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## ENGLISH LANDSCAPE: CONSTABLE & CLARE

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In the last lecture we looked at the various challenges to the cultural dominance in England of seventeenth-century Mediterranean models of landscape beauty and sublimity. In particular we discussed Jane Austen's comments on landscape gardening fashions and Picturesque tastes, and William Gilpin's promotion of Picturesque British scenery. These issues converged in the last two decades of the eighteenth century and the first decade or two of the nineteenth. We now move forward to concentrate on period following the end of the Napoleonic Wars – the late teens, the 1820s and early 1830s. The theme for this lecture is the pioneering rethinking of English landscape and its relation to European models in the work of a painter and a poet, John Constable and John Clare.

Back in 1770 Thomas Gainsborough remarked, 'with regard to real Views from Nature in this Country, he [Gainsborough] has never seen any Place that affords a Subject equal to the poorest imitations of Gaspar or Claude'. (Thos Gainsborough, letter to Philip, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Hardwicke, c.1770?: *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, ed. J. Hayes, New Haven & London, 2001, p.30). There was, however, another European landscape tradition which grew in popularity towards the end of the eighteenth century – the Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century landscapes, by Ruisdael, Rubens, Hobbema etc.

The landscape of the Low Countries was flatter, and their landscape painters of the seventeenth century concentrated on more textured, rougher scenery – rutted paths, broken banks, low-profile cottages, old mills, big skies with rich cloud patterns. It was scenery that in many respects matched that of England's East Anglia. And it was from East Anglia that several influential English landscape painters came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: in particular Gainsborough, Constable and the painters of the Norwich School, such as Cotman and Crome.

It was also from the low-profile, gently undulating English countryside in Northamptonshire that John Clare, the poet, drew his inspiration for championing a different kind of landscape aesthetic. Like Gainsborough, neither Constable nor Clare travelled abroad to taste Mediterranean scenery at first hand; but both knew the landscape traditions that came from there. Constable remarked: 'The Dutch painters were stay-at-home people, -- hence their originality'. (John Constable *Discourses*, 1970, p.65). In a letter of 1823, he wrote, 'Am I doomed never to see the living scenes – which inspired the landscape of Wilson & Claude Lorraine? No! but I was born to paint a happier land, my own dear England'. (Letter to Archdeacon Fisher, 9 May 1823, *JCC VI*, 117). We shall see later John Clare's own equally strong feelings about his native tradition in landscape painting.

It is from the more homely Northern-European tradition that these early nineteenth-century tastes in English scenery developed. But that initiative needed promotion and careful naturalisation, especially at a time when the authoritative standards of beauty in landscape (according to the Royal Academy) were largely those set by the Mediterranean painters such as Claude. William Wordsworth once wrote (in a letter of 21 May 1807): 'every great and original writer in proportion as he is great and original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished'. These two principal figures I'm talking about today – Constable and Clare - took on that task, by determinedly creating and promoting the taste for a new portraiture and poetry of landscape. Their mission was to generate for that landscape a distinctive status and national affection, and this entailed weaning public taste away from the old dominance of the classical, traditional *beau ideal*.



In this project they were able to capitalise not only on the Dutch tradition but also on later developments in Picturesque taste; and that is where I want to start.

## The Picturesque: Phase Two

The first phase of the Picturesque (1770s and 1780s), initiated by Gilpin, had been concerned with framing the landscape view and prioritising composition and structure. His popular travel books to the Wye Valley or North Wales or the Lakes were all subtitled ‘relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty’. But in his later work he was obliged to analyse more rigorously those qualities that *distinguished* the Picturesque from the Beautiful. Ever since Edmund Burke’s influential *Philosophical Enquiry...* (1759) beauty had been conventionally associated with the properties of smoothness and gentle variation. This did not satisfy the evolving taste for the Picturesque, which was restlessly reaching for something more sharply varied. Gilpin realised this – indeed he had helped initiate it - and by the 1790s he was emphasising the importance of repudiating smoothness in picturesque compositions.

