

## PAINTING AS EVENT: PERFORMANCE AND GESTURE IN LATE TURNER

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**Abstract:** In the last decades of his long career, J.M.W. Turner became increasingly prone to display his work on exhibition canvases, making the most of the varnishing days of the Royal Academy of Arts and British Institution to finish his paintings in public. These performative displays may be connected to the increasingly gestural nature of his production, to his quest for a form of adequation between his own emotional involvement in the process of painting and the dynamic motions of nature, but also to his new awareness of the process of pictorial creation as a lived or kinaesthetic experience in which vision and movement are fused. While romantic theories of expression may shed light on such an evolution, this article argues that Turner's work seems to articulate a number of issues raised by phenomenological accounts of pictorial creation. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Maldiney in particular, the act of painting is driven by the artist's lived experience and by the urge to show the world as it is perceived and painted by the moving and gesturing subject, rather than simply as an object of detached vision. These analyses may shed light on Turner's tendency, in his later production especially, to make his gestures immanent to the production of the pictorial space.

**Résumé :** *Durant les dernières décennies de sa longue carrière, J.M.W. Turner prit l'habitude de finir ses tableaux d'exposition en public, lors des jours de vernissage de la Royal Academy of Arts et de la British Institution. Il est possible d'établir un lien entre ces performances et la dimension de plus en plus gestuelle de la production de Turner, sa quête d'une adéquation entre son engagement émotionnel dans l'acte de peindre et les mouvements dynamiques de la nature, mais aussi sa conscience accrue du processus de création picturale comme expérience vécue ou kinesthésique dans laquelle se confondent vision et mouvement. Si les théories romantiques de l'expression peuvent expliquer une telle évolution, il est également possible de voir dans l'oeuvre de Turner l'articulation d'un certain nombre de problématiques soulevées par la réflexion phénoménologique sur la création picturale. Maurice Merleau-Ponty et Henri Maldiney notamment considèrent l'acte de peindre comme étant motivé par l'expérience vécue de l'artiste aussi bien que par le désir de montrer le monde tel qu'il est perçu et peint par le sujet en mouvement, plutôt que comme un objet distinct de la vue. Leurs analyses peuvent apporter un éclairage utile sur la tendance accrue de Turner, dans les oeuvres de sa maturité notamment, à rendre ses gestes immanents à la production de l'espace pictural.*

One of the most famous anecdotes of J.M.W. Turner's career is the moment when, during the varnishing days of a Royal Academy exhibition, he added a blot of red on a relatively colourless marine painting, to eclipse a canvas by Constable that was placed next to his. The two paintings in question were Constable's *Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, and Turner's *Helvoetsluys; – the City of Utrecht, 64, going to Sea*. The blot of red was eventually shaped into a buoy in the foreground, but the gesture of defiance, and its theatricality, did not go unnoticed. The scene, which took place in 1832, was related in vivid terms by Constable's biographer, Charles Robert Leslie:

Constable's "Waterloo" seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver, and Turner came several times into the room while [Constable] was heightening with vermilion and lake the decorations and flags of the city barges. Turner stood behind Constable, looking from the "Waterloo" to his own picture, and at last brought his palette from the great room where he was touching another picture, and putting a round daub of red lead, somewhat bigger than a shilling, on his grey sea, went away without saying a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture, caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable to look weak. I came into the room just as Turner left it. "He has been here," said Constable, "and fired a gun". (*Autobiographical Recollections* 135)

The incident is emblematic of the way Turner used the varnishing days, which had been established at the Royal Academy in 1809 in order to allow painters to touch up their paintings – to "varnish" them, literally – once they were placed on the walls, prior to an exhibition (see for example Costello 114). He saw them as an opportunity to actually finish his paintings in front of fellow artists. In 1832, he was still using the occasion to give small finishing touches to already completed canvases, in order to adapt his work to the exhibition site and to outshine the paintings exhibited next to his own. But in the following years, he increasingly used the exhibition room as a "public arena" to show himself at work (Gage 89), painting significant amounts of his exhibition canvases on the spot and thus demonstrating his pictorial methods in a deliberate manner.

