ENCHANTERS OF MEN, LASHED TO THE MAST AND SNOW STORM

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Khatchatur I. Pilikian, London UK, April 2015

Turner depicted a wide range of musical instruments (woodwind, brass, strings, keyboard, percussion, cymbals, castanets, bag-pipe, etc.). The metamorphosis of Turner's musical emotions into visual images were most probably initiated by synaesthesia — the 'joined sensation' impulses.[1]

Turner's 1842 Royal Academy exhibit *Snow Storm* (B & J 398) is one among many such paintings.

Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in a Shallow Water,
and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night of the Ariel left Harwich.
Turners own label to his oil on canvas

The clue, or better, the key to *Snow Storm*'s 'musical performance' is camouflaged with Turner's own words: 'I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it'[2] -- sentence frequently quoted by Turner's scholars. One such mention belongs to Prof. Luke Herrmann in TSN 80 (Dec 98, p 6). He alludes to an excerpt from Roger's poem *The Voyage of Columbus* and a vignette illustrating *Columbus* titled *A Tempest* (W 1207, R 403) Turner drew with twenty three other vignette illustrations for the 1834 edition of Roger's *Poems* (which included *Columbus* as its final item). Prof. Herrmann describes the *Tempest* vignette thus: '...galleons of a strong sea...enormous dark phantom holding a torch and surrounded by spectral archers.'

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Prof. Herrmann thus wonders whether Turner was 'telling the truth' when he was talking about himself as being 'lashed to the mast', or perhaps Turner 'had the eerie lines and his beautiful vignette in mind'. He also reminds us of the earlier and 'remarkably similar' story associated with the 18th century French marine painter Joseph Vernet.

Alongside our legitimate doubts concerning the reported accounts ascribed to Turner which are sometimes even referred to as 'myths', we might as well, I truly believe, dig deep down the path through a real myth, the *Odyssey* — the most influential epic tale ever narrated by a Bard in the Western culture.

Turner's absorption by Homer's Epic had already produced in 1829 what Ruskin called 'the central picture in Turner's career', namely *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus-Homer's Odyssey* (B & J 330, Text p.184). Kathleen Nicholson has rightly observed that 'Stories drawn from ancient epic poetry held a privileged position in Turner's classical oeuvre.'[3]

If delved to the core of Homer's narrative, one is overwhelmed by the frequent influx of sound-images which drive one to ponder whether the most plausible source of all the above mentioned eerie tales ('lashed to the mast' and a 'hero struggling in a tempest', including Roger's *Columbus*) should not be considered the mythical tale of an eerie 'musical performance' followed by a Tempest in *Odyssey.*

Beside Homer the Greek, the Latin Virgil was another 'privileged' Bard whose colourful and labyrinthine narrative ignited Turner's imagination. In an intriguing rendering of the encounter of Aeneas with Sybil, titled *The Golden Bough* (B & J 335) of 1834, Aeneas amazingly is not even in Turner's picture, unlike a picture he had painted back in c.1798, *Aeneas and the Sybil, Lake Avernus* (B & J 34) and then again in 1814-15, *Lake Avernus, Aeneas and the Cumean Sybil* (B & J 226). Instead Turner has depicted a lyre on the floor, close by a couple of maidens, one seated, another reclining. In Virgil's original, the cavern is Apollo's ward, and Aeneas reminds Sybil how Orpheus with his Thracian lyre and tunes had reached 'the spirit of his bride'.[4]

As always, Turner never misses a 'musical' episode in a tale. His depiction of the lyre is a reference to Apollo and Orpheus. However Sybil is painted without Aeneas. She is standing in front of a gateway, with a 'golden bough' in her hand. The bough, an ancient symbol of life, was to protect and guide Aeneas to summon the spirit of his father Anchises. The absence of Aeneas in *The Golden Bough* seems only to suggest, therefore, that Turner has depicted the legend of Aeneas also with himself in mind, seeking out -- a fallacious hope indeed -- his own beloved father, who had died five

years earlier in 1829.

A strikingly similar identification with another mythical hero is also discernible, when Turner painted one of his masterpieces, namely *Snow Storm* (B & J 398) of 1842 in which no human figure seems to have been at all painted. But then, that is the crux.

It is literally impossible for anyone reading Homer's *Odyssey* to forget the tale about the Sirens, the bird-like creatures with the heads of women. Unforgettable it surely is also because of it being frequently retold, like a *leitmotiv,* at the heart of Book XII of Homer's epic stretching to XXIV Books.

Let us follow the frequency and the pattern of that tale as told in Book XII of the *Odyssey,* not in Pope's translation which Turner read, but in a relatively more recent rendering into English by Ennis Rees. Rees has kept the original name of the hero, Odysseus, in the narrative, discarding the Latinised name, Ulysses, which Turner sometimes used.

First telling: The magician, Circe, advises Odysseus, king of Ithaca, how to proceed with his return voyage back to his home, leaving her house (Circe's island Aeaea) where the hero and his comrades were wined and dined for a whole year.

Pay attention to what I shall tell you, and God himself / Will help you remember. First you'll come to the Sirens, / Enchanters of men. Whoever in ignorance comes near them / / With the clear liquid tones of their song, the Sirens bewitch him, / Here knead some sweet wax, stop up the ears of your comrades, / But if you yourself want to listen, have them tie you, / Hand and foot, upright on the thwart supporting / The mast and lash you securely to the mast itself. / That you may enjoy the dulcet song of the Sirens. / And if you implore and command your friends to release you, They must tie you still tighter with even more ropes.[5]

Second telling: Odysseus speaks to his comrades after listening to Circe's advice, informing them about her predictions.

