

Quentin Blake

Born 1932. Illustrator and author of children's books.
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1. Meet Quentin Blake



Quentin Blake in his studio.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.host.designbybeam.com website.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Sidcup in Kent, although I was evacuated to the West Country during the war, which I hated. I enjoyed secondary school: I went to Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School, where I was taught English by a man called JH Walsh, who really inspired me.



Where do you live?

For the last 30 years, I have lived in South Kensington, in a late 19th Century mansion flat just off Earl's Court Road. I came to see friends there all those years ago, liked it and stayed. It has turned out to be extremely convenient.

I love the seaside and spend quite a lot of time in Hastings on the South coast. Then, for about three months a year I go to France, to a house near the Atlantic coast in the South-West. I work there, too.

What do you like to eat?

I love fish shops and stalls, especially in France, where they are very good, and you can get mussels and oysters and all sorts of things out of the sea. I eat a lot of fish and like cooking it because it is so easy.

What do you do in your spare time?

I am never quite sure when work finishes and spare time begins. Sometimes I go and give talks and lectures and that is also work but it makes a change from drawing. In my real spare time I read quite a lot of books, so that there are generally eight or ten beside my bed that I have started but not finished and perhaps will never finish. Some of them will be in French. I read them quite slowly and underline the words I don't know, though I am often too lazy to look up what they mean. I also have a house in France. I can work there but my spare time is spent buying food (which seems to be much more interesting there than in England), especially fish and mussels and oysters. The countryside is very flat, so I can cycle round looking at birds. Herons are my favourite.



Did you go to university or art school?

I seem to remember I thought that if I went to art school I would never go to a university (I wanted to read English) whereas if I did go to university I

would still have the option of doing art. That was how it worked out anyway. So I studied English at Downing College, Cambridge, from 1953 - 1956.

Then, not knowing whether one could make a living out of being a cartoonist, illustrator or artist of any kind - and the general view seemed to be that you couldn't - I also did a year's teacher training at London University.

Having done that I thought I should try to be an artist of some kind. I went to Chelsea Art School as a part-time student, not exactly to learn to be an illustrator, but to learn more about drawing and painting.'

When did you start drawing?

Probably at about the age of 5. I remember a visitor during the war saying "He draws a lot, but he won't speak!". I used to do drawings for the school magazine and also for Punch. I knew someone who drew for Punch and I started submitting drawings. I did get some little ones accepted when I was about sixteen or seventeen. That was a start. They paid me seven guineas each. I didn't know what to do with the cheque; I didn't have a bank account!

Then when I was at Chelsea I got a regular job doing two drawings a week for Punch and I also started drawing for The Spectator. I began doing small drawings for them until they decided that they were going to have an illustrated cover, and I started doing that too.

I suppose the first proper book I ever illustrated was while I was on National Service, before university. I spent three weeks illustrating a booklet - English Parade - used in teaching those soldiers who hadn't yet mastered reading. There was no alteration to my weekly pay-packet, but I was able to live at home and I was allowed to wear shoes instead of boots.

From time to time I had to show my work to a lieutenant-colonel for his approval. A few moments of silence and then: "Very good, Sergeant Blake. But I think .. the grass in this one ought to be shorter." "Yes sir. I'll see to it, sir." "And I think the creases in these trousers might be sharper." Of course, the problem with making the grass shorter in drawings is that you can't cut it: you have to do the drawing again. But at least it was preparation for encounters with editors and (worse) committees, later on.

I was interested in education, drawing and English, so it seemed as if illustrating a children's book might be something I could do.

How did you begin to do children's books?

I was interested in education, drawing and English, so it seemed as if illustrating a children's book might be something I could do. I thought: I

don't know whether they'll like it or not. I was 20-something so I thought I'll just keep on with it for a bit and see where I've got to by the age of 30, and if it's no good I'll give up and if it's alright I'll go on. By then it had begun to be all right so I kept on.

I didn't really know how to start. I talked to John Yeoman, who is a friend, and said "Could you write a book so I can illustrate it?" He could and did. It was called *A Drink of Water*.

When did you start writing the words as well?

It was in 1968, with Patrick. Really it was a kind of protest because I was seen as a black-and-white illustrator, so I was never asked to do anything in colour. I retaliated by writing this story about a young man who made things change colour when he played the violin. So you see, it had to be illustrated in colour.'

Do you identify strongly with children?

