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Turner as a Daoist Sage

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I provide a cross-cultural comparison between the life and work of the English land- and seascape painter, J.M.W. Turner, and the conception of aesthetic experience and artisanship found in classical Chinese Daoism. I argue that Turner exhibits certain key features of the Daoist sage. By developing some recent interpretations of his life and work, I claim that Turner, especially in his later seascapes, exhibited an approach to aesthetic experience that involves the artist's total absorption into and identification with the natural process with which he is concerned. Next, I show how the Daoist approach to aesthetics and artisanship similarly focuses on the artist's capacity to identify with the power and source of the world they aim to aesthetically experience. The central motif in both certain of Turner's later work and the Daoist approach to aesthetic creativity is the figure of the vortex. By becoming the center of a natural vortex, and even the vortex that is nature itself, the Turnerian and Daoist artist experiences and embodies the wisdom of accessing and identifying with nature's omnipotence. Such wisdom is thus expressed in the artwork by emphasizing the fundamental dynamism and vagueness of all things. I conclude by claiming that if one reads Turner as a Daoist sage, then a novel model for the aesthetic experience and appreciation of nature can be offered. I call this "the identification model" and recommend it being slotted into our taxonomy of contemporary options within environmental aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Turner; vortex; Daoism;
Laozi; environmental
aesthetics

1. Enter the vortex

While there may be no evidence of any sort of influence of classical Chinese Daoism on the great English land- and seascape painter, J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), my aim in this paper is to defend the claim that Turner, in his life and work, exhibited certain features of the Daoist sage as delineated in classics like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. In order to begin my defense of this claim, I will look first to the idiosyncratic reading of Turner offered by the late French philosopher and historian of science, Michel Serres (1930–2019). For Serres, Turner was more than a mere painter. He was an artistic translator of the great scientific and technological changes occurring in Europe during the first half of the 19th century. Turner's world was one in which the Industrial Revolution led to the gradual reconceptualization or replacement of the forces and objects manipulated by laboring humans from that of water, wind, wood, horses, and other humans to that of fire, heat, metal, "rain, steam, and speed," to quote the title of Turner's 1844 classic painting.

Serres emphasizes that, in Turner, we find an exchange of the geometrical world of 18th century, where line and form dominate matter and color, for a thermodynamical world of heat, intensity, and elemental priority. It is no longer particular, discrete things which may be material, move, and instantiate certain colors, but rather it is concrete, dynamical, and colorful material movement which may occasionally congeal into particular, discrete if yet still vague, things. And even if the primordial elemental fury relaxes enough to remind us of a formal and manageable world of a plurality of objects, we are no longer solely under a paradigm whereby the rigidity of geometric reasoning reigns. We are playing with more fundamental forces now, vague forces, forces which are essentially indeterminate and too powerful to be contained by the rigidity of reason. Matter is no longer imprisoned in the diagram. As Serres writes, in Turner “geometry disintegrates, lines are erased; matter, ablaze, explodes; the former color—soft, light, golden—is now dashed with bright hues.”¹ Serres’s central art historical claim is that the view Turner is a sort of pre-impressionist has to be incorrect insofar as the triumph of matter and color over line and form in his work renders Turner “a proper realist.”² Indeed, Turner dealt with objects so directly he was absorbed by them and, as we will see, Turner was such a realist he became the real.

What is most important about Serres’s approach to Turner for us is that he describes Turner’s role in this historical transition as one of absorption and immersion into the forces motivating the emerging dominance of matter and color over figure and form. Serres appears to think that in order for Turner to serve as the aesthetic medium for this transition he had to place himself inside the new world of fire, heat, steam, and thermodynamism in order to view nature from its own perspective. This perspectival shift is what allows Turner’s work to serve as the material microcosm for this new model of nature. For Turner, nature is to be viewed stochastically, where the drawing of form is mostly superseded in significance. Nature is the steam engine now, and vice versa. It is something like a blast furnace. So that Turner could paint this world, he had to enter into it, to become it: “Turner no longer looks from the outside; *he enters into Wright’s ingot*, he enters into the boiler, the furnace, the firebox. The 1838 painting is *inside* the tugboat.”³ For Serres, “Turner enters full force into the swarming cage of Maxwell’s demons. He passes from the rationalized real, from the abstract or mathematical real, to the burgeoning real that radiates from the furnace where edges collapse.”⁴

