

# THE PRINT IN ENGLAND

1790 – 1930

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# Art and Genius: Printmaking in Early Nineteenth-Century England

In the early nineteenth century printmaking was at a crisis of its history. The significance of that crisis is partly retrospective: photography was on the point of being invented and was about to redefine permanently the role of the printmaker in society. But even as the experiments of Daguerre and Fox Talbot were developing the first shadowy 'photogenic drawings' from the old principle of the camera obscura, the professional engravers were asserting their place in the world with a new aggressiveness. In 1836 they submitted a Petition to the House of Commons drawing attention to what they considered was an unacceptable bias against them on the part of their fellow artists. The House referred the matter to a Select Committee, which heard the depositions of a group of leading practitioners who put their case with all the vehemence of wounded professional pride. In particular, they resented the attitude of the Royal Academy, which since its foundation in 1768 had relegated engravers to a rank inferior to painters, sculptors, architects, even, they claimed, to flower-painters and wax-modellers. For unlike all those classes of artist they were not permitted to aspire to the rank of full Academician: six Associate members of the Academy might be engravers, anything more or higher was out of the question. In short, engraving was placed 'in a state of vassalage in relation to every other branch of fine art'.<sup>1</sup>

These discontents, of course, had been rankling for some time. They had already been forcibly expressed in 1806 when John Landseer, father of the animal-painter and himself a distinguished engraver, gave a series of lectures to the Royal Institution in which he attempted to remedy the fact that 'there is no regular history extant in any language' of 'the most commercial of the arts of embellishment'.<sup>2</sup> He attacked the Academy for its treatment of engravers, and was so outspoken against Alderman Boydell, the promulgator of the famous 'Shakspeare Gallery' (which had in fact patronised painters and engravers alike) that his lecture series was abruptly terminated. This did not prevent him from publishing it, with some acrimonious observations on the whole affair. In 1810, the Academician Joseph Farington mentioned in his Diary that Landseer's mind was 'full of consideration of a Plan for forming a Society & Academy of Engravers, patronised by the Duke of Gloucester, Lord Dartmouth, &c'.<sup>3</sup> The profession was up in arms.

The Select Committee of 1835 naturally enquired into the claims the engravers made for their calling, and received passionately argued replies pointing out the commercial advantages of the international print market and the cultural benefits of widely disseminated works of art. The engravers complained that 'the public consider engravers only as a set of ingenious mechanics, which is not the fact'.<sup>4</sup> One of the petitioners, John Pye, described with lyrical fervour the creative significance of his medium, the line-engraving: 'The best plates engraved now appear to me as being free translations from pictures, instead of being cold rigid copies. They are entirely so as to effect – that being the quality by which the English school is distinguished, whether we speak of painting or engraving. The painter produces his pictures by the aid of forms, lights and shadows, and varieties of warm and cold colours. The engraver copies the compositions of the painter, and produces his effect, aided merely by different strengths of tints and gradations of black and white – and the most successful engravers often produce effects, with this very limited means, which fill the minds of the spectators with a consciousness of the magnitude and great pleasurable varieties of nature (with very few exceptions) beyond any thing formerly done.'<sup>5</sup> John Landseer, in one of his lectures, had gone further, pointing out with

characteristic trenchancy: 'Engraving is no more an art of copying Painting, than the English language is an art of copying Greek or Latin.'<sup>6</sup> And another writer, discussing the subject of engraving in 1824, could assert that: 'The judicious taste of a master of the calcographic art, substitutes so rich and brilliant a chiaroscuro, or rather abstracts it from the original which he copies, with so new and superior a perception, that a fine impression from a plate, wrought with consummate skill, possesses that peculiar and intrinsic merit which renders it a new work, and a valuable piece of art.'<sup>7</sup>

