

Chapter Four

Turner's Desert Storm

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In the late 1790s and early 1800s Turner was engaged in the production of a series of paintings focussing on biblical themes. Five of these paintings, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* (1800), *The Tenth Plague of Egypt* (1802), *The Holy Family* (1803), *The Deluge* (1805) and *The Destruction of Sodom* (1805) are extant; a fourth, *The Army of the Medes* (1801), is untraced. In this chapter I will consider how this lost painting bears on questions of war, representation and the transmission of affect in visual culture of the late Georgian period. I am interested in particular in how *The Army of the Medes*, a work focussed ostensibly on the destruction of a military force in ancient Persia, responds to the culmination of the British campaign against the French in Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century. As I will go on to argue, the painting raises complex questions about the relations between biblical and historical notions of truth, the connections between war, visualisation and the concept of the sublime, and the political connotations of the discourse of sympathy.

[insert figures 1-2 here]

Figure 1.1 J. M. W. Turner, *A Confused Mass of Figures: Study for 'The Army of the Medes Destroyed in the Desert by a Whirlwind'*. Chalk on paper. 433 x 272 mm. Calais Pier Sketchbook. D05067 Turner Bequest LXXXI 165. © Tate.

Figure 1.2 J. M. W. Turner, *A Group of Recumbent and Semi-Recumbent Figures, and Horses, Probably for a 'Plague' Subject or the 'Army of the Medes Destroyed in the Desert by a Whirlwind'*. Chalk on paper. 433 x 272 mm. Calais Pier Sketchbook. D05063 Turner Bequest LXXXI 161. © Tate.

The Army of the Medes destroyed in the Desert [sic.] by a Whirlwind – foretold by Jeremiah, chap. xv. ver 32, and 33, to give the painting its full and, as we shall see, confusing title, was submitted to the Royal Academy exhibition in 1801. Although the painting has not been recovered, it is possible, on the basis of visual as well textual evidence to reconstruct what it may have looked like. Preparatory studies from the Calais Pier and Dynevor Castle sketchbooks indicate that the picture appears to have been dominated by a representation of a vast, swirling sandstorm in the midst of which can be seen a barely discernible cluster of

struggling figures.¹ One chalk sketch, from the Calais Pier Sketchbook, inscribed with the word 'Whirlwind' on the top left hand corner of the page, depicts a mass of tumbling figures and equipment (Figure. 1.1) while another, from the same book, focusses on a smaller group of figures in chaotic disarray (Figure 1.2). Turner's vision of naked human disorder may well have been inspired by the writhing gestures and agonised expressions of the figures depicted in Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents* (1626-27) and *Consequences of War* (1638-39). The visual parallels between Rubens' works and Turner's sketches are striking. As Turner made preparations for his unnerving portrayal of military catastrophe he would most likely have been aware that Rubens' paintings were conceived as responses to contemporary conflict, specifically to the savage deprivations of the Thirty Years' War.

[insert figures 3-4 here; images should be adjacent to each other in portrait format]

Figure 1.3 J. M. W. Turner, *Figures ?on a Shore with a Fierce Storm at Sea Beyond; Perhaps a Study for 'The Army of the Medes Destroyed in the Desert by a Whirlwind'*. Graphite on paper. 131 x 95 mm. Dynevor Castle Sketchbook. D01566 Turner Bequest XL 60a. © Tate.

Figure 1.4 J. M. W. Turner, *Figures ?on a Shore with a Fierce Storm at Sea Beyond; Perhaps a Study for 'The Army of the Medes Destroyed in the Desert by a Whirlwind'*. Graphite on paper. 131 x 95 mm. Dynevor Castle Sketchbook. D01567 Turner Bequest XL 61. © Tate.

In addition to the sketches from the Calais Pier Sketchbook the art historian Jerrold Ziff has drawn attention to two graphite and chalk drawings from the Dynevor Castle Sketchbook that may have a bearing on the composition of *The Army of the Medes*. Pages 60a-61 (Figure 1.3; Figure 1.4) depict a large, billowing dust cloud threatening to engulf a group of struggling figures, while on pages 58a-59 there is a similar scene, only with more clearly defined figures extending to the base of the whirlwind. In common with Turner's other biblical studies (*The Tenth Plague* is, in terms of composition, the painting's closest analogue) the juxtaposition of vast, looming shadows and miniscule figures conveys a sense of human vulnerability before the might of God's wrath.² During the conception of this scene Turner may well have born in mind the efforts of radical millenarians in the 1790s to interpret present events in light of the Hebrew Testament, seeing for example in the Book of Jeremiah an apocalyptic vision of the fatal consequences of Britain's war against France – a point to which I shall return.

