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ROMANTICISM AND IMPRESSIONISM. A PATH BETWEEN TURNER AND MONET

The notion of Romanticism is one of the broadest, most versatile and extensive products of Western culture. That of Impressionism, in part because it has traditionally been related almost exclusively to the realm of painting, appears to us better defined and definable. Why should we then try to identify an interconnecting path between the two?

For over half a century the possible connection between Romanticism and Impressionism has unquestionably attracted the attention of many scholars. For example, since the 70's, the Italian Francesco Arcangeli has offered a sophisticated and perceptive reflection on the historical and critical theoretical nexus between Romanticism and the informal. In his 1972 writing, published in *Paragone*, he highlighted this nexus and traced a path on the basis of «spatial liberation», a liberation that Turner accomplishes by destroying «each and every old rule and proportion» so that «by abandoning any appeal to mentally preordained rules, speaking of the informal becomes legitimate. [...] Turner has already mastered informality just as Rembrandt has already mastered romanticism» (Arcangeli 1972, 18). Therefore, the attention of critics and scholars alike is primarily directed towards the artist's cognitive and existential dimension, towards the very creative interiority that the broader it grows the more implacably uncertain it becomes. On account of its 'inner' boundlessness, it ultimately undermines the 'external' that is represented and subjects it to an infinity that, on the one hand, exalts it and on the other hand challenges its ability to be represented. In point of fact, an important exhibition that took place in Ravenna in 2006 both reintroduced and celebrated right from its very title (*From Romanticism to the informal*) Arcangeli's hypothesis that linked Turner, Monet and Pollock.

How should we then approach the re-examination of a possible connection between Romanticism and Impressionism?

First of all, we should do so with increased caution. It is not our intention to delineate a possible path between Romanticism and the pictorial phenomenon of Impressionism whose Monet was one of the main leaders. Instead, we should explore *a* potential path that may audaciously lead Turner to Monet. Secondly, unlike art history that is equipped with different purposes, tasks and tools, aesthetics, according to the meaning we would like to ascribe to it here, is aimed at grasping, within the possible relationship between the Romanticist realm and that of pictorial Impressionism, something extremely ephemeral and yet very real, something we would like to call the poetical consciousness of the time that has passed between the two poles that are being connected, we hope not too arbitrarily. It is this *poetical consciousness of time* that we will examine as we juxtapose the authors mentioned in the title, Turner and Monet, so that only by virtue of this examination, and only as long as it remains active and dynamic, it will be able to show us the path.

It is important to approach Turner's body of work through the writings of John Ruskin for a motive we deem truly intrinsic and essential to the issues that are being considered. The fact that a 24 year-old young man, in 1843, was able to offer both critics and public *an* actual reason why Turner must be considered a 'giant' of painting, and that this very reason ought to be put in relation to Turner's *modernity*, is something that transcends a scholar's passion. He himself recounts that at the early age of 17 he was awed by the painter's works. In fact, it is not by mere coincidence that the terms Romanticism *and* modernity are often juxtaposed. Yet, is it perhaps not true that expressions like 'nostalgia', 'golden age', 'pre-modernity', 'middle-ages' are often associated with the Romanticist movement? How is that possible? Actually, this question forces us to face what is generally defined – and often 'dismissed' – as the distinguishing trait of *Romanticism's ambivalence* which the speaker considers more productive, from an hermeneutical viewpoint, to call *Romanticism's ambiguity*. If one embraces such a perspective and articulately strives to grasp the sense of the relationship that connects 'ambiguity' with Romanticism one may also gain a tool for understanding how Turner – as a true Romanticist painter – is, in effect, modern. Romanticism's

ambiguity consists in configuring its own essential symbolic nucleus that looks just as much to the past as to the future in a dual, paradoxical and apparently contradictory manner. And yet, up to this point, there would be no major difference with respect to the Enlightenment or Neo-classicism. If anything, the novelty, Romanticism's modernity, consists in the fact that this very essential ambiguity plays a role from the viewpoint of the above-mentioned *poetical consciousness of time*. This means that the Romanticist claims for himself – and here lies his modernity – the *freedom* to lead the artist's imagination towards a time that is neither history's linear time nor the exclusive and eternal time of traditionally extra-historical values such as 'beauty', 'good' and so forth. As we said before, this is a poetical time whose sense is inherently *ambiguous* because it is at least bidirectional if not multidirectional, as was often the case for many Romanticists. It is also *modern* because the comparison takes place neither with the 'established' past nor with the 'anticipated' future, but with a past immemorial (thus, not simply human) and with the prefigured, expected, anticipated and possible future, that is to say, the future as it 'should be'. Within the picture that is emerging, it becomes clear that ambiguity and modernity come in contact with each other and instantly generate images.

