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ENGLISH LANDSCAPE: SAMUEL PALMER AND THE PASTORAL

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‘I hold the genuine - pastoral - feel of landscape to be very rare and difficult of attainment - & by far the most lovely department of painting as well as of poetry.’

John Constable, Letter of 17 December 1824



The Shepherd in the Landscape

In the middle of one of the most harrowing wars in human history, this scene of a quiet southern English landscape was published and widely propagated. The year was 1942. The poster's relationship between its words and imagery was paradoxical: the undulating, sparsely populated countryside emanated tranquillity, while the superimposed text was a call to arms. The emotional jarring was designed to boost wartime recruitment, in a bid to save the precious country that was most eloquently figured in its countryside. The artist, Frank Newbould, deploys a potent visual rhetoric and composes a kind of *omnium gatherum* of iconic English landscape features. As his recessional diagonal planes lap across each other towards the horizon's slip of sea, he gives us in succession pasture, shelving woodland, bright arable fields, and uncultivated downland. He juxtaposes snug shelter in the embowered human dwelling, and liberating exposure in the grand rolling fields and downs; in the valley he dramatizes the 'dells, and nooks, and corners' so cherished by Samuel Palmer, and, up by the cliff-tops, the freshness of vast open spaces on the edge of England. This combination in one view of great stretches of sunlit open land and snug embowered dwelling is a familiar formula.

It is key, for example, to the appeal of what is probably England's most popular landscape painting, Constable's *Haywain*, which combines the old tree-shaded cottage on the left and the sun-drenched cornfields on the far side of the mill stream, stretching away to the horizon.

Newbould's scene is identified in small print as 'The South Downs', but this landscape stands for the whole of Britain. Newbould based the middle distance and background on an actual Sussex landscape on the South Downs, near Birling Farm (down in the dell) and the Bell Tout Lighthouse up on the Seven Sisters.

However, the diagonal foreground field with the shepherd and his dog is based on a contemporary *Times* photograph of a scene elsewhere, possibly near Lewes (Nicholas Schoon, 'Seeing double', *Countryside Voice* (Spring 2007), 40-41). The splicing together of the two different landscapes strengthens both theme and



composition. It conveys a sense of a timeless rural world set in sharp relief from catastrophic convulsions. It has the same kind of resonance as Thomas Hardy's poem written in the middle of World War I, 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' :

Only a man harrowing clods
 In a slow silent walk
 With an old horse that stumbles and nods
 Half asleep as they stalk....
 War's annals will cloud into night
 Ere their story die.

Life survives at its lowest ebb in these ancient rhythms of working the land, pasturing sheep and cattle, the processes that keep us going. In such visions, deepest England seems unperturbed by seismic violence in the rest of the world. The 'slow, silent walk' of Hardy's ploughman is visually echoed in Newbould's shepherd on the hillside.

This is the essence of Pastoral. And it is with Pastoral that I want to start, as a way of leading in to Samuel Palmer's distinctive treatment of English landscape.



Eclogue (1783)

Pastoral has always involved a retreat from modern life, from the time of its beginnings in 3rd Century BC Sicily, in the poems of Theocritus. These pastoral poems were known as Idylls, from the Greek *εἰδυλλία*, meaning a little form – a short poem. Virgil's *Eclogues* or *Bucolics* around 40BC, became the inspiration for much Early Modern English pastoral. But the anglicising of pastoral, in literature, came up against comparable problems to those experienced by Constable in his struggles against Academy classicism in landscape conventions. Here, for example is one expression of impatience with the persistent English veneration of classical models of pastoral. This is Thomas Tickell writing in 1713: 'our countrymen have so good an opinion of the ancients, and think so modestly of themselves, that the generality of Pastoral Writers have either stolen all from the Greeks and Romans, or so servilely imitated their manners and customs, as makes them very ridiculous.' (Tickell, *Guardian*, 15 April 1713).

