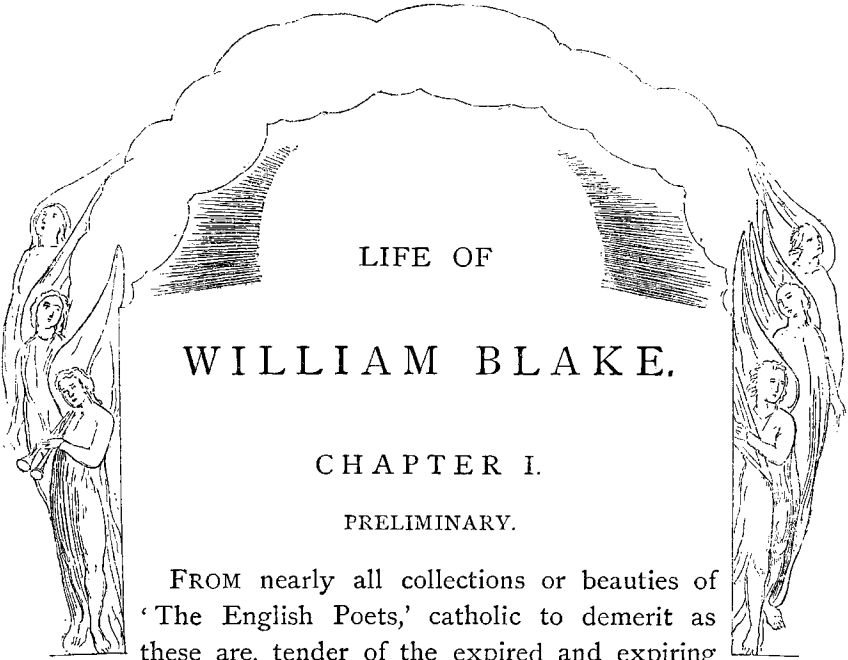


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Excerpt

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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 a while, 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

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Blake, as 'undoubtedly the production of 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 as 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 cofferlid. 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 perhaps a score of individuals, enthusiastic appreciators,—some of their singularity and rarity, a few of their intrinsic quality.

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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 in 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 must almost 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 Raffaele or Albert Dürer, on the other hand, range under the category of the 'impossible;' are crude, contorted, forced, monstrous, though none the less efficient in conveying the 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.

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Many a cultivated spectator will turn away from all this as from mere ineffectualness,—Art in its second childhood. But see that 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 in 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. Of his Poems, tinged with the very same ineffable qualities, obstructed by the same technical flaws and impediments—a semi-utterance as it were, snatched from the depths of the vague and unspeakable—of these remarkable Poems, never once yet fairly placed before the reading public, specimens shall by-and-bye speak more intelligibly for themselves. 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 five.

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, was a street much such as Wigmore Street is now, only shorter. 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

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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? 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

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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 of 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 lifelong 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 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.

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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 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 city-wards, 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



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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 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-dealer's 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 authors—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

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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 accustomed to laugh at what they called his *mechanical* taste!' 'I am happy,' wrote Blake himself in later life (*M.S. 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!