

## From Samuel Palmer's Virgilian Idyll to Caspar David Friedrich's Tragic Landscape

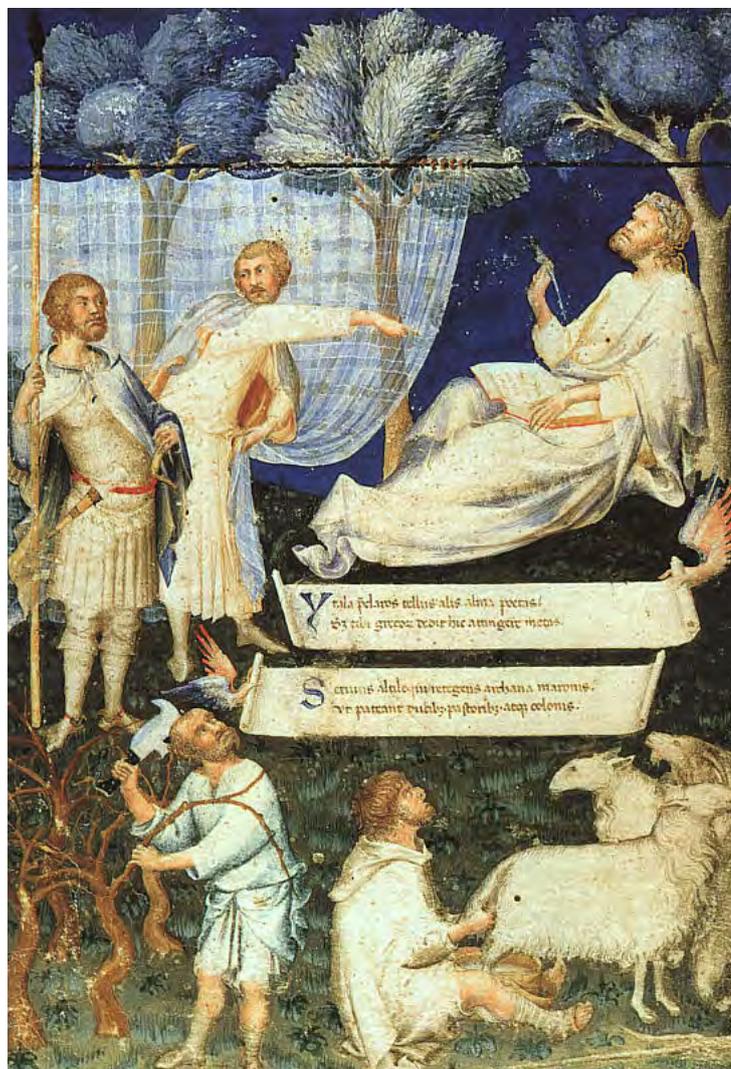
As recognisable to contemporary art lovers I dare say, as Constable's *Haywain*, or Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire*, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Mist*, is Germany's equivalent of a National icon, as of course is its painter, Caspar David Friedrich, Germany's greatest Romantic painter. And whilst there are similarities, especially with *The Haywain*, the contemplation of God's work through the eyes of a believer, rather than Constable's work of benign Nature, Friedrich's *Wanderer* puts us firmly in the position of the apparently out-of-place, well-dressed city gentleman with his cane, looking out over a 'Sublime' scene, with mountains in the distance and rocky summits projecting through the sea of mist. Here there is an open question; the painter leaves it to the viewer to find dimensions of meaning for the *Wanderer* and himself. The appeal is addressed in good questioning Protestant fashion to the individual's mind, rather as the metaphysical poet, John Donne, a Roman Catholic, turned somewhat reluctant Anglican, whose fear of death and the unknown, drove him to forensically examine his faith in his sonnets.



*The Wanderer above a Sea of Mist*, 1818, oil on canvas, 30x37 inches, Kunsthalle, Hamburg

The *Wanderer* stands on the brink, confronting a void, which might just as easily fulfil expectations as arouse fears. Seen only from behind, the questioning posture of the figure remains open, not predisposed to one answer more than another. Perhaps the man is concerned less with external experiences than with internal ones, examined under the Gaze of the 'Inner Eye', to which the painter was so fond of referring. It can be seen as an image of the 'Universal man', confronted by his own vulnerability, questioning his very existence within the context of a Creator's universe, way beyond his comprehension.

Of course the idea of viewing the world from the top of a mountain, was not one that appealed to man until the early Renaissance. Like the forest, such places were associated with fear and danger during the Middle Ages. Petrarch (1304-74), the owner of a copy of Virgil, the cover page of which was painted by Simone Martini, was probably the first man to express the emotion upon which the existence of landscape so largely depends, the desire to escape from the turmoil of the city into the peace of the countryside. He went to live in the solitude of Vacluse, not as a Cistercian monk would have done, in order to renounce his life on earth, but in order to enjoy it all the more. He was also the first man, or so the story goes, that climbed a mountain for its own sake, to enjoy the view from the summit, something we now take for granted, but one must remember in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there was no imperative to climb a mountain, either for work, or enjoyment.



*Title Page of a copy of Virgil's Poetry, 1344, Simone Martini, Biblioteca Ambrosiana*

After he had feasted his eyes for a few minutes on the distant prospect of the Alps, the Mediterranean and the Rhone at his feet, it occurred to him to open his copy of St Augustine's *Confessions*. His eyes fell upon the following passage, "And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountain, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not." And yet after his descent to the bottom, he was angry with himself for admiring earthly things, when in actuality, nothing is more wonderful than the human soul, which when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself.

