

## Len Tabner: Man Against the Sky

I cannot doubt that Len Tabner is one of the greatest painters of our time, our time being the one coming after the titanic battles of modernism, fought from the advent of Fauves and Cubists right up to the deaths of Rothko, Motherwell and Jackson Pollock. With those great masters in mind, moreover, it is also important, as always in the history of art (which must necessarily include its evaluation), to remind oneself of its *local* origins, its roots in history and geography, and in an individual creator.

Thus Tabner is British, unignorably a Teessider, child of a riverman and the river which has flowed through two centuries of colossal industrial empire with its declines, revivals and uncertainty, always in the thick of the heaviest modes of production: shipbuilding and shipbreaking, coalmining, iron forging, steel rolling, artificial fibre spinning, millions of tons of fertiliser baking and packing. That same river flows shallowly out into the North Sea, thunders against the gigantic rigs sucking the black oil up from the depths, thrusting it into the vast pipes which carry it back to the estuary where the surplus fumes flare golden above the funnels beside the squat majesty of the storage drums.

This is Tabner's home and his landscape, and for all his global travelling – to the South Atlantic, to Japan, Galway, Alaska, Norway – the imagery he seeks, finds and configures so wonderfully starts out from those tumbled, dark north-western skies and seas, their brief flashes of dazzling light, their little refuges from the elements (castle, cranny and nook), and everywhere, mighty nature and human resistance to it.

These are the terrific, traditional tokens of the great Romantic painters of, supremely, Turner and Constable, best loved and best known of all national painters, and (like Sister Wendy) I am happy and confident in mentioning those names in the same breath as Tabner's. He prompts the comparison himself, for by this stage in his development he far surpasses the smaller achievement of such as Cotman and Girtin, whose peculiar genius was to make major art from the material of minor poetry – the Chirk aqueduct, the Watendlath falls.

Tabner meets the sea head-on, like Turner. He works, as is well known, with the stuff swirling round his fishing boots, leans over the rail of HMS Exeter to meet it crashing against the bow just as he did as a boy in the prow of his father's coble. Then, like Constable beside

the shepherd boy drinking full-length from the stream or feeling the heavy horse take the leap, Tabner is "down" (noticeable how often the preposition appears in the notes scribbled in the corners of his paintings), down in the field by the hedge, down in the waves, down on the beach looking far across to the distant outline of Holy Island, down below the slate face in Llanberis, or the friable cliffs of Ravenscar.

It is as though he can reach back whenever he needs to and feel the charge of the tradition which surges through those two great predecessors. But there has of course been a long line of British landscapists intervening between Turner at his death in 1851 and Tabner in his prime in 2007. There has been, for a start, the work of Monet, so momentous for Tabner. And there has been that British and immigrant crowd of noble indigenous painters who constitute Tabner's private chorus of congenial ghosts – David Bomberg, Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer, Frank Auerbach.

Monet, you might say, taught him to leave space itself to do its work in a picture; Monet also endorses Tabner's paramount subject, the surging, primeval, unstable formation of the world, its thrilling liquefaction, whether of the sea, the sky or the scouring indentations left by the glaciers in Honister or Glencoe.

The British painters taught him, I would guess, a deliberate and provincial lesson, where 'provincial' has no derogatory implication. It merely alerts us, as those painters do, to the local and temporary nature of the modernist achievement. Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Clement Greenberg's giants in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, these heroes had announced a new world to be made by painting and in the company of history. The moment of modernism – I am paraphrasing T J Clark<sup>1</sup> - offered itself as corroborating a revolutionary re-presentation of the world, whether of its art, its science, its manufacture or its political monstrosity.

The British painters, every bit as adequate to the historical opportunity, painters such as John Piper, Ben Nicholson, a little later Prunella Clough, Edward Bawden and, a bit off to one side, Jack Yeats, looked admiringly across the Channel and the Atlantic, but didn't believe a word of it. They took what they wanted – flatness as a topic, colour as a subject, line as a

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<sup>1</sup> In *Farewell to an Idea: episodes from a history of modernism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, pp213ff.

game, abstraction as food for the soul – but they absorbed, tamed, diminished and domesticated the giddy vision, the new times, the military march of art towards an unknown future.

