

POETICAL SKETCHES

AN ISLAND IN THE MOON

ALL RELIGIONS ARE ONE

THERE IS NO NATURAL RELIGION

TIRIEL

SONGS OF INNOCENCE

THE BOOK OF THEL

THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

VISIONS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF ALBION

AMERICA A PROPHECY

EUROPE A PROPHECY

THE FIRST BOOK OF URIZEN

SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

THE BOOK OF LOS

THE SONG OF LOS

THE BOOK OF AHANIA

THE FOUR ZOAS

MILTON A POEM

*JERUSALEM: THE EMANATION OF THE
GIANT ALBION*

*SONGS AND BALLADS FROM BLAKE'S
NOTEBOOK (1793)*

*SATIRIC VERSES AND EPIGRAMS FROM
BLAKE'S NOTEBOOK*

UNCOLLECTED WORKS

COMPLETE WORKS OF WILLIAM BLAKE:

**Songs of Innocence and of
Experience, The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell, The Four Zoas,
Jerusalem, Milton and others
Illustrated**

POETICAL SKETCHES

PREFACE.

THE period between 1768 and 1783 may be described as one of utter stagnation in poetry — the low-water mark of the eighteenth century, in no part of it very fruitful in verse of a high order. With Mason, Hayley, and Darwin installed as the high priests of the Muses, and a host of satellites of the Charlotte Smith and Jerningham order, pouring forth volumes of mediocre verses, tolerable now neither to gods nor men nor columns — feeble echoes of a school which, at its best, drew but little of its inspiration from Nature, how welcome to the ear are the fresh notes of William Blake, recalling here the grand Elizabethan melodies, anticipating now the pathos and simplicity of Wordsworth, now the subtlety and daring of Shelley.



The “Poetical Sketches,” though not printed till 1783, a year after Cowper’s first volume made its appearance, were written, it appears, between 1768 and 1777 — the earliest in the author’s twelfth and the latest in his twentieth year. They lay in manuscript for six years, before, by the good offices of Flaxman and other friends, they could get into print. The little volume, which extended to only seventy pages, cannot, indeed, be said to have been published. The whole impression seems to have fallen into the hands of Blake’s personal friends: certain it is that it attracted no notice whatever from the critics. The book has now

become so scarce that no copy is to be found even in the British Museum; and as Mr. Rossetti has confined himself to a few selections, we have thought that a faithful reprint of the whole from a copy that has luckily fallen into our hands, might be an acceptable present to the numerous body of readers now awakening gradually to a sense of the rare merit and originality of the artist-poet, and form a fitting companion volume to the "Songs of Innocence and Experience."

Before closing the bibliographical portion of our remarks, we must say a final word respecting the principle adopted by Mr. Rossetti in his reprint of some of these poems in the second volume of Gilchrist's "Life of Blake." Once for all, while rendering due homage to his genius and rare critical perception, as well as to the great services he has rendered to the fame of Blake, we must firmly protest against the dangerous precedent he has established of tampering with his author's text. Much ruggedness of metre and crudeness of expression he has doubtless removed or toned down by this process : but, however delicately and tastefully done, we contend that the doing of it was unwarrantable — nay, that it destroys to a certain extent the historical value of the poems. It was the growth of this mischievous system which prevented the readers of the eighteenth century from enjoying a pure text of Shakespeare ; which to this day, in nine editions out of

ten, gives us a corrupt and mutilated text of such writers as Bunyan, Walton, and De Foe, and which has spoilt some of the finest hymns in our language. For where is the process, once admitted as legitimate, to stop? It is not every emendator who possesses the taste and judgment of Mr. Rossetti, and, in a case like the present one, where the original edition is almost inaccessible as a check, what protection has the reader against the caprice or vanity of an editor who does not adhere religiously to his author's text? Mr. Rossetti (though sanctioned by Mr. Swinburne) has no more right to alter William Blake's poems than Mr. Millais would have to paint out some obnoxious detail of medievalism in a work of Giotto or Cimabue; or Mr. Leighton to improve some flaw in the flesh-colour of Correggio. The duty of an editor, in such a case as that of Blake's "Poetical Sketches," is confined to the silent correction of obvious clerical errors, and to the rectification of faulty orthography or punctuation, due either to the lax and uncertain spelling of the time, or to the ignorance and carelessness of the printer.

