

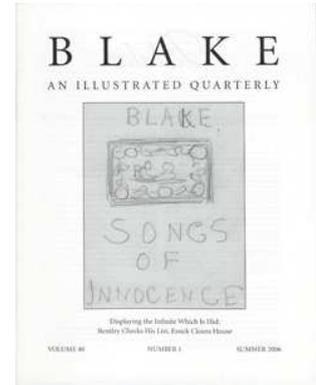
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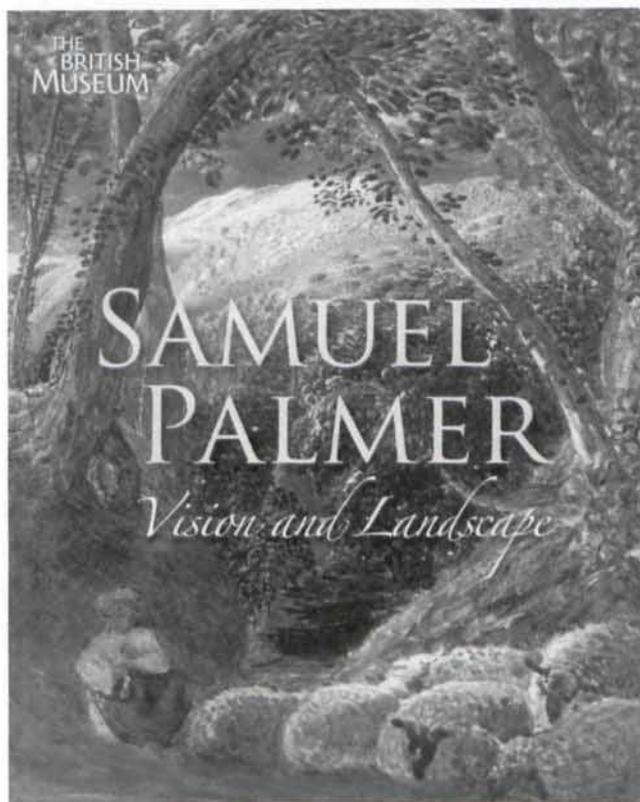
R E V I E W

William Vaughan, Elizabeth E. Barker, Colin  
Harrison, et al., Samuel Palmer 1805-1881: Vision  
and Landscape

C. S. Matheson

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William Vaughan, Elizabeth E. Barker, Colin Harrison, et al. *Samuel Palmer 1805-1881: Vision and Landscape*. Catalogue of the exhibition at the British Museum, 21 October 2005-22 January 2006, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 7 March-29 May 2006. British Museum Press, 2005. 256 pp., 230 color illus. £25.00/\$45.00, paperback.

Reviewed by C. S. Matheson

My first face-to-face encounter with Samuel Palmer was rather clandestine. It involved a theologian, a spare bedroom and a return trip from France.

Once, on my way back from the Loire Valley after a holiday with friends, S. invited me to stop over in London at his parents' home in Highgate. His father is an ecclesiastical publisher, with distant ties to the Palmer family. S. knew I was working on Blake—was I interested in Samuel Palmer too? Yes, of course, I replied, my mind's eye suddenly full of cloisonné sheep, tipsy half-moons and darkling fields with their furrows running aslant. We have an original painting, S. said, but we keep it hidden because the insurance is so ruinous.

I followed him into a dim guest room, waiting to see from where the small picture would be conjured. Behind a copy of Virgil's *Eclogues*? Folded modestly with the linen? Under here, he said, hauling the corner of a substantial swaddled rectangle from beneath the bed, give me a hand. We heaved it onto the embroidered counterpane.

Its size was the first shock. I had always thought of Palmer's work as being on a very modest scale, as if his distillation of place and emotion was so intense that the physical dimensions of the work were inevitably distilled down too. This was someone, after all, who included a "diminishing mirror" in his outdoor sketching kit. I had thought of Palmer as an artist whose visions were naturally adapted to the page and the portfolio—someone whose sensibility was most happily circumscribed by the woodcut and the etching. But this painting, in its solid nineteenth-century frame and glazing, bore heavily down on all my little assumptions. The second shock was the color. It was a sunrise landscape so vivid, so intense that the adjective "lurid" immediately came to mind. It showed a restlessly brilliant sky, its pinks, oranges, and yellows utterly unsubdued by the dark suggestiveness of the hill and trees and rural labor plodding forward below. It was the violent dawn of a new day in an very old world—"An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil," as Yeats muses in "Phases of the Moon." I hope I am betraying no confidence by identifying the work as an illustration to "Lycidas."

The aptness of this little private view strikes me now after all these years, not the least because its contradictions seem writ large in the exhibition *Samuel Palmer: Vision and Landscape*. Curator William Vaughan has divided Palmer's art and life into the broad, unequal categories of "Visionary" and "Victorian"—divisions which variously reflect the tendencies, chronology and reception of Palmer's work. As the first major retrospective of the artist in almost 80 years (the last was at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1926), this exhibition and the catalogue are great achievements, not to mention a timely intervention in the evolution of Palmer's reputation.

To mark the bicentenary of Palmer's birth, paintings, drawings, prints and artifacts have been assembled from public and private collections in North America, Britain, Europe and Australia. The greatest concentration of work is drawn from the collections of the British Museum, Ashmolean Museum, and Yale Center for British Art. Roughly a quarter of the exhibits in the UK show are not at the Met., principally leaves from the 1824 sketchbook (an updated edition of which has just been published by Thames & Hudson in association with the William Blake Trust), and a clutch of "blacks," innovative monochrome ink and wash landscapes that date from the early Shoreham period. John Linnell's compelling pencil portrait *William Blake at Hampstead* is not traveling westward. Met. viewers might also regret the omission of Palmer's *Cornfield Bordered by Trees*, c. 1833-44, his smallest surviving oil.

