
Constable, Clouds, Climate Change

Gillen D'Arcy Wood

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

“The weather is a nobler and more interesting subject, it is the present state of the skies and of the earth, on which plenty and famine are suspended, on which millions depend for the necessaries of life”—Samuel Johnson (*The Idler*, June 24, 1758)

After exhibiting “The Hay Wain” at the Royal Academy Exhibition in the spring of 1821, Constable spent the summer on Hampstead Heath, producing oil sketches with a focus on the sky and cloud formations. In the autumn, he worked “more” on “The Hay Wain” (Figure 1), then re-submitted the painting to the British Institution exhibition in early 1822.¹ That summer Constable returned to the Heath, this time abandoning all representation of landscape in favor of pure skiescapes. Constable hoped for commercial success from “The Hay Wain,” but the only customer was a French dealer, which was mortifying to the Tory Constable. By contrast, he never considered his skiescapes for exhibition or sale. Almost two hundred years later, the cloud studies stand with the iconic “Hay Wain” and the other Stour Valley “six-footers” at the summit of Constable’s achievement. Two exhibitions in the last decade were devoted to the Hampstead skiescapes, and a weighty monograph, *John Constable’s Skies* (1999), by a trained meteorologist, John Thornes. But even

after this flurry of analysis, critics dispute Constable’s motivation for painting the Hampstead cloud studies, and their relation to the contemporaneous “Hay Wain.”

Thornes argues that Constable, stung by criticism of his six-footer skies, sought to redress the supposed deficiency, to acknowledge the sky as “the chief ‘*Organ of Sentiment*’” in landscape painting (*Correspondence* 6:77). His success shows not only in the gorgeousness of the cloud studies themselves, but the improvement in his formal paintings after 1821, in which “the achievement of balanced light gives a freshness and realistic feeling . . . that is almost entirely lacking before 1821” (119). Timothy Wilcox, however, sees “more of the veracity and immediacy of the [sky] sketches” in Constable’s art after 1821-2, while an art-historical majority, including Louis Hawes, Michael Rosenthal and Graham Reynolds, sees no improvement.² Anne Lyle points out, in addition, that Constable received at least as much praise as blame for his skies prior to 1821, and that none of the fifty surviving cloud studies appear to have been used as the basis for the sky in any of Constable’s subsequent paintings. In their sheer experimental variety, they “go far beyond what he might have needed for his large paintings.”³ With that, the rationale for the cloud studies begins to fall apart. If Consta-

ble did not “need” the Hampstead studies, and they did not “improve” his handling of skylscapes, what was their purpose? And what is their relation to the commercial studio paintings

of the 1820s for which they were supposedly a preparation? Where lies “the truth of skies” in Constable? (John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* [1851] I:201).



Figure 1: Landscape: Noon [“The Haywain”], 1821. The National Gallery, London

The art-historical debate vanishes with “The Hay Wain.” For Thornes, it is the “watershed” painting, whose sky exemplifies Constable’s improved technique achieved through the cloud studies. Louis Hawes agrees that “The Hay Wain” shows “master[y]” of the skyscape, which becomes evidence for the contrary argument, that Constable “had already achieved a remarkable naturalism in the skies shortly *before* launching his skying campaign late in 1821” (360). The issue here becomes one of dates. Constable first showed “The Hay Wain” in the spring of 1821. But just how much did Constable revise the painting that autumn? Robert Hunt of the *Examiner* celebrated the original 1821 sky “which for noble volume of cloud and clear light we have never at any time seen exceeded except by Nature,” then, on seeing the painting again at the British Institution the following March expressed “doubt whether Mr. Constable ha[d] improved” the painting (Judy Crosby Ivy, *Constable and the Critics, 1802-37* [1991] 88,92).

Is the sky in “The Hay Wain” the product of a summer’s intensive masterclass in “skying” or does it owe nothing to it, as Hunt’s reviews suggest? These questions are not an-

swerable historically—there is too little information on what Constable did to the painting—and on the aesthetic issue of “improvement,” opinion is divided. The question of the painterly quality of the sky of “The Hay Wain” rests between un-decidability and irrelevance: the threatening clouds giving way to the burst of sunshine that bathes the cart exemplify either an improved or unimproved Constable sky, choice of which likewise determines one’s position regarding the cloud studies, as either belonging to a Kenneth Clark narrative of ever-improving naturalism in Constable’s technique, or somewhere outside that narrative.