Serres likens Turner’s studio to a foundry where the art produced no longer represents anything in particular, but rather merely presents Turner’s various random entries into the incandescence of the primordial natural furnace. There are no longer any discrete scenes, theoretical detours, or discourses with cold, clean edges, but only the full fusion with the natural source of matter and color. The predominance of copying in the arts has dissolved along with Turner as he merged and identified with nature’s omnipotence, its dynamical sovereignty. Serres later returned to Turner in a second essay, admitting he might have been overzealous in initially claiming Turner was painting something as purely social as the Industrial Revolution when in fact he could have just as easily been possibly capturing the effects on the atmosphere of the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815. Serres settles on the likely prospect that it was both industrial smog and volcanic ash that combined to offer Turner the fundamentally vague setting he entered into through his works. Regardless, Serres repeats his view that Turner somehow merged with nature and painted it from the inside, while again claiming that there is nothing impressionistic about his work:

Seeming to penetrate into matter in fusion, the canvases of Turner efface the boundaries of things and make their limits tremble. It's as if the wisp where molecules quiver had taken the place of the solid crystal and its precise contours: the outline is lost, on the canvas, in favor of a fuzzy-edged cloud. . . . Consequently, the whole critical perspective changed. Far from the consciousness of the artist, far from his body and the fine and qualitative perception of his senses, it entered directly into matter itself and the things of the world. These *objective* transformations plunged these works of art into an ensemble as far as possible from the *subjective* intentions of impressionism à la Manet.⁵

One last point to make about Serres's Turner is that the elemental fury that Serres thinks Turner became is often depicted in terms of a circular or cyclical movement. The roaring fires or deafening winds often found in Turner's later work are presented as swirling, rotating, vibrating, oscillating, as if elemental force constitutes an odd sort of axis in and around which everything is both devoured and expressed. For Serres, Turner's fire "dissolves matter, makes it vibrate, tremble, oscillate, makes it explode into *clouds*."⁶ We have already seen how Serres likens Turner work to an immersion into the radiating furnace whence edges collapse. This makes sense considering the basic vagueness of things in Turner is often presented in terms of their wavering and swinging movement whereby they lose their edges and merge with the primordial centripetal or centrifugal force that moves and constitutes them. If Serres is right that Turner had to become what he painted in order to see and present it from its own perspective, then what he actually became was the vortex of nature itself and, moreover, the center of that vortex from and back to which all things emerge and return. Turner became the source and fount for all things in their elemental power and natural fuzziness. He was the eye of the storm he painted, the heart of the hearth, the silent center of nature's raging chaos, what the *Zhuangzi* calls "Nature, the Potter's Wheel."⁷ I will return to this Daoist point below, but first let us note that another recent commentator who has also emphasized the role of the vortex in Turner's work.

In an essay on the role of passive power in Milton, Melville, and Turner, Laura Fox Gill argues that in each of these three artists there is a focus on both the psychological and physical importance of weakness or refusal, of silence or immobility, through and around which a central narrative unfolds wherein a kind of heroism is achieved.⁸ Often, especially in Milton, this heroism is of Christian sort, but what each shares is the use of the structuring motif of the vortex and the passive power of its center, and who can embody the passive power of the center. For Milton, Christ is the untemptable and incorruptible center of the world. He passively avoids, through a kind of strong weakness or austere refusal, any sinful activity and so defeats the devil. In Melville and Turner, things are much more secular.⁹ For them, the vortex is an image wherein the actively passive center forms the pivot around which nature's dynamic, sovereign power finds expression. This passive center has such power over the natural world which rotates around it that it serves essentially as its creator to such an extent that all things are regarded as just so many ways it creates and expresses itself. Much like the Heraclitean and Stoic notion of *ekpyrosis* or periodic conflagration, nature is a permanent process of self-causal omnipotence, eternally creating and destroying itself through vortical expansion and contraction. The passive center of the vortex is thus both itself, the center, and the periphery, all that swirls and oscillates around it. But it is precisely by refusing to become any one of the absolute infinity of things in particular which vibrate around it that it can be all of them simultaneously. The center of the vortex is the vortex itself, all that swirls within and around it, by not being merely any one aspect

amongst the totality of aspects that constitute it. Rather, it is all of them by being the immobile passive center which radiates all their movements and actions.

