Chapter-1

William Blake: A Forerunner of English Romanticism
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Romanticism was born in England towards the end of the eighteenth century and it was immediately recognized as a new consciousness and a new school of thought. It had not much to do with things widely considered as "romantic," (the word as it is used in a literal sense) even though love has been quite frequently the theme of Romantic art and literature. Rather, it was a worldwide artistic and philosophical movement that redefined the basic traditions in the light of which people in Western cultures thought about themselves and observed their world. While romantic poetry can, for sure, be about ‘romance’ and about everything that this term means and suggests, in its most general sense, romantic poetry can be about practically anything and the expression ‘romantic’ is related more to the style, attitude and world view of the poet than to any definite subject matter. The movement did not come from nowhere. It was an upshot of a long historical progression. It was a reaction to its own past but at the same time this movement embraced with open arms all that it found glorious and majestic in both the ancient as well as the recent history. Romanticism had its background in the political and social mayhem of varied shades. This time of history was witness to the Seven Years of War (a global military conflict between 1756 and 1763, involving most of the great powers of the time and affecting Europe, North America, Central America, the West African coast, India, and the Philippines), The French and Indian War (1775-1763), The American Revolution (1775-1783), and the great event called The French Revolution (1775-1783). It saw the burgeoning of the Industrial Revolution and experienced so many other private and public upheavals. This period of history which is generally known as Romantic era produced a literature which reflected its milieu in the fullest measure possible and
the label ‘romantic’ came to be associated with all most all the writers writing at that point of time in history. The writers of this era were true representatives of their age as they balanced their finely tuned historical awareness with the present and now. Romanticism as a term has proved to be mystifying, as it is difficult to define it precisely and to locate the exact period to which it can be applied. There are as many definitions of the term as the number of critics. There have been thousands of excellent definitions or characterizations of what “Romantic” means in literature, etc., but none of them truly explains it comprehensively or convincingly. There are always works or authors who are in general considered “Romantic” but they don’t fit a particular pattern. Sometimes it seems that we can only speak about Romanticisms. However, the fact of evading any explicit definition does not divest it of its richness and depth. This only shows the magnificence, glory and the vigor of the romantic mode of thinking and writing. Maurice Bowra tries to clear the mist by saying:

The word “Romantic” has been used so often and for so many purposes that it is impossible to confine it to any single meaning, still less to attempt a new definition of it. Let it suffice that it is applied to a phase of English poetry which began in 1789 with Blake’s Songs of Innocence and ended with the death of Keats and Shelley. This at least fixes a historical period, and there is no great quarrel about calling it the “Romantic age.” In its five major poets, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, despite many differences, agreed on the vital point: that the creative imagination is closely connected with a peculiar insight into an unseen order behind visible things.1

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Romanticism was a rejection of the grounds of reason, calm, restraint, decorum, mechanism, moderation, balance, stability, uniformity, universality, order, rationality and abstract thought which were characteristic features of neoclassicism or the age of reason of eighteenth century. It stood for liberty from all kinds of subjugation to rules and regulations, and the poets were left to delight freely in their romantic fancy. It paved the way for wonder and enchantment and heralded the dawn of a new way of observing life not by the modes of regulation, lucidity and tranquility, but by the means of enthusiasm and emotional gusto. It was a shift from theoretical interpretation to psychological investigation, from strict obedience of rules to individual freedom of expression and in other words from imitation to innovation. Enlightenment ideology thought of the world as a mechanical apparatus ruled by logical law. Romantic ideology envisioned the world on the model of a living organism which can be felt and intuited. Eighteenth century literary culture gave preference to the satirical mode, poetic diction, and rhymed couplet. It distrusted originality and imitated established models. It disapproved and held in disdain primitive and exotic societies and preferred present civilization in contrast to the past. The Augustan conception of the poet was that a poet is not more than a producer of objects. They could not think of a poet as a prophet, visionary, or seer. Poets used their wit to enliven their art and they paid minute attention to the world around them and created emblematic images easily understood by a collective, common perception. These images, drawn from the life, provided examples for teaching and improving the world in which they lived.

Changes in the social order, inaugurated in the 18th century and enduring into nineteenth century, brought about the Romantic Movement. It started as a reaction against the intellectualism of the Enlightenment and against the stiffness of social
structures which were built to defend the privilege enjoyed by a particular class of people. It registered a strong protest against the avarice of an age which, in the initial stages of the Industrial Revolution, already demonstrated signs of making labourers the servants of technology and of creating filthy urban environments. Romantic writers strongly resisted the onslaught of eighteenth century philosophy and literature on the minds and imagination of people. Whatever they saw as drab and arid in the thought process of past ages, they rejected and replaced with new thinking. The Romantics opposed Enlightenment because it hindered free play of emotions and creativity. Like Jean Jacques Rousseau, who was a major Genevan philosopher, writer, and composer of 18th-century Romanticism, the Romantics craved for human freedom. In turning inwards and relying on the voice of inner conscience, Romanticism followed Rousseau and also incorporated his identification of the natural as the locus of truth and authenticity. Rousseau had started the “back to nature” movement some years before the blossoming of Romantic Movement in England, arguing that civilization was accountable for mankind’s wretchedness, an argument that seems more relevant in our day. Under his impact Romanticism evolved as a strong resistance to the pressures of metropolitan modernization. Rousseau who was a high priest of romanticism constantly contrasted nature with civilization, exalting the former and denouncing the latter. He provided a philosophical background to Romanticism as it evolved as a principal force in nineteenth century. An early German influence came from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* had such a strong influence on the young men across the Europe that they started comparing themselves with its protagonist, a young artist with a very sensitive and passionate disposition. Owing to the romantic philosophy reason was discarded in favor of imagination as it was
thought that reason reduces man to a mere machine. Literature of imitation which characterized the past ages gave way to the literature of expression. There was a drastic change in the lexis and diction found in the writings of old writers as the new writers were in search of fresh possibilities which language was capable of. Language of intellect gave way to the language of spirit. In fact a new literary terminology was born in the hands of the writers who saw themselves at loggerheads with their preceding age. In tracing the changes in metaphors related to the artistic creation from Neoclassicism to Romanticism M.H. Abrams aptly writes:

The change from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues, was not an isolated phenomenon. It was an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology---that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in the perception which was current among romantic poets and critics. And the movement from eighteenth - to early nineteenth - century schemes of the mind and its place in nature is indicated by a mutation of metaphors almost exactly parallel to that in contemporary discussions of the nature of art.²

The new movement valued subjectivity, individuality, the emotions, the visions, spontaneity and the transcendental. It laid a greater emphasis on the concept of imagination accompanied with intuition, instincts and feelings. The romantic disposition responded to emotions rather than reason. It was excited by unknown rather than persuaded by lucid and logical worldly matters. It catered more zealously to the individual conscience than to the demands of society, and favored revolution to approval. The belief in man's creative potential grew stronger. Man came to be seen

as a demigod who with the power of his imagination can transform inanimate entities into animate entities. The mind no longer was thought as a passive receptor but an active creator. The ability of a poet to work wonders with the simple tools of language was attributed to a special faculty called imagination. In fact, all the writers of Romantic era held the faculty of imagination in high esteem. The poet critics such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley elaborated in detail on the minutest nuances of imagination as a creative faculty and before them Blake had written in detail about the power of imagination in both his poetry and letters. In the words of Maurice Bowra: “If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it.”

Romanticism strongly pleaded for return to nature. The movement believed in goodness of human race, and rediscovered the artist as a supremely individual creator. The poet came to be seen as a solitary being with a keen and intense perception believing in the workings of his own mind. His confidence in his own self grew to immense heights. The romantic poet had such a great assurance about the potency of his creative powers that he thought he is the only one who can endow a common man with a vision to see what lies beyond mundane, this worldly affairs. The romantic poet saw himself essentially as a creator helping his audience to get an insight into the depths of reality:

The Romantics knew that their business was to create, and through creation to enlighten the whole sentient and conscious self of man, to wake his imagination to the reality which lies behind or in familiar things, to rouse him from the deadening routine of custom and unfathomable depths, to make him

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The Romantic Imagination, p. 1.
see that mere reason is not enough and that what he needs is inspired intuition.\(^4\)

Some of the other main characteristics of this movement were interest in the common man, childhood, rural life, gothic, folk tales, old legends, pristine nature, rustics etc. Patriotism was an important factor in the Romantic Movement, and many authors turned to folk tales and indigenous mythologies as source material and exulted in the cultural richness of their respective countries. They rejoiced in their own past when their nations were an epitome of glory and majesty. A return to the aesthetics and ethos of the medieval epoch also featured robustly in the Romantic sensibility. It went back in time in order to construct a particular relationship with the mythic past.

The Romantic Movement had its roots in an altered attitude towards human kind. For many writers of this age something radically new was happening in the world affairs. The world was changing to a different order quite distinct from the previous centuries. The eighteenth century aesthetics saw the poet as a spokesman of his society addressing a cultivated audience and directing them towards truth of general nature. The romantics found the material for their poetry in particular and unique experience. Romantic poetry was a response to the classical, contemplative poetry of neoclassicism. Neoclassical literature made use of classical model, tried to imitate nature, laid emphasis on moral categories and didacticism. Romanticism presents us with dreamlike world and rejoices in myth. It defies ordinary moral categories. Romanticism celebrates the fundamental forces of nature, depicting nature as out of control. With it nature becomes an object of contemplation, not, as it had been, something either to keep away from or to be in charge of. When the unmanageable

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 24.
nature is compared to life, it makes people think life should be uncontainable; life should be incessantly on the edge. Poetry came to be regarded as having its own ingrained truth and the sincerity of a poet was given supreme importance. They believed in living life to its lees, and to live with enthusiasm and vigor was to be one with the living God. Life came to be seen as a gift from God to be cherished and valued. Poetry came to be thought as something ephemeral coloring human life with a visionary gleam. According to Harold Bloom, "... the Romantic assertion is not just an assertion; it is a metaphysic, a theory of history, and much more important than either of these, it is what all of the Romantics - but Blake in particular – called a vision, a way of seeing, and of living, a more human life."[5]

One can trace strong influences of the American and French revolutions on the movement, because the revolutionary energy was at the core of Romanticism. It can be taken as a synonym for rebellion. Romanticism rejected absolute systems of philosophy, politics and religion, and favored the idea of each person creating a subjective system. It strongly opposed all the organizations which thought that their doctrines and fundamentals were the only truths to be followed and obeyed. The romantics believed that Nature has invested every person with the knack to create his own world and exult in his own potential. Romantics showed distrust towards society because they believed it to be essentially corrupt and artificial. The false civilization of the modern world came to be seen as a greatest threat to the essential blessedness of humankind. They pleaded for the change in social world to make men happier. Many reforms like healthier treatment of the people in detention centers, less death penalties for minor crimes, and an increase in altruistic institutions, were

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recommended. They stated that every person has right to life, liberty, and equal opportunity. Romanticism was a democratic movement where every individual came to be regarded as indispensable for the whole community of mankind. For Romanticists the simple and humble life was the best. The movement was inherently anti-progress if progress meant setting up factories and industries and ruining nature. Romantics believed in the natural goodness of humans which is spoiled by the urban life of civilization. They believed that the man who lives in the lap of nature all the time, for all intents and purposes, is noble as he regularly interacts with the elemental forces of nature. The romantics also took a great interest in supernatural and paranormal. They had a fascination for the mysterious and the unreal. They were fond of writing about ghosts, fairies etc. The unconscious mind got its way into the creative endeavors and the dreams and reveries were given their due importance. Romanticism believed that there were crucial areas of experience neglected by the rational mind. Poets started emphasizing on the childlike and primitive view of the world.