If the cloud studies have no home within Constable’s own career, if they were undertaken for no explicit reason, and with no discernable effect on his art, the art-historical reading which is opposed to Thornes, nevertheless, elevates their importance as well as Constable himself in the history of modern European art. The French interest in “The Hay Wain” in 1821 led to its exhibition to great acclaim in Paris in 1824. Delacroix, famously, was inspired. The internationalization of Constable was renewed in earnest in the 1860s, with his recognized influence on the Barbizon school and

the Impressionists, and Constable's "modernity" became a commonplace of twentieth-century reception beginning with Charles Holmes's landmark study in 1902.⁴ The cloud studies, in their turn, after their first public exhibition in the modernist banner year of 1912, have extended the life of Constable's modernity beyond Impressionism into twentieth-century abstract art. To call them Kandinsky-like studies in "abstract expressionism," as Graham Reynolds has done, is now a critical commonplace, and it is difficult to imagine the recent curatorial and corporate investment in exhibiting the cloud studies without their being satisfyingly integrated, alongside Monet's haystacks, into a pre-history of twentieth-century painting (86).

As disinterested exercises in shape and form, the cloud studies make a proleptic leap toward abstraction and beyond. In short, the twentieth century recast Constable, the naturalist and Little Englander, as a prophet of European High Modernism. To resist this appropriation of Constable (and also Turner) by the Grand Modernist Narrative, whereby nineteenth-century painting is either hopelessly subordinate to or heroically transcends the naturalist regime to anticipate the modernism, I take to be one of the principal purposes of the art criticism of Karl Kroeber. "The primary thrust of Romantic art," he has written, was toward "the representation of reality as historical process."⁵ Abstraction be damned! The importance of asserting this argument on Constable's behalf seems to me greater than ever, both in its own terms, and in ways that Professor Kroeber could not have envisaged when he wrote those words in 1978.

Thornes's *John Constable's Skies* (1950) elaborates on the arguments first laid out a half-century ago by German scholar Kurt Badt, who linked Constable's interest in "skying" in the early 1820s to the contemporary fashion for meteorology. Luke Howard had first analyzed cloud formations according to the now standard Latin terms in 1803, and his work came to greater notice on the publication by his student Thomas Forster of *Researches into Atmospheric Phaenomena* (1813), a second-hand copy of which Constable owned and annotated. Then in 1818-20, Howard himself published his definitive work, *The Climate of London*, which included statistical tabulations of rainfall, temperature, etc., upon which climate historians still rely for their reconstruction of British weather in the early nineteenth century. Goethe was an admirer and correspondent of Howard's, and Coleridge and Shelley both wrote "cloud" poems around 1820, the latter seeming to apply Howard's taxonomy of cirrus, cumulus, etc. for the stanzaic organization of his poem. Clouds, in heavy volume across Europe through the 1810s owing to unusual amounts of volcanic dust in the atmosphere, became part of the post-Waterloo *zeitgeist* in both science and the arts. Forster marveled at "the daily increasing attention" to the late-coming science of meteorology (vii). But disciplinary tensions quickly surfaced. Goethe applied to Caspar David Friedrich to illustrate a German translation of Howard, but the artist rebuffed him, fearing scientific reduction would

cause "the immediate downfall of landscape painting" (qtd. Gage, "Clouds Over Europe," *Constable's Clouds* 133).

Friedrich's cool response to the meteorological enthusiasm of Goethe mirrors that of the art-historical establishment to Thornes, for whom Constable's achievement is in meteorological verisimilitude, i.e. naturalism. Even Wilcox, who agrees with Thornes that the cloud studies "improved" Constable's technique in his larger works, denies the influence of meteorology: "Constable had no need of such a source [i.e. Forster] to aid his own endeavours" (*Constable's Clouds* 85). The antipathy in art criticism against literalist, scientific argument, compounded with the importance of preserving the cloud studies for the "modernist" Constable, have ensured the unpopularity of Thornes's argument. Perhaps, concede the skeptics, there was a "meteorological moment" in British culture in the decade after Waterloo. Perhaps Constable even knew of Howard's cloud terminology. But more likely not. Why, for example, is there but a single mention of Forster and Howard in Constable's voluminous correspondence? To the art historians, there seems little need to look beyond William Gilpin, who had instructed students of the picturesque to

Mark each floating cloud

Its form, its colour; and what mass of shade

It gives the scene below, pregnant with change

Perpetual . . .

