

Symbolic Color Associations in Goethe's *Farbenlehre* and its application in the pictorial work of its early receptors

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ABSTRACT

In this article will be recognized the main contributions of Goethe in relation to a symbolic consideration of color for its use in the pictorial practice, from the connection of the chromatic polarities theory proposed by Goethe in the *Farbenlehre* with its section on the 'Effect of Color with Reference to Moral Associations'. A review of Goethe's *Color Circle* as the visual manifesto of his work and also to his previous *Rose of Temperaments* will be useful to understand how the German poet was visually thinking in giving a guide for the pictorial color application to the receptors of his *Theory of Colors*. Finally, the reception of this symbolical section of the *Theory* in the contemporary painters Philipp Otto Runge and J. M. William Turner will also be reviewed, and how each painter enriched the chromatic symbology proposed by Goethe from his own interest in religious and / or allegorical themes.

KEYWORDS

Goethe, Theory of Colors, Chromatic Polarities, Symbology of Color, *Farbenlehre*, Pictorial Color, Color Circle

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the foundations of Goethe's *Theory of colors* that has been recognized as relevant for later studies is related to the aesthetic and symbolic effects of color, which the German poet describes in the Didactic Section of his theory. The section called '*Effect of Color with Reference to Moral Associations*' contains specific guidelines that correspond to an intensification of the polar associations present in his theory, and which are proportionated for the assessment and understanding of color. These guidelines are susceptible to be applied in the artistic practice, since one of Goethe's motivations when studying color as a natural manifestation was to generate knowledge about its possibilities of application as a pictorial medium. For each perceived color, Goethe associated an answer inside the human being, from two fundamental ideas: first, that vision is not a passive sense, but an active, constituent, communicative disposition; and second, that due to this condition there is a correspondence between '*external light*' (the environment) and '*inner light*' (inside of the viewer), by which vision comes into contact with things, since '*only the affine can know the affine*' (Arnaldo 1992). The aesthetic and moral effects of color that he points to, are then derived from a sensitive action that is physiologically determined and that this action is, according to the poet, independent of cultural impositions or conventions, although these are present anyway. Goethe believed that colors have a clear effect on the mind and feelings (Miguel-Pueyo 2009), semantic associations with which he will begin his reflection on the color code as a specific language for art (Arnaldo 1992), and that will be of special interest to the artists who will later read his work, the receptors. This is clearly illustrated from the following paragraph of the *Farbenlehre*:

§758. Since color occupies so important place in the series of elementary phenomena, filling as it does the limited circle assigned to it with fullest variety, we shall not be surprised to find that its effects are at all times decided and significant, and that they are immediately associated with the emotions of the mind. We shall not be surprised that these appearances presented singly, are specific, that in combination they may produce an harmonious, characteristic, often even an inharmonious effect on the eye, by means of which they act on the mind [...] Hence, color considered as an element of art, may be made subservient to the highest aesthetical ends. (Goethe 1840)

The vindication of the color over the form that Goethe raises constantly, it is based on the consideration of color as a constituent aesthetic means, with full and sovereign formal capacity; this will be possible, to a great extent, due to the universal physiological conditions that order the chromatic values. The reactions of the observer to the chromatic combinations will not be for Goethe accidental answers, but derived from a combination of effects and counter-effects of the eye. The inherent artistic values of color in painting would remain incomplete, according to Goethe's conclusions, if they are not contemplated in relation to a receiver. The aesthetic and moral effects of color are not based only in the colored object –as traditional doctrines had pointed out– but in relation to an active subject.

2. ANALYSIS: GOETHE'S PROPOSALS ON COLOR SYMBOLISM

When Goethe took his theory, the chromatic circle, to image, he considered the inclusion of the moral and sensitive effects within the circle, in a textual way, positioning the different concepts in places close to the colors that produce them. The morphology of the circle will then serve as support for the symbolism of color, and in the same way, the various chromatic-conceptual polarities will be visualized in the chromatic circle. This chromatic circle corresponds – probably– to the first color model in history that incorporates concepts or written associations of a non-technical or pictorial nature, but rather of a cultural or symbolic nature.

