

TEMENOS ACADEMY ONLINE PAPERS

SUMMER TERM 2020

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**The Gates of Perception:
Landscape, Place and Vision in the work of
John Clare, Samuel Palmer and Stanley Spencer**

by

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[Image: *The Magic Apple Tree* by Samuel Palmer, courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge]

The Gates of Perception

Landscape, Place and Vision in the work of Samuel Palmer, John Clare and Stanley Spencer

In 1802, William Blake, poet, painter, thinker and visionary, included a poem in a letter to his friend and patron, Thomas Butts, which contains the following famous lines, 'For double the vision my Eyes do see/ And a double vision is always with me' (Letter to Thomas Butts, 22/11/1802, *Blake Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 1966, p. 817). The context makes clear what Blake means by this: as he encounters a thistle on his path, it is 'an Old Man grey' to his inward eye, a thistle to his outward. This is no mere conceit, but a condition of ontological and poetic significance. The thistle is not *like* an old grey man; it has more than one nature. It is and does more than one reality simultaneously; these realities, however, cannot be seen in the mere light image received by the retina and passed on to the brain. Their existence has to be *perceived* by the mind and the soul to be acknowledged. But how? The answer is close by: just as the eye is both the physical organ of perception that sees a thistle, so the imaginative eye perceives an old grey man. The two cannot be separated. Here is Blake again, 'I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. To the eyes of a miser a guinea is far more beautiful than the sun, and a bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way' (letter to Dr. Trussler, 23/8/1799, *ibid.*, p. 793).

The hinge that links these two realities is the visionary capacity of the seer to move into a reality, first approached through the world available to our sensory perceptions, but which illuminates and is illuminated by it to reveal abundant, symbolic and even transcendent meaning, what the early 20th century theologian Rudolf Otto identifies as the 'numinous'. This hinge or threshold is what I have called here 'the gates of perception' (with of course an acknowledgment to Blake's 'the doors of perception').

This ability both to see the physical and perceive the numinous simultaneously has characterised a particular thread in British poetry and art for well over a thousand years. It is already present in one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon poems to be preserved, possibly from the 8th, *The Dream of the Rood*, and it is a quality that pervades early Welsh and Irish manuscripts and poetry. It is there in the poetry of the 17th century divines, Vaughan and Traherne; and there are powerful concordances again with certain of the Romantic thinkers, most

particularly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Here is what he says about symbol in his essay or 'sermon', *The Statesman's Manual*: it is 'the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal'. He goes on to assert that 'it always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative', (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual; or The Bible, the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*, London, 1816, p. 37). For Coleridge this reflects his interpretation of creation: just as Christ is man and God, so the world is natural and a manifestation of God. The world is itself a gate of perception.

One of the most outstanding exemplars of this understanding, artistically, is to be found in the work of Samuel Palmer (1805-1881). Palmer was the protégé and later son-in-law of John Linnell, a champion of the ageing William Blake when the latter was working in great obscurity and poverty. Around Linnell and Palmer grew up a group calling themselves 'The Ancients', who revered Blake's return to Biblical and late medieval sources for the inspiration of his art, and his renewal of them as valid ways of exploring the world. This in turn brought familiarity with the work of the Flemish and North German painters of the 15th century, which they saw in the pioneering collection of the London-based German banker, Karl Aders; it was here also that they made contact with the German group, the Nazarenes, who were similarly seeking to infuse their depictions of the perceived world around us with a sense of the divine. What characterized the work of Blake and these artists was a rejection of the dominant perspectival realism and classicizing tendencies typified by Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy in favour of precisely that temporal translucent to the eternal that we find in Coleridge. The strangeness, the particularity, the 'haeccitas' of things (to borrow a term from Duns Scotus via G.M. Hopkins) is the very pathway through to vision. This is a refrain we will find again and again in the three creative artists before us; as Stanley Spencer wrote of his painting, *The Apple Gatherers*, in 1939, 'The apples and the laurel and the grass can all fulfil themselves through the presence in their midst' (quoted in Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer*, Phaidon Press, 1999, p.19). In other words, vision always has a shape and a presence that is real and personal to it.

