

nature is distinct, yet none defined into absolute independent singleness. By inviting the eye to fuse them or by modifying each other while remaining separate for the eye, the colors of their landscapes represent at once the individuality and the interdependence of particular things. Even when they seem detached from particular things, the colors represent their own distinctiveness—and their own interdependence. From his tireless experiments with structures of pure color Turner understood this final point better than anyone else, but it is nonetheless strikingly illustrated by what Coleridge wrote in his notebook one autumn day in 1803—when he saw the colors of Borrowdale as Monet and Renoir would later see the colors of Argenteuil:

The woody Castle Crag between me & Lowdore is a rich Flower-Garden of Colours, the brightest yellows with the deepest Crimson, and the infinite Shades of Brown & Green, the *infinite* diversity of which blends the whole—so that the brighter colours seem as *colors* upon a ground, not colored Things. [CN, 1:1603]

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*Romantic Historicism:  
The Temporal Sublime*

Despite critical clichés of the 1960s and 1970s, the primary thrust of Romantic art was toward neither apocalypse nor transcendence but toward the representation of reality as historical process. This “isolating historicity,” as Foucault calls it, is probably best studied (as he does) by treating it like one feature of an archaeological site, where coin and costume, book and picture, pot, weapon, and building stone appear as a coherence of contiguities rather than as part of a reductively rationalized sequence.<sup>1</sup> The archaeological model is certainly helpful if one juxtaposes historical writings and historical paintings, not to compare the obviously incomparable but to articulate complementarities so as to extend one’s understanding of Romanticism beyond the realm of the purely aesthetic.

In a recent essay I identified the principal tradition of history painting radicalized by J. M. W. Turner as that initiated by Benjamin West’s *Death of General Wolfe* (fig. 48), exhibited in 1771, in which an alien force, the near-naked Indian, disturbs a neoclassic “circle of response.”<sup>2</sup> The Indian is important because genuine historical consciousness, as distinct from the awareness expressed in chronicle or legend or myth, derives from recognition of alternatives, of different social possibilities. Authentic history never simply records what happened, but what happened in a world where other things might have happened. Diversification of cultural perspective is a feature of Romanticism’s breakup through enrichment of the Enlightenment’s uncommon faith in common humanity.

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, 1973), p. xxiii.

2. “Experience as History: Shelley’s Venice, Turner’s Carthage,” *ELH* 41 (1974): 321–39.

Modern history furnishes us with an example of what happened at this time in Rome. . . . Great occasions which produce great changes are different, but, since men have had the same passions at all times, the causes are always the same.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of this observation of Montesquieu is to reduce potential grandeur and awesomeness. Romantic historicism, in contrast, restores sublimity to the story of the past. David Hume, like Montesquieu, is lucid, not thrilling:

Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: you cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former most of the observations you have made in regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Neoclassical history can be beautifully rational—it is, for example, hospitable to lovely cyclical interpretations—but it cannot excite with the novel and surprising. Not irregular, it cannot be awe-inspiring; it cannot be sublime. Neoclassicism has no historical equivalent for the physical, topographical, material sublimity in which it delighted: its art and history remain distinct.

The French Revolution encouraged upheavals as violent historiographically as politically. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Hume's human nature had been renewed and estranged—witness Barthold Niebuhr:

The state of the law concerning landed property and the public domains of ancient Rome differed in such a degree in its peculiarities from the rights and institutions we are used to, that the confounding of our ordinary notions of property with those of the ancients . . . gives rise to the most grossly erroneous opinions on the most important questions of Roman legislation; opinions under which the voice of justice must pronounce condemnations against actions and measures perfectly blameless; . . .<sup>5</sup>

3. *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, trans. David Lowenthal (New York, 1965), p. 23 (from edition of 1848).

4. From the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, quoted by Emery Neff, *The Poetry of History* (New York, 1947), p. 230.

5. Barthold Niebuhr, *The History of Rome*, trans. Julius Hare and Connop Thirlwall (London, 1851), vol. 1, p. 1.

This awareness of profound difference between the historian and those whose lives he recounts involved an inversion of the concept of "heroic" events. History began to take on a complex texture. Thomas Carlyle, dismissing those who clung to uniformitarianism by appeals to inner, psychological consistency, quickly reextends his critique to externalities:

Neither will it adequately avail us to assert that the general inward condition of Life is the same in all ages. . . . The inward condition of Life . . . is the same in no two ages; neither are the more important outward variations easy to fix on, or always well capable of representation.

