Turner’s *Slave Ship*: The Victims of Empire

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Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On*, popularly known as *The Slave-Ship* (ill. 1, b.1385), is the cultural encoding of one strain of evangelical Toryism, with a subtext voicing outrage against the materialism of unbridled *laissez-faire* economic ideals.1 Fusing spectacular imagery of the ruthlessness of the slave trade that could have been experienced by the white majority only in the abstract, with the immediate and pervasive experience of drowning at sea, Turner’s picture profoundly disturbed the visitors to the Royal Academy in 1840. Its theme of the terrifying political economy of the slave system was fated to be overinterpreted when it first appeared at a key moment for both British agitation over the slave system and the intense labour protest known as Chartism.

Turner exhibited his picture with an extract from his long poem *Fallacies of Hope* that alluded to the sordid economic desires associated with the slave trade:

- Aloft hands, strike the top-masts and belay;
- You angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
- Declare the Typhon’s coming.
- Before it sweep your decks, throw overboard
- The dead and dying – ne’er heed their chains
- Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
- Where is thy market now?

The debasing of human existence to the plane of the cash nexus was the cry of the Tory reformers in *extremis* that Carlyle tried to articulate in *Chartism* one year before the picture was exhibited.

Actually, the work enjoyed two spectacularly critical lives in the nineteenth century: firstly during its reception at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1840 and its crowning moment in Ruskin’s eulogium in *Modern Painters* published three years later; and secondly, during the time of its loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1877 when the discussion centered again on the conflict between the narrative and pictorial effect, this time in an age when elite art criticism favoured ‘pure’ landscape. Mark Twain’s acid comments on the work in 1869 in his *A Tramp Abroad* suggests that he had not made the switch but at least understood it:

What a red rag is to a bull, Turner’s ‘Slave Ship’ was to me, before I studied art. Mr. Ruskin is educated in art up to a point where that picture throws him into as mad an ecstasy of pleasure as it used to throw me into one of rage, last year, when I was ignorant. His cultivation enables him – and me, now – to see water in that glaring yellow mud, and natural effects in those lurid explosions of mixed smoke and flame, and crimson sunset glories; it reconciles him – and me, now – to the floating of iron cable-chains and other unfloatable things, it reconciles us to fishes swimming around on top of the mud – I mean the water. The most of the picture is a manifest impossibility – that is to say, a lie, and only rigid cultivation can enable a man to find truth in a lie. But it enabled Mr. Ruskin to do it, and it enabled me to do it, and I am thankful for it.2

Twain’s irony here – it is clear that he disliked the work – tells us a good deal about the practical demands of the author when it came to the visual arts and his critique of aesthetes who wondered why Turner dared to ‘disfigure’ one of the most glorious aspects of nature “by the introduction of one of the most hideous of crimes”.3 Thus some thirty-seven years after its initial reception, Turner’s painting continued to stimulate debate over the questions it raised about the nature of art and its relationship to subject matter.

The confusion over categories may be blamed on the picture, with the searing sunset effect blasting its way through the clouds and exposing the flotsam and jetsam of human bodies. Chains and shackles miraculously hover above the water’s surface like grave markers to signal this perverse burial at sea. Yet only the isolated human fragment of the enchain’d upended leg at the lower right hints at the sadism of the event. Turner depicted the scene from a high vantage point for a panoramic vista, emphasising the yawning hollow between the waves. This brilliantly illuminated trough leads the eye along a blazing pathway to the sun, confounding sea and sky in a transcendental perspectival grid. So powerful is this beam that its contact with the ship drives it sidewards with the force of a rocket. The grotesque sea creatures gathering in this primordial soup add further to the ambiguity of the scene. Even the title confuses, since the phrase ‘typhon coming on’, like the ‘throwing overboard’, is cast into a present tense while the picture itself shows the action described in the title as having already taken place. Either this was an afterthought or Turner wanted it both ways for narrative clarity.

The controversial reception of the painting at the Royal Academy in 1840 was linked to what critics perceived to be a visible change in Turner’s content and execution. Such critics systematically denigrated the work as a pictorial oddity. The *Times* reviewer, who had just assailed Turner’s picture of *Bacchus and Ariadne* as representing ‘nothing that ever existed in nature, and scarcely anything that the most distorted imagination ever conceived without it’, wrote of *The Slave Ship*.

