

REITH LECTURES 1955: The Englishness of English Art

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Lecture 6: Constable and the Pursuit of Nature

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Constable never visited Italy. Nor did he visit Paris. Neither did Blake, neither did Gainsborough, neither did Hogarth. I do not think Constable seriously wanted to know Italy. There is a letter of his about someone's 'mind and talent mouldering away at Rome'. In an address to students of the Royal Academy he warned them 'not to be in too great haste to (seek) instruction in the schools of France, Germany, or Italy'. Yet he was an ardent worshipper of Claude Lorraine's Italian landscapes, and once wrote to his friend Archdeacon Fisher that he feared he might be 'doomed never to see the living scenes that inspired the landscapes of Claude'. That seems to contradict what I said just now. However, this passage immediately goes on like this: 'But I was born to paint a happier land, my own dear old England; and when I cease to love her, may I, as Wordsworth says, 'never more hear her green leaves rustle, and her torrents roar'.

Constable loved his country, and if such love can be taken as an indication of frank, naive Englishness, then Constable ought to be as promising a case for my purpose in these lectures as Hogarth, who signed himself '*Britophil*', and Blake, who called himself 'English Blake'. Blake and Constable are contemporaries and they are what Blake called Contraries. They have indeed hardly anything in common. Constable and Hogarth can more easily be compared. 'Nature is simple, plain and true in all her works': Constable could have said that, but Hogarth did. 'By a close observation of nature [the artist] discovers qualities . . . which have never been portrayed before'. Hogarth could have said that, but Constable did. And who, would you guess, said, at the beginning of his career: 'There is room enough for a natural *peinture*?' Actually it was Constable. Blake, on the other hand, said: 'Natural objects always . . . do weaken, deaden, and obliterate Imagination in me'.

But now to return to their Englishness as it appears in their art: Blake's Britain is a dim, druidical Albion; Hogarth's is the noise and bustle of London; Constable's is the English countryside, and more specifically the Suffolk countryside where he grew up, the son of a miller. There his art, as he said so truly, 'is to be found under every hedge, and in every lane'. So is Hogarth's under every pub-sign and in every alleyway of London.

But there the comparison ends. For Hogarth is a storyteller and Constable is emphatically not, and Hogarth wants, as Garrick put it, to 'charm the mind and through the eye correct the heart', whereas Constable had no such extraneous programme. He contradicts thereby what I put before you when I talked about Hogarth's reporting, namely, the English artist's literary leaning. But the contradiction is only on the surface, and it can largely be solved by a look at the change in the whole of Europe between the Age of Reason and the Age of Romanticism. Observation remained, but it was no longer the observation of man in his actions but the observation of nature. Nor was it any longer so much the

observation of man, simply in his likeness. That is, portrait' went on, but painters of the highest talent who, in the eighteenth century, had concentrated on portrait, now went into landscape. The years between just before 1800 and about 1840 saw a prodigious flowering of landscape painting in England, unparalleled in any one country on the Continent.

The development starts in the mid- eighteenth century, when Richard Wilson came back from Italy and turned from the idyllic landscapes of the south to English and Welsh landscape. Gainsborough preferred painting landscape to painting portraits, and his landscapes have, indeed, the happiest insouciance of handling and the most enchanting tenderness of sentiment. Even bolder is the handling of Alexander Cozens' landscapes. For their groundwork they have ink-blots crossed by an accidental network of lines which is created by crumpling the paper and smoothing it out again before the blots are made. The result has a breadth of vision and a sense of atmosphere prophetic of the nineteenth century. Alexander Cozens even made special cloud studies, as Constable was going to do later.

But there is yet a fundamental difference between Constable on the one hand, and Wilson, Gainsborough, and Cozens on the other—even Alexander's son, John Robert Cozens, whom Constable once called 'the greatest genius that ever touched landscape'. The masters of the eighteenth century have in their compositions and their stylish handling of the brush still a self-consciousness which reflects the century's sense of superiority over nature. Nature must be composed, nature must be improved—in this the landscape painters agreed with Reynolds and incidentally with the 'improvers' par excellence, the eighteenth-century landscapers to whom I shall come later.