An antecedent for the creation of Goethe's chromatic circle was the *Rose of Temperaments* (1798-1799), a scheme he had designed with Friedrich Schiller and which was based, in part, on the fourfold system of the four elements of Antiquity and the Middle Ages: the four humors, the four cardinal points, the four seasons, the four parts of the day, the four ages of man, the four phases of the moon, etc. (Miguel-Pueyo 2009). In that theory, red, for example, was associated with air, midnight, north, winter, old age and melancholy, reason, humor and judgment, ideal and unity. The Rose also constitutes a previous reference for the visualization of the symbolic associations of color, in which the different temperaments are indicated textually and associated by their position to one of the arcs of the circle. In the same way, the different personalities also appear explicitly and associated to a certain color of the corresponding arc. Thus, in the warm or active arc of the circle, we find the '*choleric*' temperament and its personalities '*tyrants, heroes and adventurers*', which will be associated with the colors red,

orange and a part of yellow; while the 'sanguine' temperament and its 'hedonistic, lovers and poets' personalities will also be on the active arc of the circle, mainly associated with yellow and a part of green. On the passive side of the circle, there are the 'melancholic' temperament along with their personalities 'pedants, philosophers and rulers'; and the 'phlegmatic' temperament and their personalities 'historians, speakers and teachers'.

associated with purple and blue respectively. When he writes the *Farbenlehre* and publishes his chromatic circle, in 1810, Goethe takes up the structure of textual associations within the circle, present in the *Rose*. He develops his chromatic circle from two concentric rings, in which he incorporates the textual references, but this time, on the colored areas. In the outer ring, Goethe positions four concepts, dividing the