In 1825, a year after his meeting with Blake, Palmer produced the first of what may be called his 'visionary landscapes'. It is a sequence now in the Ashmolean Museum, known as the 'Oxford sepias'. Although, in their treatment of landscape, they adumbrate the watercolours of the Shoreham period that was soon to follow, they in fact evolved out of his rambles in the then still relatively rural countryside of Dulwich, as his surviving sketch book from 1824 demonstrates. Here he writes of the change in artistic perception that this landscape wrought in him, 'Remember the Dulwich sentiment' (*The Sketchbook*

of 1824, ed. Martin Butlin, Thames and Hudson, 2005, p.39). Another note makes clear what this is. The accidents of the hilly, wooded topography, which can still be glimpsed from such places as the ridge of Crystal Palace, caught his inward eye, 'a large field of corn with...as it were, islands peeping out of it...the distant line that bounds this golden sea might prop up the... little hills of David, or the hills of Dulwich or rather the visions of a better country which the Dulwich hills will shew to all true poets' (ibid., p. 36) In a later entry he is even more explicit: Dulwich is 'the gate into the world of vision' (ibid, p. 103).

Even with these hints, a first encounter with *Early Morning*, one of the most well-known of his sepias, is truly startling. Perspectives are flattened and proportions distorted: a hare in the foreground is fully a third as big as the tree trunk which it is passing; the unreal toadstool silhouette of the densely textured tree in the middle ground juts into the space between two more slender boles, one of which appears to stand in the same plane as the bigger tree, but with its base manifestly growing into a rise in the ground that is not. A weirdly double-domed cottage whose window peeps over the horizon (remember the sketch book note) looms massively in the distance, breaking the rules of conventional perspective. Every space, except that of the sky, is clustered with fine detail of different qualities: the spikes of irises, ferns, what could be borage, a meadow with all kind of different grasses, teasels or dandelions, stones, silver birch, a cornfield, two birds courting, a rutted track, bushes, hump-backed hills, finally, the minuscule, almost to be overlooked, group of humans who nestle in a dell at the centre of the picture. The effect of all this grain, coupled with the monochrome shadings of the sepia, is to draw us into a world of heightened awareness in which the inner life of the world depicted seems to quiver and speak to us in its own language. This is a nature, not transformed, but transfigured by an artist who is 'visionary as well as visual, ... see [ing] violently and strangely... under whose contemplation the form transforms, swells or deflates'. These words, written in 1935 by D.S. McColl about Stanley Spencer in an essay entitled 'Super and Sub Realism, Mr. Spencer and the Academy', (quoted in Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer*, Phaidon Press, 1999, p.127) could not be more apposite to this work by Palmer. *Early Morning* shows us a reality beyond realism, with a significance both recognizable and strange.

Shortly afterwards, in 1826, Palmer moved to the little north Kent village of Shoreham to which he had withdrawn with other members of 'The Ancients'. Here, within a few short years (1826-35), he executed the series of paintings for which he is most famous. But these are no ordinary landscapes: there are thresholds everywhere. The most renowned is *The Magic Apple Tree* (c.1830). Tree trunks, some venerable, others more slender and youthful, frame the scene in an arch. It is late summer, harvest time, as we can see from the hills behind, golden with wheat, the copious foliage and, especially, the abundant apples on

the tree just beyond the arch. This side of it lie six sheep, ruminating; their fleece is supernally thick, curly and white; their shepherd reclines in a natural hollow made by the roots of the arching trees, dreamily playing his pipe. It is immediately apparent this is more than mere pastoral: the colours of the fields, fruit and trees have a transcendental intensity; the sheep are larger than life; the shepherd, himself a reference to Christ, is a psychopomp, piping us into a world that is emphatically Christian, not pagan. For slightly off centre and at first almost obscured by the autumnal richness of the natural colours, we discern the spire of a village church. It emerges, greyish-green, at the end of one of the many hollow ways that criss-cross that part of the world. It is an object of pilgrimage, of desire, leading us from the known to the unknown. It also rises from the earth, rooted like the trees that embrace it. The painting quivers with a symbolic meaning as profuse as the apples bobbing and weaving in the boughs. This is a place that has nothing to do with topographical verisimilitude and everything with the ‘filled’ landscape of spiritual life.