This second phase of the Picturesque in the 1790s was less interested in compositional principles and pictorial structure – those Gilpinesque side-screens and three distances, etc. This later phase seized on the more textural qualities of roughness and ruggedness as essential to the Picturesque. To that end it identified categories of objects that could qualify as prime material for the Picturesque – old cottages, ruined mills and abbeys, ancient oaks, dilapidated gates and fences, beggars and gipsies.

It created a new relish for the old, the neglected, the accidental, the obsolete, and the decaying, both in landscape and human subjects. Here, for example, is John Clare lamenting the felling of much loved old tree:

Old, favourite Tree! art thou too fled the scene?  
Could not thy ‘clining age the axe delay?  
And let thee stretch thy shadows o’er the green,  
And let thee die in picturesque decay?

(John Clare, ‘To a Favourite Tree’, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, 1820, p.200)

All those qualities – decay, obsolescence, accident – render objects rough and Irregular; and it is almost the opposite of the properties of conventional beauty. As one writer of the 1790s remarked, ‘In the theory of rural scenes, so much is irregularity of parts a constituent of beauty, that it may very nearly be said that *equality is deformity*.’ (J.T.Smith, *Remarks on Rural Scenery* 1797, pp.5-6). Neglect was paradoxically one of the greatest attractions for Picturesque tastes.

One of the most eloquent proponents of this second-phase Picturesque was the Herefordshire squire Sir Uvedale Price. Price was a garden designer, but one whose principles were vehemently opposed to the prevailing Capability Brown type of landscaping. He detested what he referred to as the Brownian ‘smoothing and levelling the ground’:

The moment this mechanical common-place operation (by which Mr. Brown and his followers have gained so much credit) is begun, adieu to all that the painter admires – to all intricacies -- to all the beautiful varieties of form, tint, and light and shade; every deep recess – every bold projection – the fantastic roots of trees – the winding paths of sheep – all must go; in a few hours, the rash hand of false taste completely demolishes, what time only, and a thousand lucky accidents, can mature, so as to make it become the admiration and study of a Ruysdal or a Gainsborough; and reduces it to such a thing, as an Oilman in Thames-street may at any time contract for by the yard at Islington or Mile-End.

(Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque*, 1796, pp.39-41)



Uvedale Price's father had been a friend of Gainsborough: hence the invoking of Gainsborough as a standard-bearer of the new tastes. Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* (to some extent a deliberate response to Gilpin's *Three Essays* (1792) a year or two earlier), prioritised accident and intricacy in creating the Picturesque. His *Essay* went on to itemise objects that had a more native, local British identity: rutted and sunken lanes, rough banks of wildflowers, stag-headed oaks, shaggy donkeys, decrepit gates, old mossy cottages and ruined water-mills.

This range of low-life scenery stimulates a response particularly cherished by Uvedale Price – 'visual irritation'. This has nothing to do with conjunctivitis. It is a property in the objects depicted as well as the in the manner of presenting those objects. It is an aesthetic criterion in which sight becomes an extension of touch, so that the spectacle of rough textures constitutes an almost haptic stimulus to the eye. As Price remarks, 'all broken, rugged surfaces have also, by *sympathy*, something of the same effect on the sight, as on the touch.' (Price, *Essay* 1796, 140) This idea of 'visual irritation' becomes an important property of the Picturesque as distinct from the beautiful, which was conventionally associated with smoothness (and remember Price's strictures on Capability Brown's 'smoothing' of landscapes). Unrelieved smoothness induces visual monotony. Price illustrates his point by taking two models of woodland landscape, one beautiful and one picturesque. The beautiful woodland scene opens up a grove, with smooth and level turf surrounded by flourishing trees free from any tangling undergrowth, and a gravel road winding gently through the scene.