Implicated in these complexities of fact and representation is the Romantic sublimity of the unspectacular, central in Wordsworth's poetry, Scott's fiction, and, as I shall try to show, even present in Turner's reworkings of his classical prototypes in history painting. History is used by the Romantics to challenge historical hierarchies. As Carlyle observes:

Which was the greatest innovator, which was the more important personage in man's history, he who first led armies over the Alps, and gained the victories of Cannae and Thrasymene; or the nameless boor who first hammered out for himself an iron spade? When the oak-tree is felled, the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred acorns are planted silently by some unnoticed breeze.<sup>6</sup>

To understand this sublime inversion, it may be useful to retreat to the relative simplicities of historical painting. The Indian in West's *Death of Wolfe* impresses a viewer with the possibility of another cultural attitude because his pose derives from, and is meant to recall, Poussin, and because he is located within so familiar a scheme of order, the circle of response created by the conventionalized gestures and facial expressions of the general's sorrowing subordinates. The Indian is outside their hierarchy though within their grouping, just as his nakedness, sensory evidence of a common humanity concealed by the Europeans, sets off their elaborate dress. Discrepancies compel one to doubt what the Indian feels watching Wolfe die. As is indicated by some dismayed reactions among the original viewers, West had introduced equivocation into conventionally heroic pathos. But equivocal scenes had been increasingly

6. Thomas Carlyle, "On History" (1830), *English and Other Critical Essays* (London, 1964, originally 1915), pp. 82–83.

popular throughout the eighteenth century, most obviously in the genre of "ruins." The intrinsic dubiety of a ruined monument, what is opposed to what was, what might have been against what could not be, needs no rehearsing here. Nor is it necessary to show again how the art of ruins is a symptom of a spreading belief in the efficacy of creative uncertainty in art. The belief progressively infected all neoclassic orders and sequences, as is suggested by Piranesi's *Carceri* (see figs. 12-14), which in part disturb by seeming not to be ruins.

Such equivocations Turner develops in Claude-challenging pictures such as *Dido building Carthage* (fig. 49) and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (fig. 50). In the former there are unfinished buildings. An incomplete edifice, whether a ruin, a Piranesi "fantasy," or Turner's not-yet-built Carthage, is discernible as incomplete so far as it implies an invisible totality, an unseen whole, from which "pieces" once derived their function or meaning. The ruin picture is meant to be imaginatively stimulating, not just appealing to the senses, to evoke what is not there, as well as what is, because a ruin is a provocation to the viewer mentally to reconstruct an architectural whole from a remnant. Turner's *Dido* is more complex: not only was it notorious that the not-yet-constructed buildings we see had been obliterated by the Romans, but also Turner wished his picture hung between paintings by Claude of different "classical" subjects. So seen, *Dido building Carthage* becomes a dramatic part of art/cultural history, the history of imaginative reconstructions. This self-reflexive historicity was reinforced when Turner added *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, which portrays the city in apparently secure luxury. Its invisible fate is spelled out in the catalogue description.

The decline of the Carthaginian Empire—Rome being determined on the overthrow of her hated rival, demanded from her such terms as might either force her into war, or ruin her by compliance: the enervated Carthaginians, in their anxiety for peace, consented to give up even their arms and their children.

"... At Hope's delusive smile,

The Chieftain's safety and the mother's pride,  
Were to th'insidious conquerors' grasp resign'd;  
While o'er the western wave th'ensanguin'd sun,  
In gathering haze a stormy signal spread,  
And set portentous."<sup>7</sup>

7. Quoted by A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R. A.*, 2d ed. (London, 1961), pp.

As important as what is depicted is what is not visible—even to a contrast of Turner's sequential pairing against Claude's structural, topical, but never historical pairings.<sup>8</sup> The presence of Claude (and with him an entire classical tradition of history painting) is deliberately evoked to be transformed. The transformation is possible because Turner works not toward abstraction but toward a self-reflexive historicity.

A key to his intention is his organizing through color. Were the Carthaginian pictures better preserved it would be easier to discern the details of how Turner changes Claude primarily by filling Claudean shapes and shape-arrangements with intricate tonalities. One must fall back on the evidence of critical response. In objecting to the original exhibition of *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, Robert Hunt saw (but missed the meaning of) a "false splendour" in Turner's tones, complaining that they portray "a beautiful and noble personage, flushed with a burning fever, and arrayed in a profusion of shewy habiliments," presumably the impression Turner desired, as the catalogue description makes clear. That colors Hunt saw are no longer present is suggested by the fact that Hazlitt's famous critique applied to the paintings of these years, before Turner's first trip to Italy.

They are pictures of the elements of air, earth, and water. The artist delights to go back to the first chaos of the world, or to that state of things when the waters were separated from the dry land, and light from darkness, but as yet no living thing nor tree bearing fruit was seen upon the face of the earth. All is without form and void. Some one said of his landscapes that they were *pictures of nothing, and very like*.<sup>9</sup>

247-48. Fully to understand how *Dido* revises Claude's *Seaport*, one needs to study the pictures in relation to Turner's *Apulia in Search of Appulus* of the previous year, derived from Claude's *Transformation of the Apulian Shepherd*, probably a deliberate provocation of Sir George Beaumont. Gerald Wilkinson, *Turner's Colour Sketches, 1820-1834* (London, 1975), argues persuasively that Turner's Italian journey of 1819 followed a decisive advance in his techniques, and is supported by John Gage, *Color in Turner: Poetry and Truth* (New York, 1969). Philip Fehl, "Turner's Classicism and the Problem of Periodization in the History of Art," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 93-129, intelligently delineates the positive aspects of Turnerian "regressions." On a parallel reworking of Claude by Constable, see my *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison, 1974), pp. 73-74.

