

## **Constable, Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites**

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In 1851, John Ruskin claimed that the Pre-Raphaelites had followed to the letter his advice to young artists in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843) to 'go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought than how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.'<sup>i</sup> Writing in 1905, William Holman Hunt declared that in February 1848, after a conversation with John Everett Millais about Ruskin's book, *Modern Painters*, he had decided to 'paint an out-of-door picture, with a foreground and a background, abjuring altogether brown foliage, smoky clouds, and dark corners, painting the whole out of doors, direct on the canvas itself; with every detail I can see, and with the sunlight brightness of the day itself.'<sup>ii</sup> These two persuasive pieces of evidence lead seductively to the conclusion that Pre-Raphaelite landscape painting, with its bright colours, unconventional compositions, and emphasis on plein-air painting and sunlight, resulted from the writings of John Ruskin. From 1851 he became friendly with members of the group and their chief defender as a critic. In 1853 Ruskin stressed in a lecture that the Pre-Raphaelites painted all their landscape backgrounds out of doors.<sup>iii</sup> In the 1850s and 1860s he manifestly did have a direct influence on Pre-Raphaelite landscape painting, taking Millais to Scotland and encouraging John Brett and John William Inchbold to go to Switzerland, and advising artists such as Alfred William Hunt through personal contact and letters. Ruskin's importance for the movement is so widely accepted that British

landscape paintings from the 1850s and 1860s which have bright colours, precise detail, and result from open-air study are described now, indiscriminately as either 'Ruskinian' or 'Pre-Raphaelite.'<sup>iv</sup>

However, recent scholars have questioned the idea of a causal relationship between Ruskin's writings and the painting of the Pre-Raphaelites. Allen Staley has stressed that Ruskin was not responsible for the Pre-Raphaelites' insistence on plein-air painting: '*Modern Painters* did not tell artists to paint finished pictures directly out of doors.'<sup>v</sup> Marcia Werner has shown that many Pre-Raphaelite sources deny the influence of Ruskin on the formative ideas of the Brotherhood. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for example, in 1868 claimed that none of them had read Ruskin's writings before 1851; his brother, William Michael, claimed in 1869 that Pre-Raphaelitism began 'in total independence and virtual ignorance' of Ruskin's writings.<sup>vi</sup> Werner argues that by the time Ruskin was commissioning his portrait from Millais in 1853, he was actually influenced by the ideas of the painters. Specifically, Ruskin accepted the principle of painting entire pictures from nature in the open air, and of including minute detail. In the early volumes of *Modern Painters*, by contrast, he criticizes painters for including too much minute detail, and does not mention plein-air painting at all.<sup>vii</sup> Ruskin also took rather a long time to come to the defence of the Pre-Raphaelites. As William Michael Rossetti put it in an article published in 1869:

In 1849 the Preraphaelite pictures were received with marked approbation ... Mr Ruskin made no sign. In 1850 the Preraphaelite pictures were received with a storm of abuse ... still Mr Ruskin made no

sign. In 1851 the vituperation gathered fresh fury; then Mr Ruskin came forward in vindication.<sup>viii</sup>

It was only in 1851, when Ruskin's hero, J M W Turner, was clearly in decline, that he transferred his allegiance to the new movement, and even then his pamphlet, despite its title, is mostly about Turner. Recently, in a paper given in Oxford, Stephen Wildman has questioned whether Ruskin really liked Pre-Raphaelitism at all. His attempts to sell Brett's *Val d'Aosta* are well known; but this was just one of many commissioned and non-commissioned works by his friends in the group which did not remain in his collection. To the end of his life, it seems, Ruskin would always have preferred to add another Turner watercolour to his collection rather than a Pre-Raphaelite work.<sup>ix</sup>

In the 1851 pamphlet, in which he effectively claimed paternity for Pre-Raphaelitism, Ruskin quoted his own advice out of context. In the original, he had started off by saying

They should keep to quiet colours, greys and browns; and, making the early works of Turner their example, as his latest are to be their object of emulation, should go to Nature in all singleness of heart ...<sup>x</sup>

It is not surprising that he did not quote this passage in full in the pamphlet. In the paintings they produced between 1848 and 1851, the Pre-Raphaelites clearly had not emulated either the early or the later works of Turner, nor had they used greys and browns – quite the opposite, in fact. In addition, Ruskin's famous

advice was specifically directed at young painters. Once they had honed their skills by emulating early Turner, Ruskin said they could 'take up the scarlet and the gold' and 'give the reins to their fancy'.<sup>xi</sup> In other words, a period of careful study of nature was to be the prelude to the use of brilliant colour, not to be combined with it – and the brilliant colour specified (despite its biblical resonance) sounds like that of Turner.<sup>xii</sup> *Modern Painters* was written as a defence of Turner, and Ruskin's pamphlet on Pre-Raphaelitism in 1851 also praised Turner, setting out to prove that he was the first Pre-Raphaelite, an argument that has never really convinced anyone, either at the time or since. If the Pre-Raphaelites were taking Ruskin as their major authority on landscape, one might expect that reading Ruskin would encourage a whole generation of artists to emulate Turner, as Ruskin had specifically directed them – but there is very little evidence that any of the Pre-Raphaelite landscape painters, apart from Alfred William Hunt, did so. Turner never painted complete oil paintings out of doors, and although he used bright colours, these were predominantly primary colours, including reds and yellows, not the bright greens evident in the early work of Millais and Hunt.

If, therefore, we discount Ruskin as the main source of early Pre-Raphaelite ideas about landscape, where else could they have come from? John Constable is barely mentioned in the literature on the group (for example, his name is not even in the index to the catalogue of the 2012 exhibition at Tate Britain).

