

## The Opaque Nature of John Constable's Naturalism

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### Article abstract

Situant les dessins de Constable dans un contexte épistémologique post-Berkleyien, cet article suggère que le basculement vers une structure représentationnelle, qui met l'accent sur l'écart entre les fonctions figuratives et picturales, avait été nécessaire pour assurer la prétention à la vérité du naturalisme de l'artiste. Nous soutenons que les modulations réalistes dans la conceptualisation sémiotique de Berkeley de la perception visuelle furent instrumentales à une esthétique qui s'efforçait d'enligner le langage de la nature avec le sentiment, réconciliant ainsi l'expression subjective et les demandes de l'objectivité. Pourtant, ainsi que nous le démontrons, la rupture d'un ordre de représentation « transparent » qu'opéra Constable eut des implications non seulement scientifiques, mais également idéologiques.

# The Opaque Nature of John Constable's Naturalism

Iris Wien

Situating the drawings of Constable in a context of post-Berkeleyian epistemology, this article suggests that the pivot towards a representational structure, which emphasizes the pictorial, was necessary to ensure the claim to the truth of the artist's naturalism. We argue that the modulations of realism in the conceptualization of Berkeley's perception of the visual were instrumental to an aesthetic that sought to align the language of nature with the sentiment, reconciling thus the subjective and the objective. However, as we demonstrate, the rupture of an order of representation «transparent» that Constable had implications not only scientific, but also ideological.

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1. *The London Magazine*, 1 April 1828, B.1., quoted in Judy Crosby Ivy, *Constable and his Critics, 1802–1837* (Ipswich, 1991), 126.

2. Charles Robert Leslie's *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable Composed Chiefly of his Letters* (London, 1843), the first biography on Constable, paved the way for a psychological reading of his late work; see e.g., Graham Reynolds, *Constable: The Natural Painter* (London, 1965), 110; Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable*, exh. cat. (London, 1991), 367. However, the authors of the 1991 exhibition catalogue also warn against one-dimensional readings,

“It is evident that Mr Constable's landscapes are *like* nature; it is still more evident that they *are* paint.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance Constable's late “expressionistic” oeuvre, which emphasizes facture and points to the picture's surface and its medial aspects, does not match the image of the artist as a truthful student of nature. When compared, in particular, to earlier landscapes that foreground a mimetic relation to the depicted sites, such as *Stour Valley and Dedham Village* or *Boat-Building Near Flatford Mill*, both 1815, Constable's late works from the late 1820s onward can appear enigmatic. The expressive brushwork of such large exhibition pieces as *Hadleigh Castle*, 1829, | fig. 1 | or *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, 1831, seems unconnected to the artist's early creative development and the construction of his artistic identity as a “natural painter,” by both the artist himself and his contemporary audience. Monographic approaches tend to explain these stylistic changes by referring to the personal distress Constable faced due to his wife's illness and death in 1828,<sup>2</sup> and, less often, to the socio-political upheavals that increasingly disturbed even the countryside after the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>3</sup>

I do not reject this attention to biographical and socio-historical contexts, but my aim here is to explore Constable's increasing consideration of the complexities involved in mimesis through a close analysis of the aesthetic structures and pictorial techniques he deployed in his landscape drawings. Notwithstanding his quest for a “natural painture,”<sup>4</sup> Constable did not adhere to a naïve kind of naturalism, with its desire for a transparent sign that approximated the resemblance between the drawn or painted mark and its referent. I will argue that the apparent dissimilarity of the forms in nature and in art, a topic much discussed not only in drawing manuals, but also in contemporary art theory and aesthetics, made such a simple transcription impossible. Constable's shift toward a representational structure that emphasized the gap between figurative functions and pictorial ones also seems to have been necessary for maintaining the truth claim of his naturalism. A group of drawings begun in the late 1810s and representing the peak of his naturalist endeavours suggests Constable's deep involvement with such conceptual difficulties. Here, the broad repertoire of drawing techniques the artist deployed to subtly hamper the synthesis of the image becomes manifest.

Constable's approach departs significantly from the classical notion of pictorial naturalism, which had been influentially expounded by Leon Battista Alberti in *De Pictura* (1435), the first Renaissance treatise on painting. Alberti

**Figure 1.** John Constable, *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames – Morning after a Stormy Night, 1829*. Oil on canvas, 121.9 x 164.5 cm. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



especially when it comes to Constable's late work, stressing its complexity and conflicting aspects, 373. For a subtle reading of Constable's late landscape painting as autobiographical project within a broader study of the impact of economic and social changes on the perception of the English countryside during the long eighteenth century, see Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1986), 87–155, esp. 128–29.

3. Michael Rosenthal, *Constable: The Painter and his Landscape* (New Haven/London, 1983), 204–13; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge, 1980).

4. In a much-quoted letter to his friend, the artist John Dunthorne in May 1802, Constable called for a "natural painture," John Constable, *Correspondence: Early Friends and Maria Bicknell* (Mrs. Constable), ed. R. B. Beckett (Ipswich, 1964), II, 31–33.

5. Leon Battista Alberti, *Das Standbild. Die Malkunst. Grundlagen der Malerei*, ed. and trans. Oskar Bätschmann and Christoph Schäublin (Darmstadt, 2000), 214 and 224. My translation.

6. See Ray Lambert, *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting* (Cambridge, 2005); Mark Evans, Stephen Calloway and Susan Owens, *John Constable: The Making of a Master*, exh. cat. (London, 2014).

compared the perspectival image with an open window, describing the intersection of the visual pyramid as "transparent" and "glass-like."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Alberti stressed the claim of verisimilitude made by the new naturalist concept of painting. The ideal of the transparent picture remained predominant in the academic art discourse of Constable's time. While engaging with this idea throughout his life, Constable nevertheless developed an increasingly rough and visible facture in his paintings.<sup>6</sup> His painterly style was censured early on by his artistic mentors as a lack of finish and deplored later by critics as a blatant exposure of the mere materiality of paint. Notwithstanding his ambition to develop an original approach to painting, Constable was anxious to avoid bravura or a mannered style, searching instead for "power without manner" throughout his career.<sup>7</sup> It is in his pencil drawings that Constable's efforts to distance himself from the idiosyncrasies of a personal hand and to develop a rhetoric of objectivity become most obvious.

I am not seeking to offer a comprehensive overview of Constable's draftsmanship in all its versatility.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I would like to indicate how Constable's foregrounding of the medial character of his drawings can be understood as a decisive strategy of mimesis with clear ideological underpinnings. I begin by looking at Constable's move toward an intellectual foundation of his drawing practice, which becomes most obvious in his engagement with Thomas Gainsborough's drawing style. Here, the pictorial strategies Constable used to position himself as a naturalist painter can best be grasped. In order to investigate the scientific and ideological implications of this move, I analyze Thomas Reid's epistemology, as mediated through the aesthetics of Richard Payne Knight. Despite the vast impact and popularity of Reid's work beyond specialized circles,<sup>9</sup> it is rarely discussed in accounts of late eighteenth-century British art and aesthetics, perhaps because of the eclectic character of his dualistic thinking. Drawing on George Berkeley's semiotics of vision, Reid,

the founding father of the Scottish Common Sense philosophy, developed his position of direct realism synthetically, modifying apparently divergent traditions of the philosophy of mind. A perspective mainly interested in intellectual history's dramatic breaks and sudden transitions is therefore apt to dismiss Reid's realist inflection of Berkeley's psychology of vision as rather unoriginal.<sup>10</sup> Such an approach neglects, however, both the ideological entanglements of the move toward vision's subjectivity and how this move was reconciled with concurrent claims of objectivity in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain.

