

**“TO SEE CLEARLY IS POETRY”*:
THE VISUAL NARRATIVES OF J.M.W. TURNER**

**“AÇIKÇA GÖREBİLMEK ŞİİR’DİR”: J. M.W.
TURNER’İN GÖRSEL ANLATILARI**

Painting and Poetry flowing from the same fount...
reflect and refract each other’s beauties with reciprocity
of splendidous allusions. J.M.W. Turner, 1810.

Yıldız Kılıç**

Özet

Joseph Mallord William Turner, (1775-1851) İngiliz Romantik hareketinin niteliğini görsel formda temsil etmiş ve 19. yüzyıl resim sanatına ışık ve rengin ‘eterik’ ifadesinde maneviyatı ve duygusallığı kazandırmıştır. Görseli sınırlayan klasik formüllerin kısır tekrarını reddederek, ‘yapısal yoksunluk’ tarzıyla fiziksel dünyayı soyutlaştırmış ve resme ‘proto-ekspresyonist’ bir görünüm ve ifade kazandırmıştır. Rasyonaliteyi simgeleyen kontur sınırlamasından kurtulan renk ve ışık, (“sınır ve hattan yoksun”) *sfumato* görünümüyle özgürlüğün çarpıcı ifadesidir; böylece Viktorya döneminin klişeleşmiş ‘müşvik doğa’ anlayışının aksine, insanlığa kayıtsız ve zalim tutumuyla ‘yıkıcı’ bir doğa anlayışını “şiirsel” anlatıyla temsil eder.

* John Ruskin, **Modern Painters Vol.III**, Kessinger Publishing Co., (1843) 2005, p. 250. (“Hundred of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry...”)

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Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) was essentially a landscape artist who came to represent the spirit of the English Romantic Movement in its visual form. He brought to the art an explosive, chimerical expression of light and colour; creating in a visual medium the ultimate reaction to the sterile repetition of Classical formulae and the facile emotions of eighteenth-century art and enlightenment. While it is his earlier, technically correct architectural and landscape engravings that endeared him to the public, it is his later 'proto-expressionistic' works dismissing traditional principles and recognisable 'structural' images that truly fix Turner as forefather: most immediately to the Pre-Raphaelite School, the mid-nineteenth-century 'brotherhood' of English painters rebellious to the artistic imperatives of the Royal Academy, who venerated Turner's earlier subversion of conservative principle in painting; technically to the Impressionists; and subsequently to the abstract painters. When, in his radically experimental late works, clichéd forms of rural tranquillity are abandoned for vaporised, formless and violently inharmonious visions of Nature at its most dramatically indifferent then is generated liberation of colour and light and the consequential dimension of a visual 'poetic' narrative.

Turner's optically evanescent paintings are to be rationalised as visual narratives that present a musing discourse upon a thematic concept. The specification of 'poetic' in reference to Turner's canvases denotes critical differentiation from the didactic social agenda inherent to Genre or Narrative painting, another nineteenth-century representational art form associated with anecdotal expression. Genre painting is a visual rationalisation of religious or civil dogma, a portrayal of attitudes and socially advocated modes of behaviour that functions by lending the arbitrary concept a paradigmatic material reality. Turner, on the contrary, strives to achieve an abstracted art form that has content and subject, which engenders sensual reactions and fosters the ability to draw conceptual meaning from material reality.

Turner's Romantic credentials and spiritual affinity to the Lake Poets¹ affiliate him to a philosophic tendency that associate the terms 'colour'

¹ An English school of poets at the beginning of the nineteenth-century who lived in the Lake District and were inspired by it. Members included William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southy, all of whom reached iconic status and came to represent the Romantic Movement.

and ‘linear form’ with a symbolic allusion to ‘inspirational imagination’ and ‘rationalistic directive’, respectively. Turner’s powerful assertion of an individualistic creative imagination in lieu of the didactic predominance of Enlightenment rationalism, make his canvases ‘visual narratives’ that are as powerfully central to the issues of the romantic rebellion as the impassioned rhetorical narratives of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Indeed, Turner, who “considered himself a poet as well as a painter”² and his greatest supporter in this venture, the critic John Ruskin³, were actively involved in forging new connections between word and image.⁴ Parallels between the ‘sister arts’ had existed prior to the nineteenth-century, conversely in support of poetry and not painting: *Ut picture poesis* is a concept that aims, through comparative association to uplift poetry to the higher status of painting. Originally conceptualised in Horace’s day, Renaissance art critics developed the theory “as is painting, so is poetry”. Another interdisciplinary practice and one in which the Romantics and Symbolists were particularly intent in the nineteenth century was *synthesis*: “...the splashing over of impressions from one sense modality to another, is a fact to which all languages testify. They work both ways – sight to sound and sound to sight. We speak of loud colours or bright sounds, and everyone knows what we mean...”⁵

The affinity of the age to divergent narrative forms, namely the textual and the visual, perhaps goes some way to explain Turner’s obsessive fascination with a mode of painting so radically removed from the traditional manifestation of landscape and one that so alienated and angered

² Jan Piggot, **Turner’s Vignettes**, Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., London, 1993. (“Turner had a keen interest in poetry, his use of lines from poets such as James Thomson and John Milton as epigraphs for paintings, starting with the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1798... Turner’s unpublished poem ‘**Fallacies of Hope**’ [was] the phantom source for many of his epigraphs from 1812 onwards.”)

³ John Ruskin initially began **Modern Painters** (1843) as a defence of Turner: recommending him to an openly sceptical and often directly offensive public; as well as to the Pre-Raphaelites, an equally reactionary generation of young English painters. In the second volume Ruskin expanded his study to a wider survey of European art.

⁴ Alexander K. Wettlaufer, **The Sublime Rivalry of Word and Image: Turner and Ruskin Revisited, Victorian Literature and Culture**, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.149.

⁵ E.H. Gombrich, **Art & Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation**, Phaidon Press Ltd., 2005, p.310-311.

his public. Contrary to claims that he had artistically ‘lost his way’ and was ambling in a wash of colour, his objective was to infuse painting with imaginative and emotional depth: not merely to regenerate prototypic ‘rationalised’ perspectives of nature, but to formulate a representation derived from a singularly subjective and intuitive response. Landscape painting, according to rigorous Royal Academy criteria was not considered fit subject matter for high art. Turner, ever the rebel, took it upon himself to elevate this genre to predominance, partly motivated no doubt by his lifelong obsession⁶ with French seventeenth-century landscape artist Claude Lorraine (1600-82) whom he strove to equal. This and a diversity of factors like the existing Romantic predisposition towards nature as an exemplary force; a growing sensitivity to the ever changing façade of the English countryside; the manifestation of a sentimental hankering for the past; and a streak of nationalistic pride: all motivated Turner to respond beyond the merely aesthetic.

Essentially the problematic was a dichotomy of representation: Turner found himself at odds with the “concrete, mimetic nature” of his earlier works and his growing desire to “communicate abstract ideas”. The synthesis he eventually arrived at resounds with the idea that ‘form and substance’ need to be re-addressed:

Turner’s deconstruction of the verbal image into its constituent visual parts illustrates his belief that the “most elegant most interesting... allusions in *poetry often fail in representation*”...Turner ultimately believed “we cannot make good painters without some aid from poesy”. As poetry could evoke both the abstract and the concrete through the associative powers of the imagination, Turner sought a way for *painting to surpass its physical limitations* and depict ideas as well as objects, beating poetry at its own game.⁷

While the textual narrative of poetry lacked spatial dimensions, the visual narrative innate to painting lacked temporal dimensions: poetry, he felt, needed form to substantiate the conceptual; while landscape painting craved emotional profundity. The dialectic between painting and poetry, between the visual and the textual, was a routine practice for Turner who,

⁶ E. H. Gombrich, **The Story of Art**, Phaidon Press Ltd, London, (1950) 1984, p.389.

⁷ Wettlaufer, **The Sublime Rivalry of Word and Image**, op.cit, 154-155, (The text quotes Gage 200, 205, respectively). My italics

when sketching out of doors prior to painting in the studio always “wrote colours down in words”⁸: whereas applied colour is concrete and corporeal; words presumably are relative, suggestive and vacillating. Hence, poetry and painting could be mutable: one extending into the other. If, as in poetry, material representation could inspire vicarious emotions and spiritual affinity; then painting, through formless, spectral images could tangibly represent the multi-dimensional concept. The release from the tangible rigidity of fixed forms may have been inordinately liberating for the artist, but for his uninitiated audience it proved to be a major hurdle. The practice of a non-representational style proved to be so problematic for public and critics alike, that the invariably latter bewailed the “lack of intelligibility” and objected vehemently to “the artist’s increasing tendency to paint the unpaintable in such a fashion as to mystify the beholder accustomed to the more pedestrian efforts of conservative artists”.⁹

Turner chose to communicate on a level that frankly confounded conventional Victorian tastes: “more often than not his allusions to ideas do not give themselves up at first glance, requiring instead a commitment from the spectator to engage with the work with full attention. This is serious art, requiring serious consideration.”¹⁰ To an audience versed in the ‘story-telling’ propensity of Genre (or Narrative) Painting (a demonstratively instructive style that administers social didactics by means of familiar domestic incident), and accustomed to tamed images of landscape, as sentimental or prettified description of *vista*, these allusions to ideas in the abstract were an abomination. Turner’s adamant transfiguration of landscape into abstraction that subsequently became an emotive ‘concept’ of landscape, was for many too vehement a demonstration of aesthetic detachment so that appalled his viewers disparagingly dismissed them as being ‘about nothing much’; their antagonism so openly defamatory that his paintings would be degraded as “Mr Turner’s little jokes”. Yet undoubtedly they attracted a dynamic response of sorts. From the earliest part of his career Turner was aware of the “need to produce a creative

⁸ Cecilia Powell, **Turner in the South: Rome, Naples and Florence**, Yale University Press, 1987, p.50.

⁹ Simon Schama, *The Patriot: Turner and the Drama of History*, *New Yorker*, 0028792X, 09/24/2007, Vol.83, Issue 28, p.625.

