

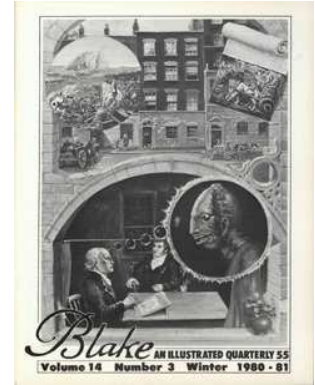
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R E V I E W

Andrew Wilton, Constable's "English Landscape
Scenery"

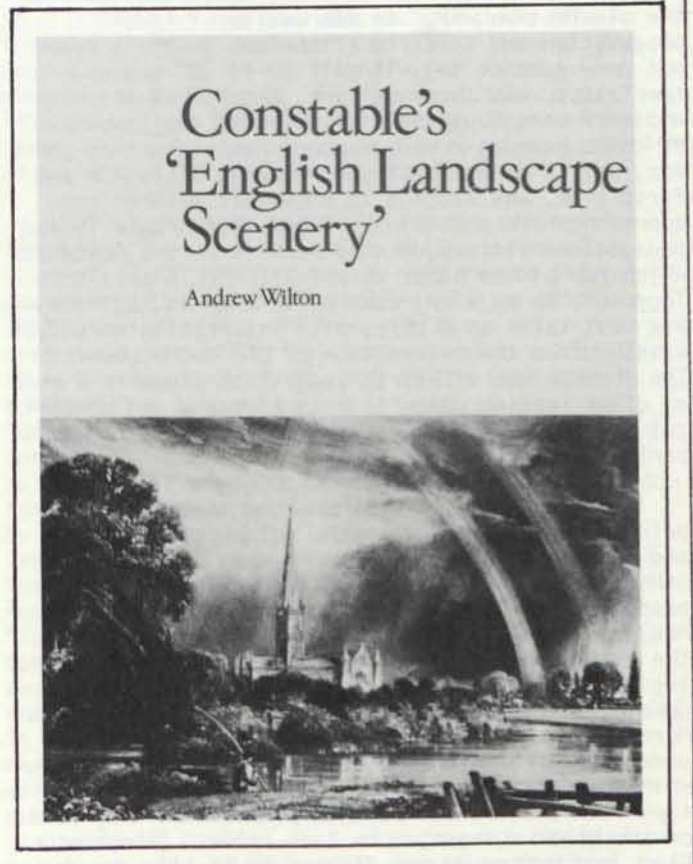
Ann Bermingham Miller

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128-129



Andrew Wilton. **Constable's 'English Landscape Scenery.'** London: British Museum Publications Ltd., 1980. 113 pp. £ 6.95.

Reviewed by Ann Bermingham Miller.



In February 1829, after ten years as an Associate, John Constable was elected to full membership in the Royal Academy by a margin of one vote. Other reasons besides the narrowness of his election made it difficult for him to enjoy the recognition that it officially conferred. He had lost his beloved wife Maria a few months before, and his painting was popular neither with critics nor collectors. Still smarting from his election seven months after it, Constable planned a series of prints that would summarize, diffuse, and defend the principles of his art. He hired an engraver, David Lucas, to render in mezzotint several of his paintings and sketches. Lucas submitted his proofs to Constable and revised his steel plates according to the latter's corrections, heightening and dramatizing the effects of natural light. The series appeared from June 1830 to July 1832 (four issues of four prints, and a fifth of six) under the title *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery, From Pictures Painted by John Constable, R. A.* Although--or perhaps because--the project, which he financed himself, was not a great success, Constable published a second edition of the series in 1833, this time with an expanded commentary and a new title, *Various subjects of Landscape, characteristic of English Scenery, principally intended to mark the Phenomena of the Chiar'oscuro of Nature.*