(*"On Landscape Painting,"* 1.68-71)⁶

Notwithstanding the demonstrated weakness of the Badt/Thornes position from a narrow historical viewpoint—Constable did not require Luke Howard to inspire visions of himself as "the man of clouds"—the modernist reading of the cloud studies is likewise no longer satisfying (*Correspondence* 6:142). From our own meteorological moment, on the heels of the hottest decade in a millennium and perennial drought in the south of England, a fresh reading of Constable's cloud studies as "the representation of the reality of an historical process"—call it climate—seems imperative. The terms of conventional art history were never wrong, only we cannot view the cloud studies as we once did. More even than "historical process," they now possess a specific content, as snapshots of climate history, recording, in Constable's words, "the natural history . . . of the skies."⁷ To turn from art history to climate history is not to repudiate the aesthetic in Constable. On the contrary, climatology will produce tropes of reading the Constable skiescapes that enlarge immeasurably their potency and relevance as cultural objects, beyond modernism and into the twenty-first century. It will also reimagine the relation of the cloud studies to "The Hay Wain" as a working climatic critique of the georgic monumentalism of the six-footers.

A painter's painter, Constable's first principle was not picturesque or narrative content, but the very material de-

light he took in the representation of color and atmosphere: "A cloudy or stormy day at noon with partial bright and humid gleam of light over meadow scenery, and near the banks of rivers with trees, boats and building, are most desirable objects with a painter, who delights in Colour and Light and Shade" (*Discourses* 26). His fascination, in Michael Rosenthal's words, was for "abstracted nature, seen in terms of essences, wind and light" (166). Whatever the abstract purity of Constable's intentions, "The Hay Wain" has by degrees entered popular imagination with a specific cultural loading, as the English georgic ideal representing what John Barrell called in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980) "permanence, the stability of English agriculture" (148-9). The empty hay cart in the center is returning to the field in the distant right of the picture where reapers are at work, and will soon load up the cart once more for its return journey. A washerwoman and fisherman are uninterested witnesses to an unremarkable event that will not only repeat itself numerous times during the course of this midsummer day, but is also, at another level, a timeless act, a ritual element of the diurnal round of English country life, simple evidence of what Constable's favorite poet, Thomson, called "the glories of the circling year" ("Summer" 1.14). The sky too belongs to the complacent image of cyclical continuity, as if to echo Hazlitt's trust that "It is the same setting sun that we see and remember year after year, through summer and winter, seed-time and harvest . . . the glittering sunny showers, and December snows—are still the same, or accompanied with the same thoughts and 'feelings'" (*Complete Works*, ed. Howe [1934] 5:102-3).

But landscape, as Constable himself acknowledged, "is the child of history," and there are many pitfalls for the informed viewer seeking such pastoral comforts from "The Hay Wain" (*Discourses* 40). The little ford breasted by the cart is by no means timeless: the water and irrigation system of the East Anglian countryside had been overhauled in the 1740s by a system of canals on the Stour River, built in response to a particularly dry stretch of summers that decade. The canal system that is a feature of Constable's six-footers ("Flatford Mill," "The Leaping Horse," etc.) thus represents a modernization undertaken within living memory of Constable's painting "The Hay Wain." The segmentation of the landscape into discrete fields bound by fords, hedgerows and other markers, which forms the compositional structure of Constable's six-footers, is still more recent, a product of the progressive enclosure of common land begun from the 1780s and accelerated by the exigencies of war with France.⁸ That war, which put great pressure on the price of wheat, also prompted many Suffolk farmers to abandon dairy farming. The presence of the reapers in the distant field may thus be a sight only possible within a decade of Constable's painting. By 1820, England as a pastoral idyll of swains and shepherd had long passed into myth.

After the war in 1815, a new round of enclosures in East Anglia displaced the population, leading to unemploy-

ment, food shortages, and labor unrest. In April, 1822, Constable, discussing his problems selling "The Hay Wain," refers unsympathetically to the plight of his fellow East Anglians: "My brother is uncomfortable about the state of things in Suffolk. They are as bad as Ireland—'never a night without seeing fires near or at a distance' . . . no abatement of tithes or rents" (*Correspondence* 6:88). The angler in the bushes of "The Hay Wain" might well be no sportsman, but rather seeking alternative means to feed his family now that the commons are closed to him and the new farming technology has made him dispensable to the squire. The driver of the hay wain, too, could plausibly end his day of seasonally contracted labor at some insurrectionary meeting and, when night falls, be setting stables on fire.⁹ "The Hay Wain" was the last of his major Stour Valley paintings; after 1820, one could argue that Constable shifted his focus to Hampstead and Salisbury prompted by his painful awareness that the East Anglian community of his boyhood was fast falling apart. The still moment of "The Hay Wain," according to this reading, stands as a monumental defense against the social unrest that would ultimately produce the Reform Bill, a prospect Constable regularly reflected on in his letters with fear and loathing.

