

Not long after I arrived in Boston, to mark the 14th anniversary of my dad's death, I made a trip to The Clark Institute to see J. M. W. Turner's *Rockets and Blue Lights*. I never learned to drive, and so I had to take a subway train and three buses to get to the gallery, a journey of almost six hours that would have taken little more than two by car. From Boston South Station, I took a crowded bus to Springfield, where I changed for another to Pittsfield, and from there, another smaller bus on which I was one of only two passengers to Williamstown, a picturesque college town in a region known as The Berkshires, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

The leaves lining the quiet roads were turning orange, yellow, and red. They were the colours of Turner's late seascapes, and the sight of them framed by the bus's window brought to mind the 35mm projector slides my dad used in his lectures. I thought of an occasion, during one of my rare extended stays with him, on which he took me along to the Manchester School of Art, a gothic sandstone building on Oxford Road where the light was dusty and our footsteps reverberated on the Victorian tiles. In a darkened classroom, I watched him talk to a small group of students as he projected images of Turner's paintings onto a canvas screen. That evening, I took the slides from his desk and held them up one at a time to the lamp in my bedroom, so that the seascapes and sunrises compressed into their polyester screens glowed orange, yellow and red. The driver pulled into a layby and announced our arrival in Williamstown. The air outside was colder and cleaner than in Boston, and in all directions hills covered in trees rose above the town. I set off walking, the only pedestrian on a narrow pavement at the side of the road, following signs for The Clark.

My dad wrote a PhD thesis on Turner. We never talked about it, but as far as I can tell, it was the major exertion of his life, the work of a decade's intellectual energy, ambition, and anguish. It was also one of the few material traces he left behind. He had already begun work on the thesis before he met my mum at 28, and didn't finish it until he was 35. Then, a few years after receiving his doctorate in 1996, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He was already a manic depressive and an alcoholic, and the MS destroyed what little fortitude remained. He lost control of his legs and had to walk with a cane. He moved into a ground floor flat, and, when living on his own became too difficult, his mother's spare bedroom. He lived there for a few months before he drank himself to death. The coroner returned an open verdict, but it was clear enough that he intended to die. The last time we saw each other was at a concert my band was playing. He had never seen us before, and he made sure to be there despite his poor condition. A few days later, we spoke on the phone, and at the end of the call he said, I love you. I said I love you too, dad. And he repeated the words as though I hadn't understood them: I love you. That night there was a party at his sister Emma's house, next door to his mother's. At some point during the night, my dad excused himself, took a bottle of gin up to his bedroom, and died. By the end of his life, he had very few possessions. He left me £5000, a box of photographs, and a grotesque clay sculpture of a homunculus. He had joked several times that 'Hughie' would be my sole inheritance. He was cremated, and somehow I was never able to ask his mother what happened with the ashes. There is no memorial to him anywhere.

TURNER IN THE 1840S, HIS SPECTACULAR MELANCHOLY
AND THE FATE OF MODERNITY

by

Nicolas G A Flynn

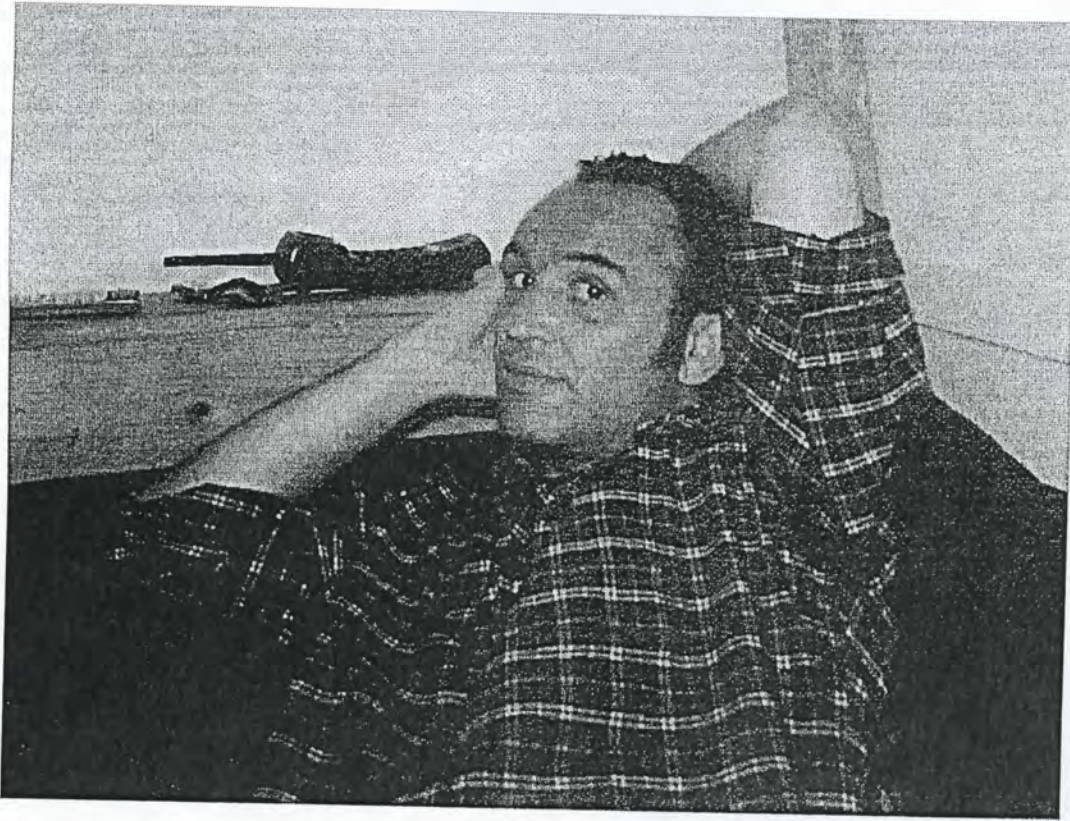
Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in the
University of London