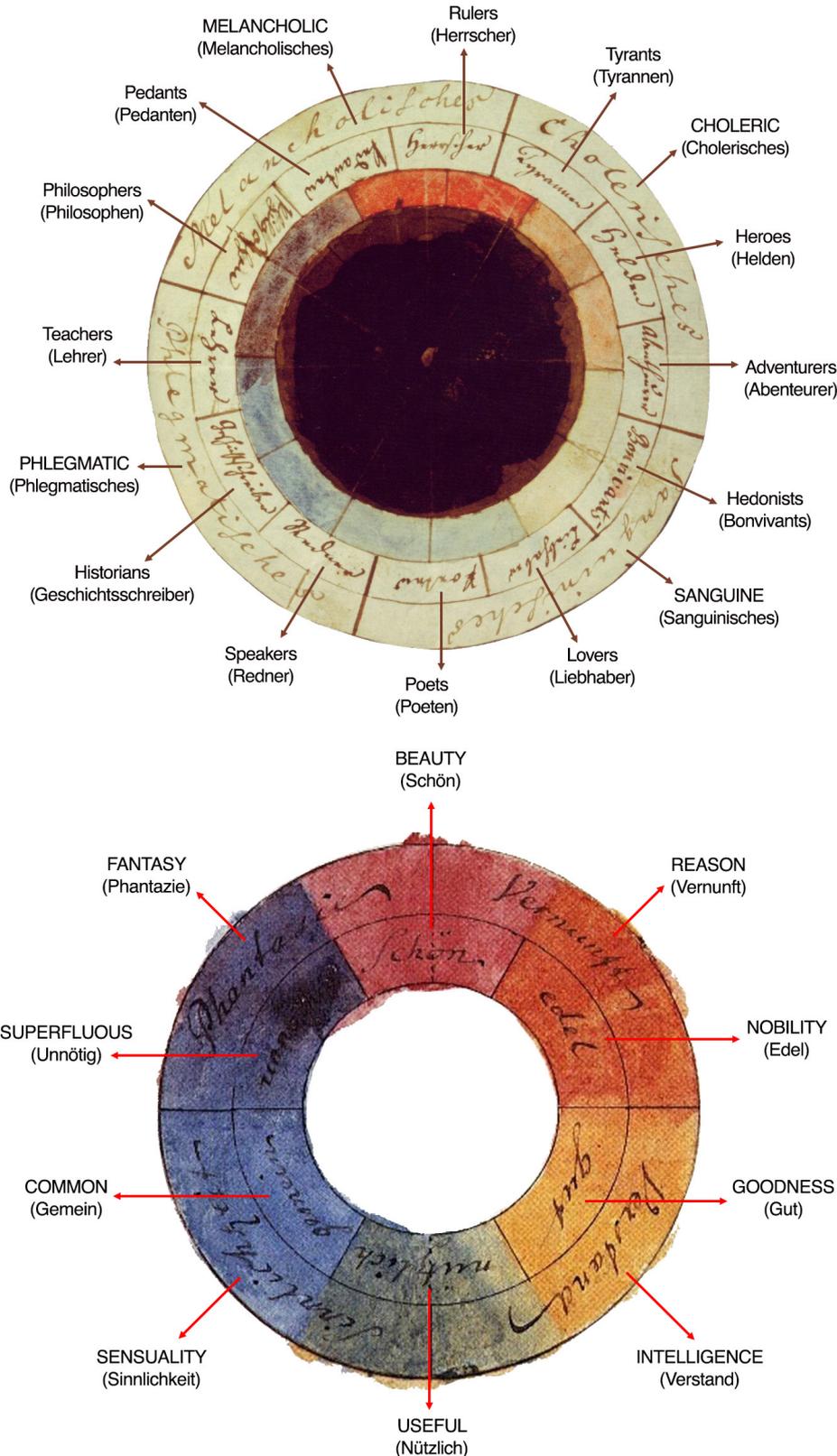


Figure 1 - Translation of the Rose of Temperaments of J.W.V. Goethe and F. Schiller, 1798.

Figure 2 - Translation of the Color Circle of J.W.V. Goethe, 1810.

circle into four quarters, which are related to the concepts of the inner ring and are associated to them by their color and closeness. In this way, in the outer ring, we see the concept *'fantasy'*, associated with violet and purple colors, which contains the *'superfluous'* (in violet) and part of *'beauty'* (in purple). The *'beauty'* is also contained by the *'reason'*, purple and orange, which also contains entirely the *'nobility'* (in orange). The *'intelligence'*, of yellow and green colors, contemplates *'goodness'* (in yellow) and *'utility'* or *'function'* (in green). Finally, the *'sensuality'*, of blue and green colors, is related to the *'function'* and the *'common'* (in blue).

These associations contemplated in the circle correspond to a summary of what is stated in the *Theory*, in the *'effects'* section. These are symbolic qualities that accentuate the distinction of the two fundamental arcs of the circle. As expected, the poet will refer to the moral-sensitive effects of colors in terms of polarity, in their relation to both arcs of the circle, active and passive, yellow and blue. This polarization gives symbolic characteristics related to light and illumination to the colors that are close to yellow, and the characteristic of darkness to the colors that are close to blue (§778). On the active side, it is possible to find the qualification of yellow as the color of warmth and gladness (§773), cheerful and magnificent, especially pleasant when it has a reddish tone. Orange brings yellow to exaltation, *'intolerably powerful impression'* (§774). Of the red-purple, Goethe will say that its effect is *'as singular as its nature'*, with an impression of *'grave dignity'* at the same time as *'of serene grace'*. In his unique style, he will add that *'the dignity of age and amiableness of youth may adorn itself with degrees of the same hue'* [1] (§796). Besides the red-purple, the union of the two exalted poles –yellow and blue– will occur and therefore the calm, an ineffable satisfaction (§794). With yellow, orange and red-purple, the active side is *'in its highest energy'* (§775).

The colors of the passive side, blue, green and violet, on the other hand, *'produce a restless, susceptible, anxious impression'* (§777). Blue will be *'a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose'* (§779). Violet will have *'something lively without gladness'* (§789). In the green, on the other hand, the color resulting from the mixture of both poles, if none of them is above the other, *'the eye and the mind repose on the result of this junction as upon a simple color'* (§802).

