

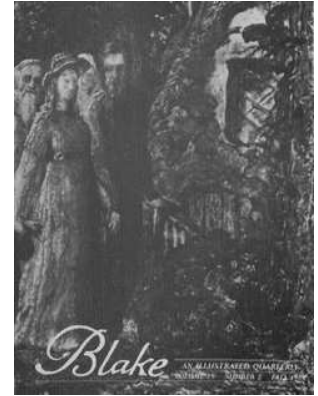
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A R T I C L E

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West Kent, 1832 Rediscovered

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# Samuel Palmer's *An Address to the Electors of West Kent, 1832* Rediscovered

BY DAVID BINDMAN

In 1975 I gave a lecture at London University on Samuel Palmer in which I attempted to relate some major themes in his work to the political upheavals of his time. The idea was to demonstrate that the study of politics could be as relevant to the discussion of visionary artists as it was to those like Madox Brown and Courbet who made direct reference to political issues in their paintings. Palmer seemed a good example because his letters of the later 1820s reveal him as bitterly hostile to radicalism and dissent in all its forms. Furthermore Palmer was known to have been moved in the face of the Reform Act of 1832 to produce an anonymous political pamphlet, *An Address to the Electors of West Kent*, by "an Elector." No copy appeared to have survived, but its existence was known from a reference to it in a letter by John Linnell, and Geoffrey Grigson had found some extracts held up for derision in a reform newspaper, the *Maidstone Gazette* for 11 December 1832.<sup>1</sup> In preparing my lecture I made strenuous efforts to find the pamphlet but without success, and I had to rely for my picture of Palmer's political views on the extracts and various passages from his letters. Some time later I mentioned the missing pamphlet to Michael Collinge of the Institute of Historical Research of London University. As it happens he was going shortly afterwards to the Maidstone Public Record office which I had searched in vain, and a few days later he sent me a photocopy of the whole pamphlet. It is here reprinted in full for the first time since 1832, and it is Palmer's longest and most considered piece of prose to have survived, dating from a critical period in his career.

In this introduction I want to discuss briefly the political background to the pamphlet and suggest some possible connections with his art. To a degree I will be following in the footsteps of Geoffrey Grigson who in an article in *Horizon* of 1944<sup>2</sup> and his book on Palmer of 1947 argues that Palmer's political reactions in the period around the Reform Act were symptomatic of his retreat from the visionary basis of his work which led to his eventual departure from Shoreham. The pamphlet as we already know from the published fragments is strongly anti-radical and defensive of the Established

Church which he believed to be the true Apostolic Church through its descent from the pre-Reformation Catholic Church, as he makes clear in a letter to George Richmond of 24 June 1828: "I hope, Sir, that the Lord will confirm you & comfort you in true and sweet affiliation to the Apostolic Church which has only Bishops and pastors (tho' many drones & wolves) in which only are the efficacies of the holy sacraments, the authority and absolution & blessing, the delegated power of Jesus Christ, the eternal shield against the gates of Hell, The chief corner stone . . . the rock St Peter, the indissoluble foundation of the apostles & prophets, stronger than the pillars of the world & the fabric of the universe & the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>3</sup> In this devotion to the Church of England Palmer was perfectly consistent throughout his life and he accepted the paternal view of society it implied, but in 1828 it did not alienate him from his friends in the Shoreham circle many of whom were, like John Linnell, themselves dissenters: "Politics we dabble in: Mr. L[innell] though of no party magnifies the peasants; I, also, as you know, of no party, as I love our fine British peasantry, think best of the old high Tories, because I find they gave most liberty to the poor, and were not morose, sullen and blood-thirsty like the Whigs, liberty jacks and dissenters; whose cruelty when they reign'd, was as bad as that of the worst times of the worst papists; only more sly and smoothlier varnish'd over with a thin shew of reason."<sup>4</sup>