The problem with containing the ever-popular "Hay Wain" wholly within a Tory autobiography of georgic nostalgia, however, as John Barrell does, is that so few of its admirers are now personally familiar with such a scene's having ever existed, or understand its references. And yet "The Hay Wain" still retains its sentimental power. By its rhythmic structure, its implication of time passing both in the trajectory of the cart and the "weathered" naturalness of its man-made elements—the worn brick, the half-submerged remains of the jetty—the picture assures viewers, in Kroeber's felicitous phrase, "that *we* are at home on the earth," whoever *we* are.¹⁰ By inscrutable means, Constable's localism becomes localism-in-general. The specific class history of the Stour Valley complicates ones viewing experience of the painting, but cannot offset the wonderous self-sufficiency of the image, which in its utter repletion of natural fact—what Wilcox has called "The Hay Wain" the "best example of the cross-fertilisation of ideas, both technical and abstract, surrounding the cloud studies and the six-footers . . . the clouds can be seen as part of a complex nexus of themes and ideas."¹¹ The original title of the painting, "Landscape: Noon" calls attention to the light shining directly on the cart, and thence to its source in "the chief '*Organ of Sentiment*'" above. But the most striking element is the convective cloud formation above the trees. Constable was most drawn to cumulus clouds for their filtered distribution of light across the landscape. He surely agreed with Howard that "Independently of the beauty and magnificence it adds to the face of nature, the Cumulus serves to screen the earth from the direct rays of the sun; by its multiplied reflections to diffuse, and, as it were, economise the Light" (*The Climate of London* [1833] L:xliv).

The economy of light—its diffusions across the varying textures of water, wood, brick and foliage—is the essence of

Constable's art. The sky, as the source of that light, produces what Kroeber calls "the chiaroscuro of meaning" characteristic of the mature landscapes (*British Romantic Art* [1986] 40). That is, Constable's radical innovation occurs not at the compositional level, but at the point of contact between brush and canvas. The relationship between paint and perception is entirely fluid, depending on where one stands in relation to the canvas. The closer one peers at a particular element—light reflected on the water, the outline of a cloud—the more indistinct, in fact mysterious, the technical achievement becomes. Naturalism is an inadequate word for that achievement. "The Hay Wain" is an artificial reality-system dependent in equal part on scrupulous attention to "natural" effects of which a viewer might be reminded in his own optical memory, and the translation of those effects in the studio into a virtuosic language of pigment-signs, organized to produce the impression of both a conscientious dependence on nature and stand-alone totality.

Neither naturalism nor pictorial totality guarantees meaning, however. Even the weather itself, albeit so naturalistically delineated, is dubious. Some commentators have forecast imminent rain, while in *Constable and His Influence on Landscape Art* (1902) Charles Holmes dismisses the entire picture as "merely an aggregate of circumstances suggesting fine weather" (174, emphasis added). When critics of the Stour Valley paintings, and even Fisher himself, began to call for new subject matter, Constable responded that "weather and effect" was all the variety he required. (*Correspondence* 6:181) Clouds, in particular, were essential to his capturing "that playful change so much desired by the painter." (*Discourses* 14) In other words, even if one agrees that "The Hay Wain" represents weather, the problem of meaning is only deferred. "Change" is a process, not a subject, and the weather, even in its verisimilitude, is ambiguous. The direction of the wind, as evidenced by the smoke from the cottage chimney drifting away toward the trees, suggests that the storm clouds are passing: a gray morning is giving way to a brilliant midday. Constable preferred to paint at right angles to the wind, and so it appears here, with the white clouds to the deep right (south), though playing a prominent role in the composition, actually having little to do with the literal "weather" of the scene. The dark clouds are the climatic past of the image, not its present or future, which lies overhead beyond the frame. That said, meteorology, literally speaking, is marginal to one's experience of the actual painting. The clouds exist, as Kroeber argues, "to endow the still scene with movement" (*Romantic Landscape Vision* 19). In the grammar of the image, the sky is the verb of motion, inflecting the hay cart itself with implicit movement, dramatizing, within the viewer's pictorial imaginations, time past and time future.

Constable considered the harmonization of the landscape and sky as the greatest technical challenge he faced. "I have done a good deal of skying" he wrote to his confidant Archdeacon Fisher after his first summer at Hampstead, "I am determined to conquer all difficulties." (*Correspondence*

