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J. M. W. Turner's *Falls at Schaffhausen*

Marjorie Munsterberg

The Art Museum has been fortunate in its acquisition of a splendid late Alpine watercolor (figure 1) by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851). These watercolors are very special pictures. To our eyes, they epitomize the qualities we prize most about Turner's art: extraordinary virtuosity of technique; a vivid sense of the process of artistic creation; the dissolution of the subject into washes of brilliant color. Although intended as studies for Turner's private use, these watercolors are neither working notes toward a finished picture nor records of natural phenomena (such as those collected in Princeton's early sketch-book by Turner, discussed elsewhere in this issue). Rather, they present a series of meditations on a subject—the Alps—and on an aesthetic—the sublime—that absorbed Turner for the duration of his long career.¹ By the 1840s, his visualization of these themes had become idiosyncratic and extremely abbreviated. The resulting pictures seem to us, nurtured on the late works of Monet and on Jackson Pollock, prescient in their abstraction.² This modern understanding is not historically plausible, however, and more careful consideration reveals the presence of quite a different aesthetic sensibility.

To Turner and his contemporaries, the Alps exemplified the natural sublime. Most important was the feeling that the mountains exceeded the grasp of human comprehension. The emotions they aroused were extreme: the elevation of the mind through the contemplation of something so grand, and a delicious thrill at the possibility of danger. For the British especially, the major guide to the sublime was Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1756). This book, which analyzes the experience in terms of our psychological response, identifies fear as the critical emotion:

Whatever is in any sort terrible...is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.... When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience.³

The publication of Burke's book marked a major shift in attitude. Previous generations had made clear their dislike of such landscapes as the Alps, finding them ugly and frightening. By the early eighteenth century, however, taste was changing. The youthful Thomas Gray, traveling over the Alps with Horace Walpole in 1739, wrote in his journal:

Magnificent rudeness, and steep precipices.... You here meet with all the beauties so savage and horrid a place can present you with; Rocks of various and uncouth figures, Cascades pouring down from an immense height out of hanging Groves of Pine Trees, and the solemn Sound of the Stream, that roars below, all concur to form one of the most poetical scenes imaginable.

To a friend, Gray wrote: "Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry."⁴ By the end of the century, such appreciation had become a common response, found in Romantic poetry, Gothic novels, and countless travelogues. Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Manfred*, among other works, fixed the mountains in the popular imagination and assured their place on tours throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, by the end of the century, the obligatory Alpine Visit had become a tired commonplace fit only for ridicule.⁵

No other major visual artist depicted the Alps as often as Turner. He traveled there repeatedly: first in 1802, when the Peace of Amiens temporarily opened the Continent to British tourists, and then in 1836, 1841, 1842, and 1844. Many pictures resulted from these trips, ranging from the barest of pencil sketches to large oil paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy. The Alps contained all manner of visual experience for Turner. The drama of the scenery and the physiognomy of the mountains appear as the subject of countless pictures, but studies of local costume, the towns along his route, and myriad incidental visual details also fill pages.⁶ Particularly as he grew older, though, the spectacle of the whole—the combination of mountains, water, and light—appeared most often, described in watercolors such as the one discussed here.

Turner visited the fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen, depicted in Princeton's watercolor, in 1802, 1836, and



Figure 1. J. M. W. Turner, *Falls at Schaffhausen*, ca. 1841, watercolor, 22.6 × 28.8 cm.
The Art Museum, Princeton University. Museum purchase
with funds given by Mrs. Millard Meiss and the Surdna Fund (82-48).



Figure 2. J. M. W. Turner, *Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1806), oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Purchase, Bequest of Alice Marian Curtis and Special Picture Fund, 1913 (13.2723).

1841. John Murray's popular guidebook rated it the most impressive of the Alpine waterfalls:

[From a balcony over the fall], covered with the spray, the traveller may enjoy the full grandeur of this *hell of waters*; and it is only by this close proximity, amidst the tremendous roar and the uninterrupted rush of the river...that a true notion can be formed of the stupendous nature of the cataract. The best time for seeing the fall is about eight in the morning, when the iris floats within the spray (provided the sun shines), and by moonlight.

