

*Blake's*  
*Songs of Innocence*  
&  
*of Experience*

always appealed to Blake the intellectual rebel. He also explored it epigrammatically in *The Proverbs of Hell* (1790), many of which bear on the Songs, such as the celebrated formulations: 'Joy impregnates. Sorrows bring forth'; and 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'. He believed that 'Without Contraries is no Progression'.

The *Songs* do indeed have a pattern of 'contrary' or answering poems: such as 'The Lamb' (8) and 'The Tyger' (42); 'The Chimney Sweeper' (12 and 37); 'The Little Boy lost' (13 and 50); 'Holy Thursday' (19 and 33); 'Nurse's Song' (24 and 38); 'Infant Joy' (25) and 'Infant Sorrow' (48). These poems turn the same images, and even sometimes the same words (such as 'green' in 'Nurse's Song'), from states of joy and content, to those of sorrow and protest. But the Contrary States go far deeper than this.

The Contraries exist *within* the poems themselves, emerging with ever stronger force as the cycle advances. Even in *Innocence* there are strange moments of anxiety and unease. What is the meaning of 'The Blossom' (11)? Is it a mother talking to her infant at the breast, at one moment like the 'Merry Sparrow', and at the next like the 'sobbing Robin'? (And if so, why the change?) Or is it, as some

Freudian critics have suggested, some mysterious parable of sexual pleasure? Or again, what exactly is the protest against the slave-trade contained in 'The Little Black Boy' (9), in which God's love seems to be an unbearable scorching heat like the tropic sun? And why does the black child have to protect the white child?

These puzzling ambiguities, or contrary energies of meaning, are greatly increased in *Experience*. The meta-physical terror of 'The Sick Rose' (39) or the grim allegories of 'Ah! Sun-Flower' and 'My Pretty Rose Tree' (43) suggest profound and disabling glimpses into realms both sexual and religious, in which the hopes of human love are dashed against the realities of Time. Yet they also suggest strange possibilities of delight and transcendence in Eternity. 'The Tyger', for all its fire and dread, its relentless hammering out of fearful questions, also conjures up a vision of sublime creative power, an incandescent workshop in the artist's own brain, which can somehow 'frame' an entire universe, and dares to do so.

Or 'London' (46), one of Blake's greatest poems of outrage against social injustice, which transforms the sounds and images of eighteenth-century London (the river, the palace, the church, the brothel) into

eternal symbols of pain and protest; yet in the very force and music of that nightmare vision ('But most thro' midnight streets I hear') asserts a poetic consciousness that knows a Contrary State, that passionately believes in an arcadian city of sunlight, freedom and joy, where 'new-born Infants' will never have to weep. In such poems Blake's visionary genius triumphs forever.

Here then is a book that, at first sight, may appear like an eccentric, childlike, naively illustrated collection of nursery home-spun verses; but which grows compellingly into one of the great works of the English Romantic imagination. It has a quality of philosophic epic more usually associated with the major poems of Milton or Wordsworth. It is remarkable that among William Blake's greatest champions have been his fellow poets from later days – among them Swinburne, Yeats, Kathleen Raine and Allen Ginsberg. His *Songs* make us re-read our own childhood and supposed maturity; and alert us again to the possibility of angels and what they may be telling us.

**RICHARD HOLMES**

## *Acknowledgements*

The Folio Society is most grateful to the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge, for making their copy of the *Songs* available for reproduction; to the William Blake Trust and the Tate Gallery, who first published the facsimile as Volume 2 of their collected edition of the Illuminated books and who have lent us the colour separations; and to Andrew Lincoln, who edited that edition and whose transcriptions of the poems are reproduced here.

# *Contents*

To listen to readings by Adam Mars-Jones,  
tap the text on the left-hand page.