Courtauld Institute of Art

1996.

He didn't leave me a copy of his thesis, but ten years after his death, when I had belatedly begun my own university studies, I tracked one down. On the British Library's online database of doctoral theses, I found the entry for his: *Turner in the 1840s, his spectacular melancholy and the fate of modernity*. I had not heard his voice in years, and never this one. I had no letters, journals, or postcards. There were photos of him that once moved me to tears, but they had lost their power to revive him. I had absorbed their images, and they replaced my real memories, which became weaker the more they coalesced behind a series of stills. Through his thesis, I hoped a part of his life that had seemed so remote and of which I knew almost nothing, his intellectual life, his ambitions not for me but himself, could become intelligible. I emailed the Courtauld Institute, where he had been a student, and arranged to visit the library that summer.



his spectacular melancholy

The mirror effect that flickers between the vast swathes of smoke and the wave, a logical and visual conundrum that fills Each morning, I took the tube to Charing Cross, walked along the Strand to Somerset House, and spent the days in the reading room, where I was usually the only visitor, reading my dad's thesis. Sometimes I thought of it as research, sometimes a kind of séance. He wrote about Turner's late, mostly unfinished works of the 1840s, in which the painter's experiments with colour, material, and form were so radical that his contemporaries thought he was going blind or mad. The first chapter focused on *Rockets and Blue Lights*, the last on *Sunrise with Sea Monsters*. My dad's prose style was difficult, less because of its emotional significance than because he wrote in the high-theory language of his cultural moment, the language of Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva. There was rarely a simple sentence. Increasingly as I read, I gave up on following the argument, which, on account of its dense language and frequent reference to histories and texts I knew nothing about, was beyond my comprehension. The writing became just so many words. I lost the argument, and I was saddened to find myself growing bored.

a subtle interweaving of colours across the combined reflexive form of both. Burnt umber fills the sky along with traces of browns that are more earthy still than umber, and these shades, mixed in with the yellows of the sun and the gold of the city's aura, which are their antithesis, confuse the division of earth and sky. The earthiness of these areas is confirmed by their resonance in the deepest patches of colour in the painting around the figures in the lower left hand corner. Here the lowest and highest points of the work are united across a diagonal whose very steepness contributes itself to the speed of the glance that runs over the body of

The mirror effect that flickers between the vast swathes of smoke and the wave, a logical and visual conundrum that fills the right-hand side of the painting, continues its work, at both its surface and thematic levels, unsettling vision and overturning the coherences of the genre. Together these forms create a powerful dovetailing conduit that the eye readily follows into the picture's heart, and they function between the levels of surface and depth and violence and calm that is the characteristic of the Turner vortex. The simple division between sea and sky, land and sea, substance and essence, is confounded in the painting's materialization of space and in its aetherialization of nature. The great arches of smoke read, then, in the context set by the rest of the work, as air solidified, and the mighty crashing of the wave as light embodied. These effects of misrecognition are achieved through a subtle interweaving of colours across the combined reflexive form of both. Burnt umber fills the sky along with traces of browns that are more earthy still than umber, and these shades, mixed in with the yellows of the sun and the gold of the city's aura, which are their antithesis, confuse the division of earth and sky. The earthiness of these areas is confirmed by their resonance in the deepest patches of colour in the painting around the figures in the lower left hand corner. Here the lowest and highest points of the work are united across a diagonal whose very steepness contributes itself to the speed of the glance that runs over the body of

In some moments, though, especially in those where he wrote freely and extensively on the paintings themselves, the writing came alive. I saw a character I recognised as his. He hadn't spoken to me about Turner, nor of sublimation, knowledge as subjection, or the volatile unruliness of silence, yet I heard him in the writing. I felt his presence there. Sometimes a phrase would catch my ear and I could imagine him working it with care. I began to see how the work was constrained by the conventions of the academic form: he had wanted to create an artwork and not an academic thesis. So I began to copy down passages I liked for their prosody. Some lines I read so often that I learned them by heart, and that summer, during the many trips I made to the Tate to see *Sunrise with Sea Monsters*, I repeated these lines quietly before it, as though by speaking his words, I could invoke his presence in the painting.

