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*The Material Sublime:  
John Martin, Byron, Turner,  
and the Theater*

It sometimes happens that one may learn something useful about works of art from translation into another medium, especially when these appear to be vulgarizations. My example is the translation of John Martin and J. M. W. Turner into theater, and, more broadly, the relations between their pictures and the theater of the nineteenth century. Both painters are thought of as Romantic artists, both shared stylistic and thematic qualities with contemporary poetry, and both reflect developments in one of the chief begetters of Romantic art, the eighteenth-century notion of the sublime. Their different versions of the sublime and the qualities they share with contemporary poetry turn out to be implicated in the translation of their work into theater, even into popular theater. The complex of these relations suggests a less fragmented, more entangled and interconnected model for the culture at large than one would gather from a more single-minded or fastidious approach.

I will not try to deal here with all the ways Martin and Turner relate to the theater nor with many of the ramifications of those connections I mention. For convenience I will start with Martin and the sublime, then pursue the theatrical realization—by way of Byron—of Martin's images, before taking up the transformations of Turner. Ultimately I will address the question raised by the difference in their histrionic fates. Turner and Martin were awarded antithetical assignments in the theater, with correspondingly different functions for an audience. Why this was so has little to do with the comparative excellence of the two paint-

ers; but it does bear upon the deepest psychological structures of their work and on the fundamental matrices of the viewer's response.

## I

A good place to start is the ringing phrase with which Charles Lamb characterized the achievement of his contemporary, the painter John Martin. Martin's structures, he declared, were "of the highest order of the material sublime"—a gift phrase for anyone in charge of publicity, but not intended as a compliment. It appeared early in 1833 in an essay Lamb eventually called "The Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art," wherein he also compares *Belshazzar's Feast*, then Martin's most famous painting, to a "pantomime hoax."

The phrase pointed to some other condition of sublimity than "material"; but it also pointed to what Lamb conceived of as Martin's theatricality. Coleridge—who may have made it current before Lamb—certainly uses it to characterize a theater of spectacular effect. "Schiller," he observes, "has the material Sublime; to produce an effect, he sets you a whole town on fire, and throws infants with their mothers into the flames, or locks up a father in an old tower. But Shakespeare drops a handkerchief, and the same or greater effects follow."<sup>1</sup> That Martin was, figuratively speaking, a "theatrical" artist was often asserted during and after his lifetime, usually disparagingly. Sometimes, in an odd terminological leakage, critics argued whether his art was Legitimate or Illegitimate theater. Nevertheless, Lamb's phrase had a special appropriateness to the nineteenth-century stage and particularly to its insistent attempt to translate the sublime into the spectacular.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the stage and its means simply ran counter to a fundamental Romantic endeavor: to free the sublime from material causes and

1. Lamb's essay appeared originally in the *Athenaeum*, 12 Jan.–2 Feb. 1833; *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (London, 1903), 2:226–34. Coleridge's remark appears in his table talk under 29 Dec. 1822, but was published in 1835, *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (New York, 1835), pp. 33–34. Keats also uses the phrase "material sublime" in his verse epistle "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq." (25 March 1818, printed 1848), in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 1:261.

2. The issue of Martin's "legitimacy" is indignantly dismissed by the *Examiner* 25 (15 April, 1832): 244, reviewing his engraving *The Fall of Babylon*. See also the conclusion of Martin's obituary in *Gentleman's Magazine* 195 (1854): 433–36.

correlatives and to claim it as a subjective terrain. The shift that this entailed may be summed up neatly by juxtaposing Burke, who constructed his argument to establish a correspondence between external and internal events and predispositions, and Schiller (as philosopher rather than playwright), for whom the sublime occurs when we are reminded of our absolute transcendence of external nature and what relates to it.<sup>3</sup> The theater meanwhile strove mightily towards a material illusionism. Inevitably, inadequacy of means, failures in "realization," and the inescapable awareness of machinery—dramatic and theatrical—for the successful production of "effect" emphasized its "materiality" and its distance from a more psychic sublimity. Between matter and spirit, however, in popular imagery and philosophical speculation, was a bridge: light. One can argue that even in the theater this century of technical progress in the creation of a materially illusionistic stage would conclude antithetically, in the work of such scene-philosophers as Edward Gordon Craig and, especially, Adolphe Appia. The stage was dematerialized when Appia advanced beyond light as effect and even light as movement to the direct creation of dramatic space by light.

Meanwhile lurid light, incoherent light, the light that never was on sea or land, when it appeared in the other arts was declared "theatrical," and so was Martin. An enthusiastic reviewer of his *Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822) defends its rendering of light in the following terms: "The light, from its central energy on Vesuvius, is gradually carried off with exquisite judgment to the darkened extremities of the picture. . . . The whole scene has a red and yellow reflex of fiery light, that, terrible in its glory, makes the spreading ocean, the winding shore, the stately edifices, the vegetative plains, the gradually rising hills and mountains, with the astounded population, look like the Tartarean regions of punishment, anguish, and horror." To those who would object, he cites assurances that the "fiery effect" of the actual eruption "cannot be exaggerated." Nature herself is sometimes theatrical.<sup>4</sup> Objections, however, to the quality and control of Martin's light tended to disappear when the paintings were translated into engravings. Like Hogarth, Martin was his own chief engraver, in direct control of the medium through which he

3. See Burke's *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, part 5, secs. 1 and 2, and Schiller's "On the Sublime," *Essays Aesthetical and Philosophical* (London, 1875).

4. *Examiner* 15 (7 April 1822): 219.

was chiefly known. His extraordinary contemporary reputation as, among other things, a master of effect through the control of light and dark rested on the black and white of his engravings. His gift here, however, was to create not light, but material darkness; Milton's "darkness visible."

The materiality of Martin's sublime chiefly lay in the features that excited most wonder: his renderings of space, multitudes, and perhaps above all architecture, his manipulation of perspective and scale; what Uvedale Price, summarizing the principal features of sublimity, had called "infinity; [and] the artificial infinite, as arising from uniformity and succession."<sup>5</sup> The immensity was not merely in these physical things, however, nor in the actual size of the canvases, but in events, which also have their scale. The characteristic event was nothing less than Apocalypse, and Martin early established himself as the chief painter of the Apocalyptic Sublime. But the apocalyptic strain is rampant in the first half of the nineteenth century; and among painters it is nowhere more important than in Turner, most obviously in his plagues, in his deluge paintings, in his *Angel Standing in the Sun* (fig. 54); but also in avalanche, shipwreck, storm and fire, and the reiterated consummations of things. In historical criticism it is Turner who unfortunately for Martin must furnish his chief foil; for in Turner of the apocalyptic imagination one sees the fullest transformation in painting of the sublime into a subjective terrain, the sublime as the affective dissolution of material forms in light.

It should be said that the charge against Martin that he was trapped in the material made no sense to most of his huge nineteenth-century audience, for whom he was an "ideal" painter whose greatest work served precisely to demonstrate the vanity of the material and of all earthly pomp and pride. His vast physical spectacles were thus redeemed by their catastrophic character, as well as by their embodiment of specifically biblical history (or prophecy); and so redeemed, made instru-

5. *A Dialogue on the District Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful* (Hereford, 1801), p. 11. Price, theorist and advocate of the picturesque, takes his summary straight from Burke. He lists "obscurity, power, all general privations, as vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence," as well as greatness of dimension and the two infinities, natural and artificial, a range of qualities with an evident appropriateness to many of Martin's best-known works. Burke had observed that "magnitude in building" often involves "a generous deceit on the spectators," vastness by effect rather than dimensions. "No work of art can be great, but as it deceives; to be otherwise is the prerogative of nature only." He so theatricalizes art and provides for its assimilation to the illusionistic stage (*Inquiry*, part 2, sec. 10).

ments of edification, they found their way into such unwitting nurseries of the Romantic imagination as Haworth Parsonage and pious and respectable households by the thousand. What one critic calls "the School of Catastrophe" took much of its character and imagery from Martin, as well as its continuing association with Christian melodrama.<sup>6</sup> Between 1816 and 1828 Martin painted seven major visions of catastrophe, five of them direct embodiments of biblical history: *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still upon Gibeon* (exhibited 1816), *The Fall of Babylon* (1819), *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821), *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1822), *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (1824), *The Deluge* (1826), and *The Fall of Nineveh* (1828).