1	Combined Title-page
2	Innocence Frontispiece
3	Innocence Title-page
4	Introduction
5	The Shepherd
6/7	The Ecchoing Green
8	The Lamb
9/10	The Little Black Boy
11	The Blossom
12	The Chimney Sweeper
13	The Little Boy lost
14	The Little Boy found
15	Laughing Song
16/17	A Cradle Song
18	The Divine Image
19	Holy Thursday
20/21	Night
22/23	Spring
24	Nurse's Song
25	Infant Joy
26	A Dream
27	On Anothers Sorrow
28	Experience Frontispiece
29	Experience Title-page

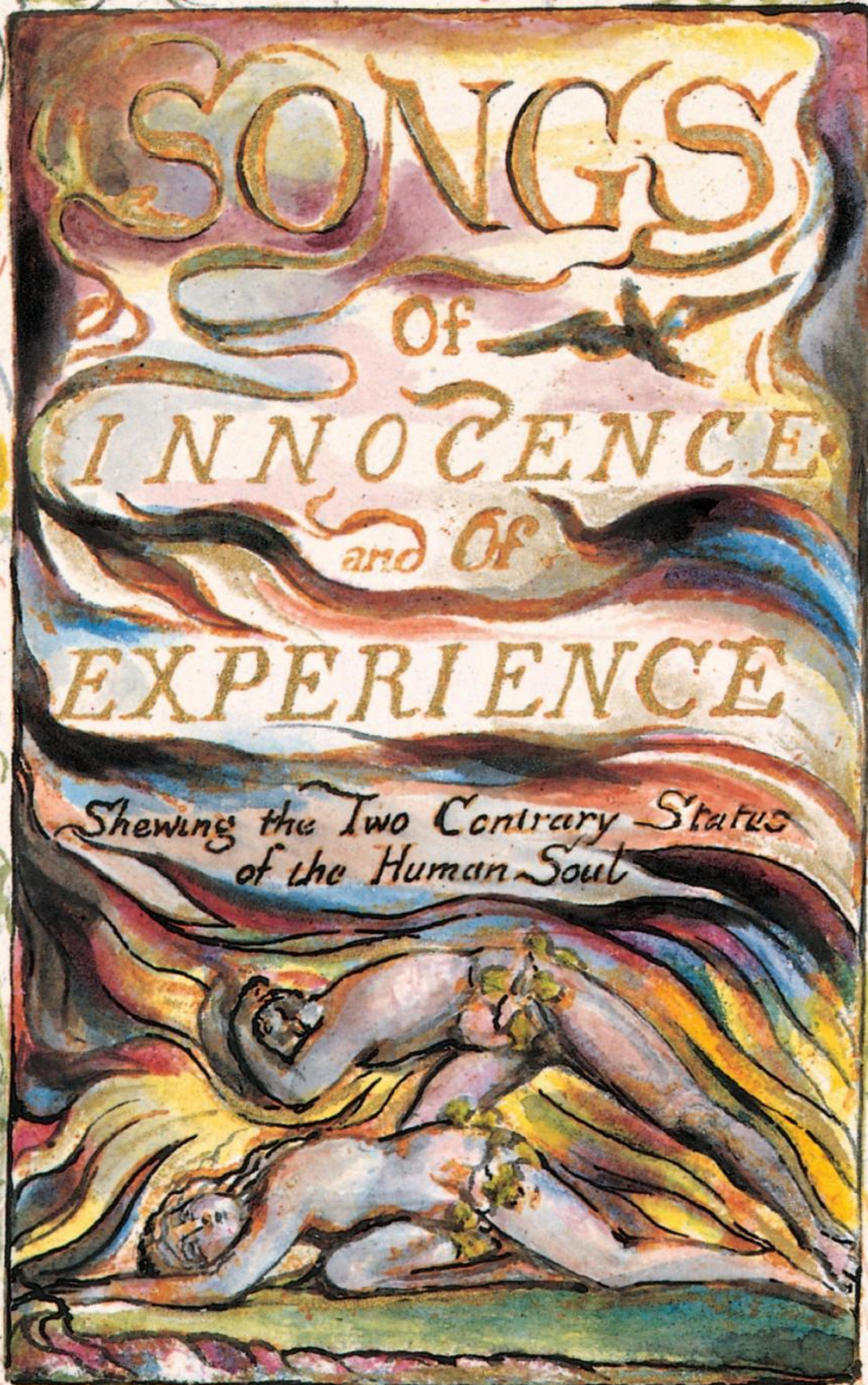
30	Introduction
31	Earth's Answer
32	The Clod and the Pebble
33	Holy Thursday
34/35	The Little Girl Lost
35/36	The Little Girl Found
37	The Chimney Sweeper
38	Nurses Song
39	The Sick Rose
40	The Fly
41	The Angel
42	The Tyger
43	My Pretty Rose Tree
	Ah! Sun-Flower
	The Lilly
44	The Garden of Love
45	The Little Vagabond
46	London
47	The Human Abstract
48	Infant Sorrow
49	A Poison Tree
50	A Little Boy Lost
51	A Little Girl Lost
52	To Tirzah
53	The School Boy
54	The Voice of the Ancient Bard



