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The Colour of Words:

Crafting Links between Romantic Poets and Painters

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John Constable, *Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle'*, 1829

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Abstract

The Romantic Movement brought the classicist approach of art to completion and opened the transition to a modern artistic expression that focused on ideas such as the expression of feelings, individualism, inspiration and imagination. *The Colour of Words: Crafting the Link between Romantic Poets and Painters*, studies the links between the craft of English Romantic poets and painters. Attempts to find this connection have concentrated on the topics shared both by artists and writers. This TFG aims to focus not only on the topics but also on the similarities in artistic techniques that enabled the particular expression of an artistic Romantic vision. To this end, the form of poems and paintings will be compared. There are many topics that both Romantic painters and writers used as subjects for their works. What are the connections in both artistic disciplines as far as the methods employed for depicting these topics? My research will describe some recurring patterns in the creative process of the Romantic artist. By proving this, the TFG asserts that what defined the Romantic Movement as a whole were not only the subject matters but also the way in which they were represented.

Introduction

By the end of the 18th Century, an artistic and cultural movement known as Romanticism emerged in Europe. It brought with it an anti-Classicist and revolutionary approach to creative endeavors by focusing on ideas such as the expression of feelings, individualism, inspiration and imagination. Artists, musicians and writers shared those principles that defined the movement, and as Peter Quennel describes, “at the time, there was an unusually close connection between the different branches of creative art; while certain writers had a keen pictorial sense, many painters, both good and bad, acquired an extraordinary gift of self-expression, and were strongly influenced by poetic ideas and images” (1970: 189). The connection between Romantic painting and poetry – in particular the similarities informing both poetic expression and pictorial representation– will be the research focus of this TFG. It is a huge area of study that cannot be tackled comprehensively within the scope of this paper, so my aim is to narrow down on the actual execution of poetry and painting rather than discussing the artistic and poetic ideals that animated these techniques. My interest in this topic stems from my readings two years ago when I wrote my paper on the representations of the ‘common man’ in English Romantic poetry and Goya for ‘Literatura del Romanticisme Anglès’. At that time I realized that the emphasis of this comparative approach was placed on the genesis and the themes of poetic and pictorial representations, and far less on the actual craft (even in art books). If Romantic aesthetics was sprawling the arts and is recognizable when we listen to it, look at it, or read it, what similarities can we find, for example, in the creative methods of Romantic painters and poets?

This Romantic conception of art was based on the idea that imagination and inspiration prevail over artistic conventions and rules. For the Romantics, the creative process began with a moment of inspiration that was usually triggered by the

contemplation of Nature. Inspiration was necessary to awaken the imagination, the true driving force behind creation. This is captured by the well-known sentence by William Wordsworth, “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth, 1984: 598). These words can be found in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, the essay that marked the beginning of the Romantic Movement in England. Wordsworth and his co-author Samuel Coleridge sought to express the idea that the most important thing for the poet was to write according to one’s feelings and experiences, irrespective of any previous rules on decorum and poetic diction.

The relevance given to the expression of feelings by the Romantics is closely related to the idea (or even the cult) of individuality. This movement placed its value on each artist’s individuality, and hence it was important for them to reflect it in their works. The object of creation should be brimming with the poet’s subjectivity. As a consequence, the figure and the cult of the artist became significant, and resulted in the idea that true artists (and to a lesser extent, artisans) had an inherent gift for perception and inspiration. Thus, artists considered themselves to be talented and gifted beyond the ordinary man, and could even be labelled as geniuses. Due to the influence of the French Revolution, this idea assumed revolutionary characteristics, and artists sometimes felt that their creations were misunderstood due to the fact that their way of perceiving reality was unique. This idea of the artist as a genius appears in William Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*:

[The artist is] a man speaking to men a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him. (Wordsworth, 1984: 603)

The fact that these artists had a different way of perceiving the world showed in their works. Therefore, they tend to express objects and abstract concepts by moving away from reality. The term ‘Suspension of Disbelief’ has been used to refer to this idea. This meant that both poets and painters used supernatural elements in their work to express human truths. Their aim was to shock the audience and open their minds so as to see reality and the universe, as Blake wrote it, “in a grain of sand”. The supernatural was a vehicle to express the truth, and the moment in which the audience understands this was called ‘Suspension of Disbelief’. The one who reads or contemplates these works find in the supernatural elements truths that are essential to humankind.

The way in which the Romantics understood Nature also distinguished them from other artistic movements. As stated before, the use of supernatural elements was common. That followed from the belief that Nature was not something merely physical, since they believed that it had a spiritual quality in it. That is the reason why they used Nature as a source of inspiration, because it was the perfect way to find spirituality. Their relationship with Nature is defined by Quennel as ‘both passionate and directly personal’ (1970: 173). Romantics found in Nature a reflection of their own feelings, a concept coined as ‘Pathetic Fallacy’ by the Victorian critic John Ruskin. It meant that artists were able to reflect their inner feelings, emotions and mood upon Nature. That is why in their works, certain natural elements act as a symbol or metaphor of the poet’s state of mind. Furthermore, the aim of the artist was to allow the audience to identify not only the feelings of the artists, but their own as well. Therefore, Nature can be found as one of the main artistic subjects in Romanticism.

However, the ultimate aim of the Romantic artist was to find the Sublime. That is the reason why they were so concerned in finding inspiration and spirituality. This idea is explained by Philip Shaw in his work *The Sublime*:

In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of sublime. (2006: 2)

The Romantics believed in experiencing the sublime through their imagination and contemplation of Nature. Therefore, they wanted to reach the sublime in their work and show it to the audience, since they believed that a mere reproduction of beauty was not enough. However, each artist, in their individuality, experienced the sublime in their own way. Regardless of its complexity as an idea, it can be stated that the sublime was found in every experience that goes beyond reason and beauty. The sublime was something that transcended art, because it was above the human existence and close to the supernatural.

Chapter 1

Wordsworth and Constable: Essential Passions in Nature

As already mentioned before, *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* emphasized the relevance of Nature as a source for inspiration. Wordsworth claimed that, through the contemplation of Nature the artist was able to be inspired and awaken the imagination. Among the British painters, there was one who stood out in the important role that he gave to Nature in his art. This painter is John Constable who has been considered by many critics, such as Peter Quennell and Kenneth Clark, the most wordsworthian painter. The relationship between these two painters can be easily traced if we take into account the fact that both of them chose scenes of the common life in rural England as their subjects for art.

