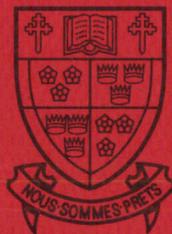
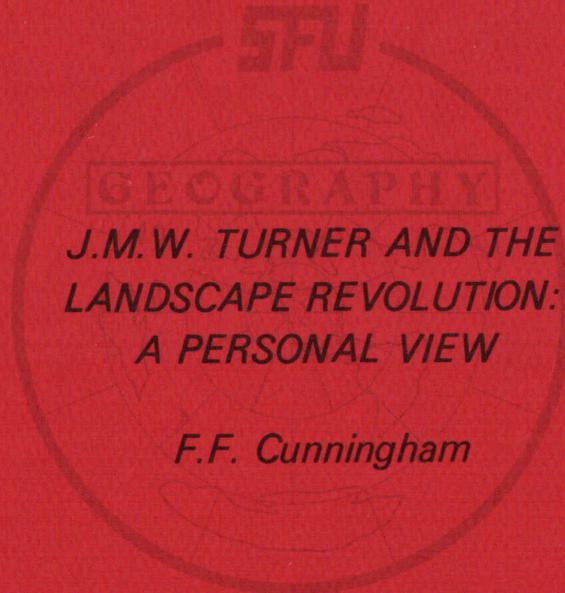


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J.M.W. TURNER AND THE LANDSCAPE REVOLUTION:
A PERSONAL VIEW

By

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DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 12

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It has been recognised at least since Plato that the 'objective' environment is not directly accessible to us. Instead, its signals are screened both by the peculiarities of the human visual apparatus, and by attitudes and perceptions, some of which are learned from cultural training and from individual experiences. Of the many influences embedded within culture, that of landscape art has been at times very powerful.

The interpretations of nature by landscape artists were of unequalled importance in Western (i.e. European-cum-North American) societies from the late 18th to the late 19th Century. Before this relatively short period, the canons of landscape appreciation came from literature rather than from art, and from the late 19th Century onwards photographic expertise has progressively ousted art in our perceptions. The 19th Century view of the Grand Canyon was doubtless tempered by the photographic records of the expeditions of J.W. Powell and the Kolb brothers, but the vision itself, as appreciated by millions who never saw the Canyon, derived from the romantic paintings of Thomas Moran. It is clear that our present day conception of landscape has a different origin, a flavour mostly drawn from multitudes of colour photographs in magazines and travel brochures, a flavour which might be summarised as 'National Geographic'.

The Landscape Revolution

The onset of the relatively brief supremacy of landscape artists was one of a number of manifestations of a massive

* Landscape, Volume 20, Number 1, October 1975, pp. 14-19.

cultural shift in Western societies in the late 18th Century, a shift of which the political revolutions in North America and in France and the Industrial Revolution in England were but symptoms. The underlying cause was a changed attitude about man's relation to environment, and it was prompted by developments in landscape science.

18th Century Europe was torn between two conflicting convictions. On the one hand stood the Christian traditions that the material life on earth is inconsequential because the real life is hereafter; that the earth's surface is a ruin left by the cataclysm of the Flood, and its present inhabitants the penitent descendants of those saved by Noah; and that natural catastrophes are warnings or chastisements from God. On the other was the Rationalist stance that reasonable people, through the pursuit of knowledge in a world of presumed 'natural order', could so arrange society that it would operate harmoniously to everyone's happiness. Whereas virtue, even to the point of martyrdom, had been the central, earthly concern of Christianity, the pursuit of 'happiness' becomes a 'self evident' fact in that typically rationalist document, the American Declaration of Independence. For Rationalists the characteristics of both the earth's landscape and its inhabitants were exquisitely ordered and contrived, the handiwork of a God who, far from moving in mysterious ways, must himself be the Supreme Rationalist. The Scottish scientist James Hutton (1726-1797), "Father of Modern Geology", was the first to formulate a comprehensive synthesis of the inorganic and organic attributes of the earth on mechanistic

lines, proposing an elegant and inevitable balance between the destructive and constructive processes affecting not only the earth's surface but also its life forms. This balance, Hutton contended, was such that we could entirely understand the earth from a persistent enquiry into its present behaviour. Any deviations, such as God-inspired cataclysms, were not only unnecessary but unthinkable. To Hutton the earth could not be a ruin because it was necessarily perfect.

While the inorganic phenomena of the world have given up many of their secrets to this rational approach, based as it is on a natural order in which the similarities between like things are assumed to be more significant than individual differences, human affairs have never fitted well into this approach except at a gross scale. This disparity has led to the divergence of 'the two cultures', a divergence which can be well exemplified in landscape study. The scientific pursuit of landscape has produced that geomorphological line of enquiry which has attempted to contain understanding of landscape within propositions of mathematical probability, but it is difficult to believe that any formula could arrange landscape paintings in any scale of agreed merit or importance.