*Blake's*  
*Songs of Innocence*  
&  
*of Experience*

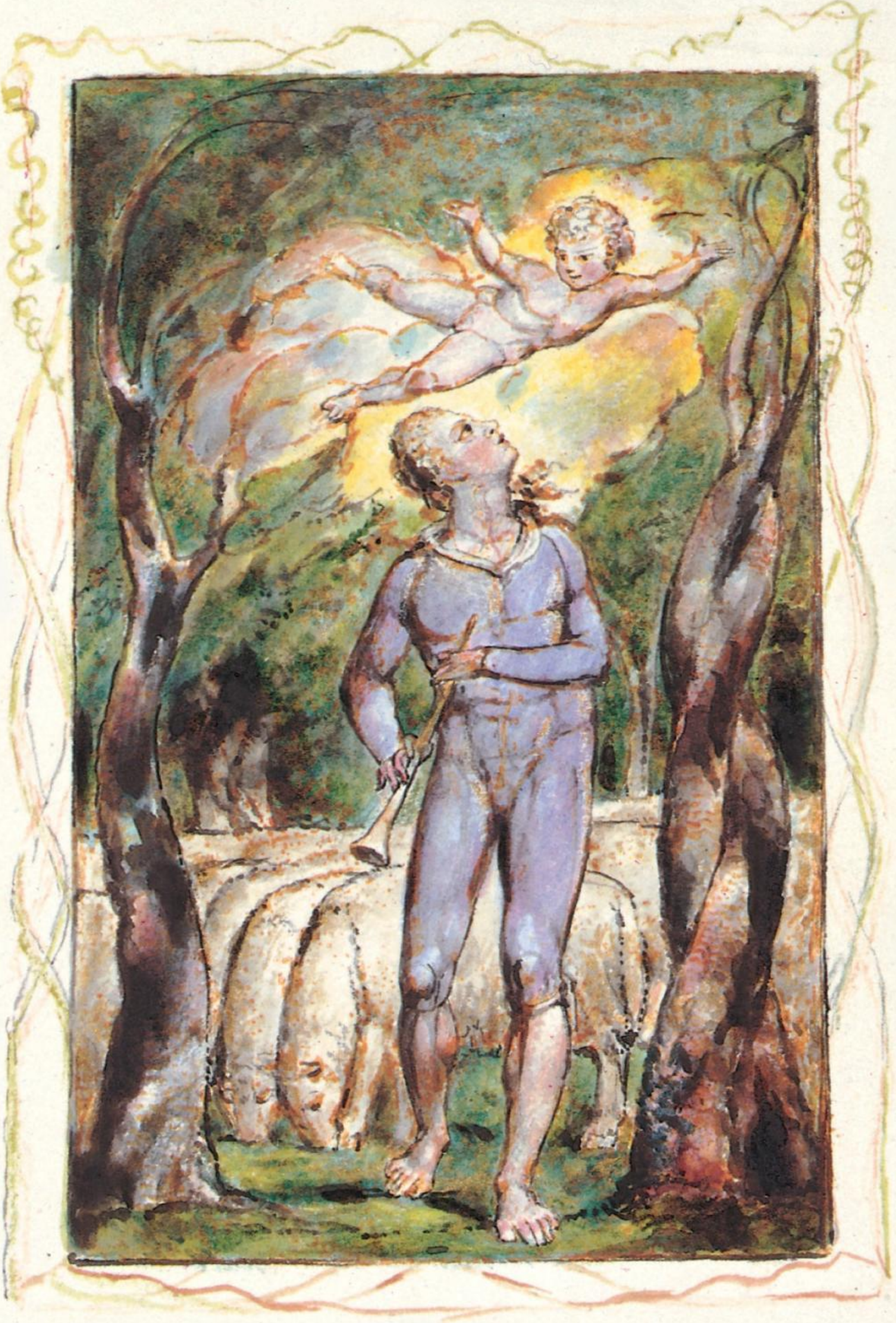
*1*

**Combined Title-page**



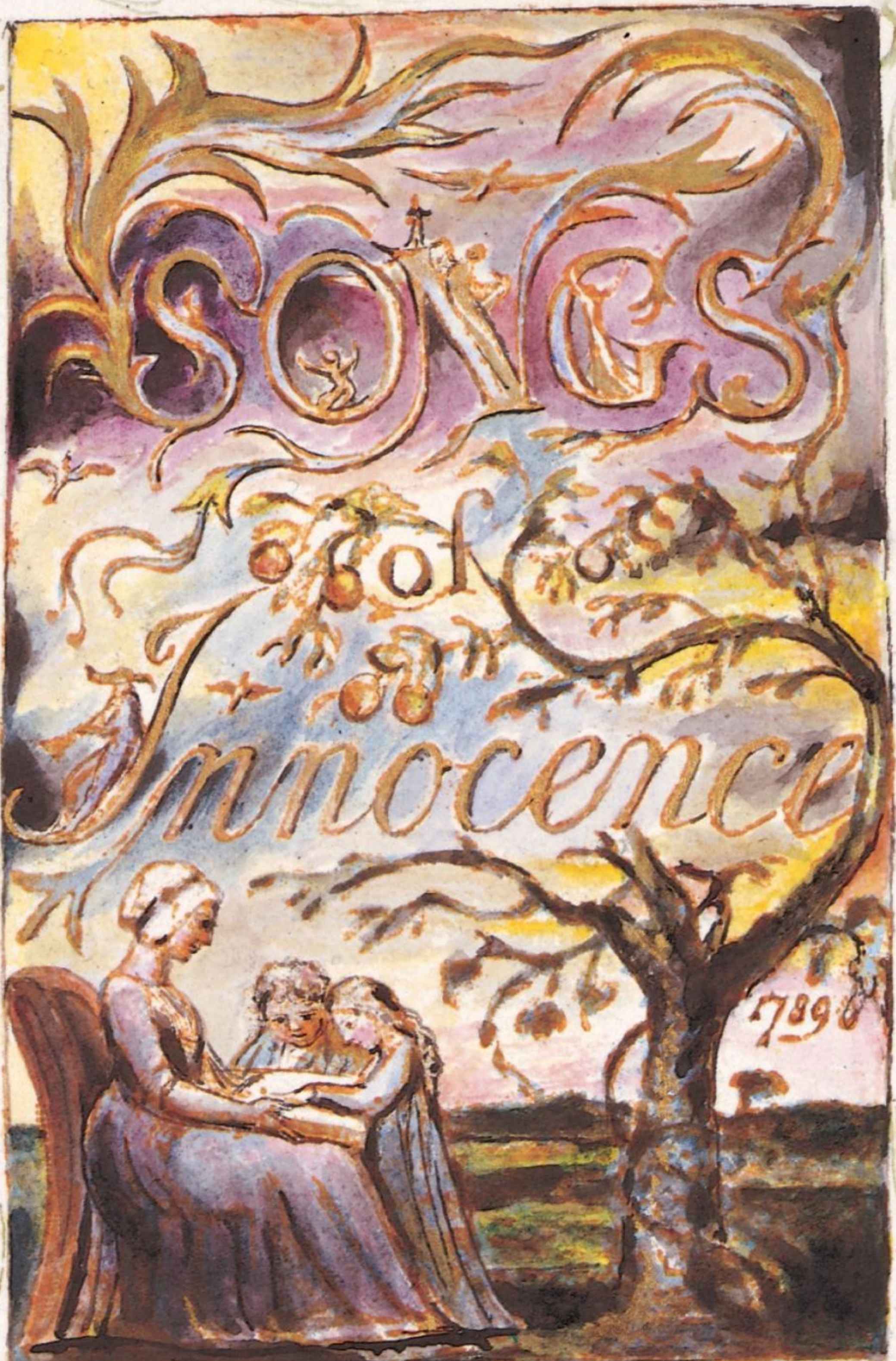
2

[Innocence Frontispiece]



3

**Innocence Title-page**



The Author & Printer W Blake

## 4

**Introduction**

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 chear,  
Piper pipe that song again—  
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe  
Sing thy songs of happy chear,  
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 stain'd the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs,  
Every child may joy to hear.