Let us go back to history. Turner, in 1836, exhibited three of his paintings: *Juliet and her nurse*, *Mercury and Argus*, and *Rome from Mount Aventine*. The theme of these three works is certainly not original. Yet, their pictorial rendering posed a problem for the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine's* critic who accused Turner of painting *out of nature* and of using color in a childish and naive manner, or in a rather unprofessional way, as we would say today. Ruskin, who at the time was only 17, foreshadowing what would later be known as his masterpiece, *Modern painters* (first published in 1843), credited Turner for having drawn freedom and realism directly from *nature*. In so doing, fundamental words were pronounced towards a better understanding of the above-mentioned interconnection between ambiguity and modernity, which we believe to be at the core of Romanticism. This very Romanticist faithfulness to 'nature' provides an indispensable tool for the comprehension of what we called the 'poetical consciousness of time'. There exists a profound link between Ruskin's intention

to defend Turner from his detractors, the uniquely Romanticist nexus between ambiguity and modernity, and the Romanticist/Turnerian fondness for 'nature'. Let us try to identify it. Firstly, it ought to be pointed out that the path of Ruskin's defense of Turner's works inevitably passes through the reevaluation of the notion of a natural truth within the work of art, a reevaluation that Ruskin considered possible only in so far as one emphasized that, *before* Turner, landscape painters

may have amused the intellect, or exercised the ingenuity, but they never have spoken to the heart. Landscape art has never taught us one deep or holy lesson; it has not recorded that which is fleeting, nor penetrated that which was hidden, nor interpreted that which was obscure; it has never made us feel the wonder, nor the power, nor the glory, of the universe; it has not prompted to devotion, nor touched with awe; its power to move and exalt the heart has been fatally abused, and perished in the abusing. That which ought to have been a witness to the omnipotence of God, has become an exhibition of the dexterity of man (Ruskin 1843-1860, I, 21-22),

writes an enthused Ruskin, and a few hundred pages later he continues: «And we shall be able to show that not only in truth to nature, but in all other points, Turner is the greatest landscape painter who has ever lived» (Ruskin 1843-1860, II, 176), because «only is a complete picture which has both the general wholeness and effect of nature, and the inexhaustible perfection of nature's details» (Ruskin 1843-1860, II, 181).

What has happened? Why has that *vedutismo*, that representation of nature by the old masters, as Ruskin calls them as he diligently analyzes their works, especially those by Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin – initially important to Turner himself – never reached the 'heart'? The answer to this question is in part related to the analysis of the painting technique and the results it has achieved each time in the works of those old masters who preceded Turner and whom Ruskin examines. Defining the dimension of what Ruskin calls 'heart' becomes more essential. The 'heart' is an organ of knowledge and not an undefined sentimental space¹. It is the place where, from a Roman-

¹ In the Romantic period, and especially in Germany, the concept of *heart* is rather particular and it has been mentioned here to show a possible link between Turner's works, according to Ruskin's analysis of them, and the German Romantic period. A clear example of what we

ticist point of view, man and nature come into contact, where the inner dimension unfolds towards a vital exterior while the exterior – bearer of life and passion – secretly moves inward. Moreover, the heart is concerned with the details in the pictorial expression of the natural landscape. This pursuit, argues Ruskin, the pull towards nature's details is what separates it from history painting, where the idea rules over those same details. Why 'romantically'? Because the predilection for (nature's) details is distinctly Romanticist with regard to the safeguard of the finite and of the fragment *vis-à-vis* the whole and a general re-composition, which bring the fragment into the realm of a manifestation thoroughly founded on its sustaining divine force.