Palmer explores a different vision in *Pear Tree in a Walled Garden* (c.1829). Here the notion of threshold is even more explicitly addressed. We are in a ‘hortus conclusus’, a walled garden designed to capture the light and heat of the sun to produce a good crop of fruit: the pear tree on the left bursts with blossom, a promise of yield to come; the apricot stretches its arms out upon a trellis as if in greeting. The foreground seethes with clumps of mallows and other herbs. Man and plant interact to nourish our bodily and our spiritual life. Here is the enclosed paradise of the *Song of Songs* 4:12, ‘A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse’. Yet we notice that the pear and the apricot enclose a gate, a doorway without a door, that allows us to see what lies beyond – even more floribundant orchards and bounteous hills curving behind the laden branches, the garden of God. This is a physical garden, in a small, early 19th century village on the banks of the Darent in Kent; it is also a garden where no transgression has yet taken place, no angel come with flaming sword to send into exile. It is a gateway into the understanding of the world as divine gift.

The poet, John Clare, (1793-1864) was a near contemporary of Palmer, and, during his brief visits to London, the circles both men moved in to some extent overlapped. Yet unlike Palmer, Clare came from the labouring agricultural class; many of his poems do indeed document the backbreaking poverty, the messy earthiness and casual cruelty that come with such a life. It has even been suggested that whereas Clare offers ‘some kind of authentic record based on personal experience’ of country life, Palmer’s is one of ‘projection’ (William Vaughan, *Samuel Palmer, Shadows on the Wall*, Yale University Press, 2015, p.137). That assertion is difficult to square with the striking convergences that sometimes occur between Clare’s poetry and Palmer’s landscapes. A notable example is the early poem ‘A Scene’ (c.1809-1819) and Palmer’s oil, *The*

Gleaning Field, from 1833: ‘the darksome lowering woods/With grains of varied hues.../ The low brown cottage in the shelter’d nook/ The steeple peeping just above the trees/ Whose dangling leaves keep rustling in the breeze/ ...And maidens strippt haymaking too appear.../ And herdsman hallooing to intruding cow’ (*Major Works*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, O.U.P, 2004, p.11, ll. 3-4, 5-7, 9, 11): all are here in Palmer’s evocation of a rural scene, although the maidens are gleaning rather than haymaking.

But a closer comparison reveals a much more powerful connection than mere illustration, and that is in the ‘double the vision my Eyes do see’. Clare no less than Palmer, and Palmer no less than Clare, sees with a double eye: the ‘rustic genius, ‘Hed fancy friends in every thing he found/ Muttering to cattle –aye and even flowers/ As one in visions claimd his talk for hours/ And hed oft wonder were we nought coud see/On blades of grass and leaves upon the tree’ (‘The Fate of Genius’, *ibid*, p. 82, ll. 70-74). A cursory reading might find ready evidence here that Clare was merely dreaming, ‘off with the fairies’; deeper consideration shows that throughout the poem he is preempting precisely that interpretation. The point is that the writer/narrator of the poem does see in the apparently mundane objects and life forms around him something other, a different inner life, a resonance that many do not hear and a spiritual embodiment that they do not see. Ordinary human sense perception alone is far from being the sole measure of all that is.

Clare’s enumeration of plant and animal life in the remarkable poem ‘Emmonsales Heath’ parallels Palmer’s highly textured vision in the sepia, *Early Morning*. Clare’s precise and detailed observations of nature have something of the flattened perspective of early Palmer: no foreground, middle ground or background but what presents itself to his imagination. We wander among ‘wild weed blossoms’ (*ibid*, p.181, l.7) where ‘the birds still find their summer shade’ (l.13); ‘the poor hare its rushy glade’ (l.15) and ‘Furze ling and brake all mingl[e] free’ (l.29). Even the dusty, gritty path is there, ‘Ive stretched my boyish walks to thee/When maydays paths were dry/ When leaves had nearly hid each tree/ And grass greened ancle high’. (*ibid*, p.183, ll. 65-8). But, just as in Palmer, these things have a luminescence beyond the physical, ‘I thought how kind that mighty power/Must in his splendour be/ Who spread around my boyish hour/ Such gleams of harmony’ (ll.77-80).