How the seemingly obscure late essays of our painter open onto this vista on our history in the light of the present's blackness lies in the ways in which they manifest the powers and the constraints given the modern self that have brought us to this. Perhaps a perspective through which modernist art becomes visible as so much displaced sadness, as so much waste, bestows an unexpected, intrinsically ironic, but delightful gift where modernism's history is most keenly felt as a history of repression. Perhaps this historical disability places us, as death and signs proceed towards inherence, in a strangely privileged position as lookers on - for we don't really know this place, but our atavistic melancholy tells us that at some time, in some other lifetime perhaps, we have seen already the still silence of beauty frozen in the air.

As for *Rockets and Blue Lights*, I had only been able to look at reproductions, and these just increased my desire for the real thing. Still, I associated the painting, or the idea of the painting, so strongly with my dad, and had so often looked at reproductions as a way of contemplating him, that now, as I caught sight of the Clark, a white marble gallery at the top of a sloping lawn, and realised I was about to see it for real, I felt full of apprehension, as if I were going to see my dad and not a mere symbol for him. I thought of the lines from the sixth book of *The Aeneid* that describe Aeneas' journey to the underworld to meet with his father's spirit.

In eager joy, his eyes filled up with tears
And he gave a cry: "At last! Are you here at last?
I always trusted that your sense of right
Would prevail and keep you going to the end.

And am I now allowed to see your face,
My son, and hear you talk, and talk to you myself?
This is what I imagined and looked forward to
As I counted the days; and my trust was not misplaced.

To think of the lands and the outlying seas
You have crossed, my son, to receive this welcome.
And after such dangers! I was afraid that Africa
Might be your undoing."

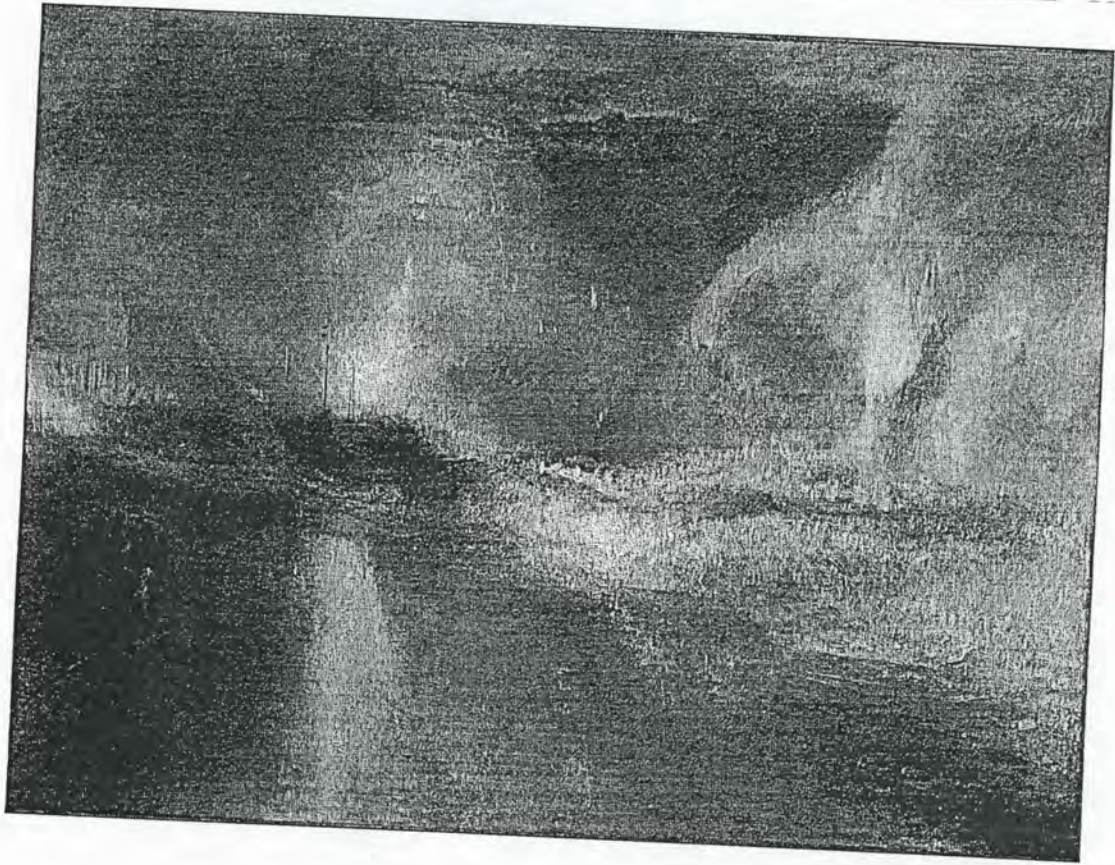
But Aeneas replied:

"Often and often, father, you would appear to me,
Your sad shade would appear, and that kept me going
To this end. My ships are anchored in the Tuscan sea.

Let me take your hand, my father, O let me, and do not
Hold back from my embrace." And as he spoke he wept.

Three times he tried to reach arms round that neck.
Three times the form, reached for in vain, escaped
Like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings.

