

# TURNER – AIVAZOVSKY

## An Auspicious Encounter

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### PROLOGUE



Aivazovsky's *Self-portrait*. 1874  
Oil, 74 x 58 cm.  
Uffizzi Gallery, Florence.



Turner's *Self-portrait*. c.1798  
Oil, 29 x 23 inches.  
Tate gallery, London

Once upon a time there was Hovhanness Haivaz, an Armenian lad born in Theodosia, the “God-given” city built by the ancient Greeks on the shores of the black sea in Crimea. He had the gift of the muses. He soon began singing, playing the violin – oriental style—and drawing on the walls with charcoal.

Hovhanness became Ivan, and Haivaz stretched to Haivazovsky, Aivazian and finally was established as Aivazovsky.

Ivan Aivazovsky became the greatest marine painter of Imperial Russia. Early in his career, he was elected a member of five Academies of Fine Arts, including those of St. Petersburg (his Alma Mater). Rome, Florence, Stuttgart and Amsterdam. He was an Academician at 27, and Professor of Marine Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, at the age of 30.

He fell in love with an Italian diva, the ballerina Maria Taglioni. She wrote to him: “your marvellous talent makes me proud to be called an artist.” Lifelong friendship was sealed, although they never married. He was 25 and she 38.

Falling in love anew, at 31, he married Julia Graves, an English governess in St. Petersburg. They had four daughters. After twelve years of marriage, Julia left her husband. Twenty-two years later, Aivazovsky, at 65, married Anna Boornazian, a young Armenian widow from Theodosia. Anna stayed with him till the end.



Aivazovsky's sketch/impression of himself as a young man playing the violin-oriental style. 1887.



Aivazovsky. *Anna Bournazian*. 1882. Oil, 73 x 62 cm. Aivazovsky Gallery, Theodosia

Aivazovsky left nearly 6000 works – accounting for more than 100 exhibitions all over Europe, Russia, England, Netherlands and the United States of America.

A master painter for 65 years, Aivazovsky was celebrated as the “marine poet” of his time, the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With his death in 1900 marine painting lost its last “poet”, and has yet to find the new. Until then, 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Art, having totally forgotten Aivazovsky, is resurrecting the other ‘poet of colours’ of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century -- J. M. W. Turner. He is the new ‘prophet’.

Prophets are admired, for better or worse. They rarely admire others. That rarity is the microcosm of their “prophecy”, or indeed, their humanity.

And the ‘prophet’ Turner admired the “poet” Aivazovsky. He said it in Rome in 1842.

## **SIMILAR LEGEND**

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) was in his mid-fifties when he first met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), in Vienna.

Haydn-Mozart mutual admiration is now a legend.

“Nobody can do everything like Joseph Haydn”, Mozart is reported to have said of his “dear friend and father.” In his turn, Joseph Haydn, whose fame then stretched throughout Europe, confessed that Mozart was “the greatest musical genius”. The professional appreciation was such that it paved the way for creative reciprocity, leaving its fascinating traits in music literature and performance practice.

A strikingly similar legend seems now possible to reconstruct in the domain of art history.

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) and Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky (1817-1900) met in Rome, in 1842. Turner had just seen, at an exhibition, some paintings by Aivazovsky – the talk of the town in those days. Recently, Pope Gregory XVI had purchased Aivazovsky’s painting, titled: “*Chaos – The Creation of the World*”, for the Vatican Gallery.



Aivazovsky's painting, *Chaos—The Creation of the World*. 1841.

Oil, 73 x 108 cm.  
The Mekhitarian St. Ghazar=Lazar  
Museum, Venice

Turner at 67, the acknowledged master of the day of landscapes and marine paintings, was literally overwhelmed. The art of the young marine painter Aivazovsky inspired the venerable master to write a poem, in Italian, the last two lines of which are intoned in a panegyric mood:

***L'arte tuo ben' e potente*      So good and potent is your art**  
***Perche il genio t'inspiró!..*'      That only genius could have inspired you**

## “OLD RUSSIA”

Perusing through the Aivazovsky literature at the British Library, I came across the entire Italian poem of Turner, published in the Russian periodical “*Ruskaya Starina*” = *Old Russia*, of 1878.

