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Signs of a Struggle: Process, Technique, and Materials in the Early Work of Mark Gertler, 1911–18

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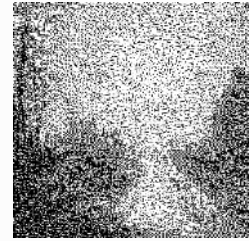
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Reason Dazzled: The All-Seeing and the Unseeing in Turner's *Regulus*

Article by **Matthew Beaumont**

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Abstract

This article proposes a reinterpretation of Turner's *Regulus* (1827; 1838), an enigmatic painting named after a legendary Roman general whom the Carthaginians, cutting off his eyelids and placing him in the direct light of the sun, first blinded and then killed. "Reason Dazzled", which takes its title from a suggestive phrase in Foucault's account of unreason, reads the painting as an attempt to stage a certain crisis in the Enlightenment, a movement that traditionally identified both light and sight with reason. It takes the picture to be emblematic of the complex, intimate relationship between all-seeing and unseeing states, and relates this to a certain experience, in the early nineteenth century, of the aesthetic of the sublime: to see nothing but light is to see nothing. The article explores this relationship between sight and blindness, in the first instance, through the violent responses the painting provoked in the nineteenth century, especially those of John Ruskin and one Walter Stephenson. After reconstructing their reactions, the article revisits debates about the precise scene the painting depicts, arguing that the composition is best grasped as a kind of "rebus". Finally, emphasising the apocalyptic dimension of the picture, and its powerful assault on the spectator's eye, it returns to the claim that, contradicting the tenets of the Enlightenment, this composition demonstrates, at the level both of form and content, the blinding or death-dealing effect of too much light.

Introduction

In the third century BCE, during the First Punic War, the Carthaginians captured a celebrated Roman general called Regulus, and, after the collapse of complicated diplomatic negotiations, cruelly tortured him. A number of ancient historians, in their more or less mythical accounts of this incident, record that the Carthaginians then proceeded either to amputate his eyelids or to staple them open, prior to placing him in the direct light of the sun, so that he first went blind and finally expired from lack of sleep. In the second century BCE, Gaius Sempronius Tuditanus, for example, reported that Regulus "was deprived of sleep for a long time, and thus lost his life".¹ In the first century BCE, another so-called "lost historian", Tubero, elaborated the details of Regulus' barbaric punishment. He noted that the Carthaginians incarcerated the Roman general repeatedly, and for long periods of time, "in black and deep dungeons", before taking him out

“when the sun was its most fierce” and forcing him “to lift his eyes toward the sky”.

“Furthermore,” Tubero continued, “they pulled apart his eyelids, above and below, and sewed them, so that he could not close his eyes.”² Terminally exposed to light, Regulus’ eyes came to see only darkness.

In the course of the 1820s and 1830s, J.M.W. Turner painted a rather cryptic picture that, though its original title is in some doubt, is today known simply as *Regulus* (fig. 1). It is an immensely powerful, if unsettling attempt to dramatise the complex, dialectical relations between light and darkness, sight and sightlessness, the all-seeing and the unseeing, which were increasingly central to the artist’s aesthetic. Turner had long been intrigued by Regulus. In one of the poems discovered among his sketchbooks after he died, composed in 1811, the painter celebrated the heroic patriotism of Regulus—“whom every torture did await”—in some verses indebted to Horace’s portrait of the Roman general as the embodiment of imperial virtue. George Thornbury cited this poem in his *Life of J.M.W. Turner* (1862), claiming that Regulus was “one of those ‘powerful beings’ and ‘stubborn souls’ the poet [i.e. Turner] seems to sympathise with.”³



Figure 1

J. M. W. Turner, *Regulus*, 1828, reworked 1837, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 123.8 cm. Collection of Tate (N00519). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)).

In addition to Horace, Turner’s encounter with the figure of Regulus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was probably mediated both by James Thomson and Oliver Goldsmith. Thomson, whose poetry influenced Turner’s verse, was an important point of reference for the painter from at least the late 1790s, when quotations from *The Seasons* adorned the pictures he exhibited at the Royal Academy. In “Winter” (1726), the first part of *The Seasons*, Thomson at one point alludes to Regulus as a “willing victim” that, “bursting loose / From all that pleading Nature could oppose”, “nobly responded to “honour’s dire command”.⁴ But a more immediate literary source was Goldsmith’s *The Roman History* (1769), which recounts the legend of Regulus in rich, fantastical detail (it includes a description of his soldiers’ struggle, during an earlier phase of the Punic campaign, against not just the Carthaginians but also an enormous, poisonous serpent). Significantly, in a list of possible subjects drafted on the inside front cover of his copy of the 1786 edition of Goldsmith’s book, Turner recorded the words “Regulus returns”.⁵ It is possible to speculate furthermore that, perhaps in his capacity as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy between 1807 and 1837, Turner also came across references to Regulus’ fate

in two works by George Adams, the distinguished eighteenth-century optician and maker of mathematical instruments. In *An Essay on Vision* (1789), as in the chapter “On the Nature of Vision” in his *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy* (1794), Adams compared the Carthaginians’ punishment of the Roman general, which “exposed him to the bright rays of the sun, by which he was very soon blinded”, to one of the methods of torture practised by Dionysius I of Syracuse. In the fourth century BCE, according to Adams, this Sicilian tyrant “was accustomed to bring forth his miserable captives from the deep recesses of the darkest dungeons, into white and well-lighted rooms, that he might blind them by the sudden transition from one extreme to the other.”⁶ For Adams, this sort of mistreatment of the eye must have seemed positively apocalyptic in its implications. After all, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a period in which, partly thanks to contemporaneous technological developments such as the popularisation of the microscope and telescope, the eye became ideologically as well as scientifically pre-eminent. “It was the fundamental organ through which men of taste explored, codified and appreciated their world,” as Alun Withey writes.⁷ The “century of the Enlightenment,” Jean Starobinski remarked in a classic study, “looked at things in the clear sharp light of the reasoning mind whose processes appear to have been closely akin to those of the seeing eye.”⁸ Turner’s picture of *Regulus*, I propose in this article, dramatises the crisis of this Enlightenment conception of vision, which identified both light and sight with reason. The painting explores the process whereby violent exposure to clear sharp light, in the form of the sun, blinds the seeing eye and pitches the reasoning mind into a state of unreason. *Regulus* is in this respect an experiment in the limits of the sublime. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke noted that “such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye” is an archetypal example of the sublime because it “overpowers the sense, [and] is a very great idea”. In its impact on sight, though, this extreme light pitches the eyes, paradoxically, into a state of blindness. “Extreme light,” he continued, “by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness.”⁹ Extreme light, annihilating sight, constitutes a sort of night. In *Regulus*, Turner depicts the rapidly creeping but permanent obliteration of objects, and the overpowering of the senses, that is the irrevocable consequence of seeing through lidless eyes. The painting, I contend, stages a dialectic wherein unceasingly clear-eyed, relentlessly rational sight produces its own kind of blindness. This is the process described by Michel Foucault, as part of his attempt to understand the form assumed by “classical unreason”, in terms of “*reason dazzled*”. “Dazzlement is night in broad daylight, the darkness that rules at the very heart of what is excessive in light’s radiance,” he writes in *Madness and Civilization*; “Dazzled reason opens its eyes upon the sun and sees *nothing*, that is, *does not see*.”¹⁰ Turner’s *Regulus* comprises an allegory, albeit an enigmatic, fragmentary one, of this dialectic of Enlightenment. In this mysterious painting, the sun that is, according to iconographic convention, symbolic of the Enlightenment, does not merely illuminate; it obnubilates. And it thus serves, in spite of its characteristic emphasis on light, or because of it, as a portrait of what Foucault, evoking the significance of delirium in the “age of reason”, calls the “night of the mind”.¹¹