His *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, for example, was largely produced during varnishing days at the British Institution, in 1835. As the following account of the event by the painter Edward Ripplingille suggests, his fellow artists were fascinated by his intense physical engagement with the canvas, his unconventional practice, and more specifically the way he worked up form from a formless preliminary arrangement of colour:

Turner was there and at work before I came, having set-to at the earliest hour allowed. Indeed it was quite necessary to make the best of his time, as the picture when sent in was a mere dab of several colours, and "without form and void", like chaos before the creation [...] for the three hours I was there – and I understood it had been the same time since he began in the morning – he never ceased

to work, or even once looked or turned from the wall on which his picture hung [...] a small box of colours, a few very small brushes, and a vial or two, were at his feet, very inconveniently placed; but his short figure, stooping, enabled him to reach what he wanted very readily. (Ripplingille 100)

As Thornbury reports, Ruskin appears to have been particularly impressed by Turner's ability to perform in public, insisting on the mastery that allowed such displays:

"The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons" was almost entirely painted on the walls of the Exhibition. His facility at this period of his life was astounding. He would frequently send his canvas to the British Institution with nothing upon it but a grey groundwork of vague, indistinguishable forms, and finish it upon varnishing-day into a work of great splendour. Likewise at the Academy he frequently sent his canvas imperfect and sketchy, trusting entirely to varnishing-days for the completion of his picture. It was astonishing what he accomplished on those days. (Thornbury 1877, 313)

Commentators have noted the competitive nature of these varnishing days (Costello 111-42), but they have also emphasised the "performative aspect" of Turner's contributions, even comparing his virtuoso performances to the concerts that were given at the time by Paganini in London (Gage 89-95; Costello 124).

It is particularly striking that as Turner's practice was becoming increasingly liberated from the primacy of drawing and perspectival structuring, he was also increasingly prone to demonstrate the very process through which his paintings came to life. This evolution was all the more remarkable as he had originally been cautious not to reveal his methods to strangers and "tenacious in not disclosing any of his secrets" (Thornbury 1862, 150). His desire to perform in front of others as he painted may have been a way for him to exhibit a new conception of painting, which he seemed to increasingly experience as a temporal and physical production, and as a process of expression, rather than as a finished product or the completion of a pre-given design.

The present study will focus on Turner's awareness of the process of painting, of the gestures that were inherent to this process, and more generally of the physical involvement of the artist in his production. After having examined the extent to which he conceived of painting as a temporal and kinaesthetic experience, and the ways in which his stylistic evolution reflects his wish to make the motions of painting a central component of pictorial composition, I will argue that this practice articulates a reflection about self and world which may be accounted for by phenomenological interpretations of painting.

Turner's stylistic evolution, his gradual emancipation of colour from outline and his assertion of the importance of colour "in the articulation of pictorial space" (Gage 75), are well known. From his

early topographic watercolour drawings and academic landscapes to his late exhibition canvases, it is clear that a significant stylistic transformation took place. In the artist's early academic works, which reveal the influence of idealising classical practices, the primacy of design over colour and texture is still unquestioned: buildings and the covering vegetation are clearly outlined, and provide a solid linear configuration, deepened by tonal gradations, in which colour plays an atmospheric role rather than a structuring one. Thus, *Thomson's Aeolian Harp* (1809), *Crossing the Brook* (1815) and *Dido Building Carthage* (1815), all of which attest to Turner's admiration for Claude Lorrain's historical landscapes, are still fairly static compositions, in which colour has not yet been emancipated from clearly-defined contours. Gradually, in his mid-career productions, architectural forms begin to fade and then literally dissolve into sunlight, although the classical spatial edifice of receding planes and internal foreground framing continues to provide a solid structure for explorations of colour and texture. In late canvases like *Yacht Approaching the Coast* (1840-5), *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals and Going by the Lead* (1842, **Figure 3**) or *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On* (exh. 1840), colour and the texture of paint applied with the palette knife have become the main structuring components. The pictorial medium and the processes through which paint has been applied on the canvas have become more perceptible than the faintly emerging shapes of boats or human figures.

These stylistic evolutions have been the object of much scrutiny. Critics have especially noted the intensification of Turner's palette as he emancipated himself from the primacy of tonal values and gradations of dark and light, which had prevailed in earlier academic landscapes (Shanes 19-20). They have also noted the increased complexity of optical effects, which Turner obtained by working through successive stages of colouring, rather than by working from design to colour (Gage 75-96).

