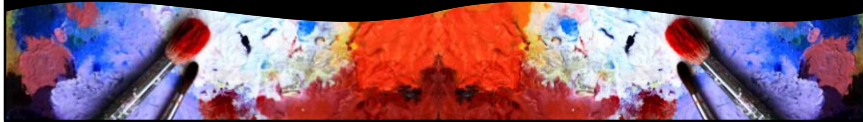


A STROLL THROUGH TATE BRITAIN

William Blake (1757-1827)

Laurence Shafe
Notes at shafe.uk



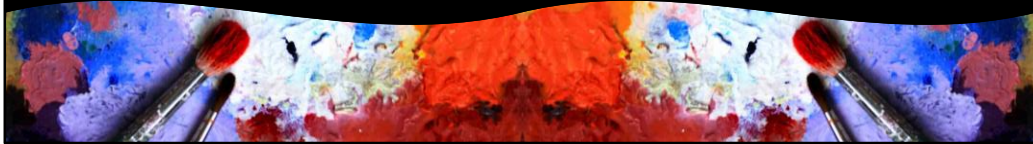
This two-hour talk is part of a series of twenty talks on the works of art displayed in Tate Britain, London, in June 2017. All the lecture notes are at shafe.uk, Lectures & Courses (<http://www.shafe.co.uk/home/art-courses-lectures/>), as PDF files. Unless otherwise mentioned all the works of art shown are at Tate Britain.

References and Copyright

- The talk is given to a small group of people and all the proceeds, after the cost of the hall is deducted, are given to charity. Our sponsored charities are Save the Children and Cancer UK.
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- Each page has a section called 'References' that gives a link or links to sources of information. Wikipedia, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story are used as additional sources of information. The information from Wikipedia is shared under a Share-alike licence (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Share-alike>). Other books and articles are used and referenced. If I have forgotten to reference your work then please let me know and I will add a reference or delete the information.

A STROLL THROUGH TATE BRITAIN

1. The History of the Tate
2. From Absolute Monarch to Civil War, 1540-1650
3. From Commonwealth to the Georgians, 1650-1730
4. The Georgians, 1730-1780
5. Revolutionary Times, 1780-1810
6. Regency to Victorian, 1810-1840
7. **William Blake**
8. J. M. W. Turner
9. John Constable
10. The Pre-Raphaelites, 1840-1860



West galleries are 1540, 1650, 1730, 1760, 1780, 1810, 1840, 1890, 1900, 1910

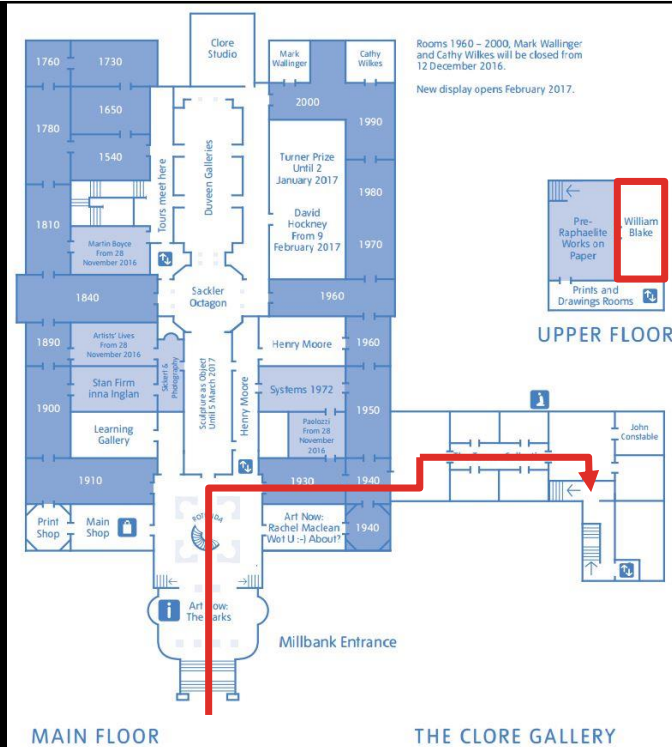
East galleries are 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000

Turner Wing includes Turner, Constable, Blake and Pre-Raphaelite drawings

Agenda

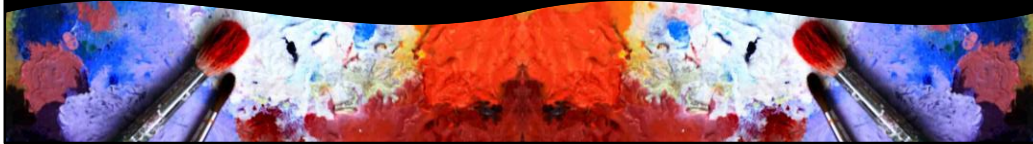
1. A History of the Tate, discussing some of the works donated by Henry Tate and others.
2. From Absolute Monarch to Civil War, 1540-1650
3. From Commonwealth to the Start of the Georgian Period, 1650-1730
4. The Georgian Period, 1730-1780
5. Revolutionary Times, 1780-1810
6. Regency to Victorian, 1810-1840
7. William Blake (1757-1827) and his Influence
8. J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851)
9. John Constable (1776-1837)
10. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 1840-1860
11. The Aesthetic Movement, 1860-1880
12. The Late Victorians, 1880-1900
13. The Edwardians, 1900-1910
14. The Great War and its Aftermath, 1910-1930
15. The Interwar Years, 1930s
16. World War II and After, 1940-1960

17. Pop Art and Beyond, 1960-1980
18. Art in a Postmodern World, 1980-2000
19. The Turner Prize
20. Summary



WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

- 1757-67, 0-10, Childhood
- 1767-78, 10-21 Apprenticeship
- 1779-84, 22-27 The Academy School and Marriage in 1782
- 1784-90, 27-33 Print seller and Poet
- 1791-94, 34-37 A Modern Prophet, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*
- 1795-1800, 38-43 Declining Fortunes
- 1800-03, 43-46 Country Life in Felpham
- 1804-18, 47-61 Poverty and Paranoia, *Jerusalem*
- 1818-27, 61-69 Contentment, illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*

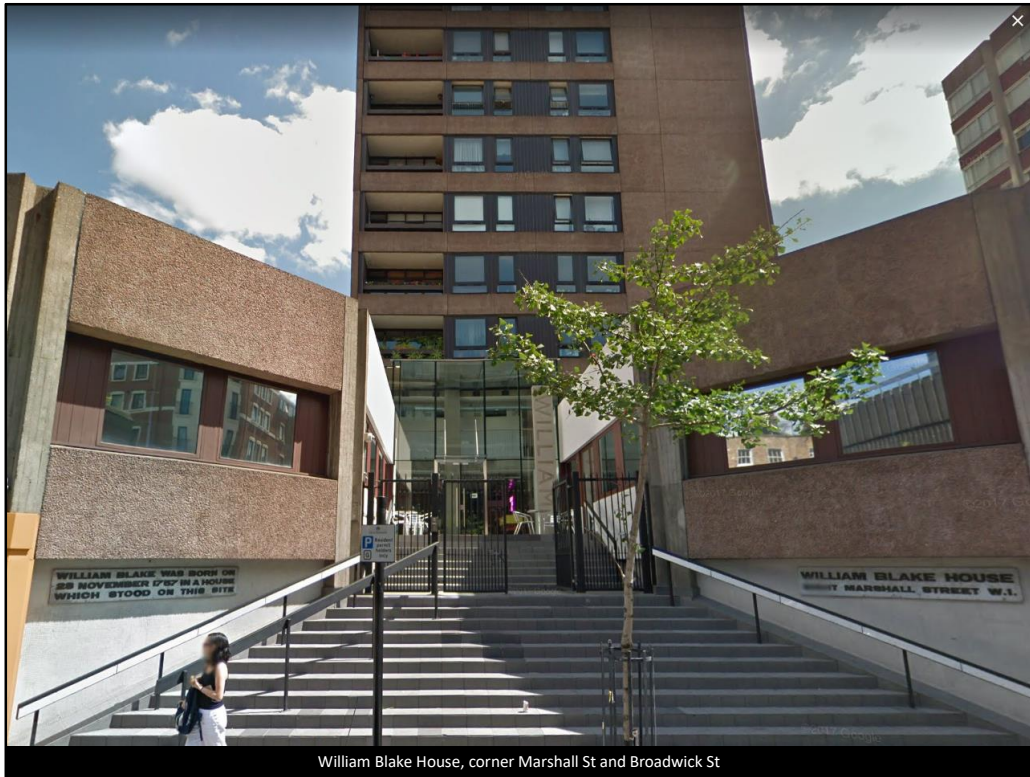


Agenda

- This life of Blake is based on the Tate website, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and Wikipedia.
 - ❖ 1757-67, 0-10, Childhood
 - ❖ 1767-78, 10-21 Apprenticeship
 - ❖ 1779-84, 22-27 The Academy School and Marriage in 1782
 - ❖ 1784-90, 27-33 Print seller and Poet
 - ❖ 1791-94, 34-37 A Modern Prophet, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*
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 - ❖ 1818-27, 61-69 Contentment, illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*

References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/william-blake>
- <http://www.blakearchive.org/>

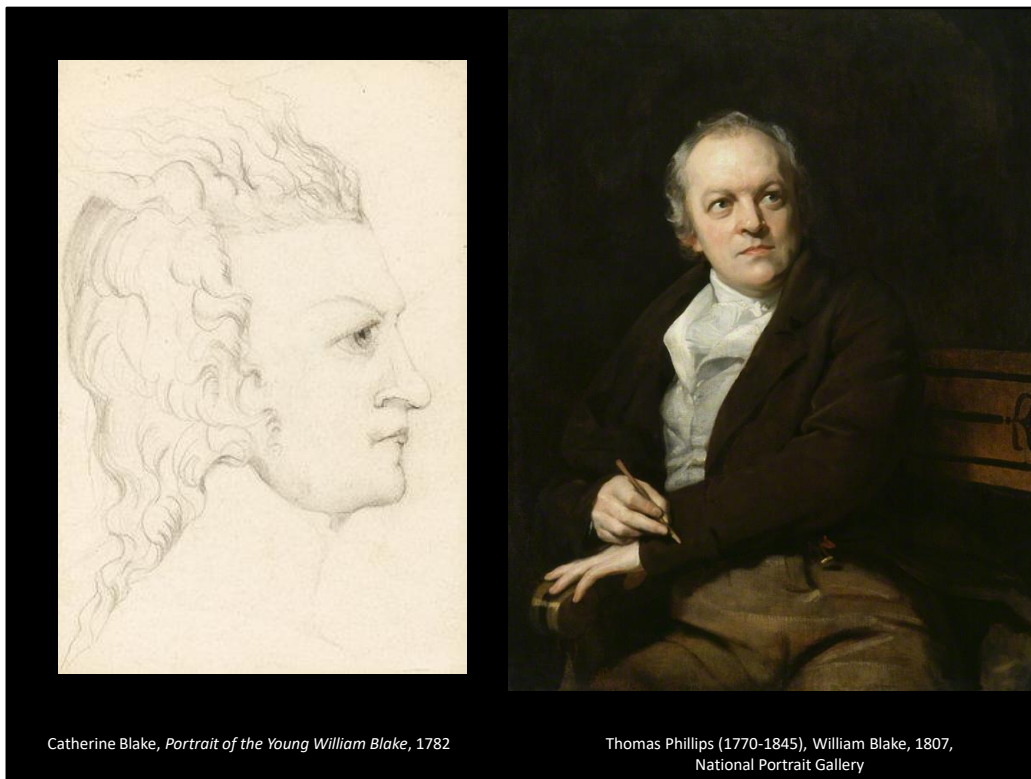


William Blake House, corner Marshall St and Broadwick St

William Blake House, corner Marshall St and Broadwick St, Marshall St is parallel to Carnaby St which is south of Liberty

Childhood 1757-1767

- Born 28 November 1757 in Soho near Carnaby Market (in **Broad Street now Broadwick**), the third of seven children. The house has now been demolished and replaced by a high rise apartment block called **William Blake House**. There is a plaque in Marshall Street just off Broadwick Street.
- His **father was a hosier** and so he was born into an ordinary middle-class family. He **left school** aged 10 not because of poverty but **so that he could be educated at home** by his mother. We know little of his early life but it is possible that he was disruptive at school and at home. The main influence on his early life and for the rest of his life was **the Bible**. His parents were **Dissenters** and so he had an unconventional religious upbringing.



Catherine Blake, *Portrait of the Young William Blake*, 1782 (aged 25), 15.5 x 10.4cm, Ashmolean Museum

Thomas Phillips (1770-1845), *William Blake*, 1807, National Portrait Gallery. Half-length portrait of William Blake (1757-1827) aged 51. Phillips was a well known portrait painter associated with 215 portraits. "Often misunderstood or scorned for his radical politics, Blake's work was only recognised by close friends like Fuseli and Flaxman and his disciple, the young Samuel Palmer. Phillips is said to have caught Blake's 'rapt poetic expression' by luring him to talk of his friendship with the Archangel Gabriel." (NPG)

- **Visions.**

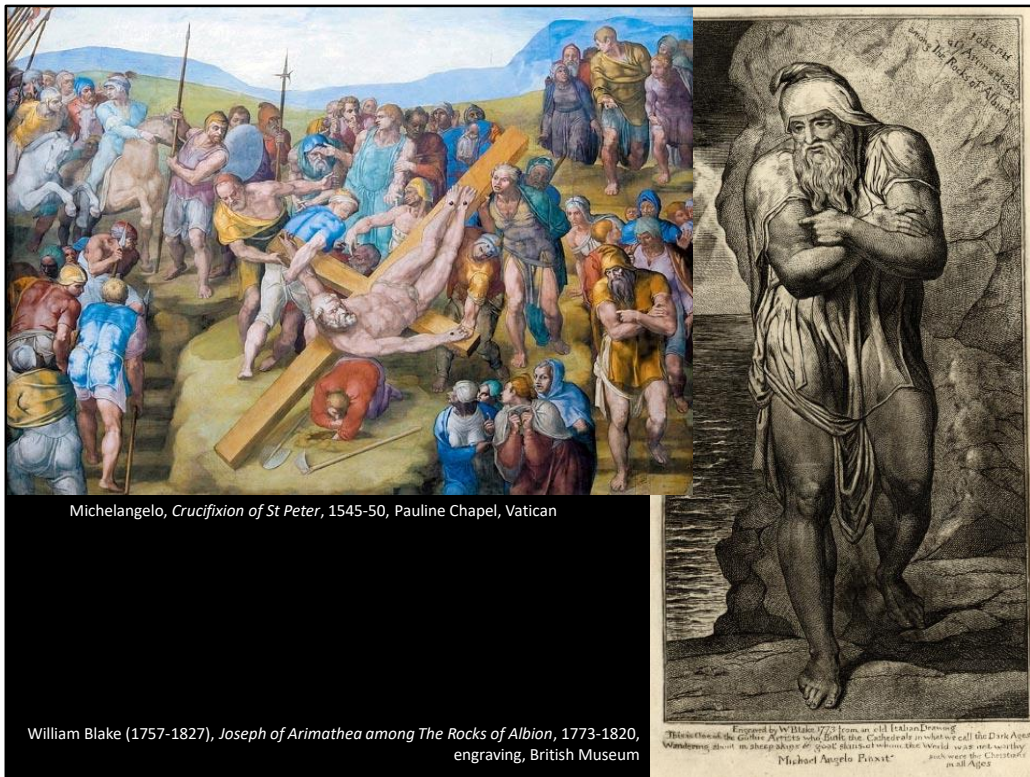
- Perhaps the most important aspect of Blake's life were his **visions**. It is reported that when he was four he saw God's head appear in a window and when he was between **eight and ten he saw 'a tree filled with angels' on Peckham Rye**. Where others might have seen leaves shimmering in the sunlight Blake saw angels and the visions intensified. He saw ancient spiritual and artistic guides such as Raphael. It is said his mother beat him for '**running in & saying that he saw the Prophet Ezekiel under a Tree in the Fields**'.

- **Very early interest in art and the Bible.**

- Blake showed an **early interest in the arts and drawing** and while still young he attended auctions to **buy prints by artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Dürer** who were **unfashionable at that time**. Blake said later that he was already **reading the works of Milton** and Isaiah as a child.