I begin, in the first substantive section of the article, by exploring *Regulus* in terms of some of the violent responses that this controversial canvas provoked in its own time: first, that of Walter Stephenson, a vulnerable working-class man who, in an incident that has been largely forgotten, physically attacked it in the National Gallery, London, in 1863; second, that of John Ruskin, who made more than one revealingly intemperate reference to it. These reactions, it might be said, are themselves instances of reason dazzled. After reconstructing Ruskin’s and Stephenson’s more or

less iconoclastic responses, I use the second section to revisit debates among art historians about the precise scene that *Regulus* depicts, tracing the shift it describes from history painting to landscape and interpreting it in terms of what Freud characterises in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) as a “rebus”. Finally, in the third section of the article, returning to the agonising details of the Roman general’s torture and the apocalyptic implications of his lidless and sleepless condition under the pitiless gaze of the sun, I read the picture as emblematic of the intimate relationship between all-seeing and unseeing states, and relate this to a certain experience, in the early nineteenth century, of the aesthetic of the sublime. Reconstructing the optics of contemporaries of Turner whom *Regulus* profoundly antagonised, I thus build on Jonathan Crary’s brilliant interpretation of this painting as the dramatisation of “an encounter with the sun that is pulling the world back into primal invisibility.”¹² To see nothing but light is to see nothing.

***Regulus* and its Antagonists**

Shortly before 2pm on 16 December 1863, a “tall man of shabby-genteel appearances” entered the Turner Room at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. Standing before the painting numbered 519 in the catalogue, he suddenly produced a penknife and stabbed at the canvas some eight or nine times. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, keeper and secretary of the National Gallery, and the man largely responsible for returning the nation’s Turner collection to Trafalgar Square after its exile to a gallery adjoining the South Kensington Museum, recorded in his unpublished diary that the most serious of these injuries “was about an inch and a quarter long”, but that there were also “four stabs and four pricks or spots”.¹³ For decades, Turner’s paintings had provoked violent reactions from its critics; none more so than this physical attack.

One of the other visitors to the Turner Room that afternoon noticed enough of the man’s destructive behaviour to report him to the National Gallery’s inspector of police, Eleazer Denning. Inspector Denning promptly and discreetly placed the suspicious man under surveillance, watching him “very closely”. Roughly ten minutes after he’d arrived in the room, Denning observed the man once more “near the picture with his hand uplifted”. But, as soon as the man “saw that he was observed”, as the inspector testified at the Marlborough Street Police Court on the following day, “he moved his hand, and leaned on the railing for about ten minutes, and then walked away and sat down on a chair for about two hours.” Bertha Mary Garnett’s 1883 picture of *A Corner of the Turner Room* gives a sense of the relationship between railing and paintings, more than eighty of which hung on the walls alongside free-standing screens that accommodated a further eighteen pictures (fig. 2).



Figure 2

Bertha Mary Garnett, *A Corner of The Turner Room in the National Gallery*, 1883, oil on canvas, 25.2 × 35.8 cm. Collection of National Gallery, London. Transferred from the National Gallery Archives Collection, 2004. Digital image courtesy of National Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

After that lengthy interval, at about five minutes to 4pm, Edmund Paine, a curator at the National Gallery since 1857, who was by then also present, saw the man “make four or five pokes” at the same picture, and immediately apprehended him and handed him over to the inspector.¹⁴ At this point, Denning asked to see the man’s “eye glass”—a common device used for conducting a close examination of the canvas—which he had first seen in his hand at 2pm. “But instead of giving me the eye glass,” he reported, “he took from his pocket a penknife, and on my asking him if he had used it that day, and for what purpose, he said ‘for stabbing a picture’.” There was a small quantity of paint on the blade. When Denning asked the man why he had acted in this manner, “he replied, ‘I was very much excited. The misty state of the picture and the dislike I had for the man made me do it.’”¹⁵ As far as the *Art-Journal* was concerned, these excuses did not amount to a cogent motive for committing the crime. Dismissing him as a “maniac”, its correspondent noted that, “when taken into custody,” the perpetrator “could give no rational reason for what he had done.”¹⁶ The *Illustrated London News*, for its part, noted that “the language and bearing of the offender when apprehended were little better than those of an idiot”, but it emphasised that, in spite of this, “there were no symptoms of insanity about him.”¹⁷ The man arraigned at Marlborough Street Magistrates Court on the following day, when he was charged with “wilful damage to one of Turner’s pictures in the National Gallery”, was named Walter Stephenson. Described at the time of the incident “as an author, of no home”, Stephenson was a 52-year-old man who on the occasion of the trial recorded his occupation as “clerk”, though he was also described as an “accountant”.¹⁸ In his diary, Wornum noted that Stephenson was a “lithographic writer” (this professional title, which had been around since the late 1810s, indicated someone who lettered lithographic pictures). He added that he “says he is destitute”.¹⁹ Stephenson, who reportedly “had no friends or relatives, and came from Newcastle”, was committed to trial on 4 January 1864 at the Clerkenwell Sessions, where he pleaded guilty to the charge.²⁰ This poor man was clearly in a state both psychologically fragile and socially and economically precarious.

On first being apprehended, according to the inspector, Stephenson expressed remorse for the crime, and told him, “If I had not been detected I should have given myself up to you before I left the gallery.” At Stephenson’s sentencing, which took place at the Middlesex Sessions on 18 January 1864, the assistant judge conceded that the prisoner had “committed the crime through distress of mind”, as enquiries respecting him had indicated, but emphasised that “there could be no doubt that he perfectly well knew that he was perpetrating a serious injury on a valuable work of art”. He concluded that “the property of the public in museums must be protected from such outrages”, before sentencing him to “hard labour for six calendar months”.²¹

The trustees of the National Gallery were doubtless gratified by this outcome, since their representative at the sentencing, a Mr Cooper, had insisted that they “would have been failing in their duty to the public had they not prosecuted this man for really one of the most wicked acts of spoliation that could well be conceived.”²² As the *North London News* reported, it was calculated that it would cost three guineas to repair the damage Stephenson had inflicted on the canvas. This proved optimistic, though, for the specialist who restored the canvas, Charles Buttery, charged eight guineas when, after little more than a month, he returned it to the National Gallery on 1 April 1864. But Stephenson’s symbolic violation both of the painting and the “national property”, in Cooper’s phrase, was evidently thought to be vastly disproportionate to these relatively modest sums.²³ After all, in symbolic terms, it constituted a spectacular rebellion against what Tony Bennett, in his Foucauldian account of the disciplinary politics of the nineteenth-century museum—a politics that entailed “simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public that inspected”—has termed the “exhibitionary complex”.²⁴ “What is the picture?” the judge asked when Stephenson was charged. It seems self-evident that the vandal, who hovered in the vicinity of this one picture in particular for most of the afternoon on which he committed the crime, had carefully singled it out (perhaps poor Stephenson, conversely, felt that it had singled him out). “Regulus leaving Rome”, Inspector Denning responded to the judge...²⁵ This remarkable painting—initially executed in 1828, and repainted and completed in 1837—had generated consternation, if not controversy, from the start of its career. Turner first painted the canvas, alongside his *Medea* and *View of Orvieto*, in Rome at the end of 1828. Charles Eastlake, who later became the first director of the National Gallery, and who was in post when Stephenson defaced *Regulus*, reported to Thornbury that the “foreign artists” who went to see these three pictures in Rome in 1828 “could make nothing of them”.²⁶ In a later letter, to Maria Callcott, Eastlake complained too that, though he regarded *Regulus* in particular as “a beautiful specimen of [Turner’s] peculiar power”, the Romans who examined it “dwelt more on the defects of the figures, and its resemblance to Claude’s compositions[,] than on its exquisite gradation and the taste of the architecture.”²⁷