8. Claude was also challenged by Turner in his original exhibition at the Royal Academy of *Dido* with the "paired" *Crossing the Brook*, "contemporary" with ancient, landscape with history. On Claude's formalized pairings see Marcel Röthlisberger, *Claude Lorrain*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 1961), 1:77.

9. Cited by Finberg, *Life of Turner*, p. 241; quotations from Hunt and Beaumont, p. 240.

That Hazlitt could see what for us appears only in Turner's later canvases will seem less surprising when we remember that the climax of Sir George Beaumont's antagonism to Turner was focused by *Dido* and *The Decline*. Beaumont perceived a hateful "colouring discordant, out of harmony . . . violent mannered oppositions of Brown and hot colours to cold tints, blues and greys. . . ." One may properly speak of a tonality to a Claudean picture, but Turner's paintings are (or were) composed of a bright complexity of contrarily interacting lights which might well provoke an uneasy suspicion that the painter was less interested in objects than in forces, though primal forces may strike us as more than "nothing."

Complicating of color gradients is inseparable from Turner's inversion of the tonal spectrum so as to work "down" from white instead of "up" from dark. His "obscurity" increasingly comes from too much light, not too little. Claude's centered suns illuminate, but Turner's blind. Equivocation and confusion arise in the later Turner from much life, not, as in traditional ruins paintings, from little. In any moment, Turner shows us, there are multitudinous possibilities, so every perspective is provisional. Even ancient history and traditional art are not inevitabilities, beyond time. Classical art can be re-viewed; past visions can be re-seen; the shaping colors of life-forces can be restored to what had become frozen, broken, even obliterated monuments. Unlike traditionalist critics such as Beaumont, Turner conceives of art as inextricably in and of time, only vital when engaged in the vortex of its own history.

Given paint deteriorations and problems of accurate color reproduction, it is easier to show Turner's transformations of his classical models through his shifts in organization of figures among architectural structures. Turner uses more figures than Claude and makes their interrelations more ambiguously intricate. Turner's figures are of "normal" size and occupied with ordinary affairs. But their ordinariness, like that of characters in historical fiction, results in significant incongruities. What the figures do sometimes appears contradictory to the painting's central event, which is culturally important, not anecdotal—the rise or decline of an empire. Turner's figures make problematic the relation of title to scene, thereby pointing up complexities in relation of form to content more stylized in his models. Thus the traditional title of Claude's *Mill* derived from the detail in the middle distance, a derivation understand-

Blind  
So Little

able, as commentators have observed, because the title, *Landscape: The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah*, is formal—the painting doesn't strive to illustrate the biblical reference. Analogously, the structure of *The Mill* is mathematically ordered, the horizon at forty percent of the picture's height, the lake at twenty-five, and so forth.

Turner's figures aid what I have called unspectacular sublimity. They are not obscure in the fashion of Piranesi, nor dwarfed by monumental buildings, as John Martin's antlike, rigorously marshalled crowds tend to be, but they trouble us by indistinctness in their actions as well as vagueness of their shapes. They are neither Italianate nor Brueghelian. They are not badly drawn but conceived as painted rather than drawn, that is, fluidly mobile in contrast to a fixed architectural ambience. The primary indistinctness for Turner is the human form.

indistinct

The second indistinctness appears in human activities. In one picture few seem to be working to build Carthage, and in the other there is little overt decadence.<sup>10</sup> In both, too many people are doing too many different things to be ignored, but the significance of their actions appears neither in direct representation nor readily accessible allegory. Contrast Claude—the mathematically centered figures of slaves loading a chest into a boat literally represent the embarkation of a queen who is not prominent in the painting (fig. 51). Turner's *Dido* is the principal person in his painting. But she is focused by light rather than position, since she is shown walking on one side, curiously isolated. Her head turns toward the girls sailing toy boats and away from older men presumably discussing plans set forth in the scroll held by one. Across the water, which runs to the picture's lower edge, carrying reflected sunlight directly into the viewer's eyes, is a completed temple dedicated, the inscription tells us, to Dido's murdered husband Sychaeus. Dido's love for him has brought her to where Aeneas's betrayal will lead to her suicide. Turner's arrangement of details, including the morning sunlight dividing Dido's past and present while it links our "now" to her "then," is best understood. I think, as showing that Dido and the Carthaginians do not live as we live and cannot see as we see. In the disjunction lies the isolating historicity of which Foucault speaks. To grasp its nature, however, we need to see its relation to the transformation in historical writing itself,

10. The catalogue material clarifies the meaning of many details, such as the scatter of items of luxurious idleness, the nursing mother, etc., but increases the moral complexities of the Rome-Carthage/Britain-France parallel.

which deserves the kind of critical analysis we too often reserve for art alone.