What you really do when you start to draw is you imagine that you are that person and you go into the reactions you think you would be having. I find myself doing the faces as I'm drawing them.

What do you like drawing best?

I like drawing anything that is doing something. I like activity. Dragons are good because you can arrange them in interesting ways across the page, get people to ride on them, that sort of thing. Most animals are interesting to draw. Cars are difficult unless they are a bit broken down.

What was it like working with Roald Dahl?

To begin with, I was a bit nervous. He was quite a powerful figure. But we got on very well. He liked winding me up - only in the most harmless way. I often wore these white shoes, and he'd say 'Here's old Quent' - no-one else ever calls me that - 'here's old Quent, he's going out for dinner in his plimsolls!'

What was so nice about Roald was that he actually wanted the pictures - he didn't like it if there weren't enough. Not all authors are like that. We worked together for 15 years from 1975, until he died.

Do you make drawings for grown-ups?

The truth is I don't make much distinction between the drawings that I do for children and the ones I do for grown-ups. To me, it's all just drawing. In fact I didn't start off illustrating children's books. I drew for magazines, I drew jokes, I did drawings for the covers of paperbacks - such as the novels of Malcolm Bradbury, Evelyn Waugh and Margaret Drabble.

The most enjoyable books for adults that I do nowadays are illustrations for the classics, and they are mostly published by the Folio Society. The most recent ones are Don Quixote and The Hunchback of Notre Dame. I've also illustrated Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, although it would be hard to say if that is for adults or children; it's really for everybody.

What does having been Children's Laureate mean to you?

Although it was hard work, it was marvellous too. It all began with a phone call in April 1999, telling me I'd won and was to be the very first Children's Laureate. A couple of weeks later, there was a ceremony at the National Theatre when Princess Anne gave me my prize and a special medal.



For two years my job was to do everything I could to promote children's literature. I gave lots of talks and interviews and wrote lots of articles. There were several new books, including *The Laureate's Party*, which brought together 50 of my favourite children's books, and *Words and Pictures*, which is a book about my work.

One of the most exciting things that happened during that time was putting together an exhibition for the National Gallery. In *Tell me a Picture* I chose 26 pictures, one for each letter of the alphabet: some Old Masters from the gallery collection; some modern works and some present-day illustrations from various countries. What the pictures have in common is that they all tell a story in some way. And the best part was that I was encouraged to

draw on the walls of the National Gallery - not something you get to do very often! Over 250,000 people visited the exhibition!

I also had a particularly interesting experience producing a book in collaboration with 1800 French-speaking schoolchildren! A group of teachers based near my house in France had the idea of collaborating with an author-illustrator on a real book to be based on suggestions made by children from schools in the region, and they asked me to do it. The book was to be about humanitarian issues: bullying, racism, pollution, war. Via the internet we involved other French-speaking schools in London, Dublin, Luxembourg, even in Singapore. I used as many of the children's ideas as possible, and much of the text was stitched together from the children's writings.

The amount of work involved by all the teachers and by me was truly enormous, but the finished book - *Un Bateau dans le Ciel* - (A Sailing-Boat in the Sky, in English) is something I am very proud of. And the whole project took just a year from the first meeting to publication - *une belle aventure* (a wonderful adventure) as one of the teachers put it!

If you want to find out more about what I did as Children's Laureate, you can find it in *Laureate's Progress*, which is a kind of diary with pictures.

2. Illustrating a Book

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.host.designbybeam.com website.

How do you decide what to draw?

When it's a book for which someone else has written the words, the process begins when the typescript appears from the publishers. In a sense I'm reading the story as if I were two people at the same time: a normal reader, who is relishing a good story for its own sake; and an illustrator on the look out for good subjects to draw, good moments.

If someone is asleep in bed dreaming, you don't necessarily want to see them in bed, but you might want to look at the dreams. I try to get as close to what the writer intended as possible - to get on their wavelength. The text, not the pictures, must lead the way.



Bruce Bogtrotter eats an entire chocolate cake.

Sometimes, though, the pictures come first. Often, in fact, the shrewd writer has already incorporated moments which ask to be illustrated. John Yeoman, who I've worked with from the start, does this. And sometimes there are moments which can't be ignored, although sometimes there are hard choices to be made. Sometimes you choose to illustrate a moment, not because it will push the story forward at all, but just because it's such an enjoyable moment. In *Matilda*, for example, there's the moment when Miss Trunchball sends Julius Rottwinkle flying through the open window, scattering liquorice allsorts in his wake, or the episode when Bruce Bogtrotter eats an entire chocolate cake.