John Ruskin was more extravagant:

Stand for half an hour beside the Fall of Schaffhausen, on the north side where the rapids are long, and watch how the vault of water first bends, unbroken, in pure polished velocity, over the arching rocks at the brow of the cataract, covering them with a dome of crystal twenty feet thick, so swift that its motion is unseen except when a foam-globe from above darts over it like a falling star; and how the trees are lighted above it under all their leaves, at the instant that it breaks into foam; and how all the hollows of that foam burn with green fire like so much shattering chrysoprase; and how, ever and

anon, startling you with its white flash, a jet of spray leaps hissing out of the fall, like a rocket, bursting in the wind and driven away in dust, filling the air with light; and how, through the curdling wreaths of the restless crashing abyss below, the blue of the water, paled by the foam in its body, shows purer than the sky through white rain-cloud.*

The physical tumult, the sheer violence of the crashing waters, is the subject of Turner's only oil painting of the fall (figure 2). Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1806, it shows the scene on a grand scale, the size of the canvas being that normally reserved for history painting. Our vantage point is low. We see the fall from the level of the small people who go about their daily affairs of watching children and a variety of animals, loading and unloading baskets, barrels, and assorted unwieldy packages. Like all of Turner's people, they exude vitality and a boisterous dignity. They are not overwhelmed by the fall, but simply outsized, and they mind their business with an absorption that precludes any attention to the grand natural scene just behind them. The scale of the painting makes this lack of attention more striking, since it is the water and the great central rock in the fall that command our vision. Nature rather than man dominates, and thus