In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and developed on the emperors all the executive powers of government. During a happy period (AD. 98–180) of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines. It is the design of this, and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire: and afterwards from the death of Marcus Antoninus, to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall; a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Edward Gibbon's first phrase in this opening paragraph of *The Decline and Fall*, like the antique garb in neoclassic history painting, establishes a distant perspective: we, the now-living, look back on the long-dead. The clear hierarchism of the relation permits Gibbon's magisterially defining language which renders superfluous geographic or sociological detail: "fairest part of the earth," "most civilized portion of mankind." The second sentence reinforces this superlative comprehensiveness by its unhesitating reliance on heroic personifications, "ancient renown" and "disciplined valour": the doubtful and dark lie outside the "frontiers" of enlightened civilization, frontiers that are barriers, not leading edges. And Gibbon's diction and tropes regularly confirm the continuing solidarity of the civilized as a timeless condition of being that links distant "then" to "now": it is the "nations" not "people" that still remember and feel the fall of Rome.

The opening sentences are built on syntactic/semantic parallelisms,

11. I cite from the Modern Library three-volume edition (New York, n.d.).

"Fairest part . . . most civilized portion," "ancient renown . . . disciplined valour." The linking-parallelizing "and" is Gibbon's favored conjunction, because he creates strongly balanced, stable compositional units. This overt architectural ordering subdues rhetorical figures as strong as oxymoron to unobtrusiveness: the third sentence's "gentle but powerful influence" shades off into all-too-reasonable contradictions, "inhabitants enjoyed and abused." Paradoxes and even ironies must be controlled rationally because Gibbon does not want his reader's mind sliding from visible behavior to invisible experience. What the "peaceful . . . enjoyed and abused" was not even "wealth" and "luxury," vocabulary relatively abstract (viz., "gold" and "silks"), but "the advantages of wealth and luxury." No construction is more characteristic of Gibbon than this of plural abstract noun plus "of," which enables him to delineate that kind of social behavior we see pictured by the conventionalized European figures in *The Death of General Wolfe*. Thus when Gibbon says that the "image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence," he exposes a reality of behavior according to recognizedly delusive appearances. What freedom individuals may or may not have experienced is irrelevant, because Gibbon's concern is that "which will ever be remembered" because always the same event. The fixed event, timeless because it has happened, demands formalized, linear representation.

Gibbon's subject is the falling of a definitively fallen object, a felicitous reflection of his Newtonian classicism. Gibbon's method is sequential presentation of chronological certainties, so he can inform us at the end of his first paragraph how he will proceed. Such orderliness of conception and perception Thomas Carlyle in *The French Revolution*, the most efficaciously sublime of Romantic histories, disrupts and complicates by resurrecting experiences from obscurity into the violence of chiaroscuro representations. And Carlyle is fascinated by how much has been forgotten—in just forty years—of what never was entirely clear. Against Gibbon's decisive definitions, Carlyle opens with clouded revelations:

President Hénault, remarking on royal surnames of honour how difficult it often is to ascertain not only why, but even when, they were conferred, takes occasion, in his sleek official way, to make a philosophical reflection. "The surname of Bien-aimé (Well-beloved)," says he, "which Louis XV bears, will not leave posterity in the same doubt. This prince, in the year 1744, while hastening from

one end of his kingdom to the other, and suspending his conquests in Flanders that he might fly to the assistance of Alsace, was arrested at Metz by a malady which threatened to cut short his days. At the news of this, Paris, all in terror, seemed a city taken by storm; the churches resounded with supplications and groans; the prayers of priests and people were every moment interrupted by their sobs; and it was from an interest so dear and tender that this surname of Bien-aimé fashioned itself—a title higher still than all the rest which this great prince has earned."

So stands it written, in lasting memorial of that year 1744. Thirty other years have come and gone, and "this great prince" again lies sick; but in how altered circumstances now! Churches resound not with excessive groanings; Paris is stoically calm; sobs interrupt no prayers, for indeed none are offered, except priests' litanies, read or chanted at fixed money-rate per hour, which are not liable to interruption. The shepherd of the people has been carried home from Little Trianon, heavy of heart, and been put to bed in his own château of Versailles: the flock knows it, and heeds it not. At most, in the immeasurable tide of French speech (which ceases not day after day, and only ebbs toward the short hours of night), may this of the royal sickness emerge from time to time as an article of news. Bets are doubtless depending; nay, some people "express themselves loudly in the streets." But for the rest, on green field and steeped city, the May sun shines out, the May evening fades, and men ply their useful or useless business as if no Louis lay in danger.<sup>12</sup>

The first paragraph of *The French Revolution* is mostly quotation, from someone of whom probably few readers have heard. Carlyle, not citing Hénault out of admiration ("sleek official way"), immediately plunges us into doubts and difficulties of every kind—who is quoted in the second paragraph is as uncertain as the meaning of the quotation. Perhaps the chief organizational trait in Carlyle's structuring is suggested by questions aroused in the first sentence: what do royal names, let alone Hénault's speculations about them, have to do with the French Revolution? True, Louis XV was a king of France, but he died

12. I quote from the two-volume Everyman edition, now the only inexpensive one readily available (London, 1966).

fifteen years before the Revolution, and we are attending a passing illness thirty years earlier. If such questions are answered by the next paragraph, we have already left behind the *Decline and Fall*, in which paragraphs are self-sufficient: each of Gibbon's structural units is self-coherent. Gibbon, of course, begins before the decline, but makes it plain he is showing us what declined. Carlyle flings us into specific experiences and comments which puzzle us as to what is happening and why it is pictured in this way, rather as we feel before a Turner historical scene. Carlyle uses puzzles and illogical resonances to create something other than sequential coherency: he will treat of another king "arrested," a different "Paris all in terror," and diverse "supplications and groans" until the Bastille is "overturned by a miraculous sound." Analogously, Carlyle transmutes Gibbon's enlightening irony of phrases such as "decent reverence" into the self-satirization of Hénault's particular sycophancy, which introduces us into a developing experience of uncertain events in which we, the readers, must learn to suspect all reporting, beginning with the very names reported, and from which suspicions Carlyle himself is not exempt.