The contrasting Picturesque version introduces forests with 'wild tangled thickets [opening] into glades...old stag-headed oaks, and twisted beeches...the irregular tracks of wheels, and the foot-paths of men and animals', and all of this, together with the 'intricacy of the objects' and the 'effects of lights and shadows' generate a high degree of activity for the eye to cover in negotiating the visual terrain. 'From all this it appears, that as a certain degree of irritation or stimulus is necessary to the picturesque, so, on the other hand, a soft and pleasing repose, is the effect, and the characteristic, of the beautiful. (Ibid 144-45). Some kind of reconciliation of the irritant stimulus of the picturesque with the calming effect of the beautiful was what Constable sought – 'freshness and sparkle – with *repose*, which is my struggle just now.' (to Fisher, 29 August 1824, *JCC* II, 367)

A good example of Picturesque forest scenery (on this model) is Gainsborough's *Cornard Wood* (1748), with its broken light and shade on crumbling surfaces and variegated colours. It has all that 'intricacy and variety, as produced by roughness and sudden deviation', according to Price. Grandeur of subject and treatment gives way to new tastes. And again *variety* is paramount.

## New Treatment and New Subjects

This emphasis on Picturesque roughness and its favouring certain low-life motifs encourages a new range of subjects for landscape artists and writers and favours English scenery.. Here is one writer on the subject, J.T.Smith in *Remarks on Rural Scenery* (1797)

Palaces, castles, churches, monastic ruins, and the remains, and even vestiges and conjectural situations, of our ancient feudal and ecclesiastical structures, have been elaborately, and indeed very interestingly described, with all their characteristic distinctions, while the objects comprehended by the term *cottage scenery* have by no means been honored with equal attention; and this, it should seem, merely because, though of equal excellence in the scale of picturesque beauty, that beauty happens not to be of the *heroic* or sublime order.

(J.T.Smith, *Remarks on Rural Scenery* 1797, pp.5-6)

Smith is alluding to the conventional hierarchy of the genres, which elevated to the highest rank of value the genre of history painting with its focus on heroic historical, religious or mythological scenes. Landscape as a genre was some way down the hierarchy, and then, within the landscape category, cottage scenery – neither conventionally sublime nor beautiful, nor associated with heroic moral nobility – would have been near the bottom. You can see what an uphill task it was to attempt to elevate humble English rural scenery. This is what Constable was up against.



## Constable

John.T.Smith the author of those *Remarks*, is our conduit to Constable. Smith, known as ‘Antiquity Smith’ for his *Antiquities of London and its Environs* (1791) was an amateur artist and a writer. He was Keeper of Prints at the British Museum. He met the 20-year-old John Constable and his family in 1796 and briefly mentored the budding painter. Constable helped to raise subscriptions for the publication of Smith’s *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, and produced for him some drawings of local Suffolk cottages.

Smith sent prints of Dutch landscape drawings and some of his own copies of these to Constable and encouraged him to copy Ruisdael and Waterloo: Constable spoke of one of Smith’s copies of a Waterloo etching as ‘one of my earliest preceptors’.

Smith also asked Constable to undertake some research on his fellow East Anglian, Gainsborough (who had died in 1788). The young Constable revelled in the remit when touring the countryside near Woodbridge: ‘I fancy I see Gainsborough in every hedge and hollow tree.’ (Letter to J.T.Smith, 18 August 1799): *John Constable: Family Documents and Correspondence*, eds L.Parris, C.Shields & I. Fleming-Williams, (Suffolk Records Society 1975), p.16.)

The Dutch school models and Gainsborough’s paintings did not monopolise Constable’s apprenticeship in landscape. At the same time as he was assiduously copying Ruisdael and Waterloo, he was able to study and imitate an exquisite small Claude painting owned by the art patron Sir George Beaumont, *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*. Constable was very fond of this, and it became a formative influence. For example in his 1802 *Dedham Vale*.

Constable was fully aware of Picturesque tastes and the writers on the Picturesque from a young age. In addition to Smith’s influence he had read Gilpin’s *Three Essays on the Picturesque* and Uvedale Price’s *Essay*. He knew the repertoire of rough old motifs that the Picturesque had made precious, and he shared these tastes. In 1816 he and Maria honeymooned in Dorset, at Osmington where there was an old Mill. This he sketched and later made into a painting. The Mill burned down in 1825, and it was upsetting for Constable: ‘I am vexed at the fate of the poor old mill. There will soon be an end of the picturesque in the kingdom.’ (Letter to Archdeacon Fisher, 12 November 1825).

