous Boy" that "perished in his pride," (1770) while certain of these very poems were being written, amid all *his* luxuriant promise, and memorable displays of Talent produced few so really original as some of them. There are not many more to be instanced of quite such rare quality. But all abound in lavish if sometimes unknit strength. Their faults are such alone as flow from youth, as are inevitable in one whose intellectual activity is not sufficiently logical to reduce his imaginings into sufficiently clear and definite shape. As examples of poetic power and freshness quickening the imperfect, immature *form*, take his verses *To the Evening Star*, in which the concluding lines subside into a reminiscence, but not a slavish one, of Puck's Night Song in *Midsummer Night's Dream;* or the lament *To the Muses*,—not inapposite surely, when it was written; or again, the full-coloured invocation *To Summer.*

In a few of the poems, the influence of Blake's contemporary, Chatterton,—of the *Poems of Rowley*, *i.e.*, is visible. In the *Prologue to King John*, *Couch of Death*,

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Samson, &c., all written in measured prose, the influence is still more conspicuous of Macpherson's *Ossian*, which had taken the world by storm in Blake's boyhood, and in his manhood was a ruling power in the poetic world. In the "Prophetic" and too often incoherent rhapsodies of later years this influence increases unhappily, leading the prophet to indulge in vague impalpable personifications, as dim and monotonous as a moor in a mist. To the close of his life, Blake retained his allegiance to Ossian and Rowley. "I believe," writes he, in a MS. note (1826) on Wordsworth's *Supplementary Essay*, "I believe both Macpherson and Chatterton: that what they say is ancient, is so." And again, when the Lake Poet speaks contemptuously of Macpherson, "I own myself an admirer of Ossian equally with any other poet whatever; of Rowley and Chatterton also."

The longest piece in this volume, the most daring, and perhaps considering a self-taught boy wrote it, the most remarkable, is the Fragment, or single act, of a Play on the high historic subject of *King Edward III.*: one of the few in old English history accidentally omitted from Shakspere's cycle. In *his* steps it is, not in those of Addison or Home, the ambitious lad strives as a dramatist to tread; and, despite halting verse, confined knowledge, and the anachronism of a modern tone of thought, not unworthily,—though of course with youthful unsteady stride. The manner and something of the spirit of the *Historical Plays* is caught, far more nearly than by straining Ireland in his forgeries.

Fully to appreciate such poetry as the lad Blake composed in the years 1768–77, let us call to mind the dates at which first peeped above the horizon the cardinal lights which people our modern poetic Heavens; those once more wakening into life the dull corpse of English song. Five years later than the last of these dates was published a small volume of *Poems*, "By William Cowper, of the Middle

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Temple." Nine years later (1786), *Poems in the Scottish Dialect*, by Robert Burns, appealed to a Kilmarnock public. Sixteen years later (1793) came the poems Wordsworth afterwards named *Juvenile*, written between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two: *The Evening Walk*, and the *Descriptive Sketches*, with their modest pellucid merit, still in the fettered 18th-century manner. Not till twenty-one years later (1798), followed the more memorable *Lyrical Ballads*, including, for one thing, the *Tintern Abbey* of Wordsworth; for another, *The Ancient Mariner* of Coleridge.

All these Poems had their influence, prompt or tardy, widening eventually into the universal. All were at any rate *published*. Some,—those of Burns,—appealed to the feelings of the people, and of *all* classes; those of Cowper to the most numerous and influential section of an English community. The unusual notes struck by William Blake, in any case appealing but to one class and a small one, were fated to remain unheard, even by the Student of Poetry, until the process of regeneration had run its course, and, we may say, the Poetic Revival gone to seed again: seeing that the virtues of simplicity and directness the new poets began by bringing once more into the foreground, are those least practised now.