- **Unappreciated.**

- He was recognised in his lifetime as a **writer and printmaker** but was often marginalised as an **eccentric**. Although Blake **worked non-stop** right up until his death producing a remarkable body of work, he was **not appreciated** during his lifetime and lived much of his **life in poverty**. He spent his final years in a **squalid two-room flat**, died in 1827 aged 69 and was **buried in an un-marked grave**.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Joseph of Arimathea among The Rocks of Albion*, 1773-1820, engraving and etching with grey wash, British Museum

Michelangelo, *Crucifixion of St Peter*, 1545-50, Pauline Chapel, Vatican

Training & Apprenticeship 1767-1778

- His **father** did not approve of his visions but **did support his artistic aspirations** by buying him casts and paying for him to attend a well-known drawing school called **Henry Pars** (1734-1806). Pars took over the drawing school founded by William Shipley the originator of the Society of Arts (now the Royal Society of Arts). It was in John Street (now John Adam Street, parallel with the Strand), next to the Adelphi district, and it trained many well-known artists of the day.
- Between the **age of 14 and 20** (1773-78) Blake completed a **conventional apprenticeship learning engraving** in Great Queen Street with **James Basire** (1730-1802). Basire was renowned for 'correct drawing and firm lines' and won many prestigious commissions throughout his life. He used an old-fashioned but successful 'line and stipple' technique rather than the popular new acquaint (using powdered rosin resist) and mezzotint (using a rocker with thousands of tiny teeth) techniques with their ability to create soft shades of grey.
- **This work** by Blake which was done when he was **still an apprentice shows his skill** even when young. It is a seascape with a draped, hooded and bearded male figure standing on a rock.
- Basire was **engraver to the Royal Society** and the Society of Antiquaries, and Blake assisted in the execution of many plates for them. Blake would have met most of the famous artists of the day and learned about the natural sciences, philosophy and archaeology.

- Basire sent **Blake to Westminster Abbey to draw its medieval monuments** which **shaped his lifelong interest** in the Gothic and early British history. His appreciation of the Gothic was not just as an artistic style but as the embodiment of a spiritual integrity to which all art should aspire. In the Abbey he had visions. He was occasionally interrupted by boys from Westminster School, who were allowed in the Abbey. They teased him and one tormented him so much that Basire knocked the boy off a scaffold to the ground, "upon which he fell with terrific Violence" and the boy's privilege was withdrawn. Blake recorded the opening of Edward I (1239-1307) coffin in 1774.

Notes

- The lettering at bottom says, "Engraved by W Blake 1773 from an old Italian Drawing"; lettered below with caption, "This is One of the Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages / Wandering about in sheep skins & goat skins of whom the World was not worthy / such were the Christians / in all Ages"; lettered below with further production detail, "Michael Angelo Pinxit"
- The figure is adapted by Blake from a figure painted by **Michelangelo in the Pauline Chapel** in the Vatican, that was **known to Blake through prints**. It is almost wholly engraved (scored with a burin) with very few etched lines (made by applying acid to a plate covered in wax with incised lines). The plate is dated 1773, which is the date of the first state (**the earliest known print designed and engraved by Blake**) and it was substantially reworked for the second state in c 1810-20.

References

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1356076&partId=1



William Blake (1757-1827), *The Death of Earl Goodwin*, c1779, pen and grey ink with watercolour, 12.7 x 18.1 cm, © Trustees of the British Museum

- The Death of Earl Goodwin; scene in an interior, with figures seated around a large table laid with food, a crowned figure at one corner, the Earl lying on his back, his legs on a bench
- Goodwin died while dining with King Edward the Confessor on 11 April 1053. According to legend he denied that he had any responsibility for the death of Edward's brother Alfred in 1036, swearing "I pray God that this morsel I am going to eat may choke me at this moment, if I had any hand in the death of that Prince", whereupon "it stuck in his throat and choked him immediately" (P. de Rapin-Thoyras, *History of England*, 1732 edn, I, p. 132). The story however, appears to be Norman propaganda and he died shortly after the banquet possibly of a stroke. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* of 1053 describes him as sinking to the floor bereft of speech and he died three days later.

The Academy and Marriage 1779-1784

- **Royal Academy.**
 - Following his apprenticeship he became a journeyman copy engraver and was **hired by booksellers to engrave illustrations**. He began to **train himself** in the arts by enrolling in the **Royal Academy of Arts in 1779** (founded in 1768). Blake **paid his way engraving** and exhibited one design, *The Death of Earl Goodwin*, at the Royal Academy in 1780. There was, however, friction between Blake and his teachers. **Reynolds** recommended that **he work with 'less extravagance and more simplicity'**, while George Michael Moser,

another teacher there, discouraged Blake's admiration for the 'old, hard, stiff and dry unfinished works' of Raphael and Michelangelo. On the other hand, **Blake was inspired by the artist James Barry** and his **grand historical paintings**. Blake produced many other works based on historical, literary, and biblical subjects.

- **Detested Reynolds.**

- Over time, **Blake came to detest Reynolds' attitude towards art**, especially his pursuit of "general truth" and "general beauty". Reynolds wrote in his *Discourses* that the "disposition to abstractions, to generalising and classification, is the great glory of the human mind"; Blake responded, in marginalia to his personal copy, that "**To Generalize is to be an Idiot; To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit**". Blake also disliked Reynolds' apparent humility, which he held to be a form of hypocrisy.

- **History painter.**

- By this stage Blake was aiming at a **career in history painting**, the **highest genre** and the most prestigious form of fine art.

- **Friends – John Flaxman.**

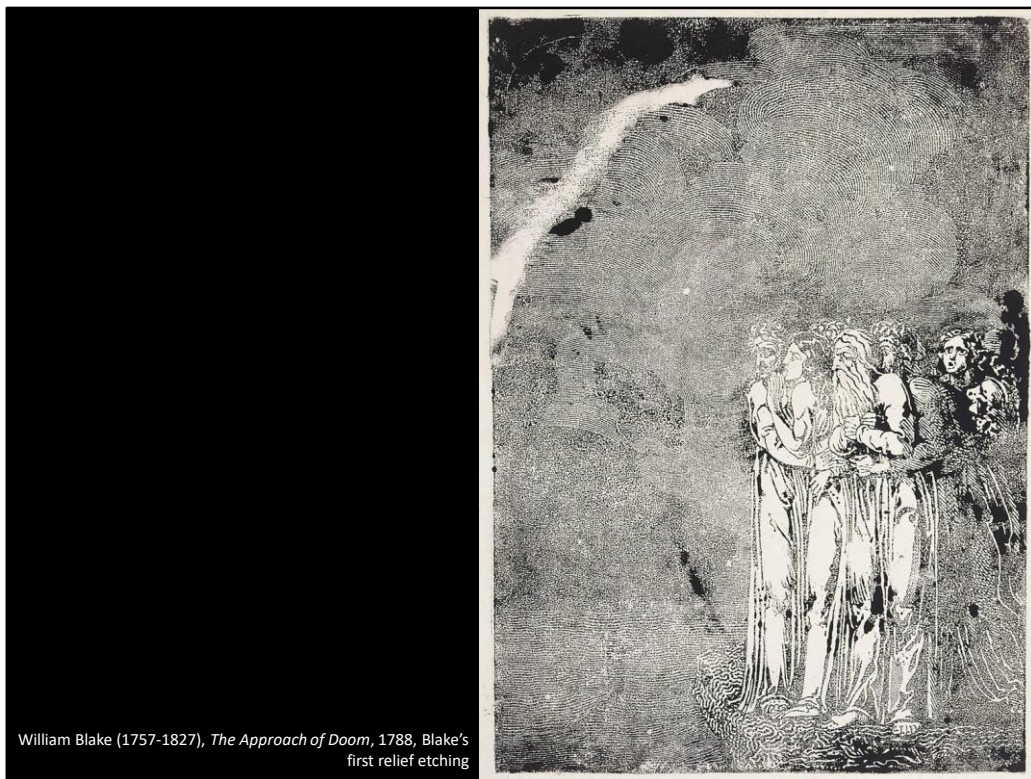
- His circle of **friends grew** and included the **sculptor John Flaxman**, the collector George Cumberland and the book illustrator Thomas Stothard. An **attempt** was made by his friends to raise funds to **send him to Italy** but without success. They went on **sketching tours** together and on one occasion were detained as suspected spies.

- **Gordon Riots.**

- A few months earlier he had 'encountered the advancing wave' of the anti-Catholic mob in London that formed part of the **Gordon riots** and he 'was forced ... to go along in the very front rank, and witness the storm and burning' of Newgate prison.

- **Marriage to Catherine**

- Blake had **romantic interests** and his **first proposal** of marriage was **rejected**. He told **Catherine Sophia Boucher** (1762–1831) about this **heart-breaking tale** and a **bond developed** between them. About a year later they **were married on 18 August 1782** in the church of **St Mary, Battersea**. Catherine signed the **register with an X**. After his marriage he and Catherine took lodgings at 23 Green Street, near **Leicester Square**. Little is known about Catherine Blake, but she managed the family purse and, in later years, would place an empty plate before him at mealtime to remind him of the monetary necessities. She was Blake's **constant companion** and a **strong believer in his genius**. The couple had **no children**.



William Blake (1757-1827), *The Approach of Doom*, 1788, Blake's first relief etching - based on a sketch by his recently deceased brother, Robert

- **Poetry.**

- From the **age of twelve Blake he been writing poetry** and in 1783 he **privately published *Political Sketches*** with financial help from Flaxman. Forty copies were printed. They are very important poems as although they are not his greatest they give an insight into his metaphorical landscape. The book contains 19 lyrical poems some of which presage *Songs of Innocence* and they are some of the earliest pre-Romantic poems.

- **Publisher.**

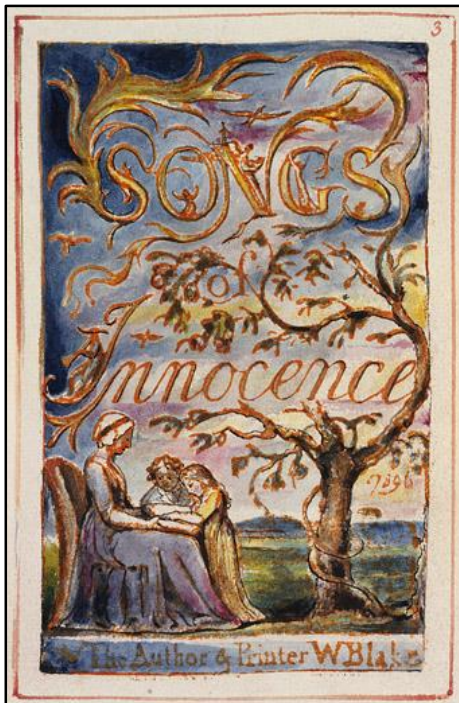
- His **father died in 1784** and with a small inheritance he started a print-publishing business which only survived a year.

- **Brother died – relief etching.**

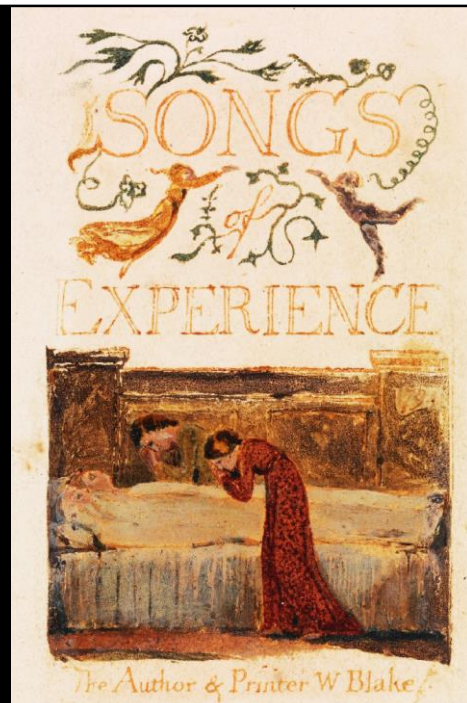
- Blake was **very close to his young brother Robert, who died in 1787**. Blake was so worn out looking after him that he slept for three days after his death and from that time on saw **visions of Robert** who **guided him** in his work. **One innovation** this produced was the use of '**relief etching**' which Blake called '**woodcut on copper**'. This technique was **used by very few artists** and involved **the artist painting directly on the plate** with an acid resistant material. The acid then was used to eat away the rest of the plate leaving the painted lines above the height of the plate. This meant it could be printed using **cheap roller presses** rather than the high-pressure presses required for conventional

etching. This meant that Blake was then in control of all aspects of production and could produce works at **low cost**.

- **His first work using relief etching was *The Approach of Doom***. This was followed by *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, both of 1788, which Blake's later described as his 'Illuminated Books' as he combined picture and words on the same plate.



William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*, title page, 1789



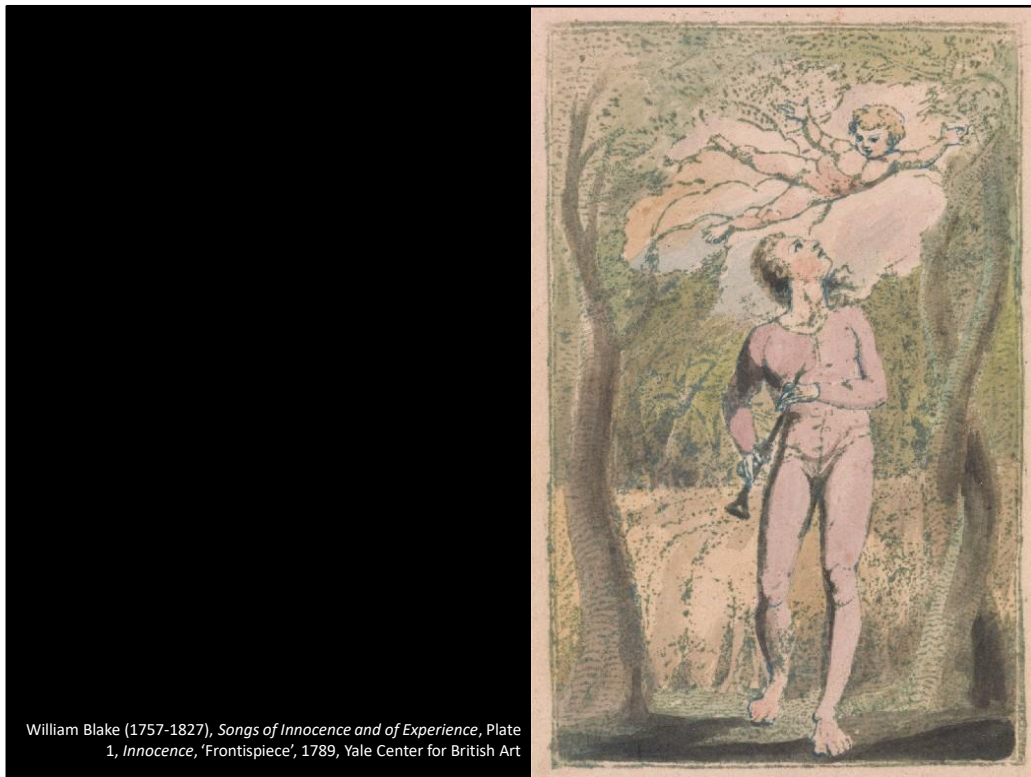
William Blake *Songs of Experience*, title page 1794, Copy F, plate 33, Yale Center for British Art

William Blake *Songs of Innocence*, title page, 1789

William Blake *Songs of Experience*, title page 1794, Copy F, plate 33, Yale Center for British Art