It is irksome to find fault with so admirable an artist as Mr. Turner has been, but it is impossible to look at this picture without mingled feelings of pity and contempt. Such a mass of heterogeneous atoms were never brought together to complete a whole before. Amidst a regiment of fish and fowl of all shapes, colours, sizes, and proportions, is seen the leg of a negro, which is about to afford a nibble to a John Dory [a large seafish], a pair of soles, and a shoal of white bait.4

The ambiguity of the work was observed by Thackeray, writing for *Fraser’s Magazine* (then a Tory publication) who noted that ‘the slaver throwing its cargo overboard is the most tremendous piece of colour that ever was seen, it sets the corner of the room in which it hangs into a flame’. Thackeray then asked rhetorically:
Is the picture sublime or ridiculous? Indeed I don’t know which. Rocks of gamboge are marked down upon the canvas; flakes of white laid on with a trowel; bladders of vermilion madly spirited here and there. Yonder is the slaver rocking in the midst of a flashing foam of white lead. The sun glares down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple, into which chocolate-coloured slaves are plunged, and chains that will not sink, and round these are floundering such a race of fishes as never was seen since the Soculum Pyrrhoe, gasping dolphins redder than the reddest herrings, horrid spreading polypi, like huge, slimy poached eggs, in which hapless niggers plunge and disappear.  

As in the case of the Times reviewer, Thackeray veered madly between the subject of the canvas and its execution. The critic of the conservative Athenæum similarly expressed this contradictory and ambivalent position by describing the work as ‘a passionate extravagance of marigold sky, and pomegranate-coloured sea, and fish dressed as gay as garden flowers in pink and green, with one shapeless dusky-brown leg thrown up from this particular coloured chaos to keep the promise of the title.’  

Blackwood’s Magazine (another Tory publication) also noted the singularity of the upended black leg amidst the extravagant marine life and fantastic landscape:

There is evidently a vessel riding in a chaos of red and yellow stuff, supposed to be meant for water, but that it quits the horizontal line and runs uphill. Of all the birds in the air, and all the fishes in the sea, what have we in the foreground? It is a black leg thrown overboard, and round it runs fish great and small. There is a whale-like fish booming large in obscurity, which Mr. Turner may mean to represent ‘Typhon’s coming.’ Is it allegory? Between the vessel and the fish there is an odd object that long puzzled us. We may be wrong, but we have conjectured it to be a Catholic bishop in canonicals gallantly gone overboard, to give benediction to the crew, or the fish, or Typhon. The fish claiming their leg-acy is very funny. What could have given rise to this dream of the colour pots? Here, too, is something quite miraculous—iron chains are floating! Is it meant to be poetical, that, as in the old woman’s case, ‘water wouldn’t quench fire’, ‘fire wouldn’t burn sticks’—so water wouldn’t swallow slavery’s chains. There they are, however and won’t go down. They may make excuse that the water is no water after all, and has not an idea of liquidity. But it is too hard a task to account for anything in this unaccountable performance.  

In these passages it is easy to detect the frustration of the critics as they try to reconcile the horrific content and humanist outlook with the unsullied realm of ‘art for art’s sake.’ They
seem to teeter on the edge of pure art and the need for an elevated theme to justify it, and they released tension through lowbrow satire of the painting. Yet by 1843, the year Ruskin published the first volume of Modern Painters, its author could state that if he were reduced to resting Turner’s immortality on a single work it would be *The Slave Ship*, the noblest sea picture ‘ever painted by man.’ Here is how he described it:

It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain-clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. The whole surface of sea included in the picture is divided into two ridges of enormous swell, not high, nor local, but a low, broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep drawn breath after the torture of the storm. Between these two ridges, the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an awful but glorious light, the intense and lurid splendor which burns like gold and bathes like blood. Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illumined foam. ... Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightening of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, — and cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.8

Ruskin’s repeated use of the term ‘lurid’ coincides with contemporary critical responses that described Turner’s deliberate use of colour to achieve a certain ‘effect.’ *The Slave Ship* in fact represents a calculatedly sensational image that is comparable to ‘lurid’ contemporary journalistic accounts of slave atrocities. Although based on an incident that occurred in the previous century, there continued to be incidents of a similar nature that were both reported in abolitionist meetings and given widespread publicity in the press. Here Turner exploited dazzling colour effects, an action-packed adventure, and the collective guilt of English society to reach his audience.