Next I address the implications of epistemological questions in early nineteenth-century Britain, a time of extreme social and political tension. This is followed by a close examination of Reid's common sense realism. Avoiding the counter-intuitive consequences of Berkeley's immaterialism, Reid's dualism offered a more plausible epistemological framework for Berkeley's theory of vision. I then trace the way in which post-Berkeleyan accounts of visual perception challenged Joshua Reynolds's art-theoretical premises, shaped in the tradition of Locke and Shaftesbury. I examine the impact of psychological accounts of vision on the broader artistic field. After closely analyzing Constable's drawing practice, I then discuss the ideological implications of evocative drawing styles in early nineteenth-century Britain, manifest also in Constable's dualistic understanding of medium. Lastly, I indicate how Constable's foregrounding of the aesthetic complexity and mediality of his drawings can be understood as a decisive strategy of mimesis with both political and religious underpinnings. Rethinking the relation between form and materiality, and, related to that, between mimesis and expression may therefore advance our understanding of the opaque nature of Constable's naturalism.

#### Shading as Analytical Tool: Constable's Engagement With Gainsborough

Constable's early career as a landscape draftsman illustrates the collective aspect of this art as a discipline replete with its own conventions and inherited formulas. As a novice Constable adopted a range of picturesque drawing techniques from his peers—extremely popular at the time among contemporary amateurs and minor artists for their vivid accents and dashes—thereby acquiring a broad and increasingly nuanced graphic vocabulary. But soon after enrolling at the London Royal Academy Schools in 1799, his engagement with these methods seems to have become more self-conscious, transposing the picturesque idiom into a system of graphic notes that emphasized the constructed nature of visual perception. Distancing himself from his early amateurish beginnings, Constable seems to have striven for an intellectual foundation for his art.

This move is in tune with William Marshall Craig's harsh criticism of the amateurish approach toward drawing. Calling it a "disease of the pencil," the miniaturist, watercolourist, and drawing master relentlessly satirized the indiscriminate use of the same "irregular dashes" regardless of the objects imitated.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he called for a drawing style that differentiated nature's individualities and deepened the resemblance between the graphic sign and its referent. Ann Bermingham has convincingly linked Craig's polemic to the widespread British critique against the rage for rationalization and systematization in the

7. Letter to Charles Boner, April 22, 1833, John Constable, *Correspondence: Various Friends, with Charles Boner and the Artist's Children*, ed. R. B. Beckett, v, 157. See also his later thoughts about the role of manner and style in the development of landscape painting, John Constable, "Lectures on Landscape," in *John Constable's Discourses*, ed. R. B. Beckett (Ipswich, 1970), 57–59, 66–68.

8. My approach is greatly indebted to Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven/London, 2000), and Ian Fleming-Williams, *Constable and his Drawings* (London, 1990). See also Ann Lyles, "The Landscape Drawings of Constable's Contemporaries: British Draughtsmanship c. 1790–1850," in *Constable, a Master Draughtsman* (London, 1994): 19–44, which provides a kind of aesthetic taxonomy of the conditions and possibilities of drawing during Constable's time; Graham Reynolds, *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, 2 vols. (New Haven/London, 1996); and Graham Reynolds, *The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, 2 vols. (New Haven/London, 1984).

9. See Benjamin W. Redekop, "Reid's Influence in Britain, Germany, France, and America," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge, 2004): 313–39; David Allen, *Making British Culture. English Readers and the Scottish Enlightenment, 1740–1830* (New York/London, 2008), 80, 103, 146–47.

10. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge/London, 1992), who mentions Reid only incidentally (58 n. 74), is indebted to Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic rupture, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966).

11. William Marshall Craig, *An Essay on the Study of Nature of Drawing Landscape with Illustrative Prints, Engraved by the Author* (London, 1793), 9, 23.

**Figure 2.** Thomas Gainsborough, *A Road with Cottage Hidden in Trees*, early to mid 1750s. Graphite on paper, 15.3 × 18.2 cm. London, British Museum, © Trustees of the British Museum.



**Figure 3.** John Constable, *An Oak Tree*, 1800. Graphite on gray laid paper, 30.3 × 22.5 cm. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Museum of Art, Gift of Gilbert M. Frimet, 1985/1.119.





12. Bermingham, *Learning to Draw*, 108–12; Bermingham, “System, Order, and Abstraction. The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1994), 88–97; see also David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago, 1993). Although Constable clearly endorsed the ideological underpinnings of Craig’s demand, Bermingham’s suggestion that Constable too followed Craig’s call for a natural and transparent sign is less convincing.

13. See Fleming-Williams, *Constable and his Drawings*, 53, for naturalistic landscape drawing of the early nineteenth century as a graphic tradition, whereby systems of depiction evolved from mimicry, understood as imitative gesture.

14. John Hayes, *The Drawings of Thomas Gainsborough* (New Haven/London, 1971), Vol. 1, 64–91; Scott Wilcox and Rosie Ibbotson, “Re-lenting Fortune weeps o’er Wilson’s fate,” in *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting*, ed. Martin Postle and Robin Simon (New Haven/London, 2014), 149–59.

15. For the publication history of Gainsborough’s prints see Timothy Clifford, Antony Griffiths, and Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Gainsborough and Reynolds in the British Museum* (London, 1978), cat. 50.

16. John Laporte and William Frederick Wells, *A Collection of Prints Illustrative of English Scenery, From the Drawings and Sketches of Thos. Gainsborough, R.A. [...]* (London, 1802–05).

17. Claude Lorrain, *Liber veritatis, or, A Collection of Prints, After the Original Designs of Claude le Lorrain [...]* (London, [1777]–1819), 3 vols.

18. Sam Smiles, “‘Splashers’, ‘Scrawlers’, and ‘Plasterers’: British Landscape Painting and the Language of Criticism: 1800–1840,” *Turner Studies* 10 (1990): 8. Kay Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven/London, 1997), 59.

19. Compare Farington’s diary jottings on February 26, 1799: “Mr. J. Constable of Ipswich called with letter from Mrs. Wakefield. [...]—Knows Sir G[eorge] B[eaumont].—thinks first pictures of Gainsborough his best, latter so wide of nature.” Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus McIntyre (New Haven/London, 1979), Vol. 4, 1164.

20. Fleming-Williams, *Constable a Master Draughtsman*, 58–62.

wake of the French Revolution and its threat of Jacobin levelling.<sup>12</sup> As we will see, Constable also strove for a “naturalization” of the pictorial sign, but he did so at the level of the medium and less so by means of mimetic gestures.<sup>13</sup> In particular this interest in the medial aspects of drawing styles is reflected in Constable’s approach to Thomas Gainsborough’s artistic legacy.