As we said before, the ambiguity, hence modernity, of this foundation lies in the depiction of nature both in its entirety and in its details while preserving, or rather acquiring by virtue of said simultaneity, heavenly traits. These traits are transferred onto the painting and expressed as effect. This foundation is of a *temporal* nature. Its duration is relative to the broadening of the significance that accompanies and characterizes it. It corresponds to the emanation of the divine into the natural phenomenon, which it traverses but never truly abandons; which it leaves be, but somehow – albeit laboriously and with effort – 'rescues'. The Romanticist saves the finite out of love, pity, compassion, and faith yet he depicts it in its relation to the infinite that sustains it. The importance of this interpretation of Turner's work – that in actuality is the interpretation of *some* of his works and not of Turner's 'entire body of work', as if it were really possible to speak of Turner's 'work' in absolute terms – once again, the importance of this interpretation is connected to the role that Ruskin ascribes to Turner's 'infinity' and, we may add, to the relation he expresses between 'infinity' and light. However, before venturing into such a challenging and uneven landscape we should again emphasize that Turner can approach infinity since nature, with a primordial act that precedes him and that Turner 'repeats' on the canvas, allows him to do so through his brushstrokes. In this sense, Ruskin believes that

are referring to can be found in his 1797 philosophical studies, in particular those regarding Hemsterhuis, whose thought Novalis transposes to a Romanticist atmosphere (see Novalis 1965, 360-378).

infinite/infinity and truth are strictly interconnected, like sides of the same coin of Turner's pictorial rendering. These remarks about the 'infinite', one of the most essentially Romanticist terms, allow us to briefly point out that while referring to the infinite – and often to the Romanticist 'sublime' infinite – is in some ways legitimate and critically accepted, it is nonetheless subject to significant misinterpretations. In particular, the constant reference to the presence of the sublime infinite in Turner's paintings makes their interpretation vulnerable to the misconception that the 'sublime infinite' somehow flows out of the painter's feelings and therefore out of his artistic act. Ruskin himself at times seems to realize that if this were the case – or better, if feelings and artistic acts alone were the infinite's ontological 'support', the infinite represented on the canvas could not exemplify or even hope to exemplify the very 'truth' that it claims to embody. When Ruskin writes these words about Turner, «For we may be quite sure that what is not infinite, cannot be true» (Ruskin 1843-1860, I, 314), we are not only faced with a crucial observation about Turner, but more importantly with a correct definition of the issue of 'Romanticist space'. As he talks about Turner, Ruskin declares that «to express» the infinite on or through the canvas means that «we may be sure that this infinity could only be based on truth – that it *must* be nature, because man could not have originated it» (Ruskin 1843-1860, I, 316). Hence, to feel means 'to draw' from nature that very infinity that becomes spatially represented on the canvas. This, and nothing else, is the Romanticist impulse whose devotion to truth as 'natural' manifestation (not simply nature's) is both a fluctuation between a human being's individual and fragmentary sentiment and the divine as the hidden and truly infinite force that pervades the manifestation of every natural phenomenon. The work of art is suspended in the middle of this painful oscillation. If to our own observations we add Ruskin's statement, «We shall find, the more we examine the works of the old masters, that always, and in all parts, they are totally wanting in every feeling of infinity, and therefore in *all* truth» (Ruskin 1843-1860, I, 316), we must ultimately ask ourselves: why do the old masters lack this feeling of infinity? As we attempt to answer this question, we are compelled to move forward.

Labeling Turner's body of work 'landscape painting', at least with respect to some of his fundamental works, is beginning to feel

