NOTE

Two Blake Drawings and a Letter from Samuel Palmer

Raymond Lister

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 6, Issue 2, Fall 1972, pp. 53-54
TWO BLAKE DRAWINGS
AND A LETTER FROM SAMUEL PALMER

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In the Department of Prints and Drawings at the
British Museum are two sketches by Blake, one on
either side of the same piece of paper, of "Isaiah
foretelling the Crucifixion" [Illus. 1 and 2].

They are thought to have been made about 1821,
measure 4 3/4 by 3 inches, and came from the col-
lection of Samuel Palmer. The two sketches are

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and writing Palmer's biography for Faber and Faber.

1 Geoffrey Keynes, Blake's Pencil Drawings, 2nd series,
2 Drawings of William Blake & Pencil Studies (New York:

(Baine, continued)

The trees in the semicircle are actually thus the
sprouted stakes, as Crusoe later explains: "Those
piles grew all like trees, and were by this time
grown so big, and spread so very much, that there
was not the least appearance to any one's view of
any habitation behind them" (p. 123). "The en-
trance into this place I made to be not by a door,"
Crusoe adds, "but by a short ladder to go over the
top . . . " (p. 50). In Blake's drawing the main
entrance to Crusoe's cave is largely concealed.
The door at the viewer's right, Crusoe constructs
later: "I work'd side-ways to the right hand into
the rock, and then turning to the right again,
work'd quite out and made me a door to come out,
on the outside of my pale or fortification" (p. 57).
In Blake's unfinished drawing it is difficult
to make out what Crusoe is doing, for his figure
and immediate surroundings are quite indistinct.
A glance at the novel, however, shows that he is
discovering, or cultivating, the barley and rice
which have miraculously appeared on one side of
the fortification. Needing a bag which had once
contained grain but now seemed to be reduced by
rodents to "husks and dust," Crusoe "shook the
husks of corn out of it on one side of my forti-
fication under the rock" (p. 65). Some time later,
he continues, "I saw some few stalks of something
green shooting out of the ground." Not long there-
after, "I saw about ten or twelve ears come out,
which were perfect green barley . . . " "I saw
near it still," Crusoe adds, "all along by the
side of the rock, some other straggling stalks,
which prov'd to be stalks of rice . . . " (pp. 65-
66).

Blake's drawings show that he followed the
novel accurately and pictured it correctly. His
selection of this last incident, moreover, one
neglected by other illustrators of Robinson Crusoe,
shows that he understood Defoe's central thesis--
God's providential care of Crusoe: "I . . . thought
these the pure productions of Providence for my
support . . . " (p. 60), Crusoe says of the grain.

Perhaps other sketches by Blake of Robinson
Crusoe have survived and can now be identified.
Blake may have planned to contribute to one of
the numerous illustrated editions of Robinson
Crusoe which began to multiply from about 1791.
If he expected to help Thomas Stothard with the
plates for the edition published that year for
The Novelist's Magazine, he was disappointed:
his name does not appear there, even though by
this time Stothard and his publisher, Harrison,
were constantly employing his burin. But perhaps
the identification of these sketches will lead to
the discovery of Blake plates in some long-forgot
dition of Robinson Crusoe. At least they demon-
strate Blake's interest in the imaginative dis-
senter beside whom he now rests.
nature, I would roughly assign it to about 1849; and from the allusion to the spring in the last paragraph, it would appear to have been written during the autumn, or perhaps during the winter.

Allow me to contribute to your Album 2 small and faint—but undoubtedly genuine Blakes.

By attaching a thin piece of paper at one side, they can both be visible on turning over.—The fainter is a design perhaps from the Pilgrim's Progress—*the first inventive lines*—from which he was always most careful not to depart. But finding that it was the right hand which ought to have been elevated he has traced the lines through at the window and gone on a little, intending then to transfer the second to another paper for completion which he probably did. The state in which Blakes drawings and those of other inventors are most interesting to myself are either the finished state or that in which the first thought is just breathed upon the paper—of the latter—the faint side of the enclosed is a fair specimen. Would that I had one, only one specimen of his finished work—but I cannot send you such, as I never possessed it.

How long it is since we have met! You must take Time by the forelock if we live till the spring, and come and see what care has been taken of those excellently contrived anti-dust-hangings which you made for my study shelves. They remind daily of your kindness.

Yrs ever truly

S. Palmer--

One of the most interesting aspects of the letter is the light it throws on Blake's method of work—his inability or unwillingness to depart from "the first inventive lines." This no doubt explains much of the vitality and immediacy of his work. In the work of many painters, the difference between the original conception and the finished composition is vast. That is why, for example, Constable's sketches and drawings are so often more moving than his canvases. And it is one reason why Blake is as powerful in his finished works as in his initial inspirations.

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3 Palmer is wrong here. Blake's Pilgrim's Progress designs were made about 1824. There were twenty-nine of them and they are reproduced in color in The Pilgrim's Progress, Introduction by Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Spiral Press, 1941).