Sometimes the writer even makes changes to the story if the pictures seem to need it. For example, in the original version of *The BFG*, the giant was wearing a big leather apron and knee-length boots. They were only mentioned once, but of course they had to appear in every drawing.

However when I did the first drawings, Roald felt that the apron got in the way when the giant moved and ran and jumped, and that the boots were just dull. So we sat down round the dining table to rethink the costume. But we couldn't agree what the BFG should wear on his feet. Several days later I received through the post a rather oddly-shaped and oddly wrapped brown paper parcel. Unwrapping it revealed a large sandal - one of Roald's own, which is what the BFG now wears.



How do you actually produce a drawing?

I do a free-wheeling sort of drawing that looks as if it has been done on the spur of the moment, although in reality it's not quite like that. I start with lots of roughs - some of which turn out to be quite close to the finished drawing, and some of which are discarded. For a book there's lots of planning. What goes on which page? Do the actions carry on from one picture to another? Do the characters still look the same on each page?

For about twenty years I've used a lightbox, which I find really useful. On the light box I put the rough drawing I'm going to work from, and on top of that, a sheet of watercolour paper. Ready to hand is a bottle of waterproof black ink and a lot of scruffy looking dip pens. What happens next is not tracing; in fact it's important that I can't see the rough drawing underneath too clearly, because when I draw I try to draw as if for the first time; but I can do it with increased concentration, because the drawing underneath lets me know all the elements that have to appear and exactly where they have to be placed.'

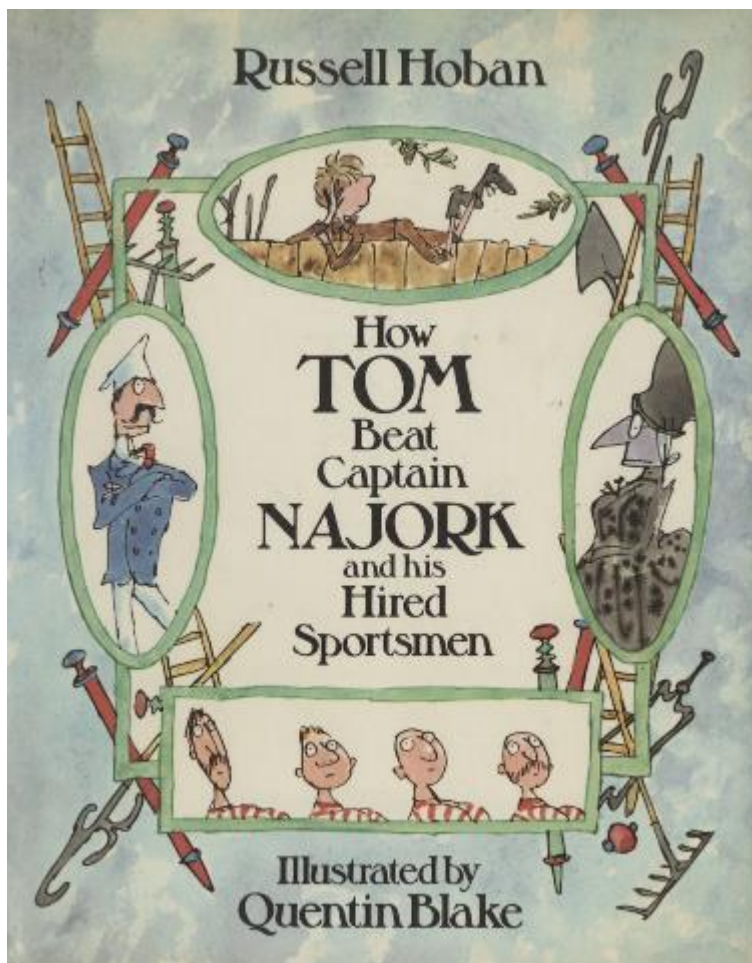
How long does it take to do a book?

It's almost impossible to say - some books are much more difficult and complicated than others. I can do three or four or five or even six in a year, of which perhaps one or two are coloured picturebooks, which take the most time. I know the drawings look as though they are done quickly, and in a sense they are; at least each bit of them is done quickly. But I spend

quite a long time planning what they are to be beforehand, and I am prepared to do them over and over again if I haven't got someone's expression or features quite right.

Of all the books you've illustrated, which is your favourite?