The other significant development that I would like to focus on is the growing emphasis on the artist's motions, which are made visible on canvas or paper, rather than being concealed, and which become a structuring component of his later work, especially in the final stages of composition.

Turner's stylistic evolution appears to have implied a meaningful inversion of the traditional process of composition: instead of starting with a "linear definition of form" (Concannon 39), and gradually adding colour to it, Turner's later style implied the gradual extraction of form from colour, which meant that the form-defining gestures came last in the creative process, rather than first. This seems to have been a deliberate stylistic decision, which may be observed equally in Turner's work in watercolour, in his oil paintings, and in his designs for engravings.

It is now well-known that Turner's use of watercolour evolved in this direction in the 1820s. His early watercolour compositions had relied on pencil sketches in which design came first and colour

next. From the 1820s, he began working from what he called “beginnings”, in which washes of colour were applied relatively freely to the paper, to study colour arrangements for later compositions or to “aid the subsequent development of a known, more detailed and highly finished design” (Shanes 11). Although he continued using light pencil sketches for topographic accuracy (in his depictions of the Alps, for example), many of his compositional and underpainting studies show no need for such delineation. Their focal points and architectural elements (castles or urban settings for example) are defined either by boundary-free washes or by surrounding colours rather than by preliminary outlines. In the preparatory study for *Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland* (c. 1837), for example, the castle emerges like a negative silhouette from the blue and yellow washes that envelop it, producing its initial shape. In this process, complexity of form was introduced only gradually as the succession of washes gradated tone, and as details were introduced or scratched out at later stages of the work.

Not only did this approach give the artist’s hand more freedom, but it encouraged expressive motion. The rare witnesses of his work with watercolour, which he was especially secretive about, were captivated by the gestural vigour which characterised the process. One of the privileged few was the eldest son of Turner’s friend and patron Walter Fawkes, who as a boy of about 15 had observed the artist’s work on *A First Rate Taking in Stores*, in 1818. His recollections of the scene were transcribed by both Thornbury and his own niece, Edith Mary, in accounts that emphasised the frantic and vigorous work of the artist. Thornbury’s version runs as follows:

At Farnley is a drawing of a man-of-war, complete, elaborate, and intricate, with a fine frothy, troubled sea in the foreground. This Turner did, under Mr. Fawkes’s observation, in three hours; tearing up the sea with his eagle-claw of a thumb-nail, and working like a madman; yet the detail is full and delicate, betraying no sign of hurry. (Thornbury 1877, 239)

Edith Mary Fawkes’s memoir similarly highlights the artist’s confident frenzy:

He began by pouring wet paint till it was saturated, he tore, he scratched, he scrubbed at it in a kind of frenzy and the whole thing was chaos – but gradually and as if by magic the lovely ship, with all its exquisite minutia, came into being and by luncheon time the drawing was taken down in triumph. (qtd in Wilton 114 and Gage 160)

In some cases, the artist’s handling became more pronounced and energetic in the later stages of the composition. Amy Concannon thus notices that the studies for the *Rigi series* show more restraint in handling than the finished watercolours, whose textured brushwork appears to intentionally convey the vigour of the artist’s gestures (39-42).

A similar conception may be observed in Turner's oil paintings, whose compositional process seems to have undergone the same evolution as his work in watercolour. As he emancipated himself from academic conventions, Turner increasingly worked up form gradually from very simple colour structures, to which he progressively added tone, texture and shape. Remarkably, the vigorous textural work and energetic motions of the artist appear to become more prominent in the final form-defining stage of the process. His late work in particular is characterised by the dynamic use of impasto as a final layer, emphatically scratched and shaped into clouds, waves, mist, rain or smoke by the artist's brushstrokes and palette knife.