The new geology, which crystallised in the work of Hutton, had two faces. From its proofs that the earth was vastly older than the traditional Christian allowance of some 6,000 years; that the processes of erosion and deposition, of vulcanism, of uplift and submergence had occurred and re-occurred over that vast interval; that the fossil record not only showed mankind to be recent, but exhibited a curious

pattern of profound organic changes which might be explained in evolutionary terms; in all these the new geology was a flagrant challenge to established beliefs. But, secondly, the new geological expertise was essential to the spread of factory industry because of the latter's dependence on greatly increased supplies of coal and iron, and it was this factory production which appeared to offer the only hope of achieving the material millenium. So the new geology not only revolutionised the interpretation of the landscape, but sanctioned that rape of the earth which, with admittedly enhanced living standards, has typified 19th and 20th Century European and North American economic developments. We are heirs to both these faces.

These revolutionary attitudes to landscape were not likely to be lost on artists, so that, contemporaneous with the advances in landscape science and the Industrial Revolution, arose (also starting in Britain be it noted) the first group of landscape artists who could at once persuade themselves, their patrons, and the general public that the rendering of the landscape was the most important of all subjects. It would be misleading to regard this group of British artists as a school. They were much too varied for that. Turner and Constable, now regarded as the most significant of that group, not only shared the contemporary milieu but were each trained at the Royal Academy schools, yet they might reasonably be regarded as occupying opposite ends of the spectrum of ideas, interests, and styles exhibited by the group. It is easy to

see in Turner's work that he not only lived through one of the most tumultuous periods of history but was much affected and perplexed by it. Constable, at least superficially, seems impervious or even unaware.

J.M.W. Turner

Joseph Mallord William Turner is unmistakably the most significant of this British group of landscape artists. While his relative merits and demerits are likely to remain matters of controversy, he provides a unique insight into the range of landscape art. Partly from an enormous intellectual curiosity but also from a competitive urge of pathological dimensions, Turner not only set out to excel in almost all styles which were highly regarded in his times, but had enough insight and energy left over to explore entirely original avenues. His prodigious energy was put almost entirely into his art. The tension between, on the one hand, his humble upbringing and, on the other, his tremendous and acknowledged abilities, provides an easy target for the psychoanalyst. Turner was brought up in a London slum. Towards his father, an uneducated barber, Turner had a touching affection, the more concentrated because his mother suffered from bouts of mental illness and was eventually confined to an asylum. In spite of commendable efforts at self-education, Turner felt himself a parvenu among many of his patrons and even among his fellow artists. A head shorter than average, gauche, secretive, but conscious of his great gifts, he avoided most social entanglements. His ambitions were boundless.

Nearly all of Turner's finished works were produced in the studio, but the raw materials were the vast number of first-hand sketches by which he recorded his incessant tours of Britain and, in later life, of Western Europe. As a young man, Turner would walk or ride all day in search of his subjects. Throughout his life he remained an indefatigable traveller and was content to put up with the simplest and cheapest fare. At the age of 60, Turner found himself crossing the Channel during a storm in which even the captain was convinced that his vessel would sink. The artist insisted on being lashed to the mast so that he did not miss the opportunity of sketching the violent waves. In 1845, at the age of 70, Turner made his last sketching tour in Europe.

J.M.W. Turner's output is vast, almost beyond belief. He left behind about 20,000 'works'! Of these, more than 500 were oil paintings, many of which were exhibited during his lifetime. The largest number of his oils, however, were painted for his own purposes, and some of these have only been exhibited in this century. In 1939 some 50 oil paintings by Turner were discovered in the cellar of the National Gallery in London. They had been rolled up and left there after the disposal of Turner's effects almost a century earlier. Thought for all that time to be merely tarpaulins, they are in his late, abstract style. They would not have been accepted in his own day but would have no such problem today. The great mass of Turner's work is not oils but water-color paintings and drawings, ranging from superbly finished products to working sketches. In his earlier years

Turner's preliminary, first-hand sketches were skilful pencil or chalk outlines to which he often added wash or water colour (usually the same evening), but later he found that the merest jottings in lines and words were sufficient. From such fragments he was able, by the aid of a phenomenal visual memory, to formulate pictures which, among other qualities, can be very recognisable representations of particular places.

It may help us to appreciate Turner's industry if we pose that if anyone were to set out to copy all of his output, and produce one every day, it would take almost 60 years to complete the task! It follows that no one really knows all of Turner's output, so that even on that account alone any evaluation is highly subjective and likely to be disputed. It is also the case that any estimate of Turner's importance must concentrate to an unusual degree on his professional progress. His life outside of his art was trivial, even squalid. But to grasp his art meaningfully is extraordinarily difficult. Apart from the sheer size of his output, few other artists, except perhaps Picasso, have moved so much in their lifetimes. In addition Turner did not only grow but he expanded in his art, embracing additional approaches but seldom relinquishing any. It is commonly judged that his style was careful and representational in youth; bold, free, but recognisable in maturity; nebulous, perverse, and uncertain in old age. In fact, almost to the last he could produce the careful, topographical style when needed (as for his many book illustrations), as well as the most exquisite water colours. It also seems the case that Turner began experimental,

expressionist ventures fairly early in his career. Consequently neither a topical nor a chronological approach to Turner's work is particularly satisfactory.