I paid the entrance fee and deposited my bag in a hangar-like building to the rear of the gallery, with floor to ceiling windows looking out onto a terrace and reflection pool, beyond it some lawn and meadow, hills and woodland. The gallery itself could have been anywhere in Western Europe, with its laminate wood floor and expensive rugs, solemn guards, its silence exactly like the silence of other galleries and religious places. I passed through the rooms quickly and tried to project a purposeful appearance, scanned the walls of America 1850 – 1900 and Europe 1450 – 1600, entered a long gallery, Europe 1700 – 1850, and knew I was close. When I rounded a corner and saw my painting hanging on a red wall in its own small anteroom, it was like spotting an old friend in a crowd.



A breeze between his hands

Rockets and Blue Lights Close at Hand to Warn Steamboats of Shoal Water. 1840. Oil on Canvas. Waves crash in all directions, leave the eye no place to settle. Left to right from centre, along the horizontal axis, paint representing water becomes just so much paint. The whole top right is grey with no objects to fix on. Smoke from a steamer looks like a child's drawing of a tornado. Blue sky upper centre, cobalt with a swirl of white, more grey top left. Back on the horizon at the left side, towers or masts: vertical lines. Bottom left two sets of figures. Those closest to the viewer observe the scene. One figure looks through a telescope but he and his instrument are so faded that he appears to be playing the flute. Closer to the horizon more figures appear to drag each other or an object from the water. From several feet back they are visible. Viewed at close range they disintegrate in their materials. Umber in the bottom left corner suggests land but the line between land and sea is indistinct. Bottom centre, white paint for light on water runs vertically toward the viewer across blue sea, draws the eye back to the centre, where waves crash in all directions, leading the eye away again. I sat down on the black padded bench, overwhelmed by the energy of the painting's hidden sun and the blinding foam and spray that dominate the surface, underwhelmed at the same time by its failure to be anything more than what it is: oil on canvas.

disquietingly asymmetrical. And where symmetry presupposes the viewing act as compelled but stable at the centre, this version, whilst achieving that same trammelling of vision, in addition creates a tilting and teetering of it into the heart of the vortex by creating instructions that move the eye both profoundly and, now, laterally. The initial attention the painting commands springs from this sweeping of looking into the conical reflex of the shape of vision overlaid with combined effects of unbalance and concentration.

a mirage, or as a remembrance, lost behind the complex unfolding of a new logic of seeing and being seen in representation.

Rockets and Blue Lights follows a fairly standard arrangement, at least below its surface, which has a place in

A note on the wall beside the painting: 'In many of his late paintings, Turner used vigorous brushstrokes and loosely defined forms to explore dramatic struggles between human beings and the elements. This work shows a storm raging in an English harbour town. Flares explode in the sky to alert ships to the location of shallow (shoal) water. On the shore huddled spectators stare out to sea, perhaps anxiously hoping their loved ones will survive the storm and return home safely.' An English harbour town? My dad said the painting depicted 'the paradigm hinterworld, between land and sea, and between history and modernity, of Venice.' Those were his words: 'The city remains visible but barely, there in the top left corner, and what would have formed the anchor and centrepiece of those earlier views, the Venetian skyline, recedes here into a shimmering, a ghostly golden light, and only the campanile of San Marco reassures us that this is in fact where we think it is. Venice stands in the painting like memory, only half real.' I stood to inspect the top left portion of the painting. The city is faded and there is a crack in the canvas. Some paint appears to have been smudged. I could not see the campanile of San Marco.

city, juxtaposing the oldest and the newest of the subjects in the painter's expansive repertoire. The presence of these heroic symbols of modernity is registered by the glimpse we are given of their funnels as the wave momentarily subsides,

that the world's axis is in its hidden unconscious!
 that ^{is that} we happen, haltingly and half-hidden
 and despite ourselves, dismay ourselves.
 the clouds begin an infinity of stories

I had recently acquired a large, hardcover notebook of my dad's. His sister had called it his 'research notebook', but there was no mention of Turner. It was filled with handwritten notes and diagrams, many of which detailed his own psychodynamics. Where reading his thesis had been novel and sometimes moving, it was also safe. The glow of his intelligence reflected kindly on me, and I was reassured that even dead, my dad knew more than I did. In this way, reading the thesis kept a comfort of childhood alive. Reading his notebook was different. It contained the excess the thesis could not hold: unpolished writing, exercises in self-loathing, cries of despair. Seeing that he was so miserable was not easy, but it was unsurprising. More painful was the extent to which I saw myself in his private writings. The resemblance was such that I found myself wondering, as Montaigne had long before the discovery of genes, 'what a prodigious thing it is that within the drop of semen which brings us forth there are stamped the characteristics not only of the bodily form of our forefather's but of their ways of thinking and their slant of mind. Where can that drop of fluid lodge such an infinite number of forms?' How was it that after 14 years without a word from him, my thoughts took after his? I resembled him physically, and I was beginning to see that I would age just as he had, hairline receding, face softening along the same lines. Now I saw we also shared a slant of mind.