**Figure 1:** J.M.W. Turner, *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (c. 1845). Oil on canvas. 90.8 x 121.9 cm. Tate Gallery. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph\\_Mallord\\_William\\_Turner\\_-\\_Norham\\_Castle,\\_Sunrise\\_-\\_WGA23182.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Mallord_William_Turner_-_Norham_Castle,_Sunrise_-_WGA23182.jpg)

The gestural vigour of this final stage is especially noticeable if one compares colour beginnings in oil with finished canvases. Thus, in *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (c. 1845), a well-known example of the

kind of work that Turner would send to the Royal Academy exhibition prior to being worked up in front of fellow artists (Vaughan 170), the impasto is applied evenly, conveying an overall sense of stillness (**Figure 1**). The texture and the motions which are so characteristic of Turner's mature style are more perceptible in exhibition canvases that were finished in front of fellow academicians, and appear to bring to light the process of painting that the artist displayed on such occasions. The dramatic and gestural performance appears to provide the final structuring moment in canvases like *Rain, Steam and Speed* (exh. 1844) or the 1842 *Snow Storm*, which reveal dynamic brushwork on the surface of the canvas and make visible the frantic scratching and scrubbing that Turner's contemporaries observed in his practice. Joyce Townsend's analysis of the artist's application of paint highlights the physicality of the process:

Many coarse brush hairs and a few short, finer ones remain in the paint as evidence of Turner's rapid and assured working-up of compositions. [...] There is evidence that Turner worked paint with his fingers, in both water and oil media [...]. More late oil paintings show evidence of finger working than earlier ones, probably since Turner applied fewer glazes which conceal the application techniques in the later works. In paintings from the 1820s curved scratch marks are visible, apparently made by Turner's thumbnail. More than one contemporary of Turner's noted that he kept his thumbnail long for the purpose. He used the handles of brushes too, to make straighter, deeper scratches. (Townsend 52-53)

Most notably perhaps, a number of late productions suggest broad circular or bow-like lateral motions, either with the palette knife, with brushes of various sizes, or with rags and cloths, often in the depiction of skies and weather, or around the motif of the sun, which reveal the energetic presence of the artist, at work on the canvas. His contemporaries were especially struck by his liberal use of impasto and the confident manner in which he applied it. The artist John Gilbert, who witnessed Turner's reworking of his own *Regulus* during the varnishing days of the 1837 British Institution exhibition, gave the following description of the process several decades later:

He was absorbed in his work, did not look about him, but kept on scumbling a lot of white into his picture – nearly all over it ... 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 on 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 picture gradually became wonderfully effective 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. (Cust 248-49)



Among the numerous late canvases which appear to have been finished in this manner, one could mention *Yacht Approaching the Coast* (1840-5), *War – the Exile and the Rock Limpet* (1842), *The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up*, 1838 (exh. 1839), *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (exh. 1843), and several of the late Venice paintings.

Through this display of his medium and his creative process, Turner was proclaiming the subjective and experiential dimension of landscape painting, and showing how much emotion could be invested into the very process of painting nature. He was making visible what many of his contemporaries were still reluctant to exhibit so deliberately. Even Constable, who considered himself a “great egotist in whatever relates to painting” (Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* 93) remained committed to a restraint of handling in his exhibition pieces: the various stages of his work, from oil sketches and studies to exhibition canvases, make it apparent that the energetic brushwork of the preliminary work was not meant to appear in the finished work, whose only motion had to be seen as the stirrings of nature, or “chiaroscuro of nature” as the artist called it. In oil sketches – like the well-known *Barges on the Stour* (c. 1811, Victoria and Albert Museum) or *Rainstorm over the Sea* (c. 1827, Royal Academy) – the handling of the artist is definitely unrestrained and energetic: it translates the immediacy of emotion connected with the direct observation of nature, as the broad brushwork conveys the artist's hurried response to the changes of weather and light. But there remains little of this initial energy in the highly-wrought exhibition canvases that the artist took months to produce in his London studio. The shimmering highlights that are so specific to Constable's style appear to be perfectly controlled, evoking the vibrancy of a landscape that fluctuates under the changing sky rather than the artist's own physical and affective involvement in its transcription. One could even observe a form of stylistic self-effacement, in order to better enhance the motions of nature.

This restraint is to be contrasted with Turner's later production, in which the artist seems to have sought a form of adequation between his own emotion, his physical involvement in the process of painting, and the dynamic processes of nature. In the artist's finishing impasto work, one is left with the impression that the energetic handling both conveys the intensity of the artist's response and matches the vigorous motions of nature. This convergence is perhaps most striking in Turner's depictions of the dynamic play of natural elements, of fires, seas, skies and storms. Thus, in *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making signals in shallow water, and going by the lead* (1842), the curved and textured motions of the artist's work on the canvas echo the roughness and violence of the elements; and the spontaneous white brushwork that seems to have concluded the process of painting is a perfect stylistic counterpart for the abrupt spurts of water in the foreground.



