William Blake, painter and poet

Garnett Richard
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Author: Garnett Richard

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When the morning Stars sang together, & all the Sons of God shouted for joy.
WILLIAM BLAKE

PAINTER AND POET

By

RICHARD GARNETT, LL.D.

Keeper of the Printed Books in the British Museum

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WILLIAM BLAKE

CHAPTER I

Preliminary observations—Blake's Birth—Education—Marriage—Early Poems—Drawings and Engravings.

The position of William Blake among artists is exceptional. Of no other painter of like distinction, save Dante Rossetti, can it be said that his fame as a poet has fully rivalled his fame as a painter; much less that, in the opinion of some, his fame as a seer ought to have exceeded both. Many painters, from Reynolds downwards, have written admirably upon art; in some instances, notably Haydon's, the worth of their precepts greatly exceeds that of their performance. But, Rossetti always excepted, perhaps no other painter of great distinction, save Michael Angelo alone, has achieved high renown in poetry, and the compass of Michael Angelo's poetical work is infinitesimal in comparison with his work as an artist. Again, the literary achievements of an Angelo or a Reynolds admit of clear separation from their performances as artists. The critic who approaches them from the artistic side may, if he pleases, omit the literary side entirely from consideration. This is impossible with Blake, for not only do the artistic and the poetical monuments of his genius nearly balance each other in merit and in their claim upon the attention of posterity, but they are the offspring of the same creative impulse, and are indissolubly fused together by the process adopted for their execution. A study of Blake, therefore, must include more literary discussion than would be allowable in a monograph on any other artist. The poet and painter in Blake, moreover, are but manifestations of the
more comprehensive character of seer, which suggests inquiries alien to
both these arts; while the personal character of the man is so fascinating,
and his intellectual character so perplexing, that the investigation of either
of them might afford, and often has afforded, material for a prolonged
discussion. In the following pages it will be our object, whenever com-
pelled to quit the safe ground of biographical narrative, to subordinate all
else to the consideration of Blake as an artist; but the Blake of the brush
is too emphatically the Blake of the pen to be long dissociated from him,
and neither can be detached from the background of abnormal visionary
faculty.

From a certain point of view, artists may be regarded as divisible into
three classes: those who regard the material world as an unquestionable solid
reality, whose accurate representation is the one mission of Art; those to
whom it is a mere hieroglyphic of an essential existence transcending it;
and those who, uniting the two conceptions, are at the same time idealists
and realists. The greatest artists generally belong to the latter class, and
with reason, for a literal adherence to matter of fact almost implies defect
of imagination; while an extravagant idealism may be, to say the least,
a convenient excuse for defects of technical skill. It is difficult to know
whether to class the works of the very greatest artists as realistic or
idealistic. Take Albert Dürer's Melancholia. It is a hieroglyph, a
symbol, an expression of something too intense to be put into words; a
delineation of what the painter beheld with the inner eye alone. Yet
every detail is as correct and true to fact as the most uninspired Dutch-
man could have made it. Take Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne, and
observe how separate details which the artist may have actually noticed,
are combined into a whole which has never been beheld, save by the
spiritual vision, since the last thyrsus was brandished by the last Mænad.
Yet, though the creators of such scenes are the greatest, some realists,
such as Velasquez, have in virtue of surpassing technical execution asserted
a nearly equal rank. The case is different when we come to the enthu-
siasts and visionaries, whose art is wholly symbolic, who have given us
little that can be enjoyed as art for art's sake, without reference to the
ideas of which it is made the vehicle. In many very interesting artists, such
as Wiertz and Calvert and Vedder, and in many isolated works of great
masters, such as Giorgione's *Venetian Pastoral*, the feeling is so much in excess of the execution—admirable as this may be—that the result is rather a poem than a picture. But only one artist who has deliberately made himself the prophet of this tendency, who has avowedly and defiantly discarded all purpose from his works save that of spiritual suggestiveness, seems to have ever been admitted as a candidate for very high artistic honours, and he is our countryman, William Blake.

This circumstance alone should render Blake an interesting object of study, even for those who can see no merit in his works: indeed, the less the merit the more remarkable the phenomenon. He is, moreover, a most peculiar and enigmatical character, both intellectually and morally. As an art critic he is of all the most dogmatic, trenchant, and revolutionary. As a poet, were nineteen-twentieths of his compositions to be discarded as rubbish, lyrics would remain not only exquisite in themselves, but possessing the incommunicable and Sapphic quality that a single stanza, even a single phrase, would often suffice to make the writer immortal. The question of his sanity is as well adapted to furnish the world with an interminable subject of discussion as the execution of Charles I. or the assassination of Caesar. Finally, it is very significant that while no man ever wilfully put more obstacles into the way of his success than Blake, whether as artist, thinker, or poet, and he did in fact succeed in condemning himself to poverty and obscurity, the verdict of his contemporaries is now so far reversed that the drawings which a kind friend overpaid, as he thought, at fifty guineas, are worth a thousand pounds.

What manner of man was he to whose shade the world has made this practical apology?

William Blake was born on November 28th,¹ 1757, at 28, Broad Street, Golden Square. By a singular coincidence this was the very year which a still more celebrated mystic, Swedenborg, had announced as that of the Last Judgment in a spiritual sense, which was by no means to preclude the world from going on in externals pretty much as usual. Blake's father, James Blake, was a hosier in moderately prosperous circumstances, whose father is stated by Blake's most elaborate commentators, Messrs.

¹ November 20 has been stated as the date, but the above is shown to be correct by the horoscope drawn for November 28, 7:45 P.M. in *Urania, or the Astrologer's Chronicle*, 1825, published therefore in Blake's lifetime, and undoubtedly derived from Varley.
Ellis and Yeats, to have been originally named O'Neil, and to have assumed his wife's name as a means of escape from pecuniary difficulties. This wife, however, was not the mother of James. This genealogy is not supported by any strong authority, and is at variance with another, also indifferently supported, according to which the artist's family were connected with the admiral's. We must leave the question where we find it, merely remarking that Blake's parents were certainly Protestants, and that we can detect no specifically Irish trait in his character or his works. He had three brothers—one, James, mild and unassuming like his father; another, Robert, who died young, apparently with more affinity to William; the third, John, a scapegrace. There was also a sister who never married, and is described as a thorough gentlewoman, reserved and proud. None of the family except William and Robert seem to have shown any artistic talent. With William it must have been precocious, for, ere he had attained the age of ten, his father, who as a small tradesman might rather have been expected to have thwarted the boy's inclinations, placed him at "Mr. Pars' drawing school in the Strand." Here he learned to draw from plaster casts—the life was denied him—and with the aid of his father and a friendly auctioneer collected prints, then to be picked up cheap, showing from the very first, as he afterwards related, a complete independence of the pseudo-classic taste of the day. At four he had had his first vision, when "God put his forehead to the window, which set him screaming." At eight or ten he saw a tree filled with angels, and angelic figures walking among haymakers. "The child is father to the man."

At the age of fourteen Blake was apprenticed to the engraver Basire. Ryland had been thought of, but Blake, according to a story which he must have narrated, but may not improbably have imagined, demurred, declaring that the fashionable engraver looked as if he would one day be hanged, as he actually was. Basire's practice lay chiefly in engraving antiquities, and the last five years of Blake's apprenticeship were chiefly spent in drawing tombs and architectural details in Westminster Abbey a most advantageous discipline, which imbued his mind with the Gothic spirit, an influence already in the air, evincing itself in Götz von Berlichingens, Rowley Poems, Percy Relics, and Castles of Otranto; and, by directing him to English history and Shakespeare, powerfully