6:76) At the same time, there must have been a purely aesthetic thrill in entering so completely into "Cloudland, gorgeous land!" as Coleridge called it ("Fancy in Nubibus" [1818] I:9) By the time Constable embarked on his cloud studies as a means of mastering the painterly relation of land and sky, however, natural philosophers had begun to recognize that that relation was not simply formal and timeless, but dynamic and historically specific, dependent on human activity. French naturalist the Comte de Buffon (read widely in English in the early nineteenth century) argued that agricultural development ameliorated climate, a happy idea Thomas Jefferson appropriated for his promotion of American western expansion.¹² Luke Howard, in turn, recognized that the spread of cities affected the weather, and that winters in the suburbs of London—for instance, Hampstead—had "improved" in his lifetime. Taking this climatological view of "The Hay Wain," one finds a landscape that was, in the eyes of its contemporaries, producing its own sky, warming the climate and stimulating greater rainfall. The understanding of this process, as it then was, was no less grandiose for being benign. Johnson chose a recognizable Enlightenment stooge in the astronomer of *Rasselas*, who imagines he can control the seasons. The supposed ameliorative relation between climate, agriculture and human settlement was an enabling premise of imperialism, where the temperate climate of Europe was, with its people and cultures, to be exported across the globe. "Climate change," in this progressive sense, "was one of the most talked about subjects during the early life of the [American] republic." (Bewell 131).

In the Enlightenment narrative of European history, the scientific view of climate naturally succeeded the biblical view, which saw vicissitudes of weather as signs of divine judgment. But belief systems overlap in messy ways. A providential view of weather remained in popular circulation in Constable's lifetime, for instance, in Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, widely read through the 1820s. Constable himself was reading White in 1821-2, with its numerous allusions to theologians of the prior age who viewed climate, and the wind and rain in particular, as God's communication to the stewards of His creation. Constable's letters on the weather of Selborne focus accordingly on its extremities, on "terrible" frosts and "scalding" heat waves, those events that give the strongest impression of a divine hand. "The summer of the year 1783," he writes, "was an amazing and portentous one, and full of horrible phaenomena" (ed. Kearton [1902] 281). The weather is no guarantor of georgic stability, but a kind of cosmic goblin given to wild tricks. White's meteorological world view is suffused with pre-Enlightenment catastrophism, "a keen sense," as Stuart Peterfreund wrote, "that theodical time is running out, and that meteorological and other signs portend just such an end."¹³

In looking at "The Hay Wain," which climatological view was closer to Constable's. His own written sentiments are decidedly conventional: the painter of nature shall be "led to adore the hand that has, with such lavish beneficence,

scattered the principles of enjoyment and happiness throughout every department of the Creation.” (*Discourses* 13) For Leon Wieseltier, however, in “Spirit in the Sky,” voicing the art-historical consensus, Constable’s clouds represent “the de-sacralization of the sky,” the liberation of the skyscape from saccharine religious idealization (*Constable’s Skies* 58). The absence of obvious apocalyptic signs notwithstanding, however, Constable’s choice between religion and science in “The Hay Wain” is ambiguous. The sunlight on the

cart might be providential, and its progress toward the light on the meadow a redemptive trajectory (Ronald Paulson gives the autobiographical translation of this narrative, where the sunlit meadow represents marriage and financial independence). The cloud studies, on the other hand, with their dispassionate formality, appear to refuse allegory, and belong to the new meteorological moment as natural products of Enlightenment curiosity.



Figure 2: Cloud Study, Hampstead, September 11, 1821. The Royal Academy of Arts, London

If the clouds of “The Hay Wain” are its climatic past, then the cloud study of September 11, 1821 (Fig. 2), undertaken between the first appearance of the painting and its “revision,” appears as a corrective filling-out of the view, a search for more meteorological information. It is the first of four views sketched on consecutive days from on top of the Heath. Constable generally allowed himself no more than an hour for his sketches, sitting with his paint box on his knees, a thick paper fixed to the inside lid. Painting with oils in such conditions, with an ever-shifting subject, posed monumental difficulties. The Constable Research Project has shed much

light on the artist’s materials and techniques, but the realism of the product, taken in such relative haste, must forever remain a wonder of art.¹⁴ In the September 11 image, the tree tops visible in the bottom right of the image give the impression of a gaze that has been fixed on the landscape, perhaps on some georgic scene, but that is now, at whatever prompting, scanning upward to the sky. The trees seem on the point of disappearing from view. By the next summer, they *will* have gone, when Constable forgoes any reference, however elevated, to land bound things. The study, characteristically, is untitled; but it is inscribed on the back with a time, date

and meteorologically specific descriptions: “Morning under the sun—Clouds silvery grey, on warm ground Sultry. Light wind to the S.W. fine all day—but rain in the night following.” The last phrase suggests that Constable returned to the study the following day to confirm the weather events the image itself portends.

