

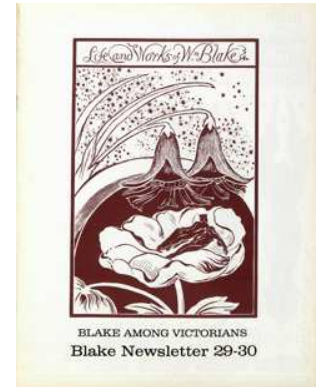
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

James Smetham (1821-1889) and Gilchrist's Life of Blake

Frances Carey

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ART. 26.]

STRUGGLE AND SORROW.

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of the same suggestive theme, is *Let loose the Dogs of War*—a Demon cheering on blood-hounds who seize a man by the throat; of which Mr. Ruskin possesses the original pencil sketch, Mr. Linnell the water-colour drawing.

During the summer of 1784, died Blake's father, an honest shopkeeper of the old school, and a devout man—a dissenter. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, on the fourth of July (a Sunday) says the Register. The eldest son, James,—a year and a half William's senior,—continued to live with the widow Catherine, and succeeded to the hosier's business in Broad Street, still a highly respectable street, and a good one for trade, as it and the whole neighbourhood continued until the era of Nash and the 'first gentleman in Europe.' Golden Square was still the 'town residence' of some half-dozen M.P.'s—for county or rotten borough; Poland Street and Great Marlborough Street of others. Between this brother and the artist no strong sympathy existed, little community of sentiment or common ground (mentally) of any kind; although indeed, James—for the most part an humble matter-of-fact man—had his spiritual and visionary side too; would at times *talk Swedenborg*, talk of seeing Abraham and Moses, and to outsiders seem like his gifted brother 'a bit mad'—a mild madman instead of a wild and stormy.

On his father's death, Blake, who found Design yield no income, Engraving but a scanty one, returned from Green Street, Leicester Fields, to familiar Broad Street. At No. 27, next door to his brother's, he set up shop as printseller and engraver, in partnership with a former fellow-apprentice at Basire's: James Parker, a man some six or seven years his senior. An engraving by Blake after Stothard, *Zephyrus and Flora* (a long oval), was published by the firm 'Parker and Blake' this same year (1784). Mrs. Mathew, still friendly and patronizing, though one day to be less eager for the poet's services as Lion in Rathbone Place, countenanced, nay perhaps first set the scheme going—in an ill-advised philanthropic hour; favouring it,



James Smetham (1821-1889) and Gilchrist's Life of Blake

BY FRANCES A. CAREY

James Smetham's claim on posterity has largely rested upon his 1869 review of Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* which was incorporated in the second edition at Rossetti's instigation. This sympathetic but conventional mid-Victorian interpretation of Blake only represents a minor aspect of Smetham's career; his letters and paintings do far greater justice to the complexity of a man, whom Geoffrey Grigson has described as "an imaginative artist who surpasses almost all his time in England."¹ This article will concentrate upon Smetham's visual imagination seen in the light of the marginal illustrations with which he annotated his own copy of the Gilchrist *Life*.²

An almost overwhelming degree of spirituality pervades Smetham's small scale biblical and landscape compositions, which prompted Rossetti to invoke parallels with the work of Blake and Palmer: "In all these he partakes greatly of Blake's immediate spirit, being also often allied by landscape intensity to Samuel Palmer."³ The emotional energy required to achieve such an effect, did, however, contain the seeds of self-destruction as

Ruskin prophesied in 1854,⁴ and Smetham was eventually to subside into an endogenous depressive illness from 1878 until his death of 1889. The Smetham correspondence exhibits some of the same