We can explore this combination of influences in one of his most famous paintings, a classic English scene, *The Cornfield* (1826). The composition and motif owe much to the Dutch landscape tradition as well as something to Claudian structural principles. Here is his oil sketch of 1817, with a Hobbema for comparison.

Constable takes his motif from the Dutch tradition – rutted footpath, rich unkempt vegetation and detailed trees, dramatic sky – and, especially in the later finished picture, he adds ‘visual irritation’ in his handling, to suggest a freshness and vitality in the brisk breeze and flickering play of light. But there was also influence from his favourite – Claude. In 1823 he painted a copy of Claude’s *Landscape with Goatherd and Goats*. ‘It contains almost all that I wish to do in landscape,’ he wrote. He described it as ‘a noon day scene – which “warms and cheers but which does not inflame or irritate” – Mr. Price. It diffuses a life & breezy freshness into the recess of trees which make it enchanting.’ (Letter to Fisher, 2 November 1823). (Note that he is quoting Uvedale Price: he is very familiar with Picturesque aesthetics).

Nearly a decade later he returns to the 1817 lane sketch, to work it up into a finished oil for exhibition. This becomes *The Cornfield* (1826).

Constable described the picture as an ‘inland’ scene, ‘a close lane, kind of thing’, with the trees shaken by ‘a pleasant and healthfull breeze’ (To Fisher 8 April 1826 JCC VI p.216): sensations similar to his experience of Claude’s goatherd painting.



Constable, as I've said, was conscious of Picturesque tastes, and it seems he deliberately introduced some elements into this painting to satisfy such tastes: 'I do hope to sell this present picture – as it has certainly got a little more eye-salve than I usually condescend to give to them' (Ibid. p. 217).

He is most likely referring to the straggle of fencing in the foreground, the half-dead skeletal tree on the left (compared with the sketch's flourishing tree), the sheep, the old plough, and the broken gate. None of these appear in the earlier sketch. All are prime Picturesque objects, both as textural features and pastoral staffage (and we will be looking more closely at pastoral in next week's lecture). But he was also, presumably, trying to conventionalise his uneventful landscape enough to win Academy approval. Constable's hopes of making a sale of this picture, and his willingness to add marketable 'eye salve' for that purpose, were not fulfilled - extraordinarily. It was never sold in his lifetime. After his death in 1837, it was bought for the National Gallery, and has remained there ever since, as an icon of English landscape.

John Clare gave a short list of some of his favourite scenes in a poem entitled 'Pleasant Places', and you can see how closely his picturesque tastes correspond with what Constable has provided here:

Old narrow lanes, where trees meet over-head;  
Path-stiles, on which a steeple we espy,  
Peeping and stretching in the distant sky;...  
Old ponds, dim shadowed with a broken tree; --  
These are the picturesque of Taste to me;

(*The Rural Muse*, 1835, p.162)

The lane itself – now Fenbridge Lane near East Bergholt - was one that had special personal significance for Constable. It was the route he used to take to school when a boy. I think I found the original site of inspiration - a gentle double bend in Fenbridge Lane, at a junction with a smaller path coming in from the right.

On the left the bank cups a small basin for the stream that runs down the side of the lane, a drinking spot for the shepherd boy.

*The Cornfield* combines and reconciles the Dutch and the Mediterranean landscape traditions: it harmonises the freshness and vigour of northern skies and brisk breezes with Claudian pastoral repose ('a life & breezy freshness into the recess of trees'); it marries Claudian compositional structures with the rough textures cherished by the Picturesque fashion. It also naturalises those combined imported traditions as it applies them to unspectacular English scenery. It is an unspectacular scene, but emotionally precious to the painter. A part of *The Cornfield's* *raison d'être* is the strong personal sentimental associations the painter has with this specific English location. This passionate local attachment is new – this deeply personal rationale for choice of motif.