The reason why Wordsworth chose to write about scenes from common life is explained in *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* where he stated that in these everyday rural situations ‘the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent form of nature’ (Wordsworth, 1984: 597). The poet’s aim is to express that which is worthy of admiration in the countryside. This is due to the fact that men lived in closer contact with nature. Wordsworth claimed that men were able to open their minds and reach inspiration through nature. This idea appealed to John Constable (1776-1837), who was also interested in portraying natural scenes in which human figures appear in total contact with nature, almost as if they were landscape elements. Both artists were able to appreciate scenes from common life as something extraordinary, and this was precisely what they wanted to communicate through their work.

In order to awake his imagination, Constable contemplated landscapes of his native land in Stour Valley. Consequently, most of his paintings portray what Constable admired, these landscapes as well as the daily occupations of its inhabitants. This appears in most of his paintings, as in Figure 1 of this TFG, *Barges on the Stour* (1811). This painting depicts a laboring scene in which some workers are transporting grain on the River Stour, an activity that Constable was familiar with. However, both Constable and Wordsworth considered that a plain reproduction of Nature was not enough so as to create art. Constable sought to give life to his scenes by capturing a specific moment in time. The painter wanted the viewer to experience a moment in time as if he wanted to keep it forever. He was portraying “a moment that stands out, having a kind of pre-eminence in its power to provoke assent to the basic value and goodness of ordinary life” (Werner, 1984: 128).

In his attempt to capture an exact moment in time, it was apt for Constable to represent the season of the year and the time of the day. That is the reason why this

painter was so concerned with representing the configuration of the sky. The representation of skies was preeminent in many paintings by Constable. The wind also plays an important role here. In this particular painting, it can be observed the way in which the wind blows along with the way in which trees and weeds are battered by it. *Barges on the Stour* is, thus, the representation of a precise moment in Constable's experience. Peter Quenell expresses in *Romantic England* the way in which Constable approached art: "Nature's marvelous variety impressed him as much as its transcendent beauty. 'The world is wide', he noted, 'no two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world'" (1970: 191). This idea is made explicit in this painting in the way the sky is sketched. It is not a plain sky, but one in which the dark clouds have moved in a manner that has created a sunny spell. Sunny spells in the sky, as it appears on the painting, only happen at specific moments and that is why Constable captured it.

Wordsworth also uses in some of his poems the configuration of the sky and its elements to express a certain feeling. This appears, for instance, in several lines of *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798). In this poem, the poet recalls a specific moment in time. Wordsworth remembers vividly this experience and recovers it five years after, and yearns for those happy times that will not come back again. To describe that exact memory, Wordsworth makes reference to the 'quiet of the sky' (8) and the season of the year: 'this season, with their unripe fruits' (12). As we have seen before, both the poet and the painter were interested in capturing the particular moment in time that triggered their imagination, and, for that purpose, they pay attention to the time of the day and the year, together with the weather.

The recollection of the weather was also a way to express the inner feelings of the Romantics. For them, these were essential since it reflected their individual mood. A

way in which both Wordsworth and Constable expressed their individuality was through the recollections of experiences that have been explained before. This becomes apparent in the changes that Constable's paintings undertook after the death of his beloved wife. From that moment on, his skies darkened and shadows increased. Moreover, his subjects of art also changed. This can be explained by considering that, although Constable was still being inspired by Nature, the situations that awoke his imagination changed. He now looked for darker states of Nature that better suited his sad feelings. All of this is reflected in *Hadleigh Castle* (Fig.4), in which he paints ruins for the first time in his career. He felt an intense sorrow after the death of his wife that could not be compared to anything he had felt before. As a result, he needed to find a subject that evoked this feeling, which is the case with the ruins. The whole painting brims with sadness since he uses ruins to represent 'his own shattered home life and melancholy sense of irreplaceable loss' (Hawes, 1983: 457).

The rural motifs that appear in Wordsworth's poetry and Constable's paintings relate both artists beyond the choice of this theme. In many of his paintings, Constable presents scenes from rural life, in which we find peasants working in the fields. Examples of this could be *Barges on the Stour*, that has already been mentioned, or the famous *The Haywain* (Fig.2). Wordsworth also includes in his poems the daily activities of life in the countryside. An example of this can be found in his poem, *The Solitary Reaper*. The poem is about a solitary peasant girl working on the harvest. Wordsworth himself wrote in *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* that, for his poems, he chose 'incidents and situations from common life' with the intention 'to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination'. However, what connects these two artists is not just their rural themes, but also the way in which they are portrayed. Wordsworth explained that his poems were written employing a 'language really used by men' (Wordsworth,

1984: 597). Wordsworth refused to use an elevated language, since his aim was to express these rural experience in a clear and direct way. As he himself wrote, in the rural life the essential passions are found and they ‘speak a plainer and more emphatic language because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity’ (1984: 597). An example of this clear language is present in ‘The Solitary Reaper’:

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss or pain,
That has been, and may be again!

(17-24)

This stanza displays a vocabulary which is common in spoken English and so is the syntax of the sentences. Moreover, what is particular of this direct language of Wordsworth is the use of compelling adjectives. Examples of this can be found in the previous passage, such as ‘old’, ‘unhappy’ or ‘humble’. These kind of adjectives are a distinctive trait of Wordsworth’s poetry. Examples of these abound in his poems but a very representative use of them is found in *The Prelude* with the word ‘shrillest’: ‘The very shrillest of all London cries’ (182).

The equivalent of Wordsworth’s direct language in Constable would be the use of thick brush strokes –they both look for the materialization of the pathetic fallacy. The painter chose this method with an intention to avoid unnecessary ornaments. This is the case of the painting that has been commented on before, *Barges on the Stour*. For this piece, as in most of Constable’s late works, the thick brushstrokes are evident. This is also present, for instance, in *Stonehenge* (Fig.3). These quick and thick brush strokes show not so much an interest in the detail and reproduction of nature, as it was the case

in previous artistic movements, but an emphasis in representing the scene as whole. In this way, the painter is able to express his feelings adequately. Moreover, this technique shows that the artist is working in a moment of intense inspiration. The painter is focused on communicating a certain state of Nature that suits his inner feelings that project the state of solitude. Through these brush strokes, the artist is able to focus on certain colours and give the whole scene an atmosphere suitable for the reaction he wanted to provoke on the audience. In the example of *Stonehenge*, the thick brush strokes allow the predominance of dark colour such as dark purple, dark blue and black. This creates a darkness atmosphere proper to emphasize the feeling of sorrow.