There was, then, a head-on collision between those who defined engraving as a mere reproductive process and those for whom it was a creative art form in its own right, regardless of whether it was nominally 'copying' another work. The quarrel was symptomatic of the age: the new, Romantic emphasis on the artist as an inspired and revered benefactor of humanity – an emphasis by then firmly institutionalised in England in the Royal Academy and the two watercolour societies that had sprung up in the first decade of the century – put creativity at a premium. Hack copying was nowhere. Yet the engravers were making a valid point; or rather, several. First, as we have seen, they could claim that the reproductive line-engraving had been brought to such a pitch of technical excellence that on grounds of virtuosity alone its practitioners deserved a place on the contemporary Parnassus (and virtuosity was a genuine Romantic virtue, as witness Paganini, Chopin, Bonington or Turner). They could look back, indeed, on a period only recently past when it had been possible to say that 'The Art of Engraving was never more encouraged than in the present day, especially in England, where almost every man of taste is in some degree a collector of prints.'<sup>8</sup> They could equally claim (and did) that engraving had from the beginning been a medium of expression favoured by the greatest artists. Sir Robert Strange, that eighteenth-century virtuoso of the burin who had seemed to open new perspectives to his profession by attaining a knighthood, asserted that: 'All the great painters adopted [engraving] with a view to multiplying their works, and of transmitting them, with greater certainty, to posterity. Albert Dürer and Andrea Mantegna, two of the greatest painters of that age, practised the art of engraving, and have left us a variety of elegant compositions.'<sup>9</sup> This argument, of course, complicates the debate. If an artist makes prints reproducing his own work, they must be more authentically 'original' than the 'copies' of another engraver. If the artist uses printmaking techniques to create entirely fresh images, then the print – engraving, etching or woodcut – is as much a medium of creative expression as pen or chalk drawing. Dürer and Mantegna both engraved their own original subjects, as did Rembrandt in his etchings; if there was any overlap with ideas expressed in other media, that was only the more interesting. For the English engravers, it was Hogarth who had resolved the difficulty by becoming his own commercial engraver, and even causing to be passed the Copyright Act of 1735 whereby trade in pirated prints was curtailed. Hard on Hogarth's heels followed Reynolds, with his large school of carefully supervised mezzotinters, reproductive engravers who acquired something of the status of creative artists by virtue of their closeness to the master himself. Such arrangements made the precise position of the engraver vis-à-vis the work of art, the artist, and the public increasingly hard to plot, and the natural inertia of the established order became more and more at odds with the Romantic ambitions of the printmakers.

A further complication of the matter was the new multiplicity of technical processes with which the early nineteenth-century artist

found himself arrayed. The classic skills of line-engraving – still in 1836 regarded as the highest and best medium for the printmaker – and mezzotint, which had swept England in the eighteenth century as an efficient and relatively speedy method of reproducing paintings, especially portraits, were no longer alone in the field. William Blake's experiments in the 1790s with a stereotype plate, which he characteristically claimed to have been explained to him in a vision, is a significant instance of a thoroughly professional engraver responding to the climate of change. Woodcutting had always been a crude popular medium in England and was at a low ebb in the eighteenth century, but Horace Walpole, introducing his *Catalogue of Engravers, who have been born or resided in England* (2nd edition, 1786), pointed to the Frenchman Jean Michel Papillon's *Traité* of 1766 on the subject of wood-engraving as an example to 'make editors ashamed of the slovenly stamps that are now used for the fairest editions'.<sup>10</sup> His dissatisfaction proved prophetic; for towards the end of the century Thomas Bewick was to introduce the art of engraving on the end-grain of the wood and bring it to a perfection that gave it currency for 70 years or more. It brought what was virtually a new medium to the illustration of books. Likewise, aquatint, again developed in France in the 1760s, reached England in the 1770s and rapidly established itself as the natural way to reproduce drawings with tonal washes, and, by extension, watercolours. It replaced the elaborate and costly mezzotint-based systems of colour reproduction evolved by J. C. Le Blon and Ploos van Amstel, which had never found widespread application; its heyday coincided with that of the picturesque tour, illustrated by watercolourists whose work could be produced almost in facsimile by the sophisticated colour aquatint process that had been developed by 1800. It was usually combined with an etched outline, corresponding to the fine penwork of a drawing; but some artists, notably Gainsborough and John Robert Cozens, also employed the equally new soft-ground etching technique, which gave a more delicate, broken line, similar to that of the pencil. The supreme examples of soft-ground etching are the series of panoramic views of Paris that Thomas Girtin executed in the last year of his life. He enhanced some impressions of these with subtle grey washes, but after his death the set was issued as a series of aquatints by F. C. Lewis and others. Both soft-ground and aquatint were to be superseded by lithography during the course of the next few decades.

Lithography was undoubtedly the most revolutionary of the innovations of the period. Neither an intaglio process like engraving and etching nor a relief process like the woodcut, it enabled the designer to draw directly onto a prepared stone surface and produce an exact (though reversed) replica of his drawing. After some years of gestation in Germany in the 1790s, it was patented in London in 1801 by Alois Senefelder, who is usually credited with its invention, and the patent passed in the same year to Johann Anton André, a music publisher. As an early historian noted, it was 'at first confined to coarse works, and principally to the printing of music'.<sup>11</sup> But under the name of 'Polyautography' it was quickly taken up by serious artists, and as early as 1801 the President of the Royal Academy himself, Benjamin West, had made a drawing in chalk on stone, though it was not until 1803 that a series of *Specimens of Polyautography* was published, including the work of a number of prominent draughtsmen and painters. Between 1803 and 1807 André and his successor G. J. Vollweiler issued a total of 36 prints by, among others, West and his son Raphael Lamar, Thomas Stothard, Henry Fuseli, James Barry, William Havell, Henry Singleton, Paul Sandby Munn and Robert Kerr Porter: historical painters, landscape painters, illustrators, senior Academicians, young hopefuls and amateurs, all alike demonstrated the versatility of the new process.