As a theory of power then, the image of the vortex in Turner, and nature as *the* vortex, which he himself became the center of by experiencing and painting it, involves the achievement of a strength and force through a refusal of individuation by standing, waiting, and withdrawing into oneself to such an extent that one becomes the source and power of all things in their relative, individual movements and actions. Gill views this power move as a submergence into passivity that “must result from the *intention* not to act, or to refuse, or to stay silent,” but perhaps the more Daoist way of putting the point, as we will see, is to say rather that it is a passivity that results from acting without intention instead of intending not to act.¹⁰ Either way, what matters is that Turner is viewed as someone who, through a kind of passivity, became the center of the vortex of nature. It was by identifying with this natural sovereignty that Turner became what he was: the aesthetic expression of nature’s omnipotence. And we probably should not doubt that this was Turner’s precise motivation, for even the first critics of his later seascapes saw that “he empathized completely with the dynamic form of sovereign nature.”¹¹ But to provide a much more concrete example of this point, one could mention the story, perhaps apocryphal but most likely not, of Turner’s being lashed to the mast of the steamboat *Ariel* during a snowstorm. By having himself tied down and totally exposed to the storm, rendering himself passive, immobile, open to all the storm had to offer, Turner could view and fuse with it, feel its force from within, become the point around which it swirled, and identify entirely with its natural power. This aspect of the background of the experience that led to the 1842 painting that captured it was so important to Turner that he included it in the painting’s full title: *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the “Ariel” left Harwich* (Figure 1).

For Gill, Turner’s passive placement on the mast of steamboat within the center of a vortical snowstorm that he then painted as just such a swirling vortex surrounding a steamboat that oddly appears to be spraying outward this very storm demonstrates Turner’s utilization of a position of immobile centrality for the sake of coming to identify with, embody, experience, and express nature’s entire vortical movement. Turner subjects himself to the passivity of the center in order observe and experience the truth of nature’s sovereign power. “Physical weakness is transformed into creative power.”¹² She argues that just as Milton’s Christ or Melville’s *Moby-Dick* or *Bartelby*, the Scrivener serve as the heroically and passively empowered centers of their respective narratives, Turner turned himself into the hero of his own story by viewing and presenting himself as the central source of nature’s material and colorful vortical force. Turner imbued himself with the sagacious standing of a medium for nature’s truth, as the passive vehicle through which the universal vortex could find specific, explicit expression. “In addition to Milton’s Christ and Melville’s *Bartelby*, we might add “Turner’s Turner” as a passive being at the center of a vortex of oscillating action and arrest. In his self-mythology, Turner is a passive being at the center of a vortex.”¹³ Combining Serres emphasis on Turner’s absorption or immersion into, his identification with, the novel forces of nature’s thermodynamism with Gill’s emphasis on Turner’s self-placement within and identification with the passive center of nature as an absolute vortex of eternal expansion and contraction, we have an image of Turner as an artist who had the wisdom and power



Figure 1. J.M.W. Turner, Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the "Ariel" left Harwich, 1842, oil on canvas, 91 cm x 122 cm, Tate, London, Great Britain.

to become what he was, which is, in Spinoza's terms, nature naturing (*natura naturans*), nature in its full self-causal and monistic glory, as the omnipotent force of material and colorful vibration, oscillation, and rotation.¹⁴ Now, there just so happens to be another model of nature, wisdom, aesthetic experience, and artisanship that says exactly this. It is classical Chinese Daoism.

2. The hub of the wheel

There are many images of the Dao found throughout the Daoist classics, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. One such image of the Dao is as a wheel, both as the hub of a wheel and its spokes. The Dao, or Way, is regarded by Daoists as something like the name of nature's permanent change, its unceasing expression of itself as the process by which all things emerge and decay. The image of the Dao as a wheel is quite fitting insofar as it captures its constant cyclical movement, the perpetual changes and rotations of nature [*tian*], the way that nature natures. The Dao is more often associated with the hub of a wheel, however, because it is in the emptiness of the center of the wheel that it, and the "cart" it helps to move, obtains its natural function. The eleventh chapter of the *Laozi* reads:

Thirty spokes are united in one hub. It is in its [space of] emptiness, where the usefulness of the cart is. Clay is heated and a pot is made. It is in its [space of] emptiness, where the usefulness of the pot is. Doors and windows are chiseled out. It is in its [space of] emptiness, where the usefulness of a room is. Thus, there is presence [*you*] for the benefit, there is nonpresence [*wu*] for the use.¹⁵