However, in the England of the late 1840s and early 1850s his work was the most obvious precedent for open-air painting, and for the use of bright greens. Both these features of his work had been highlighted by Charles Robert Leslie in

his *Life of Constable*, which came out in 1843, the same year as Ruskin's first volume of *Modern Painters*. Leslie says that Constable painted *Boat Building* entirely in the open air, as well as a later picture of *Hampstead Heath* (Pl 1) which expressed the mid-day heat of midsummer.<sup>xiii</sup> Ruskin had a copy of the first edition of Leslie's *Life* (he takes several illustrations from it for his later volumes of *Modern Painters*), presumably the one which was bought by his father in April 1844.<sup>xiv</sup> Leslie's *Life of Constable* was an immediate success. It was widely reviewed, and the lavish first edition was soon followed, in 1845, by a cheaper version with additional text. Constable was a recently deceased Royal Academician who had died suddenly six years earlier, in 1837, leaving seven orphaned children. Leslie's *Life* tells the touching story of an artist who was devoted to his work and to his family, single-minded in his determination to be 'a natural painter' – to depict what he saw in front of him rather than imitating earlier artists – and a man of profound religious belief. Leslie quoted extensively from Constable's correspondence and incorporated many vivid anecdotes which rapidly became very well known. Leslie preferred Constable's early, naturalistic works, and expressed his opinion that his art was at its most perfect when he painted the picture of Hampstead Heath in the open air.

In contrast to Leslie, Ruskin was highly critical of Constable in his writings, as Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams have documented.<sup>xv</sup> Ruskin's attacks on Constable started with the second edition of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, published in 1844, in which he wrote:

Un-teachableness seems to have been a main fault of his character, and there is corresponding want of veneration in the way he approaches nature herself. His early education and associations ... induced in him a morbid preference of subjects of a low order. I have never seen any work of his in which there were any signs of his being able to draw ...

Ruskin goes on to say that Constable's showery weather misses both the majesty of storm and the loveliness of calm weather. In the third edition of volume I (1846) he describes him as unable to draw a log of wood, let alone the trunk of a tree.<sup>xvi</sup> By 1856, in volume three, his tree-drawing is characterized as un-inventive, lazy and wholly barbarous. Constable is represented as a sort of sub-human, inferior being: what he perceives in a landscape is equivalent to the combined perceptions of a fawn and a skylark.<sup>xvii</sup> Constable's reputation gives countenance to the 'blotting and blundering of Modernism.'<sup>xviii</sup> By 1871, in a lecture Ruskin delivered in Oxford, he is describing Constable's work as the blundering of a 'clever peasant.'<sup>xix</sup> Most of these criticisms are, of course, wholly unfair. Constable was self-consciously pious in his approach to landscape painting; he revered the Old Masters; he was the son of a landowner, and actually came from a higher social class than most artists of his time; his subjects are only 'low' if one thinks of the everyday life of the countryside as 'low'; and he certainly could draw trees and represent storm and sunlight. It was a part of Ruskin's method in the book to denigrate other artists, such as Claude, in order to argue for the pre-eminence of his hero, Turner, but with Constable the criticism seems to have taken a particularly personal turn, especially when we consider that he

was writing about an artist who had died so recently, and whose young children and close friends would have been able to read Ruskin's words.

Ruskin was very conscious of the rivalry between the artists of Constable's generation – which included the recently deceased David Wilkie, as well as Turner. As William Vaughan has pointed out, three important books came out in 1843, each of them emphasizing the naturalist tradition in British art, and each of them with a different hero: Allan Cunningham's *Life of Wilkie*, Leslie's *Life of Constable*, and Ruskin's *Modern Painters*.<sup>xx</sup> Ruskin clearly saw this rivalry as being about the painters' characters as well as their art. He wrote in his diary in May 1843, the month that *Modern Painters* was published, that he was disappointed in Cunningham's *Life of Wilkie*: 'he is a thoroughly low person and his biographer worse.'<sup>xxi</sup> Constable, however, was described by Leslie as a 'gentleman': 'he possessed that innate, and only real gentility, of which the test is conduct towards inferiors and strangers; he was a gentleman to the poorest of his species, - a gentleman in a stage coach, nay, more, - a gentleman at a stage coach dinner.'<sup>xxii</sup> In addition, the extensive quotations from his letters in Leslie's *Life* made it clear that Constable was well-educated and well-versed in contemporary standards of politeness and etiquette. Ruskin could not claim that Turner possessed gentlemanly qualities, but emphasized instead the sublimity of Turner's work, and his noble subjects.

In his memoirs, Holman Hunt presents his 'out-of-door picture', *Rienzi vowing to obtain Justice for the Death of his younger Brother* (1848-9) as a landmark in Pre-Raphaelite landscape painting, stimulated by Ruskin's writing. The accuracy of

his claim is now difficult to judge, since he was writing 57 years after the event and he repainted the foreground and sky in 1886. But Millais's painting, *Ferdinand lured by Ariel* (1849-50), begun the following year, does suggest a very new approach, with its bright colours and minute botanical detail. He wrote to Holman Hunt, while he was painting the landscape background at Shotover Park, near Oxford in the summer of 1849: 'The landscape I have painted ... is ridiculously elaborate. I think you will find it very minute, yet not near enough so for nature. To paint it as it ought to be would take me a month a weed – as it is, I have done every blade of grass and leaf distinct.'<sup>xxiii</sup> Two years later, when Hunt and Millais went together to Ewell, in Surrey, in the summer of 1851 and painted the backgrounds to *Ophelia* (Tate Britain) and *The Hireling Shepherd* (Pl 2), their methods of painting in bright colours on a white ground, in the open air, were well established. In addition, Hunt's painting showed a disregard for the usual rules of landscape composition. Instead of framing trees on either side and a distant view in the middle, the trees are in the centre and the distant view off to the left. He is clearly aiming to give the impression that he has just taken nature as it is, rather than composing it.