Considering the effects of colors, Goethe introduces some reflections on the importance of tradition and conventions in the meanings that colors can acquire in different cultural contexts. This is how the poet alludes, for example, to the preferred colors of *'lively nations'* such as the French –the active side of the circle– in

comparison with the *'sedate nations'*, English and German, and people aiming at *'dignity of appearance'*, as Italians or Spaniards, who would prefer the colors of the passive side (§838); or the preferred colors of the fair-haired women in comparison with the brunettes (§840); or the disinclination of refined people to color (§841). He also makes some suggestions for the pictorial use of color in relation to harmony, classifying the combinations into *'characteristic harmonies'* and *'non-characteristic'*, and also regarding the use of complementary colors. Towards the end of the *'effects'* section, Goethe refers to different uses of color, which he names as symbolic –natural or attached to Nature–; allegorical –arbitrary or conventional–; and mystical. All these considerations were very useful for the artists who received the *Farbenlehre*, at different times. The artists were attracted by the seductive brilliance of their observations, as well as its charming writing (Kemp 2000).

3. RESULTS: RECEPTION OF THE 'EFFECTS': RUNGE AND TURNER

Two early recipients of the *Farbenlehre* were the German painter Philipp Otto Runge and the English painter J.M. William Turner. Runge had first-hand access to Goethe's chromatic studies since they were great friends and regularly exchanged correspondence. Although Runge would not be able to read the complete *Theory of Colors*, since he passed away the same year of its publication in 1810, he was perhaps the most important consultant of the work, receiving constantly commentaries and questions that the poet sent him by letter. In parallel, Runge developed his experimental series of works called *Hours of the Day*, in which is believed he was testing and applying the advances that Goethe shared with him.

Turner, in the other hand, had access to one of the copies of the first and perhaps most influential translation of the *Farbenlehre* into English, made by his friend the painter Charles Eastlake. Turner was fascinated with the work of the German poet and put it into practice in his later pictorial work, alluding to the *Theory* in the name of his series of two paintings: the first called *Light and Color (Goethe's Theory)*, *The Morning after the Deluge - Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* and the second *Shade and Darkness - The Evening of the Deluge*, both of 1843, where both names show a clear allusion to the theory of polarities –light and dark– as it is already said, one of the foundations of Goethe's work.

Returning to Runge, the German painter manifested an important interest in the symbolism of color. This was partly based on the

ideas shared with Goethe via correspondence, as well as his conviction that the pictorial work could be used to express the moods of man, through a series of natural symbols and allegories, as exemplified in the following quote, taken from a letter to his brother Daniel of 1802:

Nov. 7th, 1802: *'Color is the final art, which is and always will remain a mystery. It contains the true symbol of the Trinity. Light or white is good and the darkness is evil; that is why men were given the revelation and colors came to the world; that is, blue, red and yellow. Blue is the Father and red is the true link between earth and heaven. When both disappear, then the fire appears in the night, which is the yellow, or the Holy Spirit that is sent to us; also, for this reason, the moon is yellow'* (Runge 1982).

From the quotation, it is possible to notice that already towards 1802 great similarity existed in Goethe and Runge with regard to the symbolic association of the black-white polarity, in linking white with the light and the good, and black with darkness or evil. Although we have seen that for Goethe color acquires fundamental importance as a means to access sensitive experience, for Runge it will have a religious-mystical tint, since it *'contains the true symbol of the Trinity'* and is part of *'the revelation of God towards men'*. He also refers to the three primary nuances of Goethe's symbolism, yellow, red and blue, but these are also defined in religious terms, associating the blue color with the Father, red with *'the link between heaven and earth, between God and men'*, Jesus Christ; and yellow as the color of the Holy Spirit.

From these associations, it might seem difficult to link the rationality of Runge in the construction of his geometric-mathematical model *Die Farben-Kugel* (*The Sphere of Colors*) with the mystical intensity with which he refers to color in his letters to Daniel. However, in the same publication of *The Sphere*, the painter included another brief scheme that alludes to the symbolic qualities of colors: a six-pointed star inscribed within a circle, which will summarize some of his chromatic associations. Runge contrasts what he considers to be 'ideal colors' in the upper pole of the scheme, where the red color is placed, with the 'real colors' of the lower pole, or shades of green. Red is linked in *Die Farben-Kugel* to love (Liebe) and green with the physical world. The cold colors, blue and violet, are linked to the woman (Weib) and the feminine passions (Weibl: Leidenschaft), respectively; Warm colors, yellow and orange, on the other hand, are related to man (Mann) and male passions (Männl: Leidenschaft).