At this stage the criteria by which lithography was judged were those of the existing print processes. It was acknowledged to be capable of great fidelity to the artist's drawing, to give 'proofs of the accuracy, distinctness, and minuteness with which the steel pen may be used'; but the ultimate accolade bestowed by one of its

proponents was that a certain print of a shepherd boy was 'for minuteness nearly equal to the etchings of Hollar'.<sup>12</sup> John Landseer, anxious to defend line-engraving against the new invention, seized on the aptitude of lithography for rendering drawing techniques as its great limitation: 'it is *not* the painter's sketches, that it is most desirable to multiply, but his *finished performances*'.<sup>13</sup> The traditional conception of the print, as moulded by centuries of familiarity with the products of the copper-plate, remained the touchstone, and the rapid erosion of those old notions was a circumstance that lent much of the dynamism of dialectic to the period. Line-engraving itself underwent profound changes. It had already in the mid eighteenth century been radically modified towards greater flexibility and expressive range by the innovations of William Woollett, who, in plates like his famous 'translation' of Richard Wilson's *Niobe*, 1761, combined engraving with etching and repeated bitings with acid to overcome the inherent hardness and dryness of conventional, Continental line-engraving, and so was a pioneer of the new 'creative', and recognisably British, school of engravers who belong to the Romantic movement.

Woollett's ideas were taken still further by William Sharp, the doyen of the historical line-engravers, to whom the nineteenth-century practitioners looked back with particular reverence. Sharp not only made use of engraving and etching in combination but also borrowed the technique of stippling, which was widely used in the later eighteenth century for fancy or sentimental subjects: building up its images by means of a multitude of tiny dots, it avoided the hard linear quality of true engraving and achieved a softness and delicacy that was considered particularly appropriate to the rendering of disconsolate lovers and pretty children. The most famous exponent of this 'chalk manner' was the Italian Francesco Bartolozzi, whose admission as a full Academician on the slender excuse that he also painted was a cause of special annoyance to the ambitious and patriotic engravers of the next generation.

They, in their zeal to advance their medium, were as technically audacious and experimental as the Romantic watercolourists were in theirs. Their large mixed-media plates, incorporating line, stipple, etching and mezzotint,<sup>14</sup> are *tours de force* which go beyond anything that Woollett and Sharp had done, and which, it must be said, are often a great deal more interesting than the fashionable pictures from which they are taken. And herein lies the last of the engravers' dilemmas: they were inevitably dependent on the level of invention supplied by the painter, and the problem of judging their merits is frequently clouded by the dullness or bombast of their models. But we may usually presume that an engraver admired the work he was reproducing. The early nineteenth century is scattered with evidence of close relationships between artists and engravers prolonging and amplifying the principle established by Reynolds with his army of mezzotinters. Indeed, the creative intimacy between artists and engravers was perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for revising the engravers' status; yet it is odd that it is never mentioned in the depositions of the engravers themselves; nor, apparently, did the Academicians who made such use of them often think of pleading their cause.<sup>15</sup>

There were, perhaps, as many quarrels as happy unions. Both Turner and Constable engaged in bitter disputes with their engravers: Constable seems to have driven his mezzotinter David Lucas to drink and an early grave;<sup>16</sup> Turner had stormy relations with Charles Turner, the mezzotinter of the *Liber Studiorum*, and with George Cooke, the engraver and publisher of, among other works, the *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*. Nevertheless, both Constable and Turner stand as paradigms of the fulfilled marriage of painter and engraver. Constable used only Lucas; Turner a host of engravers in both line and mezzotint (only one lithograph was made from his design in his lifetime). These men were subjected to a course of training which coincided with their work on Turner's plates; his instructions, criticisms and advice, often scribbled at length on the progress proofs they had to

send to him wherever he happened to be, are a sequence of lessons that must have inculcated sensibility into the most obtuse hack; and, on the whole, Turner made sure that his engravers were not such. Both John Landseer and John Pye worked for him. They and their colleagues learnt to 'abstract' a 'rich and brilliant chiar-oscuro' from the most testing of all originals – those condensed essays in pure colour which Turner submitted as designs for picturesque views and illustrations to poetry in the 1820s and 1830s. Turner's use of colour in his work for the engravers is so personal and uncompromising that it prompts the suggestion that he neither knew nor cared how the engraver's 'translation' was to occur. Yet he, of all artists, demonstrates perfectly the gamut of the relationship between painter and printmaker. The long series of plates for the *Liber Studiorum*, which comprehend in the history of their execution at least four techniques – etching, aquatint, soft-ground and mezzotint – were some of them the product of Turner's supervising a professional team of etcher and mezzotinter, some of a collaboration between artist and engraver, and some of the unassisted work of the artist alone. As the series proceeded, Turner seems to have become more and more involved with mezzotint, and having begun as the etcher of some of the outlines concluded as the mezzotinter of whole plates; adding the postscript of a dozen unpublished and unusually intimate mezzotints known as the 'Little Liber'. This progression, coinciding as it does with the evolution of Turner's most idiosyncratic work as an illustrator, takes on the significance of a long-drawn-out dissertation on the relationship of colour to black-and-white. As his use of colour moved toward the saturated, obviating the old systems of chiaroscuro which relied on the tonal range between black and white, so he became more conscious of the expressive value of black and white in themselves. Hence his almost simultaneous realisation that he could design in pure colour for the engraver, and that he could, conversely, construct chromatically complete subjects in black and white. This profound idea, embodied as it is in a large group of works at the core of Turner's output, expands to comprehend the large mezzotints made after his pictures by Quilley, F. C. Lewis and Thomas Lupton, and the large line-engravings after individual landscapes that he supervised in the 1830s and 1840s. And it includes more still: we shall find that the period of the early nineteenth century (Turner's mature lifetime) is in its art largely an enactment of this idea, which is itself the aesthetic embodiment of the struggle between painters and engravers.

