

Power, Creativity, and Destruction in Turner's Fires

Leo Costello

'More fires have broken out in art than formerly.'¹

It may seem churlish to suggest that the subject of J. M. W. Turner and fire is somewhat understudied. Indeed, some of Turner's most well-known works are of or about fire and have been subject to correspondingly extensive scholarly investigation. For all of this, however, as with a lot of things about Turner, the subject of fire has been generally approached on a case-by-case basis, in responses to particular pictures, or problems, rather than being treated comprehensively.² The extraordinary *Oxford Companion to J. M. W. Turner*, for instance, does not have an entry for 'Fire', though it does have entries for specific pictures in which fire figures prominently, like the various *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1835) images and *The Hero of a Hundred Fights* (1847), and other thematic elements such as 'Pornography', 'Skies', and 'Railways'.³ Ultimately, there is nothing wrong with this; indeed, case studies, many of which I will cite below, have yielded important information and often ingenious, convincing interpretations.

These studies have been in line with approaches to Romantic art more generally in the last forty years or so, which, as Andrew Hemingway has discussed, have largely favoured micro-historical accounts of individual pictures.⁴ In looking more broadly at the subject of fire for Turner, however

¹ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Literary Gazette*, 19 May 1832, pp. 314–15 (p. 314).

² An exception, and an excellent brief introduction to the topic, is Inés Richter-Musso, 'Fire', in *Turner and the Elements*, ed. by Inés Richter-Musso and Ortrud Westheider (Munich: Hirmer, 2011), pp. 180–85.

³ *The Oxford Companion to J. M. W. Turner*, ed. by Evelyn Joll, Martin Butlin, and Luke Herrmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Andrew Hemingway, 'Introduction', in *Transatlantic Romanticism: British and American Art and Literature, 1790–1860*, ed. by Andrew Hemingway and Alan Wallach (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), pp. 1–26 (p. 2).

— in, dare I say, surveying the matter — we will be able to ask some different questions of his work, and draw together a number of apparently disparate themes. In particular, I will focus on fire as an ambivalent subject for Turner: linked at once to both innocence, creativity, and comfort and also to experience, destruction, and chaos. Most importantly, we will see that by means of the subject of fire Turner explored different modes of human experience, as they interact with the world and with each other. In so doing, I will consider the subject of fire from the whole of Turner's career, as well as critical responses, both contemporary and subsequent; this concern with human relationships and responses will run throughout the text, even as the results change and evolve. I will seek to identify what was at stake in this discourse of fire for Turner and his critics both early in his career and in the early 1830s, and, in particular, focus on his paintings of the 1834 Houses of Parliament fire and his 1832 *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace*, the painting to which the epigraph refers. Almost uniquely among Turner's pictures available in public collections, this painting has received very little sustained critical attention. While doing so, I will resist the too-easy separation of Turner's early and late work that this might prompt, by showing the continued treatment of the human concerns Turner elaborated through the depiction of fire. If I do find differences between early and late work, it will be more the result of an altered conception of the relationship of the individual to society.

Turner's engagement with fire in some form spans his career. In 1792 the 17-year-old Turner announced his arrival as an exhibitor at the Royal Academy with a watercolour, *The Pantheon, the Morning after the Fire* (Fig. 1). This picture, because of its status as a sort of gateway into Turner's career, has generally been evaluated in terms of what it says about the young artist's progress and confidence at this early stage, especially relative to his teachers and peers.⁵ The work presents many of the concerns that will recur in Turner's later treatment of fires. It was, first of all, highly topical, as *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* would be. Throughout his career, Turner reacted to specific contemporary events and issues. The Pantheon, designed by James Wyatt, had burned down on 14 January 1792, just a few months before the Academy exhibition opened in April 1792. It is possible, though now seems unlikely, that Turner had been working in the painting

⁵ See, for example, A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R.A.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 21; John Gage, *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth* (London: Studio Vista, 1969), p. 23; and Eric Shanes, *Young Mr Turner: The First Forty Years, 1775–1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2016), p. 45. Barry Venning uses the picture as an opportunity to introduce the importance of going beyond topographical views for Turner in establishing his reputation at the Royal Academy, in *Turner* (London: Phaidon, 2003), pp. 25–27.



Fig. 1: J. M. W. Turner, *The Pantheon, the Morning after the Fire*, 1792, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-pantheon-the-morning-after-the-fire-d00121>>.

room at the Pantheon since the year before.⁶ Accounts of the fire at the time indicated that it had begun behind the stage, in rooms that had been recently added, where props, paintings, costumes, and scenery were kept.⁷

Beyond topicality, this early picture reveals an already complex set of pictorial and aesthetic terms, which allow us to detail how Turner managed the technical and conceptual challenges that events like fires posed to the artist. The picture is also related to another pair of images, as Turner created an interior view of the ruins as a watercolour now in a private collection, a study for which is at Tate Britain (*Fig. 2*). The Tate study is set inside the great domed rotunda that was the centrepiece of the building, whereas the exterior view looks through the shell of the facade into what would have

⁶ Curtis Price, 'Turner at the Pantheon Opera House, 1791–92', *Turner Studies*, 7.2 (1987), 2–8. Eric Shanes follows Judith Milhous in seeing it as unlikely that the William Turner employed at the Pantheon in 1791 is J. M. W. Turner (*Young Mr Turner*, p. 470, n. 12).

⁷ James Hamilton, *Turner* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 30–31; Anthony Bailey, *Standing in the Sun: A Biography of J. M. W. Turner* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1997), p. 38.



Fig. 2: J. M. W. Turner, *The Interior of the Ruined Oxford Street Pantheon*, 1792, watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-interior-of-the-ruined-oxford-street-pantheon-d00122>>.

been the card rooms and corridors closer to the street than the rotunda, which was set back in the southern portion of the building.⁸ In both views, Turner highlights the effect of sunlight hitting reddish brick, a colouring which evokes a still-burning fire.⁹ This is heightened in the interior view by the climbing ruins of the columns, which suggest the form of flames licking the sky.¹⁰ In the exterior view, the red colouring comes through the windows and suggests a burning building seen from the outside, further heightening the hot/cold contrast created by Turner's inclusion of icicles formed on the facade. The sunlight striking the interior bricks is a curious detail, because while Turner identifies the scene as morning, the sun is coming from the west, since we are looking to the south-east, from the opposite (north) side of Oxford Street. Turner may have intended the watercolour to be made into a print, which would have reversed and corrected the sun's direction, but he may also have kept the orientation from a preparatory drawing he used for the watercolour. In either case, the effect of sun hitting brick was clearly an important aspect of the scene for the young Turner. Together with the contrast of the hot and cold noted above, this detail allows the artist to set the scene with great vividness in terms of conditions of light and colour, but also with great specificity as to time of year and the broader atmospheric conditions within which viewers would have experienced it. Again, when Turner showed this painting the event would have been fresh in the minds of many of its viewers and by these means his picture vividly evoked the conditions of a cold January morning.

These interior and exterior views allowed Turner to invoke both the fire itself and its aftermath. That aftermath is experienced in markedly different modes in the two pictures: one busy, social, and multiple; the other meditative, silent, and desolate. What seems to have attracted Turner most, though, is the human response to fire, as well as the issues of power that it brings to the fore. This supports Eric Shanes's contention that it is the human element that most interested Turner: 'The overall emphasis on staffage further demonstrates Turner's resolve to bring humanity to the forefront of his art' (*Young Mr Turner*, p. 45).

⁸ See Curtis Price, Judith Milhous, and Robert D. Hume, 'A Plan of the Pantheon Opera House (1790–92)', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3 (1991), 213–46.

⁹ Anthony Bailey notes the slanting morning light and suggests that it allowed Turner to render the windows of the neighbouring buildings without reflections, as would have suited his clientele for architectural drawings (p. 38).

¹⁰ In response to the negative criticism of the Rev. John Eagles, Ruskin would much later make a similar comparison between Turner's architecture and flames in writing about *Juliet and Her Nurse* (1836): 'And the spires of the glorious city rise indistinctly bright into those living mists, like pyramids of pale fire from some vast altar.' See 'A Reply to "Blackwood's" Criticism of Turner', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), III: *Modern Painters*, vol. 1 (1903), pp. 635–40 (p. 639).