Gainsborough was, along with Richard Wilson, among the founding fathers of a native school of art vaunted during the years of the Napoleonic Wars. As leading British landscape painters of the recent past, their work was widely copied and imitated among amateurs and minor artists around 1800.<sup>14</sup> Gainsborough’s graphic works were especially praised. His bold experiments with soft-ground etching and aquatint were republished by John Boydell in 1797, and several facsimile editions of his drawings were issued.<sup>15</sup> The most lavish of these was an edition released between 1802 and 1805,<sup>16</sup> which demonstrated to a broader public that Gainsborough’s achievement successfully rivalled that of Claude Lorrain’s *Liber Veritatis* drawings.<sup>17</sup> Gainsborough’s drawings thus escaped the verdict of a mannered style that his late landscape paintings incurred in comparison to his early works’ perceived faithful imitations of common nature.<sup>18</sup>

By and large, Constable endorsed this assessment of Gainsborough’s oeuvre.<sup>19</sup> In his first years in London, Constable often adopted the bold massing of forms of the older artist’s early drawings, which he studied in the collection of his friend, the amateur George Frost, an enthusiastic admirer and collector of Gainsborough’s work.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Gainsborough’s practice of using rapid diagonal shading with varied pressure in order to capture the fleeting effects of light and shade in sometimes extremely slight sketches | fig. 2 | seems soon to have captured Constable’s imagination. An early example of this interest is the study of *An Oak Tree* from 1800, | fig. 3 | in which the stem and branches of the tree are still closely outlined. However, from 1805 onward, at a moment when his watercolours start to look much more spontaneous, Constable adapted Gainsborough’s shading techniques more freely.<sup>21</sup> He began to eschew outline, using instead Gainsborough’s rapid shading for broad landscape sketches. It is striking how often Constable used this idiom between 1809 and 1814, as in *Dedham Vale* from his 1814 sketchbook. | fig. 4 |

Constable seems to have understood this kind of shading as an analytical tool. He used it not only to structure a view pictorially, but also to analyze the disposition of light and shade of a painting, as seen in a sketch after Salvator Rosa’s *Vision of Jacob*, 1811. | fig. 5 | Joshua Reynolds had recommended this method in his comments to Charles Alfonse Dufresnoy’s didactic poem *The Art of Painting* (1783) as a means of investigating the compositional principles behind a picture.<sup>22</sup> Abstracting from subject matter, spatial depth, and relief, Reynolds used rapid diagonal shading when studying, for example, the chiaroscuro of Venetian painting. Constable adopted the method several times, for instance to study Reynolds’s own *Cupid* in 1813, and Lorrain’s *Seaport* in 1819.

The self-reflective character of Constable’s adaptation of this method is indicated by his choice of subject. It seems no coincidence that Constable explored Rosa’s famous painting when using this analytical tool for the first time. In his *Discourses on Art*, Reynolds expressed his deep admiration of Rosa’s

**Figure 4 (left).** John Constable, *Dedham Vale*, 1814. Graphite on paper, 7.9 × 10.8 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

**Figure 5 (right).** John Constable, after Salvator Rosa, *Vision of Jacob*, 1811. Graphite on paper, 9.0 × 15.2 cm. Private collection (photo: reproduced from Graham Reynolds, *The Early Paintings and Drawings of John Constable*, New Haven and London, 1996).



21. At this time, Constable's watercolours resemble Thomas Girtin's work in that medium. It is not known if Constable was personally acquainted with Girtin, but he may have been introduced to the latter's highly innovative landscape drawings by his mentor Sir George Beaumont. Farington's diaries record that Constable repeatedly copied works from Beaumont's collections between 1799 and 1804. See Charles S. Rhyne, *John Constable: Toward a Complete Chronology* (Portland, 2005).

22. Note 39 to Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy's "The Art of Painting." Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knt. [...]*, 2 vols. (London, 1797), Vol. 2, 245–47; cf. Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800* (New Haven/London, 2000), 283–89; Harry Mount, "Reynolds, Chiaroscuro and Composition," in *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art*, ed. Paul Taylor and François Quiviger (London/Turin, 2000), 172–97.

23. Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert E. Wark (New Haven/London, 1988), 254–55.

24. Peter Funnell, "'Visible Appearances,'" in *The Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight 1751–1824*,

poetical art by referring to his *Vision of Jacob* as a classic example of imaginative landscape painting. He voiced his praise of Rosa in a critical appraisal of his late RA colleague, Gainsborough, whose landscapes were judged exceedingly natural but rather unimaginative works of art.<sup>23</sup> Constable's adoption of this drawing technique, which at the beginning of the nineteenth century was associated more with Gainsborough than with Reynolds, appears like a reassessment of the latter's verdict.

#### Visual Perception and the Perils of Materialist Theories of Mental Association

At the time, Gainsborough's shading technique may have also carried scientific associations. This is suggested by Richard Payne Knight's peculiar interest in even the slightest of Gainsborough's sketches, documented in the British Museum's holdings from Knight's collection. It is very possible that Knight understood these sketches, with their relinquishing of outline, as representations of pure "visible appearances."<sup>24</sup> In his widely read treatise *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 1805, Knight adopted the notion of "visible appearances" developed by the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid.<sup>25</sup>

Despite rumours about his revolutionary allegiances and his notorious libertinism, Knight was a respected connoisseur, collector, and art writer—that is until his reputation suffered following his 1816 attack on the Elgin Marbles. While he did support Parliamentary Reform, Knight's radical Whiggism did not question the restriction of voting rights to men of independent means;<sup>26</sup> his political stance clearly did not endorse radical universalism.<sup>27</sup> Resembling Edmund Burke's anti-Revolutionary rhetoric in his damning of the "monsters Marat and Robespierre," Knight assured the readers of *An Analytical Inquiry* of his moderation, which might have become suspect due to the *Anti-Jacobin's* charges against his more radical views set forth in the poem *The Progress of Civil Society* in 1796.<sup>28</sup> At a time of social and political crisis and the much-feared threat of a French invasion, Knight may have felt pressured to be clear about such matters.

Situating his aesthetic discourse within Reid's dualistic epistemology helped Knight avert potential suspicion regarding his personal political and

ed. Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny (Manchester, 1982), 82–92.

25. Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London, 2nd ed., 1805), 150; Funnell, “Visible Appearances,” 84.

26. Following the constitutional crisis of 1782–84, the “Whigs took up Parliamentary Reform for strictly limited purposes as a weapon against the power of the executive” and the dominance of King George III, an objective that did not change until 1832. L. G. Mitchell, “Foxite Politics and the Great Reform Bill,” *The English Historical Review* 108, 427 (Apr. 1993), 338–64; Andrew Ballantyne, *Architecture, Landscape, Liberty: Richard Payne Knight and the Picturesque* (Cambridge, 1997), 122–25.

27. See Simpson, *Romanticism*, 113.

28. Knight, *Analytical Inquiry*, 235; see Ballantyne, *Architecture*, 219–29; Nicholas Penny, “Richard Payne Knight: A Brief Life,” in *The Arrogant Connoisseur*, 10–12.

29. This may have been even more important in view of Knight’s Epicureanism, see Ballantyne, *Architecture*, 79–85.

30. This culminated in the “Priestley Riots” of July 1791, in which Priestley’s house and laboratory was burned down by a Tory-galvanized mob. Before his emigration to the United States in 1794, Priestley resided in London, where he became a magnet for a younger generation of radicals. Maurice Crosland, “The Image of Science as a Threat: Burke versus Priestley and the ‘Philosophic Revolution,’” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 20, 3 (July 1987): 277–307.

31. Joseph Priestley, *Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas* (London, 1775). The first edition of Hartley’s treatise appeared in 1749.

32. “Art. II. Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas [...],” *Monthly Review* 53 (1775): 380–90, and “Art. VI. Conclusion of the Account of Dr. Priestley’s Edition of Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind,” *Monthly Review* 54 (1776): 41–47.

33. Reid, “Art. II Hartley’s Theory,” 389.

34. On the Reid/Priestley controversy see Alan Tapper, “Reid and Priestley on Method and the Mind,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52, 209 (Oct. 2002): 511–25; Jack Fruchtman, “The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical*

moral outlook as well.<sup>29</sup> Since Reid had argued at length against mechanist explanations of how the mind forms ideas from sense impressions, his theory of visual perception was particularly adapted to this purpose. Reid carefully differentiated between bodily sensation and mental perception, thus criticizing both materialist and idealist theories of mind. Although Reid had provided the general outline of his thinking already in 1764 in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, his dualistic epistemology proved especially attractive toward the end of the eighteenth century. It allowed for a convincing integration of the new scientific discoveries within an empiricist episteme without compromising, as skeptical and materialist thinkers had done, neither orthodox religion nor the political and social status quo.