It is a condition of Gibbon's irony that it never be applied to the historian himself. Carlyle is so conscious of the dubieties of his project that he first impresses us with how totally forgotten has been a "lasting memorial" of 1744, even as indifference overtook a "great prince" in thirty years. Gibbon's irony detaches us from the confusion of the moment (much of which he believes ought to be forgotten because trivial) to distinguish lines of rational chronology. Carlyle's irony engages us in the indefiniteness of specific experiences and the fuzziness of reports about them. Thus we encounter Louis's final illness through the fashion in which it was disregarded by ordinary citizens, and by the second paragraph have become involved with a tense unknown to Gibbon, the present. With Carlyle's history, as with Turner's, we are in the picture. Throughout *The French Revolution* Carlyle, so impressed has he been by the equivocations in all accounts of human affairs, denies us the advantages of simple retrospectiveness. The past of the first paragraph, Louis's illness in 1744, is forgotten in the second paragraph, the subject of which is this absence of positive act. Carlyle thus emphasizes the discrepancy between a historian writing of an event and the event itself. He must select from, thereby distorting, the wholeness of a total situation, whose totality is probably an artificial construct.

Carlyle  
c  
Turner  
c

in picture  
vs  
witness

The Romantic historian perceives memorable events to be made up of what Wordsworth called "little, unremembered acts." And what to the historian seem important deeds or deaths (or what he makes to seem important) take place amongst those to whom they are but an opportunity for casual betting or *prix-fixe* litanies. The essence of history is its equivocal reconstructing of intrinsically doubtful experiences. At the height of the Terror, Carlyle will remind us, nearly a hundred theaters were crowded nightly. So he will follow home from public celebration a "Goddess of Liberty" who must prepare dinner in a modest flat for a pedantic husband. And so Carlyle seldom forgets what the neoclassic historian seldom mentions, the epitome of life's trivial incertitudes, the weather.

But one notices that the specificities of detail which characterize Carlyle's writing often call into doubt the validity of sensory evidence. Just as Turner paints a picture in which it is difficult to be sure what one may be seeing because he paints accurately how one sees in a storm or blazing sunshine, so Carlyle, however anxious he may be to make us see his scenes, never forgets how delusive and unreliable our perceptive powers are, how untrustworthy is the evidence of our senses, which, at best, give us one perspective out of many possible, and none of which, even the historian's, is privileged. So Carlyle's history resounds with confusing echoes, not only partial repetitions whose contexts shift (as with "this great prince"), but also inversions of situation, as in the two first paragraphs. Analogously, syntax and semantics are made to intersect violently, even counteracting one another upon occasion. Not just in the opening lines but throughout the book we encounter diversified negatives, abrupt tone changes, reversals of customary word order, and startling interrogatory and exclamatory interjections, while Carlyle maneuvers constantly from dramatization to narration to speculation—both retrospective and prospective.<sup>13</sup>

The significance of the French Revolution to *The French Revolution* is not simple, in part because the historian is involved in what is now called imaginative deconstructions—for example, his final evaluation of the

13. An excellent study of these shiftings is by H. M. Leicester, Jr., "The Dialectic of Romantic Historiography: Prospect and Retrospect in *The French Revolution*," *Victorian Studies* 15 (1971): 5–17. See also Philip Rosenberg, *The Seventh Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), as well as René Wellek's essay in *Confrontations* (Princeton, 1965) and Hedva Ben-Israel's chapter in her *English Historians on the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

Reign of Terror that it was no more what it is called than Louis XV was *Bien-aimé*: "there is no period to be met with, in which the general Twenty-five Millions of France suffered less than in this period which they name Reign of Terror." That this judgment should often have been lost sight of by subsequent commentators is in accord with Carlyle's feelings about the unreliability of sources—intrinsically dubious, they are less likely to be understood than misunderstood, since what makes history possible is not mechanical recording but creative imagination.

Romantic historical vision is founded upon the impossibility of any definitive, that is, rationally unchanging, representation of historical phenomena. Of course the past no longer exists; but even when the past was the present, its significant events were to a considerable degree not perceivable and not comprehensible. For the Romantic, the central problem is not the pastness of the past but its former presence. One of the great Romantic forms, the historical novel, is a specific response to that problem. One can perhaps suggest the nature of the responses through one more pictorial/literary juxtaposition, centering upon Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps* (Fig. 52), which represents the immediate, sensory experience of an ancient event.