1 G. Grigson, *The Harp of Aeolus* (London, 1948), pp. 96-97.

2 Collection of Dr. Gerald Bindman.

3 A. Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, 2nd ed. (London, 1880), p. 429.

4 J. Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1903-12), XIV, 461.

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intimate, revelatory quality as the Haydon diaries,⁵ unfolding a personality which partook of "Blake's immediate spirit" transmuted by a powerful strain of Methodist piety; this bifurcal influence clearly emerges in the unifying theme of the letters, Smetham's concept of destiny in terms of a *Pilgrim's Progress* which, in visual form, was poignantly summarized by one of his last paintings, *Going Home*, depicting an old man on the road to death.⁶ Smetham's endeavor to develop a fully integrated imagination combining "art, literature and the religious life all in one,"⁷ was reflected in a self-imposed regime of intense, disciplined study, the results of which were enshrined in a system of *monumentalism*; the grandiose designation of *monument* was in fact applied to a tiny, squared pen drawing, encapsulating in the margin Smetham's thoughts on the text in question. Shakespeare, the Bible, Tennyson and Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* were all subjected to this approach, which was initiated by the artist at eleven o'clock on the evening of 18 February 1848. The creative fervor and elevation of purpose infusing the thumbnail sketches, is eloquently expressed by Smetham's account of how,

in later years, he would revisit his *monuments*, "pouring the oil of joy on the shapeless stone in which I saw my thought as Michael Angelo in his marble saw hidden the gigantic shapes of Night and Day."⁸

Smetham's copy of *Gilchrist* is a peculiarly apt example of *monumentalism* since he had been recommended by Rossetti in 1861 as a suitable draughtsman for the line drawings in the text. In the event Smetham was deprived of the commission but in July 1867 supplied his own miniature cycle of the life of Blake, which paid a self-conscious

5 J. Smetham, *Letters*, eds. W. Davies and Sarah Smetham (London, 1891).

6 Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

7 Smetham, *Letters*, p. 13.

8 Smetham, *Letters*, p. 92.

left p. 39: "away I go, / And the vale darkens at my pensive woe."

right p. 69: "In a vision of the night, the form of Robert stood before him, and revealed the wished-for secret, directing him to the technical mode by which could be produced a fac-simile of song and design."