The exterior view is inherently social. We view the scene as part of an extensive and varied group of figures. Andrew Wilton has convincingly suggested that Turner's approach in this regard is related to the large London views of artists like Edward Dayes and Thomas Malton.¹¹ Figures in the foreground attend the firefighting apparatus in the lower left-hand corner, while others further away are still removing debris from the interior. In the street, people of various classes, genders, and ages stop on their way down Oxford Street. We are given a range of responses, some more task oriented — physically engaged with the building and its calamity — others more aesthetic in nature: distanced, wondering, and visual. Fire is a social matter, and a matter of sociability even, as crowds gather to discuss the public event. Turner's watercolour partakes of this public quality. It is busy and complex, with multiple focal points. Figures, as often with Turner, engage with the viewer, as if to include us in the conversation(s), as they discuss the scene and evaluate its consequences.¹² Research into the Pantheon's history, and the fire, has suggested that it was almost certainly started intentionally by the building's proprietors. Turning the Pantheon into an opera house had not proved financially sound, and a deal had been struck to move the Opera back to Haymarket, leaving the Pantheon's investors with several years left on the lease at a burdensome price. Indeed, rumours of arson apparently circulated almost immediately (Price, 'Turner at the Pantheon', p. 6). Implicit within the morning sociability of the scene, then, is a contrast with the antisocial night-time activity of arson. Turner likely knew of these rumours, and some of the hurried conversations we see taking place here may even concern them. The picture enters into a conversation with its urbane, informed London audience at the Royal Academy: they are able to relate to the discussions taking place within its frame.

A contemporary account stresses both the consequences of the fire and the degree of efficacy in attempting to combat it. The report notes, on the one hand, that the fire had already become so intense by the time fire engines could be brought to the scene that property could not be saved. It goes on to note, however, that no one was hurt and that the engines,

¹¹ Andrew Wilton, 'The Pantheon, the Morning after the Fire (1792) by Joseph Mallord William Turner', catalogue entry, April 2012, in *J. M. W. Turner: Sketchbooks, Drawings and Watercolours*, ed. by David Blayney Brown, Tate Research Publication, December 2012, <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-pantheon-the-morning-after-the-fire-r1140046>> [accessed 25 August 2017]. The influence of Malton and Dayes has also been noted by Edward Yardley (*Oxford Companion to J. M. W. Turner*, ed. by Joll, Butlin, and Herrmann, p. 210).

¹² James Hamilton notes especially the working nature of the figures: 'The topical narrative is driven by urgent work and gestural action.' See James Hamilton, *Turner and the Scientists* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), p. 38.

when they did arrive, were able to keep the fire from spreading to other buildings, thus avoiding real catastrophe. But other damage was done: the report points out that the performers, as well as the insurers, would suffer financially,

for they have put themselves, as usual, to great expences [*sic*] in preparing for the season, many of them were obliged to do this on credit, but their salaries ending with the existence of the house, and before any of them had their benefit nights, they have now no means of extricating themselves from their difficulties.¹³

What is at stake is power; not only the power of fire to destroy, but also issues of class, capital, and the power to control one's own economic destiny.

When we see the Pantheon watercolour as forming an implicit pair with the interior view, moreover, we can add another layer to Turner's exploration of human responses to fire. As James Hamilton has noted, the two scenes are dramatically different: where the exterior is lively and social, as glances, gestures, and conversations move in different directions across the sheet, the interior scene is calm, solitary, and silent (*Turner*, pp. 30–32). The eye moves more slowly and rhythmically around the picture, following the contours of the massively scaled ruins of the space of the rotunda. The only human presence here is ghostly, as if the building had been in ruins for decades already, its human creators and users a distant memory, so that the viewer, instead of being surrounded by others, here experiences the scene in radical isolation.¹⁴ The interior of the building becomes a metaphor for a state of mind, for interiority itself, as the scene is experienced privately as a solitary meditation and a meditation on solitariness. Fire allows Turner to explore human experience, both in terms of events and aesthetic representations. The final version of the drawing softens the picture by tidying the ruins a little, de-emphasizing the contrast between light and shade, and inserting two figures in the foreground of the scene, who act as surrogates for the viewer's meditation.¹⁵ Turner's perspective from the burned-out interior affects our view of the exterior, alerting us to a sense of the desolation of the ruins that underlies the sociability of the exterior view.

¹³ 'Domestic Occurrences', *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1792, pp. 84–86 (p. 85).

¹⁴ Hamilton, describing the finished work, rather than the drawing now in the Tate, describes the 'precarious towers of tottering brickwork with two men picking over the ruins of Wyatt's great creation, as if they were contemplating the decline and fall of the Roman empire among the ruins of the Forum'. He calls the exterior view 'by contrast jaunty and matter-of-fact' (*Turner*, p. 31).

¹⁵ Andrew Wilton, *The Life and Work of J. M. W. Turner* (London: Academy Editions, 1979), catalogue number 28, p. 303.

These two modes also intriguingly correspond to what we know of the young Turner's personal comportment. On the one hand, he was notorious from an early age for his asocial, taciturn disposition and his immersion in nature and art. One account described him as 'not like young people in general, he was singular and very silent, seemed exclusively devoted to his drawing, and would not go into society, did not like "plays"'.¹⁶ By contrast, Clara Wells claims, 'Of all the light-hearted merry creatures I ever knew, Turner was the most so; and the laughter and fun that abounded when he was an inmate in our cottage was inconceivable, particularly with the juvenile members of the family.'¹⁷ These qualities match the two modes of the Pantheon pictures: the one brooding, silent, and isolated; the other lively, light, and sociable.¹⁸

In this vein, the exterior Pantheon view is notable also for the prominence of children, something highlighted by the extremely low viewpoint Turner has adopted. This low viewpoint was a common feature of Turner's early works such as *Oxford: Tom Tower, Christ Church* (1792–93) (*Fig. 3*) and should be acknowledged in analysing the modes of representation in play in the Pantheon pictures. Two other, even earlier watercolours, feature a similarly low viewpoint and a focus on children. The first, *Cottage Interior by Firelight* (1790–91) (*Fig. 4*), must be Turner's first image of fire, and places us at eye level with a young boy who tends to the fire, while the mother holds a cat and his sister feeds it a spoonful of milk. Shanes convincingly ties the imagery to Turner's sense of yearning for the loving mother and sister (his own had died when he was aged four, in 1783) that he had been denied as a young boy (*Young Mr Turner*, p. 16). Here, fire functions powerfully in relation to the invocation of innocence and comfort. At the same time, however, the uneven bricks and their glowing red colour under the intense heat of the flames hint at the fire's destructive capacity. If we apply this to both Pantheon pictures, then we can further complicate our sense of the modes of representation in play there. On the one hand, for instance, the pictures speak to corruption: arson and destruction. On the other hand, the viewpoint, aligned with the children

¹⁶ Cited in Andrew Wilton, *Turner in His Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), p. 22.

¹⁷ Cited in Wilton, *Turner in His Time*, p. 24. Jack Lindsay makes note of the dichotomy I have described in *J. M. W. Turner: His Life and Work: A Critical Biography* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1966), p. 32. Lindsay's work offers further discussion of Turner's tendency to think of his pictures as his children (pp. 32, 92–95), and is interesting in this regard.

¹⁸ I bring in these biographical details here not because I think it is the goal of analysis to gain insight into the personal life or thoughts of the artist by means of his or her work, nor because I see pictures as contiguous with their creators' intentions. Rather, a dual focus on biography and imagery can be mutually illuminating, allowing us to further elaborate the complexities of representation that we are concerned with here.



Fig. 3: J. M. W. Turner, *Oxford: Tom Tower, Christ Church*, 1792–93, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-oxford-tom-tower-christ-church-doo155>>.

visible in the street, situates us as innocent viewers, taking in the scene with a sense of childlike wonder. But in the interior, the low viewpoint also seems to invoke childhood terror: the irredeemably destroyed building recalls an abject state of mind.



