

Isolation, Loneliness

VII. Visual Arts

Throughout history, painters have sought to address spiritual, psychological, and existential aspects of isolation and loneliness through their art, and the Bible has offered a range of possibilities for doing so.

In the Orthodox Church, veneration of icons depicting biblical figures might be seen as offering an opportunity to transcend spiritual isolation and loneliness. Through contemplation of the visual, the icon offers a revelation of God and draws the viewer into the eternal world it depicts.

The Western tradition of painting has drawn on the Bible in figurative, landscape, and abstract painting, as a source for engaging with loneliness and isolation.

David Grossman opens his retelling of the story of Samson, which presents Samson as a lonely and tortured soul, by remarking that the Bible is “a history of actions” and “as a rule the Bible rarely records the feelings of its heroes.” This lacuna assumes great significance in the Western tradition of figurative painting: the commitment to realism means that artists are called upon to depict physiognomic details, for which they must draw on their own imagination, and the commitment to individuality invites artists to give expression to their emotional interpretation of the scene. Berys Gaut offers a compelling interpretation of two paintings of Bathsheba, in which he argues that Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba with King David’s Letter* (1654, Louvre, Paris) captures Bathsheba as the lonely object of unwelcome sexual attention, whereas Willem Drost’s *Bathsheba with King David’s Letter* (1654, Louvre, Paris) depicts her from King David’s point of view. Gaut claims that Rembrandt’s treatment of Bathsheba’s interiority is ethically superior, and that this makes it an aesthetically superior work of art.

European attitudes to the aesthetics of nature, and mountains in particular, were deeply anchored in the biblical image of wilderness as debris from the flood, and as hostile, inhospitable, and suitable only for religious scourging. Marjorie Hope Nicholson charts the course by which rugged mountains came to be seen as instances of the Creator’s achievement and ultimately as worthy of aesthetic appreciation in their own right. This gave rise to the category of the sublime, and the appreciation of the transcendent value of isolation in the natural world. Caspar David Friedrich’s mystical brand of Protestantism disposed him to regard the solitary contemplation of nature as being on a par with communion, and his paintings seek out the divine and the infinite through isolation in nature: in *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1810–11, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin), the summit cross symbolises a landscape redeemed by Christ, however, the biblical ref-

erence is absent in *The Wanderer above a Sea of Mist* (1817–18, Kunsthalle, Hamburg), where the romantic sublime seems to have taken hold.

The abstract expressionist painter, Barnett Newman, reinvented the sublime and, in doing so, returned to the Bible in his abstract “zip” paintings: the *Onement* series (6 paintings, 1948–53, different collections) and the *Stations of the Cross* series (14 paintings, 1958–66, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), *Covenant* (1949, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C.), *Abraham* (1949, Museum of Modern Art, New York), *Adam* (1951–52, London, Tate Modern), etc., which isolate the viewer in an experience of oneness.

Bibliography: ■ Gaut, B., *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford 2007). ■ Grossman, D., *Lion’s Honey: The Myth of Sampson* (trans. S. Schoffman; Edinburgh 2006). ■ Newman, B., “The Sublime is Now,” in *Selected Writings and Interviews* (ed. J. P. O’Neill/B. Newman; Berkeley, Calif. 1992). ■ Nicholson, M. H., *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1959). ■ Wolf, N., *Caspar David Friedrich* (trans. K. Williams; Cologne 2003).

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