

## INDIVIDUALITY AND TRADITION

With the exception of purely naturalistic landscape painting, nearly all of the art produced in the decades of 1820-1850 derived, in style and theme, from the art of earlier periods. The greatest artists of the time, as well as numberless mediocrities, drew so heavily on traditional material that their work cannot be understood apart from the work of their models or guides. Claude was to Turner, Raphael to Ingres, Rubens to Delacroix far more than a brief stimulus or passing influence. Such dependence on tradition was not unprecedented in the history of art, but what distinguished the particular situation of 19th century art from that of earlier periods of eclecticism was the modern artist's claim to originality and individual freedom. How to reconcile the need for self-expression with the necessity of working within the range of established forms and subjects was a problem which every artist of the time had to face. Personal expression came to be regarded as the individual artist's particular choice, combination, and arrangement of suggestions from the vast repertory of tradition. This accounts for the stylistic disunity of the period which was a serious burden even to the strongest artists, and a fatal handicap to the weak.

## Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)

That an artist of such powerful individuality as Turner should profess academic principles is reason for surprise. But there can be no doubt about Turner's ardent loyalty to the Royal Academy to which, as he said, "I owe everything; for I cannot look back but with pride and pleasure to that time, the halcyon perhaps of my days, when I received instruction within these walls." After his appointment as Professor of Perspective in 1807, it fell to his lot to present the annual short course in his subject, speaking from the same platform from which he had heard Sir Joshua Reynolds deliver his last presidential Discourse in 1790. By all accounts, Turner was a boring and confused lecturer. It was his custom to treat of perspective in a series of five lectures, to which he added, in 1811, a sixth dealing with "Backgrounds, Introductions of Architecture and Landscape." In making this addition (which he dropped from the course in 1816 or 1818), he may have hoped that it might persuade the Academy to establish for him a professorship in landscape painting. The main burden of the lecture on Backgrounds is the importance of landscape, not merely as an adjunct to history painting, but

as an independent branch of the art. There are passages in the lecture in which Turner sheds his usual labored manner and speaks with eloquence and warmth of the great colorists of the Baroque, and of Titian and Claude whom he regarded as his ancestors.<sup>51</sup>

From *Backgrounds, Introductions of Architecture and Landscape* (1811)

... The highest honour that landscape has as yet, she received from the hands of Titian, which proves how highly he considered its value not only in employing its varieties of contrast, colour and dignity in most of his Historical Pictures; but the triumph even of Landscape may be safely said to exist in his divine picture of St. Peter Martyr. No thought of narrow subservience enters the Idea or appears in the arrangement of that truly great specimen of his powers and of art.

Amplitude, quantity and space appear in this picture given by the means of Trees opposed to a blue sky and deep sunk Horizon not more than one-sixth of the height of the picture, across which rush the knotted stems of trees with dark brown and yellow foliage, stretching far their leafy honours. And their heads [are] lost in the effulgence of the angels descending to crown the dying Martyr, whose looks are directed upwards, as likewise [are] the flowing garments of the companion endeavouring to escape. Its [the picture's] apparent immensity arises from the quantity of sky, the continual line of trees and last, tho' not least, the low sunk horizon to which the eye always supports itself equal. And therefore the figure as it were rushes out of the picture impelled forward upon you.

To Nicolas Poussin let me direct your observation. His love for the antique prompted his exertion and that love for the antique emanates through all his works. It clothes his figures, rears his buildings, disposes of his materials, arranges the whole of his picture and landscape and gives, whether from indifference or strength of his ground, a colour that often removes his works from truth.

To these proofs of his abilities of Historic grandeur and pastoral subjects we possess another truly sublime in the picture at Ashburnham House of Pyramus and Thisbe. . . . whether we look upon the dark, dark sky sparingly illumined at the right-hand corner by lightening there rushing behind the bending trees and at last awfully gleaming, her power [?] is reborn, its dying efforts upon some antique buildings on the left, while all beneath amid gloom scatter'd foliage and broken ground lies the dying figure of Pyramus. And in the depth and doubt of darkness all is lost but returning Thisbe.