In many respects, this dramatic emphasis on the artist's gestures and physical engagement with his work reflected the new consideration given to the artist's creative spontaneity, which has been associated with Romanticism. Turner's art could be seen as emblematic of what Meyer Howard Abrams has described as a shift from mimetic to expressive depictions of nature in romantic artistic practices. In his studies of romanticism, Abrams explains that romantic reflections about artistic creation emphasise the idea of an "overflow", an uncontrollable pressing out, or *ex-expression* of the internal feeling, through which the mind modifies and animates the materials of sense (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 48; 55). He also underlines the Romantics' quest for a synthesis between artistic expression and the living natural world, in which both nature and the creative mind were to be enhanced and reanimated by being reunited, after having been separated by mechanistic and dualist conceptions in Enlightenment thought (*Natural Supernaturalism*). This critical model goes a long way towards interpreting Turner's late art, which may be seen as visualising the encounter between the artist's creative overflow and the energetic processes of nature. The correspondence between the artist's expressive gestures and the dynamic forces of nature may be construed as a celebration of the recovered unity between the creative mind and the living world. And as gestures begin to prevail over perspectival construction in the structuring of the painting, natural forces are shown to prevail over mathematical models in the creative process.

The romantic conflation of mind and nature is one way of accounting for Turner's expressive style; but the emphatic display of his creative gestures calls for further investigation. In particular, it may be understood to reflect a new awareness of the process of pictorial creation as a lived or kinaesthetic experience in which vision and movement are fused. In other words, it may be seen as motivated by a quest for new visual paradigms in which the bodily dimension of creation, its temporality and rhythm are taken into account. In these respects, Turner's work seems to articulate a number of issues raised by phenomenological accounts of artistic creation, which see in the latter an urge to show the world as it "arises in relation to our living body" (Johnson 13), as it is perceived and painted by the moving and gesturing subject, rather than simply as an object of detached vision.

Of the phenomenological philosophers, it is Merleau-Ponty who has most strikingly emphasised the significance of pictorial practices for our apprehension and understanding of the world. At several points in his work, Merleau-Ponty argues that painters are especially capable of expressing what he considers to be the pre-cognitive and purely experiential perception of the visible, which he considers central to the constitution of meaning. According to him, this lived-bodily experience of the world is central to pictorial practice. In *Eye and Mind*, he describes the embodied experience of the painter in the following terms:

The painter “takes his body with him,” says Valéry. Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.

I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous system. My moving body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. [...]

This extraordinary overlapping, which we never give enough thought to, forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or a representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality. Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens onto the world. (*Eye and Mind* 123-24)