As I have observed elsewhere, the historical fact of Hannibal's crossing the Alps was perceived in Britain of 1812 as an event of ambiguous significance, and Turner exploited the doubtfulness.<sup>14</sup> Most important, he looked at history from what in the neoclassic tradition would have been its backside. The picture's foreground is the rear of Hannibal's army, the hangers-on, the stragglers, the abandoned, the dying, and the dead. To the left of the center foreground an African is being despoiled of arms and clothing; above him are flung corpses, while to the right, below a pyramidal rock, a man coolly ties on the footgear of a dead soldier. Behind him, another soldier pressed against a boulder is stripped of clothes and gear. The center of this foreground is a dramatically puzzling group of four figures. Over a supine, nearly naked body a man kneels with knife raised, his arm arrested by another man whose left hand supports a woman, naked to the waist, her head lolling in faintness or death. The meaning? Well, the heroic army has passed. Storming vortices of cloud brighten over distant elephant and Italy, leaving behind the forgotten of history, the sordid, personal, "meaning-

14. "Experience as History," p. 330.

less" violence of trivial anonymity. It is in keeping with Turner's presentation that commentators have disagreed as to whether we see Carthaginians robbing natives or mountaineers preying on army stragglers. Who cares? Turner's historical vision is through history's little, nameless, unremembered acts of violence and fear.

Romantic historical art, in other words, not only represented subjects from the past but also was about the difficulties of historical representation. The primary work in this tradition, of course, is *War and Peace*, which is founded on Tolstoy's recognition of the impossibility of historical representation, despite his conception of reality as in essence nothing but temporal processes. The trouble is that

absolute continuity of motion is not comprehensible to the human mind. Laws of motion of any kind become comprehensible to man only when he examines arbitrarily selected elements of that motion; but, at the same time, a large proportion of human error comes from the arbitrary division of continuous motion into discontinuous elements. . . . to assume a beginning of any phenomenon . . . is in itself false.

This is the theory. Now for the dramatization of General Kutúzov, like Hannibal, "in the midst of a series of shifting events":

it is suggested to him to cross the Kalúga road, but just then an adjutant gallops up from Milorádovich asking whether he is to engage the French or retire. An order must be given him at once, that instant. . . . after the adjutant comes the commissary general asking where the stores are to be taken, and the chief of the hospitals asks where the wounded are to go, and a courier from Petersburg brings a letter from the sovereign . . . the commander in chief's rival, the man who is undermining him . . . presents a new project . . . and the commander in chief himself needs sleep and refreshment . . . and a respectable general who has been overlooked in the distribution of rewards comes to complain, and the inhabitant of the district pray to be defended, and an officer sent to inspect the locality comes in and gives a report quite contrary to what was said by the officer previously sent; . . .<sup>15</sup>

15. I use the Maude translation in the Norton Critical Edition, ed. George Gibian (New York, 1966), pp. 917-18, 922.

Tolstoy's Kutúzov and Turner's Hannibal are caught up in continuities of motion for which the most appropriate form of representation is the vortex. The paragraph above illustrates the nature of vortical action. Unlike a circle, or even a spiral, a vortex is a complex of diverse movements, little movements, a coherence of contiguous, affiliated, similar, yet distinct, partly antagonistic, curvilinear forces. The vortex is the primary design produced by vital processes; all living things are shaped by the multi-dimensional swelling curves of growth forces. Turner's and Tolstoy's involuted reiterated rhythms reflect the fecund near-repetitions of minute actions which constitute vitality. In *Snow Storm: Hannibal* each vortical pattern is made up of reechoing, reinforcing yet diverse turnings, each whorl dependent on others so that one cannot define any beginning or end point to the storm—an exact analogue for the swirling of beginningless interactions and diverse contingent processes Tolstoy represents as historical experience. The involution of many "minor" conjoined contrarities as temporal force is the key form in Romantic historical vision, demanding an imaginative, rather than a rational or perceptual, ordering of interdependent energies. In literature the impress of vortical form can be traced in such matters as the development of the novel with multiple plots. The linear formalism of neoclassic unitary plots, however fragmented or inverted, is unlike the multiple intersecting plots characteristic of nineteenth-century fiction. In painting what needs recognition is the association of vortices with the development of color-structuring as a revision of form-structuring.

Turner needed not just whirling configurations but swirling colors, for in color alone could he attain the minutely shifting interpenetrations necessary to what he perceived to be actuality. Color finally is the antagonist of fixed forms. To structure a painting by color, as Turner does, is to organize by dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating forms. It is to arrange according to the ever-changing dynamics of liquid or gaseous conditions, dynamics irreducible to the definite boundaries of geometric shapes. The obscurity, vagueness, indistinctness of Turner is accurate, even pedantic, rendering of the fluidly vital. And one should not expect a Romantic artist to be so inconsistent as to present an active universe for an inert audience. Color-perception and form-perception are different; the former is more directly violent, less intellectual, more evocative of affects. As Schachtel, who studied the psychology of color in Rorschach tests, puts it, "color seizes the eye," whereas "the eye grasps



color as motion  
(body)

form"; in Gombrich's terminology, form is more dependent than color on schemata. Schachtel notes how color frequently compels reaction without reference beyond itself. Color does not, he observes, require the memory necessary for the appreciation of form's meaning; often, he says, red is fire or is blood without symbolic mediation.<sup>16</sup> Color moves us, which is what the Romantic wants, because only if we are "in motion" can we imaginatively respond to the continuity of action which is reality.