Perfect the plan - don't
 risk that demoralization i.e.
 keep perfecting the plan

part of me - the whole of me - that wants only to feel alive. To run along the shore and laugh. With

Fiona There was an entry in his notebook that he must have made after a trip we took together. My
This dad, his girlfriend Fiona, my cousin Eddie, and I drove to Rhyl in North Wales in Fiona's
love, Morris Minor, intending to go to the Sun Centre, a waterpark with slides and various pools.
But The old car couldn't keep up on the motorways, so we had to take the B-roads, and Eddie and
or I sat on the wooden benches in the back for the two-hour drive. When we arrived at what looked
like an industrial unit on the dilapidated seafront, we discovered the Sun Centre had closed
indefinitely, so we spent the day at the beach instead. I don't know why this particular day
stuck in my memory. Maybe because there are some photographs Fiona took of me and Eddie
with my dad, who holds aloft a plush Pokémon toy he won on the claw crane in the arcade. Or
maybe because it was the only trip my dad and I ever took together. Were it not for the
photograph, I would almost certainly have forgotten the Pokémon toy. I have one other memory
of that day. We were on the pebble beach. Grey skies and choppy water. Seascape with a storm
coming on. He and Fiona climbed some rocks and disappeared. I followed them. Were they
arguing or kissing? I remembered a sense of not being able to approach him, of there being an
impassable distance between us, and of the anguish this caused me at the time.

Mum and Dad. Friends, children. In 2 way. 2 way of
needing 1 thing. My isolation. My family is my isolation
from openness and love. Gabe and Fi are where my new
family is.



here sky and sea exist as separate entities for a second only

The reference to the day in my dad's notebook reads as follows: 'The part of me – the whole of me – that wants only to feel alive. To run along the shore and laugh. With Fiona, with Gabriel. To be alive. This is not and never has been my depression, my loveless, lifelessness. My death. This is not mine. But this has been all I have known. All that I am or can be.' An inscrutable diagram appears to illustrate the point and then more text follows: 'Time to leave my family. Why? Because we all fill the hole where a life of our own should be. Mum and dad. Friendless children. In 2 ways. 2 ways of needing one thing. My isolation. My family i, my isolation from openness, and love. Gabe and Fi are where my new family is.' I find it sad and also tedious: as tedious as anybody's private struggles. Some part of me wants to say, come on, man, pull yourself together. Stop with your whining, please.

mimicking the heliotropic power of the sun, but also humbly repositioning his mimesis as a flickering, as a revelation and a hiding of his power, in moments of obscurity and enlightenment - the winking of the divine eye of the creator. And this divided persona, this fluctuation between essence and material, composes everything else that we can see, constructs the rest upon a series of ambivalencies which direct the subjects of the painting towards a moment of recognition in a glimpse of the emptiness at the heart of the thing.

When our foundation as subject occupies the central question of representations, when order gives way to process and our identities are deeply inculcated in a gaze that no longer confronts the painter's looking out, but looks now into the very question of our mutual representability, then looking

1752550834

Terminal (Get it?)

Coming too in that particular place I was confused
confused about destination and about nature of

He was brilliant and he was tedious. He couldn't stop playing with his suffering. 'When I have
perfected myself via self analysis... When I have that one cathartic event... Expectation lurking
behind everything. Horizon habit.' His notes. 'Panic - in dream, and in waking. Night waking
in an anxiety attack - in the morning the anxiety lay, siege.' The way he spoke to himself:
'You're bloody useless you.' Unbearable to read.

giving
the
and
would
ing

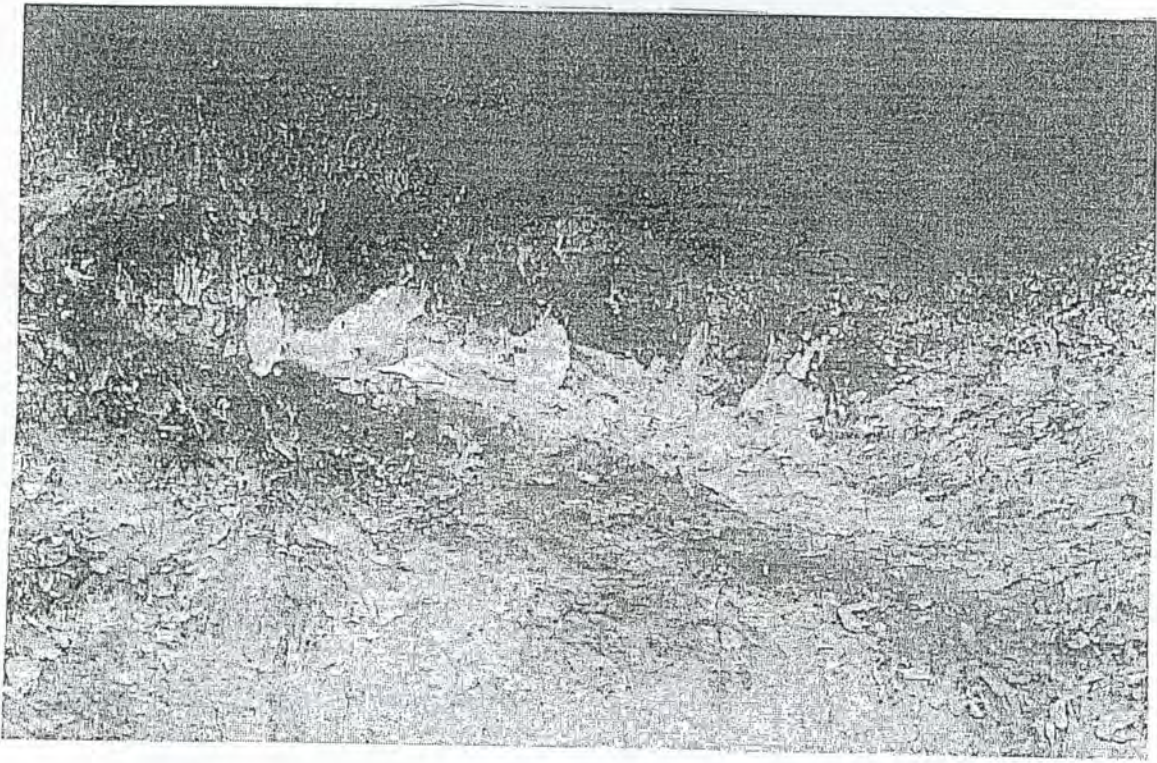
practically, even she seemed to know more than
I did. But she said nothing.

