**Turner’s The Evening Star  Artist’s Eye’ talk, National Gallery, June 2011**

**1**

Turner’s ‘The Evening Star’ is one of number of touchstone images for me in National Gallery; others include Casper David Friedrich’s ‘Winter Landscape’, Monet’s Waterlilies, Jacopo Bassano’s ‘The Good Samaritan’ (which I made a painting from at art school), and Giovanni Di Paolo’s ‘St John going into the wilderness’ (which I revisited for a show called ‘Translations’ in 2006).  But when I was asked to give this ‘Artist’s Eye’ talk I found myself returning to this haunting image of Turner’s; it was the one that made earliest impression, and it has particular resonance for my recent works on paper, particularly as his painting owes so much to his watercolour experiments.

I first came to see Turner’s work at National Gallery as a child, and can still remember the O level essay I wrote about ‘Rain, Steam and Speed’.  I first saw ‘The Evening Star’ in reproduction, in a Thames & Hudson book in the school library, and remain as struck by it today as I was then.  Why? I think because it is less formal and finished than the large monumental public pieces, less explicit and detailed. His later watercolours and ‘unfinished’ paintings are more personal and internalised, more to do with reflection & memory. But above all what struck me then as now is the interior light of these pictures, the way they are so open & empty and yet so specific to a certain time and place.

I was reminded of this again when visiting New York recently. I was wondering around the galleries of Chelsea & Lower east side when I took refuge from the rain in a gallery dedicated to Buddhist art and saw a piece by the photographer Atta Kim that encapsulated something of what makes this work continue to resonate: it was a digital layering of multiple images of Turner’s work one on top of the other that ultimately generates an empty luminous field, an ethereal atmosphere that suggests what Rothko saw when confronted by his late paintings, and what Constable referred to as ‘tinted steam’. The accumulated light is redolent of water and sunsets, and also of the romantic sublime; as Rothko is reported as saying: “this guy Turner, he learnt a lot from me”.

It reminded me too of what has always drawn me to Turner: his ability to contain light within paint, as though emanating from behind the surface. I first saw it in an earlier picture of his, ‘A Frosty Morning’ (1813), where the atmosphere is so specific to the time of day (as it is here) and with a similarly oblique narrative. It was something he learnt from looking at Claude Lorrain’s skies, although here the light in the pale blue sky is characteristically English & changeable. What strikes me today is the way it echoes my own concerns when working on the Essex marshes: the same liminal, transitional space between earth and sky, day and night, land and water.

My awareness of Turner’s importance came first through history, where iconic images like ‘Temeraire’ represented the passing of one kind of world and ‘Rain, Steam, Speed’ represented the onrush of a new more turbulent industrial age. His images were woven into the fabric of British history, and still are, as Simon Schama has shown; he describes the weather and the coast in Turner’s pictures as being ‘part of our cultural DNA’, and the sea as ’the stage on which the drama of British history is played out’.  In the art history I was later taught Turner was represented as standing at a crossroads: on the one hand representing the romantic sublime (alongside Friedrich and others, as Robert Rosenblum showed), on the other presaging the arrival of the modern world and its representation in the transient light effects captured by Monet & the Impressionists.

**2**

The Evening Star has no subject to speak of (no action, boats, ruins, or storms): it’s essentially a distillation of mood & memory in paint.  While it shares the preponderance of sunsets & low horizons - the ending of the days - with the others you see here (‘Ulysses’ and ‘Temeraire’), and is likewise never being far from the water and the sea (which haunted Turner all his life), nevertheless it has none of the stormy turbulence of the others around it; nor is its symbolism so overt (as ‘Temeraire’), or as mythical (as ‘Ulysses deriding Polyphemus’), or the message so urgent and polemical (as ‘Rain, Steam and Speed’).

It is the emptiest, quietest picture in the whole gallery, the still point at the centre of the storm. It is quite different to the two earlier Dutch inspired pictures hanging at the end of gallery, with their tempestuous seas made up of  ‘soap suds & whitewash’. It is ‘unfinished’, closer to the pure light studies of his watercolours and ‘colour beginnings’ (which he began in the 1820s after his first visit to Italy). It has a reflective, backward looking feel, while also looking forward technically. It is somehow poised between the past & the future.

It has an abstract contemplative quality, appealing to modern eyes conditioned by 20th century abstraction,  that is also very specific and personal to Turner. There’s an elementalsimplicity to it, but also an ambiguity I like. And this is what draws me to it; even if we don’t know the details, we can still read it as quite particular without needing to know much more than this: it is the point where day turns to night, twilight, the transitional moment that echoes the transitional nature of the coast itself, where sky meets water and water meets land.