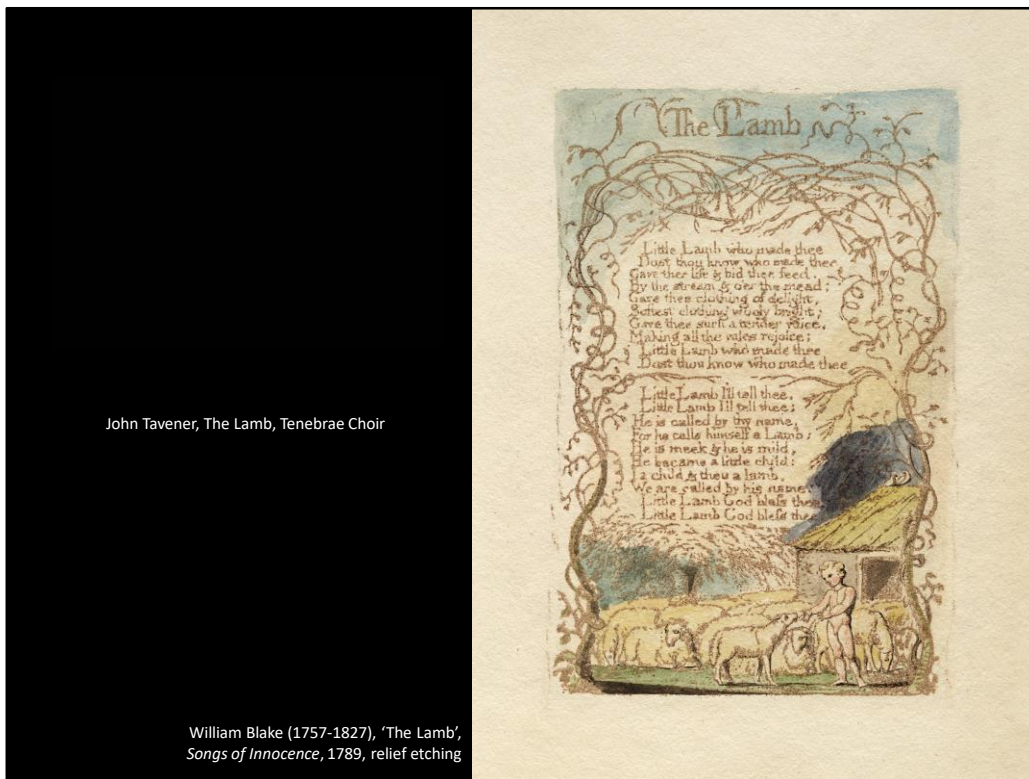
Print seller and poet 1784-1790 (27-33), *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

- In 1789, Blake produced his first great work, *Songs of Innocence*. The words, decoration and illustrations lift this work from children's literature to a masterpiece that expresses his vision of the profound spiritual significance of the innocence of children.
- **To understand Blake it is necessary to understand what he meant by 'innocence' and 'experience'. Previously, the Miltonic interpretation of childhood included the idea of original sin and the only hope of salvation was through faith. Blake saw childhood as a state of innocence that is free from sin. Through experience, particularly the oppression of the Church, State and ruling classes, the innocent child is corrupted and suffers from a loss of vitality, and the onset of fear and inhibition. This way of seeing childhood as innocent and corrupted by experience became the standard view of the Romantics.**
- Catherine helped Blake colour the pages and they sold them directly to collectors rather than through booksellers thus covering all stages of production and distribution.
- From 1791 he lived in 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth which he saw rapidly turn from a quiet rural area into factories and slums. They were the most productive years of his life.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Plate 1, *Innocence*, 'Frontispiece', 1789, Yale Center for British Art

William Blake (1757-1827), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Plate 1, *Innocence*, 'Frontispiece', 1789, Yale Center for British Art



John Tavener, The Lamb, Tenebrae Choir

William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Lamb',
Songs of Innocence, 1789, relief etching

William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Lamb', *Songs of Innocence*, 1789, relief etching

- This is the third poem, '**The Lamb**' which is a **counterpart to 'The Tyger'** in his later work ***Songs of Experience***. Like the other poems it was **intended to be sung** but his original melody is lost. It was made into a song by **Vaughan Williams** in his 1958 song cycle ***Ten Blake Songs***, although he described it as "**that horrible little lamb – a poem that I hate**". It was also set to music by Sir John Tavener, who explained: "The Lamb came to me fully grown and was written in an afternoon and dedicated to my nephew Simon for his 3rd birthday."

Notes

- *Songs of Innocence* (the hyperlinks go to the relevant Wikipedia page)
 - Introduction
 - [The Shepherd](#)
 - [The Echoing Green](#)
 - [The Lamb](#)
 - [The Little Black Boy](#)
 - [The Blossom](#)
 - [The Chimney Sweeper](#)
 - [The Little Boy lost](#)
 - [The Little Boy found](#)
 - [Laughing Song](#)
 - [A Cradle Song](#)

- [The Divine Image](#)
- [Holy Thursday](#)
- [Night](#)
- [Spring](#)
- [Nurse's Song](#)
- [Infant Joy](#)
- [A Dream](#)
- [On Another's Sorrow](#)
- *Songs of Experience*
 - [Introduction](#)
 - [Earth's Answer](#)
 - [The Clod and the Pebble](#)
 - [Holy Thursday](#)
 - [The Little Girl Lost](#)
 - [The Little Girl Found](#)
 - [A Dream](#)
 - [Nurse's Song](#)
 - [The Sick Rose](#)
 - [The Fly](#)
 - [The Angel](#)
 - [The Tyger](#)
 - [My Pretty Rose Tree](#)
 - [Ah! Sunflower](#)
 - [The Lily](#)
 - [The Garden of Love](#)
 - [The Little Vagabond](#)
 - [London](#)
 - [The Human Abstract](#)
 - [Infant Sorrow](#)
 - [A Poison Tree](#)
 - [A Little Boy Lost](#)
 - [A Little Girl Lost](#)
 - [To Tirzah](#)
 - [The Schoolboy](#)
 - [The Voice of the Ancient Bard](#)



William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Tyger', *Songs of Experience*, 1794

William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Tyger', *Songs of Experience*, 1794, the illustrations were produced using relief etching

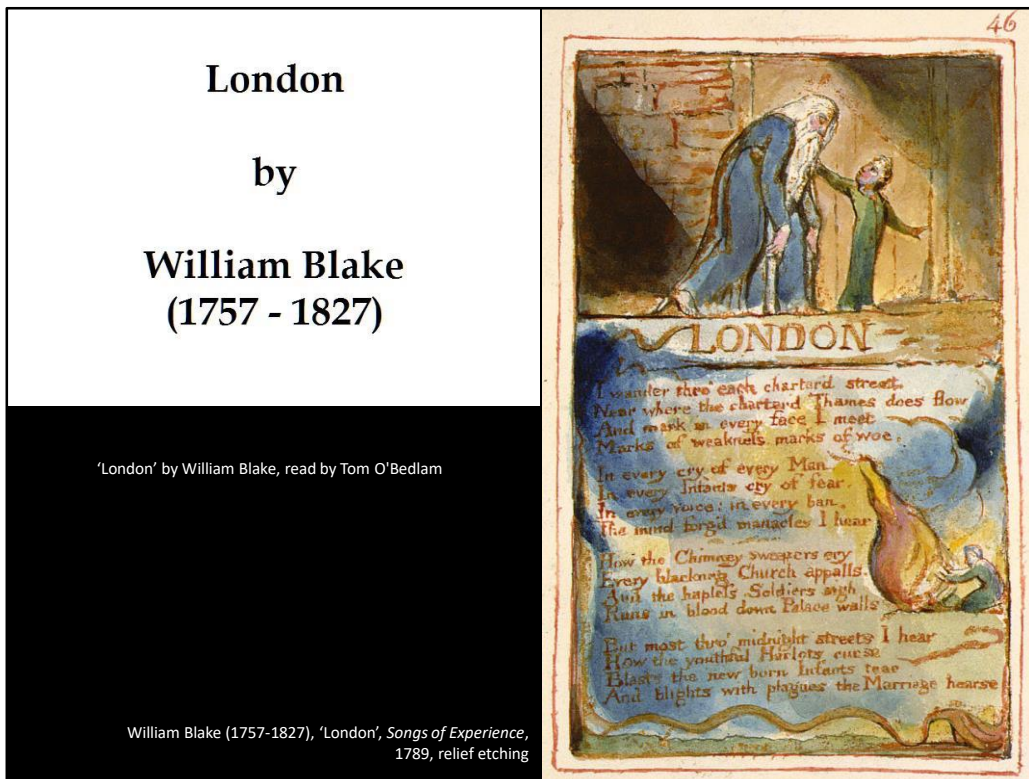
- *Songs of Experience* was produced five years later and 'The Tyger' can be contrasted with 'The Lamb'.
- These poems express Blake's mythology and his life and writing become increasingly political.



'Social Injustice' from Iain Sinclair explores the historical background to William Blake's radical writings

'Social Injustice' from Iain Sinclair explores the historical background to William Blake's radical writings. Filmed on the South Bank of the River Thames, Vauxhall, London.

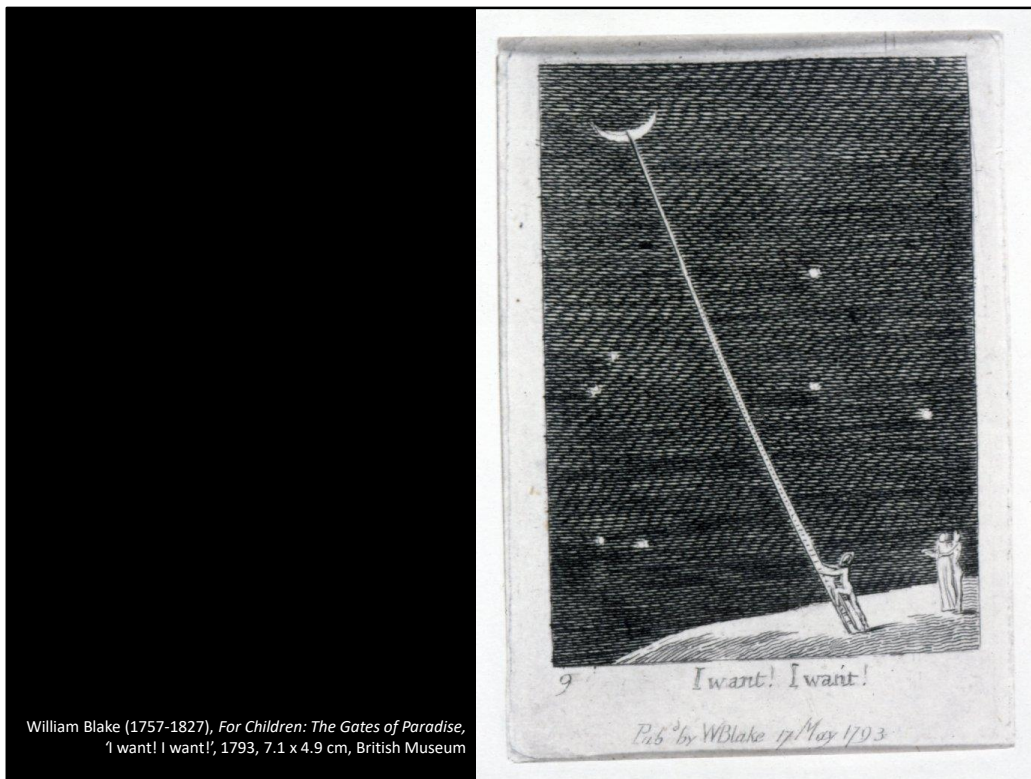
- Blake was driven to draw attention to, explain through his mythology and try to correct all the injustices he saw.



William Blake (1757-1827), 'London', *Songs of Experience*, 1789, relief etching
"London" by William Blake, read by Tom O'Bedlam

- In 1794 Blake published *Songs of Experience* which was soon to be combined with his earlier work as *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.
- Between the production of these two works Blake produced many other works including a narrative poem *Tiriel* which combined Greek, British and Hebrew myths and, in 1789, *The Book of Thel*, a short, allegorical work that has been interpreted as representing his rejection of the Church of England.
- He also continued to take on commissions, such as an engraving of *Beggar's Opera* after a painting by William Hogarth. The payment enabled him to move to a fine house in Lambeth. He was commissioned to illustrate many other works including Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791). At this time he was introduced to many other artists, Swiss-German artist Henry Fuseli who became a good friend.
- His views continued to become more radical as expressed in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). He was a 'vehement republican' and wore a red cap in public as a symbol supporting French liberty and equality but after he heard of the Reign of Terror he 'never wore the red cap again'.
- Except for a short period when he dabbled with the Swedenborgians in 1789, it is likely he did not 'attend any place of Divine worship' for the last forty years of his life.
- Blake planned an enormous work based on the retelling of the Bible, starting with Genesis but

the poor sales of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* caused him to stop producing illuminated books.



William Blake (1757-1827), *For Children: The Gates of Paradise*, 'I want! I want!', 1793, 7.1 x 4.9 cm, British Museum

Described by *The Guardian* newspaper as the first vision of space travel.

A modern prophet 1791-1794

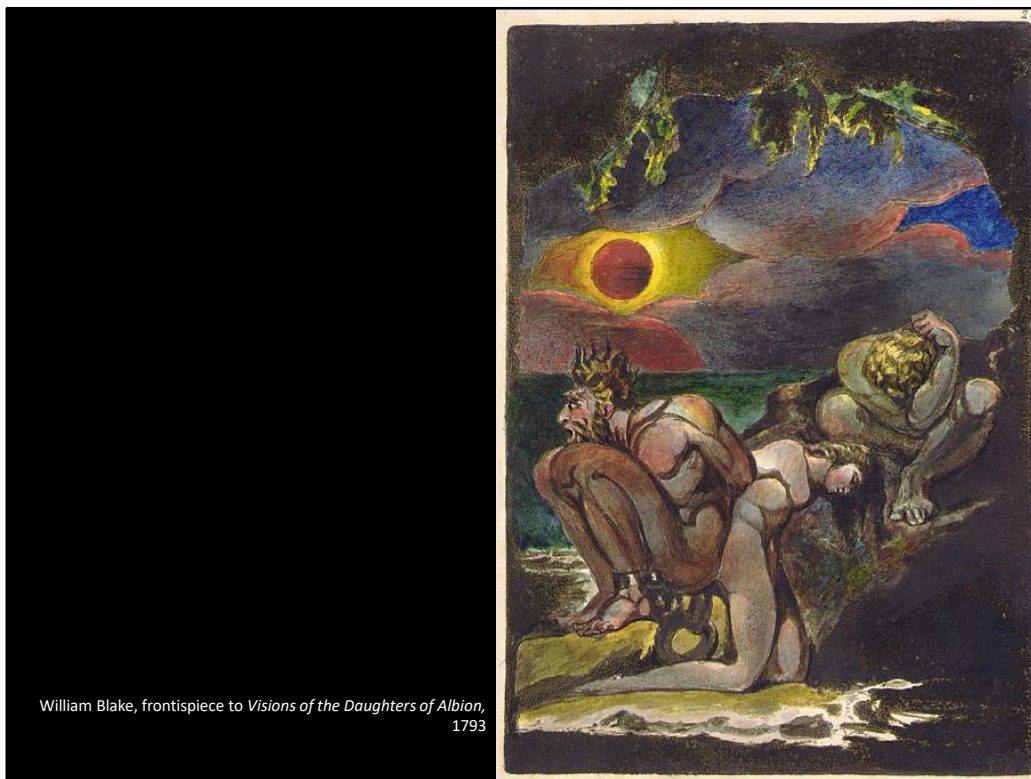
- **Lambeth was still a village** when **Blake and his wife** moved to **13 Hercules Buildings in 1791**. A **larger house** than any Blake had lived in before, it provided the light and space that he needed for his work. Blake, aged 34, now entered upon the **most creative and productive period of his life**. It was the largest house in the road with eight or ten rooms and at this time Lambeth was a **pleasant rural area**. Within a **few years factories**, processing plants and other noxious industries had crossed the river and it quickly began to change into a **disease-infested slum while Blake was living there**.
- Blake's work had become **more overtly political** after the upheavals in **France in 1789**. His poem ***The French Revolution***, though printed in 1791 by Joseph Johnson (publisher of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*), was deemed **too dangerous to actually publish**. By this time, Blake already felt himself to be **losing out** to his contemporaries in the art world, and now he saw the **door to public recognition closing**. The 1793 co-publication of ***The Gates of Paradise*, an emblem book for children**, was **Blake's last venture** into commercial publishing. In October of the same year, Blake published his *Prospectus* a public advertisement of his recent works. The *Prospectus* was also a critique of the establishment and the difficulty of gaining recognition for artists who lacked 'the means to propagate such works as have wholly absorbed the Man of

Genius'. Blake was literally taking matters into his own hands by producing his own work and offering it for sale at his home.