Critics have pondered much over Palmer’s enigmatic sepia of 1825, *The Valley Thick with Corn*. The imaginative landscape here forms a bridge between the Dulwich and the Shoreham visions. We recognize the profusion of shapes, forms and textures that help to create those visions; the agricultural sights -- the stooks, ripe corn, stile and cows -- may be familiar, but the way they are juxtaposed in blocks and flat planes, the lack of realistic, receding perspective,

the impossibly domed hills, and vast harvest moon seemingly spiked by the church tower, all tell us we are in an enhanced and symbolic world. Most mysterious of all, however, is the reclining figure to which the eye is immediately drawn. He is lost in the reading of a book, seemingly oblivious to the scene that enwombs him. He lies, not so much in the centre foreground, if one can call it that, but at the inverted apex of a triangle that opens out from him into the nature surrounding and upwards to the heavens. This, as we shall see, is important. His dress and beard immediately make one think of portraits of Shakespeare and his contemporaries; this has disconcerted commentators, who have tried to link the reader, variously, to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the King James Bible, or a character from Shakespeare's plays. Here we have, I think, some proverbial red herrings. Palmer appended to the picture a verse from the Book of Common Prayer's version of Psalm 65, v. 11-13: 'Thou crownest the year with Thy goodness: and Thy clouds drop fatness./ They shall drop unto the dwellings of the wilderness: and the little hills rejoice on every side./ Thy folds shall be full of sheep; the valleys shall stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.'

This indicates that here we have a landscape replete with the abundance of God, so replete that the earth itself sings. This is what the figure is contemplating, even as he appears not to be: he is reading simultaneously both the scriptural Word of God and the Word as manifest in God's creation. Yet again it is the double eye of vision. In 'The Meadow Grass', also from the 1820s, Clare's narrator goes into the fields, and 'drops me down' to drink in his peaceful surroundings, but as he does so, he moves into a different reality, 'For heavens ways are pleasant ways/ Of silent quietness and peace/ And he who musing hither strays/ Finds all in such a scene as this' (*MW*, p. 201, ll. 29-32). The sunlight is transformative, just as is that of the moon in *The Valley Thick with Corn*, '—the light/ Seems more than any common scene' (*ibid*, p. 200, ll. 43-4). The book of nature spreads out and fulfils herself, 'Theres something more to fill the mind/Then words can paint to ears and eyes... I feel so calm I seem to find/A world I never felt before/A heaven fills my clouded mind' (*ibid*, p. 202, ll. 65-6; ll.73-75). And here perhaps is the key to Palmer's painting, 'Tis sweeter than the sweetest book/That ever met the poets eye/To read in this delightful nook/ The scenes that round about me lie/And yet they are but common things' (*ibid*, p. 202, ll. 80-85), though he knows them for the gates of perception that they really are, 'An endless sunshine glows around/A meadow like a waveless sea/ Glows green on many a level ground/A very paradise to me'. (*ibid*, p.203, ll. 77-80).

In the poem, 'Woodland Thoughts', the speaker retires, like the figure in Palmer, with his chosen reading matter to a hidden dell, 'As I recline mid grass

and cooling flowers/...Sure tis a pleasure in such secret nooks/ To muse on distant friends in memorys eye/ Or glance on passages in favourite books/Whose thoughts like echoes to our own reply' (*MW*, p.109, ll. 5-8). The poem appears to do what is generally agreed extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do in a picture, that is, give a sense of the passage of time; the poet sees with 'memorys eye' which recalls 'shades...which substance long forsook' (*ibid*, p. 109, l. 9). But wait a minute. Perhaps the interplay is the other way round. The climax of the sonnet concertinas time, just as Palmer concertinas perspective in *The Valley Thick with Corn*, 'Ah thus to think the thoughts of death is sweet/In shaping heaven to a scene like this/ With loves and friends and feeling all to meet.' (*ibid*, p. 109, ll. 12-14). What Palmer and Clare are showing us is that when the gates of perception open, distinctions of time and space are not so much abolished, as transfigured. This is what I think Blake, who knew very well that it is in particularities, not generalities, that vision is conveyed, means by his famous phrase, 'If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite' (William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', Plate 14, *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake*, ed. David Bindman, Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.95). The crucial word here is cleansed: the thing perceived is perceived differently, while yet remaining the leaf, the stream, the tree. Yet it has acquired another aspect or way of being through the change in perception in the viewer (or listener), a change of which it is both the object and the cause. In short, our relationship with the world of phenomena and the world of the divine is a dynamic, reciprocal one.