This account proceeds to first review the styles of painting thought well of in Turner's time. These were the first hurdles of his ambitions. Secondly, there follows a brief survey of his works arranged in chronological phases which the writer recognises but others would dispute. Thirdly an attempt is made to evaluate the artist and his influence.

The Styles of Painting in Turner's Times

Except that the relative significance of landscape increased markedly, the styles of painting favoured during Turner's long career were largely traditional. Turner himself classified his work as Historical, Pastoral, Mountain, Marine, and Architectural, but these adjectives are neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive.

'History painting', by which at the end of the 18th Century was understood the representation of moral-pointing incidents from the Bible and from Classical history or mythology, was regarded as the worthiest objective for an artist. Such art required not only a lofty purpose, but an enviable range of skills in painting figures, costumes, architecture, landscape, seascape, and skyscape. As with all other styles of art at this time, its patrons were those wealthy enough to commission painters, and were of the same small group who commissioned architects to build them country houses or palaces, landscape gardeners to plan their estates,

and interior decorators to fashion furniture, wall hangings, and ornaments. These patrons customarily had a Classical education, and their reverence for the past had been reinforced by the Grand Tour, a holiday on the Continent of Europe during which they visited specific places (notably Rome), and indeed were expected to appreciate specified items. These patrons demanded and readily discerned in commissioned art the appropriate Classical and Biblical references, and saw possible analogies with contemporaneous issues. Such art obviously demanded a great deal from the viewer.

Respect for the past breeds conventions and models. It was considered that in history painting Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), and Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), Frenchmen who had spent most of their professional lives in Italy, were the paragons. Although Claude's subjects, as revealed in the titles of his most famous works, were Classical or Biblical incidents, he was unusually pre-occupied with landscape and with architecture. His figures, which are ostensibly his chief concern, are usually small (he contrasts strongly with Nicolas Poussin in this), and his pictures are chiefly noteworthy for an idealised calm, for a balance of the massing of buildings or landscape every bit as thoughtful and contrived as Raphael's figure groups, as well as for a delicate effect of recession in which he was unrivalled. British collectors were most anxious to acquire works by Claude and other Old Masters, and British artists, who had been consistently schooled to think of themselves as inferior, were equally

anxious to view them. Before the opening of the National Gallery in 1824, British artists had little other access to such works.

It took an American, Benjamin West, to change the 'history painting' tradition. It is difficult for us to see his Death of Wolfe (1771) as the revolutionary work it really was. Firstly, it depicted a relatively recent event, well within the memory of many persons then living. Secondly it showed the participants in the appropriate military uniforms. Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy and arbiter of art taste in Britain at the time, pleaded with West to paint his figures in classical armour!

'Portrait painting', though considered a lesser art, had always been profitable, and became much more so when the British aristocracy were aped by the rapidly growing numbers of commercial and industrial nouveaux riches. They too commissioned country houses and had themselves and their families' portraits painted.

These two sets of patrons also provided a market for topographical work, the careful rendering, often in line with washes of tone or more rarely colour, depicting the country seat of the patron or scenes on the Grand Tour. Similar techniques were employed in the representation of places in Britain, for which there arose an enhanced interest as the country emerged as the foremost in Europe. From such modest intentions arose a remarkable and unique galaxy of water colourist of whom Paul Sandby, John Robert Cozens, Peter de Wint,

Francis Towne, John Sell Cotman, Thomas Girtin, and Turner himself were the most notable pioneers. Britain's national pride, based originally on worsting the French during the 18th Century, was greatly enhanced by Trafalgar and Waterloo, and by her new supremacy in manufacturing and in geological enquiry. The British, developing an interest in their landscape appropriate to their nationalism, not only discerned the hand of a preferential providence in their uniquely large and accessible supplies of coal and iron, but pretended that their country was a balanced assemblage of the various types of scenery. They went so far as to detect, in the more rugged parts of their country, scenery to which they could attribute the objective 'alpine'! In listing the scenic gems of their land, their respect for the past, coupled with the cult of the 'picturesque', ensured that the most favoured views which were to be admired or drawn were of castles and abbeys (especially ruined ones), mediaeval cathedrals, waterfalls, seacliffs, and mountains.