¹⁰ Sam Smiles, **British Artists: J.M.W. Turner**, Tate Publishing, London (2000), 2004, p.30.

response to the motif rather than merely recording it”¹¹, therefore contrary to contemporary opinion that he failed, by conscious slovenliness or mental degeneration, to “report upon the facts of nature as they appeared to ordinary eyes,”¹² he deliberately transfigured onto canvas an *imaginative response* to what the eye actually saw rather than what it rationalised as existing. When Kenneth Clark asserts that “artists have found it necessary to formulise what they cannot accurately describe,”¹³ he delineates between ‘rationalistic’ and ‘expressionistic’ representation: the former is a mentally gauged perspective, which in order to represent the object in all its *known* qualities proceeds to objectivise it by formulating an appearance irrespective of perceptual distortion; the latter, a physiologically determined *ocular* perspective. It is also significant that given the subjective nature of this latter perspective that emphasises intuitive and individualistic reckoning, indeed insists on an idiosyncratically ‘personal’ frame of response that is as emancipating as it is flagrantly subversive and therefore disturbing in the extreme to the Victorian corporate mindset. Turner’s visual rendition is a characteristically subjective transcription of the moment tempered by a poetic musing of the subject as such it is more expressionistic, than impressionistic: the artistic motive is to capture the essence rather than its actuality. When, for example, a Naval Officer queried over the lack of portholes in ‘**Peace Burial at Sea**’ (1842), a portrayal of Sir David Wilkie’s maritime funeral, he received the answer:

“No, of course not. If you climb Mount Edgecumbe and look at the vessels against the light, you’ll see that you cannot perceive the portholes”...“very well said the officer, but you know that the portholes are there?”...“Yes” said Turner, “Of course I knew that, but my job is to draw what I see, not what I know”.¹⁴

Be it that of a confused and agitated public, confounded by a canvas obdurately demanding to be understood, or that of the artist himself, filtering the world through his subjective viewpoint with impressionistic truth or expressionistic self-authority - individualistic response seems to be of

¹¹ *ibid.* p.18

¹² Lester Dolk, *The Reception of Modern Painters*, *Modern Language Notes*, Vol.57, No.8 (Dec.1942), John Hopkins University Press, P.642.

¹³ Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York 1960. p. 47

¹⁴ <http://www.ellensplace.net/turner4.html> 02.02.2014

fundamental importance. Understanding derived through an intuitive and imaginative response, as opposed to blind acceptance of prescribed formulae, corresponds to Turner's agenda to extend physical dimensions and encapsulate within painting a heightened continuum of response, which feeds as much from the visual image as it does from the corresponding meaning the individual viewer attaches to it. Painting, recognised largely as a public experience, with Turner's abstraction, became, like poetry, a private experience that resounded within individual intuition, experience and testimony.

The 1844 oil on canvas entitled (F.1) '**Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway**', for example, is in purely visual terms an abstraction of colour and light that generates the perception of a train moving at great speed through the English countryside: the bridge stretching beyond the right foreground, the arches of the viaduct to the far left and the comparatively insignificant solitary boat and oarsman far below are the only representative marks on a canvas otherwise a blur of light and frenzied brush stroke. A painting in which subjective 'optical' perception of temporality is being depicted through the absence of form, to the pragmatic and literal minded Victorian observer is a painting about nothing. Speed is related as an activity, but its representation as a central conceptual issue is not a familiar theme and one made all the more alien by an utterly extraordinary rendering. The portrayal, in exceeding traditional perimeters does not objectify the train, since this would mean depersonalising it by asserting its exteriority, which appears contrary to Turner's final aim. Rather, it is an imposition of Turner's own 'optic' perception: his eyes are fixed on the speeding train, hence everything else is a blur; this representation is presumptive because the train now becomes a derivative of the onlooker/artist's point of view, it is being defined subjectively; in turn it asks for a correspondingly familiar recognition from the viewer. Extending beyond that which the eye registers is the complexity of what the mind duly perceives: Turner has created an epic narrative: through the ambiguity of subjective perception he taps into the dominant social discourse and invokes through the blurry confusion a metaphor of disorientation and perplexed cognizance. He is expressing the fears of a public unversed in the effects of speed (they feared suffocation would occur at acceleration) and enlarging upon the argument by communicating the psychological trauma of rampant industrial development. He is also participator in the fascination of the 1840's for railways and the pleasure of hurtling along at tremendous

speed: the billowing clouds of colour insinuate the fearful buzz of a fair-ground ride heightened by the early open-top variety of carriages. Since as the viewer, we seem to be precariously and disconcertingly suspended just above the viaduct, our perspective on the entire scene suggests there is no solid ground beneath our feet, so that the sensation is at once violently carefree and frighteningly careless: a tangibly physical metaphor for the ongoing industrial whirl. The steam locomotive is a miracle of technology and as such a pertinent symbol for the ingenious tenacity and conversely the dangers inherent to Victorian progress. Additionally, reference to ‘locomotive’ is an ingenious and rather poetic play on words: it’s scientific usage denoting movement or progress that is, ironically, organic indeed “muscular”.¹⁵ Yet scientific break-through is ominously unstoppable, quite literally the train, albeit on clearly defined tracks, is surging wildly towards us, what untold powers have been unleashed by such development? Turner seems to pose the question, how will it all work out? Rapid industrial transformation is communicated through strong diagonals and an imposing contrast of light and dark. A central gyrating blur suggesting nature in metaphorical chaos peripheral to development and progress: a hare on the tracks, an animal renowned for speed, flies in abject terror to escape the oncoming train. In contrast the rational solidity of contour is used only to enforce that which is man-made; the viaduct, the boat, the train and the tracks. Perhaps the subliminal presence of the Divine is being usurped by the new God Science and its rationalist mentors? When Turner transfigures ‘a train’ into an implication of rampant velocity (“Turner had managed to paint speed itself”¹⁶), it systematically becomes an interrogative sublimation of *social change*. As Sam Smiles isolates, “Turner offered a form of cognition which was mediated through a sensuous form.”¹⁷ The scene is near bereft of natural and cultural landmarks, indeed the train itself is made to appear engulfed by the composition’s all pervasive *raison d’être* of physical *speed* and metaphorical *progress*.

¹⁵ “Locomotive: The movement of an organism from one place to another, often by the action of appendages such as flagella, limbs, or wings. In some animals, such as fish, locomotion results from a wavelike series of muscle contractions.” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/locomotion> 12.02.2014)

¹⁶ Martin Butlin & Evelyn Joll, **The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner**, New Haven & London, rev. edn. 1984, p.257. (*The Morning Chronicle*, 8 May 1844; *Frazer’s Magazine*, June 1844)

¹⁷ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.12

Visual abstraction distanced Turner from mainstream popularity, angrily cited as difficult and obtuse, he was readily condemned as self-indulgent: “Turner’s *preference for poetic atmospheric* over narrative clarity,”¹⁸ meant he was rigidly censured as marginal, yet Turner was by no means detached from contemporary issues, he was “...[an] authentic first - the paint[er] of the people... Hogarth’s heir, with an unerring instinct for the crowd as a social animal... public-minded, [the] historically fretful Turner [who] thought that Britain should confront ugly truths.”¹⁹ Abstraction in his paintings did not initiate hermetical inversion rather it allowed free expression of the inner self to interact with material reality, in turn to impart, a conscious and palpable response: his was never the ivory tower.

J. M. W. Turner was born into the utilitarian family circumstance of a Covent Garden tradesman. There is little documentation of his childhood, except for the information to be derived from John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843). It is Ruskin who informs us of the formative influence on Turner of being sent away, at the age of 8 to stay with his maternal uncle in Brentford on the banks of the River Thames; a time and location when he first expressed an interest in painting and produced numerous drawings, which his father subsequently exhibited in his shop window, with entrepreneurial gusto and not a little parental pride. Ruskin delights in imagining the boy Turner running through the colourful array of Covent Garden Market, the hub of bohemian and artisan London, to the Thames, where Ruskin envisions him:

...cading a lift in a boat to the mysterious forest below London Bridge, *the forest of masts feeding the imagination better than wood or pine or grove of myrtle*; these the only beautiful things he can see in all the world, except the sky...²⁰

Turner romanticised the mercantilist domain of London. Ruskin acknowledges that his was not the detached, extra-social viewpoint of the doleful romantic: with confrontational frankness Turner deliberately set out to ‘voice’ much rather than merely ‘represent’. Such were the experiences and associations of his formative years: the colours of the market

¹⁸ Schama, *The Patriot: Turner and the Drama of History*, op.cit., p.1. My italics

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Kenneth Clark, *The Romantic Rebellion: Romantic Versus Classical Art*, John Murray, Sotheby Parke Bernet, London, 1973, p.223. My italics

place, the intricate lines of rigging, the movement of water and the beauty of the light dancing upon it. Although all this is essentially nothing more than intuitive supposition on Ruskin's part, examination of Turner's work is tantamount to an instinctive fascination with the sea and an exquisite consciousness of colour and natural light as a means of discourse. Perhaps Ruskin was correct in his assumption that these unconscious memories of childhood were to persist and carry over into even the very early works.

The watercolour, (F.2) **'Transept of Tintern Abbey'** (1795) for example, is a delicate and sentimental vision of the fashionable 'ruined Gothic' architecture of the day a la mode the archetypal romantic poet William Wordsworth. Certain characteristics of Turner's future style are here in their infancy: the exaggeration of scale by which the human figures are overwhelmed and reduced to comparative insignificance; the seeming majestic grandeur of the man-made edifice seen to be slowly overcome by the irrepressible forces of nature, as tendrils of ivy curl tenaciously around decaying walls and branches invasively shoot out of seemingly impenetrable walls; the arrangement of mysterious exaltations of light giving a floating appearance to the ruined vault; and finally the love of a vista which carries our gaze into the depths of the picture. The sense of degeneration in Wordsworth's poem *Tintern Abbey*²¹ (1798) speaks of human disenchantment and the realisation that life however dire, nature exists as a continuum. The poem is a celebration of that which is greater than oneself. The dignity and industry of man, his "orchard-tufts... hedge-rows [and] pastoral farms"²² is acknowledged yet reckoned to always fall prey to the benign and peaceful "landscape with the quiet of the sky"²³ that eventually encroaches upon ("Green to the very door"²⁴) and overpowers the work of man. As the handiwork of man is doomed to crumble so the organic inevitably conquers all. The remedial quality of nature reverberates in every line; "tranquil restoration"²⁵ is there for the seeing and man's otherwise facile existence is rendered meaningful with "...unremembered

²¹ William Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798*, **Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads, 1798**, H. Littledale (Ed.), Oxford University Press, 1911.