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CHAPTER V

STUDENT AND LOVER. 1778–82. [ÆT. 21–25]

APPRENTICESHIP to Basire having ended, Blake, now (1778) twenty-one, studied for awhile in the newly formed Royal Academy: just then in an uncomfortable chrysalis condition, having had to quit its cramped lodgings in Old Somerset Palace (pulled down in 1775); and awaiting completion of the new building in which more elbow-room was to be provided. He commenced his course of study at the Academy (in the Antique School) "under the eye of Mr. Moser," its first Keeper, who had conducted the parent Schools in St. Martin's Lane. Moser, like Kauffman and Fuseli, was Swiss by birth: a sixth of our leading artists were still foreigners; as lists of the Original Forty testify. By profession he was a chaser, unrivalled in his generation, medallist — he modelled and chased a great seal of England, afterwards stolen—and enamel-painter, in days when costly watch-cases continued to furnish ample employment for the enamel-painter. He was, in short, a skilled decorative artist during the closing years of Decorative Art's existence as a substantive fact in England, or Europe. The thing itself—the very notion that such art was wanted—was about to expire; and be succeeded, for a dreary generation or two, by a mere blank negation. Miss Moser, afterwards Mrs. Lloyd, "the celebrated flower painter," another of the original members of the Academy, was George Michael Moser's daughter. Edwards, in his

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Anecdotes of Painters, obscurely declares of the honest Switzer, that he was "well skilled in the construction of the human figure, and as an instructor in the Academy, his manners, as well as his abilities, rendered him a most respectable master to the students." A man of plausible address, as well as an ingenious, the quandom chaser and enameller was, evidently: a favourite with the President (Reynolds), a favourite with royalty. On the occasion of one royal visit to the Academy, after 1780 and its instalment in adequate rooms in the recently completed portion of Chambers' "Somerset Place," Queen Charlotte penetrated to the old man's apartment, and made him sit down and have an hour's quiet chat in German with her. To express his exultation at such "amiable condescension," the proud Keeper could ever after hardly find broken English and abrupt gestures sufficiently startling and whimsical. He was a favourite, too, with the students; many of whom voluntarily testified their regard around his grave in the burial-ground of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, when the time came to be carried thither in January, 1783.

The specific value of the guidance to be had by an ingenuous art-student from the venerable Moser, now a man of seventy-three, is suggestively indicated by a reminiscence afterwards noted down in Blake's MS. commentary on Reynolds' *Discourses*. "I was once," he there relates, "looking over the prints from Raffaelle and Michael Angelo in the Library of the Royal Academy. Moser came to me, and said,—'You should not study these old, hard, stiff and dry, unfinished works of art: stay a little and *I* will show you what you should study." He then went and took down Le Brun and Rubens' *Galleries*. How did I secretly rage! I also spake my mind! I said to Moser, 'These things that you call finished are not even begun: how then can they be finished?' The man who does not know the beginning cannot know the end of art." Which observations 'tis to be feared Keeper Moser

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accounted hardly dutiful. For a well-conducted Student ought, in strict duty, to spend (and in such a case lose) his evening in looking through what his teacher sets before him. It has happened to other Academy students under subsequent Keepers and Librarians, I am told, to find themselves in a similarly awkward dilemma to this of Blake's.

With the Antique, Blake got on well enough, drawing with "great care all or certainly nearly all the noble antique figures in various views." From the living figure he also drew a good deal; but early conceived a distaste for the study as pursued in Academies of Art. Already "life," in so factitious, monotonous an aspect of it as that presented by a Model artificially *posed* to enact an artificial part—to maintain in painful rigidity some fleeting gesture of spontaneous Nature's—became, as it continued, "hateful," looking to him, laden with thick-coming fancies, "more like death" than life; nay (singular to say) "smelling of mortality"—to an imaginative mind! "Practice and opportunity," he used afterwards to declare, "very soon teach the language of art": as much, that is, as Blake ever acquired, not a despicable if imperfect quantum. "Its spirit and poetry, centred in the imagination alone, never can be taught; and these make the artist": a truism, the fervid poet already began to hold too exclusively in view. Even at their best—as the vision-seer and instinctive Platonist tells us in one of the very last years of his life (*MS. notes to Wordsworth*)—mere "Natural Objects *always did and do* weaken, deaden and obliterate imagination in me!"