Fast forwarding to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is with this same intense spirituality that Samuel Palmer, the English 19<sup>th</sup> century painter, expressed a vision in an uncompromising symbolic language. Like Wordsworth, Palmer invested Nature with a spiritual quality; but whereas Wordsworth took his point of departure in the senses and deduced the presence of God in everything he

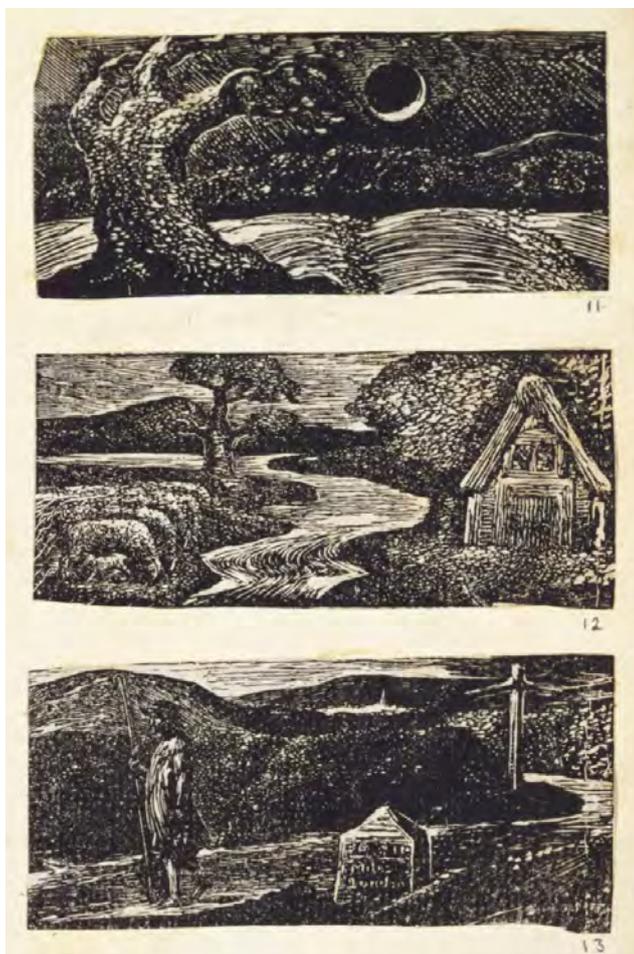
saw, Palmer saw first with the spiritual eye and in so doing found every blade of grass, leaf and cloud was designed according to God's pattern. It was the vision of the Middle Ages, the landscape of symbols, updated to the needs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and not too wild a notion that it anticipated the landscape painting of Vincent van Gogh, who also had a deeply held spiritual conviction and found a unique way to express his colourful visions of Nature.



*A Hilly Scene*, 1826, Samuel Palmer, tempera and gum Arabic on paper, 8x5 inches, Tate Britain.

From his birth in 1805 to his death in 1881, the span of Palmer's life covered a good part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, encompassing the huge societal upheaval in the countryside associated with the Industrial Revolution, much enabled by the Enclosure Acts, which drove hundreds of thousands off the land into the mines, iron foundries and mills etc. In 1823, when he was eighteen, he forsook his parent's staunch Baptist faith to become an Anglican, although he remained more a non-conformist by inclination. In 1837, he married the daughter of his mentor John Linnell, a Baptist convert.

Palmer, like Constable, retained throughout his life an intense love of the English countryside and a resistance to change in the social order; his was definitely not painting of a social revolutionary character. He was educated largely at home, his nurse Mary Ward, fostering in him his greatest love, the poetry of Milton; the bond between the two strengthened when his mother died in 1818. A drawing tutor, William Wates was employed shortly afterwards and a painting exhibited at the British Institution was sold when he was but fourteen.



*Engravings for Thornton's Virgil Pastoral Eclogues*, William Blake, V&A

To all intensive purposes, Palmer was almost entirely self-taught and boldly experimental, although not always successfully so. His introduction to William Blake by John Linnell in 1824 was a seminal moment. At the time, Blake had been working on a series of wood engravings to illustrate *Virgil's Pastoral Eclogues* and it was these images that encouraged Palmer to concentrate on extracting the essence of the landscape, not fearing to be guided by his emotional response.

By 1826 Palmer had purchased a property at Shoreham in Kent and it was there that he became associated with George Richmond, Edward Calvert and crucially Blake himself, under the banner of 'The Ancients.' Shoreham Village and the surrounding countryside inspired a vision of landscape so intense as to have an almost hallucinatory quality. *A Hilly Scene*, was amongst his earliest and most successful works at Shoreham. The flanking trees on either side of the path leading to the church form a Gothic Arch overhead, as if the very forms of Nature cannot help revealing their spiritual character.



*In a Shoreham Garden*, 1829, Palmer, watercolour and body colour, 11x9 inches, V&A

Palmer's mystical vision of Shoreham rarely included any reference to the hard times being experienced by local peasant farmers, who in both 1828 and 1829 experienced very poor harvests. Most of Palmer's neighbours would have been finding life very tough. Many would have been happy to join the seventy families from the Weald that emigrated in 1827. Palmer claimed to 'love our fine British peasantry', but one suspects that Linnell his much older friend and mentor may have become exasperated at his blithe indifference to the hardships being experienced by all around him.

An image of springtime, the Blossoming fruit tree with a profusion of blobs of dense white body-colour depicted in, *In a Shoreham Garden* and the woman in the distance, is a thinly veiled reference to the Garden of Eden; that much more obvious, when one discerns the serpent entwined around a garden stake in the right foreground.



*Coming Home from Evening Church*, 1830, Palmer, mixed media on gesso paper, 12x8 inches, Tate Britain.

Although *Coming Home from Evening Church* has the inscription 'Shoreham', the village church did not have a spire at all and Palmer is in effect depicting an idealised religious community. The 'flock' are the metaphorical sheep evoked in the New Testament Gospels, filing out of church in a stately procession led by a married couple with children and grandparents, the model nucleus of a settled society. Further back near the door stands a robed clergyman.

Hardly had the paint dried on Palmer's idealised and sanctified rural life, when a much harsher reality began to erupt all around him. In July 1830, a wave of riots broke out across Southern England, beginning in Kent, undoubtedly encouraged by the July Revolution in Paris, adding fuel to the expectation of what might be achieved by a popular uprising. In 1832, in the parliamentary election in which the Great Reform Act was first implemented, Palmer's reaction was to print a pamphlet in which he accused any reform supporters of Jacobinism, predicting the imminent collapse of British civilisation, if the Tory candidate was not selected.



*The Gleaning Field*, 1833, Palmer, tempera on panel, 12x18 inches, Tate Britain.

Palmer's flocks of sheep, harvest moons and trees weighed down with fruit, symbolise a passionate conviction that the good life can only be lived in terms of pastoral simplicity. There are few references to the back-breaking toil of the peasant farmer. *The Gleaning Field* is one such painting in which the viewer does see a group of women, stooping to gather

such leavings as they can find after the harvest has been completed, but these figures appear to be little more than 'Staffage.' Peter Bruegel's, *The Harvesters*, of 1565, illustrated below, one of six paintings of the renowned series of the seasons, or more likely an engraving thereof, may have been an influence.

To convince the viewer in *The Gleaning Field* that this was indeed an eye witness account, Palmer has positioned in the left foreground a small still-life of a hat, staff, cider flagon and a bundle. It is as if a traveller, himself no doubt, acknowledges through these attributes that he is an outsider, an observer of a world of which he is not truly a part. And indeed how could he be, when either so blind, or apparently uncaring of the plight and welfare of his fellow much less fortunate human beings.



