

Vital Spark

THE LANDSCAPES OF SAMUEL PALMER

by Gail Leggio

The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved
An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil.

—W.B. YEATS, “THE PHASES OF THE MOON” (1919)

It is easy to see why Samuel Palmer (1805–81) entered the pantheon of Yeats’s spiritual seekers. Palmer’s etching *The Lonely Tower* (1879) and the related watercolor set that quintessentially Yeatsian symbol atop a promontory overlooking a visionary pastoral: shepherds recline with their flocks, an owl swoops through a ravine, a sickle moon skims a low hill. The dense web of fine lines is charged with vitality, the way a van Gogh drawing is, yet the atmosphere is different, steeped in twilight and the archaic. Palmer’s eccentricity and heavily worked surfaces suggest Albert Pinkham Ryder, but this thoroughly British artist can be best examined as an offbeat contemporary of William Blake (1757–1827), John Constable (1776–1837) and the Pre-Raphaelites.

For the bicentennial of Palmer’s birth the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have organized “Samuel Palmer: Vision and Landscape,” the first major retrospective of his art in eighty years. The 100



The Lonely Tower, watercolor, 1881 THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA



Classical River Scene, c. 1878 BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

works on view at the Metropolitan this spring trace the contours of a long, curious and not always happy life, transfigured by periods of illumination. Although his talent was recognized when he was a teenager and his more conventional mature landscapes earned him a measure of success, Palmer's most original paintings were largely unknown until the 1920s. He kept them in what he called his "Curiosity Portfolio" and showed them only to friends. Rediscovering him, modernists responded not only to the power and conviction of his intuitions but also to his formal strategies: the emphasis on surface pattern, the gestural line, the implicit rejection of illusionistic space. "We are not troubled with aerial perspective in the valley of vision,"¹ Palmer wrote, referring to his personal eden at Shoreham in Kent. During the decade he spent there (1825–35) Palmer formed an aesthetic confraternity called the Ancients, similar to the earlier Nazarenes in Germany and the British Pre-Raphaelites a few decades later. The Ancients were brought together by piety and a love of literature. *The Lonely Tower*, a late work in which Palmer recovers his youthful freshness, belongs to a suite illustrating John Milton's diptych *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Milton, Virgil, John Bunyan and the Bible were as much a part of everyday experience to Palmer as the countryside he walked through.

William Blake was a guiding spirit for the Ancients. Palmer met him in 1824, becoming a friend and disciple during the last three years of Blake's life. The Ancients called Blake "the Interpreter," referring to Christian's guide in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Palmer contributed crucial recollections to the first biography of the master, Alexander and Anne Gilchrist's 1863 *Life of William Blake*. Yet Palmer's worldview differs from Blake's, as you can see in their approaches to Milton. Blake's *Milton* (1804–08) tackles *Paradise Lost* directly, quarreling

with Milton's theology. Palmer loves Milton's depictions of nature and lyrical evocations of mood. Significantly, Palmer was particularly enthusiastic about Blake's work in an atypical genre, praising the woodcuts Blake made for an 1820 edition of Virgil's *Pastorals*: "They are visions of little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise; models of the exquisitest pitch of intense poetry.... There is such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul, and gives complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world."² Focusing on the least apocalyptic part of Blake, Palmer articulates his own aesthetic. Blake saw trees full of angels, yet had little use for botanical observation; Palmer loved humble cornfields as much as the starry heavens.

Like Constable, Palmer found his subject in a particular corner of the English countryside, studying trees, fields and skies. But there are clear differences. Palmer's landscapes are intimate, while Constable works on an epic scale. Constable, master of the meteorological science of clouds, seems to think in paint. The literary Palmer is a draftsman above all. But, like Constable, Palmer had a special intimacy with the land, especially its trees. Palmer's *Oak Trees, Lullington Park* (1828) is a relatively straightforward Romantic depiction of one of England's largest and most ancient stands. Palmer uses pen and ink, wash, graphite and watercolor to capture the dynamic vigor of the gnarly trunks and the incandescence of yellow-green moss. He approaches the trees with almost druidical reverence but stays on a terrestrial plane. *In a Shoreham Garden* (c. 1829) is more visionary. A tiny, graceful figure in red seems fairy-like juxtaposed against the towering apple tree in full bloom, the clusters of pink and white blossoms exploding like fireworks against the sky. Palmer's watercolors do not have the customary transparency associated with the medium. Here he outlines the swelling forms with thick black India ink and thickens the texture with gouache, setting off the vibrant colors, green and egg yolk yellow as well as pink. His colors can seem as saturated as stained glass. A rich golden light suffuses *The Magic Apple Tree* (1830), in which a roughly sketched shepherd and his neatly rounded bread-loaf sheep are nestled beneath Gothic arched trees, in an edenic vale of ripe fields. A similar configuration appears in *Pastoral with a Horse Chestnut Tree* (c. 1831–32), a more realistic depiction despite the thick outlining of the oversized chestnut leaves. The catalogue authors contrast the "entirely pagan" sensibility of the *Horse Chestnut* scene with the Christian piety of *The Magic Apple Tree*, citing Psalm 65: "...the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing."³