Constable's art of local attachment is part and parcel of his persistent promotion of the status of landscape painting. Central to this endeavour is his publication of a series of printed plates entitled *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery...* (1830-33). This was a publication of a series of mezzotints based on his own paintings. It gives him the opportunity to add text to his paintings of personally important places. The aim was as follows:

to increase the interest for, and promote the study of, the Rural Scenery of England, with all its endearing associations, its amenities, and even in its most simple localities...[the author] may be pardoned for introducing a spot to which he must naturally feel so much attached; and though to others it may be void of interest or any associations, to him it is fraught with every endearing recollection. (*English Landscape*, 1833: 'Introduction' & Plate I text)

In order to promote the status of English 'home scenery' this project will include the '*most simple localities*'. The simplest localities and most banal scenery can be rendered beautiful by the kind of pictorial treatment Constable is developing. It doesn't matter that it is not classically beautiful, not the *beau idéal*. He famously remarked: '*I never saw an ugly thing in my life*: for let the form of an object be what it may, --light, shade and perspective will always



make it beautiful.’(C.R.Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Esq. R.A.*(1845, Paul Minet, Chichely, 1971), 308.)

The first of the plates to be issued was a challenge.

It was indeed one of the most simple localities, hardly arresting at all in its own right. It was a portrait of Constable’s birthplace and childhood home, and the picture includes the figure of a sketching artist. In a way this is Chapter One of Constable’s autobiography. It is also an assertion of the primacy of emotional associations, particularly those of childhood (as it was for Wordsworth in *The Prelude*). This candid declaration of personal motives is, as I mentioned, something quite new: hence, I think, his slightly apologetic tone: ‘As this work was begun and pursued by the Author solely with a view to his own feelings, as well as his own notions of Art, he may be pardoned for introducing a spot to which he must naturally feel so much attached; and though to others it may be void of interest or any associations, to him it is fraught with every endearing recollection.’ That and the sequence of landscapes that followed in the series of prints all had very personal meaning, as they set about promoting the appeal of English scenery. Constable’s childhood associations with the Dedham valley landscape gave it emotional significance for him as a map of his own past.

He uses the word ‘associations’ twice in that preface. It is a word that acquired some resonance in this period, and I’d like to spend a bit of time on it.

### Association Theory and Local Attachment

Theories about the Association of ideas were current in the late eighteenth-century thinking about philosophy and psychology. If we accept the premise that the human mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, ready to be inscribed by the sensory and intellectual experiences of early life, then each individual will grow up absorbing different sense data from accumulated experiences. According to Association theory these sensations and ideas are absorbed and organised in associative clusters. Thus, in Coleridge’s words ‘Ideas by having been together acquire a power of recalling each other; or every partial representation awakes the total representation of which it had been a part.’ We and our individual tastes are the product of our associated experiences.

By the early 1790s – just around the time that the Picturesque was being earnestly debated – popularised ideas about Associationism were adopted and developed by poets and other writers. Archibald Alison’s book, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, outlining key formulations and applications of Associationism appeared in 1790. It was highly influential: by 1817 it was in its fifth edition. In 1792 the poet Samuel Rogers published his long poem *The Pleasures of Memory*, which drew on Associationism: by 1816 it was in its nineteenth edition. Rogers’s prefatory essay explained the principles of association theory and how strongly it binds feelings to particular places: ‘When ideas have any relation whatever, they are attractive of each other in the mind: and the perception of any object naturally leads to the idea of another, which was connected with it. Hence arises our attachment to inanimate objects; hence also, in some degree, the love of our country.’ You can see how this now adds encouragement to writers and artists to focus more on the local and the native, on those environments charged with personal significance.

In 1796, a Cornish clergyman and poet Richard Polwhele, published a poem entitled ‘The Influence of Local attachment’, strongly indebted to Association Theory. Here is one particularly eloquent stanza:

No country, then, is fair to all alike;  
    No landscape with inherent beauty glows;  
But different objects different creatures strike...  
    The mind alone, from habitude bestows  
On each material form its shadowy grace:  
    And thus a never-ceasing pleasure flows  
Or to the human, or the bestial race  
From those ideal charms we all attach to place.