<sup>51</sup> Turner's "Backgrounds" lecture was first published in its entirety by J. Ziff, "Backgrounds, Introductions of Architecture and Landscape," a Lecture by J. M. W. Turner," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1963, XXVI, 133 ff.

From this effort of conception of contending elements let us consider one where Nature struggles for existence and the last twisting to the overwhelming waters of the Deluge, bearing along Earth's perishable materials under one tone and the residue of Earthy matter is the impression of this famous picture. Richelieu is said to have declared that it absorbed his mind from all worldly concerns and that he could remain before it for hours as his only pleasure. This picture is now in the Louvre and called the Deluge.

For its colour it is admirable. It is singularly impressive, awfully appropriate, just fitted to every imaginative conjecture of such an event. But [it is] deficient in every requisite of line, so ably display'd in his other works, inconsistent in his introductions in the colouring of the figures, for they are positively red, blue, and yellow, while the sick and wan sun is not allow'd to shed one ray but tears.

Pure as Italian air, calm, beautiful and serene springs forward the works and with them the name of Claude Lorrain. The golden orient of the amber-coloured ether, the midday ethereal vault and fleecy skies, resplendent valleys, campagnas rich with all the cheerful blush of fertilization, trees possessing every hue and tone of summer's evident heat, rich, harmonious, true and clear, replete with all the aerial qualities of distance, aerial lights, aerial colour, where through all these comprehensive qualities and powers can we find a clue towards his mode of practice? As beauty is not beauty until defin'd or science science until reveal'd, we must consider how he could have attained such powers but by continual study of parts of nature. Parts, for, had he not so studied, we should have found him sooner pleased with simple subjects of nature, and [would] not [have], as we now have, pictures made up of bits, but pictures of bits. Thus may be traced his mode of composition, namely, all he could bring in that appear'd beautifully dispos'd to suit either the side scene or the large trees in the centre kind of composition. Thus his buildings, though strictly classical and truly drawn from the Campo Vaccino and Tivoli, are so disposed of as to carry with them the air of composition.

But in no country as in England can the merits of Claude be so justly appreciated, for the choicest of his work are with us, and may they always remain with us in this country. The walls of the Louvre can only boast of two by name, which two may with more propriety be called Swanevelt, the plodding tho' not the mean or humble imitator or élève, whose best works have in other countries besides France been honour'd, if honour it can be call'd in depriving him of his just need of merit in calling them Claudes, a compliment that steals from him a good name and leaves him poor indeed.

The Flemish school approaches to individual nature, and only two,

Rembrandt and Rubens, ever dared to raise her above commonality. Rembrandt depended upon his chiaroscuro, his bursts of light and darkness to be felt. He threw a mysterious doubt over the meanest piece of Common; nay more, his forms, if they can be called so, are the most objectionable that could be chosen, namely, the Three Trees and the Mill, but over each he has thrown that veil of matchless colour, that lucid interval of Morning dawn and dewy light on which the Eye dwells so completely enthral'd, and it seeks not for its liberty, but as it were, thinks it a sacrilege to pierce the mystic shell of colour in search of form.

No painter knew so well the extent of his own powers and his own weakness. Conscious of the power as well as the necessity of shade, he took the utmost boundaries of darkness and allow'd but one-third of light, which light dazzles the eye thrown upon some favourite point, but where his judgment kept pace always with his choice surrounded with impenetrable shade still remains.

Rubens, Master of every power of handicraft and mechanical excellence, from the lily of the field to animated nature, disdained to hide, but threw around his tints like a bunch of flowers. Such is the impression excited in his Fête in the Louvre, wholly without shadow compar'd to Rembrandt's mode, obtaining everything by primitive colour, form and execution, and so abundantly supplied by the versatility of his genius with forms and lines, could not be happy with the bare simplicity of pastoral scenery or the immutable laws of nature's light and shade, feeling no compunction in making the sun and full moon as in the celebrated picture of the Landscape with the Waggon, or introducing the luminary in the Tournament, while all the figures in the foreground are lighted in different directions. These trifles about light are so perhaps in Historical compositions, but in Landscape they are inadmissible and become absurdities destroying the simplicity, the truth, the beauty of pastoral nature in whose pursuit he always appears lavish of his powers. Full of colour, the rapidity of his pencil bears down all before it in multitudes of forms, not the wild incursions full of Grandeur as Salvator Rosa, but [the] swampy vernality of the Low Countries.