## II

The dematerialization of the sublime, its translation into subjective terms, doubtless found its most congenial medium in the poetry of the first third of the century. Shelley (for whom light had meanings and uses analogous to Turner's) carried the impulse furthest, into verbal and affective textures. But it was Byron, externalizing that within which passeth show, who swept Europe as the poet of the subjective sublime, of an inner drama set among scenes of glaring material sublimity and intermingled sordidness. The relation between these flawed and shadowed sublimities is often heavily ironic in Byron. But interestingly this poet of unaccommodating inner states and outer substances was found to be better partnered by John Martin than by anyone else when the time came to attempt to realize his conceptions in the theater.

The sublimation of spectacle in the theater and the materialization of the sublime in painting visibly converge in the biblical and Byronic stage productions that use the imagery of John Martin and his school. Both dramatic strains also reflect the contemporary interest in the imagining of apocalypse and the turn towards archaeological historicism. But an essential prior link between the two manifestations of sublimity, pictorial and theatrical, was forged by an earlier painter whose influence may be traced both in Turner and in Martin as well as directly on the stage:

6. See Curtis Dahl, "Bulwer-Lytton and the School of Catastrophe," *Philological Quarterly* 32 (1953): 428-42, and "Recreators of Pompeii," *Archaeology* 9 (1956): 182-91. Bulwer-Lytton's panegyric on Martin in *England and the English* appeared in 1833, and his *Last Days of Pompeii* in 1834.

Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg, inventor of the Eidophusicon (1781), an illusionistic theater on a reduced scale, a theater of "effect," where moving and changing scenery temporalized by mechanical means and changing light supplanted entirely actor and play. One can argue that de Louthembourg's influence lay behind most of those persistent attempts of the English nineteenth-century pictorial stage to endow itself with motion and ultimately to define itself by light.<sup>7</sup> His influence is clear, at any rate, in the first dramatic production that seems to reflect the particular creations of John Martin, W. T. Moncrieff's *Zoroaster; or, The Spirit of the Star* (Drury Lane, 19 April 1824). The highpoint was an "Eidophusicon, or Image of Nature, shewing The Beauties of Nature and Wonders of Art," really a moving diorama supplemented by its namesake's light changes and mechanical effects, painted by Clarkson Stanfield. It featured an eruption of Vesuvius; and its climax was "The City of Babylon in All its Splendour," giving way to "The Destruction of Babylon."<sup>8</sup> Martin's *Fall of Babylon* had been exhibited at the British Institution in 1819, where it drew sizable crowds. It was reexhibited in the Egyptian Hall in 1822, where the other chief attraction in this strictly commercial venture was Martin's new and sensational *Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*.

Yet what redeemed paint and the still more chaste ink of a steel engraving to a pious and even evangelical eye could not redeem everything. It could not redeem the theater. Therefore, when a tide of pictorial "realization" in the theater set in in the early 1830s, there was some difficulty, apart from the merely technical, about realizing the biblical catastrophes of Martin and his school on the stage, at least in England. One hopeful attempt is rather reminiscent of the evasions of Davenant in the declining years of the Commonwealth, when all dramatic performances necessarily had to be called something else. In February 1833 Covent Garden presented *The Israelites in Egypt; or, The Passage of the Red Sea: An Oratorio, consisting of Sacred Music, Scenery, and*

7. The fullest accounts of de Louthembourg's theatrical art are in Ralph G. Allen's dissertation, "The Stage Spectacles of Philip James de Louthembourg" (Yale, 1960), and in Rüdiger Joppien's *Die Szenenbilder Philippe Jacques de Louthourbourg, eine Untersuchung zu ihrer Stellung zwischen Malerei und Theater* (Cologne, 1972). See also Sybil Rosenfeld, "The Eidophusicon Illustrated," *Theatre Notebook* 18 (Winter 1963/64): 52-54.

8. Playbill for *Zoroaster* (19 April 1824), Enthoven Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum; and published text, 2d ed. (London, 1824). Before he became a respectable Royal Academician, Stanfield was regarded as a leading scene painter and the supreme artist of the moving "dioramic" scene in England.

*Personation. The Music composed by Handel and Rossini. The Drama written, and the Music Adapted by M. Rophino Lacy.*<sup>9</sup> The performance was sanctioned by the Bishop of London as well as by the Lord Chamberlain; and at least one reviewer poked fun at them both for allowing this drama while suppressing others on the grounds that the theater would profane a religious subject. This reviewer praises everything in the production but the scenery; for "two finer subjects, more completely marred, than the *Temple of Worship*, and the *Passage of the Red Sea*, never were exhibited at a booth."<sup>10</sup>

The second subject, important enough to furnish the alternate title, appears in the book of the play as follows:

Pharoah and the Egyptians enter the path among the Billows taken by the Hebrews. Moses, who, with the Israelites, has already gained the land, stretches out his hand over the Sea, when the waters furiously coming again together, the Egyptian Host is drowned; while the Hebrews, with a bright celestial glory beaming on them, are discerned on the opposite bank, returning thanks to the Lord for their miraculous preservation.

The conception sounds difficult to live up to; but an effective rendering was not beyond the spectacular resources available. The artists concerned, the Grieves, were certainly equal to their part. A pen-and-ink sketch for the scene survives (University of London); it bears a clear relation to Francis Danby's *Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (1825), published as an engraving in 1829 under the title *The Passage of the Red Sea* (fig. 56). But a later maquette, with palmate wings and cutout waves, shows how the realization fell short, so that the audience, the reviewer tells us, condemned it as a "positive burlesque" (fig. 57). Francis Danby, who for a time managed to rival Martin on his own ground, here had anticipated Martin, and his picture was well known from all the printshop windows. Martin's mezzotint *The Destruction of Pharoah's Host* (1833) also has affinities with the Grieves' scene, with more sea in the foreground than in Danby's painting. It is conceivable that faced with the theater's attempt to do justice to these apocalyptic images, the Covent Garden audience responded less to any gross inadequacy than to the uneasiness

9. Published by W. Kenneth: The Dramatic Repository, [London, 1833].

10. Unidentified review, 24 Feb. 1833, Enthoven Collection, V&A.

that attended the mounting of a sacred subject on the English stage.<sup>11</sup> For the unembarrassed realization of biblical catastrophe as stage spectacle in this period one must go to France.

