

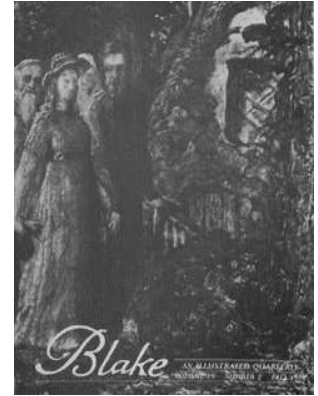
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

G. E. Bentley, Jr., Robert N. Essick, Shelley M. Bennett, and Morton D. Paley, *Essays on the Blake Followers*; Joseph Viscomi, *Prints by William Blake and His Followers*

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G. E. Bentley, Jr., Robert N. Essick, Shelley M. Bennett, Morton D. Paley. Preface by Robert R. Wark. *Essays on the Blake Followers*. San Marino, California: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1983. 71 pp., 51 illus. \$8.00

Joseph Viscomi. *Prints by William Blake and His Followers*. Ithaca, New York: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1983. 36 pp., 18 illus. No price stated.

Reviewed by Raymond Lister

Samuel Palmer, the most important of William Blake's followers, was a few years ago in the news in England on account of the crude fakes of his work, executed by the late Tom Keating, which appeared on the London art market. Several of us said at once that they were not authentic; others appeared to give them their blessing. Some were reproduced in the book *Samuel Palmer* by James Sellars (London, 1974)¹ and one in the *Burlington Magazine*.² One at least was accepted by the late Edward Croft-Murray of the British Museum, and Martin Butlin of the Tate Gallery said there was "a considerable case for their being by the artist."³ Which surely all goes to show that enthusiasm, even when combined with academic scholarship, is not always supported by perfect connoisseurship.

But the fact remains that this all did Palmer's reputation considerable harm if only temporarily, for when leading experts, especially if they are also important museum officials, are deceived into accepting fakes as original works, and when the fakes are illustrated in a leading art journal and in an otherwise scholarly book, people begin to ask themselves if the original artist's work is as good as it is reputed to be, considering that it apparently could be so easily faked as to deceive such expert opinion. This point is often put to me by those outside art circles. Even on Keating's own assessment his fakes were "crude daubs,"⁴ so the non-expert must have found it doubly puzzling that, if Palmer were such an outstanding artist, experts should have been prepared to accept the "daubs" as original work. Consequently the non-expert observer could hardly be blamed for thinking Palmer a lesser figure than before.

The books under review, especially the Huntington volume, should do something towards correcting this. Indeed few of those who even glance over the reduced

reproductions in the Huntington book would possibly imagine that Palmer could have been the same man who made the fakes. The essays in the book provide further evidence of the way in which the authentic Palmer thought and worked, how he translated his visual and literary experiences into original works of his own, how his own complicated personality acted as a catalyst on his reading of, for instance, the poems of Milton, or on his visual experience of the drawings and paintings of Claude Lorrain, transforming each experience into visions of the English countryside with, later on, accents derived from his visits to Devon, Wales, and Italy.

In the first essay, G. E. Bentley, Jr., places the Palmer circle, "The Ancients" as they called themselves, in the Blake milieu, noting, correctly, the prudery and religious conventionality of some of them. Strangely, they seem to have had little comprehension of the mind of their great mentor. It is practically certain that one of them, Frederick Tarham, destroyed much of Blake's work on religious grounds. Again, when Eliza Finch wrote her memoir of her husband, Francis Oliver Finch, another Ancient, she did not even mention Blake; the Finches were Swedenborgians and Blake had thrown the beliefs of that sect aside, so obviously his views rankled. And in a letter of 27 June 1862 to Anne Gilchrist, who was preparing her late husband's life of Blake for press, Palmer advised: "Pray don't send to the printers any extracts made from the book itself [*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*] which has not been looked over and prepared for the press as I saw this evening an indecent word in the text—at least a coarse one."⁵ To which he added a footnote: "I would recommend the same caution as to all Blake manuscripts not already prepared—on account of other matters which 'crop up' now and then and which would be considered BLASPHEMOUS and might ruin the sale of the work if shown up in any ill-natured review."⁶