In its range of expertise, 'genre painting' was as demanding as history painting, but in its aim was categorised by Reynolds as 'contemptible'. Genre painting was concerned not with high-minded incident, but with the anonymous and contemporary majority going about their humdrum business - farmers tilling fields, fishermen hauling nets, housewives cleaning house, people at the market or the fair. Hogarth expanded this approach into much wider contexts of British life. The Dutch had long excelled in this style, and Reynolds

conceded their great technical skill, but he was almost as much offended by the mere representation, the unidealised rendering of things as they are, as he was by the lack of high purpose in such art. In fact there was always the possibility that genre art and history painting might converge. For instance the genre rendering of the rural landscape might pay homage to the supposed virtues of living in the country, virtues which some of the educated British of the 18th Century feared was in danger of extinction by the advance of industry and commerce. Such genre painting could thus join the pastoral tradition pursued by contemporary writers in the style of the revered Vergil. So, too, the rendering of contemporary rather than past events might be on an epic scale. Industrial scenes or warfare might be painted with high moral intent.

Marine painting blurred the issues even further. It allowed either 'history' or 'genre' approaches, depending upon whether the artist was portraying a memorable sea battle or anonymous shipping. The artificiality of the distinction was clearest here because the successful rendering of ships, of whatever kind, demanded considerable technical knowledge as well as skill, and the sea has been notoriously difficult to paint throughout the history of art. The Dutch attention to detail had been helpful in this task, and the British were long convinced that no one, not even the Old Masters, could ever equal Van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) in marine subjects.

The Young Turner

For an uneducated slum boy like young Turner to break into the artistic circles of his times, a literature-oriented, patron-dominated circle, would seem nearly impossible. Turner managed it because of his talents, his remarkable powers of application, and the development through self-education of a genuine if erratic taste for literature. In the catalogues of exhibitions of his works he attached quotations from poets, especially from James Thomson who had first described nature in realistic terms, and later, and increasingly, some verses of his own. Turner's quotations were often incorrect, his historical allusions often hazy, his own verse very amateurish, but his promptings were genuine enough. "The fumes of history filled his brain, not its dry facts".* He became essentially a history painter. If subsequent generations such as our own have looked at his work principally in terms of colour and effect, his own intentions, at least in his exhibited works, were unmistakably literary.

Turner's father was quick to see his son's talent in drawing, and had him trained by a drawing master (Thomas Malton). From 1789 to 1793 the boy attended the rigorous if conventional Royal Academy Schools which Reynolds had set up. Turner was a quiet, assiduous, and absorptive student. In 1790, at the age of fifteen, he had a painting (a watercolour), shown in the Royal Academy's annual exhibition, the first of an almost

* Martin Butlin: J.M.W. Turner; Art and Content, p. 10, in Turner 1775-1851, (The Tate Gallery, 1974).

uninterrupted stream of exhibits there, in the British Institution, and in his own Gallery which he set up in London. His first oil was not exhibited until 1796.

After leaving the Royal Academy Schools, Turner spent much time at Dr. Munro's 'manufactory'. Munro, an expert in mental illness who treated persons so diverse as George III and Turner's mother, provided a group of promising young artists with a place to work, materials, and reproductions or actual drawings he wished copied. It is not clear how much Munro was concerned about the prospects of the young men (they certainly got practise and became acquainted with the work of a wide variety of artists), and how much he was concerned at getting good, saleable drawings for almost no cost. Turner was particularly stimulated in copying work by J.R. Cozens, who had accompanied William Beckford, author of 'Vathek' and one of the richest men of his times, on the Grand Tour. Cozens' wash drawings of Alpine scenery were amongst the very earliest to show an understanding of scenic grandeur and an ability to realise it. Turner was also much influenced by another of Dr. Munro's boy artists, Thomas Girtin. Girtin and Turner seem to have been the first water-colourists to apply the desired colours directly to the paper without preliminary tone washes. Both rapidly developed a virile style, capable of much more than colouring drawings and allowing the brush rather than the pencil to be the master. Although Girtin, (who died very young) made a stir in France, watercolour was widely and disparagingly called the 'English Art',

and was never pursued so seriously outside of Britain. Yet the medium is capable of effects of unequalled subtlety, and is therefore most appropriate for atmospheric renderings. Turner also accompanied Girtin on his earliest sketching tours, a habit that Turner never lost.

Turner was elected ARA at the youngest possible age in 1799 (he had been nominated in spite of the rules in the previous year) and in 1802 became an RA, the highest recognition for any British artist, when he was but 27. His oils and water colours were in demand by rich patrons, and his drawings were used widely in collections of British views (which substituted for the modern post card or travel magazine) and as book illustrations.

In 1802 Turner and many other British artists took advantage of the termination of the Revolutionary Wars to cross the Continent from which they had been excluded for nine long years. The principal objective was the galleries of the Louvre which had been supplemented by judicious thefts by Bonaparte from Italian collections. It is significant that Turner, however, first visited Switzerland to see for himself the Alps he had drawn second hand from J.R. Cozens, and he produced there drawings and paintings in which, for the first time, the true flavour of glacier-clad peaks and alpine gorges is achieved.