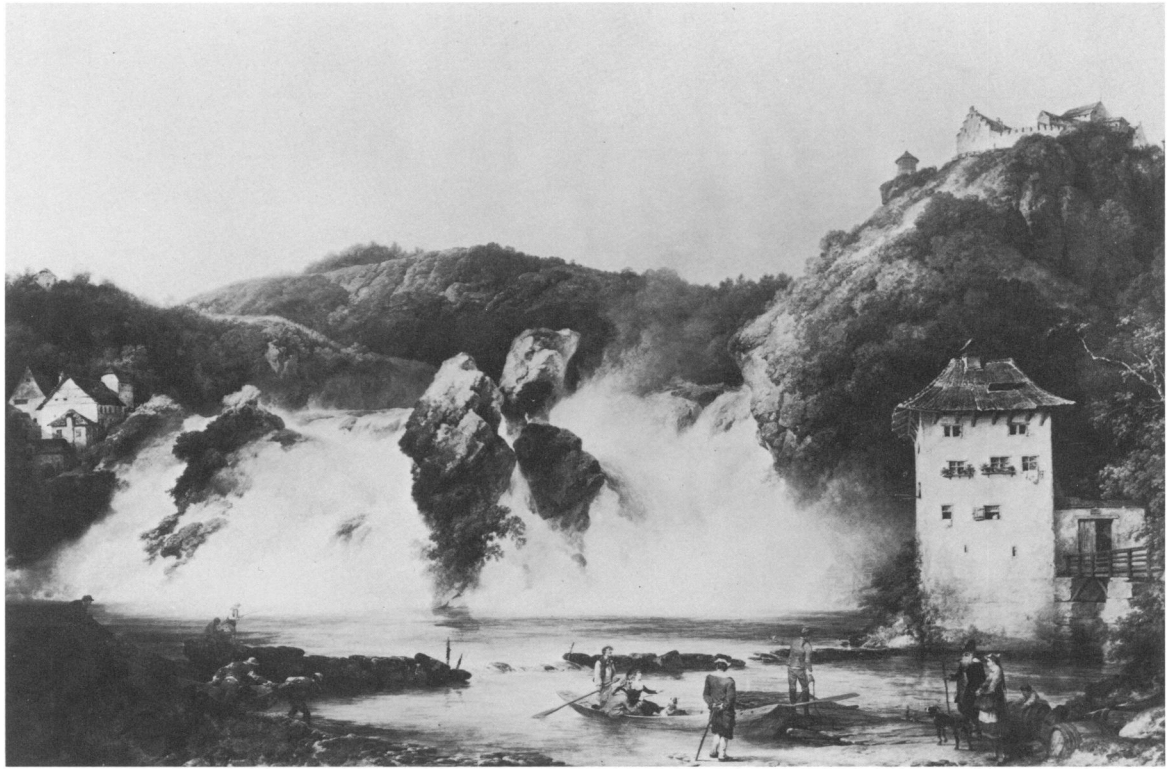


Figure 3. Philip James de Loutherbourg, *Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1788), oil on canvas. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

the viewer of the picture (unlike the people within it) experiences the full sublimity of the landscape. The figures in the foreground serve as a reminder of our place; they suggest the physical vulnerability that is a necessary ingredient of our appreciation of the sublime.

A comparison to a more traditional picture of Schaffhausen makes clear the distinctiveness of Turner's painting. Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), the most famous and most accomplished of Turner's older rivals in landscape painting, exhibited a view of the fall at the Royal Academy in 1788 (figure 3). Our vantage point still is low, and again there are small people in the foreground with whom we can identify. In Loutherbourg's picture, however, the placement of the fall in the middle ground makes the contrast of human and natural scale less forceful. It also eliminates any sense of physical immediacy from the spectacle of the thundering waters. Further, the fall is surrounded by landscape and building, encircled and thus visually neutralized as a truly sublime, uncontainable power. Finally, the people in the most immediate foreground are elegant travelers, visiting the fall as a picturesque spot. Their attitudes make it clear that the view pleases the eye rather than elevates the mind; they

enact none of the depth of response that the sublime landscape should arouse.

Turner further emphasized the sublimity of the fall by his method of painting. Unlike Loutherbourg's picture, which has a smooth, highly finished surface and pretty colors, Turner's is rough and expressive. The water especially is painted with great sweeps of a paint-laden brush, which twists and turns as it describes the leaping, crashing water. The two materials become in some sense equivalent; the driving force of the paint represents, but also comes to be, the driving force of the water. The grand scale of the painting makes the roughness of the surface and the prominence of the white, foamy strokes overwhelming. This handling also differs from that in the rest of the landscape, which is described with layers of thinner, often somber-toned, oil paint. Thus the fall possesses a visual drama quite independent of its character as a pictorial subject.

This method of painting seemed shocking to many of Turner's contemporaries. The landscape painter Joseph Farington recorded in his diary that a Mr. Dashwood Junior of Clay, Norfolk, "denounced [Turner's *Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*] as being a wild, incoherent, unnatural production, the froth of