The Dao is understood in more explicit terms as the emptiness or nonpresence of the center of an emerging area or spinning movement that serves as its condition of possibility. But the Dao is also what emerges out of and returns to the empty center of cyclical creation, what is present as the expression of the Dao's empty and inexhaustible creative power. This creative power is the Dao's *de*, its efficacy or productive capacity. The Dao is the constant unfolding

and returning of all that emerges—namely, everything—through its perfect efficacy. Daoism is thus not one-sided in its emphasis on emptiness, but instead treats the Dao as both central and peripheral, as both what does the moving *and* what unfolds and returns. It is the entire permanent cyclical process of expansion and contraction, but from the explicit perspective of *what* is doing the expanding and contracting: the immobile, passive, silent, creative, empty center, the hub of the wheel, the center of the vortex.

Throughout his work, the Daoist scholar, Hans-Georg Moeller, has emphasized the key role the image of the hub of the wheel plays in understanding classical Daoism.¹⁶ He points to philological and archaeological research that focuses on the ancient cultural context of early Daoism and how this context contributed to some of Daoism's most important ideas. He discusses the work of Pang Pu, whose etymology of the term *xuan*—or “dark,” “mysterious,” and “cosmic essence”—involves the claim that the earliest form of the character itself, as found in oracle bones, depicts two hands turning something, most likely a stick, around and around, creating the image of a whirl.¹⁷ A whirl is “dark” and “mysterious” in the sense of the appearance of the downward spiraling of a whirlpool, of water say, evincing a kind of black hole where the water disappears into the depths. In the ancient Chinese context, the whirl represented a gate that served as the cosmic source for the emergence and return of all things. We see the importance of this etymology when reading the first chapter of the *Laozi*, where the Dao is discussed as both the nonpresent and empty source of all present things and their functional lifespans and return to their central source. The present Dao which can be specified and named, which is all things in their relativity and finitude, is not explicitly the permanent, nonpresent Dao that expresses and unfolds the present Dao. However, the permanent, nonpresent, empty hub-of-the-wheel Dao is in fact and perhaps implicitly nothing but the impermanent Dao of all the spokes of the wheel, all the layers of the whirlpool of existence, the names for all the material and colorful aspects of the vortex of nature. Chapter one concludes by claiming: “The two—together they come to the fore, differently they are named. Together they are called: darker even than darkness—gate of multiple subtleties.”¹⁸

If Pang Pu's etymology is roughly correct, then we can say the nonpresent, empty, permanent Dao is the dark, impenetrable, mysterious, invisible gate through and from which all things are born and back to which they decay in an eternally recurring cycle of emergence and submergence. The Dao is the gate, the empty center of the vortex of nature's unfolding and refolding, that allows for everything's creation and destruction. It is also all that which passes through its gate, the whirling cyclone of nature naturing, of the cycles of nature's endless birth, death, and rebirth. Out of the darkness of the Dao comes and returns all material and colorful things in their incessant change and fluctuation, which are nothing but so many vague expressions of the Dao's unfathomable, empty, nonpresent, passive dark omnipotence, its *de*. The Dao is the useless hub of the wheel that is the source of, and functions as, the efficacy of the entire wheel, the hub and all its spokes. The hub is the dark gate from and through which the wheel functions and so moves the cart. Thus, with Daoism, we have a model of nature or reality that views it as a central emptiness and a peripheral fullness that forever revolves in an permanent cycle of material and visual creation and destruction. As Turner put it in an unpublished poem with a rather Daoist title, “Fallacies of Hope,” parts of which were appended to his first painting of a vortical snowstorm, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (1812) (Figure 2): upon the creative force of the Dao, “wide destruction roll'd.”



Figure 2. J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812, oil on canvas, 146 cm x 237 cm, Tate, London, Great Britain.

The key concern of Daoism is, if it is right about the structure of nature and creation, how one can live in accordance with the Dao and, moreover, how one can come to not only experience, embody, and express the Dao, but to simply thrive *as* the Dao, that is, how to become its *de*, nature's omnipotence. The *Laozi's* main character is the Daoist sage who, in a variety of contexts, becomes the Dao and identifies with the passive power of the center of the vortex of nature, just as Turner did in his life and work. The Daoist sage, in order to achieve the wisdom of identifying with the Dao, must empty his own heart-mind (*xin*), the hub of his own wheel, of all its specific and named content in order to discover the cosmic dark gate that thrives within him, the one hub that is the center of all things. The Daoist sage aims to instantiate the same properties of the Dao: passivity, centrality, emptiness, oneness. It is possible for him, and all things, to do this precisely because that is what they already are: every spoke is in essence the hub which is the source and essence of the entire wheel. What matters is the change in perspective and lifestyle that allows one to occupy the hub. So, the Daoist sage drops all pretenses to metaphysical or normative specificity, of relativity or finitude, and submerges back through the mysterious gate whence he came, first by emptying his own heart and then by plunging back through the source of all things. He empties his heart-mind of all particular beliefs, desires, and emotions, and hence fuses with the world.¹⁹