When these paintings were exhibited in England in February 1829—after a troubled journey back from Italy during which *Regulus* probably suffered the fairly severe tear that has been discovered in the upper-left portion of the canvas—they generated a more mixed response.²⁸ According to Eastlake’s account, at least a thousand people went to see them—“so you may imagine how astonished, enraged or delighted the different schools of artists were, at seeing things with methods so new, so daring, and excellencies so unequivocal.” “The angry critics have, I believe, talked most,” he added, “and it is possible you may hear of *general* severity of judgment, but many did justice, and many more were fain to admire what they confessed they dared not imitate.”²⁹ Among those who came to value it, incidentally, at a time “when the work was still highly controversial”, was the American novelist Herman Melville, who bought Samuel

Bradshaw's engraving after Turner's painting, which was instead titled *Regulus Leaving Carthage* (1859).³⁰

Turner's *Regulus* continued to provoke extreme responses, as Stephenson's act of iconoclasm most dramatically indicates. One of those persistently angered by the painting was John Ruskin, Turner's most distinguished and most evangelical champion in the nineteenth century. The engraver Daniel Wilson, no more than an apprentice at the time, testified to this in the late 1830s. He was permitted to visit Turner at his home in Queen Anne Street, London, and there found him in such a tolerant mood that he was led into the "Inaccessible gallery" and directed to the *Regulus* for the purposes of engraving it on a copper plate—"It was not the one I would have chosen, but it was triumph enough to get one of his choice." Wilson, who published the *Embarcation of Regulus* in 1838, recorded in his journal some forty years later that, when Ruskin "commended [his] translation of the picture", the eminent critic added, "But it is labour thrown away; for the picture is one of Turner's grand mistakes, an artifice, not a study." Ruskin classified it, moreover, as one of Turner's "nonsense pictures".³¹

In his *Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House* (1857), Ruskin reiterated this opinion in public, condemning it as "a picture very disgraceful to Turner, and as valueless as any work of the third period can be; done wholly against the instincts of the painter at this time, in wicked relapse into the old rivalry with Claude."³² *Regulus*, in short, was an egregious example of Turner's persistent habit of attempting to emulate Claude, whose influence, as Ruskin had complained in *Modern Painters*, prevented the British artist from successfully imitating nature and therefore honouring God's creation.³³ This painting's "great fault", Ruskin continued in dogmatic spirit in his *Notes*,

*is the confusion of the radiation of light from the sun with its reflection—one proof, among thousands of other manifest ones, that truth and greatness were only granted to Turner on condition of his absolutely following his natural feeling, and that if ever he contradicted it, that moment his knowledge and his art failed him also.*³⁴

Regulus, in fact, was one of several paintings that, in a kind of Foucauldian fantasy combining the institutional functions of exhibition and incarceration, Ruskin recommended be "placed in a condemned cell, or chamber of humiliation, by themselves; always, however, in good light, so that people who wished to see the sins of Turner, might examine them to their entire satisfaction."³⁵

Stephenson, himself subsequently placed in a condemned cell, was offended, according to his own confession, both by the sins of Turner, as his reference to "the dislike [he] had for the man" indicates, and the painting's formal execution, which he characterised in terms of "the misty state of the picture". It is as if he consciously converted Ruskin's aesthetic and moral attack on *Regulus* into a physical attack. Ruskin, in fact, as his correspondence intimates, seems almost to have sympathised with Stephenson. He appears, at least, to have felt inclined to overlook the crime, in part perhaps because he regarded the painting as "disgraceful", in part because he believed that the man's attempt to deface a single, relatively unrepresentative canvas was insignificant compared to the National Gallery's corrosive treatment of the Turners in its institutional care. Ruskin, who in the late 1850s laboured intensively on the Turner Bequest in order to conserve and catalogue its contents, was convinced that the colours of its drawings and paintings were already fatally fading.

So, in an undated letter to Georgiana Cowper from late 1863 or early 1864, Ruskin complained that the Turners in the National Gallery had "decayed to absolute death" as a result of the mildewed conditions that, scandalously, prevailed in the room in which they had been

temporarily stored. He then commented, in cantankerous tones, that “the stabbing [of] pictures is nothing—one ‘cleaner’ does more harm in an hour than a charge of bayonets and a volley of grape[shot] would.” “My mind has been long made up to the destruction of the whole,” he continued, alluding to the entire collection of Turners for which the National Gallery had custodial and curatorial responsibility:

*So that this stabbing is to me just what the prick of a pin would be to a man who had had his flesh cut off his bones in little bits—as far as a multitude of Shylocks could do it without any Portia conditions—except just that they must leave him alive, or a little alive.*³⁶

Ruskin’s personal identification with both Turner and his paintings in this sentence—reinforced no doubt by the curious and mysterious crisis in their friendship that occurred in the mid-1840s—is startling. In rhetoric that seems indebted not only to Shakespeare but to other, even more lurid Renaissance dramatists, he posits the National Gallery’s negligent preservation of the pictures, which entails above all bleeding the colour from them but leaving them “a little alive”, as equivalent to torture. Moreover, Ruskin implies that he himself experiences this torture almost physically. The National Gallery has in effect entombed both Ruskin and Turner, according to the former, in a “chamber of humiliation” like the one he evoked in conversation with Wilson. Compared to this calculated and protracted persecution, Stephenson’s punctual, spontaneous stabbing of *Regulus*, a painting for which Ruskin felt no affection, clearly seemed inconsequential to the critic.

Why did *Regulus* inspire such savage, vengeful reactions? Ruskin wanted to exhibit the picture, like some criminal monstrosity, in a condemned cell, as an aesthetic and moral example. Stephenson, adopting an approach both more dramatic and more demotic, simply stabbed it. Perhaps the violence of the painting itself, a violence that shapes its composition and its pictorial content alike, provoked these responses. For, in some almost literal sense, it appears to have comprised an assault on the eye. The diarist Joseph Farington recorded after all that, in reacting to Turner’s *Dort, or Dortrecht* (1818), a naturalistic painting far more constrained in its use of light, the Royal Academician Henry Thomson had commented that “it almost puts your eyes out”.³⁷ This sort of violent rhetoric was not untypical of contemporary responses to many of Turner’s compositions, the blazing, brilliant effect of which, when they were first exhibited, cannot in retrospect be underestimated. In an elaborate, slightly laboured account of *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* (1829), to offer another example, the critic for the *Literary Gazette*, recalling Odysseus’ exoculation of the one-eyed Cyclops, joked that this “is really no reason why Mr. Turner should put out both the eyes of us, harmless critics”, adding that “so red-hot a mass has seldom been applied to our visual organs”.³⁸ The scorching optics of *Regulus*, like other later Turners, were far more extreme than this painting. Turner’s “sun absolutely dazzles the eyes”, the *Literary Gazette* remarked in its review of this painting.³⁹ Certainly, it seems to have dazzled Stephenson’s reason—perhaps Ruskin’s too.