The unmistakably popular taste in the French theater for what Théophile Gautier always benignly related to the "Biblical enormities sketched [ebauchées] by Martynn"<sup>12</sup> had its severe critics in England. Thackeray, for example, who was most English when abroad, seethes with indignation at a *Festin de Balthazar* in June 1833, though he must give credit where credit is due:

At the *Ambigu Comique* is an edifying representation of "Balshazzar's Feast." The second act discovers a number of melancholy Israelites sitting round the walls of Babylon, with their harps on the willows! A Babylonian says to the leader of the chorus, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion"; the chorus answers, "How can we sing in a strange land?" and so on; the whole piece is a scandalous parody of the Scripture, made up of French sentiment and French decency. A large family of children were behind me, looking with much interest and edification at the Queen rising from her bath! This piece concludes with a superb imitation of Martin's picture of Belshazzar.<sup>13</sup>

The theatrical impresario Alfred Bunn, fresh from the imperial maneuvers that would unite Covent Garden and Drury Lane under his leadership in the fall, visited Paris that summer, and like Thackeray felt the urge to display his national colors. He notes in a journal: "Went afterwards to *L'Ambigu Comique*, to see *Le Festin de Belthazzar* [sic], and a

11. A conflicting but circumstantial report on the effect of the scene appeared in the *Times*, 23 Feb. 1833, p. 5: "The scenery, which is entirely new, is beautiful and striking, and the last scene most remarkably so. It represents the Israelites pursued by Pharaoh and his host, and saved from destruction by their miraculous passage through the Red Sea. The pursuers hang upon their rear, and rush after them into the water. The waves then close up, the clouds descend, and the Egyptian army is engulfed. After a few moments the clouds clear off, and the Israelites are discovered on the opposite bank, returning thanks to the God whose power has rescued them, while the sea is strewn with the trophies of the discomfited host of their enemies. This is so well managed as to render it one of the most effective scenic representations we ever remember to have seen." Among the many dioramic exhibitions in London during this period (regularly reviewed in the fine arts columns) was a phylorama which, in 1832, included views of Danby's *Passage of the Israelites* [sic] and Martin's *Joshua*.

12. *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans* (Paris, 1858-59), 2:309. See also 1:180, 333-34, reviewing *David et Goliath*, *Le Massacre des innocents*, etc.

13. "Foreign Correspondence," *National Standard*, 6 July 1833; in *Stray Papers*, ed. Lewis Melville (London, 1901), p. 37. The play, by Robillard d'Avrigny et al, opened 15 May.

precious mess of blasphemy and impiety it is!"<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, he was soon to give proof that he had not escaped unscathed.

Through the thirties and forties Thackeray often refers to the insidious advance of German religious art, the "Catholic Art" of Overbeck and Cornelius. He sees it making its way in France and hopes (in the spirit of Hogarth) that the roast beef of Old England will keep it out. He relates what he calls the "Catholic Reaction" in France to English Puseyism and complains that it is this fashion which has produced "not merely Catholic pictures and quasi-religious books, but a number of Catholic plays"—such as *Belshazzar*.<sup>15</sup> The representative paranoia in this complicated but most intelligent Englishman, his vivid sense of an insidious international conspiracy engaged in a calculated corruption of the young and weak-minded, goes far to explain the reception of the Pre-Raphaelites in the late forties. It is curious that Thackeray finds no significance in the fact that the painter most likely to be "realized" in this profaning theater was John Martin, as true a sprig of the English Protestant imagination as John Milton, or John Bunyan, or Martin's three brothers: the prophet, the poet on biblical themes, and the incendiary of York Minster.

Bunn began his reign, like many another Napoleon, with the need to do high-toned things "by way of being extra legitimate," as he himself put it. One promising avenue had been opened up by his predecessor in the management of Covent Garden. "The impression," Bunn writes, which "the dramatic representation of the *Israelites in Egypt* had made upon the town, now led to the preparation of another sacred subject, *Jephtha's Vow*, on precisely the same scale." But pressure from what Bunn calls "persons high in authority" led him to withdraw the *Vow* suddenly. Moreover, repetition of the *Israelites in Egypt* itself was interdicted; and the licenser made clear that all oratorios "to be represented in character and with scenery and decorations" would be excluded in the future.<sup>16</sup> If anything resembling a striking and edifying sacred spectacle were to be realized, it would have to be managed indirectly. Inspired, perhaps, or at least supported by *Le Festin de Balthazar*, Bunn turned to the notably profane drama of Lord Byron.

In April 1834 Bunn mounted a production of *Sardanapalus* at Drury

14. Alfred Bunn, *The Stage: Both Before and Behind the Curtain* (London, 1840), 1:128.

15. See his *Paris Sketch Book* (1840) passim, but especially "French Dramas and Melodramas," "On the French School of Painting," and "Mme. Sand and the New Apocalypse."

16. Bunn, *The Stage*, 1:134, 176-77.

Lane, with Macready and Ellen Tree. The *Examiner* thought that the end, with its homage of the soldiery and the raising of the pyre, bordered on the ludicrous as well as the horrible; "and if it had not been for the concluding scene—a scene worthy of the imagination of MARTIN and the execution of STANFIELD—they might have proved fatal to the piece." The *Athenaeum* reported:

The burning itself, and the disappearance of *Sardanapalus* and *Myrrha* were capitally managed, and drew down shouts of applause. There was rather too much black smoke in front, which in some measure marred the effect of the discovery of the burning city; but this may be easily obviated in future. We believe we need not inform our readers, that the last scene is a copy by Mr. Stanfield, from Mr. Martin's picture of "The Fall of Nineveh" [fig. 58]<sup>17</sup>

Success was not likely to give pause; and management therefore was not yet through with the team of Byron and Martin. In 1827 Martin's remarkable illustrated *Paradise Lost* began to appear, issued in parts and in two sizes, engraved by himself. There was an affinity between Martin and Milton, that greatest practitioner of the Material Sublime, creator of the Heavenly Artillery; and Martin's illustrations, if not as independently intriguing as Blake's, are still probably the best that Milton ever got. They were certainly Martin's own finest achievement. The illustrations had great success, and in April 1829 Burford's Panorama in Leicester Square advertized a "View of PANDEMONIUM, as described by MILTON, in the first book of 'Paradise Lost' . . . the whole forming the most sublime and terrific Panorama ever exhibited." The accounts of the architecture, with its overwhelming scale, its "huge masses and endless repetitions," make clear the influence of Martin.<sup>18</sup>

In England, Dryden had set his Restoration hand to a dramatized version of *Paradise Lost*, and there was at least one oratorio version; but no nineteenth-century licenser would have permitted a staging of *Paradise Lost*, nor—more to the point—would public notions of propriety.<sup>19</sup> Therefore any attempt to realize theatrically illustrations to

17. *Examiner*, 13 April 1834, p. 231; *Athenaeum*, 12 April 1834, p. 276.

18. *Spectator* 2 (April 1829): 255, 267.

19. A *Paradis perdu* by d'Ennery and Dugué (1856; in *Le Théâtre Contemporain Illustré*, series 43, Paris, 1856) proved the climax of spectacular scriptural illustration in the French theater. It was eclectic in its images as well as in its text, which (as Dickens pointed out) mixed Milton with Byron's *Cain* (John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* [London, 1872], 3:108). A deluge scene evokes Martin, Danby, and Girodet, and the play

*Paradise Lost* had to be in a strictly pictorial mode, like Burford's (whose vision of Pandemonium de Louthembourg had anticipated by half a century); or it had to be in a dramatic context that bore no direct relation to sacred history. In the fall of 1834 Bunn's Covent Garden replied to the success of *Sardanapalus* at Bunn's Drury Lane with an even bolder venture, the production of Byron's *Manfred*.