²² *ibid.* ln.11, 16, 17 p.201,202

²³ *Ibid.*, ln.8

²⁴ *ibid.*, ln.18

²⁵ *ibid.*, ln.31

acts / Of kindness and of love.”²⁶ As man’s presence fades and shrinks to occupy a barely discernable “hermit’s cave, where by his fire / The hermit sits alone,”²⁷ so nature flows on with indifferent and persistent vitality: “These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / with a sweet inland murmur.”²⁸ The poem’s most powerful testament is to the naturally proximal yet essentially disparaging relationship man and nature. In Turner’s engraving too man’s monumental celebration of the Christian church, towers above the lone countryman, who stands comparatively puny besides its impressive columns. Equally, unappeasable nature impeaches the already ruined edifice: delicate fronds of trees, shrubs and climbers, eat away at the lofty structure with dedicated purpose. So that by such seemingly frail means a formidable structure of age old stone and mortar is seized upon, with every column and arch ‘shadowed’ by nature that “sticketh closer than a brother”²⁹: Turner’s conceptualisation of nature seems less benign than that of Wordsworth, he seems fascinated by the contradictory fragile power of nature. The figure of the countryman is dwarfed, as in the poem, not only by nature but equally by the disillusioned and decaying monument of man’s aspirations to immortality. Man achieves a spiritual reclamation through association with nature, although nature exists in heedless detachment perfectly indifferent to man. Nature seeps into human consciousness through the senses and resonates as heightened sensibility of the self and a spiritual understanding of the greater and lesser powers of man. The poem begins with the wandering narrator, first describing then musing on his surroundings he arrives at a state of self-awareness through his perception of nature and re-evaluates his role and that of humanity within the greater picture. Just so Turner guides and manipulates the viewers gaze and brings about just such a narrative development. The eye homes in upon the minute figure of the man standing within the derelict edifice of **Tintern Abbey**, framed by a detailed background that features a partially hidden doorway to the right, stone work finely delineated immediately behind, and a canopy of fronds with leaves specified in minutia that leads the eye to the first level of windows from which it overhangs. The eye

²⁶ *ibid*, ln.35,36

²⁷ *ibid*, ln.22,23

²⁸ *ibid*, ln.3,4

²⁹ “A man that hath friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” **King James Bible**, Proverbs 18:24. This biblical reference illustrates the contradictory relationship between nature and man.

wishing to register all this detail is made to pause and contemplate just that bit longer. Insistently the countryman's tools strategically located in the central foreground – a basket and hoe, lengthen this duration a little longer still. But the columns rising with spectacular assurance cannot be overlooked for long and the gaze soon follows the upward rise of the illuminated, central vertical through consecutive levels when the sky to building ratio grows with each elevation, until looking to where the roof should be a blank homogenous radiance captures the eye. From contemplation of man, slight and inconsequential to Tintern Abbey, a metonymic device signifying the grandiose yet frail achievement of mankind, to delicate yet tenacious nature and finally to the sublime as represented by the light. The poem signifies the sublime through the spiritual healing process incited by man entering the realm of nature (an emotional association often alluded to in the Romantic genre), finally combines with the vision of the Abbey itself, impling restoration of the narrator's belief in God and the divine. Turner, however, is limited by an eighteenth-century landscape tradition that through the portrayal of nature implicates aesthetic and Arcadian ideals, rather than spirituality; the picturesque as opposed to higher conceptual meaning. Hence, in order to imbue the portrayal with similar conceptual depth, Turner creates a running narrative flow of metonymic representation from man to ruined edifice to subliminal radiance. Light in Wordsworth's poetry symbolizes divine truth and knowledge beyond the scope of human reason; hence when the poem's narrator seeks to reinvest the meaning lost from his life, the resonance of daylight becomes in part the experiences of epiphany:

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
 ...and the living air,
 And the blue sky..."³⁰

Epiphany is a wholly human perception and finds expression only in the human mien. Since no such human continuum exists in the painting, Turner ascribes this awakening of the imaginative mind through spatial

³⁰ **Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads**, op. cit., p.206, ln.94-100

elements like perspective and binary opposition of forms (organic/nature and artificial/man-made): laying the symbolic mile-stones that progressively encourage the mind of each observer to reach epiphany: “The walls of an abandoned abbey were not simply inanimate blocks of stone; they were altered by the effects of time, the facts of history, and the imagination of the observer.”³¹ When Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1850) recalls a childhood experience in the ruins of Furness Abbey he stipulates a similar narrative progression:

... the antique walls
Of that large abbey where within the Vale
Of Nightshade, to St. Mary’s honour built,
Stands yet a mouldering pile with fractured arch,
Belfry, and images, and living trees;
A holy scene!³²

“The union here of “mouldering” man-made forms with “living trees” blends the human and the natural world in a way that creates a “holy scene!”³³

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817)³⁴ discusses the occasion of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and the objects originally proposed. He refers to his collaboration with William Wordsworth and how their “conversation turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry”: he elucidates the first as “the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the *truth of nature*”, ascribing adherence to a familiar, representative portrayal; and secondly as “the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination”,³⁵ suggesting a portrayal that fosters the free expression of the recipient’s imagination. When analysing Turner’s compositional motivation, hav-

³¹ Deborah Kennedy, ‘Wordsworth, Turner, and the Power of Tintern Abbey’, **Wordsworth Circle**, Vol. 33, March 22, 2002 (www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-92803037.html 26.12.2013)

³² William Wordsworth, **The Prelude or Growth of a Poet’s Mind**, Edward Moxon, London, 1850, Book 2: ln.102-7, p.37.

³³ Kennedy, *Wordsworth, Turner, and the Power of Tintern Abbey*, **Wordsworth Circle**, op. cit.

³⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria**, (1817), (Vol. II, Chap. xiv), <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/6081> 26.01.204

³⁵ *ibid*, Volume I, Chap. iv. My italics

ing previously seen his artistic proximity to Wordsworth, this definition by Coleridge seems more than incidental to a painting like (F.3) ‘**Snow Storm - Steamboat off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water and Going by the Lead**’ (1842) where a vessel is caught in the centre of an elemental vortex and battles with nature to stay abreast: meanwhile we the viewers are pulled into the scene by the spiralling mass of water, churning and extending to the extreme periphery of the painting and seemingly without terminus, to beyond. As Kenneth Clark expounds, in Turner’s ‘**Snow Storm**’ nothing comes to rest “Not only is the subject exceptional, but *the whole rhythmic organisation* is outside the accepted modulus of European Landscape Painting. We have been brought up to expect inside a frame a certain degree of balance and stability... *To look [at the painting] for long is an uncomfortable, even exhausting experience.*”³⁶

A simplified definition of poetry would perhaps be the art of rhythmical composition that excites the imagination and invites sympathetic attachment: how telling then is Clark’s poignant description of this painting, his wholly impassioned response, his reference to and use of a poetic diction in order to elucidate it: so closely intertwined seem the poet and painter. Ruskin’s assertion of *Theoria* as a symbol of man’s futility against the power of nature seems to find sympathy with Turner who placed a similar onus on Nature as an entity whose vigour lay beyond the minimal powers of man. In response to criticism, probably due to the composition’s disregard of linear wave-action and traditional delineation of wave, ship and horizon, Turner makes the comment “I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like... But no one had any business to like the picture.”³⁷ Actively dismissing a conventional approach, Turner seeks comprehension beyond the figurative; his precept appears to be the viewer’s conceptual awakening - immediate and raw; rather than a detached acknowledgement along purely aesthetic principles. He courts an immediate emotive response, as opposed to a rationalised interpretation of traditional aesthetic signs. His paintings are a visual communication of events from a personal point of view: arrived at *impressionistically* through his eyes and *expressionistically* through his mindset. Significantly, brushstroke, the artist’s physical presence, is tangible, in-

³⁶ Clark, **Looking at Pictures**, p.143. My italics

³⁷ From an anecdote reported to John Ruskin by his friend the Rev. W. Kingsley, of Sidney College, Cambridge. <http://www.art-bin/art/oruskin4.html> 11.12.2013

deed the act of painting is expressive, human, and even muscular³⁸: Turner “...drives the paint about till he has expressed the idea in his mind”³⁹ and does so with his hands, his nails uncut so that he may scratch form in the canvas.⁴⁰ The visual composition manifestly incorporates not only the perceived image subjectively transmuted onto canvas as liberated colour, but also in the manner of transference the physical reality of the artist is made a constant and delible presence. What emerges is an individualistic and untutored ‘experience’ as opposed to a one-to-one representation of the scene; initial shock of the new then leads to a parallel discursive comprehension of feelings and thoughts in the viewer, churned up by the experience of the canvas, so that the first intuitive response gives way to a secondary slow deliberate reasoning.⁴¹ When describing the painting in the 1842 Academy Catalogue with the extended title ‘**Snow Storm - Steamboat off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water and Going by the Lead. The *Author*⁴² was in this Storm the Night the *Ariel* Left Harwich**’, Turner makes the deliberate switch from *painter* to *author* surely to differentiate between *compiler* and *composer*. Unlike so many of his contemporaries who took objects directly from nature and placed them to produce a compilation merely, staunchly faithful to nature’s original, Turner sought to create something new from his materials, hence he sought to ‘compose’ as one would a literary work – to create intellectual and emotive depth greater than the sum total of its parts. He introduces in

³⁸ Maggie Gee, *The Sun is God* (A review of The Oxford Companion to J.M.W. Turner) **New Statesman**, 19 February 2001, p.52 (He would use brushes- both ends; pallet knives and fingers to drag the paint and scratch highlights with one “eagle-claw of a thumb nail.”)