Without affecting to do anything, Teniers has given us that individuality, which the great genius of Rubens in his Flemish Fête and pastorals always seem'd in search of. Artfully arrang'd and exquisitely touched tho' looking careless, bearing a freshness and silvery tone pervading everywhere thro' all the diversity of colours, tho' scatter'd upon the innumerable figures of the Flemish Marriage Feast at Louth Castle, yet all the tones tend by his consummate management, concentrated, to one figure in white and grey which binds the whole together.

Cuyp, Paul Potter and Adrian van der Velde sought for simplicity below commonality which too often regulated their choice and alas their

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introductions, yet for colour and minuteness of touch of every weed and briar long bore away the palm of labour and execution. But Cuyp to a judgment so truly qualified knew where to blend minutiae in all the golden colour of ambient vapour.

Gainsborough, our countryman, rais'd their beauties by avoiding their defects, the mean vulgarisms of common low life and disgusting incidents of common nature. His first efforts were in imitation of Hobbema, but English nature supplied him with better materials of study. The pure and artless innocence of the Cottage Door now in the possession of Sir John Leicester may be esteemed as possessing this class, as possessing truth of forms arising from his close contact with nature, expression, full-toned depth of colours and a freedom of touch characteristically varied with the peculiarities of the vigorous foliage or of decaying nature.

#### Turner on Varnishing Day

*In 1835, Turner exhibited the first version of his Burning of the House of Parliament at the galleries of the British Institution in London. One of his fellow exhibitors, E. V. Ripplingille (1798-1859), has left a description of Turner finishing his picture in the exhibition gallery:*<sup>52</sup>

He was there and at work before I came, having set to at the earliest hour allowed. Indeed it was quite necessary to make the best of his time, as the picture when sent in was a mere dab of several colours, and "without form and void," like chaos before the creation. The managers knew that a picture would be sent there, and would not have hesitated, knowing to whom it belonged, to have received and hung up a bare canvas, than which this was but little better. Such a magician, performing his incantations in public, was an object of interest and attraction. Etty was working at his side [on his picture "The Lute Player"] and every now and then a word and a quiet laugh emanated and passed between the two great painters. Little Etty stepped back every now and then to look at the effect of his picture, lolling his head on one side and half closing his eyes, and sometimes speaking to some one near him, after the approved manner of painters: but not so Turner; for the three hours I was there—and I understood it had been the same since he began in the morning—he never ceased to work, or even once looked or turned from the wall on which his picture hung. All lookers-on were amused by the figure Turner exhibited in himself, and the process he was pursuing with his picture. A small box of colours, a few very small brushes, and a

<sup>52</sup> A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961, p. 351.

vial or two, were at his feet, very inconveniently placed; but his short figure, stooping, enabled him to reach what he wanted very readily. Leaning forward and sideways over to the right, the left hand metal button of his blue coat rose six inches higher than the right, and his head buried in his shoulders and held down, presented an aspect curious to all beholders, who whispered their remarks to each other, and quietly laughed to themselves. In one part of the mysterious proceedings Turner, who worked almost entirely with his palette knife, was observed to be rolling and spreading a lump of half-transparent stuff over his picture, the size of a finger in length and thickness. As Callcott was looking on I ventured to say to him, "What is that he is plastering his picture with?" to which inquiry it was replied, "I should be sorry to be the man to ask him." . . .

Presently the work was finished: Turner gathered his tools together, put them into and shut up the box, and then, with his face still turned to the wall, and at the same distance from it, went sideling off, without speaking a word to anybody, and when he came to the staircase, in the centre of the room, hurried down as fast as he could. All looked with a half-wondering smile, and Maclise, who stood near, remarked, "There, that's masterly, he does not stop to look at his work; he *knows* it is done, and he is off."