Romantics grew steadily as a group sharing ideas and beliefs. No one particular Romantic writer expressed all these ideas, but each believed enough of them to set him apart from earlier writers. Before the Romantic Movement burst into full expression there were beginners and experimenters. Progressively independent of aristocratic patronage, they saw themselves as liberated spirits expressing their own imaginative truths. The controlled equilibrium valued in 18th-century culture was cast off in support of emotional intensity, often taken to extremes of ecstasy. Nostalgia for childhood and the past, horror, melancholy, or sentimentality came to be valued. Some of these Pre-Romantic writers cultivated the taste for the unusual, the strange, or the morbid. Almost all of them showed a new interest in the irrational realms of dream and hallucination and of folk superstition and legend. The creative imagination
occupied the centre of their views of art, which replaced the ‘mechanical’ rules of
conventional form with an ‘organic’ principle of natural growth and free
development. James Thomson (1700-1748) took a deep interest in nature. His poem,
“The Seasons” (1730) evokes interest in the process of nature. He is awed by the
dreadful features of nature such as floods and storms. He as a poet paints the exquisite
pictures of landscape. He speaks in detail about the deep relation between man and
Nature in “The Seasons”. The extreme variety and beauty of Nature enchants him and
moves him profoundly. William Collins (1721-1759) had a great impact on almost all
the Romantic Poets. To him landscape gives birth to ideas and emotions. He is drawn
close to Nature at twilight. His “Ode to Evening” is the precursor of Keats’ “To
Autumn”. Romantic features such as a return to the past and anti-intellectualism may
be seen in his “Ode on Popular Superstitions”. Coleridge was greatly impressed with
the way Collins made use of Superstitions and classical legends. Thomas Gray (1716-
71) in his very famous poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” pays attention
to nature and humble life and these are the themes which were very dear to the
Romantic poets. Gray’s later poetry indicates the shift towards medieval literature and
Scandinavian folklore. His letters anticipate the Romantic love for scenery and nature.
He writes about the varied moods of nature in charming detail. Such descriptions
paved the way for Wordsworth’s memorable descriptions of nature. Robert Burns
(1759-1796) wrote love songs in which he celebrated love of nature and freedom. As
well as making original compositions, Burns also collected folk songs from across
Scotland, often revising or adapting them. Many of Burns’ most famous poems are
songs with the music based upon older traditional songs. He scorned false pretensions
of wealth and birth. He wrote in the dialect of common people and talked about
simple and familiar everyday matters. His songs are emotionally charged and they
resemble folk songs in their intensity. William Cowper (1731-1800) raged against the brutality of slavery and political oppression. He was a poet and a great exponent of hymns. He can be considered a transitional figure in English poetry whose works represent both eighteenth and nineteenth-century styles and concerns. Cowper continues to be regarded for the spontaneity and simplicity of his nature lyrics, the solemn, personal tone of his religious poetry, and the wit embodied in his satires and correspondence. He wrote about day to day life and highlighted the scenes of English landscape. William Godwin (1756-1836) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) were severe social critics and social rebels. Godwin attacked political institutions and detested aristocratic privilege. He was a proponent of mystery novel. Wollstonecraft was an advocate of women’s rights. She was one of the founding feminist philosophers and had an unorthodox life style. Mary Wollstonecraft was also the author of a remarkable Romantic work, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796). James Macpherson (1736-1796), a Scotsman, composed a detailed epic poem full of romantic vitality and passion. He collected Scottish Gaelic poetry and is accredited as the translator of Ossian cycle of poems. Macpherson produced works of literature which by their deep appreciation of natural beauty and the melancholy tenderness of their treatment of the ancient myth and legend did a lot to aid the Romantic Movement to grow and flourish. Thomas Percy (1729-1811) collected old English songs and ballads. His “Reliques of Ancient English Poetry” helped stimulate interest in the ballads and songs of medieval England. Its publication initiated a universal interest in earlier literary forms and exercised a great influence on the romantic poets in Germany as well as England. The *Reliques* consists of one hundred and eighty ballads in three volumes with three sections in each. It contains very important and famous ballads such as *The Ballad of*
Chevy Chase, The Battle of Otterburn, Lillibulleo, The Dragon of Wantle, The Nut-
Brown Maid and Sir Patrick Spens. Not only would it inspire poets such as Samuel
Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth to compose their own ballads in imitation,
it also made the collecting and study of ballads a popular activity. The book is also
credited, in part, with changing the current art movement of the 18th century, Neo-
Classicism, into Romanticism. The Reliques highlighted the traditions and folklore of
England seen as simpler and less artificial.