The most prominent advocate of a materialist theory of mind in late eighteenth-century Britain was the dissenting clergyman and natural philosopher Joseph Priestley. In the 1790s the Pitt administration propagandists had associated him with the “radicals” and their supposed imminent plotting against the government.<sup>30</sup> Adapting David Hartley’s doctrine of associations, Priestley used causal relations between mind and matter to explain cognitive processes.<sup>31</sup> Already in 1775, Reid had criticized Priestley’s mechanist theory of association in an anonymous published review of the latter’s abridged edition of Hartley’s *Observations on Man*.<sup>32</sup> Stressing the absolute difference between physiological and mental phenomena, Reid ridiculed Priestley for conveying material substance to something as transient as ideas. Moreover, he exposed the alleged selfishness of Priestley’s materialist philosophy, comparing it to an Epicurean hedonist doctrine.<sup>33</sup> In this way Reid implicitly compromised both the efforts of the moral and social reformer Priestley and the hope that the recent advances in natural philosophy would equally be followed by social and political progress.<sup>34</sup>

It is not surprising then that in 1805, a historical moment that was fraught with political and social tensions, both Hartley’s and Priestley’s mechanist theories of association are conspicuously absent from Knight’s account of an associationist theory of taste. In contrast to Hartley’s and Priestley’s passive conception of how the mind forms ideas by associating sense impressions, Knight adapted Reid’s epistemological model and insisted on the activity of the mind in all mental processes. In analyzing aesthetic experience, Knight stressed the role of subjective associations dependent on the knowledge, education, and cultural horizon of the recipient. However, as we have seen, Reid’s dualistic epistemology not only provided the basis for Knight’s elitist aesthetics, it distanced his associationism from the more radical materialist versions of this theory.

Constable, who owned an edition of *An Analytical Inquiry*, might have come into contact with Knight’s ideas through his earliest mentor, the influential connoisseur, collector, and amateur painter George Beaumont. Despite their political differences, Beaumont and Knight were close friends, and they were both enthusiasts of Gainsborough’s drawings.<sup>35</sup> As will be shown, Knight’s stress on the medial aspects of visual perception may have supported Constable in his endeavour to understand landscape painting, not merely in representational terms, but also as an imaginative achievement.



### Reid's Realist Inflection of Berkeley: The Semiotics of Visual Perception

ical Society 73, 4 (1983): 1–125; Isaac Kramnick, "Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific Liberalism," *Journal of British Studies* 25, 1 (Jan. 1986): 1–30.

35. Both acquired sketchbooks at Margaret Gainsborough's sale at Christie's in May 1799. See Kim Sloan, *A Noble Art: Amateur Artists and Drawing Masters, c. 1600–1800* (London, 2000), 206. Regarding Beaumont and Knight's friendship, see Penny, "A Brief Life," 12; and Felicity Owen and David Blarney Brown, *Collector of Genius: A Life of Sir George Beaumont* (New Haven/London, 1988), 59, 72–91; and see 2 and 7–80 on Constable's relation to Beaumont.

36. Knight, *Analytical Inquiry*, 94. Reid's more neutral term stresses the naturalness of the process. Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh, 1997), 171.

37. Reid, *Inquiry*, 43.

38. Reid, *Inquiry*, Ch. vi, xx, 167–74, "Of Perception in General."

39. Bruce Silber, "Boswell on Johnson's Refutation of Berkeley: Revisiting the Stone," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, 3 (1993): 437–48. For a critique of Reid's (mis)reading of Berkeley see John W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis, 1984), 204–23.

40. Margaret Atherton, "Berkeley's Theory of Vision and its Reception," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge, 2005), 94–124; Bernard E. Rollin, "Thomas Reid and the Semiotics of Perception," *The Monist* 61, 2 (1978): 257–70.

41. Reid, *Inquiry*, 177.

42. Reid, *Inquiry*, 5–6, 75, 91–93.

43. Atherton, "Berkeley's Theory of Vision," 100–02.

44. For Reid, without some intentional element, visual sensations cannot gain the status of signs. He writes, "There is no necessity of a resemblance between sign and the thing signified: and indeed no sensation can resemble any external object. But there are two things necessary to our knowing things by means of signs. First, That a real connection between the sign and thing signified be established, either by the course of nature, or by the will and appointment of men. When they are connected by the course of nature, it is a natural sign; when by human appointment, it is an artificial sign. Thus, smoke is a natural sign of fire.... Another requisite to our knowing things by signs is, that the appearance of the sign to the mind, be followed by the

Like Reid, Knight emphasized that in everyday perception the actual visible appearance of objects escapes our attention, being supplanted by "habitual perceptions," or, in Reid's parlance "acquired perceptions," gained by experience.<sup>36</sup> In his *Inquiry*, Reid had compared this to speech comprehension where we are usually unaware of the peculiarities of phonetics: "The sensations of smell, taste, sound, and colour are of infinitely more importance as signs or indications, than they are upon their own account; like the words of a language, wherein we do not attend to the sound, but to the sense."<sup>37</sup> Visual appearances are constantly confused with conceptions previously acquired by the other senses and brought back to mind by association when the object is encountered again. Thus, we are able to "see" the roughness of a tree's bark or its "real" size and shape, because we have learned that certain visual appearances relate to qualities mediated by touch.<sup>38</sup>

The semiotic model of visual perception is borrowed from the philosopher George Berkeley. Reid gave it a new twist by firmly repudiating Berkeley's immaterialism, which many considered counter-intuitive: Samuel Johnson, for instance, famously refuted it by kicking a stone.<sup>39</sup> In Reid's dualistic epistemology, Berkeley's innovative thinking about visual perception in terms of language, associating visual cues with tangible meanings, obtained a less controversial metaphysical framework.<sup>40</sup> Advocating direct realism, Reid referred to the irrefutability of our perceptual belief in the existence of an external material world. As this conviction was provided by the "original principles of our constitution," Reid asserted the externality of the reference of sensations as an innate fact about human beings.<sup>41</sup> To doubt this common sense conviction, whose epistemological function Reid compared to the role of axioms in mathematical reasoning, inevitably gave rise to skepticism, as Hume's reception of Berkeley's immaterialism indeed had proven.<sup>42</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this article to follow Reid's realist inflection of Berkeley's conceptualization of vision as a kind of semiotic system in all its subtleties. Yet it is worth noting that although Reid took his anti-representationalist account of sensation from Berkeley, he considerably modified the cornerstone of Berkeley's argument: according to Berkeley's heterogeneity thesis, ideas of sight and ideas of touch were entirely unrelated to each other. Being utterly arbitrary, the connections between visual signs and tactile meanings had to be learned by habit and experience. Thus, Berkeley considered visual perception a learning process, similar to learning a new language: by linking visual and tactile cues one made sense of a plethora of unconnected visual sensations, which in themselves were completely meaningless.<sup>43</sup> Despite agreeing with Berkeley that sensations do not resemble qualities of objects, Reid doubted that without assuming externality of reference we would even start to look for meaning in sensual cues.<sup>44</sup> He believed that visual sensations were potentially meaningful only *because of* the belief in the existence of an external material world. Unlike Berkeley, Reid was fully aware that a mark cannot function as a sign without assuming an intentional element in it.