Eureka! Here it was at last. For many years only these two lines of the original Italian, mentioned above, were known to me, plus few more lines in Russian verse or prose, and an entire poem in an Armenian translation from a Russian rendering of the Italian poem. The Armenian translator was none other than the late Hovhanness Shiraz, one of the great Armenian poets of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fascination and enthusiasm of H. Shiraz with the Russian version of the poem resulted in rendering his Armenian version in a flourish of expansive interpolations. Furthermore, H. Shiraz presented Turner as the “venerable English poet”, placing him alongside Lermontov, V. Hugo, Li Tai Po and Barashvili. The said Armenian poem of Hovhanness Shiraz was in turn translated into English by Hovhanness Pilikian to relocate the poem in Turner's own native English. (See Appendix)

That was in 1978 when I had based my research and hypothesis on those scanty sources, albeit the only available ones appearing in the Aivazovsky literature after 1940s.

But now at last, I was able to read the entire poem in its original Italian which “*Ruskaya Starina*” had published among the autobiographical notes of Aivazovsky, in Russian, informing us, among others, the latter's Roman sojourn of 1842. Surprisingly and curiously enough, to date no western scholar of Turner seems to have come across this unique document in verse. Furthermore, they all agreed that Turner did not visit Rome in 1842. Meanwhile the Russian scholars of Aivazovsky had merely dealt with the said poem as no more than a panegyric curiosity.

I have no hesitation in considering Turner's Italian poem—published among Aivazovsky's autobiographical data--as an important document that illustrates our understanding of the creative worlds and the consequent reciprocity of Aivazovsky and Turner.

Perhaps it is the only poem Turner wrote in Italian or any other language other than his native English. We know that Turner versified throughout his entire creative life. He accompanied his

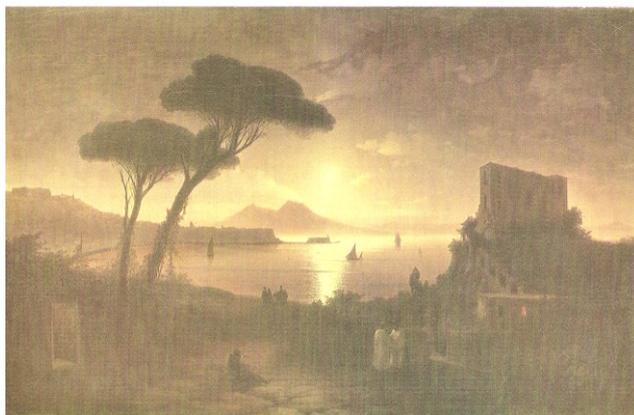
sketches and paintings mostly with his own verses which he labelled more often than not as “Fallacies of Hope”.

## CLAUDIAN AND FAUSTIAN “LEITMOTIVES”

I suggest that the significance of the poem in its art-historical context lies in its remarkable Claudian “leitmotiv”. Turner has ‘repainted’ in Italian words Aivazovsky’s most Claudian landscape, which, I suggest, is the one titled: *The Bay of Naples by Moonlight*, 92 x 141 cm. now at the Aivazovsky Gallery in Theodosia. Most strikingly, the formal composition of this painting is a mirror/reverse image of a Turner painting titled: *The Bay of Baiae*, of 1823, now at the Tate Gallery. Furthermore, the poem resonates the aura of the spell the venerable master was under, of that “noble moment” created by the “art divine” of the young master, not unlike the Faustian *Augenblick* = glimpse/moment, uttered by Goethe’s old philosopher in his now famous words:

***“Verweile doch! Du bist so schön.” = Yet, stay/stop! You are so beautiful.***

Whereas Goethe’s lofty, Faustian bliss is only envisaged in a future moment which might be won only by the “ultimate good”, Turner’s “sublime moment” is a felt reality “by art betrayed” but won, nevertheless. Even at 67, metaphysical bliss was beyond the reach of the sense-wrought artist, Turner, even though it touched the threshold of his colours. But that bliss was in abundance in the mature, disciplined will, classical skill and character of the art of the young Aivazovsky— an art luxuriating in romantic subject matters notwithstanding. That was, I believe, what fascinated and inspired Turner, the “magnificent giant of English painting” (Herbert Reed), to write a poem in praise of his young colleague, Aivazovsky.



Aivazovsky’s painting, *The Bay of Naples by Moonlight*. 1842.  
Aivazovsky’s most Claudian landscape (see text above)

Oil, 92 x 141 cm. now at  
Aivazovsky Gallery, Theodosia.



Turner’s painting: *The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Sibyl*.  
Exh. BA 1823

“a full-blooded essay in the  
mould of Claude”  
(G. Reynolds, TURNER, 1976, p  
119)

Oil, 57.5 x 93.5 inches, now at  
the Tate Gallery, London

Turner acquainted himself with Goethe's (1749-1832) treatise on colour, "*Zur Farbenlehre*" (1810), which was translated into English by his friend and colleague Charles Eastlake in 1840. In 1843, one year after his "enchantment" in Rome with the "potent art" of Aivazovsky, Turner 'illustrated' Goethe's theory with his own colours and words. Two oil paintings, accompanied by verses of his omnipresent *Fallacies of Hope*, were the result of that endeavour. One was titled: *Shade and Darkness – The Evening of the Deluge*. This was to exemplify Goethe's so called "minus" colours of blues, purples and blue-greens which, according to Goethe, were associated with restlessness, anxiety and susceptibility. Turner's accompanying verses read thus:

***The moon put forth her sign of woe unheeded;  
But disobedience slept; the darkening Deluge closed around;  
And the last token came, the giant framework floated,  
The roused birds forsook their nightly shelters screaming,  
And the beasts waded to the ark.***

Turner's *Shade and Darkness –  
The Evening of the Deluge*.  
Oil, 30.5 x 30.5 inches. Exh. BA 1843.  
Tate Gallery, London.



The other oil painting was titled: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses writing the Book of Genesis*. This painting was to exemplify Goethe's "plus" colours of reds, yellows and greens, which were supposed to produce feelings of happiness, joy and warmth. The accompanying verses of Turner read thus:



***The ark stood firm on Ararat, th'returning sun  
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous of light,  
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic guise  
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer fly  
Which rises, flits, expands, and dies.***

Turner's *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) –  
The Morning after the Deluge – Moses writing the Book of Genesis*.  
Oil, 31 x 31 inches. Exh. BA 1843.  
Tate Gallery, London

Turner knew his Bible well. His decision to choose Moses and not Noah the morning after the Deluge was the outburst of the artist's sensuality indulging in the eternal vortex of creation – the matrix of regeneration. Eventually the vortex as a structural, formal image had become Turner's pictorial obsession. Hence, letting Moses write the Book of Genesis, and not the Ten Commandments, meant, I believe, re-enacting the life cycle after the Deluge all over again.

In fact, Turner did not forget also reminding us of the Creation myth's archaic symbol of a rod with the serpent twisted on it. The rigid divinity of the Patriarchal Commandments – epitome of divine finality once and for all – would have interrupted the vortex drive of that divine matrix of rebirth -- regeneration. Such was Turner, the sensual genius at his most poetic.

## ARARAT – AIVAZOVSKY’S “ARMENIA”

Incidentally (or is it?), Turner’s choice of the Ararat theme to exemplify Goethe’s theory of colour came after his meeting with the Russian-Armenian painter, Ivan (Hovhanness) Aivazovsky (Aivazian) in Rome, in 1842.

