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Beyond the Bastille: Turner in Grenoble

Roland Courtot

Among the works by Turner in Manchester Art Gallery are two watercolours hitherto identified as representing the fortress of Sisteron in France's Department of Alpes de Haute Provence. In 2004, Charles Nugent, then a curator at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, and aware of the study I had just published on Turner at Sisteron (Courtot, 2004), drew my attention to the uncertainty surrounding their titles. I subsequently worked on identifying the drawings in Turner's sketchbooks from his travels in Provence by applying my training as a geographer to picture analysis, in particular, the analysis of landscapes (Courtot, 2006). As I sought to match Turner's sketches with the specific places he observed, I came to realise what a fascinating line of inquiry this could be. This is what I discovered.

The first of the two Manchester watercolours (fig. 1) depicts a mountain ridge that ends abruptly above the flat bottom of a large valley where the river makes a wide meander at its base. A fort, which crowns the top of the ridge, connects to a rampart that descends sharply down to a structure situated on the river's edge. To the right, what resembles a road or, better, a rampart follows a steep winding descent down the slope from top to bottom to connect the fort to the valley where a village is found at the river's edge. In the foreground to the left, small boats have been pulled onto the sandy bank. In the background to the left, beyond the fortress, lies a town dominated by a church steeple, behind which looms in the distance a steep rocky mountain only faintly visible.

The second watercolour (fig. 2) portrays the same fortified site, but this time at a much closer range: the artist was standing at the entrance to the main street of the village located at the foot of the ridge. This perspective becomes the centre of the composition. In the foreground to the right and left of the road is a scene that evokes a small roadside market near the entrance to the town. The city in the left background is brightened by a patch of light which may correspond to the sunbeam seen penetrating the sky behind the clouds; the same steep rocky relief is still faintly sketched at the bottom to the left.

These two works evidently refer to the same site. In 1996 Charles Nugent identified them as representations of the citadel of Sisteron, an entirely understandable suggestion for two reasons: these fortifications bear a resemblance to those at Sisteron and it is known that Turner had drawn the fortress of Sisteron several times. The fortress shown here is, indeed, composed of the same three basic ingredients as that at Sisteron: a fort perched on the projection of a ridge and dominating the valley; a fortified gate at its base on the river's edge; and an almost vertical rampart which joins the two works. Yet, other aspects of these two watercolours speak of another environment: the curve of a wide river, a village at the foot of the fortification, and a winding road climbing the slope in front of the curtain, which joins the high and low fortifications. None of that is found at Sisteron, which is why, when we know the rigour and accuracy with which Turner made his architectural drawings, it is necessary to look elsewhere to find these fortifications, which are so characteristic of the defence of valley sites in the Alps that link a steep ridge and the river at its base.

With the help of topographical maps and aerial photos available on new websites (the Géoportail of the National Geographical Institute of France; Google Earth from Google; and Maps Search Live from Microsoft), I have examined the large Alpine valleys through which Turner travelled on his journeys between France and Italy. Using this method, I have been able to identify the subject of the two watercolours in question: a

place - the city of Grenoble – that was well known to Turner. The watercolours undoubtedly represent the east side of the Bastille of Grenoble which dominates the village of La Tronche on the river Isère upstream from the city.

For the first work, Turner positioned himself on the right bank of the river near what was at the time the village of St-Ferjeux (today integrated into the commune of La Tronche) (see fig. 3). The village of La Tronche lies before him on the same side of the river and the Bastille is at the top of the ridge of Mount Rachais, which forms one of the ends of the Grande Chartreuse Massif looming above the city of Grenoble. At its base on the river's edge, fortified works protect the portal of Savoy (Saint-Laurent portal). Between the two, a rampart runs down the line of steepest slope, whereas on the right another wall winds down from the fort toward the village of La Tronche. The small boats at the water's edge in the foreground, surrounded by people, show that in the valley of Grésivaudan the wide meanders of the Isère were navigable for this kind of watercraft.