Departing further from Berkeley, Reid insisted on a necessary connection between our visual and tactile notions of extension and figure.<sup>45</sup> This allowed him to "establish that the judgments connected with vision were not purely in

the mind but were truly founded in nature.”<sup>46</sup> Although Reid followed Berkeley in rejecting Euclidian geometry as appropriate for representing vision, he did not consider the distinction between visible and tangible space to be a difference in kind<sup>47</sup> and adhered to a unified concept of space that encompassed visible, physical, and tangible aspects. Developing a non-Euclidian “geometry of visibles,” which represented three-dimensional objects as projections on the two-dimensional spherical field of the eye, Reid provided a set of rules of perspective whereby the “visible figure [i.e., a shape seen in perspective], magnitude, and position, may be deduced from the real.”<sup>48</sup> In such a way even a blind mathematician could gain clear notions of an object’s visible aspects. While a sighted person would simply interpret visible appearances as signs habitually connected to real figures, magnitude, and spatial position, a blind person had to deduce these notions through mathematical reasoning.<sup>49</sup> Thus, corresponding to Cartesian dualism, Reid divided the problem of vision into two parts, assigning complementary roles to geometry and to the language metaphor.<sup>50</sup> By revealing the non-Euclidian yet objective laws that linked visual and tangible figures, Reid rejected Berkeley’s subjectivism.

In his phenomenological account of vision Reid stressed the great obscurity of our notions of the visual qualities of objects, such as colour, perceived size, and perspective shape, by referring to the painter’s efforts to attend to purely visual appearances without being misled by his knowledge of their undistorted forms. This must have been especially attractive to Knight, since the figurative drift inherent in the perceptual process offered an explanation for the rather belated emergence of pictorial illusionism in the history of painting.<sup>51</sup> But while this propensity for substitution complicated the painter’s task of pictorial imitation, it also allowed the beholder to see *more* in pictorial articulations than merely abstract markings and touches.

Reid and Knight both believed that visual appearances served as “natural signs” and provided reliable information about the external world, and that it is directly through them that we perceive independently existing objects. To identify the fugitive, subliminal character of these signs with transparency, as Bermingham’s interpretation of Constable’s naturalism suggests, would be misleading. Reid developed his subtle theory of perception in order to repudiate representational theories of ideas, such as those of John Locke and David Hume.<sup>52</sup> Following Berkeley’s critique of Locke’s resemblance theory, Reid argued that the prevalent notion of simple ideas as copies or images of primary qualities of objects had lost its cogency in light of new scientific insights. In particular, vivisections as early instances of experimental physiology involving the stimulation of nerves suggested an understanding of sensation as a response to external stimuli, which had no intrinsic mimetic relation to the external objects of sight.<sup>53</sup> Thus, even the bodily senses were now understood, to a certain extent, as media.

Constable encountered Reid’s thought not only through Knight but also through the clergyman-essayist Archibald Alison. When Constable read Alison’s *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790) in 1814, he valued his epistemological and ideological premises highly, as he wrote in a letter to his future wife Maria Bicknell.<sup>54</sup> Like Knight, Alison also combined Reid’s Common Sense philosophy with associationist arguments. Adapting Reid’s

conception and belief of the thing signified. Without this the sign is not understood or interpreted; and therefore is no sign to us, however fit in its nature for that purpose.” Reid, *Inquiry*, 177. See Rollin, “Thomas Reid,” 266; J. Todd Buras, “The Nature of Sensations in Reid,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22, 3 (Jul. 2005): 221–38.

45. Reid, *Inquiry*, 95–100, and 177.

46. For this and the following see Geoffrey N. Cantor, “Berkeley, Reid, and the Mathematization of Mid-Eighteenth Century Optics,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, 3 (1977): 429–48, 444; and Atherton, “Berkeley’s Theory of Vision,” 106–07.

47. “I take them [visible and tangible space] to be different conceptions of the same thing, the one very partial, and the other more complete; but both distinct and just, as far as they reach.” Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1785), 263–64.

48. Reid, *Inquiry*, 95; see Norman Daniels, *Thomas Reid’s Inquiry: The Geometry of Visibles* (Stanford, 1989).

49. On Molyneux’s problem see Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility* (Chicago, 2002), Ch. 11, “The Blind and the Mathematically Inclined,” 19–67.

50. Reid, *Inquiry*, 188; Cantor, “Berkeley, Reid,” 446.

51. Knight, *Analytical Inquiry*, 149–50.

52. Ryan Nichols and Gideon Yaffe, “Thomas Reid,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2015 edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/reid/>. Distinguishing sensation and perception, Knight followed Reid’s inflection of Berkeley closely: “there being no more reason why a *notion* should resemble a *perception*; a *perception* a *sensation*; or a *sensation* its *object*, than that an *exertion* an *arm*; an *arm* a *lever*; or a *lever*, a *weight*.” Knight, *Analytical Inquiry*, 40.

53. Nicholas Pastore, *Selective History of Theories of Visual Perception 1650–1950* (New York/London/Toronto, 1971); Geoffrey N. Cantor, *Optics after Newton* (Manchester, 1983); Crary, *Techniques*, 67–96.

54. Constable, *Correspondence: Early Friends*, 131.

aesthetic doctrine “that matter is not beautiful in itself, but derives its beauty from the expression of MIND,”<sup>55</sup> Alison emphasized the moral and religious feelings evoked by the experience of beauty in nature. Alison’s assertion that “the appearances of the material world” were clearly expressive of God’s providence<sup>56</sup> was one that the deeply religious Constable fully embraced.

### Against Mimesis: Re-Evaluating Joshua Reynolds’s Art Theory

In his lectures, Reynolds had already stressed the difference between nature and art. Strictly analogizing the pictorial arts with language, he emphasized the artificiality of painting and based the intellectual value of an artwork on its figurative potential.<sup>57</sup> In this respect, Reynolds followed Burke’s assertion that “POETRY [is] not strictly an imitative art.”<sup>58</sup> Since “words undoubtedly have no sort of resemblance to the ideas for which they stand,” Burke claimed that especially descriptive poetry operates by substitution.<sup>59</sup> Reynolds’s appropriation of Burke’s poetics succeeded despite the medial differences between the two arts, not least thanks to the artist’s demotion of the senses in favour of the intellect as guides for genius and taste. For Reynolds, giving free scope to a colouristic approach in painting threatened the intellectual nature of an art devoted to the expression of “general truths,” and hence to the ideal and abstract.<sup>60</sup> Foregrounding the material aspects of the processes of mediation jeopardized the ideal transparency or invisibility of the picture plane, distracting the beholder from the contents of the artwork.

Assessing Gainsborough’s achievement after his death in 1788, Reynolds stressed the aesthetic moment when “all those odd scratches and marks... which even to experienced painters appear rather the effect of accident than design... by a kind of magick, at a certain distance” assume “form, and all the parts seem to drop into their proper places.”<sup>61</sup> Reynolds’s praise of Gainsborough’s bravura brushwork seems qualified in the broader context of his academic doctrine. Comparing Gainsborough’s “intuitive sagacity” to “natural eloquence,”<sup>62</sup> Reynolds denied his former rival the intellectuality he considered a distinction of the artist of genius, whose works transcended their epoch and delivered timeless truths, and granted him only a more limited “Genius of mechanical performance.”<sup>63</sup> Gainsborough’s purely intuitive approach to painting lacked the universality that Reynolds demanded of art. This universality could only be achieved through abstraction, understood in a Lockean sense as a process of generalization. Hence Reynolds denigrated the mimetic potential of painting. His art theory remained an important point of reference in early nineteenth-century British aesthetic discourse, and although his overall aesthetic doctrine was not challenged, its critical attitude toward nature’s *minutiae* was considerably modified.<sup>64</sup>

Knight addressed Reynolds’s legacy in a way that seems typical for the time. He re-evaluated the sensuous aspects of the art of painting, but downplayed his differences with Reynolds’s art theory by stressing the latter’s own colouristic practice and predilection for Rembrandt’s painterly style.<sup>65</sup> Knight was well aware of the theoretical implications of his move from Locke’s to Reid’s epistemology, which enabled him to argue for the existence of “mere visible” or “abstract beauty” dependent solely on optical, or as Knight called them “picturesque,” qualities of an object. Building on a processual understanding

55. Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (Edinburgh, 1811), 417.

