

**Darkness terrible in its own nature'; Turner's Sublime in the common heathlands of South East London c.1796-7**

**Conference Paper**

**Conference: 'Romantic Spectacle'. Centre for Research in Romanticism, Roehampton University, London.**

**Date: 9 July 2006.**

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) specifically identified 'the Sublime' as an independent aesthetic category while producing a thorough categorization of the elements and factors that could contribute to an experience of the sublime. Burke famously stated that man's two strongest instincts in life are self preservation and a social impulse: 'to the ends of one or the other of which all our passions are calculated to answer'.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, when self-preservation is threatened this causes terror, which is the source of the sublime. The defining paradigm that Burke used as an instigator of that threat upon our self-preservation was the natural world. Where a more picturesque sense of beauty in a landscape attracted and reassured, the sublime intimidated. Burke's lexicon of the Sublime included terms such as vastness, infinity, privation and darkness – aspects that when applied to a landscape, inferred a lack of the usual, comforting landscape attributes – in English terms, small, rolling fields, country lanes, hedgerows, winding streams. But when we are faced with a landscape that manifestly lacks these attributes, it follows that we could feel deprived of a sense of security and control in this landscape. My research is concerned with artistic representations of common land, particularly over the period of c.1789-1832. One example of this is a set of watercolour sketches by JMW Turner of the unimproved heathlands of SE London dating from 1796-7 that I want to specifically examine today (see for instance

*View from Blackheath, with St Paul's in the distance.*

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SketchbookViewer?cgroupid=65691&page=6> )

Burke stated that when passions are caused by the great and sublime in nature, 'the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other'.<sup>2</sup> In topographical terms, the great and sublime in nature meant a landscape which was wild and uncontrollable. Psychologically, a Sublime landscape threatened to cause a loss of visual, intellectual and emotional control over what was seen. More dangerously, the Sublime landscape also contained elements that, socially at least, could potentially undermine order and coherence: 'that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'.<sup>3</sup>

At face value, we can look upon Turner's *View from Blackheath* and clearly see how unimproved common land wastes – heaths and moors – could potentially suspend – as Burke had it – the 'motions of the soul' with 'some degree of horror'. An awareness of Burke's definitions of the sublime in a landscape can frequently be detected in commentaries on the unenclosed countryside throughout the eighteenth century: for instance, in 1791, John Byng (later Viscount Torrington) noted at Kirkstead in Lincolnshire 'A miserable common, with some miserable cottages around it.' At nearby Kirkby he travelled across 'a staring black moor ... a wild, dreary prospect'.<sup>4</sup> I hope that, initially at least, it can be seen from this painting and from Byng's experience that the open, often extensive and quite empty and bleak common field landscape, could become a source of the Sublime. In Picturesque and more general terms, a common field landscape in the later eighteenth century and beyond was seldom considered beautiful – William Cobbett, for instance, in his *Rural Rides*

referred to 'those very ugly things, common fields'. The 'ugly' common open fields and those 'staring black moors' of unenclosed common wastes inherently refused the contemporary theories on ideal beauty and landscape appreciation.

At same time however – a new generation of artists – Thomas Girtin, Turner and, slightly later, John Crome – were beginning to reject the increasingly conventional and artificial ways of packaging an ideal or 'Picturesque' scene, and this led them in part to consider unfashionable, contingent landscapes, such as the expansive, 'ugly' and therefore visually challenging open fields and commons. Common wastes in particular were not only socially and aesthetically undesirable, they also could be pictorially unframeable because of the lack of any boundaries or features, and therefore difficult to organize within contemporary principles of composition.<sup>5</sup> As such, they presented the progressive landscape painter with increased potential for individual expression. Artists like Turner developed new and highly personal modes of artistic expression through a more direct approach to the landscape that made progress both in transcending the limitations of the Picturesque, and in articulating the Sublime. Just as the establishment clearly feared the social and visual indeterminacy, and therefore psychological sublimity of the common field landscape, these painters especially sought to paint this landscape and embrace these characteristics. Even with this small and otherwise undeveloped sketch of Blackheath, Turner typically revels in this seemingly indeterminate and uncontrollable natural habitat of unenclosed common and waste land, both exploiting and developing the qualities of the Sublime that were potentially apparent in this type of landscape.