The painterly organization of “The Hay Wain” may seduce one to think of georgic permanence and stability, but the cloud studies cannot. Their subject is change itself, or weather as a figure for change. The subject is thus less the clouds than the invisible presence of the wind they signify. The skyscapes are deeply negative images, with the clouds, themselves intangible, called upon not only to fill the vacuum of the atmosphere but to serve, in their pictorial fixity, as signs of motion and metaphors of instability. Their emphasis is not on a dramatic meteorological event, but the mundane unfolding of weather itself as a formal pattern of relations between opacity, light and implicit motion. Between 1817-19, Turner was conducting sky studies of his own, but his interest lay in the cosmic “apocalypse of heaven,” not in weather as such. Ruskin devoted pages of panegyric in *Modern Painters* to the naturalism of Turner’s skies but never considered their role anything but figurative. For Ruskin, the Turnerian sky was “almost human in its passions, almost spiritual in its tenderness, almost divine in its infinity, its appeal to what is immortal in us is as distinct, as its ministry of chastisement or of blessing to what is mortal is essential” (I: 218, 202). Constable’s skies, by contrast, are not spiritualized; they are purified of sentiment. “Nothing numinous rides these clouds,” as Wieseltier observes (*Constable’s Skies* 58). Instead of the figurations of heaven, Constable’s cloud studies represent “reality as historical process;” they are, in fact, studies of process itself.

From our meteorological moment of the twenty-first century, the processes of weather, as Constable observed them, now represent a specific climate history: the condition of the northern sky on the very brink of modern, man-made climate change. With that, all is changed utterly. The conventional art-historical reading of the cloud studies as experiments in abstraction necessarily gives way to the recognition of their empirical, literal, documentary power. Some climatologists predict that over the course of the present century, if Co2 emissions remain at their current levels, there will be a small increase in annual rainfall in Britain, but as much as 30% less rain in the summer in southern England.¹⁵ Constable inherited Thomson’s vision of an temperate England of “timely rains,” where the dance of the seasons could be relied upon to “soften [] into joy the surly storms.” (“Summer” l.124, 126) In the coming century in Britain, more rain will come in the form of violent storms, and in the non-summer months. Untimely rains and surly storms are forecast. Constable’s art depended on wet summers (1821 was one “in the wet extreme,” according to Howard) that would preserve the greenness and luxuriance of the foliage through the heat of July and August and into the autumn (*Barometrographia*

[1847] unpaginated). As Fuseli reportedly said, “I like de landscapes of Constable . . . but he makes me call for my greatcoat and umbrella” (C. R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* [1911] 87).

Rain is the future of Constable’s paintings, but also the past. Constable preferred to paint his landscapes after a night of rain, which brought out what he proprietarily called his “dews” and “freshness”: “Nature is never seen, in this climate at least, to greater perfection than at about nine o’clock in the mornings of July and August . . . and it is still more delightful if vegetation has been refreshed with a shower during the night.” (*Correspondence* 3: 96; *Discourses* 17) The controversial “white spots” he applied in finishing his paintings were in fact temporal weather markers, the residue of a recently concluded meteorological event, essential to the image’s *durée*. However sensitive to criticism, Constable resisted all calls to dispense with the effect. But on top of the hottest decade on record, and with English summers increasingly dry, dewy freshness will decline as a characteristic of real-world Constable country. July, 2006, was the sunniest month in three hundred years of weather records in England and, were Constable on the Heath, he would have waited in vain for his clouds, his sketchbook filled with moribund Claudean blue.

Our consciousness of climate change has produced an image of weather the very opposite of the georgic ideal long attributed to “The Hay Wain.” The seasons now are not proceeding cyclically, where any perception of “change” might be comfortably brought within the parameters of natural variation, but according to a linear trajectory of potentially irreversible transformation. Constable preferred to paint on days with a westerly wind, which brought his favorite rain-bearing cumulus clouds (Thornes 66). But the clouds that so often promise rain in Constable’s famous landscapes are fewer in number and precipitate less. “Constable Country” and the climate that produced it is vanishing, an artifact of climate history. With this knowledge, too, the half-century long debate between the meteorological and modernist readings of Constable’s cloud studies is effectively redundant.

In the age of global warming, Constable’s cloud studies produce two new figures, heretofore unreadable. Constable’s image of a September morning sky on Hampstead Heath in 1821 has crossed from the literal into the figurative, from the meteorological into the apocalyptic. Mundane in conception, it now nevertheless bears the deep pathos of a specific historical process it invisibly captures, namely the climate change that with the impact of industrialization and urbanization was just beginning. Next to it, the idealized skies of European art—Tiepolo’s vault of heaven, Rosa’s terrors of the storm—appear cold or quaintly melodramatic. Turner’s skies are apocalyptic, but reveal nothing of the real end-of-humankind. It is the literal, meteorological sky, Constable’s sky, that contains within it imaginable portents of last things. The Romantic sublime in art, it turns out, falsely figured the apocalypse, which will come not with the wrath and power of

a storm on the Alps but ever-so-gradually, as the impalpable onset of clouds appearing above a stand of trees in a Constable oil sketch.