The year before its exhibition, a new edition of Clarkson’s *History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* appeared, and it included an account of the notorious case of the slave ship *Zong.* It is certain that Turner knew this book, since his rendering of the shackles seems to be dependent on a plate from it (ills.2, 3). The story is as follows: in 1783 one hundred and thirty-two slaves had been thrown alive into the sea from the English slave. The *Zong* had lost its way; sixty slaves and seven crew members had died of an epidemic and the water supply was running uncomfortably, if not dangerously, low. As the rest of the slaves were in poor health, it was clear from the captain’s perspective that many would die before the voyage was over and the survivors would fetch low prices in Jamaica. The loss would have fallen on the owner, but if slaves could be jettisoned on any pretext concerning the safety of the ship or if they perished due to providential circumstances, the insurance underwriters would be obligated to pay. Thus the captain contrived to throw the slaves overboard in three groups; the last thirty-six knew what was in store for them and resisted. Twenty-six were shackled and thrown overboard; the last ten broke away and leaped into the sea themselves. One caught a rope trailing from the ship, pulled himself on board and managed to survive to bring back the story to the noted abolitionist lawyer Granville Sharp.10 The appalling incident accelerated the union of the abolitionists and became a clinical case study of the horrors of the slave trade. Thomas Powel Buxton, Wilberforce’s successor as parliamentary spokesman for abolition since the 1820s, also published an account of the incident in his 1839–1840 publication *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy.*11 Buxton’s efforts during the 1830s—pushed by an insurrection in Jamaica in December 1831—had realised the dream of his predecessor
for emancipation in the colonies. Building on the work of Clarkson and Wilberforce, in 1833 he helped steer through Parliament an act ‘for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies.’ British taxpayers had to come up with £20 million to compensate the planters, and a seven year apprenticeship for slaves was arranged as a transitional preparation for emancipation. The House of Commons, however, was not content with this concession to planters, and succeeded in cutting two years off this period, with the result that slavery was finally abolished in the British colonies by August 1838.

By that time, however, Buxton was disillusioned with the fact that the slave trade in general had not diminished in accordance with expectations. The Spanish, French, Portuguese and Brazilians continued to carry on the trade, and maintained the murderous seizure of slaves, their painful march to the coast, their tortures between the decks of the slave ship, the dreaded ‘seasonings’ on the coast, and finally, the abominable cruelties of the colonial masters. In his book, Buxton noted with utter disdain the inefficient economics of slavery: ‘In no species of merchandise is there such a waste of the raw material, as in the merchandise of man. In what other trade do two-thirds of the goods perish, in order that one-third may reach the market?’ Buxton’s formulation, although underpinned by humanistic sentiment, was unmistakably couched in economic terms and corresponded to his commercial interests in Africa. He long felt that Africa would be far more profitable for England if the trade in slavery could be abolished and Africans encouraged with English capital to exploit the ‘boundless’ mineral and agricultural resources of West Africa. His purpose in attacking those who maintained the trade, and his stress on substituting legitimate commerce for slavery in Africa, was meant to promote British trade interests. In July 1839 he founded the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilization of Africa with the double view of diffusing Christianity among the African peoples, and uniting to the suppression of the slave trade ‘the pursuit of private enterprise and profit.’

Buxton organised the first anniversary meeting of the society in Exeter Hall during the first week of June 1840, just prior to the convocation of the international Anti-Slavery Convention on 12 June. Prince Albert accepted the Presidency of the society and delivered the opening address that affirmed his commitment to the extinction of the trade. Buxton then took the floor, and it may have been with Turner’s picture in mind that he conjured up the image of the slave-ship to epitomise the unspeakable horrors of slavery. He concluded ‘that the horrors of Africa were not to be described or even conceived. The tongue of man could not tell them, the ear of man could not receive them, they completely outran the comprehension of man’s mind.’ By defining the issues at this abstract level, it followed that no solutions could be forthcoming. Accordingly, while the rhetoric flowed hot and heavy and flattering comments were exchanged all round, nothing concrete resulted from the meeting. There were more statements on the need for the spread of Christianity in Africa, and for eliminating ‘idolatry and sin’ than on practical economic measures for realising Buxton’s mercantile dreams of wage labour in Africa.

Thackeray’s review of Turner’s picture linked it, if only ironically, to the abolitionist activity of the period. ‘Ye gods’, he exclaimed, ‘what a “middle passage”!’ And he continued: ‘How Mr. Fowell Buxton must shudder! What would they say to this in Exeter Hall? If Wilberforce’s statue downstairs were to be confronted with this picture, the stoney old gentleman would spring off his chair, and fly away in terror!’ Yet Turner’s fantastic imagery, and dazzling light and colour, corresponded to the indescribable and inconceivable ‘horrors’ that Buxton claimed ‘completely outran the comprehension of man’s mind.’

