

POETICAL SKETCHES

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Poetical Sketches by William Blake & Richard Herne Shepherd

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WILLIAM BLAKE & RICHARD HERNE SHEPHERD

**POETICAL
SKETCHES**

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By WILLIAM BLAKE

NOW FIRST REPRINTED FROM THE ORIGINAL

EDITION OF 1783

EDITED AND PREFACED BY

RICHARD HERNE SHEPHERD



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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 ap-

pearance, 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 memorable for ever, and haunt the ear with their melody. The "Winter," though it opens vigorously, soon falls

* In the *Verses to Autumn* we meet with the line,

"And all the daughters of the year shall dance."

Is it possible that this beautiful symbol of the months suggested to Tennyson the well-known lines in the *Gardener's Daughter*, in which the same epithet occurs?