What William Blake called his “Spiritual Life” was as varied, free, and dramatic as his “Corporeal Life” was simple, limited, and unadventurous. His father was a London tradesman. His only formal education was in art; at the age of ten he entered a drawing school, and later he studied for a time at the school of the Royal Academy of Arts. At fourteen he entered an apprenticeship for seven years to a well-known engraver, James Basire, and began reading widely in his free time and trying his hand at poetry. At twenty-four he married Catherine Boucher, daughter of a market gardener. She was then illiterate, but Blake taught her to read and to help him in his engraving and printing. In the early and somewhat sentimentalized biographies, Catherine is represented as an ideal wife for an unorthodox and impetuous genius. Blake, however, must have been a trying domestic partner, and his vehement attacks on the torment caused by a possessive, jealous female will, which reached their height in 1793 and remained prominent in his writings for another decade, probably reflect a troubled period at home. The couple was childless.

The.Blakes for a time enjoyed a moderate prosperity while Blake gave drawing lessons, illustrated books, and engraved designs made by other artists. When the demand for his work slackened, Blake in 1800 moved to a cottage at Felpham, on the Sussex seacoast, to take advantage of the patronage of the wealthy amateur of the arts and biographer William Hayley (also a supporter of Charlotte Smith), who with the best of narrow intentions tried to transform Blake into a conventional artist and breadwinner. But the caged eagle soon rebelled. Hayley, Blake wrote, “is the Enemy of my Spiritual Life while he pretends to be the Friend of my Corporeal.”

At Felpham in 1803 occurred an event that left a permanent mark on Blake’s mind and art—an altercation with one John Schofield, a private in the Royal Dragoons. Blake ordered the soldier out of his garden and, when Schofield replied with threats and curses against Blake and his wife, pushed him the fifty yards to the inn where he was quartered. Schofield brought charges that Blake had uttered seditious statements about king and country. Because England was at war with France, sedition was a hanging offense. Blake was acquitted—an event, according to a newspaper account, “which so gratified the auditory that the court was... thrown into an uproar by their noisy exclamations.” Nevertheless Schofield, his fellow soldier Cock, and other participants in the trial haunted Blake’s imagination and were enlarged to demonic characters who play a sinister role in Jerusalem. The event exacerbated Blake’s sense that ominous forces were at work in the contemporary world and led him to complicate the symbolic and allusive style by which he veiled the radical religious, moral, and political opinions that he expressed in his poems.

The dominant literary and artistic fashion of Blake’s youth involved the notion that the future of British culture would involve the recovery, through archaeology as well as literary history, of an all but lost past. As an apprentice engraver who learned to draw by sketching the medieval monuments of London churches, Blake began his artistic career in the thick of that antiquarianism. It also informs his early lyric poetry. Poetical Sketches, published when he was twenty-six, suggests Blake’s affinities with a group of later eighteenth-century writers that includes Thomas Warton, poet and student of Middle English romance and Elizabethan verse; Thomas Gray, translator from Old Icelandic and Welsh and author, in 1757, of “The Bard,” a poem about the English conquest of Wales; Thomas Percy, the editor of the ballad collection Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765); and James Macpherson, who came before the public in the 1760s claiming to be the translator of the epic verse of a third-century Gaelic bard named Ossian. Like these figures, Blake located the sources of poetic inspiration in an archaic native tradition that, according to the prevailing view of national history, had ended up eclipsed after the seventeenth century, when French court culture, manners, and morals began their cultural ascendancy. Even in their orientation to a visionary culture, the bards of Blake’s later Prophetic Books retain an association with this imagined version of a primitive past.