An equally striking, though very different, manifestation of the issue is to be found in the art of John Sell Cotman, in many ways the most extraordinary colourist of the age. As a watercolourist he moved from a youth of subdued, subtle harmonies of tertiary hues to a maturity of vivid primaries, as boldly saturated as any of Turner's, and organised with a corresponding boldness that gives them much greater pictorial force than Turner's more atmospherically controlled palette. For Cotman, strong colour found a necessary concomitant in clear, precise outline: despite their chromatic brilliance, his designs are inconceivable apart from their idiosyncratic, expressively counterpointed linear structures. To draw such outlines was to imply the colour masses contained within them; hence, just as Turner could eliminate colour to produce mezzotints in which black and white are, effectively, colours, so Cotman could make etchings which, in their clear, exquisitely articulated outlines, express the colour of the world they so precisely describe. Most of Cotman's etchings, notably those he made for his series of studies of the *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy*, 1819-22, dispense very largely with tight hatching and the other means whereby etchers establish tone; for tone is superfluous to Cotman's patterns of implied colour. Such hatching as there is usually conveys textural rather than tonal contrast. To verify this intuition of colour in Cotman's etchings we need only turn to the equally economical use of outline in the work of the engravers (notably the Italian Tommaso Piroli) who worked on John Flaxman's neo-classical illustrations to Homer, Aeschylus and Dante, or the more Gothic, German-inspired outlines after H. C. Selous, Daniel Maclise, William Bell Scott and Noel Paton,

published in the 1840s and 1850s by the Art Union of London. All these works were produced under the inspiration of an art-historical theory of design, derived either from classic Greek sculpture or from Italian medieval and renaissance engraving and painting; in them the 'distinct, sharp and wirey' 'bounding line', as Blake calls it,<sup>17</sup> absorbs all the significance of the image into itself rather than diffusing its implications of colour and texture throughout the subject.

The theme recurs in Constable's approach to the print; but, again, a very different facet of the idea presents itself. Constable used the term 'chiaroscuro' in the title of his published set of mezzotints, as he revised it in 1833 in the interest of explicitness: his 'Various Subjects of Landscape characteristic of English Scenery' were 'principally intended to mark the phenomena of the Chiaroscuro of Nature'. Constable seems to want us to see nature from the outset as a gamut of monochrome, from black to white; yet he supplied Lucas, not with monochrome drawings and sketches, but with coloured studies and finished paintings. It is the sparkle of natural light and shade as recorded there that Lucas renders into mezzotint. And it can be argued that Lucas' work, dragged painfully out of him by a fretful and vacillating Constable, constitutes the apogee of the mezzotint as a translation of oil painting: the very gusto of Constable's brush is caught and rendered by Lucas' burnishing tool, the airy impressionism of his spontaneous handling marvellously conveyed in brilliant flickerings of black and white.

Even though painter and printmaker were two individuals, and working, often enough, under conditions of much personal friction, the *English Landscape Scenery* exemplifies the elevation of engraver to partnership with the artist, and the achievement of prints which have the creative status of original works of art. The chemistry by which this occurred is hard to analyse. Lucas' virtuosity played no small part in it; his willingness to do what Constable demanded was always tempered by that. It was a partnership in which two very different kinds of mastery fused and bore fruit. 'We have a bond of friendship', Constable wrote to Lucas, '... in the lovely amalgamation of our works'. The implication here is that the print is not so much subservient to the painting as a logical and necessary extension, indeed a fulfilment of it. The period offers even more startling examples of the process. After Turner and Lucas, the outstanding mezzotinter of the time is John Martin, whose series of 24 illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, commissioned by Septimus Prowett, appeared in 1825-7, precisely the moment when Turner was working on the 'Little Liber', and a year or two before the inception of *English Landscape Scenery*. This was one of Martin's earliest essays in the medium and it launched him on a successful career as a publisher of his own paintings, à la Hogarth, with whom his contemporaries were coupling him by 1831.<sup>18</sup>

