

**TURNER AND LIGHT
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
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William Turner (1775-1851) is often referred to as "the painter of light." His dying words were "the Sun is God." John Ruskin proclaimed him the father of modern painting. The transformation of his early work to the works at the end of his life are a portent of what would become of Western art and philosophy, we moved from clear and precise definition unto ambiguity and impression. It is difficult to overvalue his art.

A few years ago, my wife and I drove to Boston to see an exhibit of Turner's work. Like the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, this exhibit of Turner's paintings was meant to create a path for you follow the arc of his career. You begin with the bucolic countryside of England and the canals of Venice with their dramatic contrast of buildings and water and sky. You end in a kind of haze. The ocean, the shore, the sunset, fog, all sense of definition is lost in the shifting quality of light. In the middle, though, there is a mix of both definition and ambiguity.

An example of this is a famous painting of Turner where a slave ship is sinking in the ocean. There is a fire and debris, waves are tempestuous. You can make out a donkey in the swirl. And yet there is often no clear demarcation where the sea and the wind and sky begin and end. You can make out a part of the sinking ship, but not clearly. Into this social critique of slavery and the economy of empire, with the introduction of ambiguity, Turner created beauty. The painting is stunning, intoxicating, mesmerizing. John Ruskin owned this painting and always traveled with it. It was as if life should not be lived without such beauty.

Even though the style of his work changed dramatically during the course of his life, the common thread of light binds them together. This is not a new insight. The path to Turner's paintings as a study of light is well worn. What I found though was how his consideration of light, be it in clarity or ambiguity, was a powerful way of understanding the relationship between memory and beauty.

When I combined Proust's sense of time with Ruskin's lamps of architecture, and then considered Turner's long obsession with light, what came clear in their relationship was how beauty illumines memory.

Memory is alive, able to come and go in us. Some memories are good, and some are bad. How often have we been in a room and there is a sound, a smell, a quality of light and then a memory comes to us. Again, sometimes memory is a welcome guest. I remember being surprised by the power of the wind and the water and light of Lake Ontario. As a man in his fifties, I would all of sudden become a boy of eight on the beaches of San Diego. It was if I had been transported, caught up and cast to a time long past. There were multiple factors conjuring the memory, but I always felt it was a quality of light which came to me, illumined my memory. And this light was beautiful.

Some memories are ugly. A misdeed, a failure, a moment of shame comes over us and pierces any joy letting all the light escape. How and why this terrible memory came to intrude on our living of the day is often the question of therapeutic counseling: why are you stuck in this memory, this particular moment of suffering? And what is healing of the soul if it is not the freedom to see and hear the painful parts of life and not lose joy, to not be overwhelmed by the darkness?

If we consider William Turner not simply as the painter of light but as the one who demonstrated or expressed the power of light to bring beauty to memory, there is a great gift to be found. For with his paintings can also be placed sculpture and music, poetry and prose, architecture and landscape. Any and all forms of art, from dance to meditation, all attempt to find beauty can become the light illuminating our memories.

It is the purposeful pursuit of such light which renders the monument, museum, and memorial more than stacked stones or portraits and images. The Sherman/Victory monument in Manhattan is both an accurate representation. Saint-Gaudens has captured the likeness and life of Sherman. One gets a sense from his gaze that he is both frenzied and in complete control, his life is a contradiction of order and chaos. And yet beside him is the African American model who has become Nike, she is carrying the frond of the victorious and leads Sherman as he rides South. Here the statue becomes hazy as it were. Is this Saint-Gaudens way of saying what could not be said, "the war for the union was the fight for emancipation." Is the gilding a matter of beauty or is it a critique of the deep complicity of all the states: gold equals greed. The only victory was the economy. The beauty of the statue can illumine us, illumine the past as well as the present.

William Turner's light revealing the beauty of the city, the shore, the sunset, the field, like so many of the Hudson River School painters to follow him with their enormous skies drawing the viewer into a quality of life, a primitive and primordial time, Turner's capturing of light is a poetic moment. What he captures is the possibility of illumination. In the same way Proust captures the possibility of memory regained, time restored. In this way the monument can become a bringer of light: we have seen truth here with this one. What truth? How? Have we lost sight of it or has this light been cut off from sight and cast into oblivion?

Within such light memory is seen by the power of beauty and we are restored.