Hunt specifically referred to 'brown foliage' as something he was 'abjuring' in *Rienzi*. This is reminiscent of the most famous story told by Leslie in his *Life of Constable*. It concerns Sir George Beaumont, who asked Constable where he put his 'brown tree' when he was painting a landscape. Sir George said that the colour of an old Cremona fiddle should provide the prevailing tone for a landscape painting. Constable then placed a violin on the grass to show Beaumont how different it was from the real colour of nature.<sup>xxiv</sup> This story was



quickly picked up and became common currency in the art world. It is retold, for example, in all the reviews of Leslie's book.<sup>xxv</sup> Holman Hunt tells a variation of it early on in his memoirs. He says he was painting a 'transcript' of Chingford Church in the open air (this would be c. 1845) and showed it to a Mr Rogers, who said:

You must not paint foliage green like a cabbage; that'll never do. ...  
Constable, who is just lately dead, tried to paint landscapes green, but he only proved his wrong-headedness ... I'll show you a small picture I did when last in the country; there now, you see all the trees and grass, which an ignorant person would paint green, I've mellowed into soft yellows and rich browns.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Hunt tells the story in the same spirit as Leslie, to show the ignorance of conventional painters in the face of Constable's superior understanding of truth to nature. Ruskin also recounts the story about Sir George Beaumont and the Cremona fiddle in a long footnote to his Preface to the second edition of *Modern Painters* Volume I (published in 1844). In this footnote he acknowledges that 'the feelings of Constable with respect to his art might be almost a model for the young student ... He who walks humbly with Nature will seldom be in danger of losing sight of Art.'<sup>xxvii</sup> In fact, it is possible that Ruskin's famous exhortation to young artists, in *Modern Painters* volume I, is an unconscious echo of the words Constable used in his last lecture on landscape painting: given in 1836, the lecture was published in Leslie's *Life* and so it became widely known. Constable said

The young painter ... must become the patient pupil of nature. If we refer to the lives of all who have distinguished themselves in art or science, we shall find they have always been laborious. The landscape painter must walk in the fields with an humble mind.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Leslie's *Life of Constable* came out in March 1843, and the first volume of *Modern Painters* was published in May, so it is just possible that Ruskin had read, or heard about Leslie's *Life* before he sent his own work to the printers.<sup>xxix</sup> Ruskin's reference to walking with Nature draws on the lines from Wordsworth he used on the title page of *Modern Painters*, and it could be argued that the similarity is just coincidental, but it is interesting that they both use the unpoetical term 'laborious', which does not occur in the Wordsworth extract.

Ruskin, in his famous passage, said the painter must go to nature and 'walk with her laboriously'. But he would not have been so favourable to the idea that the painter should walk in the fields. Ruskin's view of landscape was typical of a modern, urban sensibility: when he left the comfortable suburbia of Denmark Hill he wanted to find himself in a 'pure nature' that was as different as possible from the city. For Ruskin, real nature was not to be found in the fields, but in the mountains, the forest, the wilderness. He wanted artists to study 'nature as she is, rejecting with abhorrence all that man has done to alter and modify her.'<sup>xxx</sup> There were, nevertheless, many reasons why Ruskin should have appreciated Constable's work. Constable was an artist who set out to paint nature in a devout and humble spirit, believing it to be God's handiwork. This was what Ruskin

wanted artists to do – ‘to be humble and earnest in following the steps of Nature, and tracing the finger of God’.<sup>xxx1</sup> By contrast, Ruskin struggled with his fear that Turner had no religious belief at all. Constable was a model husband and father; Turner’s private life would not bear close examination. Constable, in Leslie’s account, was a gentleman; Turner could not really be described in those terms. Scholars have speculated that Ruskin was unduly critical of Constable because he had little acquaintance with his work, but it is more likely that Ruskin realized, correctly, that Constable would be a major rival to Turner when the history of British landscape painting came to be written. Constable, therefore, was a real threat - perhaps the greatest threat of all - to Turner’s reputation, which Ruskin wanted to secure for posterity. Ruskin certainly had opportunities to become acquainted with Constable’s work, had he wished to do so. Constable’s *Cornfield* (Pl 3) was presented to the National Gallery in 1837, and Leslie had several examples of the artist’s work in his house. In an Epilogue to *Modern Painters II*, published in 1883, Ruskin says that Leslie was one of the artists who used to come to dine with him and his father on Ruskin’s birthday; and in a letter to W. H. Harrison from Pitlochry, in September 1847, he asks his friend to ‘remember me to the Miss Constables when you see them,’ so he clearly had been introduced to the Constable children, who retained many of the artist’s paintings.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Leslie responded to Ruskin’s criticisms of Constable in a further book, *A Handbook for Young Painters*, published in 1855, and Ruskin, in turn, became even more negative in his attitude to Constable, in his remarks in *Modern Painters* Volume III, published in the following year. Leslie deprecated Ruskin’s use of criticism ‘that tends to obscure any of the true lights in Art, in order that one

great luminary may shine the more brilliantly'. He then resorted to a similar tactic himself, being extremely damning about Turner's abilities to paint trees and foliage. Turner, Leslie says, 'is the most unfaithful (among great painters) to the essential and most beautiful characteristics of English midland scenery,' such as the oak, elm, ash and beech, the English hedge, and the 'deep verdure [that is, the greenness] of his own country.' Constable, by contrast, 'was the most genuine painter of English cultivated scenery.'<sup>xxxiii</sup> Leslie denies Ruskin's claim that Constable only paints 'greatcoat weather' and praises his ability to paint 'mid-summer noon-day heat,' using greens and blues rather than hot colours.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In 1856, in a response to this book in an appendix to *Modern Painters* Volume III, Ruskin says that Leslie had 'suffered his personal regard for Constable so far to prevail over his judgment as to bring him forward as a great artist, comparable in some kind with Turner.'<sup>xxxv</sup> There was, therefore, a continuing debate going on between Leslie and Ruskin over the relative merits of Constable and Turner. The dispute became quite personal, with Leslie implying that Ruskin was too young to know any better when he first published *Modern Painters*, while Ruskin, in turn, implied that Leslie was senile.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The young Pre-Raphaelites were students at the Royal Academy in the late 1840s, and here they would have been exposed to Leslie's ideas on landscape. Leslie was Professor of Painting at the Academy from 1847, and gave a series of lectures: his *Hand-book for Young Painters* was based on these lectures. Ford Madox Brown records going to the first of the lectures in February 1848: his opinion was that it was 'twaddle,' but such a dismissive comment is very typical of Brown's diary entries.<sup>xxxvii</sup> It is possible that Hunt and Millais were also in the