I was even confused, though, by her silence, or
rather, by the fact that the particular silence
in the face of my distress, ^{in my} sitting, ^{in my} speaking,
on the edge of the ~~bench~~ ^{bench} ^{of} ^{great} ^{at} ^{rest} beside her, ^{in my} sitting into
her face and into that of my sister, sat beside her
- that she was as proper and stern as dignity in
her silence as she was ~~not~~ ^{not} want to be. She seemed
sanguine, in fact. Given the situation and my evident
distress, that surprised me. Confused a surprise.

These two benches of seats on which the three of
us sat were tucked far into the furthest corner of
the terminal building; by the farthest blank glass
wall, the nearest to the runways. Although the activities
of the planes - as always seen the way in these places
- remains obscured. You know though that the departing
planes milled just beyond the glass wall behind
us and - my mum, my sister and me. Whose sister
was there I don't remember. Rather, I remember that
the one who was there carried characteristics of an

20 And then there were the entries I simply couldn't read because his handwriting was illegible, and so I saw them as the ghostly outline of thought, as the form of his writing only, its content faded, a vision mirrored in *Rockets and Blue Lights*, which seemed to depict the threshold between the material and the abstract. To be sure, it was *something*: a seascape, yes, with figures, boats, waves. But what exactly are the figures in the bottom left corner doing? And where does the land they stand on meet the sea? And where are the rockets and where are the blue lights? And what is the patch of bloody umber that stains the bottom left of the canvas? I had imagined seeing the painting for real would clear up these questions. Yet looking at it now, none of them was any clearer. I could look, did look at it for hours, and it seemed as though at any moment its details would come into focus. Standing far back, the image appeared to become whole, cogent. Then a certain detail catches the eye: what is that poking out from the darkest wave? a ship's mast or a building on land? Moving closer, an answer to the question seems imminent, and then I am suddenly too close; it is too much paint, just a line, depiction of nothing. Close up, one sees in the central white spray that the canvas is ageing, its surface cracking. There are no ropes to keep viewers at a distance from the painting, so it is possible to study its details from only an inch away. At the centre of the canvas, where the sea meets the sky, there are a few heavy brushstrokes, thick with white paint. From a distance, they merge into the spray, perhaps give it texture. Up close, they are so laid on that they become a sign of the painting's artifice: a wink, a signature, definitive sign that someone was there.

eye of a benevolent creator, organizes and guarantees coherence to the natural and the social which in turn mirror each others' beauty and order. This other painting is legible still in the recesses of *Rockets and Blue Lights* but only as



Where can that drop of fluid lodge such an infinite number of forms?

