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THE EVOLUTION OF THE SIGNIFIED IN CONSTABLE'S LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

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The Evolution Of The Signified In Constable's Landscape Paintings

Landscape paintings are frequently the subject of spirited debate among art critics. The question at issue is nearly always an interpretive one: whether the image is topographical portraiture, or whether it signifies something beyond the land; and, if it does, whether it is possible for a viewer to access the signified other. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which one could reasonably answer 'no' to the first portion of the question—even maps drafted by cartographers aiming to objectively portray topography reveal the mindsets of their creators; if even such maps carry additional meaning, how can an image painted as a work of art fail to do the same?

When evaluating the work of John Constable, the question is better re-phrased: *what* else does landscape signify, and about whom? The paintings certainly bear information concerning Constable's own political views, aesthetic ideas, and emotional states, but they have also revealed the mindsets of their interpreters: each successive wave of literature concerning the 'real' meaning of Constable's work exposes the underlying values of the interpretive body. Investigation into the meaning of Constable's work should therefore proceed on two paths: one which analyzes the various statements and biographical data of the artist, and one which examines his reception by various groups and notes how his work has been interpreted since the artist's death in 1837.

Constable's biography and published correspondence offer useful insight into possible autobiographical elements of his paintings, and perhaps shed some light on his aesthetic and political views. Art Historian Ann Bermingham has done considerable investigation into the possible interplay between Constable's art and his personal life, and argues that most of the

elements of his paintings, including scenery, compositional emphasis, and use of color can be explained in terms of a tension between his “impulse to record with naturalistic objectivity the scenes of his boyhood and an equally powerful desire to infuse these scenes with personal associative meaning.”¹ Bermingham theorizes that Constable resented East Bergholt, since for several years he had to labor at the family mill, rather than pursuing a career in art. This resentment was balanced with a love for the landscape, about which Constable wrote:

This spot saw the day-spring of my life,
 hours of Joy and years of Happiness;
 this place first tinged my boyish fancy with a love of the Art
 this place was the origin of my fame.²

Two of Constable’s early paintings, ‘*Boat-Building*’ and ‘*A Water-Mill*’ (1812), seem to manifest this tension, displaying both Constable’s love of the land, reflected in his faithful rendering of the natural scenes, and his resentment toward it, manifested in a baffling indifference to compositional emphasis.³ Bermingham argues that the dynamic behind Constable’s work was altered in 1815-16, with the deaths of both his parents, his marriage to Maria, and the couple’s settling in London.⁴ The emotional tension of East Bergholt was now a thing of the past, and Constable’s paintings show a slight tenor of nostalgic remembrance.

His methodological approach to painting also shifted at this time: having previously produced small works and sketches on site, Constable now adopted a process that would draw

¹ A. Bermingham, ‘Mapping the Self: Constable/country’ in *Landscape and Ideology: the English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*, (University of California: Berkeley, 1986) 126.

² Inscription on the frontispiece of *English Landscape Scenery*, featured below an image of the Constable family home. Quoted in Bermingham, 125.

³ Bermingham, 120.

⁴ J.C. Ivy, “Constable, John (1776–1837),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6107> (accessed March 25, 2008).

attention and earn lasting notoriety. Working on 6 by 4 foot canvases, he first created a full-size sketch on site, then took it back to his studio to create a finished painting.⁵ *A Scene on the River Stour* (*‘the White Horse’*, 1819), the first of the ‘six-footers’, as these paintings became known, was noticed by the critics and earned the artist an associateship at the Royal Academy.⁶ Beyond their size, the six-footers are interesting both for the insight they yield into Constable’s careful attention to nature, and for the widely variant political messages ascribed to them by scholars such as Barrell, Feaver, Brookner, and Vaizey.⁷ While William Feaver interprets the figures present in the scenes as classical pastoral poses of rest, Marina Vaizey contends that the figures are all poised for work, and Anita Brookner argues that not only does Constable portray the figures at work, but also shows them to be serfs, implying that the painting would dissolve if they were once to rest. Barrell himself appears to take a middle road, writing that Constable wanted to portray man in harmony with nature, but could only do so by distancing the viewer from the figures, who became general types, rather than specific workers.⁸ As widely variant as they are, these opinions all represent modern scholarship; though Constable’s contemporaries frequently mentioned his works in reviews, none of the publications collected by J.C. Ivy comment on the possible political reads of the pieces. It was not until 1865 that Constable’s work became popularized as a celebration of “England in all her wealth of picturesque

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Barrell offers a summary of the positions in *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1987), 132.