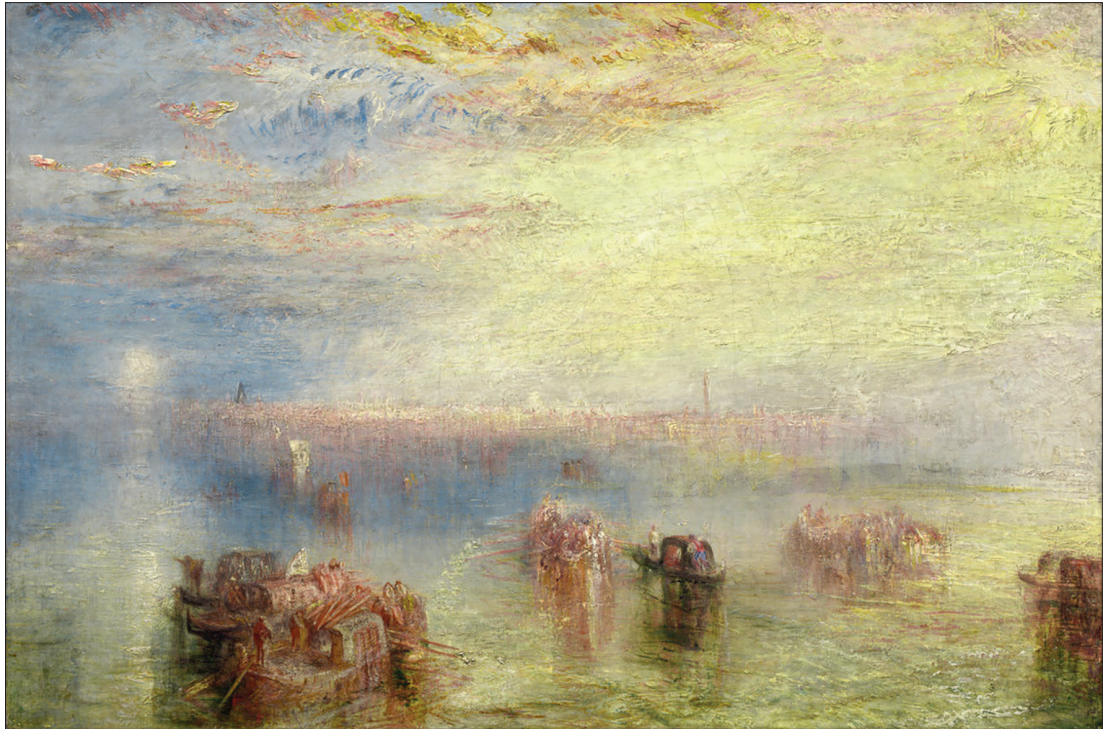
According to Merleau-Ponty, taking into account this embodied experience allows the painter to recover the texture of the real rather than simply order objects according to a pre-given spatial model, as in perspectival constructions. The painters of the modern period in particular seek to recover a depth that is not simply an empty third dimension, an artificially constructed relation between objects seen from outside, but the way the visible makes itself seen to the embodied eye, a “coming-to-itself of the visible” (*Eye and Mind* 123-42). Merleau-Ponty considers that this intuitive and embodied visuality is especially noticeable in Cézanne’s work, in which spatial structures are a form of “lived perspective” that “contributes [...] to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes” (“Cézanne’s doubt” 64-5). According to him, this conception is a way to reconcile individual perception and the order of the world: “Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, as if he were deciding between chaos and order. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization” (63-4).

Cézanne’s artistic approach particularly fascinated Merleau-Ponty because it matched his own philosophical project. As Forrest Williams argues, it had affinities with his phenomenology of perception as a means to reconcile perceptual experience and the quest for objectivity (172-73). More importantly perhaps, it showed the way for a philosophy in which body and mind would be reconciled:

Nothing is left for our philosophy but to set out to prospect the actual world. We *are* the compound of soul and body, and so there must be a thought of it [...].

This philosophy, which is yet to be elaborated, is what animates the painter – not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision becomes gestures, when, in Cézanne’s words, he “thinks in painting”. (Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* 138-39)

In other words, the gestures of the painter may be considered as pre-cognitive ways to make sense of the world, or at least a form of thought in which mind and body can apprehend the world together, rather than separately. Cézanne's artistic project is one of the most conscious expressions of this kinaesthetic apprehension of the world through painting.



**Figure 2:** J.M.W. Turner, *Approach to Venice* (1844). Oil on canvas. 62 x 94 cm. National Gallery of Art. Andrew W. Mellon Collection. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Approach\\_to\\_Venice\\_A11470.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Approach_to_Venice_A11470.jpg)

Even though Turner never articulated such a coherent project, one could argue that the desire to “think in painting” and to convey meaning through “that instant when [...] vision becomes gestures”, is an essential dimension of his later work: by increasingly structuring the pictorial space through colours and gestures rather than a strictly geometrical perspectival model, Turner was conflating motion and vision, and thereby bringing to the fore the lived experience of the perceiving subject,

rather than seeking a detached and purely optical representation of the world. He was also, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, visualising “matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation” (*Eye and Mind* 63-4). The process of composition, from colour beginnings to gestural brush and palette knife work, suggests that Turner did seek to convey the experiential and pre-rational dimension of perception, in which vision and motion are still mingled and an order is still emerging. In an atmospheric painting like *Approach to Venice* (exh. 1844), shapes seem to be apprehended in a gestural and tactile manner as much as a visual one (**Figure 2**). The sky and water emerge from a thick layer of creamy impasto applied in sweeping lateral motions and scratched through to display blue and purple underlayers, while the distant city, boats and human silhouettes begin to take shape from textured and indistinct areas of white, nervously prolonged by crimson vertical hatching to suggest reflections in the water or human forms. Nothing is clearly shaped yet: what is shown is the process through which the artist begins to make visible “the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things” (Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s doubt” 68), through a combination of hurried motions and of yet uncomprehended visual percepts.