Ziff states further that the Dynevor Castle sketches bear a striking resemblance to contemporary descriptions of the painting, such as the following, from a review in the *Star*:

This is a very masterly sketch but there is so much trick in the execution that we doubt much if its chief beauties could be retained in a print. To save trouble the painter seems to have buried his whole army in the sand of the Desert with a single flourish of his brush; thus reminding us of an itinerant Raphael, who, undertaking the delineation on a staircase of the story of the Children of Israel passing the Red Sea, contented himself with covering the whole with a coat of yellow ochre, and when it was demanded of him by his patron what had become of the Israelites, he observed that they had all gone to the promised land and that Pharaoh and his host were all drowned.³

As well as serving as a useful index of the painting's composition the *Star's* assessment tells us a great deal about contemporary perceptions of Turner's technical and, by extension, commercial shortcomings. By highlighting the indistinctness of the work the critic suggests that Turner's 'sketch', although 'masterly', cannot hope to serve the lucrative print market. The underlying implication is that a work dominated by an aesthetic commitment to obscurity, inscrutability and abeyance cannot be consumed beyond the rarefied surroundings of the Academy. While, in one sense, Turner's work resists co-optation by commercial society in another it adheres stubbornly to the values of a privileged elite. Without wishing to diminish the force of this criticism I would like to propose that the painting's resistance to reproduction may be related to a wish on Turner's part to provide his audience, however narrowly defined, with an intimation of the horrors of war. Discussing *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1806-8) Tim Costello has argued convincingly that Turner's interest in obscurity, dissolution and the multiplication of perspectives prevents elite viewers from assuming command over political terrains assumed to be transparent, unified and incontestable.⁴ In like manner, by signally failing to provide viewers with visual information, by 'burying' his subject in indistinct matter, *The Army of the Medes* offered a version of the sublime in which the encounter with terror is prevented from becoming a staging ground for the recuperation of the unified, autonomous self; absorbed, as it were, by an image of pure, undifferentiated chaos, viewers of Turner's painting were subjected instead to a vision of the self's dissolution.

That contemporary reviewers of the work were alert to the painting's investment in the sublime as a mode of blockage rather than as a source of distinction is suggested by a judgement from the *Porcupine*: 'Mr. Turner has doubtless heard that obscurity is one source

of the sublime, and he has certainly given to the picture a full measure of this kind of sublimity. Perhaps his work may be best described by what a lady said of it – that it is all flags and smoke'.⁵ By exceeding Burke's narrowly defined understanding of painting as a medium on the side of clarity and comprehension Turner has, in the opinion of this critic, failed to provide his audience with a point of comparison for measuring the effects of the sublime. In an assessment of Turner, written a decade later, the liberal critic Robert Hunt, in the first issue of the quarterly magazine *The Reflector*, presents a more charitable assessment of the picture's sublimity:

Our first landscape-painter is Mr. Turner, who has the same fault in his drawing as Sir Joshua, that of indistinctness of outline; but this fault, which is so obnoxious in human subjects, and baffles Mr. Turner's ragged attempts at history, becomes very different in the mists and shadows of landscape; and he knows how to convert it into a shadowy sublimity. Mr. Turner's invention generally displays itself through this medium, whether disturbed or placid. His *Whirlwind in the Desert* [*sic.*] astounded the connoisseurs, who after contemplating at proper distance an embodied violence of atmosphere that seemed to take away one's senses, found themselves, when they came near, utterly at a loss what to make of it, and as it were smothered in the attempt.⁶

The passage makes unclear whether the '*Whirlwind in the Desert* [*sic.*]' is to be considered as a 'ragged attempt at history' or as a 'shadowy' sublime landscape, but leaving these not insignificant considerations of genre aside, what interests me about Hunt's assessment is the way it sets up a tension between the propriety of remote seeing and the dangers of getting too close. Turner is praised for his ability to convey 'an embodied violence of atmosphere', but this sense of embodiment is paradoxically dependent on the maintenance of distance. A painting's sublimity may be praised if it *seems* to 'take away one's senses' but this out-of-body experience becomes questionable when, as a result of coming 'near' in an effort to understand the work, the viewer finds themselves 'utterly at a loss [...] and as it were smothered in the attempt'. Hunt's 'as it were' speaks of the means by which Turner's painting absorbs the viewer's attention, arousing as a consequence of this absorption a disorientating sensation of being smothered. Burke, in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, warns that when 'danger or pain press to nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible'.⁷ If Turner's painting fails to match Burke's criteria for the sublime it is because it

prevents viewers from placing themselves at a distance from terror; lacking a point of orientation within the painting from which to measure the effects of the sublime the feeling aroused in the viewer is, instead, one of pain unleavened by pleasure. As a result of this proximate encounter with the brute reality of terror *The Army of the Medes* runs contrary to the desideratum of conventional military art. Where, for example, in Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) or John Singleton Copley's *The Death of Major Pierson* (1784) audiences are encouraged to emulate the stoical detachment of the mourners surrounding the central figure, a scene modelled on early modern images of the *pietà*, in Turner's painting, by contrast, viewers are drawn in towards a potentially life-threatening identification with the undifferentiated dead, unredeemed by the transcendental and always discernible body of the sacrificial officer hero.