- The *Prospectus* advertised the illuminated prophetic books which had begun to pour forth from his press: ***The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a brief epic interspersed with proverbs, *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, an allegory about freedom, and *America, A Prophecy*, a mixture of history and myth, all date from 1793.**
- There was no letting up in **1794, when *Songs of Experience*** (the **pessimistic 'contrary' volume to *Songs of Innocence***) was completed. In the same year Blake also published *Europe, A Prophecy* (an allegory of the political situation in Europe with warnings about the **dire consequences of war**), and *The First Book of Urizen* (his account of the **origins of mankind and the natural world**).

References

- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/dec/23/william-blake-i-want-i-want>



Frontispiece to William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793

- The book contains Blake's critique of Judeo-Christian values of marriage. Oothoon (centre) and Bromion (left), are chained together, as Bromion has raped Oothoon and she now carries his baby. Theotormon (right) and Oothoon are in love, but Theotormon is unable to act, considering her polluted, and ties himself into knots of indecision.
- In the book Blake compares the sexual oppression of marriage to slavery. Blake was critical of the marriage laws of his day, and generally railed against traditional Christian notions of chastity as a virtue. Blake believed that humans were "fallen", and that a major impediment to a free love society was corrupt human nature, not merely the intolerance of society and the jealousy of men, but the inauthentic hypocritical nature of human communication. He also seems to have thought that marriage should afford the joy of love, but that in reality it often does not, as a couple's knowledge of being chained often diminishes their joy. Mary Wollstonecraft, an early feminist and proponent of free love wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In her writings, Wollstonecraft challenged the institution of marriage and advocated its abolition.



William Blake (1757-1827), *The Penance of Jane Shore in St Paul's Church*, c. 1793

William Blake (1757-1827), *The Penance of Jane Shore in St Paul's Church*, c. 1793

- The painting was included in his exhibition of 1809. **Jane** (also known as Elizabeth) **Shore** was a bourgeois wife who as the **mistress of Edward IV** (1442—1483, reigned 1461-70 and 1471-83) was subjected to public humiliation after his death. David Hume's *History of England* (1754–62) described how she was condemned for '**adulteries and lewdness**'; and she did penance in a white sheet at St Paul's, before the whole people'. Blake's painting shows the **dignified figure** sharing the forefront of the picture.



William Blake, 'The Ancient of Days', frontispiece from *Europe a Prophecy*, 1794

- It draws its name from one of God's titles in the Book of Daniel and shows Urizen crouching in a circular design with a cloud-like background. His outstretched hand holds a compass over the darker void below. Related imagery appears in Blake's *Newton*, completed the next year. The design was a favourite of Blake and so there are many versions including one shortly before his death.
- Early critics of Blake noted the work as amongst his best, and a favourite of the artist himself. It was compared to the work of Raphael and Michelangelo.
- Urizen is the embodiment of conventional reason and law. He is usually depicted as a bearded old, white man; he sometimes bears architect's tools, to create and constrain the universe; or nets, with which he ensnares people in webs of law and conventional society. The compass borrows from Masonic symbolism for God as the "Great Architect of the Universe".
- Urizen originally had an opposite number called Los who represented imagination. Later he was one of the four Zoas which were the divisions of primordial man, Albion. Urizen has a female counterpart Ahania who stands for Pleasure. He is joined by many daughters and four sons representing the four elements. They rebel against him but are all united on Judgement Day.

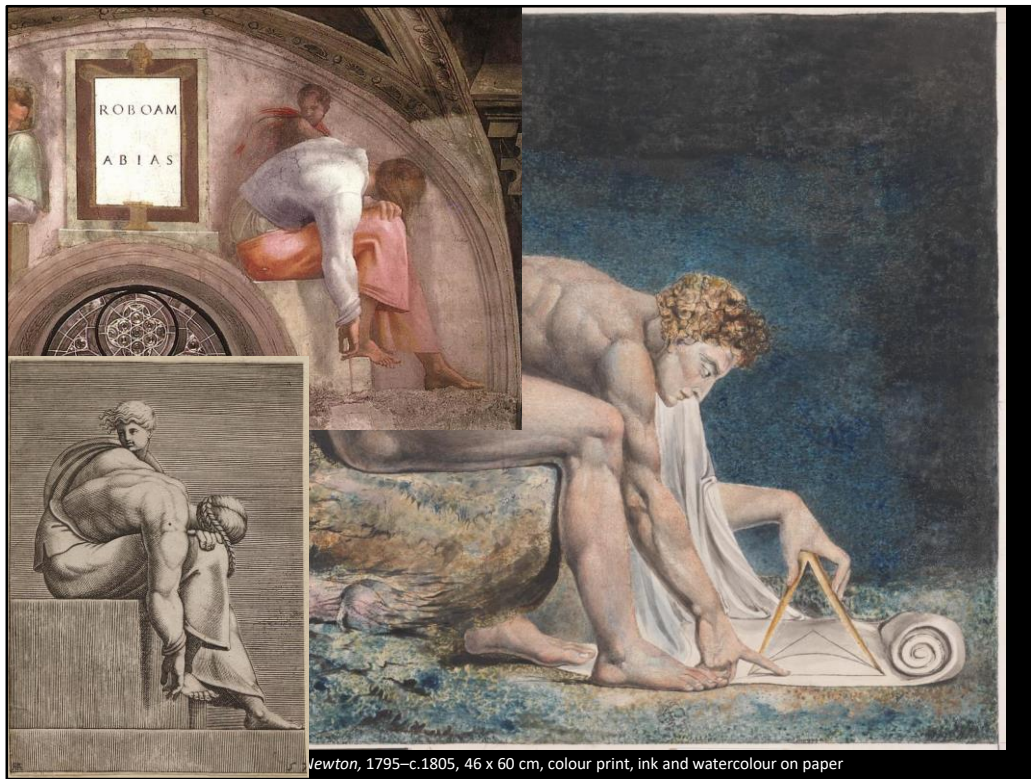


William Blake (1757-1827), *The House of Death* 1795/c.1805, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 48.5 x 61 cm

Declining fortunes 1795-1800

- The illustrations in Blake's *Prophetic Books* had been growing ever larger and more colourful. It was therefore a logical step for him to adapt his printing-methods to produce full-scale paintings. The year 1795 saw the production of the series of twelve large watercolour prints, including *Newton and Nebuchadnezzar* and *The House of Death* (shown here), which biographer Peter Ackroyd calls 'the finest artistic statement of Blake's Lambeth visions'.
- The prophetic books are a series of lengthy, interrelated poetic works drawing upon Blake's own personal mythology. They have been described as forming "what is in proportion to its merits the least read body of poetry in the English language". They conclude with the epic *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, and in them he elaborates a personal invented mythology.
- The *Prophetic Books* are:
 - *Tiriel* (c. 1789)
 - *The Book of Thel* (c. 1789)
 - *America a Prophecy* (1793)
 - *Europe a Prophecy* (1794)
 - *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793)
 - *The Book of Urizen* (1794)

- *The Book of Ahania* (1795)
- *The Book of Los* (1795)
- *The Song of Los* (1795)
- *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (begun 1797, unfinished; abandoned c. 1804)
- *Milton a Poem* (1804–1810)
- *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804–1820)



William Blake, *Newton*, 1795–c.1805, 46 x 60 cm, colour print, ink and watercolour on paper

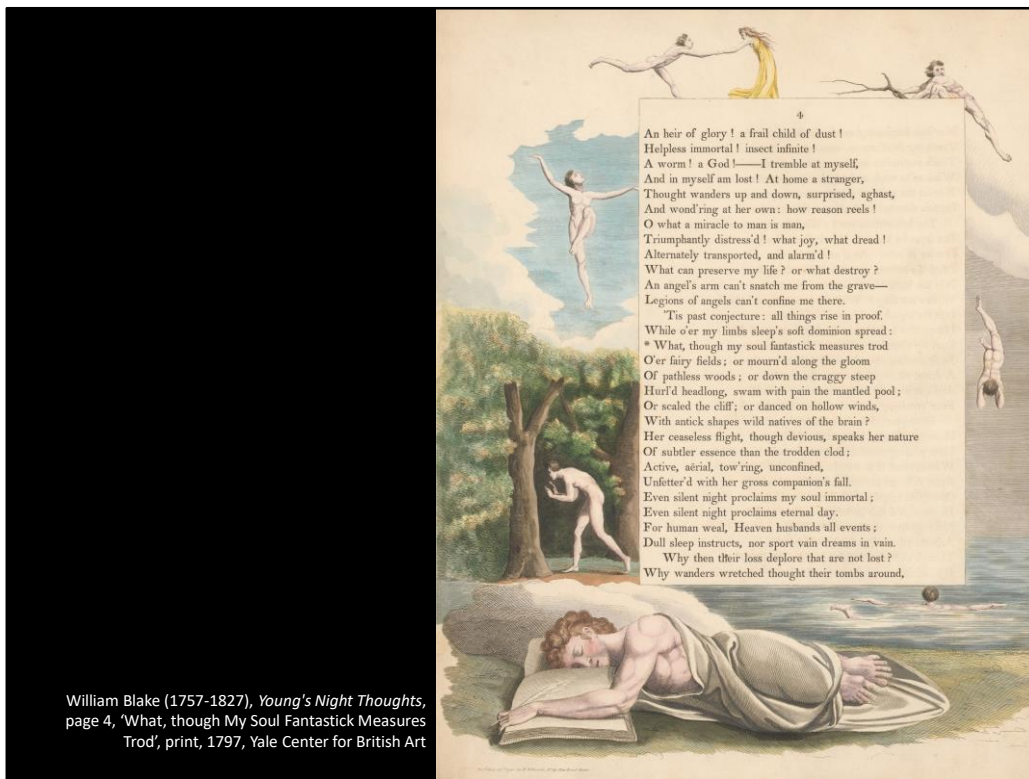
- Tate display caption, “As an example of rational thought, Newton was an important figure for Lavater. Arguing for the veracity of physiognomy, Lavater stated that greatness was ‘visible in every well drawn outline’ of the scientist’s head. Reiterating a pervasive racial stereotype, he asked ‘Could the mind of Newton have invented the theory of light, residing in the head of a Negro’. Blake, however, was critical of reductive scientific thought. In this picture, the straight lines and sharp angles of Newton’s profile suggest that he cannot see beyond the rules of his compass. Behind him, the colourful, textured rock may be seen to represent the creative world, to which he is blind.”
- The figure of Newton is related to Michelangelo's Abias, one of the Ancestors of Christ in the lunettes of the Sistine Chapel.
- Tate, “The design was also developed from plate 10 of the second issue of *There is no Natural Religion* of c.1788, which shows an old man kneeling on the ground and drawing with a pair of compasses to illustrate the text ‘Application. He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only’.”
- Blake was critical of the idea that science could solve all our human problems. He may be suggesting that Newton, by focusing on the sharp angles and geometry of the compass is missing the beauty of the world around him.
- **Newton**, personification of man limited by reason. The eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope, wrote a satirical epitaph for Newton: ‘Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night, God said Let Newton be! And all was light.’ This shows just how much the eighteenth century

revered the great philosopher. Newton had successfully explained the workings of the physical universe. To Blake, however, this was not enough: Newton had omitted God, as well as all those significant emotional and spiritual elements which cannot be quantified, from his theories. Blake boasted that he had 'fourfold vision' while Newton with his 'single vision' was as good as asleep. To Blake, Newton, Bacon and Locke with their emphasis on reason were nothing more than 'the three great teachers of atheism, or Satan's Doctrine'. In this print from 1795 Newton is portrayed drawing with a pair of compasses. Compasses were a traditional symbol of God, 'architect of the universe', but notice how the picture progresses from exuberance and colour on the left, to sterility and blackness on the right. In Blake's view Newton brings not light, but night.

- It has been suggested the figure is based on Michelangelo's Adam in the Sistine Chapel. Blake was an engraver looking at engravings as he had never seen the original. He accentuates the lie and the muscles. It has been observed that Blake's figures seem to be "all muscle, as if they had no fatty tissue anywhere, and one layer of skin too few ... is Blake, or is he not, interested in muscles? He is not interested enough to get them right". Blake is more interested in muscles as pattern, passion and tension. It is like an early form of expressionism where the anatomical accuracy gives way to emotional power and exaggeration.

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/blake-newton-n05058>



William Blake (1757-1827), *Young's Night Thoughts*, page 4, 'What, though My Soul Fantastick Measures Trod', print, 1797, Yale Center for British Art

- *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality*, better known simply as ***Night-Thoughts***, is a long poem by Edward Young published in nine parts (or "nights") between 1742 and 1745.
- Blake was **commissioned in 1795 to illustrate *Night-Thoughts*** for a major new edition of the poem to be published by Richard Edwards. Young's *Night Thoughts*, a philosophical verse epic immensely popular in the late eighteenth century.
- Blake began by making a **series of 537 watercolour illustrations** from which he planned to engrave about 200 for publication. For all this effort **Blake was only paid £21**. It is possible he expected more following the success of the book but the first volume – with forty-three engravings by Blake – was published in 1797 and was a **commercial failure**. The expensive publishing venture was abandoned and Blake's immense labours had failed to produce a profit or fame.
- Following this **Flaxman commissioned Blake to illustrate the poems of Thomas Gray** and Blake began to compose an epic called *Vala* later changed to *The Four Zoas*. In addition, Blake's most important patron the civil servant Thomas Butts, commissioned a series of Biblical paintings from him. However, this work was not enough to compensate for price inflation and the **depressed art market, caused by the war with France**.

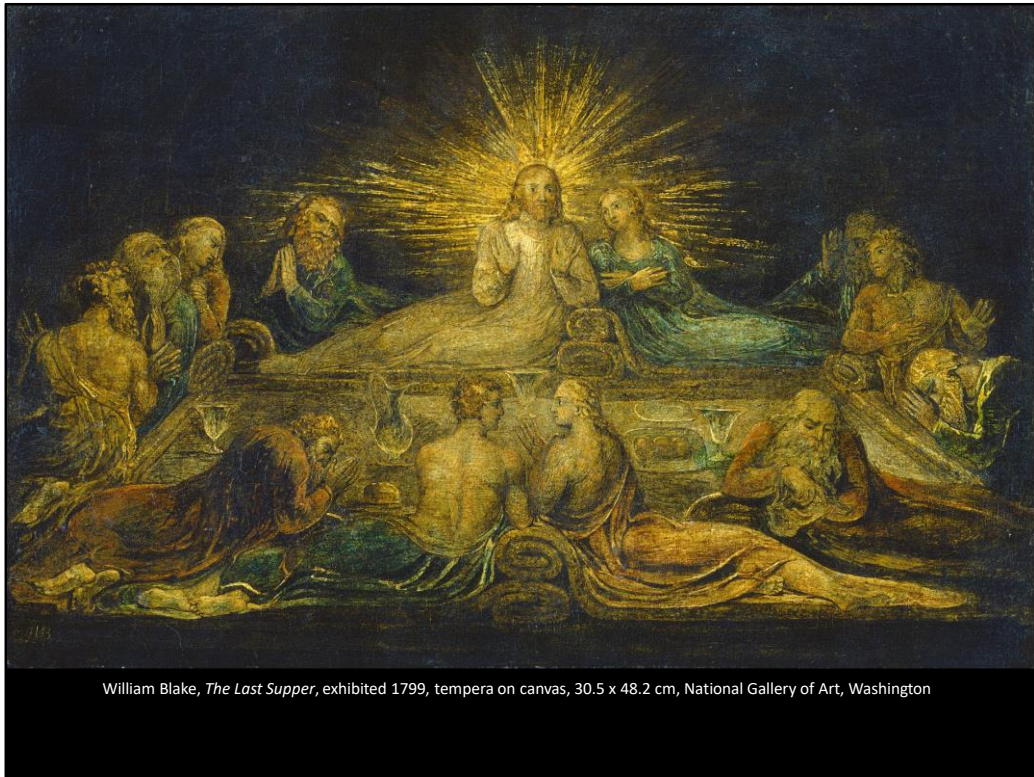
Notes

An heir of glory ! a frail child of dust !
Helpless immortal ! insect infinite !
A worm ! a God !— —I tremble at myself,
And in myself am lost ! At home a stranger,
Thought wanders up and down, surprised, aghast,
And wond'ring at her own : how reason reels !
O what a miracle to man is man,
Triumphantly distress'd ! what joy, what dread !
Alternately transported, and alarm'd !
What can preserve my life ? or what destroy ?
An angel's arm can't snatch me from the grave—
Legions of angels can't confine me there.