On his return, Turner exhibited his 'Calais Pier', which was meant not only to illustrate his landing there, but also to show his superiority as a marine painter over the redoubtable

Van de Velde. Some of the wealthy patrons, notably Sir George Beaumont, who had been happy enough when Turner more or less copied Van de Velde (as in his Bridgewater Sea Piece, 1801) were critical of Turner's new departures, and from this time his progressive move from representational detail to generalised suggestion led to increasing hostility from some critics. The newspapers and the general public, however, continued to give his exhibited works support. For them he remained that unique phenomenon, a British artist equal to the Old Masters. The Royal Academy faithfully exhibited anything he sent to them.

The Mature Turner

During the Napoleonic Wars, which began with a threatened invasion of Britain in 1803 and lasted for over 10 years, Britain was again isolated. It was in this period that Turner achieved a seeming maturity of style which characterised many of his most famous pictures then and thereafter. The key picture of this period and style is perhaps his Hannibal, the outstanding item in the Royal Academy's 1812 Exhibition. Its origins illustrate well the complexity of its maker's promptings. Turner had acquired that reverence for the Classical past which characterised the British educated classes, and he saw the apparently endless struggle between Britain and France as a replay of the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage. His natural pessimism was reinforced by the knowledge that in those Punic Wars the sea power had lost, and at the time of his painting 'Hannibal', the French debacle

in Russia had not yet occurred. As regards the actual painting, the mountain pass is a remembrance of his own crossing of the Mont Cenis (in 1802), but the stormy sky derived from an experience in the Yorkshire Pennines. Not only do these natural elements come first in the full title (Snow and Storm: Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps), but in the picture they dominate, indeed overwhelm the human incidents. Hannibal on his remaining elephant is there if one looks very hard, but the whole effect is not of heroic achievement (the foreground Carthaginian soldiers are looting not marching), but of the ruthless supremacy of natural forces, and the depravity as well as the ineffectiveness of humanity. This is the Byronic stance in paint, and summarises Turner's most consistent opinions.

But the mature range of Turner cannot be epitomised in one style. In 1813 Turner produced the equally remarkable Frosty Morning, the talk of the Royal Academy Exhibition of that year. It is a still, somewhat sinister rendering of farm workers in the Dutch style of Cuyp. During this same period of the Napoleonic Wars, Turner, following West, rendered some contemporary events in the heroic style, predictably choosing Nelson and Trafalgar, but he also continued with the popular Biblical subjects, notably his Deluge and his Seven Plagues of Egypt, in which he emphasised that the cataclysms of nature were the purposeful chastisements from God, and not, as some impious scientists would have it at the time, merely mechanistic and amoral events. Characteristically,

Turner had gone to great trouble to find out about the geological enquiries of his time*, but he was a clear supporter of Catastrophism. As throughout the remainder his life, at this stage he reveals an excessive interest in cataclysms and particularly in shipwrecks.

But the elusive Turner had another quite different style at this time. His views of the middle Thames, painted (perhaps in 1807) on wood veneered panels, were done directly in the open air, probably from a boat. These paintings, which were never exhibited until this century, unmistakably anticipate the best of Constable. Indeed Turner's 'The Thames near Walton Bridges' looks as if it might well have been painted by Constable at his most fluent.

In a genre painting, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1807, Turner strikes yet another note. In the previous year David Wilkie had exhibited a genre painting obviously aping the manner of the Dutchman Teniers, and this had been very favourably commented upon. Turner's 1807 'Blacksmith' is clearly an attempt to outdo Wilkie in the Teniers style. The full title of the picture, A Country Blacksmith Disputing Upon the Price of Iron, and the Price Charged to the Butcher of Shoeing his Poney, would have horrified Reynolds.

In yet another imitative vein, Turner's 'Crossing the Brook' of 1815 portrays the Tamar Valley of southwest England in a Claudian style intended to show the public that he could

* Turner owned copies of the first two sets of Transactions of the Geological Society, (of London), 1811 & 1814, and was a friend of McCulloch, one of the leading geologists of the time.

outdo the Italianate version of British scenery in which Richard Wilson had excelled. While there must be much artificiality in such a transfer, Turner's 'Crossing the Brook' is a masterly amalgam of convention and of carefully realised topography, the more distant parts of the landscape being quite miraculously achieved.

Turner squarely confronted Claude himself in his two Carthaginian pictures, Dido Building Carthage, (1815) and his Decline of the Carthaginian Empire, (1817) (both titles are in fact longer). Some of those critics who had regarded Claude as the apex of historical painting became convinced that Turner had outdone him, and urged that the nation should buy the Decline of the Carthaginian Empire. Turner himself must have also been persuaded that he had overmatched Claude (and we have to recall that for both Turner and most art critics and patrons this was the supreme test) for in 1829 he made a will bequeathing the two Carthaginian pictures to the National Gallery (which had opened only four years earlier), with the proviso that after his death they would be hung alongside the two Claude's which the Gallery had acquired (Sea Port and The Mill). Remembering Turner's frequent comparisons between Carthage and contemporary Britain, his Decline of the Carthaginian Empire indicates that, even two years after Waterloo, he was not at all convinced that Britain could recover from the long wars with France, and this pessimistic impression is reinforced by the verses with which he accompanied the painting.