56. *Ibid.*, 443–62, here 458.

57. Iris Wien, “Naturalising Tradition: Why Learn from the Masters?” in *The Concept of the “Master” in Art Education in Britain and Ireland, 1770 to the Present*, ed. Matthew C. Potter (Farnham, 2013), 29–46.

58. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1990), 157.

59. *Ibid.*, 157.

60. See John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven/London, 1986), 83–86.

61. Reynolds, *Discourses*, 257–58.

62. *Ibid.*, 258.

63. On Reynolds’s differentiation between intellectual and mechanical genius, see Disc. xi, 192, Disc. vii, 129–30.

64. Bermingham, “System, Order, and Abstraction,” 88–93. The reevaluation of pictorial detail was furthered by post-Berkeleyan critiques of Locke’s account of the process of abstraction. For the discourse on abstraction, see M.A. Stewart, “Abstraction and Representation in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume,” in *The Philosophical Canon in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Sylvania Tomasalli (Rochester, 1996), 123–47.

65. Knight, *Analytical Inquiry*, 6, 204–05.

of perception, Knight stressed the elusiveness of “mere visible beauty.”<sup>66</sup> Following Reid’s dualistic adaptation of Berkeley, Knight conceptualized sensation—and it is important to note that for these authors sensations are ultimately beyond words—as a kind of language deeply embedded in our constitutions.<sup>67</sup> Contrary to Reynolds’s discursive conceptualization of painting, the semiotic model of visual perception gives rise to a notion of painting’s pure visuality, which marks the boundary between verbal language and silent image. As Reid had made so clear, the alleged transparency of sense perception rested on the simple fact that neural processes causing sensation escaped awareness. Notwithstanding sensation’s elusive character, it is original perceptions (colour, perspective shape, visible place) that provide us with an immediate testimony of the existence of external nature.

The epistemological role of sense perception as a form of knowledge beyond words is further strengthened by not being conceptualized in representational terms. With their understanding of simple ideas as copies of impressions, Locke, Hume, and Reynolds had reduced the knowledge gained by the senses to static copies of the external world.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, Reid opened sensual knowledge up to continual refinement by pointing to the complex processual character of sense perception. In Knight’s theory of taste, the medial operations of the painter became a genuine instrument for the acquisition of perceptual knowledge. In order to impart substance to visual appearances otherwise escaping our attention, the artist had to make imaginative use of the differences between the pictorial medium and the medium of perception.<sup>69</sup>

#### Learning to See: Edward Kennion and the Concept of Direct Attention

Although Reynolds’s call for abstraction and his concept of “general nature” were increasingly criticized in the early nineteenth century, his views on the intellectual status and artificial nature of painting went undisputed<sup>70</sup> and became assimilated into the new epistemological framework. The dissimilarity of nature and art that one experienced while attentively observing and rendering natural scenes, and the difficulty of conveying nature’s “exhaustless abundance,” were recurrent *topoi* of drawing manuals throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> The landscape painter Edward Kennion, for example, discussed the apparent discrepancy between nature and art in his *Essay on Trees*, written in 1805, but only published posthumously in 1815.<sup>72</sup> Like Craig, Kennion argued against an idiosyncratic drawing style that was oblivious to the true appearance of trees in nature, but he also addressed at length the difficulties involved in directly engaging with true appearances. An effective representation of natural objects, in his view, was only achieved “by means apparently *unlike* the lines and parts of the original.” Because of the overwhelming complexity of individual natural forms, Kennion developed his method of translating natural appearances “into a describable, and therefore teachable form, which gives the attention something to fasten on.”<sup>73</sup> Supplanting Reynolds’s “general nature” with a concept best described as guided attention, Kennion intended to forestall the reduction of individual forms into meaningless generalizations.<sup>74</sup>

With their praise of the abundance and complexity of natural forms, many drawing manuals of the time echo the “providential naturalism” underlying

66. *Ibid.*, 85–86.

67. Reid, *Inquiry*, 91, 188.

68. See for instance David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1738] (Oxford, 2001), 1.1.1.5, 8.

69. See *Analytical Inquiry*, 153, for Knight’s reflections on “the feelings and discernment of an great artist” as an “improved medium” through which we perceive reality.

70. Reynolds developed his idea of “general nature” in the third and fourth discourses, in which he harked back to the concept of “central form” developed in the last *Idler* essay. Joshua Reynolds, *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds [...] Containing his Discourses, Idlers, A Journey to Flanders and Holland* (London, 1797), Vol. 1, 355–62.

71. See James Duffield Harding’s numerous writings, and for the quotation, J. D. Harding, *Lessons on Trees* (London, 1850), text accompanying Plate 29.

72. Edward Kennion, *An Essay on Trees in Landscape* (London, 1815), preface, 1.

73. Kennion, *Essay on Trees*, 5.

74. See also Bermingham, *Learning to Draw*, 116–19.



Reid's epistemology. The theory of visual perception developed by Scottish Common Sense philosophy would have provided Constable with a scientific foundation for his colourist interests, while dissociating these interests from the widespread suspicion of mere sensationalism and capriciousness. In particular, it may have helped him develop a kind of "purified" version of "breadth." A highly desirable aesthetic quality exemplified in Reynolds's academic doctrine by the painterly style of Titian and Rembrandt, breadth denoted a freedom of handling that displayed "at a glance the subordination of details to the overall design," thus ensuring the "transcendence of the particular called for in academic theory."<sup>75</sup> Paradoxically breadth was also the one pictorial quality most obviously betraying the personal hand of the artist. As Reynolds informed his students, "original paintings are distinguished from copies" by their "breadth," understood as "uniting solidity with facility of manner."<sup>76</sup>

#### Constable's Practice: Staging Perceptual Process and Registering Light

An examination of the draftsman's practice of breadth points to the way in which Constable reconciled the uniqueness of personal style with the demands of objectivity. A letter to his friend John Dunthorne, written in May 1803, shows that the question of breadth was at the forefront of Constable's thinking during his first years in London. After giving voice to his ambition to become a painter whose productions would stand the test of time, Constable gives a critical account of Ramsay Reinagle's engagement with the fashion of panorama painting and his approach to nature:

He views Nature minutely and cunningly, but with no greatness or breadth. The defects of the picture at present are a profusion of high lights, and too great a number of abrupt patches of shadow. But it is not to be considered as a whole.<sup>77</sup>

Constable transformed the picturesque manner of his artistic peers into a purely optical mode of drawing. His landscapes register the fleeting conditions of light and shade without getting lost in details. The attempt to catch something of the elusiveness of different forms of vegetation in full sunlight becomes a recurrent theme in Constable's pencil studies from 1817 onward. His use of highly ambivalent pencil touches was calculated, evoking precision even in areas of great indeterminateness. *Bridge near Gillingham* (1820) | fig. 6 | exploits this effect, suggesting sharpness of detail by a flurry of elliptical touches. By eschewing outline, these drawings seem to build on Constable's deep engagement with Gainsborough's hatching technique, transforming the latter's diagonal hatching, which conveyed generalized visual impressions, into a more nuanced tool.

In the 1820s, when Constable resumed his practice of *plein air* oil sketching in Hampstead Heath, he created some of his most arresting drawings. Although not intended for public view, they can be considered finished works. As Ian Fleming-Williams noted, the artist lent his sketchbooks to friends, who admired and copied their contents.<sup>78</sup> A close reading of *Harnham Bridge* | fig. 7 | demonstrates how the artist subtly staged the beholder's perceptual process, thus succeeding in evoking the subliminal character of visual appearances, or, as Reid and Knight called them, natural signs.