If we turn to Clare's poem 'Sabbath Bells' and read it/look at it in conjunction with Palmer's aforementioned watercolour, *The Magic Apple Tree*, we find a concordance that remarkably demonstrates the existence of these multiple, synchronous dimensions. And this concordance is to be found in something that is paradoxically both there and yet not there in either work: the dimension of sound, specifically harmonic and melodic sound; in other words, music. The figure of the piper is a significant one in Palmer: it appears throughout his career: in this painting; in the Oxford sepia, *The Skirts of a Wood* (1825); *The Flock and the Star*, (1831-2); a draft drawing for *The Bright Cloud* (1831-2); the late watercolour, *Till Vesper Bade the Swain*, (1879); and the etching *Opening the Fold*, (1880). Other contemplative figures who mimic the reclining pose of the piper are ubiquitous: in *The Valley Thick with Corn*, (1825), *Late Twilight*, (1825); *The Sleeping Shepherd*, (1831-2), *The Timber Wain*, (1833-4), and *The Lonely Tower*, (1879). It is sure that Palmer was early influenced by the imagery of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, but this solitary player is more than just a pastoral stock in trade.

A comparison with Clare's poem illuminates Palmer's symbolism. The former's narrator retreats, like the piper, to 'Where pastoral quiet dwells/ [I] Lay down among the new mown hay' (*MW*, p.190, ll. 11-13). He is there to experience a sensory world to which sound and human-made music are central, 'To listen distant bells/That beautifully flung the sound/Upon the quiet wind/While beans in blossom breathed around/A fragrance oer the mind'. (ibid, p.190, ll. 5-8). 'Earths music' is everywhere: in the air that hums with swallows or calling to the passing clouds. Gradually the world begins to partake of a time that is not of time; it metamorphoses into a fresh, transfigured place, 'the very air seems deified/Upon a sabbath day' (ibid, p.190, ll. 11-12). So the piper in *The Magic Apple Tree* in his playing is not idly accompanying his own thoughts, but giving voice to the harmony of creation: he has charmed his flock not so much into rumination as into meditation. Thus it is also with Clare, 'And I have listened till I felt/A feeling not in words...A love a rapture of the breast/That nothing will explain' (ibid, p.191, ll. 17-18; ll. 23-24). The wind and the sky are enwrapped, enraptured together, 'The wind-flirt fanning bye/How soft how sweetly swept away/The music of the sky' (ibid. p.191, ll. 30-32). It is at this point that we notice how Palmer also seeks to convey a sense of movement in the trees arching over his shepherd in *The Magic Apple Tree*. Such movement, like the movement of time, is technically almost impossible to render in the medium of paint --and certainly Palmer is ahead of the impressionists in trying—but now we understand the dashed brushstrokes, the stippled leaves of the ivy, the swirling of the branches, even as they also make an architectural arc to frame the scene. The corn flows up the hill like a wave, as it does in a breeze, and the astonishing apples, as densely packed as pomegranate seeds, seem to dance for joy; the flowers and fruits of the earth are ripened for giving, 'The waving blossoms seemed to throw/ Their fragrance to the ground' (ibid, p. 191, ll.45-6).

There is a yet further parallel: as the woodland trees overhang and form a circle with the hollow way where the piper sits, so the Sabbath bells frame Clare's poem, introducing the vision in the first stanza, reinforcing it in the last: they fling their sound across the poem in the same way that the apples fling themselves into the centre of Palmer's painting. Towards what, moreover, do these apple branches gesture? The spire of the village church from which, each Sunday, the bells will peal. Their intangible presence pervades both poem and picture, 'While up and down and loud and low/The bells were ringing round' (ibid, p.191, ll. 47-8). The sound and the smell of the wind have become *visible*; the landscape *audible*. Both the poem and the painting evoke then a synesthetic experience of sound, sight, scent, touch, even taste; it is this which constitutes the vision of transfiguration, another way also of conceiving of Blake's infinity.