'Tis past conjecture : all things rise in proof.

While o'er my limbs sleep's soft dominion spread :
* What, though my soul fantastick measures trod
O'er fairy fields; or mourn'd along the gloom
Of pathless woods ; or down the craggy steep
Hurl'd headlong, swam with pain the mantled pool ;
Or scaled the cliff; or danced on hollow winds,
With antick shapes wild natives of the brain .
Her ceaseless flight, though devious, speaks her nature
Of subtler essence than the trodden clod ;
Active, aérial, tow'ring, unconfined,
Unfetter'd with her gross companion's fall.
Even silent night proclaims my soul immortal ;
Even silent night proclaims eternal day.
For human weal, Heaven husbands all events ;
Dull sleep instructs, nor sport vain dreams in vain.

Why then their loss deplore that are not lost ?
Why wanders wretched thought their tombs around,



William Blake, *The Last Supper*, exhibited 1799, tempera on canvas, 30.5 x 48.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

William Blake, *The Last Supper*, exhibited 1799, tempera on canvas, 30.5 x 48.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

- He separated his printing from his painting and began to produce his **so-called 'tempera' or 'fresco' paintings on biblical subjects**, such as *The Last Supper* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1799) and *the Loaves and Fishes* (1800). They were **commissioned by Thomas Butts**, a government official, who became a **major patron**.
- Butts is the source of an **amusing anecdote** reported by Gilchrist. One day he was visiting Blake's house when they lived in Lambeth. He found **the couple nude in their garden** summer house. **"Come in!" cried Blake; "it's only Adam and Eve you know!"** Husband and wife had been reciting passages from *Paradise Lost*, in character'.
- Blake wrote 'The nakedness of woman is the work of God' and 'Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed'.

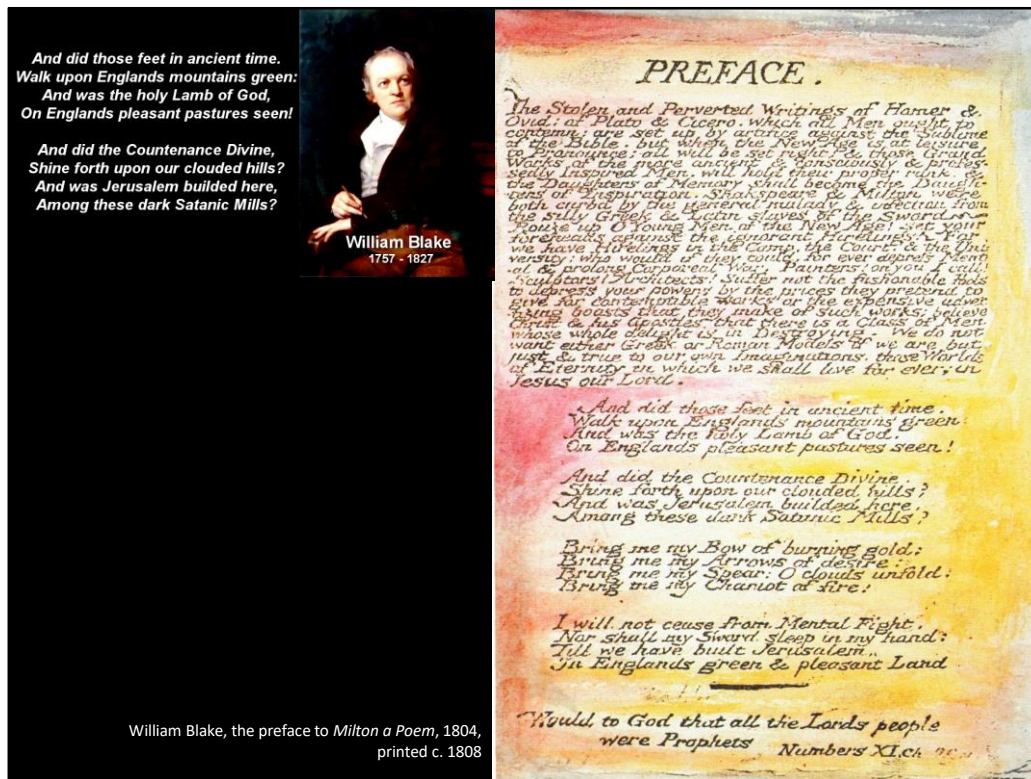


William Blake (1757-1827), *Landscape near Felpham* circa 1800, pencil and watercolour on paper, 23.7 x 34.3 cm

- Delighted by the **natural beauty around him**, Blake embarked on his new life in Sussex with **great optimism**. Blake received many commissions from his new patron, producing plates for Hayley's ballad *Little Tom the Sailor*, and engravings for his *Ballads on Anecdotes* relating to *Animals* and for his *Life of Cowper*.
- But **by 1802, the situation had soured**. Blake was **tired** of the endless stream of **trivial commissions** from Hayley and his society neighbours. He had no wish to waste his talents painting a series of great poets' portraits for Hayley's new library, or handscreens for his neighbour, Lady Bathurst. The next year Blake wrote a letter to his patron Butts stating that **only in London could 'carry on his visionary studies...see visions, dream dreams'**.
- To make matters worse, in **August 1803 Blake had driven a soldier, Private John Schofield, out of his garden, allegedly uttering the treasonous words 'Damn the king. The soldiers are all slaves.'** **Scheduled to be put on trial for sedition**, Blake moved back to London in late 1803, thoroughly sick of his officious patron, of his damp cottage and of the law. He briefly returned to Sussex in early 1804 and was **acquitted** to the riotous approval of the court. Blake's £200 bond was paid by Hayley who also paid for a London barrister and eight months later he was acquitted of all charges. Rather than being grateful to Hayley for his financial and moral support Blake became convinced there was a conspiracy against him and that Hayley had hired the soldier to kill him.

Notes

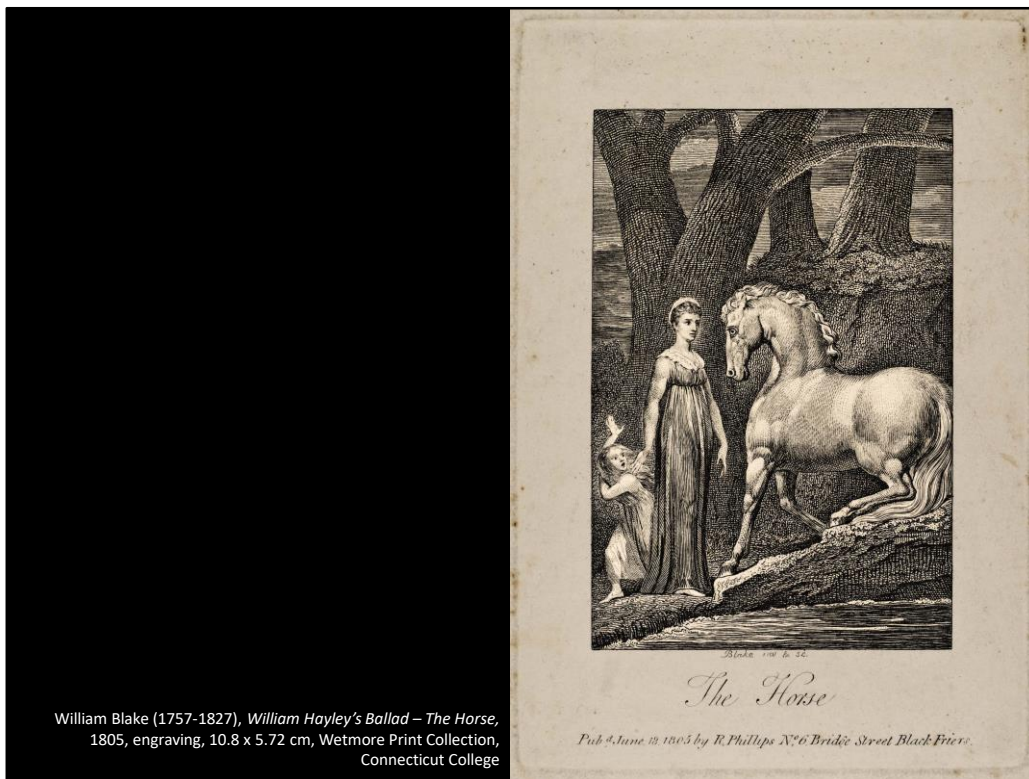
- Blake's relationship with Hayley was starting to deteriorate in about 1801 as Hayley tried to divert Blake from poetry and history painting to practical crafts such as copy engraving and miniature portraits. **Hayley taught Blake Latin, Greek and Hebrew** and treated him as a protégé with great talent but he wrote to a friend that his **eccentricity verged on 'Insanity'**. This criticism was made worse by illness and his wife's recurring bouts of rheumatism. Blake wrote to Butts about the increasing disruptive situation and what he regarded as Hayley's 'Genteel Ignorance'. He was torn between the need to make money and his spiritual calling as an artist. Blake's moods alternated between **depression and hope** and by 1803 he vowed not to spend another winter in Felpham. Blake started to view the **mild-mannered Hayley as jealous of his talent**. It is worth bearing in mind that **Hayley was a popular and successful author** and Blake was merely an engraver who needed direction, instruction and counselling.
- In 1803, that a serious incident took place. Blake found a soldier in his garden and not knowing he had been invited by the gardener they got into an argument and a physical confrontation. Three days later the soldier, John Scolfield, accused Blake of sedition, of praising the French and damning the king. A serious charge when England was at war with France.
- Blake returned to London in 1804 and found that although **every engraver had so much work they were turning it away** no one brought him work. Blake had to rely on friends such as Fuseli, Flaxman and Hayley for commissions. A new edition of Hayley's ballads with new engravings by Blake was commissioned in 1805.



The preface to *Milton*, as it appeared in Blake's own illuminated version, 1804, printed c. 1808

- "And did those feet in ancient time" is a short poem by William Blake from the preface to his epic *Milton a Poem*, one of a collection of writings known as the Prophetic Books. The date of 1804 on the title page is probably when the plates were begun, but the poem was printed c. 1808.[1] Today it is best known as the anthem "Jerusalem", with music written by Sir Hubert Parry in 1916. It is not to be confused with another poem, much longer and larger in scope, but also by Blake, called *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.
- The poem refers to a legend that Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea, a tin merchant, travelled to England and visited Glastonbury. Jerusalem has been a metaphor for heaven in the Christian Church and the Book of Revelations describes a Second Coming when Jesus establishes a New Jerusalem.
- The creation of heaven in England is contrasted with the 'dark satanic mills'.
 - These have been interpreted as the **factories of the industrial revolution** and in 1791 a flour mill in Southwark called the Albion Flour Mills was destroyed by fire. At the time opponents of the mill described it as satanic.
 - Another interpretation, amongst Nonconformists, is that the phrase refers to the **established Church of England** as it preached a doctrine of conformity to the established social order and class system, in contrast to Blake. Blake believed in free love and was strongly anti-clerical so it is ironic that this poem was adopted by the church and by women's organisations.
 - Finally, An alternative theory is that Blake is referring to a **mystical concept within his**

own mythology related to the ancient history of England. Satan's "mills" are referred to repeatedly in the main poem, and are first described in a way that suggests something more abstract than industrialization: "the starry Mills of Satan/ Are built beneath the earth and waters of the Mundane Shell...To Mortals thy Mills seem everything, and the Harrow of Shaddai / A scheme of human conduct invisible and incomprehensible".



William Blake (1757-1827), *William Hayley's Ballad – The Horse*, 1805, engraving, 10.8 x 5.72 cm, Wetmore Print Collection, Connecticut College

Country life 1800-1803

- By 1799 Blake's fortunes were waning and lacking employment as an engraver had turned to his patrons to commission paintings and drawings. He continued to be employed by Thomas Butts and received a new commission from Dr John Trusler. However, Trusler tried to instruct Blake in composition and Blake wrote a letter implying Trusler was an 'idiot' at which point his patronage ceased.
- Work was scarce and life was hard, so it seemed like a stroke of luck when William Hayley, an eccentric gentleman poet, invited Blake down to live on his estate in Sussex. Hayley commissioned Blake to produce engravings for his book *Essay on Sculpture*. A friendship developed and in 1800 Blake visited Hayley at his home in Felpham and Hayley invited him to live there. The Blakes were glad to leave the 'terrible desert of London' for 'sweet Felpham'. He wrote about 'Londons Dungeon dark' and how his forthcoming trip to Felpham brought him out of a 'Deep pit of Melancholy'. Blake suffered from bouts of depression followed by periods of elation for the rest of his life.
- Blake moved down in September 1800 with his wife and sister and seven carriages of household goods. Blake wrote of his renewed 'Vision' by the sea and Hayley provided ample employment such as portraits of poets for his library, an etching illustrating a poem by Hayley called 'Little Tom the Sailor', portrait miniatures, illustration for ballads (as illustrated above) and engravings

for Hayley's *Life of William Cowper*. Blake reported to Butts that Felpham remained 'the sweetest spot on Earth'.

- Blake is well known for his dramatic mythological and Biblical watercolour paintings and his **epic poems**, *William Hayley's Ballads – The Horse* is an **illustrative engraving** done in collaboration with William Hayley, a poet much like Blake himself. The engraving showcases Blake's **fine use of detail and line coupled with tight composition**, causing tension between the characters in his work. *The Horse* illustrates the atmosphere of tension and peace in the last poem in Hayley's anthology of Ballads, under the same title, which tells the story of a runaway Arabian stallion, confronted with **a mother's courage** as **she stands between the beast and her daughter**. As the **stallion reaches the woman**, it is suddenly tamed.



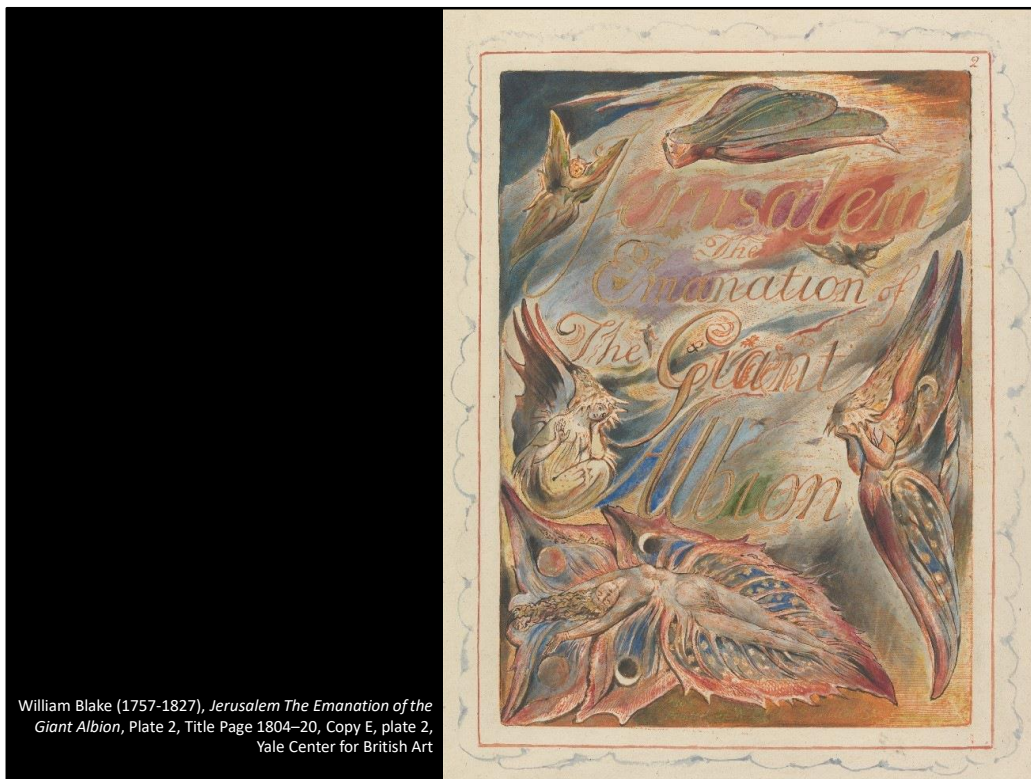
William Blake (1757-1827), *Jerusalem*, Plate 1, Frontispiece, 1804 to 1820, Bentley Copy E, Yale Center for British Art

Poverty and paranoia 1804-1818

- Blake's **optimism** about his return to London was **ill-founded**. At his new lodgings on the first floor of 17 South Molton Street, he began work on the illuminated books, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. However, commercial work proved even more elusive than it had before. '**Art in London flourishes,**' he wrote, '**yet no one brings work to me**'.