Ironically, however, in another context, Ruskin celebrated precisely this offensive aspect of Turner’s art. In *Modern Painters*, Volume 1 (1843), he praised the quality that, as far as he was concerned, made Turner unique among other colourists—“the dazzling intensity, namely, of the light which he sheds through every hue, and which, far more than their brilliant colour, is the real source of their overpowering effect upon the eye.” Here, at his most aggressively avant-garde, Ruskin mocked ignorant gallery-goers who, illogically, made Turner’s forceful use of light in his paintings “the subject of perpetual animadversion; as if the sun which they represent, were quite a quiet, and subdued, and gentle, and manageable luminary, and never dazzled anybody, under any circumstances whatsoever.”⁴⁰ The idea of the sun as an unmanageable, indeed unendurable,

luminary is absolutely central both to the literary theme and artistic form of *Regulus*. It is all about dazzling; and it enacts this dazzlement at the level of form as well as content.

As Ronald Paulson has recognised, in Turner's paintings of the sun, from *Regulus* to *Yacht Approaching Coast* (c.1840–1845), “everything in the picture, from the waves to the clouds and the people, is determined—both created and destroyed—by this source of energy.” He underlines that “over a large number of paintings the sun becomes associated with, on the one hand, fruition, warmth, and energy, but, on the other, with plagues and apocalyptic conflagrations and blood-baths.”⁴¹ In *Regulus*, the sun that cultivates is all but obliterated by this cataclysmic one.

Regulus as a Rebus

At the climactic point of his account of Regulus in *The Roman History*, Goldsmith records the fury with which the Carthaginians greeted their prisoner once the failure of their attempts to make peace with the Romans had become clear on his return:

*First, his eyelids were cut off, and then he was remanded to prison. He was, after some days, brought out and exposed with his face opposite the burning sun. At last, when malice was fatigued with studying all the arts of torture, he was put in a barrel stuck full of nails that pointed inwards, and in this painful position he continued till he died.*⁴²

Turner's painting, in the 1820s and 1830s, is shaped not by the heroic figure of Regulus he found in Horace but by this sketch of the Roman general trapped for perpetuity in an abject state of agony.

But the scene in which Regulus was blinded and starved in the sun is not in fact the one that Turner depicted; at least, it isn't the one that he depicted directly. Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain precisely which of the legend's scenes the painting does reconstruct. If Turner, in *Regulus*, portrayed what Foucault calls in his account of state executions a “theatre of terror”, then the stage is oddly empty.⁴³ What precisely does the painting depict? In the 1860s, when Stephenson defaced it, the curators at the National Gallery evidently regarded it as a “Regulus Leaving Rome”. And, certainly, if the *Roman History* was the picture's most important source, it seems likely that this is the relevant scene, since Goldsmith provides a more vivid sketch of Regulus departing from the Roman city than from the Carthaginian one. But some critics have suggested instead that it represents the general leaving Carthage rather than Rome; that is, at the commencement rather than at the conclusion of his diplomatic mission. Gerald Finley, impressed by the fact that the full title of Wilson's line engraving, which was overseen by Turner, is titled “Ancient Carthage—the Embarcation of Regulus”, has, for example, made this assumption.⁴⁴

Turner's painting portrays a fairly generic seaport, similar to the ones in *Dido Building Carthage* (1815) and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) (the latter a rumination on the theme of imperial decline that was also informed by Goldsmith's *The Roman History*). These paintings, which both have a comparatively cool palette, evoke a fairly pacific atmosphere, even if the former in particular portrays a certain amount of industrious activity. In *Regulus*, a far more fraught composition, the frenetic if not febrile movement in the harbour frames the central image of a blankly blazing, death-dealing sun.⁴⁵ This sun, painted principally in the chrome yellow to which Turner was so attached, is not an identifiable focus of the composition, though; it is not an orb whose concentrated force can neatly be contained. For it is in some almost literal sense inscrutable. It is, instead, a sort of sedimented stain; and, at once fascinating and sinister in its potential limitlessness, it metastasises across the sky and threatens to contaminate or corrode the cityscape that, whether Carthage or Rome, lies unprotected beneath it. As Turner's allegory of

lidlessness and blindness in *Regulus* reveals, the sun is an agent of illumination that, if it warms and illuminates the world, also threatens to plunge it into terminal darkness.

In *Regulus*, the sun's light, in spite of its oddly troubling diffuseness, batters down the choppy, fretful waters of the seaport, reducing it to a thin sheet or strip of beaten gold that, as it unfurls into the foreground, fatally tempts the viewer's gaze. In the immediate foreground, there are the beginnings of a golden-brown beach, on the right of which mothers and children bathe and men and women wait for boats to embark or disembark. On the left, beside a chaotic jumble of commercial boats and ships, the rigging of which is inhabited by several figures, three men roll a barrel and a fourth man gestures savagely and strangely (like the horrified figure, arms outstretched, at the bottom right of Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* [1812], another painting centred on the journey taken by an ancient general, this one Carthaginian rather than Roman, beneath an apocalyptic sun). In the middle ground, on either side of the water, there are buildings. The ones on the left, which seem to be deserted, are like half-ruined fortifications. The palatial ones on the right, which are as intimidating as they are immense, pullulate with people. But, like those on the opposite side of the harbour, these buildings too have a faint air of decadence about them, and the light impasto that ornaments some of their details seems, like algae, to signal some subtle process of organic decomposition. The sun, in this painting, is not only an inflammation, it is a contagion.

Regulus, as Ruskin implies, can be interpreted in part as a meditation on Claude Lorrain's picturesque *Seaport with the Villa Medici* (1637), which Turner had copied into his sketchbook during his first trip to Rome in 1819; or on his *Seaport at Sunset* (1639). But, if this is the case, the British artist's meditation on his French precursor's paintings is peculiarly bitter and vindictive. As the critic for *The Spectator* put it in 1837, after peremptorily declaring that "we wish the sun were out of the picture", in *Regulus*, Turner "is just the converse of Claude; instead of the repose of beauty—the soft serenity and mellow light of an Italian scene—here all is glare, turbulence, and uneasiness."⁴⁶ In formal terms, at least for heuristic purposes, *Regulus* can thus be regarded, like a number of Turner's other paintings, as a sublime reinscription of the Claudian picturesque; if not a "primitivist" reduction of it.⁴⁷ Interestingly, J. Hillis Miller has proposed that Turner's oil sketch *Claudian Harbour Scene* (1828) might in fact have been a preliminary version of *Regulus* (it is usually thought to be a preliminary version of *Dido Directing the Equipment of the Fleet* [1828]). More fancifully, Miller even speculates that:

*the Claudian Harbour Scene may show Regulus as a hooded figure to the right being led out to be blinded by the sun or perhaps surrounded by his family and friends in Rome about to embark for his voyage back to certain death in Carthage.*⁴⁸

Perhaps there is indeed a spirit of spitefulness as well as sublime grandeur to Turner's recreation of the Claudian topos—a "wicked relapse into the old rivalry with Claude", as Ruskin had characterised it.