³⁹ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.18. (Diary entry for 16 Nov. 1799 in The Diary of Joseph Farington, New Haven and London, vol.4. p.130.)

⁴⁰ Simon Schama, **Power of Art**, BBC Books, London, 2006, p.67.

⁴¹ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.17. (This process of progressive comprehension is not dissimilar to the way Turner worked in watercolours. One reason why watercolours were preferred to oils was that they could be taken out-of-doors and used to sketch quickly climactic or light changes in nature. Yet for Turner, always aware that he must produce a creative response rather than a recording, he rarely sketched in colour. All his watercolours would be produced in the studio and not directly from the scene; he would make extensive pencil sketched and ‘written colour’ notes, as John Ruskin observed: “before the deliberate processes necessary to secure the true colours could be got through, the effect would have changed twenty times over. He therefore almost always wrote the colours down in words, and laid in the effect at home.”)

⁴² My italics.

‘**Snow Storm - Steamboat**’ a subversive element of near physiological realism (insinuating impressionistic trait of that which one sees, rather than that which one thinks one sees), and compounds a complexity of sensual, transcendental as well as cerebral aspects into his painting.⁴³ Beyond the fallacy propagated by academic theories, he unites feeling with the sensual reality of the individual experience.

Returning to Coleridge’s definition, Turner appears to combine the two cardinal points (the engagement of Nature to generate familiarity, and the inducement of the imagination to incite novelty) by starting from a familiar basis and injecting a further dimension of the supernatural. Unlike, for example, another poet/painter, William Blake, who refers to the Divine by a visual representation of subliminal symbolism; angels, demons and the like. The steamboat ‘Ariel’ may or may not have existed, yet Turner by naming the vessel clearly seeks to give solidity and realistic foundation and thus to foster familiar allusion. Ofcourse, Coleridge states “truth of nature”, but surely to a mercantilist minded, sea faring island race like the British, a steamboat battling with nature is ‘material and organic’ reality, enough to “excite the sympathy of the reader”. The burst of white light behind the mast comes from a flare sent up to signal the ship’s difficulties, yet within the visual pragmatics it becomes a fiery allegorical portent of disaster. Akin to the bestial ferocity of nature, light is an evocation of greater supernatural powers at work, an “awakening [of] the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom.”⁴⁴ The awakening is the invigoration of the viewer’s imagination to the conceptual dimensions of the painting. If the known values of landscape painting were utilised to excite sympathetic association, then light became the medium that worked on the imagination. When Coleridge elaborates upon the second clause of his “two cardinal points of poetry” and states: “The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known familiar landscape, appears to represent the practicability of combing both. These are the poetry of nature...”⁴⁵ he seems almost be describing a Turner canvas.

⁴³ Turner reportedly tells the Rev. Mr Kingsley, who has said that his mother liked the picture, in no uncertain terms that, “No one has any business to like it”.

⁴⁴ S. T. Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria**, op. cit.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

Eighteenth-century enthusiasts had developed a continuous and expansive taste for what came to be called the ‘discovery of Britain’: a surging bid to portray and record the changing visage of rural Britain under the sweep of the Agricultural Revolution. Landscape was both financially rewarding and popularly acclaimed, yet by the profoundly hierarchal values of The Royal School of Art (est. 1768) it was considered least important in a long prescription of worthy subjects. The same diminution of watercolour stated that oils were the superior medium. In spite of these dictates Turner, ever the marginal, deferred from complying, not only had his reputation had been made as a watercolourist there was much to recommend the medium: watercolour was quick and permitted both spontaneity and mobility; its relative inexpensive render paintings a viable commodity for a wider public; and as the new technologies replaced organically derived extract hues with synthetically produced pigments, the new colour pallet became multi-variant and excessively vibrant. In 1796 his first oil on canvas, ‘**Fisherman at Sea**’ was shown at the Royal Academy: a conservatively romantic vision of moonlight and firelight, where a framing darkness surrounds the central image, creating a sense of foreboding that is secondarily emphasised by the yellowing moon. Although Turner was borrowing certain mannerisms from other artists⁴⁶ and his handling of them was less than mature, he was now disassociating with the sentimental and creating instead a sense of ominous danger underlying the ‘violence’ of Nature with man at its mercy. This perspective quickly earned him the universal charge of being ‘unlike nature’ and caused Ruskin to rally to his defensive with his seminal work, *Modern Painters* (1843).

The late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century sensibility, focusing on Nature as a benevolent extension of the Christian God, envisaged a natural realm abounding in *His* bounteous *Love*, hence Turner’s detached and merciless, if not malevolent portrayal was unsettling, even sacrilegious. As well as the impressionistic application of light as an optical phenomenon; equally important was the dimension of the spiritual through implication of the sublime: for Turner light signified God. In his

⁴⁶ Turner was directly motivated by numerous contemporaries: With Robert Cozens (1752-1792) he shared a sense of the vastness of Nature; in ‘**The Fisherman at Sea**’ (1796) (his first oil on canvas hung at the Royal Academy) are features directly attributable to two artists: a sense of foreboding, generated by the yellowing moon in deference to John Wright and a battle-torn seascape as favoured by P.J. Lotterbourg.

later paintings light is no longer a necessity to generate tonal values, but exists in prolific excess as light on water, wild fires, evocative moonlight and radiant skies, principally to signify the radiation of the spirit of God. The maxim, “The Sun is God,”⁴⁷ stated on his deathbed is a respectful acknowledgement of the parallel predominance of the Divine in all creation and the parallel element of light on canvas.

There followed an extensive period when Turner’s style seemed to shift periodically between the establishmentarian and the intuitive, in anticipation of his later style. This is perceptively obvious in (F.4) **‘Dutch Boats in a Gale (Bridge-Water Sea Piece)’** (1801) where Turner strikes up a challenge to the Flemish and Dutch seascape painters: the picture is characterised by its horizontal background which steadies the more outlandish undulation of the sea; it is a work in deference to (F.5) Willem van de Velde the Young’s, **‘Ships on a Stormy Sea’** (1672). The paintings kinship to de Velde’s is evident, only more so - more impassioned, more ominous: “Turner’s picture is bigger in scale, more frightening and more charged with emotion because his seas are rougher, the roll of his waves more pronounced, and his storm clouds blacker.”⁴⁸ It was not until 1805 that Turner gave free-reign to all his instinctive feelings of perilous nature in (F.6) **‘The Shipwreck’**: this time the mountainous waves, the pessimism and absolute chaos of the moment are realised without restraint. The shifting tones of the sea and light are fervently animated, while the figures are ludicrously fragile by comparison: a central white enclave of ghostly pale foam and waves that ‘cradle’ the doomed sailors, are encircled by a inky black sea, void of light, the impenetrableness of which decries a cold indifference and unsympathetic detachment; the squares of sail and timbers of wildly tossed ships appear strangely dislocated and paltry – man and his crafted world are ridiculous playthings in the grasp of Nature.

Turner’s tempestuous style was clearly where his strength lay, while the Classical, as anti-thesis of Romantic passion, was singularly constrictive to his powers. Rather than as a direct aesthetic influence then, the clas-

⁴⁷ Maggie Gee, *The Sun is God* (A review of *The Oxford Companion to J.M.W. Turner*), op. cit.

⁴⁸ Richard Dorment, *Turner and the Masters at Tate Britain: Review, The Telegraph*, London, 23 Sept. 2009 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/6222186/Turner-and-the-Masters-at-Tate-Britain-review.html> 16.01.2014

sical tenet lent his visual statement a paradigmatic quality: clarifying the ideological motivation behind the painting into a definitive often historically qualified statement. Turner's conceptualisation of Romanticism seems much more representative than that of the corresponding poets; hardly surprising given that his was a visual proposition of Romantic doctrine comparatively more immediate in its impact and necessitating negligible prior indoctrination, if any. Turner was perhaps more socially compelled and pragmatic. The social responsibility of the Lake Poets is most certainly not contested, yet it can be argued that Coleridge's testimony to the experimental nature of *Lyrical Ballads* is avouchment to the fact that their motive was quintessentially aesthetic, as opposed to socially utilitarian. Turner chose to consider and more often than not to directly dispute contemporary events and opinions: **Rain, Steam and Speed**, is one example already referred. While in that particular study he questions the general mentality and accompanying problematic of a conceptual social issue: developing technology, social change, and new ideas superseding old beliefs and so on. With all but the locomotive in blur it is as if the speculative nature of the artist's conceit is being avouched for by the use of a 'veiling' sfumato. However, in those works where specific social issues are being referred to, even contested, then the delineation and illustrative lucidity lent by classical principles dominate over hazy abstraction and chimerical illusiveness.

In 1797 Turner painted his most ambitious work to date, '**Buttermere Lake**', the excellence of which aided his election in 1799 to associate of the Royal Academy. The work displayed those qualities he had come to admire in John Robert Cozens (son of the watercolourist, Alexander Cozens): the vastness of Nature, the darkened threatening tones of a grey/blue sky, perhaps going a little way to justifying the title 'master of naturalism,'⁴⁹ a quality in which Turner was considered exemplary by Ruskin and who subsequently urged young contemporaries to "go to nature in all singleness of heart...rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth."⁴⁹ Compared with the later archetypal canvases there is still a definite restraint on the use of colour and even though this and other early works look rather dark,⁵⁰ connoisseur Sir George Beaumont accustomed

⁴⁹ Christopher Wood, **The Pre-Raphaelites**, Phoenix Illustrated, London (1981) 1997, p.10.