Behind this altered perception stands one last sphere of understanding. Palmer, in common with his times, had an intimate knowledge of the Bible and other devotional texts. The inscriptions he often chose to accompany his paintings attest to this. He gave neither title nor inscription to *The Magic Apple Tree*: the name, though apposite, was given it by his son. But it is impossible for a man of his cultural background not to have had the following lines resonating in his mind, ³ As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.⁴ He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.⁵ Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of [Modern English: 'with'] love' (KJV). These lines are, of course, from Chapter 2 of *The Song of Songs*, the Bible's definitive hymn of erotic and spiritual love. Solomon is here in all his glory; but elsewhere Solomon is also the embodiment of wisdom, and favoured by God. So we are presented symbolically with a vision of wisdom which is the wisdom conferred by vision, the wisdom that those who lack it cannot understand. We have come a long way from the fate of Clare's poet in *The Fate of Genius*, 'We wonderd many times as well we might/And doubted often if his mind was right/ een children startld from his oddness ran/ And shund his wanderings as "the crazy man"' (*MW*, p. 81, ll. 53-56).

We said earlier that vision always has a shape and a presence that is real and personal to it. For Clare, it is the heathlands, fields and woodlands of the Northamptonshire countryside which offer a gateway, 'the world's end was at the edge of the horizon... a day's journey would be able to find it' (*ibid*, p. xviii). A hundred years later the river cliff and sweeping meander of the Thames valley at Cookham in Berkshire opened up a similar visionary horizon to the painter, Stanley Spencer. They set a pattern that lasted through out his life for what he called his 'homing instinct'. By this he did not mean merely a nostalgia for familiar places, but rather a desire to find 'spiritual nesting places... a habit which emphasizes and brings out the sense & purpose of the things I build a home in' (Stanley Spencer, *Letters and Writings*, ed. Andrew Glew, Tate Publishing, 2001, p.164). The apparently ordinary may suddenly reveal the sacred, 'I saw many burning bushes when I was in Cookham' (*ibid*. p.164). We are reminded too of Palmer's 'Dulwich sentiment' and the 'Valley of Vision' that Shoreham offered him. For both artists, then, place and landscape are intimately bound up with the imaginative response they trigger. (The many commissions that each carried out for more naturalistic, topographical views were what might be called 'bread and butter work', dependent on skills of draftsmanship, rather than chosen by the artist himself for their symbolic value to him.)

The Apple Gatherers (1912-3), which Spencer described as ‘my first ambitious work’, represents a useful imaginative connection with *The Magic Apple Tree*. At first glance Spencer’s work has little in common with Palmer’s, and we should be cautious about pushing the analogy too far. Nevertheless, the sense of abundant, almost superabundant, fruitfulness in Palmer’s work is also apparent everywhere in Spencer’s: in the baskets of huge, unreal large apples, the massive strength in the hands of the gatherers and, most evidently, in the detailed and textured grass and foliage that surrounds them. The main female and male figures hold hands in a solemn conjoining of man and nature; their bodies rise up through the centre of the picture like two halves of a tree. What Spencer said of this painting exactly fits the transfigured nature that we find in the arches, boughs, hills, shepherd and flock of Palmer’s vision, ‘The Apple Gatherers’ ... is an earnest [sic] request from whence what is marvellous in themselves (God given) can be revealed and expressed’ (quoted in Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer*, Phaidon Press, 1999, p.19).