Immersed in dust, struggling for air, an army of observers recede into nothing. But how, precisely, can Turner's painting be understood as an intervention in contemporary perceptions of war? In his biography of the painter Jack Lindsay suggests that Turner may have intended a reference to the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt.⁸ This reading is given some credence when the painting's allusion to Jeremiah is taken into account. As several critics have pointed out, Turner's citation of Jeremiah 15: 32-3 is mistaken as no such verses exist in chapter 15. Following Ziff's suggestion that 'the passage in Jeremiah which seems more closely related to Turner's painting is XXV: 32-3' Lindsay claims that *The Army of the Medes* is most likely a representation of the following passage:

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Behold, evil shall go forth from nation to nation, and a great whirlwind shall be raised up from the coasts of the earth.

And the slain of the LORD shall be at that day from *one* end of the earth even unto the *other* end of the earth: they shall not be lamented, neither gathered, nor buried; they shall be dung upon the ground.⁹

Yet, while these verses do seem to have a bearing on the apocalyptic scenes depicted in the Calais Pier and Dynevor Castle sketchbooks it is possible that the reference in the R. A. catalogue to Jeremiah 15:32-3 may have been a misprint of 51:32-3:

And that the passages are stopped, and the reeds they have burned with fire, and the men of war are affrighted.

For thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; The daughter of Babylon *is* like a threshing floor, it *is* time to thresh her: yet a little while, and the time of her harvest shall come.

Although Jeremiah 51, unlike Jeremiah 25, makes specific mention of the army of the Medes as the vanquishers of Babylon (51:11) there is, however, no mention in 51:32-3 of their destruction by a ‘whirlwind’, as prophesied in 25:17 and 25:32-3. Nevertheless, accepting Lindsay’s suggestion that Turner wished to draw parallels between the wars of the Medes and the progress of the imperial forces in Egypt, how should this allusion be understood? Before we can answer this question we must first reconstruct the historical and cultural contexts in which Turner’s painting appeared.

When work on *The Army of the Medes* began the French Army of the Orient had been trapped in Egypt since Nelson’s victory at the Battle of Nile in August 1798. Despite some initial successes – notably at Gaza and notoriously at Jaffa – the isolation of the army was beginning to take its toll. By the spring of 1801, when a British expeditionary force led by General Abercromby landed in Egypt, expectations of a French defeat were riding high. When news of British victory at the battle of Aboukir was announced by the War Office at the beginning of May, it was evident that the conflict had been costly, in terms of numbers of dead and wounded, for both sides; General Abercromby was himself wounded and died shortly after the battle. Despite being officially pronounced a British triumph, the outcome of the Battle of Aboukir was, therefore, by no means decisive. Although demoralised and depleted by the British assault, the French troops, under the command of General Menou, chose not to surrender but to retreat to their garrison in Alexandria.¹⁰

The desultory outcome of the battle failed, however, to dampen public enthusiasm for a host of celebratory spectacles. Visitors to the Royal Academy Summer exhibition at which Turner’s painting appeared would have had the opportunity to attend a variety of Egyptian entertainments, from a ‘serio-comic pantomime’ entitled the *Harlequin Mamaluke; or, The British in Egypt* at the New Royal Circus and a show at Sadler’s Wells called *Egyptian Laurels*, depicting ‘the Capture of the Invincible Flag of Bonaparte [...] an exact representation of the Real, Invincible Flag, accurately copied from the original by permission’, and the ‘Death and Apotheosis of Sir RALPH ABERCROMBY’ to a military and naval extravaganza at Astley’s entitled *British Glory in Egypt*.¹¹ While British troops laid siege to Alexandria the nation waited expectantly for confirmation of the French defeat. In anticipation of Menou’s surrender, a mood of cheerful belligerence spread unabated,

infecting loyalist and anti-loyalists alike, saturating every level of society, including the connoisseurs of the Royal Academy. Expressing disappointment at the lack of ‘sublimity and grandeur’ in the poetic and historical paintings on display at the exhibition, the reviewer for the *Morning Post*, a paper noted for its criticisms of the government’s war policy, berated contributors for failing to capture ‘new ground, and explore regions hitherto unknown [...] If their success has not equalled expectation, it is because they are, perhaps, more timid than weak. To win the victory, they must fight the battle’.¹²

Although the *Morning Post* reviewer does not mention *The Army of the Medes* – a bold and enterprising artistic excursion into ‘regions hitherto unknown’ if ever there was one – a visitor to the Academy exhibition for 1801, whipped up by the news of victory in Alexandria, might well have regarded the work as a prophetic of French defeat. The neatness of this parallel is complicated, however, by the fact that in Jeremiah the Medians are counted as one among many nations that God intends to destroy. I would suggest, therefore, that the topicality of the painting’s biblical citation recedes before its universalising implications: Turner’s allusion is to an ‘evil’ that will have consequences for every nation, not just the French. Lamenting British hubris in projected victory as well as French abjection in anticipated defeat, the obscurity of Turner’s sublime is such that it precludes any form of ideological coherence. By refusing to present a determinate vision of national triumph, Turner, as Ann Livermore has intimated, aligns himself with the ‘sacred Bard’ of James Thomson’s ‘Ode on Aeolus’s Harp’ (1748), ‘who sat alone in the drear waste and wept his people’s woes’.¹³ Thomson, a habitual touchstone for Turner on account of his attention to ‘poetic, metaphorical, Historical and [...] geographical truth’, may also have inspired the vision of decimation that is at the painting’s core.¹⁴ In ‘Summer’, from *The Seasons* (1726-30), Thomson describes a violent desert storm:

From all the boundless furnace of the sky,
And the wide glittering waste of burning sand,
A suffocating wind the pilgrim smites
With instant death. Patient of thirst and toil,
Son of the desert! even the camel feels,
Shot through his withered heart, the fiery blast.
Or from the black-red ether, bursting broad,
Sallies the sudden whirlwind. Straight the sands,
Commoved around, in gathering eddies play;

Nearer and nearer still they darkening come;
 Till, with the general all-involving storm
 Swept up, the whole continuous wilds arise
 [...]
 Beneath descending hills the caravan
 Is buried deep.

And in 'Autumn' the dying inhabitants of a bee hive are 'Convolved, and agonizing in the dust', while in 'Winter' the 'vainly wise' lie 'Confounded in the dust'.¹⁵ Like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, what the poet and painter regard in the wastage of history and of nature is a pile up of catastrophic proportions in which distinctions of race, class and national allegiance become meaningless. Small wonder that viewers conditioned to regard paintings as conveyors of knowledge – about politics, history and society – should have come away from the painting feeling perplexed.

[insert Figure 1.5 here]

Figure 1.5 Philip James De Loutherbourg, *A Distant Hail-Storm Coming On, and the March of Soldiers with their Baggage* (1799). Oil on canvas. 1092 x 1626 mm. N05389. © Tate.

In one sense, however, *The Army of the Medes* did signal a determinate connection with the surrounding world. In their catalogue of Turner's works Martin Butler and Evelyn Joll suggest that the painter may have conceived the work as a response to a painting by Philip James De Loutherbourg entitled *A Distant Hailstorm coming on, and the March of Soldiers with their Baggage* (Figure 1.5) that was displayed at the Academy in 1799. Butler and Joll introduce their analysis with a discussion of some criticisms of Loutherbourg contained in Gilpin's *Observations on the Western Parts of England* (1798).¹⁶ In his book Gilpin berates Loutherbourg for failing to depict the effects of dust in a landscape, concluding that 'the only circumstance which can make a cloud of dust an object of imitation is *distance*'.¹⁷ It may be that Loutherbourg intended *A Distant Hailstorm* as an answer to Gilpin's criticism. Turner, for his part, would most certainly have known of the picture and he may well have intended his own painting as a contribution to Gilpin's critique.

The question of whether or not *A Distant Hailstorm* responds satisfactorily to Gilpin's observations is easy enough to assess. Now in the Tate collection, Loutherbourg's picture is an accomplished yet unremarkable work, combining close attention to meteorological detail with the accepted conventions of genre painting. The figures in the landscape are clearly

delineated and harmonious relations between soldiers and civilians are the order of the day. Although the composition was clearly informed by Burkean notions of sublimity, the central conceit, founded in the contrast between the sociability depicted the foreground and the lowering gloom on the horizon, is disappointingly picturesque. As Butler and Joll comment, the loss of *The Army of the Medes* ‘makes it impossible for us to judge how far [Turner] succeeded’ in showing his competitor the correct way to portray such a scene.¹⁸ However, mindful of the responses of contemporary viewers to the ‘embodied violence’ of this work I would suggest that something more than artistic rivalry was at stake in this picture’s production. Where Louthembourg’s bucolic composition presents its audience with a reassuringly coherent image of military activity, Turner’s violent, convulsive image depicts an army in turmoil, its identity erased by the effects of the storm.

As if by way of response to Turner’s arresting yet politically baffling contribution to the 1801 exhibition, Louthembourg in the following year painted two works of unimpeachable ideological correctness: *The Battle of Alexandria* and *The Landing of the British Troops at Aboukir, 8 March 1801*. Conceived like Louthembourg’s earlier military paintings *The Grand Attack on Valenciennes* (1793) and *The Glorious First of June* (1795) as pendant pieces, the pictures were produced during the short-lived period of peace from October 1801 to May 1803 that saw a proliferation of canvases representing the death of Abercromby by Robert Pollard, Samuel James Arnold, James Northcote and Thomas Stothard.¹⁹ The popularity of these battle scenes and death tableaux was complemented by Robert Ker Porter’s ambitious panoramic work, *The Battle of Alexandria*, on display at the Lyceum from 3 May 1802; just as Louthembourg’s paintings enticed viewers with the promise of verisimilitude, boasting ‘views taken from the spot’ alongside portraits taken from ‘life’, so Porter’s panorama was marketed to the public on the basis of its representational accuracy and attention to detail. Containing over ninety portraits of the chief British participants, the work was produced from ‘personal communication of the very first Authority, giving a correct idea of the Situations and movements of nearly the whole line of both Armies, and introducing in the fore ground, correct Portraits of the British Officers; the surrounding Figures of the subject being also painted from life’. In accordance with the cognitive rationale underwriting the panorama form, the key to Porter’s work announced that viewers would be able to ‘comprehend at one View, the most striking and interesting Points of Contest between the English and French Forces, in Egypt, on the memorable 21st of March 1801’.²⁰ In striking contrast, then, to Turner’s disorientating vision of the dissolution of self-command, works like *The Battle of Alexandria*, along with their attendant keys, prints and explanations, enabled viewers to