75. Smiles, "Splashes," 8.

76. Reynolds, *Discourses*, 260.

77. Constable, *Correspondence: Early Friends*, 34.

78. Parris and Fleming-Williams, *Constable*, 387; Fleming-Williams, *Constable and his Drawings*, 186–87.

**Figure 6.** John Constable, *A Bridge Near Gillingham*, 1820. Graphite on paper, 15.6 × 22.9 cm. London, British Museum, © Trustees of the British Museum.



**Figure 7.** John Constable, *Harnham Bridge*, 1820. Graphite on paper, 15.5 × 22.9 cm. London, British Museum, © Trustees of the British Museum.



Although the drawing of *Harnham Bridge* closely corresponds to a *plein air* oil sketch of the same view,<sup>79</sup> it transcends the mere purpose of a preliminary study. In the oil sketch, the tower of Salisbury cathedral bathes in the midday sun, whereas in the drawing, it is obscured by clouds, and the sun only illuminates the riverside lawn, the bridge with its bridge house, and the right side of the cathedral's roof. Constable painted and drew the view with the sun standing high behind him. In the painting the lack of strong shadows results in a somewhat flattened appearance.<sup>80</sup> In the drawing, this effect is alleviated by the shadow-casting clouds on the left-hand side. The resulting dark area in the background clarifies the spatial layout. The same ambiguously described trees and shrubs on the opposite riverside occupy the centre of both the oil and pencil sketches: their shapes dissolve and their details are lost in the radiant light of the midday sun. In the drawing, this impression of the dissolution of forms is further enhanced on the right and bottom margins, and guides the gaze to the sunlit bridge and house. The bright stretches of the drawing are finely gauged, disclosing the lateral and spatial extension of the landscape to the beholder. In the furthest plane, the glare of the cathedral's roof provides a definite light accent to the view. Although very small, the brilliance of the spot attracts the gaze, deflecting it constantly from the other parts of the scene. Constable's subtle direction of light accentuates not the cathedral's majestic spire, which seems to blend into the soft sky, but its less-memorable roof. As a result, the eye of the beholder is continually stimulated: it rescans the drawing again and again.

Without relinquishing the much-sought-after aesthetic quality of "breadth," Constable thus evokes the extreme dynamic of an observer's visual perceptual experience in nature. He is most concerned with the reflective and absorbing qualities of objects and conceptualizes the surface of the paper as a medium for the registration of light. His shift from contour to the grain of the graphite pencil as a medium of imitation may have been motivated by atomistic theories of atmosphere and light in the tradition of Isaac Newton. In view of experiments supporting the wave theory of light conducted by Thomas Young and Augustin-Jean Fresnel around that time, atomistic theories of light may seem anachronistic. But in the early nineteenth century many scholars redeveloped material concepts of light, and in his influential dualistic philosophy Reid also endorsed Newtonian corpuscularianism.<sup>81</sup> Remarks related to chiaroscuro in the artist's *Lectures on Landscape* strongly suggest that Constable adhered to these material concepts. In his ambitious mezzotint project *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Landscape Scenery*, 1829–37, he even claimed "that the CHIAR'OSCURO does really exist in NATURE [...]," and hence has a material basis in reality. With their graininess and stress on chiaroscuro, both the graphite pencil and the medium of mezzotint served well as pictorial equivalents for a particle-saturated atmosphere.<sup>82</sup> While Constable did not aim for resemblance between the graphic mark and its referent on the level of form, he increasingly strove for the naturalization of his pictorial medium. In this way he managed to objectify his imitative gestures. As we will see below, embedding mimesis within the pictorial medium seems to have been crucial in cases where he departed from a close transcription of observed nature.

79. The Wernher Collection, Luton Hoo; Reynolds, *The Later Paintings*, no. 20.54, pl. 175.

80. As stated in the 1991 exhibition catalogue: Parris and Fleming-Williams, *Constable*, 255–56.

81. In contrast, Berkeley could not even accept an idealist version of corpuscularianism, attacking mechanism not only on metaphysical but also on physical grounds. Lisa Downing, "Berkeley's Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge, 2005): 230–65; Paul Wood, "Thomas Reid and the Culture of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reid*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge, 2004), 59–60. Geoffrey N. Cantor and Michael J. S. Hodge, "Introduction," in *Conceptions of Ether. Studies in the History of Ether Theories 1740–1900*, ed. Geoffrey N. Cantor and Michael J. S. Hodge (Cambridge, MA, 1981): 1–60.

82. John Constable, "The Letterpress to English Landscape Scenery," in *John Constable's Discourses*, ed. Ronald Brymer Beckett (Ipswich, 1970), 9; see Iris Wien, "[T]he Chiar'oscuro does really exist in Nature": John Constable's *English Landscape Scenery* and Contemporary Theories on Colour, Light and Atmosphere," in *Die Farbe Grau*, ed. Magdalena Bushart and Gregor Wedekind (Berlin, 2016), 155–75.

British Naturalness: Evocative Drawing Styles and their Ideological  
Implications around 1800

When Constable became acquainted with the London art world around 1800, he entered a public arena in which the question of style had become much contested. A thorough scientific foundation of his art helped him come to grips with the contradictory expectations placed on handling and execution. He invested his views of particular English sites with a rhetoric of objectivity, striving to transcend the idiosyncrasies of personal manner. Kay Dian Kriz has pointed to the “central dilemma facing artists who attempted to fashion their practice on the basis of academic rules and precepts.”<sup>83</sup> From a commercial point of view, a novel and individual manner was advantageous, for it contributed to the recognizability of one’s work. Within the academic paradigm, however, everything connected with the execution of a painting was dismissed as merely mechanical. Individual manner, understood as a sensationalized execution or touch, was denounced as singularity and suspected of being a form of commercial self-promotion. In addition, the discourse about manner and execution was strongly tinged with nationalist rhetoric, especially between 1795 and 1805, when British fears of a French invasion were at their peak.

By adopting Gainsborough’s shading practice, Constable not only profited from its scientific connotations, he also inscribed himself self-consciously into a drawing tradition that, with its spurning of outline, could be considered typically British. The landscape drawings, sketches, and watercolours of Richard Wilson, William Gilpin, and Alexander and John Robert Cozens stood in this tradition, which took shape in the collections of amateurs who were interested in these drawings’ picturesque effects of light and shade. In *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), while recommending mezzotint for the reproduction of landscape painting in the chapter on light and shade, William Hogarth had already referred to Leonardo’s statement that in nature lines do not exist.<sup>84</sup> Evocative drawing styles based on chiaroscuro connoted naturalness and could be contrasted effectively with the alleged artificiality of the linear style epitomized by the art of Jacques-Louis David and his school, which became widely associated with heartlessness due to the petrified character of its pseudo-classical figures. David’s extreme focus on contour was, moreover, connected to his political radicalism.<sup>85</sup>

A late echo of this assessment is still found in Constable’s second lecture on the history of landscape painting of 1836, where linear style is seen as an expression of the inhumane character of the French Revolution. Constable considered the revolutionary style of David as a direct consequence of the “romantic hyperbole” characterizing French taste and mores throughout the eighteenth century. In Constable’s historical assessment the “climax of absurdity” of a style oblivious to nature was reached with François Boucher, who did not distinguish between the social and the natural order. Boucher’s pastoral scenery is described as “a bewildered dream of the picturesque” mirroring the “strange anomalies” of the habits of the time, when the court enacted the pastoral in the countryside, duchesses performed the part of “shepherdesses, milk maids, and dairy maids, in cottages; and also brewing, baking, gardening, and sending the produce to the market.”<sup>86</sup> In Constable’s enumeration of “anomalies,” the commercial realization of profit from the

83. Kay Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Artist: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven/London, 1997), 32 and for the following passage 28 and 52.

84. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven/London, 1997), 76.

85. Kay Dian Kriz, “French Glitter or English Nature? Representing Englishness in Landscape Painting, c. 1790–1820,” in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*, ed. Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughan (Cambridge, 1989), 63–83, here 71; Eric McCauley Lee, “‘Titianus Redivivus’: Titian in British Art, Criticism, and Practice, 1768–1830,” PhD diss., Yale University, 1992, 275–86.

86. Constable, “Lectures,” 59.



duchesses' pastoral pursuits is clearly the strangest and most dangerous one, suggestive as it is of social conflict. The real dangers of a fictitious "unnatural" taste turning the social order upside down are revealed in the following passage:

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 relentless outline and destitute of chiaroscuro, the soul and medium of the art.<sup>87</sup>

Constable's criticism of French neoclassical painting reveals a dualistic understanding of chiaroscuro, encompassing both mental—indeed spiritual—and material aspects of painting. Although he claimed a material basis for chiaroscuro in nature, remarks in his third lecture on seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish landscape painting suggest that he was also aware of chiaroscuro's highly artificial nature as a compositional tool.<sup>88</sup> Here, Constable distinguished clearly between two kinds of chiaroscuro: a "real" and an "artificial" one. While he referred to Claude, Ostade, Cuyp, and Ruysdael as "masters of real chiaroscuro" he thought of Rembrandt's chiaroscuro as "decidedly an artificial feature in his works," adding: "he painted expressly for it—it was his own peculiar language, and used by him to express sentiment."<sup>89</sup> Chiaroscuro, as the most important means of art, conveyed both the language of nature and the artist's sentiments. Reconciling the mental with the material, it also aligned culture with nature, squaring subjective expression with the artist's claims toward objectivity.

#### Drawing as Revelation: Constable's Expressionistic Practice

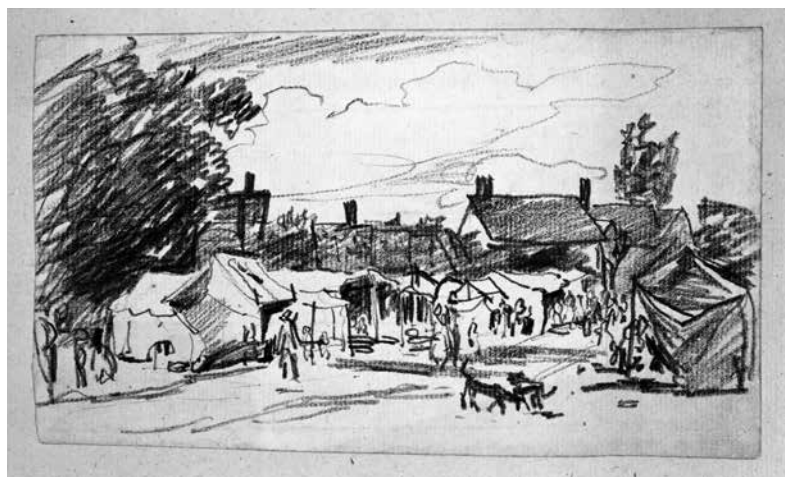
Constable thus questioned the primacy of the line, which had dominated academic art theory for centuries. In view of the revolutionaries' belief in universal reason and quest for political and social improvement, the linear style, with its abstractness and its claim to represent universals, started to be viewed with suspicion. The truth-value of contour was also doubted because of the shift toward post-Berkeleyan epistemology that occurred in early nineteenth-century aesthetics. In both a Cartesian and a Lockean framework, the primacy of contour stood for the sense of touch, informing the subject about "true" spatial relationships. Secondary qualities of objects, such as colour, distance, and size, were devalued by this thinking due to their mediated status. As we have seen, Reid questioned the hierarchy of the senses inherent in the primary/secondary distinction by pointing out, like Berkeley, that neither tactile nor visual sensations resemble the qualities of the objects that cause them. Reid's philosophy of mind could, therefore, be used to justify both a colouristic approach to painting and evocative drawing styles with their latent ambiguity. In his theory of taste Knight adopted these notions, which gave precedence to the depiction of contour-less visible appearances.

The shift from Locke to Reid's dualistic philosophy as a framework for the new theories of taste in the first decade of the nineteenth century had ideological implications as well. Adapting Berkeley's anti-representationalist stance, Reid not only rejected Hume's skepticism, he also strove to avert the

87. *Ibid.*, 60.

88. Roger de Piles, Reynolds, and Gilpin stressed chiaroscuro's artificial nature as well. Wien, "[T]he Chiar'oscuro," 159–61.

89. Constable, "Lectures," 63.



**Figure 8.** John Constable, *East Bergholt Fair, 1812*. Graphite on paper, 10.5 × 18.4 cm. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Gilbert Davis Collection. © Courtesy of the Huntington Art Collections, San Marino, California.

possible materialist ramifications of the new natural philosophical insights, so manifest in Joseph Priestley's mechanist theory of association. In the wake of the French Revolution and its reverberations in Britain—social and political upheavals connected to the radical call for social and parliamentary reform—this became even more urgent. Although Priestley, as the most prominent representative of this line of thought, had to emigrate to the US in 1794, the reformist impulse of his scientific worldview could still be considered, in the socio-political climate of early nineteenth-century Britain, as a latent political threat.<sup>90</sup> In this context Reid's philosophy of mind proved very attractive, for it convincingly integrated the new scientific worldview while securely maintaining the dualism between mind and matter. Advocating dualism, Reid avoided the counter-intuitive consequences of Berkeley's immaterialism, which most eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers interpreted as a downright denial of the existence of a material world. Moreover, Reid's dualistic epistemology fully embraced the tenets of providential naturalism. This was a stance less likely to threaten the political and social status quo than the dangerous link between scientific, economic, social, and political progress that radical reformers had established since the American Revolution.

Constable's markings and touches, so prominent in the pencil drawings from the second decade of the nineteenth century onward, transcend, therefore, merely optical implications. By drawing attention to the pictorial medium and its function within the representational structure, Constable's ambiguous marks made beholders aware of the ineluctable mediatedness of their sensual relation to the external world. One could even state that Constable's drawings had a revelatory character; by imparting pictorial substance to something as fleeting as visual appearances, he provided the viewer with a testimony of the existence of external nature, otherwise manifest only in latent sensuous feelings inaccessible with words. Because Common Sense philosophy considered nature to be present in indistinct feelings rather than in reason and logic, with their all-too-often misleading promise of a transparent order of things, the pictorial signs of the naturalist artist working in this

90. Kramnick, "Eighteenth-Century Science," 6–17.



Figure 9. John Constable, *A House, Cottage, and Trees by Moonlight*, ca. 1830–36. Sepia and grey wash, 18.7 × 22.8 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

framework of thought had to be opaque. The truthfulness of Constable's naturalism was therefore signalled by the unbridgeable gap between the physiological process of sensation and mental perception. That sensuous feelings did not bear any resemblance to the objects causing them, moreover, left room for the artist's imagination, as Knight had already stressed. Thus, Constable could exploit the figurative impulse of the perceptual process revealed by Berkeley, Reid, Knight, and Alison in order to convey more than merely optical phenomena. He could impart the noisy, rambunctious atmosphere of *East Bergholt Fair* | fig. 8 | to the viewer, or imbue a landscape with his own feelings as in his late bistre drawings, | fig. 9 | thus giving pictorial expression to subjective experiences independent of external senses. From this perspective, Constable's late "expressionistic" oeuvre appears quite consistent with the naturalist aesthetics the artist developed in the first decades of his career. ¶

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