This is a very hard question because I don't think I have one favourite book. Perhaps it is easier to explain if you think of all the books as a sort of range of hills, all different shapes, and some taller than others. How Tom Beat Captain Najork was exciting because it was the first book I illustrated by Russell Hoban and it was something I couldn't possibly have imagined; though I love Russell Hoban's *The Raindoor*, although I don't think it is so well known. (It ought to be!)



I like *The BFG*, and that is partly because in various ways it was quite difficult to do and I was pleased when I got there in the end; and partly because the relationship between the BFG and Sophie is very interesting and obviously was very important to Roald Dahl.

Of my own books I perhaps like *Clown* best, because somehow I feel close to the main character, and partly because it was a very interesting task to tell a story entirely in pictures without any words. I was pleased to do a book about city life without (I hope) it being dull and boring.

Do you prefer illustrating books written by other people, or the ones you write yourself?

I like them both, and I'm glad I don't have to give up one or the other, because they are each interesting in their own way. Illustrating a book by someone else is exciting, because when you start reading that typescript you really have no idea what you are going to find there, and it may be something that you would never have thought of. And it's very interesting to try and draw in just the way that matches the book. Is it very fantastic? Or very realistic? Or outrageously funny? Or sad?

The interesting thing about drawing my own books is that it's really a story in pictures, with the necessary words underneath. These books give me the opportunity to draw something that I realise I want to draw.

3. Review of Beyond the Page

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Inside Story website at www.insidestory.org.au. The article was written by Iain Topliss in April 2013. Iain Topliss, an Honorary Associate in the English Program at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, is completing a biography of Saul Steinberg.

The innocence of Quentin Blake: A review of *Beyond the Page* by Quentin Blake, published by Tate Publishing

The British illustrator's weightless characters have moved into a world beyond books



A new purpose: Quentin Blake's painting in the reception centre in the Hôpital Armand-Trousseau in Paris.

Quentin Blake, knighted for “services to illustration” in January this year, with well over 300 books to his credit, is probably the most prolific and successful British illustrator of all. His first book, *A Drink of Water*, appeared in 1960. He went on to provide the drawings for such children's classics as *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen* (Russell Hoban, 1976), *Arabel's Raven* (originally written for the BBC children's show *Jackanory* by Joan Aiken, and published from 1972 in a series of thirteen books), and the *Monster* series (twenty-four of them) by Ellen Blance and Ann Cook (1973 onwards).

His long collaboration with Roald Dahl is a story in itself, beginning with the picture book *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), but really taking off with Blake's illustrations for *The BFG* (1982). The fusion of these two talents

produced, as one critic has said, “a kind of alchemy.” It says everything about the pairing that when Penguin Books bought out the rights to Dahl’s work and wanted to reissue his novels for children in a uniform edition they asked Blake to redraw all the illustrations, not just for the six he had already done, but also for the six that had previously been illustrated by other artists. (The only Dahl book Penguin didn’t give to Blake was *The Minpins*, with drawings by Patrick Benson.)

Then there are over thirty-five books by Blake himself, a list that includes *Angelo* (1970), *Mister Magnolia* (1980), *Clown* (1995), *Angel Pavement* (2005) and, most recently, *Daddy Lost His Head* (2009). Not to be forgotten are the many commissioned works that Blake drew for publishing houses, such as the series of drawings in the 1960s for the Penguin Classics edition (1962) of the novels of Evelyn Waugh. Journeyman work it might be, but for many readers the definitive image of *Brideshead Revisited* is Blake’s impromptu line drawing of Charles Ryder, Sebastian Flyte and Aloysius (Sebastian’s teddy bear), relaxing with cigarettes and a bottle of Château Peyraguey, as depicted on the cover of the Penguin edition – a drawing that wrought its magic long before anyone associated the scene with Jeremy Irons and Anthony Andrews.

Monster and the Toy Sale is a typical and low-key example of what a book illustrated by Blake might offer. Monster takes the little boy out on his bicycle – the child has a seat on the crossbar – to a toyshop sale “to buy something special.” Unfortunately, Monster’s services are required by other people – he directs the traffic when the traffic lights fail, he reunites a tearful lost child with his parents, he acts as an information desk for other visitors to the toyshop sale. The boy and Monster are far too busy to buy anything: they leave the shop empty-handed and disappointed. But on the way home they come across a man selling balloons on the street and they buy one. “Everything came out fine.”