The Turning Point

When hostilities ceased in 1815, Turner, unlike many other British artists, was too pre-occupied with commissions to at once revisit the Continent. In 1817 he made a journey to the Rhineland and to the field of Waterloo. One of the outcomes of this visit was the group of 30 splendid watercolours of the Rhineland commissioned by Walter Fawkes, the first of Turner's patrons with whom he became close friends. In 1819 Turner visited Italy for the first time, and it seems clear that this had a profound effect upon the future direction of his art. In four months he went through 19 sketch books, and from these came a series of water colours of unequalled skill and spontaneity. Although he gave most attention to Rome, perhaps the best known of the series is his Venice: S. Giorgio Maggiore from the Dogana. This is thought to be his first Venetian subject, and was the opening of a long love-affair with that city. Venice, especially in morning mist, has exactly that atmosphere which suited Turner's mature, generalised, and fluid style, and both the city's decayed condition and its history equally suited his pessimism about maritime empires. Turner's instant capture of an entirely new flavour refutes the notion, popular at present, that only native artists can deal with specific localities.

Although from 1819 Turner continued with earlier styles, he had clearly come to a cross-roads which most art critics consider to be the turning point of his career. Thereafter his advance was mainly into representation of light rather than

of form. For this advance water colour was in fact the most suitable medium, and it is noticeable that Turner's first encounter with Italy produced very few oils and these unsatisfactory. The relative prestige of oils, however, ensured that Turner would attempt to achieve in oil what he had instantaneously achieved in water colour. There was much justification in the subsequent and growing criticisms of Turner (from persons such as Sir George Beaumont) that the artist was attempting to divert oils to water colour avenues. Turner began to use a preliminary cover of white on his canvases and to work towards the darker parts of the picture, a complete reversal of established practise and indeed of the best uses of oil. His growing pre-occupation with light resulted in an increasing, and sometimes quite inartistic over-use of yellow.

From 1819, when Turner was 44, to 1845, when he was 70, the artist made repeated journeys to Europe (in 1821, 1825, 1826, 1829, 1833, 1836, 1837, 1840, 1841, 1841, 1843, 1844 and 1845, in some of these years making more than one visit). There is perhaps only one generalisation that may be safely made about this long, varied, and productive period, and that is that, while his drawings and water colours continued to secure his fame, his oil paintings, best known through their almost annual appearance at Royal Academy Exhibitions, became progressively more eccentric and less approved, although pictures such as the Temeraire, or Ulysses, and some of his Venetian oils were highly regarded.

In 1819, too, Turner finally gave up his Liber Studiorum.

This was a series of engravings, of which 71 were published but 30 others were left in different degrees of incompleteness. As so often, the enterprise had been partly prompted by competition, for Claude had left his 'Liber Veritas', a famous collection of his drawings, of which an English edition had been printed in 1770. Comparisons are, in fact, most unfair to Claude whose drawings were merely a recognisable record of his paintings so that he could keep track of them, whereas Turner's Liber is a very serious attempt to show the range of landscape art through his own works, and a collection in which each study is most carefully finished. Turner did not at all give up engraving, but rather changed his emphasis during the 1820's and 1830's, producing large numbers of prints which reached a wide and generally appreciative public in collections such as his 'Picturesque Views of England and Wales' and his 'The Rivers of France', and in book illustrations, notably for poetical works including those of Byron and Scott. Turner continued through most of his life to make journeys to nearly all of those places in the British Isles which were considered picturesque, and through his drawings and engravings, with their specially imaginative and somewhat theatrical style, great numbers of the British public came to view their own country in his terms.

The Late Turner

It is not certain whether Turner produced any finished water colours after 1846, by which date he was 71, but up to that time he had little difficulty in selling either water

colours or drawings at good prices. He had long been financially independent, and, while Ruskin claimed that only after 1840 did Turner paint exclusively for himself, it would seem that some years earlier the artist had, at least in his oil colours, decided to let the patrons and the public take his work or leave it. His *Ulysses* of 1829 aroused controversy at least in its representation of the sky, but in fact is a thoroughly-stylised, historical painting with a close dependence on Pope's translation of The Odyssey for many of its details. It should be compared with his highly impressionistic Staffa of 1832, the first of his important pictures to almost abandon representationalism.

Turner's oils of Venice, the earliest in 1833, however, managed to combine representationalism and atmosphere remarkably well. They were widely admired, and in a work such as the 1842 The Dogana it is difficult to deny that Turner had substantially achieved one of his great ambitions, to capture in oils the subtlety of water colour.

Some of the works of this late period were a sad disappointment to even Turner's most ardent admirers. The twin pictures of The Deluge (1843) were almost universally ridiculed. Turner had long been concerned as to how he might concentrate the viewer's attention on the focus of his painting, and he had done this in Hannibal and elsewhere by the vortex composition, a swirling spiral. In attempting a similar result the two Deluge paintings are in octagonal frames. Their purpose was exploratory rather than artistic. Turner had read

a translation of Goethe's Farbenlehre and, as his vitriolic annotations prove,* he strongly disapproved of many of Goethe's ideas about colour theory. Nevertheless, and perhaps from perversity, he adopted Goethe's choice of optimistic and pessimistic (plus and minus) colours for The Evening of the Deluge and The Morning After the Deluge respectively.