Poetical Sketches was the only book of Blake’s to be set in type according to customary methods. In 1788 he began to experiment with relief etching, a method that he called “illuminated printing” (a term associating his works with the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages) and used to produce most of his books of poems. Working directly on a copper plate with pens, brushes, and an acid-resistant medium, he wrote the text in reverse (so that it would print in the normal order) and also drew the illustration; he then etched the plate in acid to eat away the untreated copper and leave the design standing in relief. The pages printed from such plates were colored by hand in watercolors, often by Catherine Blake, and stitched together to make up a volume. This process was laborious and time-consuming; and Blake printed very few copies of his books; for example, of Songs of Innocence and of Experience only twenty-eight copies of some of them incomplete) are known to exist; of The Book of Thel, sixteen; of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, nine; and of Jerusalem, five.

To read a Blake poem without the pictures is to miss something important: Blake places words and images in a relationship that is sometimes mutually enlightening and sometimes turbulent, and that relationship is an aspect of the poem’s argument. In this mode of relief etching, he published Songs of Innocence (1789), then added supplementary poems and printed Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794). The two groups of poems represent the world as it is envisioned by what he calls “two contrary states of the human soul.”

Gradually Blake’s thinking about human history and his experience of life and suffering articulated themselves in the “Giant Forms” and their actions, which came to constitute a complete mythology. As Blake’s mythical character Los said, speaking for all imaginative artists, “I must Create a System or be enslaved by another Man’s.” This coherent but constantly altering and enlarging system composed the subject matter first of Blake’s “minor prophecies,” completed by 1795, and then of the major prophetic books on which he continued working until about 1820: The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem.

In his sixties Blake gave up poetry to devote himself to pictorial art. In the course of his life, he produced hundreds of paintings and engravings, many of them illustrations for the work of other poets, including a representation of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrimage, a superb set of designs for the Book of Job, and a series of illustrations of Dante, on which he was still hard at work when he died. At the time of his death, Blake was
Blake's first attempt to articulate his full myth of humanity's present, past, and future was The Four Zoas, begun in 1796 or 1797. A passage from the opening statement of its theme exemplifies the long verse line (what Blake called "the march of long resounding strong heroic verse") in which he wrote his Prophetic Books and will serve also to outline the Books' vision:

Four Mighty Ones are in every Man; a Perfect Unity Cannot Exist, but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden, The Universal Man. To Whom be Glory Evermore, Amen. . . .

Los was the fourth immortal starry one, & in the Earth
Of a bright Universe Empery attended day & night
Days & nights of revolving joy, Urthona was his name
In Eden; in the Auricular Nerves of Human life
Which is the Earth of Eden, his he Emanations propagated. . . .

Daughter of Beulah, Sing
His fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity.

The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness

The Argument. As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences. This faculty I treat of.

1. This and the following two selections are early illuminated works, probably etched in 1788. They are directed both against 19th-century Deism, or "natural religion" (which bases its religious tenets not on scriptural revelation but on evidences of God in the natural or "organic" world), and against Christian orthodoxy, whose creed is based on a particular Scripture. In this selection Blake ironically accepts the Deistic view that all particular religions are varieties of the one true religion but rejects the Deists' "Argument" that this religion is grounded on reasoning from sense experience. He attributes the one religion instead to the innate possession by all people of "Poetic genius," i.e., of a capacity for imaginative vision.

2. Applied in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 3:3) to John the Baptist, regarded as fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 39:3. Blake applies the phrase to the story of his own life in a double sense: that he was the "forerunner" of the 'New Religion' of his time and that he was the "voice in the wilderness" of the spirit of prophecy before the Kingdom of God was established on earth. (The prophecies to the 18th century being religious revolutions, and the Kingdom of God a realization of Blake's own conception of the "Universal Man."
There Is No Natural Religion

[a]

The Argument. Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to Sense.

I. Man cannot naturally perceivé but through his natural or bodily organs.

II. Man by his reasoning power can only compare & judge of what he has already perceivé'd.

III. From a perception of only 3 senses or 3 elements none could deduce a fourth or fifth.

IV. None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions.

V. Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceivé'd.

VI. The desires & perceptions of man, untaught by any thing but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense.

Conclusion. If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philospophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.

1788