complex  
process

Turner's appeal to imagination puts him in opposition to the rational formalism of many of his predecessors as well as to the abstraction of many of his successors. He portrays the full complexity of a specific perception of a particular event, but that means diffusively rendering curves of action, since both perception and what one perceives are live processes. Of course he was fascinated by physical exemplifications of continuous movement, by water, and by all atmospheric phenomena, in short, by rain, steam, and speed. And when he could conjoin fire and water he was delighted. His enjoyment of the burning of the Houses of Parliament is so unmistakable one wonders he wasn't imprisoned for treason. But these are surface manifestations of a deep-rooted instinct for regarding all actuality as working according to principles more like those of the shifting transformations we study in organic chemistry than the defined consistencies which were the focus of Newtonian physics. Actuality cannot be identified through arithmetic relations of fixed structures because it exists in a perpetual interflowing and interfusing of conditions fundamentally plastic, porous, equivocal. Reality is only truly perceived as we are meant to perceive it in *Snow Storm: Hannibal*—uncertainly, provisionally, imaginatively.

The main thrust of Romantic historicism is not toward apocalypse nor transcendence but, instead, toward a dialectical engagement with confusingly open-ended experiences, for experience to a Romantic is, by definition, transitional. So the Romantic with an historical subject is in the position of representing what he recognizes cannot be represented. Or, to use a term again becoming popular, he seeks the sublime, which even Schiller (whom Coleridge thought old-fashioned in his conception)

16. Ernest G. Schachtel, "On Color and Affect," *Psychiatry* 6 (1943): 393-407, p. 396. Wilkinson, *Turner's Colour Sketches*, p. 147, commenting on two sunset sketches, observes that Turner has "concentrated on what seems to be the struggle of the colours of fire and blood against the encroaching purple of night, or death. There are many indications in his notebooks that Turner thought of his colours in just such terms."

identified as incomprehensible to reason and inapprehensible to the senses, and, therefore, specially evocative of imaginative power.<sup>17</sup> The evidence shows Romantic historicism to be part of the aesthetics of such sublimity, specifically, the sublimity not of space but of time.

17. There is a useful translation of *On the Sublime* by Julius A. Elias (New York, 1966). The elaborate diction of Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore, 1976) obscures some excellent commentaries, which recognize that Romantic sublimity differs from Burke's, for instance, in emphasizing discordance between outer events and psychic powers. John Dixon Hunt argues cogently for Turner's deliberate, sustained exploration of a painterly vocabulary for the sublime in "Wondrous Deep and Dark: Turner and the Sublime," *Georgia Review* 30 (1976): 139-54.



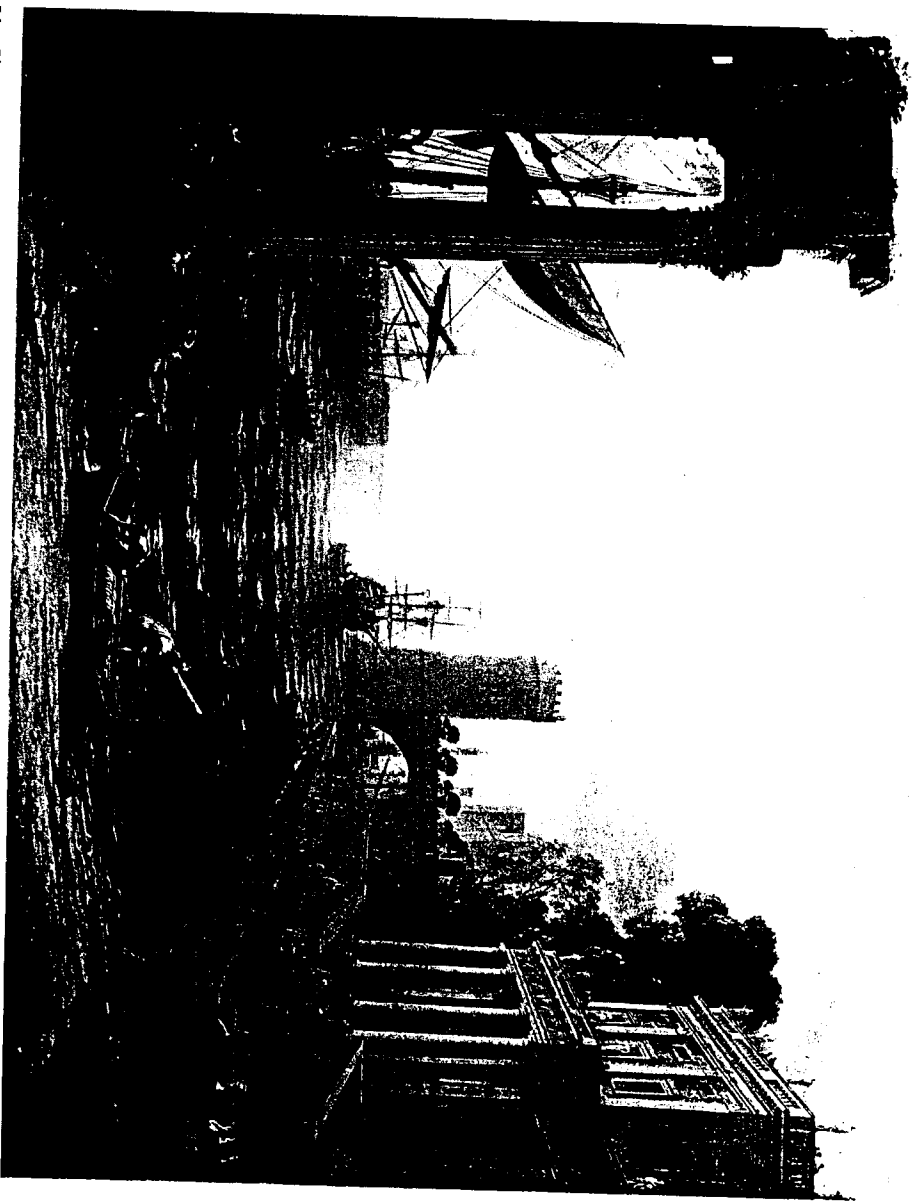
48. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*