How to naturalise Pastoral: that is the question. 'What is proper in Arcadia, or even in Italy, might be very absurd in a colder country', remarked Tickell. It is like Doric Temple ruins in English gardens. In Alexander Pope's first *Pastoral* (1704) Sicilian Muses burst into song on the banks of the Thames, where two local shepherds called Daphnis and Strephon pine for their shepherdesses. Pope had some skirmishes with a fellow poet, Ambrose Philips, who had written some English Pastorals in 1708. These poems had won some praise precisely for naturalising the classical conventions, as Joseph Addison observed: 'One would have thought it impossible for this kind of poetry to have subsisted without fawns and satyrs, wood-nymphs and water-nymphs, with all the tribe of rural deities. But we see [Philips] has given a new life, and more natural beauty to this way of writing by substituting in the place of these antiquated fables, the superstitious mythology which prevails among the shepherds of our own country.' (Addison, *Spectator*, 1712). Pope, the Virgilian traditionalist, was enraged by this preference and wrote (anonymously) a deeply ironic appreciation of Philips's modernised and anglicised pastoral mode, and equally ironic disparagement of his own conventional practices:

Mr. Pope hath fallen into the same Error with Virgil. His Clowns do not converse in all the Simplicity proper to the Country: His Names are borrow'd from Theocritus and Virgil, which are improper to the Scene of his Pastorals. He introduces Daphnis, Alexis and Thyrsis on British Plains, as Virgil had done before him on the Mantuan; whereas Philips, who hath the strictest Regard to



Propriety, makes choice of Names peculiar to the Country, and more agreeable to a Reader of Delicacy; such as Hobbinol, Lobbin, Cuddy, and Colin Clout.

(*Guardian*, 27 April 1713)

Pope later rejoiced in the opportunity to nick-name Ambrose Philips ‘Namby-pamby’.

Near the end of the century, around the period we have been concentrating on in considering the Picturesque and its relation to English nationalism, there is little tolerance left for sustaining the Virgilian conventions. George Crabbe’s lines make this clear:

Fled are those times, if e'er such times were seen,
 When rustic poets praised their native green;
 No shepherds now, in smooth alternate verse,
 Their country's beauty or their nymphs' rehearse;
 Yet still for these we frame the tender strain,
 Still in our lays fond Corydons complain,
 And shepherds' boys their amorous pains reveal,
 The only pains, alas! they never feel....
 Must sleepy bards the flattering dream prolong,
 Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song?
 From truth and nature shall we widely stray,
 Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?

(George Crabbe, from *The Village*, 1783)

A few voices were raised against this abandonment of Virgil and his idyllic world. One such voice was Samuel Palmer’s:

Have Corydon and Thyrsis met in Corduroys and Manchester cottons? ‘Yes’ say the men of matter
 ‘and it is out of the present that the true Poet weaves his Fable.’

(Samuel Palmer, Letter 29 January 1862)

As far as Palmer was concerned the ‘men of matter’ were the philistine materialists of the modern age, impervious to as well as ideologically hostile to the charms of traditional pastoral. Notwithstanding Palmer’s passionate traditionalism, a modernised pastoral sentiment was perfectly possible. Wordsworth had argued this in *The Prelude* and other poems. ‘Shepherds were the men that pleased me first’, he recalls in that poem: not the Arcadian swains of the classical world, or from Shakespeare’s Arden, but the modern Cumberland shepherd, a type of natural stoical nobility:



Meanwhile this creature--spiritual almost
 As those of books, but more exalted far;
 Far more of an imaginative form
 Than the gay Corin of the groves, who lives
 For his own fancies, or to dance by the hour,
 In coronal, with Phyllis in the midst--
 Was, for the purposes of kind, a man
 With the most common; husband, father; learned,



Could teach, admonish; suffered with the rest
From vice and folly, wretchedness and fear...

(Wordsworth *Prelude* Bk VIII)

Nineteenth-century Pastoral is a genre consistently more rooted in English soil and, importantly, apparently accessible even in the modern world. Access to the idyll, or something approximating to it, now doesn't entail imaginary excursions to Arcadia or the Vale of Tempe. It can be a journey from the modern city to the downland pastures of the painters, or Wordsworth's Cumberland or Constable's Dedham Vale or Palmer's Shoreham valley. These places, local and familiar, mediated by the nature writer, the poet or the painter, draw one to the edges of the modern world, from where there's a view into antiquity (a disappearing rural culture, for instance) or a transcendental region. Nineteenth-century Pastoral also heroises the veteran shepherd, that lone figure in Newbould's poster and Davis's oil sketch: nothing romanticised. The man (and it is nearly always the man) in his remote rural setting represents both a fading way of life and a symbol of endurance, of continuity.