position themselves as integrated, transcendental spectators, apprehending war as an object of knowledge in a single 'view'. Where the over-determined sublimity of *The Army of the Medes* initiated cognitive crises, Porter's vast, circular painting, crammed with historical details, acted as a kind of mental prosthesis, deploying the technology of the sublime to assist identification with the omniscient gaze of a triumphant, commanding 'spirit'. Endlessly reproducible, the clearly delineated topographies, battle lines and portraits on display in the panorama were designed to assist in the process of commemoration, consolidating indeterminate and often ambiguous actions as discrete historical events. By sheer visual insistence, the Battle of Alexandria, fought 'on the *memorable* 21st of March 1801' was thus brought home, leaving 'nothing left unresolved, nothing left to know'.²¹

That Turner was, from the outset of his career, unwilling to provide audiences with reassuring images of clarity and distinction is evident when one considers the *Battle of the Nile, at 10 o'clock when L'Orient blew up, from the Station of the Gun Boats between the Battery and Castle of Aboukir*, a painting, now lost, that was submitted to the 1799 Royal Academy exhibition at which Louthembourg's *A Distant Hailstorm* first appeared. Although little is known about this important early work, the RA catalogue notes that it was displayed with the following quotation from Book 6, lines 584-90 of *Paradise Lost* which describe the satanic army's initial, successful assault on Michael and his angels:

Immediate in a flame,
But soon obscured with smoke, all heav'n appear'd
From these deep-throated engines belch'd whose roar
Imbowel'd with outrageous noise the air,
And all her entrails tore, disgorging foul
Their devilish glut, chain'd thunderbolts and hail
Of iron globes.²²

Turner's title refers to the destruction of the French ship *Orient* at the Battle of the Nile in August 1798, but the idea of the painting as a patriotic response to this event is qualified somewhat by the implication, arising from the appended quotation, that the fire 'belch'd' forth issues from the canons of the attacking British ships rather than from an explosion of ordnance on board the *Orient*. As Alastair Fowler has noted, Milton's physiological images (belched, embowelled, entrails, disgorging, glut) 'amounts almost to a Freudian allegory about alimentary and anal aggression'.²³ At a time when the British press was inundated with

patriotic encomiums for Nelson's decisive triumph over the French fleet the sight of a burning ship, obliterated with devilish effluvia, may well have prompted audiences to reflect with a degree of uneasiness on the sublime delight evoked by images of destruction. When, years later, the burning of the Orient was celebrated by Felicia Hemans in 'Casabianca' (1826) – 'The wreathing fires made way. / They wrapt the ship in splendour wild' – the connections between war, sublimity and the id-enjoyment suggested by Turner's satanically-inflected picture were made verbally explicit.²⁴

The ideologically unstable vision of French annihilation that Turner conjured in *The Army of the Medes* could therefore be said to originate in this first, morally ambiguous portrayal of death in the Orient. Like *The Army of the Medes* the effect of the *Battle of the Nile* appears to have traded on the artist's penchant for 'indistinctness and confusion', prompting at least one reviewer of the 1799 exhibition to pronounce that 'Mr. Turner has compleatly [*sic.*] failed in producing the grand effect which such a spectacle as the explosion of a ship of the line would exhibit'.²⁵ Unlike comparable depictions of the Battle of the Nile by Robert Cleveley and Nicholas Pocock, also on display at the Academy, Turner's painting was berated on two counts: first, for failing to present a 'correct representation of a particular action' and 'accurate portraits of particular ships'; secondly, for falling short of recognised criteria of 'Grandeur, and Sublimity'.²⁶ In the opinion of the *London Packet* these shortcomings were linked: the absence of 'grand effect' could be attributed to the artist having 'mistook the colouring of such an eruption – the reflection should be red, but the vitreous flame should be bright and prismatic in its tints'.²⁷ Inferring on the basis of this description that both the fire and its reflection were tinted red, Turner's strange, demoniacal painting begins to resemble less a failed attempt at the sublime and more a way of getting audiences to experience the sanguineous offensiveness underlying the surface thrills of wartime spectacles. By rendering this vision unclear, as well as bloody, Turner may have born in mind Hugh Blair's comment that 'the imagination may be strongly affected [...] by objects of which it has no clear conception' and, in further accordance with Blair, the artist may also have regarded the 'power and strength' exhibited in the clash of armed forces as an arresting source of the sublime.²⁸ However, where Turner qualifies Blair's assessment of war as the 'highest exertion of human might' it is in his willingness to present audiences with an impression of extreme morbidity and personal threat, sufficient to undermine the position of safety and security that is the endgame of the sublime encounter.²⁹