Jerusalem

- At over 4500 lines, *Jerusalem* is the **longest and the most magnificent of Blake's illuminated books** – but it is also perhaps his **most unfathomable**. His first biographer disparaged the epic poem as 'a chaos of words, names and images'.
- **It consists of 100 plates or pages** divided into four sections of around twenty-five pages, each one addressed to a **different audience – the Public, the Jews, the Deists, and the Christians**. In between these different sections come four text-free illustrated plates like the one shown here. This page comes from the start of the third section, addressed to the Deists.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Plate 2, Title Page 1804–20, Copy E, plate 2, Yale Center for British Art

- Blake worked on *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion* from 1804 to 1820, a period during which Britain was mostly at war with France. **He regarded it as his masterpiece.** Believing that 'poetry fetter'd, fetters the human race', he composed *Jerusalem* in unrhymed free verse. Five copies of the poem exist, of which only one (from the Yale Center for British Art) is in colour.
- In *Jerusalem*, Albion (England) is infected with a 'soul disease' and her 'mountains run with blood' in consequence of the Napoleonic wars. **Religion exists merely to help monarchy and clergy exploit the lower classes. Greed and war have obscured the true message of Christ. If, however, Albion can be reunited with Jerusalem, then all humanity will once again be bound together by the ties of love.**



William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion* 1804–21, Copy A, plate 37, British Museum

William Blake, *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy* (formerly called 'Hecate') circa 1795, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 43.9 x 58.1 cm

William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion, Loss*, 1804–21, Copy A, plate 100, British Museum

William Blake, *Nebuchadnezzar* 1795/circa 1805, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 54.3 x 72.5 cm

William Blake, *Newton*, 1795/circa 1805, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 46 x 60 cm

William Blake, *Frontispiece to 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion'* circa 1795, colour print finished in ink and watercolour on paper, 17 x 12 cm

Cast of characters

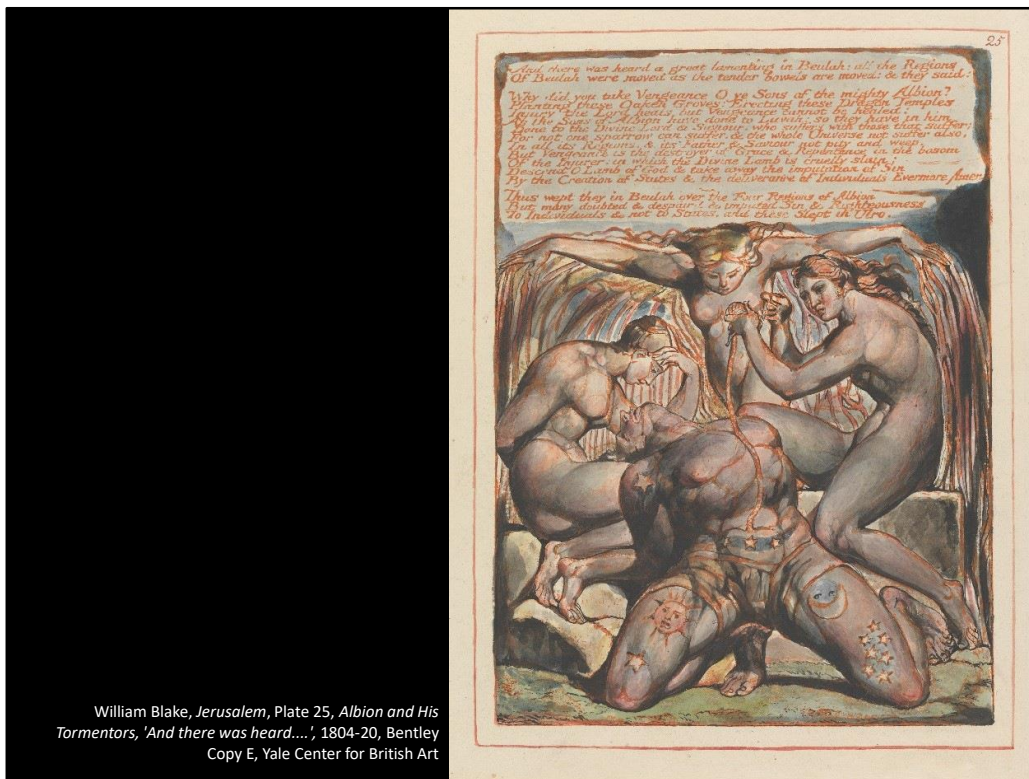
- In *Jerusalem*, his greatest prophetic book, Blake famously wrote 'I must create a system, or be enslav'd by another man's. I will not reason & compare: **my business is to create**'. So while other poets might be content to use characters from the Bible, or from Greek and Roman myth, **Blake created his own mythology** populated by a host of beings that he himself had either invented, or re-interpreted.
- **Albion**, personification of England, often suffering or in despair, occasionally joyful. *Jerusalem* tells the story of the regeneration of Albion from harshness and cruelty.

- **Enitharmon**, represents spiritual beauty and poetic inspiration but also misguided religion based on chastity and vengeance.
- **Los**, personifies poetry and the creative imagination. This picture, the 100th and final plate from *Jerusalem*, shows Los (the middle figure) in the pose of the Apollo Belvedere. He is holding a hammer in his right hand, and a pair of tongs in his left. In Blake's mythology Los represents the imagination, and corresponds to the loving and forgiving Christ of the New Testament. (As opposed to Urizen who, according to Blake, is the vengeful and repressive God of the Old Testament). Los often appears as a blacksmith with the tools of his trade. Blake sees Los crafting objects from molten metal, as he himself forged his visions and inspirations into poetry and art. In the Songs of Experience, *The Tyger* is created with the blacksmith's implements of hammer, anvil, chain and furnace. *The Tyger* is often interpreted as a symbol of man's irrepressible urge to create. Could it be Los then who 'framed' (made) the Tiger? The name 'Los' may derive from the word 'loss', alluding to fallen man's having 'lost' Paradise. It may, however, be a reversal of the Latin word 'Sol' (sun), since Los is shown creating the sun on plate 73 of *Jerusalem*. On the right is another image of Enitharmon, Los's wife. Their offspring is Orc, the symbol of revolution.
- **Nebuchadnezzar**, the personification of a fallen tyrant. Nebuchadnezzar was the King of Babylon whose arrogance was punished by God. Here we see him in exile, animal-like on all fours. Naked, he gazes with mad horror at his own reflection.
- **Newton**, personification of man limited by reason. The eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope, wrote a satirical epitaph for Newton: 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night, God said Let Newton be! And all was light.' This shows just how much the eighteenth century revered the great philosopher. Newton had successfully explained the workings of the physical universe. To Blake, however, this was not enough: Newton had omitted God, as well as all those significant emotional and spiritual elements which cannot be quantified, from his theories. Blake boasted that he had 'fourfold vision' while Newton with his 'single vision' was as good as asleep. To Blake, Newton, Bacon and Locke with their emphasis on reason were nothing more than 'the three great teachers of atheism, or Satan's Doctrine'. In this print from 1795 Newton is portrayed drawing with a pair of compasses. Compasses were a traditional symbol of God, 'architect of the universe', but notice how the picture progresses from exuberance and colour on the left, to sterility and blackness on the right. In Blake's view Newton brings not light, but night.
- **Oothoon**, personification of free love frustrated. The picture shows Bromion who raped Oothoon and is now bound back to back with her and Theotormon. Oothoon, the 'soft soul of America', represents both the innocent sexuality of the 'savage', and the political freedom of North America. She is in love with Theotormon who returns her love, but is unable to act, considering her polluted. In the picture he is literally wreathing himself into knots of indecision. He represents

man tortured by the restrictions of conventional Judeo-Christian morality. The Daughters of Albion are a chorus who 'weep' and 'sigh towards America' and represent monarchy-oppressed Britain's yearning for liberty.

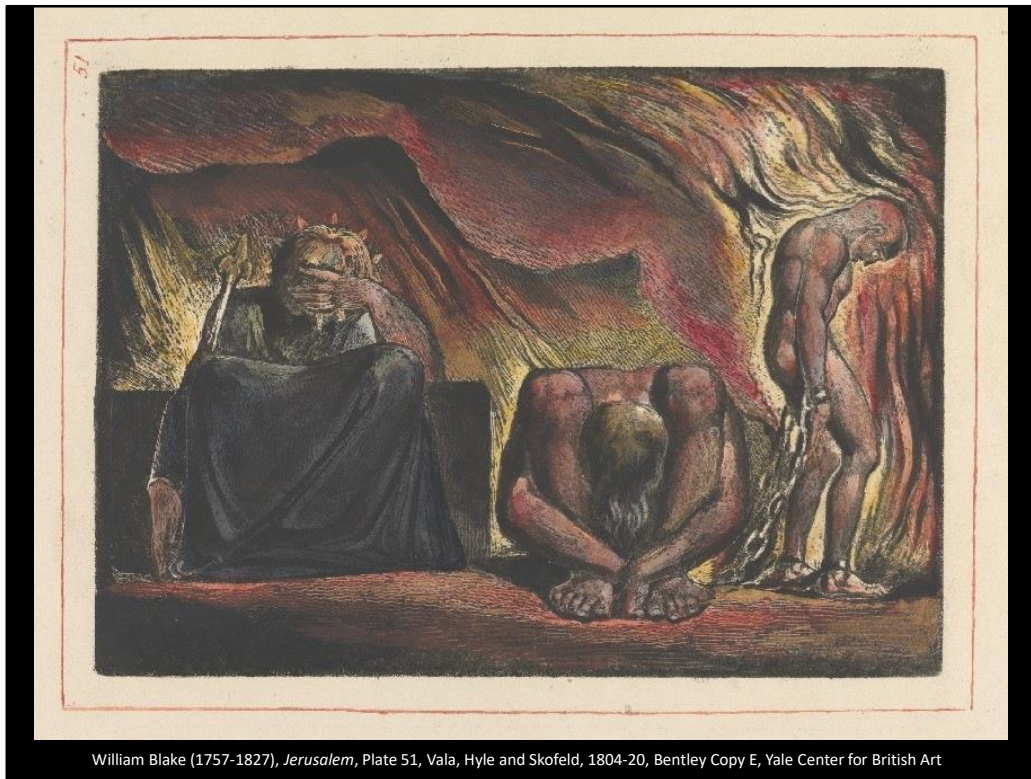
Not Illustrated

- **Orc**, personification of the revolutionary spirit. In *America: A Prophecy*, Orc is described as 'Lover of Wild Rebellion, and transgressor of God's Law'. He symbolises the spirit of rebellion and the love of freedom which provoked the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.
- **Urizen**, personification of reason, repression and authority. Urizen is always represented as a bearded old man. Sometimes he bears books of divine law, sometimes measuring instruments (with which to create, but also limit the universe). Urizen is the God of the Old Testament who, in alliance with kings and priests, creates 'nets of religion'. With these nets (on which he is resting his elbows in this picture), he keeps the people down. He uses them to restrain their yearning for freedom and justice (as in *The Chimney Sweeper*) and to suppress their sexual desire (as in *The Garden of Love*). Urizen is therefore in conflict with Orc, the revolutionary spirit, and with Luvah, the Prince of Love.



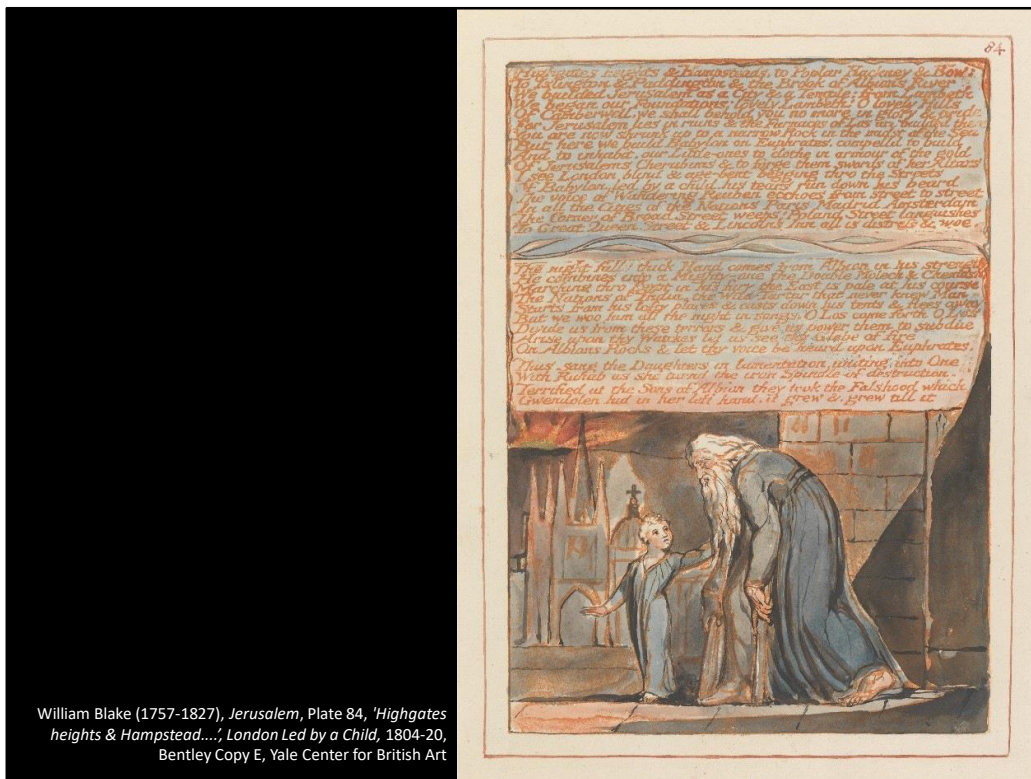
William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 25, *Albion and His Tormentors*, 'And there was heard....', 1804-20, Bentley Copy E, Yale Center for British Art

- In *Jerusalem* Druidic religion, with its rituals of human sacrifice, represents the cruelty and aggression of England. For Blake, the campaigns then being waged by his countrymen against Napoleon's France were the contemporary expression of that savage, warlike spirit.
- Here **Albion (England)** is the victim of Druid sacrifice, and is being **disembowelled by three women**, Rahab, Vala and Tirzah. Seated on the right, Tirzah cries as she winds Albion's intestines into a ball in her hand.