*View from Blackheath* is found in a sketchbook that is now known to us as the Wilson Sketchbook, dating from 1796-7. The Wilson Sketchbook contains several studies of heathland in areas of what is now South East London, particularly around Blackheath, Lewisham and Nunhead. This sketchbook consists of small sheets of grey paper which were often then covered by Turner in a brown wash before embarking on studies made with gouache, pencil and watercolour, a mixture perhaps intended to create a texture similar to that of oil paint and therefore to give 'the force of an oil sketch'.<sup>6</sup> This technique helped to produce heathland sketches which are forceful, dark and often formless in their nature and execution.

As such, these sketches can be essentially viewed as mere studies and experiments in the application of tone, but they are also clearly an attempt to experiment with the rendition of light, atmosphere and the wild, indeterminate sublimity of large tracts of common waste such as Blackheath, particularly under adverse weather conditions. Blackheath was never legally a common but it was, at the time Turner was there, a 500 acre expanse of waste used as common: wild and uncultivated gorse, scrub, pits and hollows that stretched to the west into Deptford, east to Shooters Hill and Lewisham Common, and north towards the Thames between Greenwich and Charlton.<sup>7</sup> Turner's sketch effectively evokes the sense that Blackheath was a wild place: a dense, dark, stormy, and indefinable mass of wasteland, sky and inclement weather. It clearly reflects Burke's ideas on the depiction of the Sublime in painting when 'the images in painting are exactly similar to those in nature; and in nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions'.<sup>8</sup> Small and unfinished as it is, *View from Blackheath* clearly provides a visual equivalent to the common socio-psychological responses to this type of

landscape. One phrase Burke employs here – ‘Darkness terrible in its own nature’ – can be readily applied to this sketch of Blackheath, particularly in what Burke referred to as the ‘ill effects of darkness’ and the ‘ill effects of bad weather’ that ‘appear ... in a melancholy and dejection of spirits’.<sup>9</sup>

Turner’s unusual choice of subject here exemplifies Burke’s notion that the observations of the sublime ‘will be better deduced from the nature of the subject and from the occasion, than from any rules that can be given’.<sup>10</sup> At first glance, the sketch reflects this – an observation of the sublime better deduced from the nature of the subject and from the occasion – and, to use the improving terminology of the day, of a wild, dreary prospect of barren heath. But we do need to raise some speculative, contextual notes of caution in how Turner used and reconfigured this particular landscape. Firstly, *View from Blackheath* and others from the Wilson Sketchbook are essentially sketches only, experiments in depicting tone and atmosphere for private consumption. Secondly, there has always been a theatrical grandeur to Turner’s work, and I will come to argue that there is perhaps a strong element of exaggeration in Turner’s ‘moody’ sketches of this heath. At the time these were produced, critics were already noting Turner’s quite theatrical use of chiaroscuro as a particular characteristic, citing especially the influence of Rembrandt. There have always been more conventional influences and qualities present in the work of the Romantic artists of this period, before Turner later came to be seen as a romantic purveyor of the sublime experience. I’m always wary of assuming that the likes of Turner actually read, for instance, Burke – in my experience, artists are better doers than readers. We also have to be careful about being a-historical with these people, for example when considering the sublime in this period, we frequently cite the writings of Kant on the

subject when one recent study has found that Kant was not widely read in England until the 1830s. Indeed, Turner was – quite conventionally – more likely to use Milton as his source – if it can be called that – of the sublime. He slavishly followed his contemporaries popular use of poetic epithets to enhance the effect of his paintings, for instance in the dense and sombre *Morning amongst Coniston Fells* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1798, and which is clearly intended to evoke the Sublime, although the literary source for the evocation of sublime feeling was, in this case, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a quotation from which Turner used to both accompany the painting and to amplify his intended effect.<sup>11</sup>

Finally – and this brings us back to the notion of theatricality in Turner's work – when we look at the context to these dark, atmospheric sketches of heathland, it can be suggested that Blackheath and its environs actually presented Turner with a local, accessible (within walking distance from the centre of London itself) and therefore quite convenient and unthreatening source of the 'sublime'. By looking at the history of Blackheath, we can see how Turner actually stage-managed a sense of the sublime from what was in reality an increasingly gentrified and built up area.