The tone of the discussion shifted somewhat when the Anti-Slavery Convention opened at the Freemason’s Hall, with the spotlight on the frail eighty-one-year-old Clarkson who was elected to the Chair. Although he needed help in ascending the speaker’s rostrum, the still feisty Clarkson immediately wanted to take on the cotton planters of the southern United States who had to be made to ‘feel their guilt in its consequences.’ He proposed to strike at them economically in the markets of Europe by underselling them with ‘the produce of free tropical labour.’ His belief that only economic pressure would force them to yield, embedded the terms ‘guilt’ and ‘market’ in a structure reminiscent of Turner’s pictorial conception.

It was Turner’s antagonist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, who was commissioned to record Thomas Clarkson’s address at the World Anti-Slavery Convention (ill.4). Haydon was a strong proponent of abolition and served as a delegate to the Convention. Although only three blacks were present, Haydon located one of them – Henry Beckford, an emancipated slave from Jamaica – in the foreground. This bothered John Scoble, one of the leaders of the abolitionist movement, and again reveals the abolitionists’ mixed motivations and condescending attitude. Haydon informed Scoble that he intended to locate the ex-slave in the foreground and on the same level as the Europeans:

I shall place you, Thompson, and the negro together. Now an abolitionist on thorough principle would have gloried in being so placed . . . He sophisticated immediately on the propriety of placing the negro in the distance, as it would have much greater effect. Now I, who have never troubled myself in this cause, gloried in the imagination of placing the negro close by his emancipator. The emancipator shrank. I’ll do it though. If I do not, damn me.

Haydon completed the picture the following year, and it had a mixed reception. Mainly a compilation of portraits, it hovered between two distinct genres and critics had difficulty categorising it. As a statement on slavery, it has a more practical and more concrete political message than the Turner, but it was less effective as a contemporary history painting.

Thackeray reserved his choicest comments on the slave question for another work that was exhibited in the 1840 Royal Academy exhibition, Biard’s The Slave Trade (ill.5). The
appeal of this work to the Anti-Slavery Society is shown in the fact that it was purchased by Buxton’s fellow members and presented to him as a gift. Art critics claimed to prefer Biard’s work to Turner’s because it appeared less staged, more authentically real and less obsessed with creating an effect. At the same time, it did not ‘offend the eye’, for despite its subject it was artfully arranged to appeal to Victorian sentimentalism. Although Thackeray later refused to read Uncle Tom’s Cabin because he thought its painful themes lay outside the purview of legitimate storytelling, he had nothing but unreserved praise for the French painter’s work:

Let the friends of the negro forthwith buy this canvass, and cause a plate to be taken from it. It is the best, most striking, most pathetic lecture against the trade that ever was delivered. The picture is as fine as Hogarth.

Thackeray's personal position on the slave question emerges in his commentary on the motif of branding (ill.6), one of an array of horrors portrayed in what the writer called Biard’s Encyclopedia of Slave Abuses:

Yonder is a poor woman kneeling before one of the Frenchmen, her shoulder is fissing under the hot iron with which he brandishes her; she is looking up, shuddering and wild, yet quite mild and patient: it breaks your heart to look at her. I never saw anything so exquisitely pathetic as that face. God bless you, Monsieur Biard, for painting it! It stirs the heart more than a hundred thousand tracts, reports, or sermons: it must convert every man who has seen it. You British government, who have given twenty millions towards the good end of freeing this hapless people, give yet a couple of thousand more to the French painter, and don’t let his work go out of the country, now that it is here. Let it hang along with the Hogarths in the National Gallery, it is as good as the best of them.

Aside from Thackeray’s sado-masochistic terminology that seems to express a certain Schadenfreude in the ‘fissing’ flesh and ‘exquisitely pathetic’ face, the description of the motif was clearly meant to appeal to an audience motivated by guilt and pity rather than by outrage, an audience of such exquisite sensibility that it would hardly injure a fly while yet maintaining a rigid social hierarchy that expressed itself ‘decently’ through a condescending attitude towards all beneath them in the social and cultural scale.

Thackeray’s racism and anti-Semitism are too well known to require any detailed examination here, but evidence of his actual position on blacks is seen in his comments on them when visiting the southern United States, where he had slaveholding friends. As he wrote to his mother on 26 January 1853, ‘I don’t believe Blacky is my man & my brother, though God forbid I should own him or fog him, or part him from his wife & children. But the question is a much longer [one than] is set forth in Mrs. Stowe’s philosophy....’ The following month he elaborated on his position in a letter from Washington:.