Such a story – with its clear moral certainties, its anti-materialism, its belief in selflessness – is a hymn to goodness. The illustrations and their broad palette pictorialise the theme. The Monster, a lavender-blue gangly figure with huge hands and feet, a snout-like, featureless face, twice as tall as the adults, is not threatening but is still a force to be reckoned with. Physically all-powerful, his strength is important but not paramount. Instead his influence is moral, empathetic and protective. He is a friend, a super-parent, an extension of something within the child. The little boy is a personification of innocence.

THE creator of this world is a short, stocky, articulate, round-faced, balding man who plods around in white gym shoes. Roald Dahl has left us with a memorable image: “Here’s old Quent – he’s going out to dinner in his plimsolls.” No one else ever called him “Quent,” Blake says, but he

concedes the plimsolls. His gestures are precise, his manner is mild and amiable, his self-possession unflappable. He was born in deep suburban Sidcup in 1932 of middle-class parents. He had a good schooling at the local grammar school, where the husband of his Latin teacher, Alf Jackson, himself a painter and cartoonist, spotted his talent as an artist, and another, Stanley Simmonds, “a proper painter,” encouraged him. He was old enough to experience the second world war as a real event in his life (he was evacuated to the West Country). He did his National Service in the early 1950s, and in 1953 went up to Cambridge to read English at Downing College, where his tutor was F.R. Leavis, a man he found to be baffling, inhibiting and “not a good teacher.”

He was then getting work published in *Punch*, an activity that seemed “unsavoury” in the face of Leavisian high-mindedness. Still, he liked and valued Cambridge: “I thought if I went to art school I would never go to university, whereas if I did go to university I would still have the option of doing art.” After Cambridge, he undertook part-time study at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, then trained as a teacher at the University of London, and ended up teaching at the Royal College of Art, where he eventually became the head of the illustration department (1978–86). He had published in *Punch* as early as 1949, but from the 1960s onwards published more and more work as an illustrator. Tom Maschler, at Jonathan Cape, emerges as a key figure, for it was Maschler who fostered Blake’s career and introduced him to the writers with whom he enjoyed such long and fruitful collaborations.

Thirty years ago, in a series of events that sum up the stability at the heart of Blake’s private world, he found a studio he liked in a mansion block in Earls Court where his old teacher Stanley Simmonds already had a flat. He then took a flat himself in the same building, where he could live with John Yeoman, a school friend with whom he had been at Downing. He and Yeoman, who wrote the text for Blake’s first book, still live in that flat, and Blake continues to draw and paint in the same studio.

Blake also spends three months a year in his house in southwest France, near the ocean, but like Edward Ardizzone, a forerunner who drew a very different version of Britain, he is attracted by the shabby seaside towns of the southeast coast of England. He discloses little about his private life, beyond saying that he has never been married and has no children, though he insists that when he draws he tries to identify with the children who will be his readers, “rather than look on them as a benevolent adult.”

“Doing art” – the unpretentious phrase conveys something essential about him and the period in which he flourished, the postwar Britain of the end of the class system (according to the plan, at any rate), the rise of the welfare state, streamed free education, Swinging London, Mini-Minors, Habitat

furnishings and airy renovated Victorian terraces, the discovery of Greece, France and Italy, and a new democratised aesthetic sensibility that sought out well-drawn, offbeat, mildly non-conformist books for children, books that celebrated unconventionality and impulsiveness. His popularity derives from an artistic vision that chimed in with (and no doubt shaped) the spirit of the age for middle-class Britain in the years between Harold Macmillan and the election of Margaret Thatcher. Goodbye to all that.

Quentin Blake: Beyond the Page is a chronicle of the latest phase of Blake's career, from 2000 to the present day. It is generously furnished with over 300 illustrations, nearly all of them in colour. It is well-designed and beautifully, not to say sumptuously, produced. Partly a résumé of developments in Blake's career, it has a narrative of sorts, recounting how his drawings have managed to get off the page and find new homes in a series of public venues, a development that Blake values and draws strength from.

Beginning with an invitation from Michael Wilson in 2001 to draw on the walls of the National Gallery (of which Wilson was then Director of Exhibitions), the book shows how Blake's work began to appear on a wide range of public surfaces: stamps, posters, wallpaper, fabrics, walls, theatre foyers, a development site opposite King's Cross, library buses in Africa, a psychiatric-care centre, an aged-care centre, a hospital for children in France, a maternity hospital, also in France. Blake offers a commentary which gives a sense of how the appearance of his art in public spaces has exhilarated him and given him a new sense of purpose. Equally interesting are his comments on the technical aspects of enlarging his drawings to the huge sizes needed – in one case the figures had to be as high as a five-storey building.