**3**

So what do we know about ‘The Evening Star’? It was probably painted in 1830s when Turner in his mid fifties. Although it has the feel of being done ‘en plein air’ it is most likely based on a drawing or watercolour (perhaps similar to ‘Dawn after the wreck’ in the Courtauld collection). It could almost be a watercolour, while its luminous washes show the influence of Venice, with its slightly lagoon-like feel, as well as that clear Italian light he had witnessed on his most recent visit  to Rome in 1829.  It feels ‘unfinished’ and may have been, like many others from this time on, the base for a more worked up image (as was his way, when he would use all three varnishing days to complete a work on the walls of the Royal Academy).

It was not exhibited in his lifetime and remained in his studio after his death. It was one of select group retained by the National Gallery when the rest of the artist’s bequest went to the Tate. It’s condition remains remarkably fresh (although it has been cleaned and relined), and it seems to have survived the poor condition of much of the work left behind in his studio, which was damaged by prolonged exposure to the damp and rain.  Often Turner kept particular pictures back that were personally important to him in some way, as private rather than public images, and I guess we can speculate why this was the case here: perhaps because of way he captured a particular light, or the way it provoked memories for him, possibly of Margate & his relatively peaceful & happy interludes there during difficult times in his life.

One can see this in the figure and subject of the picture, which is really about himself.  It represents the ghost of his past, recalled in the present. It is an elegy for his own time and place: his memories of being on coast as a child.  It distils who he is: the boy drawn to the water, the artist fascinated by light. But there is an emptying out of the narrative and drama of his earlier work, which you can see elsewhere in National Gallery (for example in ‘Sun rising through vapour’ of 1807, painted thirty years earlier in the manner of Dutch maritime painting).

**4**

So what do I see when I look at ‘The Evening Star’? The answer is not very much at first. When I looked at it closely I was struck by what has gone or remains hidden as much as what remains visible, and in a sense it is characterised by what it is not: a story, a turbulent sea, a ship or a storm (although it could be the aftermath of all these things). Unlike the other pictures around it (and more in keeping with Friedrich’s ‘Winter Landscape’, in the next door gallery), there are just a few things to dwell on here: - a wandering figure (with a net perhaps), a playful dog,  a low horizon interrupted by a post.

It is painted with minimal means, using a mix of rapid washes with glazes and impasto. He’s used a mid-tone brown base (to generate that luminous sky), which is still visible on the lower left hand side and beneath the ultramarine sky at the top. Mostly it is made up of blues & yellows, his characteristic palette, with flashes of pink & white applied with palette knife (the same pink that he’s used in ‘Ulysses’). It’s a masterful linking of colour & mood, showing the influence on him of Goethe’s colour theory, where the blue of the sea (Prussian blue, verging on black) is melancholy, dark and distant, while the yellow above (chrome yellow moving towards white) is bright and life affirming.

The eye travels along the low horizon (generating a potent light/dark contrast), and then rises upwards into the open northern light before returning to the darkening sea and coast below where three vertical (and almost equally spaced) incidents quietly capture our attention. The post in the sea on the left (marking the middle distance) is balanced by the boy and dog on the right (in the near distance).  And in the centre there is a single vertical stroke of white, which sends the eye skyward again to the star.  If the star is furthest from us (and almost invisible), the reflection is closest, its dense whiteness overshadowing all the other elements. The sea horizon meets the vertical points of the star and reflection to form a cross, although this is suggested rather than explicit, as in Friedrich’s picture.

Its serenity is emphasised by the extraordinary balance of the composition. The overall dimensions do not quite form a golden section but his carefully arranged rectangle employs golden ratios within it. Each element is perfectly placed within this hidden structure. It is there for example in the grid he uses, where three horizontal lines run through three vertical incidents, leaving the top half completely empty while the bottom half sinks into darkness. In this way, it recallsanother picture ofFriedrich’s, ‘The Monk by the Se**a’** (1809). It is also there in his subtleuse ofdiagonalsto carry eye through the space, from the marks on the bottom right of the image that move towards the post on the left before doubling back through the cloud line above the beach.

**5**

Then there’s each element in the picture.

The post isliterally a mooring post, but also suggests a ladder from earth to sky. It reminds me of Blake’s ladder or Miro’s ‘Dog Barking at the Moon’ and it also echoes the outline of a church spire (much like Friedrich’s in ‘Winter landscape’). The figure recalls the artist himself, reflecting on his childhood by the water: the boy who built his own boat and who lived by the Thames and the sea. The child and the dog on the beach are doing what he once did – mudlarking, catching shrimps. As in Friedrich’s ‘Monk by the Sea’, the figures anchor it in the real, allowing us to identify with it, but only just: the boy & boat seem on verge of dissolving into the ether, while their small scale underlines the sublime, the wide expanse above. This is a recurring theme in Romanticism: not only our smallness in nature but also our union with it: as Byron asked: whether mountains, hills & clouds were not part of himself and his soul, just as he was part of them?