But whereas Hogarth, for all the energy and idiosyncrasy of his line-engravings, never thought of them otherwise than as reproductions of his pictures, Martin, belonging as he did to the Romantic generation, brought a new sense of the self-sufficiency of the print. In preparation for his *Paradise Lost* he made a whole set of oil sketches; not because he had it in mind to execute the series in oil as well, but because the prints were from the outset conceived as independent works, alternatives to, and not substitutes for, paintings. Having seen Turner's and Constable's approach to the same question we can, perhaps, understand Martin's methods more clearly. As one commentator has remarked, 'in aesthetic terms each print represented an advance on the painted master-work'.<sup>19</sup> And for Martin's characteristic subject matter, the mezzotint does appear to be the ideal medium. The 'sublime darkness' of his apocalyptic subjects is better expressed by the dense burr of mezzotint than by anything else, and he took to it with a greater conviction than he ever succeeded in bringing to his paintings, which are tawdry and crude in comparison. The glow and shimmer of distant lights in the vast nothingness of hell or chaos is evoked in his prints with a visionary force that makes him a

central figure of the age, even though his work in oil is often laughable. He demonstrated graphically, if unintentionally, that a print could actually be more serious, more powerful than a painting.

He proved, too, that a painter might find the print a more lucrative source of income than large and sometimes unsaleable pictures. Even the successful Turner did conspicuously well out of many of his projects for engraving, though often his engravers earned more for each plate than he did for his designs: Martin made over £20,000 from the mezzotints he issued between 1826 and 1840.<sup>20</sup> The market was expanding rapidly; the middle classes, who had since Hogarth's time been the main purchasers of prints, were by the early nineteenth century a very large and increasingly well-informed sector of the population. Engravers were greatly helped to meet the new demand by the development of soft steel plates in about 1822, largely at the hands of Thomas Lupton, one of Turner's favourite mezzotinters. The steel permitted much longer runs than copper and effectively gave engraving the new lease of commercial viability that it needed to sustain competition with the lithography, chromolithography and photography which all gradually overtook it in the course of the century.

The search for a market was, clearly, an important factor in bringing at least some painters to the print. Hogarth, Turner, Constable and Martin all in their different ways felt the pressure. Nevertheless there was a contrary pull: James Ward, for example, began his career as a very successful mezzotinter after other artists, notably his brother-in-law George Morland, and Hoppner, but could never reconcile himself to remaining a big fish in so lowly a pond. He and his ambition came into direct collision with the official Academy policy on engraving:

The question was whether I should come forward as a painter or engraver. I enquired if I became an associate engraver first, I could then change that and become an Academician. The reply was 'certainly not', I must withdraw and be elected associate painter.

Hoppner tried to persuade him to enter the Academy as an engraver and 'make a fortune', but Ward replied: 'Does Hoppner say that I cannot climb up to the painters? Then I'll try.'<sup>21</sup>

When Ward did try, he fell under the spell of Rubens' great picture of the *Chateau de Steen* and painted his large *Fighting Bulls at St Donat's Castle*, which some of his colleagues considered a great improvement on his original. 'You have thrown the gauntlet at Rubens, and you have beaten him', said Henry Tresham. But the King, George III, was more realistic. 'How! How! How! Mr. Ward, how is this', he spluttered, 'That you, so fine an engraver, should turn painter, and landscape painter too. Why, I am sure that it cannot pay you as well as engraving?' To which Ward replied, on behalf of many of his more ambitious contemporaries: 'An please your Majesty, I engrave to live and I paint for the pleasure of the art.'<sup>22</sup>

Such aspiration could not be content, of course, with fighting bulls or any of the cattle with which Ward had by 1807 made a name. The hierarchy of aesthetic importance penetrated even the byways of animal-painting: Henry Bernard Chalon taunted 'Ward can paint rustic horses, but can no more paint blood horses than my boot.' We are told that Ward 'never forgot nor wholly forgave' this jibe.<sup>23</sup> He proved that he could indeed paint blood horses, and went on to execute a commission for a large allegory of Wellington's triumph at Waterloo. This was his undoing, and its exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in 1822 was a failure. Much reduced in reputation and circumstances, he turned once more to printmaking, and in 1823-4 produced a set of lithographic drawings of 24 portraits of pedigree horses. He dedicated them to George IV, who received him graciously, talking to the artist 'as an equal', and even 'placed his hand familiarly on his shoulder, a gracious action that lingered long in Ward's memory.'<sup>24</sup> Such was the power of the print; and indeed, Ward's set of lithographs deserved such recognition: his vigorous draughtsmanship is

recorded there in one of the outstanding groups of animal pictures of the romantic period; like Martin he benefited from the concentration, the elimination of infelicitous handling, that converted overblown paintings into vivid and entirely satisfactory works of art. One critic was prompted to the following eulogium:

Mr Ward's series of lithographic studies is now before us, and we are gratified in having another opportunity of expressing our admiration of these masterly evidences of the utility of this style of multiplying the compositions of a distinguished painter, by the ingenuity of his own hand. It is proclaimed abroad, to the reproach of our school, that drawing in England is neither practised nor well understood. In the delineation of the horse, however, we have long been able to boast of the superiority of our painters over those of all nations, ancient or modern: for that anatomical knowledge of the noble animal, without which the strength, character and beauty of his proportions can never be truly and gracefully represented, originated with the English school, in the taste and scientific research of the late Mr Stubbs, whose magnificent folio volume on the horse, engraved by himself, is a production that stands alone in art.<sup>25</sup>