The downland shepherd in particular stands for an England and an Englishness that typifies patient tenacity and a parental devotion to his flock: he is stoical and yet sensitive, one whose own livelihood is reliant both on his own tender and expert care and yet also on nature's volatile moods. W.H.Hudson, the naturalist and writer, saw in the Downland shepherd an apparent this was an inbuilt or Downs-acquired immunity to the restlessness of modern life and lure of the city:

One of the numerous, mostly minute, differences to be detected between the Downland shepherd and other peasants --- differences due to the conditions of his life -- refers to his disposition. He has a singularly placid mind, and is perfectly contented with his humble lot. In no other place have I been in England, even in the remotest villages and hamlets, where the rustics are not found to be more or less infected with the modern curse or virus of restlessness and dissatisfaction with their life. I have, first and last, conversed with a great many shepherds, from the lad whose shepherding has just begun, to the patriarch who has held a crook, and "twitched his mantle blue," in the old Corydon way, on these hills for upwards of sixty years, and in his this respect have found them all very much of one mind. It is as if living alone with nature on these heights, breathing this pure atmosphere, the contagion had not reached them, or else that their blood was proof against such a malady.

(W.H.Hudson, *Nature in Downland*, 1900 Ch.6.)

Against Hudson's veteran rural hero, there were other versions of the reality of pastoral life. John Britton, the antiquary and topographer who produced a series of illustrated books on English Topography, was a deeply sceptical about the myth of pastoral:

Many poets and essayists have eulogized rustic life and manners, as being replete with sylvan joys, arcadian scenes, primeval innocence, and unsophisticated pleasures. Alas! these are but the closet dreams of metropolitan poets and visionary enthusiasts; for I fear that all their pleasing pictures are wholly drawn from imagination, and not from nature. The genuine rustics, I believe, in all counties, and I apprehend in all nations, have very little more sagacity than the animals with whom they associate, and of whose natures they partake....

(John Britton, *The Autobiography of John Britton*, Part I (1850), p.59)

There was always this kind of tension in the pastoral tradition, between the social and economic reality of a shepherd's life and the idealised qualities culturally invested in him and his world. It is this complex amalgamation of myth and social actuality that gave English pastoral in nineteenth-century writing and art such a vigorous life, and also made it a core part of the national myth, especially at a time in the country's history when it was industrialising fast and when its cities were expanding. By the mid-century only half the population remained country dwellers, a demographic milestone France was to reach a full century later; and China only about 6 years ago. The more urbanised the population the more alien the countryside becomes as a working and living environment, and the more that countryside fades into myth and idyll.



Dore, 'Ludgate Hill' & Inchbold's *Shepherd on the Downs*

So images of solitude in the vast empty spaces of the Downs would have had particular force for mid-Victorians caught up in the rapid spread of urbanisation, and vulnerable to what Matthew Arnold called 'this strange disease of modern life...its sick hurry...divided aims...heads o'ertaxed'. (Matthew Arnold, 'The Scholar Gipsy'; in *Poems* (Longmans, 1853). Some sense of the powerful antithesis between metropolitan and (albeit idealised) pastoral life can be gained from juxtaposing Inchbold's spacious landscape with Gustave Doré's London scene, from *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872). Ironically, pastoral is present in Doré's London. The reason for this block in the street is a flock of sheep being driven into market.

The rural world was seen as a retreat, a sanctuary. Working life in the country had simplified patterns. And at the end of the working day, there was the dream of the beckoning homestead, family, shelter and nourishment after a day in the open. This motif was captured near the end of the nineteenth century in paintings by the Scottish artist Joseph Farquharson. These pictures remain extraordinary popular today, especially as Christmas card subjects. Their currency testifies to the persistence of the pastoral ideal combined with distinctively English domestic cosiness. The scene is actually north of the border.



Joseph Farquharson, *The Shortening Winter's Day is Near a Close* (1903)

Farquharson's painting *The Shortening Winter's Day is Near a Close* (also known as *Beneath the Snow-Encumbered Branches*) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1903. Nearly every year for a quarter of a century Farquharson exhibited his rural snow scenes at the Academy; and the demand for his particular landscapes was such that he executed several copies of this *Winter's Day* (one sold at auction just a few years ago for nearly £160,000 Sold at Bonhams in 2013. See <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20646/lot/20/> (accessed May 2016)).