Bearing in mind that Ararat is the perennial symbol of the land called Armenia, it would not be surprising to find Aivazovsky depicting the Ararat landscape. But he painted the landscape with the imposing mountain first in 1868, decades later than Turner’s reference to it in his verse accompanying *Light and Colour*. Incredible but true, depicting Ararat made Aivazovsky the first Armenian painter ever to do so. The awesome majesty and ‘sanctity’ of mount Ararat, graciously treasured in popular myth, had a foreboding, quasi-iconoclastic influence on Armenian painters. Aivazovsky broke that ‘spell’.

Indeed, Aivazovsky returned to paint the majestic two-summits mountain in 1882, titling it: *The Valley of Mount Ararat*. Moreover, he signed his name in Armenian, “*Aivazian, 1882*”, on the image of the rock lying at the bottom left corner of the painting, in addition to his usual signature in Russian, *Aivazovsky*, at the bottom right corner. In 1885, he signed another *Mount Ararat*, both in Armenian and Russian, on the bottom right corner of the unusually small oil painting measuring 23 x 34 cm,



Aivazovsky.---- *Ararat*.  
1868



Aivazovsky---*The Valley of Mount Ararat*. 1882



Aivazovsky.---- *Mount Ararat*.  
1885

But in 1887, Aivazovsky too, like Turner, painted mount Ararat’s biblical theme of ‘after the Deluge.’ He named it simply as *Noah Descending from Ararat*. As mentioned above, the subject matter in Turner’s painting of Ararat after the Deluge is swept up in the dynamic vortex of regeneration. In Aivazovsky, the vast emptiness of the world-universe after the Deluge, the majesty of mount Ararat and the chilling serenity of the disciplined descent of the survivors, all breathe Biblical inevitability. Moreover, in the Aivazovsky oil painting Noah’s group has chosen to bend the path of the caravan in a semicircle (the painter has modified the straight path of the caravan in his initial sketch.) The Patriarchal group is pushed further away from his followers, in an anticlockwise motion, towards the right, thus creating a guiding momentum for the bewildered survivors in their descent.

A journalist of the acclaimed Venice periodical “*Bazmavep*”, reported that in a Paris exhibition of Aivazovsky’s paintings, in 1889, the master himself stood aloof and afar, pointing to his large painting *Noah Descending from Ararat*, saying:

**“Here it is, our Armenia.”** (M. Sargsian, H. AIVAZOVSKI. “*Knowledge*” Publications, Yerevan 1967, p 32)

As for Aivazovsky’s painting titled *The World Deluge*, of 1864, there is a distinct and violent contrast of light and shade bisecting the world/canvass vertically, as if each trying to subdue the other half totally. Humans, whether drowned or still alive are all depicted as statuesque details, nay even as broken stone remnants of the massive earth/rocks defoliated by the flood. The whole world

is engulfed in a visually frozen battle/tension, a halted still of the natural tragic event – a Faustian *augenblick*, indeed, albeit not of bliss but of affliction.



Aivazovsky--- *The World Deluge*. 1864  
Oil, 246 x 369 cm.  
Russian Museum. St. Petersburg



Aivazovsky--- *Noah Descending from Ararat*. 1887  
Oil, 128 x 218 cm.  
Painting Gallery of Armenian. Yerevan

Nothing indeed could exemplify better the difference between the two painters as these paintings pertaining to the biblical events before and after the Deluge. Their formal and pictorial treatment of the same subject matter by both artists created the opposites in the classic-romantic dialectics of the spectrum of art.