⁵⁰ The dark tonalities reflect the influence of Edmund Burke, who associated sombre colours with the Sublime.

to the even darker tones of the old masters, complained of Turner's work being too light; saying in 1813 that "much harm had been done by his endeavouring to make his paintings in oils appear like watercolours".⁵¹ It was around 1810 that Turner began the revolutionary practice of painting on a pure white background, a practice we now so readily and unthinkingly associate with modern art. Since contemporaries like John Constable (1776-1837) were using a traditional chestnut or honey-hued background, these paintings were thought decidedly strange, one entitle (F.7) **Dort or Dordrecht: The Dort Packet-Boat from Rotterdam Becalmed** (1818) was thought so excessively 'bright' that the complaint was voiced: "it almost puts your eyes out."⁵² This entire episode puts one in mind again of Coleridge's exposition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, when he states:

Mr Wordsworth ... was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by *awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand...*⁵³

The experimental objective of *Lyrical Ballads* finds a parallel in Turner's growingly abstract style: the emphasis placed on *de-familiarisation* of the viewer, to the point of confusion and derision; responsiveness beyond sensory stimuli; and eventual cognitive apprehension that is a synthesis of sensation and material fact. The diminishment of representative form corresponds to a parallel emphasis upon the metaphysical: supernal light-effects transposed onto canvas are the incorporeal substantiated in paint and delineated as the divine or spiritual. Hence, landscape painting is sublimated to a dimension beyond the representative and picturesque: taking the familiar as a basic structure that invites conventional recognition, all

⁵¹ Clark, **The Romantic Rebellion**, op.cit., p.248.

⁵² "Dort is as much a personal artistic statement as an homage to an Old Master, however; its contrast of cool and warm colors and bright chromatic scale (a contemporary viewer told the diarist Joseph Farington that "it almost puts your eyes out" [Farington, "Diary", vol. 15, p. 5191]) mark the emergence of Turner the colorist and anticipate the brilliance of his work of the 1820s." Curator Gillian Forrester, 2007-01. <http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1667701> 23.03.2014

⁵³ S. T. Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria**, op. cit. My italics

other qualities pertaining to the painting subsequently work to systematically generate de-familiarisation. In spite of the seeming totality of abstraction within Turner's landscapes, they clearly are not 'meaningless', on the contrary they are replete with non-figurative meaning. Subliminal symbolism is a coherent narrative presence, not as didactic proposition, but as a vehicle to precipitate the said "awakening of the mind" through inspirational, visionary experience.

In later years, Turner's mature works displayed antipodal styles: the instinctive and the systematic. He sought to prove himself a competent painter of Classical subjects, and "he strove to imitate, rival and surpass"⁵⁴ the Old Masters. One can only suppose that as a superlative draughtsman yet one so audibly reviled for abstraction, that he sought to demonstrate himself not merely capable but consummate. In Paris, his careful studies of pre-eminent works brought about an experience of design from the likes of Raphael, Correggio and Poussin. In 1806 he began the famous '**Liber Studiorum**' – a series of landscape compositions engraved under his own supervision, made in emulation of Claude Lorraine's '**Liber Veritatis**' (1635-1682). It would not be excessive to say that Turner held Lorraine in near obsessive admiration: going as far as to make this a condition of his legacy to the Tate, that at least one of his pictures be hung alongside one by Claude Lorraine. Yet the parallels Turner sought to create between himself and Lorraine seem unfounded: Claude Lorraine's work was made beautiful by an intrinsic sense of serenity and classical order, Turner's style, however, belied a dramatic opulence of sensations - the two by definition incompatible. This diametric opposition of genres further asserts the passionate extent of Turner's style: an impetuous sentience in dire discord with the cerebral predisposition of classicism. The *Turner and Italy at the National Gallery Complex, Edinburgh* exhibition, in which the works of Turner and Lorraine are presented in juxtaposition, attracted the comment that "Turner slowly turned up the heat on Claude's serene pastorals, breathing warm colour into his cool rural scenes... Dazzling suns descend towards distant horizons, filling the atmosphere with glittering light. Forms deliquesce into a glorious shimmer."⁵⁵ Albeit "Turner, gaz[es]

⁵⁴ Art Knowledge News

<http://www.artknowledgenews.com/2009-09-23-22-00-35-tate-britain-presents-a-selection-of-paintings-by-jmw-turner-and-old-masters.html> 17.02.2014

⁵⁵ Rachel Campbell Johnston, *Turner and Italy at the National Gallery Complex Exhi-*

into the polished surfaces of peaceful Claudean visions”⁵⁶ yet his deferent response is, if not antithetical, indubitably energised by counter motive. Extending beyond an immaculate fictionality of *beauty* and specifying a sense of spirituality beyond the picturesque: “Turner sought to capture the personality of the landscape he painted: to explore its past and its present, its atmospheres and its moods. He wanted to convey the essence of an experience.”⁵⁷ Then why were Classical principles resorted to by an artist so clearly and innately Romantic? Simply because through it Turner felt able, at this early junction of his career, to promote painting or the visual medium as a profoundly conceptual phenomenon as opposed to merely an optical occurrence.

It was after 1805 that he adopted a more didactic tendency⁵⁸, a shift not unconnected with his experience of Europe for the first time and discovery of the Old Masters. It all came to ahead in 1807 when Turner was appointed Professor of Perspective by The Royal Academy and was thus launched into the painting mainstream. Yet as if to testify to the ideological incongruity within the man, he was also paradoxically “concerned to show that schematic, rule-bound precepts inevitably over-simplified art, arguing instead for guidance based in practical experience... This suspicion of doctrinaire theory echoes his dissatisfaction with [the] mechanical...”⁵⁹ He continued to be concerned with the nature of perception, advocating sensibility as inspirational guide to comprehension and how it could be cultivated as a principle within the decipherment of a painting. As stated earlier he was largely concerned with painting’s inability to extend mere representative dimensions: he felt painting craved significance, it could and should be able to represent the tangible concept. Perhaps his incongruous association with the mainstream and with the classical approach can in part be rationalized as a wish to prove his abilities. Another explanation could be that it enabled him to utilise an already universally venerated, epic, elegiac visual form, a veritable ‘canon’ of artistic, mythical, historic sub-texts onto which he could ‘graft’ or rather *craft* his own agenda: after all, as Rachel

bition: Review, The Times, March 25, 2009. http://entertainment.Timeonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article5968726.ece 04.12.2013

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Smiles, *British Artists*, op. cit., p.27

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.28

Johnston states, when “we gaze entranced into Turner’s vision, its sources in Claude [are] by now all but forgotten.”⁶⁰ It is perceptively true that in the Carthage series of paintings, for example, with their frankly anaesthetised, limpid tonation and drowsy lack of animation they seem far removed from the extravagance of the visionary Turner; yet within these same canvases the complexity of Turner’s pictorial narratives are enlarged beyond measure.⁶¹ When Ruskin, states in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) that “[t]he perception of solid form is entirely a matter of experience”⁶² though he is commenting on the practice of drawing, it seems not intangible to use this statement in metaphorical terms to elucidate how a like-minded Turner could presume to utilise the ready-made and readily-accepted, comprehensive form of classical landscape as a backdrop by which to present this ‘experience’ of the world through sensibility.

By the selection of Carthage as subject for a series of paintings, Turner not only turned to a topical discourse of the 1810’s, “the struggle between Rome and Carthage... prefiguring contemporary hostilities between France and England”⁶³, but more specifically meditates on the contentious subject of Empire. Thus in (F.8) **Dido Building Carthage; or the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire** (1815) we see Turner’s ability to unite in a single scene shifting political values and struggle for power. To the Royal Academy Exhibition catalogue Turner adds the subtitle ‘Ist Book of Virgil’s *Æneid*’ to remind his viewers of the mythical beginnings of a historic conflict. Portrayed is Dido, Queen of Carthage surveying the construction of the city: all is harmonious calm; the grand edifices stand proudly erect among ancient trees seemingly assured of similar longevity and belonging; children play by the water’s edge launching toy vessels into the water. The soft blue skies and a rising, warmly glowing sun heralding the dawn of empire adds to the assured confidence in the future – all seems well with the world. Contemplate a little longer and soon becomes obvious as to why Turner has specified the additional reference to the *Æneid*, because myth and historical fact combines to form a heady metaphor of the nature of Empire. Aeneid, escaping Troy, becomes the lover of Dido, but is ordered

⁶⁰ Johnston, *Turner and Italy at the National Gallery: Review*, op. cit.

⁶¹ Smiles, *British Artists*, op. cit., p.34

⁶² John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, Dover Publications Inc., London, (1857) 1973, p.27.

⁶³ Smiles, *British Artists*, op. cit., p.34.

to fulfil his destiny as the founder of Rome. Heartbroken by his departure the bitter Dido demands eternal enmity between Carthage and Rome and subsequently takes her life; that which follows is historic conflict, war and the ruin of Carthage. The subtitle arms the viewer with this knowledge so that even while gazing and comprehending the optimism of the rise of Carthage “[k]nowledge of this outcome gives this optimistic scene a tragic undercurrent and a sense of proleptic irony that all of Dido’s endeavours will end in ruin.”⁶⁴ Art that had *something to say*, is part of the Turner legacy; but didacticism is surely not. As a passing phase, perhaps, but in the greater extend of his career abstraction was vehemently to replace classic pretensions. Classical ‘delineation’ informed: since line is prescriptive, authoritative, as *contour* or *outline*, it does not suggest, but distinctly substantiates with fixed, immutable pronouncement, hence the line delineated figure or object is necessarily explicit. Romantic unrestraint, however, was inspirational and visionary, it was characterised by the absence of line and what is line removed, but colour liberated from the restraint of *contour*; as when the instinctive and sensual is liberated with the removal of rationalist and arbitrary establishmentarian *control*.