If he is to draw a landscape from Nature, let him take his station on a rising ground, when he will have a large horizon, and mark his tablet into three divisions downwards from the top to the bottom, and divide in his own mind the landscape he is to take, into three divisions also. Then let him turn his face directly opposite to the midst of the horizon, keeping his body fixed, and draw what is directly before his eyes upon the middle division of the tablet; then *turn his head, but not his body* to the left hand, and delineate what he views there, joining it properly to what he had done before; and, lastly, do the same by what is to be seen upon his right hand, laying down everything exactly, both with respect to distance and proportion.

*John Constable (1776-1837)*

Ruskin said of Constable that he "*perceives in a landscape that the grass is wet, the meadow flat and the bough shady; that is to say, about as much as, I suppose, might in general be apprehended, between them, by an intelligent fawn and a sky lark*"—a remark which perhaps expressed a secret appreciation. Ruskin also wrote that "*Un-teachableness seems to have been a main feature of his character,*" paying Constable another unintentional compliment. But he was wrong in concluding that Constable was "*nothing more than an industrious and innocent amateur,*"<sup>32</sup> for Constable was, in fact, a reflective artist, the most profound of the naturalists, who accomplished the difficult feat of combining in his landscape paintings a scientific penetration into natural phenomena with an undimmed freshness of perception. He professed no systematic doctrine, but his scattered writings reflect a view of the relationship of art to nature which bears some resemblance to Schelling's natural philosophy and to the ideas of Friedrich, his close contemporary (see page 52). In contrast to the Germans, Constable refrained from dramatizing the life of spirit which he, like them, sensed in nature, through outright symbolism or stylistic devices. Instead, he expressed it through a minute observation of the forces which move water and clouds, which govern light and the growth of plants, and whose activity he felt within his own body and mind. The empathic experience which underlay his naturalism

<sup>32</sup> E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, III, *Modern Painters*, I, London, G. Allen, 1903, pp. 172 and 191.

was strikingly similar to that which the chemist Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829) recorded in a notebook jotting, some time after 1800:<sup>33</sup>

Today, for the first time in my life, I have had a distinct sympathy with nature. I was lying on the top of a rock to leeward; the wind was high, and everything in motion; the branches of an oak tree were waving and murmuring to the breeze; yellow clouds, deepened by grey at the base, were rapidly floating over the western hills; the whole sky was in motion; the yellow stream below was agitated by the breeze; everything was alive, and myself part of the series of visible impressions; I should have felt pain in tearing a leaf from one of the trees.

*In feeling and in the quality of observation, this is very close to Constable's sketches, many of which bear notations such as the following:*

5th September 1822. 10:00 o'clock Morning. Looking S.E., brisk wind at W. Very bright and fresh grey clouds running fast over yellow bed about half way in the sky.

*Constable's letters and lecture notes were collected by his friend and biographer, C. R. Leslie, who wove them into his Memoir of the Life of John Constable, Esq., R.A., London, 1843 (second, definitive edition 1845), from which the following excerpts are taken.*

"A Pure and Unaffected Manner"

London, May 29th, 1802. My dear Dunthorne, I hope I have now done with the business that brought me to town with Dr. Fisher. It is sufficient to say that had I accepted the situation offered, it would have been a death-blow to all my prospects of perfection in the art I love. For these few weeks past, I believe I have thought more seriously of my profession than at any other time of my life; of that which is the surest way to excellence. I am just returned from a visit to Sir George Beaumont's pictures with a deep conviction of the truth of Sir Joshua Reynolds' observation, that "there is no easy way of becoming a good painter." For the last two years I have been running after pictures, and seeking the truth at second hand. I have not endeavoured to represent nature with the same elevation of mind with which I set out, but have rather tried to make my performances look like the work of other men. I am come to a determination to make no idle visits this summer, nor to give up my time

<sup>33</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphry Davy*, edited by John Davy, London, 1839, quoted in G. Grigson, *The Romantics*, Cleveland, G. Routledge and Sons, 1962, 128.

to commonplace people. I shall return to Bergholt, where I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me. There is little or nothing in the exhibition worth looking up to. *There is room enough for a natural painter.* The great vice of the present day is *bravura*, an attempt to do something beyond the truth. Fashion always had, and will have, its day; but truth in all things only will last, and can only have just claims on posterity. I have reaped considerable benefit from exhibiting; it shows me where I am, and in fact tells me what nothing else could.