The second figure that now adheres to the cloud studies, when it didn't before, is loss. Together with the experience, unique in Western painting, of imaginatively forecasting the weather—an adventure in futurity—the cloud studies now speak also to a lost climatological past. From our own historical moment, they represent the irrevocable September-ness of 1821. Constable's September is not ours. Old-fashioned melancholy derived its pleasures from a comparison between the slow ebb of human existence in linear time against the cyclical renewal of the seasons. But with the buds, butterflies and birds beloved of Gilbert White arriving up to two weeks earlier in England than just a generation ago, March will soon be the cruelest month for such reflections, and we will be able to mourn along with our own youth and possibilities the ever-diminishing possibilities for human civilization on a warming planet.

In an ironic twist to the unfolding geo-tragedy of climate change, the terms for our experience of clouds and climate in Constable now threaten to turn full circle, back to Gilbert White and the providential theory of nature to which he subscribed: "it pleaseth God, for the punishment of a nation, to withhold rain by a special interposition . . . this distribution of the clouds and rain is to me (I say) a great argument of providence and divine disposition."¹⁶ The distinctly religious figure of the apocalypse has resumed its relevance to British Romantic art, not in the vortical phantasmagoria of Turner, but the incremental material processes of global warming unwittingly memorialized by John Constable. The catastrophist viewpoint might be de-theologized, but the scenarios we are now taught to envision are no less apocalyptic. With sea levels predicted to rise by up to a meter this century, and a radically more violent and uneven distribution of rainfall, we can expect "food shortages, decreased water supplies in key regions, and disruption to energy supplies . . . global conflict and economic malaise."¹⁷ Human misery aside, as many as a third of all species of plants and animals may be on the path to extinction by 2050. In the words of one NASA climatologist: "I wouldn't be shocked to find out that by 2100 most things were destroyed."¹⁸ Presumably that includes landscape painting, and essays on it in *The Wordsworth Circle*.

Constable's full intentions in painting the cloud studies remain indecipherable, but the reading newly available to us positions them as working critiques of the georgic enlightenment skies of the six-footers. None of the cloud studies subsequently appear in any of Constable's academic paintings because they are self-critical studies, standing in reflection upon, not as preparations for, Constable's commercial art. That is, "The Hay Wain" might easily be appropriated by an enlightenment georgic ideal, as the image of a temperate, quintessentially European climate to which the colonial do-

minions will be adapted, and at which Tory hearts will forever gladden. The skyscapes, however, as studies of weather-as-such, have come to read as unnerving commentaries on that georgic stability and England as a climatic ideal. Set alongside the cloud studies, "the signs and symbols of permanence" in "The Hay Wain," are "transformed into markers of doubt."¹⁹ The forecast in and of "The Hay Wain" is uncertain. Certainly, nothing about it or the cloud studies now suggests our "transcendent survival" of climate, as Ann Bermingham could once safely argue. (159)

Climate change, as a phenomenon, is a problematic object of perception, as impalpable as a painting or Romantic poem.²⁰ One's experience of long-term changes in the weather takes place between the statistic and the anecdote, and climate memory, as Howard saw already in 1818, is untrustworthy: "Our recollection of the weather, even at the distance of a few years, being very imperfect, we are apt to suppose that the Seasons are not what they formerly were; while, in fact, they are only going through a series of changes, such as we may have heretofore already witnessed, and forgotten." (1:xxxiv) The strong impulse when asked the question—has the climate changed?—is to say "yes," when one may have experienced only variation or nothing at all. Do Constable's clouds change after 1821? One likewise wants to say yes, but are vulnerable to contradiction. In the running, ruinous debate over climate change, even the statistical truth of warming, it is argued, may represent mostly variation and little or no unique change outside the natural climate cycle—at least, such is the never-fully-falsifiable skeptical position. The space of climate change denial is as wide open as the debate over Constable's skies.

Constable took Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* seriously, and was always looking to leaven his fascination for local detail—the "slimy posts & woodwork" etc.—with a more elevated "general idea" amenable to academic orthodoxy (*Correspondence* 6:77) Out of view of the Academy, he took great painterly interest in the weather, the very definition of the local and transient Reynolds abhorred. The cloud studies, meteorologically conceived, were anti-academic in their essence and only began to find an audience in the early twentieth century with the final overthrow of academic art. That audience is still growing, but its view of the paintings has changed. We are all Constables now—obsessive, even morbid students of the weather. That "most magnificent ordinance of the clouds," as Ruskin called it in *Modern Painters* (1856), no longer points to infinity or the Divine but to a set of wholly material historical probabilities, to climate-as-the-end-of-history (IV: 12).