As a matter of fact Palmer had little, if any, understanding of the bulk of Blake's poetry. The lyric poems he could no doubt appreciate, but when it came to the mythological books he was all at sea. "His poems were variously estimated," he wrote. "They tested rather severely the imaginative capacity of their readers. Flaxman said they were as grand as his designs, and Wordsworth delighted in his *Songs of Innocence*. To the multitude they were unintelligible. In many parts full of pastoral sweetness, and often flashing with noble thoughts or terrible imagery, we must regret that he should sometimes have suffered fancy to trespass within sacred precincts."⁷

In truth these young followers of Blake followed him in a very limited way. Edward Calvert was in a visual sense more influenced by him than any other member of the circle; in his few engravings references to Blake may be traced again and again.⁸ There is a

little of Blake in Richmond's early work, and Palmer's visionary mode had been developed before he ever met Blake, although after they had met the younger man made considerable borrowings. Even so, the influence of the old man was mainly through his wood-engravings for Thornton's *Virgil* and his *Job* engravings, and to a lesser extent through his designs for *Songs of Innocence* and through a few of his watercolors. Within a few years of his death the Ancients were each going separate ways: George Richmond as a fashionable portrait painter, Calvert as a painter of idealized classical scenes, and Palmer as a landscape painter developing along more conventional, though far from uninteresting lines; F. O. Finch had always painted Claudean landscapes and continued to do so. Here and there there is a backward glance at Blake, as in Calvert's "A Young Shepherd on a Journey"⁹ which is an almost exact copy of Blake's illustration to the line "With wand'ring feet unblest . . ." in Thornton's *Virgil*. Nevertheless the impact of these little engravings on the young men was, for a few years, enormous; and if the period of their ascendancy was brief, it did enable them to produce, at least for that time, work as compelling as anything they were to produce in the future.

Robert N. Essick's essay on "John Linnell, William Blake, and the Printer's Craft" is, as one has come to expect from him, an elegantly written and well argued study. The influence of Samuel Palmer's father-in-law, John Linnell, among the Ancients has not often been seriously considered, and it is refreshing to see it given some prominence here. But who has influenced whom it is sometimes difficult to decide; some early Linnells, drawn or painted before the two men had met, seem to be precursors of works by Palmer (for example "Primrose Hill"¹⁰ and "Twilight"¹¹), whereas his "The Weald of Kent,"¹² drawn years after Linnell's first meeting with Palmer, might almost be the work of the younger man.

Essick's study is, as its title implies, concerned with printmaking rather than with drawings, but much the same remarks apply: Linnell's etchings, "Sheep at Noon" and "Woodcutters Repast" (both 1818) again look like precursors of later work by Palmer, especially in the composition and shape of those watercolors he called "Little Longs."

But the most compelling part of this section is Essick's analysis of the engraving techniques used by Blake and Linnell, in which he endeavors to demonstrate Linnell's influence on Blake, especially in their jointly executed plates (for example in "Wilson Lowry," begun in 1824). It is illuminating, too, to read his remarks, brief though they are, on the relationship between Palmer's only known wood-engraving, "Harvest under a Crescent Moon," and Blake's *Virgil* wood-engravings. It is, he writes, "very close in size, mood, and technique to Blake's *Virgil* cuts. Palmer once noted that Blake

particularly admired some of Claude Lorrain's paintings because, 'when minutely examined, there were, upon the focal lights of the foliage, small specks of pure white which made them appear to be glittering with dew.' The *Virgil* wood engravings, with their bold but skillfully deployed flick work, exhibit a graphic equivalent to this technique. In turn, Palmer's single effort in wood achieves its moon-lit effects through an almost identical, if slightly less energetic, use of the graver."