Hampstead, October 23rd, 1821. My dear Fisher, . . . I am most anxious to get into my London painting-room, for I do not consider myself at work unless I am before a six-foot canvas. I have done a good deal of skying, for I am determined to conquer all difficulties, and that among the rest. And now talking of skies, it is amusing to us to see how admirably you fight my battles; you certainly take the best possible ground for getting your friend out of a scrape (the example of the old masters). That landscape painter who does not make his skies a very material part of his composition, neglects to avail himself of one of his greatest aids. Sir Joshua Reynolds, speaking of the landscapes of Titian, of Salvator, and of Claude, says: "Even their *skies* seem to sympathise with their subjects." I have often been advised to consider my sky as "*a white sheet thrown behind the objects.*" Certainly, if the sky is obtrusive, as mine are, it is bad; but if it is evaded, as mine are not, it is worse; it must and always shall with me make an effectual part of the composition. It will be difficult to name a class of landscape in which the sky is not the key note, the standard of scale, and the chief organ of sentiment. You may conceive, then, what a "white sheet" would do for me, impressed as I am with these notions, and they cannot be erroneous. The sky is the source of light in nature, and governs everything; even our common observations on the weather of every day are altogether suggested by it. The difficulty of skies in painting is very great, both as to composition and execution; because, with all their brilliancy, they ought not to come forward, or, indeed, be hardly thought of any more than extreme distances are; but this does not apply to phenomena or accidental effects of sky, because they always attract particularly. I may say all this to you, though you do not want to be told that I know very well what I am about, and that my skies have not been neglected, though they have often failed in execution, no doubt, from an over-anxiety about them, which will alone destroy that easy appearance which nature always has in all her movements.

How much I wish I had been with you on your fishing excursion in the New Forest! What river can it be? But the sound of water escaping from mill-dams, etc., willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brick-work, I love such things. Shakespeare could make everything poetical;

he tells us of poor Tom's haunts among "sheep cotes and mills." As long as I do paint, I shall never cease to paint such places. They have always been my delight, and I should indeed have been delighted in seeing what you describe, and in your company, "in the company of a man to whom nature does not spread her volume in vain." Still I should paint my own places best; painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate "my careless boyhood" with all that lies on the banks of the Stour; those scenes made me a painter, and I am grateful; that is, I had often thought of pictures of them before I ever touched a pencil, and your picture is the strongest instance of it I can recollect; but I will say no more, for I am a great egotist in whatever relates to painting. Does not the Cathedral look beautiful among the golden foliage? its solitary grey must sparkle in it.

[1823]

May 9th. I had many interruptions in my works for the Exhibition, as you know, so that I have no large canvas there. My Cathedral looks uncommonly well; it is much approved of by the Academy. . . . It was the most difficult subject in landscape I ever had on my easel. I have not flinched at the windows, buttresses, etc.; but I have still kept to my grand organ colour, and have, as usual, made my escape in the evanescence of the chiaroscuro. . . . Callcott admires my Cathedral; he says I have managed it well. Wilkie's pictures are the finest in the world. Perhaps the outdoor scene is too black. Fuseli came up to him and said, "Vell, vat dis? is dis de new vay, de Guercina style?" Speaking of me, he says, "I like de landscapes of Constable; he is always picturesque, of a fine colour, and de lights always in de right places; but he makes me call for my greatcoat and umbrella." This may amuse you, when contemplating this busy but distant scene; however, though I am here in the midst of the world, I am out of it, and am happy, and endeavour to keep myself unspotted. I have a kingdom of my own, both fertile and populous—my landscape and my children. I have work to do, and my finances must be repaired if possible. I have a face now on my easel, and may have more.