like an over-simplification. In some ways, and in spite of Ruskin's fondness for this particular formulation, to commit his paintings to the realm of 'landscape' becomes even somewhat misleading also because the 'sublime' lies in waiting beside the 'landscape' together with the danger of misinterpretations. No, some of Turner's most important works are deserving of a broader horizon – naturally but certainly 'superior' to the 'landscape' – instead of one that is so reductive and confining. Within this horizon, nature and history romantically meet and become joined as features of the visible and the invisible caught in their moment of neutrality, of the passage that hangs between two worlds in the life of the *divine*, where one cannot exist without the other and whose existence is linked, almost ruled, by the incessant flow of the colors of light. For this reason, and making no claim of introducing a new and original definition, but rather because of the need to provide the support of an additional hermeneutical horizon, we can affirm that Turner is *the painter of light* where 'light' means the result of the mixing of colors projected onto the plane of the divine oneness that radiates itself onto the canvas. Turner presents us with the pictorial simplification of the Romanticist theory of *mixture* (*Mischung*): the need to mix, to blend the 'fragments', whatever significance one may ascribe to such a key term for the understanding of the Romanticist universe. It implies the need, the call to let the existing circulate freely in all its forms so that the form behind each and every fragment is able, even though for an instant, to transpire and emerge as spirit. In Turner's paintings, the spirit that moves through the phenomena as divine flow and that *animates* (not supports) them with *its* flowing could be compared to the way *colors* interrelate and act not only as a trace, but also as a forerunner of *light*. If this were true, we would also gain an interesting insight into Ruskin's belief that light, and not colors, plays a central role for Turner. Secondly, we would also have an explanation for the possibility – a possibility Turner actualizes – of making equal room on his canvases for both 'natural' and 'historical' phenomena, beginning from that 'neutral' suspension that molds itself into the divine light that permeates both the natural and the historical. Imagination, so essentially Romanticist, by virtue of being connected to neither the natural nor the historical/idealistic, but rather to the divine flow that runs through both, is able to grasp and reproduce them. It captures them

in their instantaneity and immortalizes them onto the canvas. For the artist, *purity* of heart and of imagination is not to be found in his supposedly higher moral or sublime plane, but rather in his being able to remain, so to speak, 'neutral', pure, just like light itself. In doing so he is able to proceed neutrally and therefore with purity within the relation that exists between the visible and the invisible without being 'bound', if we may say so, to any particular color. In this sense, the painting's luminosity appears to be positively correlated to the infinity that it reveals, beyond any effect of light or the use of one or more colors. This is because it is evident, at least to us, that for Ruskin and for the Romanticists truth is a unitary and luminous organization of the world of phenomena whose colors and effects must always and radiantly refer back to the primordial divine principle. To summarize, colors are multiplicity; light is singularity. Ruskin's insistence on the difference between the old masters and Turner with respect to their approach to 'transparency' gains particular importance when, *vis-à-vis* the rendering of the cloud forms, he points out that for the old masters, «and their light is always *on* them, not *in* them» (Ruskin 1843-1860, I, 309). Clearly, the intention is not to criticize Ruskin's comments on the basis of technical or historical/technical considerations, but rather to inject him in Turner's Romanticist interpretation. However, the objective is also to reflect on the fact that the vibration of the light inside a form represents the divine, luminous nucleus that is pulled between the visible and the invisible and filters through the individual colors. Instead of being directed towards the gaze of the observer, they in turn should lead back to it. *The introduction of this new directional purpose, the colors-human eye directionality in contrast to that of colors-light* will represent, in our contemplation of the path that connects Turner with Monet, the profound poetical sign of the transformation that takes place between the two. Far from attempting to consider the difficult issue of Newton and Goethe's dispute over colors, let us instead examine Turner's 1843 painting that he deliberately titled *Light and color* as a reference to Goethe's *Theory of color*.



Although Turner had a personal interpretation and view of Goethe's theory, it is essential that in addition to the reference to the color yellow and to its symbolisms, as well as to the analysis of the viewer's position relative to the painting to better appreciate its light-shadow interactions depending on his or her distance from it, we refer to *The morning after the deluge. Moses writing the book of Genesis* as moments where the divine light reveals itself to man as an eye; the eye that is not only capable of perceiving the colors, but also of partaking in the unitary nature of the event itself, on the one hand (human) atmospheric and on the other (divine) transfiguration and conveyance of truth. The intermediary role of the canvas – the intermediation between the world of man and that of the divine – is present in many other paintings by Turner.

Before we conclude our conversation about some aspects of his body of work, we would at least like to mention *The slave ship. Slavers*

throwing overboard the dead and dying. Typhon coming on that Ruskin considers «the noblest sea that Turner has ever painted» (1840) and «based on the purest truth» (Ruskin 1843-1860, II, 140-141). This comment pertains to a painting whose essence is to refer nature and history, in all their tragic aspects, back to a communal luminous event that neither explains nor justifies but rather 'judges', while, at the same time, accepts.