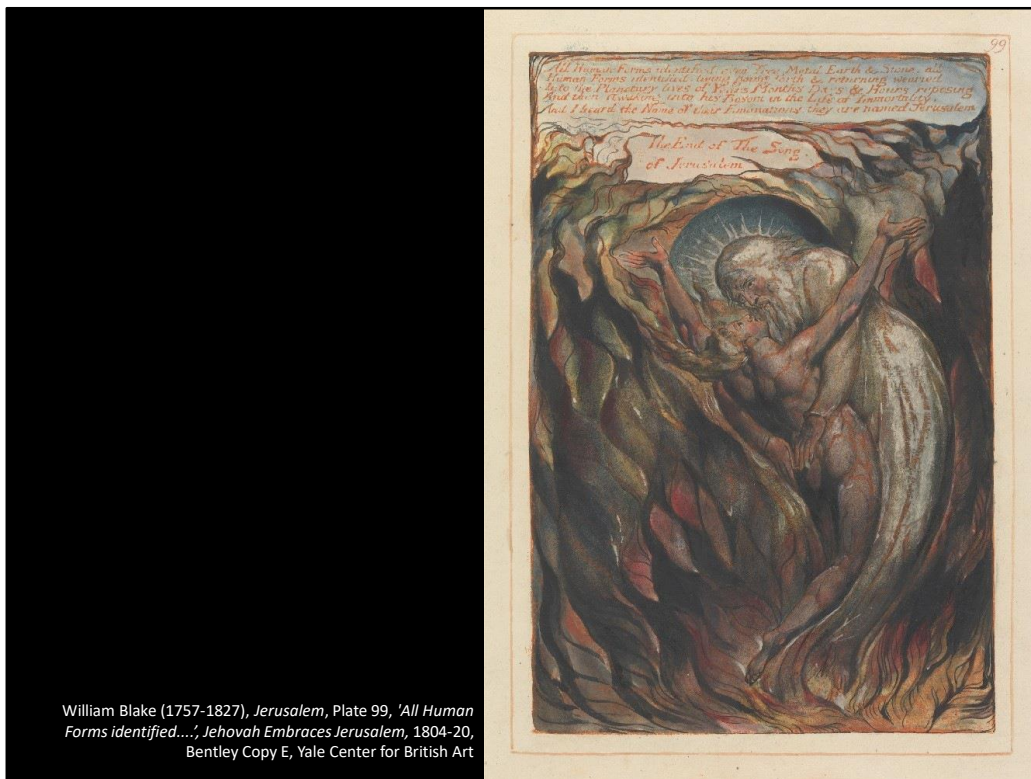
William Blake (1757-1827), *Jerusalem*, Plate 51, Vala, Hyle and Skofeld, 1804-20, Bentley Copy E, Yale Center for British Art

- The picture shows (from left to right) Vala, Goddess of Nature, Hyle, one of the giant Sons of Albion, and 'Skofeld'. The last of these three is the most interesting, since we can see how Blake took his revenge on people who had crossed him by inserting them into his private mythology. 'Skofeld' is, in fact, Private John Schofield, the soldier who, after being expelled by Blake from his Sussex garden, claimed that Blake had made disparaging remarks about the King and the British army, causing him to be tried for sedition in 1804. The scholar Morton D. Paley points out that Schofield, burning in hell-fire, is also weighed down by 'mind-forg'd manacles' of the kind we saw in *London*, in the *Songs of Experience*, while his posture resembles that of the personification of Despair in *The House of Death*.
- The other real-life figures who play a significant role in *Jerusalem* are the Hunt brothers, journalists who had reviewed Blake's work with brutal contempt.



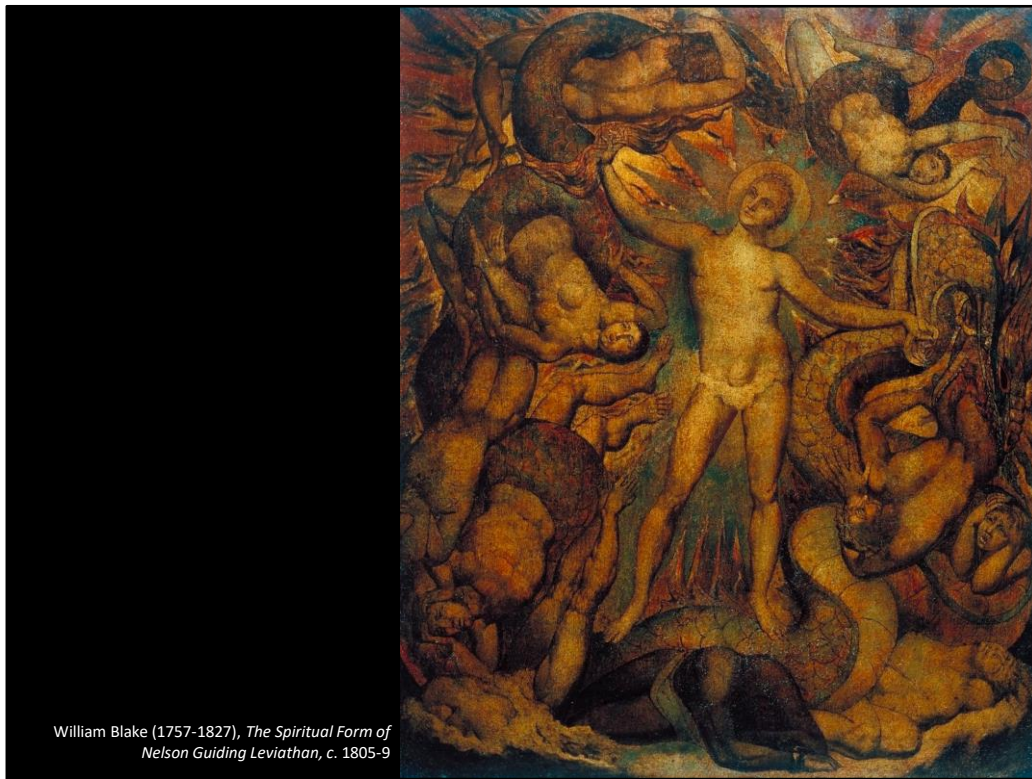
William Blake (1757-1827), *Jerusalem*, Plate 84, 'Highgates heights & Hampstead....', London Led by a Child, 1804-20, Bentley Copy E, Yale Center for British Art

- The light falls dramatically on a child leading a bearded old man on crutches past a domed church towards a Gothic abbey, as the sun sets behind a distant hill.
- This design illustrates lines 11–12 of plate 84:
- I see London, blind & age-bent begging through the streets / Of Babylon, led by a child, his tears run down his beard.
- In fact, this design (though reversed) is identical to that for the poem *London* in *Songs of Experience*. The scholar Morton D. Paley observes that the baroque dome of St Paul's (which the two characters pass by) signifies the hollowness of established religion, while the Gothic Westminster Abbey, their final destination, represents true religion.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Jerusalem*, Plate 99, 'All Human Forms identified...'; Jehovah Embraces Jerusalem, 1804-20, Bentley Copy E, Yale Center for British Art

- This is the penultimate plate of the whole *Jerusalem* series, and the man and woman embracing among dark flames is appropriately climactic. The picture illustrates the penultimate line of the whole poem:
- Awakening into his bosom in the Life of Immortality.
- Most commentators agree that the bearded old man is Jehovah, while the woman is Jerusalem. The image can be read as a message of universal reconciliation. The scholar Morton D. Paley points out the resemblance between Blake's design and the Flemish artist Martin De Vos's engraving of the *Prodigal Son*. According to the artist Samuel Palmer (a friend of Blake) this was 'a story that Blake particularly loved and could not read without tears coming to his eyes'.

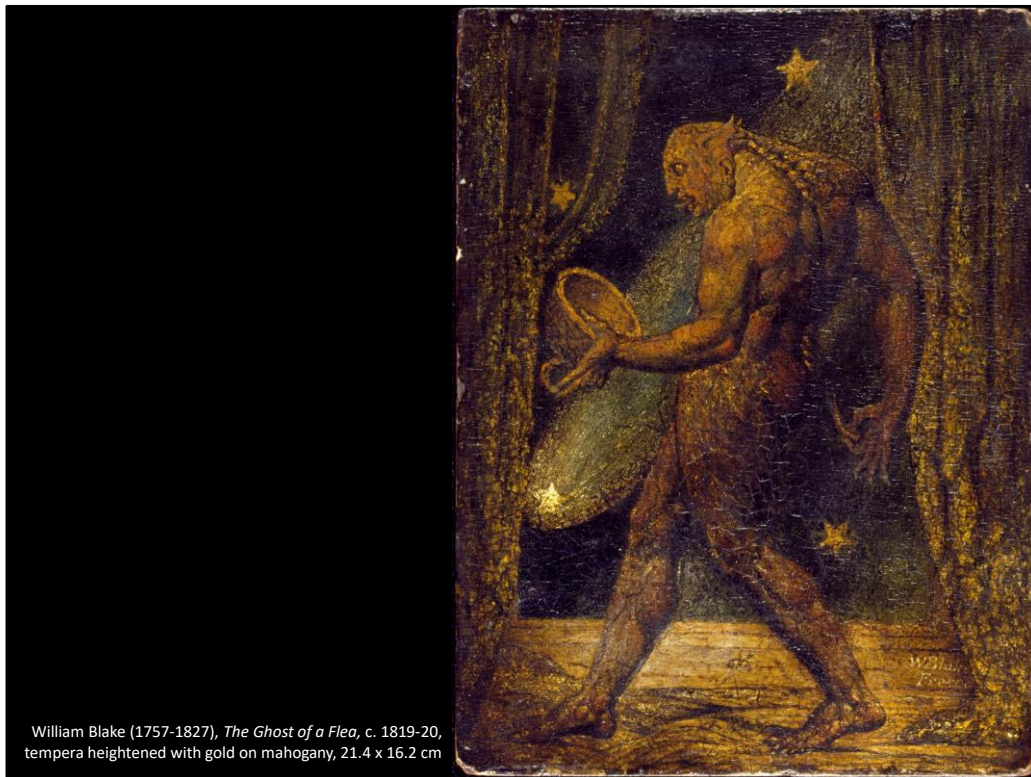


William Blake (1757-1827), *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*, c. 1805-9

William Blake (1757-1827), *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*, c. 1805-9

Blake's Exhibition

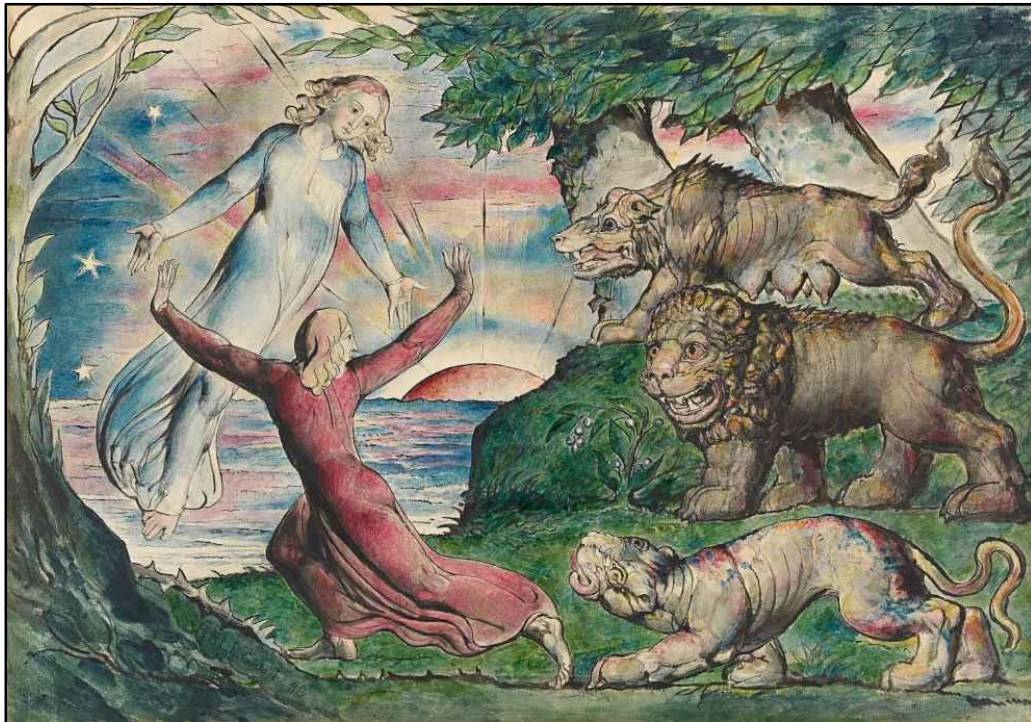
Blake's **1809 exhibition** that he organised of his own work represented the height of his ambition and it was a **disastrous failure**.



William Blake (1757-1827), *The Ghost of a Flea*, c. 1819-20, tempera heightened with gold on mahogany, 21.4 x 16.2 cm

The Ghost of a Flea

- **John Varley** was a watercolourist, landscape designer and astrologer whom Blake met towards the end of his life. Varley **encouraged Blake to sketch portraits of the people who populated his visions**, and in all there are between **forty or fifty drawings of such 'visionary heads'**. Many of these depict historical characters, such as kings and queens, but the most popular has always been the flea, which exists both as a simple sketch and as this elaborate painting.
- Blake claimed that, while he was sketching the flea, it had explained to him that **fleas were inhabited by the souls of bloodthirsty men**. These bloodthirsty men were confined to the bodies of small insects, because if they were the size of horses, they would drink so much blood that most of the country would be depopulated.
- The flea's bloodthirsty nature can be seen in its tongue, darting eagerly from its mouth, and the cup (for blood-drinking) that it is carrying.
- The poor quality of this picture is due to Blake painting it in what he called 'fresco' (tempera), which has cracked and dulled with age. The influence of Michelangelo (1475–1564), a Renaissance artist whom Blake admired, can be seen in the highly defined musculature of the flea's burly body



William Blake (1757-1827), *Dante running from the Three Beasts*, Canto 1, 1824-7, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

William Blake (1757-1827), 'Dante running from the Three Beasts', (illustration from *Divine Comedy*), Canto 1, 1824-7, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

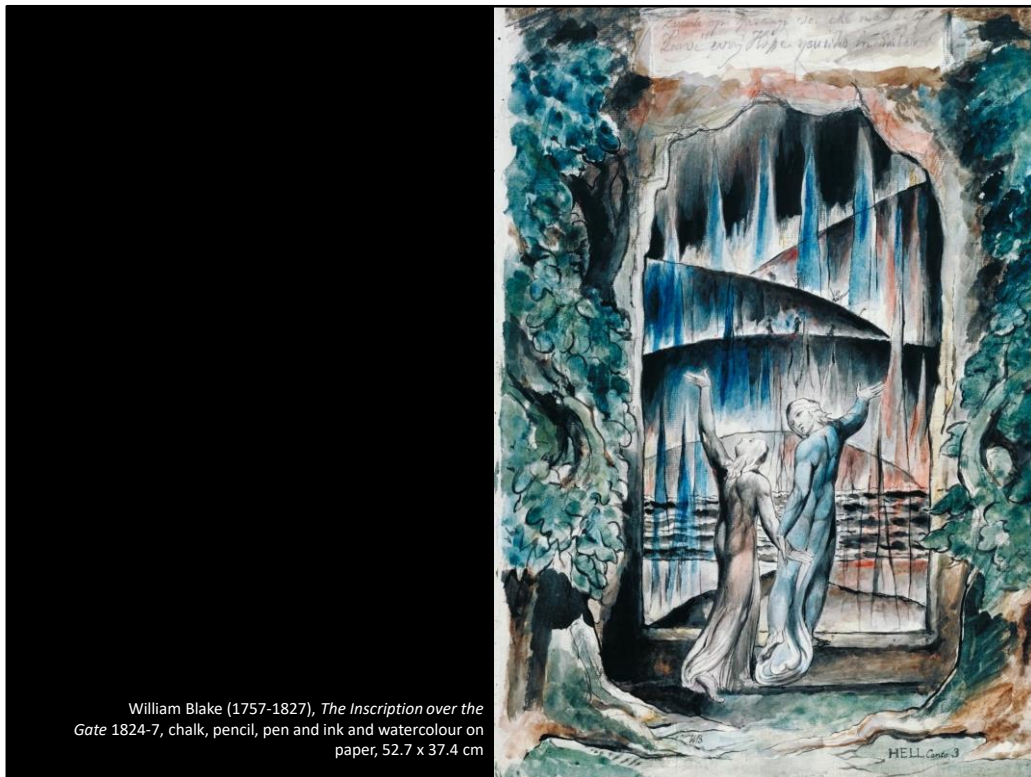
Illustrations to Dante

- In 1824, three years before he died, Blake's friend the artist John Linnell, commissioned him to make a series of illustrations based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Blake was then in his late sixties. A contemporary account informs us that he designed 100 watercolours of this subject 'during a fortnight's illness in bed'.
- **Dante Alighieri** started the *Divine Comedy* in c. 1308 and completed it in 1320. It is considered one of the world's greatest works of literature. The narrative describes Dante's travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Originally it was called *Comedy* and the word 'Divine' was not added until the 1555 edition. It consists of 14,233 lines. There are three sections of 33 cantos with one introductory canto. It is written in the first person and Dante is guided through Hell and Purgatory by Virgil and through Heaven by his distant love Beatrice. There are 9 rings in each section each followed by one summit. In Hell he becomes lost in a dark wood (sin) and is assailed by **three beasts, a lion, a leopard and a she-wolf**. The sun symbolises salvation but Dante cannot find it on his own until he is rescued by Virgil.