If Turner was thinking of Claude's landscape paintings in this picture, then he was also thinking of history paintings that had previously depicted Regulus. The fate of the Roman general had been a far from popular classical theme in the history of European painting, but it was nonetheless not unfashionable in Turner's lifetime. It served, for example, as the subject matter selected by the French Academy for the Prix de Rome in 1791. Furthermore, both Salvator Rosa and, more recently, Benjamin West had produced distinguished paintings of aspects of the story. Rosa's *Death of Regulus*, painted in the early 1660s, was exhibited at the British Institution—the "prime objective" of which "was to foster a native school of history painting"⁴⁹—in both 1816 and 1828. West's *Departure of Regulus*, which George III commissioned in 1769, apparently

after reading Livy's description of the general's departure from Rome, was displayed that same year at the Royal Academy's inaugural exhibition (fig. 3). There, it "simultaneously projected the Academy's idealised self-image and confirmed the exalted character of its royal patron", as David Solkin has observed.⁵⁰ Subsequently, in 1824 and 1833, it too was exhibited at the British Institution.



Figure 3

Benjamin West, *The Departure of Regulus*, 1769, oil on canvas, 225.4 × 307.2 cm. Collection of Royal Collection Trust (RCIN 405416). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

In both formal and thematic terms, Turner's version of the Regulus legend deliberately refuses West's example. The latter depicts the self-sacrificing scene when the Roman general turned his back on his family in order to return to Carthage as a hostage; and it therefore calculatedly fostered the aristocratic cult of the hero that prevailed in the late eighteenth century. As Martin Myrone has commented, it presented "the most severe version of masculine exemplarity—a harsh, self-sacrificing hero whose noble sufferings would inspire his people."⁵¹ Turner, in contrast, depicted a mysterious seaport in which the action, at first far from comprehensible, is performed by an indistinct mass of people rather than a heroic protagonist instantly recognisable as Regulus. In this respect, his iteration of the legend conforms to the political context in which it was painted, that of the 1820s and 1830s, when the political agency of the individual aristocratic subject celebrated by West was increasingly challenged by the emergence of the collective subjects embodied in both the middle and working classes.

In this climate, epic narrative no longer seemed like a viable painterly paradigm, and *Regulus* is in part an expression of what Leo Costello calls the artist's "ambivalent response to the loss of history painting as it had been traditionally practiced as a locus of significant pictorial statements."⁵² Generically speaking, Turner displaces the Regulus legend, framing it not in terms of history painting, as West had done, but in terms of landscape painting. Even if it is reconfigured as a landscape, though, the scene he portrays is still shaped by its prior inscription in the tradition he inherits. So the composition itself necessarily registers the shift from history painting to landscape. *Regulus* is then one of those pictures that, as Costello puts it, "instantiate the complex ways in which the distinction between landscape and history painting becomes undecidable" for Turner.⁵³

No doubt, the contrast between West and Turner's approaches to the legend of Regulus was also, and relatedly, the result of the different material and historical conditions in which they were produced. Conceived for a royal patron, West's history painting needed to render the *exemplum virtutis* of the narrative readily apparent. Turner's picture, the result of a persistent interest in Regulus dating back to the early 1810s, was in contrast painted speculatively, for the exhibition room, where it might or might not ultimately find a customer prepared to purchase it; and it could therefore afford to be far more elusive and evasive in its treatment of this subject matter, far more experimental. Instead of inviting the spectator to identify with a patrician example of martial virtue, as West had done, Turner confronted the spectator with a mysterious horror that defies coherent narrative form and lacks both an obvious hero and a clear moral. If West's practice, in Costello's formulation, "maintain[s] the individual male subject as the primary agent of history", then Turner's positively undermines this elitist paradigm.⁵⁴ As it happens, like many of the oil paintings Turner exhibited in the 1830s, *Regulus* never did find a buyer.

In terms of narrative content, Turner's *Regulus* is most productively apprehended, I want to argue, as a composite of several different parts of the classical legend of the Roman general, which it reorganises not as a historical tableau but as a landscape. Time, in this painting, is displaced in terms of space. The departure it depicts, according to this approach, is from both Rome and Carthage (as if Regulus is so remorseless in his pursuit of civic virtue, as his alleged indifference to his family indicates, that both departures amount to the same thing). The people it portrays, seething among the boats and ships on the shore in the foreground, teeming on the terraces of the monumental buildings on the right in the middle ground, are at the same time Carthaginians and Romans. The port, perhaps even the surface of the sea itself, seems to boil with the emotions of the people assembled there, whether they are the general's enemies or his agitated friends. In a literal rather than colloquial sense, it might be partly because of this composite form, this topographical expression of narrative form, that Ruskin categorised the painting as one of Turner's "nonsense" pictures. It calculatedly confounds rational sense.

In *Regulus*, Turner organises his thematic material not diachronically, as a distinctive episode within a coherent narrative, but synchronically (this is consistent with his developing interest, to which Cecilia Powell among others has pointed, in portraying composite scenes).⁵⁵ His aesthetic is, so to speak, poetic as opposed to novelistic. In this respect, *Regulus* conforms to the composite, contradictory, and fragmentary logic of the legend of Regulus itself, with its phantasmagoric images of studded barrels, rampaging elephants, and lidless eyes. In short, the painting is a kind of "rebus", in which several elements of the legend are combined according to the logic of a dream. It will be recalled that, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud compared the dream to a rebus or "picture-puzzle". There, he observed that his "predecessors in the field of dream-interpretation" had committed the error of "treating the rebus as a pictorial composition"; "and as such it has seemed to them nonsensical and worthless."⁵⁶

Perhaps it is an analogous error to judge *Regulus* as a coherent narrative entity. For it is in the compound, enigmatic terms of a rebus that certain apparently anachronistic pictorial features of Turner's composition can be understood: the miniscule but brightly illuminated figure "in Roman toga descending the grand flight of steps of the palace" on the right of the canvas, whom Wilson identified in 1889 as Regulus himself; and the cask being rolled by the four men, one of them gesturing angrily or despairingly, on the left of the canvas, which the engraver identified as the spiked barrel into which Regulus was thrust in order to redouble his agonies (it is also possible to speculate that, like the man on the steps, this man too is the Roman general himself, here on the point of being incarcerated in the barrel).⁵⁷ These pictorial details, in their non-synchronous

relation to the scene, are the components of a dream, and are therefore “no longer nonsensical”, in Freud’s terms again, “but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance”.⁵⁸ And to these details might be added other dreamlike features, such as the two small windows beneath the portico that surmounts the imposingly tall building at the right-hand edge of the canvas, which recall a pair of blankly staring, perhaps blinded, eyes. Alongside its strikingly impressionistic form, it was perhaps this phantasmagoric dimension of *Regulus* that, in its refusal of narrative logic, offended Stephenson, who finally condemned it, after gazing at it for an entire afternoon, as if he too had been half-blinded by its sun, for its “misty state”. In contrast to West’s painting of *Regulus*, Turner’s refuses to fulfil the viewer’s expectation that she should be able to pinpoint the scene it represents; and, in this sense, it constitutes a “pointed negation” of what Alex Potts has helpfully identified, in relation to Delacroix, as “the aesthetic of the pregnant moment” that Lessing had sponsored in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁹ After all, in spite of its title, and even if a diminutive *Regulus* really can be glimpsed in the distance, Turner’s picture doesn’t have an obvious protagonist. This is not a “death-of-the-hero” picture. As the critic in the *Literary Gazette* exclaimed, in admitting to the futility of attempts to identify the Roman general: “*Regulus!* There is certainly a little group of little men, rolling a little spiked cask into a little boat; but, *au reste!*”⁶⁰ Here, as in Turner’s other displacements of history painting in terms of landscape, there is no hero. Instead, the sun itself, and the empty space it illuminates with such intensity, is at the centre of this dreamlike composition.