Around the time of *The Gleaning Field*, Palmer had reached a crossroads in his career. Agricultural unrest and political upheaval had dented his youthful optimism. Furthermore, whilst up to now financially independent and confident of his own abilities, the failure to achieve any meaningful recognition by the artistic establishment now became a pressing concern. His previous apparent insouciance did not preclude a burning ambition to cause a revolution of his own through his art.

However, to achieve this, he needed at the very least to have his work exhibited and if he was going to win over the critics and patrons on whom his future depended, he must impress them not only with his imaginative powers, but with his technical ability, an area in which he was feeling increasingly vulnerable. Coincidentally, his older friend and mentor Linnell's success with his more technically advanced landscape paintings and Palmer's interest in marrying Linnell's fifteen-year-old daughter Hannah, changed the outlook completely. This then was the moment to bid farewell to the 'Valley of

Vision.’ So it was then, that after marrying the nineteen-year-old Hannah in 1837, the couple embarked for Italy, where over the space of two years, Palmer wrestled with the problems of finding a style, which matched the grandeur of the unfolding spectacles and which constantly challenged his limited compositional ability. Up to then, his paintings were modest by Royal Academy exhibition standards, almost insignificant and therein lay part of the problem; how to scale up his paintings, while retaining their technical underpinnings. It was only decades later, in the 1860s, after twenty years of patiently representing and reformulating cherished notions of about rural life and the visual language appropriate to portray it, did he become acknowledged as the leading exponent of the imaginative landscape; indeed, one might almost say the only exponent, as this was virtually a one-man crusade.

In 1864, he was commissioned by Ruskin’s solicitor L.R. Valpy to produce a series of watercolours based on Milton’s *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, two poems whose themes have been neatly summarised as ‘mirth and melancholy.’ Valpy gave Palmer freedom to choose his own subjects and the painter opted for texts that had the distinction of having been recommended in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by none other than Joshua Reynolds, as being full of suggestive imagery for landscape painters. The eight works form a summation of Palmer’s entire career as a landscape painter. He deliberately combined images from Shoreham, Devon, Buckinghamshire and Italy to create an idealised world that mirrored that of Claude, though without imitating it. *A Dream in the Apennine*, a topographical view, depicting a panorama of Rome from the South-East, is described as a vision. It is one of his largest and most successful watercolours and is very densely painted in a mixture of watercolour and bodycolour; that is watercolour mixed with opaque white.



*A Dream in the Apennine*, 1864, Samuel Palmer, watercolour and gouache, 26x40 inches, Tate Britain

Samuel Palmer’s art throughout his life appears to have been a struggle to reconcile inner and outer worlds. His view of Nature through the lens of nostalgia, was deeply imbedded in his memories of childhood, spent in the presence of his pious nurse, Mary Ward. It was she that first instilled the love of Milton and he attributed to her much of his future course as a painter and what he had glimpsed as a child, he did not abandon in later life.

‘When less than four years old, as I was standing with her, watching shadows on the wall from the branches of an old elm behind which the moon had risen, she transferred and fixed the fleeting image in my memory by repeating the couplet: Vain man, the vision of a moment made, Dream of a dream and shadow of a shade. I never forgot those shadows and am often trying to paint them.’

It was inevitable that Palmer’s compositional and technically archaic style should be out of favour in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, such was the rapid developments taking place in painting, with first the Pre-Raphaelites and then the advent of first Millet and Courbet’s Social Realism, and long before he died in 1881, the revolution of Impressionism. His was essentially a lonely journey along one of the side-roads of 19<sup>th</sup> century painting. However, paradoxically it is their very archaic, almost childish quality, especially typical of his Shoreham paintings, that delight and thoroughly captivate today’s viewer.

The more universally known German master, Caspar David Friedrich, born in 1774, just one year before Turner and two before Constable, completes the triad of the most important of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic landscape painters. His birthplace was Griefswald, Swedish Pomerania, on the Baltic coast of Germany. One of eight children, he was brought up in the strict Lutheran tradition of his father, a soap-boiler and candle-maker. His mother died when he was but seven and as a young child, he knew further repeated family tragedy, with the death of two sisters and even more traumatic, the death of his younger brother, Johann Christoffer, who fell through the ice of a frozen lake and drowned; some accounts suggest that Johann perished while trying to rescue Caspar, who was also in danger on the lake.

In terms of artistic training, home drawing lessons were followed by studies at the Copenhagen Academy from 1794-8 and then entry to the Dresden Academy exhibition in 1799, followed by Weimar exhibition in 1805. But it was the exhibition in 1808 of *The Tetschen Altar* in his Dresden studio, which brought him his first major recognition.

Friedrich’s figure of the ‘Wanderer’ might be compared to its literary equivalent, in Rene de Chateaubriand’s *Genie du Christianisme* (1802), where the French writer uses the same metaphor for man’s journey through life:

‘Man is suspended in the present, between the past and the future, as if on a rock between two chasms. Behind and ahead, all is darkness; he can scarcely make out the phantoms that rise up from the bottom of both abysses, float for a moment on the surface and then dive back down again.’

What the poet’s words share with the painter’s image is their climate of isolation and uncertainty. Chateaubriand proposed a new iconography of landscape and argued indirectly for the humble genre to be revalued. In the absence of French painters to take up the gauntlet, it was the German Romantics and specifically Friedrich, who took up the challenge to use mystical landscape as a metaphor for the craving of human beings to come to terms with their existential search for the meaning of life and their destiny.

Friedrich’s first major success, *The Tetschen Altar*, quickly became an icon of German Romantic art. The carved figure of Christ on a cross, silhouetted against a blood-red sun-set sky appears to be suspended in limbo, between earth and heaven. Countess von Thun-Hohenstein had seen a sepia of a *Cross in the Mountains* at the Dresden Academy in 1807 and commissioned Friedrich to paint a panel for the altar in the private chapel in Schloss Tetschen. When exhibited in Dresden in 1808, according to one viewer: ‘It cast a spell on everyone who entered the room. The loudest chatterboxes lowered their voices as if they were in a church.’ Nevertheless, the painting was not above criticism, most specifically some critics drew attention to the paintings divergence from the conventions of central perspective and its somewhat archaic appearance. Friedrich conceded that he had indeed departed from one of the central tenets of academic painting, as he had depicted a conglomerate of different sensory detail to convey his meaning, instead of a coherent ‘natural visual space’, he could not take

advantage of the illusionism, which the painters of Catholic Europe had used since the Counter-Reformation to represent miraculous acts in dramatic naturalistic detail.