To give a definite direction to all this progress towards romanticism in England
came William Blake, who is by all critical standards the first great romantic. William
Blake grew up in a world that was going through remarkable changes. The second
half of the eighteenth century witnessed the initial stages of industrialization in Britain
which later culminated in the Industrial Revolution. Industrial Revolution was
responsible for making the plight of the poor and uneducated even more desolate and
desperate. Old, young and children all equally were constrained to work long hours in
factories, mills, and coalmines. They had to work under hazardous and appalling
conditions for a scanty remuneration. There were many significant events that
unfolded during Blake's early life outside his home land. The most important amongst
them were the American War of Independence in 1775 and the outbreak of the French
Revolution in 1789. These events appealed to Blake's political radicalism, for he
strongly believed in the liberation and freedom of the human spirit. Blake wrote
poems about both these historical events. Though it is tough to categorize Blake's
work in single genre he profoundly influenced the romantic poets with his recurring
themes of good and evil, heaven and hell, knowledge and innocence and external
reality in opposition to inner truth. Blake turned back to Elizabethan and early
seventeenth-century poets, and other eighteenth-century poets outside the tradition of
Alexander Pope and the Metaphysical school. He was quite different from the romantic writers who immediately came after him owing to the intensity of his visions and peculiar nature which earned him the epithet of being mad. He was considered mad for his seemingly eccentric views by his contemporaries, but later criticism regards Blake highly for his expressiveness and creativity, as well as the philosophical and mystical undercurrents within his work. His paintings and poetry can be characterized as part of both the Romantic Movement and "Pre-Romantic", for its mostly having appeared in the 18th Century. The seeds of romantic thought which later on blossomed into a vast garden in the hands of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats were all found in Blake’s poetry. Blake’s love of nature and childhood was taken to tremendous heights by Wordsworth and his revolutionary and mythological vision was shared by Shelley. The shades of his political awareness and his interest in the politics of his time found its adherent in Byron. Blake’s love of ideal beauty saw its great exponent in Keats. His prying into the mysteries of the familiar as well as unfamiliar world and his love for supernatural found its prophet in Coleridge. Though he was unique among romanticists, the transition from neoclassicism to romanticism comes full circle in his writings. The shift from neoclassicism to romanticism in his poetry is so smooth that it instills awe and wonder. As Harold Bloom says:

Blake preceded the other Romantics, and never identified himself with them...

All this aside, Blake and these others can be read more richly in each other’s company, for their problem, theme, and central resource are nearly as one. Though he began earlier, in the time of Cowper and Gray, the poetry of Blake
reaches further into the present than that of Wordsworth, and may be more prophetic of the future.\textsuperscript{6}

Many scholars are of the view that Romantic period began with the publication of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. \textit{Lyrical Ballads} (1798) was published with the aim to reject Augustan poetry and the authors gave more importance to direct speech derived from folk traditions. Both poets were also involved in utopian social thought in the wake of the French Revolution. But the host of other literary scholars situate the start of romantic period around 1785. They name Burns, Collins, Mary Wollstonecraft, Cowper, Thomas Percy etc. and especially mention Blake as the originator of Romanticism in England. Peter J. Kitson firmly believes that it is Blake who started the Romantic Movement in England.

By critical consensus the Romantic poets are the six male poets: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron. Together, it has been argued, they formed a literary and artistic movement known as ‘Romanticism’, which marked a profound shift in sensibility.\textsuperscript{7}

He further writes:

Traditionally Romanticism was seen to begin around the time of the Revolution in France and to develop certain stylistic and linguistic innovations. These innovations are reflected in the works of a number of writers. William Blake produced his prophetic and apocalyptic illuminated books during the 1790s. Blake’s personal vision, expressed in a highly

\textsuperscript{6} The Visionary company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry, p. 6.

symbolic language and form, was seen by many to inaugurate a new kind of revolutionary writing.⁸

However, Kitson accepts the fact that there is no critical consensus about the exact dates when this movement began in England.

Literary starting points for the romantic period are difficult to determine; however, the period is often described as covering the years between the 1780s and 1830s, although some critics may refer back to the 1760s and other forward to around 1850 as significant dates.⁹

All said and done William Blake stands out as a figure to be reckoned with in the history of both the poetry and visual arts of the English Romantic era. He was an individualist and this led to his isolation from society. He refused to compromise on the matters of personal and spiritual freedom for everyone. Blake searched for a spiritual reality and a truth that could only be achieved by taking help of feelings and the imagination and using these faculties to the utmost limit. He believed that man originated from a spiritual kingdom, and was born as a free spirit. It is because of the profoundly harmful influence from the earth itself, that man got ensnared in the limitations of his physical body and the five senses, which narrowed his ability for discernment. The only way to be freed from this confinement was by what he called "Imagination", the capacity to apprehend realities outside the prison of the corporeal world. Throughout his life Blake embraced the imagination as both divine and human reality. Blake’s internal world of imagination was a prime motivator for him throughout his life. His works are highly expressive and creative interspersed with

⁸ Ibid., p. 329.
⁹ Ibid., p. 327.
philosophical, mystical and spiritual thoughts. The greatest refuge for him was in the spiritual realm which for him was to be discovered living within the physical realities of this world. The muse who dictated to Blake was the inhabitant of the world of spirit. In the opinion of Northrop Frye, “To Blake, the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy; he harnessed spiritual power as an engineer harnesses water power and used it to drive his inspiration: he was a spiritual utilitarian.” He respected the Bible but opposed the Church of England. He was greatly influenced by the ideals and aspirations of the French and American Revolutions. The doctrines put forth by Jacob Bohme and Emanuel Swedenborg had a great impact on him. In fact he lived during a time of intense change. The changes at political, social, economic and cultural levels in his era gave Blake an opportunity to see the transformation of the western world from a practically feudal, agricultural society to an industrial society. He observed the changes which transformed the whole world order of his times very minutely. From the very childhood he saw England witnessing a radical alteration at political, social, economic and cultural level. He used his poetic gifts to echo the changes which took England of his times by storm. He lived his age in his works despite carving out his own unique way of expression. J. Bronowski has something pertinent to say:

William Blake is to me the poet whose work and whose life expresses most sensitively the moving changes of that age. He more than any other had the ambitions of simple men, spoke out of their difficult dilemmas, and suffered their neglect. His poetry and his designs belong to the Romantic Revival, and his life and his friends (as well as the men he hated) belong to the Industrial revolution. He was a man of new stamp, self taught, lonely, awkward, with