Fig. 1 *The Bastille at Grenoble from the Valley of the Isère, 1835-1840?* (W 1035), pencil, watercolour and gouache on buff paper, 138 x 192 cm. © The Manchester Art Gallery, 1917.115

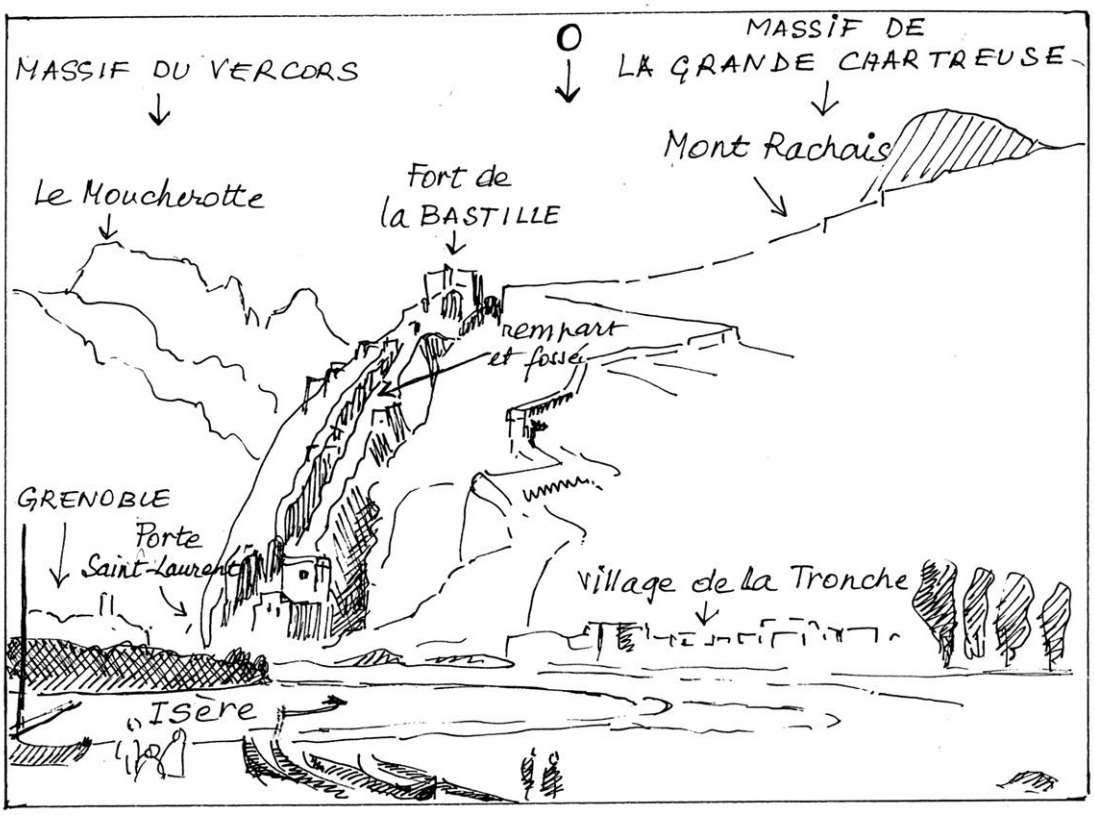

Fig. 2. Explanatory sketch of W 1035
(sketch by the author, after Turner)

Here, upstream from the city, we are in the presence of the east face of the fortified system for Grenoble. It is on the side of the portal of Saint-Laurent that the royal highway of Savoy begins, leading up the valley of the Isère toward Chambéry. The Bastille is instantly recognizable by the notch corresponding to the large moat and by the vast glacis which protects it towards the dominating ridge. The fortified blockhouses that surrounded the Saint-Laurent portal lie at the foot of the slope. The almost vertical rampart and its moat are less clearly drawn. Construction of this defensive unit started at the beginning of the seventeenth century under the direction of Lesdiguières, Governor of the Dauphiné and Marshall of France under Henri IV and Louis XIII, but it was not refurbished by Vauban in the second half of the century (under Louis XIV). Later, on the orders of General Haxo, General Inspector of Border Fortifications under the Restoration and the July Monarchy, the fortification was completely transformed between 1823 and 1847. At some point in this construction period, Turner drew the wall and the moat though in a blurred fashion since it was not yet completed. Once finished, the construction work was angular. The ‘wall road’ shown descending the slope in hairpin bends to the east of the Bastille above the village of La Tronche is the rampart of the walled enclosure of Lesdiguières. Haxo’s fortification, then under construction, had not yet progressed to the point of destroying the older enclosure: its upper layout today roughly corresponds to the twisting hairpins of the present Bastille road (or ‘battery road’).

