

SECRET EXCHANGES

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OF CENTRETRUTHS DIGITAL MEDIA

CDM Prose

This edition of *Secret Exchanges* first published 2012 and republished with revisions 2022 by Centretruths Digital Media

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ISBN: 978-1-4466-4497-3

CHAPTER ONE

He was so very pleased to be sitting in such close proximity to the paintings he had specifically brought Gwendolyn Evans along to the Tate Gallery to view; to have them all around him in a dazzling profusion of light and colour.

Yes, it was fundamentally here, with these largely abstract-looking canvases, that modern art began. Here, with *Peace, Burial at Sea; Norham Castle, Sunrise; Mountain Scene with Lake and Hut; Mountain in Landscape;* and *Sunrise with a Boat between Headlands*, all painted between 1835–40 in a manner which, to Turner's contemporaries, could hardly have been expected to win widespread understanding, let alone critical adulation! Yet here they were, exhibited on the wall in front of Matthew Pearce, painter and sculptor, together with his latest girlfriend, who had never seen them before. Here for the eye to behold was the revolutionary break with tradition which, not altogether surprisingly, had caused such a scandal in Turner's day, obliging the great painter to keep so much of his later work largely to and for himself. In these and similar paintings, matter had been broken down, virtually erased from the canvas in order that light and colour could come shining out of it with a brilliance and importance scarcely dreamed of by earlier painters. Here form, if and where it still existed, had been subordinated to content, the material displaced by the spiritual, and the resulting impression was so nebulous ... that one might have taken it for pure abstraction – devoid of the even slightest reference to external reality. No artist before Turner had dared to be so biased on the side of the spirit. More exactly, no artist before Turner could have conceived of the possibility or legitimacy of being so spiritually biased, especially prior to the nineteenth century. It wouldn't have been relevant to the age, an age, at least from approximately the 14–18th centuries, of what Spengler would have called 'great art', or art that reflected Western man in his egocentric prime – balanced, in varying degrees, between his subconscious and superconscious minds in the ego at its dualistic height. Torn between the sensual and the spiritual, the mundane and the transcendent.

Around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular, when Western man was in full-flower, there could not have been the slightest possibility of an art arising which betrayed a distinct predilection for the spirit – for light and colour over form and substance. Had, by any quirk of evolutionary fate, something approximating to a late Turner been produced then, it would have struck people as a mess, not art but rather something akin to an artist's palette – one that had taken a number of diverse paints and suffered them to be experimentally blended. With the nineteenth century, however, a great change came over the Western mind, a change initiated by the Industrial Revolution, itself a product in part of the Napoleonic Wars, and the subsequent growth of towns and cities to a size quite unprecedented in the entire history of mankind. No longer was civilized man finely balanced between the sensual and the spiritual, the subconscious and the superconscious minds, but in the process of becoming increasingly biased on the side of the transcendent – in short, to whatever reflected his growing isolation from nature in the artificial urban and industrial environments he had created for himself in response to evolutionary necessity. From the nineteenth century, it was becoming increasingly evident that Western man had passed his prime as an egocentric being, a recipient of dualistic tension, and accordingly entered a post-egocentric epoch of transcendental lopsidedness, in which the influence of the superconscious came to play an ever-more decisive role in shaping his destiny. Hence Turner's late canvases, which reflected the imbalance that was characterizing modern man. And hence, too, their great importance and significance to such eyes as could be expected, at this more evolved juncture in post-egocentric time, to appreciate them – a greater number of minds, it should be evident, than would have done so shortly after they were first painted.

Yet, despite the eulogistic comments which Matthew Pearce was making on behalf of the half-dozen or so brightly painted canvases in front of him, Gwen's eyes weren't all that appreciative, her mind remaining rather unmoved by them, even though, thanks in large measure to the esoteric information being imparted to her by Matthew with regards to the general direction of human evolution, she was now in a better position than ever before to understand them. Had she been honest with her boyfriend, instead of trying to please him by feigning enthusiasm for the works, she would have confessed, then and there, to the sad fact that a majority of the paintings on display in this particular section of the Turner bequest left her

stone cold, absolutely failed, for one reason or another, to interest her. But from feminine tact, which embraced a certain fear of what Matthew would think of her if she disappointed him in this way, she did her best to appear sympathetic, to share his unquestionable admiration for those exhibits upon which he specifically chose to comment.