This suspension of forms, whose emerging order is being apprehended through a combination of gestures and vision, does reveal a new emphasis on the embodied experience of the painter. There is another respect in which Turner’s approach has affinities with Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the experiential and embodied nature of perception: even though in most of his compositions a perspectival order remained implicit, the artist also attempted to convey the initial immersion of the perceiving self in the world. He notably explored compositional strategies that draw the viewer into the represented space, and questioned the implicit distance of a geometrically reconstructed space. His atmospheric paintings, with their tangible vapours, called on the external viewer to experience the scenes in an immersive and tactile, rather than purely optical, manner. Other paintings attempted to construct the perceived space around, rather than at a distance from, the observer.

The 1842 *Snow Storm* is a famous example of his attempt to convey the somatic, pre-reflexive experience of the world, and the perception of the self as it is immersed in the world (**Figure 3**). As is well-known, the last part of the title states that “The artist was in this storm on the night the Ariel left Harwich”, which suggests that one of the intentions of the painting was to convey the experience of the represented space from within, by a perceiving subject physically interacting with it. The result is a dynamic vortical structure, within which the perceiving self seems to be plunged and tossed around, rather than safely placed at a viewing distance. It is a space which, instead of being given by an existing geometrical order, is in the process of being formed, emerging from the artist’s motions and brushwork, rather than arising from a conventional perspectival construction. In this respect, the painting raises the question of the lived experience of the world at two levels at least: first, by



exploring perceptual immersion and its impact on the pictorial space, and then by exploring the act of painting itself as a kinaesthetic experience.



**Figure 3:** J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Going by the Lead* (exh. 1842). Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 121.9 cm. Tate Gallery. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph\\_Mallord\\_William\\_Turner\\_-\\_Snow\\_Storm\\_-\\_Steam-Boat\\_off\\_a\\_Harbour%27s\\_Mouth\\_-\\_WGA23178.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Mallord_William_Turner_-_Snow_Storm_-_Steam-Boat_off_a_Harbour%27s_Mouth_-_WGA23178.jpg)

While Merleau-Ponty has mostly emphasised spatial and perceptual issues, the question of the rhythms and gestures of pictorial production has drawn the attention of another phenomenological philosopher, Henri Maldiney, who provides interesting insights into Turner's late practice.

Maldiney justifies a phenomenological approach to the artwork in reaction to semiotic approaches, which according to him neglect the temporal dimension of the act of painting, or what he calls the advent or event of painting. Instead, he calls for a new awareness of the rhythm which gives existence to the painting. He especially argues that the pictorial space, far from being a neutral container of independent signs, should be conceived as emerging immanently to the act of painting, to the "apparitional moment" of the artwork (*Art et existence* 30). In his conception, the artwork should be understood as articulated by its own internal rhythm, and by pictorial events that communicate rhythmically with one another:

A painting is made of pictorial events, each of which has its own horizon and, within that horizon, its marginal field. [...] Thus each pictorial event occurs in phase with another pictorial horizon and opens in its turn the space where yet another such event will occur. These openings and spatial intersections have little to do with what defines a sign. (Maldiney, *Art et existence* 30)<sup>1</sup>

Because of this emphasis on rhythm and on the event of painting itself, Maldiney considers the artist's gesture to be the foundational moment of the artwork, the moment through which the work emerges from (and indeed perhaps through) the artist's lived experience and perception of the world. According to him, it is the gesture of the artist, that is to say his presence, that makes the artwork and distinguishes it from the neutral image:

A painter is not an eye, but a gaze. And to gaze is for a painter to make himself into a point of origin or focus of the world – not just where he is but wherever in space there emerge rhythms that resonate with his inner being. I have seen many photographs of the undergrowths, rocks and waters of the Tholonet of which I thought for a while that they could provide the wherewithals for a painting. But almost immediately, they became aggregates of dead parts. They were arbitrarily limited and unnecessarily complex. They were devoid of a focal point, a human presence, empty of any gesture. (Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace* 24-25)<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Une peinture est faite d'événements picturaux, dont chacun a son horizon et, sous cet horizon, son champ marginal. [...] Ainsi chaque événement pictural entre en phase sous l'horizon d'un autre et ouvre à nouveau l'espace où un autre encore se produira. Ces éclosions et ces intersections spatiales contredisent à la nature du signe". My translation here and below.