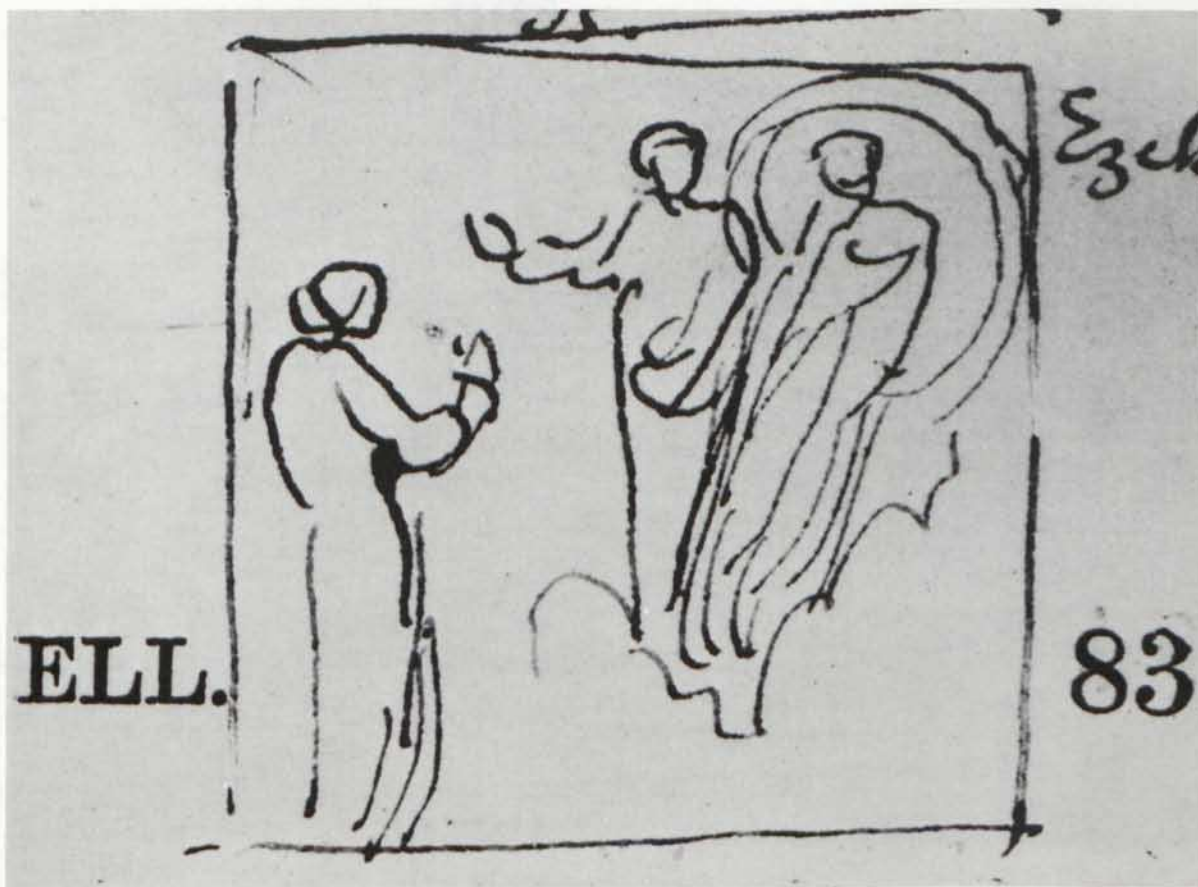


homage to the marginal illustrations of medieval manuscripts. For Smetham an illuminated book was "a mystery, like the Microcosm" into whose borders were wrought "the whole life and soul and history of the men who did them; but thinly veiled."⁹

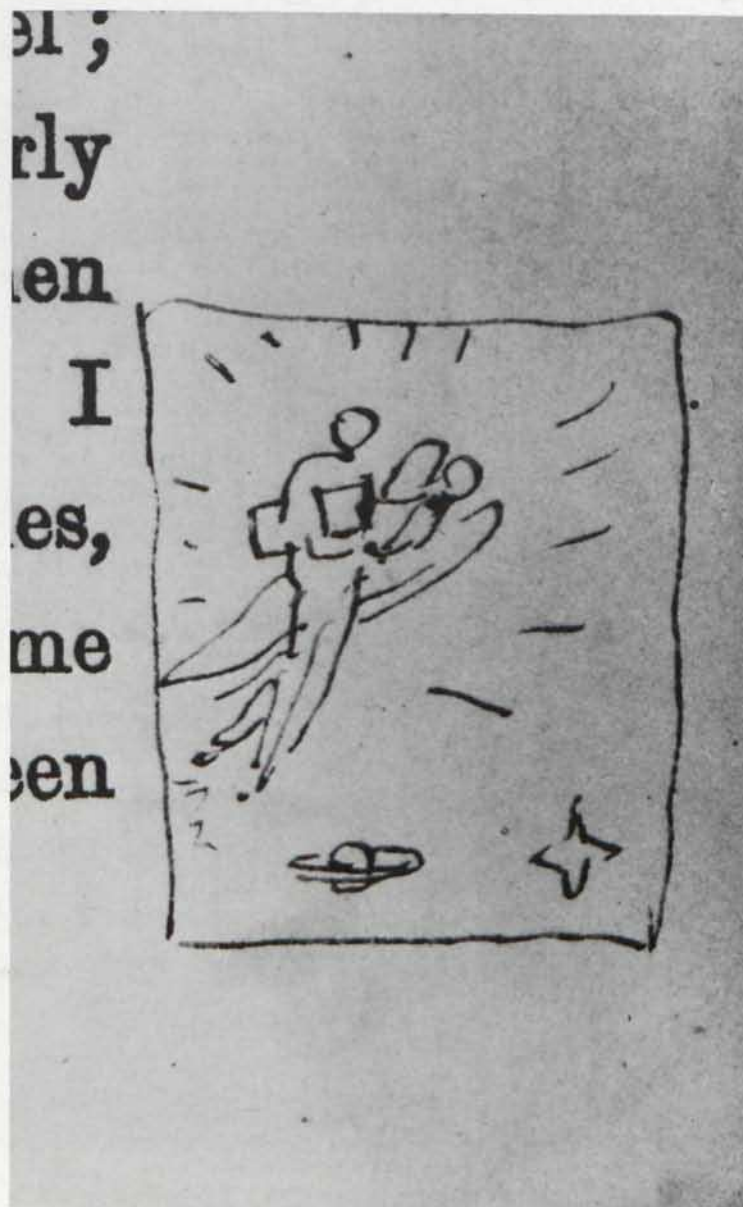
The *Gilchrist* marginal designs provide just such a documentation of the artist's inner life concealed beneath the commentary on Blake's spiritual history; author portraits of Smetham himself periodically intrude upon the Blakean cycle, again reminiscent of the practice of medieval scribes and illuminators. The main pictorial narrative includes not only episodes and personalities from Blake's material existence but also those from his visionary world; "majestic shadows, grey but luminous and superior to the common height of men" encountered on the Felpham shore (p. 159), have as much substance as Mrs. Mathew's bluestockings (p. 45) or the Godwin circle of radicals (p. 92); a corporeal Robert Blake plays leap-frog with J. T. Smith on one page (p. 57), then later appears in spiritual form to reveal to his elder brother the secret of stereotype printing (p. 69), while funeral processions, whether they be for fairies (p. 159) or Sir Joshua Reynolds