The scene is both inviting and somewhat forbidding. The radiating lines of the tree shadows on the roseate snow and the converging lines of the sheep draw the viewer towards the foddering farmhand. Man and animals stoically go about their business in the freezing landscape which the artist has converted into a glowing image of homecoming (the contrary to Inchbold's shepherd and flock setting out to the pastures). At the same time an intense chill emanates from the landscape. It looks like a moment's pause as the day fades and food and shelter beckon. The scene in fact was carefully contrived by the artist. Farquharson arranged to have stuffed model sheep pose for the painting and the farmhand had to stand for quite some time in the snow while the artist, from within his heated caravan, set about painting the scene through his window. (This is according to a mini-documentary on Farquharson, featured on BBC 1 television: *The One Show* 15 December. 2009. Available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPPuXwxYSVlk>. (accessed May 2016) As a Christmas card, designed for the mantelpiece above a bright fire, its chill winter aura would reinforce the comfort of the warm home scene.



The pastoral evening homecoming was a favourite subject of Samuel Palmer's too;

You may remember Jane Austen's Emma rhapsodising about 'English comfort' as she gazes at Donwell Abbey? In Palmer's *Christmas* etching, the chill moonlit midwinter night contrasts with the cosy glow of the firelight within the house where the table is being laid for Christmas dinner.

Samuel Palmer

With this fairly brief and broad-brush broad account of the shifting pastoral tradition in English literature and art, we can now turn to Palmer himself.

Samuel Palmer is a key figure in this century for attuning the pastoral tradition to an English idiom, notwithstanding his passionate devotion to Virgil. It is not just that his paintings return again and again to scenes of shepherds and their flocks; it is what he does with the landscape they inhabit.

Whether he works with oils, or watercolour and gouache, or ink and gum arabic, he creates strangely shaped and compressed landforms, very heavily textured. He manipulates scale, and he stages these scenes in near supernatural lighting. His primitive rural folk inhabit a world that has acquired, in visual terms, a formal primitivism: it is almost as though they and their landscapes have arrived on canvas or paper directly from ancient stained-glass windows. This formal naïveté was quite deliberate, and developed during the years he spent living in Shoreham, Kent, in the Darent valley in the middle and later 1820s and early '30s.

Palmer was part of a circle of artists known as the 'Ancients', who cultivated an archaic style. The Ancients were devotees of William Blake, whose own brand of pastoral, especially in *the Songs of Innocence and Experience* and in his woodcuts for Virgil's *Eclogues*, was a powerful influence on Palmer's landscapes.



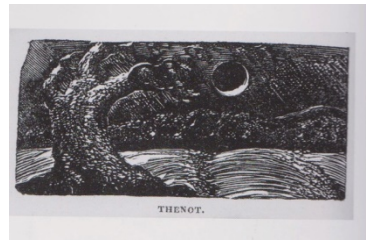
William Blake, Plates from *Songs of Innocence*

In Geoffrey Grigson's words, 'Blake helped Palmer not only to see, but to see religiously'. (Geoffrey Grigson, *Samuel Palmer: The Visionary Years* (Kegan Paul, 1947), 33) Palmer in turn grounded Blake's visionary world; he lifted Blake's exquisite images of a partly classicised pastoral idyll off the illuminated page and away from pure allegory, and transplanted them into the north Kent countryside.

His images of shepherds and sheep still carry some of Blake's luminous visionary power and devotional ardour, but they also now live in a rich material world: the gardens are heavy with radiant apple blossom and the fields thick with corn-sheaves glimmering under a huge harvest moon. This is where he can realise his 'little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise'. (Quoted from ?Notebooks 1824-1835: A.H.Palmer *The Life and Letters of Samuel Palmer, Painter and Etcher*, (Seely & Co London 1892), p.15. Hereafter abbreviated to *Life and Letters*.) Palmer thus creates a border land, an English Arcadia where rural life and scenery are part myth and part historical topography, and this plays directly into the making of iconic English landscape. Palmer called this place his 'valley of vision', (He used the phrase 'valley of vision' several times (e.g. in a letter to George Richmond from Shoreham, 14 November 1827) -- a phrase that marries the topographically specific Shoreham with the otherworldly, the material with the mystical, and in so doing he both revitalised and naturalised the pastoral genre.