The student still continued to throw off drawings and verses for his own delight; out of his numerous store of the former, engraving two designs from English history. One of these engravings, *King Edward and Queen Eleanor*, "published" by him at a later date (from Lambeth), I have seen. It is a meritorious but heavy piece of business, in

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the old-fashioned plodding style of line-engraving, wherein the hand monotonously hatched line after line, now struck off by machine. The design itself and the other water-colour drawings of this date, all on historical subjects, which now lie scattered among various hands, have little of the quality or of the mannerism we are accustomed to associate with Blake's name. They remind one rather of Mortimer, *the* historical painter (now obsolete) of that era, who died, high in reputation with his contemporaries for fancy and correct drawing of the human figure, but neglected by patrons, about this time, viz. in 1779, at the early age of forty. Of Mortimer, Blake always continued to entertain a very high estimate. The designs of this epoch in his life are correctly drawn, prettily composed, and carefully coloured, in a clear uniform style of equally distributed positive tints. But the costumes are vague and mythical, without being graceful and credible; what mannerism there is is a timid one, such as reappears in Hamilton always, in Stothard often; the general effect is heavy and uninteresting,—and the net result a yawn. One drawing dating from these years (1778–9), *The Penance of Jane Shore* in St. Paul's Church, thirty years later was included in Blake's Exhibition of his own Works (1809). In the *Descriptive Catalogue* he speaks of it with some complacency as "proving to the author, and he thinks to any discerning eye, that the productions of our youth and of our maturer age, are equal in all essential points." To me, on inspecting the same, it proves nothing of the kind; though it be a very exemplary performance in the manner just indicated. The central figure of Jane Shore has however much grace and sweetness; and the intention of the whole composition is clear and decisive. One extrinsic circumstance materially detracts from the appearance of this and other water-colour drawings from his hand of the period: viz. that, as a substitute for glass, they were all eventually, in prosecution of a hobby of Blake's, *varnished*,

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THE ORDEAL OF QUEEN EMMA

Water-Colour. Early Historical Drawing (circa 1778), showing the influence of Mortimer

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—of which process, applied to a water-colour drawing, nothing can exceed the disenchanting, not to say destructive effect.

There is a scarce engraving inscribed "W. B. *inv.* 1780," which, within certain limitations, has much more of the peculiar Blake quality and intensity about it. The subject is evidently a personification of Morning, or Glad Day: a nude male figure, with one foot on earth, just alighted from above; a flood of radiance still encircling his head; his arms outspread,—as exultingly bringing joy and solace to this lower world,—not with classic Apollo-like indifference, but with the divine chastened fervour of an angelic minister. Below crawls a caterpillar, and a hybrid kind of night-moth takes wing.

Meanwhile, the Poet and Designer, living under his father the hosier's roof, 28, Broad Street, had not only to educate himself in high art, but to earn his livelihood by humbler art—engraver's journey-work. During the years 1779 to 1782 and onwards, one or two booksellers gave him employment in engraving from afterwards better known fellow-designers. Harrison of Paternoster Row employed him for his *Novelists' Magazine*, or collection of approved novels; for his *Ladies' Magazine*, and perhaps other serials; J. Johnson, a constant employer during a long series of years, for various books; and occasionally other booksellers,—Macklin, Buckland, and (later) Dodsley, Stockdale, the Cadells. Among the first in date of such prints, was a well-engraved frontispiece after Stothard, bold and telling in light and shade ("The Four Quarters of the Globe"), to a *System of Geography* (1779); and another after Stothard, ("Clarence's Dream"), to Enfield's *Speaker*, published by Johnson in 1780. Then came with sundry miscellaneous, eight plates after some of Stothard's earliest and most beautiful designs, for the *Novelists' Magazine*. The designs brought in young Stothard, hitherto an apprentice to a Pattern-draftsman in Spital-

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fields, a guinea a-piece,—and established his reputation: their intrinsic grace, feeling, and freshness being (for one thing) advantageously set off by very excellent engraving, of an infinitely more robust and honest kind than the smooth style of Heath and his School, which succeeded to it, and eventually brought about the ruin of line-engraving for book illustrations. Of Blake's eight engravings, all thorough and sterling pieces of workmanship, two were illustrations of *Don Quixote*, one, of the *Sentimental Journey* (1782), one, of Miss Fielding's *David Simple*, another, of *Launcelot Greaves*, three, of *Grandison* (1782–3).