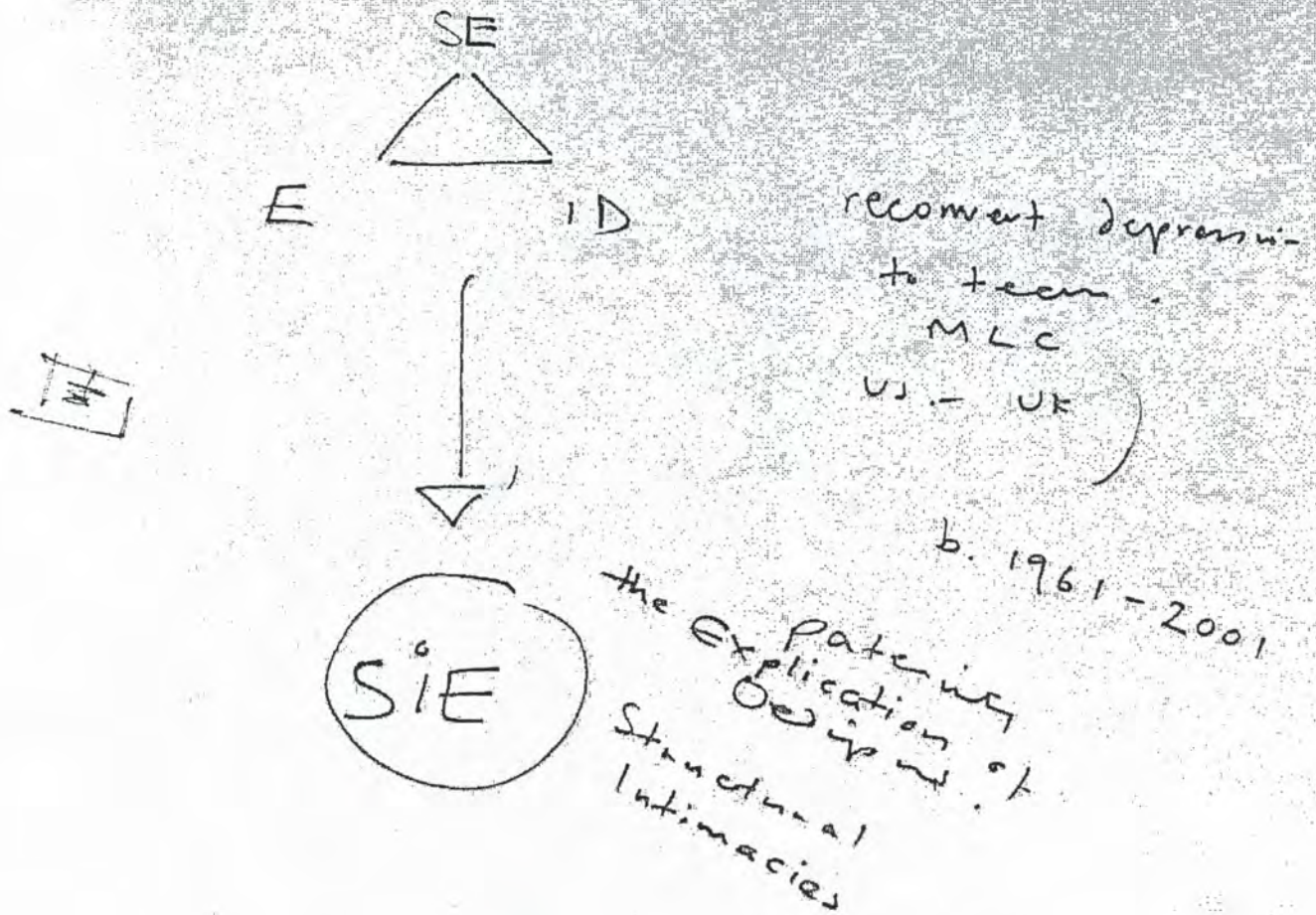
the modern subject's constitution: in these paintings
transcendental idealism's flawed rationality is visible

Perhaps having noticed how long I had spent with the painting, a guard entered the room and asked if I had a special interest in it. I did, I said. It was dear to me. Then there is a story you should know, he said, regarding a controversy. Several years ago, a conservator discovered that much of the paint was composed of materials not available to Turner. This conservator judged that the paint must have been applied by one of his predecessors in the late 19th century in an attempt to restore Turner's work. The Clark summoned specialists from all over the world to give their opinions on the provenance of the paint and help decide a course of action. They decided to remove a substantial amount of paint. You will see that only one steamboat is visible, for example, but there was once another boat at the right side of the canvas, with passengers on the top deck. That has been completely erased. I wish I knew more, the guard said. I haven't worked here for long. As I said, it was very controversial.

flawed but poignant path to the history of the present.

And if the present truly finds us at a crisis of the symbolic, a crisis brought on by the disappearance of the transcendental, the sublime of the sign, and if the condition we now are face-to-face with leads us to reconsider our faith in language itself for a condition in which all signs signify only the terrific equality of their affect, which is, thereby, affective asymbolia, then, simply, seeing through this semiotic, subjective collapse might open onto a new, ironic freedom at which this suffering is sublimated into this self-

I was too stimulated or bored by looking at *Rockets*, so I took a walk through the grounds of the Clark, up the Pasture Trail, to the Manton Research Centre at the top of the hill, and back down to the main building via the Woodland Trail. I thought of a story my mum once told me, a story he told her. He was walking in the Lake District when he came upon on a waterfall so beautiful that he shat himself. The story was intended to illustrate the sublime.



A curious thing about my dad: he was colour-blind.

It seems *Rockets* was always in some sense unintelligible. When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1841, the public was angered and perplexed. Turner's paintings were 'perfectly indescribable' and 'without form or shape'. The *Art Union* said *Rockets* would have been 'equally effective, equally pleasing, and equally comprehensible if turned upside down'. Now, nobody can be sure exactly what is Turner's art and what is damage brought about by careless treatment. *Rockets* was bought by a colliery owner named Charles Birch, who sold the work to John Naylor, who agreed to lend it to the 1857 Art Treasures exhibition in Manchester. On its way to the exhibition, the wagon carrying the painting was struck by a train at a level crossing, and the painting was badly damaged. Between 1850 and 1900 it changed hands thirteen times, settling only briefly in private dealers' collections in Britain and Paris. It crossed the Atlantic to New York, and there it was owned by another seven dealers and private owners before it was bought by Sterling and Francine Clark, whose collection would go on to form the basis of their new gallery, opened in 1955, six years before my dad was born, and in whose library annex I was presently reading an old technical report on the painting's condition that described 'scattered wandering age cracks' and a 'bull's-eye network from a blow to the right of the wide white reflection.' The report stated that examination of the paint surface using magnification, ultraviolet light, and infrared reflectography revealed large portions of the upper half of the picture were now displaying Turner's underlayer of paint and that this condition was not primarily caused by past overcleaning, but by delamination: the flaking off over time of the final layers of paint.