A mediocre actor named Denvil had the success of his career in this first production of *Manfred*, though the great attraction was necessarily—in the words of a reviewer—"the beauty of the scenery, its music, and its mechanical and scenic effects, which are equal, if not superior, to any thing ever yet seen." The first-night playbill had proclaimed a measure unusual in those days of bright auditoriums: "In order to produce the necessary effects of Light and Shade, the Chandeliers around the Front of the Boxes will not be used on the Evenings of the Performance of *Manfred*." The review continues: "The Messrs. Grieve have exhibited some of the most beautiful specimens of their art; the Jungfrau Mountains, the Cataract of the Lower Alps, and a Terrace of Manfred's Castle are exquisite pictures, & the Hall of Arimanes, a copy of Martin's Pandemonium was terrifically grand." The Grieve drawing for the last mentioned scene confirms this pleasurable recognition (figs. 59 and 60).<sup>20</sup>

Better known as *Satan Presiding at the Infernal Council* (when issued as a separate engraving in 1832, it was called *Satan in Council*), Martin's picture illustrates the opening of book 2 of *Paradise Lost*:

High on a throne of Royal State, which far  
Outshone the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*,  
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand  
Show'rs on her Kings *Barbaric* Pearl and Gold,  
Satan exalted sat, by merit rais'd  
To that bad eminence. . . .

realizes unmistakably Prudhon's allegorical *La Justice et la Vengeance divine poursuivant le Crime* (1808), now in the Louvre, and Martin's *Satan in Council*, discussed below. Cf. G. H. Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London, 1875), pp. 204–06.

20. Playbill for 29 Oct. 1834, and unidentified review, Enthoven Collection, V&A. See also the *Observer*, 2 Nov. 1834, and the *Times and Morning Chronicle*, 30 Oct. 1834. The last, the only severely critical notice, finds Denvil "little more than the showman of a series of splendid scenes painted by the GRIEVES; and as the house was kept in darkness, the effect was quite dioramic." Cf. Henry Crabb Robinson, *The London Theatre, 1811–1866*, ed. Eluned Brown (London, 1966), p. 145: "it should be called a show in which grand pictures are explained by words."

But even more does it illustrate act 2, scene 4 of Byron's genuinely undramatic but eminently pictorial dramatic poem, published ten years before the Milton engravings. Byron's stage direction reads: "*The Hall of Arimanes—Arimanes on his Throne, a Globe of Fire, surrounded by the Spirits.*"

Though he liked to profess ignorance of Milton, Byron had him somewhere in mind in writing this scene. He also had Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) in mind, on the evidence of the most striking addition to his Miltonic scene, the globe of fire. When Vathek and Nouronihar penetrate to the center of the Hall of Eblis, they enter a "vast tabernacle" where numberless bearded elders and armored demons "had prostrated themselves before the ascent of a lofty eminence; on the top of which, upon a globe of fire, sat the formidable Eblis." Beckford also remembered Milton's Satan, as the description of Eblis makes clear: "His person was that of a young man, whose noble and regular features seemed to have been tarnished by malignant vapours. In his large eyes appeared both pride and despair: his flowing hair retained some resemblance to that of an angel of light." He bears the marks of the thunder, and, like Milton's Moloch (and Byron's Arimanes), is a scepter'd king.<sup>21</sup>

Martin also may have drawn on Beckford and his illustrator Isaac Taylor for his Miltonic Pandaemonium (fig. 61).<sup>22</sup> Martin's architecture often seems like an embodiment, in real space and geometry, of the vast platforms, towers and multitudes, perspectives, courts, columns, and arcades, of "an architecture unknown in the records of the earth" in Beckford's Eastern gothic fantasy. But Martin unquestionably drew directly and frequently on Byron, not only for a sense of the gorgeous East and her Kings Barbaric, but also for his sense of apocalyptic ironies. Martin's *Fall of Nineveh*, which Stanfield recreated for the Drury Lane production, drew some of its initial inspiration from Byron's *Sardanapalus*, discernible in the foreground melodrama. His *Last Man* (1833, 1849), among other canvases, owes a great deal to Byron's extraordinary poem "Darkness" (1816), as well as to works by Mary Shelley

21. William Beckford, *Vathek*, 4th ed. (London, 1823), p. 209. E. H. Coleridge notes the "throne of Eblis" parallel in *The Works of Lord Byron, Poetry*, vol. 4 (London, 1901), p. 113 n. See also Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, 1966), p. 258: "'Vathek' was another of the tales I had a very early admiration of. . . . What do you think of the Cave of Eblis, and the picture of Eblis himself? There is poetry."

22. Jean Seznec, *John Martin en France* (London, 1964), pp. 19, 20. Seznec notes that the frontispiece of the 1815 London edition of *Vathek* "annonce le Satan président le Concile Infernal." For Martin's direct connections with Beckford, see William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 60-64.

and Thomas Campbell. The self-conscious temporal structure of *Belshazzar's Feast* has affinities with Byron's "Vision of Belshazzar" (1815). In the description of his own *Deluge*, Martin refers to "that sublime poem," Byron's *Heaven and Earth* (1821), which ends with the wonderful stage direction: "*The waters rise: Men fly in every direction; many are overtaken by the waves; the Chorus of Mortals disperses in search of safety up the mountains; Japhet remains upon a rock, while the Ark floats towards him in the distance.*" And shortly before producing his Milton illustrations, Martin painted *Manfred on the Jungfrau* (1826). A later version in watercolors (1838) shows a diminutive figure among fantastic peaks and gorges seized at the moment he is about to spring into oblivion. A companion painting, *Manfred and the Witch of the Alps* (1838), possibly took more from the theatrical embodiments of the scene than it gave to them.<sup>23</sup>

*Manfred* was twice revived during the century for London audiences, both times with considerable success as the embodiment of the sublime as spectacle. Phelps put it on at Drury Lane in 1863, sharing the stage management with William Telbin, the scene painter and designer. The music was the same that Henry Bishop had provided for the first production: Weber or in the style of Weber. The costumes were billed as "from designs by R. W. Keene, Esq., and from Flaxman's illustrations of Classical and Mythological conceptions." The reviews had much to say about the history of the poem and play, its present classic status, its reflection of the French Revolution and the years of reaction.<sup>24</sup> The *Spectator*, however, makes it clear that what has "drawn crowds every night during the week has unquestionably been the scenery." The writer praises especially Telbin's Alps; "but the great sensation scene is, of course, that in the second act, 'the dwelling of Arimanes in the nether world,' the idea being taken from Martin's celebrated picture. Arimanes is seated on a globe of fire, in the centre of a vast amphitheatre filled with a lurid glare, and peopled by thousands of indistinctly seen spirits." The

23. Reproduced in Feaver, pp. 153-54. Cf. *The Illustrated London News* 43 (17 Oct. 1863): 389.

24. See *Lacy's Acting Edition*, vol. 60, and the newspaper announcements of the production (10 Oct. 1863) for the costume note. The long notice in the *Illustrated London News* 43 (17 Oct. 1863): 384, makes much of "the impulses and influences that were set in motion by the French Revolution." These of course affected Martin no less than Byron. Carlyle quotes a description of the meeting place of the Jacobins by a contemporary witness that explains much of the feeling and some of the imagery that Martin brought to his infernal scenes. Cf. *The French Revolution* ("The Jacobins"), Everyman's Library edition, 2:78. Cf. Shelley, *The Revolt of Islam*, 1:xliv-lvii.

sublimity of it all, however, seems not to have overcome this reviewer. He goes on: "The effect is decidedly appalling; but it is difficult to avoid comparison between the globe of fire and a monster plum-pudding, and the fiend at the top, with outstretched wings, resembles at first sight in no small degree the sprig of holly which usually surmounts the Christmas dish."<sup>25</sup> It was by no means the first time one of Martin's conceptions collapsed before the tendency of the human eye and spirit to assert a more comfortable and more human scale. Nevertheless, the realization was repeated at the Princess's theater in 1873 with the intended awesome effect, in a further revival that met with the now usual "enthusiastic applause of a crowded audience" and "a very complete success."<sup>26</sup>

