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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 collection of Samuel Palmer.¹ The two sketches are

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two stages in the development of the composition, the second, more detailed sketch being inscribed in Palmer's hand: "The 'First Lines', on the preservation of which Mr Blake used so often to insist, are on the other side."

The prophet is shown seated, with his left hand on an open scroll, and his right hand raised above his head. The background details of the second sketch show, from left to right, the Crucifixion, the Holy Ghost as a dove, and the Ascension. The sketches were obviously preliminary studies for a third, almost identical, drawing on a wood block, also in the British Museum, which depicts "Isaiah foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem."²

Accompanying the sketches is a fragment of a letter from Samuel Palmer to an unknown addressee. It is undated, but from the handwriting and sig-

1 Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake's Pencil Drawings*, 2nd series, (London: Nonesuch Press, 1956), p. 39.

2 *Drawings of William Blake 92 Pencil Studies* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 83.

(Baine, continued)

sketch from *Robinson Crusoe* and remembered that Blake had certainly made at least two other sketches for the novel, he probably would have accepted it without question as Blake's. The drawing actually shows no sign of a well, but pictures unmistakably Robinson Crusoe's fortification, with Crusoe sketched lightly at the right. This palisade, as Crusoe describes it, was backed against a "rising hill, whose front towards this little plain was steep as a house-side." As Crusoe relates, he constructed it "ten yards in its semi-diameter from the rock, and twenty yards in its diameter from its beginning and ending" (p. 50).

In this half circle I pitch'd two rows of strong stakes, driving them into the ground till they stood very firm like piles, the biggest end being out of the ground about five foot and a half, and sharpen'd on the top; the two rows did not stand above six inches from one another.

Then I took the pieces of cable which I had cut in the ship, and I laid them in rows one upon another, within the circle, between these two rows of stakes. . . . (p. 50)

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 entrance 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 fortification 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 thereafter, "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 ryce. . . ." (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. 66), 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-forgotten edition of *Robinson Crusoe*. At least they demonstrate 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 Progress³--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.⁴

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.

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).

4 Palmer did, in fact, own Blake's tempera picture, "The spiritual form of Pitt, guiding Behemoth," now in the Tate Gallery, London. Palmer refers to this in a letter to George Gurney, written in October 1880 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). It is, of course, possible that the tempera did not come into Palmer's possession until after the letter in the British Museum was written. Cf. Martin Butlin, *William Blake: A Complete Catalogue of the Works in the Tate Gallery* (London: Tate Gallery, 1971), pp. 56-57.