Shelley M. Bennett, who compiled an attractive catalogue of the 1982 Huntington Library and Art Gallery exhibition, *Prints by the Blake Followers*, contributes an essay entitled, "The Blake Followers in the Context of Contemporary British Art." In this Palmer and his circle are considered against the background of the work of Turner, Constable and other Romantics. Bennett, also with considerable originality, compares them with certain aspects of the Pre-Raphaelites; one piquant comparison concerns their similar surface textures: "The dense rich surfaces of the meticulously worked plates, wood-blocks and drawings of the Blake followers produced a glowing, often jewel-like effect. The Pre-Raphaelites obtained a similar luminosity in their oils by working on a wet white ground which created a bright cloisonné-like clarity and sparkle."

Bennett also makes interesting points concerning portraits by the Palmer circle, claiming that they were indebted in some measure to Blake's Visionary Heads, and drawing attention to "their frontal, almost iconic presentation." She makes a similar point about Linnell's portrait of John Varley, painted against a star-studded sky which, she writes, combined with "the fixed, hypnotic stare of the eyes," produces "an emotionally charged, almost visionary, effect quite different from Lawrence's slick grand-manner exhibition-style portraits." She might, more tellingly, have used George Richmond's later portraits as a comparison instead of those of Lawrence.

If I have a minor criticism of Bennett's essay (and this also applies in places to the other essays) it is of her continual reference to the "Shoreham circle" and to the "Shoreham period." Shoreham, though highly important to the young men as a place of spiritual recreation and inspiration, was their center for only a brief period; Palmer alone was there for any length of time and the other members of the circle were only intermittent visitors. Moreover, some of Palmer's most intensely visionary works—the great sepia watercolors of 1825—were completed before he moved there. There is nothing against using "Shoreham" as a convenient label—and that is doubtless what Bennett has done—but this ought to be kept in perspective.

The final chapter in *Essays on the Blake Followers* is by Morton D. Paley and is entitled "'To Realize After A Sort the Imagery of Milton': Samuel Palmer's Designs for *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*." It is in many ways the

most interesting in the book, for it deals with a group of watercolors, painted in Palmer's later years, which have attracted little critical attention during the present century, though there is now strong evidence of a revival of interest.¹³ Commissioned by Leonard Rowe Valpy, John Ruskin's solicitor, the series contains some of the most powerful works created by Palmer during his middle and old age.

Milton's influence on Palmer was strong; he loved especially *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. He also loved *Comus*, which provided subjects for an earlier series of watercolors, which though splendid in many ways, are less vital than the Valpy watercolors. In the later Miltons Palmer drew on the experiences of a lifetime, and it is possible to discover in them recollections of his visionary years, of his visit to Italy, and of his work in Devon, Surrey and Wales. His technique had matured impressively since his early years, and he was now a complete master of the watercolor medium. Incidentally, it is not surprising that Keating did not attempt to forge works in Palmer's later style with its formidable mastery of technique. The mannerisms present in the works of the 1820s and early 1830s made them misleadingly more inviting, though even here Keating did not come within miles of making convincing forgeries.

Paley discusses the Milton watercolors with great perception, relating them to other contemporary interpretations of the same themes, and contrasting their conception with that of similar works by William Blake, in the course of which he demonstrates Palmer's artistic independence, at least in his maturity, of the older man.

Yet it is a pity that he does not write more of the influence of earlier artists on these works. Of these the influence of Claude Lorrain is the strongest; indeed "A Towered City" seems to have been based largely on an idealized view of Tivoli in Claude's *Liber Veritatis*,¹⁴ which Palmer probably knew through the mezzotints of Richard Earlom, published in 1777. But Paley is absolutely right when he claims that among those of his contemporaries who painted subjects from Milton, "only Palmer captures the enticing atmosphere of poetic mystery we find in 'The Bellman' and 'The Lonely Tower.'"