The advantages of *Sardanapalus* over *Manfred* were not only that *Sardanapalus* was written with half an eye to dramatic requirements and, dispensing with spirits, it incorporated a pair of villains, a pair of interesting female parts, and a domestic triangle. The advantages were also that *Sardanapalus* borders on sacred history without actually invading it; and that it culminates in an apocalypse physical in nature and staggering in its scale. *Manfred* also was given a visible apocalyptic ending in the theater. The last scene is described in the 1834 playbill as "THE GLACIERS OF THE UPPER ALPS! / PARTLY / Borne down by a violent THUNDER STORM, / And exhibiting in their Ruins, the Evidences of / *Crime & Punishment, with the Moral of the Drama.*" Sherwyn Carr, in his essay entitled "Bunn, Byron and Manfred," tells us, from the musical score, what was exhibited: "Rocks fall, & discover [once more] at the back the Palace of Arimanes." The good and evil spirits then do battle, and the good spirits win. This external combat and apocalypse runs quite counter to Byron's end of *Manfred*, from which the spirits are scornfully dismissed, like plebeian interlopers, and whose point is the irrelevance of Manichaean angel and demon to one who "was my own destroyer, and will be / My own hereafter." For an audience with a factual, material, historical appetite, however, a *real* apocalypse was much more satisfying than such an objectified allegory of subjective experience.<sup>27</sup>

25. *Spectator* 36 (17 Oct. 1863): 2631. The batlike wings "Amateur" describes do not show in the illustration realized, but appear in other engravings in the series. Danson and Sons rather than Telbin were immediately responsible for the scene.

26. Dutton Cook, *Nights at the Play* (London, 1883), pp. 199–202.

27. Carr's article appears in *Nineteenth-Century Theatre Research* 1 (1973): 15–27. The reconstructed ending, quoted in full in Carr, puzzled most of the reviewers, who were not

When Charles Kean produced his monumental *Sardanapalus* in 1853, extraordinary advantages had accrued in historical and archaeological research. Austen Layard's *Nineveh and its Remains* had appeared in 1848–49, and a popular abridgement was selling in the railway stalls by 1851. His *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, based on a second series of excavations, appeared in 1853. Paul-Emile Botta had published his alternative account of Nineveh, in France, and H. C. Rawlinson and others had deciphered Persian cuneiform. Winged lions now sat in the British Museum, and the Crystal Palace was acquiring a Nineveh Court. But the material remains of the past had not yet diminished the fascination of apocalypse. If anything, the fascination had been reinforced and authenticated by the work of the archaeological resurrection men, as Kean's treatment of Byron's text makes plain. Byron's text hastens to an end after Sardanapalus mounts the pile and Myrrha, at his signal, fires it:

Myrrha: 'Tis fired! I come.  
(As Myrrha springs forward to throw herself into the flames, the Curtain falls.)

The last direction in Kean's version reads:

MYRRHA springs forward and throws herself into the flames; the smoke and flames surround and seem to devour them—the Palace bursts into a general and tremendous conflagration—the pillars, walls, and ceiling crumble and fall—the pyre sinks—and in the distance appears a vast panoramic view of the Burning and Destruction of Nineveh.<sup>28</sup>

The record of the scene Kean's artists made for him shows a wall collapsing in flames, and a background of Martin-like structures, but no realization of Martin's painting, which in a sense had been superseded by the discoveries it may have helped to provoke. Nevertheless, Martin's vision can still be felt, here and in the grand scene that precedes it, "The Hall of Nimrod," where the scale, the perspective, the repeating elements, even some of the detail that the archaeologists had not yet

sure whether Manfred (forgiven by Astarte) was damned or saved. See also Boleslaw Taborski, *Byron and the Theatre*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature (Salzburg, 1972), p. 211.

28. *Lacy's Acting Edition*, vol. 11. Kean's interest in *Sardanapalus* antedated Layard's discoveries.



managed to supply, show the underlying paradigm of Martin's material sublime.<sup>29</sup>

In his playbill *apologia* Kean takes every opportunity to invoke the proximity of his subject to sacred history, while making clear that the relation to sacred history is merely ancillary and illustrative. At least one of the reviewers goes further, crediting the historicity of the production to not merely the "pictorial" but also the "scriptural authorities recently brought to light," thus innocently invoking a branch of archaeological and historical thinking that was causing some uneasiness in Christendom.<sup>30</sup> But for Kean—who actually drilled himself and his company in the attitudes found on the Assyrian reliefs—there are no such problems, and he can scarcely contain his joy at the coincidence of truth and beauty, the scientific and the exotic spectacular, the material and the sublime. "In decoration of every kind," he declares, "whether scenic or otherwise, I have rigidly sought for *truth*"; and Layard himself had approved. And the truth (in Kean's illuminating phrase for the ruins of empires past) is "the gorgeous and striking scenery, that has been so unexpectedly dug from the very bowels of the earth."<sup>31</sup>

### III

Turner had his catastrophic and infernal side, and Martin his paradisaic side: Turner his sea monsters, death ships, plague, avalanche, and typhoon, not to mention his versified "Fallacies of Hope"; Martin his blooming Edens and his vast *Plains of Heaven* (1853), perhaps the truest embodiment of a Sunday School heaven ever painted. A large proportion of Martin's illustrations for *Paradise Lost* and the paintings he developed out of them necessarily have to do with the earthly or heavenly paradise, and a student of the whole history of Milton illustration finds him the only artist to portray Adam and Eve fully in the setting Milton

29. Both in the department of prints and drawings, Victoria & Albert Museum. Frederick Lloyd's "Hall of Nimrod" is reproduced in Sybil Rosenfeld's excellent *Short History of Scene Design in Great Britain* (Oxford, 1973), p. 127, and (as a wood engraving) in the *Illustrated London News* 22 (18 June 1853): 493. The *Athenaeum* reported (18 June 1853, p. 745) that the Hall of Nimrod was "so managed in its perspective that it appears endlessly extended in a lateral direction, with an infinite number of square projections guarded with winged lions, and decorated with figured frescoes."

30. *Illustrated London News* 22 (18 June 1853): 493.

31. Enthoven Collection, V&A; the playbill was adapted as an "Introduction" in Lacy's acting edition.

provides for them.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as seen through the curious prism of the theater—a type of the popular eye—Martin is *par excellence* the infernal, catastrophic artist, and Turner the paradisaic one. The reason, apparently, lies not so much in differences in subject but rather, more interestingly, in differences in the use and rendering of form, color, and light.

A pictorial theater concerned with the translation of brush work into "effect," and aiming in some of its moods at enhancing the magical character of its illusions, had much to learn from Turner. One of the leading scene painters in the latter part of the century wrote, concerning his art and its requirements:

The boy crossing the stile in Turner's vignette to Rogers' "Poems," exquisite as it is, would be too delicate and modest in effect, but the same painter's "Dido building Carthage," "Ulysses deriding Polyphemus," "Bay of Baiae," are magnificent lessons to the scene-painter in colour, composition, and poetry. How many times have not his compositions of "Tivoli," "Ancient Rome," "Modern Italy," "The Temple of Jupiter," and a host of others, been copied for act drops, for which they are, indeed, the "beau ideal," or been the inspiration for—well, perhaps a little *less* satisfactory "original" compositions?<sup>33</sup>

The world of the stage lay between act drop and backdrop. The backdrop extends that world, dissolves its limits; the act drop conceals it, but also transforms the space it shuts away, apparently opening it to the eye and epitomizing the place of magic and beauty that lies behind it.