Tabner's work is of itself a vindication of such quietism. Not that his paintings are quiet. They are a storm of colour, muted only and sometimes by the minute, exquisite silhouette of an artefact against the immensity of enormous air and water: a refuge platform on the Holy Island causeway, the tiny uprights marking the edge of the road "stitching the sea to the sky", or the thin, black matchsticks of fencing hopelessly swamped by the flowing, floury sands at Spurn Head. The absolute mastery of living line away in the distance delights the eye and fills the heart with happiness, holding at poise small safety against big nature.

British landscape painting is a triumph of the nation's culture and universally acknowledged as such. Its popularity, its ease of access and the astonishing beauty which Tabner rediscovers for us in the ordinary and familiar bulk of stone and water give the lie to that precept of modernism which set itself to violate the beautiful as untrustworthy and to render its representation as difficult as possible.

Tabner's vision is wholly distinctive; he searches out what we wouldn't see for ourselves; but once he has shown us, his world is ours to enter. He teaches us how to see it and everybody then wants the chance to do so. It was Ruskin, Turner's champion, who once remarked mournfully that the Victorian preoccupation with landscape was the result of "mistakes in our social economy" and is the expression of a love of liberty which can no longer find fulfilment in civic life.<sup>2</sup> Tabner works in the same solitude as Turner and his paintings are similarly empty of other people. But a hundred and fifty years after Turner's death and precisely because Turner and his successors have, in Patrick Heron's rousing words, fulfilled "the prime function of painting to dictate to us what the world looks like",<sup>3</sup> we love to take our leave from the social economy and, as Ruskin continues, "lose the company of our friends among the hills".

Nonetheless, the moment we find a landscape which we can see as Tabner teaches us to see it, we hasten to find a friend to whom we can say, "it's just like that painting – of Coatham

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<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, part 4, London: Dent Everyman, 1913, pp292-3.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Heron, 'Solid space in Cézanne', *Modern Painters*, vol 9, no 1, 1996.

Sands, of the Llanberis slate face, of Sandsend the day the big waves broke with just such a plume of water over on the right of the beach". Our feeling for the place makes for our love of the painting, and *vice versa*.

Such feeling is deep in the aesthetics of landscape painting, and carries us over from landscapes we know to those that we don't. This is true even of paintings such as Tabner's extraordinary sequence of the Creation. As he dryly says, "Well, I wasn't there", but in the fearful painting of 'Darkness upon the face of the Waters' we recognise at once, whether we have ever seen such a thing or not, the omnipotence of the uncontainable ocean and the ancient terror of darkness. We see and feel their fearfulness, and the sheer exhilaration which rides so strangely alongside.

In these days of environmental eschatology and needful solemnity about our crowded island, it has become too easy to say that the natural landscape is poisoned and lost. The wonderful spaciousness and the infinite skies of north-eastern England are a needed reassurance that the romantic metaphysics which is by now the nearest thing we have to a national religion (and none the worse for that) still lives and grandly moves out there, indifferent to all those of our lives which count on it for our spiritual bread and butter.

Tabner is the living artist who best captures these meanings, and does so with such tenderness as well as such strength, transforming them into worshipful images. It is no doubt a bit shy-making to talk like this; I am trying to capture the essential reverence of his painting, as well as his glad optimism that old nature still rolls unstopably round her diurnal course, while we find ourselves a ledge of hers on which to build a home. In the grandeur of the painting, 'Morning', the golden centre catches our eye at once and provides a small, bright, safe place from which to look out at the tumult of colour and the dark materials which hurtle through it.

For, steady and hopeful as he always is – there is no tragedy in Tabner's paintings, only the plotless epic of seeing and believing – these pictures from the continental edge are dark, dark with cloud, rain, tempest, with the sun's long withdrawal in winter. Not for him the empyrean blues of the Mediterranean; he shares with Ruskin the thrilling drama of clouds, squalls, twilight, early dawn. The notes in the corners of his picture bear witness to the importance of this particularity and detail. "Holy Island and Bamburgh. Thursday August 30, 2007. Early afternoon". Along with Blake's "flaming line" (which Pevsner named as an

essence of "the Englishness of English Art"<sup>4</sup>), he shares with Blake the view that "to generalise is to be an idiot. To particularise is the alone distinction of merit".