⁸ Ibid., 139.

beauty...not clipped and cropped as the corn-manufacturers disfigure her.”⁹ Rather than indicating a particular message intrinsic to the landscapes, such comments reflected the tenor of the day: industrial development from London was encroaching on the heathland, and organizations such as the Commons Preservation Society needed a way to turn public opinion to resist the enclosure of Hampstead Heath.¹⁰

The more recent interpretations of Constable’s figures as showing “the impact of industrialization”¹¹ or the “harmonious relationship of worker and land”¹² reflect modern sensibilities concerning labor conditions in the 1730-1840s, and the exploitation of the poor underlying the successes of the industrial revolution. In effect, a viewer can see whatever he desires to see in Constable’s subjects: too impressionist to be understood neatly as either pastoral, picturesque, or protest, the meaning of his figures is ambiguous. Barrell helpfully clarifies that this difficulty is located primarily in Constable’s early works. In analyzing *Dedham Vale with Ploughmen* and *Stour Valley and Dedham Village*, both exhibited in 1814-15, he writes:

Morland’s picturesque is not ambiguous in this way; we know with him that raggedness is being shown as of aesthetic *and* social interest; but with Constable we do not know, as we study these figures, whether we are discovering something about what Constable as seen, or about how he sees it.¹³

⁹ S. Daniels, ‘John Constable and the Making of Constable Country’, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, (Blackwells: Oxford, 1993), 207.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bermingham, 143.

¹² Barrell, 156.

¹³ Ibid., 150.

As Constable matured and began work on the six-footers, however, he placed more emphasis on the landscape, and the figures became sparse and less defined. As his interest in nature grows, “the emphasis in his work becomes less social, and the figures carry less and less of the meaning of the pictures, which is displaced into the clouds, where ‘the Student of nature may daily watch her endless varieties of effect.’”¹⁴ Though it seems counter-intuitive, the non-figurative elements of Constable’s paintings yield much more information about the painter and his intent, as there is less temptation to project modern mindsets onto the imagery.

An average of half of the compositional area of each of the six-footers is devoted to the sky, and most of the scenes depicted take place at noon. Though as a wind-mill operator Constable had an intimate experiential knowledge of the sky, he was unsatisfied with his ability to render the clouds in *The White Horse*. In the time between it and his next major work, *The Hay Wain (1821)*, Constable devoted himself to careful study of the English sky. Professing that painting “is scientific as well as poetic; that imagination alone never did, and never can, produce works that are to stand by a comparison with realities”,¹⁵ the artist familiarized himself with formal meteorology, and executed over 52 oil sketches of the sky. J. E. Thornes, upon completing careful investigation of these studies, concluded,

the inscriptions to the sky studies are extremely revealing of Constable’s meteorological understanding and his reasons for producing the sky studies... he often recorded the date, the time of day, the direction he was facing, the wind speed and direction, and the current weather...¹⁶

¹⁴ Barrell, 162. Quoting the introduction to *English Landscape Scenery*, John Constable, *Further Documents and Correspondence*, 9.

¹⁵ First address to the Royal Institution, quoted in J.E. Thornes, *John Constable’s Skies*, (University of Birmingham Press: Edgbaston, Birmingham, 1999), 51.

¹⁶ J. E. Thornes, 59.