Blake has confessed that he can't really draw cars or buildings, that unlike (say) Ronald Searle, with whom comparison is inevitable, he has only a minimal interest in place. Searle's Paris, for instance, is the kind of thing that is either beyond Blake or doesn't interest him much. What he draws best is "movement, gesture and atmosphere." His pictorial world is defined by three things: a freely developed line, the recursion to a certain pose, and an anti-Newtonian attitude to gravity.

The line is scratchy, uninhibited and unpremeditated – improvised, ecstatic, free, anarchic, even manic. It owes much to André François, an indebtedness that Blake has freely acknowledged, saying how taken he was by the way François's painterly, "not respectful" drawings seemed "improvised on the page." One might think that such a line is sufficient, it is so alive, but when Blake applies colour – his characteristic vibrant, irregular, watery palette of pinks, blues, yellows, reds, greens, and grey washes, as he has done to the previously black-and-white *George's*

Marvellous Medicine – it is not merely an addition, but the opening up of a new expressive dimension. The elements of the most characteristic pose in Blake’s work are found in his drawings of Mister Magnolia. Extravagantly dressed, he adopts a bold, upright, self-assertive stance, his feet at ballet position three, arms outstretched, fingers spread wide, meeting the world head-on. Such figures in the Blake universe tend to behave as though the laws of gravity do not apply to them. They climb up high, upon boxes, flowers, trees or buildings, they rollerskate, perform acrobatics, swing on trapezes, dance on tightrope wires. They fly and show no fear of falling. And there is the smile – Mister Magnolia wears a huge grin that loops all the way around his face.

Blake has been accused of being “too cheerful,” and although he could point, with reason, to his illustrations for Voltaire’s *Candide* or the drawings he did for Michael Rosen’s *Sad Book* about the early death of a son, the charge is not without foundation. He concedes that his work has no dark side, no “hidden Gothic archive.” But “cheerful” is the wrong word. Blake’s work is innocent.

FOR an earlier Blake, whom Leavis thought one of the most important English poets, innocence and experience were the “two contrary states of the human soul,” and both were necessary, for “without contraries there is no progression.” If there is a case “against” Quentin Blake it might be framed in this way: that he tries to proceed equipped with only one half of the dialectic, to produce the single-handed handclap. One response might be to say that in Quentin Blake’s art innocence is supplemented by something else: energy. Indeed, his drawings, with their cast of gravity-defying figures, exemplify the Blakean principle of “energy,” which, being “from the body” rather than the mind, is “Eternal Delight.”

“Eternal Delight” – “joyfulness” – might explain why it is so moving to find such drawings in modern sites of medical suffering like clinics. Such a place is a psychiatric facility, the Gordon Mental Health Centre for Adults in Vincent Square, London. Blake’s drawings show fully clothed people – old men and women, mainly – swimming under water in the company of schools of fish. Blake cannot explain their origins, still less what the drawings mean, and he calls their creation “illustration pulled inside out.” They are strange and unaccountable but uplifting.

Even more moving are his drawings for the Hôpital Armand-Trousseau in Paris. This is a hospital for children of all ages, including the poorest immigrants from North Africa, who suffer from both physical and psychological ills. Blake’s wonderful murals show children of all sizes and colours, ascending ladders, stepping confidently across wooden bridges with no handrails, leaping from heights to be caught in blankets held out by doctors and parents, consulting physicians perilously, but safely, high in the

branches of trees: “in varying states of optimism or” – Blake realistically adds – “despair.”

Drawings like these show the world through the eyes of innocence, a world that is both self-sufficient and self-sustaining, which, one hopes, can return to the suffering children a small but plausible utopianism in a situation of distress and danger. What is good about them is that they can have no conceivable design upon anyone – they cannot be charged with trying to cheer anyone up, for instance, least of all the patients. Their virtue lies in the absence of motive beyond a confidence that such drawings can be made to work in such a setting. But perhaps an additional reason why Blake values as much as he does these works in places of suffering and pain for the old, the sick, the mad, is that those places supply in a happenstance and unexpected way – not as part of a “project,” with the attendant self-serving personal motivations – the missing, complementary half of the Blakean dialectic.