The 1920 canvas, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, announces the first period of Spencer’s mature style. It is of course significant that it comes after the carnage of the First World War but before his considered treatment of that conflict in panels of the Sandham chapel at Burghclere. Spencer’s biographer, Kenneth Pople, has pointed to the fact that the picture draws on, though is not bounded by, the young artist’s experience of leaving his beloved home in Cookham to go to war. But this is no conventional departure scene: the little brick homes and modest streets of what was then still, quite literally, a rural backwater have been transformed into the road to crucifixion, a modern Calvary. Cookham is simultaneously both Cookham and Jerusalem; the fulfilment of Christ’s mission and journey is this place, at this moment and yet for all time. It is early in the morning, the sun is rising and the light rakes across the crowd accompanying Jesus carrying the cross round the corner into Sutton Street, as well as the spectators watching from the combined houses of Fernlea, Spencer’s home, the adjoining Belmont where his uncle’s family lived, and the adjacent cottage, The Nest. Two builders’ mates follow the illuminated Christ, carrying their own burden of ladders that lead the eye across the horizontal of the painting. The canvas is alive with texture: the ivy engulfing The Nest, the minutely recorded pointing on the bricks of Fernlea, the garden hedges and railings: all these are memories from Spencer’s childhood, but they are seen through the gates of vision. The figures who lean from every window to see the tortured Christ going to his consummation wear undifferentiated pink tunics – are they in their nightgowns? – whilst their lace curtains have turned miraculously, in the passing of the breeze and breath of the Holy Ghost, into angels’ wings. The crowds, whether idly curious, hoping for the egregious excitement of a public execution, or appalled and grieving, are now the heavenly host acclaiming the Son of God.

Spencer, who had formed a group with several of his fellow students at the Slade calling themselves the 'Neo-Primitives', was well aware that in setting his road to Calvary in a Berkshire village, he was both placing himself within an iconographic tradition that extended back to early Italian and Flemish/Netherlandish painters and making the crucifixion contemporary. Herein lies its power. Palmer too was conscious of this. His *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1824-5) may lack the startling sense of Spencer's 'spiritual use & purpose to which ordinary life & things & objects can be put' (*Letters and Writings*, p. 128); nevertheless, the Italianate Holy Family rests upon a sloping chalk upland behind which downs and wealden forest stretch towards a blue horizon such as can still be seen in the environs of Sevenoaks. The palm tree that shelters them is not so much incongruous as a reminder that what confronts us here is the imaginative landscape of asylum in exile. Every refugee carries with them memories of home.

Throughout much of his career, Spencer worked on what he called his 'Church House' project. This was to have been a specially designed building in Cookham, in which an extensive series of canvases, linked in meaning and connected to his life in the village, could be displayed. Spencer wanted it to show 'the relations of the religious life in the secular life, how that all is one religious life' (Keith Bell, *op. cit.*, p.103). His vision for it evolved and was constantly being added to, to the extent that his ambition was never realized; the paintings he did for it are correspondingly uneven in focus and even quality. Nevertheless, the intensity of his preoccupation with the dual significance of the world around him did not lessen.

This becomes strikingly evident in the unfinished series, *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta*, of which the main canvas, of the same name, was also never completed. Smaller related panels, which were sold off separately, depict the inhabitants of Cookham, together with wealthy day-trippers from London, enjoying this central social event of the year, one of course defined by the river that for centuries dominated Cookham life, activities and economy. This, however, is not Henley, and the participants are in all kinds of dress, work-a-day, or with skirts hitched up, or sportswear, maids in uniform, as well as the visitors in summer finery and big, floppy hats. At first the explosion of detail perplexes the eye; but as the spectator is drawn in, we realise that the actors in each scene are responding, in a different way, to one thing: the unseen presence of Christ in their midst. In *Girls Listening*, four girls have spread a white tablecloth on the grass for a picnic; their attitudes are clumsy, their dress casual. All manner of wild flowers – brambles, daisies, meadow sweet, lady's smock, clover, flowering grasses—are painted with that same textured attention that we have seen in Palmer. They are there because they are a manifestation of God.

The girls stretch their hands into the centre of the tablecloth in gestures that clearly recall the communion and prayer of the Last Supper; their heads are turned away from each other in the manner of people who are listening intently. A newspaper is the focus of *Conversation between Punts*: the girl who sits centrally appears to be reading from it to the others; suddenly we recognise that this is The Good News. It is thus that we are to understand the theme of *Dinner on the Hotel Lawn*, ostensibly a very different scene, yet here too close inspection shows that most of the characters are either reading leaflets with intense concentration or expounding their contents to others.