Catalogue co-author William Vaughan describes how Samuel Palmer, around 1823, "determined to become a religious artist as part of his conversion to the primitive."⁴ Primitive, at this period, meant medieval, and Palmer would be greatly influenced not only by Blake's reinvention of Gothic line but also by old master prints by Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and Lucas van Leyden (1494–1533). Palmer rarely tackled Biblical subjects directly. Among the excep-

tions are an oil-and-tempera *Rest on the Flight* (c. 1824–25), transporting the Holy Family and a palm tree to the vale of Shoreham. You can see a similar integration of the exotic palm into northern woods in Dürer's woodcut *The Flight into Egypt* (c. 1504), from the 1511 edition of *The Life of the Virgin*, a particular favorite of Palmer's, according to the catalogue authors. Dürer's Virgin and St. Joseph have a rustic look that must have appealed to Palmer, along with the graphic richness of the old master's line. Palmer's chalk-and-wash *Ruth Returning from the Gleaning* (c. 1828) is unusual in focusing on a heroic, Blakean figure. More typical are scenes of rural piety redolent of Bunyan's pilgrims. The oil-and-tempera *Coming from Evening Church* (1830) depicts a multigenerational procession winding down a lane of peaked cottages, a chapel spire rising in harmony with undulating hills and a filigree of leaves silhouetted against an enormous full moon. Palmer was a deeply pious Christian, but his faith gracefully encompasses the primordial religion of numinous nature, reminding us that the word *pagan* derives from the Latin *paganus* (peasant) and *pagus* (country).

Palmer read even the classical pastoralists in the light of his own occult piety. In an 1866 letter he argued that Virgil's *Georgics* taught "the wisdom of all life and the mysteries of intellectual discipline under the veil of agriculture...so that the veil itself is glorious—the diamond is set in gold."⁵ Palmer was less interested in the erotic pastoral, a genre taken up by the most talented of his Ancient brethren, Edward Calvert (1799–1883). Best known for his bold and elegant engravings, Calvert would also be rediscovered in the twentieth century, as a source for art deco book illustration. *The Bride* (1828) bears a *Canticle of Canticles*-inflected inscription: "The waters of the brook shall never fail to the married wife of the Lord God." The composition revolves around a nude woman who looks like a mannerist Diana, albeit leading a lamb rather than pursuing a deer. A border of heavy-laden grapevines reinforces the theme of fecundity. Palmer does not paint the nude but his landscapes—like his language—are permeated with a sense of paradisaal ripeness. To capture the "excess" of nature, a manifestation of divine generosity, he believed, what was needed was the "essential vivifying spirit, vital spark, embalming spice...of the finest art."⁶

Palmer hit his stride very early as an artist, as you can see in the *Self-Portrait* (c. 1824–25) he made at age nineteen, one of the great Romantic examples of the genre. His only surviving portrait, in black and white chalk on buff paper, it depicts an introspective youth with a straight-on, visionary gaze. The exhibition includes a set of works, in brown ink and sepia mixed with gum arabic, from 1825, that demonstrate how Palmer matched technique and subject. Now in the Ashmolean, all but one of the six works had a text inscribed on the frame, but the scenes depicted do not simply illustrate the specific literary passages. (The artist may have added the texts later, in some cases.) *A Rustic Scene* is paired with a passage in Latin from Virgil's *Georgics* referring to the autumn equinox. Palmer celebrates the earth's fruitfulness, with corn standing in the fields and

apples hanging from the boughs. A waning sickle moon, visible only at dawn, identifies the time of day. The centerpiece of the composition is a ploughman and his magnificent ox, the rounded shoulders of the animal echoing the rhythmic swelling of the field-covered hills. *The Valley with a Bright Cloud* carries lines from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* extolling country life, with its "books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything." The deep burnished browns contrast vividly with the white of the voluptuous, scudding clouds. *Early Morning*, with an inscription from John Lydgate (although Palmer cites Chaucer), is the most curious of the set, a woodland scene with a Dürer-like hare, a towering toadstool-shaped oak and raking light. *The Skirts of a Wood*, uninscribed, has a German Romantic feel, with bats flying through the low light and a shepherd piping at the roots of a huge chestnut.

Perhaps the most remarkable of the set are *Late Twilight* (with a brief quote from *Macbeth*, misattributed to Milton) and *The Valley Thick with Corn*, which cites Psalm 65: "Thy folds shall be full of sheep, the valleys stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing." *Late Twilight* depicts a cultivated landscape: a village—with stiles, fields, shepherds and sheep—is being enveloped in the gloaming. This everyday scene unfolds against a spectacular backdrop: the sun has set in a band of radiance while, in the layer of night sky above, a haloed sickle moon hovers like an apparition. *The Valley Thick with Corn*, in contrast, presents a bountiful landscape as neatly parceled out as an Appalachian quilt, with flocks and waving grain and sheaves outlined in thick patchwork lines. A reading figure in Elizabethan dress reclines in the foreground, a familiar trope of the contemplative life from the hermit saints to the



In a Shoreham Garden, c. 1829

VICTORIA AND ALBERT
MUSEUM, LONDON

Romantic poets. A neat circle of sun stands, not quite centered, over a deep cleft in the hills, a beneficent presence.