## KNOW THYSELF

Sir Kenneth Clark has pointed out that **“three-quarters of the paintings by Turner which we admire most were not exhibited in his lifetime; many of them were not put on stretchers or seen by another human eye till over fifty years after his death”** (*The Romantic Rebellion*, p 223). Sir Clark’s observation serves as a warning when we try to assess which works of Turner Aivazovsky knew and admired. We cannot yet tell that story in full. That Aivazovsky did admire Turner, even before he met the venerable master in Rome in 1842, is obvious from Aivazovsky’s autobiographical notes, which has served as a primary source for his biographers and catalogue compilers. Research will have to be done to recapture the essence of that mutual admiration.

Yet it seems obvious that the venerable English painter Turner, **“certainly the greatest of English Romantics and colourists”** (A. Finberg), was powerfully attracted not so much by Aivazovsky’s romantic subject matter, employed abundantly with heightened pictorial moods, as with the young artist’s attainment of classical visual discipline which moulded his youthful exuberance without containment.

I propose that Turner conceived of the Russian-Armenian painter Aivazovsky, as the ‘new’ Claude. Turner and many an artist before and after him, tried to emulate Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), the French-Italian master of 17th century classical landscape and seaport paintings. But Turner’s natural and powerful romanticism, I think, ‘failed’ his lifelong obsession to become a ‘new’ Claude, despite earning a reputation as the ‘British Claude’. That ‘failure’ was to become his strength especially after his encounter with Aivazovsky’s work. Unlike Turner, the essentially classicist Aivazovsky never entertained such an obsession but was able to become Claudian with a panache, whenever he chose to. Hence, I believe that Aivazovsky’s art helped Turner to abandon his Claudian obsession. As a result of which and especially after 1842, a ‘radical’ Turner emerged, tenaciously unbound.



Turner's ---- *The Dogana and, Santa Maria della Salute. Venice, 1843*  
Oil on canvas, 62 x 93 cm.



Aivazovsky ----- *View of a Bay near Venice.*  
ca. 1842  
Oil on canvas, 75 x 119 cm.

Aivazovsky at 25 was Turner's 'Claudian Hope' incarnate. To emulate Claude after having experienced Aivazovsky's work would have been pointless exercise and truly a 'fallacious hope' for Turner at the age of 67. Thanks to that auspicious encounter, Turner relentlessly pursued his creative independence. A unique and essentially a revolutionary painter, Turner was no more in need of Ruskin's defence of his art of 1843 (*Modern Painters*). J. M. W. Turner had absorbed the Delphic Dictum. He knew himself. He became the Bard of Visual Culture for our own times and the millennium to come.

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## AN EPILOGUE

The 'benefit of doubt' is a helpful tool for research all right, but not an excuse for a-priori neglect. The most hardened misconception remains the one claiming that Turner did not visit Italy after 1840. Nevertheless, here are a few 'encouraging' hints from noted British scholars of Turner:

The editor of *Turner Society News*, Cecilia Powell recently wrote the following about Christine Bicknell's journal the latter jotted down on 24 June 1845:

**"Christine Bicknell noted briefly 'Turner going to Venice'. This suggests that Turner's 1840 visit to Venice was perhaps not his last, as is usually supposed, but further evidence to confirm a later visit is not, as yet, forthcoming."** (TSN 56, p 6)

In his *A Wonderful Range of Mind* (1987), John Gage questions the possibility of Turner's visits of Tyrol and North Italy in August/November 1843.

But Andrew Wilton is quite sure, in his *Turner Abroad* (1985, p 30), about Turner visiting Lake Como and Bolzano in August 1842.

Hence, there is no reason whatsoever not to regard Aivazovsky's autobiographical notes published in 1878 as one such further evidence of Turner visiting Italy after 1840, not unlike Bicknell's journal of 1845 referred to by C. Powell.

Furthermore, the Russian scholars of Aivazovsky, namely Kuzmin (1901), Skvortsov (1943), Barsamov (1955), Wagner (1871) and Novouspensky (1980), all do tell us that the author of the poem in Italian in praise of Aivazovsky was non other than J.M.W. Turner.