(p. 96), are all treated to the same loving delineation. In the second volume the *monuments* are almost exclusively confined to William Michael Rossetti's annotated catalogue, where Smetham used the descriptions attached to each item as a basis for illustration; his own knowledge of Blake's visual art was probably limited to the reproductions in *Gilchrist*. Smetham's naive, literal renderings of poetic images constitute a further category of *monument*; punctuating the line from the *Poetical Sketches*, "And the vale darkens at my pensive woe," a lonely figure is represented wandering amidst gloomy obscurity (p. 39). These evocative visual annotations serve to underline the unifying links between the "whole life and soul and history" of Smetham and his subject, which are perhaps epitomized by his impression of Blake's soul finding "refuge amid the slights of the outward vulgar throng" in the invisible world (p. 245).

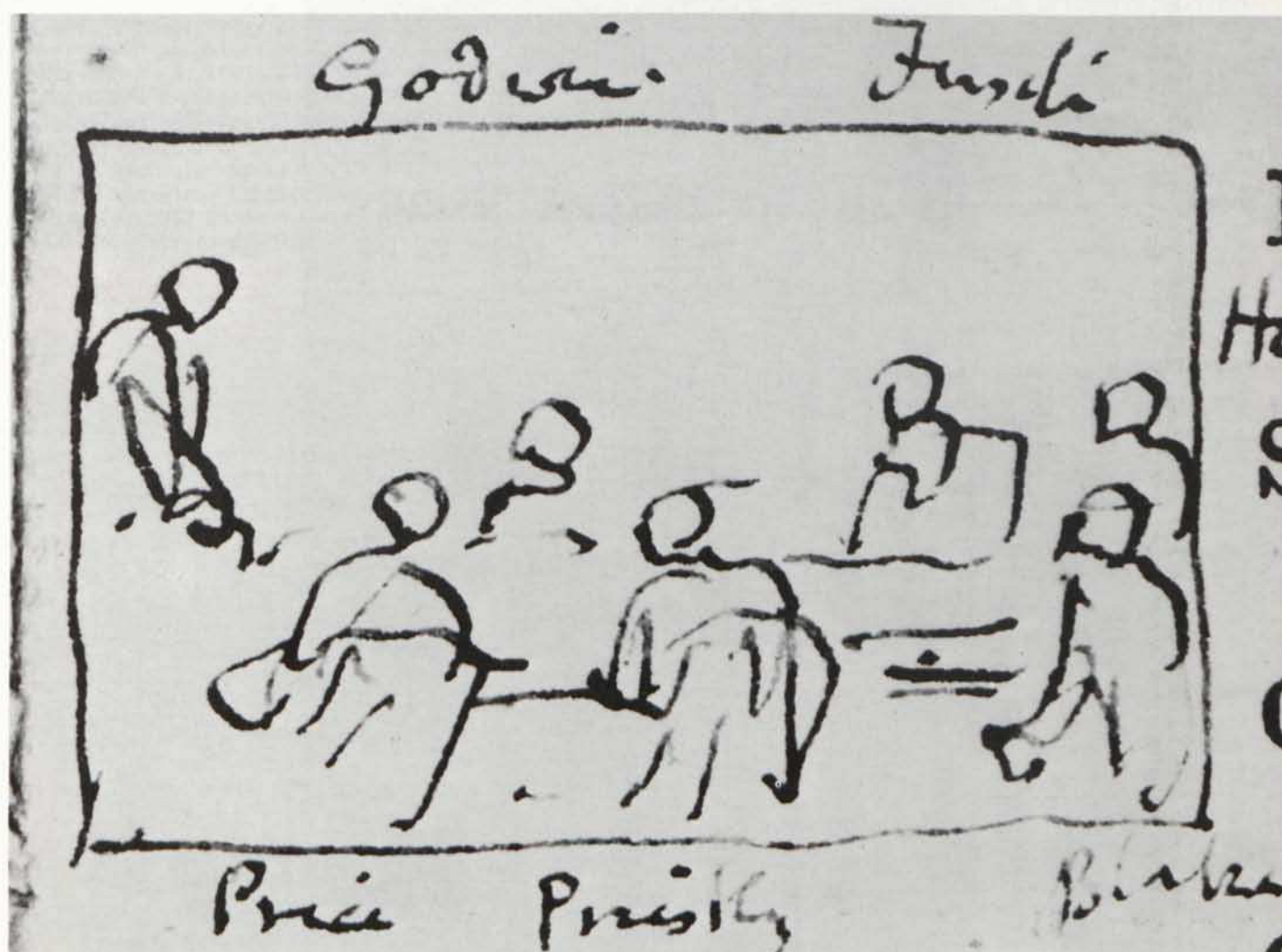
9 Smetham, *Letters*, p. 93.



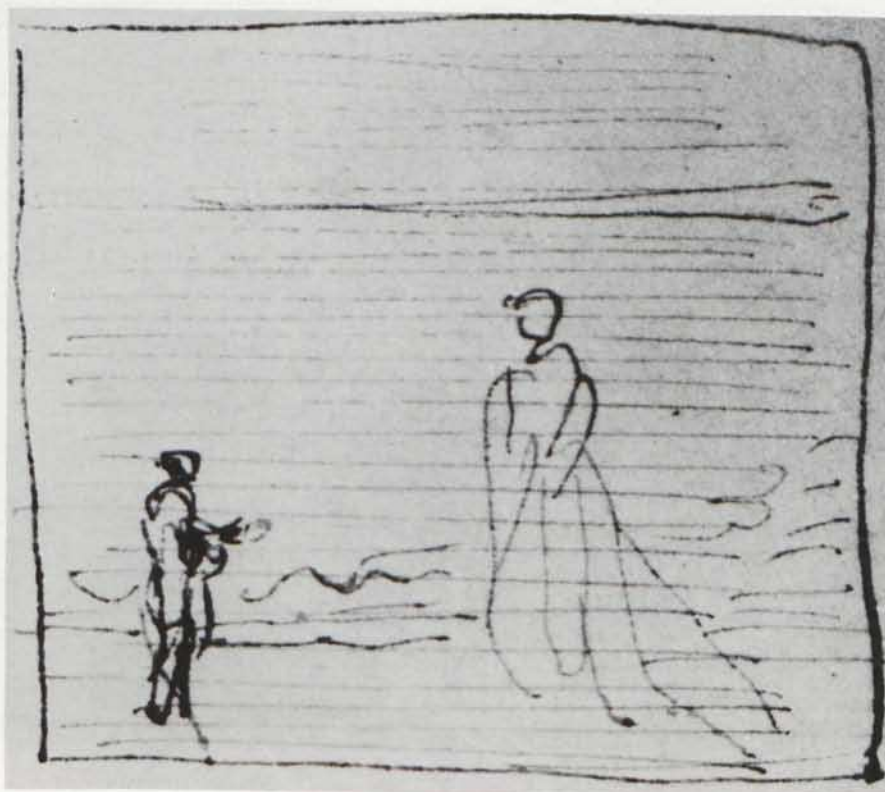
above p. 83: Blake's vision of Isaiah and Ezekiel in "A Memorable Fancy," *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.