There are a variety of contexts where the Daoist sage can achieve this wisdom. One is political. The Daoist sage is also an absolute monarch who reigns by becoming one with nature's dynamical sovereignty, and not by actually or actively participating in any real policy decisions. The Daoist sage-ruler rules through absence, indifference, passivity. And yet he reigns supreme and with maximal efficiency. State functions unfold properly and harmoniously through him. Is it too much of a stretch to claim that Turner too reigned by identifying with nature's absolute sovereignty and becoming its aesthetic vehicle? Perhaps, perhaps not. Other contexts in which the Daoist sage thrives are more individualistic and indeed aesthetic. The sage aims to access as many avenues back to the hub, to the source of creation, the Dao itself, as possible. This is achieved always through cognitive and volitional subtraction, from erasing mental content and reducing effort, will, and desire as much as possible. This is because the Dao is already the self-causal source all that is and happens. To attempt to contribute to that is to overemphasize one's external role in the cosmic wheel as

more than merely one spoke among absolute infinity of others. To achieve effortless, non-purposive, or non-intentional action, is to act as the Dao acts: with autopoietic spontaneity (*ziran*) and without deliberate, mechanistic, and all-too-human anthropocentric arrogance. There is only nature naturing, one swirling, whirling, vortical sea of which all things are so many waves. And, from the perspective of the sea, all waves are just so many ways the sea moves, means by which it churns itself. The point is to view oneself and act from the perspective of the sea, not merely as one of its waves. This way one can obtain full efficacy.

In the context of any specific performance, there is a way to act without intention (*wu wei*) and as the Dao's constant spontaneous unfolding. In the context of art and artisanship, the Daoist classics give us a variety of examples of those who achieved the wisdom of aesthetic intuition and creativity that rendered them indistinct from the Dao's central, empty, vortical self-expression. The wise artisanship of a spoke is nothing but the natural artisanship of the hub. The Daoist artist is the Dao's self-aestheticizing, experiencing and expressing itself through the masterful, virtuoso performance of its perfection and omnipotence. A famous example of such a Daoist artisan is that of Cook Ding from the *Zhuangzi*.²⁰ Cook Ding carves up oxen with maximal ease. His knife slides through the flesh spontaneously and without any resistance. He has tapped into the natural pattern of oxen as another way the Dao unfolds its perfect harmony. He hasn't had to sharpen his knife in over 19 years since he never strikes bone or sinew. It is as if the flesh just drops off the skeleton when he slices and carves. Without intentionality or purposiveness, but by spontaneously following the natural course of the structure of oxen, Cook Ding displays the empty center which constitute the patterns through and by which all things unfold, including both himself and the oxen he carves. As Moeller puts it, "He follows the natural pathways and his blade occupies the empty spaces at the center of things—and therefore it is not subject to friction or loss of power and efficacy. Cook Ding and his knife imitate the workings of the Dao."²¹ I would just add that they not only imitate the workings of the Dao, but that they simply *are* it. It is the Dao which slices and carves itself and returns to its passive center through Cook Ding and his oxen.

There is also the story of the masterful, virtuoso Daoist swimmer. In the both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Leizi*, we find tales of swimmers so adept at going with the flow of bodies of water that they seem to be more naturally *of* the water than any other aquatic animals like fish or turtles. When asked how he swims so effortlessly and naturally, the Daoist swimmer replies,

No, I have no Way [Dao]. I began with a grounding, grew up [in accordance] with the quality [of things], and completed [my] destiny. I enter the vortex with the inflow and leave with the outflow, follow the Way [Dao] of water without acting on my own. This is how I bring it on the Way [Dao].²²