First she bade me avoid the song / Of the Sirens / / But you must bind me fast with ropes so tight / And lash me securely to the mast itself, and if / I implore and command you to release me, tie me / Still tighter with even more ropes.[6]

Third telling: Odysseus informs Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians who gave him shelter, how he and his comrades prepared themselves for Circe's predictions.

And they bound me hand and foot in the ship, upright / On the thwart supporting the mast and lashed me securely / To the mast itself.[7]

Fourth telling: Odysseus continues his tale to Alcinous, at the point when he hears the two Sirens singing.

Most famous Odysseus, linger a while. . . / And listen as we two blend our voices. . . / The

honeyed tones of our song.[8]

Finishing his recollection of the Siren's duet song, Odysseus continues the story by repeating obsessively, yet again, the same episodes, albeit in different words.

and I / ordered my men to release me, / And soon Perimedes and Eurylochus got up and drew / My bonds tighter and added still more. [9]

The *leitmotiv* tale finally succeeds in lashing the reader's memory to the mast. . . Circe first told Odysseus that 'God himself will help the hero 'to remember' her tale. To assure its impact on the reader or the listener of the epic story, let alone its impact on Odysseus himself as Circe would wish, the tale is narrated twice as a prediction, and then twice while the prediction actually takes place, with the preparations preceding it. The impact itself thus becomes predictable - acquiring an unforgettable imprint, which exactly is the case with Turner. He is remembering, hence retelling the tale in his own way, never mind as his own experience: 'I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did.'[10]

It seems obvious that Turner 'becoming Odysseus' is recording / remembering the four times/hours *leitmotiv* of the 'Enchanters of men' with the hero 'lashed to the mast', while he, Turner, was painting his *Snow Storm* in 1842. As a latter-day Bard enacting to 'show' his narrative, Turner, performing his own story in colours, is also reported to have said that he 'did not paint to be understood', but 'wished to *show* what such a scene was like'(my *italics*). Furthermore, Turner insisted that 'no one had any business to like the picture .'[11] Unless of course, we may well add with confidence, if that 'one' was capable of 'listening' and experiencing a 'live performance' of a storm, albeit a painted storm. Hence the painting in question is to be experienced as a colour-recorded 'show', first and foremost.

It is also quite indicative that the episodes of the Sirens and the 'lashed hero' are followed by a crescendo of adventures throughout Book XII, which eventually culminate in a mighty storm. Odysseus is adamant to let Alcinous hear about that devastating storm from the mouth of the sole survivor, himself, Odysseus, the mighty hero.

The West Wind came shrieking upon us, a blow of hurricane / / Then, with a great clasp of thunder, Zeus hurled his bolt. [12]

When all was lost to the storm — the ship destroyed and comrades drowned — it is worth underlining the fact that the image of 'lashing the mast' was nevertheless still preserved by Homer as an essential metaphor to bring his hero to a safe haven eventually. It is precisely this which Turner has targeted in Homer to express his own life's predicament.

I lashed / The keel and mast together, and aboard these two / I was driven on by the havocking winds.[13]

Homer's modern translator E. Rees has this to say about Odysseus: ' he seldom tells strangers anything literally. He prefers to fabricate, to speak in metaphor and say precisely what his experience has been like. These stories and fabulous tales, he says in effect, are *like* what I have been through, '[14] (Translator's *italics*)

One wonders whether the profile of Homer/Odysseus sketched by Rees might not be reflected into Turner's own silhouette!

It is beyond any reasonable doubt that Homer's flashy and luscious sound-images in *Odyssey*, Book XII, are the stuff Turner's own 'lashed to the mast' tale is made of, as is his painting of 1842 which he 'narrated' bard-like as: *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in a Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night of the Ariel left Harwich.* (B & J 398)

We should not be surprised then to discover that: 'Despite Turner's title, no ship called *Ariel* is known to have been lost or involved in a storm in the years immediately preceding 1842, nor is any ship of that name known to have operated out of Harwich at this time.'(B & J Text, p.247)

Surely, Turner might well have witnessed a few storms by then.

But then, of course, once upon a time there was Greece, and Greek culture became the *logos* of Western Civilisation. There was Homer and his Odyssey, with Hermes at his service. Then Shakespeare came and his Tempest, with Ariel in Prospero's service, before Turner rose to greet them both with a Snow Storm, with his Memories at his own service — conducting with a brush their Enchanting Symphonies.

Khatchatur Pilikian, member of Labour Heritage national committee writes on art and society. His paper on William Turner, a painter with working class routes is sent out with **Labour Heritage Bulletin Spring *2015.***

Notes

1. Richard E, Cytowic, Synaesthesia: Phenomenology and Neuropsychology, reprinted from Psyche (1996). In Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings, ed. S. Baron-Cohen and E. Harrison, 1997, p. 17.
2. Turner's alleged conversation with Rev. W. Kingsley, reported by J. Ruskin,

in the latter's fifth edition of notes on Turner pictures on view at Marlborough House. In B & J, Text, 1984, p. 247.

3. Kathleen Nicholson, Turner's Classical Landscapes: Myth & Meaning, 1990, p.264.
4. John Jackson, trans., VIRGIL - The Aeneid, 1995, p. 92.
5. Ennis Rees, trans., The Odyssey of Homer, 1977, p. 196.
6. Rees, op. cit., p. 200.
7. Ibid., p. 201.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. B & J, Text, 1984, p. 247.
11. Ibid.
12. Rees, op. cit., p. 209.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., Introduction, p.x.