audience.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Leslie's prominence in the teaching of the Academy may well have led to discussion of his book on Constable, or of anecdotes about the earlier painter, who had, of course, been known personally to many of the Academicians. It is significant that February 1848 was exactly the same month when Hunt says he decided to paint 'an out-of-door picture'.

The entries in William Michael Rossetti's PRB Journal suggest that the young painters were interested in depicting cultivated landscape, of the kind favoured by Constable, in 1849. In May 1849, Millais apparently thought of painting a hedge, to the closest point of imitation, with a bird's nest.<sup>xxxix</sup> A major point of reference here is the work of William Henry Hunt, but Millais may also have been struck by Constable's statement in a letter to Leslie 'my limited and abstracted art is to be found under every hedge and in every lane, and therefore nobody thinks it worth picking up.'<sup>xl</sup> This, too, was in Leslie's *Life of Constable*, and was noted by the reviewers. In July 1849 William Michael Rossetti records in the PRB Journal that Hunt has made a study of a cornfield – a subject very similar to that of the painting by Constable in the National Gallery. In December of the same year, we read in the Journal that Millais is going to bully his brother into doing nothing all next summer but paint out in the fields – and it was 'in the fields' that Constable said the young painter should walk 'with an humble mind'.<sup>xli</sup>

In February 1850, another member of the Brotherhood, F. G. Stephens, published an article in *The Germ* entitled 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art'. He heralded the rise of a new school of naturalistic landscape painters in England:

An unprejudiced spectator of the recent progress and main direction of Art in England will have observed, as a great change in the character of the productions of the modern school, a marked attempt to lead the taste of the public into a new channel by producing pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of conventionalities and feeble reminiscences from the Old Masters ... This has been most strongly shown by the landscape painters, among whom there are many who have raised an entirely new school of natural painting, and whose productions undoubtedly surpass all others in the simple attention to nature in detail as well as in generalities. By this they have succeeded in earning for themselves the reputation of being the finest landscape painters in Europe.<sup>xlii</sup>

Stephens names no names, but he does not seem to be thinking of Turner – and the reference to a ‘new school of natural painting’ echoes the letter, quoted in Leslie’s *Life of Constable*, in which he says ‘there is room enough for a natural painter.’<sup>xliii</sup> Unlike Hunt’s memoirs, the PRB Journal and the *Germ* are primary sources which date from the early years of the Pre-Raphaelite movement: we might assume from these sources that the Pre-Raphaelites were, at this date, looking with approval at those artists, including Constable, who had painted the cultivated scenery of England with ‘simple attention to nature.’ By 1850, it was widely accepted that Constable was a ‘truly English painter’ who had rejected the conventions of earlier idealized landscape painting, one who worked in the open air and ‘had his studio on the downs and in the bye lanes of England.’<sup>xliv</sup> In this

year, William Makepeace Thackeray declared that ‘every succeeding year adds to the public appreciation of this great genius’ who had been insufficiently appreciated during his lifetime.<sup>xlv</sup>

When Hunt and Millais went to the countryside to paint landscape backgrounds in 1851, they chose to go to Ewell in Surrey, selecting sites that were very similar to the East Anglian canal scenes of Constable. By this time, the young Pre-Raphaelites, Millais, Hunt and their friend Charles Alston Collins were evidently on friendly terms with Charles Robert Leslie. In the second edition of Hunt’s memoirs he is described in a footnote as ‘this lovable man’ who showed ‘modest courtesy to one of the young generation’ when he invited Hunt for a visit in September 1852.<sup>xlvi</sup> In the first edition, Hunt says how he and Millais ‘perhaps beyond other artists’ were saddened, in later years, to hear that Leslie was dying, implying that they had a particularly close relationship with him.<sup>xlvii</sup> Hunt recalled in 1905 that, in one of their visits to London during the painting of their landscapes, he and Millais attended a party at Leslie’s house, in the course of which Hunt visited his studio.<sup>xlviii</sup> The landscapes they painted in that summer of 1851 are much closer to the example of Leslie’s hero Constable than to the works of Ruskin’s hero Turner. Hunt’s *Hireling Shepherd* is set in a landscape of low-lying, marshy ground, with brooks and arable land. Millais’ *Ophelia* is set in the same watery rural landscape. Hunt says that Millais erased a water rat in his painting, on the advice of C. R. Leslie when he saw the picture, so it is clear that the older man was taking a great interest in their work at this juncture, and also that the young painters respected his opinion.<sup>xlix</sup> In 1852 Leslie was the

principal hanger for the Royal Academy exhibition, and both paintings were given favourable positions, on the line in the Middle Room.<sup>1</sup>

