

Jean Robert

Rain Steam and Speed and the new scopic regime

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In 1844, during the years of ferroviary enthusiasm recalled as the decade of the railroad mania, an already well-travelled lady described the strange dance of an individual who visibly did not yet know how to behave in a train compartment. In the coach seated opposite her, she commented, was an elderly gentleman, short and stout, with a red face and a curious prominent nose. The weather was very wild, and by and by a violent storm swept over the country blotting out the sunshine and the blue sky, and hanging like a pall over the landscape. The old gentleman seemed strangely excited at this, jumping up to open the window, craning his neck out, and finally calling to her to come and observe a curious effect of light. The story, or rather the gossip was circulated by a Mrs Simon during the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1844, of which the masterpiece was William Turner's Rain, Steam and Speed, which showed the Western Express crossing the Maidenhead Bridge over the Thames. The old gentleman was allegedly Turner himself whom Mrs Simon, as she reported, had witnessed jumping and exulting in the train like a first-timer.

If the story wasn't true it was, as the French say, well invented. Rain, Steam and Speed has the freshness or a first vision. What it shows is the power the railroad exerted on the landscape, it is its "perception-shaping" force.

A landscape shaped by a machine's rhythms

Though the sky occupies more than half of the picture's surface, it is not a skyscape in which the clouds and the light piercing through them would play the dramatic part, as in Snow Storm, painted two years earlier. Nor is the sky of Rain, Steam and Speed the uniform grey lid that takes hold after days of bad weather, when it seems that the sun has lost the force to pierce the lead of fog condensed into low clouds. It is a threatening sky, but the threat is diffuse and suspended, as in the composure which succeeds a thunderbolt, when a cumulus, like a pierced barrel, is on the verge of pouring a local deluge, but it hasn't happened yet. It might not happen, for the thunderbolt with which the sky resonates is not a heavenly, but an earthly explosion: it is the tumult which accompanies the train's sudden appearance.

Patches of the left part of the picture are still illuminated by sun rays, as if some parts of the landscape remained indifferent to the mechanical storm. More than an elementary uproar, the sky of Rain, Steam and Speed suggests a broad open space - in part diaphanous, in part veiled by stripes of rain

- laden with the tension of a man-made conflagration. The line of the horizon is blurred, but it would not be adequate to say that it is hidden behind a veil of fog. It rather dissolves into a white substance that suggests infinity.

It is from that white that the train emerges like a fist blow. The train? No, the whole system of the railroad: the locomotive, the steam ribbons it adds to the strips of rainy fog hauled by the wind, the iron tracks and the black mass of the bridge that sustains the whole. The iron way is perfectly rectilinear and its tracks, like the strokes of light which suggest glitters on the convoy's wheels, converge toward a point that loses itself in the milky infinity of the horizon. Whatever this is -- a black monster, a technological structure, the Machine or the New Age -- comes from very far. It does not properly belong to the landscape but a closer examination reveals that it structures it. Though the touch is of a quasi impressionistic facture, several convergences of lines suggest that the infinite point from which the Thing stems coincides with the vanishing lines of the picture's perspective.

The technological infrastructure of the bridge is in strong contrast with the impressionistic conception of the rest. The two lines marking the edges of the bridge are so straight that the painter must have traced them with a rod and though the tracks themselves, because they catch twinkles, partly dissolve into the space of light, the dark streaks that indicate their presence also organize themselves along perfectly straight lines.

Once Turner obtained the ideal point of convergence of these four beams of light and shadow, he must have marked on the canvas some other straight lines irradiating from that point, for the crest of some hills and of a remote forest also converge toward it. Some of the underlying lines of construction even seem to lurk, in a pentimento-like fashion, from under the brushes. I suggest that it was only once these constructive indications had organized the canvas that Turner surrendered to that kind of "acting painting" which so impressed a young onlooker who was to become the art critique G.D. Leslie, and, years later, recalled it in these terms:

He used rather short brushes, a very messy palette, and, standing very close up to the canvas, appeared to paint with his eyes and nose as well as his hand. Of course, he repeatedly walked back to study the effect.