The Elizabethan figure is a particularly salient example of Palmer's deliberately archaic style. He explained in an 1834 letter to another Ancient, George Richmond:

I believe in my very heart...that all the very finest original pictures... have a certain quaintness by which they particularly affect us—not the quaintness of bungling—the queer doing of a common thought—but a curiousness in their beauty—a salt on their tails by which the imagination catches hold on them while the sublime eagles and big birds of the French academy fly up far beyond the sphere of our affections....⁷

Like Blake, the Nazarenes, the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris, like Paul Gauguin in a different chapter of art history, Palmer was seeking a more intuitive, spiritually numinous way of making art. The hypothetical primitive—whether located in the middle ages or Tahiti—offered a fresh and energetic way of looking, both at the phenomenal world and at the formal microcosm of pictorial space. This sophisticated choice of the naïve is beautifully exemplified by *Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star* (c. 1830), once owned by Sir Kenneth Clark. A figure in a smock, with a broad hat and staff, who could be a simple countryman with his dog or a Bunyanesque pilgrim, makes his way between rows of sheaves, his path illuminated by the supernatural incandescence of the moon. That outsized sickle moon, accompanied by a huge star, dominates the heavens, riding the crest of wooded hills. Palmer uses watercolor, gouache and brown ink to depict the scene, under a coat of varnish that gives the work an overall terracotta patina. Blurring the boundary between painting and drawing, his use of gestural line is dynamic, freewheeling. The rays emanating from moon and stars are scratched in; thick scribbles seem to bind the sheaves with sinews of ink. The wayfarer abroad in this bucolic, cosmic night becomes a kind of everyman alive to the deepest mysteries of nature.

Palmer's idyll ended around 1935, when he moved to London. Two years later, he married Hannah, the daughter of John Linnell (1792–1882), the painter who had introduced him to Blake and to old master prints. Linnell was an overbearing man who proved to be a difficult father-in-law. Palmer spent two years in Italy, then became a drawing master, taking painting excursions to Wales and Cornwall. His life was marred by the early death of two of three children. His style changed, becoming more topographical, and there was some mainstream recognition. He was elected to the Old Water-Color Society in 1843, and Ruskin praised his studies of foliage in the 1846 edition of *Modern Painters*. That same year Charles Dickens chose him as illustrator for his travel book *Pictures from Italy*. By then, Palmer's work had become conventional enough not to offend Dickens, who famously ranted against the eccentricities of the Pre-

Raphaelites. This is ironic, in light of Palmer's later involvement with the Pre-Raphaelite circle, beginning with the Blake connection. The Blake manuscript purchased from the British Museum by William Michael and Dante Gabriel Rossetti contributed significantly, along with Palmer's recollections in the Gilchrist biography, to the Blake revival. Palmer admired Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first published poetry, *The Early Italian Poets* (1861), while Rossetti praised the "manifestation of spiritual force absolutely present" in Palmer's landscapes.⁸ Ruskin's solicitor, Leonard Rowe Valpy, offered Palmer a commission for his last great project, the cycle based on *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

But how do we rate the post-Shoreham work? The catalogue authors argue that Palmer's later, less radical art deserves re-evaluation, and a number of works support that claim. Two 1838 views from the Italian trip justify Ruskin's admiration: *The Cypresses at the Villa d'Este*, a richly colored foliage study, and *The Villa d'Este from the Cypress Avenue*, a sketchier but vibrant composition depicting a startling vista. A splendid etching, *The Sleeping Shepherd—Early Morning* (c. 1854–57), combines a foreground figure derived from classical sculpture with a view of plowing framed by an arbor; the evocation of light—articulating the dozing shepherd and dissolving the background vignette—is masterful. Palmer's later watercolors may lack what Graham Reynolds calls "the thick bosses of opaque color" and "linear arabesque"⁹ of the Shoreham works, but they have their own power, sometimes as prismatically intense as the paintings of William Holman Hunt and Ford Madox Brown, sometimes as tender as the views of Edward Lear. The late *Classical River Scene* (c. 1878) is a good example, with its wheeling rooks, moody castle and mountain (more Romantic than classical) and twilight sky. The star and crescent moon still hover, as they did over Shoreham's cornfield. Palmer presents an interesting case, the Romantic genius who outlives his first inspiration. This exhibition and the deeply scholarly, warmly insightful catalogue that accompanies it suggest a long life well, if not always happily, spent.

NOTES

1. Cited, Dale Nelson, "The Corners of Paradise," *Touchstone* (June 2000).
2. Cited, Kathleen Raine, *William Blake* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 193.
3. William Vaughn, Elizabeth E. Barker and Colin Harrison, *Samuel Palmer, 1805–1881: Vision and Landscape* (Burlington, Vermont: Lund Humphries, 2005), pp. 141–44.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
9. Graham Reynolds, *A Concise History of Watercolors* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1971), pp. 110–12.