Colour is sensual as opposed to cerebral; in eighteenth-century art it was treated as something verging on the improper and antiestablishment. Even the most cursory examination of modern art will reveal that impact is due almost entirely to the unrestricted application of colour. Impact should not be confused with brilliancy of hue, however: the Victorians loved the garish and florid and the Pre-Raphaelites delighted in the bold, vibrant hues of medieval scriptures. Turner as the first artist to realise that colour could communicate directly with the senses, paved the way to its intellectual, ecstatic and liberal application in the sumptuous final (1830-1850) phase of his painting career. Undoubtedly he was initially awakened to bold colour usage through Titian, whose luminous tints and polychromic modulation moved him to adventurous heights, yet it was Turner who first used colour, whether brazenly vibrant or pastel and pale, as a determining structure in its own right. When his mutable washes of colour were first exhibited these works were referred to as ‘unfinished Turners’, ‘sketches’ at best and at worst ridiculed on the stages of Music Halls (when a man carrying pots of paint would be made to trip up and the resulting mess of

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.29.

paints would be referred to sarcastically as a Turner masterpiece). Turner had always been highly conscious of his early popularity and this sort of reaction caused him to become rather bitter and subsequently to withdraw from social life. As he evolved into the dejected and isolated iconic figure of the ‘Romantic artist’, so his style become increasingly obdurate; clearly once he felt peripheral to mainstream art, he no longer felt himself duty bound to conform to its rules. As Kenneth Clark says of (F.9) ‘**Interior of Petworth House**’ c (1837) “Turner, who hated society, loved the informality of Petworth. Everything he painted there- and he painted a great deal- is shining with the happiness of liberation.”⁶⁵ In order to see what true liberation from the conventional style⁶⁶ is in terms of an actual picture, one need only to look at the ‘before and after’ of the Clyde paintings. (F.10) ‘**Falls of Clyde**’ originally a watercolour exhibited at the Royal academy in 1801, is of a conventional style, it is attractive but by no means sensational. Some 40 years later (c1845) Turner was to re-interpret this work and paint another version, as if his first had been a preliminary sketch. The second (F.11) is similar to the original in title, content and composition, yet a startling exhilaration had swept over it; executed this time in oils, a marvellous transition of colour has occurred from blue-grey hues to burnished golds, a colour palette that was to become Turner’s terms of expression. The contrivance inherent to this new manner of treating light both sublimates and invests a depth of meaning beyond the physical. Moreover,

...the dramatic effect of light is not achieved by contrast of tone but by a most subtle alternation of colour. As a result oil paint achieves a new consistency, an iridescence, which is more like that of some living thing – in this case the flower of an iris – than a painted simulacrum. The surface of a late Turner is made up of gradations so fine and flecks of colour so inexplicable that we are reminded, whatever the subject, of flowers and sunset skies. To substitute colour for tone as a means of rendering enlightened space could not be achieved by mere observations.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Clark, **The Romantic Rebellion**, op. cit., p.223-263.

⁶⁶ The Petworth interior demonstrates that this technique is not just an issue of stylistics; while landscapes captured as blurred and indistinct swirls of colour may be explained in part as necessary to the depiction of naturally occurring climatic or meteorological phenomenon, the interior demonstrates that this technique is central, not to the demands of external scene, but the interiority of the artist.

⁶⁷ Clark, **Looking at Pictures**, op. cit., p.145.

This “feat of pictorial intelligence” was the conclusion of a long evolutionary process for Turner: the term *intelligence* is not negligently used since the process involved a systematic study of colour theory. He was growingly intrigued by the direct use of colour, whole sketchbooks were filled with washes of colour, he worked intensely on the notion of “creat[ing] a coherent sense of light and space before he even decided on the subject”; hue had become an impassioned language in its own right. Pictures discovered in his studio after his death had no titles at all and were just masses of colour in fluid mobility. In this new language, form was marks of colour that in a roundabout way denoted subjects and objects: his maturity became tantamount to “his liberation of colour to become an expressive vehicle, above and beyond its descriptive function”.⁶⁸ Having already noted Turner’s formative influence on the impressionists, his colour practices seem also to disclose a natural proximity to the expressionists: beyond the optical perspective, using colour as a vehicle, he develops a psychological dimension to his canvases that find source not in external issues, but find sole invigoration in Turner’s psyche that shapes the manifestation of the world encapsulated within his paintings. The orchestration of pictorial space to a graduation of tonal values and the play of shade and light, were also a solution to his essentially incongruous use of the classical tenet. In a bid to secure within the visual statement a paradigmatic quality, hence clarifying the ideological motivation behind the painting into a definitive statement, Turner had reverted to Classicism, a mode of painting diametrically opposed to his qualities as a ‘Romantic’ artist. Sam Smiles states that **Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus- Homer’s Odyssey** (1829):

...embellishes the classical account with further natural observations and symbolic connotations. The Nereids playing like dolphins at the prow of the ship may owe their appearance to recent investigations into marine phosphorescence, thereby rationalising the supernatural; the horses of Apollo, the sun-god, are visible to the right of the rising sun, as though making the same natural-symbolic point... All these details are infused with a chromatic intensity which gives a jewel-like quality to the painting, saturating the image with colours which are descriptive and yet something more than that, transposing naturalistic features into another register, such that colour begins to carry the composition and to provide the emotional tone. The contrast between light and darkness reinforces

⁶⁸ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.36.

Ulysses' triumph over Polyphemus' pain, while the overall *gorgeousness of colour might be said to function like the rhetorical devices of heroic myth, using heightened effects to convey an elemental truth.*⁶⁹

In *embellishing*, Turner appears to have synthesized a 'naturalisation of the classical', thereby removing the studied artificiality for "an elemental truth", all the while maintaining the touchstone quality. To the objectivity of the classical is added the subjective and emotive element of colour, which carries the ongoing orchestration of narrative to an all together more evocative dimension: hence, the canon of rhetorical devices and sub-texts fostered via the classical is achieved by liberated colour working directly on the intuitive mind.

It was around 1844 that Turner became most determined in these efforts. The primary step was his reading of Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre* (Teaching Colour) (1810). This theory divided colours into two symbolic registers: 'plus' colours such as red, yellow and green, associated with the positive states of happiness and wellbeing and 'minus' colours such as blue, blue-green and purple associated with the negative state of anxiety and desolation. The innately emotive nature of Goethe's theorizing and its basis upon human sensibility and expression is key to Turner's fascination with it. Goethe's theory of colour was set out as a non-didactic proposition, "its intention [being] to portray rather than explain"⁷⁰ and its source experimental rather than an imposition of theoretical, passively received, statements. Goethe's procedure of deriving his 'colour theory' promoted the complexities of human perception by using experiments that allowed the individual to experience and 'see' for themselves. Sir Isaac Newton's colour theory had been formulated in 1704, yet had not caught Turner's imagination perhaps for being conversely rationalist and mathematical in outlook and practice:

Newton's error in his color theory, said Goethe, was trusting math over the sensations of his eye. "Insofar as he makes use of his healthy senses," wrote Goethe, "man himself is the best and most exact scientific instrument possible. The greatest misfortune of modern physics is that its experiments have been set apart from man." ... If Newton began

⁶⁹ *ibid*, p. 37-38

⁷⁰ Douglas Miller, Ed., **Johann Goethe: Scientific Studies (Goethe: The Collected Works, Vol. 12)**, Princeton University Press, 1995, p.57.

with the equation, he would begin with the eyeball, with a “physiology of color.” He would return color to its beginning, in the brain.”⁷¹

Comparatively, an excitable and perceptively un-scientific urgency of feeling floods Goethe’s analysis, in a speculative tone that resounds with metaphorical implication, light, he expounds in a correspondence, “is the simplest most undivided most homogenous *being* that we know.”⁷² The personification of an optical phenomenon into deipotent dimensions is a romantic gesture not lost Turner, who also associates light with the outward manifestation of God. The issue is so profoundly taken to heart by both Romantics that just as on his deathbed Turner states that “The sun is God”; Goethe with similar preoccupation calls for “More light”.⁷³

It was seven years prior to his death that Turner became a recluse, living under an assumed name and creating his most elusive works, where he abandoned all recognisable forms and produced some of his most ‘modernist’ work to date. Two such extremes are the Goethe inspired compositions (F.12) ‘**Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory)–The Morning of the Deluge, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis**’ (1843) and ‘**Shade and Darkness– The Evening of the Deluge**’ (1843). The former is a complex work in which once again Turner invokes reference to science and religion, more specifically to God’s covenant with mankind. Although the tones used in ‘**Light and Colour**’ are the golden yellows of the ‘plus’ pallet, a hypnotising central vortex initiates a central pearly white to a spectrum of pale and yellows that transpose to bloody orange and rusted greens – hence, the colour spectrum in its entirety does not harbour an optimistic outlook. The circular composition is bubble-like in shape; held in a circle of light is Moses perched upon the Brazen Serpent writing the book of Genesis: “The rainbow, God’s sign for Noah after the Flood, is replaced here with prismatic bubbles exhaled from the earth...traditionally taken as prefiguring the Crucifixion, with a drowned serpent and

⁷¹ Jonah Lehrer, **Goethe and Colour: The Frontal Cortex**, December 7, 2006, http://scienceblogs.com/cortex/2006/12/post_7.php 02.02.2014

⁷² Johann Peter Eckerman, **Conversations of Goethe**, Da Capo Press Inc., 1998. p.527. My italics

⁷³ **The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations** (Third Ed.), Book Club Association, London, p.230, (Goethe’s dying words were in full: “Macht doch den zweiten Fensterladen auch auf, damit mehr Licht hereinkomme” (‘Open the second shutter, so more light can come in.’)).

other drowned victims piled up below”, the painting begins by referring to a Divine positive bond extending through Moses, Noah and Jesus, yet Turner’s appended verses, like the painting’s shifting colour spectrum, are pessimistic and implicate the total visual statement to be equally so: “Each bubble, ‘Hope’s harbinger’, is ‘ephemeral as the summer fly / Which rises, flits, expands, and dies’. God’s covenant, it seems, is temporary and therefore delusive.”⁷⁴ In the accompanying painting ‘**Shade and Darkness**’ the light retreats away from the spectator, the colours are darker and invoke the sublime in conventionally sombre tones. Even though Turner preferred the pallet of intense gold and yellow in his late paintings, it did not follow that intensity of colour meant intensity of meaning. The rhetorical ability of colour in a composition did not insist upon brightness or luridness of hues, indeed they could be faded and extremely delicate and still capture the eye –it was a question of tonal balance, the important thing was the relationship of tones to each other. Ruskin explains this perfectly when he describes Turner’s Watercolour of a Swiss lake:

There is not much colour in that low amber light upon the hill-side as there is in the palest dead leaf. The lake is not blue, but grey in mist, passing into deep shadow beneath the Voirons’ pines: a few dark clusters of leaves, a single white colour- scarcely seen- are all the gladness given to the rocks of the shore. One of the ruby spots of the eastern manuscript would give colour enough for all the red that is in Turner’s entire drawings.⁷⁵

This is similarly evident in ‘**Snow Storm - Steamboat**’ in which colour is subdued and occupies the grey/blue pallet, yet the composition carries associations of *human endurance* and homage to the greater power of nature, rather than the implication of death and destruction. Though tantalisingly unconfirmed, Turner insisted that he once tied himself to the mast of a ship during a violent storm so that he could experience at first hand the visual and emotional terror of the moment prior to its transference onto canvas: “I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it,” he explained, “I was lashed for four hours and did not expect to escape, I felt bound to record it”. The resulting painting was ‘**Snowstorm - Steamboat**’. The actuality of such an event is largely irrelevant, what it under-

⁷⁴ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.66.