of floating signs
picture rest here,
has at once buttr
articulating them
spray and smoke th

IN THIS STATE THE ASPECT OF
THE WORLD IS UNDIFFERENTIATED

IMAGES OF THE WORLD
FALLING AWAY

IN TIMES
AN ANIMAL
FEAR
SURVIVAL

broken down and read as a series of signatures, markers of his immanence: these are Turner's colours, this is his vortex, his

Fiona left my dad after he took up drinking again, ending what would transpire to be the last happy period of his life. They had bought a house together. He had finished his thesis and he was teaching at the university. He had published a chapter of his thesis in the *Oxford Art Journal*, and he must have been hoping a publisher would want to take on the whole thing as a monograph. Fiona had been one of his students and was now having success as an artist. In their red-brick terrace, they had built a good life together. He and I saw each other during this period more than we ever had before. He seemed optimistic, making burgers from scratch in the kitchen while Fiona worked in her studio upstairs. But it was here that he was diagnosed with MS, and as his condition deteriorated, he became depressed and started drinking again. After Fiona left, the house looked bare, stripped of the trinkets and artworks that had made it so hospitable. My dad grew ever more melancholic. The insulating covers of the nerve cells in his brain and spinal cord were flaking off. His legs began to wobble: walking from the living room to the kitchen, they would suddenly give way, and he would need to place his hands on the wall to keep steady, an image of the world falling away.

	4 yr	2 yr	2 mo	Now
sing 2	Good	Drinking	Drink	
Physical	Unaware	Smoking, Heavy	Dung, } all.	
Mental	Unreal expectation	Breakdown	Cigs }	
Life/Prof	Naive re. work indications etc.	Suicidal	Suicidal	
		Nothing Bits	Nothing	
		Hooping	Hooping	
	Ambitious	Hooping Despite	Waiting for an act of God	

before it we are invited to feel the particularity of its unique and thrilling environment. Now here, a series of visual plays, of height and depth, of surface and space, of paint and picture, are enacted within the framework of the grander still, sublime, distinctions that lie between time and infinity, and infinity and place.

Infinite space and absolute surface are simultaneously made manifest to vision by the blue lights that are indicated in the title of the work. At the heart of the vortex and in the surface of the sea the painter's favorite cobalt and cerulean blues are applied unmixed and blueness suffuses the entire surface of the canvas. Lightened and then sullied through its intermixing with the yellows and the browns, it

Amongst the materials the library had on *Rockets and Blue Lights*, there was a set of memos made after the meetings surrounding the event the guard had described. According to the report, 'approximately 75 percent of the surface of the painting was not the work of Turner but rather some past restorer's attempt to disguise the evidence of some unknown earlier trauma.' And so, the report said, 'it was decided that the only sound course of action would involve the removal of the overpaint. This was the only way to discover the truth about the past mistreatment of *Rockets*. It was also the only way to ensure the future preservation of an honest, albeit practically destroyed painting.'

a cold and immediate chemical fact; whilst simultaneously as representative of infinity and of absence of matter it dissimulates this presence. The blue lights provide another of



A dream on wings

29 index of that archaism, form distorted and hollowed at the

What did he think as he left his sister's house at midnight? He was drunk and had spent the night with the family he had failed to leave. He had not become a great art historian. His immune system was attacking his nerve fibres, a cold and immediate chemical fact. He stumbled next door with his cane and searched for his keys with a trembling hand. He lost his balance midway along the hall. His breathing was heavy as he climbed the stairs. The light in his bedroom was too bright. He sat down on the bed and drank from his bottle of gin. He was so weak; he knew it would be easy to die. He drank again and began to sob. He was very sorry for himself: he had been gifted with a special intelligence and had failed to make of it what he hoped to. He had been a boy admired by his mother and sisters. He had gone out into the world hoping to find more admiration and had found it only occasionally. After years of careless anguish, smoking, drinking, sleeping poorly, his body had begun to malfunction, was practically destroyed. He was disabled, drunk, depressed. The spark in his eye had faded. Time had made sad work of him. He took another slug of gin and his reflex was to vomit but he held it back. He lay his head on the pillow and wept. I wonder if the world appeared at all beautiful to him there, strange joy, and if he made some peace with his life before it stopped.

They have moved me because, finally, they are not there,
and when I have seen this, I know that I am still breathing.

There wasn't long left until the gallery closed for the day, and a wave of guilt rocked me: I had taken a walk and spent an hour in the library when I could have been sitting with the painting. On the other hand, it was just a painting, a form reached for in vain. It was not him. He was not looking back at me from *Rockets and Blue Lights*, nor looking over me as I looked at it. His eyes had closed forever and I was looking at the badly damaged remnants of a canvas painted a hundred and eighty years earlier by a man I didn't know. I sat before the painting for a while longer, keeping vigil. The gallery was quiet so I read it some favourite lines. 'Often and often father, you would appear to me / Your sad shade would appear.' At 5, the gallery closed and I set off for the bus back to Boston.

somewhere and everywhere between the materiality of
paint and the infinity of blue light.