Constable was advised by his academic mentors to employ his skies as a "White Sheet drawn behind the Objects," a backdrop to the main business of his paintings (6:76-7). His rejection of that advice led to an extraordinary series of oil sketches that have the impalpability of climate as their very subject. In the cloud studies of 1821-2, Constable is indeed "a

formulator of new visual arguments,” but those arguments are for natural history as much as abstraction (Shields 19). “Historicism is at the root of all Romantic art,” Kroeber concludes in *British Romantic Art* (34); by historicism, he means the self-reflexive awareness of the thinking viewer. Nothing could be more true of the cloud studies. Looking at them, one is moved to embark with Constable upon the same scopic adventure. Scrutinizing his skies, one becomes conscious of oneself: the diffusive clouds take on the shape of looking, and the humidity of self.

Beyond historicity, however, there is a new rhetoric of history in the cloud studies, which foretell not simply the weather of a September day in 1821, but a neo-biblical lastness of things. The argument over meteorology in Constable is a dead letter, just as the opposition between science and art was anathema to Constable himself: “Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature” (*Discourses* 69). Constable’s frustration with the divergence of science and art was as palpable, if not as pressing as modern disciplinary anxiety. His cloud studies are an exemplary response to that frustration. They compel the climatologist to look for the truth in skies, but also the humanist, who feels demoralized by the regime of the sciences, to address the great crisis of the age. Humanists are not climatologists, but are trained to theorize art and experience. When made desperate by competing models of climate change and their disaster scenarios, I say: turn to Constable’s clouds, which, by turning weather into art, model the attentiveness one will need to experience and record, not simply stand witness to, the slow-motion catastrophe of change itself.

NOTES

¹John Constable’s *Correspondence*, ed. R. B. Beckett (1968), 6:71. Hereafter referred to in text.

²Wilcox in *Constable’s Clouds*, ed. Edward Morris (2000), 72; Hawes, “Constable’s Sky Sketches,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969), 360; Rosenthal, *Constable: The Painter and His Landscape* (1983), 133, 136; Reynolds, *Constable: The Natural Painter* (1965), 84.

³“This Glorious Pageantry of Heaven,” in *Constable’s Skies*, ed. Frederic Bancroft (2004), 34; Timothy Wilcox, in *Constable’s Clouds* 87.

⁴Ian Fleming-Williams and Leslie Parris, *The Discovery of Constable* (1984), 122-3.

⁵“Romantic Historicism: The Temporal Sublime,” in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, ed. Karl Kroeber and William Walling (1978), 149.

⁶*Three Essays* (1792), 101.

⁷*John Constable’s Discourses*, ed. R.B. Beckett (1970), 14. Hereafter referred to in text.

⁸Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscape: Turner and Constable* (1982), 116.

⁹Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology* (1986), 88-9.

¹⁰From Professor Kroeber’s analysis of “The Hay Wain” in *Romantic Landscape Vision* (1975) 25, which is the inspiration for this essay.

¹¹“Keeping Time: Clouds and Chronometry in Constable’s Major Landscapes,” in *Constable’s Clouds*, 167.

¹²Alan Bewell, “Jefferson’s Thermometer: Colonial Biogeographical Constructions of the Climate of America,” in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. Noah Heringman (2003).

¹³“Great Frosts and . . . Some Very Hot Summers’: Strange Weather, the Last Letters, and the Last Days in Gilbert White’s *The Natural History of Selborne*,” in *Romantic Science*, 94.

¹⁴Sarah Cove, “Very Great Difficulty in Composition and Execution: Materials and Techniques of Constable’s Sky and Cloud Studies of the 1820s,” in *Constable’s Skies* 123-152.

¹⁵P. D. Jones and P. A. Reid, “Assessing Future Changes in Extreme Precipitation over Britain using Regional Climate Model Integrations,” *International Journal of Climatology* 21 (2001) 1337-56. In a fitting historical convergence of art and science, the Climatic Research Unit, one of the most important centers in the world for the study of climate change, is located at the University of East Anglia, where Jones and Reid are on the faculty. I take additional information here from its website and from various other UK government online sources, including the UK Climate Impacts Programme and the City of London website.

¹⁶John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691; Edinburgh, 1798), 83.

¹⁷A. Barrie Pittock, *Climate Change: Turning up the Heat* (2005), 127

¹⁸Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (2006) 85, 110-11.

¹⁹Conal Shields, “Why Skies?” in *Constable’s Skies*, 121.

²⁰As Arden Reed has put it, “The weather diffuses a mist that obscures the pages of the book of nature, covering over its transparent signs with weather-signs that are more difficult to read—difficult in the way that literary signs are.” *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (1983) 10.