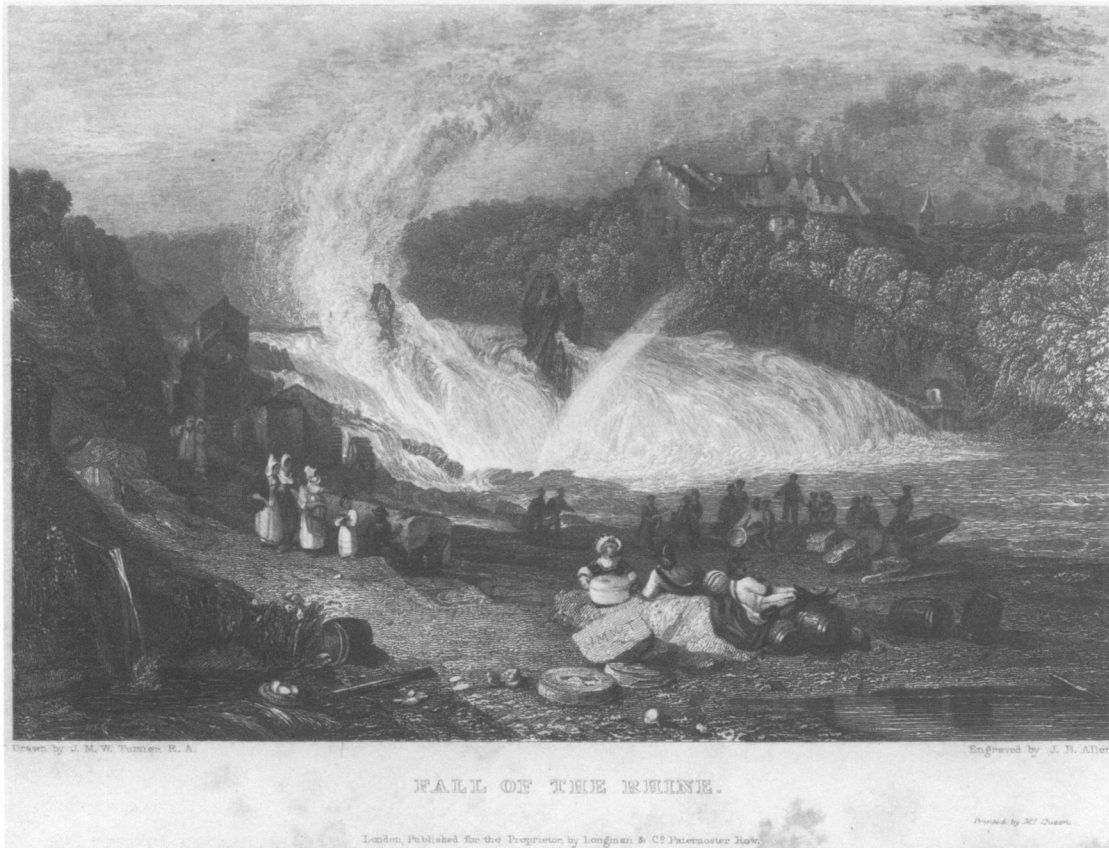


Figure 4. J. M. W. Turner, *Fall of the Rhine* (published in *The Keepsake*, 1833), engraving. Photograph courtesy of the University of Illinois.

the water being like a brush of snow.” Editors of two major newspapers agreed: “That is madness—he is a madman.”⁹ Not all of the reaction was negative, however. One of the most important collectors of British art, Sir John Leicester, bought the work, and some critics praised it. The anonymous reviewer for the popular *Monthly Magazine*, for example, used terms appropriate to the sublime:

The tumult and grandeur of this very wonderful picture cannot be described, or communicated to those who have not seen it; and to those who have seen it, it is scarcely necessary. The whole is singularly awful, and eminently impressive.¹⁰

Turner depicted the fall only once more in an image seen publicly: an engraving that appeared in *The Keepsake* of 1833 (figure 4). Accompanied by an unsigned article about the viewing of the fall by moonlight, the illustration was part of a medley of romances, travelogues, and articles of general interest that filled this popular annual of the nineteenth century. Given this context, it is not surprising that the engraving differs markedly from the painting of 1806. If anything,

Turner’s later work is more like Louthembourg’s painting in its emphasis on human activity and the visual containment of the fall within a circle of land and building. Once again, though, Turner’s people do not look at the fall, but create their own psychologically distinct world. Typically, too, the fall is more flamboyant in Turner’s design. A great arc of water sprays up from the rock, and, as in the painting from 1806, a rainbow appears above the fall. Ruskin, who owned the preparatory watercolor, described the image:

Turner wants to get the great concave sweep and rush of the river well felt...the column of spray, rocks, mills, and bank, all radiate like a plume, sweeping round together in grand curves to the left, where the group of figures, hurried about the ferry boat, rises like a dash of spray; they also radiating; so as to form one perfectly connected cluster.¹¹

Princeton’s watercolor is a different sort of image altogether. Probably part of a series Turner made during his trip to the Alps in 1841, the work depicts the fall from a point of view considerably to the right of any discussed so far.¹² This position places the square

tower of the Castle of Worth at the left of the picture and makes the massing of the castle on the hill an important aspect of the composition. Again, there is a rainbow in the sky and dramatic spray from the fall. In this version, however, there are no people. Subsumed within the whole landscape, the fall seems a centerpiece, a jewel in a splendid setting. Most important is the light, which seems to radiate from within the substance of the things depicted. As with the painting from 1806, the material represented and the material of representation become equivalent. Here, though, the substances are less tangible; both the landscape and the watercolor dissolve into nearly seamless, enveloping atmospheres. Only the closest inspection of the work reveals the progress of Turner's hand and at least a partial separation of the depicted scene into its component parts. This lack of detailed definitions encourages such scrutiny, however, and we approach the watercolor to establish the proper identity of the objects we see. Instead, we become absorbed in the extraordinary spectacle of the surface of the work itself.