Fig. 4: J. M. W. Turner, *Cottage Interior by Firelight*, 1790–91, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-cottage-interior-by-firelight-d00187>>.

Again, combining these observations with biographical information allows us to see how Turner's fires had comforting, domestic associations as well as more ominous ones. Turner also adopted a low viewpoint in *The Two Eldest Daughters of W. F. Wells Playing in an Interior* (c. 1795, private collection). The girl on the left is the same Clara Wells who we have seen speak affectionately of Turner. She would also, Shanes notes, recall Turner in her house sitting and sketching by the fireside, which he seems to have viewed as a haven from the turmoil of his own domestic situation (*Young Mr Turner*, pp. 109–10). Compared with *Cottage Interior by Firelight*, this watercolour's greater formality is striking. The rooms are clearly more finely appointed, and Turner places an almost impossible amount of floor between himself and the two girls. The picture already speaks to a yearning for a lost connection to innocence, as the artist takes in the formal setting in a way that is different from the two girls, whose downward glances are focused narrowly on their play, oblivious to any broader social context. The inclusion of this low viewpoint in the exterior Pantheon view creates a similar effect, at once near and involved but also slightly distanced and apart. This sense of distance carries a quality of loss and yearning for

innocence that colours the exterior view as it looks back on the ruins of the once-bustling building.

In one sense, this experience of loss is carried over in the artist's position as a creative agent, which figures in an ambivalent way as belated, already posited on the basis of a prior loss, of destruction. But, in comparing the two pictures of the Pantheon, we can be even more precise about that loss and the way that it produces creativity. In the exterior, we see the shell of the neoclassical building. The destructive force is only hinted at through the open windows, making the fire posterior to man's creation. Turner seems at pains to maintain a sense of the elegance and delicacy of the facade — which is reminiscent of the interior in the Wells drawing of the two girls — so that some of the aesthetic quality of the original building is maintained even after the fire destroys its architecture. The beauty and lightness of the Pantheon was stressed in contemporary responses to the building after its interior expansion and redesign in the early 1790s. As one typical account put it:

The appearance of the house in general is elegant, light, airy, and striking. The boxes are lined with a fine green paper, which produces a very agreeable effect. The ornamental part is simple, yet splendid, and the whole exhibits an air of chaste magnificence. (Price, Milhous, and Hume, p. 221)

Turner's picture trades on the ruined emptiness of the shell of the building, but the sense of lightness and delicacy remains and seems an appropriate match for the liveliness of the scene as a whole. Human creativity and natural destruction combine to produce the scene, which then prompts Turner's own creative intervention.

This again highlights the difference from the watercolour of the interior of the ruin. While the exterior is a ruin it still communicates stylistically and socially. The destruction in the interior view, however, is absolute, abject, and all the more so for the futility of the remaining fragments of fireplaces that held up the interior space of the rotunda. The reddish-brown tonality of the drawing gives the remains of the building the look of a corpse splayed open, in full decay. The fire itself is the only living force that could remain in the space, and its effects are almost cruelly anatomized in the bodily fragments of the once-lively building. Into this space Turner's solitary viewer emerges. Here, the picture seems intended to contrast with the splendour of the building before the fire, as suggested by comparison with another contemporary description:

The Pantheon Opera House is in a light and very finished style. The Boxes painted white — the Pillars very small, and gilt. The Galleries green, traversed with gold network. The Stage is nearly as large as that of the old House, in the Haymarket

23 and the Drop Curtain is certainly as beautifully conceived, both as to painting and effect, as any thing ever was of the kind. (Price, Milhous, and Hume, p. 222)

The language here is self-consciously aesthetic. It offers the interior space of the building as a pictorial composition, varied in tone, colour, and effect; doubled by the presence of the stage curtain, which functions as a picture within a picture. All this variance, delicacy, and composition is obliterated by fire, giving rise to Turner's own work, which is the opposite: heavy instead of light, almost monochrome instead of colourful and direct, almost painfully simple instead of complex and diverting.

I have elsewhere argued for the extent to which Turner at this time built his reputation, paradoxically, on the basis of his ability to paint destruction, and we may see from this discussion that his exploration of fire and its effects offered an opportunity to examine this.¹⁹ At the same time, however, this connection was not absolute. Indeed, there is also a strong association of fire with domesticity, childhood, and comfort, which should caution us against too complete an association of fire with destruction for Turner. Interestingly then, a number of his pictures from the late 1790s that include fire typically do so on a much more modest, private, individual scale. This is true of very different pictures: from interior cottage or workshop pictures like *An Old Woman in a Cottage Kitchen* ('*Internal of a Cottage, a Study at Ely*') (1795–96) and *The Interior of a Cannon Foundry* (1797–98) (Figs. 5, 6) to outdoor scenes such as *A Beech Wood with Gypsies Round a Campfire* (Fig. 7) and even industrial scenes like *Limekiln at Coalbrookdale* (c. 1797) (Fig. 8), and watercolours of lime kilns (for instance, Fig. 9).²⁰ This is, in one sense, a very disparate group of pictures, linked by nothing save perhaps their apparent marginality to Turner's main work in the period, which was aimed at establishing a reputation and securing an associate position at the Royal Academy. They were undertaken at different times and places, as a part of different painting campaigns, and only the interior cottage picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy. Indeed, Eric Shanes suggests that the group of three oil sketches to which *A Beech Wood with Gypsies* belongs was undertaken during a trip to Kent precisely to distract Turner from the impending associate election of 1799, suggesting that they were purposefully separate from Turner's endeavours at the Academy (*Young Mr Turner*, p. 182).

And yet, in addition to the presence or implied presence of fire, there are certain similarities to these pictures. They are all intimate in both scale and expression, and, whether situated outdoors or in, are sombre in tonality

¹⁹ Leo Costello, *J. M. W. Turner and the Subject of History* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 61–109.

²⁰ On the foundries and mills, see Richter-Musso, p. 180.



Fig. 5: J. M. W. Turner, *An Old Woman in a Cottage Kitchen* ('*Internal of a Cottage, a Study at Ely*'), 1795–96, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-an-old-woman-in-a-cottage-kitchen-internal-of-a-cottage-a-study-at-ely-d00729>>.



Fig. 6: J. M. W. Turner, *The Interior of a Cannon Foundry*, 1797–98, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-interior-of-a-cannon-foundry-d00873>>.



Fig. 7: J. M. W. Turner, *A Beech Wood with Gypsies Round a Campfire*, 1799–1801, watercolour. Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. UK/Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 8: J. M. W. Turner, *Limekiln at Coalbrookdale*, c. 1797, oil on panel. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. USA/Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 9: J. M. W. Turner, *Llanstephan Castle by Moonlight, with a Kiln in the Foreground*, c. 1795, graphite and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-llanstephan-castle-by-moonlight-with-a-kiln-in-the-foreground-doo689>>.

and populated either by single figures or very small groups of figures. The foundry scene is clearly the most active of them, but even here the pervasive darkness lends the image a sombre quality. The interior cottage picture overtly reprises themes from the early *Cottage Interior by Firelight* watercolour. Some sense of a longing for domestic tranquillity similar to that in the earlier work may be what led nineteenth-century viewers to speculate that it showed Turner's own mother in his childhood home in Maiden Lane.²¹ Likely completed during Turner's tour of the Midlands in 1794, the picture also indicates his interest in the humble, moralizing scenes of seventeenth-century genre painting (Shanes, *Young Mr Turner*, p. 125). Furthermore, we may note that in all of these cases, the fire is not seen directly; but rather, that Turner explores its effect in filling or partially filling the space of the work with the effects of its light. This resonates with William Rodner's discussion of Turner's later interest in industrial scenes that show fire as a hidden source of power and energy.²² Within this immediate period, moreover, this interest in muted tones and glowing light led Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll to connect the *Coalbrookdale* picture to Turner's *Moonlight, a Study at Millbank*, exhibited in 1797 at the Royal Academy, a work central to the artist's ambition in those years.²³ Similarly, Andrew Wilton has connected one of the kiln scenes to Turner's first exhibited oil at the Royal Academy, *Fishermen at Sea*.²⁴

Another unifying factor in all of these pictures involving fire is the influence of Rembrandt, a connection which makes these works less marginal, especially in terms of their place in Turner's later career since, as we will see, Rembrandt recurs powerfully in the late 1820s and early 1830s at the point at which fire becomes most prominent in Turner's work. In 1795 Turner had visited Stourhead, home of the collector Richard Colt Hoare and had seen Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Rest on the Flight into*

²¹ Andrew Wilton, 'An Old Woman in a Cottage Kitchen ('Internal of a Cottage, a Study at Ely') (1795–96) by Joseph Mallord William Turner', catalogue entry, April 2012, in *J. M. W. Turner* <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-an-old-woman-in-a-cottage-kitchen-internal-of-a-cottage-a-r1141105>> [accessed 25 August 2017].