One could say the perfect Daoist swimmer is less a person who swims and more simply the process of swimming itself, a way of going with the flow of the water, in and out with its vortical movements, never resisting nature's naturing, always residing within one's element with maximal ease, becoming another vehicle for its self-expression. This is so much the case that one could say the Daoist swimmer doesn't even swim in any normal sense. He is just the water. He doesn't master the water. It masters him. He becomes it. He perfects his craft by becoming its medium. Just as the Daoist swimmer becomes water, we

could say Turner became color, matter, and light. He swam within his wild late seascapes. He became the way they paint themselves. He became the vortex of nature he painted and the medium through which vision, and hence painting, is possible. There is no longer merely a perceiver and an object perceived, but the process and medium through which perception, or any relation whatsoever, is possible. Turner, unbeknownst to himself, seemed to have had Daoist aesthetic wisdom, the empty knowledge of and an identification with the process one actually is so that it could explicitly express itself in aesthetic terms. And Daoism even has stories of virtuoso painters who perform something like Turner's identification with his land- and seascapes.

Daoist aesthetics is more a theory of artisanship and the process of aesthetic creation than a theory of either aesthetic objects or aesthetic properties like the beautiful or picturesque. It's concern is with discovering the natural way of producing anything, the way nature produces it, and then becoming and presenting that. With respect to landscape painting, Daoists regard painted landscapes as being composed of the same basic stuff or energy [*qi*] as "real" landscapes. There is one substantial process of which both painted and real landscapes are an expression. A perfect Daoist landscape painting is then one which simply *is* the landscape it depicts. There is no representation involved. The painted landscape is the landscape painted, and vice versa. The viewer of a Daoist landscape painting can stroll around within it as much the landscape it depicts because they are the same landscape. This is possible because the Daoist painter becomes the landscape he paints in order to paint it and after he paints it he enters into and disappears within it, and so can you or any Daoistly-inclined observer. By painting it, the Daoist painter creates *as* the landscape permanently creates (and destroys) itself, as the way it paints itself. The landscape painting becomes a dark gate for entering into the landscape painted. In his virtuoso wisdom, this is precisely what the famous Daoist painter, Wu Daozi, achieved. Here is a story about what happened when Wu Daozi was asked by the emperor to paint a landscape in his palace:

About Wu Daozi it is told that he once painted a huge landscape on the inner walls of the imperial palace. Only when he had finished the painting did he unveil it for the emperor. He pointed towards a grotto and clapped his hands. Thereupon an entrance opened and the painter entered the painting he had created and disappeared along with it right in front of the emperor's eyes.²³

Along with this story, there is another about Wu Daozi's painting of some dragons. In ancient Chinese myth, rain is produced by the motions of dragons high in the sky. Wu Daozi painted five dragons on the walls of the imperial palace as well and whenever it rained outside, rain also came out from the painted dragons. These tales are obviously fanciful, but they betray an essential point: to truly masterfully paint a landscape, or anything for matter, one must become what they are painting, one must become the medium through which what is being painted paints itself. Wu Daozi is the landscape he paints, so he can disappear within it. The landscape painting is thus also an invitation for us to activate the hub of the wheel within ourselves, to empty our hearts of beliefs or desires about representing the world and simply fuse with it and pass through the dark gate of the painting that serves as a source of nature's permanent unfolding, the center of the vortex of the Dao's self-causal omnipotence. One could argue Turner himself and his later seascapes achieved exactly this. Turner embodied the wisdom and skill of Wu Daozi

and thus also entered into the material, colorful thermodynamism of the natural scenes he painted and his land- and seascape paintings can serve a similar function for us.

One final point about the Daoist aesthetic virtuoso. By being a Daoist sage, as are all Daoist sages, the Daoist aesthetic master also happens to be immortal. This makes sense considering the Daoist creator loses all finite and relative limitations by passing through the dark gate of the Dao and entering into the center of the vortex of nature naturing. The Daoist sage is the Dao and the Dao is constant, permanent, eternal change, endless self-causal emergence and decay. That is how he was able to carve, swim, and paint so perfectly in the first place. The Daoist classics often use the imagery of babies and old men to depict Daoist sages who have found a way to switch perspective to that Dao and embody the perfect efficacy of the Dao's eternal *de*. The infant and old man are not productive bodies in the all-too-human sense of intentional and purposive activity. Instead, they are closed off from the social pressures of adult human life. They have cultivated the pointless spontaneity of the Dao within them. The more perfect they become the more they resemble embryonic corpses spared the usual loss of energy associated with a merely finite existence. Indeed, they tend to revert back into the stillness and passivity of the source of all change: the nameless, permanent Dao and its perspective as the center of nature naturing. The body of the Daoist sage transforms into the entire body of the world and so lives and thrives as it does, effortlessly and spontaneously, forever.