All that changed with Thomas Girtin, who died young in 1802, and then with Crome and Constable. Their world is the English everyday world, their theme is atmosphere, the technique they used to interpret an ever-changing nature is open and sketchy. This pre-eminently painterly technique was not created at that time nor in England. It is the direct descendant of Venetian sixteenth-century painting and then of Baroque painting, especially in Holland. In England it appeared out of the blue with Hogarth—but he, as you know, did not want to be a painter primarily, he wanted to be a teacher of morality, as Reynolds wanted to be a teacher of classical culture. Hence both wrote on the theory of art as well Gainsborough was not interested in theory and general ideas, and that is why Reynolds blamed him, in spite of his respect and a sensitive appreciation of his technique. The wording of his reproof is that Gainsborough saw nature 'with the eye of a painter' and not of a poet. It seems absurd to us to blame a painter for seeing with the eye of a painter, but we have been through the experience of Constable and the nineteenth century, with its climax in the French Impressionists. That has changed our views.

It is time now to say something of the character of Constable's landscape. The motifs are humble: Dedham Vale, Hampstead Heath, Willy Lott's cottage, boat-building near Flatford Mill. As C. R. Leslie, his early biographer writes: He worked 'within the narrowest limits in which, perhaps, the studies of an artist ever were confined', but his aim could 'be best attained by a constant study of the same objects under every change of the seasons, and of the times of day'. The sky Constable called indeed 'the keynote' of all classes of landscape. Fancy Poussin saying something like that, or Courbet, or Cezanne. And clouds were Constable's delight and obsession. In one of

his letters to C. R. Leslie he suddenly breaks off and puts in the exclamation: 'I can hardly write for looking at the silvery clouds'. On his cloud studies you find entries such as: 'September 5, 1822, ten o'clock, morning, looking South-East, brisk wind at West. Very bright and fresh, grey clouds running far over a yellow bed, about half way in the sky'. And we have an analysis of a painting by Ruisdael from him which is a masterpiece of analysis not of composition but of the weather conditions prevailing at the moment when Ruisdael painted. The adjectives with which Constable describes his own pictures are very telling too: 'Silvery, windy, and delicious...all healthy... (nothing) stagnant', he says of his painting 'The Lock'. He knew no false modesty about his achievement. He knew that his peculiar, dewy, breezy bloom had never before him been 'perfected on the Canvas of any painter in the world'.

Fuseli, who belonged to the eighteenth century and the world of Blake, said of Constable: 'He makes me call for my great coat and umbrella'. But Blake himself, when he saw Constable drawings, said: 'Why, this is not drawing but inspiration'. Constable, incidentally, answered: 'I meant it for drawing'. Even so, however, he did call himself a visionary—in order to excuse being irritable with clients and dealers—a visionary, the very word Blake used with so much more justification. I suppose to Constable the word must have had an undertone of vision in the optical sense. It is, in any case, remarkable that the last sentences of the last of a course of lectures he gave at the Royal Institution, nine months before he died, are: 'Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?'

There we are, back with a bang in our subject of Englishness, the rational approach even in Constable, where one would least expect it. The atmospheric approach is just as English, and so is Constable's primary choice of landscape as his exclusive subject, too. Just as Hogarth spoke of 'what the puffers in books call the great style of history painting', so Constable, in a letter of 1828, wrote: 'I have heard so much of the higher walks of art, that I am quite sick'. Hogarth's art, Constable's art, and also Reynolds' art have indeed this in common, that they are all based on close observation of what is around us, whether the behaviour of people or the features of a man, or of a sky and trees. That, we have seen, is England's eternal contribution.

But we have also seen apropos Blake and equally apropos medieval architecture that England is ill at ease in the world of bodies, self consciously displaying their fleshly presence, and so, when it came to landscape in the Romantic Age, it was England that led Europe away from the landscape arranged with carefully disposed masses and towards the atmospheric landscape. That Claude Lorraine in Rome and such Dutchmen as Cuyp had done much the same in the seventeenth century need not detain us here. The fact remains that Constable's searching naturalism is devoted to air and that Turner's anti-naturalism carried him away into phantasmagorias of nothing but air. 'Golden visions', wrote Constable of Turner, 'but only visions'.