George Stubbs had not only made the series of engravings for his *Anatomy of the Horse*; he had also issued a number of exceptionally sensitive mezzotints (and plates in which mezzotint is mixed with other techniques) which rank among the first great Romantic prints.<sup>26</sup> The oscillation between scientific accuracy and Romantic expressiveness in Stubbs is a hallmark of the period: Girtin's panoramas of London and Paris, for instance, embody the same qualities. And another animal-draughtsman, Thomas Bewick, achieved in wood-engraving an eminence parallel to that of Stubbs in painting and mezzotint. The scientific nature of Bewick's depictions of birds and quadrupeds, for his two books devoted to them, is manifest in the careful descriptive texts that accompanied them. Their value as art lies in their exploitation of sophisticated and sensitive wood-engraving techniques, both 'white-line' and 'black-line', to convey not only the character and physical appearance of the creatures themselves, with all their variation of texture and movement, but also the very atmosphere of their habitats. The frosty field in which the fieldfare presides, beside ash-buds that echo the pattern of his dog-tooth breast; the summer garden, shimmering in the warm breeze beneath the bright eye of the spotted flycatcher – these are perceptions of the artist and not of the scientist. Bewick's depiction of the plumed tail of the barnyard cock shows that he completely grasps the principle of treating black and white as colours. And his tailpieces, humorous and poignant reflections on the life of the countryside in general, are among the great romantic statements about English landscape. The reaper, pausing in the field to gaze at the nest of eggs that he has just unwittingly orphaned with his scythe, is an extraordinarily touching vignette; the two gunmen who meet each other with their dogs across a snowy meadow; the man and woman who wade out to rescue a pig in deep water; or the small black devil who smokes a pipe behind a rock as he observes at a distance a crowd round a gallows:<sup>27</sup> the life of rural England is richly presented, with a combination of delicacy, boisterousness and compassion that even in the age of romantic landscape is all too rare.

The success of these modest illustrations is reinforced by the complete absence of that sense of friction between medium and subject matter which as we have seen underlies so many prints of the period. There is no suggestion that great ideas are struggling within the confines of too narrow a medium; nor that the technical difficulties of printmaking raise obstacles to the understanding of the artist's conception. Another series of wood-engravings, however, was to exemplify just such an incompatibility: William Blake's set of illustrations to Ambrose Philips' *Pastoral in Imitation of Virgil*, which Robert Thornton published in his *Virgil Primer* of 1821. When Thornton apologised to the public for these designs, with his famous distinction – 'they display less of art than genius' – he put his finger on the central conundrum of the Romantic print: what do we admire in a great artist? his artistry – his mastery of a

particular medium? or his mind – the inspired insights into human existence that he provides us? The Romantic period was one in which both commodities enjoyed unprecedented respect, and, as has become clear to us, it had become the bugbear of the printmakers that they could not persuade the world that their technical virtuosity adequately compensated for their lack of direct inspiration. Blake, acknowledged by many in his own time to enjoy genuine, if inscrutable, inspiration, stamped that inspiration too rawly upon his woodblocks for Thornton's taste. Printmaking required greater refinement, and for Blake that refinement was, by definition, an interrupter, an adulterer, of inspiration.

Nevertheless, Blake was all his life a professional engraver in line, and had proved himself quite capable of orthodox work reproducing masters past and present like Watteau, Fuseli or Stothard. He was well qualified to judge the technical merits of the great eighteenth-century line-engravers, but his violent outbursts against Strange and Woollett as mere 'Ignorant Journeymen' are unfortunately no real guide to his own position as an engraver, springing more from personal prejudice born of his early association with another printmaker of that period, James Basire, than from any well-founded objections to their methods.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Blake's own work is often reminiscent of the variegated and inventive processes of Woollett and could hardly have come into existence without them. It is odd that his passionate – one might say ideological – commitment to clear outline in the neo-classical spirit did not reveal itself more explicitly in his translations of Flaxman's designs for Hesiod, where he adopts a delicate, stippled technique rather than the firm calligraphic and truly 'engraved' line of Piroli; but there is no doubt that when he was expressing his own ideas in the medium, he brought a vigour and intensity to line-engraving which none could equal. Even setting aside the technical originality of the stereotype plates, or the white-line experiments on copper which prelude the wood-engravings for Thornton, his pure line work in the designs for the *Book of Job* or the unfinished set of plates for Dante's *Inferno* is astonishing in its energy and spiritual resonance. For Blake's engravings bring into focus the fundamental problem of line-engraving: the inhibiting nature of the very arduous process of digging repetitive parallel lines into copper. Rich as its effects were, it could not easily be made to respond to the promptings of direct inspiration. The professionals were perhaps shielding themselves from this difficulty by their insistence that accurate reproduction of finished works was precisely the chief merit of their medium. Blake, like Mantegna and Dürer before him, needed no such excuse. His use of the burin is an extraordinary marriage of the traditional processes with a personally charged expressive force; and in his adaptation of the conventional systems of hatching in *Job* or the *Canterbury Pilgrims* he creates shimmering areas of tone that seem exactly to transcribe the finely hatched and iridescent atmosphere of his visionary watercolours. Here again, perhaps, we encounter in an important context the contemporary awareness of the parallel significance of colour and monochrome.