No more ego, no more human identity: only the embodied experience of and physical identification with the world's creative omnipotence. Daoist immortals were often depicted, in Chinese art, as infants, old men, landscapes, the whole world, and sometimes all four at once. Kristofer Schipper has argued that Liang Kai's painting of a Daoist immortal from the 12th century is actually a portrait of Laozi himself.²⁴ Schipper claims that Laozi is painted in the style of a landscape, as it clearly looks like Laozi's body emerges out of a mountain scene. Laozi's body also looks like that of an old man, while his face carries the expressionless grin of a newborn. So, in a painting entitled *An Immortal* (Figure 3), Liang Kai paints Laozi, the Daoist sage-master, as a senior infant who happens to also be a mountain scene. As the whole scene, the whole process, Laozi is presented as both old and young, dead and alive, human and natural, immobile and proceeding, mountainous and misty, precise and vague. He is the center of the vortex of nature, the eternal unfolding and expression of all there is. The Daoist sage, the perfect aesthetic virtuoso, is the eternity of the world. He is immortal. When Turner used the structure of the vortex again for his *Light and Colour (Geoth's Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1842) (Figure 4), could we not say that he as well placed himself back into the origin of creation, into the source of the world of matter and color, and by melding and fusing with it, obtained and embodied a kind of aesthetic immortality? Did not Turner walk into his landscape, the landscape of creation, with this piece and achieve the immortality of being one with nature's cyclical, swirling unfolding? Turner is light and color. He is a Daoist sage.

3. From engagement to identification

I would like to conclude by adding a note concerning the place this Turnerian and Daoist theory of aesthetic experience might occupy amongst the various models of the aesthetic appreciation of nature found in contemporary environmental aesthetics. Theories of the



Figure 3. Liang Kai, Immortal in Splashed Ink, c.1140–1210, ink on paper, 48 cm x 27 cm, Taipei, National Palace Museum.

aesthetic appreciation of nature are often distinguished between being either cognitive or non-cognitive, conceptual or non-conceptual, or narrative or ambient. Cognitive, conceptual, or narrative views often claim that proper aesthetic appreciation of nature necessarily involves bringing a certain knowledge to one's experience of nature. This knowledge is usually understood in scientific terms. The idea is that one cannot properly aesthetically appreciate nature without a knowledge of the natural history and basic, but probably preferably latest, science regarding a certain landscape or natural scene. The assumption on the part of cognitivists is that one is properly aesthetically appreciating nature "as it is" only by bolstering one's aesthetic experiences with a background possession of accurate information regarding the piece of nature one is aiming to properly appreciate. This approach to the aesthetic appreciation of nature is often labeled the natural environmental model or scientific cognitivism.²⁵ Apparently, the view is that it is only through the scientific knowledge of nature could one appreciate its aesthetic qualities.



Figure 4. J.M.W. Turner, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, 1843, 78 cm x 78 cm, Tate, London, Great Britain.

On the other hand, non-cognitivist, non-conceptual, or ambient theories of aesthetic appreciation of nature downplay the role or relevance of the scientific knowledge of nature in any aesthetic experience of a landscape or natural scene. By combining aspects of phenomenology with analytic aesthetics, the engagement model, mostly championed by Arnold Berleant, suggests that the entire aesthetic tradition of the coolly disinterested objectifying and measuring of nature is already an inappropriate approach to a nature one is aiming to aesthetically experience.²⁶ It is not by isolating and abstracting nature that one accesses its aesthetic qualities or it itself “as it is.” Rather, one must enjoy a multi-sensory immersion into the unity of nature, an absorption into the continuity of nature’s naturing, in order to properly aesthetically experience and appreciate it. Other non-cognitivist views emphasize the need not to know nature, but to be aroused by it, to be called into a certain emotional intensity regarding its power. Mere openness to emotional arousal is more relevant for an aesthetic experience of nature than any sort of knowledge of natural history.²⁷ Some argue that any attempt to know nature at all, in a cognitivist or propositional sense of having of justified true beliefs about it, is already a mistake and an inappropriate response to nature. This is because nature, in its essence, is simply too alien, aloof, and mysterious to be known in any orthodox or normal, human sense.²⁸