Leslie goes on to tell how the painter commented with him "the little hare running for its life in front of the locomotive on the viaduct" and even suggests that Turner did it to show him how painters of old would have represented a fast motion. Another allegoric intimation of the same style is the figure

of a man ploughing on the plain below the viaduct which, Leslie recalls, evokes the name of a popular country dance, "Speed the Plough."

These are, however, hat bows to means of allegoric representation of the past or, as modern art critiques would say, "quotations". In Turner's picture, speed is not only emblemized -- as it was for instance in Rembrandt's Landscape with a Coach, where a young boy running after the coach stood as an emblem of movement. Speed impregnates the whole space of the picture, and structures its meteoric and tectonic forces anew. What the whole space is filled with is the noise of the train. Looking at Rain, Steam and Speed, the modern onlooker cannot help evoking The Cry, that picture by Edvard Munch in which a whole landscape seems to be molded in the vibrations of a shout. In Turner's painting, the noise seems to stem from the same point from which the black mass of the railroad jumps into reality, and it is echoed by "perspectival reminiscences" among the lines of the hills and of the sky, as if the landscape's tectonics would vibrate with the artificial noise.

The train comes and its noise seems to suspend everything. What the noise does to rural rumors, the railroad and its infrastructure do to the landscape. The tracks have no locus, they know no "topos", respect no sense of "a concrete place". They do not meander, like old roads and they ignore valleys and hills. Their straight line floats, or better, the train with its infrastructure does not inhabit a place: it occupies a space. The structural integration of the iron way into the composition of the picture suggests that the railroad creates the space that it fills with its noise. Once the train will have crossed the landscape, this will never again be the same.

A chasm between two "landscapes"

The black shape of the railroad cuts the picture into two unequal parts, as if it were dismembering the body of the landscape. The right part is already re-structured by the new force and seems animated by a syncopic rhythm punctuated by vertical strips which resonates with the monster's noise. And look at the oblicuous alternating bands of rainy air which makes the bridge vibrate with the noise, taa ta ta ta, taa ta ta ta, scanning perhaps the music of the new age? Intimations of verticality suggest the edge of a city beyond the field where a single individual passes the plow, probably chanting - as Leslie suggests -- "Speed the Plough" at the new rhythm of production.

On the contrary, on the left side of the picture, we are recalled of the landscape of old: a "riverscape" under the arches of another, older bridge in which a man in a boat is fishing. On the river side, a group of bathers plays games and beckon some invisible travelers with the hand. Remembrances of previous modes of perceiving and painting the landscape, "quotations" of the baroque palette, of the Romantic sky.

The lesson of Rain, Steam and Speed is that speed -- mechanical motion and its action on the flesh -- , unlike the tectonic and meteorological forces of the Romantic landscape, cannot be "represented". By an irony of History and the unique genius of an old man, it was given to one of the creators of the "Romantic landscape" to understand this. In the "Romantic landscape," the elements -- wind, fire, water, earth -- were the actors. Speed is not an "actor" on the scenery of nature, but a force organizing its perception. What we, today, call "the environment" is perhaps the landscape seen through the looking glass of speed by the successive generations which came and passed since Turner painted a train. Or better: "speed" -- the vision of nature through a vehicle's window -- changed people's gaze.

The kinetic experience

The black mass of the tracks and the viaduct materialize the lines of construction of linear perspective. Yet, the space which is constructed by these lines does not reveal itself from the vantage point of a window in reality. Rain, Steam and Speed is a perspective without a window in a real place, it offers a viewpoint without a standpoint. In Turner's time, no real body had ever occupied the position from which the Maidenhead Bridge is represented and, today, only the helicopter, which stays immobile at any distance above the landscape could make it "real". This disembodiment of the onlooker's position is Turner's means to express the specificity of the new experience of speed. In its literary expressions, the core of the kinetic experience -- that is of the experience of speed apprehended from vehicles -- always implies the establishment of a fictitiously fixed vantage point from which the apparently immobile body sees the landscape as a space of images in motion. The accustomance to speed, which renders veteran travelers numb to the profusion of impressions which overwhelms first-timers, amounts to a progressive reification of the imaginary place from which the landscape is seen into a stable space. Upholstered seats, framed pictures on the walls, curtains at the windows, a whole register of symbols of stability borrowed from the architecture of all times make the mobile point look immobile. By contrast, the vividness of the first kinetic experience relied on the ambiguity of the newly gained vantage point, on