*The Cross in the Mountains, The Tetschen Altar*, 1808, oil on canvas, Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.

Examining the image in greater detail, the sunset is stripped of its transitory nature and made transcendent, becoming three, or four rays of light, thus achieving eternal symbolic power. These sharply defined rays of light avoid the central axis of the image, as do the rocks and trees, all being organised in a markedly asymmetrical manner. The cross, too, is placed off the central axis and the red tinged clouds are in harmony with the rise and fall of the rounded pinnacle of rock. The curve of the clouds follow the semi-circular frame, made by the Dresden sculptor Gottlieb Kuhn to a design prescribed by Friedrich and is meticulously executed with all the regularity that the painting avoids. There are the heads of five angels appearing from amongst palm branches, all looking down on the cross. The evening star lies above the middle angel in purest shining silver and at the bottom, in an oblong panel, the all-seeing eye of God, is enclosed by the holy trigon, representing Father, Son and Holy Ghost, surrounded with rays.

The Protestant Friedrich did not invite the viewer to see anything especially visionary, or supernatural in his painting, but compensated for this by transferring the supernatural element that our empirical vision cannot see, to the picture frame, where it takes the form of Christian Symbols. In other words, like elaborate Renaissance altars, the detail on the frame is providing not only a decorative function, but of at least equal importance, supplementary information, which is in itself to be viewed as an essential part of the painting, amplifying the central message.

Arguably *The Tetschen Altar* both looks back to the Middle Ages before perspective and forward to the modern era and the end of perspective. The painting is not tied to a specific context, although it has something of the appearance of an altarpiece, it was not necessarily restricted to a chapel and as it transpired, could even be hung in a bedroom, where it would become a focus for personal devotion. Similarly, the characteristics of its form and content are such as to evade categorisation in any traditional genre, for it occupies a new area between landscape and a sacred picture. The phrase '**Landscape as an Icon**' was coined to describe this hybrid role, in other words, landscape as a vehicle for religious meditation, even if now more symbolic in nature.

In 1810, Friedrich submitted two paintings to the annual exhibition of the Prussian Academy in Berlin, being listed in the catalogue as landscapes in oils. These were *The Monk by the Sea* and *The Abbey in the Wood*. It was this exhibition that gave Friedrich his 'breakthrough.'



*The Monk by the Sea*, 1809, oil on canvas, 43x67 inches, National Gallery, Berlin

Despite their sombre tone, the Crown Prince persuaded his father Frederick William III to buy both paintings. The Prussian Royal Academy confirmed Friedrich's status when it elected him as a member in 1811. In *The Monk by the Sea*, the three elements in the picture are the dunes, the sea and the sky and in between them the human figure, a vertical line, which both separates and connects, but only the dunes and sea; the sky occupies a little over four fifths of the canvas. The remainder is divided into the strips of the dark sea and in strong contrast, the sand dunes, the colour of bleached bone. Never before had a painter juxtaposed such elements so soberly, so close together and yet so little connected. The figure, the monk, probably an inferred self portrait, stands on the highest point of the dunes looking out to sea and in a compositional position, where the monk's habit divides the width of the picture exactly by the Golden Ratio; was this chance, intuition, or calculation.



*Self-portrait*, 1810, chalk, 9x7 inches  
Berlin

The key to the painter's meaning is the fact that the monk is a self-portrait. In the above self-portrait, his last, he drew himself with the habit and features of a monk, gazing intently, with an almost crazed intensity, one side of the face in shadow and the other in light. Does this indicate some inner angst? The childhood incident, where his brother drowned, would have been a harrowing and unforgettable experience, which added to Friedrich's innately gloomy disposition and a profound dissatisfaction with his own achievements, may have resulted in suicidal thoughts, most likely to have been precipitated during his early years in Dresden. Add to this the Romantic, self-examining sensibilities of the age, where Goethe's prose translation of certain passages from *The Songs of Ossian*, seem especially apt:

'It is night: I am alone, forlorn on the hill of storms.  
The wind is heard in the mountain.  
The torrent pours down the rock.  
No hut receives me from the rain;  
forlorn on the hills of wind!'

Combined with Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-44) and some gloomy verse about graveyards and hermits, is reached the common literary ground, from which Friedrich and his contemporaries learned to think of Nature as intensified into something more terrible. The theoretical basis upon which these thoughts might be realised came from Edmund Burke's *Philosophical enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757, a German edition having been published in 1773. What Burke relates there about the 'uniformity, vastness and endlessness of deserts, seashores and threatening clouds', reads like a commentary on *The Monk by the Sea*. Schiller analysed the mixed feeling, 'delightful horror', in his essay on the Sublime, *Über das Erhabene*: 'It is a compound of unease, expressed in the highest degree as terror and joy, capable of intensifying to delight, and although it is not really pleasure, it is much preferred to any pleasure by fine souls.' The paradox of two contradictory sensations, 'delightful horror' in one single emotion is an irrefutable proof of our moral independence. This independence is demonstrated when, instead of experiencing the sublime as a physical threat, we create it as the object of our imagination, as an act of free contemplation. Friedrich does just this when he paints his alter ego as a monk by the sea, exposed to the threat of Nature.



*The Abbey in the Oak Wood*, 1809, oil on canvas, 43x67 inches, Nationalgalerie, Berlin



*The Abbey in the Oak Wood*, is a much more complex painting, with infinitely more detail. The ruins of a Gothic abbey surrounded by leafless, possibly dead oak trees rise above the misty horizon into the early morning sky. Within a wintry world, in the foreground is a snowbound, forlorn cemetery, with grave stones and crosses askew. A group of monks, stand, muffled up against the cold, in front of a barely visible Crucifix, brought together possibly for the burial of a brother. The juxtaposition of the bare oak trees, with an appearance of symmetry on either side of the Gothic edifice, may be a reference to the pagan past.

From both these paintings, Friedrich invented the structures,

which from then on would embody the concept of the **'Tragic Landscape.'** He would continue to explore this theme in paintings such as *Winter Landscape with Church*, where again we see the lone figure of a man, seated leaning against a rock, having abandoned his crutches, hands clasped, praying in front of a cross next to a fir tree.