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none of the graces of the poets of the Augustan establishment; and he broke their formal tradition to pieces.\textsuperscript{11}

William Blake was born in London, where he spent most of his life. As a young boy he wandered the streets of London and could easily escape to the surrounding countryside. His early life was dominated by spiritual visions which influenced both his personal and professional life. As a young boy he had a most revealing vision of seeing angels and other supernatural beings. He used to have fantastic visions and asserted even having a direct vision of God. He would also in the later stage in his life claim that he had regular conversations with his deceased brother Robert. He used to dream about the great prophets of past ages. He lived as if in the company of fairies. Mona Wilson records: “When he was only four years old God ‘put his head to the window’ and set him a-screaming; angels walked among the hay-makers one summer morning, and Mrs. Blake saved him from his father’s wrath, when at the age of eight or so. he spoke of seeing a tree on Peckham Rye starred with angels, though she was less lenient to a latter vision of Ezekiel.”\textsuperscript{12} His parents were broadly sympathetic with his artistic temperament. They encouraged and supported his creative endeavors and thus began his education and development as an artist. He had early shown his curiosity and propensity for drawing, so at the age of ten, Blake entered Henry Pars’ drawing school. Then, at the age of fourteen he started a seven year apprenticeship with engraver James Basire, the authorized engraver to the society of Antiquaries. He was frequently sent out to create sketches and drawings of statues, paintings and monuments including those found in churches like Westminster Abbey. The passionate study of Gothic art and architecture appealed to the aesthetic sensibility of

Blake and brought out his zest for the Medieval. He also met some very famous figures from London’s intellectual circles during this time. He started work as an engraver at an early age and then attended the Royal Academy but owing to his rebellious nature found the atmosphere stifling and clashed with the academy’s founding members, especially Sir Joshua Reynolds. According to Peter J. Kitson, “...Blake decried the stultifying influence of those like Reynolds who prescribed rules for art.”

It was as a journeyman engraver that Blake earned his living. Booksellers engaged him to engrave illustrations for publications ranging from novels such as *Don Quixote* to serials such as *Ladies' Magazine*. Blake had a pure heart and spoke his mind freely, so much so that people thought of him as mad. He started writing poetry at the age of twelve, and in 1783 his friend paid for his first collection of verses to be printed, which was entitled *Poetical Sketches*. While Blake was busy with the host of things he was required to do as part of his commissions, he also undertook the assignment of creating the engravings that would illustrate his own poetry. Blake showed his disappointment from the very boyhood of his towards the current state of poetry and drabness of contemporary thought. His first work *Poetical Sketches* echoes influences from Spenser to the eighteenth century but at the same time it demonstrates his eagerness to experiment with the form and language of poetry. Northrop Frye states:

> Though not in the canon, ‘Poetical Sketches’ is of the highest importance to us, partly because it shows Blake’s symbolic language in an emergent and transitional form, and partly because it confirms our point that Blake is organically part of his literary age. Chatterton, Ossian, Goldsmith, Percy, Collins and to a lesser extent Thomson and Gray, Gothic horror, the charnel

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13 *English Literature in Context*, p. 316.
house and the graveyard, Primitivism, northern antiquities, oligarchic mercantilism, the renewed appreciation of Renaissance poetry, all find echoes of one kind or another here.¹⁴

It is an anthology of youthful verse and amid its conventional, imitative elements are indications of his latter original style and theme. Some of the poems contained in it have freshness, purity of vision and a lyric intensity one can hardly find in English poetry since the 17th century. These poems reveal the basic ideas characterizing the nineteenth century Romantic poetry.

_Poetical Sketches_ starts with a poem titled “To Spring”. This beautiful romantic poem is an apostrophe to spring. The poet praises spring for its beauty and for its benevolent effects on all living things. Poet calls spring holy and wants it to approach his land. Poet’s land is shorn and devoid of the feelings of love and he has full faith that the coming of spring will bring with it elements of love and passion. He addresses the Spring as a person with moist tresses who looks down on the earth through the clear windows of the morning. She turns her beatific eyes towards the western island, whose crowded life is full of songs and merriment. The hills around seem to communicate with each other and the valleys are listening peacefully with interest. All the inhabitants of the earth with their craving eyes turn up to her bright tent. Blake invites the season of Spring to come over to the Eastern Hills and let their seasonal winds kiss and feel her sweet smelling attire. Let all life on earth experience both her morning and evening breath. He wants her to disperse her pearls of natural beauty upon their yearning land which is in mourning. Blake passionately appeals to spring to decorate his love sick land with ornaments using her fair fingers. He appeals

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her to put the golden crown upon the languished head of his land which has undergone neglect and experienced prolonged apathy, suffering, hardship and distress. He wants spring to embrace and crown his land. The nature imagery of this poem is very subtle and beautiful:

Come o’er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumed garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our love-stricken land that mourns for Thee.¹⁵

The song ‘How Sweet I roamed from field to field’ is a lamentation on the loss of liberty. For Blake freedom is of utmost value. The hypocritical values of this world and the pretences with which people are laced make an innocent creature captive and mock his loss of freedom. This poem has been written in a romantic vain. Its diction is simple, setting is pastoral and emotions are part of the action. This poem is highly lyrical and generates a serene music. This poem has a correlation with its later counterpart, Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy”. The second stanza of this poem reads like:

He showed me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow.¹⁶

Keats writes in the same style and rhythm and as if emulates the structural simplicity of Blake’s Song in his “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy”:

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¹⁶ Ibid., P. 4.
I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.
I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song. 17

The poem “To the Muses” is an address to the muses of poetry. Blake laments the loss of good old spontaneous poetry. He laments that the muse has forsaken poets and left them devoid of the grace and majesty which it bestowed on old poets. The poetry has grown mechanical and dull. He shows his opposition to the neoclassical creed of dry, static and labored poetry. He praises the poetry of great ancient writers which is full of passionate feelings, sublime emotions and is spontaneous and natural. Wordsworth, many years after Blake in his famous Preface to Lyrical Ballads criticized the poetic diction employed by neoclassical writers. He like Blake was lamenting the loss of spontaneity and creativity in the poetry of the writers like Pope and Dryden. Blake quite in the same fashion as the author of the Preface wants a shift from the hackneyed style to a new and fresh style. He addresses to the Muse:

How have you left the ancient love
That bards of old enjoyed in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move!