Analysis of these notes and correlation between the sketches and the skies of the six-footers reveals that Constable's primary purpose in the study was to perfect the skies of his larger works—to create a scientifically accurate, real sky, rather than an imagined backdrop.¹⁷

His landscapes, then, with their meteorologically correct skies, bear testimony to Constable's conviction that "painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature."¹⁸ The loose brushwork that he used to render these skies also compels us to note that this conviction was not held to the exclusion of artistic emphasis; Constable remained conscious that he was making paintings, not writing a meteorological treatise. Studying Constable's dialogue with his critics, J. C. Ivy notes that his "persistent refusal to refine the surface texture of his pictures suggests that he actively wanted the viewer to detect the paint, to come up close to relish its richness, and then to step back to relish the look of nature..."¹⁹ The paintings themselves reflect Constable's dual-emphasis on painting *as paint* and nature *as nature*; their reception by the critics illuminates residual beliefs that landscape painting ought to perfect and beautify nature. This attitude changed as Constable's career progressed. While an early review (1815) comments "we cannot help regretting that his performances, from want of finish, are rather sketches than pictures",²⁰ by 1827 *The Times* called him "unquestionably the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65, 68. Thornes writes, '...it is remarkable that he recorded the hour so religiously, which again confirms his desire to achieve scientific accuracy in his work', and elaborates that the annotations 'suggest that the single most important reason for the pure sky sky studies was for Constable to perfect the noon skies of his six-footers.'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, quoting Constable's 4th lecture at the Royal Institution, found in *Shields, C. & Parris, L. John Constable (London: Tate Gallery, 1969), 333, 335.*

¹⁹ J.C. Ivy, *Constable and the Critics*, (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 1991), 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

finest landscape painter of the day”,²¹ and at the artist’s death in 1837, the press wrote that “his natural perceptions of what was good in art were strong and very original, ... His mode of painting was peculiar, but it embodied much truth and sound principles of art which will render his works lasting, and far more valuable in years hence...”²² Apparently, the artist’s determination and pursuit of an independent style had finally succeeded.

Constable’s works did indeed appreciate as time progressed, but not entirely because the public came to appreciate his aesthetic theory or execution. The association of Stour Valley with ‘Englishness’ begun by the Commons Preservation Society in 1866 continued to grow, and gained momentum with the rise of ‘commodity patriotism’ in the late 1880’s.²³ Concern over growing German militarism and foreign wars fanned the patriotic flames, and what better way could a citizen support England than by buying a painting of the heart of England by an Englishman? Constable’s paintings fit the bill, and by 1900 *the Haywain* was “well on its way to becoming a national icon”.²⁴ When Charles Holmes’ *Constable and his Influence on Landscape Painting* (1902) criticized the artist’s compositions as being “merely an aggregate of circumstances suggesting fine weather”,²⁵ it became clear that the cause of Constable’s popularity had indeed changed. His admirers did not rise to defend his ‘fresh’ brushwork and fidelity to nature, nor did they praise his ‘picturesque portrayal’ or careful use of *chiascuro*—instead, they searched for rural areas that resembled Constable’s paintings. Nostalgia for an

²¹ Daniels, 201.

²² Ivy, *Constable and the Critics*, 228. Quoting *The Morning Post*, April 4, *Obituary of John Constable*.

²³ Daniels, 210.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

agrarian England fueled both the artist's enduring popularity, and a thriving tourist industry in the Stour Valley which became known as 'Constable Country'. As English industrial supremacy gave way to German and American industrialism, the association of England with old-fashioned, agrarian scenes grew stronger, and by 1925 Stour Valley was seen as a place of refuge from encroaching modernity.²⁶ By the Second World War, English nostalgia had decidedly classified Constable as a rural painter in the Pastoral tradition,²⁷ but it is worth pausing to ask whether such a declaration should inform one's view of Constable, or his audience.

His paintings do feature many elements of the traditional pastoral genre. Images of man in nature dominate the compositions, which are generally sunlit under a blue sky. The colors are vibrant, particularly in the grass and trees, but unlike pastorals Constable's landscapes are not Edenic, nor are his figures portrayed blissfully rejoicing in their toil. One need only contrast *The Haywain* with the roughly contemporary pastoral painting by Samuel Palmer, *The Gleaning Field (1833)*, to conclude, as Bermingham does, that Constable's paintings do not quite conform to pastoral tradition: "The laborers work, but are never overwhelmed by bounty as their reward as Palmer allows them to be."²⁸ Though he is not a pastoral painter, to assert that Constable's paintings critique the exploitation of agrarian labor is overstating the case: he places the laborers at a distance, too far to judge whether they rejoice or mourn their toil. His laborers just *are*, and a viewer must engage them at a formal, rather than political, level. Barrell insightfully notes that:

At most, the figures come to represent a notional and unrealized 'human element'; but really they are what Constable described, in a remark on Claude, as 'objects of color'—he

²⁶ Ibid., 217.