All the above notwithstanding, I think further research is needed to consider, among others, the following: Did Turner write the said poem first in English and then asked an Italian friend to translate his poem into Italian? It's worth mentioning, also, that Aivazovsky had his first London exhibition in 1843, hence the meeting might have even been then in London and not in Rome. But

Aivazovsky's autobiographical notes leave no doubt as to when, where and who was the original author of the poem in question—1842, Rome, Turner.

Delving into the intricacies of the so called 'late Turner', Prof. W. Vaughan argues that late Turner, or, as he calls it, 'private' Turner was bound through "associative Romantic Aesthetics" to the "superior taste" of the "superior observer" of the "aristocratic class" or the "nouveaux riches" in Britain (TSN 56, p 14)

Nevertheless, it is significantly better to point out that 'late' Turner manifests not so much a 'private' Turner but a 'primary' Turner. His visual Romanticism, naturally omnipresent in his oeuvre, was 'bound' in Claudian Classicist obsession, until early 1840's. The encounter with Aivazovsky's oeuvre made Turner 'unbound', reaffirming the time honoured, ageless and never fading or failing truth in life and in art—the Delphic dictum: **Gnothi Seauton = KNOW THYSELF.**

## APPENDIX – THE 'TURNER POEM' IN "OLD RUSSIA" OF 1878

The original poem in Italian, said to be Turner's, as it appears in "*Ruskaya Starina*"=*Old Russia*, of 1878.

Come tenda che si lieva  
E si ferma alla metà  
*Come duol che mezzo alliéva*  
La speranza di piacer;  
Si la notte il cielo abbruma  
Della placida città  
Ed il raggio della luna  
Ne rischiara ogni sentier!  
Dalla via ch'a Margellina  
Sta sa dosso a cavalier,  
Guarda tutta la marina  
Ed un sogno ti parra:  
Quelle case, quel Vulcano,  
Taciturne quel pensier  
Distuanno un senso arcano  
Che anchó il di non cacciera!  
Qella luna d'oro e argento  
Sopra il mar' si specchia e stà,  
Onde il mar' ch'un legger vento  
Va incessando innanzi a té  
Sembre un campo di scintille  
Che la spuma accemde e va,  
O metalliche faville  
Sopra un manto d'un gran' rè...  
Ma di giorno che raggiona  
Quella luna è bassa ognor!  
Somma artista, mi perdona  
Se un artista s'ingannó!..  
Nel delizio della mente  
Mi sedusse il tuo lavor  
L'arte tua ben' e potente  
Perche il genio t'inspiró!..  
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An abridged English translation by Hovhannes Pilikian, in 1978, of the Armenian poem by Hovhannes Shiraz based on the Russian translation of the original Italian of 1878.

Like a curtain slowly drawn  
It stops suddenly half open,  
Or, like grief itself, filled with gentle hope,  
It becomes lighter in the shore-less dark,  
Thus the moon barely wanes  
Winding her way above the storm-tossed sea.  
Stand upon this hill and behold endlessly  
This scene of a formidable sea,  
And it will seem to thee a waking dream.  
That secret mind flowing in thee  
Which even the day cannot scatter,  
The serenity of thinking and the beating of the heart  
Will enchain thee in this vision;  
This golden-silver moon  
Standing lonely over the sea,  
All curtain the grief of even the hopeless.  
And it appears that through the tempest  
Moves a light caressing wind,  
While the sea swells up with a roar,  
Sometimes, like a battlefield it looks to me  
The tempestuous sea,  
Where the moon itself is a brilliant golden crown  
Of a great king.  
But even that moon is always beneath thee  
Oh Master most high, Oh forgive thou me  
If even this master was frightened for a moment  
Oh, noble moment, by art betrayed...  
And how may one not delight in thee,  
Oh thou young boy, but forgive thou me,  
If I shall bend my white head  
Before thy art divine  
Thy bliss-wrought genius...  
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