There is another significant correlation between Wordsworth's poetry and Constable's painting which is related to their *modus operandi*. This way of working can be defined as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', and Wordsworth defines it in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. For the poet, the creative process is akin to the process of remembering: 'The poem is not the record of an immediate impression, but rather the controlled and formalized depiction of what was the essential nature of an experience' (Werner, 1984: 126). This means that Wordsworth believed that the best way to write a poem was to recall those moments of intense feeling and inspiration. An example of this is found in *Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, as it has been previously explained.

Constable also resorted to his imagination while creating his paintings. His paintings were made up from sketches that he drew while he was being inspired. These sketches were produced while the painter felt a stimulus that came from the contemplation of nature, which awakened his inspiration. Sometimes, a difference of ten or more years can be found between the sketch and the painting. This is the case of the painting that has been mentioned before, *Hadleigh Castle*, but also other celebrated art

pieces, such as *Stonehenge*. There is evidence that the former was done fourteen years after the sketch was painted, and the latter, sixteen years later. Since both of the paintings were made after his wife's death, both paintings have a clear melancholic hint. In *Stonehenge*, for instance, the melancholy is achieved by the use of dark colours for the sky, as it has been mentioned previously. Therefore, it can be claimed that this work, in the same way as *Hadleigh Castle*, is not only a recollection of a past experiences, but also a reminiscence of the happy times when the sketches were made. This is closely related to *Lines written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey*.

As it has been noted throughout this chapter, it is possible to find several connecting links between William Wordsworth's poetry and John Constable's painting. They both chose common scenes from ordinary life as subjects for their works and attempted to represent them by using a direct language. In the words of Bette Charlene Werner, 'For both Constable and Wordsworth meaning resides in and can be revealed in the most ordinary scenes' (1984: 110). Furthermore, Nature is used in both artists as a primary source of inspiration and, its representation allows them to express their feelings. Both artists achieved this by remembering a previous experience of inspiration in a controlled way, a procedure named by Wordsworth 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Those aspects relate to these two artists, and these are a feature of Romanticism, since these artistic movement emphasized aspects such as individuality, inspiration and nature that can be found in both Constable and Wordsworth.

Chapter 2

Byron and Turner: Beyond the Romantic Turbulence

Lord Byron is one of the key figures in the Romantic movement. His singularity attracted the interest of his contemporaries and continues to appeal to many artists today. He was not only recognized as being a great poet but also as someone for his embodiment of the Romantic ideals such as freedom and individuality. Therefore, they looked at him as an example of what they aspired to be as Romantic artists. This is what made Byron such an inspirational figure. The Romantics, in their search for idols, chose Byron and his poetry as one their favourite subjects of art.

One of those artists who were attracted by Byron was William Turner. Although they never knew each other, Turner read his poems and it was *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* the one that touched him the most. This work aroused Turner's interest in Europe and connected with his melancholic vision of the world and the past. That 'each of them regarded the world with an idiosyncratically pessimistic eye' (Heffernan, 1989: 208). That is why Turner was commissioned to illustrate Byron's poems in their posthumous editions. A job that he accepted pleasantly and that made him become one of the most prolific illustrators of Byron's works. Moreover, Turner's interest in Byron is explicit in the following paintings: *The Field of Waterloo* (1818), *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage – Italy* (1832), *The Bright Stone of Honor and the Tomb of Marceau* (1835), *Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino* (1839), and *Approach to Venice* (1844); as Hefferan lists in his article 'Self-Representation in Byron and Turner'. There is no doubt that Turner saw some affinities with Byron, especially in his vision of Europe.

The first painting that shows a quotation from *Childe Harold* is *The Field of Waterloo* (Fig.5). It can be stated that this poem is highly Byronic in the sense that it reflects a pessimistic vision of a historical event. Turner is able to understand Childe

Harold's feelings – which were a reflection of Byron's own feelings– while looking the field where the battle took place. This was possible due to the fact that Turner himself visited the field and identified his own feelings with Childe Harold's. By visiting a historical place allowed Byron and Turner to think over its impact on the world they knew. As stated by David Blayney Brown 'Byron's habit of approaching places through their history and associations, evoking their past and present condition through a few telling images, was exactly Turner's method' (1992: 59). It has also to be taken into account that Turner visited Europe having read Childe Harold's and this would have probably determined in a way what Turner expected to find and feel.

Let's now take a look at the passage quoted by Turner in *The Field of Waterloo*:

'Last noon behold them full of lusty life;
Last even in Beauty's circle proudly gay;
The midnight brought the signal-sound of strife;
The morn the marshalling of arms – the day,
Battle's magnificently stern array!
The thunder clouds close o'er it, which went rent,
The earth is covered thick with other clay
Which her own clay shall cover, heaped and pent,
Rider and horse – friend, foe, in one red burial blent'

(XVIII, 244-252)

It seems that Turner chose this passage because it is the one that best represents the consequences of war and has a clear pessimistic tint. However, there were probably other reasons that made Turner chose this stanza. In this verses, Byron uses natural elements, especially thunder clouds that concur with the sadness and tragedy of this scene. That is to say that Byron is making use of the Pathetic Fallacy by providing the passage with a natural environment that reflects not only the character's feelings but also the poet's. This is exactly what Turner was most interested in most of his works; as a landscape painter, he used natural elements so as to express his inner feelings. That is

why this Byronic tempestuous sky is what caught Turner's attention. Moreover, this grey and unstable sky is also closely related to both artist's radical and transgressive approach to art and their own lives.

The sky in Turner's painting also reflects the mood of the scene. The sky is fully covered with dark clouds and it seems that a storm is impending. In the same way, the wives in search for their husbands seem to be on the verge of finding their loved ones' corpses. In both works, a natural element, the 'thunder-clouds' are used to announce the upcoming tragedy. This is how Turner and Byron created the tension they needed in order to reflect their own feelings about war. 'Turner adopted Byron's grimly realistic vision of the aftermath of battle as his own, producing the absolute opposite of the conventional battle picture, avoiding overt celebration of victory and stressing instead the more universal moral of the remorseless wheels of fortune' (Brown, 1992: 92).