²² William Rodner, *J. M. W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 113–18.

²³ Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 20–21. The Turner images discussed in the text but not provided as figures are available to view in Butlin and Joll; wherever possible, hyperlinks have been included to locations where copies may be viewed online.

²⁴ Andrew Wilton, 'Llanstephan Castle by Moonlight, with a Kiln in the Foreground (c. 1795) by Joseph Mallord William Turner', catalogue entry, April 2012, in *J. M. W. Turner*, Tate Research Publication, December 2012 <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-llanstephan-castle-by-moonlight-with-a-kiln-in-the-r1141186>> [accessed 25 August 2017].

Egypt (Fig. 10). Shanes convincingly argues for the profound impact of this picture on the young artist. Writing more than a decade afterwards, in preparation for his lecture as professor of perspective at the Royal Academy, Turner notes:

In no picture have I seen that freshness, that negative quality of shade and colour, that aerial perspective enwrap in gloom, never attempted but by the daring hand of Rembrandt in his Holy Family Reposing, a small picture at Stourhead. [...] Rembrandt has introduced two lights, one of the fire and the other from a window to contrast the grey glimmering dawn from gloom. (Shanes, *Young Mr Turner*, p. 114)

Shanes views this as a central lesson for Turner in developing a more subtle use of colour, attentive not just to qualities of light and dark but also to warmth and coolness. Shanes also directly connects the dual sources of light in the kiln pictures to Rembrandt, and we can add to this the general interest in glowing light that we have seen in all of these works (pp. 114–17). Finally, a memory of the still, reverent quality of the Rembrandt painting seems to connect plausibly to the similarly hushed tenor of the group of works by Turner I have collected together in this period.



Fig. 10: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Landscape with the Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1647, oil on wood panel. © National Gallery of Ireland.



Fig. 11: J. M. W. Turner, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, 1800, oil on canvas, Indianapolis Museum of Art, USA. Gift in Memory of Evan F. Lilly/Bridgeman Images.

In contrast, during the early 1800s, it was through Turner's more public pieces that fire, like water, became a means by which he forged his reputation as a painter through scenes of destruction. Throughout the next decade, fire, again like water, tears bodies, ships, buildings, and communities apart, paradoxically allowing Turner to consolidate his own reputation and standing in the Academy and the competitive market. *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* (Fig. 11), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800, included a biblical passage (Exodus 9. 23) that specifies the focus on fire: 'And Moses stretched forth his hands towards heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along the ground.'²⁵ This picture is rightly discussed in terms of the influence of Poussin and Richard Wilson on Turner, but it is interesting that neither of these models would have provided much guidance for the depiction of fire.²⁶ Rather, in overall tone, in the elaboration of multiple light sources, and, most of all, in the way that the glow of the fire, white-hot in some places, fills the atmosphere, Rembrandt, and Turner's own explorations in the late 1790s seem to be most strongly present here. In *The Destruction of Sodom* (Fig. 12), we are brought much closer to the scene

²⁵ See Ian Warrell, *Turner's Wessex: Ambition and Architecture* (London: Scala Editions, 2015); and Shanes, *Young Mr Turner*, p. 196.

²⁶ Butlin and Joll, p. 11; Costello, pp. 73–74.



Fig. 12: J. M. W. Turner, *The Destruction of Sodom*, c. 1805, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-destruction-of-sodom-no0474>>.

of fire whose glow allows Turner to explore tonality amid darkness: in particular, the contrast between warm reds at the top centre of the canvas and the bluish shadows below, framing the already ruined buildings of the city as it succumbs to fire and brimstone. If it was shown at Turner's Gallery in 1805, as is generally thought, it would have made an interesting pair with *The Shipwreck* (Fig. 13), also on view: contrasting overall warm and cool tonalities, a biblical and a modern scene, and destruction by fire and water, respectively. In both we should also notice a greater emphasis on the presence and action of figures, either fleeing the scene as in *Sodom* or struggling against the forces of nature in *The Shipwreck*. The point of view is typically higher in these works compared with the low vantage point that we saw in pictures such as the Pantheon watercolours. This gives these paintings a broader, less intimate sense of scale. What we begin to see here is a transformation of the power of fire, in terms of both destruction and creativity, to a scale that is more public in nature, less individualized and intimate than in the 1790s.

This combination of fire and complex human action, as well as an elevated viewpoint, is then massively expanded in Turner's first picture of the Battle of Trafalgar, shown first in 1806, and then again, reworked, in 1808 (Fig. 14). The sense of tumult and confusion that dominates the piece as a whole, powerfully evoking the violent intermingling of ships that was Nelson's constant goal in engaging the French and Spanish fleets,



Fig. 13: J. M. W. Turner, *The Shipwreck*, 1805, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-shipwreck-no0476>>.



Fig. 14: J. M. W. Turner, *The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizzen Starboard Shrouds of the 'Victory'*, 1806–08, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-battle-of-trafficar-as-seen-from-the-mizen-starboard-shrouds-of-the-victory-no0480>>.



Fig. 15: J. M. W. Turner, *The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805*, 1822–24, oil on canvas. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Greenwich Hospital Collection.

is created in large part not just by the vast numbers of sails and masts that dominate the top half of the picture, but also by the swathe of smoke and fire that fills the space between the *Victory* and the French *Redoubtable*.²⁷ As the *Victory*'s port-side guns belch flames, the work is essentially torn apart, so that a significant portion of the middle of the canvas is obscured. This dramatically fragments the scene and also evokes the guns' capacity for tearing ships and men apart. This fragmentation is all the more evident when compared to Turner's 1824 version of Trafalgar (Fig. 15). In the later picture, the *Victory*'s intact form dominates the scene. Even though Turner peoples the foreground extensively, it is a miniature version of the battle focused on one group, separated from the tumult of the action, with the implied masses of combatants in the distance. The scene features a correspondingly low vantage point, which allows the viewer to connect more directly with the smaller group in the foreground.

While images of fire were relatively rare in Turner's work of the 1810s, many of the threads we have identified are dramatically united in the 1818 *Field of Waterloo* (Fig. 16). Once again, the influence of Rembrandt

²⁷ Adam Nicolson, *Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and Nelson's Battle of Trafalgar* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006); Costello, pp. 15–60.



Fig. 16: J. M. W. Turner, *The Field of Waterloo*, 1818, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-field-of-waterloo-noo500>>.

is powerfully present, in the overall tonality and the multiple light sources.²⁸ There are three distinct sources of light, all fires created by humans: the flare that fills the sky in the distance, the raging fire that transforms Hougoumont Farm into a vision of Dante's infernal city of Dis, and the torch held by the women in the foreground as they search for their loved ones amid the unmoving but still uncannily writhing mass of the dead and dying. There is also a memory, perhaps, of Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Rest on the Flight into Egypt* in the woman clutching her child at centre, here deployed ironically to emphasize the devastation of the scene and the scores of families torn apart. Much like the interior Pantheon study, this is a scene of complete abjection (Costello, p. x). In both the early *Trafalgar* and *Waterloo*, then, fire is insistently the creation of humans, and tears apart their bodies and their creations, their buildings, their ships. We can highlight this emphasis further by comparing it with the depiction of fire as a natural destructive force in Turner's images of volcanoes from around this period, such as *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains* (1815), which is tonally quite close to the *Waterloo* picture.²⁹ This

²⁸ See Fred Bachrach, *Turner's Holland* (London: Tate Publishing, 1995).