Association theory proved a powerful force in challenging the idea of an absolute standard of beauty. It also challenged the contention that certain objects were *intrinsically* beautiful because of their proportion, or colour mix, or whatever. You will remember ‘Antiquity’ Smith’s *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, which challenged the traditional hierarchy of genres that had so demeaned the study of cottage scenery. Associationism in effect helped to democratise Taste, and vindicated the relativist, subjective position in aesthetics. If cottage scenery or English country lanes are emotionally precious through their deep associations with childhood, then that justifies fulsome artistic and poetic attention. The ordinary person became culturally empowered; their individual sense of what is beautiful had an authority, whether or not that beauty conformed to academic aesthetics. There was no need for deference to the aesthetics of a cultural elite, such as the hierarchy of the genres. Samuel Monk in his study of eighteenth-century critical theories remarks: ‘The individual becomes of primary importance; his perception of values becomes significant, and he is left free to express them untrammelled by tradition’. (Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII England* (New York, 1935), p.155). Hence the ascendancy of the private vision, which is such a hallmark of Romanticism. The importance of local attachment through association – the bonding to individual familiar places regardless of their supposed beauty or ugliness - grows out of this new interest in the validity of private and personal experience.

Constable had a life-long battle with the Royal Academy establishment and with the tenacity of the old hierarchy of the genres that relegated landscape to such a lowly position. He wrote sourly of all those ‘members who stickle for the “elevated & noble” walks of art – i.e. preferring the *shaggy posteriors of a Satyr* to the *moral feeling of landscape*.’ (Letter to C.R.Leslie, 21 January 1829) Constable read Alison’s book in 1814, and warmed to it. This is not surprising. Take this passage from Alison early in the book, in which Association plays its part in infusing moral feeling as well as emotional power into scenery:

The scenes which have been distinguished by the residence of any person, whose memory we admire, produce a similar effect.... The scenes themselves may be little beautiful; but the delight with which we recollect the traces of their lives, blends itself insensibly with the emotions which the scenery itself, excites; and the admiration which these recollections afford, seems to give a kind of sanctity to the place where they dwelt, and converts every thing into beauty which appears to have been connected with them.

(Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* 1790, p.16)

Compare this with Constable’s sentiments about the power of association:

But the sound of water escaping from Mill dams, &c., Willows, Old rotten Banks, slimy posts, & brickwork. I love such things. ...As long as I do paint I shall never cease to paint such Places. They have always been my delight.... I should paint my own places best -- Painting is but another word for feeling. I associate "my careless boyhood" to all that lies on the banks of the *Stour*. They made me a painter (& I am grateful). (Letter to Rev. John Fisher (23 October 1821), from *John Constable's Correspondence*, part 6, pp. 76-78.)

Let me recap the main points so far. Local attachment – such as one’s home and its surrounding landscape - is formative in Constable’s work. The Picturesque and its fondness for lane scenery, cottages, old trees and hedgerows helped to bring English scenery into favour. There was a pre-existing tradition of painting such motifs – the seventeenth-century Dutch painters – and that helped to provide inspiration as well as models for English landscapists to portray their own scenery. Association theory helped to democratise taste and prepare the way for the promotion of sentimentally valuable landscapes, even if those landscapes didn’t conform to the *beau ideal* enshrined in traditional academy circles. It is akin to Wordsworth’s revolutionary elevation of humble and rustic life in a poetic language free from the conventions of traditional pastoral: another kind of flouting of the hierarchy of the genres. All of these new conditions are also at the heart of John Clare’s poetry.

## John Clare

‘the Londoners, with all their ingenuity as artists, know nothing of the feelings of a country life (the essence of landscape)’ (Constable, Letter to Fisher, 1 April 1821: *Memoirs* p.8)



‘what appears as beautys in the eyes of a pent-up citizen are looked upon as consciets by those who live in the country’ (John Clare, from ‘Fragments 1825-37’: *The Prose of John Clare*, eds J.W. & A. Tibble, 1951), p.33.)

