

Light

Seeing

Looking



Friedrich
Turner



“In art, to express the infinite one should suggest infinitely more than is expressed”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Romanticism (Nature)

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From the Museum

**J.M.W. Turner:
Ulysses deriding Polyphemus - Homer's
Odyssey: 1829;**

National Gallery, London

**C.D. Friedrich:
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog: 1818;**

Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Ulysses deriding Polyphemus is an experiential painting that brilliantly illuminates the canvas using multiple focal points to simultaneously disperse original darkness and shine light on a deeper, multi-layered narrative. As the pioneering “painter of light”, Turner manages to both shine a reverent light on the old masters and provide a complete break from the past. His fundamental insight into the operations of light and colour as registers of cosmic meaning in combination with a scientifically enlightened and inquiring mind, superb technical skill and uncompromising sophistication with poetic leanings allowed him to interweave “many pictures within one picture”. The classical account of Ulysses escaping the Cyclops is therefore embellished with specific natural observations and symbolic connotations. Different sources of illumination are examined and details are infused with chromatic intensity: from the subterranean glow of volcanic fires breaking up the darkness on the far left, to the chemical light of surface phosphorescence allowing bow-wave frolicking Nereids to be visible at night (science rationalising the supernatural), to the all-encompassing celestial light of the rising sun on the right (Apollo and his horse-drawn chariot). Polyphemus is shown as a mountainous apparition of grey into blue above the bay, whereas Ulysses is shown moving towards a sun-lit jewel-like sky and away from both primal world darkness and the blinded Cyclops. In parallel with the heroic myth rhetoric, nature’s light, colour and visual chemistry are treated with heightened effects both to convey elemental truths and to celebrate light in all its complexity. Through Turner, everything lights and is lit and *colour is light broken up and put back together again within the context of “earth, fire, water and air”*.

Although Turner was fascinated by light and colour as building blocks of perception and gave nature’s drama the lead role in his subject paintings, he was equally committed to using landscape as a vehicle for the profoundest ruminations on the human condition, society and politics. Just as light can be viewed as an essential component to render visible any objective form, so too can myth be a window into the human condition and psyche. By incorporating both visions into this seascape, Turner’s images metaphorically link ideas in extended chains, thereby liberating landscape from merely a topographical register and create story and an atmosphere of mystery and riddle. Moreover, the strong assertion of the moral power of light over darkness juxtaposed with Ulysses outwitting Polyphemus teases us with autobiographical symbolism. According to Ruskin[#]: “Turner had been shut up by one-eyed people (critics) in a cave darkened by laurels (the critics’ use of his predecessors achievements) and had seen his companions (fellow artists) destroyed by critical attack, but he had stabbed these critics with a blazing-pine trunk (his profound knowledge of nature and light) to escape their clutches.”

Both Turner and Friedrich offer a complex interaction between observational perception and pictorial meaning with viewer as active participant. However, whereas Turner gives us “light” to see, Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* reminds us that how we “look” is also important. This mood-scape combines realistic elements with spiritual interpretation (*internal light*) and invites us to look *through* the wanderer’s eyes – forward facing and absorbed in the contemplation of nature – at the sublime (*personal introspection*). Friedrich’s *wanderer* stands on a mountain-top at the very edge of existence, confronted by a physical and emotional choice: he could end it all by hurling himself into the unknown or he could, like Turner, return to the world below – a changed man.

[#]: attributed to John Ruskin, leading 19th century English art critic.

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