It is to be hoped that Paley's impressive essay will help to initiate a more widespread interest in these works which, even if they lack the intense visionary qualities of the artist's more youthful work, remain sublime evocations of the mind of the poet whose work they illustrate. They are also a survey in old age of the artist's lifetime of artistic endeavor, of wide reading and of deep thought; akin to what W.B. Yeats called "An old man's eagle mind."¹⁵

Joseph Viscomi's survey, *Prints by Blake and His Followers*, is more specialized than *Essays on the Blake Followers*, but within its self-imposed limits it is a successful little work. It contains, in addition to the essay,

a catalogue of an exhibition held in March and April 1983 at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University. It is a shame that the unique impression of Welby Sherman's mezzotint "Illustration to Byron's *Sennacherib*," now in the British Museum, did not come to light soon enough to have been discussed by Viscomi, for it is a remarkable little work, a tiny plate that seems to show the influence of John Martin. It is to be included in the big exhibition *Palmer and "The Ancients"* at the Fitzwilliam Museum during the coming autumn [1984].

Incidentally, Viscomi is not quite right in claiming that George Richmond's "The Robber" and "The Shepherd" were the only plates he executed, for later, in 1844, he made a first class etching of Filippino Lippi's portrait of Masaccio in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.¹⁶

Viscomi's discussions of technique are always trenchant. To take an example, his argument against Bo Lindberg's views of how Blake prepared the designs on his *Job* plates are convincing. I do not know what studies Viscomi has made during his career, but it would not surprise me if he were a practical engraver, as he seems to be familiar with nuances of technique that usually become apparent only to a practitioner.

But the author is at his best in discussing the engravings of Calvert, that wonderful world of *multum in parvo*, of callipygous beauties, of Christian allegories in classical landscapes. Here again he analyzes with intelligence the practical methods used by Calvert, explaining how he arrived at his effects; this is particularly fascinating in the case of his lithographs.

Of Palmer, Viscomi's remark that "compared to the vibrantly free etched lines of James McNeil Whistler and Seymour Haden, Palmer's etchings are paintings executed with needles and acid" is perceptive. Palmer's approach to etching was always that of a painter—how could it be otherwise?—so it is strange that he was so cautious in his attitude to *retroussage*,¹⁷ a device which gave to his etchings some of their most painterly effects.

To sum up, these two books, small though they are, are serious studies which should help to bring greater understanding to Blake's followers, and should also help to show those who were misled by the Keating forgeries how to look at their works.

¹ Plates 41, 43, 78, 87, 89.

² August 1965, p. 439.

³ *The Times*, 16 July 1976, pp. 1-2.

⁴ *The Times*, 20 August 1976, p. 13.

⁵ Raymond Lister, ed., *The Letters of Samuel Palmer* (Oxford, 1974), p. 657.

⁶ *Letters*, p. 661.

⁷ *Letters*, p. 509.

⁸ Raymond Lister, *Edward Calvert* (London, 1962), Chapter 5, *passim*.

⁹ c. 1860. British Museum.

¹⁰ 1811. Fitzwilliam Museum.

¹¹ c. 1819. Private collection, England.

¹² 1833. Fitzwilliam Museum.

¹³ Arnold Fawcus, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Raymond Lister and Graham Reynolds, *Samuel Palmer: A Vision Recaptured* (London, 1978); Helen Irwin, "Samuel Palmer, Poet of Light and Shade," *Apollo* (August 1981), pp. 109–13.

¹⁴ Reproduced in Michael Kitson, *Claude Lorrain: Liber Veritatis* (London, 1978), plate 67.

¹⁵ "An Acre of Grass" from *Last Poems* (1936–39).

¹⁶ Raymond Lister, *George Richmond* (London, 1981), p. 176, pl. XXIX.