²⁹ On Turner's images of volcanoes, see Richter-Musso, pp. 181–82. Shanes suggests that the eruption of Laki in 1783 may have been the cause of the death of Turner's younger sister and perhaps of his own lifelong difficulties in breathing (*Young Mr Turner*, p. 4).

similarity in overall colouring suggests that humans can tap into some of the extraordinary energy and power of natural fire. But the macabre, non-triumphant message of *Waterloo* also points to the corruption of that power, to its use by humans against humans. With no agency, the volcano picture is morally neutral; *Waterloo*, on the other hand, aligns fire with immorality and evil.

Two things should be said as we turn to the early 1830s when fire emerged both as an important subject for Turner and as a focus for critical responses to his work. First, it is perhaps surprising to note that while it featured in a number of his works, fire had not been the primary concern of Turner's up to that point. Secondly, however, many of the themes that we have seen will persist, even as fire does become more predominant, especially in the linkage between creativity and destruction and the concern with the elaboration of power dynamics within an overall consideration of the human effects of fire. I emphasize the point, because paintings like the two *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (Figs. 17, 18) have come to stand as much as any other pictures in his career for Turner's achievement as a Romantic genius. Lawrence Gowing argued that the depiction of



Fig. 17: J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, 16 October, 1834, 1834–35, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA, USA. The John Howard McFadden Collection/Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 18: J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16 October, 1834*, 1834–35, oil on canvas, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH, USA. Bequest of John L. Severance/Bridgeman Images.

fire in the *Burning of the Houses* works marked a moment at which Turner found a means to create a visual representation on the canvas as an equivalent experience to something perceived, rather than as a secondary representation of it. ‘Turner’, Gowing writes,

was now concerned only with the inherent light that colour generates within a picture. To set it free he needed the homogenous, diffuse consistency in which paint retains its own objective value. The reality of flame-like colour in *The Houses of Parliament* required complementary hues of an equivalent tone.³⁰

While critics up to this point had not paid particular attention to the depiction of fire either in form or content for Turner, in the early 1830s it became commonplace to use fire as a metaphor, among others, for

³⁰ Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 31. For a detailed discussion of Gowing’s response, see Sam Smiles, *J. M. W. Turner: The Making of a Modern Artist* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 192–205.



Fig. 19: J. M. W. Turner, *Caligula's Palace and Bridge*, 1831, oil on canvas. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-caligulas-palace-and-bridge-no0512>>.

the artist's work. Interestingly, this trend emerged largely before Turner actually started creating his most well-known pictures of fire. At the Royal Academy exhibition of 1831, for instance, the *Literary Gazette* compared Turner's *Caligula's Palace and Bridge* (Fig. 19) to Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows* (Fig. 20) by calling them 'fire and water'. Continuing, the reviewer indicated that the reference was indeed not to the subject or even the form of the pictures themselves but to the process of their creation:

If Mr. Turner and Mr. Constable were professors of geology, instead of painting, the first would certainly be a Plutonist, the second a Neptunist. Exaggerated, however, as both these works are, — the one all heat, the other all humidity, — who will deny that they both exhibit, each in its own way, some of the highest qualities of art? None but the envious or ignorant.³¹

By invoking the geological controversy between scientists who believed that rocks were formed by the crystallization of water (Neptunists) and those who saw it as the result of the solidification of magma (Plutonists), the reviewer suggests that Turner actually creates form out of fire.

As the term 'exaggerated' designates, the invocation of fire here is related to concerns that had been raised over the prevalence of high-key

³¹ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Literary Gazette*, 14 May 1831, p. 315.



Fig. 20: John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, oil on canvas.
 © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/constable-salisbury-cathedral-from-the-meadows-t13896>>.

dramatic colours, intended to attract attention on the crowded walls of the Royal Academy exhibition space, then in Somerset House, as K. Dian Kriz and I have both discussed.³² Great concern was frequently voiced in these years over the sacrifices of other pictorial values. As one critic put it:

Unless it be very conspicuous, from its size or situation, in order to obtain notice in the exhibition-room, a picture must have something that will catch the eye at once, no matter whether that quality be attained by the sacrifice of more valuable ones or not.³³

³² K. Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Costello, pp. 111–42.

³³ [William Henry Leeds], 'Our Royal-Academical Lounge', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1832, pp. 709–20 (p. 711).

The *Literary Gazette* voiced the concern more directly in 1831 in a typically conflicted response to Turner's *Vision of Medea* (1828):

Colour! colour! colour! Still there is something so enchanting in the prismatic effect which Mr. Turner has produced, that we soon lose sight of the extravagance, in contemplating the magical result of his combinations. We are bound to add, that if he could have imparted beauty of form and feature to his figures, with a little repose for the eye, this work would in other respects have been as admirable as it is extraordinary.³⁴

The reference to the eye, and to the physical exhaustion produced on it by Turner's picture, was another common feature of critical responses during these years and could be directly connected to both fire and the blazing light it could produce. It became a means to register at once the power of Turner's work and its potentially excessive, even disruptive effects within the exhibition space. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that fire and light became frequent metaphors not only for the process of Turner's work but also for its effect on the viewer. In its 1829 account of *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*, the *Literary Gazette* complained that

although the Grecian hero has just put out the one eye of the furious Cyclops, that is really no reason why Mr. Turner should put out both the eyes of us, harmless critics. So red-hot a mass has seldom been applied to our visual organs.³⁵

The power of fire, which Turner's work had previously depicted or indicated, has become a feature of the work itself, thus enabling the critics to use the metaphor with some adventurousness. This links well with Gowing's account as it suggests that the paintings were a fiery experience unto themselves rather than an illustration of that experience. These responses also compare Turner's work to a kind of sun, both essential to vision, central to our very existence, but also dangerous when gazed at directly or for too long.³⁶

Fire served critics especially well as a metaphor for Turner's work because of the implications of a glaring intensity and also for the linkage between a kind of protean, supernatural creativity and the potential for destruction. Thus, in 1828 the *Repository of Arts* could compare Turner to the 'meteor-spirits of the sun', concluding of *Dido Directing the Equipment of the*

³⁴ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Literary Gazette*, 7 May 1831, pp. 299–300 (p. 299).

³⁵ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Literary Gazette*, 9 May 1829, pp. 306–07 (p. 307).

³⁶ On Turner and the sun, see Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 63–105.



Fig. 21: J. M. W. Turner, *A Bedroom with a Fire Burning, and a Bed with Yellow Curtains*, 1827, gouache and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-a-bedroom-with-a-fire-burning-and-a-bed-with-yellow-curtains-d22738>>.

Fleet that its conception was ‘grand’ and ‘its execution full of powers of the highest order’.³⁷ In the same year, another critic discussed Turner’s use of colour in relation to his ambition, again resorting to fire as an ambivalent metaphor: ‘On land, as well as on water, Mr. Turner is determined not merely to shine, but to blaze and dazzle. Watteau and Stothard, be quiet! Here is more than your match.’ This comes, however, before the conclusion that Turner’s picture wanted finish, which would have prevented it offending both the ‘principles of art, [and] common sense’.³⁸ Want of finish was a familiar refrain for Turner critics, but perhaps part of the issue here is that fire as creativity, as opposed to destruction, is a process without end.

This critical comparison of Turner and his pictures to fire preceded his production of public pictures of fire. As Richter-Musso notes, Turner did include fires in a number of informal interior works at Petworth during his visit there in 1827, such as *A Bedroom with a Fire Burning, and a Bed with Yellow Curtains* (Fig. 21) and *The Artist and His Admirers* (Fig. 22).

³⁷ Cited in Butlin and Joll, pp. 149–50.

³⁸ ‘Royal Academy’, *Literary Gazette*, 17 May 1828, pp. 314–15 (p. 315).



Fig. 22: J. M. W. Turner, *The Artist and His Admirers*, 1827, watercolour and bodycolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-artist-and-his-admirers-d22764>>.