All these individual paintings reinforce what Spencer planned as the central painting, *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta*. Punt after punt stretches away into the distance on the shimmering waters of the upper Thames. Children jump excitedly in and out of the boats; the punt manager shoulders his mop; swans crane their elegant necks forward to be fed. There are babes in arms; men with their hands in their pockets; young men and women dozing on cushions, chatting, gazing into the sunlit air. We can hear the noise, the sound of many conversations, the happy clamour that echoes over water on a hot day. Gradually, however, the eye focuses on a small but extraordinary figure at the dead centre of all the action. He wears the long black gown and black boater of a louche itinerant preacher, the effect reinforced by his matted, streaming hair, bare feet and staring eyes. He leans forward for emphasis as he addresses his immediate audience, a gaggle of children who seem quite unperturbed by his alarming appearance. His oddity is only heightened by the fact that he is delivering his beatitudes seated in a basket chair, replete with cosy cushions, on a punt. Surrounding him are his apostles, bearded and balding sages also ensconced in basket chairs, listening with rapt faces. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, the carefree and the labourers, all are here to follow the words of the Sermon on the Water. Spencer's beloved Cookham and Christ's salvific message conjoin to make a vision that is universal. Here is the artist's explanation as to why, 'the significance of anything comes out when two experiences are welded together as one experience. ... The putting together in pictures, as I do, of things which might be thought to be unlikely or anachronistic are in fact neither, and because of my understanding of these joins, their union is emphasized. Therefore, in this "Progress of the Soul" I would wish... to keep this join preserved unsevered, as it is in life itself'. (*Letters and Writings*, p.170). We are back with the fusion that takes place in Blake's double perception.

At about the same time as Samuel Palmer was beginning to discover in the fields and hills of Dulwich a gate to a transfigured world, he executed a self-portrait in black and white chalk. It has become rightly famous. The sitter, barely twenty years old, faces us, his gaze impassive, his features regular but

not striking, his forehead high and slightly domed. A silk scarf is knotted at his neck in the informal Romantic manner of the period. His quiet eyes penetrate, without staring, straight through and past us; it is at one and the same time a self-conscious and yet entirely self-less work. It is as if he sees something behind, or more properly, beyond us, even as he comes into our presence. He has drawn the seeing eye and the eye of the seer.

Ninety years later, Stanley Spencer also did a self-portrait at almost exactly the same age. He has adopted exactly the same stance, full-on to the viewer. The shape of the face and nose is near identical; the eyes and lips just a fraction wider and fuller, but describing the same arc. Despite the different cleft chin and dark fringe that obscures his forehead, the resemblance to the Palmer portrait is eerie, though not uncanny: Spencer is clearly referencing the earlier artist, taking him as a guide and exemplar. His eyes challenge us, as if saying, 'I too am a visionary'. The conscious imitation becomes even more obvious when one looks at a pen and ink sketch for this self-portrait he made two years earlier: the same attitude, a slight pout around the mouth which is closer to Palmer's and, most tellingly, a kerchief à la romantique framing his jaw instead of the long bare youthful neck of the 1914 canvas. It is a powerful homage from one seer to another.

Let us finish with Clare, the horizon of whose imagination opened in the furzes and heathland and meadows near Helpston. Even in the writings of his later years in the asylum in Northampton he retains this ability to look so hard at what is actually there that he 'sees' through it to another, fulfilled reality, 'where the dew lies on the Primroses the violets and white thorn leaves they are emerald and berryl ... the road grasses are cover'd with gold and silver beads and the further we go the brighter they seem to shine like solid gold and silver' (*MW*, p.413). Vision is everywhere, even in a grain of sand, 'Natures universal tongue/ Singeth here/ Songs Ive heard and felt and seen/ Everywhere/ Songs like the grass are evergreen/ The giver/ Said live and be and they have been/ For ever ('Songs Eternity', p. 124).

So, as we read, see and hear the work of Samuel Palmer, John Clare and Stanley Spencer, we are brought closer to an understanding that the world possesses and shows forth both real and symbolic meaning. We are in the presence of a vision that shows us 'the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal'.

Hilary Davies

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