Paradise in the nineteenth-century theater—apart from its ironic reference to the part of the auditorium that held the "Gods"—was to be found in pantomime, fairy-play, and extravaganza, that cluster of related forms. When a pantomime began in hell, as it often did—the cave or other grim abode of some malevolent spirit—the visual analogies with Martin's art were often striking. But a grim opening and a dark scene, and the garish malevolence of a horde of imps and demons, served to set off the paradisaic character of what everyone knew was to come and had come to see, whose climactic visual achievement became the underlying rationale of the form. What is important through all the shifts and

32. Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton and English Art* (Manchester, 1970), p. 179.

33. William Telbin [the younger], "Art in the Theatre I—Scenery," *Magazine of Art* 12 (1889): 95–96.

changes of these nineteenth-century forms is, first, the constancy of *transformation*, and second, the progressive designation of pantomime and Easter spectacle as an ideal entertainment for children. As such, it still gave liberal scope to broad mischief; but the formal heart of it was a manifestation of the prelapsarian world, full of beauty and wonder and benign influences and overgrown vegetation, like the first panel of Thomas Cole's allegorical *Voyage of Life* (1839).

The scene painter who supposedly had most to do with this spectacular achievement was William Beverley. Joseph Harker, resurrecting him as he feels from undeserved oblivion, thought that "Beverley, without a doubt, owed much to the influence of Turner's supreme art, and excelled in depicting scenes of atmospheric and poetic beauty." But beauty wasn't all:

It is to the magic brush of Beverley that we owe the invention of what came to be known as Transformation Scenes—marvels of intricate design and development, of subtle changes of light and colour, that were created to decorate the fairy-plays of Planché for Madame Vestris at the Lyceum, and gradually crept into successive pantomimes for many years as their culminating glory.<sup>34</sup>

Movement and light, color and change, wonder that was not mimetic and material, but magical and atmospheric—these things form the basis of what Harker sees as Beverley's debt to Turner.

Metamorphosis itself—the spectacle of form in flux—was essential to wonder; not the disruption of form in the mill of cataclysmic energies, as in some of Martin, but a liberation of form in the flow of light and color. Harker describes the transformation scene as belonging "to an era of scenic art in which the audience was content to watch one stage picture gradually grow out of another in mysterious fashion, thanks to the ingenuity and fancy of the artist. Today we sit in the dark, while one scene is hustled into another by violent and noisy human agencies of a different kind," clearly a fall from an angelic to a demonic world, from innocent wonder to cynical knowledge.

Metamorphosis was also much on the mind of the irreverent reviewer in *Blackwood's* who turned to a spectacular entertainment, a variety of

34. Harker, *Studio and Stage* (London, 1924), p. 166. Harker saw himself as the heir and end of the tradition.

"magic lantern," in order to characterize Turner's contributions to the 1842 Academy exhibition:

They are like the "Dissolving Views," which, when one subject is melting into another, and there are but half indications of forms, and a strange blending of blues and yellows and reds, offer something infinitely better, more grand, more imaginative than the distinct purpose of either view presents. We would therefore recommend the aspirant after Turner's style and fame, to a few nightly exhibitions of the "Dissolving Views" at the Polytechnic, and he can scarcely fail to obtain the secret of the whole method. And we should think, that Turner's pictures, to give eclat to the invention, should be called henceforth "Turner's Dissolving Views."<sup>35</sup>

A few months earlier, a reviewer in the Christmas-day *Examiner* finds little to choose between the technical magic of the dissolving views and the wonders of the pantomime as a family entertainment. He is enraptured at the dissolving views by the transformations: how the "opening glory of the Bosphorus went gliding into a valley of Sweet Waters, from which there rose, as by enchantment, the richest scenes of the great city—with all its fantastic mosques and spires, its gorgeous palaces, and glittering bazaars." The educational and topographic features are clearly swallowed up in the marvelous, and Turner's Venice is perhaps not remote.<sup>36</sup>

It was Turner who provided the fundamental image in Charles Kean's most notable attempt to realize the paradisaical world, as the magical moonlit wood of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1856). That Shakespeare's version of the wood has something of hell and madness in it—as Fuseli knew—was here suppressed, in keeping with the Victorian domestication of fairyland. Three years earlier, however, Kean had been capable of reminding his audience that they were about to witness, in the

35. [John Eagles], *Blackwood's* 52 (July 1842): 26. It is worth recalling that a *Blackwood's* review of 1836 first sent Ruskin to the defense of Turner, and that one of the reviews of this same exhibition of 1842 provoked him into beginning *Modern Painters*. The first volume was attacked at length in *Blackwood's* 54 (Oct. 1843): 485–503; and Ruskin replied savagely in the preface to the second edition, citing *Blackwood's* 1842 exhibition review as evidence of incompetence. The pictures exhibited were *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth; Peace—Burial at Sea; War: The Exile and the Rock Limpet*; and two Venetian paintings.

36. *Examiner*, 25 Dec. 1841, p. 823.

Nineveh of Sardanapalus, a living picture of an age "long since passed away, but once as famous as our own country for its civilization and power." With a somewhat similar thought for present glory, he now set his paradisaal wood in the frame of an Athens restored to its Periclean magnificence. Reviewers mostly recognized that in so dealing with the Athens of Theseus, Kean had gone beyond the "illustrative and historical accuracy" identified with his system, though they did not always grasp the significance of the contrast between the architecture of an imperial civilization at its height and the beautiful world of innocent imagination, defined by light, atmosphere, music, and metamorphosis, where

the perpetual change of scene and incident, the shifting diorama, the beams of the rising sun glittering upon the leaves, the gradual dispersion of the mist, with the hosts of fairy beings who are there discovered, light and ethereal as gossamer, grouped around the unconsciously sleeping mortals; these, and an endless succession of skilfully-blended pictorial, mechanical, and musical effects, bewilder the faculties with the influence of an enchanting vision.<sup>37</sup>

The scene that epitomized this protean world (act 2, scene 1) was W. Gordon's "A Wood near Athens," a recreation of Turner's *Golden Bough*, with the evidence of man's cultural presence omitted (figs. 62 and 63). Transposed to moonlight, it united classical and romantic landscape, and substituted for the claustrophobic maze of the wood near Athens Turner's central avenue to infinity by way of water and light.<sup>38</sup>

Turner had sent the painting to the Academy exhibition in the spring of 1834, precisely when Byron's *Sardanapalus* and Martin's *Fall of Nineveh* might be seen in their first joint realization at Drury Lane, and *Manfred* at Covent Garden was in the offing for the fall. A reviewer in the *Athenaeum*, impressed with the brilliance of Turner's contributions to the exhibition, especially *The Fountain of Indolence* (after Thomson) and *The Golden Bough*, tried to come to terms with what might best be understood as the sense of a difficulty in seeing; that is, a difficulty in standing

37. *Illustrated London News* 29 (Oct. 1856): 393. William Gordon's splendid scene of Athens from Theseus's palace is reproduced in Rosenfeld, *Short History*, p. 123.

38. The relation of Gordon's scene as recorded for Kean by his artists (V&A) to Turner's painting was observed by Martin Hardie, *St. James's Gazette*, 17 Apr. 1902.

outside the pictures in the role of conceptualizing observer and being sure of boundaries, surfaces, identities. The problem lay deeper than a rivalry of line and color, and he explains the seeming contradiction as a fault, a slovenly neglect of finish, an absence of the "last touch." But the difficulty in "seeing" remains oddly paradoxical, something associated not with darkness but with light. He suggests as much in his description of *The Fountain of Indolence*: "the scene is magnificent—golden palaces, silver fountains, romantic valleys, and hills which distance makes celestial, are united into one wondrous landscape, over which a sort of charmed light is shed, that is almost too much for mortal eyes." *The Golden Bough* is even more perplexing: "almost dim through excess of brightness."<sup>39</sup> Thus, the paradox of Martin's "material sublime," which found an appropriate content and analogue in the "darkness visible" of Milton's hell, had its true antithesis in Turner, and in Milton's heaven, where the "Fountain of light, thyself invisible . . . Dark with excessive bright" irradiated creation.