The year 1828 saw the final repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts which removed the statutory bar upon non-Anglicans from holding public and municipal offices. The issue neatly polarized political and religious attitudes, with Radicals and Dissenters on one side, and the "old high Tories" and the Church of England, who rightly feared that the Act would spell the end of what Norman Gash calls the "oligarchic Anglican constitution of the eighteenth century,"<sup>5</sup> on the other. For the Church of England the 1820s were years of ever-increasing threat, and Palmer, like Constable who spent much time in the close of Salisbury Cathedral, saw the Church, the repository of all true values, progressively isolated by the spread of dissent, especially in the towns where Angli-

cans were often in a minority. In the countryside the complaints of Radicals gathered around the issue of tithes, the traditional method of paying the clergy whereby a farmer was obliged to give one tenth of his produce either in cash or kind to the local parish. The problems this system created were endless, for assessment could always be at issue; in hard times there was always the cry that the clergy should abate their demands. While some clergy were genuinely poor themselves there were church pluralists who lived very comfortably without ever seeing their parishioners. Furthermore Dissenters normally regarded the Church as an "unscriptural institution" and denied the Church its title to the tithe in the first place. Most threatening from the point of view of the Church was the fact that the issue of tithes could unite farmers and farm laborers in common cause against them.<sup>6</sup>

On what grounds could the Church mount a defense of the system of tithes which made the clergy such an obvious target for Reform? An unsigned article in the *Quarterly Review* of 1830<sup>7</sup> claimed among other things that the Church in consequence of its independence from the state provided a means of betterment for poor men without social advantages. These men having acquired a good education would then return to rural areas the advantage of a learned clergy; here the author quotes Burke: "In retired parishes, the family of the clergyman is often a little centre of civilization, from which gleams of refinement of manners, of neatness, of taste, as well as of science and general literature, are diffused through districts into which they would otherwise never penetrate." In the last resort, however, the anonymous author rests the defense of tithes on more ineffable ideas, in this case those of the mature Wordsworth of the *Excursion*, first published in 1814, in particular the words of the country pastor in Book VI:

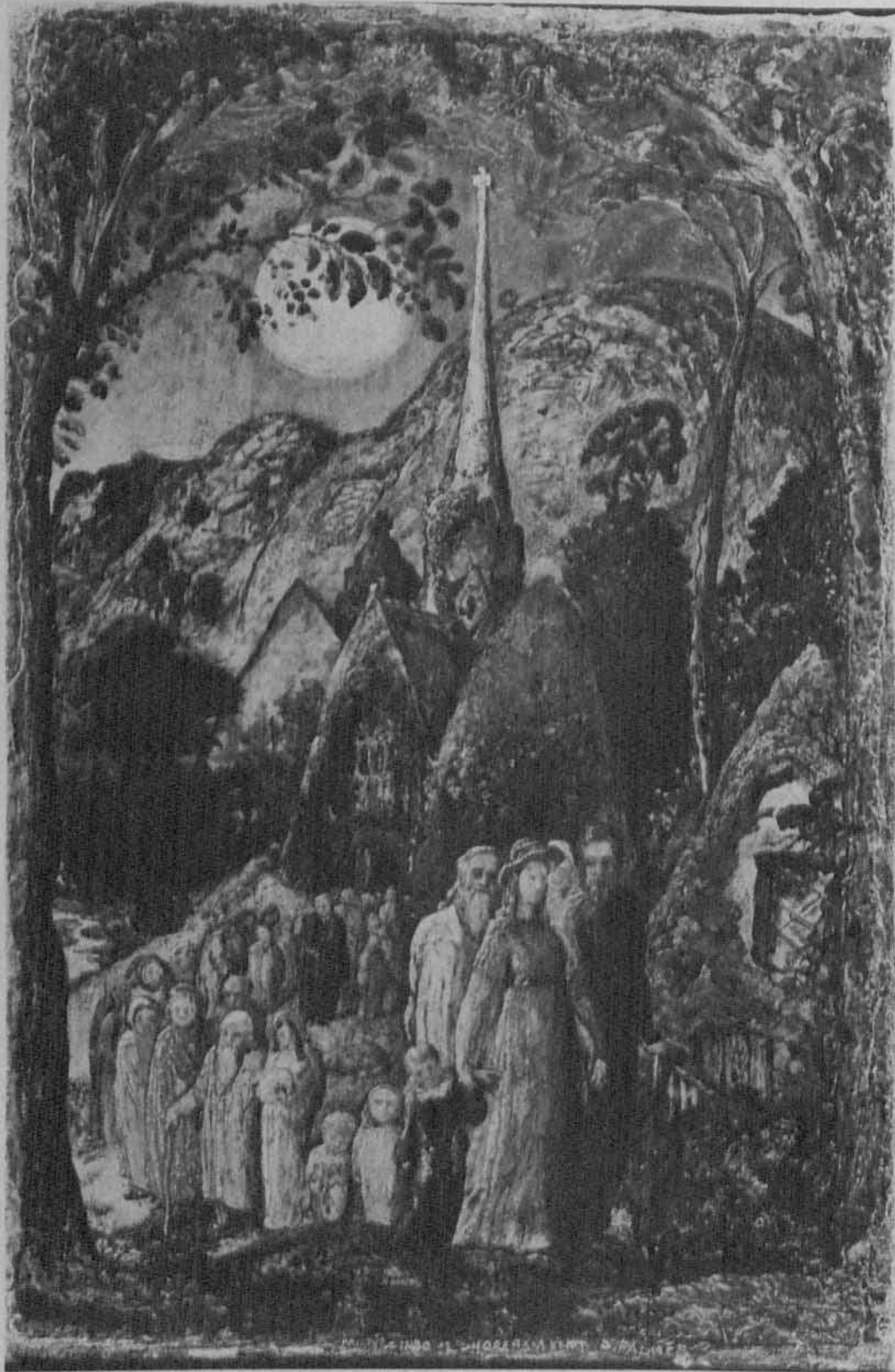
Hail to the state of England and conjoin  
With this a salutation as devout  
Made to the spiritual fabric of her church,  
Founded in truth; by blood of martyrdom  
Cemented; by the hands of wisdom reared  
In beauty of holiness, with ordered pomp,  
Decent and unreprieved. . . .  
And O, ye swelling hills and spacious plains,  
Besprent from shore to shore with steeple towers  
And spires, whose silent finger points to heaven—  
Nor wanting at wide intervals, the bulk  
Of ancient minster, lifted above the cloud  
Of the dense air which town or city breeds,  
To intercept the sun's glad beams—may ne'er  
That true succession fail of English hearts,  
Who with ancestral feeling can perceive  
What in those holy structures ye possess  
Of ornamental interest, and the charm  
Of pious sentiment diffused afar,  
And human charity and Social love.  
Thus never shall the indignities of time  
Approach their reverend graces unopposed;