⁷⁵ Clark, **The Romantic Rebellion**, op. cit., p.253.

lines, however, is Turner's insistence upon disciplined observation and his predominant purpose to first *internalise* the storm and only then to register his experience of it on to canvas: in other words "To see the object as it really is... is to know ones subject as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly."⁷⁶ The visual image is seen to exceed the dimensions of the flat, figurative 'tableau'; it is an ongoing *cerebral* process, a progressive narrative of subjective experience relayed through fluid 'lyrical' shifts of *sensual* colour. The rhetorical ability of colour to voice emotive reflection in the poetic sense is not necessarily achieved through intensity of hues but tonal balance, in other words the polychromatic whole belies innate harmonies; the spectral iridescence of each colour – a rhythmic and seamless interblend extending from tint to shade (from gradation of light to dark) radiates to a symbolic narrative: from a respective divine luminosity to an acherontic gloom of human sensibility. As referred to earlier, *synesthesia* avouched for our instinctive reaction to certain colours: bright reds are loud, livid, impassioned and resonating; blues are subdued, cool, appeasing; greens lull and subdue while paradoxically invigorating, and so on. Yet this 'natural' association is also a rudimentary one. In Turner's late canvases colour is without cliché or formulaic bias, it is a complex idiosyncratic language.

Turner's approach to the dialectic between painting and poetry pivots around the essence of Nature: within the material reality of landscape the immaterial (the spiritual and psychological) is liberated and "translated into resounding chords of colour".⁷⁷ Representation in the late works is negligent, permeated by a common elemental medium the abstract canvas nevertheless possesses a subject, which, as in figurative painting provides a narrative that exists outside of the painting and grounds the viewer, in an albeit flimsy, yet recognisable reality. Turner's use of poetry can be explained in part as an attempt to broaden his sphere of operation. He actively sought to integrate the sister arts, to invigorate landscape painting with connotation and allusion from a meagre status of topographical register to a sphere of greater intellectual and artistic importance. Poetry for him was the discursive treatment of a topic in all its metaphorical and spiritual

⁷⁶ Walter Pater, **The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry**, Oxford University Press, London, (1873) 1998, Preface, p.xxx.

⁷⁷ Simon Wilson, **Tate Gallery: An Illustrated Companion**, Tate Publishing, London, 1990, p.12.

dimensions. Poetic diction ennobled and universalised the emotive invocation derived through the abstraction of Nature. Visual art had already been linked with poetry: the Pre-Raphaelites had used painting to provide a visual interpretation to numerous poetic texts, their paintings enriching them by broadening meaning hitherto understated (for fear of reactionary backlash) or not stated at all. Yet the visual narrative reduced to *illustration* could mean a forfeit of integrity, when the visual consequently became little more than a means for ease of comprehension. Turner considered the particular aesthetics of painting as a medium and conceptualised their integration as a meeting of equals rather than making one subsidiary to the other. In a manuscript written in about 1810 he declared: ‘Painting and Poetry flowing from the same fount...reflect and refract each other’s beauties with reciprocity of splendidous allusions’.⁷⁸ Hence the overlapping of narratives worked both ways and Turner not only painted but also versified with the same passion that dominated his canvases.

(F.13) ‘**Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps**’ (1812) is Turner’s first painting to be exhibited accompanied by a selection of lines from his extended poem, *Fallacies of Hope*. From 1812 to 1850, the year of Turner’s last exhibition, numerous paintings bore lines from this unpublished epic work, yet following his death no manuscript was ever discovered and it is subsequently believed that *Fallacies of Hope* probably never existed as a single, complete body of work.⁷⁹ Turner had come a long way in his art: his canvases had become progressively insular and complicated through political, historic and religious associations, and presumably he felt that no other poet could relate, his concerns as completely. Hence, he composed each verse as and when necessity or a new painting demanded it, seeing it no doubt, as perhaps one more dimension to the detailed exposition of his late narratives. Ofcourse, this begs the question, which came first, the poem or the painting? Since the various stanzas of *Fallacies of Hope* albeit linked by thematic, never existed as a single body of work, it seems that unlike the Victorian practice of selecting a known poem and creating a painting to accompany it, Turner first painted

⁷⁸ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit., p.20-21 (British Library Add. Ms. 46151 K (c.1810), quoted in Shanes 1990, p.74).

⁷⁹ Jerrold Ziff, ‘*John Langhorne and Turner’s “Falacies of Hope”*’, **Journal of The Warburd and Courthauld Institutes**, 1964. <http://www.jstor.org> 18.03.2014

and then composed accompanying lines of poetry.⁸⁰ The politically aware Turner true to his Romantic sentiments experienced, like Wordsworth, a crisis of faith during this period: “As the promise of liberty represented by the French Revolution faded and the malign effects of the parallel Industrial Revolution became manifest, a bleak note of fatalism crept into the art and writings of the Romantic Generation”.⁸¹ That sense of defeated ideals, horror and abject disappointment experienced by Wordsworth was a disillusionment shared by Turner since both witnessed “égalité, liberté, fraternité” degenerated into the Reign of Terror (“Head after head, and never heads enough”⁸²).

Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps (1812) is a historically themed landscape set in Val d’Aosta in north western Italy and based on the great heroic journey of the Cartesian General Hannibal taking a cortège of war elephants and soldiers up through Spain and over the Alps into Italy; Hannibal’s intention being to inflict destruction over Roman forces. Central to the canvas is the moment of Hannibal’s forces being violently overwhelmed by Swiss tribesmen. Dwarfing this bloody episode is the brewing storm; in fact given that the painting is dedicated to the Hannibal escapade, the greater majority of the canvas (both in intellectual and spatial terms) is given over to the menacingly angry sky and the sun barely visible behind its swollen presence. The combined word and image narratives of the painting are a good example of the complexity of Turner’s intellectual objectives and his design in demonstrating those objectives on a multi-dimensional level: not simply as a pictorial scene, but an experience. The pessimistic and oppressively gloomy representation of man falling prey to mankind is a theme elaborated in the accompanying lines from *Fallacies of Hope*:

Craft, treachery and fraud – Salassian force,
Hung on the fainting rear! Then Plunder seiz’d
The victor and captive, Saguntum’s spoil,
Alike, became their prey...

⁸⁰ Turner was not alone in such a practice: Gabriel Dante Rossetti, a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of artists, contrary to his fellow artists, painted and versified in unison.

⁸¹ Ed Voves, ‘*The Life and Art of J.M.W. Turner*’, **California Literary Review**, February 26, 2008, <http://calitreview.com/36> 13.11.2013

⁸² William Wordsworth, **The Prelude**, op. cit., Book 10, ‘Residence in France’.

Contrary to the dialectic of painting and poetry by Turner's contemporaries, where the visual functions as an auxiliary subtext to the poem; in Turner's usage the lines of poetry read like a informative historical account, a dispirited second to the comparative poignant drama and vehement eloquence of the visual narrative. In the left foreground are the wounded and dying, the hapless "Salassian force", defenceless against the oncoming onslaught of both the native Swiss tribesmen to the far left foreground and the storm bursting with snow and ice. The defeated "fainting rear" guard of an otherwise victorious army is paradoxically both "victor" and imminent "prey...captive" to the Swiss tribesmen. Deep into the lower central background is a miniscule silhouette of Hannibal astride an elephant, in the vanguard of assault, impervious to the carnage in the rear of his defences, he considers the portentously sickly-yellow sun as being omen to a victorious outcome: "...still the chief advanc'd, / Look'd on the sun with hope; - low, broad, and wan." A significant role played by the textual narrative is to imbue the observable scene with irony: given that the title of the painting, denoting subject, is the first text, the verse accompanying the painting are the second text. The title **Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps** appears to be a positive and assured celebration of military glory yet the canvas ostensibly nullifies it by representing nothing more than an absurdly diminutive figure of Hannibal so completely removed from the prosaic banality of the front line to seem a thing of myth and fairytale. This ironic complicity of title and image is then reinforced by the lines of verse: while Hannibal regards the sun with hope (significantly bestride a wondrously powerful and seemingly unstoppable elephant), the calamity of defeat is incorporated in its "low, broad, and wan" appearance. Both texts work with the general tenet of the painting, but while creating an attitude in contradiction to that which is ostensibly being stated by it. This contradictory impulse related through the invocation of irony also indicates intellectual detachment from that which is, to all intents and purposes, a frankly traditional reference to military glory; the mire of death and suffering behind the officious glory of champagne and revolution left in the great general's wake. In parallel answer to Hannibal's unfounded optimism the storm rises obscenely above the flood of brilliant light surrounding him, but then descends ominously onto the rear guard. The far upper right hand area, above the heads of tribesmen is blue and clear, while the snow storm, in dolorous near-black, appears like a growth extending from the land, curls

up like a vengeful claw or indeed "...the fierce archer of the downward year / Stains Italy's blanch'd barrier with storms" around the decimated army. Or like an open jaw, with the jagged rocks around which the Carthaginians rearguard clings, appearing to be its sharp, jutting teeth: "In vain each pass, ensanguin'd deep with dead, / Or rocky fragments, wide destruction roll'd." In historic terms this is a victorious event, yet tragedy on a massive human scale is what Turner is emphasising: 'man's inhumanity to man' seems a fitting adage to the carnage being insinuated and as the visual imbalance of natural phenomena to human casualty undeniably verifies, it is the power of Nature, a greater subliminal force that easily humiliates and vanquishes all: "Still on Campania's *fertile plains* – he thought, / But the loud *breeze sob'd*, 'Capua's joy beware!'" Nature is impervious to the suffering of man, it is a subliminal representation of moral superiority, hence even this rocky, imposing terrain is positively described as a "fertile plain" and the breeze carries the voice of an omniscient and omnipotent God, not however a benevolent father. Hannibal, regarded as a gifted strategist would lead the Carthaginians to victory, yet in the long term it would lead to soft living and communal degeneration, so that for Turner the particular episode he chooses to illustrate is the initial step of burgeoning tragedy that is yet to come: "The fury of the storm is thus counterpoised not with a sun symbolic of hope, but with the false light of delusion."⁸³

As Turner's later canvas became growly more torturous and overflowing with angst, so the parallel intensity of visual image and accompanying verse narrative form a concordant intensity. A late painting, (F.14) **Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying: Typhoon Coming On** (1840) is a tragedy in memoriam: based on the 1783 true story of the slave ship *Zong* whose cargo of slaves had suffered an epidemic, the ship's captain knowing that the insurance would not compensate for those killed by disease and motivated by commercial greed had thrown overboard the sick and dying so that he could collect insurance money available only for slaves drowned at sea. From his reading of Clarkson's **History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade** (1839) Turner would have known the incident was by no means isolated.⁸⁴ The mercenary evil of a contemporary event

⁸³ Smiles, **British Artists**, op. cit, p.30.