John Clare’s intense devotion to the local, the native, the personal and the neglected in English landscape is extraordinary. Clare asserts again and again what *he* considers beautiful in rural scenery: it is an idiosyncratic repertoire of motifs and it constitutes a very deliberate challenge to the stale imagery of traditional pastoral with its imports from Greek or Roman mythology.

Pastoral poems are full of nothing but the old thread bare epithets of ‘sweet singing cuckoo’ ‘love lorn nightingale’ ‘fond turtles’ sparkling brooks’...these make up the creation of Pastoral and descriptive poesy and every thing else is reckond low and vulgar in fact they are too rustic for the fashionable or prevailing system of rhyme...

(*John Clare: Selected Poems and Prose*, Eds E. Robinson & G. Summerfield, OUP, 1966, 114)

The mention of what is ‘reckond low and vulgar’ takes us back to the tyranny of the hierarchy of genres, as well as to fastidious dictates of eighteenth-century ‘decorum’.

[Keats] keeps up a constant alusion or illusion to the Grecian Mythol[ogy] & there I cannot follow but as far [as] I can judge his descriptions of senery are often very fine but as it is the case with other inhabitants of great citys he often described nature as she...appeared to his fancys & not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes.

(January-October 1830: *The Letters of John Clare*, ed., M.Storey, OUP 1985, 519)

Clare was marketed as ‘A Northamptonshire Peasant’. He had a passion for poetry and a profound feeling for the identity of specific places and of his roots in those places. In fact this feeling for local attachment – those life-building associations - was so acute that the separation from his own home and environment may well have contributed to his mental breakdown in his early 30s.

Associations sweet each object breeds...  
[The man of true taste] loves each desolate neglected spot  
That seems in labours hurry left forgot  
The crank and punished trunk of stunted oak  
Freed from its bonds but by the thunder stroke  
As crampt by struggling ribs of ivy sere  
There the glad bird makes home for half the year  
But take these several beings from their homes  
Each beauteous thing a withered thought becomes  
Association fades and like a dream,  
They are but shadows of the things they seem  
Torn from their homes and happiness they stand  
The poor dull captives of a foreign land

(from ‘Shadows of Taste’ 1831)

The passage is dominated by the emotional drama of separation, and note how crucial the issue of association becomes. Clare ‘loves each desolate neglected spot/ that seems in labours hurry left forgot’. This fondness for neglected spots is something he shared with Constable, who wrote: ‘My limited and abstracted art is to be found under every hedge and in every lane, and therefore nobody thinks it worth picking up’. (Letter to Leslie, 14 January 1832). These neglected spots correspond to the prime Picturesque motifs – ancient tree stumps, lichen and moss, derelict old cottages, wild pastures. But one can also think of the elevation of the ‘neglected’ as a corollary to the artistic neglect of English scenery in the conventional tradition of landscape painting: ‘nobody thinks it worth picking up’, that is until the later Picturesque tourists and theorists and then Constable and Clare and some of their contemporaries.





There are further affinities between Clare and Constable, beyond choice of focus and motif. This relates to the way in which each handles his medium. They have in common a textural sensuousness about their work, in poems and paintings. Clare's localism is embedded in the vocabulary he uses – the Northamptonshire dialect words – and these often give a distinctive auditory quality to the lines, a densely onomatopoeic roughness and richness of sound to the descriptions. I think there is something of the same sensuous effect, rendered visually in Constable's handling. As an example I'll take some lines from Clare's sonnet 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter' and put them beside a detail from Constable's Dedham Vale *Landscape* of 1828.

I love to see the old heaths withered brake  
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling  
While the old heron from the lonely lake  
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing  
And oddling crow in idle motion swing  
On the half rotten ash trees topmost twig  
Beside whose trunk the gipsy makes his bed  
Up flies the bouncing woodcock from the brig  
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread...

We are all supposed to subvocalise in our silent reading, (ie we practise a kind of internalised speech – you hear the sounds inside your head as you read silently), and I wonder if we don't find the journey over this old heath more than just a passage of the mind's eye? We subliminally register its sounds and textures too, I suspect, as we respond to the heath's winterscape of dead ferns, tangles of gorse and clumps of old heather in those first two lines: the thickened consonants, the packed sibilants, the rough fricatives – all clog the movement. The phonetic surface has almost a materiality of its own, as we absorb this dense natural debris.