The sound is forced, the notes are few.\textsuperscript{18}

"To Autumn" is a poem where Blake praises autumn for its fruits and flowers. It is a season of fulfillment. Autumn is the season when life itself is in full bloom. It is a season of ripeness. The imagery and the figures of speech employed by Blake are very apt and beautiful. The poem creates a romantic atmosphere and the poet exults in the sense of accomplishment that autumn has left the golden load of fruits and flowers.

The narrow bud opens her beauties to
The sun and love runs in her thrilling veins;
Blossoms hang round the brows of Morning, and
Flourish down the bright cheek of modest Eve,
Till clust'ring Summer breaks forth into singing,
And feather'd clouds strew flowers round her head.\textsuperscript{19}

This poem seems to be a forerunner of the Keats’ "Ode to Autumn". Keats in the same fashion as Blake writes:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

\textsuperscript{18}Blake's Poetry and Designs, P. 9.
\textsuperscript{19}ibid., p. 2.
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cell.20

“Fair Elenor” is a poem charged with supernatural atmosphere. This is a special example of Dark poetry and a dark themed poem. The forces of death and darkness run throughout the poem. It has a medieval touch and it is full of mystery and suspense. It reads like an old Gothic poem. This poem reminds us of Coleridge’s poems, especially “Christabel”.

The bell struck one, and shook the silent tower;
The graves give up their dead: Fair Elnor
Walked by the castle gate, and looked on.
A hollow groan ran thro’ the dreary vaults.21

The song ‘I love the jocund dance’ is a celebration of the feelings of love which the poet harbors for everything beautiful like dance, music, nature, beauty etc. His love of countryside and rural life is also evident in this poem. He sings like a child lost in meditating the beautiful landscape of countryside. The second stanza reads like:

I love the laughing vale,
I love the echoing hill,
Where mirth does never fail,
And the jolly swain laughs his fill.22

22 Blake’s Poetry and Design, p. 5.
The song “Memory hither come’ shows poet’s love for sorrow which is a typical romantic trait. The poet feeds on pure nature and exults in melancholy as it is food for his thought. This poem evokes a feeling of nostalgia as one is lead to think about the golden ages of the distant past when man used to live permanently in the company of nature and lived a life of perfect freedom and liberty at ease with the fundamental elements of nature.

I’ll drink of the clear stream,
And hear the linnet’s song;
And there I’ll lie and dream
The day along:
And when night comes, I’ll go
To places fit for woe,
Walking along the darken’d valley
With silent Melancholy. 23

After the bright dawn of Poetical Sketches came the Songs of Innocence (1789) and Songs of Experience (1794). In these songs the world is seen from a child’s point of view directly, simply and innocently. These songs demonstrate that a change has occurred in Blake’s political thought as well as in his literary expression. These songs have simple, sweet and powerful language. Their language and form are most strikingly original and it is very difficult to find one or their kind in the western literary tradition. They are a cause enough to regard Blake as one of the earliest and greatest figures of Romanticism. They differ radically from the seemingly imitative pastoral mode of Poetical Sketches. These songs remind us of popular street ballads

23 Ibid., p. 6.
and rhymes of children and are modeled on them but it is Blake’s superior intelligence and genius which helped him to transmute these forms into some of the purest lyrical poetry in English literature. These songs talk about the contraries of human nature and show Blake’s use of romantic themes and elements at the best. These songs contrast the innocent, pastoral world of childhood against an adult world of corruption and repression. Kitson says, “Blake’s concern with the dialectic of two stages of life, innocence and experience, through which the individual must pass has come to be regarded as a deeply Romantic Notion.” Songs of Innocence and Experience is the tangible expression of his conviction that innocence and experience are “the two contrary states of the human soul,” and it is experience only which makes true innocence possible. Songs of Innocence consists of poems either composed from the standpoint of children or written about them. Most of the poems appearing in Songs of Innocence have a counterpart in Songs of Experience, with quite a distinct view of the world. The disastrous consequences of the French Revolution caused Blake to lose faith in the goodness of humankind and it is this loss of certitude which explains much of the despair and cynicism found in Songs of Experience. Blake also believed that children lost their innocence through exploitation by religious organizations which valued dogma instead of mercy. He did not, however, believe that children should be kept from becoming experienced entirely. In fact, he believed that children should indeed become experienced but through their own discoveries, which is reflected in a number of these poems.

The very first poem of Songs of Innocence called “Introduction” shows Blake’s love for and interest in countryside, innocence (in the form of a child) and also his belief in the supreme power of imagination. Blake presents the poet in the form of a

24 English Literature in Context, p. 337.
simple shepherd. This poem gives Blake a status of a pioneer romantic poet. This poem emanates a spiritual glow as it deals with the happy, carefree and blissful child who symbolizes innocence in its very pure state. Blake is seen illuminating the qualities of the state of innocence. In this poem Blake is at his creative best. The poem itself is a plea for a spontaneous nature of writing. Poetry comes and descends on the imaginative faculty of a poet in the form of a song without any straining of intellect.