its radical difference from all previous experience of being in a place. Turner wants to represent the space generated by the railroad while remembering the freshness of his first-time experience: his standing point is not solidified.

In its genuine profusion of stimuli, the kinetic experience is first an estranged glance at real places. Then, as the mobile vantage point solidifies into the simulacrum of a room, the landscape in imaginary motion dissolves into fleeting images in space. Or, to say the same in other words: speed and the windshields first separate the body from sites which were still imprinted in the flesh. This ambiguous situation corresponds to the short period of exultation of the first experiences. Then, accustomance makes the eye oblivious of "how it felt in the legs" and numb to the tastes and smells of seen things. The gaze becomes a dream-like sense of fleeting shadows.

In the kinetic experience, the onlooker is excluded from nature by the effects of speed and of the windshield. His perception of motion is dissociated from the feeling in the walker's calf of the leg or of the rider's buttocks. He sits quietly on a bench while, around him, everything turns, all is motion. Astonished, he experiences a motion that his body does not acknowledge.

Here is how an overwhelmed Victor Hugo described his first kinetic experience, in the train between Brussels and Antwerp, on August 26, 1837:

It is a magnificent motion, that one must have felt to appreciate it. Speed is something unheard of. The flowers on the road are no longer flowers, but spots, or rather red or white stripes; no longer points, everything becomes a line; the wheat is a big yellow blur. The alfalfa fields are large green braids; towns, steeples and trees dance and mingle madly on the horizon; from time to time, a shadow, a form, a standing specter appears and disappears like a lightning: it's a railroad guard that, following military custom, presents arms to the convoy.

Jean-Bertrand Barrère, from whose book on "Victor Hugo's fantasy" I borrowed this passage comments:

Joy opens his eyes. His gaze, always so sensitive to fresh impressions, first seizes the prodigious transformation of the landscape. Instead of dismantling it, speed recreates it, differently. He attentively acknowledges this new geometry of perception: "no longer points, everything becomes a stripe". It is an original modality of vision which, as any other, one must learn.

It was in 1837 too that Théophile Gautier took the train for the first time and reported the following impressions:

... the trees fled, right and left, like a defeated army; the steeples disappeared and flew to the horizon; the gray earth, striped with white spots, looked like an immense guinea-hen tail; the stars of the daisy, the golden flowers of the rape lost their shape and hatched the dark background of the landscape with diffuse stripes; clouds and winds panted to keep up with us.

Turner's genius consisted in integrating his first-time impressions into a new spatial logic. He gave the constructive character of the space generated by speed its first pictorial expression. Rain, Steam and Speed is a picture without a foreground because speed dissolves close objects -- "the flowers along the road" -- into colored stripes. Since the kinetic experience melts all solids in air, Turner located the onlooker in the atmosphere, at an ideal point some fifty yards above the bridge. It was how he could paint the train seen from the outside, and yet convey the essence of the kinetic experience which lies in the dematerialization of the immediate surrounding. Alternating bands of rainy air constitute the only foreground the onlooker is left with; by means of that dematerialization of his standing point, the painter translated his original exultation -- "ex-sultation": leaping up -- into a literal ex-altation, a physical elevation of his body.

From that imaginary vantage point, he discovered what Hugo and Gautier could not see from their wagons: speed does not only exalt the perceptions of first-timers; the repetition of the kinetic experience also substitutes a cold, homogenous extension -- the mentally constructed space of the picture's right side -- for the concrete diversity of places and sites.