

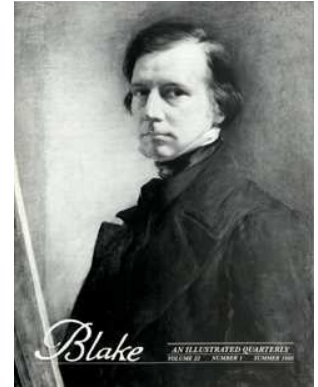
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BLAKE

R E V I E W

Raymond Lister, *The Paintings of Samuel Palmer*;
Raymond Lister, *The Paintings of William Blake*

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REVIEWS

Raymond Lister. *The Paintings of Samuel Palmer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 178 pp. \$29.95.

Raymond Lister. *The Paintings of William Blake*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 176 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Shelley M. Bennett

Raymond Lister has contributed two new publications to the rich body of works on Blake and his followers. *The Paintings of Samuel Palmer* and *The Paintings of William Blake* are attractive picture books directed to the general public. Each comprises a short introduction on the life of the artist, followed by seventy-five color plates arranged in a chronological sequence. The plates are accompanied by a brief commentary. Although there are no footnotes, a selected bibliography is included for further suggested reading.

These broad surveys span the entire artistic careers of Palmer and Blake. In the case of Palmer, this is particularly useful. By devoting more coverage than usual to his prosaic middle years, Lister corrects an imbalance that exists in most Palmer literature. Lister also covers the wide variety of media utilized by these two artists. Since this includes drawings and prints, in addition to paintings, the titles of both works are misleading. Perhaps "art works" would be more indicative of the myriad material covered in each book.

The brief introductions encapsulate in a very readable manner a good deal of biographical information. In his commentary on the color plates, Lister introduces the reader to the diverse literary, musical, and artistic references that enrich the works of both artists. Although attuned to a general audience, his discussion of Blake's works also refers to various interpretations which prevail in current scholarship. As he justly notes in his remarks on Blake's "The Dance of Albion" (pl. 10), "Perhaps all these readings are valid, for one of the sources of Blake's strength is the multiplicity of meaning in much of his work." Without footnotes, there is, however, no way for the uninitiated to tell what is borrowed from other sources and what is a fresh interpretation.

THE PAINTINGS OF SAMUEL PALMER



RAYMOND LISTER

On the whole, Lister has done a fine job of presenting the richly nuanced art of both men in a manner which will be easily accessible to the general reader. This broad approach has distorted the material in some instances. In the introduction, for example, there is too much emphasis on biographical anecdote, rather than the intellectual and artistic content of Blake's and Palmer's work.

The format also has necessitated an overly simplistic explanation of some aspects of their work, in particular the social side. Indeed, Lister's explanation of Palmer's scenes of labor, such as "The Harvest Moon" (pl. 25), tell us more about his own nostalgic projections than about Palmer's intent: "One can imagine the constant talk, the satisfaction of working in a group, and the well-earned simple but gratifying meal during the afternoon, washed down by cider; and at the end of it all the jollity and feasting of harvest home."

The restricted format also results in some strange bedfellows. For example in his remarks on Palmer's "A Hilly Scene" (pl. 10), Lister has thrown together, willy-nilly, allusions to Gothic architecture, illuminated manuscripts, Milton, Schubert, and Keats within a few brief sentences. The discussion of Palmer's "The Sleeping Shepherd" (pl. 32), piles up references to Graeco-Roman sculpture, a play by John Fletcher, nocturnes by Chopin and John Field, and a passage by Walter Pater.

THE PAINTINGS OF WILLIAM BLAKE



RAYMOND LISTER

For the most part, Lister is careful to note related works (and their location), but there are some inconsistencies in his procedure. In a few cases, he fails to cite closely allied studies. For example, in his discussion of Blake's "Pestilence" (pl. 2), he refers to the versions of this composition in Steigal Fine Art at Edinburgh, the City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and an American private collection, but no mention is made of the pencil drawing of "Pestilence" in the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery (published in *Blake* (winter 1984-85): 132-40).

Although adept, Lister's discussion of Palmer's and Blake's techniques is limited by the restrictions imposed by the audience to which it is directed. Some of the basic data necessary for a scholarly reading is not included. For instance, he does not identify the state of the print he reproduces in Palmer's "The Lonely Tower" (pl. 70), although he emphasizes the difference in quality between earlier and later impressions. He could have supplied this information by citing the entries in his own publication, *Samuel Palmer and his Etchings*. The addition of Butlin's catalogue numbers would also make Lister's Blake book of greater use to the scholar.

Since these are picture books, they rely primarily on the quality of the copious color reproductions. With few exceptions, the color is good, ensuring the popular success of both publications.

Morton D. Paley. *The Apocalyptic Sublime*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986. xii + 196 pp.; illus. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Joseph Wittreich

"Pieces of art, in the frame of Prophecy": thus, in the late seventeenth century Thomas Beverley¹ anticipates the phenomenon—the translation of the Apocalypse into paintings—that is nominally the subject of Morton Paley's fine book. And I say *nominally* because *The Apocalyptic Sublime*, like any book of first importance, has a reach that exceeds the grasp of its seven chapters and three appendices. Indeed, encoded within the very organization of the book—its threefold structures, its septenary design—is an ambition (perhaps too modestly expressed) to redefine romanticism, at least in England, in terms of a preoccupation with the apocalyptic myth. Shared by poets and painters alike, this preoccupation, when fully understood, is with history (the creation of a new history) and with poetics (the formation of a new aesthetics). Paley's concern, then, is with the poetry of history as it registers itself in the history of painting. That concern, in turn, is centered in romanticism, which is a breakthrough—a revolution—in both ideology and aesthetics but which, paradoxically, is rooted in the past. Paley's book (appropriately given the occasion that inspired it) is a necessary supplement to Northrop Frye's *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968) and M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). It extends the conclusions of both these books into another art form, another dimension of romantic culture.

The alliance of word and picture in the last of the scriptural books, together with the question of which is to be privileged, is the subject of an exchange between Richard Haydock and Joseph Mede; and it is an alliance foregrounded, a question centered, through the juxtaposition of Haydock's and Mede's opinions within the prefatory matter that accompanies most editions of Mede's highly influential, twice translated, and often reprinted *Clavis Apocalyptica*.² Mede marks a turning point in the history of apocalyptic interpretation, making of it a science, and part of that science involves implicating the Apocalypse in the other arts: painting, drama, architecture, and even music. Mede's followers were legion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and what they stressed about St. John's apocalyptic theater (indeed, what is still stressed about that theater today) is that this intricately designed and structured edifice, this mental theater and sacred drama, is filled with "shifting scenes" making up the landscapes of hu-