Such exceptional work apart, the medium that seemed to act most impartially and purely as a channel for the artist's own inspiration was etching. This rapid, sharp technique, capable of reproducing the most spontaneous marks of the draughtsman's needle, had been raised to the highest pitch of art by Rembrandt, whose etchings were much admired and collected from his lifetime onward. It is no coincidence that two artists in particular used the etching medium to express some of their most important ideas; both of them connected to Blake. One was James Barry, whom Blake greatly admired, the other Samuel Palmer who was an admirer of Blake himself. There is little in common between the rough-hewn, large-scale etchings by which Barry chose to disseminate his most complex historical subjects and the richly worked, delicate filigrees of line with which Palmer reproduced his own later watercolours; but both men surely responded to the forceful directness imparted by the action of the acid on the needled line and sought in it the fulfilment of their passionate and densely packed response to the world. Etching, with its Romantic

process of acid biting (many professional engravers were seriously injured by constant exposure to the fumes of the acid bath), its rich and subtle response to inking, and its feeling of intimacy and spontaneity, has always been *par excellence* the virtuoso medium, and its revival in the Romantic period for 'personal' statements by artists was, in a sense, to be expected. The adoption of an etching style based on that of the little Dutch masters by landscapists such as John Crome and his Norwich School followers is entirely in keeping with this view of the technique. The foundation of the Etching Society in the 1840s was a late manifestation of the same sentiment and led naturally to the emergence of Whistler and a new school of virtuoso etchers in the second half of the century.

In this context, it is odd that Bonington was not an etcher. He is, in many ways, the true precursor of Whistler – his warm virtuosity, his cool, spacious compositions devised for aesthetic reasons alone: all this is Whistlerian; but Bonington made only two true etchings, and otherwise confined his printmaking to soft-ground and lithography. The earliest cataloguer of his prints, Aglaüs Bouvenne, summed up the particular quality of lithography as opposed to engraving and etching: 'La gravure étale à l'oeil tout son travail, long, minutieux, compliqué; le curieux et l'amateur sont également séduits par les merveilleuses combinaisons de la pointe, du burin, de la roulette; la lithographie, vite faite, chacun le sait, n'est pour la plupart qu'un dessin plus ou moins réussi'. But, he goes on: 'on reconnaitra qu'en question d'art le procédé importe peu, que le résultat est tout'.<sup>29</sup> This explains well enough the attraction of lithography for the youthful Bonington; indeed, it seems to define the transition from 'old master' to modern printmaking which the romantic movement brought about. It is significant, perhaps, that the second half of Whistler's career as printmaker was largely dedicated to the production of lithographs.

Bonington's associate and follower in Paris, Thomas Shotter Boys, continued where he left off, stopped in mid career by death at the age of twenty-six. Boys, too, looked back to the soft-ground outline panorama of Paris that had been Girtin's last testament at a similarly premature demise: 'I have a folio of good "material" I am about a work on Paris to follow up Girtin's, for it has never been done but by him & his sketches are so correct there is not a line out. Nash's, Batty's, Pugin's, Skelton's & all the french . . . are the damnest, lying, ill got up, money getting clap-trap possible[.] I intend to do 'Paris as it is' & I flatter myself I have some picturesque bits . . . but I am a bit soured with publishers so must do it myself'.<sup>30</sup> However, the effect of soft-ground was obtainable with greater fidelity to the pencil medium by means of lithography, and it was an entirely logical step for Boys to adopt the newer method for his architectural subjects in northern France and, later, in London. In his *Picturesque Architecture in Paris, Ghent, Antwerp, Rouen &c.*, 1839, he developed a sensitive form of colour-printed lithography which accompanies some of the most imaginatively conceived subjects of their type.