English landscape painting of between 1800 and 1840 is immensely varied in character and personalities. Blake's few landscapes range from the completely disembodied 'God moving on the Face of the Waters' to the small, wonderfully compact woodcuts for Thornton's Virgil, which almost at once released Samuel Palmer's youthful genius and gave us the landscapes of his visionary years (as Geoffrey Grigson has called them). Many years later Palmer spoke of the 'Raving

mad splendour of orange twilight glow' in these landscapes. While he painted them, he wrote: 'I will, God help me, never be a naturalist by profession'. The surface of a Palmer landscape is, to quote him again, all 'sprinkled and showered with a thousand pretty eyes, and buds . . . and blossoms, gemm'd with dew'. Both Henry Moore and John Piper owe much to this exciting dapple.

Cotman, with the heavenly peace of his smooth, flatly and coolly coloured landscapes, is the very reverse of Palmer. Yet what they have in common is the intensity of feeling for nature combined with an unreal coherence of the surface, independent of the corporeal shapes lying as it were behind. A look at any Bonington landscape will show what draws Cotman and Palmer together. Bonington, on the other hand, belongs to Constable. He has the same bold, open brush-strokes as Constable, the sense of breeze and never once arrested change. To explain what distinguishes the two would need more time than I could give to it here. Bonington died as early as 1828. Constable died in 1837. With David Cox and plenty of good minor painters in water-colour this broad English achievement carried on beyond the middle of the century.

Incidentally, the water-colour as such is an English phenomenon. For one thing it is small in scale, as are also the bosses and capitals and marginal little people in the Middle Ages, and as are the wonderful sixteenth-century miniature portraits by Hilliard and Isaac Oliver. But the water-colour, as such, as a technical medium so much thinner and less full-bodied than oil, is English too.

Side by side with the pure landscapes there are such English specialities as the sporting picture. It is characteristic enough that it is a speciality, but how it is handled is equally characteristic. Mr. Basil Taylor has recently written a Pelican Book on Animal Painting in England. The title of the book is significant, for it deals little with the popular sporting picture of the Alken and Leech kind, which may be skilful reporting or boisterous cartooning but does not reach higher. Where animal painting is at its best, where even the racing picture is at its best, there is no exciting action, but a curious stillness. There is no one in England to compare with Rubens in the Netherlands or Delacroix in France, except perhaps James Ward. Stubbs, the greatest animal painter in England, was a scholarly student of anatomy. His compositions are, as Mr. Taylor says, 'very still, very fastidious', and he went to Italy in 1754, 'to convince himself that nature . . . is always superior to art, whether Greek or Roman'.

Another English speciality is the open-air portrait: other countries—at least before the impressionists of the eighteen-sixties and 'seventies—have nothing like it. I am thinking of such delightful pieces as Gainsborough's 'Morning Walk' or Zoffany's 'The Garricks taking tea on the lawn by the river Thames at Hampton', or, in a more romantic mood, of Joseph Wright of Derby's portrait of Brooke Boothby lying somewhere in his grounds and dreaming over a book he has been reading. For that is really the setting in which the open-air portrait and the sporting picture must be seen—the passion of the eighteenth-century English for garden and park, and the passion of the present-day English for gardening, which is the latter-day poor relation of landscaping. The landscape garden is the most influential of all English innovations in art. Its effects can be studied everywhere, from the U.S.A. to Russia.

The master-key, I suggest, to landscape gardening and landscape painting and the open-air portrait and the sporting picture, is the English climate. Climate is indeed, as

I mentioned in the introductory lecture to this series, one of the fundamental premisses of character. The English climate has been discussed so often and ridiculed so often that it may be just as well to quote to you here a very different view. It was Charles II's, and you must realise that he had been brought up in France and so knew what he was talking about. He said, that he 'lik'd that country best, which might be enjoy'd the most hours of the Day, and the most Days in the Year, which he was sure was to be done in England'. You think that is a King's blatant flattery of his country. But do not forget that no man in the seventeenth century would have called scorching sunshine something to be enjoyed out of doors. So outdoor life at that time and right to the nineteenth century required moderate weather—too warm not to want to be out of doors, too cool to be idle outdoors. Hence sports, hence gardening: and surely such weather turns up for some time on nearly every day in England, however much moisture there may be in the atmosphere lying in wait to condense into rain, and drip off your sandwiches taken to enjoy the sunshine on top of Bowfell or the Gogmagogs or Porlock Hill.