A direct comparison between *The Hireling Shepherd* and Constable's *Flatford Mill* (Tate Britain) is instructive. There are identifiable varieties of wild flower in the foreground of the painting; the trees are elms or poplars and willows, suited to damp conditions. In Constable's painting, too, there are minutely delineated flowers in the foreground, tall trees on the left, and trees in the centre, casting shade, which is contrasted with the view through to the sunlit land, a cultivated field on the right. The textures of the tree trunks are carefully studied in each case. *Flatford Mill* was still in the collection of the Constable children in 1851, but Hunt could have seen a print of it (Pl 4), which was published in 1845. Both paintings reject the normal conventions for landscape compositions, with their framing trees either side which direct attention to a central view into the distance: instead, there are areas on interest on the left and right sides of the canvas. In each case, the impression that is created is that the artist has taken an actual scene as it is, rather than trying to compose it. Both artists show a largely man-made landscape, one that provides for man's physical needs: in Constable's work, the interconnectedness of its elements – the trees providing the wood to make boats, bridges and fences, the field growing wheat that is ground into flour in the mill then taken down to the sea in a barge – is proof of God's benevolence to man. There are also some interesting parallels between *The Hireling Shepherd* and Constable's *Cornfield*, which Hunt would definitely have known from the National Gallery. Both show cultivated landscape, with a cornfield, sheep and a shepherd. The subject matter of the *Hireling Shepherd* may even have been



suggested to Hunt by the *Cornfield*, in which the flock apparently heads straight for the entrance to a cornfield, unprotected by a gate that has fallen off its hinges, while the boy who should be minding them stops to take a drink from the brook. In Hunt's picture, the hireling shepherd is neglecting his sheep, who are straying into the corn, and by eating too much of it succumb to the dangerous condition of bloat.

Ruskin, however, disliked pollarded willows, or indeed any tree that been clipped out of its natural shape, and felt that agriculture spoilt the 'liberty' of nature. In 1846 he had added a long footnote to his Conclusion to *Modern Painters I* to warn artists that they should go to real nature:

I have just said that young painters should go to nature trustingly ... but they must be careful that it *is* nature to whom they go, nature in her liberty, not as servant of all work in the hands of the agriculturist, nor stiffened into court-dress by the landscape gardener. It must be the pure wild volition and energy of the creation which they follow, not subdued to the furrow, and cicatrized to the pollard... Let them work by the torrent side, and in the forest shadows: not by purling brooks and under "tonsile shades" ... As far as the painter is concerned, man never touches nature but to spoil.<sup>li</sup>

This comment was probably meant partly as another criticism of Constable, whose works often show cultivated fields and pollarded willows. However, 'purling brooks' and 'tonsile shades' are exactly what Millais and Hunt did study

in Ewell in the summer and autumn of 1851, even after Millais, at least, had met Ruskin. Hunt's painting shows plentiful evidence of agriculture: the cornfield on the right, and stoked field beans in the distance on the left. And their trees are indeed 'cicatrized to the pollard' - the willows in both paintings have been pollarded, and the trees on the left of Hunt's picture are probably stripped elms. It was common in the nineteenth century for them to have their lateral branches removed, so that the trunks would grow straight and regular and could be used for water pipes.<sup>lii</sup>

It was not just Millais and Hunt who persisted in painting scenes that, to Ruskin, were not 'nature in her liberty'. Ford Madox Brown was also painting out of doors in the summer of 1851, posing his wife and child in his back garden, with a view of a plantation of trees in rows, cultivated fields, hedges and corn ricks in the distance, for his picture, *The Pretty Baa Lambs* (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), which he showed at the Academy in 1852. When he exhibited the picture in Newcastle later that year, Brown changed the title to 'Summer Heat.'<sup>liii</sup> Leslie wrote in his *Hand-book for Young Painters* that Constable had 'fearlessly painted mid-summer noon-day heat' using greens and blues, not hot colours, 'because his sensibility of eye directed him to the true tones and arrangements in nature of those colours at the season he most loved to paint...'<sup>liv</sup> Brown, similarly, expresses the idea of heat with bright blues and greens, using blue also for the clothing of the figures. Furthermore, in the mid-1850s, Brown painted four landscapes which take agriculture, and suburbia, as their main subjects, finding beauty in the contrasting colours of crops: the rich green of turnips and the yellow of ripe corn in *Carrying Corn* (Tate Britain), the rich green of the grass and

the reddish pink of the hay in *The Hayfield* (Tate Britain). In *Walton-on-the-Naze* (Pl 5) Brown conveys a similar view to that of Constable, a conception of landscape as consisting of parts that all fit together, for the benefit of mankind. The man in the foreground (who is, of course, a self-portrait) is pointing towards the corn ricks indicated by the end of the rainbow, the windmill (used to grind up wheat for flour), the labourers busy in the field to the left and taking a loaded cart along a road. The foreground is taken up by a field of beans, which were grown to feed cattle. *An English Autumn Afternoon* (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), similarly, is a landscape rich in evidence of the human exploitation of nature, with a dovecot, chickens being fed, apples being picked from the trees, and the city of London in the distance. In his published *Diary*, Brown mentions Constable only once, when he notes the presence of 'a fine Constable' in the collection of John Miller in September 1856.<sup>lv</sup> This reference implies, at least, respect for the earlier painter. To Ruskin, none of these scenes would have been 'pure nature'. Like Constable, he thought nature had been created for the benefit of mankind, but Ruskin puts the emphasis on human aesthetic and spiritual needs rather than physical ones, hence it is the forest and the mountain that fulfils this purpose most effectively, not the agricultural landscape. He asked Brown why he had chosen such an ugly subject for *An English Autumn Afternoon*, and Brown, whose *Diary* makes it very clear that he disliked Ruskin, replied 'because it lay out of a back window.'<sup>lvi</sup>