If, in surveying the *Battle of the Nile*, the viewer finds him or herself implicated in hellish delight at spectacular misfortune, the effect of looking at *The Army of the Medes* is, I

would suggest, more closely related to an excessive form of sympathetic identification with the victims of war. As we have seen, *The Army of the Medes* appears to have lured Academy audiences into an alarming proximity with the dead, surpassing any sense of the war painting as an object for the exercise of self-definition. While conventional death-tableaux, large-scale panoramas and lavish popular entertainments provided wartime audiences with ideologically freighted visions of martial heroics, predicated on the maintenance of sublime distance from the vitiating effects of conflict and a bogus identification with the commanding vision of the noble officer hero, Turner created a painting that, intentionally or not, brought audiences face-to-face with the ignoble realities of disorientation, deprivation and physical violence. By eschewing the conventions of both military and history painting and by seeming, in addition, to refuse to lend itself to commercial appropriation, the *Army of the Medes* became less an object of contemplation and more an act of representation. The painting, that is, exposed the representational conventions that conspired to shield audiences from the abject realities of war.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I wish to resume consideration of the question of the painting's complicated relationship with biblical prophecy. In *War at A Distance* Mary Favret has argued that prophecies in wartime 'effectively move the register of timekeeping away from the time of the nation in order to introduce the end of time and with it the end – in one sense the dissolution, in another the unfurling project of empire'.³⁰ While in one sense the *Army of the Medes* looks to the past – in this case the biblical past – in order to orientate the present in relation to an established narrative of national history, in another sense it evokes the threat of those popular forms of prophecy, often linked with religious enthusiasm and radical politics, that in the late eighteenth century were 'viewed with suspicion by the established church and government, in part because of their emotional volatility and irrationality'.³¹ Drawing support from John Mee's work on Romantic enthusiasm Favret goes on to claim that prophetic proclamations 'reformulating the prophets of the Hebrew Testament [...] depended on a rhetoric that seemed to provoke "delirium" or "illapses of the spirit" [...] that suggested a rending' rather than a suturing 'of the temporal order'.³² Just as the title of Turner's work generates confusion about the identification of the French Imperial and Median armies – destroyers of Babylon and/or objects of God's wrath – so the painting itself instils in the viewer a sense of temporal and national bewilderment: is this now or then? Are the figures struggling in the midst of the whirlwind the Army of the Medes, the Army of the Orient or perhaps, more alarmingly, the British expeditionary force?

The latter possibility takes on some force when one bears in mind the following passage, from General Menou's open letter to the Egyptians: 'The English, who everywhere oppress mankind, have made their appearance off the coast [...] if they advance, they shall be reduced into dust, and the Desert will swallow them up'.³³ Published in March 1801 at around the same time as Turner was putting the finishing touches to his painting, Menou's letter serves both as an alternative gloss to Jeremiah 25: 32-3 and as an indication of the dangerous instability of the prophetic mode. Had Turner looked to the classical rather than the biblical past for inspiration he might have located a more stable context for his vision of an army in distress. In the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus raises a blast of wind that shrouds the Achaean ships in dust and gives hope to Hector and the Trojans; in Herodotus a dust cloud foretells Greek victory at Salamis while, in another episode, the Persians are 'buried in masses of sand [...] and so they disappeared from sight'; Cassius Dio writes of Hannibal raising 'limitless showers of dust [...] so that the Romans could neither see clearly nor speak plainly, but, being crowded into a narrow compass and falling upon one, were shot, and died no easy nor even speedy death'.³⁴ By way of contrast to the historical specificity of these classical sources Jeremiah 25 is radically open: if, as verses 17-38 predict, the end of *all* empires is dust and dissolution then no empire, not least the British, should feel secure. The real subject, therefore, of Turner's painting is not the destruction of the French army but rather the destruction of all imperial ambition.³⁵

The disruptive consequences of Turner's deployment of the temporal instabilities of the prophetic mode are compounded further by the ways in which the painting plays with notions of place and identity. By collapsing spatial distinctions, and by eliminating the focalising presence of the officer hero offered by conventional military historical paintings, the *Army of the Medes*, as we have seen, encouraged viewers to become absorbed in the painted scene to the point of suffocation. As noted earlier, Turner's painting can thus be seen to mark a radical intervention in visual responses to the discourse of sympathy. Where traditional military historical paintings such as West's *Death of General Wolfe* drew on Adam Smith's notion of sentiment to assist audiences in forging deferential relations with objects of military sacrifice, the *Army of the Medes* appears more closely allied with Francis Hutcheson's much earlier emphasis on 'fellow-feeling' as a form of 'contagion' or 'infection': '[w]e not only sorrow with the distressed, and rejoice with the prosperous; but admiration, or surprise, discovered in one, raises a correspondent commotion of mind in all who behold him. Fear observed raises fear in the *observer*'.³⁶ Elsewhere I have argued that Hutcheson's belief that the emotions and energies of a person may be absorbed, like a virus,

into the body of another presents a significant challenge to the emphasis placed by the Smith on the spectator as an isolated mental observer.³⁷ While for Smith the spectator does, in a sense, come to 'enter' the body of the other, his knowledge of the other's suffering is gained only through an act of 'imagination': 'our senses will never inform us of what he suffers'.³⁸ The spectator, therefore, does not identify with the other but seeks rather, through imagination, to represent to himself what the other feels. Even when, in a later paragraph, Smith admits that the 'passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned' his admission is qualified by the observation that passions such as 'grief and joy inspire us with some degree of the like emotions' only because 'they suggest to us the general *idea* of some good or bad fortune that has befallen the person in whom we observe them'.³⁹ For Hutcheson, by contrast, the mere observance of distress can result in an individual experiencing a corresponding *feeling* of distress severe enough to dissolve the relations between self and other.