The same is true for another famous painting dating back to 1812, which we would like to place next to *The slave ship*. It is *Snow storm. Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps*.



The transition from Turner to Monet is not the transition from one author to the next. By the way, not many years separated the two (Turner died in 1851 and we know that Monet and his fellow painters became disparaged as Impressionists in 1874). We are talking about the poetical time that passed between Romanticism – in the way it manifested itself in and through Turner – and Impressionism. It is not unusual to encounter the historical/critical remark that the use of color, typical of some of Turner's paintings, anticipates or is reminiscent of Impressionist poetics (and effects) with respect to the predilection for color and – in fact – to the detriment of the 'line'. In doing so, it creates a sort of path that, albeit problematically, leads *from* Turner *to* Monet (and eventually to the informal). Yet, as we have remarked

at the beginning, this is not the point of view we intend to adopt. In any event, as early as 1846 Baudelaire had remarked about the *Salon*:

To extol the line to the detriment of color or color at the expense of the line is undoubtedly a point of view but it is neither very broad nor very just and it reveals a great ignorance of individual destinies. You cannot know to which extent nature has blended the taste for line and the taste for color in each mind or by what mysterious processes she performs this fusion whose result is a picture (Baudelaire 1846, 41).

Now, irrespective of the fact that Baudelaire's considerations combined Romanticism, colorist painting and imagination together in a mixture that, in a typically French manner, transformed Romanticism into irrationalist individualism, his call for the uniqueness of the work of art and the very peculiar alchemy of its components is noteworthy. As we have attempted to point out with the help of Ruskin's observations, in Turner's paintings that special alchemy rested upon the luminous nature of the world of phenomena as expression of the divine. In the transition to Impressionism this luminosity that, at heart, remains unitary and unifying reveals the development of a manifold luminous principle, coloristically explosive and dazzling, the onset of a singularity that, while still dormant in Turner, is nonetheless the development of a Romanticist principle. So as to better characterize it, we must avail ourselves of a few references that may seem 'ancillary', but that in reality are essential to understanding the Impressionist phenomenon, and Monet as its possible 'leader'. The first reference involves the studies carried out by the chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul. While researching the reason behind the discoloration of tapestries, he concluded that it was due to an optical and not to a physical factor. It was not associated, in other words, to the quality of the pigments. His first observations concerning the issue date back to 1828. In 1839, he formulated the laws of simultaneous contrast and later, in 1861 and 1864, he introduced a method for the chromatic classification of colors. Positive proof of a connection between Chevreul's studies and Delacroix's work, so valuable to the Impressionists, is corroborated by the fact that in 1850 Delacroix obtained a notebook containing notes taken from Chevreul's lessons, and that he unsuccessfully tried to meet him in person before his death. At the same time, as demonstrated by Paul Signac's 1899 book

about the relationship between Delacroix and Neo-impressionism, this proof is pretty relative and circumscribed. The second reference concerns Ernst Mach's work and his analysis of sensations first published in 1886. However, the references are certainly not aimed at constructing a stable and demarcated horizon, but a shifting one. As an example, in many ways one could say that the Impressionism-scientific/philosophical theories relationship becomes much more evident in a literary context than in a pictorial one. In point of fact, it is indispensable to start from the observation that the terms 'impression', 'sensation' and 'perception', and probably not only these, are interchangeable, or at least not precisely distinguishable. This apparent problem may actually constitute a strong point in Monet's painting. The essential 'ambiguous' aspect of art takes on a role whose centrality may have been unprecedented up to this point. In fact, impression and sensation, just to mention two of the terms we just cited, describe the 'quality' of reality in all its elusiveness and irreducibility, its avoidance of the 'stability/permanence' feature, a feature that had previously and almost spontaneously been attributed to all that exists and is portrayed, even ideas, myths, and 'imaginings' in the broadest sense. Having recognized the essential boundlessness of the perceived reality – a boundlessness that its lines and volumes attempted to circumscribe and endow with regularity, stability, and permanence – Monet seems to move toward the extreme 'realism' of the sensation intended as a repository of the transitory and of the irreplicable. The luminous as color, fruit of juxtapositions and of mutual reinforcements or reductions, the effect of interplay and incessant 'transitions' and therefore removed from the reassuring 'artifice' of constancy, all constituted the undeniable recovery of Romanticist elements, especially the 'fragmentary'. The Impressionist faithfulness towards the rendering (vibrant, luminous, and colorful) of the sensation was both the reproduction-rendition of what the painter 'was experiencing' during his *plein-air* encounter with the outside reality, and the demonstration that this faithfulness could only exist provided it abandoned itself to the transition, the *transeunt*». This was not in itself inexpressible, but it was certainly not entirely 'reliable' in terms of its ability to be 'realized', 'completed' (thus the frequent criticism that the work of art was left incomplete, unfinished). Faithfulness to in-