*Winter Landscape with Church*, 1811, oil on canvas, 13x17 inches, Dortmund

In the background, rising through the mist of an early wintry morning, the spires of a fantasy Gothic church, loom up mirroring the fir trees in the foreground. The crutches dispensed in the snow, lead the viewer's attention to the reclining figure and then once identified, the cross becomes apparent. It might almost be a Christmas card scene, until one notes the cross and the poignancy of the image. The praying man does not look at the church and does not appear to need it. The rock of faith, the crucifix and the trees are shelter enough. This sense of shelter stems from the power of prayer and from the relinquishing of the 'Church' as a mediator, the central tenets of the Protestant faith.



*Chalk Cliffs on Rungen*, 1818, oil on canvas, 36x28 inches, Kunst Museum, Winterthur

In January 1818, Friedrich married Christiane Caroline Bommer, who was about twenty years his junior; they subsequently had three children. On their honeymoon in the Summer they visited relatives in Neubrandenburg and his home town of Griefswald. From there the couple undertook an excursion

to the Baltic island of Rungen with Friedrich's brother, Christian. The *Chalk Cliffs on Rungen* appears to be a celebration of the couple's union. Friedrich's portrayal of a seemingly idyllic afternoon of seaside sightseeing is one of the least melancholy works painted by him. Unsurprisingly it was executed during a brief period of hope, both in the painter's personal life and in the political life of the fledgling German nation. The figure on the left in the red is undoubtedly his wife, with his brother Christian leaning against a tree, gazing out into the distance. Kneeling between the two, Friedrich, having taken off his hat and laid down his stick, is seen peering carefully over the edge into the abyss below. Whereas Caroline represents his personal life, the figure of Christian may be speaking to the wider political context. Dressed in the old German costume of the student fraternities, that formed in the wake of the Congress of Vienna on the model of the anti-Napoleonic freedom corps, this figure may represent the liberal nationalists who, at the time were still basking in Frederick William's III's promise of constitutional reform.

Despite its hopeful mood, the canvas exhibits many of the hallmarks of early Romantic painting: the close almost overly detailed observation of Nature; the dramatic framing that somehow gives the picture the feel of an enticing, but unattainable view through an open window and Friedrich's unmistakable intimation of a deeper spiritual meaning. But for all its apparently innocent and cheerful spontaneity, the image of newly-weds exploring the edge of a precipice may also be read as a metaphor, for the challenges and dangers that lie ahead. As the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote to his bride in 1809: 'As joyful and light-hearted as you first seemed to me, frolicking around me on the edge of a precipice picking flowers, so will you frolic with me on the edge of this ominous time and wrest from it whatever it may offer.'



*Moonrise over the Sea*, 1822, oil on canvas, 22x29 inches, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

*Moonrise over the Sea*, is an early evening, moonlit scene, in which we see three seated figures looking out over a calm Baltic sea with two sailing ships approaching the shore. It's a quiet scene and whilst it features Friedrich's favourite almost symmetrical composition, it lacks the steep mountains, or melodramatic clouds of many other works. Facing into the picture, Friedrich's motionless, reverent figures have long been seen as surrogates for the viewer. They grant us our privacy, while maintaining their own in the contemplation of Nature's inspiring and indifferent grandeur. During the early 1820s, human figures appear with increasing frequency in his paintings. Of this period, Linda Siegel writes, 'the importance of human life, particularly his family now occupies his thoughts more and more and his friends appear as frequent subjects in his work.' In Friedrich's depiction of couples, Enlightenment worldliness is transformed into silent contemplation.



*The Lone Tree*, 1822, oil on canvas, 18x22 inches, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

*Moonrise over the Sea*, was one of two paintings commissioned by the art collector Joachim Heinrich Wilhelm Wagener, which formed a complimentary pair of morning and evening scenes, the morning painting being, *The Lone Tree*, a bright morning scene overlooking a sweeping valley, with a village nestling in the valley beyond and just one human being in sight. With these two paintings, Friedrich was playing to the spiritual core of Romantic art, the tide, the cycles of the day and night, of beginning and end, birth and death.

So far, little has been said about the socio-political background to Friedrich's career. The defeat of Napoleon in Russia and his final demise at Waterloo by the combined forces of British and Prussian troops, gave those wishing for the unification of Germanic states into Nationhood a degree of hope. However, this aspiration was dashed at the 1815 Congress of Vienna, where the three non German

monarchs, the English as King of Hannover, the Danish as Duke of Holstein and the Dutch as Grand Duke of Holstein agreed only to the institution of a phantom state consisting of thirty-eight members, thirty-four German states and four free cities, Frankfurt, Bremen, Hamburg and Lubeck, in other words a loose Confederation. Like many Germans, Friedrich was bitterly disappointed by the outcome, if not embittered. Even at the height of the post-liberation euphoria, he had no illusions and foresaw the retreat into half measures, which would follow joyful proclamations.

The centre of resistance to restoration of the old institutions was in the associations of university students. The assassination of the playwright and diplomat, August von Kotzebue, in the pay of Alexander I, by the theology student Karl Ludwig Sand on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1819, gave the establishment reactionary forces an excuse to put public life in the member states under the vigilance of a police state. Kotzebue edited a weekly newspaper in which he had poured scorn on the liberal, intellectual camp. The crack-down took the form of a new university law regulating disciplinary and surveillance measures and a press law did away with the 'pernicious principle of press freedom.' And censorship for all publication was reintroduced for all printed matter.

So, how did Friedrich go about turning patriotism into Art?



*Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise*, 1817, oil on canvas, 20x26 inches, National Gallery, Berlin.

In truth, Friedrich's response was carefully calibrated, with strict censorship it had to be. The two men with their backs to us are looking out to sea; their tricorne hats probably a reference to the *Burschenschaften*, the association of university students, with whom Friedrich had considerable sympathy. Their presence on the horizon join all three strata of the painting, land, sea and sky.

As is more often, than not, Friedrich is involving us as the surrogate viewer; are they looking forward to a more liberal, democratic future. In fact, the foundation of a German Nation State, the German Empire, would have to wait until 1871, in the aftermath of Prussia's decisive victory over France in the 1870-1 Franco-Prussian War.