The foreground of Constable's *Dedham Vale* gives us much the same scene as Clare describes: a patch of neglected common ground, with a tangle of vegetation, rotten tree and gipsy.

This section of the landscape is loosely painted in impressionistic dabs and strokes and palette-knife touches to convey the confusion of indistinct forms huddled together in wild disarray, nature's prolific accidents. Are those gleams on the tree-trunks sunlight or shield lichen? Are those patches of mustard on the ground sun dapples or yellow moss? They are, of course, oil paint, sometimes thick enough almost to come into bas-relief; they invite the touch as they loosely suggest the vegetation; they have some of that 'visual irritation' beloved of the Picturesque theorists. Constable in later life seems to have slightly regretted some aspects of his characteristic style: 'I have too much preferred the picturesque to the beautiful', he reflected in 1834, 'which will I hope account for the *broken ruggedness of my style*.' (Letter to Leslie, 16 July 1834, *JCC* III, 111). What a break from the smooth brushwork of a Claude. Clare's language draws attention to the phonetic texture almost as much as to the motif; so with Constable the surface texture and materiality is a part of our landscape experience. The sensuous delight they each have is expressed as much in the handling as in the subject. Both Clare and Constable love this accidental confusion and profusion of natural detail as a part of the English scene, where unkempt common land survives alongside the cultivated and domesticated.

Clare didn't know Constable. But he was devoted to particular painters who, to his eyes, represented essentially the unassuming landscape character of his own environment. One of these was Peter De Wint. Clare wrote to him asking for 'one of those rough sketches taken in the fields that breathes with the living freshness of open air & sunshine'; sounding very like Constable's ambitions for the *Cornfield*. Constable's paintings deployed all the means to take people into the open air, to experience 'my "breezes" – my *bloom* and my *freshness* – no one of which qualities has yet been perfected on the canvas of any painter in this world' (to Leslie, ?Spring 1833, *JCC* III, 96). Some, like Fuseli, said that his landscapes make him 'call for his great coat', and others that standing before his canvases they could feel the wind blowing on their faces (letters to Fisher, 9 May 1823 & 26 November 1825, *JCC* VI, 116 & 211). The acclaimed pictorial realism extended to the picture's ability to provoke almost physical reactions to the weather depicted. Some of De Wint's paintings Clare described (in a letter of 1829) as 'fac similies of *English* scenery', (Letter to Peter De Wint, 19 Dec 1829: *The Letters of John Clare*,



ed. Mark Storey, Oxford 1985, 488.); and 'English' is underlined. A little later he wrote a sonnet to De Wint (1835 *The Rural Muse*, p.133). It is an appropriate text to conclude with.

DEWINT! I would not flatter; nor would I  
Pretend to critic-skill in this thy art;  
Yet in thy landscapes I can well descry  
The breathing hues as Nature's counterpart.  
No painted peaks, no wild romantic sky,  
No rocks, nor mountains, as the rich sublime,  
Hath made thee famous; but the sunny truth  
Of Nature, that doth mark thee for all time,  
Found on our level pastures: – spots, forsooth,  
Where common skill sees nothing deemed divine.  
Yet here a worshipper was found in thee;  
And thy young pencil worked such rich surprise  
That rushy flats, befringed with willow tree,  
Rivalled the beauties of Italian skies.

That sonnet encapsulates so much of what I've been tracing, in this lecture and last week's. You can hear, loud and clear, that nationalistic note, compelling emancipation from the tyranny of foreign models of landscape beauty. Clare dislikes what he sees as the artifice and the rhetorical flourishes in Claude and Salvator Rosa and their British followers. It is as if their landscapes were painted stage sets. Those painters also worked in an idiom that allowed no attention to the texture and detail and character of English landscape. Like Constable in painting, Clare's mission in his poetry was to rehabilitate and reinvigorate poetic natural imagery, as part and parcel of the project to raise the prestige of native English scenery.

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