When observing, therefore, the image of suffering in *The Army of the Medes* contemporary audiences seem to have responded in a manner more closely akin to Hutchesonian self-abnegation than Smithian self-affirmation. Since '[f]ear observed raises fear in the *observer*', viewers of the painting could find themselves over-identifying with the army's struggles for survival. Here, in what amounts to a striking anticipation of recent theories of affect, Robert Hunt's account of the experience of viewing Turner's painting testifies to the important sense in which

[...] the *registration* of the image in the mind's eye is only one side of things. The image is also, necessarily, *transmitted*. It is transmitted as surely as the words whose sound waves or valence register physical effects in the air around the ears of those who hear. In the last analysis, words and images are matters of vibration, vibrations at different frequencies, but vibrations. The significance of this is easily underestimated in that we have failed to consider how the transmission through physical vibration of the image is simultaneously the transmission of a social thing; the social and physical transmission of the image are one and the same process.⁴⁰

Teresa Brennan, the author of this passage, goes on to state that 'if the image is violent, this means one is not indifferent to its effects, however indifferent one feels.

But the immediate point is that sights and sounds are physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin, but physical in their effects'.⁴¹

The specific 'social thing' that Turner's painting transmitted is now lost to us; but I would like to propose that something of its primary volatility persists in *The Field of Waterloo*, the controversial moral landscape painting that Turner contributed to the Royal Academy exhibition of 1818. Taking inspiration from Lord Byron's account of the aftermath of the battle in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1817) – 'Rider and horse, – friend, foe, – in one red burial blent!'⁴² – as well as from Leonardo da Vinci's instruction to painters to show 'the dead partly or entirely covered with dust, which is mingled with the oozing blood and changed into crimson mire [...] there might also be seen a number of men fallen in a heap on top of a dead horse',⁴³ Turner's painting confounded audiences when it was first displayed. Although some viewers, notably Robert Hunt in the *Examiner*, were sympathetic to Turner's focus on the 'slaughtered victims' of '[a]mbition's charnel-house', a majority felt puzzled and affronted.⁴⁴ Objecting to the picture's gloomy, inchoate mass of dead bodies at the center of the composition the diarist and war correspondent Henry Crabbe Robinson condemned the work as 'a strange incomprehensible jumble' while a reviewer in the *Annals of fine Arts* took issue with the depiction of soldiers' wives 'scuffling and scrambling' for missing partners amidst the heap of dead and dying bodies.⁴⁵ Like *The Army of the Medes* *The Field of Waterloo* is unstinting in its portrayal of the abject matter of conflict; but perhaps more specifically what the painting throws back on its audience is a sense – indeed a sensation – of the Clausewitzian understanding of war as 'the province of uncertainty'.⁴⁶

¹ The Calais Pier and Dynevor Castle sketch books are in the Tate collection. The contents of both of these books may be surveyed at <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/>

² J. Ziff (1964) 'Proposed Studies for a Lost Turner Painting', *Burlington Magazine*, CVI, 328-33; 330.

³ Cited in M. Butlin and E. Joll (1977) *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner (Text)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 2 vols, I, p.3.

⁴ T. Costello (2012), *Turner and the Subject of History* (Farnham: Ashgate), p.51.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ E. Burke (1757; 1990) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. A. Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.36.

⁸ J. Lindsay (1985) *Turner: The Man and His Art* (London: Granada), p.33.

⁹ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha* (1997), ed. R. Carroll and S. Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.857.

¹⁰ For an informative account of the British campaign in Egypt see P. Mackesy (2010) *British Victory in Egypt: The End of Napoleon's Conquest* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris). For an authoritative account of the French campaign see J. Cole (2007) *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (London: Palgrave).

¹¹ *Morning Post*, Monday, 1 June, 1801, 1; *Morning Post*, Monday, 15 June, 1801, 1; *E. Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor*, Sunday, 7 June, 1801, 1. Of *Egyptian Laurels*, the *Morning Post* (Wednesday, 3 June, 1801, 3) commented that 'a stage engagement never was represented to such advantage, as it has all the appearance of reality, from the immense quantity of men engaged; and the interest excited by the appearance of whole columns advancing, retreating, and struggling for victory, is uncommon'.

¹² *Morning Post*, Tuesday, 28 April, 1801, 3.

¹³ A. Livermore (1957) 'J. M. W. Turner in 1797', *Burlington Magazine*, XCIV, 48-51. Cited in Butlin and Joll (1977), p.13.