constancy. Is there something more 'modern' and in some ways Romantic? Let us consider Monet's 1872 *Impression, sunrise*.



We are faced with a rather interesting and eloquent situation because, as we reflect on the founding pictorial elements of Impressionism, we also reflect on the fact that what art is accomplishing, and especially painting, is not the representative-replicative function or the factual imitation of the external reality through the use of lines, forms, volumes, and colors. On the contrary, Impressionism may relate to the fictitious and illusory trait of the fundamental character of reality – in other words, to the idea that terms like 'substance' and 'matter' could be comforting fabrications for something fleeting, and therefore fundamentally ambiguous. Hence, it is on this plane that

there may be a connection between Ernst Mach's empiriocriticist and theoretical viewpoints; the latter, quite radical, posits that the traditional expressions of the idea that substance is 'external' to the subject and the very idea of consciousness or of self are destined to fade. From a pictorial/mimetic standpoint the disappearance of matter's qualities in terms of mass, weight and form – a 'substantial', certainly not a 'functional' disappearance – corresponded or was juxtaposed to the Impressionist idea of the rendering of the impressions of this dematerialized, de-solidified matter as light and color effects; true moods and atmospheres suspended between the internal and the external, between the self (consciousness) and the world; a pure luminous relationship recreated on the canvas. This was a very different approach from the Turnerian 'interiorization' of the natural and substantial luminous principle that, by rendering both nature and self 'stable and permanent', is ultimately transported onto the canvas as light, irrespective of whether or not it 'speaks' the language of history or nature. Whereas Zola exalted the Impressionists' realism because they depicted modern life as it really was, Monet desperately attempted to recreate the effects that the elements had on his own perception: namely, the impressions they left.

Faithfulness to inconstancy, or better faithfulness to change and transformation as an impenetrable horizon. We are therefore faced with the following poetical path: Turner and the Romanticists discover, in the luminous element, the fundamental unitary phenomenon that encompasses both natural and historical events, which the human being is part of on account of his luminous and illuminating consciousness. The pyrotechnic luminosity of matter is bound to transpire as a multiplicity that cannot be referred to any unitary formative principle, not so much because of the technical necessity to overcome line, volume or outline, but rather because the unifying force of consciousness and of world/matter seems to vanish when, *romantically*, the consciousness/world relation – the relationship – takes center stage. According to the Romanticist notion of relation and relationship, the unitary luminosity of the original being begins to disperse in a flow of colors and effects. Their becoming overpowers both the light and its sense in favor of those intermittent and fleeting luminous events that Monet so capably captures. As the idea of unitariness of the self wanes so does the possibility of 'recognizing' the object that is