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me:

‘Pipe a song about a Lamb!’
So I piped with merry cheer.
‘Piper, pipe that song again.’
So I piped: he wept to hear.

‘Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
Sing thy songs of happy cheer:’
So I sung the same again,
While he wept with joy to hear.

‘Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book, that all may read.’
So he vanish’d from my sight;
And I pluck’d a hollow reed,
And I made a rural pen.
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.\textsuperscript{25}

"The Echoing Green" presents a pastoral world. The atmosphere is that of mutual love and understanding. The children are playing and happy in the lap of nature. The elder people are there to take care of them. Seeing them play they get nostalgic about their own childhood. This poem is in fact a detailed exploration of the cycle of life. What is happening on the Green will happen again as it is shown by the 'old folk' who watch the children and are reminded of their own childhood on the Green. The poet marvels at the God’s creation of children who are innocence incarnate. The first stanza sets the tone:

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the spring;
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells’ cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the Echoing green.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Blake's Poetry and Designs, P. 19.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 20.
Songs of Experience presents a vision contrary to Songs of Innocence. This book also opens with a poem called “Introduction”. Here the voice of the poet is that of the ancient Bard and that also of the biblical prophet who has heard the ‘Holy Word’, the word of God. The Bard reiterates the call of the Holy Word to fallen man. The message repeated by the Bard is that man still ‘might control’ the world of nature and bring back the ‘fallen light’ of vision. Blake believes that the concern for the substance led to the fall of man. The poet as well as God wants man to leave the world of materialism and turn once again to the world of imagination. For Blake imagination is a great rescuer. In the world of experience men tend to come under the sway of reason and hence lose their spirituality. Blake wants people to gain spirituality in order to unite again with the divine.

Hear the voice of the Bard,
Who present, past, and future, sees;
Whose ears have heard
The Holy Word
That walked among the ancient tree;

Calling the lapsed soul,
And weeping in the evening dew;
That might control
The starry pole,
And fallen, fallen light renew!

"O Earth, O Earth, return!
Arise from out the dewy grass!
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

"Turn away no more;
Why wilt thou turn away?
The starry floor,
The watery shore,
Is given thee till the break of day."  

"Earth’s Answer" is a poem where Earth responds back. She says that the selfish God of materialism has chained her and led her astray. The earth wants back the state of freedom and she beseeches the benevolent God to set her free from the chains of reason. Blake comes out as an advocate of free love. He detested clergy for stifling the natural love of man for woman. Here I quote the relevant lines from the poem.

...............  
Can delight,
Chained in night.
The virgins of youth and morning bear?  

"Break this heavy chain,
That does freeze my bones around!
Selfish, vain,
Eternal bane,
That free love with bondage bound.\textsuperscript{28}

"The Tygr" is a romantic revolutionary poem par excellence. Here the poet marvels at the acumen of God. He is surprised that God, who has made a ferocious animal like tiger, has also made an innocent creature like lamb. So, good and evil are the creation of the same power. Yet, how man understands God depends on man's view of God's divinity. Blake is building on the conventional thought that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a mirror image of its creator. The poem consists of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to awe at the sheer enormity of God's power, and the inscrutability of divine will. Blake's analysis is a variation on an old philosophical and theological question: Why does evil live on in a universe created and ruled by a munificent and compassionate God? Blake provides no answer. His task is to reflect reality in striking images. A poet's first intention, after all, is to present the world and its denizens in language that stimulates the aesthetic sense; he is not to exhort or moralize. The poem is more about the creator of the tiger than it is about the tiger itself. In contemplating the terrible ferociousness and awesome symmetry of the tiger, the speaker is at a loss to explain how the same God who made the lamb could make the tiger. Humans are incapable of fully understanding the mind of God and the mystery of his creation. Blake gives free flow to his romanticism and mysticism as he examines the metaphysics of creation and the ultimate union of good and evil in one being – be that God itself or its human manifestation.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,

\textsuperscript{28}ibid., p. 41.
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder, and what art.
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?
What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? ²⁹

The two short prose pieces “All Religions are One” and “There Is No Natural Religion” show Blake raging against the philosophy of Bacon, Newton and Locke. In “All Religions are One” Blake is seen rejecting the eighteenth century deism or natural religion which thought God’s existence can be discovered with the evidences found in the material world. Blake is of the view that the imaginative faculty alone helps us to reach God. It is the discovery of self which underlie all religions. This

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 49-50.
prose piece is an argument for the primacy of imagination over all metaphysical and moral systems. According to Blake all men are one in their imagination, so all the religions of the world are one in their essence. All religions of the world have a common source and a common goal. Through aphoristic pronouncements Blake campaigns for the fundamental harmony of all religions as expressions of the ‘Poetic Genius’ within all human beings. In “All Religions Are One,” Blake portrays the results of his quest for truth and outlines his faith in the universality of the Poetic Genius and other elements of his unique religious convictions. Blake criticizes all the institutions which believe in the difference of religions. He ousts reason from its supreme place and replaces it with imagination.

Blake says in Principle 1st:

That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius.  

In Principle 7th Blake says:

As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all Religions, as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.  

“There is no Natural Religion” consists of two series contradicting each other. In the first series Blake says men are physical and are limited by their senses. The first series employs irony as it satirizes Enlightenment philosophers for their undue emphasis on reason. In the first, Blake states basic principles, derived from the philosophy of John Locke and his followers, about physical perception, reason, and the limits of

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knowledge. The second series redefines and confutes the first and argues for the infinitude of spiritual perceptions. Blake is of the view that believing our senses and reason only, makes us dull and passive, and it is only poets and prophets who save us from this dry philosophy by opening the window into the world of imagination. In the second series Blake presents the point of view he himself believes in. He says that men perceive more than senses can discover and are infinite like God. He insists on Man’s potential infinitude. Blake believes that Man’s soul and his intuition helps him to see beyond the visible and the present. Man is the image of God itself because both are limitless. The only reason people believe in natural religion is that they are unwilling to believe in the unity of God and Man. In the second series of “There is No Natural Religion” Blake says:

Man’s perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover.  