# Introduction

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 vanished from my sight  
 And I pluck'd a hollow reed.

And I made a rural pen,  
 And I stain'd the water clear,  
 And I wrote my happy songs  
 Every child may joy to hear.



# 5

## The Shepherd.

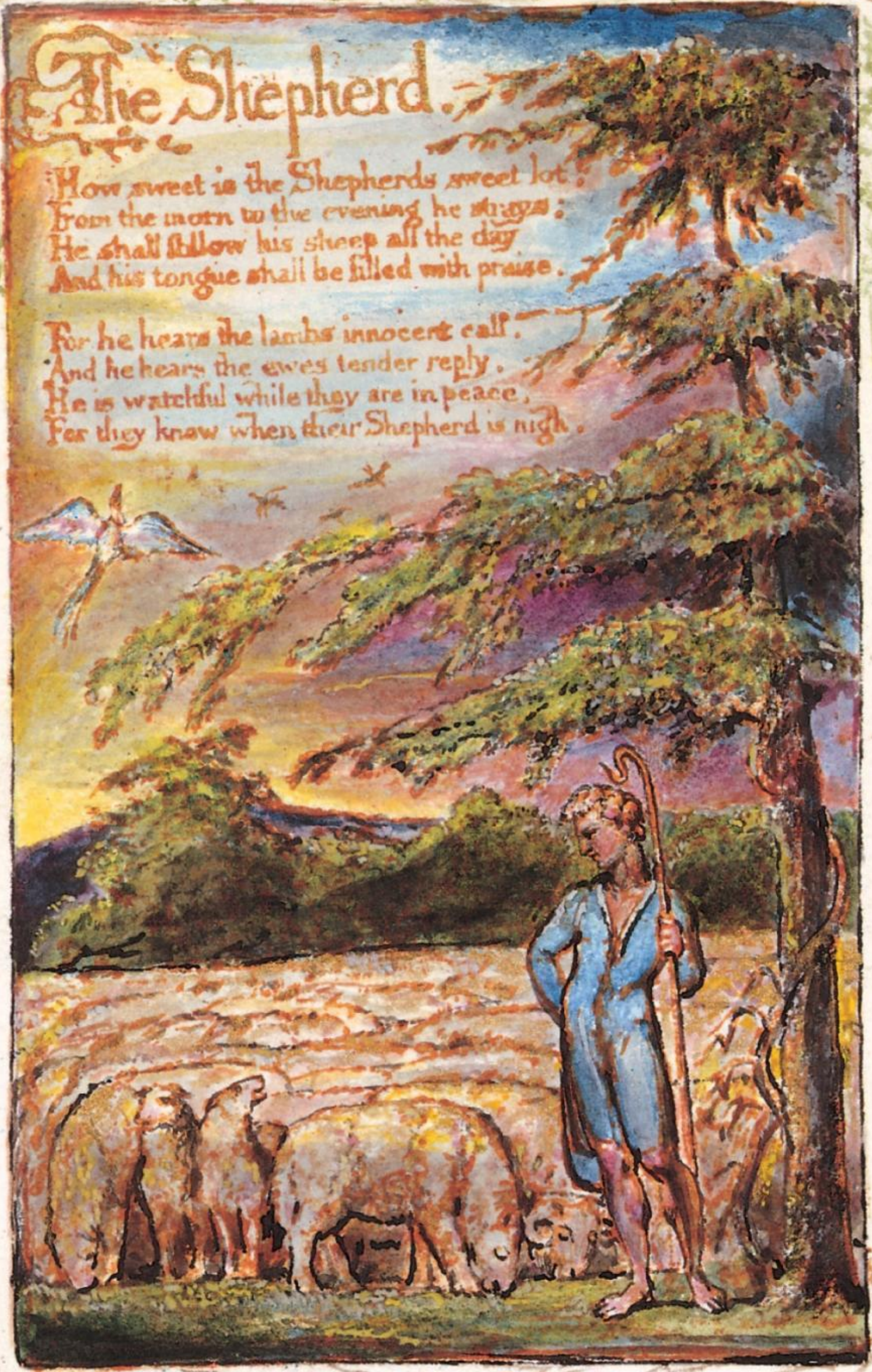
How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,  
From the morn to the evening he strays:  
He shall follow his sheep all the day  
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs innocent call.  
And he hears the ewes tender reply,  
He is watchful while they are in peace,  
For they know when their Shepherd is nigh.