All twenty-two mezzotints, along with eighteen other prints from the Constable-Lucas collaboration, have been reproduced after forty years of scholarly

neglect in *Constable's "English Landscape Scenery"* by Andrew Wilton, who carefully catalogues them and details their history and dates of issue. Mr. Wilton has performed a valuable service, though one more valuable than he evidently knows. His prefatory essay is strangely lacking in reasons why this little known part of Constable's work should be better known. Mr. Wilton only finds in the prints further evidence of that "freedom from mannerism, from preconceptions derived from the work of other artists" that Constable's work is traditionally supposed to demonstrate. Even on its own sweepingly general terms, this commonplace can scarcely be maintained. E. H. Gombrich has shown the considerable extent to which Constable did work from preconceptions, and the Bicentenary Exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1976 amply demonstrated Constable's debt to the work of Claude, Gainsborough, Wilson, Girtin, Cozens, and even Turner. It is not *nature* that determines the composition of Constable's work, so much as *naturalism*, that is, an artistic rhetoric meant to convey the effect of nature. It is particularly inappropriate to extol Constable's freedom from mannerism in the context of these mannered mezzotints, where such a rhetoric appears at its most theatrical.

All that motivates Mr. Wilton's resurrection of *English Landscape Scenery* seems to be an ideal of scholarly thoroughness. In fact, the work has far more interesting claims to our attention. Born of Constable's anxiety to secure public understanding and acceptance of his art, the series marks a

significant turning point in his style, from the restrained naturalism of his early works to the personal expressionism of his late ones. The shift, of course, is only the most conspicuous version of a tension running throughout all Constable's work between objective representation and subjective expression. Even the rhetorically restrained work of his early period makes covert allusions to private reminiscences (of his boyhood, his father's business, his courtship). In the bolder, reverse strategy taken in *English Landscape Scenery*, Constable identifies the overt personal expressionism of the prints with an utterly empirical study of nature. As the change of title indicates, together with the changes of design asked from Lucas, the key to this identification is Constable's conception of chiaroscuro. As he asserts in his 1833 introduction, chiaroscuro is both a natural and an artistic means for giving landscape its expression. As a result, "the Chiar'oscuro of Nature" permits Constable to

equate nature's moods with his own. At the same time as the inky shadows and glittering highlights evoke the dramatic effects of natural light, they also imply an equally dramatic emotional response to them. (Both dramas, unfortunately, are lost in the British Museum's muzzy reproductions.)

Chiaroscuro is thus Constable's anxious way to seduce the uncomprehending public into collaborating in the meaning and purpose of his art. We participate at once in nature and in the emotional life of an artist deeply moved by nature. If art historians have neglected *English Landscape Scenery*, the reason may be that the prints were not executed by Constable himself. Yet insofar as they carry forward the dramatic revelation of the uses of chiaroscuro, they are directly pertinent to works that he did execute: those intensely tonal late masterpieces like "The Valley Farm" (1835) that seem to aspire to no less than the state of mezzotint.

A Wollstonecraft Anthology



Edited with an Introduction by Janet M. Todd

Janet M. Todd, ed. **A Wollstonecraft Anthology**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977. \$16.50.
Reviewed by Alicia Ostriker.

Two years Blake's junior, an ambitious Mary Wollstonecraft arrived in London in 1787 at the age of twenty-eight, seeking a living by her pen and declaring in a letter to her sister, "I am going to be the first of a new genus." Like Blake, Wollstonecraft was essentially self-educated. She had survived a penurious childhood and the conventional and humiliating employments of widow's companion and governess. She had abducted a sister from a bad marriage, organized a school for girls, participated in Newington Green's community of

intellectual Dissenters which included Richard Price, and attended the deathbeds of her mother and of a best friend in Portugal. Having written *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Mary, a Fiction*, both published by Joseph Johnson, she meant to support herself--and a number of kin. She was, she told Johnson, "not fond of grovelling."

Working for Johnson first as translator and reader, later as reviewer and editorial assistant for *The Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft continued