The Field of Waterloo has been considered to be a historical painting but it is not actually so. It does not depict the main historical event, which is the battle of Waterloo, but its aftermath. Turner is showing us how he imagines the consequences of a battle. There is no intention to celebrate the heroism of British soldiers or the glory of the battle. In fact, in the painting, we do not know the difference between the two sides. Turner was focused on the idea of death, which was something that made both sides suffer the same consequences, regardless of having won or failed. In the same way, Byron does not make any reference to any of the sides and seems to consider both equal. In the stanza that comes right before the one quoted by Turner, he only mentions the 'unreturning brave' (238). Besides, this idea becomes explicit in the following verses: 'heap'd and pent,/Rider and horse, – friend, foe, – in one red burial blent!' (251-252). The historical event is not the main subject of the work but a way to reflect the artist's ideas. In this case, the dark feelings of sadness and despair that are experienced

after a battle. In order to achieve this, both of them made use of their imagination since neither Byron, when he wrote *Childe Harold*, nor Turner had experienced a real battle.

How did both Byron and Turner get inspiration to imagine something, a battle that they had never seen? It can be stated that in both the third canto of *Childe Harold* and in Turner's painting the artist's imagination was stimulated by the experience of travelling. Turner's wanderlust is not comparable to Byron's, whose travels were celebrated and used to shape Byron's Romantic figure, but they shared the same idea. Considering how difficult it was to travel at the time, Turner can be regarded as an enthusiastic traveler since he took the opportunity to visit more or less ten European countries such as Italy, France or Germany. Getting to know other places was the way for both artists to broaden their horizons and open their minds so as to get different perceptions of the world. The aim of this was to find inspiration in places they had never seen before in order to be able to create something new. The fact that they both visited landmarks that commemorate historical events proves that they both were interested in history. Thinking about the past was a way to understand the current situation of their own country and the countries they were visiting, but more deeply, it was a way to reflect on humankind as a whole. This is made evident in the passage that was quoted by Turner as well as in the painting. They use the battle of Waterloo to express the terrible consequences of it. The ultimate aim of these works is to ponder on death, as something that equals all men without making any difference between the victorious and the defeated.

Byron and Turner had another point in common although this might not seem so obvious as the one that has been traced before. Byron and Turner had a similar way to represent themselves in their works. This may seem not evident at the beginning if we take into account the fact that Byron constantly made his life public, whereas Turner

was determined to keep his privacy. Turner was even distrusting as whether to show his physical traits since he only painted three self-portraits, all of them in the early years of his career. However, this is not the kind of representation we are going to analyze. As Romantics, they were both concerned in shaping themselves as artists and this is something that can only be found if we look closely to their works. Within Byron's poems and Turner's painting it is possible to find evidence of the presence of the artist. Their ideas about artistic creation and Romantic aesthetics seem to be hidden but they are indeed the most interesting ones in order to affirm that both of them belong to the Romantic movement.

By reading the first three stanzas of *Childe Harold*, it is possible to find the use of the first person singular. The narrator opens the poem and the first person refers to his voice. Be that as it may, if we move to the third stanza we find that the first person is slightly different. The tense has changed from present to past and this change also indicates that the voice has moved from the narrator to the own poet. This can be noted by looking at the third stanza as a whole:

In my youth's summer I did sing of One,
The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind;
Again I seize the theme then but begun,
And bear it with me, as the rushing wing
Bears the cloud onwards: in that Tale I find
The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,
Which, ebbing, leave a sterile track behind.
O'er which all heavily the journeying years
Plod the last sands of life, -where not a flower appears

(III, 19-27)

In this passage, Byron is referring to the difficulties that he has find in the poetic creation and therefore, it is the poet within him who talks overtly to the reader. Once again, Byron uses elemental forces (the clouds and the wind) to reflect his ideas. Here in

particular, he uses it and defines himself as an artist. He makes a connection between the most tempestuous elements in the sky to his own character and way of working. This can be related to the fact that Byron was aware of making something that was regarded to be radical at the time. As it would be stated now, Turner also resorts to natural elements to depict his own artistic ideas.

Turner wanted to keep his methods secretly in order to protect the individuality of his works. He believed his work was different from the other painters of the moment and he wanted to make his paintings easily recognizable. Nevertheless, he sought a way to be able to represent himself, named by Heffernan 'covert self-portrait', that allowed him to not reveal too much about himself or his methods. *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* (Fig. 6) shows one of these covert self-portraits. The figure of Moses is located at the lower right, which is the place where most painters put their signature. In fact, Turner had signed his previous paintings in the lower right corner. Moses is almost indiscernible since it is very tiny but it can be seen that his arms are raised to the sky. In this painting, the sky is quite significant since it is a turbulent state nature and, as it has been explained before, the representation of tempestuous nature is one of Turner's work emblems. It can be stated that Moses, which is a covert representation of the painter, lifts his arms as if creating a turbulent and dangerous sky. Therefore, he is depicting himself as the creator of a new way to express the artist's feelings, which involves a reflection of those feelings in nature. This becomes more evident if we take into account that a small figure rising its arms can be found in some other paintings such as *Deriding Polyphemus – Homer's Odyssey* and *Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (Fig.8) that depict tempestuous natures.

It can be argued that turbulent elemental forces and dangerous nature is something that connects Turner's and Byron's work. Nature played an important role in

their work since they both made use of nature so as to express their inner feelings and their own vision of themselves as artists. Moreover, they looked for inspiration in nature, especially in their travels, where they had the opportunity to show their pessimistic vision of the past so as to reflect on transcendental ideas, such as death. These ideas relate them to each other, but most importantly, they define them as participants in the Romantic movement.

Chapter 3

William Blake against Himself

William Blake has been considered by many critics as a pre-romantic since he worked in the late 17th century and early 18th Century -whereas the most iconic Romantic artists, such as Byron, worked in the mid-18th Century-. The ideas and themes that Blake was interested in were also unique within the Movement. However, he is the figure that best embodies the relationship between poetry and painting. "In all his mature work Blake used two languages simultaneously: one consisting of graphic icons, and the other using letter-symbols representing sounds that form words" (Freed-Isserow, 1998: 11). Blake was unquestionably a great poet, but the fact that he earned a living as an engraver gave him a vision which is particular of the pictorial arts. Therefore, in his works he makes use both of the power of words and images and, in order to fully understand his message, it is necessary to pay attention to both his verses and illustrations.