Throughout these pictures, fires burn behind or next to scenes that show different spaces in the house from shared gathering places, like parlours and libraries, to the much more private bedrooms. As the two examples here indicate, these show, by and large, informal interactions, with figures leaning or reclining in order to talk easily. As such, these works clearly demonstrate the continued importance of the domestic and sociable implications of fires for Turner in these years, evoking perhaps most clearly the picture of the two Wells daughters discussed above. The bedroom scenes can even push towards indications of eroticism. In these, fire accompanies human interaction, but is generally not the focus of the scene as it would be in the *Burning of the Houses* pictures and others of the ensuing decade.

But ultimately, the relative lack of pictures of fire in the 1820s makes the emergence of it as a preoccupation for Turner over the next decade all the more striking. In addition to the two *Burning of the Houses* canvases, there is the large watercolour he also painted of the Parliament fire (Fig. 23), the industrial fire burning prominently in *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* (Fig. 24), an image of Rome burning (Fig. 25), and a number of watercolours (for instance, Figs. 26, 27), which were long



Fig. 23: J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, c. 1834–35, watercolour and gouache on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-burning-of-the-houses-of-parliament-d36235>>.



Fig. 24: J. M. W. Turner, *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. USA/Bridgeman Images.



Fig. 25: J. M. W. Turner, *The Burning of Rome*, 1834–40, gouache, graphite, and watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-burning-of-rome-d36232>>.



Fig. 26: J. M. W. Turner, *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841, watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-fire-at-the-grand-storehouse-of-the-tower-of-london-d27846>>.



Fig. 27: J. M. W. Turner, *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841, watercolour on paper. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-fire-at-the-grand-storehouse-of-the-tower-of-london-d27851>>.

thought to have been related to the Parliament fire and perhaps to have been a record of Turner's movements that night in witnessing it. Matthew Imms, however, has recently convincingly connected them to the fire at the Tower of London in 1841, indicating Turner's continued interest in the subject in general as well as in specific conflagrations.³⁹

For critics at the time, the Parliament paintings certainly came to stand as representing much of what they both admired and lamented about Turner's work in ways that build on the earlier responses that invoked fire. In response to the version now held by the Philadelphia Museum of Art

³⁹ Matthew Imms, 'Fire at the Tower of London Sketchbook 1841', sketchbook, April 2014, in *J. M. W. Turner*, Tate Research Publication, September 2014, <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/fire-at-the-tower-of-london-sketchbook-r1148238>> [accessed 25 August 2017]. For the most detailed response to the watercolours as records of the 1834 fire, see Richard Dorment, *British Painting in the Philadelphia Museum of Art: From the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 400–01. Dorment did note the difficulty in identifying specific details relating to the Parliament fire.

(*Fig. 17*), for instance, shown at the British Institution in early 1835, the *Spectator*'s reviewer wrote in rather awestruck terms that repeatedly invoke fire in various forms:

The brilliancy of TURNER'S picture is not owing to the mere fiery hue. [...] TURNER'S picture transcends its neighbours as the sun eclipses the moon and stars. The burst of light in the body of flame, and the flood of fiery radiance that forms a luminous atmosphere around all the objects near, cannot be surpassed for truth as well as burning brightness.

The review goes on to lament the picture's loose handling and poor representation of the crowd and concludes in rather mixed terms:

Not that we like this scene-painting manner; we should prefer being able to look at a picture near as well as at a distance; but such a one as this we are content to look at in any way the artist chooses — with all its faults.⁴⁰

Where the *Spectator* could admire Turner's ability to eclipse his neighbouring painters, however, the *Morning Herald*, this time in response to the Cleveland version (*Fig. 18*) at the Royal Academy in 1835, saw it as undermining the overall effect of the exhibition:

This very agreeable state of affairs is, however, glaringly invaded by some flaming canvasses of Mr. J. M. W. Turner, R.A. We seriously think the Academy ought, now and then, at least, to throw a wet blanket or some such damper over either this Fire King or his works. (Butlin and Joll, p. 214)

Here we should note that the use of the plural 'canvasses' indicates that the reviewer was describing not just this picture of fire as 'glaringly invading' and 'flaming' but was also including works shown at Turner's other exhibitions that year, such as *Keelmen Heaving in Coals*, and pictures which do not show fire at all, like *Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute* (c. 1835). Implicit in these responses was an ambivalent reaction to the fact that Turner had painted both pictures very publically during the Varnishing Days immediately preceding the respective exhibitions. The comparison of Turner's paintings to fire then became a way to mark varying degrees of awe and concern at the way his work seemed at once to be both sublimely creative and potentially destructive. This latter aspect has largely dropped out of accounts in subsequent art historical responses, which have made these works absolutely central to Turner's accomplishment.⁴¹ Jack Lindsay,

⁴⁰ 'Fine Arts: British Institution', *Spectator*, 14 February 1835, p. 20.

⁴¹ Costello, pp. 92–98; Imms.

for instance, writes of the Parliament pictures as both the beginning of ‘a new series of disasters’ and a kind of culmination of his goals with colour:

The Parliament works allowed him to express to the full his liking for dramatic contrasts of warm and cold colours, the reds and oranges of the flapping flags of flame and the quiet blues of the sky; contrasts of the violent flame and the quietly flowing river — with the flame reflections, lurid or soft, as a connexion. (p. 179)

Fire is indeed present in a number of prominent pictures of Turner’s career, including *Juliet and Her Nurse* (1836); *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844); *Peace, Burial at Sea* (1842); and *Whalers (Boiling Blubber) Entangled in Flaw Ice, Endeavouring to Extricate Themselves* (1846), all which continue in different ways the association of fire with industrialism.⁴² Arguably, however, only *The Hero of a Hundred Fights* takes fire as its primary subject. Shown in 1847, Turner reworked a much earlier picture of an iron forge to illustrate the casting of Matthew Wyatt’s statue of Wellington.⁴³ This picture is also connected to a number of Turner’s late works which show or invoke fire, such as *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, as discussed by James Hamilton (*Turner and the Scientists*, pp. 111–14).

Turner’s reputation as a painter of fire thus coalesced in ways that exceeded the actual pictures themselves. Indeed, central to their role in building his reputation has been their ability to spread outwards, beyond their frames, to viewers, critics, rivals, and followers. In conclusion, I will look in more detail at some of the works involved, beginning with *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace* (1832) (Fig. 28). This picture has been largely marginalized in the vast Turner literature and certainly kept separate from the likes of the *Burning of the Houses*.⁴⁴ Ruskin no doubt contributed to this in criticizing the figures in this work and in *Boccaccio Relating the Tale of the Bird-Cage* (1828), writing that ‘except as

⁴² One image thought to represent a fire at Fenning’s Wharf was reidentified by Ian Warrell as *A Steamer at Adelaide Wharf, with London Bridge*, in ‘J. M. W. Turner and the Pursuit of Fame’, in *J. M. W. Turner*, ed. by Ian Warrell (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), pp. 13–21 (p. 19).

⁴³ See John McCoubrey, ‘The Hero of a Hundred Fights: Turner, Schiller and Wellington’, *Turner Studies*, 10.2 (1990), 7–11; Jan Piggott, ‘Fire: The Element of Transformation’, in *Turner and the Elements*, ed. by Richter-Musso and Westheider, pp. 201–04; and Sam Smiles, catalogue entry 111, in *Late Turner: Painting Set Free*, ed. by David Blayney Brown, Amy Concannon, and Sam Smiles (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), p. 175.

⁴⁴ No paintings from before 1835, i.e. the year of the *Burning of the Houses* pictures, were included, for example, in the 2014 Tate-organized ‘Late Turner’ exhibition. The show included the Philadelphia version, thus, implicitly at least, suggesting a dividing line between his early and late work occurs around this date, and with these pictures.