2. "Un peintre n'est pas un œil mais un regard. Et regarder c'est pour le peintre se constituer en foyer du monde – non pas seulement là où il est mais partout où émergent dans l'espace des rythmes qui sont en résonance avec son être profond.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Maldiney singles out the work of Cézanne as one of the most convincing realisations of such a conception of painting. He considers that Cézanne freed himself from the homogeneous perspectival space of earlier pictorial traditions, and created a stylistic space which is shaped by his lived experience, his “being in the world”, and consequently by his rhythms and gestures. He sees his painting as a rhythmical encounter with a world which is not yet shaped into decipherable forms, or signs;<sup>3</sup> a world which does not fit into conventional structures, but produces its own space:

Cézanne’s space is not a receptacle, a container of images or signs. It is a field of tensions. Its elements or constructive moments are themselves events: outbursts, ruptures, encounters, modulations [...]. The rhythm that underlies them gives these elements their formal dimension, that is to say the dimension according to which a form is formed – and which is this very form. In this process they are integrated into a single space, whose rhythmical genesis alone allows them to become forms. (Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace* 31-32)<sup>4</sup>

Once again, these analyses could apply to the work of Turner. The rhythm of some of his late canvases, but perhaps even more his process of creation from the 1820s, do suggest that he was trying to create living pictorial spaces, through the rhythmical interaction of colours, and by making his gestures immanent to the production of forms. Increasingly, he was creating stylistic spaces, shaped by rhythms as much as by the recognisable forms and structures towards which they tended. He was also creating tactile spaces which combined touch and sight and prevented a purely optical apprehension of the world, conveying the thickness of things rather than combining distinct forms in an empty and neutral space. His gestures connected forms at the same time as they made visible his presence on the canvas. In all these ways, he was suggesting that the event of painting was coexistent with the experience and apprehension of the world, and that the artwork can be seen to be revealing its own creation, producing its own space in front of the viewer.

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J’ai vu maintes photographies des sous-bois, des rochers et des eaux du Tholonet dont j’ai pu croire un instant qu’elles pussent faire un tableau. Mais, presque aussitôt, tout n’était plus en elles que parties mortes. Arbitrairement limitées, inutilement complexes. Elles n’avaient pas de foyer : il y manquait la présence de l’homme, le geste”.

3. “The artist does not perceive objects; he is sensitive to a certain rhythm – singular and universal – through which he experiences his encounter with things” (Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace* 18). (“L’artiste ne perçoit pas des objets ; il est sensible à un certain rythme – singulier et universel – sous la forme duquel il vit sa rencontre avec les choses”).
4. “L’espace de Cézanne n’est pas un réceptacle, un conteneur d’images ou de signes. Il est un champ de tensions. Ses éléments ou moments formateurs sont eux-mêmes des événements : éclatements, ruptures, rencontres, modulations [...] Le rythme qui les reprend en sous-œuvre confère aux éléments leur dimension formelle, c’est-à-dire la dimension selon laquelle une forme se forme – et qui est cette forme même. En cela ils sont intégrés à un espace unique, dont la genèse rythmique, seule, les fait formes.”



Unlike Cézanne, Turner never outlined a theory of painting that made this artistic project explicit and the phenomenological philosophers have shown little interest in his work. Nevertheless, as this paper has suggested, his increasingly gestural approach to painting points to a growing awareness that, in order to apprehend the world, the painter should aim to grasp the rhythmical process through which forms are produced and create their own spaces rather than fitting conventional signs into conventional spatial structures. He appears to have been aware that this quest for pictorial forms and spaces that were not pre-given involved a true physical engagement with the world and the work. But more significantly, his late work may be said to engage with the “apparitional moment” of the artwork, which Maldiney considers to be central to the painter’s quest. Even though it remains figurative, the emphasis is no longer on the representational function of the work, but on the rhythmical emergence of colour and form.

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