His most significant inspiration for a rehabilitated pastoral came not directly from his beloved Virgil's texts but from Blake's 1821 illustrations to the *Eclogues*, or more specifically to the eighteenth-century poet Ambrose Phillips's imitation of Virgilian pastoral.



William Blake, Illustrations to Virgil's *Eclogues* (Ambrose Phillips's imitations of Virgilian pastoral). Woodcuts: 1821.

These small woodcuts he first saw two or three years after their publication, and a few months before he was actually introduced to Blake, in the autumn of 1824. They were to have a powerful and enduring affect: he called them 'perhaps the most intense gems of bucolic sentiment in the whole range of art.' (Letter to Philip Gilbert Hamerton, 26 January 1872: *Letters* II, 835.) In many ways their impact on him set the course for Palmer's greatest work:

I sat down with Mr. Blake's Thornton's Virgil woodcuts before me, thinking to give their merits my feeble testimony. I happened first to think of their sentiment. They are visions of little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise; models of the exquisitest pitch of intense poetry. I thought of their light and shade, and looking upon them I found no word to describe it. Intense depth, solemnity, and vivid brilliancy only coldly and partially describes them. There is in all 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.

(L&L, pp.15-16.)

There are several points of interest in this description of his first intensive encounter with Blake's woodcuts. What strikes him almost immediately is not any particularly Virgilian characteristic nor the pastoral theme which they are supposedly illustrating, but their sensuous qualities (Blake in fact had no enthusiasm for Virgil and seems to have taken on the woodcut assignment as a routine job. It has also been argued that Annabel M. Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* 1987, p.255). They primed his own vision. So that, a year or two after seeing them, when he settled in Shoreham village, he saw the valley landscape as so many exquisite poetic compositions of 'little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise', dimly lit to produce that 'Intense depth, solemnity...mystic and dreamy glimmer'. As he wrote to his fellow-Ancient George Richmond soon after he had arrived in Shoreham: 'I have beheld as in the spirit, such nooks, caught in such glimpses of the perfumed and enchanted twilight – of natural midsummer, as well as, at some other times of day'. (to Geo Richmond, 14 Nov 1827; from Shoreham. PL, 29). That determined Palmer's unique contribution to English pastoral.

Palmer the Naturalist (John Linnell) vs Palmer the Visionary

Palmer moved to Shoreham village in 1826 – the year when Constable's Cornfield was exhibited at the Royal Academy – and left it around 1835. His twin mission during this period was how to wrest pastoral into an English context, and how to reconcile poetic vision with landscape naturalism. 'The great landscape painters', he once asserted, 'used as much of literal truth as was necessary in order to "make the ideal probable"' (To Leonard Rowe Valpy, [May 1875]: *Letters* II, 911). Two mentors jostled for the possession of Palmer's artistic soul: the naturalist painter John Linnell, and the visionary illuminator William Blake. During the Shoreham period Palmer was under the sway of both; sometimes more attuned to one than to the other. Thus, writing to Linnell in 1824, he boasted: 'I have not entertain'd a single imaginative thought these six weeks, while I am drawing from Nature vision seems foolishness to me – the arms of an old rotten tree trunk more curious than the arms of Buonaroti's Moses' (Letter to Linnell, 'Wednesday September. 1824': PL, 27).

But then, in a letter four years later to his fellow Ancient, George Richmond, after reporting Linnell's comment that he could 'get a thousand a year directly' through studies of the Shoreham scenery, he remarks: 'Tho' I am



making studies for Mr. Linnell, I will, God help me, never be a naturalist by profession.’ (To Geo Richmond, ‘Sept. [-Oct] 1828; from Shoreham. PL ,35). These dichotomies -- Nature and Art, Vision and Reality – preoccupied Palmer during this time: ‘I can’t help seeing that the general characteristics of Nature’s beauty ... are in some respects, opposed to those of Imaginative Art’. And so the struggle goes on to reconcile the antagonists. He always knew that the better chance of making a living from his art was to paint portraits of the

English countryside. Half a century after the Shoreham period he ruefully reflected on ‘that genuine village where I mused away some of my best years, designing what nobody would care for, and contracting...a fastidious and unpopular taste.’ (To [Philip Gilbert Hamerton], 4 August 1879: Letters II, 970).

