

# TURNER AND THE SUBLIME<sup>1</sup>

## LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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Anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind ... Sublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings – greatness, whether of matter, space, power, virtue, or beauty: and there is perhaps no desirable quality of a work of art, which, in its perfection, is not, in some way or degree, sublime.<sup>2</sup>

The grotesque which comes to all men in a disturbed dream is the intelligible example of this kind but also the most ignoble; The imagination, in this instance, being entirely deprived of all aid from reason, and incapable of self-government. I believe, however, that the noblest forms of imaginative power are also in some sort ungovernable, and have in them something of the character of dreams; so that the vision, of whatever kind, comes uncalled, and will not submit itself to the seer, but conquers him, and forces him to speak as a prophet, having no power over his words or thoughts.<sup>3</sup>  
—John Ruskin

The great and the grotesque are two ways in which we may encounter the sublime.

**sublime** (sə'blaim), a and sb. [ad L. *sublimis* . . .]. **A.** Adj.

4. Of ideas, truths, subjects, etc: Belonging to the highest regions of thought, reality, or human activity.

5. Of person, their attributes, feelings, actions: standing high above others by reason of nobility or grandeur of nature or character; of high intellectual, moral, or spiritual level. Passing into a term of high commendation: Supreme, perfect.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220#fn\\_1\\_7](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220#fn_1_7). Both quotes to follow are from this essay. The citations are as they appeared in the essay.

<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, 'Modern Painters', in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, London and New York 1903–12, vol.3, p.128.

<sup>3</sup> See George P. Landow, 'The Triumph of the Innocents', *Replete with Meaning: William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism*, New Haven and London 1979, <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/whh/replete/triumph.html>, accessed 20 August 2009; Ruskin in Cook and Wedderburn 1903–12, vol.11, p.178.

7. Of things in nature and art: Affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.

The two ways of encountering the sublime (greatness and the grotesque) were radical ideas in 19th century when John Ruskin suggested God is found in each and that sublimity was not necessarily that which is defined. In the later paintings of William Turner as his focus became more and more about light itself, Ruskin argued that such paintings were sublime in so far as they lacked definition. To put it crassly, the blurrier the painting the more sublime.

In his earlier paintings, Turner's subjects were grand in scale, massive paintings which were meant to "inspire awe." The paintings were grand or great in scale and scope. Yet, as he grew more and more focused on the lack of definition, on how we are immersed in the light, how boundlessness and a lack of definition could create vastness and thus a grandeur of light, the sublime became associated with ambiguity. Where the sublime before was a definition and attributes of clarity above others, now to be sublime was a lack clarity, to be neither above or below.

After Turner died, Ruskin would develop a second category for the sublime, the grotesque. Prior to Ruskin this category was associated with evil or wickedness. Yet, in the light of great tragedy, both constructed by humankind or brought by the force of nature, the sublime in devastation came to be seen as what can be captured in art. Suffering too could be sublime.

Where the grotesque differed from the ambiguity of vastness was twofold. Where the loss of clear definition in the sublimity of unbounded light was seen in ambiguity, the encounter of tragedy in the grotesque brought a definition of great clarity. There was violence here; there was suffering here. While the grotesque need not be blatant or simply explicit, it does need to embody a wildness, an unyielding to a degree beyond our imagination. As light was grand, so was unfathomable darkness.

In our consideration of monuments and memorials, these modern definitions of the sublime are important after the Holocaust. In the earliest of memorials to the unfathomable loss of six million Jews, symbols and realism and clarity failed to grasp the magnitude. The art created to remember the victims drew heavily on a sublime usage of lightness and darkness. The void became a defining aspect of design (or the absence of design as it were). At Yad Vashem in Jerusalem the expression of loss in the flash of light, a brief light, an extinguished light was meant to represent the children of the Holocaust. In a glass globe with a glass floor without any light, pure darkness, a light flashes a name of a child and then fades as quickly as their brief life.

In this and other features, Yad Vashem invites you into grief without narrative, without image, without symbol. Here you are immersed in tragedy and your grief, your sense of despair becomes the offering, the gift of what is owed.

You can see this sensibility in the "wall" in the mall for the Vietnam Veterans. The only image is of yourself reflected on the black polished granite. You are temporarily etched, engraved in the loss. Yet, where the ambiguous and the grotesque find their greatest example is in the cascading waterfalls leading to the abyss and the 9-11 Memorial. The design was chosen for the express purpose that people are invited into the flow of water, they are not comforted, they do not see the end (meaning) of the water flowing away. And it is compounded. There is a falling and then another falling, and then as if it were incomplete in its lack of definition, there is an implied third loss. Like the "wall" the only story and definition is in the names of those who died.

The cascading waterfalls leading to an abyss are certainly ambiguous in the sense that they are not violent, they are not heroic, they are not even about tragedy alone. Water is a symbol of life, of healing, as well as a symbol of death and chaos. Hence the material itself is ambiguous in its contradiction. And yet, it is very clearly an image of loss. The absence of the former towers, an inverted form of them as it were, this is the undeniably grotesque form of the sublime.

What is important for us to consider is the way the waterfalls create a place for offering, for gift, tribute, at whatever level or value you can bring. By their ambiguity and their absence the waterfalls allows the one who brings a personal grief to be joined by those who carry the collective grief of the generations to follow.