Few would claim much merit for either work. The pictures do not contrast in mood as one would expect and those who first saw them exhibited at the Royal Academy must have noticed that Turner's own verses which appeared in the catalogue were equally woeful for each picture.

Most of the oil paintings depicting interiors at Petworth, the home of Turner's eccentric friend, the third Lord Egremont, were painted during the 1830's, but were not exhibited, and it is assumed, perhaps wrongly, that most of them are unfinished. One could readily imagine the controversy such a picture as The Music Party would have provoked, even though it is now highly appreciated as perhaps the earliest appearance of true Impressionism.

Many of the most significant of Turner's later oils have a marine setting. Indeed, in many the sea is the real subject, though the titles commonly concern some human incident. It is noticeable that, in addition to the freeness of treatment, these sea paintings also share other common themes in that they are usually concerned with recent events and that they are

* Turner's copy of Goethe's Farbenlehre in translation is owned by his relative, Mr. Charles Turner of London. It abounds in dissenting remarks written by the artist on page margins.

almost unfailingly pessimistic or even frightening. In them a frequent message is the vanity of humanity in hoping to control the ruthless sea. Turner crystallised the love/hate relationship which the British have for the sea. On the one hand it has been their traditional line of defence; it was the basis of their supremacy in trade, exploration, and empire. But the loss of lives in battle or storm were very real to Turner. Of many examples, space forbids more than a brief consideration of three.

Turner's Temeraire of 1838 is rightly considered one of his finest paintings. The battleship 'Temeraire' which had distinguished itself greatly at the Battle of Trafalgar, was towed up the Thames in 1838 to a breaker's yard. Turner's patriotism combined with his distrust of the new industrial era in the contrast between the elegant if faded 'Temeraire' and the ugly tug which pulls her to her last berth. The sky is perhaps the finest he painted, although Ruskin handed the palm to Ulysses in this respect.

Turner's Slave Ship of 1840 has a fairly precise literary origin. He had read of an incident in which slaves, affected by a plague, had been thrown overboard because insurance could be claimed for persons lost at sea, but not for those dying from disease on board. In fact the incident depicted had occurred in the 1783 when Turner was a boy, but it served his low opinion of humanity well enough. He accompanied the painting with some verses of his own, ending;

"Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy market now?"

The extravagance of its colouring was generally deplored, but Ruskin maintained that the Slave Ship was the most important of all Turner's works. It may be significant that Ruskin owned the Slave Ship for some years, but, finding it "too painful to live with", sold it.

Turner's Snow Storm of 1842 is even more advanced or excessive, depending upon the viewpoint. This records the great storm already referred to in which Turner, as well as the captain of the Channel ferry, did not expect to survive. His treatment was regarded not so much as free but careless. "Soap suds and whitewash" was Hazlitt's verdict. The composition is Turner's favourite vortex, but the assymetry, the slope of the sea from left to right, and the curious disposition of dark and light areas, give the whole scene the disturbing effect that it is about to begin a spiral movement. One wonders whether any unusually sensitive viewer has ever been seasick after examining this picture. Few even of Turner's closest adherents could follow him so far.

Although the present writer considers that the Snow Storm is the most advanced of Turner's late representational works, this praise or criticism is usually reserved for his Rain, Steam and Speed of 1844. This shows a Great Western Express making for London, and is intended to represent 'the sublime' in modern dress. Burke had distinguished 'the sublime', that is the impressive or awesome, from 'the beautiful', and Turner found it easy to use a modern industrial machine as a sinister example. "The train appears and disappears in the wind

and rain like a mythical beast of modern times, at war with nature and regarded by Turner with detached melancholy".

Posthumous Work

After Turner's death, even into this century, quantities of lightly painted canvases by him have been discovered. From the vagueness of many of these it was assumed that they were unfinished and there was precedent for this judgement. It had long been Turner's habit to submit works for the Royal Academy's annual exhibitions which were far from complete, "like chaos before creation". The artist was taking advantage of an indulgent Academy whose rules allowed R.A.'s and A.R.A.'s the privilege of varnishing their paintings and adding a few touches in the few days between the hanging of accepted works and the opening of the Annual Exhibition. Turner used these so-called 'Varnishing Days' to whip up a formless, preliminary work into recognizable shape. On such occasions his skill and speed astonished his fellow artists, but his intentions were often inartistic and the results sometimes disastrous. There is little doubt that a prime motive was largely to outshine those pictures which happened to have been hung adjacent to his own, rather than to realise his own intentions. The pressure of time forced him to resort to technically unsound methods, including the application of water colour to oils, and his overuse of yellow was frequently deplored. Some admirers maintained that only those who had seen a Turner work within a few weeks of its completion could have an adequate idea of its merits.