above p. 85: "A Memorable Fancy"--"Here I stayed to rest, and then leaped into the void between Saturn and the fixed stars."

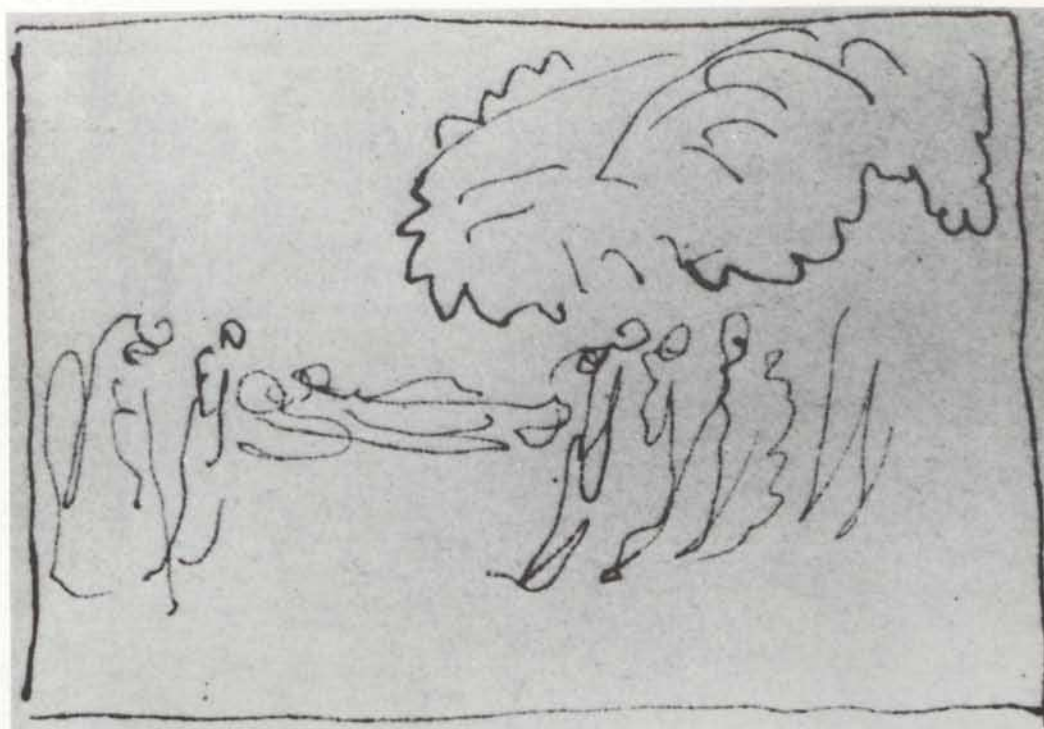


above p. 92: The radicals in Johnson's house.