It is because of the protagonist’s apparent absence from the scene of Turner’s painting that John Gage’s highly imaginative claim about the picture—that it is in fact painted from the perspective of *Regulus* himself; and that it thus depicts the scene on which he has been forced to stare in the course of his cruel punishment—is such a perceptive attempt to resolve its narrative challenges.⁶¹ But this interpretation must be understood not as some singular solution to the picture’s cryptic composition, but simply as one more possibility, if a peculiarly suggestive one, that is opened up by its phantasmagoric organisation in terms of what I have characterised as a rebus.

The persuasive force of Gage’s influential argument that *Regulus* situates painter and viewer in the position of *Regulus* as he is being tortured does not lie in the fact that this resolves the picture’s geographical ambiguities. Its elaborate intercalation of time as well as space is more complicated than this. No, the advantage of this reading is that it helps make sense of the painting’s subjective topography, as it might be called, rather than its objective geography. For, from this angle, *Regulus* portrays the nightmarish gaze of the general, a gaze that is influenced by an interior vision as much as an exterior one, as it feverishly recombines elements of his past, present, and perhaps even future. It represents the delirious images that, interfering with the logical disposition of space and time, superimposing both memories of his torture and premonitions of his death on the seaport in front of him, unfurl before a man with lidless eyes as he is forced to stare at the sun. This vision, then, also effectively conforms to the dreamlike logic of a rebus. Whether the composition is structured according to the “subjective” perspective of the Roman general, as Gage proposes, or some more “objective” perspective, it is consciously contradictory, comprising as it does non-synchronous scenes, and also consciously cryptic. It can be understood either as *Regulus*’ rebus or as that of the painter and spectator: as *Regulus*’ apocalypse or that of the painter and spectator—or as both.

Regulus and the Apocalypse

It is the presence of the sun, rather than any narrative consistency, that imparts a sense of unity to the painting. Turner's painting, as we have seen, provocatively features a vast, empty space at the core of its composition. The light of the sun, in the magnesium flare of its passage from background to foreground, as it either rises from the sea or falls into it, tunnels out the central picture space before it. This is a moment when, as Crary neatly puts it, "the distance between observer and world collapses in the physical inscription of the sun onto the body."⁶²

As it proceeds implacably towards the spectator, the sun obliterates everything in its path apart from the boats and buildings that, in the violence of its movement, it pitilessly casts to left and right—like elaborately carved driftwood bristling with marine life. Even the swarming Carthaginians, or Romans, seem in the process of "being swept away by the strength of the sun."⁶³ The sun bleaches and burns the earth beneath it; and this cataclysmic scene recalls the world that Ruskin described when, in his baroque account of Turner's youth in *Modern Painters*, he evoked a Europe torn apart by military conflict and in the grip of physical and spiritual death: "Full shone now its awful globe, one pallid charnel-house,—a ball strewn bright with human ashes, glaring in poised sway beneath the sun, all blinding-white with death from pole to pole."⁶⁴ As Costello phrases it, through "a formal and thematic exploration of decay and disintegration", Turner painted "not a vision of the world being brought together into unity, but rather visions of the world falling apart."⁶⁵

The celebrated account of Turner's artistic process given by the nineteen-year-old painter John Gilbert, who observed him reworking *Regulus* at the British Institution on Varnishing Day in 1837, communicates in expressive prose a sense not simply of his method but also the dramatic visual impact of this apocalyptic sunscape:

*The picture was a mass of red and yellow of all varieties. Every object was in this fiery state. He had a large palette, nothing in it but a huge lump of flake-white; he had two or three biggish hog tools to work with, and with these he was driving the white into all the hollows, and every part of the surface. This was the only work he did, and it was the finishing stroke. The sun, as I have said, was in the centre; from it were drawn—ruled—lines to mark the rays; these lines were rather strongly marked, I suppose to guide his eye. The picture gradually became wonderfully effective, just the effect of brilliant sunlight absorbing everything, and throwing a misty haze over every object. Standing sideways of the canvas, I saw that the sun was a lump of white standing out like the boss on a shield.*⁶⁶

In its immediacy, this description transmits a vivid sense of the painting's textures as well as its tones. And it brilliantly evokes the vital force of its pitiless sun, which—because of Turner's courageous use of impasto—constitutes an irreducible, faintly monstrous physical presence on the surface of the picture: "I saw that the sun was a lump of white standing out like a boss on a shield." As this martial simile implies, there is something calculatedly combative about Turner's lump of paint, which might from one perspective be interpreted, in the aristocratic context of the British Institution, as a characteristically pugnacious, plebeian response to what Costello calls the "rhetoric of violence" that, by the 1830s, "had become commonplace in characterizing Turner's work on the Varnishing Days."⁶⁷

Turner's brilliant pale sunlight, distilled from the "lump of flake-white" that Gilbert spotted on his palette, actually seems to be emitting light rather than merely reflecting it. It sears the viewer's eyes with pitiless intensity. It is surely "the effect of brilliant sunlight absorbing everything" that, responsible as it is for what Gilbert calls the picture's "misty haze",

overwhelmed Stephenson, who subsequently complained of the “misty state of the picture”. For the sun in this painting positively scours or scoops out our central vision, rendering the core of the composition indistinct and leaving the spectator with only peripheral vision. At the same time, though, and this seems to redouble the picture’s offensiveness, there is something oddly calming and cooling about it. It is as if the artist has bathed the scalding canvas, not in the “soapsuds and whitewash” of which some critics of Turner’s seascape *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842) supposedly complained, but in the flax and whites of eggs that, in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the servants mercifully apply to Gloucester’s bleeding eye sockets once Cornwall has enucleated them.⁶⁸ *Regulus’* pain, if we privilege Gage’s interpretation of the painting for a moment and see it as the scene on which he is forced by the Carthaginians to stare, is so extreme that it has been rendered exquisite. There is something cruelly ecstatic about the painting’s use of retina-burning light. Turner’s cataclysmic sun makes us long for complete oblivion. In its uncompromising abstraction, at the centre of the composition, it is an objective correlative for the obliteration of rational consciousness—for reason dazzled.

Regulus, in implicitly collapsing the perspective of the painter into the apocalyptic vision of the Roman general himself, at the precise moment when his life is recomposed in front of his lidless eyes in the final minutes before his death, or in the moment before he is terminally blinded by the sun, is a picture that appears to revel in the violence it visits on its viewers. Exposing them to too much light, it blinds and confuses them. Early critics of it “recognized some obscure danger involved in looking at this picture,” as Miller suggests: “It is like looking the sun in the eye. There is a danger of being blinded.”⁶⁹ Like Heinrich von Kleist confronting Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* (1808–1810), it might be said, “the viewer feels as though his eyelids had been cut off.”⁷⁰ And, as we have seen, Turner’s picture also provoked violent, retaliatory responses from his contemporaries. The most significant of these responses, arguably, is not Ruskin’s verbal one—though he used the language of torture, symptomatically enough, to express his desire to confine *Regulus*, among other paintings that consciously sought to overpower the Claudian picturesque, to a “chamber of humiliation”—it is Stephenson’s physical reaction, his repeated stabbing of the canvas.⁷¹