A description of Turner's working methods during the 1830s makes his mastery of the watercolor medium clear:

He stretched the paper on boards and, after plunging them into water, he dropped the colours onto the paper while it was wet, making marblings and gradations throughout the work. His completing process was marvellously rapid, for he indicated his masses and incidents, took out half-lights, scraped out high-lights and dragged, hatched and stippled until the design was finished. This swiftness, grounded on the scale practiced in early life, enabled Turner to preserve the purity and luminosity of his work, and to paint at a prodigiously rapid rate.¹³

Princeton's work bears traces of all of those techniques: the quick, nimble line of a pencil and a reed pen outlining the architectural and topographical details; translucent washes of color laying in the basic colors of the composition; the clear stroke of a full brush to build up color, especially the blue of the water; white highlights to indicate the fall, its spray, and the rainbow; the removal of paint through scraping and daubing with water. Most of the areas of color have soft,

slightly blurred edges, the result of the paint sinking into still-wet paper. Clearly Turner's brush moved rapidly to avoid sully the colors already laid, while taking advantage of the wet to modify the ground with another layer. Across that complicated foundation, he worked the last accents: some of the pen lines, the pure color, the highlights.

Such watercolors are so different from those of his contemporaries that it is hard to situate them in their historical context. The transformation of the landscape into luminous veils of brilliant color and the free, even improvisational, character of Turner's technique distinguish his pictures from any others of the period. Full responses from his contemporaries are particularly rare for these pictures, which were nearly unknown during Turner's lifetime. One description of his style seems appropriate, however. In 1816, the great essayist and critic William Hazlitt wrote:

Turner [is] the ablest landscape-painter now living, [but his] pictures are, however, too much abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen.... They are pictures of the elements of the air, earth, and water. The artist delights to go back to the first chaos of the world, or to that state of things, when the waters were separated from the dry land, and light from darkness, but as yet no living thing nor tree bearing fruit was seen upon the face of the earth. All is without form and void. Someone said of his landscapes that they were pictures of nothing, and very like.¹⁴

Hazlitt's characterization seems even more appropriate to a late work like this watercolor than to the paintings about which he actually wrote. But a comparison of a watercolor from 1802 and an oil painting of the same composition from the 1840s suggests both the continuity and the development of the style Hazlitt identified.¹⁵

Turner exhibited a large, finished watercolor called *Falls of the Clyde, Lanarkshire: Noon* at the Royal Academy in 1802 (figure 5). A reference to Mark Akenside's *Hymn to the Naiads*, a poem that describes natural effects through mythological figures, accompanied the work. Turner's picture personifies the nat-



Figure 6. J. M. W. Turner, *Falls of the Clyde*, ca. 1840s, oil on canvas. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Cheshire.

Figure 5. J. M. W. Turner, *Falls of the Clyde, Lanarkshire: Noon* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1802), watercolor. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Photograph courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

ural forces as nude women cavorting on the rocks, their allegorical meaning explained by the citation of Akenside's poem. The intellectual character of the depiction—the representation of nature through mythology and allegory—relates the watercolor to the equivalent literary tradition, of which Akenside is an important eighteenth-century British exponent. It also identifies the picture as an example of the most ambitious type of landscape painting by the standards of the traditional Academic hierarchy. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Turner published the image in his collection of landscape prints, the *Liber Studiorum*, he classified it as one of the highest type—the elevated, or epic, pastoral.¹⁶