Blake further states:

The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite.  

Finally Blake’s epic poems, prophetic books and prophecies are an amalgam of poetry, visionary prophecy and exhortation. They include The Book of Thel(1789), The French Revolution(1791), The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Vision of Daughters of Albion(1793), America, a Prophecy(1793), The First Book of Urizen(1794), Europe, a Prophecy(1794), The Song of Los(1795), The Book of Ahania(1795), The Book of Los(1795), Vala or The Four Zoas(1795-1804), Milton, a poem in 2 books

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32 Ibid., p. 15.
33 Ibid., p. 15.
(1804-08), *Jerusalem* (1804-20) and some other lesser known works. In these books Blake presents a vision of whole human life. The instinct, energy and imagination are shown as struggling with the forces of oppression. In these books he records his life long concern with the struggle of the soul to free its natural form from reason and organized religion. In his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake writes:

> Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. \(^{34}\)

He further says:

> How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,
> Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five? \(^{35}\)

Blake further states:

> If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narow chinks of his cavern. \(^{36}\)

Blake went on writing and painting till his death and after his death his influence grew steadily and reached pre-Raphaelite poets and later on T S Eliot and W B Yeats embraced his mythological and esoteric vision. His art had been too adventurous and unconventional for the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. In certain ways he was ahead of his time. Mona Wilson says, “... the revolution which poetry was to achieve in the last years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 87.  
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 88.  
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 93.
nineteenth, ... Blake carried through in his own work, unknowing and unknown.  

He broke away from the enlightenment tradition of writing poetry and pioneered a new sensibility which later flourished as a Romantic Movement in English art and letters. In the words of Northrop Frye: “The Augustan process of developing a poetic tradition within a civilized environment no longer appealed to a poet who wanted to recapture for himself the primary creative mood in which the more sublime visions of earlier ages had been produced.” He was writing at a time when the Age of Reason was turning into Age of Enthusiasm. He had a naïve and almost arrogant confidence in the power of his own inspiration. According to Mona Wilson, “The poetry of Blake is self-begotten: it lived to itself without influence on the world; it might have perished without record. And yet it promises — and often realizes — whatever is new and significant in the poetry which was to declare itself twenty years later and to reign unchallenged from that time onward.”

All the traits of Romanticism are amply found in Blake’s poetry. Blake was a romantic in his incessant admiration of Imagination. His mysticism, symbolism, lyricism, his love of freedom and liberty, his love for children and rural life, his rebellious nature all combine to give him a pre-eminent place as a forerunner of British Romanticism. Blake was representative poet of Romanticism as he believed in the exaltation of the artist, always in quest of the absolute. Both his poems and paintings are imaginative and symbolic with a spiritual message surpassing any other poet writing in the same vein. He had an unquenchable thirst for the complete integration of man, in his entire nature, with the universe. Blake was a supreme creator. He was a pioneer Romantic who like all other first generation romantic

37 The Life of William Blake, p. 9.
39 The Life of William Blake, pp. 9-10.
writers thought and firmly believed that the blazes of the French Revolution would burn down all iron chains. He was an inspired rebel. From any conservative perspective Blake was too different a person to be related easily to familiar conception of the nature of the individual and society. Blake rejected neoclassical prejudices and prefigured Romanticism exercising complete faith in mystic intuition and showing distrust in reason. Blake created his own mythology and with its help denounced the recently born positivism and the enslaving church. It helped him to promote imagination, energy and reconcile evil with good. Blake wrote in Jerusalem: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another Man’s. I will not Reason and compare: My business is to create.” He hated the church’s dogma, money, the oppression of minorities and despised science. He raged against the powers repressing human possibilities. Blake fought against the church for its oppressive hypocrisy. According to J. Brownowski, “He was trying to make men give up systems, rationalist and religious alike. And he was trying ‘to converse daily as man with man’.” Blake started by smashing the fetters of neo-classical diction and style. He raged against the orthodox morality and dead tradition. Reason he believed was a great transgressor and the only way out was a complete faith in imagination. He looked within himself for the inspiration and material for his works. Blake exulted in the beauties of nature and provided some beautiful landscape portrayals through his poetry. Blake as a romantic was passionate believer in liberty and freedom for all, especially for women. Like a true seer he could see beyond the ordinary world and glimpse the light of the far beyond. Poets like Burns, Cowper, Gray, Thomson and Collins anticipated Romantic Movement but none of them was a one man institution like Blake incorporating all the traits of Romanticism taken as a broad movement in the history of English literary

40 Blake’s Poetry and Designs, p.316.
41 William Blake and the Age of Revolution, p. 31.
thought. In fact, Blake was much ahead of his time as a man of new consciousness and he drew a sharp line dividing the olden neoclassical world whose representatives were poets like Alexander Pope from the new world of Romanticism whose chief harbinger he himself was. He is the only poet in whose works one can trace all the elements of Romanticism which were later on quite comprehensively found in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Natural emotions and individual novelty makes Blake a forerunner of the Romantic poetry of the 19th century. Blake was a literary genius who lived at the turn of the 18th century, hence a very early Romantic, but most genuinely a Romantic. The poems and prose works which consist of the bulk of his literary production give him the place as a one of the fathers of Romanticism, one who defined the genre.