They are not my men & brethren, these strange people with retreating foreheads, with great obtunding lips & jaws with capacities for thought, pleasure, and endurance quite different to mine. They are not suffering as you are; impassioning yourself for their wrongs as you read Mrs. Stowe, they are grinning & joking in the sun, roaring with laughter as they stand about the streets in squads;... Sambo is not my man & my brother, the very aspect of his face is grotesque, and inferior. I can’t help seeing & owning this, at the same time of course denying any white man’s right to hold this fellow-creature in bondage & make goods & chattels of him & his issue.

In letters and sketchbooks Thackeray drew likenesses of ‘little
nigger children trotting about the Streets [who] are the queerest grotesque little imps; they all look well fed and are in the main kindly treated...."26 Thackeray’s image of black people is vividly demonstrated in his sketch of an African-American woman cradling a delicate white child in her arms while her own children are depicted as grotesque and stunted beings (ill.7).27 Like most members of his class, Thackeray assuaged his guilt through the caricatural depiction of ethnic groups as subhuman. After his companion, Eyre Crowe, had been expelled from a slave market for sketching the proceedings, Thackeray could declare: ‘The negroes don’t shock me or excite my compassionate feelings at all, they are so grotesque and happy that I can’t cry over them’.28 By such a divorce he could sympathise with the blacks when they were maltreated, as he would if he saw an animal maltreated, but at the same time he could justify their inferior status. As he concluded: ‘Slaves these poor dark folks must remain, as slaves they have been ever since their race (for what we know) began.’29

Thackeray was only too eager to listen to the slavers’ side of the story and to their rejoinders that the English treated their poor very much like the slaves were treated.30 Thus he returned home in the belief that the working poor in England were worse off and more miserable than the black slaves, and felt that England should cleanse up its own act before advising other countries on the slave issue. As he wrote: ‘Of course we feel the cruelty of flogging and enslaving a negro – Of course they feel here the cruelty of starving an English labourer, or of driving an English child to a mine – Brother, Brother we are kin.’31 Ironically, Thackeray’s acceptance of the equivalence of the black slave and white labourer corresponded to the Chartist’s ascription of hypocrisy to the chief British abolitionists who were conservative on the labour question.

One specific link to Turner’s picture and its glimpses of maimed bodies is to be found in the reformist policies advocated by the Tory reformer Michael Sadler, whose tireless efforts on behalf of the poor met scant recognition at the time.32 His report of children, little ‘white slaves’, who had been tortured and maimed while being forced to labour daily for between fourteen to sixteen hours (and in some cases, for nineteen hours) created an image of horror in much more concrete terms than Turner’s picture. One proletarian writer inspired by Sadler wrote of child mine workers in imagery reminiscent of Turner: ‘Deep, deep below, where do the miners go?/A world of death o’er heads and gloom below!’33 When the best items in Sadler’s bill were defeated in Parliament, the Tory critic Maginn wrote with regard to protection against machinery that

we have seen in the public prints inquest after inquest, held in the manufacturing districts, on the remains of children who had been torn in pieces by the machinery of the factories. Doubtless, for every life absolutely lost we may calculate upon ten arms, or legs, or fingers, torn off. But what care the mill-owners, or what care the people at the Board of Trade, about the arms of the lives of a parcel of little children.34

Here the modern factory owner fills in for Captain Collingswood, and his mill for the good ship Zong.

It was the upended human leg with its shackle swinging from a chain in the foreground of Turner’s picture that proved to be the most disturbing motif for the reviewers (ill.8). Although they tried to distance it through irony, this fragment
of a mutilated body must have been painful to behold for the very reason that the location of the motif projected the head and trunk of the body into the spectator’s space. Thus the head and body emerged from the watery depths like the missing limb of Copley’s *Watson* thrown up above the waves, the dismembered white youth functioning as a surrogate for the traditional black victim set in a treacherous context of voracious and rapacious sharks.35

Richard Oastler, the indefatigable champion of the legal regulation of the working day, began his career as a disciple of Wilberforce and as an ardent opponent of slavery.36 But his growing awareness of the inequities and ruthlessness of the factory system disposed him to focus his energies on *laissez-faire* economic policies. He struck the keynote of the evangelicals with his slogans ‘Slavery in Yorkshire!’ and ‘Child Slavery’, persistently drawing parallels between the West Indian plantation slave and the white slave of the factory. He drew on metaphors such as ‘shiploads’ to describe the gangs of workers brought to the factories, and he referred to the ‘pestilential white slavery ‘plantations’, called factories.’37 In putting down a Dissenter who advocated emancipation abroad while wishing to preserve the sixteen-hour day at home, Oastler declared: ‘There is Slavery at home, Slavery as cruel, as demoralising, as debasing, and as killing as West India Slavery! – aye and much more so! – and ye refuse to destroy this most horrid system, at home.’38