One Trotter, a fellow-engraver who received instructions from Blake, who engraved a print or two after Stothard, and was also draftsman to the calico-printers, had introduced Blake to Stothard, the former's senior by nearly two years, and then lodging in company with Shelly, the miniature painter, in the Strand. Stothard introduced Blake to Flaxman, who after seeing some of the early graceful plates in the *Novelists' Magazine*, had of his own accord made their designer's acquaintance. Flaxman, of the same age and standing as Stothard, was as yet subsisting by his designs for the first Wedgwood, and also living in the Strand, with his father; who there kept a well-known plaster-cast shop when plaster-cast shops were rare. A wistful remembrance of the superiority of "old Flaxman's" casts still survives among artists. In 1781 the sculptor married, taking house and studio of his own at 27, Wardour Street, and becoming Blake's near neighbour. He proved—despite some passing clouds which for a time obscured their friendship at a later era—one of the best and firmest friends Blake ever had; as great artists often prove to one another in youth. The imaginative man needed friends; for his gifts were not of the bread-winning sort. He was one of those whose genius is in a far higher ratio than their talents: and it is Talent

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which commands worldly success. Amidst the miscellaneous journey-work which about this period kept Blake's graver going, if not his mind, may be mentioned the illustrations to a show-list of Wedgwood's productions: specimens of his latest novelties in earthenware and porcelain—tea and dinner services, &c. Seldom have such very humble essays in Decorative Art—good enough in form, but not otherwise remarkable—tasked the combined energies of a Flaxman and a Blake! To the list of the engraver's friends was afterwards added Fuseli, of maturer age and acquirements, man of letters as well as Art; a multifarious and learned author. From intercourse with minds like these, much was learned by Blake, in his art and out of it. In 1780, Fuseli, then thirty-nine, just returned from eight years' sojourn in Italy, became a neighbour, lodging in Broad Street, where he remained until 1782. In the latter year, his original and characteristic picture of *The Nightmare* made "a sensation" at the Exhibition: the first of his to do so. The subsequent engraving gave him a European reputation. Artists' homes as well as studios abounded then in Broad Street and its neighbourhood. Bacon the sculptor lived in Wardour Street, Paul Sandby in Poland Street, the fair R.A., Angelica Kauffman, in Golden Square, Bartolozzi, with his apprentice Sherwin, in Broad Street itself, and at a later date John Varley, "father of modern Water Colours," in the same street (No. 15). Literary celebrities were not wanting: in Wardour Street, Mrs. Chapone; in Poland Street, pushing, pompous Dr. Burney, of Musical *History* notoriety.

In the catalogue of the now fairly established Royal Academy's Exhibition for 1780, its *twelfth*, and first at Somerset House—all previous had been held in its "Old Room" (originally built for an auction room), on the south side of Pall Mall East—appears for the first time a work by "W. Blake." It was an Exhibition of only 489 "articles,"

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in all, waxwork and "designs for a fan" inclusive; among its leading exhibitors, boasting Sir Joshua Reynolds and Mary Moser, *R.A.*, Gainsborough and Angelica Kauffman, *R.A.*, Cosway and Loutherbourg, Paul Sandby and Zoffany, Copley (Lyndhurst's father), and Fuseli, not yet Associate. Blake's contribution is the *Death of Earl Goodwin*, a drawing probably; being exhibited in "The Ante-room," devoted to flower-pieces, crayons, miniatures, and water-colour landscapes—some by Gainsborough. This first Exhibition in official quarters went off with much *éclat*, netting double the average amount realized by its predecessors: viz. as much as 3,000*l.*

In the sultry, early days of June, 1780, the Lord George Gordon No-Popery Riots rolled through Town. Half London was sacked, and its citizens for six days laid under forced contributions by a mob some forty thousand strong, of boys, pickpockets, and "roughs." In this outburst of anarchy, Blake long remembered an involuntary participation of his own. On the third day, Tuesday, 6th of June, "the Mass-houses" having already been demolished—one, in Blake's near neighbourhood, Warwick Street, Golden Square—and various private houses also; the rioters, flushed with gin and victory, were turning their attention to grander schemes of devastation. That evening, the artist happened to be walking in a route chosen by cne of the mobs at large, whose course lay from Justice Hyde's house near Leicester Fields, for the destruction of which less than an hour had sufficed, through Long Acre, past the quiet house of Blake's old Master, engraver Basire, in Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and down Holborn, bound for Newgate. Suddenly, he encountered the advancing wave of triumphant Blackguardism, and was forced (for from such a great surging mob there is no disentanglement) to go along in the very front rank, and witness the storm and burning of the fortress-like prison, and release of its three hundred inmates. This

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