Nor shall the elements be free to hurt  
Their fair proportions; nor the blinder rage  
Of bigot zeal, madly to overturn:  
And if the desolating hand of war  
Spare them, they shall continue to bestow  
Upon the thronged abodes of busy men  
(Depraved, and ever prone to fill their minds  
Exclusively with transitory things.)  
An air and mien of dignified pursuit,  
Of sweet civility, on rustic wilds.

I have quoted that passage at length because it seems to be in sympathetic accord with the painting by Palmer in the Tate Gallery entitled by him *Coming from Evening Church, Shoreham*, dated 1830. It shows a group of people leaving a village church set in a valley beneath the moon. The bold form of the church is balanced by the warm and homely cottage on the right, and the villagers represent all ages and generations from small children to old men; in the middle distance can be seen the parson in the midst of his flock. The church spire whose "silent finger points to heaven" (in fact Shoreham Church did not have a spire, though most others in that part of Kent do) dominates the village but seems to grow out of the hillside, which with the overhanging trees appears to protect the village. The painting is a representation of the village as part of the natural order of things, under the benign auspices of the Old English Church, which guarantees the indivisible harmony of nature, nation and religion.

The painting, therefore, offers a positive if highly idealized vision of rural life, and one that can be paralleled in Palmer's letters of 1828, like the one already cited. It is all the more striking that the *Address* should be so bleak in tone even though it cannot have been written much more than two years after the painting. It expresses primarily Palmer's rage at the very idea of electoral reform, the supporters of which are seen as nothing less than beasts and despoilers who wish only for the destruction of the Church. The note of hysterical intolerance can be matched with that in a letter to George Richmond of 21 September 1832 in which he repents of the indulgence he had shown to friends even until quite recently:

If people knew how deeply the whole world lieth in wickedness, and how totally it is estranged & set in opposition against God; they would I cannot help thinking, no longer wonder why all kinds of sects & schisms may not equally be term'd the Churches of Christ. . . . Once I was full of this lightness and folly—yea even to the present time my old Adam can see no reason why the sleek & sober Quaker or the meek & moral Unitarian should be beholden to the Church, claiming the power of the keys of the kingdom of Heaven—But blessed be God. I am changed ever since you saw me—I am a free thinker in art in literature in music in poetry—but as I read of but one way to Heaven & that a narrow one it is not for me to chuse which way, I will be saved & make it a pretty speculation or matter of taste, & run to seek my Saviour in holes & corners, but go at once where He is ever to be found, at the Apostolick altar of the Melchisedekian priesthood.<sup>8</sup>



Samuel Palmer. *Coming from Evening Church, Shoreham* (1830). Courtesy of Tate Gallery Publications Department.