On the personal level, Friedrich's marriage to the much younger Caroline Bommer, introduced him to a more conventional bourgeois life, which in turn changed the direction of his art. His pensive quietude became more contemplative, but his feeling of loneliness was somewhat relieved. Nevertheless, his thoughts on married life, even at the beginning are not altogether a resounding endorsement. In a letter to his relatives in Griefswald he wrote in a whimsical letter:

'It's a droll business, when a fellow has a wife; it's droll having a household, be it ever so small; it seems droll to me when my wife summons me to the table at noon....Much has changed now I have a wife . My old simple domestic arrangements are in several ways no longer recognisable and I am pleased to say my house looks cleaner and neater now. Only in my room where I work is everything still as it was. Everything has changed: formerly my room was my spittoon, now I am directed to spit in little dishes put there for the purpose. But my love of cleanliness and neatness is happy to comply.'



**Woman at the Window**, 1822, oil on canvas, 17x14 inches, National Gallery Berlin.

Marriage brought a woman into Friedrich's life and womankind more frequently into his work. He painted Caroline not in a formal portrait, instead protecting her from inquisitive stares, by showing her from behind, or in *profil perdu*. It gives her quiet grace a radiance we might call aura. She assumes all the hallmarks of a prototype, a mystery on which the viewer may project their thoughts. The extent to which his wife was part of him and his four walls is clear from a letter he wrote on her birthday, when she was away visiting friends, when he described the silence as being akin to emptiness and how he would not want to have such quietness around him always. **Woman at a Window** dates from around the time of this letter. The organisation of the composition is akin to a double triptych, where first the walls on either side frame the subject and then the shutters frame Caroline's upper body. The middle shutters are open and his wife looks out onto a row of poplars in the distance and the masts of sailing boats in the foreground. Interestingly, the bottles of turpentine on the window sill would suggest that this is Friedrich's domain, his studio



**On the Sailing Boat**, 1819, oil on canvas, 28x22 inches, Hermitage.

The woman in the sailing boat may not be Caroline. Perhaps each of Friedrich's female figures is both his Caroline and another that he seeks in his imagination, a dual figure representing reality and a figure of perfection. Nevertheless, the fact that the couple are holding hands, looking out towards the horizon and the mirage of the distant city suggests that they are content with each other's company. It has been postulated that the painting may refer to the painter's wedding trip to Rungen in the Autumn of 1818 and interpreted in the morning light as a promise of future happiness. The painting was bought by the Russian Grand Duke Nikolay Pavlovich, when he visited the painter's studio in 1820. Married to Princess Charlotte of Prussia since 1817, they might have seen themselves in the young couple sailing towards perhaps Stralsund, Griefswald and Dresden, in the case of Charlotte, or St Petersburg in the case of the Grand Duke.



*The Raven Tree*, 1822, oil on canvas, 21x28, Musee du Louvre

As the poet is influenced by his store of language, so is the painter by his hoard of images, motives gathered through observation, perception and honed to his idea of perfection by continuous practice and revision. Friedrich's lifelong familiarity with sailing boats, sea coasts, rocks, solitary trees, structured his creative drive, even before it reaches out for specific factual content, what the art critic Jacob Burckhardt called *Sachinhalt*, which in turn modified the 'total idea.' Delacroix's definition in one of his many diaries, of the cardinal point of this process remains unsurpassed in its demystification of the creative process:

'There are sacred moulds into which one throws all ideas, the good and the bad; the the greatest and most original talents automatically bear their stamp. The first stroke with which a master outlines his idea contains the germ of everything that will be in the eventual work.'

*The Raven Tree* follows this theme of using well- practiced motives as accessories in his paintings, as in this case, trees. A twisted oak tree, bare, but for a few leaves is seen against an evening sky. An inscription on the back of the canvas refers to the hill at the painting's compositional focal point as a *Hunengrab*, or dolmen, a prehistoric burial ground on Rugen. In the distance can be seen the ocean and Cape Arkona's chalk cliffs, a favourite subject. The bare oak tree with its twisted branches is informed by studies made earlier in his career and has medieval symbolic connotations with strength, endurance and fertility. A flock of ravens (also known as a 'murder' of ravens), surrounds the tree, some perching on its branches; the raven is commonly associated with bad omens and death. The foreground may also be seen as representing death, with the distant horizon and sky offering consoling beauty and the promise of redemption.

The wealth of detail in Friedrich's early paintings, demonstrate how much rhetoric Friedrich had to shed and learn to do without, in order to free his central theme, nearness versus distance. Rather than the Classical school of painting, choosing only that which is perfect and beautiful, Friedrich preferred to be guided by another authority, his 'spiritual eye.' This was closely allied to the 'total idea', with the two concepts empowering and strengthening each other. The authority of his spiritual eye not only served Friedrich as a support for his formal vocabulary, but also allowed him to reuse and recombine his impressions of the outside world, recorded with scrupulous exactitude in his sketchbooks. Friedrich did not work with the intention of extracting the ideal, but relied on his obscure idea. In similar terms, Raphael confessed in a letter to Count Baldassarre Castiglione: 'In order to paint a beautiful woman, I should really see more beautiful women, but as there are so few beautiful women, or qualified judges, I make use of a certain idea that comes into my head. Whether it is of artistic value, I cannot say.'

Friedrich believed that: 'The painter should not paint merely what he sees in front of him, but also what he sees within him. If he sees nothing within him, however, then he should refrain from painting what he sees in front of him.'



*The Sea of Ice, Arctic Shipwreck*, 1824, oil on canvas, 38x50 inches, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

*The Sea of Ice*, again brings to mind the 'Sublime' of Edmund Burke, with its startlingly dramatic portrayal of the fate of a ship crushed beneath towering slabs of fractured ice, Nature reducing the puny efforts of men to splinters; had ice been so realistically portrayed ever before? Friedrich had never been anywhere near the Arctic, but he had witnessed large ice floes on the River Elbe in the winter of 1820/21 and recorded them with several oil sketches. So here he has with his fertile imagination used these sketches to inform an imaginary incident, the crushing of a wooden sailing ship. Of course, he would have no way of knowing what the dynamics of such a process would look like, but Ernest

Shackleton, on his heroic attempt on a trans Antarctic crossing of 1914-15 certainly did, when his ship, the *Endurance* was trapped in the ice, crushed and sunk.

Friedrich has by varying and repeating the positions of one single motif, that of a slab of fractured ice, imagined how the enormous stresses with an ice-field would result in such a dramatic appearance. We first discern a slight rise in the bottom floes from left to right, where an upright, ochre wedge suddenly opposes the drift and the conflict between the opposing floes is fought out in the heap of ice in the centre of the image, with the hull of the ship submerging in ice.