represented on the canvas. The technical/representative element is consistent with this path, as Paul Signac's reflections on Neo-impressionism will later essentially substantiate. Signac, whose personal life and painting history are too well known to require a detailed account, first published his book in 1898. The book opens with a lapidary statement: «The Neo-impressionist painters are the artists who established and, after 1886, developed the technique called *divisionism* by using as their mode of expression the optical mixture of tones and hues» (Ratliff 1921, 205). He continues by pointing out that «These painters came to their technique because of their desire to achieve a maximum of brightness, color and harmony» (Ratliff 1921, 205). This effect cannot be achieved by mixing colors on a palette, but rather through the use of the *optical mixture of hues* – that is, by making the most of those scientific discoveries that, since those of Chevreul, had become widely accepted. Therefore, the dabs of pure colors juxtaposed and separate on the canvas would be the result of division and not 'pointillism'. Obviously, in this context elaborating on Signac's level of 'historical accuracy' is not particularly relevant. It is well known that Signac ascribed to Delacroix the inception of what would eventually come to an end by the hands of the Neo-impressionists. Rather, consideration should be given to how Signac read the development of this light revering movement. Turner's veneration and appreciation for light as the internal and unitary significance of both the world and the artwork became for Monet the joyous admiration for colors and for their transitory and irreproducible effects, which were to be rendered on the canvas through a sort of 'hand-to-hand match' with the world phenomena as they constantly disappear and reappear before the eyes of both the artist and the spectator. For the Neo-impressionists that veneration became awareness of space, of the artist's voluntary and purposeful role in keeping the world's hues separate, divided, by means of a technique that allowed them to be reproduced on the canvas not 'naturally' but as effects at the peak of their luminosity; as fruit of a deliberate 'divisionist choice' they could reach the very apex of brilliance that was still eluding the Impressionists. In our opinion, we may gain a better visual appreciation of the product of the transition from Turner to Monet if we pause to examine Manet's famous 1862-1863 *The breakfast outdoors* and, immediately after, the equally famous *A Sunday afternoon on the island of*

La Grande Jatte (1884-1886) by Seurat whom Signac considered a master, just like Manet was a master for the Impressionists.



The suggestion of interaction and even complicity between Manet's characters and the natural environment represented the point of departure and reference for the Impressionist mood where, starting with Monet (certainly not in all of his works) color – the colors – form a symphony of joyous and lively voices, even potentially dissonant, radiant, inebriating, and dispersive. They undoubtedly portray quite a different condition with respect to that of Turner's luminosity, which inheres in the painting and in the scene, or emerges and watches over the scene from the outside, often from above, in the unitary and in some ways unifying manner that pertains 'to' what is true. The truth of color represents the truth of phenomenal multiplicity as it differentiates itself 'from' what is true almost to the point of losing any trace of it while preserving its footprints, albeit frantically, for as long as possible. Seurat and Signac's 'reaction' looks for an extreme use of luminosity. Their effort to be faithful to inconstancy, to 'natural' color in order to transcend the subjective/individual dimension of the impression that pertains to the artistic act of the painter and of 'his own' impression, surpasses that of the Impressionists. The Neo-impressionists' exclusive recourse to optical mixture and their outright refusal to mix the colors on the palette resulted not just in the fierce intensification of the luminosity achieved in view of a truly 'natural' effect, but also in the elimination of the subjective/arbitrary element in the optical manifestation of color. However, these results, as Seurat's painting clearly shows, appear as the 'descent' of a resplendent but silent light onto the canvas. Natural environment, plants, human beings and animals lie almost still inside a wonderfully crystalline setting that, in its own way, is a *Still-leben*, a soundless life; a 'still life' for us. In his book, Signac often remarks on how Romanticists and Impressionists alike made the frequent mistake, in their paintings, of trying to make the impurity of colors on their palettes more pleasing to the eye. The Neo-impressionists' pull towards the absolute purity of the hue appears to have lost its way – in other words, it has ceased to welcome on the canvas the man-world dialogue that had tumultuously found its voice in some of Monet's most famous works. For the Neo-impressionists, man and world greet each other from afar and yet seem almost incapable of establishing a di-

alogue. For Turner, the world's voice was the divine verb that appeared as light in all its oneness and that never dispersed throughout it. In 1811, Schelling, Turner's true contemporary (Turner and Schelling were both born in 1775 and died in 1851 and 1854 respectively), wrote a sentence that could perfectly suit one of Turner's paintings. We quote: «It is not God, but rather the splendor of the unapproachable light in which God dwells» (Schelling 1811, 32-34)².

Of that very splendor Turner has been able to paint the reflection.

Translated from the Italian by Carla Bruschi Ferrara

² The complete sentence in German reads: «Sie ist nicht Gott, sondern der Glanz des unzugänglichen Lichtes, in dem Gott wohnt, die verzehrende Schärfe der Reinheit, welcher der Mensch nur mit gleicher Lauterkeit des Wesens sich nähern kann».