At the end of his career, from about 1800 to 1818, which is a period of almost 20 years, Blake worked in one of his major poems *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*. The great dedication that he put into this work made some critics consider it

‘Blake's last great work on illuminated painting’ (Freed-Isserow, 1998: 12). In this work, Blake also fully develops his theories related to important key themes in his poetry, such as the power of imagination, energy and spirituality. Besides, *Jerusalem* is filled with Blake's myths that appear in his previous works as well. Throughout his career, Blake developed his own world and, as Kathleen Raine considers, Blake ‘belongs to a few great imaginative minds that can create a world which seems to possess a reality, a coherence, a climate and atmosphere of his own’ (1970: 7). As the poet did before in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he decorated the poem with his characteristic paintings. These paintings are sometimes complementary to the text and other times they represent other ideas that gave the reader a fuller understanding of the poem. As Raine states in his book dedicated to William Blake, in *Jerusalem* ‘a single inspiration informs words and decoration alike’ (1970: 158).

Jerusalem is a complex work and this makes it difficult to understand. Moreover, the poem does not follow a linear order, since Blake worked in the same order in which his imagination did. For him, the natural world does not follow a linear order. This is translated into Blake's poems since they do not follow an episodic order. On the contrary, the world of the imagination -which is the spiritual world- is timeless. Blake considers this world to be the true one, whereas the natural world restricts the human soul. This poem narrates the fall of the giant Albion, –that Freed-Isserow identifies with Britain (1998: 12)– and Los' attempt to save Albion. Los is a key figure in the poem since he represents the imagination and functions as Blake's alter ego in the poem. Moreover, as stated by Harold Bloom, ‘Los is closely involved with Jesus, and the furnaces of inspired art become identical with the machinery of salvation’ (1971: 110). Jesus the Imagination is the true god for Blake, while the Church, mistakenly, imposes rules that limit the people's imagination in the name of God. This oppressive

and false God imposes his moral law and Blake identifies this figure in his work with Urizen. This figure is fully developed in *The First Book of Urizen*. In this book 'Urizen [...] becomes [an] anxious demiurge, engaged in the 'enormous labors' of imposing his 'ratio of the five senses' on rebellious life, whose nature he has not understood' (Raine: 1970). The way to save ourselves from the natural world and its moral laws is the main subject of *Jerusalem*. This salvation is represented by Albion, and it would save England. Then, the building of the New Jerusalem, which is the symbol of an ideal city of London, would take place. This city would be free from the chains of the corporeal world that has corrupted the city with laws imposed by the industrial revolution. Jerusalem in the poem is Albion's wife and they need to help and support each other in order to save themselves.

As it has been stated before, Los is a key figure since it embodies the power of imagination. The role of imagination is crucial in order to understand Blake's spiritual world. For Blake, the imagination goes beyond the materialistic world and he gains access to it through his visions. Blake's aim was not to depict the human figure and nature as it appears to the mortal eye but as it shown to the eye of imagination. Therefore, he claimed that, by using the visions of the imagination, each person saw things in a different way. These visions elevate the soul from the mortal world to the spiritual one. This is the way that Albion must go over in order to awake and be saved.

William Blake believed that he was one of the few to have these visions, and, as a consequence, the only one to understand that imagination was the way to salvation. As a result, in his work, he represents himself as a prophet and that is why the poem *Jerusalem* is one of his Prophetic works. This appears in an explicit manner in *Jerusalem*:

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me.
 Yet they forgive my wanderings, I rest not from my great task!
 To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
 Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
 Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination
 O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love:
 Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!

(5, 16-22)

In this passage from the first chapter of *Jerusalem*, Blake appears performing his 'great task', which is the creation of a work that guide 'the immortal Eyes' of the reader into Eternity. In this process, the role of imagination is crucial. However, even though he felt the need to show people what he believed to be the true way to salvation, he believed himself to be misunderstood. As Bloom explains in *The Visionary Company*, he considered himself to be an 'unwanted and unheard poet' (1971: 112) and this also plays an important part in his self-representation: 'For I am one of the living: dare not to mock my inspired fury' (8, 34).

The relationship between Blake and Los is significant to understand the poem. The poet's Spectre, that represents Blake's rational side, appears in the poem with the intention of demoralizing him and attaching him to the mortal world. In order to reach the imagination, he needs the help of Los that symbolizes his visionary side. In this fight of contraries, Los finally controls the Spectre and involves it in his build of Jerusalem:

Take thou this Hammer & in patience heave the thundering Bellows
 Take thou these Tongs: strike thou alternate with me: labour obedient.

(8, 39-40)

In plate 36, the text narrates how Albion is about to fall.

Albion is sick! said every Valley, every mournful Hill
 And every River: our brother Albion is sick to death
 He hath leagued himself with robbers; he hath studied the arts
 Of unbelief!...

(11-14)

The only one that can free Albion from ‘the arts of unbelief’ -unbelief in the imagination and spiritual world- is Los, as we have stated before. This is the reason why the illustration in this plate depicts two figures, Albion and his wife Enitharmon. If the reader looks closely to the male figure, as noted by Freed-Isserow (1998: 15), the man is pointing to a certain word in the poem. This word is ‘Albion’. Besides, there are flames that emerge from Albion’s arm. Fire for Blake represents the imagination and its powers since fire needs plenty of energy, in the same way that imagination does. If this is taken into consideration, the reader may get the idea that the power of imagination, embodied by Los, is the one who is going to save Albion. Moreover, the plate is filled by plants that sprout from the two figures. These plants seem to be holding the text, and, as Freed-Isserow states, this is a metaphor that indicates that Los is also holding Albion in his fall. This is important since it is an example of the messages that Blake is giving to his reader. Blake makes use of his illustrations to tell the reader something that goes beyond the text. Blake is emphasizing how the visual arts and the text complement each other.

Freed-Isserow also points out that “a green vine on which he [Los] stands spirals downward like a ribbon to the woman, who is evidently assisting him” (1998: 15). Freed-Isserow points out that this figure represents Blake's wife Catherine since “the name Enitharmon is partly an anagram of the name of Blake's wife Catherine, his technical assistant, devoted disciple and constant companion throughout the forty-five years of their childless marriage” (1998:16). Thus, it can be claimed that, although implicitly, Blake is representing himself in this plate and honours his wife. These two figures seem to be very busy working in the same way as Blake and Catherine did. They worked whenever Blake’s visions reached him. In this process, Catherine was key in helping him, in the same way as Los and Enitharmon are working in this illustration. ‘In

the face of poverty, neglect and obscurity in which Blake and his wife lived themselves during the whole period of *Jerusalem's* composition, Blake's Los continues his task' (Freed-Isserow, 1998: 17).