However, it was far from easy! For even with the best will in the world, she couldn't bring herself to view paintings like *Mountain in Landscape* and *Sunrise with a Boat between Headlands* through the same pair of eyes as him. To her, they seemed a mess. Too indistinct to be worth taking seriously. There was the suggestion of a certain scrappiness about them which violently conflicted with her own classical predilection for neat, clear, well-defined works, such as she had seen in some of the other rooms. One might have thought the artist had gone mad, lost contact with reality to the extent of being incapable of reproducing coherent forms, so vague was the resultant impression! Such, at any rate, was how she secretly felt at the sight of the more abstract-looking paintings, not least those which she had seen in the previous room – like, for example, *Scene in Venice* and *Venice from the Salute*, which had been painted 1840–45. And partly because of this subjective doubt concerning Turner's sanity, she found herself incapable of entering into the spirit of the paintings, unwilling to commit herself to an enthusiastic acceptance of them from fear that she might compromise her aesthetic integrity and become reduced, in her own estimation, to the unenviable level of a bigoted crank. With one part of her mind she remained defiantly aloof, self-consciously superior to what she saw all around her, while with the other part she played along with Matthew, responding to various of his pronouncements with an appropriately complaisant nod, smile, or gentle grunt – a policy she was subsequently obliged to adopt as much for exhibits like *Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge*; *Yacht Approaching the Coast*; *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – the Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, which were hung on the large picture support at right-angles to the wall in front of which they had been sitting, as for exhibits like *Sun Setting over a Lake*; *Stormy Sea with Dolphins*; and *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water*, and going by the *Lead* on the opposite wall, the extended title of which both baffled and privately amused her.

Not that Matthew Pearce was unduly garrulous or imposing, and therefore

necessitated one's constant attention on his conversation. Yet he was certainly not a man to allow himself to be led from painting to painting at a rate corresponding to the disinterestedness of his partner! On the contrary, standing or sitting in front of a Turner from 3–5 minutes, as he devotedly did in a number of instances, it was obligatory for her to fix her attention on the relevant painting for a corresponding period of time, even when it wasn't of any particular interest to her. A sign of impatience would almost certainly have offended him, a cursory inspection of the other occupants of the room no less than a tendency to flit from one painting to another independently of his guidance and running commentary. Feminine tact was enough to tell her this – now no less than previously!

Yet it wasn't enough to tell her that, after a couple of minutes' silent inspection of *Stormy Sea with Dolphins*, Matthew would suddenly change mental tack and, for the first time since setting eyes on the Turners, launch out on a swift stream of criticism concerning the manifest turbulence of the scene portrayed, which he considered the worst aspect of Romanticism and therefore the one he could least abide. For, to his way of thinking, the turbulent was by nature Satanic, opposed to evolutionary progress towards blissful passivity, and, for that reason, something to be roundly condemned. "God knows," he continued, speaking in a fairly quiet though firm tone-of-voice, "Delacroix and Gericault were worse offenders against the peace surpassing all understanding than ever Turner was! Yet that doesn't mean to say that he wasn't guilty, from time to time, of following suit and producing works which, in their Romantic turbulence, correspond to the demonic. That and the one next to it, *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth ... etc., etc.*, are typically Romantic in this respect. They seethe with negativity, with horribly tortuous activity. Not my favourite Turner, by any means!"

He broke away from the canvas in question, as though from an evil spell, and briskly led Gwen towards the next room, which contained works by other English painters. He looked quite stylish in his tight black denims and puffy zipper-jacket, stylish enough, at any rate, to attract the passing attention of two young women, who caused Gwen to look at him from a broadly personal perspective herself and reflect upon his tidy, if informal, and not entirely relevant appearance. His dark-brown hair, gathered into a short ponytail that gently curved down from the back of his head to his neck, had been washed only the night before and looked perfectly docile.

With his aquiline profile and large blue eyes, he was certainly more handsome than the previous men in her life, which was of some consolation. He was also more intelligent, though not perhaps more highly-sexed. As yet, it was still too soon for her to get him into proper sexual focus, since she hadn't known him long enough. But time would doubtless tell, and thus enable her to extend her assessment of him to such matters as were of specific importance to her as a woman, not simply as an intellectual.

Before entering the next room, however, Matthew halted near the exist in front of one last Turner, a relatively small work entitled *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, for which he confessed a special fondness, deeming it one of the master's most spiritually noble productions – a shedder of dazzling light.

"Admittedly, not one of his most abstract-tending works," he softly remarked. "Yet the whole concept of angelic transcendence and light is really too beautiful. Not altogether surprisingly, it was one of his last works, dated 1846. I can't help but admire its mystical symbolism. It is virtually an epitome of the coming Post-human Millennium, of man become superman, or angelic being, surrounded by spiritual light in blissful self-realization. For, of course, the essential light of the Post-human Millennium won't be the sun, though that will doubtless continue to exist in cosmic selflessness for some time thereafter, but the light of ,,,"