It is now clear, however, that many of these vague, unexhibited paintings were not incomplete preliminaries for future exhibits, but were finished works intended for Turner's eyes alone. Thus Turner moved beyond the expressionism of his Snow Storm into an abstract art based on colour rather than form.

SUMMARY

If the foregoing has but one message it is that any consensus about J.M.W. Turner's work is unlikely and is at present premature. It is for this reason that this Section is headed Summary and not Conclusion. We are far from knowing the whole Turner output, much further again from fully understanding Turner the person, though illuminating attempts have been made by Kenneth Clark, Martin Butlin, William Rothenstein, Jack Lindsay, and John Gage, in particular. Nevertheless, certain propositions may be reasonably made about the characteristics of Turner's art and his influence.

Firstly, Turner was the earliest great artist for whom the landscape itself was the hero (or villain). To be sure he had to graduate thus far. He moved through conventional representation (both his topographical work and his geographically-displaced, Italianate renderings are of this sort) to the bold, generalized style exemplified by Hannibal, for which he was and remains most acclaimed and identified. En route he turned out, as an aside, those Thames panels which anticipate Constable but were unknown for decades. Ruskin recognised that Turner's generalised style was based on acute not imprecise visual awareness, but the present writer cannot agree that Turner either by intent or result was the 'natural' painter Ruskin claimed he was. Modern Painters would have been, with much more consistency, a defence of Constable or Holman Hunt (who rightly thought it described his aims rather than Turner's). Turner is not a matchless eye let loose on

the landscape, but a powerful and unusual mind.

In his middle phase, which might be described as maturity, Turner is clearly using the 'pathetic fallacy' long-established in literature, whereby the sentiments of humanity are echoed by the surrounding landscape. This is in keeping with his literary promptings and his conviction that the messages of history are universal. Turner obviously progressed in this approach so that the natural forces become dominant in the interplay between man and environment, and the overt message is carried by representations of nature, a ruthless nature in comparison with which he saw the doings of humanity as tawdry and ineffective. This profound disillusionment with humanity and its prospects is similar to Byron's, and, as with that poet, perhaps most of the disillusion came from within. Turner was always conscious of his humble origins and the possible taint of his mother's madness. His external fears, engendered by the life and death struggle between Britain and France, were compounded by his misgivings about the dislocations of society caused by the Industrial Revolution. Lord Clark has expressed regret that Turner did not set out to be the prophet of doom about the industrial take-over, that he spent little time painting Blake's 'Satanic Mills'. Certainly he had just the right sorts of talents, both technical and temperamental.

Turner anticipated the future of European art in several respects. His mature style, with recognizable form but a 'misty' effect, as well as its literary connections, was the starting point of derivative, Romantic painters on both sides of the Atlantic, notably the Hudson River School. It is

difficult to find any significant followers of his later, impatient, near-formless style which begins in his Staffa and which reaches its apex in Snow Storm and Rain, Stream and Speed. No one else in art so clearly epitomises the forebodings about the future. Alternatively his Thames Panels might have been an inspiration to the Impressionists if they had seen them. It is clear too that in later work, such as his experiments with the subject of Norham Castle, Turner is as much interested in light as were the Impressionists a generation later, but in a different way. The Impressionists, fortified by a quasi-scientific theory about the complementary relationships between the colours of an object in light and in shade, were fascinated by dappled light on water. This phenomenon is a perplexing one to the painter who has to 'freeze' his vision while its essential character, missed by the still camera but caught by ciné, is a switch between light and dark components over a short interval of time. Turner, on the other hand, became pre-occupied with how strong light, especially light behind objects, envelops and to some extent consumes forms, an effect widely used in current magazine adverts. It was a short move from the 1835-40 version of Norham Castle to the unexhibited colour abstracts by which Turner anticipated much mid-20th century painting. Even the intermediate stage of subordinating form to colour is discernible. Long before Monet produces his different colour versions of Rouen Cathedral, Turner has his Blue Rigi, Red Rigi, Yellow and Pink Rigi, Pale Grey and Yellow Rigi, experiments based on the

assymmetrical form of the famous Rigi Mountain alongside his beloved Lake Lucerne.

When we remind ourselves that throughout this astonishing declension, at the end of which Turner is anticipating the future of much European art (but because his relevant work was unknown, not shaping that future), he continued to turn out splendid and highly acceptable engravings which closely conditioned how his fellow countrymen saw Britain and Europe and how they visualised the settings of many of their favorite poems, as well as the great number of marvellous water colours which have still not a wide-enough currency, we are left to wonder at his multiplicity.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Black and white reproductions make very unsatisfactory records of most of Turner's paintings, particularly his more advanced ones. The cost of colour reproduction in this periodical would be prohibitive. It has been decided, therefore, not to include any illustrations in Professor Cunningham's article. Colour reproductions of almost all the paintings he refers to are widely available in art books. [J.T.P.]