The shabby-genteel, possibly homeless author—who in his attempt to express himself substituted a penknife for his pen—confessed that he was prompted to violence both by his “dislike” of Turner and the “misty state” of the painting. Moral and aesthetic judgements had long been entangled in the reception of Turner’s paintings, especially by connoisseurs and conservative critics. For example, Joseph Farington reported in his diary that, when Sir George Beaumont and a number of artists came to dinner in 1806, “the Vicious practise of Turner & His followers was warmly exposed.”⁷² In 1863, in the National Gallery, it seems plausible that Thornbury’s scandalous biography of Turner, which had first revealed the existence of the artist’s mistresses and illegitimate daughters, played a part in inflaming Stephenson, since it had been published only a year before his attack on *Regulus* took place. But the gossip that ensued was no doubt inseparable, for Stephenson, from the cryptic, impressionistic form of the painting, and its depiction of the sun, since its aesthetics also appear to have upset him. The critic in *The Spectator* evoked something like this disruption of the spectator’s expectations when, in his description of *Regulus* in 1837, he argued that “the only way to be reconciled to the picture is to look at it from as great a distance as the width of the gallery will allow, and then you see nothing but a burst of sunlight.”⁷³ The spectator is compelled by Turner’s sun to distance herself from the composition and to adopt a defensive posture in relation to it. She is forced by its burst of sunlight to blink, moreover, and thereby to have recourse, in an irony as painful as it is playful,

to precisely the physiological defence mechanism of which Regulus himself was deprived as he faced the sun.

Stephenson, prowling around the painting almost three decades after *The Spectator's* critic had insisted on the need to look at *Regulus* from the other side of the gallery, collapsed or flouted this very distance to some almost psychotic extent; and in this respect refused to be "reconciled" to its force. Like Regulus himself, he seems to have been blinded by the sun. It will be recalled from the details of his arrest that, in addition to concealing a penknife about his person, Stephenson also carried an "eye glass". When Inspector Denning asked to see the former item, in fact, he first produced the latter. These prostheses seem in the end exemplary of Stephenson's radically ambivalent attitude towards the painting: on the one hand, fascination; on the other, horror. But in this coupling of the blank, staring lens or lenses of the "eye-glass" and the cold blade of the knife, they are also condensed, displaced images of the torture committed against Regulus. It is as if, like the composition itself, the juxtaposition of these objects at the scene of the crime, alongside the painting that stands mutely but provocatively behind the railing, ultimately conforms to the dream logic of a rebus. The Turner Room itself, under the lidless gaze of *Regulus*, becomes the waking dream of an insomniac or maniac.

In thinking of Stephenson's violently defensive reaction to the painting, then, it might be possible to interpret *Regulus*, finally, in an additional layering of the composite scene, not as a seascape, whether it is seen from the perspective of the Roman general or not, but as the shocking portrait of an all-seeing eye of intolerable potency. It is what Foucault, conjuring up "the perfect disciplinary apparatus", characterises as "a single gaze" that "see[s] everything constantly"; it is "both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known."⁷⁴ From this reverse perspective, wherein the one who sees is seen, and the subject is objectified, as if in a ritual of humiliation framed by the context of the exhibition room, Turner's picture is thus itself the portrait of a lidless eye.

In *Regulus*, as it fans out across the thin cloud through which it is refracted, Turner's sunlight assumes a spherical form. It sculpts the sky, and the seaport beneath it, into a sort of socket. Crary has argued that in one of Turner's late paintings, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)* (1843), which has a characteristic circular structure related to the production of vignette designs for book illustrations, "the view of the sun that had dominated so many of Turner's previous images now becomes a fusion of eye and sun."⁷⁵ The same claim might be made about *Regulus*. Turner's sun, in this disturbing picture, can be interpreted as a scorched and scorching eyeball that, because of its divine potency, makes everything in its path wither. It is—to cite Foucault again—"a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned."⁷⁶ And in the conditions of the museum or exhibition room, it thus exerts a disciplinary power, especially in relation to a vulnerable visitor such as Stephenson.

In his "Hymn to the Flowers", probably first published in 1836, and often anthologised in the late 1830s, the dramatist, novelist, and poet Horace Smith innocently, if a little strangely, characterised the morning sun, which he depicts rising benignly above the dewy flowers as they open their "frownless eyes", as "God's lidless eye".⁷⁷ In *Regulus*, completed a year later, Turner effectively excavates the cruelty and ferocity that lies half-concealed beneath Smith's fragile, superficially picturesque image, and violently presses it to the extreme limits of the sublime. Turner, who allegedly announced before he died that "the Sun is God", implies in this painting that the lidless eye that is the sun is not merely an attribute of God, as in Smith's poem, it is God itself.⁷⁸ The lidless eyes of Regulus, then, ultimately mirror the lidless eye of a sun that

embodies a pagan deity, in all its monstrous, unendurable otherness; and that presides over a godless world, the “pallid charnel-house” evoked by Ruskin.

Paulson has persuasively claimed that, “at his most sublime,” Turner “makes part of the terror the unimportance in every sense of the human survivors.” If the Burkean sublime, as exemplified in pictures like Philippe de Loutherbourg’s *Avalanche* (1803), “leaves the viewer outside the picture”, and hence ultimately secure in their meditation on catastrophe, then the Turnerian sublime, pressing beyond this paradigm, situates the viewer “in the position of the endangered person himself, leaving no ground to stand on.”⁷⁹ Stephenson is emblematic of this endangered person. *Regulus* is a painting that lies at the extreme limit of the sublime, for it subjects its viewer to a fate in which, like the Roman general, she is poised between seeing everything and seeing nothing. In the same impossible moment, as if on the point of death, or as if trapped in the state of insanity evoked by Foucault when he uses the phrase “reason dazzled”, the spectator too is compelled at the same time to be all-seeing and unseeing.

Here, in *Regulus*, is an allegory of the crisis of the Enlightenment; a crisis to which Hans Blumenberg gestures, in his “metaphorology” of light, when he distinguishes between light as “an advancing dethronement of darkness” and light as “a dazzling superabundance”.⁸⁰ To be all-seeing, to be terminally exposed to light, is to be unseeing; it is to embody not a reasoning but an unreasoning state. Foucault writes that, if “truth and light, in their fundamental relation, constitute classical reason”, that is, the classical reason of the Enlightenment, then “delirium and dazzlement are in a relation which constitutes the essence of madness”. *Regulus*, in Foucault’s terms, sees nothing but light, as a result of his lidless condition, and he therefore “sees it as a void, as night, as nothing”. Turner’s painting portrays this “secret night of light”.⁸¹

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Footnotes

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4. James Thomson, “Winter”, ll. 513–514, 516, in *The Seasons*, in *Poetical Works*, edited by J. Logie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), 204.