Fig. 28: J. M. W. Turner, *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace*, 1832, oil on mahogany. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-shadrach-meshach-and-abednego-in-the-burning-fiery-furnace-no0517>>.

subjects for curious study, they are of no value whatsoever'.⁴⁵ When *Shadrach* is discussed, two points are primarily made: that it was painted in friendly competition with George Jones, and that it belongs to a group of pictures in which Turner was heavily under the sway of Rembrandt. Both aspects of the picture are discussed extensively by Michael Kitson, who uses the opportunity to compare it unfavourably to Turner's earlier Rembrandtesque works, such as *Pilate Washing His Hands* (1831), but favourably to Jones's (*Fig. 29*), whose figures he calls 'a pastiche of Rembrandt (which Turner's figures never are)'.⁴⁶ According to Jones's recollection, Turner had asked him what subject he intended to paint for the upcoming 1832 Royal Academy exhibition, and agreed that they should both paint the *Burning Fiery Furnace* on the same format and size canvas. As a result, it is difficult to engage in much interpretation regarding the choice of subject since it was apparently arbitrary. Indeed, Turner did not even title the painting in the exhibition catalogue, but merely quoted the biblical passage from Daniel 3. 26:

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come forth and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came forth of the midst of the fire.

As Kitson notes, this last sentence seems to be what is shown in the image. Nebuchadnezzar had set up a giant gold idol and asked the people to worship it. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused he ordered them into the fire, whence they subsequently emerged, miraculously unharmed. We see them silhouetted against the yellow-red light that emerges from the furnace at the centre-right of the picture. The idol of course is visible in the background, its arms raised like so many of Turner's figures in shipwrecks and other disasters, while Kitson suggests that the black figure at the centre is Nebuchadnezzar, though he may be sitting on the throne on the left. As Butlin and Joll note, only one critic at the time was inclined to compare the picture to Jones's and considerable scorn was heaped on Turner's treatment of the figures (here Ruskin and the press could agree), and no attention was given to the biblical theme at all. The *Athenaeum's* account is typical:

We pray to be delivered from the human nature of Turner: he can neither paint man, woman, child, nor any living thing in the heavens above, the earth beneath, or the waters under

⁴⁵ 'Turner's Works at the National Gallery', in *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, XIII: *Turner, The Harbours of England, Catalogues and Notes* (1904), pp. 77–388 (p. 136).

⁴⁶ Michael Kitson, 'Turner and Rembrandt', *Turner Studies* 8.1 (1988), 2–19 (pp. 15–16). Andrew Wilton sees a less friendly competition between Turner and Jones, and more a demonstration of Turner's superiority, even without seeing one of Jones's works, in *Turner as Draughtsman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 119.



Fig. 29: George Jones, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, 1832, oil on mahogany. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/jones-the-burning-fiery-furnace-no0389>>.

the earth. His figures are mere clods of the valley — lumps of deformity: nor can he inform them with either passion or feeling, or even breathe into them the breath of life. In fact, they are all Frankenstein sort of nondescripts, and so we dismiss them.⁴⁷

Fraser's was more succinct, calling it one of Turner's 'freaks', an 'unintelligible piece of insanity'.⁴⁸

But what the critics did grasp was that this was a picture of fire. If we mark this, moreover, as the point at which Turner started actually painting fires, instead of pictures that were like fire, critics in 1832 responded by suggesting that his pictures of fire actually partook of the qualities of what they represented. Thus, a number of responses in that year literalized the scene in various ways. The *Literary Gazette* suggested it had been placed near a 'watery' work by Constable 'in order to prevent the room from becoming damp' and continued, 'certainly, since the introduction of chrome, more fires have broken out in art than formerly; and this is one of them.'⁴⁹ It is not just Turner's colour that is like fire, but the picture itself that is a fire. Both models could thus be in play at once. The *Morning Herald* used fire metaphors to describe *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage — Italy* (1832), also on view that year, referring to its 'constant recurrence of a laky red glow [...] fatiguing to the eye', and its 'blaze of king's-yellow and chrome'.⁵⁰ Similarly, the *Spectator* quipped: 'Here is one fierce as the fiery furnace it represents [...], its glare is scorching; we hope the Academy is insured — or perhaps the picture is painted on canvas of asbestos.'⁵¹

Two aspects are striking about these responses. First, we should be attentive to the tone of excess. Viewers had complained about Turner's figures for three decades by this point, but the language here is striking even against this history. The second is that these two responses are related: that critics, unable to see a painting in the sense of a narrative they could grasp, instead saw fire. The basic elements of the scene — crowd, furnace, idol — seem obvious enough, but it is as though, faced with the mass of Turner's figures, critics can only really discern the fire, which then stands for the broader loss of form, the loss of coherence, and the dominance of chaos. Granted, critics were moving fairly quickly around the gallery and seeing works at some distance on a crowded wall, but the picture's structure is in fact fairly easily grasped, even if it is internally split. On the one hand, it is bisected vertically. On the left is a vast profusion of figures, dominated by the women in the foreground, and framed above by

⁴⁷ 'Exhibition at Somerset House', *Athenaeum*, 16 June 1832, pp. 387–88 (p. 387).

⁴⁸ [Leeds], 'Our Royal-Academical Lounge', p. 717.

⁴⁹ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Literary Gazette*, 19 May 1832, p. 314.

⁵⁰ Cited in Butlin and Joll, p. 342.

⁵¹ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *Spectator*, 12 May 1832, pp. 21–22 (p. 22).

the creation of humans, the buildings. On the right is the furnace, whose heat and light cast this portion of the canvas into obscurity, creating an imbalance in the composition between the mass of information and detail on the left and the lack of specific form on the right. At the same time, the work is also divided by the diagonal line that defines the silhouettes of the figures beginning in the furnace at the right and tracking up to the left and, confusingly, back into space. Indeed, perspective, depth, and space may have been part of what was difficult for viewers in 1832.

In drawing out some further themes of the picture, the *Spectator* was perceptive when, in its mention of the Philadelphia *Burning of the Houses* work in 1835, it noted a resemblance to *Shadrach*. Although arrayed very differently on the canvas, we can notice many of the same features. First of all, the forms of the buildings on fire are carved out within the searing yellow of the flames, much as the figures emerging from the furnace are in *Shadrach*. Even the twin towers in the distance are reminiscent of those to the left in the earlier painting. Both pictures share odd, even awkward diminutions in scale: the way the figures behind the foreground women in *Shadrach* become so much smaller so quickly, just as the north side of Westminster Bridge drops precipitously as it recedes suddenly. More broadly, *Burning of the Houses* also contains a vast area of indistinct colour and form, expanded here, highlighted by the blue sky, which plays against the primary yellow and indications of red, just as we can see in the central portion of *Shadrach*. This also contrasts with the areas of extreme profusion of detail in the later work, along the bottom edge of the canvas, where a vast crowd is gathered to witness. Indeed, in the Philadelphia *Burning of the Houses* it is as though from *Shadrach* we have rotated our position as viewers ninety degrees to the left so that we are above and slightly behind the crowd looking at the fire across a now expanded gulf.

This juxtaposition of crowd and fire is the key element in both paintings, especially considering Turner's ongoing interest in the human element of fire, compared to the much earlier Pantheon pictures. In this sense, both paintings are extensions of the first *Trafalgar* image, where I have argued that history is shown not as the work of single dominant individuals, but as being played out, and witnessed by, a massive group of connected but separate figures, a depiction of history that responded to altered ideas about society and change in an era of reform and developing mass politics (Costello, pp. 49–51). The crowd assembled here, and thus the scale and the implications of the fire, is exponentially increased from the exterior Pantheon view. It is not enough to say that there are more people in the *Burning of the Houses* pictures. If we see a crowd in the Pantheon and at the Parliament burnings, then the latter is of a different order and scale entirely; it is a mass of virtually indistinguishable people, whereas in 1792, we still had a finite group of specific individuals. In this sense, these works of the 1830s seem to mark a shift from the early scenes in the depiction of

fire, as fire becomes an opportunity to explore social interactions unlike the more domestic, interior, and even childlike associations we saw earlier.