It seems churlish, however, to protest these omissions when the show is so rich and revealing—not of a narrowly canonical Samuel Palmer, but a Samuel Palmer broadened beyond

the corrective presence of his (pyromaniacal) son, Alfred Herbert. (Before A. H. Palmer emigrated to Canada in 1910, he burned masses of what he considered his father's equivocal work; the fire, he said, lasted for days.) A long, long career of innovation, struggle and acute observation is chronicled here. Two catalogue essays on Palmer's materials and techniques, one by Alexandra Greathead and the other by Marjorie Shelley, are particularly welcome accounts of Palmer's career-long experimentation with pigments and effects. Technically and psychologically Vision and Landscape seems a comprehensive answer to the charge of escapism that has dogged assessments of Palmer's production. One is guided, in fact, to see Palmer as a unique bridge between romanticism, impressionism and post-impressionism—"essentially the English Van Gogh," as Graham Sutherland once described.

Each room establishes a major phase of Palmer's life, from his prodigious early years (Palmer was 14 when he first exhibited at the British Institution and Royal Academy), to the articulation of a "primitive vision" between 1823 and 1826. "Early" Shoreham and Palmer's involvement with Blake and the Ancients (here named "Britain's first artistic community") are carefully documented, along with "later" Shoreham, 1830-35, "the high point of his individuality," as Colin Harrison observes, and the period of such seminal works as *The Magic Apple Tree*, *In a Shoreham Garden*, *The Bright Cloud*. In contrast to these Shoreham rooms, the spaces devoted to Palmer's picturesque travels in the West Country and Wales, and his Italian interlude of 1837-40, feel less intense, in spite of the ambitious size and scope of the landscape compositions. The Italian scenes paradoxically reinforce Palmer's gifts as a domestic landscape artist: at his best in England, Palmer blends a naturalist's eye with a sense of place so deep it could only form through accretion. Only in the study of *The Cypressess at the Villa d'Este* does Palmer approach the same level of rootedness in his environment.

It is a cliché in Palmer studies to lament the waning of Palmer's creativity post-Shoreham. Happily, the exhibition does not acquiesce in this view, but gives serious treatment to the products of Palmer's extended involvement with the Society of Painters in Water-Colours and with the Etching Club of London. Elizabeth E. Barker's essay on Palmer and printmaking, "The excitement of gambling, without its guilt and its ruin," presents the technical and commercial aspects of this latter work with admirable clarity. The last two decades of Palmer's life (c. 1865-81) are represented through a magisterial series of illustrations to Milton, and, in a circle back to Blake, 11 etchings to illustrate an English translation of Virgil's *Eclogues*. Palmer's last great cycle of watercolors and etchings for "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" is best characterized as an engagement with the author—although on more moderate terms than Blake's correction of *Paradise Lost*. Commissioned by Ruskin's solicitor L. R. Valpy, the series is also representative of Palmer's late critical success and his standing amongst the pre-Raphaelites and their circle. I was disappointed to find that Palmer's complementary work on "Lycidas" was not addressed in the show or catalogue.

Palmer's relationship to Blake and the nature of his debt to Blake are certainly things that trouble the division between the categories "Visionary" and "Victorian." Vaughan describes Blake as the second most important mentor in Palmer's life after his father-in-law Linnell, and characterizes Palmer's 1824 introduction to Blake as the most influential encounter of his life. (Blayne Brown in his essay ranks Blake as the third greatest influence on Palmer's literary life after his nurse Mary Ward and her favorite author, Milton). Much stress is given throughout the exhibition and catalogue to the lasting impact on Palmer of Blake's Job illustrations and his wood engravings for Thornton's *Pastorals of Virgil* and, to a lesser degree, Blake's designs for the *Inferno* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Less acknowledged are traces of Blake's graphic methodology throughout Palmer's work, even in unexpected places like the 1828 *Oak Trees*, *Lullingstone Park*. Vaughan notes that the form and presence of Palmer's study of these ancient trees may owe something to Blake's Wood of Self-Murderers from the Dante illustrations, but I would argue that Palmer's awareness of Blake goes beyond literal content here and into the surface tension of the piece. The texture of *Oak Trees* is a revelation firsthand. Palmer has built up the furrows and edges of the foreground oak with gouache and ink: heightened lines course the length of the tree like the sap within its limbs and time in its aspect. It's as if the energies of the organism itself are squeezing the marks up in relief from the paper—a powerful enactment of Blake's "determinate and bounding" line that not only "distinguish[es] the oak from the beech," but reveals the very nature of what it represents.

The implication here, however, is that Palmer seemed to value Blake more for what he represented as a type of artist than for what he produced as an artist. Blake is cast as a singular creative genius, independent, original and spiritual, who privileged the imagination over observation. Palmer's lifelong mandate was to reconcile natural observation and imagination. But one of his most prized possessions was William Blake's spectacles.

#### Blake & the Pre-Raphaelites

A short selection of first, limited, and signed editions; rarities; and books containing plates by Blake and others. Including the 1793 Gay's *Fables*, a 2nd edition Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, Plate 9 ("Then a spirit passed ...") from Blake's 1825 *Job*, Trianon Press "overs," DG Rossetti's 1870 *Poems*, Hall Caine's *Recollections* ... with photographic frontispiece of DGR, plates after Blake by WB Scott, and more

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