When Palmer is writing about his landscapes, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether at any one point he is meaning the visionary experience or actual visual perception. For instance, ‘we are not troubled with aerial perspective in the valley of vision’ (*Parting Light*, p.110). Is he commenting on the Shoreham valley atmosphere, which can encourage the collapse of strict recessional plotting, or is he simply declaring that the *visionary* painter need not bother with academic technique in rendering distances?



Samuel Palmer, *The Valley of Vision: Sepham Barn, Shoreham*, 1828

The dual nature (visionary-real) of Palmer’s valley pastorals is well illustrated (perhaps accidentally) in Palmer’s undated drawing ‘*The Valley of Vision: Sepham Barn, Shoreham*’ (1828). The title itself draws attention to the hybridity. It is a view of the large old Shoreham barn that featured in other topographical sketches by Palmer. In the middle ground a group of women and children from the barn buildings seem to be bringing a bag of feed into the sheepfold. But already within the fold, is another group, altogether fainter, more sketchy in form and with a veil of white, consisting of an impressively tall and dignified shepherd with his small flock. In a notebook of 1859 Palmer had asked himself the question ‘What must I do to attain excellence?’ The answer was ‘Increase what I love.’ And what did he love? The list that followed included ‘Figures of antique grace and sentiment, and rich picturesqueness’ (L&L, 113.) The faintly drawn tall shepherd certainly corresponds to this prescription. The ghostly ensemble has something of a biblical look. It is distinctly Blakean in its configuration, as one can see in Blake’s woodcut from Thornton’s *Virgil*.

Shoreham and the Dulwich Sentiment

That comment about the Valley of Vision and not needing aerial perspective comes in a meditation on the Dulwich Hills.

Note. That when you go to Dulwich it is not enough on coming home to make recollections in which shall be united the scattered parts about those sweet fields into a sentimental and Dulwich looking whole No But considering Dulwich as the gate into the world of vision one must try behind the hills to bring up a mystic glimmer like that which lights our dreams. And those same hills...should give us promise that the country beyond them is Paradise. (*Samuel Palmer: The Sketchbook of 1824*, ed. Martin Butlin (Thames & Hudson in association with the William Blake Trust, 2005, MS pp. 81-2).

One of the faculties Palmer shared with Blake was the heightened sense of a visionary world cohabiting with the real world. Indeed, the experience seems to have happened to both of them in the same location – Dulwich – which seems an improbable site for heavenly epiphanies. When Blake was about ten years old he had his first vision. Sauntering along by Dulwich Hill, he ‘looks up and sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars.’ (Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (Bodley Head, London, 1906), p.7). Palmer reflected on Dulwich as potentially ‘the gate into the world of vision’; and in order to achieve this



potential ‘one must try behind the hills to bring up a mystic glimmer like that which lights our dreams. And those same hills...should give us promise that the country beyond them is Paradise.’ (*Sketchbook 1824*, MS pp.81-2). This is presumably what he meant by ‘the Dulwich sentiment’: that capacity so to intensify the poetic representation of a place, through lighting and other formal strategies, that the ordinary acquires an extraordinary spiritual lustre. For Palmer Dulwich and Shoreham prompted that impulse to partly transfigure familiar English landscapes into visionary places.

English Longings

After leaving Shoreham Palmer married Hannah, the daughter of his mentor John Linnell, and they travel together to Italy, 1837-39. Writing home to his sister-in-law from Pompeii in 1838 Palmer acknowledged that Italy had spectacular mountains, ‘cities and villages cresting the hills and precipices; and...heavenly sunshine and atmosphere’; but ‘High as is the gratification of exploring this beautiful country, those who do not feel disposed to cross the channel may comfort themselves by knowing that *specimens* of almost every class of beauty may be found in our island.... In *apparent* richness I think Kent and Devonshire have the preference of everything I have seen.’ (Letter to Elizabeth Linnell, 8 July 1838: *Letters* I, 155). He longed to return home, and hoped there would be no further occasion to leave England: ‘[I] should enjoy to sojourn some day with you in our beautiful vales, to hide ourselves from an impertinent world in tangled orchards; to go sitting on our thyme hills, and in our magic Northern twilight to hear the village clock ticking in his grey tower’. That epitomises Palmer’s English idyll: he is enchanted by the idea of being tucked away in tangled orchards as the twilight deepens and the silence swells, with only the sound of the church clock.