Why was Martin given the infernal and apocalyptic assignments in drama and Turner the paradisaal ones? I can only venture a suggestion.

In Martin the perceiver empathizes with the represented experience of scale, with the radical duality of the miniscule human and majescale inhuman. In Turner the perceiver is implicated in the dissolution of boundaries and objects, in the unity of perception and experience. The attempt to discriminate often has to be abandoned at a given point, and one is drawn into the vortex or the path of light. Discrimination gives way to sensation as a source of affect, a reassertion of the primal order. It is profoundly infantile.

In Martin the structure is one of separation, alienation, diminution of the ego in the face of cosmic or physical reality. It represents the nightmare of annihilation and humiliation, but with a persistent kernel of bounded identity. It is adolescent or perhaps even menopausal (I am put in mind of the catastrophic "Maturity" panel in Cole's *Voyage of Life*). It represents not state or process but climacteric.

In Turner the self is already dissolved in cosmos—in light, or in the vortex of the elements, or in the landscape itself. Even in storm, there is a paradisaal identity of self with the universe of perception, of experi-

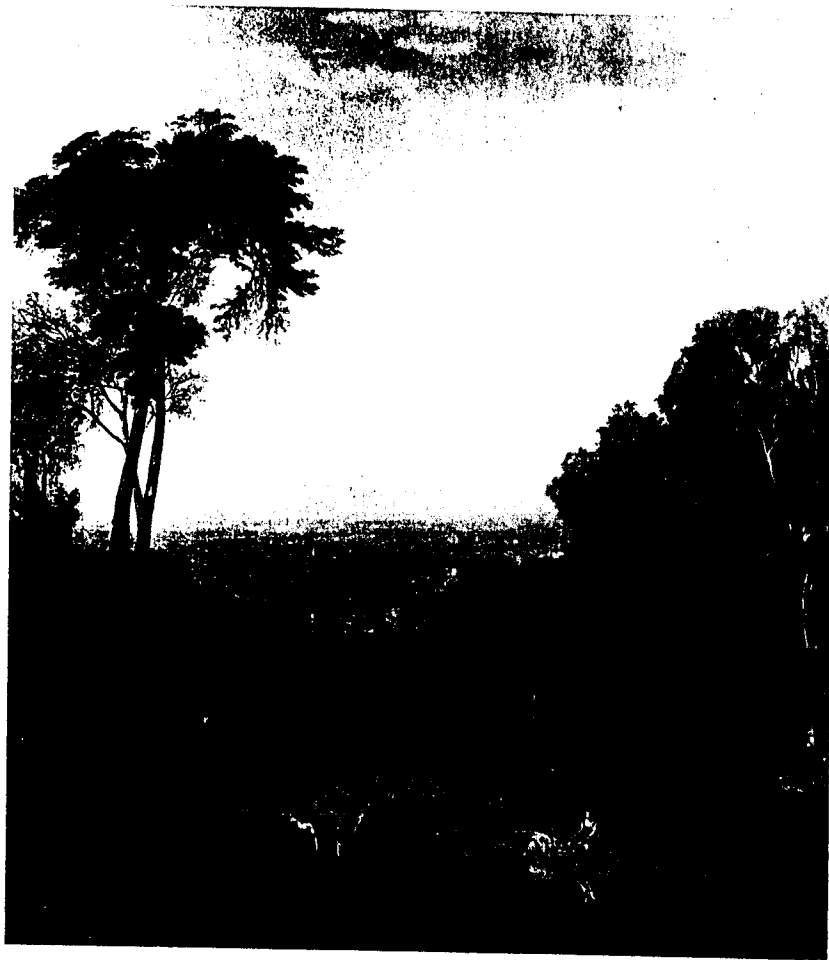
39. *Athenaeum*, 10 May 1834, p. 355.

ence, of imagination, and of process. Experience, in and of the painting, is kinesthetic, and the pictorial image is liberated from the "imaginable"—from the abstraction of bounded forms in a projected and time-fixed Euclidean space. The "structure" may be infantile, but the achievement reconstitutes the paradise we have lost.