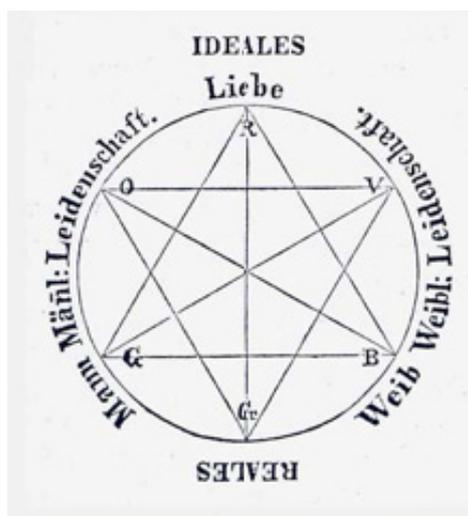


Figure 3 - Hexagram of color and correspondences of P.O. Runge, *Die Farben-Kugel*, 1810.

Some theorists, such as Martin Kemp, argue that Runge took much of the mysticism of the seventeenth century, and sought particular inspiration in the writings of Jakob Böhme. From Böhme's work, *Aurora oder Morgenrote in Aufgang*, of 1620, Runge would have adopted the divine triangle of the Trinity as an omnipresent principle of organization in the universe, as in the three fundamental primary colors –yellow, red and blue– (Kemp 2000). In another letter to Daniel in 1803, Runge again alludes to the trinity in chromatic terms:

'the one and the three, that is, the longing, the love and the will; yellow, red and blue; the point, the line and the circle; the muscles, the blood and the bones' (Runge 1982).

When trying to take its symbolism to the pictorial practice, Runge generated his project of four pictorial works called *Hours of the Day* he initiated in 1802 and that was composed by the morning, the day, the dusk and the night. For all, he developed sketches in engraving, but he only managed to paint the allegory of *The Morning* (1809-1810). This series was widely admired by Goethe and is perhaps the most representative work that links the mystical and symbolic associations of Runge with different characters and nuances. *The Morning* presents a symmetrical image with the representation of a sunrise, its Renaissance appearance is bathed with the warm brilliance of the golden light and translucent blue-purple shadows, which mark the chromatic counterpoint.

Inside and around the work sprout the flowers, the sun rises warmly from behind the earth, all the souls seem to ascend towards the ethereal blue and a baby in the center below alludes to the new day that is received by the angels. Other angels in the middle of the play surround Aurora, who is holding a white lily, symbol of purity, which *'is in the highest light'*, as Runge wrote in

another letter, combining the brightness of the symbolic trilogy, of yellows, reds and blues, which are protagonists of the painting. The warm and cold nuances are perfectly balanced, as in the background of the work where you can see an impeccable transition between the complementary blue and yellow. For Runge, color and light within the work express the progress of the earthly soul towards liberation.

In the case of Turner, his interest in symbolic representation with color dates back to his lectures prior to reading the *Farbenlehre*. For the English painter, the three primary colors constituted the epitome of all visible creation. In a lecture of 1818, he pointed out that yellow represents the medium –that is, light–, red represents material objects, while blue corresponds to distance in the landscape—or also to the air–, and the three colors are associated with morning, afternoon and night, respectively.

However, Turner was constantly skeptical about attempts to arrange colors into rigid groups of emotional or symbolic associations: ‘the practice of these sentiments of color, particularly in those who follow color as sentiment [...] they must be left with those who framed them as emblematical concepts and typical allusions’ (Gage 2001); in some of his lectures he even exemplified contrasting the emblematic and crude use of the color choices of artists like Carlo Dolci, among others, with more sensitive and expressive chromatic palettes like those of painters like Nicolas Poussin.