Given the nature of the buildings involved and the timing of their burning relative to the passage of the Reform Act in 1832, a number of writers have connected Turner's paintings to ideas of broad social change.⁵² Also noted in reference to the Cleveland version of the *Burning of the Houses* has been Turner's inclusion of firefighting vessels coming up the Thames. Although these efforts proved futile, as Butlin and Joll note, they prompted the inventor G. W. Manby's call for a unified fire service in a pamphlet published the following year.⁵³ As James Hamilton points out, Turner and Manby had a mutual friend in one of the artist's patrons, Dawson Turner (no relation), who also underwrote much of Manby's work (*Turner and the Scientists*, pp. 89–90). Turner's familiarity with Manby's invention for saving lives from ships run aground is clear from his painting of 1831, *Life-Boat and Manby Apparatus Going Off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal (Blue Lights) of Distress*.

It is ultimately impossible to determine whether Turner was signalling support for Manby's cause in the *Burning of the Houses* pictures, as Butlin and Joll suggest, though I think it quite plausible. But there is a broader connection related to the difference in the crowds we see here compared to those at the Pantheon. Manby, who invented the modern form of the fire extinguisher, had also been at work for most of the century on methods of saving people from burning buildings. By his own account, he had addressed a parliamentary committee on the topic of fire safety as early as 1816, and later published plans in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1823. Manby's proposals were based on three innovations: the fire extinguisher, which, he argued, would stop many fires at source; a couple of different apparatuses for removing people from burning buildings; and, finally, the establishment of a unified, governmentally controlled central fire police that would replace the piecemeal insurance companies then in place to fight conflagrations. 'It is evident', Manby wrote in the 1830s,

that the present fire establishment of the insurance companies does not, and cannot be expected to give that amount of protection, to the LIVES and PROPERTY of the inhabitants of this vast metropolis, which the public have a right to demand.⁵⁴

⁵² See Lindsay, pp. 180–81; John McCoubrey, 'Parliament on Fire: Turner's Buildings', *Art in America*, December 1984, pp. 112–25; Eric Shanes, *The Life and Masterworks of J. M. W. Turner* (London: Sirocco-Parkston, 2008), p. 207; Sam Smiles, catalogue entry 89, in *Late Turner: Painting Set Free*, ed. by Blayney Brown, Concannon, and Smiles, p. 150.

⁵³ Butlin and Joll, p. 215. See also, John Gage, *J. M. W. Turner: A Wonderful Range of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 207–11.

⁵⁴ G. W. Manby, *An Address to the British Public; with Suggestions for the Recovering Property from Sunken Vessels* (London: Gathercole, 1838), p. 76.

Again, there are echoes of the Pantheon here: the concern with the preventability and control of the fire and, most of all, with the effects of fire on human lives. However, we deal here not with the specifics of the performers who lost their livelihoods in the theatre fire, but rather with abstracted, generalized masses, the ‘inhabitants’, the ‘public’ who exist in an urban space that is now far more cosmic in scope than anything a view of Oxford Street could encompass.

Manby frequently invoked the scale of London with the phrase ‘vast metropolis’. The 1792 Pantheon watercolour (*Fig. 1*) is decidedly intimate in scale; the fire is a local one, particular to this street, happening this particular morning, affecting these particular people. On the other hand, the later paintings — and the watercolour, for that matter — depict precisely the kind of ‘vast metropolis’ Manby describes. It is beheld by a seemingly infinite crowd, the ‘public’ to which Manby says the government is responsible. Compared to the Pantheon watercolours, where I described two modes of viewing the sublime, here we have a third. The sublimity, the power of fire, is beheld from within the vast crowd, itself sublime. The early 1790s was a period of arguably even greater political turmoil in Britain than the early 1830s, with the rippling effects of the French Revolution making themselves felt through repressive governmental policies. And yet, where we are almost compelled to place the Parliament pictures in relation to the context of reform and its upheavals, we feel little urge to do the same with the Pantheon. Its scale does not ask us to consider its implications outside of Oxford Street on that morning. If the artist, and his viewer, in 1792 had seemed to be in conversation with the assembled city dwellers, here we are simply absorbed into the mass to behold the awesome spectacle. Where might one begin to converse with the crowd in the Parliament scenes? In a sense, we experience the world of these pictures in a manner akin to the childlike viewpoint of the pictures of the 1790s: it is a place of both awe and terror, something that we may experience visually, but not fully enter. This accounts for the nearness of the crowd in the Parliament paintings and watercolour, and in *Shadrach*, where it presses on us; but also for the simultaneous sense of being separated from it much as we are from the fires that have called it forth.

The larger framework on view in the 1835 Parliament images elaborates the development of more than a specific sense of the toppling of governmental traditions by reform. Rather, what we see in both text and image is the growth of the bourgeois democratic idea of a contiguity between government and a mass of people made visible in the ‘vast metropolis’ that they inhabit. Implicit in Manby’s writings and, I argue, in Turner’s paintings — both here and in the 1831 *Manby Apparatus* picture — is an evolving sense of governmental responsibility to the public, a respect for its humanity, conceived now as a whole rather than as individual humans, that demands that it take every possible step to preserve their

lives and property. With that development, however, comes a Foucauldian sense of omnipresent oversight and control. In text and image, the city becomes sublime, so vast that its boundaries and contours cannot possibly be known and its people only imagined as an inconceivable whole. This is present already in the fires of *Waterloo*. That picture mourns the masses rather than individuals, and does so under the omnipresent light of the fire, with the flare in the sky as a panoptical eye, ever ready to discipline and punish even in a moment of national triumph and tragedy.

Along with an attentiveness to the sanctity of individual lives, then, there is a concomitant surveillance, and a parcelling out of the mass into discrete isolated entities that make surveillance possible, even as the state appears to be the guarantor of individual safety and ‘liberty’.⁵⁵ Here is Manby on the best means of creating fire safety in the city:

No doubt, surely, can be entertained that a well organized body of FIRE POLICE, duly trained, and exclusively occupied in making the circuit of our vast Metropolis, crossing and re-crossing every ramification of its streets, and acting according to a fixed, well-digested code of Regulations, would be the means of stilling many an anxious thought at the period of retiring to rest, and in case of alarm, by being always at hand, or within immediate call, might prevent much mischief, and defeat the dark-laid plans of the incendiary. (p. 75)

While the metropolis is vast, the ‘duly trained’ force will cross and recross ‘every ramification’, ‘making the circuit’. No matter how large, nothing, it would seem, could escape its notice. The language of discipline and punishment is unmistakable as the fire force’s goal here suddenly is not putting out fires, but ‘defeating the dark-laid plans’ of arsonists, who, on this account, can be anywhere, and therefore, must be everywhere. The implied arsonist here is not the one of 1792, whose goals were individual and self-interested. Here, it is the arsonist as revolutionary, attacking society as a whole — on a broad political basis rather than on a personal, financial one. While intended to reassure, ‘stilling many an anxious thought at the period of retiring to rest’, and ‘being always at hand’, are decidedly panoptical gestures that indicate the omnipresence of the surveillance regime. Moreover, the passage evokes the domestic as a space in which the individual subject is either a plotter, a potential threat, or a place in which subjects are threatened by the schemes of arsonists. If we apply this to the vast metropolis of Turner’s pictures, then the domestic is not necessarily lost completely but is something present throughout the spaces evoked as an opposite pole, something to be both protected and feared.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 777–95.

The crowds of Turner's images of fire in the early 1830s both watch the conflagrations and are made visible by them. Like the Pantheon, figures also stare back at us from the crowd. The fire activates both surveillance of the crowd and by the crowd, turning the vast metropolis into a space of visibility. Seen this way, both the *Burning of the Houses* pictures and *Shadrach* use the cauldron of fire to explore the interaction between power, the crowd, and individuals in a way that registers the profound changes that had occurred since the beginning of the period of reform.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kate Flint, Anne Sullivan, and an anonymous reader for their perceptive comments, which have vastly strengthened this article. It is dedicated to the memory of Eric Shanes. Thumbnail image: J. M. W. Turner, *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace* (detail), 1832, oil on mahogany. © Tate CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-shadrach-meshach-and-abednego-in-the-burning-fiery-furnace-n00517>>.