¹⁷ Increasing the strength of the lines by dropping a piece of muslin on to the plate to drag up the ink in them before a print is taken.

William Blake. *America: A Prophecy and Europe: A Prophecy*. Facsimile Reproductions of Two Illuminated Books with 35 Plates in Full Color. New York: Dover Publications, 1983. \$5.95

William Blake. *Songs of Experience*. Facsimile Reproduction with 26 Plates in Full Color. New York: Dover Publications, 1984. \$3.00

Reviewed by Jenijoy La Belle

Dover Publications has made a fine reputation for itself by publishing well-made paperbacks useful to students and scholars. Among its Blake titles are *Drawings of William Blake* (1970) and a reduced facsimile reproduction of Richard Edwards' 1797 edition of Young's *Night Thoughts* (1975). In 1971 Dover embarked upon the production of color facsimiles with an original-size reproduction of copy B of *Songs of Innocence*. Some of the plates are fuzzy and the backgrounds are a little too dark, but for only two dollars (later raised to three), the volume is valuable for handy reference and classroom use. Dover has recently issued two further volumes containing color reproductions of three illuminated books.

America and *Europe* are reproduced original size in a single pamphlet-style paperback. The brief "Publisher's Note" includes the following information: "The present volume reproduces the complete copy M of *America* (printed on paper made in 1799), whereas the complete *Europe* reproduced here includes colored plates from copies B and G of that book and the black-and-white plate

from copy K (all these copies are privately owned). Note that *Europe* contains two plates numbered 9—referred to in the present edition as 9(a) and 9(b)—and has no plate numbered 11." Some of this information is wrong, and the whole statement is misleading. Copy M of *America* and B of *Europe* are indeed in private collections, but copy G of *Europe* is now in the Pierpont Morgan Library and copy K has been in the Fitzwilliam Museum since 1950. The comment about two plates numbered 9 implies that this repetition appears in original copies of *Europe* and that none contains a plate numbered 11. This is not the case at all. Both copies B and G are numbered consecutively, and the presence of two plates numbered 9 in the facsimile results from its composite nature. In copy G, plate 12 (following the plate numbers in Bentley, *Blake Books*) is numbered 9, while the same number is given to plate 13 in copy B.

The Publisher's Note implies that the Dover reproductions were made directly from the original copies cited. I am highly suspicious of this—partly because none of the owners of the originals is named and also because there is no statement of permission to reproduce. Further, the mixture of three copies of *Europe* is exactly the same as that appearing in the Blake Trust/Trianon Press facsimile of 1969. The copy of *America* reproduced by Dover is the same as the one used by the Blake Trust for its 1963 facsimile. The Dover reproductions of both illuminated books show distinct boundary lines between contiguous colors, and this feature is typical of the Blake Trust method of stencil coloring, rather than of Blake's own method with its gentle gradations of tones. Thus it would appear that the Dover volume is based on two Blake Trust facsimiles and that these are the books "privately owned" (perhaps by Mr. Hayward Cirker, founder and owner of Dover?). Since the volume lacks any reference to the Blake Trust, I assume that no permission was necessary.

Using the Blake Trust facsimile of *America* copy M as a standard, I find that most of the plates in the Dover reproduction have acceptable color fidelity. The only major problem would seem to be a dulling of the blue tones, particularly on plates 3 and 5 (as numbered in copy M). The sunburst on plate 7 has lost some of its brilliance, and the outlining of the ram and the two figures has become a little unfocused. Several other plates suffer from indistinct outline in design areas, but the only really bad reproductions are plates 8 and 9. Both have a brown tint to the white paper in text areas, and this browning has seriously affected the blues on plate 8 and the greens on plate 9. Clearly, the Dover reproductions are not suitable for the detailed analysis of Blake's hand coloring. No one, however, should expect an inexpensive reproduction to provide the basis for such analyses. The Dover reproductions are certainly adequate for many other types of studies.