When we look at *View from Blackheath*, we see a wild heath – barren, wild in its topography and climate, thinly populated and therefore socially threatening. Until the end of the seventeenth century there was virtually no local population at Blackheath, just a few cottages housing agricultural labourers and those who worked in a handful of manor houses nearby. The gothicky, moonlit romance of the heath had already been promoted in other, older mid-eighteenth century popular prints and, the uncontrolled nature of the heath was certainly borne out by the way it suffered

constant encroachment throughout the century for squatting, turf cutting, gravel digging, lime burning, and rubbish dumping. But by the time Turner was making his studies of Blackheath, the area itself was becoming increasingly urban and gentrified, particularly with the ambitious development on the north eastern edge of the heath of a 14-house four-storey neo-classical crescent called The Paragon, which was begun in 1794, a couple of years before Turner sketched here, and completed by 1805.<sup>12</sup> This development alone, along with others that were also taking place nearby, presents a very different picture to the heath that Turner shows us.

*View from Blackheath* is an experiment in tone and the depiction of atmospheric effects, but it can be read as an exploration into sublime experience and feeling. It is also the product of an emerging inclination amongst Turner's generation of landscape painters for the unadorned, the uncultivated, the unloved – and the landscape of common heathland certainly corresponded with this inclination. On the face of it then, this sketch appears to be a typical product of a traditional view of Turner and his work: as an artist of the Sublime, and of a newer, individualistic and Romantic temperament. But I also hope that we can start to understand that this was the result of a more conventional personal and artistic development – the honing of technical skills, the prevailing influence of the old masters and English literary greats – combined however with a strong and opportunistic sense of ambition, exemplified here by finding convenient, almost expedient, sources of the sublime, within an hour's walk from the city, and by placing a sublime 'spin' on a 'wild' place that was in fact being quickly suburbanized. I sometimes feel that we need to reconsider the more practical and prosaic attitudes of artists in relation to the more idealistic parameters of Romanticism. While these sketches certainly accord with Burke's typology of the

Sublime via the experience of 'darkness', 'privation' and so on, they perhaps only evoke a modish and somewhat vicarious Sublime 'thrill' that could conveniently and safely be found in a very local and quite domesticated setting. And if you want final – and to me, absolutely damning – proof of an increasingly suburbanised Blackheath, which Turner had to work on in order to manipulate a sense of the sublime out of this landscape, then I've one last word to say to you today, 'golf!'<sup>13</sup>



## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Part One, Section VI, 1757, Oxford, 1990ed, p.36-36

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Part Two, Section I, p.53

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 95

<sup>4</sup> John Byng, *The Torrington Diaries, a selection of the tours of the Hon. John Byng between the years of 1781 and 1794*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1954, p. 346

<sup>5</sup> Tom Williamson, Enclosure and the English Hedgerow, in Boris Ford (ed) *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain, Vol 6 The Romantic Age in Britain*, Cambridge 1989, p.264

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 45

<sup>7</sup> Edward Walford, 'Blackheath and Charlton', *Old and New London*, vol. 6, London, 1878, p.225

<sup>8</sup> Burke, *op cit*, Part Two, Section IV, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, *ibid*, Part Four, Sections XV and XVI, p.131-132

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Part Two, Section IV, p.58

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Johnson said that Milton's 'peculiar power' is 'to astonish ... displaying the vast, illuminating the splendid, enforcing the awful, darkening the gloom, and aggravating the dreadful'. Quoted in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000ed, p. xvi

<sup>12</sup> Walford, *op cit*, p. 226-7

<sup>13</sup> Blackheath is home to the oldest golf club in the world, thought to have started in 1746. See <http://www.royalblackheath.com/index.php>