The relationship between the picturesque topographers and printmaking was a special one, conditioned partly by their traditional association with the illustrated tour, accompanied as it was by engraved or aquatinted plates, and partly by the fashionable preoccupation with such subjects by the amateur draughtsmen and women who abounded. Every picturesque or topographical artist was either in fact or in intention the master of a large 'school' of eager pupils, and soft-ground, aquatint and lithography were well suited to the business of reproducing drawings or watercolours accurately enough for principles of technique to be grasped. A long line of instructive manuals by Francis Nicholson, John Varley, David Cox, Samuel Prout, J. D. Harding and many others stretches through this period as a constant reminder of the function of the print neither as reproduction nor as illustration but as exemplar. Indeed, as it was one of the boasts of the printmakers, when they put their point of view, that prints brought art to the people, the power of the print to teach people to draw and paint was *a fortiori* worthy of particular emphasis. 'The lithographic works of Prout alone, we feel assured', one enthusiast wrote in 1834,

'have created a very extensive love for topographical drawings. The bold and picturesque gestures of these masterly imitations of his pencil sketches are too obvious to be misunderstood. Many young persons, the children of the wealthy, diffident of their talents, who would not have dared to attempt to copy more elaborate works, struck with the simplicity of his style, have set sedulously to work 'to draw from Prout'; and from these their willing essays, having exceeded their own expectations, and those of their friends, have proceeded with a zeal and interest in the pursuit, that has led them to attempt to draw similar objects from nature – and have thus become enthusiastic in the delightful study of topography. Amateurs like these become the friends and patrons of the professors, and purchase their finest pictures and drawings, to improve themselves in art. Those, moreover, who commence by admiring the picturesque charms of these bold sketches, will proceed, until they feel the refined sentiment, and comprehend the beauty and skill displayed in the elaborate engravings of the Cookes, the Le Keuxs, of Pye, and many others of our school of engravers'.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the agonising of the engravers and the ambitions of the painters, there existed, then, a fertile cycle of prints and paintings, artists, patrons and pupils which to a large extent supplied society with what it required. It was a cosy ecology that was to be largely destroyed by the arrival of photography in the 1850s; after that, printmaking could not hold the same place in the community again. But it was no more doomed to extinction than was painting itself: we have already noticed that Whistler imparted new energy to the etching tradition at precisely this moment; and the print, shorn altogether of its badge of servitude as 'reproduction' rather than original, was unequivocally reinstated as the expressive creative medium that so many artists had proved it to be.

But line-engraving as a medium of reproduction was, of course, redundant. The subtleties of oil painting could far better be conveyed by the camera. By a poignant historical irony, the printmakers won their independence at the cost of the very medium which had been so confident of its superiority to all the rest, and which had led the ideological battle of the Romantic period on their behalf.

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#### NOTES

1. John Pye, *Evidence relating to the Art of Engraving, taken before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, on Arts, 1836*, 1836, p. 11.
2. John Landseer, *Lectures on the Art of Engraving, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain*, 1807, pp. 1, vii.
3. Joseph Farington, *Diary*, ed. Kathryn Cave, vol. X, 1982, entry p. 3664, 4 June 1810.
4. Pye, *Evidence*, p. 18, evidence of John Burnet.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28, evidence of John Pye.
6. Landseer, *Lectures*, p. 177.
7. *Somerset House Gazette*, no. XXXVI, 19 June 1824, p. 157.
8. Joseph Strutt, *A Biographical Dictionary; containing an Historical Account of all the Engravers, from the earliest period of the Art of Engraving to the Present Time*, 2 vols., 1785, Vol. I, Preface, p. v.
9. Cited by Pye, *Evidence*, p. 5, note. Strange received his Knighthood in 1787.
10. Horace Walpole, *A Catalogue of Engravers, who have been born or resided in England; digested by Mr. Horace Walpole from the MSS. of Mr. George Vertue*, 1763; 2nd edn, 1786, p. 4, note.
11. T. Fisher in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1808, p. 193. For a full account of the invention and development of lithography see Michael Twyman, *The History of Lithography 1800–1850*, 1970.
12. Fisher, in *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1808, p. 193.
13. Landseer, *Lectures*, p. 143.
14. See Hilary Beck, *Victorian Engravings*, Victoria and Albert Museum 1973.
15. Though Farington, an influential Academician, records his friendly relations with John Landseer and admiration for his lectures at the Royal Institution.
16. The relationship between Constable and Lucas is fully documented in R. B. Becket, *John Constable's Correspondence*, Vol. X, 1966, pp. 314–443.
17. W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 1966 (paperback edition), p. 585.
18. See William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin*, 1975, p. 86.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
20. *Ibid.*
21. C. Reginald Grundy, *James Ward, RA*, 1909, p. xxix.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiii, xxxv.
23. *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.
24. *Ibid.*, p. xlvi.
25. *Somerset House Gazette*, XXXVI, 12 June 1824, p. 151.
26. See Basil Taylor, *The Prints of George Stubbs*, 1969.
27. All the examples cited are headpieces or tailpieces in Bewicks' *History of British Birds*, 1799, Vol. I.
28. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 593.
29. Aglaüs Bouvenne, *Catalogue de l'Oeuvre gravé et lithographié de R. P. Bonington*, Paris, 1873, p. 4. Bouvenne cites the lithographs of Delacroix as exemplifying these romantic principles.
30. Quoted in Patrick J. Noon, 'Bonington and Boys: Some Unpublished Documents at Yale', *Burlington Magazine*, CXXIII, 1982, p. 298.
31. *Somerset House Gazette*, XXXVI, 12 June 1834, p. 151.