The polarity, the division of colors in Goethe’s circle on the active and passive sides was one of the topics that most interested Turner in his reading of the *Farbenlehre*. His series of works *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Color (Goethe’s Theory)* –both of 1843–, is precisely the pictorial response of Turner to the consideration of color

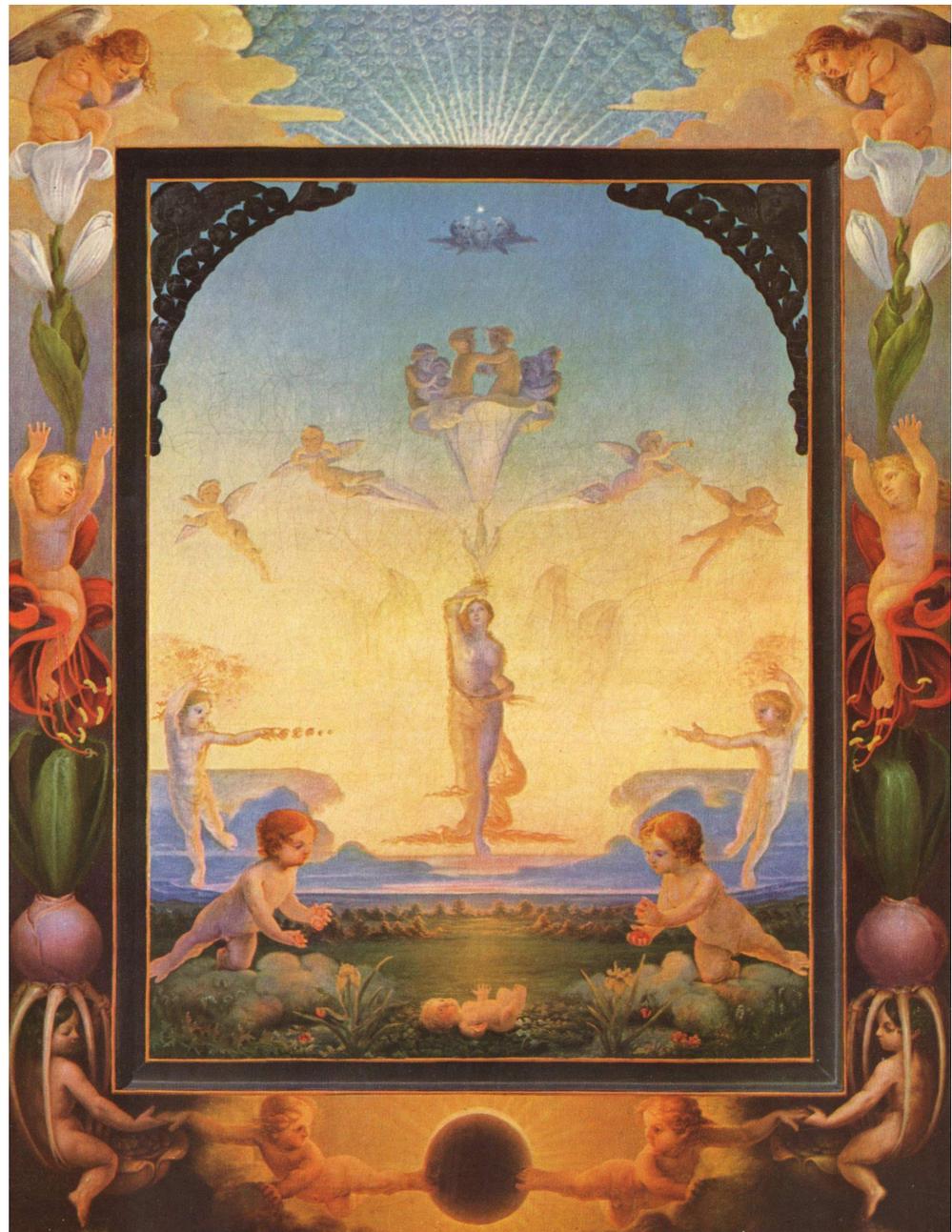


Figure 4 - Philipp Otto Runge, The Morning, 1809-10. Oil on Canvas, Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

in polar terms. But this same series of works will also be fundamental to understand how Turner granted semantic associations to colors, based on polarity but also related to his interest in linking religious allegories with the forces of Nature, from the inclusion of a poem to foot of the series of paintings, *The Fallacies of Hope*.