[1832]

. . . My "Lock" is now on my easel; it is silvery, windy, and delicious; all health, and the absence of everything stagnant, and is wonderfully got together; the print will be fine. . . . I am so harassed and interrupted that I must now conclude almost as abruptly as I did my last. . . .

[1832]

I am much interested with your account of the pictures at Petworth. I remember most of Turner's early works; amongst them was one of

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singular intricacy and beauty; it was a canal with numerous boats making thousands of beautiful shapes, and I think the most complete work of genius I ever saw. The Claude I well know; grand and solemn, but cold, dull and heavy; a picture of his old age. Claude's exhilaration and light departed from him when he was between fifty and sixty, and he then became a professor of the "higher walks of art," and fell in a great degree into the manner of the painters around him; so difficult it is to be natural, so easy to be superior in our own opinion. . . . Hobbema, if he misses colour, is very disagreeable, as he has neither shapes nor composition. Your mention of a solemn twilight by Gainsborough has awakened all my sympathy; do pray make me a sketch of it of some kind or other, if it is only a slight splash.

As to meeting you in these grand scenes, dear Leslie, remember the Great were not made for me, nor I for the Great; things are better as they are. My limited and abstracted art is to be found under every hedge and in every lane, and therefore nobody thinks it worth picking up; but I have my admirers, each of whom I consider an host. My kindest regards to Mrs. Leslie.

[Undated]

The world is wide; no two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world; and the genuine productions of art, like those of nature, are all distinct from each other.

In such an age as this, painting should be *understood*, not looked on with blind wonder, nor considered only as a poetic aspiration, but as a pursuit, *legitimate, scientific, and mechanical*.

From Constable's *Fourth Lecture* (1836)

It was said by Sir Thomas Lawrence, that "we can never hope to compete with nature in the beauty and delicacy of her separate forms or colours—our only chance lies in selection and combination." Nothing can be more true—and it may be added, that selection and combination are learned from nature herself, who constantly presents us with compositions of her own, far more beautiful than the happiest arranged by human skill. I have endeavoured to draw a line between genuine art and mannerism, but even the greatest painters have never been wholly untainted by manner.—Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry 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?

[1822]  
*The art will go out; there will be no genuine painting in England in thirty years. This will be owing to pictures driven into the empty heads of the junior artists by their owners, the directors of the British Institution, etc. In the early ages of the fine arts, the productions were more affecting and sublime, for the artists, being without human exemplars, were forced to have recourse to nature; in the latter ages, of Raphael and Claude, the productions were more perfect, less uncouth, because the artists could then avail themselves of the experience of those who were before them, but they did not take them at their word, or as the chief objects of imitation. Could you but see the folly and ruin exhibited at the British Gallery, you would go mad. Vander Velde, and Gaspar Poussin, and Titian, are made to spawn multitudes of abortions: and for what are the great masters brought into this disgrace? only to serve the purpose of sale. Holland has sold a shadow of Gaspar Poussin for eighty guineas, and it is no more like Gaspar than the shadow of a man on a muddy road is like himself.*

[1829]  
 In art, there are two modes by which men aim at distinction. In the one, by a careful application to what others have accomplished, the artist imitates their works, or selects and combines their various beauties; in the other, he seeks excellence at its primitive source, nature. In the first, he forms a style upon the study of pictures, and produces either imitative or eclectic art; in the second, by a close observation of nature, he discovers qualities existing in her which have never been portrayed before, and thus forms a style which is original. The results of the one mode, as they repeat that with which the eye is already familiar, are soon recognised and estimated, while the advances of the artist in a new path must necessarily be slow, for few are able to judge of that which deviates from the usual course, or are qualified to appreciate original studies.

[Found on a scrap of paper among his memoranda:] My art flatters nobody by imitation, it courts nobody by smoothness, it tickles nobody by petiteness, it is without either *jal de lui* or *fiddle de dee*, how then can I hope to be popular?