Perhaps the one text of the period that made the parallel between slavery abroad and at home most vivid for the English reader was John Nicholson’s poem entitled *The Factory Child*, published in 1832. A factory operative himself, Nicholson equated factory and tomb, slave-ship and nation, child labourer and West Indian slave. One remarkable section of the poem synthesizes these metaphors:

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Talk of reform! then with the young begin,
Since NEGRO SLAVERY is proclaim’d a sin
By England’s voice, pray let us look at home,
Nor send our youth by thousands to the tomb!
Worn out with cruel hardships, fierce disease
Feed on their vitals – death is a release
The graves close on them – not a tear is shed,
And thousands thus are number’d with the dead.
In ENGLAND, let this awful truth strike home,
THY PRIDE HAS SENT ITS MILLIONS TO THE TOMB!
Send if thou wilt thy gifts beyond the sea,
But first resolve that BRITONS SHALL BE FREE!!!
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And a little later:

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The Press – the Pulpit – Senate – and the Stage –
Proclaim’d the Negro’s griefs, the Planter’s rage;
Whilst England’s children, heavier far oppress’d,
Rais’d not a qualm within her callous breast,
Enro’d in darkness, veil’d in gloomy night,
Oppress’d, and shorn of liberty and right,
Mourning unpitied, helpless and forlorn,
Their wallings mock’d, their griefs all laugh’d to scorn,
Their deep unutterable sorrows drown’d,
Their hopes deep buried in the dark profound;
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Anticipating Turner’s metaphor for divine retribution in the blazing sky, the poet declared: ‘Yes, nature, all above, below, the sky, / Looks with disdain on INFANT SLAVERY.’ And the concluding stanzas intone the message of the *Fallacies of Hope*:

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Since trade began to be this nation’s pride,
To what great miseries is it allied?
Affluence to few – distress, with swelling train,
Follows the rear. With all our mighty gain,
What profit we? 29
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All of the Tory evangelicals opposed the antislavery propaganda as antithetical to the expansion of trade and felt that for the most part it was carried on under false pretences. Its so-called humanitarianism was merely a bait to curry popular favour, and gain evangelical reformers. According to such Tories, the real object of the Whig mill owners was to divert public attention from their own brutality by expatiating upon that of the plantation owners, the crimes committed against slaves in the West Indies being thus made a screen for the crimes committed against the white ‘slaves’ in England. The Tory reformers would not wish it thought that they favoured the institution of slavery. But they feared that such policies struck at the prosperity of the colonies, weakening the ties that bound them to England and ultimately undermining the empire.40

These issues are not irrelevant, for Turner’s *The Slave Ship* folds into its visual and thematic structure the economic issues peculiar to England’s industrial development by 1840. Turner’s blazing sunset, like the motif of *The Fighting Temeraire*, is a metaphor for the passing of an outmoded institution in the context of the new industrialised state. *The Slave Ship* belongs to the period of Turner’s close examination of the impact of industrialisation that included such productions as *Snow Storm – Steamboat off a Harbour’s Mouth* of 1842 and *Rain, Steam and Speed – the Great Western Railway* (ills.9) of 1844. In the picture Turner may have attacked an institution that was by then diminishing in importance for British commerce, but rather than point out the abuses still being perpetrated in the West Indian colonies, the painter instead focused on an incident that occurred in the previous century and was familiar to all. As a result, his image reduced to melodrama the tragic circumstances of the *Zong* and allowed the theme to be almost totally submerged beneath the artifices of pigment, exactly as Twain reported in his construction of the picture. In this sense, Turner employed visual language remarkably akin to that employed by Carlyle in his sledgehammer attack on a greedy commercial system:

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English commerce stretches its fibres over the whole earth, sensitive literally, nay quivering in compulsion, to the farthest influences of the earth. The huge demon of Mechanism smokes and thunders, panting at his great task, in all sections of English land, changing his shape like a very Proteus, and infallibly, at every change of shape, oversetting whole multitudes of workmen, and as if with the waving of his shadow from afar, hurling them asunder, this way and that, in their crowded march and course of work or traffic. . . 41
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If we compare *The Slave Ship* with *Rain, Steam and Speed*, some remarkable similarities emerge, for both manifest the displacement of one temporal realm by another, and a vivid one-point perspectival scheme that dramatises the onrush of industrial technology and the havoc it wreaks upon its victims (ills.9). The vivid solar headlight piercing the storm clouds and illuminating the trough is echoed by the beam of the locomotive lantern, while the trough itself metaphorically anticipates the railway track. Like Melville’s Ahab, when applying a railroad metaphor to his monomaniacal sea quest: ‘Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ beds, uneerringly I rush!’42 This grooved, briny path, with its sinking bodies, may be likened to assembly-line organisation and underground tunnels into whose mechanical operations the bodies of labouring children are thrown (ills.10 and 11). Carlyle may have been thinking in similar terms when he compared the rushing off of [Manchester’s] thousand mills’ with ‘the boom of an Atlantic tide.’43
Yet by 1840 slavery and slave uprisings were no longer the burning issue for the industrial classes who patronised Turner. Now the threat came from the labouring classes in the urban slums. In September 1840 Chartists interrupted an assembly of Buxton and his followers in Norwich, compelling the meeting to disperse. It was clear to English labourers that the British ruling class preferred saving Africans at the expense of the indigenous poor. Buxton wrote to a colleague shortly after the Chartists’ break-in, equating the demonstration with slavers and their supporters:

What with the Chartists at Norwich, and the Times newspaper, and the Edinburgh Review, and the bitter Resolutions of the Liverpool Anti-slavery Society, and the recognition of Texas, and the threatened admission of slave-grown sugar, clouds seem to be gathering round about us.\footnote{44}

Given Buxton’s business preoccupations, it is understandable that he could not or would not make the imaginative leap to see the analogy between the plantation slave and the factory worker.\footnote{45}

In this context it is possible to see The Slave Ship as an arena in which the contending forces of two economic orders played themselves out. Turner himself was caught up in reality by those same forces; during his lifetime his patronage shifted from a landed nobility to a manufacturing elite, and although some of the Whiggish aristocracy may have opposed slavery, they also profited from it. Turner’s cry, ‘Where is thy market now?’ is also a cry of self-doubt and an acknowledgement that the new economic order has invaded his own pictorial space. The old metaphors of drastic change and social upheaval metaphorically represented in forms of geological and natural catastrophe have given way to industrial images. Turner’s cry is about his own personal dilemma, with ambivalence expressed through the combination of flagrant horror and fairytale playfulness. Turner’s own acknowledgement of these new forces stimulated him to struggle against the very materialism in which he himself was caught – hence his fanciful marine forms and vivid colourations encoded his condemnation of brutality in both the colonial and domestic spheres.

Ruskin’s vivid interpretation of the picture in 1843 emphasised the trough of water that is formed by two ridges of an enormous swell and highlighted by the sun’s reflection. Ruskin hinted that this trough was a visual metaphor for a tomb, since the entire near area of the scene is filled with the flailing limbs of slaves who have been ruthlessly flung overboard. A correlative text for this representation may be found in Charles Dickens’s Dombey and Son, published in 1848. Dickens brings into parallel the steelily reserve of the banker Dombey with the uniform rows of books in his library and the industrial progress of the class that Dombey represents. The metaphor for this progress is the railroad, the building of which Dickens likened to the ‘shock of a great earthquake’:

There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls, whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth, and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.\footnote{46}

The rending of the surface, and the ensuing chaos of natural and man-made catastrophe in Ruskin’s interpretation of The
Slave Ship and Dickens’s account of railway construction in Dombey and Son read remarkably alike. And in The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens took the American railway as the symbol of indifference to the agonies of the labourer and the slave. ‘The engine yells’, Dickens wrote, ‘as if it were lashed and tortured like a living labourer, and writhed in agony.’ He concluded (with the slaves in mind) that it would ‘cost a man more dollars in the way of penalty and fine, and satisfaction of the outraged law, to deface in wantonness that senseless mass of metal, than to take the lives of twenty human creatures!’

Twain’s remarks on Ruskin’s transformation of the actual ‘lie’ into a ‘cultivated’ truth calls to mind another important implication of Turner’s work. Ruskin demanded a subject of dramatic import for the production of the highest art, yet his interest in the specific theme was negligible. Despite the suggestion that the horror of the event will bring down retribution from on high, Ruskin’s attention was drawn to the formal qualities of the work above all else. Ruskin aesthetised Turner’s representation of the horrors of the slave trade, thus anticipating the aestheticising of the content of imperialist hegemony by the Cubists in a later period. Turner set the trap by taking a subject whose latent content had been neutralised and revivifying it in pigment and light. Ruskin took it one step further in trying to construct the viewer as one who demands moral subjects as a pretext for high art. In this way, the political content became denatured and almost effaced – showing that behind formalist construction is the attempt to neutralise politics.