*Final Moments of the  
Endurance November 1915*

Raised to emblematic status, the frozen 'chaos' is open to many levels of interpretation. The painting used to be known as *The Wrecked Hope*, which appeared to infer a specific shipwreck, albeit fictionalised, a title which would appear to suggest the danger of human enterprise, especially when challenging the forces of Nature. More recent critical opinion tends to restrict itself to the formal element of the painting, which has been variously described as an emblem of existential inevitability, a symbol of 'God's almighty power', or a symbol of general paralysis, that is a comment on the state of the German Confederation when Metternich, was Chancellor of State, in charge of public order.

*The Sea of Ice* is often compared to Theodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* of 1819, but a comparison only makes sense if confined to the observation that both paintings exhibit the same interlocking registers, characteristic of innovative paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his great painting of human tragedy, marked equally by both despair and hope, Gericault was also depicting the absence of a hand on the political post revolutionary helm of France, just as Friedrich's angular blocks represent both anti-democratic hardening and the secret hope that one day the 'ice would break.'



*Totes Meer*, 1941, Paul Nash, oil on canvas, 40x60 inches, Tate

Depicts a moonlit landscape with in the foreground a 'graveyard' of crashed German Luftwaffe aircraft. The broken shards of metal from the wings and fuselages resemble a seascape of jagged ice inspired by Friedrich's *Sea of Ice*. Nash was for some time an official war artist. Kenneth Clark, chairman of the War Artist's Advisory Committee regarded it as 'the best war picture so far.'

There is a danger, when examining the career of a great painter, to pigeon-hole their work, to condense artistic intelligence into a code, in which every sign has only a single meaning and which purports to possess the invariably correct interpretation of every detail. Friedrich himself allowed the viewer to make their choices from among the multiple possible meanings of his pictures, for he believed that the greatest gift of an artist was to stimulate the mind and arouse emotions. That Friedrich had a complex personality is beyond argument. In his early career, he exhibited the strange combination of deepest seriousness with the most light-hearted jesting, the latter never finding an expression in his paintings. In later married life, especially the last decade of his life, there was a 'darkening of the soul', a state of paranoid behaviour, remarked upon by his close friend Carl Gustav Carus, a physician and painter. Carus wrote, 'Friedrich tortured himself and his family with ideas about his wife's infidelity, which were wholly figments of his imagination, but were nonetheless real enough to consume him entirely'. These were followed by fits of brutal harshness against those close to him.

*The Stages of Life* portray some of the people who suffered the painter's 'fits of brutal harshness', depicted in a kind of family idyll. The two children playing with the Swedish flag have been identified as Friedrich's son Gustav Adolf, eleven-years-old, daughter Agnes twelve-years-old and their older sister, Emma sixteen-years-old; their mother is not included. The top-hatted man standing with them looking towards the viewer was not Friedrich, but his nephew Johann Heinrich and that Friedrich himself could instead be the older man with the stick and wearing a tricorn hat.

As early as 1816, when Friedrich was only forty-two, a friend Louise Sedler had remarked in a letter to Goethe, 'I must say again I feel sorry for Friedrich, already walking with a stick like an old man and so gloomy and joyless from his own stubborn nature.' And yet, there does not appear to be any overt sign of gloominess in this painting, either in the old man, or in the scene as a whole, which incidentally has something of a snap-shot quality about it.



*The Three Ages of Man*, 1835, oil on canvas, 29x37 inches, Museum der Kunst, Leipzig

It has been claimed that *The Three Ages of Man* is set on the beach at Utkiek, on the north-east German coast by Friedrich's native Greifswald and if so how autobiographical might the picture be? Most likely, the painting is set at dusk. Five figures of assorted generations are gathered on the foreshore, surrounded by fishing gear, set against the most beautiful sky, with of course the mandatory metaphor of sailing craft, symbolic for the journey of life.

As with many paintings, the title to the painting was only attributed to the painting in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a revival of interest in Friedrich's work and yet it is this posthumous title that has coloured every interpretation since. Is it simply a depiction of a happy family gathering on a beautiful evening, enjoying the scenery, or is it the allegorical interpretation of the journey through life, or is it completely autobiographical, where Friedrich has by leaving out his wife, suggested that this is not after all such a happy family portrayal.

The sense of frozen time is reinforced by the five sailing boats, which also adds to the mystery. The largest stands in the exact centre and as such forms an axis of symmetry, although this sense of balance is altered somewhat by the disposition of the other ships and the figures on the shore. The five ships also appear to form an arrangement of verticals that recall musical notes, where they seem to hang, light as air above the calm, mirror-like surface of the sea, while the figures remain earthbound.

However sombre Friedrich's attitude towards his family and friends may have been in the last ten years of his life, he could still summon up his wry humour. It sustained him when he suffered a stroke in June 1835, which appears to have robbed his painting hand of its strength. He went to Teplice in Bohemia to take the cure for six weeks and soon after his return painted '*Seashore by Moonlight.*' When

his doctor/painter friend Carus proposed that the Saxon Art Association purchase it in December 1937, he suggested that it might well be the last work from the artist, as he was 'stricken by paralysis.'



*Seashore by Moonlight*, 1835, oil on canvas, 52x66 inches, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Friedrich eventually died of pulmonary failure in Dresden on 7 May 1840, in his sixty-fourth year. Taking these circumstances into account, it seems impossible to avoid seeing premonitions of death in this painting. A shaft of moonlight, centrally placed, illuminates both the horizon, extending forwards to the rock pools in the foreground, where two small rowing boats are moored. On either side two sailing craft complete the beautifully balance composition.

Friedrich's Romanticism was wholly different from that of Gericault and Delacroix. Where their paintings are expressions of ambition and danger, Friedrich's are about exploring man's deeper relationship with both God and Nature, through the use of surrogates, or wanderers. Delacroix also painted 'wanderers', but his are given clear and definitive goals, for instance Dante and Virgil in *Dante and Virgil traverse the lake surrounding the walls of the Infernal City of Diss*. Meanwhile, Friedrich's couples and pairs of friends are not seeking adventures, but are poised in contemplation of natural phenomena. Another valid comparison are the figures of the Wanderer and Delacroix's figure of Liberty in *Liberty Leading the People*. Here Liberty in the form of a bare-breasted Amazonian figure is striding over the barricades, a 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary Joan of Arc heroine of the people, whereas Friedrich is not proclaiming an ideal, cut-and-dried statement of belief. His painting is neither the expression of of a Christian-Catholic message of salvation, nor its secular equivalent in the democratic concept of freedom. The invitation to identify with the figure, whose back we see in *The Wanderer above the Sea of*

*Mist*, involves neither collective action, nor revolutionary commitment to a cause, but rather entry into a realm of stillness, encouraging reflection remote from everyday concerns.