So we return, as people coming home, to the particularities of north-east Yorkshire, the Lake District, Rannoch by Glencoe, Deinolen near Snowdon and the Welsh slate quarries. Honister Pass, the tricky path between the swooping, towering waves of rock, is barely visible through dark grey columns of rain; looking along Coatham Sands, just below his house at Boulby so much of which was built by Tabner's own hands, the painter picks out a pale blue patch of sky and a glimmer of red sunset to remind us of the briefly sunny day just past, and then signals to us the human lights along the peninsula where the sleepless industry drives on. The Tees estuary is molten; humankind works ceaselessly to find access to that moltenness in its primeval caverns – oil, coal, gas, potash, hydraulic power.

By the same token, Len Tabner *works* to make that same "Heraclitean Fire" (in Gerard Manley Hopkins' words) blaze in every painting. This is what settles him deep in his tradition and, amid the present heartless cynicism of the art market and its bookies, seem almost old-fashioned, for all his daring and originality. He paints with artful innocence and from his heart; his paintings are replete with feeling and with an abundant sense of his responsibility to truth. He seems to me to be part of that most urgent tendency in present cultural life to "secularise religious responsibility" as well as to accomplish "the domestication of culture" (Emerson's phrases as it happens) where otherwise culture has either been ransacked for money or removed to levels of fastidious difficulty.

These paintings have been built with hands as well as seen with eyes. Tabner's hands are palpable in the thick, almost-impasto of the water-colour soaked so deep in the heavy paper that it takes on a mass and weight which contradicts everything in the water-colour textbooks. His hands have thrown water and body colour across the paper in long loops. You don't just see, you feel the shock of the waves on your body and on the boulders on the right in the picture of Whitby. Such paintings restore to us the physicality of art, its union of body and soul, its holding out, as Stendhal put it, of "the promise of happiness".

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<sup>4</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, chapter 5.

These paintings keep that promise. Let us forget Kant's injunction, still knocking about our presumptions about art whether we have heard of Kant or not, that the sublime be impersonal. Great art commands us, for sure, but its works become our familiars and, if we are loving and persistent, our friends. One enters a room filled with Tabner's paintings and even when they are as awesome and beautiful as my own favourite here, 'The Causeway to Holy Island', one is ready to befriend it, one can readily foresee how it could become both master and friend, how one could greet it heartily after absence, how it would make you happy.

'The End of Art' has been long announced.<sup>5</sup> That old misery Hegel said it first around 1800, claiming that "art is a form of life grown old", and in parting from history can no longer "bring home to consciousness spiritual truths of widest range". Well, that was before Turner and impressionism and modernity. The same thing was said as the New York painters faded away. It is there in the small change of the Britart catalogues.

There may be other painters of the present who serve to rebut this morbidity. But Tabner is my subject, and more than good enough, by way of the work of three decades, temporarily arrested on the heights of this latest achievement, to embody the continuity of British landscape painting, and to carry over that admirable practice into our collective effort to make the good society.

As I began by saying, I do not doubt Len Tabner's greatness as a painter. I commend him as a living, active embodiment (he is only just sixty) of a figure essential to the life of your society and mine. He is a radical conservationist, holding on to certain values (because he can't help it, these are his deepest allegiances) which he has wrung out of his history and that of his people, and transmuted into the principles of the art which is his work. The works themselves, of the nature of their arduous composition and of their achievement enshrine and embody the continuity of a culture. Quite without world-historical pretensions, they rejoin past to present. Unmistakably modern, they offer themselves for our common recognition as pictures of home. In the dreadful din of popular culture and commercial image-vending, the quiet enterprise of home-making remains the source of our best hopes, and its paintings are essential ingredients of the good society.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. by Arthur Danto in his essay of that title, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.