That moisture steams out of Turner's canvases as well; it makes Constable's so uncannily clear and fresh, and it lays a haze over man and building in England which dissolves their bodily solidity—all that is equally true, but is not my business at the moment. It rather links up with what I have described as the Incorporeal in English art. At the moment I want to introduce you to English gardening and a conceit which is in my opinion of fundamental importance in the Englishness of art in the eighteenth century as well as today: the Picturesque. The English garden, as you know, the *Jardin Anglais*, the *Englischer Garten*, is asymmetrical, informal, varied, and made of such parts as the serpentine lake, the winding drive and winding path, the trees grouped in clumps, and smooth lawn (mown or cropped by sheep) everywhere and reaching right up to the French windows of the house.

I suggest that the English garden is English in a number of ways, all profoundly significant. The winding path and the serpentine lake are the equivalent of Hogarth's Line of Beauty and of the ogee curves of the decorated style in architecture. When, on the other hand, Hogarth himself uses these motifs of the garden to illustrate a point, he says that they 'lead the eye a wanton kind of chace'. That is something a little different. It introduces such elements as surprise in the composition of the English garden, and surprise was indeed one of the elements consciously aimed at:

Let not each beauty everywhere be spied
When half the skill is decently to hide,
He gains all points who pleasingly confounds,
Surprises, varies, and conceals the bounds.

That is Alexander Pope, and though Pope was a teacher of reason and a friend of Lord Burlington who established in eighteenth-century England the clarity and the cubic simplicity of Palladian architecture, Pope designed for himself at Twickenham, on a miniature scale I admit, one of the first picturesque gardens of England. That was about 1718.

But surprise is not all that Pope demands of a garden. There is also 'the amiable simplicity of unadorned nature'. Both take us back into the seventeenth century. On the Continent neither of these trends in gardening appeared before the great cultural English invasion of the mid-eighteenth century. Sir Henry Wootton, the first coherent

writer on architecture in the English language, wrote in 1624: 'As Fabriques should be regular, so Gardens should be irregular'. Then Sir - William Temple, in his *Gardens of Epicure* of 1685, wrote more explicitly, after some pages on the formal gardens of his time: 'There may be other forms wholly irregular, that may, for ought I know, have more beauty'. Such, he says, are those of the gardens of the Chinese. But to attempt that kind of beauty in England would be an adventure 'of too hard achievement for any common hands'.

If the adventure was yet embarked on, that was due to yet another train of thought. And it is this train of thought with which I shall now end. Lord Shaftesbury, the philosopher of the early years of the eighteenth century, praised wild nature, 'where neither Art, nor the Conceit or Caprice of Man, has spoil'd (her) genuine order by breaking upon (her) primitive state'. To him 'the verdure of the Field' and 'even the rude Rocks, the mossy Caverns, and broken Falls of Waters' represent that natural, unartificial world which roused his enthusiasm.

Addison, in *The Spectator*, wrote the same more quietly: 'For my own part, I would rather look upon a tree in all its luxuriance and diffusion of boughs and branches than when it is . . . trimmed into a mathematical figure'. That refers to the Dutch and French gardens with their formal parterres and their cut hedges. Shaftesbury refers to the same when he says that his rocks, caves, and waterfalls are 'Nature more truly than the formal Mockery of princely Gardens'.

With the formal mockery of princely gardens politics come in. England is liberty; France is suppressed by her rulers. James Thomson, in a long poem which he called 'Liberty' and in which he sings of Britain 'Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame', also speaks of 'sylvan scenes' in picturesque gardens 'such as a Pope in miniature has shown'. And George Mason in his 'Essay on Design in Gardening' of 1768 explains the creation of landscape gardening in England by the English sense of 'independency... in matters of taste and in religion and government'. There you have the link between Liberty and the Picturesque clearly expressed. But there is also a link between both and certain problems of planning which press hard on us today. I shall try to show in my final lecture how they bear upon each other, and how the English character bears upon them.