The plants that emerge from Los are the product of his imagination. They take different forms and shapes and they branch off. This is related to the way in which Blake wrote his poems, where there is no linear order. He wrote as the events appeared in his imagination. As Kiralis explains, "all the events are present before him; he selects from them to please his own imagination, and not so much to satisfy our rational minds as to awaken our intellectual faculties" (1956: 142). Moreover, he refused to use linear time since it belonged to the material world that Blake despised. The way in which Blake follows his imagination is also present in the way he uses focalization in *Jerusalem* (Ferrara, 2011: 25). The poet changes the focalizer and it moves from Albion to Los, to Albion's daughters, to Jerusalem herself. All of these characters appeared to his imagination and he wanted to show it in his poem.

In the plate that has been described, it can be noted that the figures are outlined. This is not something particular to this painting since it also appears in all of Blake's illustrations - another example could be plate 25, to mention just one-. These techniques have a lot to do with the influences of engraving. However, it is also aroused from Blake's own theories and convictions. As Raine wrote, "line was, for Blake, above all an expression of energy. Every solid form can be seen as the imprint and the product of a flow of energy, and it is certain that Blake saw line as energy, as the signature of life" (1970: 109). Energy is necessary for the imagination and when contemplating the world through visions, one is capable of perceiving the energy in everything. The relevance of energy for Blake does not only appear in his illustrations, but also in the text. Wolfson

mentions the use of repetitions of rhythm, syntax and sound in order for Blake to give his verses a feeling of 'poetic energy' (2003: 64). This is an example from *Jerusalem*:

The land of darkness flamed but no light, & no repose:
The land of snows of trembling, & iron hail incessant:
The land of earthquakes: and the land of woven labyrinths:
The land of snares & traps & wheels & pitfalls & fire mills:
The Voids, the Solids, & the land of clouds & regions of waters. (13, 46-50)

This passage is built around the structure 'the land of', and in the two last verses there is also a repetition of the conjunction '&'. The commas and nexus give the passage a sense of rapidity, and thus, of energy. This is an example of how a poetic technique and a pictorial one serve the serve purpose in the Romantic Movement.

The decoration of plate 36, the one that has been described, also resemble Gothic art, especially medieval illuminated books, mostly due to the plants that surround the text and also because of the linear style. This was something present in Blake's work throughout his career since he was an admirer of Late Gothic and Medieval Style. The decoration of the pages of his books has a clear Gothic echo. This is most clearly present in the Introduction page of *Songs of Innocence*. He admired this style since it overflows spirituality and triggers religious zeal.

The intention of Gothic portrait-sculpture was not naturalistic, nor the reproduction of every detail and blemish of the physical form, but rather the expression of the essence of the spiritual tenant of the earthly body. (Raine 1970:18)

This is exactly what William Blake was looking to capture in his work. He believed that spiritual representation should dominate the physical one. Moreover, Blake believed that they represent a great and powerful era for England. Blake's emphasis on England

and his willingness to restore it to its former glory is presented metaphorically in the figures of Albion and Jerusalem. However, in plate 36 this is mentioned explicitly:

(I call them by their English names: English the rough basement
Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, writing against
Albions melancholy, who must else have been a Dub despair).

Gloucester and Exeter and Salisbury and Bristol: and benevolent Bath.

(58-61)

Being Albion a metaphor of England there is no other way to save him than by using the English language. Moreover, the English names that Blake chooses are not arbitrary since in those cities we find some of the most celebrated British Gothic Cathedrals. These Cathedrals, which are representations of spirituality are personalized in Blake poem. They appear as Albion's friends, thus, they take human form and behaviour. They are important since, due to the strength of their personality they are able to help Albion. This is an idea which appears in Blake's paintings, such as the one on Plate 32 of *Jerusalem* (Fig.11). Five human figures appear in here, one of which represents Westminster Abbey. The buildings can also be found in the side margins of the paintings. The human figures than represent St Paul's and Westminster show a highly spiritual expression. They support the characters of Jerusalem and Vala, which are decisive in helping Albion defeat Urizen. Once again, these figures are given power and relevance in the piece. Blake has two ways of celebrate England; on the one hand, he uses the English language for his poems; on the other hand, he pays tribute to what he believes to be England's most glorious and spiritual artistic spiritual representations, its Cathedrals and Abbeys. In addition, he gives them human attributes since for Blake, the most perfect entity was the human form. By making them human, Blake was representing what he considered to be the highest form of spirituality.

Blake's paintings and engravings differ from other Romantic painters due to the fact that painters such as Turner or Constable, depict mainly images of Nature. By contrast, Blake is more focused on portraying human figures. However, it can be claimed that all of them belong to the Romantic Movement since they were all concerned with the idea of the Sublime. While most of Romantic painters and poets found the Sublime in Nature, Blake attempted the Sublime 'in terms of the human form' (Raine, 1970: 115). This is related to the conclusion of *Jerusalem*, where Albion is finally saved with the help of Jesus and Los. Albion is finally able to find the spiritual way that leads him to salvation, free from the moral and natural laws of the material world. At the end of the poem, 'God and man are one, and everything on earth has become humanized' (Kiralis, 1956: 135). That is to say, Albion has reached the Sublime. Blake is guiding the reader to find their way to spiritual world and its vehicle must be the power of imagination. Therefore, the spiritual world can only be achieved at an individual level.

Although Blake may seem the most different poet and painter of the Romantic Movement, I have sought to highlight some Romantic aspects of his work. He emphasizes the individual but at the same time, he shows his concern for England. This vision is also nostalgic because he evokes some aspects of the past such as the Gothic Art. Besides, he found the Sublime in the human figure and, thus, he represented (both in his poetry and painting) abstract ideas as human forms. He achieved this through his visions that were loaded with energy. Consequently, the representation of energy is also crucial in his work and it can be noted both in his texts and images. Blake employed repetitions that gave the reader a sense of rapidity, but also he drew lines that symbolize energy and liveliness. Moreover, he saw himself as a misunderstood prophet, and, thus,

a unique artist. His focus on imagination and the Sublime unquestionable includes William Blake among the geniuses of the Romantic Movement.