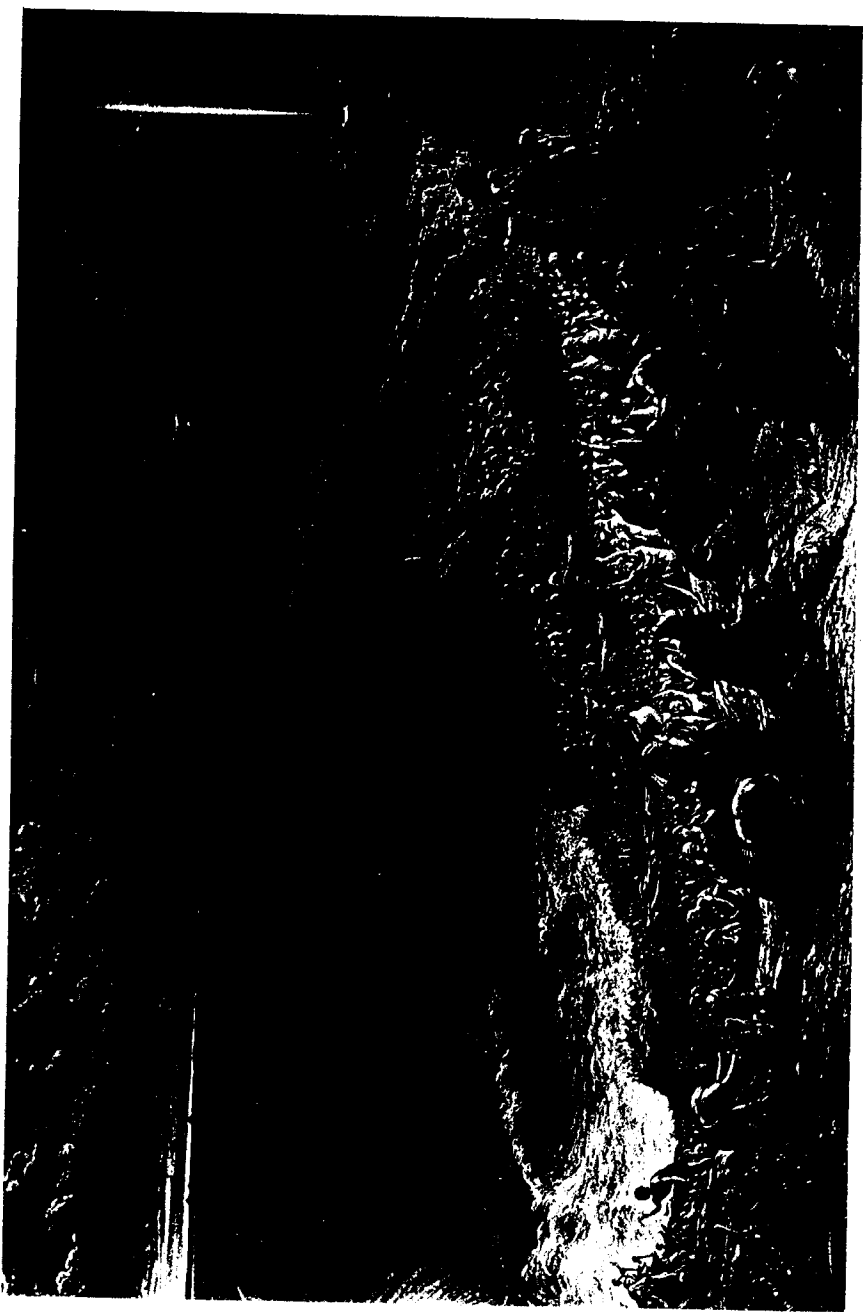
*Illustrations*



54. J. M. W. Turner, *The Angel Standing in the Sun*



55. J. M. W. Turner, *Crossing the Brook*



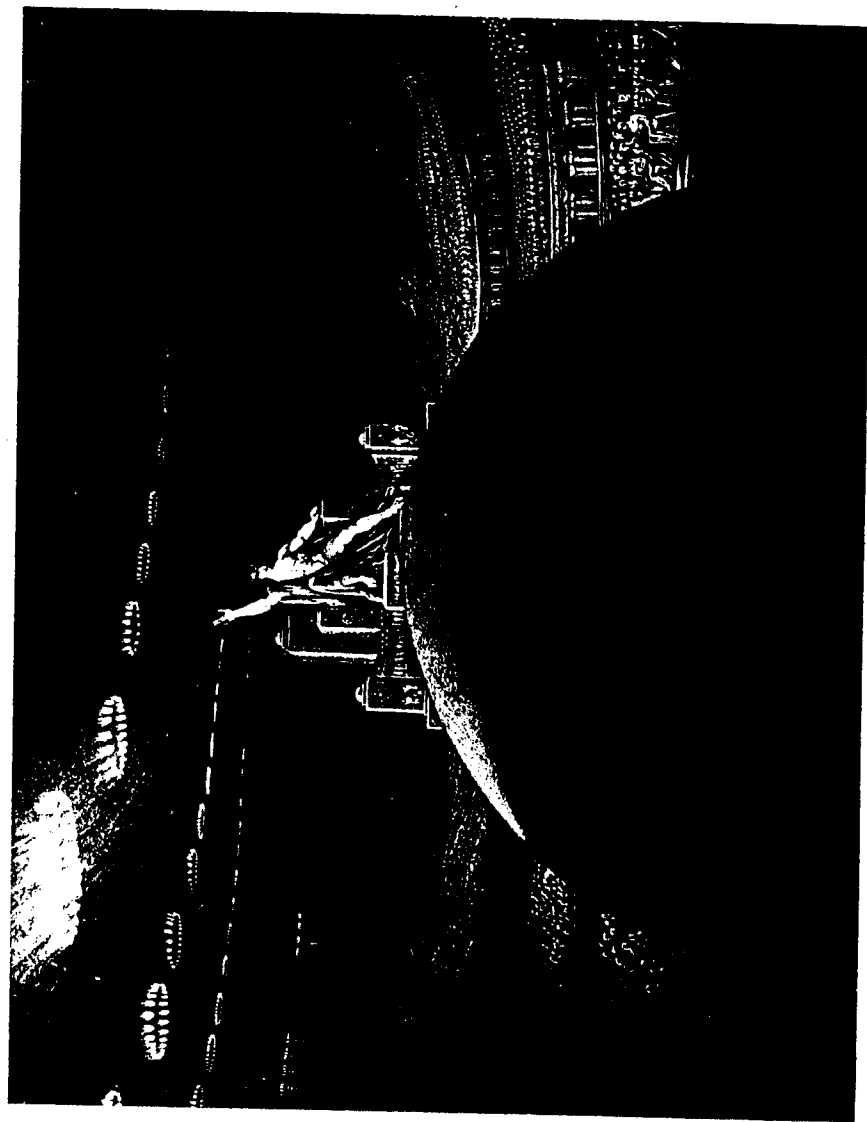
56. Francis Danby, *The Passage of the Red Sea*



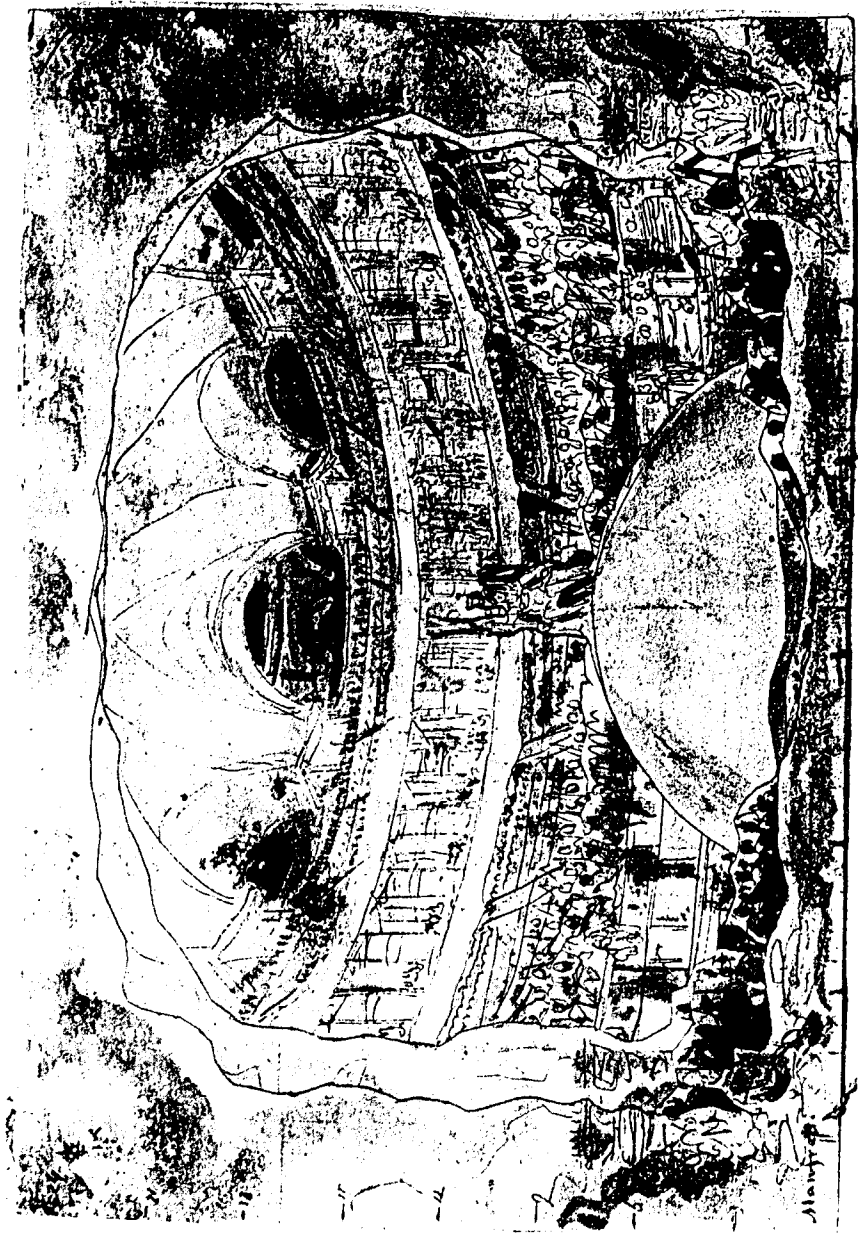
57. Family Grieve, scene for *The Israelites in Egypt*



58. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*



59. John Martin, illustration to *The Paradise Lost of Milton*, book 2, line 1



60. Family Grieve, scene for *Manfred*



61. Isaac Taylor, illustration to *Vathek*





62. William Gordon, scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act 2, scene 1



63. J. M. W. Turner, *The Golden Bough*