Ruskin also disapproved of the locations chosen by Hunt and Millais for their paintings of *Ophelia* and *The Hireling Shepherd*. When they were working in Surrey in the summer of 1851, Ruskin wrote to Millais criticizing their choice of

backgrounds: 'When you do paint nature why the mischief should you not paint pure nature and not that rascally wirefenced garden-rolled-nursery-maid's paradise?'<sup>lvii</sup> Ruskin did his best to persuade artists, starting with Millais, and continuing with Inchbold and Brett, to go to the mountains of Scotland, Wales or above all Switzerland, trying to get them away from the attractions of the typically English, cultivated rural landscape beloved of Constable. In the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* (1860) Ruskin complained about what he called the 'duck-pond delineation' of the Pre-Raphaelites, saying that it was 'utterly and inexcusably wrong that they should neglect the nobler scenery which is so full of majestic interest, or enchanted by historical association.'<sup>lviii</sup> This is similar to his criticism of Constable as 'having a morbid preference for subjects of a low order.' As Bernard Richards has pointed out, it suggests the lingering influence of a sense of the hierarchy of the genres, which could be used to contrast Turner, the painter of history and the sublime, with Constable, the blundering peasant.<sup>lix</sup> However, it was out of step with democratizing tendencies in contemporary art, and with the inclinations of many of the painters over whom Ruskin wished to exert an influence.

Ruskin did not get Millais as far as Switzerland, but he had more success with John Brett, whom he encouraged to go to the Val d'Aosta in 1858. Ruskin presumably hoped that Brett would paint sublime mountain scenery in the spirit of Turner. But, as Allen Staley puts it:

The chief benefit of Brett's working in the Alps was not that he could see and paint high mountains ... but that he himself could have a high

vantage-point from which he could see and paint ever more cottages and fields and trees.<sup>lx</sup>

That is, the ‘subjects of a low order’ that had provided the main part of Constable’s subject matter. When Brett returned to England and painted the *Hedger* (private collection), in the winter of 1859-60, Ruskin was not at all sympathetic – he advised Thomas Plint against buying it because the subject was ‘wholly uninteresting.’<sup>lxi</sup> Did it, perhaps, remind Ruskin of Leslie’s statement that Turner had never painted an English hedge? Here, the trees have been coppiced, another interference with nature of which Ruskin presumably would not have approved. Hedging and coppicing were both essential country crafts in nineteenth-century England. Coppicing was important for providing a steady supply of wood for all sorts of uses, including firewood, charcoal burning, and hop-poles, while traditionally laid hedges provided shelter for livestock and protected growing crops. But to Ruskin such activities were ‘wholly uninteresting’.

Brett records in his diary that he read and admired Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* in 1852; but he was also reading Leslie’s *Life of Constable* in August 1853, when he describes Constable as an artist he had long admired.<sup>lxii</sup> ‘Miss Constable’ of 16 Cunningham Place appears on a list of 51 names he made in a sketchbook early in 1864, probably as a preparation for sending out invitations to a private view of this work.<sup>lxiii</sup> This would be Constable’s eldest daughter Minna, so he may well have known her and visited her house. But he could, in any case, have seen eleven paintings by Constable, including *Flatford Mill*, at the International

Exhibition of 1862. Brett's work in the 1860s shows a renewed interest in Constable: for example, his watercolour, *End of the Harvest* (1864, Pl 6), is almost a homage to Constable. Like Constable's landscapes, it shows a sense of interconnection: manure from the dunghill (provided by horses) is being loaded onto a cart to put on the fields to ensure their fertility for the next harvest. This is a subject Constable had depicted in his *View of Dedham* of 1816 (now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts). In addition, the boy on the horse in Brett's watercolour is a direct quotation from *Flatford Mill*.

When painting another watercolour, *February in the Isle of Wight* (Pl 7) in early 1866, Brett returned to the composition of Constable's *Cornfield*, a painting he is likely to have studied carefully in the National Gallery in the early 1850s. Here again, the presence of a small boy in the foreground adds to the likelihood that this was a conscious act of homage to his predecessor. In this same year, 1866, Richard and Samuel Redgrave published their *Century of Painters of the English School*. They explicitly contrasted Constable with the Pre-Raphaelites, suggesting that the latter should follow the example of his later practice of painting pictures in the studio, suppressing detail and aiming at breadth of colour, light and shade. The Redgraves acknowledged Constable's influence as 'inducing much of that candid acceptance of Nature, as contradistinguished from *compositions*, which some of the artists who succeeded him here, affect to follow even too minutely,' and they declared that the *View of Hampstead Heath* (which by this time was in the South Kensington Museum) was 'a minute and careful study, painted on the spot, and ... as careful in its handling as any work of the new school.'<sup>lxiv</sup> But Constable was now praised for having abandoned plein-air painting in the

interests of expressing general truths, in a shift away from Leslie's preference for his early, more detailed works, and presented as an example to the younger generation, in the hope that this would wean them off what the Redgraves regarded as the excessively detailed and literal style of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Constable's reputation continued to grow after 1866, but Ruskin was never converted – quite the opposite, in fact. His antipathy to Constable, and his claim to be the progenitor of Pre-Raphaelitism in his pamphlet in 1851, have obscured the role of Constable's rejection of compositional conventions, his use of bright colour, and his practice of painting in the open air, in the development of Pre-Raphaelite landscape painting. In addition, Ruskin's objections to Constable's everyday subject matter set up a tension between the critic and his protégés: he wanted them to follow Turner and paint grand scenery, while they were inclined, rather, to follow Constable and depict what Leslie called 'the essential and most beautiful characteristics of English midland scenery:' the fields, the hedges, the native trees, the bright green meadows and roadside verges.<sup>lxv</sup>

6699 words.