Conclusions

The artists and poets that have been analyzed –William Wordsworth, John Constable, Lord Byron, William Turner and William Blake– share the idea that art is conceived and created directly from the poet’s imagination. They seek a subjective representation that results in the expression of their inner feelings which is at the core of the Romantic Movement. Moreover, the emphasis on individuality can also be noted in their interest in portraying themselves. Some of them, such as Constable, Wordsworth, Byron and Turner, represented their feelings through natural elements. By contrast, Blake embodies a visionary himself in his poems and paintings by relating himself to Los, a spiritual figure that embodies the power of imagination. As David Blayney Brown writes in *Romanticism*, Romantic artists ‘thought at least as much about what it meant to be an artist as they thought about art itself’ (2001: 19).

When it comes to the relation between Wordsworth and Constable, the themes that appear in their work are significant. They both depict scenes from common rural life in England. Nevertheless, they picture these scenes as something extraordinary, since they wanted to express more than a simple reproduction of Nature. As explained by Raymond Lister, “Wordsworth’s aim, like Constable’s, was to show the supernatural in the Natural” (1989: 111). These scenes from common life can be found, for instance, in paintings such as *The Haywain* or *Barges on the Stour*, or in Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Solitary Reaper’. Be that as it may, there is another aspect of these artists’ work that links them together. Both of them explored the idea of ‘emotion recollected in

tranquility' which consists in the remembrance of intense moments of inspiration, and look at them from a distant perspective. This is why Wordsworth's narrative point of view is usually far removed from his object of observation, which is often elusive and difficult to apprehend, while Constable's interest in topography is not incompatible with an abstract depiction of a location (stones, the Stonehenge ruins, barges, huts) that is blurred or faded away.

Nature also plays an important role in Byron and Turner's art. Albeit theirs displays a different personality from the one depicted by Wordsworth and Constable. Most of the natural elements found in Byron and Turner are defined by their turbulence. As we have seen earlier, Turner's sign of self-identity are turbulent skies, the agitated and changing mood that is the seal of a rebellious and unique artist and is different from the spiritual and political breath of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. As to their melancholic vision of the world, David Blayney Brown writes that 'Turner could have assimilated Byron's later view of nature, the darker and more pessimistic vision of the unpredictable and irrational' (1992: 62). Turner was inspired by Byron's poetry, and some of his paintings bear a title pointing at Byron's work, especially his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

Last but not least, the case of William Blake is beyond compare, since he was at the same time a brilliant poet and painter. This allowed him to use both aspects of his work in a way that complemented each other. His work is completely understood when regarded as a whole, taking into account the connection between images and poetry. Blake's works are also filled with his own subjectivity and imagination. He considered that imagination was necessary so as to shape and sharpen the artist's vision. "It is his gift of communicating his vision, rather than his technical accomplishment [...], that entitled Blake to so high a place" (Raine, 1970: 8). Moreover, he believed that energy

was necessary in order to keep imagination running. Therefore, he uses marked curved and straight lines in his paintings, as well as repetitions of rhythm, anacoluthon and consonant alliteration in his poetry, in order to provide his work with an intense energetic quality that appeals to the visionary mind –here ‘visionary’ understood as capable of forming mental images. Another aspect that distinguishes Blake is his search of the sublime in the human form rather than in the natural world. For Blake, the spiritual world was accessed through each person’s spirituality and not in the contemplation of Nature.

Considering all of the above, we can approach the aesthetics of Romanticism beyond its tropes and thematic representations to embrace its actual craftsmanship: that of the artistic language when the powers of imagination are in charge. The language of Romantic poets and painters is not yet fully abstract, but it experiments with forms of portrayal that are non-representational in essence. Hence, and taking my discussion one step further, the connections between Romanticism and Modernism are not only to be found in the cult of the individual artist, but also in the methods and modes in which the artistic vision is actually rendered on a canvas and on paper. For Alexandra Harris and her provocative book *Romantic Moderns*, Romanticism is a form of Modernism and the other way round by dint of its “lure of abstraction” (2010: 15). Whether this abstraction is called ‘imagination’ or ‘avant-garde’, the aim in both cases is to reach the Sublime (or its Ideal and the Spleen, as in the case of Goya’s black paintings) through a further liberation of linguistic and pictorial codes. As Paul de Man in his *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* argues, even when Wordsworth attempts to provide an autobiographical account in his *Prelude*, the borders between the genres of poetry, prose and fiction are blurred.

These ideas were revolutionary and meant a revolution for the world of arts. The legacy of the Romantic Movement is still relevant today. An example of this is the figure of the true artist that, since then, has been of a free spirit whose originality is misunderstood. Furthermore, the study of landscape would remain important later on. An example of this would be the Impressionist painters that would take the reflection of their own subjectivity into the landscape to the ultimate expression. In Brown's words: "the works themselves are rather referential, [and] the great concerns of Romantic artists are still ours today - the artist's vocation, the past and its art, nature and life, its sufferings and its end" (2001: 424).

Appendix



John Constable

Figure 1. **Barges on the Stour with Dedham Church in the Distance** 1811

Oil on paper laid on canvas

26 x 31.1 cm

Victoria and Albert Museum, London



John Constable
 Figure 2. **The Haywain** 1821
 Oil on canvas
 130.2 x 185.4 cm
The National Gallery, London



John Constable
 Figure 3. **Stonehenge** 1835
 Watercolour on black chalk
 16'8 x 24'9 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London



John Constable
Figure 4. **Sketch for 'Hadleigh Castle'** 1829
Oil on canvas
122.6 x 167.3 cm
Tate Collection



J.M.W. Turner
Figure 5. **The Field of Waterloo** 1818
Oil on canvas
147.3 x 238.8 cm
Tate Collection



J.M.W. Turner
 Figure 6. **The Fifth Plague of Egypt** 1800
 Oil paint on canvas
 124.4 x 183 cm
Indianapolis Museum of Art



J.M.W. Turner
 Figure 7. **Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey** 1829
 Oil on canvas
 132.5 x 203 cm
The National Gallery, London