5. Cecilia Powell, *Turner in the South: Rome, Naples, Florence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 147.
6. George Adams, *An Essay on Vision* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1789), 8–9. See also George Adams, *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Considered in It's [sic] Present State of Improvement*, Vol. 2 (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1794), 271.
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8. Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700–1789*, translated by Bernard C. Swift (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 210.
9. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65–66. For a related discussion, see John McCoubrey, “Turner’s Slave Ship: Abolition, Ruskin, and Reception”, *Word & Image* 14, no. 4 (1998), 334.
10. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1971), 108. Although there is, of course, voluminous secondary literature on Foucault’s concept of unreason, I have found little that is useful specifically on the notion of “reason dazzled”.
11. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 103.
12. Jonathan Crary, “The Blinding Light”, in *J.M.W. Turner: The Sun is God* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), 23. See, too, Jonathan Crary, “Spectral”, in Caroline A. Jones (ed.), *Sensorium: Embodies Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 207–211.
13. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, *Diary*, entry for 16 December 1863 (NGA2/3/2/13).
14. *Morning Post*, 18 December 1863, 8.
15. *Morning Post*, 18 December 1863, 8.
16. *The Art-Journal* 3 (1864), 57.
17. *Illustrated London News*, 26 December 1863, 647.
18. *Morning Post*, 18 December 1863, 8. The *Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, which identified Stephenson’s forename as “William (or Walter)”, noted that he was “described as an author and also as an accountant”; see *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* 2, January–May 1864, 405.
19. Wornum, *Diary*, entry for 16 December 1863 (NGA2/3/2/13).
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22. *Morning Post*, 19 January 1864, 7.
23. *North London News*, 9 January 1864, 3; and *Morning Post*, 19 January 1864, 7.
24. Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex”, *New Formations* 4 (Spring 1988): 73–102.
25. *Morning Post*, 18 December 1863, 8.
26. Quoted in William T. Whitley, *Art in England, 1821–1837* (Cambridge: : Cambridge University Press, 1930), 159.
27. Quoted in Anthony Bailey, *Standing in the Sun: A Life of J.M.W. Turner* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997), 255.
28. Joyce H. Townsend, Rebecca Hellen, and Ian Warrell, “Turner’s *Regulus*: A Tale of Violence, Abuse and Accident, Illuminated by Technical Study”, in Joyce H. Townsend and Abbie Vandivere (eds), *Studying the European Visual Arts 1800–1850: Paintings, Sculpture, Interiors and Art on Paper* (London: Archetype Publications, 2017), 114. This article offers a fascinating technical reconstruction of the material condition of the painting from the moment

of its composition to the present time, one that reveals that, in fact, Turner probably repaired and repainted the part of the painting damaged on its journey back from Rome some time before 1837.

29. Quoted in Whitley, *Art in England, 1821–1837*, 159.
30. Robert K. Wallace, *Melville and Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 50.
31. See “Appendix: Daniel Wilson and *Regulus*”, in Gerald Finley, *Angel in the Sun: Turner’s Vision of History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 212.
32. John Ruskin, *Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House, 1856–7* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1857), 60,
33. See, for example, John Ruskin, “Preface to the Second Edition”, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 1, in *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. 3, edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 42–44.
34. Ruskin, *Notes on the Turner Gallery*, 60 and, 67. ‘Preface to the Second Edition’.
35. Ruskin, *Notes on the Turner Gallery*, 60 and 67.
36. John Ruskin, *The Letters of John Ruskin to Lord and Lady Mount-Temple*, edited by John Lewis Bradley (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964), 26–27.
37. See Bailey, *Standing in the Sun*, 218.
38. Quoted in Leo Costello, “Power, Creativity, and Destruction in Turner’s Fires”, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 25 (2017), 27. Costello links these extreme responses not simply to the narrative content of Turner’s pictures, especially insofar as these relate to fire, but to his very public performances on Varnishing Day, arguing that such responses “became a means to register at once the power of Turner’s work and its potentially excessive, even disruptive effects within the exhibition space” (27). On the performativity and dramatic impact of Varnishing Day, see Michael Rosenthal, “Turner Fires a Gun”, in David H. Solkin (ed.), *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 145–155; and Leo Costello, *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 111–142.
39. “Exhibition at the Gallery of the British Institution”, *Literary Gazette; and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*, 1046, 4 February 1837, 74.
40. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. 1, 290.
41. Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 83.
42. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Roman History, from the Foundation of the City of Rome, to the Destruction of the Western Empire*, Vol. 1 (Dublin: S. Powell, 1769), 152 and 158.
43. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 49.
44. Finley, *Angel in the Sun*, 97.
45. For a neat comparison of the earlier paintings with the later one, see Franny Moyle, *Turner: The Extraordinary Life and Momentous Times of J.M.W. Turner* (London: Viking, 2016), 350–351.
46. “Modern Pictures at the British Institution”, *The Spectator*, 11 February 1837, 20.
47. See Paulson, *Literary Landscape*, 81, where he calls Turner “a powerfully reductionist painter of the Claude landscape, a primitivist who eliminates every extraneous element except the source of light on the horizon.”

48. J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 134.
49. Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape between Ideology and the Aesthetic: Marxist Essays on British Art and Art Theory, 1750–1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 427.
50. David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 269.
51. Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750–1810* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 99.
52. Costello, *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*, 3.
53. Costello, *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*, 2.
54. Costello, *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*, 35.
55. See Powell, *Turner in the South*, 148. For additional accounts of paintings by Turner in which he appears to incorporate separate scenes, see Eric Shanes on *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), in *Turner's Human Landscape* (London: William Heinemann, 1990), 40–42; and Costello on *The Slave Ship* (1840), in *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*, 207–208.
56. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, edited by Angela Richards, translated by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 382.
57. See “Appendix: Daniel Wilson and Regulus”, in Gerald Finley, *Angel in the Sun*, 213.
58. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 382.
59. Alex Potts, “The Romantic Work of Art”, in Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, Vared Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor, and Seth McCormick (eds), *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 53.
60. See “Exhibition at the Gallery of the British Institution”, *Literary Gazette* no. 1046, 4 February 1837, 74.
61. See John Gage, *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth* (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 143.
62. Jonathan Crary, “Nineteenth-Century Visual Incapacities”, in James Elkins (ed.), *Visual Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 68.
63. Paulson, *Literary Landscape*, 82.
64. John Ruskin, “The Two Boyhoods”, in *John Ruskin: Selections from his Writings*, edited by Jonathan D. Rosenberg (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 118.
65. Costello, *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*, 67.
66. See Lionel Cust, “The Portraits of J.M.W. Turner, R.A.”, *Magazine of Art* 18 (1895), 248. Turner’s repainting of *Regulus* on this occasion was also captured, in oils, by both Thomas Fearnley and Charles West Cope.
67. The Tate conservationists conclude from their recent technical analysis of the canvas that it is “now impossible to determine whether the depiction of dazzling light was an intrinsic feature, or greatly augmented when Turner was obliged to disguise the large tear in the sky”, see Townsend *et al.*, “Turner’s *Regulus*”, 122. From my point of view, as no doubt from that of Gilbert and Stephenson, Turner’s repainting is ultimately no less “intrinsic” to *Regulus* than its original iteration of the sun.
68. Ruskin, *Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House*, 15.
69. Miller, *Illustration*, 134.
70. Heinrich von Kleist, “Feelings before Friedrich’s Seascape”, in Philip B. Miller, “Anxiety and Abstraction: Kleist and Brentano on Caspar David Friedrich”, *Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (1974), 208. For more detail, see Matthew Beaumont, “Looking through Lidless Eyes: Friedrich, Kleist and the Logic of Sensation”, *Angelaki* 23 (2018): 3–19.

71. The conservationists at Tate, who have used an X-radiograph to examine the canvas, observe that “the assailant made diagonal strokes rising from right to left”, and speculate that “the attack must have been quite frenzied, much more so than any eye-witness reported.” See Townsend *et al.*, “Turner’s *Regulus*”, 121.
72. See Finley, *Angel in the Sun*, 15 and 18.
73. “Modern Pictures at the British Institution”, *The Spectator*, 11 February 1837, 20.
74. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 173.
75. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 139.
76. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 173.
77. Horace Smith, “Hymn to the Flowers”, in *Poetical Works*, Vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1846), 7.
78. See John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Vol. 4, letter 45 (August, 1874), in *The Work of John Ruskin*, edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Vol. 28 (London: George Allen, 1907), 147.
79. Paulson, *Literary Landscape*, 77 and 78.
80. Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation”, in David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 31.
81. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 108.

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