¹⁴ Turner, quoted in A. Wilton (1980) *Turner and the Sublime* (London: British Museum Publications Ltd), p.37.

¹⁵ J. Thomson, *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence* (1991), ed. J. Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 63-4: ll.962-73, ll.976-7; p.121: l.1183; p.156: ll.1050-51.

¹⁶ Butlin and Joll (1977), p.13.

¹⁷ W. Gilpin (1798) *Observations on the western parts of England, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty. To which are added, a few remarks on the picturesque beauties on the Isle of Wight [...]* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies), p.283.

¹⁸ Butlin and Joll, *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner (Text)*, p.13.

¹⁹ For further details see P. Harington (1993) *British Artists and War: the Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints, 1700-1914* (London: Greenhill Books), pp.79-85.

²⁰ Quotations cited in Harington (1993), p.80.

²¹ M. A. Favret (2010) *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p.219.

²² Cited in Butlin and Joll (1977), p.7.

²³ J. Milton (1667; 1971) *Paradise Lost*, ed. A. Fowler (London and New York: Longman), p.337.

²⁴ S. Wolfson (ed.) (2000) *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p.429: ll.29-33.

²⁵ *True Briton*, 4 May 1799, 1; *London Packet*, 29 April-1 May, 1799 (no page range; reference as cited in Butlin and Joll (1977), p.7).

²⁶ *The Naval Chronicle* (1799) (London: J. Gold), I, pp.157-8.

²⁷ *London Packet*, 29 April-1 May, 1799 (no page range; reference as cited in Butlin and Joll (1977), p.7).

²⁸ H. Blair (1787; 1812) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (12th edn; London: T. Cadell and W. Davies), 3 vols, I, p.57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p.55.

³⁰ Favret (2010), p.85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

³² *Ibid.*

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- ³³ R. T. Wilson (1803) *History of the British Expedition to Egypt* (2nd edn. London: T. Egerton), p.366.
- ³⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, Book 13. ll.334-7; Heroditus, *The Histories*, Book 8, ch.65; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book 40, p.441. Quotations cited in E. Echols (1951) 'Military Dust', *The Classical Journal*, XLVI, 285-8.
- ³⁵ Jeremiah is frequently cited in sermons warning against the prosecution of war in this period. Meditating on Jeremiah 4: 23-6 ('the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the Lord, and by his fierce anger') the preacher William Steadman draws a parallel with the present 'desolations now raging in the world [when] we hear of countries over-run, towns besieged, plundered, burnt, upwards of thirty thousands of our fellow creatures at one time lying dead upon the field of battle'. W. Steadman (1795), *Hearing the voice of God's Rod; and the safety of true penitents in a time of public calamity. The substance of two sermons, preached at Broughton, in Hampshire. The former February 28, 1794. The latter February 25, 1795* (Salisbury: printed for (and by) J. Easton), p.24.
- ³⁶ F. Hutcheson (1755) *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: A. Millar and T. Longman), 3 vols, I, pp.20-1.
- ³⁷ P. Shaw (2013) *Suffering and Sentiment in Romantic Military Art* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp.11-13.
- ³⁸ A. Smith (1790) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (6th edn. London: A. Miller). Republished as A. Smith (2006), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications), p.3
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5; my emphasis.
- ⁴⁰ T. Brennan (2004) *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p.70.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.71.
- ⁴² Lord Byron (1980-91) *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J. J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 7 vols, III, p.28.
- ⁴³ L. da Vinci (2008) *Notebooks*, ed. T. Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.176.
- ⁴⁴ *Examiner*, Sunday, 24 May, 1818, 12.
- ⁴⁵ H. C. Robinson (1869) *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabbe Robinson*, ed. T. Sadler (2nd edn. London: Macmillan & Co.), 3 vols, I, p.96.
- ⁴⁶ C. Von Clausewitz (1832; 1982) *On War*, ed. A. Rapoport (London: Penguin), p.140. That Turner continued to meditate on this subject is evident from the watercolour sketch 'A Hurricane in the Desert (the Simoom)', which the artist designed in 1830-2 as an illustration to Samuel Rogers' poem 'Human Life' (1819). Appended to lines describing the fate of travelers in the desert ('and in an instant lost – A hollow wave / Of burning sand their everlasting grave!'), the image, showing fallen animals and humans, dominated by a consuming, black vortex – the Simoom, or 'poison wind' of the title – signals, once again, Turner's abiding preoccupation with impaired sight, contested ground and the futility of imperial command. See S. Rogers (1836), *Poems* (London: T. Cadell), p.94. See also M. Gamer (2006; 2008), 'A Hurricane in the Desert (The Simoom), for Rogers's 'Poems' c.1830-2 by Joseph Mallord William Turner', catalogue entry, August 2006, revised by Nicola Moorby, July 2008, in D. Blayney Brown (ed.), *J.M.W. Turner: Sketchbooks, Drawings and Watercolours*, December 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/jmw-turner/joseph-mallord-william-turner-a-hurricane-in-the-desert-the-simoom-for-rogers-poems-r1133352>, accessed 20 May 2014