Evidently something traumatic had happened to Palmer in the years before 1832, and Grigson astutely pointed out that the early 1830s were the time of the "Captain Swing" riots when unemployed and hungry farm laborers terrorized farmers, particularly in Kent, by setting fire to ricks. In fact Shoreham was right in the heart of the discontents and Palmer by moving there in the late 1820s with the dream of finding "a primitive village where none of the King-choppers had set up business"<sup>9</sup> found himself in a position similar to someone who had recently sought refuge from civilization in the Falkland Islands. By the end of the 1820s more than a third of the population of the Kentish Weald was unemployed following the agricultural recession after Waterloo. According to Hobsbawm and Rudé, in the counties of Southern England by 1828 "Pauperism, degradation, desperation, and sullen discontent were almost universal."<sup>10</sup> In 1829 a disastrous harvest was followed by a cruel winter, and misery increased even further especially in Kent. In 1830 the farm laborers turned to open revolt in the form of rick burning and the destruction of threshing machines, sometimes accompanied by sinister letters in the name "Captain Swing," which became part of life in the area around Shoreham. In retrospect the causes of the revolt can be seen to have lain in local desperation and it was not part of a general uprising. But 1830 was the year of a revolution in France and renewed agitation for Reform in the towns, so one can well see how someone of Palmer's temperament might persuade himself that the pathetic actions of the rick burners were fomented by Jacobins rushing over from France to join with their English counterparts in the destruction of the property-owning classes. The first recorded outbreak came in Orpington on 1 June 1830 and by the end of 20 September fires were reported within the area of a few miles about Shoreham, including one on land belonging to Mr. Love of Filston Hall Farm in Shoreham whom Palmer had described as "one of the best farmers here-about."<sup>11</sup> The revolt was suppressed by the end of the year, but one may presume that the fires consumed not only Palmer's hopes of a rural retreat but also his faith in the "fine old English peasantry."

*An Address to the Electors of West Kent* was published in support of the Tory candidate Sir William Geary in December 1832 in the general election which followed the passing of the Reform Act, which would have further confirmed Palmer's despairing vision of the future. The political imagery of the pamphlet is essentially of the kind popularized by Canning and the *Anti-Jacobin* and also the caricatures of Gillray, in which the movement for Reform even in its most moderate and respectable form was equated unequivocally with the worst excesses of the French Revolution; to support Reform was to open the floodgates to mob rule and the imposition of French atheism and equality, for in Palmer's words it

was "the importation of yesterday, from poor, degraded, dishonoured, Atheistical France." It is easy to see on reading the pamphlet why a radical newspaper should complain of its "gross invectives and foul vituperation," and why it should have offended John Linnell who also complained of its impertinent imitation of Milton. Nonetheless it is full of stirring imagery, even a certain visionary quality which is not incompatible with the rapturous imagination of the Shoreham paintings. This pamphlet deserves to be regarded not as an aberration nor simply the product of disillusionment, but as the other side of the coin of the political and religious vision which is implicit in Palmer's Shoreham paintings. In the last resort Palmer's art is as essentially High Tory in spirit as Blake's is indelibly Radical and apocalyptic.

<sup>1</sup>G. Grigson, *Samuel Palmer: The Visionary Years* (1947), pp. 104-107.

<sup>2</sup>"Samuel Palmer: The Politics of an Artist," *Horizon*, 4 (1944), 314-28.

<sup>3</sup>*The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, ed. R. Lister (1974), I, no. 1828 (4), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Palmer, *Letters*, I, no. 1828 (9), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>N. Gash, *The Age of Peel* (1968), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>E. J. Evans, "Some Reasons for the Growth of English Rural Anti-Clericalism," *Past and Present*, Feb. 1975.

<sup>7</sup>*Quarterly Review* (1830), pp. 105-47.

<sup>8</sup>Palmer, *Letters*, I, no. 1832 (1), pp. 58-59.

<sup>9</sup>Palmer, *Letters*, I, no. 1828 (11), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup>E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1969), p. 81.

<sup>11</sup>Palmer, *Letters*, I, no. 1827 (3), p. 14.