Fig. 3 *The Bastille at Grenoble from the Village of La Tronche, 1835-1840?* (W 1028), black chalk, pen and ink, watercolour and gouache on buff paper, 140 x 192 cm. © The Manchester Art Gallery, 1947.109

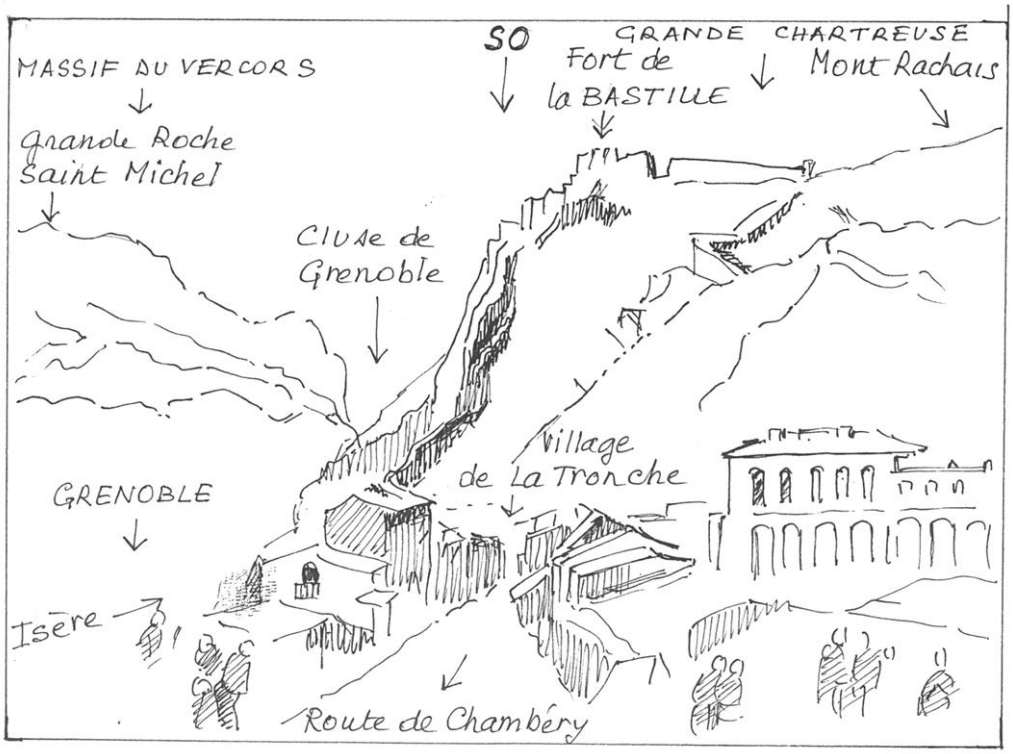

Fig. 4. Explanatory sketch of W 1028
(sketch by the author, after Turner).

Interpretation of the second work is much easier than the first (see fig. 4). Turner has positioned himself at the entrance to the village of La Tronche looking straight down the main street where the line of houses with their projecting low-pitched roofs is shown in some detail. The high ridge of Mount Rachais is seen from below. The rampart becomes almost vertical and the Bastille rises steeply in the sky. The resemblance of this scene to other fortified sites (an inexhaustible subject for Turner) long hindered the correct identification of these two scenes. The first was once believed to represent the site of St Martin's precipice near Innsbruck, and the second was identified as Sisteron (Nugent, 1996). Furthermore, none of Turner's sketchbook views of Grenoble shows the landscape to the north-east of the city. Most were taken from the south and west.

These watercolours could not have been made on Turner's first visit to this area, in 1802, for the fortifications did not then exist in the state in which he drew them. The engineering project inaugurated by Haxo could have been seen by Turner only on a second, much later, visit which took place between 1835 and 1840, when he was coming back from Italy to London, by Genoa, Nice, Aix-en-Provence and Sisteron. Since the project was not completed until 1847, the construction would have been unfinished – hence the curious drawing of the connecting rampart. This journey, recorded in Turner's sketchbook *Genoa to Grenoble* (TB CCXCV), inspired several separate drawings of Sisteron as he travelled through the area: TB CCCXLII 7, 8; W 1011-13 (Courtot, 2004); but, differently with the watercolours of Sisteron prepared by a lot of sketches, apparently the sketchbook CCCXLII no presents any sketch of the Bastille,

Comparing one of the two works under discussion with those of Sisteron, Nugent (1996, p. 100) rightly stated: 'It shares the same dimensions as these works and is on the same buff paper.' I would add that they present in general the same hues and intensities. Coming from Sisteron and arriving at Grenoble, Turner may have been struck by the similarity of their fortifications, both rising so magnificently more than 250 metres above the valleys they dominate. He may suddenly have seen the fort and its setting from an angle that he had missed on his first visit and been overwhelmed by its grandeur. These two superb depictions of the Bastille are the legacy of that moment of discovery.

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