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Suggested Illustrations:

1. *Hampstead Heath, with the House called 'The Salt Box'* by John Constable (1776-1837). Oil on canvas, 38.4 x 67 cm. Tate Britain.
2. *The Hireling Shepherd* by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), 1851. Oil on canvas, 76.4 x 109.5 cm. Manchester Art Gallery.
3. *The Cornfield* by John Constable (1776-1837), 1826. Oil on canvas, 143 x 122 cm. National Gallery, London.
4. *Flatford Mill* by David Lucas (1802-1881) after John Constable (1776-1837), 1845. Mezzotint with drypoint, 17.8 x 20.7 cm. British Museum.
5. *Walton-on-the-Naze* by Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), 1860. Oil on canvas, 31.7 x 41.9 cm. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.
6. *End of the Harvest* by John Brett (1831-1902), 1864. Watercolour and bodycolour, 22.9 x 31.1 cm. Private Collection.
7. *February in the Isle of Wight* by John Brett (1831-1902), 1866. Watercolour and bodycolour, 46 x 35.4 cm. Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

I am very grateful to Judith Bronkhurst and Stephen Wildman for sharing their expert knowledge of the sources and offering perceptive comments on the text of this article.

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i John Ruskin, *Preraphaelitism*, 1851, E T Cook and A Wedderburn, eds, *The Works of John Ruskin*, London, 1903-12, vol XII, p339.

ii William Holman Hunt, *PreRaphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, London, 1905 (=Hunt 1905), Vol I, p91.



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- iii John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, in *Lectures on Architecture and Painting, delivered at Edinburgh, in November 1853*, Cook and Wedderburn, eds, Vol XII, p157-8.
- iv For example, Tim Barringer writes: 'A number of artists outside the London-based Pre-Raphaelite circle gradually began to adopt a Ruskinian view of landscape painting' (*The Pre-Raphaelites*, London, 1998, p. 60).
- v Allen Staley and Christopher Newall, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature*, exh cat, Tate Gallery, London, 2004, p26.
- vi Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-century Realism*, Cambridge, 2005, pp54, 51. In 1880 Holman Hunt wrote a long letter to Ruskin testifying to the great influence *Modern Painters* had on him, but he seems to be referring more to Volume II than to Volume I, which contains the passage about going to nature. George Landow, ed, "'Your Good Influence on Me": The Correspondence of John Ruskin and William Holman Hunt,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library University of Manchester*, vol 59 (1976-7), p43.
- vii Werner, op cit, p40.
- viii W M Rossetti, quoted in Werner, op cit, p51. The complete essay by W M Rossetti is reprinted in J L Bradley, *John Ruskin: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1984, pp48-59 (W M Rossetti, 'Ruskin as a Writer on Art', *Broadway*, March 1869).
- ix Stephen Wildman, 'Did Ruskin like Pre-Raphaelitism? Paper delivered at 'Pre-Raphaelitism: Past, Present and Future', Oxford Brookes University, Ashmolean Museum and St John's College, Oxford, September 2013.
- x *Modern Painters*, Vol I, 1843, Cook and Wedderburn, op cit, Vol III, p623-4.
- xi *Ibid*, p624.
- xii The reference seems to be to David's lament for Saul and Jonathan: 'Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet ... who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel.' 2 Samuel 1:24.
- xiii C R Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Esq., RA, composed chiefly of his letters*, London, 1843 (=Leslie 1843), p19, and in same title, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London 1845, p. 79, where he says of the painting of Hampstead Heath 'I know of no picture in which the mid-day heat of Midsummer is so admirably expressed.'
- xiv In *Modern Painters*, Vol III, Plate 5, fig. 2 is from the tree in the engraving of *Lock on the Stour*; in *Modern Painters*, Vol IV, plate 27, fig. 5 is from the Frontispiece to Leslie's *Life* (Cook and Wedderburn, eds., op cit, Vol V p162, Vol VI p101). A copy of the first edition of Leslie's *Life* was purchased by John James Ruskin in April 1844, for £4 4s (James Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin* (Oxford, 2012), p200. I am grateful to Stephen Wildman for this reference).
- xv Leslie Parris and Ian Fleming-Williams, *The Discovery of Constable*, London, 1984, pp49-51.
- xvi *Modern Painters* Vol I, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1846, Cook and Wedderburn, op cit, Vol III p. 603.
- xvii *Modern Painters* Vol III, 1856, Cook and Wedderburn, op cit, vol V, pp162, 172.
- xviii *Ibid*, Appendix, p. 423.
- xix *Lectures on Landscape*, given in Oxford, 1871, published 1897. Cook and Wedderburn, vol XXII, p58.

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- xx William Vaughan, 'Constable's Englishness,' *Oxford Art Journal*, 19, 2 (1996), pp17-27.
- xxi *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, selected and edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, Oxford, 1956, p246. Wilkie had died in 1841.
- xxii Leslie 1843, p116.
- xxiii Undated letter from Millais to Hunt, quoted in Leslie Parris, ed, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, exh cat, Tate Gallery, London, 1984, p74.
- xxiv Leslie 1843, p41.
- xxv For example, *Art Journal*, July 1843, p190; *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, September 1845, no CCCLIX, Vol LVIII; *Athenaeum*, 849, 3 February 1844, pp101-103.
- xxvi Hunt 1905, Vol I, pp25-6.
- xxvii Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, Preface to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1844, Cook and Wedderburn, eds. op cit, Vol III, footnote p45.
- xxviii Leslie 1843, p150.
- xxix Ruskin notes in his Diary on 1 May 1843 that he was at his 'work for Turner' all through April, though this may refer to the second volume of *Modern Painters*. On 15 February he says he is 14 days from his own deadline to finish the work (presumably volume I), and there are no entries between 12 March and 1 May, when he says that he could not write the diary 'while I had this work for Turner to do'. *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, selected and edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, Oxford, 1956, pp244-5.
- xxx Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, I, Preface to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1844, Cook and Wedderburn, eds., op cit, Vol III, p44.
- xxxi Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol I, 1843, Cook and Wedderburn, op cit, Vol III, p623.
- xxxii Letter to W H Harrison from Pitlochrie (sic), Saturday 25 September [1847]. Cook and Wedderburn, Vol XXXVI, p. 80. Minna, Isabel and Lionel Constable lived together at 16, Cunningham Place from 1838 (Parris and Fleming-Williams, op cit, pp22-6).
- xxxiii Charles Robert Leslie, *A Hand-book for Young Painters*, London: John Murray, 1855, pp. 267, 272.
- xxxiv Ibid, p. 277.
- xxxv *Modern Painters* Vol III, Appendix, 1856. Cook and Wedderburn, op cit, Vol V, p. 423.
- xxxvi Leslie writes that he was delighted and surprised when he heard that 'a very young man had come forward ... as champion of Turner' (Leslie, *Hand-book*, p. 267); Ruskin, in a Supplement to his *Academy Notes*, 1855, says the handbook is a warning to painters advanced in life not to meddle with things they don't understand (Cook and Wedderburn, eds, op cit, Vol XIV, p39).
- xxxvii Virginia Surtees, ed, *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, New Haven and London, 1981, p31 (17 February 1848).
- xxxviii Judith Bronkhurst has pointed out to me that Hunt was attending the Life School at the Royal Academy in February 1848. This may mean that he was considered too junior as a student to attend a lecture on painting; on the other hand, he was at least in the building on a regular basis and exposed to the conversation of other students who had attended the lecture.