Turner’s The Slave Ship marked a turning point in his cultural production: the essence of his drama became more conspicuously tied to the industrial revolution and more inwardly symbolic. The fantastic motifs were bathed in flooding colour. The interpenetration of light and the elements were embodied in forms inspired by industrial innovation. The work vividly packages a complex political and social issue while at the same time distancing it from the political site it had occupied until only recently. It belongs to that phase of Turner’s career when he became dependent upon the patronage of the manufacturing classes, and when he himself explored the impact of industrialisation on English social life.

There seems to be little doubt that he also tried to obtain royal patronage in trying to appeal to Prince Albert, who presided at the Anti-Slavery meeting prior to the Convention. Thus The Slave Ship appeared as an anomaly both in the historical and autobiographical sense, presented in the period when slavery was actually receding on the British commercial horizon. This is demonstrated in the ambivalent reception of the picture, which betrayed an uncomfortable mixture of nervousness and sardonic humour. Turner’s image transformed the painful incident of the Zong into a hell-and-brimstone sermon, subsuming human suffering to the taste for high tragedy. The painting’s power derives from the aesthetics of the sublime that tries to shift the concrete horror of the slave system above time and place, precisely at the moment when the captains of industry (who were only nominally against slavery) replaced the captains of slavers and rode the crest of a policy of unchecked exploitation of labour and material resources both at home and abroad.

Ironically, this early attempt at aestheticising white supremacy was deconstructed in the controversy carried in the local press over the merits of the picture during its loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1877. 10 One letter to the editor of the Transcript could inquire, ‘What is there to admire in this picture?’ The answer appeared in subsequent letters that defended its inchoate passages with the claim that the work embodied ‘a giant protest’ and conveyed ‘a scene of mysterious horror, where the cruelty of man and the power of nature are brought face to face.’ It was neither ‘ideal’ nor ‘beautiful’, but a pictorial sermon ‘of moans, and tears, and groans, and shrieks.’ These comments show that the devastations of the American Civil War and the collapse of Reconstruction continued to preoccupy the public conscience, and that Turner’s content still carried meaning for the United States which emancipated its slaves much later than either England or France. This was played out in the attack on the picture for the very formalist features that Ruskin had extolled some twenty-five years earlier. As in the case of Twain, the messiness of the picture suggested the horror and guilt that were still present in white Northern consciousness—which is why it could be likened to a ‘red rag’ waved in the face of the bull.

Notes

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5 ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, The Times, 6 May 1840.


14 Ibid., p.450.


16 Ibid. at the meeting, the Bishop of Winchester claimed to want to strike 'a blow at barbarism in Africa - the real root of the evil, and for planting Christianity in lieu of the superstitions and vices of idolatry and sin', while Dr Lushington, M.P. declared that 'the evil would never be over-


A Letter to the Editor of the Argus and Demagogue, Bradford, 1835, pp. 1-2.
42. Buxton, "Memos", p. 52.
43. Buxton's views were informed in large measure by the Quakers. Much of the Quaker anti-slavery activity was bound up with ties of intermarriage, and with industrial and business interests. Although Buxton was not a Friend himself, his mother belonged to the Quaker Hambury family, who were founders of a tobacco empire prior to the American Revolution, and who had subsequently turned to banking, brewing, and iron manufacture before eventually settling down with chocolate. Buxton's wife was also from a Quaker abolitionist family with extensive banking interests, and Buxton joined the banking firm of Truman, Hanbury & Co. in 1808, helping to consolidate the Hanbury iron business with both the iron and banking interests of the Lloyd dynasty, and the banking and brewing interests of the Barclay group. Later he was associated with the major insurance firm founded by Samuel Gurney, Alexander Baring and Sir Moses Montefiore. Buxton's position on the slave question rested in large part on his wide network of business contacts.
44. C. Dickens, Dombey and Son, New York, 1950, p. 60.
46. Much of this debate was played out in the Buxton Transcript; see O.R.A.C. Turner's "Slave Ship"; Daily Evening Transcript [DET], 20 March, 1877; Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 23 March, 1877; Crescent, Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 29 March, 1877; A realist, Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 4 April, 1877; Whalier, Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 7 April, 1877; O.R.A.C. Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 18 April, 1877; Bz., Turner's "Slave Ship"; DET, 5 October, 1877. At the time, the picture belonged to Alice Hooper, daughter of the Senator, who had purchased it from J.T. Johnston.