So, what of Friedrich's legacy? Of his contemporaries, the Norwegian Johan Christian Dahl (1788-1857) was the most influenced. On his move from Copenhagen to Dresden in 1818, he was introduced to Friedrich, after which the two painters became close friends. Friedrich was fourteen years Dahl's senior, but the two found in each other love for Nature and a shared vision for a way of depicting it based on study of it, rather than the academic clichés that they both profoundly despised. Dahl is now regarded as the greatest Norwegian Romantic painter and indeed one of the foremost 19<sup>th</sup> century European landscape painters. He was the first Norwegian painter to achieve international fame and he in turn influenced his fellow countryman, the landscape painter, Peder Balke (1804-94).

*Megalith Tomb* is very much straight out of the Friedrich vocabulary of images. The association between the leaf-bare, aged, 'blasted' trees and the tomb is a reminder of the ravages of age, whilst the early morning winter sunrise provides the hope of a new dawn and salvation.



*Megalith Tomb*, 1825, Johann Christian Dahl, oil on canvas, 30x42 inches, N. G. Norway

For a long time, the address of Dahl was on Elbe 33 and it was from near his home that he painted *View of Dresden at Night*. Like the Italian, Bernardo Bellotto, almost a century earlier, he captured scenes of this beautiful historic city with almost photographic exactness. The full moon-light filters through the clouds, casting a strong beam of illumination across the Elbe, providing just sufficient visibility for the riders to refresh their horses and silhouette the historic skyline of Dresden, with the Augustus Bridge crossing the River Elbe and the Baroque Church of our Lady's dome.

“Why has looking at the moon become so beneficiary, so soothing and so sublime?”, asked the German philosopher Schopenhauer in 1840. “Because the moon remains purely an object of

contemplation, not of the will. Furthermore, the moon is sublime and moves us sublimely because it stays aloof from all our earthly activities, it sees all, yet takes no part in it.”

As we have already seen, the moon was a pivotal motif in Friedrich’s work and Dahl would frequently invoke its mystery in his paintings of Dresden and Copenhagen.



*View of Dresden by Moonlight*, 1839, Johan Christian Dahl, oil on canvas, 30x51 inches, Dresden

There is no mistaking Friedrich’s influence, but the scene, with its depiction of night time activity on both sides of the River Elbe, is at odds with Friedrich’s solitary mysticism. Figures can just be discerned crossing the bridge and on the opposite bank the lights of buildings are faithfully represented, reflected on the glassy surface of the river. Dahl’s later work can thus be seen as a transition from the Romantic painting of his friend and mentor to realistic landscape depiction.

Dahl remained close to his friend during the later years of his life and complained that to the art-buying public, Friedrich’s paintings were only curiosities. While the poet Zhukovsky, who was also a friend of Friedrich and regarded him as a kindred spirit appreciated his psychological themes, Dahl attended to the descriptive quality of his friend’s landscapes. Dahl said, “Artists and connoisseurs saw only in Friedrich’s art a kind of mystic, because they themselves were only looking out for the mystic. They did not see Friedrich’s faithful and conscientious study of Nature in everything he represented.

Outside of Germany, in Russia, there were several extensive collections of Friedrich’s work, commissioned and collected by the Russian nobility, including the Tsar and his family. And of Eastern European painters, it was Ivan Shishkin (1832-98), undoubtedly the greatest of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian landscape painters, who was the most influenced. His painting, *In the North* of 1891, is a remarkable, almost photographic portrayal of a snow-covered tree against a moonlit sky. Shishkin was given the nickname, “The Titan of the Russian Forest” and the “Forest Tsar”, in view of his wonderful depiction of trees. His works were regarded as the defining images of Russia, paintings that promoted a new sense of pride in the indigenous landscape.



*In the Wild North*, 1891, Ivan Shishkin, oil on canvas, 63x46 inches, Kiev



*The Isle of the Dead*, 1883, Arnold Böcklin, oil on panel, 31x59 inches, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

By 1890, the rich vein of symbolism in Friedrich's work began to be in tune with the artistic mood of more progressive forms of art, as expressed by Symbolist painters such as the Swiss painter, Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) and the French painter, Odilon Redon. Both *The Isle of the Dead* by Böcklin and *Reflection*, by Redon, strongly suggest the influence of Friedrich.



*Reflection*, 1900, Odilon Redon, pastel on paper, 19x24 inches



*The Human Condition*, 1933, Rene Magritte, oil on canvas, N.G.Washington

Friedrich's modern revival gained momentum in 1906, when an extensive collection of his work featured in an exhibition of Romantic era art. Consequently, his landscapes exercised a strong influence on the work of German Surrealist Max Ernst and Belgian Rene Magritte. Magritte's *The Human Condition*, directly echoes Friedrich's motifs in its questioning of perception and the role of the viewer. A painting of a landscape on an easel appears to be continuous with that of the scene, as seen by the viewer out of the window. For the viewer, it is both inside the room with the painting and outside in the real landscape. Thus has Magritte played tricks with our perception of the world around us; the structure of the easel is the clue to the deception.

In his 1961 article "The Abstract Sublime", the art historian Robert Rosenblum drew comparisons between the Romantic landscape paintings of both Friedrich and Turner with the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko. Rosenblum specifically describes Friedrich's painting, *The Monk by the Sea* and Turner's *The Evening Star* and Rothko's 1954 *Light, Earth and Blue* (image not available for downloading due to copyright), as revealing affinities of vision and feeling. According to Rosenblum, "Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the aestheticians of the Sublime. The tiny monk in the Friedrich and the equally small fisherman in the Turner, establish a poignant contrast between the infinite vastness of a pantheistic God and the infinite smallness of His creatures."



*The Evening Star*, 1830, Turner, oil on canvas, N.G. London

The title of the *Evening Star*, was not his own, but taken from some lines of Turner's verse scribbled in a sketchbook he used in 1830. The evening star first appears in daylight and is soon supplemented by the stronger light of the moon. Here the pale point of the star is barely discernable in the sky, directly above its reflection in the sea, that is itself directly in front of the fisherman, the boy with a shrimping net and a small leaping dog.

Perhaps the last word on Caspar David Friedrich and his legacy should go to Kenneth Clark, who remarked in his seminal *Landscape into Art*, 'No one has expressed more poignantly the gloom of solitude and the sadness of unfilled expectations.' A fitting end to our exploration of the Romantics.