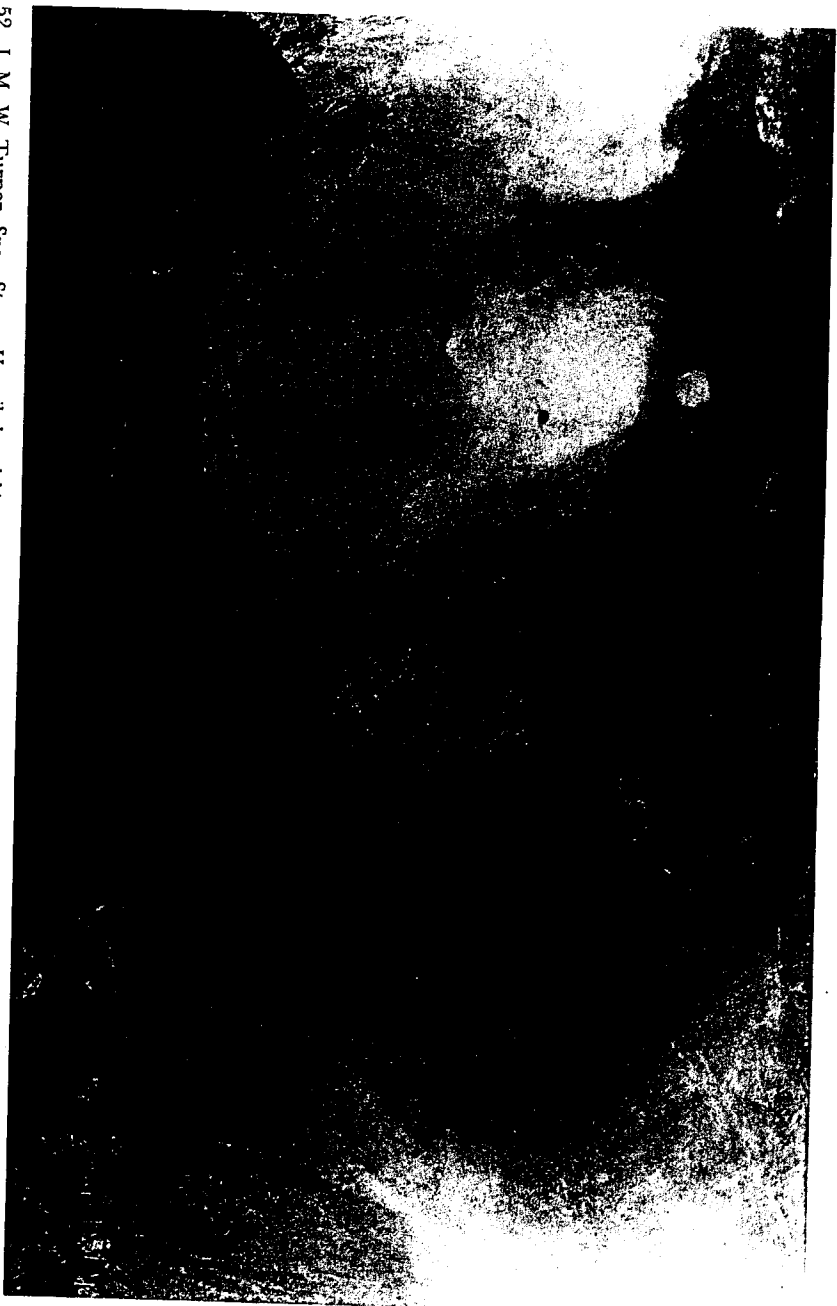
49. J. M. W. Turner, *Dido building Carthage; or The Rise of the Carthaginian Empire*



50. J. M. W. Turner, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*



51. Claude Lorraine, *Seabort: Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*



52. J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing The Alps*