Contentment at last 1818-1827

- **As Blake turned sixty, his work at last began to find passionate admirers among younger artists**, such as the watercolourists **John Linnell** and **John Varley**. It was Varley who encouraged Blake to draw sketches of his 'spiritual visitants', of which the most famous is *The Ghost of a*

Flea. Linnell, meanwhile, despite being over **thirty years Blake's junior**, **commissioned works for himself**, and helped Blake secure commissions from others. It was thanks to his influence that Blake made the woodcuts for Robert Thornton's school text of Virgil's *Pastorals* in 1821. And Linnell himself ordered a duplicate set of the watercolours of *The Book of Job* (originally produced for Thomas Butts) and commissioned the series of drawings from Dante's *Divine Comedy* in 1824.



William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Inscription over the Gate', (illustration from *Divine Comedy*), 1824-7, chalk, pencil, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 52.7 x 37.4 cm

- **Dante is being led by Virgil**, the Roman poet, **through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise**. **Here they are shown entering the Gate of Hell**. Once inside, they shall first pass through the region where the souls of the uncommitted (those who lived their lives without doing anything notably good or bad) reside. They shall then be ferried by Charon across the river Acheron into Hell proper. **Virgil is the right-hand figure** in blue, Dante the left-hand one in grey.
- Notice how the greenery framing the outside of the gate contrasts with the bleak panorama of fire and ice inside. If you look carefully you can see tiny figures in torment on the hills. These successive hills represent the different circles of hell, where the souls of people guilty of different sins are punished in an appropriate manner. Those guilty of the sin of lust, for example, are buffeted about by the winds of passion and desire in the second circle.
- In **1821**, **Blake moved** to a couple of rooms in **Fountain Court, Strand**, from which he could see the Thames. His young admirers called him 'The Interpreter', and confident in the judgement of posterity, he grew into a **gentler and less angry man**.
- In the spring of **1827**, **Blake fell ill**. A friend at his deathbed said he **died 'singing of the things he saw in heaven'** on August 12 at the age of sixty-nine. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the dissenters' graveyard at Bunhill Fields. One of his last acts had been to draw a picture of Catherine, his loyal wife and helpmate, from his deathbed.



William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini ('The Whirlwind of Lovers')', (illustration from *Divine Comedy*), 1826-7, reprinted 1968, intaglio print on paper, 24.3 x 33.5 cm

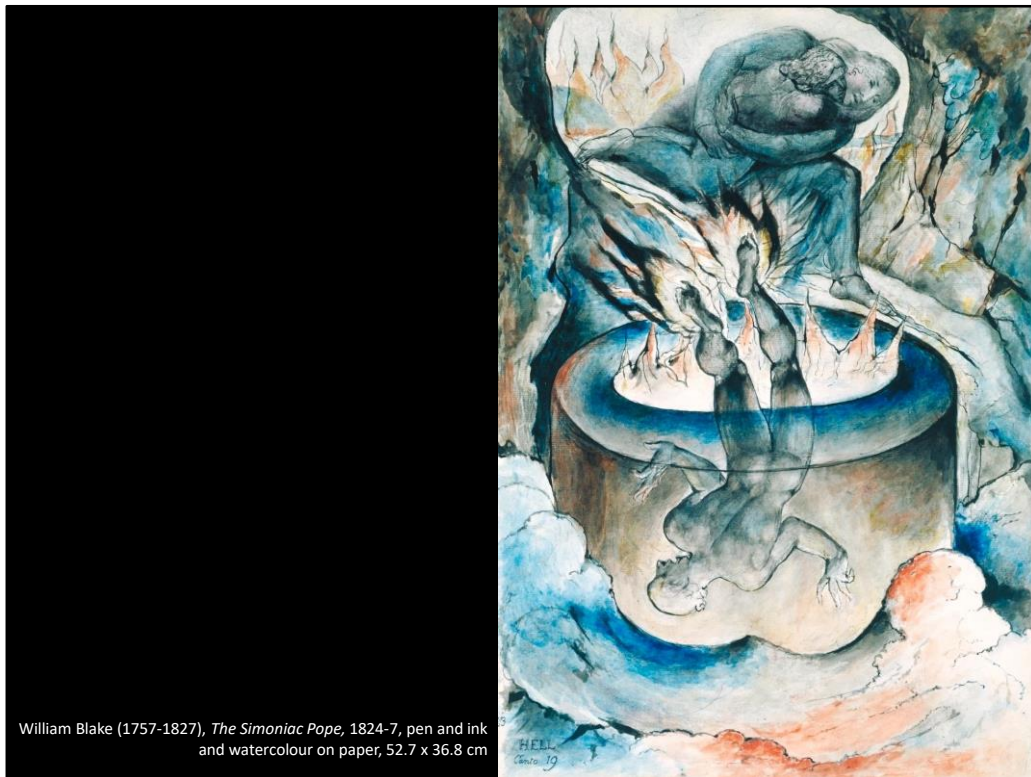
- In this circle people guilty of the sin of lust are whirled round and round in an unending storm. The storm, of course, represents irresistible passion. Among those being blown about are mythic and historical queens such as Helen of Troy and Cleopatra of Egypt. Dante, however, chooses to speak to Paolo and Francesca, famous lovers from Rimini.
- Francesca had been married to the brave, but physically deformed Gianciotto. She was reading an Arthurian romance with his better-looking brother, Paolo, when passion got the better of them. Gianciotto, enraged, murdered them both, for which he was consigned to the deepest circle of Hell (where Dante shall later meet him).
- Dante is so moved by this romantic tale that he faints, hence his position flat on his back. Notice that above Virgil's head a sun-like disc contains a sketch of a couple embracing, while the wind-blown lovers themselves seem to be flying up and out of the picture to freedom. Blake disapproved of Dante for depicting God as a vengeful judge, whose role was to inflict ingenious punishment (similar to his own Urizen), and these details are his subtle protest. As we can see in poems such as *The Garden of Love*, Blake himself believed that suppressing desire was a far worse crime than yielding to it.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Cerberus*, 1824-7, pencil, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 37.2 x 52.8 cm

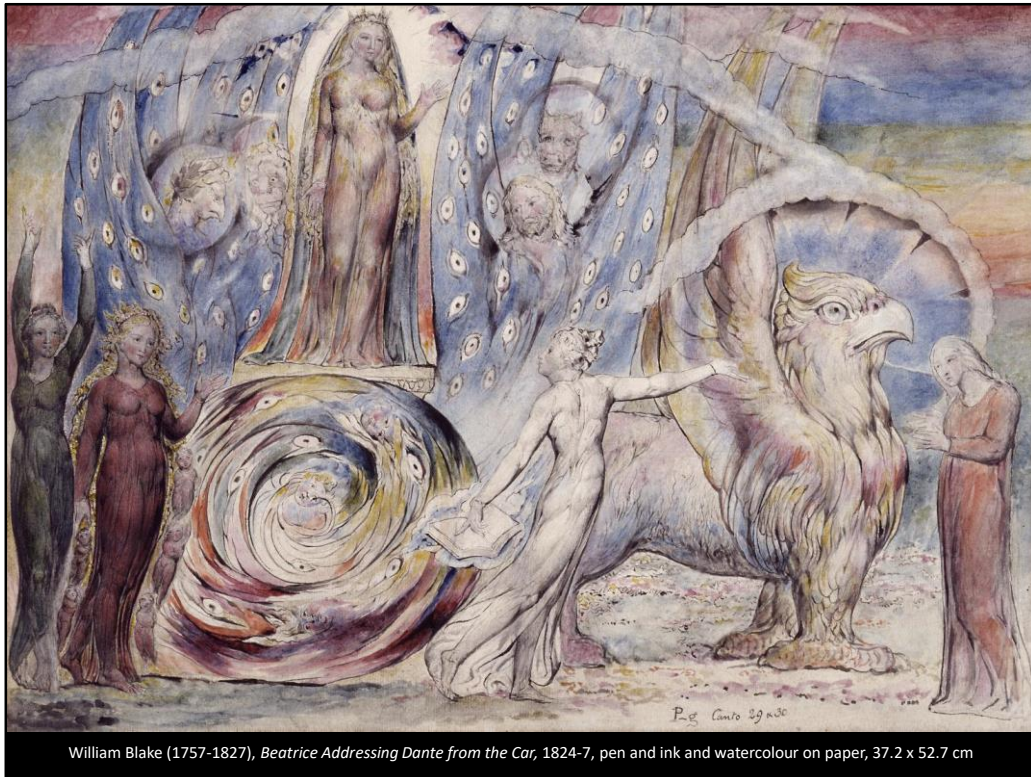
William Blake (1757-1827), 'Cerberus', *Divine Comedy*, 1824-7, pencil, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 37.2 x 52.8 cm

- Cerberus is a monstrous three-headed dog who stood guard over Hades, the Hell of classical mythology. Here in the *Divine Comedy* he stands guard over the third circle of Hell. He is always hungry, and will only allow Dante and Virgil to pass after they have placated him by throwing earth into his three mouths. It is the gluttons who are punished in this circle. Their fate is to lie wallowing in the mud like pigs, pelted by an endless storm of hail and snow, in the very opposite of luxury.



William Blake (1757-1827), 'The Simoniac Pope', (illustration from *Divine Comedy*), 1824-7, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 52.7 x 36.8 cm

- Simony is the sin of exploiting one's position in the church to make money, and the eighth Circle of Hell is a chasm containing the popes guilty of this sin. Their punishment is to be thrust upside down in a stone hole, with the soles of their feet on fire.
- This picture depicts Pope Nicholas III. Dante has just been ranting against the corruption of the church, and against Nicholas in particular. In response, Pope Nicholas has writhed in anger, causing an alarmed Dante to leap into Virgil's arms.
- Notice how Dante seems to have literally shrunk from fear. Notice also the blue-lighting that gives an atmosphere of unworldly horror to this dynamic picture.



William Blake (1757-1827), *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*, (illustration from *Divine Comedy*), 1824-7, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 37.2 x 52.7 cm

- In this picture Dante (standing in the right hand corner) finally meets Beatrice, who is the crowned figure on the chariot. Beatrice was the love of Dante's life, and was the subject of his first collection of poems, *Vita Nuova*. She died when she was only 25 years old – hence her presence in the afterlife as the central figure of *The Divine Comedy*.
- Anxious that Dante had gone astray after her death, it was Beatrice who, in the scheme of the poem, arranged for Virgil to guide him through Hell and Purgatory. She is veiled but Dante nonetheless senses who she is and begins to tremble. Beatrice, however, represents more than love. In the scheme of the poem she is divine revelation and grace.
- The rich and bright colours used here express Dante's double delight. He is reunited with his lady-love, and at the same time is experiencing a revelation of the divine.



William Blake (1757-1827), *The Deity, from whom proceed the Nine Spheres*, (illustration from *Divine Comedy, Paradiso XXVIII*), 1824-7, Ashmolean Museum

- In Paradise Beatrice has replaced Virgil as Dante's guide. They are now close to God, and so nearly at the end of their journey.
- This picture shows the angels arranged in concentric circles of light around the deity. Beatrice explains to Dante that the closer to God they stand, the brighter and the more powerful they are. God at the center is depicted as a bearded old man resembling Urizen. The angels (somewhat like the staff in the hierarchy of a Japanese company) grow older as they get closer to God, although immediately beside Him are the younger Cherubim and Seraphim.
- Blake died while working on this commission, so this picture, which comes from the end of Dante's trilogy, remains an unfinished sketch. The loss is less than it might be since Blake (like Gustave Dore and other artists who have illustrated Dante) found that Purgatory and Paradise offer much less interesting subject matter than Hell with all its perverse and bizarre punishments.



Summary of Blake's Life as a Journey Round London

- William Blake was a Londoner. Born in Soho in 1757, he died off the Strand nearly seventy years later. Except for three years by the Sussex seaside, Blake spent his entire life in the capital. Though he loathed its misery and darkness, it was only in London, he wrote, that he could 'carry on his visionary studies...see visions, dream dreams'.
1. [28 Broad Street](#) (1757)
 2. [St James's Church](#) (1757), Piccadilly - Blake was christened in this Wren church on December 11, 1757. By rights, however, the ceremony should have taken place in the Blakes' own parish church of St. Anne's Soho (Wardour Street), since St. James's was in fact in the next-door parish of Westminster. Given Blake's scorn for Newton, it is an irony that this church is diagonally opposite the philosopher's London residence in Jermyn Street.
 3. [Mr Par's Drawing School in the Strand](#) (1767-1771) - The former site of Mr Par's drawing school at the corner of Agar Street and King William (William IV) Street, The Strand. In 1767, at the age of ten, Blake was sent to Mr. Pars' drawing school, where he stayed for four years copying plaster-casts. Pars' drawing school was located on the North Side of the Strand in Castle Court. The address no longer exists as the court was demolished in Regency times.
 4. [31 Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn](#) (1772/3-1778) - where William Blake served his apprenticeship. Located on what is now Great Queen Street, Covent Garden. He drew in [Westminster Abbey](#) where he saw visions.
 5. [Royal Academy, New Somerset House](#) (1779) – he became a student but disagreed with Joshua Reynolds's teaching.

6. [St Mary's Battersea](#) (1782) - Blake was married to Catherine Boucher here on 17 August, 1782. Catherine, whose family lived nearby, was twenty-one at the time, Blake twenty-five. They remained married for forty-five years until Blake's death, Catherine 'uncomplainingly and helpfully sharing the low and rugged fortunes which over-originality insured as his unvarying lot'. On his deathbed, Blake cried out to her '**Stay! Keep as you are! You have ever been an angel to me**'. Catherine died in 1831.
7. [Green Street, Leicester Square](#) (1782-84, now Irving Street) After his marriage in 1782, Blake moved out of the parental home in Broad Street to lodgings in Green Street, off the South-East corner of Leicester Square. Gilchrist reports that Blake's father, angered by his son's humble marriage, had in fact expelled him from the house. In the late eighteenth century Leicester Square was a fashionable residence for artists, and both Hogarth and Sir Joshua Reynolds had lived there. Blake and his wife, Catherine, resided here for just two years before returning to Broad Street when Blake's father died in the summer of 1784.
8. [27 Broad Street](#) (1784-87) - on Blake senior's death in 1784, the eldest son James took over the hosiery business at No. 28 Broad Street, while William moved back to No. 27 next door. Here he set up as a print seller in partnership with James Parker, an expert in mezzotint. Both families lived together above the shop. Despite a boom in print-making and print-selling, this venture lasted only three years before Blake dissolved the partnership and moved around the corner to Poland Street. 27 Broad Street no longer survives. The street has been renamed Broadwick Street, and on the site there now rises a block of high rise apartments, William Blake House.
9. [28 Poland Street](#) (1787-1791) - It was at 28 Poland Street that William Blake invented his revolutionary print making technique allowing him to combine text with image and create the works for which he is best known.
10. [13 Hercules Buildings](#) (1791-1800) - Blake lived in No. 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth for the most productive years of his life, from 1791 until 1800. It was demolished in 1918. When Blake arrived it was a pleasant rural area but quickly changed into a disease infested slum.
11. Felpham, Sussex (1800-03) Blake had lived on the Sussex seaside at the village of Felpham.
12. [17 South Molton Street](#) (1803-1821) - he returned to this house near Tyburn (Marble Arch) where public hangings took place. In this house he was to suffer his bitterest disappointments. Fame and financial success continued to elude him, and he sank into poverty and paranoia.
13. [Fountain Court, The Strand](#) (1821-27) - Blake lived in two rooms on the first floor of No. 3 Fountain Court, a red brick house, from 1821 until his death in 1827. He was very poor, and frankly admitted that 'he lived in a hole'. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that 'God had a beautiful mansion for him elsewhere'. It was here that Blake produced his Illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and his

Illustrations to *The Book of Job*. Fountain Court no longer exists, but was just situated behind the Coal Hole Tavern on the Strand which still stands, albeit rebuilt.

14. [Bunhill Fields](#) - Blake died on August 12, 1827, and was buried here in the Dissenters' Graveyard at Bunhill Fields on Friday August 17. Blake's father and beloved brother Robert had also been buried there, as had the writers John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe. Blake was buried in an unmarked grave. Bunhill Fields is north of the Barbican.

NEXT WEEK

Joseph Mallord William Turner