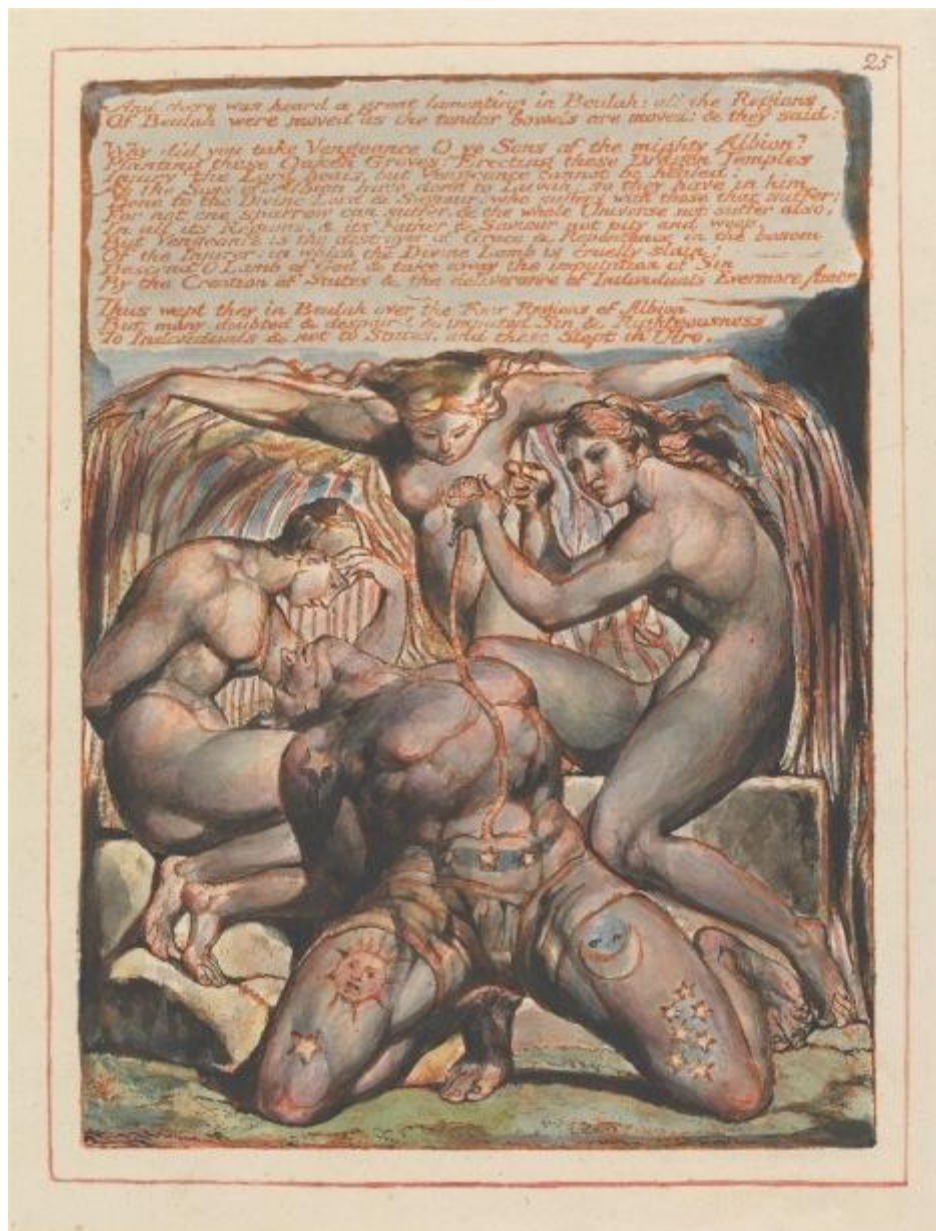
J.M.W. Turner

Figure 8. **Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps** 1812

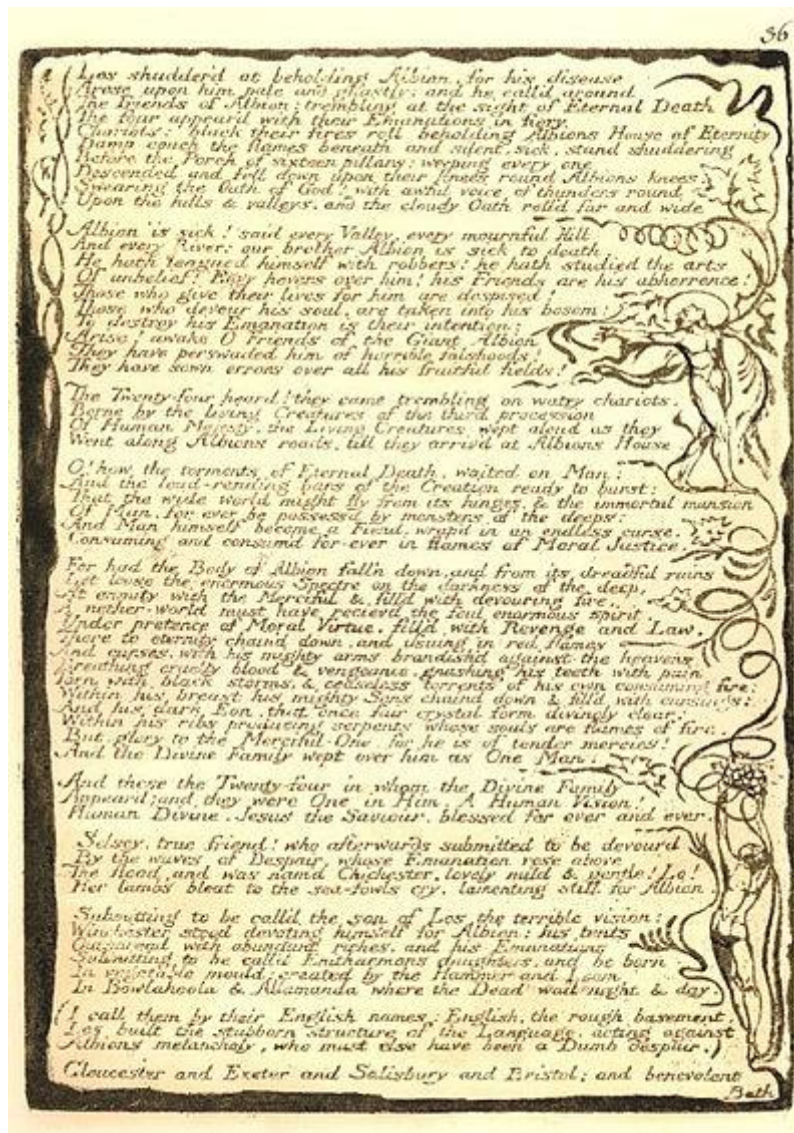
Oil on canvas

146 x 237.5 cm

Tate Collection



William Blake
Figure 9. **Jerusalem: Plate 25, Albion and his Tormentors** 1804-20
Copy E
Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



William Blake
 Figure 10. **Jerusalem: Plate 36** 1804-20
 Copy A
 British Museum, Dept. of Prints and Drawings



William Blake

Figure 11. **Jerusalem: Plate 32** 1804-20

Copy E

Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

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