

**THE POEMS OF WILLIAM BLAKE,
COMPRISING SONGS OF INNOCENCE
AND OF EXPERIENCE,
TOGETHER WITH POETICAL SKETCHES
AND SOME COPYRIGHT POEMS NOT IN
ANY OTHER COLLECTION**

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The Poems of William Blake, Comprising Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Together with Poetical Sketches and Some Copyright Poems Not in Any Other Collection by William Blake

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A NEW EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

BY THE EDITOR.

A VERY few words of introduction will suffice to explain the character and purpose of this new edition of William Blake's Poetical Works. Five-and-thirty years ago, and some twelve years after the death of Blake, an edition of the Songs of Innocence and Experience* (the first, in fact, printed in the ordinary way) was issued by the father of the present Publisher. It was edited by Dr. Garth Wilkinson, who prefixed a graceful preface, which presented for the first time anything like an adequate appreciation of the high and subtle qualities of the artist-poet's verse.

Some eleven years ago the publication of Gilchrist's "Life of Blake" created, or re-awakened at least, an extraordinary interest in the poet-painter's singular genius. This memoir, which its

* Songs of Innocence and of Experience, shewing the two states of the human Soul. By William Blake. London: W. Pickering, Chancery Lane, 1839; pp. xxi. 76.

accomplished author did not live fully to complete, was accompanied by a collection of Blake's lyrical poems. This collection, it soon appeared, was very imperfect as regards completeness and very unreliable as regards accuracy of text. Apart from these serious disadvantages, the mass of extraneous matter with which it was weighted placed it beyond the reach of many readers who might desire to possess the Poems in a separate form. These considerations, his father's former connexion with the Songs of Innocence, and the purchase eventually of a number of inedited autograph Poems of Blake, led the Publisher to re-issue his father's volume, together with the newly-acquired pieces, in 1866. The ground was carefully re-traversed, and several errors into which Dr. Wilkinson had fallen were removed by a careful collation with the rare original edition issued by Blake himself. The little volume was welcomed as satisfying a public want, and it passed into a second edition (now also exhausted) two years later (1868). About the same time the loan, opportunely obtained, of a still rarer book, the juvenile Poetical Sketches, privately printed in 1783, with a few other short pieces written in the fly-leaves, enabled the Publisher to add a twin volume to the former one. These are now united,

together with a few similar pieces, not included before, scattered through the Prophetical Books. It will suffice to add that not a few of these pieces do not appear in Gilchrist's "Life of Blake," and being the present Publisher's copyright, cannot appear in Messrs. Bell's forthcoming edition.

Although the poetry of Blake was comparatively neglected until a quite recent period, it did not remain entirely unnoticed even during his lifetime. Flaxman, through whose kindly aid his early verses are preserved to us, considered Blake's poems as fine as his pictures. Wordsworth spoke of them with a generous admiration, which he did not often accord to the writings of his contemporaries. Charles Lamb also loved them as so subtle a critic and so kind and simple-hearted a man could not fail to do.

"A Father's Memoirs of his Child," by Benjamin Heath Malkin, (London, 1806), contains a portrait frontispiece designed by Blake, in introducing which the author devotes twenty pages to a disquisition on Blake's genius, and quotes the following poems: "Laughing Song," "Holy Thursday," "The Divine Image," "How sweet I roam'd," "I love the jocund dance," "The Tiger."

On this memoir the late Mr. Henry Crabb Robinson founded a notice of Blake as an artist and poet, which was translated into German by a certain Dr. Julius, and appeared in the first (and only) number of the second volume of the *Vaterländisches Museum* (Hamburg) in 1811.* The extracts were given in both languages, and included: "To the Muses," "The Piper," "Holy Thursday," "The Tiger," "The Garden of Love," and a few passages from the Prophetical Books.

The next notice of Blake's poetry was by Allan Cunningham in his "Lives of the Painters," in 1830.† His praise, however, is rather half-hearted and lukewarm, and the dozen pieces he printed as specimens, he could not refrain from touching up here and there to suit his fancy.

In a recent volume the author of "Modern Painters" thus speaks of Blake's poetry:—

"The impression that his drawings once made is fast, and justly, fading away, though they are not without noble merit. But his poems have much more than merit; they are written with absolute sincerity, with infinite tenderness, and though in the manner of them diseased and wild, are in verity the words of a great and wise mind, disturbed but not deceived, by its sickness; nay,

* Pp. 107-131.

† Vol. II., pp. 142-179.

partly exalted by it, and sometimes giving forth in fiery aphorism some of the most precious words of existing literature."*

That the poems of William Blake should have been long neglected was but the natural consequence both of the vitiated taste of his contemporaries and of the unusual manner of their publication—if publication it can, indeed, be called.

"It consisted," says Mr. Gilchrist, "in a species of engraving in relief both words and designs. The verse was written, and the designs and marginal embellishments outlined on the copper with an impervious liquid, probably the ordinary stopping-out varnish of engravers. Then all the white parts or lights, the remainder of the plate that is, were eaten away with aquafortis or other acid, so that the outline of letter and design was left prominent as in stereotype. From these plates he printed off in any tint, yellow, brown, blue, required to be the prevailing, or ground colour in his facsimiles; red he used for the letterpress. The page was then coloured up by hand in imitation of the original drawing, with more or less variety of detail in the local hues."†

It is not extraordinary that a book appearing in

* John Ruskin, "The Eagle's Nest" (1872), p. 23.

† Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* (Lond. 1863), l. 69.

this way should have failed to attract the attention of an age which chose Whitehead for its Poet Laureate, which applauded the mediocrities of Darwin and Hayley, and which refused to read or to buy the Lyrical Ballads in ordinary "hot-pressed twelves."

To William Blake must, however, be accorded the merit of having been the first to lead back English poetry to that simplicity and nature from which the school of Pope and his feeble imitators had so widely departed. Already in 1783, he had printed for circulation among his friends a tiny volume of verses written in very early youth, and containing, among other things, six songs characterized by a power of lyrical feeling and expression of which no poet had given evidence for more than a century. As these poems were all written by Blake before he had attained his one-and-twentieth year in 1777, we may fairly call him the precursor not only of Wordsworth, whom he preceded by fully fifteen years, but also of Cowper and of Burns. With respect to the first of these the fact is all the more remarkable on account of the ²¹general resemblance in tone and style, the similarities of subject and metre between the Songs of Innocence and of Experience published in 1789-1794 and the earlier poems of Wordsworth, pub-