Similar sentiments and imagery come in a letter a few months later (again from Italy) as Palmer dreams of a kind of English pastoral essence: ‘we shall together thread the garden’d labyrinths of Kent, and on the thymy downs, by twilight, listen to the distant shepherd’s pipe or village bells.’ (To Mrs Linnell, in a composite letter 4-13 August 1838: *Letters* I, 175-76). Palmer’s most distinctive English landscapes invite one to indulge that impulse ...kind of hiding away. In that 1859 list of things he loved and wished to foster in his painting, Palmer included the following: ‘Intense depth of shadow and colour. Mystery, and infinite going-in-i-tiveness.’ (L&L, p.113). That strange coinage ‘going-in-i-tiveness’, corresponds to those beloved ‘little dells, and nooks, and corners of Paradise’ that he identified in Blake’s woodcuts. This is the pure spirit of English pastoral for Palmer - seclusion from ‘the impertinent world’. It is not necessarily a matter of herdsmen and flocks in the picture; it is the quality of the landscape configurations. He discerned it in a range of painters; for instance in the scenes of Fra Angelico: nooks and dells of Paradise, where emulation, and power, and learning and greatness, have become empty sounds.’ (To Leonard Rowe Valpy, September 1868: *Letters* II, 785)

English Scenery and ‘Going-in-i-tiveness’

In order to achieve this ‘Going-in-i-tiveness’ Palmer harmonizes the representation of landscape forms with his narrative subject, so that the trees and hills, fields and churches diverge from topographical realism, scale and accurate perspective in favour of a crafted antique naïveté, and that ‘mystic and dreamy glimmer’ that he so enthused about in Blake’s woodcuts. This is the manner of that strange series of six drawings known as the Oxford Sepias, painted in 1825, the year before he moved to Shoreham. All six are scenes depicting landscapes at those times of day most likely to generate the mystic glimmer Palmer sought: early morning, late twilight, full moon.



Samuel Palmer, *Early Morning* 1825: Sepia and Brown Ink. Ashmolean

Early Morning can serve as an example. Palmer attached a quotation to the picture, four lines from John Lydgate’s medieval poem *The Complaint of the Black Knight*:



I rose anone and thought I would be gone
Into the wode, to hear the birdes sing,
When that misty vapour was agone
And cleare and faire was the morning.

The limpid early morning light shows a world oddly compressed into a shallow perspective of woodland path, cornfields, cottages and distant hills: quite clearly in this landscape, ‘we are not troubled with aerial perspective in the valley of vision’. Forms are rounded into cushiony shapes – the plump hare, the umbrella canopy of the big oak standing amidst the billowing fields, the beehive cottage roofs echoing the natural swell of the landscape. It is like the benign surging of a sea. Palmer once described journeying through similar countryside and invoked similar terms: ‘Riding between the Surrey sand-banks, lapped and folded in by pastoral crofts and overhanging orchards.’ And he much admired Claude’s voluptuously mounded foregrounds: ‘His knolls, so softly clad, are round and figurelike.’ (Letter to James Clarke Hook, May 1863: Letters II, 680)

Right in the centre and heart of this exquisitely upholstered countryside a small group of people sit at ease in a dell, presumably (following the narrative of Lydgate’s lines) listening to the song of the birds on the twig above them. The stiff archaic style matches the period of the verse quotation, and this would have been quite deliberate. In a notebook entry (most probably in 1824) Palmer remarked that when Nature is represented it should be ‘most simple of style...what would have pleased men in earlier ages, when poetry was at its acme, and yet men lived in a simple, pastoral way’. (L&L, p.15) *Early Morning* is simple of style and yet very richly wrought. Everything is pushed forward in defiance of perspective and proper distancing, as if to gorge the viewer with a still-life table of landscape delicacies. Emphatically inked outlines isolate each of the landscape forms, and each form has its own discrete texture and tone, so that the effect is like that of marquetry’s complex inlay of differently grained woods. It has the mysterious, bewitching quality of a closed world, an exquisite miniaturising of an English landscape: it is a demonstration of Palmer’s maxim that ‘bits of nature are generally much improved by being received into the soul’.