From Constable's *Second Lecture* (1836)

But the climax of absurdity to which the art may be carried, when led away from nature by fashion, may be best seen in the works of

Boucher. Good temper, suavity, and dissipation characterised the personal habits of this perfect specimen of the French School of the time of Louis XV, or the early part of the last century. His landscape, of which he was evidently fond, is pastoral; and such pastorality! the pastoral of the opera-house. But at this time, it must be remembered, the court were in the habit of dispersing into the country, and duchesses were to be seen performing the parts of shepherdesses, milkmaids, and dairymaids, in cottages; and also brewing, baking, and gardening, and sending the produce to market. These strange anomalies were played off on the canvases of Boucher. His scenery is a bewildered dream of the picturesque. From cottages adorned with festoons of ivy, sparrow pots, etc., are seen issuing opera dancers with mops, brooms, milk pails, and guitars; children with cocked hats, queues, bag wigs, and swords—and cats, poultry, and pigs. The scenery is diversified with winding streams, broken bridges, and water wheels; hedge stakes dancing minuets—and groves bowing and curtsying to each other; the whole leaving the mind in a state of bewilderment and confusion, from which laughter alone can relieve it.—Boucher told Sir Joshua Reynolds “that he never painted from the life, for that nature put him out.”

It is remarkable how nearly, in all things, opposite extremes are allied, and how they succeed each other. The style I have been describing was followed by that which sprung out of the Revolution, when David and his contemporaries exhibited their stern and heartless petrifications of men and women—with trees, rocks, tables, and chairs, all equally bound to the ground by a relentless outline, and destitute of chiaroscuro, the soul and medium of art.

[1822]  
 I have been to see David's picture of “The Coronation of the Empress Josephine.” It does not possess the common language of the art, much less anything of the oratory of Rubens or Paul Veronese, and in point of execution it is below notice; still I prefer it to the productions of those among our historical painters who are only holding on to the tail of the shirt of Carlo Maratti, simply because it does not remind me of the *schools*. I could not help feeling as I did when I last wrote to you of what I saw at the British Institution. Should there be a National Gallery (which is talked of) there will be an end of the art in poor old England, and she will become, in all that relates to painting, as much a nonentity as every other country that has one. The reason is plain; the manufacturers of pictures are then made the criterions of perfection, instead of nature.

[1835]  
 . . . I have seen David's pictures; they are indeed loathsome, and

the room would be intolerable but for the urbane and agreeable manners of the colonel. David seems to have formed his mind from three sources, the scaffold, the hospital, and a brothel. . . .

From Constable's *Last Lecture* (1836)

The decline of painting, in every age and country, after arriving at excellence, has been attributed by writers who have not been artists to every cause but the true one. The first impression and a natural one is, that the fine arts have risen or declined in proportion as patronage has been given to them or withdrawn, but it will be found that there has often been more money lavished on them in their worst periods than in their best, and that the highest honours have frequently been bestowed on artists whose names are scarcely now known. Whenever the arts have not been upheld by the good sense of their professors, patronage and honours so far from checking their downward course, must inevitably accelerate it.

The attempt to revive old styles that have existed in former ages may for a time appear to be successful, but experience may now surely teach us its impossibility. I might put on a suit of Claude Lorrain's clothes and walk into the street, and the many who know Claude but slightly would pull off their hats to me, but I should at last meet with some one more intimately acquainted with him, who would expose me to the contempt I merited.

It is thus in all the fine arts. A new Gothic building, or a new missal, is in reality little less absurd than a *new ruin*. The Gothic architecture, sculpture, and painting, belong to peculiar ages. The feelings that guided their inventors are unknown to us, we contemplate them with associations, many of which, however vague and dim, have a strong hold on our imaginations, and we feel indignant at the attempt to cheat us by any modern mimicry of their peculiarities.

It is to be lamented that the tendency of taste is at present too much towards this kind of imitation, which, as long as it lasts, can only act as a blight on art, by engaging talents that might have stamped the Age with a character of its own, in the vain endeavour to reanimate deceased Art, in which the utmost that can be accomplished will be to reproduce a body without a soul.

The Voice of God in Nature

[From a letter written to Mrs. Constable in May 1819, while he was on a short visit to Bergholt:] Everything seems full of blossom of some kind and at every step I take, and on whatever object I turn my eyes, that sublime expression of the Scriptures, "I am the resurrection and the life," seems as if uttered near me.