The painting *Shade and Darkness, The Evening of the Deluge* is accompanied by the first part of the poem, which gives an account of the 'darkness' of the Deluge:

*'The morn put forth her sign of woe
unheeded:
But disobedience slept; the dark'ning deluge
closed around,
And the last token came: the giant framework
floated,
The rous'd birds forsook their nightly shelters
screaming
And the beasts waded to the ark'.*

This work is the abstraction of a landscape that announces the disaster, dark and bluish. Turner's interest was to claim the sublimity of darkness, the sadness of the black. The greens and purple blues present in the work are taken by the painter on the passive side of Goethe's circle,

which the poet called 'restless, susceptible, anxious impressions', and which for Kemp will correspond to 'dramatic use' (Kemp 323) of the negative polarity of the *Farbenlehre*. In the case of Turner, darkness –or shadow– does not have the symbolic character of 'passive', but rather, associates a negative force or power. The Deluge is the storm that advances, where the forces of darkness threaten to hide the new dawn.

On the other hand, the iconography of *Light and Color (Goethe's Theory)*, presents a 'brightness' absolutely opposite and complementary to that of his companion:

*'The ark stood firm on Ararat: th'returning
sun
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous
of light
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic
guise
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer
fly
Which rises, flits, expands and dies'.*

This work is presented with the rounded shape of a fragile sphere, a bubble like the ones with which Goethe and Turner experimented



Figure 5 - J.M.W. Turner, *Shade and Darkness, The Evening of the Deluge*, 1843. Oil on Canvas, London, Tate.

–with water and soap– in order to obtain the prismatic colors, the rainbow, on their surface. Goethe referred in the *Farbenlehre* on numerous occasions to the ‘floating kaleidoscope’ of the surface of the bubbles. In the poem, Turner refers textually to the ‘wet bubbles’ and the ‘prismatic’ character. *Light and Color* represents the morning after the Deluge, the sun rising after the storm, through the visual and emotional power of the reflected and refracted prisms. Turner replaced the classic pictorial figure of hope, the rainbow, with ‘prismatic bubbles’ expressing his interest in optical and chromatic theory.

When John Ruskin asked Turner what this work meant, the author would respond with only three words: ‘red, blue and yellow’ (Gage 126) that is, the foundation of color. Both works, *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Color*, as a unique series, are a reflection on the symbolism of color, correspond to the reduction of color, in one case, and the deployment of its totality, in the other. The spectator experiences directly, due to color, the state of mind that the works manifest.

Both *The Morning* of Runge and this series of works by Turner are the consecration of the romantic tendency to a greater consideration of color as a resource to account for the feeling and subjectivity in the pictorial work. To a greater or

lesser extent, they are the test of the symbolic associations of Goethe, mediated by Runge and Turner, in a state of common thought. They deal specifically with the elemental power of color and light, as the chromatic attitude of other artists such as John Constable or Caspar David Friedrich, and later of Eugène Delacroix. All these artists contributed to raise a prosperous era for the representation with color, which wouldn’t have a point of return –happily would have said Goethe– and is what makes Romanticism so important for what authors such as Manlio Brusatin, Michel Pastoureau or Ariel Jiménez have more recently defined as ‘the History of Color’, an incipient and prosperous field of knowledge.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that no financial or personal interests have affected my objectivity, and this investigation has no conflicts of interest.



Figure 6 - J.M.W. Turner, *Light and Color (Goethe's Theory)*, *The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, 1843. Oil on Canvas, London, Tate.

NOTES

[1] In the section of the sensitive-moral effect of color it is recurrent to find poetic descriptions regarding the use of colors proposed by the poet. This is the main way in which Goethe alludes to artists, granting them exemplary literary images to promote a more conscious application of color. This can be further illustrated by paragraph §848, when he states: 'from the moral associations connected with the appearance of colors, single or combined, their aesthetic influence may now be deduced for the artist'.

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