⁸⁴ Ibid., "...the same callous calculation was made by contemporary slavers who would throw their human cargo overboard when pursued by British ships policing the slave ports." p.63

is conveyed through the elemental: brushstrokes are agitated, colours are hot and ominously dark and a blood-red sky overshadows violently tossing waves. This abject inhumanity is seen to be condemned by Nature in tangible revolt. Turner exhibited the painting at the Royal Academy with the following lines from *Fallacies of Hope*:

Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
Yon *angry setting sun* and fierce-edged clouds
Declare the Typhon's coming.
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
The dead and dying - ne'er heed their chains
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy *market now?*

The sea is festooned with the dead and injured: the frenzied feeding of fish on still shackled bodies a depraved and grotesque metaphor of commercialism; the just visible hands of the drowning, pitifully extended as if clawing the sky. The churning of the sea seems to have no direction - no delible order to its generation by wind or sea currents; a kinetic chaos of discord attests to the moral unnaturalness of what is a commerce fuelled act of murder. Even the bright white light, which we associate with a divine presence seems significantly reduced to a narrow fragmented strip among the red/orange “anger [of] the setting sun and fierce-edged clouds”. The typhoon's coming is like a judgement on the entire incident. As the last two lines of the verse first demand ‘what of hope’ and then surcome to the obvious realisation that there is no hope, hope is a fallacy. So emotive and evocative a painting that one wonders whether Turner is not ‘gilding the lily’ in having a textual narrative in attendance; again one realises that the poem adds a motivational directive to viewer involvement. The red sunset is much more than a sign of the day's end, because the verse defines it as the “angry setting sun” and pronounces a presumptuous value judgement. Just in case the analogy of animals tearing at the dead and dying slaves goes unheeded, “Where is thy market now?” is a deliberately audacious and categorical taunt to brutal commercialism.

Turner's primary poetic achievement was undoubtedly his paintings, which for all their seeming implication of covert and obscure meaning articulated fiercely that which one first ‘feels’ and then ‘comprehends’. Yet ‘poetic painting’ is so illusive a concept and the question whether a given

painting functions on the level of poetic expression and possesses poetic depth is one so essentially arbitrary, subjective and untenable, that perhaps it is not the achievement but the striving that can and should be contested.

Turner's, achievements as forefather to the impressionists and subsequently to the modern painters is without rival in the nineteenth century. The quality in the man which makes this possible is his visionary purpose to express through painting something greater than the object: to invest in the visual a further intuitive dimension of intellect and imagination. The expression of emotion had replaced imitation in poetry and Turner sought the same release for painting. Since it is this aim which motivates him to eventually remove constraint and arbitrary control and thereby allows the free but measured flow of colour and light, the quest for poetic expression becomes a visual realisation of liberty and as such a singularly Romantic tenet. Yet as with the rude awakening of the late Romantic mentality to the pitfalls of revolution, so too in Turner's most liberal late canvas's the statement of 'freedom' is tempered by a notion of benevolent authority and intrinsic control, nevertheless his canvases remain undaunted anthems to anti-rationalist principles. When M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) specifies, "A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings"⁸⁵ he is stressing the liberation of poetry from confinement to the written word. Concepts, like *Ut picture poesis* and *synechesia* report on a historical tendency and an artistic capacity to engage the visual with the rhetorical. However, it is John Ruskin who provides a means of comprehensive analogy between visual poetics and written poetics. Referring to a number of his works one can isolate five definitive characteristics that he associates with both poet and artist: namely *sincerity*; *intensity*; *originality*; (particularly with Turner and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads in mind) *isolation* and *alienation*.

In a late work, *The Laws of Fésole* (1878-1879), Ruskin wrote that "The greatest art represents everything with absolute sincerity, as far as it is able" (15.359) and in the final volume of *Modern Painters*, that Turner, "is broadly this, that all the power of it came of its mercy and *sincerity*".

⁸⁵ M.H.Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford University press, (1953) 1971, p.21-22.

With reference to perception, Ruskin explains, that we achieve it through the imagination, whose distinguishing quality and strength is that it *sees with intensity*: “The virtue of the Imagination is its reaching, by intuition and intensity of gaze (not by reasoning, but by its authoritative opening and revealing power), a more essential truth than is seen at the surface of things” (4.284). Hence, *intensity* becomes a criterion of both artistic perception and aesthetic experience. *Originality* is another quality innate to perception and came not from mere novelty but from better apprehension of truth: “That virtue of originality that men so strain after is not newness, as they vainly think (there is nothing new), it is only *genuineness*” (4.253). He believed that the artist and the poet possessed a sense of perception of greater sensitivity than others, therefore they were more able to grasp the essentially truth, and truth was actual originality or “original genius.”⁸⁶ Since the poet and painter present truth in new and strikingly original ways, great art will rarely meet or adapt itself very much to the expectations of an audience; for, indeed, art’s very purpose is to increase the audience’s range of knowledge and expectations. The audience must thus be sympathetic to originality in all its atypical forms. But this is easier said than done, acknowledges Ruskin, since audiences tend not to be sympathetic to that which is unfamiliar and out of the ordinary; therefore *isolation* and *alienation* are the natural conditions in which the artist must create. So it was, we are told, with Joseph Mallord William Turner.

⁸⁶ John Ruskin, **A Joy Forever**, George Allen, London, Re-print Ed. (1857), 1905, p.56.



F. 1. J.M.W. Turner, *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, oil paint on canvas, 1844, The National Gallery, London



F. 2 J.M.W. Turner, *Trancept of Tintern Abbey*, Watercolour, graphite, pen and ink on paper, 1795, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



F. 3 J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm - Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water and Going by the Lead*, Oil on canvas, 1842, Tate Gallery, London.



F. 4 J. M. W. Turner, *Dutch Boats in a Gale (Bridge-Water Sea Piece)*, Oil on canvas, 1801, National Gallery, London.



F. 5 Willem van de Velde the Younger, *Ships on a Stormy Sea*, Oil on canvas, (c.1672), Toledo Museum of Arts, Ohio



F. 6 J. M.W. Turner, *The Shipwreck*, Oil on canvas, 1805, Tate Gallery, London.



F. 7 J. M. W. Turner, *Dort or Dordecht: The Dort Packet-Boat From Rotterdam Becalmed*, Oil on canvas, 1818, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven



F. 8 J. M. W. Turner, *Dido Building Carthage aka The Rise of the Carthaginian Empire*, Oil on canvas, 1815, National Gallery, London



F. 9 J. M. W. Turner, *Interior of Petworth House*, Oil on canvas, c1837, Tate Gallery, London



F. 10 J. M. W. Turner, *Falls of Clyde*, Oil on canvas, 1801, Scottish National Gallery



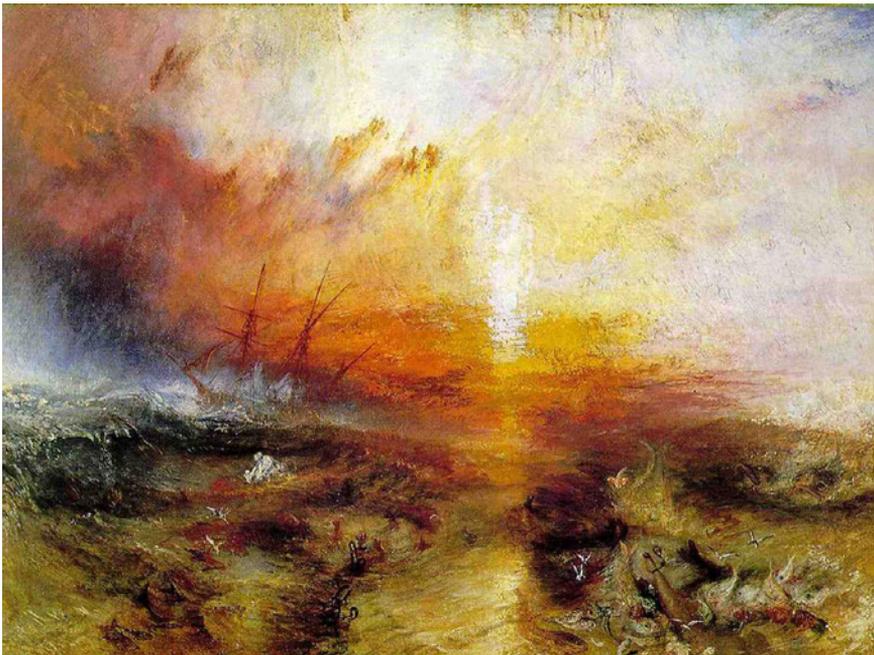
F. 11 J. M. W. Turner, *Falls of Clyde*, Oil on canvas, c1845, The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool



F. 12 J. M. W. Turner, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning of the Deluge. Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, Oil on canvas, 1843, Tate Gallery, London



F. 13 J. M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, Oil paint on canvas, 1812, Tate Gallery, London



F. 14 J. M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, Oil on canvas, 1840, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