Lastly the reflection, a rapid impasto stroke that draws attention to the other impasto marks, especially in the bottom right corner, where you see the marks of Turner’s thumbnail as he runs it through the pigment. It remains unresolved, but for that reason, and in a modern way, it draws attention to the matter, the stuff of paint, from which image emerges.

So the symbolism is there while remaining elusive - unlike Friedrich’s ‘Winter Landscape’, which is far more explicit; but also unlike Constable’s ‘Weymouth Beach’, which is more direct and physical, less encumbered by the weight of the past.

**6**

There is no topography here to suggest a place (though may have been once, on the right hand side, beneath the surface paint). It might be of the beach at Margate, a view remembered from Mrs Booth’s Lodging house perhaps, pretty much where the new Turner Contemporary Museum now stands. At least, I like to imagine it could be Margate because of the weight of personal history. It was one of the country’s earliest seaside resorts and a place he often returned to; in his final years Mrs Booth often took him there to ‘savour the sea air’.

But there is one problem with this view. Margate beach faces north and the sun sets in the west, not the east. So perhaps it is of Ramsgate or Folkestone? Or perhaps it is an amalgam of all three? In the end it is unimportant as it’s simply what worked for the composition. As Peter Ackroydhas remarked: ‘On later trips he often painted the scene as it had been in his youth, ignoring any contemporary changes. His memory invested the landscape with a reality that lived beyond time’ (as the evening star does). It could be first star in the night sky or, as some have suggested, it could be the planet Venus. We don’t know. The title wasn’t Turner’s own and was added much later (in 1906). It is taken from some lines of his verse scribbled in a sketchbook he used in 1829-30.

So the picture draws you in through what is not there, or barely there - through the tension between presence & absence. In particular through that spectral boat, which recalls the red boat shape in ‘Ulysses’, and other pictures like ‘Burial at Sea’. The shadowy nature of the over painted boat underlines this ghostly, transitional feeling and suggests what’s submerged by time & memory. To have left it in would have been too much, too specific & descriptive, too open to narrative or historical pinpointing.

All of which reinforces that elegiac quality, the sense of the past fading as the day itself fades. It is interesting to compare it to the start of day you can see in ‘Sun rising through vapour’, an earlier work of 1807, which is full of busy figures and fishing boats with their sails up, ready to go out to sea. Here, by contrast, the sea is becalmed, the fishing boats gone, the storm passed. It seems to mark the evening of Turner’s own life, returning from his sea voyages. It is both a coming home and a looking back. His work is often made up of fire and water and here the fire seems to be fading. It comes at a critical juncture in the artist’s life, while he was grieving for his beloved father who had died in 1829, and after a period when he himself was suffering from poor health (we know he went to Margate in 1827 to recuperate by the sea). If there’s a sense of being alone, of solitude, in the picture, I think there’s also a serene acceptance of finality, as though artist himself is the evening star.

**7**

Lastly I want to say something about the light and its spiritual dimension. The white reflection is really the key to the whole picture – this and the mellow evening light make the whole scene deeply reflective,a place of silent wonder. If the clear light and sense of harmony look back to Claude, they also convey something more symbolic, sacred even; the light is central to his romantic pantheism: ‘The Sun is God’, he’s supposed to have said.

You sense here a reaching for what is beneath the empty distant horizon of the dark sea, an insistent dark line that seems to ask ‘What lies beyond?’ Beyond this life.  What Shelley described as ‘the white radiance of eternity’ (Adonais, 1821). In a way it confirms Ruskin’s view that ‘Turner’s underlying theme was death’. It makes it for me a deeply meditative image, a still point to return to - to breath the cool air and stand on the beach for a while alongside the painter and the boy.

Although these works were derided as ‘pictures of nothing and very alike’ by his contemporaries (Hazlitt 1816), they became images of the ‘luminous void’ that allowed Rosenblum & others to look forward, to link him to the future: to Whistler and Monet, and on to the vaporous fields of Rothko, to modern abstraction and even to artists working today, like Anish Kapoor and James Turrell, who are still inspired by notions of the sublime.

In this picture we see him begin to move into ‘that ocean of light’ which Schama describes. In a recent book on the Sublime, the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto says this of his photographs, but it could serve for this image too: ‘A sea memory, I am quite sure that it’s a memory of the sea. Not a cloud in the sky, a sharp-edged horizon, waves surging in endlessly from beyond. When I saw that vista, it was as if something in my infant consciousness awakened from a long dream. I looked around at my hands and feet. And then I seemed to be looking down on myself from above. As if I were there merged into that seascape… a place from some ancient level of common memory’.

So I return finally to this: that Turner’s paintings provided a kind of foundation on which I could build. They showed me not only how paint can continue to be explored & reinvented. But also helped to confirm my own instinct: not only that I wanted to learn how to paint (something I am still doing) but also whatit is I wanted to paint: place, light, the passage of time and memory.

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