The obvious question for us is, which general approach to the aesthetic appreciation of nature does the Turnerian and Daoist approach most resemble? It seems just as obvious that the answer is the non-cognitivist, non-conceptual, or ambient approach. If the reading of Turner as a Daoist sage offered above is at least approximating a plausible reading of both Turner and Daoism, I think we can extract a variant of the engagement model that summarizes the approach to environmental aesthetics offered by both. I will call this the identification model. With respect to the aesthetic experience and appreciation of nature,

Turner and the Daoists were identificationists. The identification model says that not only is a kind of non-cognitive engagement or emotional arousal (or equally intense emptying) required for a proper aesthetic experience of nature, but a total immersion and absorption into nature is the necessary condition for a “true” or “proper” experience of the aesthetic qualities and power of nature. To truly aesthetically appreciate nature, one must become it. One must lose all distinction from nature’s omnipotence. One must view the world from its own perspective, become its vehicle for creative and destructive self-expression. Mere immersion or absorption into the world is not enough. One must not merely be *in* the world, one must *be* the world, the hub of the wheel, the cosmic gate, the center of the vortex. The identification model says that if one wishes to properly aesthetically experience and appreciate nature, one must embody nature and become its aesthetic self-expression, its own presentation of itself to itself as an aesthetic object. As a theory of aesthetic creativity and appreciation then, the identification model says all distinctions between subject and object must be dissolved and the creator must be one with the appreciator and vice versa. One must be the source of nature’s aesthetic qualities and the appreciator of those qualities.

Now, as we saw, this identification model involves an idiosyncratic theory of wisdom or sagacity. The Daoist sages, including Turner, embody the wisdom of accessing and identifying with nature’s permanent, empty, passive center. It was in this way they could become its periphery, all the spokes of the wheel, all color and matter. This kind of wisdom, however, can scarcely be described in cognitivist or conceptual terms. It is not by possessing any specific information about nature that one can identify with it. Rather, wisdom consists in accessing its nature, nature’s nature, its eternal naturing. Such access is not a mental event insofar as the heart-mind has been emptied of all content in order to take on the empty heart of the world, the hub of the wheel. So, we could say the identification model is so extremely non-cognitive that while it certainly employs arousal and taps into the mystery of the cosmic gate, it also bypasses them entirely to form a kind of knowledge that involves a total identification with the nature that one has engaged with, received arousal from, or felt its mystery. Thus, there is knowledge in the identification model, and it is a knowledge based entirely on experience and constitution, and not on any sort of normative relationship of a truth-bearer like a proposition corresponding to the world as its truthmaker. In the identification model, there are neither beliefs nor propositions nor reasons nor a mere relative plurality of things with properties. Rather, there is full monistic identification with nature and an experience of the collapse of all the normal distinctions that make human life and perception possible. This is a deeper, more true, knowledge of nature than any piece of scientific information could offer. Science has no access to nature “as it is,” “in its own terms,” because if it did, it would no longer be science, but nature itself, which is precisely what the identification model offers: an aesthetic experience of nature so absolute and perfect one becomes what one knows, nature naturing, and it is by this knowledge that one creates and appreciates nature aesthetically. This is what Turner and the Daoists did.

Notes

1. Serres, “Turner Translates Cornot,” 56.
2. *Ibid.*, 57.
3. *Ibid.*, 57–8.

4. Ibid., 58.
5. Serres, "Science and the Humanities," 10.
6. Serres, "Turner Translates Cornot," 58.
7. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 14.
8. Gill, "Milton's Christ and Passive Power," 69–70.
9. Ibid., 74.
10. Ibid., 73.
11. Bockemühl, *Turner*, 69.
12. Gill, "Milton's Christ and Passive Power," 80.
13. Ibid., 81.
14. Curley, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 20.
15. Moeller, *Daodejing (Laozi)*, 27.
16. Moeller, *Daoism Explained; The Philosophy of the Daodejing; Daodejing (Laozi)*.
17. Pu, "Tan 'xuan.'"
 18. Moeller, *Daodejing (Laozi)*, 3.
 19. Ibid., 117.
 20. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 22–3.
 21. Moeller, *Daoism Explained*, 109.
 22. Ibid., 110.
 23. Ibid., 114.
 24. Schipper, *Taoist Body*, 103.
25. Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment"; and Parsons, "Nature Appreciation."
26. Berleant, "Towards a Phenomenological Aesthetics of Environment"; "What is the Aesthetic Engagement?"
27. Carroll, "On Being Moved By Nature."
28. Godlovitch, "Icebreakers."

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