The changes Turner made in the later composition are characteristic: what he suggested through figure and poetic reference before, he now conveyed through color and light alone (figure 6). The transformation is staggering. The figures of the nymphs and the sparkle of the water are just barely distinguishable from the brilliantly colored landscape. Rather than an assembly of separate elements which, in the way of a traditional allegory, stand for one another, the picture has become a single glorious whole. It is, then, an entirely visual rendition of the natural forces of the landscape, a visual transformation of what had begun as a literary idea. The result is personal but also potentially accessible, even to the untutored viewer. Unlike the traditional allegory, such works do not demand knowledge of a conventional vocabulary to be legible.

Turner's pictures of the fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen reveal a similar transformation of style. The interests expressed in his earlier views—the opposition of the human and the natural, the extraordinary force of the water, the beauty of the rainbow—have become fused. The light, the water, the land cannot be distinguished clearly; no single element is autonomous. We can understand these late watercolors as statements of the self and of modernism, but surely, more truly, they are statements of Turner's understanding of the natural sublime. They also reveal the complexity of the exchange between nature and art in Turner's work, his transformation of, but simultaneous dependence upon, the particular physical place. Turner himself described the process:

Every glance is a glance for study: contemplating and defining qualities and causes, effects and incidents, and develop[ing] by practice the possibility of attaining what appears mysterious upon principle. Every look at nature is a refinement upon art. Each tree and blade of grass or flower is not to [the artist] the individual tree, grass or flower, but what [it] is in relation to the whole, its tone, its contrast and its use, and how far practicable: admiring Nature by the power and practicability of his Art, and judging of his Art by the perceptions drawn from Nature.¹⁷

Notes

1. Two publications by Andrew Wilton examine these interests: *Turner in Switzerland*, introduction by John Russell and catalogue by Andrew Wilton, Zurich, 1976, and *Turner and the Sublime*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1980. For a different approach, see John Dixon Hunt, "Wondrous Deep and Dark: Turner and the Sublime," *The Georgia Review* (Spring 1976), 30: 139–54.
2. One influential exhibition that suggested such comparisons was held at The Museum of Modern Art; Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1966.
3. The major discussion of the aesthetics of the sublime is still Samuel Monk, *The Sublime*, London, 1935. For the Alps particularly, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory, the Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Ithaca, 1959.
4. Thomas Gray, *Works*, ed. Edmund Gosse, New York, 1885, vol. 1, p. 244, and vol. 2, p. 45.
5. See Nicolson, "Epilogue," and her quotation of Samuel Butler's parody of the British tourist in *The Way of All Flesh*, p. 373.
6. A selection of such sketchbook studies can be found in Gerald Wilkinson, *Turner's Early Sketchbooks 1789–1802*, London, 1972; *The Sketches of Turner, R.A., 1802–20*, London, 1974; and *Turner's Colour Sketches 1820–34*, London, 1975.
7. John Murray, *Hand-Book for Travellers in Switzerland and the Alps of Savoy and Piedmont*, 3rd rev. ed., London, 1846, p. 21.
8. John Ruskin, *Works*, Library Edition, eds. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, vol. 3, pp. 529–30.
9. Joseph Farington, *Diary*, May 5, 1806.
10. *Monthly Magazine* (June 1806), 20: 452.
11. Ruskin, vol. 7, pp. 221–22. The preparatory watercolor now is in the Birmingham City Art Museum.
12. See Andrew Wilton, *J. M. W. Turner: His Art and Life*, New York, 1979, ills. 1460–69, for reproductions of the related works.
13. Described by James Orrock, quoted in John Gage, *Colour in Turner*, New York, 1969, p. 32.
14. William Hazlitt, *Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, London, 1930–1933, vol. 4, p. 76n (originally published in *The Examiner*, February 18, 1816).
15. Gage discusses this comparison in similar terms, p. 143f.
16. The print was published on March 29, 1809.
17. Marginal comment in Turner's copy of John Opie's *Lectures on Painting*, probably from about 1809, quoted in A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R.A.*, rev. ed., Oxford, 1961, p. 230.