²⁷ Ibid., 222.

²⁸ Bermingham, 143.

especially admired Claude's figures, as 'according so well with the scenes; as objects of colour they seem indispensable'.²⁹

It is perhaps safest to interact with Constable's indeterminate elements as Barrell does, on a formal, aesthetic level. Understood in this light, the laborers are just compositional elements needed to complete the scene, and may be added or removed just as easily as the black and white sheepdog present in half of the pieces. Studying his remarks on the topic of figures confirms their status as designs rather than portraits. Constable frequently repeated a piece of advice he attributed to J.T. Smith, to refrain from "inventing figures for a landscape taken from nature", because a naturally occurring living thing "will in all probability accord better with the scene and time of day than will any invention of your own."³⁰ It is significant to note that motive is to find a figure that completes the scene, rather than one that makes a political point, or that best romanticizes the scene.

He did, at times, invent impossible elements for artistic effect. The most identifiable instance of such behavior is the occurrence of a rainbow in *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows (1831)*. Constable was aware of both the meteorological conditions necessary for a rainbow, and the fact that his painting did not satisfy them, but at this late stage in his career, it is arguable that "Constable's sky had moved beyond realism into the realm of symbolism."³¹ Though they are physically impossible, the colors of the rainbow accentuate the vibrant composition and highlight the spiritual aspect of the tumultuous, weather-dominated view of the cathedral.

²⁹ Barrell, 144, quoting *John Constable's Discourses*, ed. Beckett, Ipswich 1970, 54.

³⁰ Ivy, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, quoting Leslie, 1845, 7.

³¹ Thornes, 84.

Both the rainbows and his use of figures as pattern emphasize the fact that Constable held specific, set ideas concerning the aesthetics of paintings. Even after winning general approval with the six-footers, he continued to challenge longstanding opinions concerning the proper appearance of a finished work. Liking his paintings to sparkle with reflected light, Constable liberally applied white highlights to his pieces, causing the critics to protest at the ‘snow’ which, in their view, marred otherwise excellent paintings. In his late work, and most noticeably in *Hadleigh Castle*, Constable experimented with the texture of his finished pieces, choosing to add an expressive dimension by applying the paint with a palette knife. These pieces are among the most haunting and emotionally charged of his work, but are so emphatically individual that they received mixed, and even negative, reviews. Ivy writes,

Simultaneously expressive and descriptive, Constable's brushwork combines with the palette knife to create an ode to melancholy and ruin. Reviewers, stunned by its power, were none the less perplexed by its surface texture which was likened to chopped hay and whitewash.³²

Rather than altering his style, Constable trusted that, in time, the critics would become accustomed to it, and recognize that his were paintings “bearing an original cast of mind, of genuine study, and of consequent novelty of style in their mode of execution.”³³ In time, some critics did appreciate his work for its originality—and for a few other reasons, whether or not it was Constable’s intent.

After surveying the various implied meanings and statements made by Constable’s landscapes, it is clear that they *do* signify more than topography, but it is less clear exactly *what*. Clearly they instantiate the artist’s aesthetic approach, and so make accessible his unique views

³² Ivy, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

³³ Ivy, *Constable and the Critics*, 50. Quoting the final paragraph of Constable’s January 1833 introduction to *English Landscape Scenery (John Constable’s Discourses*, 10)

on the relation of artistic mark-making and the description of landscape. Equally clearly, the political or psychological meanings perceived or advocated by a particular interpretive group stem at least in part from that group's preconceptions, and thus the paintings in a sense reveal the mindsets of their audiences. Specifically which psycho-political meanings Constable intended to convey—if any—is less clear; nor is it evident that such meanings are accessible to a modern viewer. Perhaps one ought to restrict oneself to aesthetic properties, and meanings revealed explicitly by the author, recognizing that while landscapes do inevitably signify more than topography, there are prohibitive difficulties to achieving more nuanced understandings of a painting's subtle political or psychological meanings.

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