# The Shepherd.

How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,  
From the morn to the evening he strays;  
He shall follow his sheep all the day  
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs innocent call,  
And he hears the ewes tender reply,  
He is watchful while they are in peace,  
For they know when their Shepherd is nigh.



## 6

### The Ecchoing Green

The Sun does arise,  
And make happy the skies.  
The merry bells ring,  
To welcome the Spring.  
The sky-lark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,  
Sing louder around,  
To the bells chearful sound.  
While our sports shall be seen  
On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John with white hair  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak  
Among the old folk.

*They*



## The Ecchoing Green

The Sun does arise  
And make happy the skies.  
The merry bells ring  
To welcome the Spring.  
The sky-lark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,  
Sing louder around,  
To the bells cheerful sound,  
While our sports shall be seen,  
On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John with white hair  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak,  
Among the old folk.

They

They laugh at our play,  
And soon they all say,  
Such such were the joys.  
When we all girls & boys.  
In our youth time were seen,  
On the Ecchoing Green.

Till the little ones weary  
No more can be merry  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have an end:  
Round the laps of their mothers.  
Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest.  
Are ready for rest;  
And sport no more seen,  
On the darkening Green.

They laugh at our play,  
 And soon they all say,  
 Such such were the joys,  
 When we all girls & boys,  
 In our youth time were seen,  
 On the Evening Green.

Till the little ones weary  
 No more can be merry  
 The sun does descend,  
 And our sports have an end;  
 Round the lap of their mothers,  
 Many sisters and brothers,  
 Like birds in their nest,  
 Are ready for rest:  
 And sport no more seen,  
 On the darkening Green.



## The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight.  
Softest clothing wooly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice.  
Making all the vales rejoice:  
Little Lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb Ill tell thee;  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name,  
Little Lamb God bless thee,  
Little Lamb God bless thee.

# The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee,  
 Gave thee life & bid thee feed,  
 By the stream & over the mead;  
 Gave thee clothing of delight,  
 Softest clothing woolly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice;  
 Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee;  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb;  
 He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 A child & thou a lamb,  
 We are called by his name.  
 Little Lamb God bless thee,  
 Little Lamb God bless thee.



## The Little Black Boy

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white.  
White as an angel is the English child:  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree  
And sitting down before the heat of day.  
She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
And pointing to the east began to say.

Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.

And we are put on earth a little space. .  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.  
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face  
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

*For*



# The Little Black Boy

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
 And I am black, but O! my soul is white.  
 White as an angel is the English child:  
 But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree  
 And sitting down before the heat of day,  
 She took me on her lap and kiss'd me,  
 And pointing to the east began to say:

Look on the rising sun where God does live  
 And gives his light, and gives his heat away,  
 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
 Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.

And we are put on earth a little space  
 That we may learn to bear the beams of love,  
 And these black bodies and this sunburnt face  
 Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear  
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.  
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care.  
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say and kissed me.  
And thus I say to little English boy.  
When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.

Facsimile reproductions and text transcript, edited by Andrew Lincoln, first published 1991, in Volume 2 of *Blake's Illuminated Books*, by Tate Enterprises in association with the William Blake Trust.

Small-format edition first published 1992,  
by The Folio Society Ltd  
44 Eagle Street, London WC1R 4FS  
[www.foliosociety.com](http://www.foliosociety.com)

Digital edition first published 2014,  
by order of the Tate Trustees, by Tate Publishing,  
a division of Tate Enterprises Ltd, Millbank, London, SW1P 4RG  
[www.tate.org.uk/publishing](http://www.tate.org.uk/publishing)

© The Tate Gallery and the William Blake Trust 1991  
Digital edition © Tate Enterprises Ltd 2014  
Introduction © The Folio Society Limited 1992

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers or a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, [www.cla.co.uk](http://www.cla.co.uk)

Front cover: Title-page from the Blake manuscript held at the King's College Library, Cambridge

Narrated by Adam Mars-Jones  
Audio production by Matt Mars  
© Tate 2014