This love of retreating into mystery is both a visual and an imaginary one. A landscape can invite the viewer to recede into tangled nooks of cosy twilight gloom; it can also lure the imagination into a temporal recess, so that the forms and figures draw one back into mellow, ancient English history – the ‘dark ages’ (‘A preference for the present as a matter of taste is a pretty sure sign of mediocrity’ (Frederic George Stephens, 3 Sept 1875: Letters II, 923), Palmer remarked tartly on one occasion). Or it can invite retreat into an apparent timelessness with the unchanging figure of the rustic herdsman. Either way, pastoral becomes the past. -- an idealised refuge from the present.

Eventually, in Palmer’s later life, Shoreham itself, or the memory of Shoreham, became that recessed idyll, that epitome of ‘going-in-i-tive-ness’. Nowhere did that idyll of a mellow English pastoral surface more captivatingly than in his large watercolour *The Bellman*, completed in the year of his death, 1881.



Samuel Palmer, *The Bellman* (watercolour, 1881)

The subject comes from Milton’s ‘Il Penseroso’, the companion poem to ‘L’Allegro’ from which Palmer had drawn his inspiration for *The Prospect*. In ‘Penseroso’ the poem’s speaker dismisses ‘vain, deluding joys’ and dreams of evocatively solemn settings in which to indulge his melancholy mood to the full, before, in ‘weary



age', he retires to 'the peacefull hermitage, /The Hairy Gown and mossy Cell.' One such setting is a 'removed place' –

Where glowing Embers through the room
Teach light to counterfeit a gloom,
Far from all resort of mirth,
Save the Cricket on the hearth,
Or the Belmans drousie charm,
To bless the doers from nightly harm

In formal terms *The Bellman* seems a long way from the Blakean idiom of the Shoreham village scenes like *Coming from Evening Church*.

The intense compression has gone ('my idea is poetic compression'), so has the stylisation of forms. The sentiment is somewhat the same, but without the visionary intensity it relaxes more into sentimentality. The lighting too has a greater realism than the mystic glow of the Shoreham landscapes. It is nonetheless captivating – at least to this viewer. The warmth of those last gleams of the sunset, reflected in a cottage window or two, blends with the twilight seeming to rise from below the horizon and the firelight or lamplight from the cottage door. Twilight is a kind of softly illuminated darkness, a midway stage: 'Increasing gloom sometimes enforces the sentiment of exuberance by giving more play to the imagination.'

If any single painting could be said to epitomise Palmer's 'pastoral essence' it is this one, to my mind. It is a village scene, but the conventional pastoral element is there in the presence of the slumbering cattle. They are not penned into a byre or railed off from the human domain, but sleep on a cushion of land bordered by a low hedge, and they could as easily stroll down the village street as any of the human inhabitants.

The scene has that 'mystic and dreamy glimmer' Palmer had so loved in Blake's pastoral woodcuts, so utterly 'unlike the gaudy daylight of this world'. That 'gaudy daylight' is going down on the Bellman's village and stimulating the imagination to wander in those tempting nooks and corners, and indulge that 'going-in-iveness'. As the shadows thicken, the mystery heightens, under the influence of 'the Belman's drousie charm'.

This is an English nook that has slipped into the past, in two senses: the village belongs to a pre-industrial age, when the bellman would make his sunset round to reassure the villagers that 'All's well'; it is also a scene from Palmer's personal past history. 'I am very glad you like my *Bellman*', he wrote to a friend who had seen the etching of *The Bellman* in 1879: 'It is a breaking out of village-fever long after contact – a dream of that genuine village where I mused away some of my best years' (to Philip Gilbert Hamerton? 4 Aug 1879: Letters II, 970). Notwithstanding the distant line of crags, this is a memory of Shoreham, a dream idyll of that time half a century before when his village was seen as a natural organism. Humans and animals share the same rhythms of work and rest, and now families are gathering back in their homes, like the cattle, and preparing to retire.

Palmer introduced his scene like this: 'Here we enter seclusion without desolateness; where light enough remains to show the village sheltered in its wooded nest, and ... the ground heaves well and is rich enough in pasture.' (to Leonard Rowe Valpy, ? July 1864: Letter II, 699). It's an image that epitomised the idealised character of English scenery for the Victorians.

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