Having spoken this word in season, we pass on to the pleasanter duty of examining these poems separately.

Of the opening poems addressed to the four Seasons, we may say that the first three, though marred here and there by irregularities of metre, have a wealth of imagery and felicity of expression worthy of some of

the finest things in Keats and Shelley and Tennyson. There are lines too in them which stand out rememberable for ever, and haunt the ear with their melody. The "Winter," though it opens vigorously, soon falls into the pseudo-Ossianic grandiloquence, of which there is also a taint in several other pieces, and the last three lines, stumbling and staggering, remind us irresistibly of the same incongruous blending of sublime and ludicrous images (going on halting feet) in Turner's unfortunate "Fallacies of Hope."

The lines to the "Evening Star" are almost Tennysonian in happily-chosen epithet and perfect cadence of music:

"Smile on our loves; and while thou drawest the
"Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew
"On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
"In timely sleep. Let thy west wind sleep on
"The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering
eyes,
"And wash the dusk with silver."

"Fair Eleanor" — a sort of blank-verse ballad of the Radcliffe type of crime and mystery and horror — is a somewhat abortive attempt, much in the style of some of Shelley's early poetry of the St. Irvyne and Margaret Nicholson period — not without lines of singular beauty that stand out in relief to the dulness and insipidity of the rest.

But what fitting tribute can we pay to the

marvellous beauty of the six lyrics which follow, and of the lines "To the Muses?" We must go back to apology for the less happy efforts of a poet who in his best things has hardly fallen short of the large utterance of the Elizabethan dramatists, the pastoral simplicity of Wordsworth, the subtlety and fire of Shelley, and the lyrical tenderness of Tennyson.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE following Sketches were the production of untutored youth, commenced in his twelfth, and occasionally resumed by the author till his twentieth year; since which time, his talents having been wholly directed to the attainment of excellence in his profession, he has been deprived of the leisure requisite to such a revisal of these sheets, as might have rendered them less unfit to meet the public eye.

Conscious of the irregularities and defects to be found in almost every page, his friends have still believed that they possessed a poetical originality, which merited some respite from oblivion. These their opinions remain, however, to be now reproved or confirmed by a less partial public.



TO SPRING.

O THOU with dewy locks, who lookest
down
Thro' the clear windows of the morning,
turn
Thine angel eyes upon our western isle,
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!
The hills tell each other, and the listening
Valleys hear; all our longing eyes are turn'd
Up to thy bright pavilions: issue forth,
And let thy holy feet visit our clime.

Come o'er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumed garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our lovesick land that mourns for thee.
O deck her forth with thy fair fingers; pour
Thy soft kisses on her bosom; and put
Thy golden crown upon her languish'd head,
Whose modest tresses were bound up for thee!

TO SUMMER.

O THOU who passest thro' our valleys in
Thy strength, curb thy fierce steeds, allay the heat
That flames from their large nostrils! thou, O
Summer,

Oft pitchedst here thy golden tent, and oft
Beneath our oaks hast slept, while we beheld
With joy, thy ruddy limbs and flourishing hair.
Beneath our thickest shades we oft have heard
Thy voice, when noon upon his fervid car
Rode o'er the deep of heaven: beside our springs
Sit down, and in our mossy valleys, on
Some bank beside a river clear, throw thy
Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream:
Our valleys love the Summer in his pride.
Our bards are famed who strike the silver wire:
Our youth are bolder than the southern swains:
Our maidens fairer in the sprightly dance:

We lack not songs, nor instruments of joy,
Nor echoes sweet, nor waters clear as heaven,
Nor laurel wreaths against the sultry heat.

TO AUTUMN.

O AUTUMN, laden with fruit, and stain'd
With the blood of the grape, pass not, but sit
Beneath my shady roof, there thou mayst rest,
And tune thy jolly voice to my fresh pipe,
And all the daughters of the year shall dance!
Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers.

“The narrow bud opens her beauties to

“The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins;

“Blossoms hang round the brows of morning, and

“Flourish down the bright cheek of modest eve,

“Till clustering Summer breaks forth into singing,

“And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her

head.

“The spirits of the air live on the smells

“Of fruit; and joy, with pinions light, roves round

“The gardens, or sits singing in the trees.”

Thus sang the jolly Autumn as he sat;

Then rose, girded himself, and o'er the bleak

Hills fled from our sight; but left his golden load.

TO WINTER.