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- xxxix PRB Journal, entry for Wednesday 23 May 1849. W M Rossetti, ed, *Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters*, London, 1900, p. 212.
- xl Leslie 1843, p80.
- xli PRB Journal, entries for Sunday 19 July 1849 and Saturday 29 December 1849. W M Rossetti, op cit, pp216 and 243.
- xlii No. 2, February 1850. Andrea Rose, ed, *The Germ: The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites*, Oxford, 1992, p. 58.
- xliii Leslie 1843, p8.
- xliv Commentary on an engraving of *The Cornfield*, 'a fine specimen of that truly English painter, the late John Constable, R A,' *The Lady's Newspaper*, April 8, 1848, p275; 'Constable ... had his studio on the downs and in the bye lanes of England,' *Daily News*, January 17 1851, review of Louis Marvy, *Sketches after the Landscape Painters of England* (sic).
- xliv L. Marvy, *Sketches after English Landscape Painters*, with short notices by W. M. Thackeray, London, 1850, text facing illustration of Constable's *Cornfield*.
- xlvi William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London and New York, 1913, Vol I, p. 193. This passage is not in the 1905 edition of Hunt's memoirs; the footnote was added by Edith Holman Hunt, who edited the 1913 edition. In both editions, Hunt says he dined with the Collins family at the time he was painting *The Hireling Shepherd* and they talked about the artists of the previous generation, including Constable (Hunt 1905, Vol I, p309-10).
- xlvi Hunt 1905, Vol II, p180.
- xlviii Hunt 1905, Vol I, pp272-3. Judith Bronkhurst, however, thinks that Hunt may be remembering the date of this visit incorrectly, since the first recorded letter from Leslie to Hunt, inviting him for a visit, dates only from September 1852, long after Hunt had finished *The Hireling Shepherd*.
- xlix Hunt 1905, Vol I, p305.
- i Millais wrote to Thomas Combe on 31 March 1852, saying that he had every hope that *Ophelia*, and his other picture (*A Huguenot*) would be placed in good positions, as the principal hanger, Mr Leslie had called twice to see them, 'each time expressing great admiration.' J G Millais, *Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, London, 1899, Vol I, p90. Drawings of the hanging arrangements at the 1852 exhibition, preserved in the Royal Academy Library (RA/SEC/23/1) show that *Ophelia* and *The Hireling Shepherd* were both hung on the line in the West Room, at equal intervals from the centre of the wall.
- li Ruskin, *Modern Painters* Vol I, 3rd edition, 1846, Cook and Wedderburn, Vol III p627. 'Purling brooks' is a quote from Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Mrs Teresa Blount* (1713-17): 'She went to plain-work, and to purling brooks,/ Old-fashion'd halls, dull aunts, and croaking rooks.' Ruskin seems to have made up 'tonsile shades.' Tonsile = capable of being clipped. Cicatrized = healed by means of the formation of a scar.
- lii For stripped elms, see R. H. Richens, *Elm*, Cambridge, 1983, pp98-9.
- liii Mary Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven and London, 2010, Vol 1 p122.
- liiv Leslie, *Hand-book*, p277.
- lv Surtees, ed, op cit, p189 (25 September 1856).
- lvi Ibid, p144 (13 July 1855).

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- lvii Letter dated 5 August 1852, cited in Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, London, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New Haven and London, 2001, p33.
- lviii Ruskin, *Modern Painters* Vol IV, 1856, Cook and Wedderburn, eds., Vol VI, pp30-1.
- lix Bernard Richards, 'Ruskin and Constable', *Ruskin Newsletter*, 14, Spring 1976, p5. Richards also points out that Ruskin could have used Constable's principles to support his case for accuracy and knowledge in landscape painting, and expresses the opinion that 'Constable was discovering principles later followed by Ford Madox Brown in his landscapes' (ibid, pp5-6).
- lx Staley, op cit, p176.
- lxi Letter from John Ruskin to Thomas Plint, undated, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, 1254, letter 15.
- lxii See Christiana Payne, *John Brett, Pre-Raphaelite Landscape Painter*, New Haven and London, 2010, pp17, 25. John Brett Diary 1851-61, private collection, typescript edited by Charles Brett, 2002 (entries for 12 July 1852, p16, and 17 August 1853, p44). The first reference to Ruskin in this diary, 20 May 1852 (p15) is more ambivalent.
- lxiii Sketchbook no 16, '1864 Palermo', end of book (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)
- lxiv Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School*, London, 1866, vol 2, pp390-1, 398.
- lxv Leslie, *Hand-book*, p273.