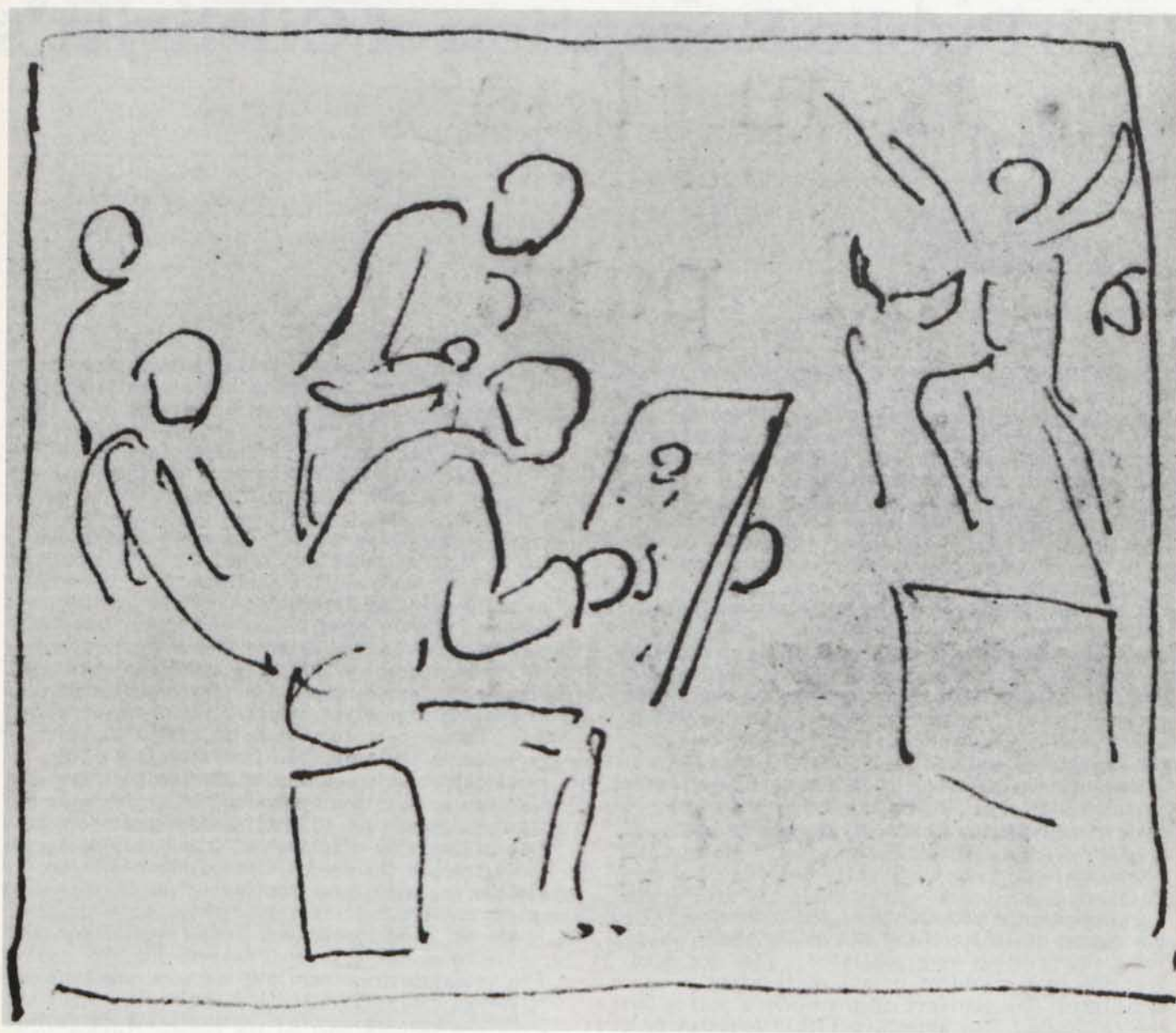
top p. 157: Blake at Felpham. "Often, in after years, Blake would speak with enthusiasm of the shifting lights on the sea he had watched from those windows."

bottom p. 159: "majestic shadows, grey but luminous, and superior to the common height of men."



top p. 159: A fairy funeral.

bottom p. 245: Blake's soul finding refuge in the invisible world amid the slights of the outward vulgar throng.



above p. 248: Blake drawing the Laocoon in the Royal Academy.