We give to it our all of hope, of fear, of present enjoyment, and stake our last chance of happiness wilfully and desperately upon it.

4 John Constable (1776–1837) Four Letters to John Fisher

These letters were written during a period when the painter was working on a sequence of substantial landscapes of English scenery — the six-foot canvases referred to in the second letter. They were transcribed and published by C.R. Leslie in his Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, London, first edition 1843, second and expanded edition 1845. John Fisher was Archdeacon of Salisbury Cathedral and a constant friend and confidant to Constable on the subject of his art. The letters testify to the painter’s governing interests: in the legacy of the French and Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth century; in the close empirical observation of familiar scenes; and in the possibility of reconciliation of the two in an ambitious form of naturalistic art. In the final letter he refers to the recent exhibition of three of his pictures at the Salon in Paris, among them The Hay Wain (The Waggon), completed earlier that year. An acquaintance recently returned from Paris wrote to say that Constable’s pictures had ‘created a division in the school of landscape painters of France. You are accused of carelessness by those who acknowledge the truth of your effect; and the freshness of your pictures has taught them that though your means may not be essential, your end must be to produce an imitation of nature, and the next exhibition in Paris will teem with your imitators...’ (cited in the Memoirs, p. 144). Delacroix was among those who acknowledged the originality of the English painter’s technique. The effect of his work was to be particularly pronounced among members of the Barbizon school. Constable’s dealer declined to sell The Hay Wain in Paris and it finally entered the collection of the National Gallery in London in 1886. The following excerpts are taken from the second edition of the Memoirs, 1845, pp. 90–3, 142–3 and 145–6.

Hampstead, September 20th, 1821

My dear Fisher, How much I should like to come to you! and I cannot say I will not, but I fear I must go into Suffolk soon, on account of a job. I have made some studies, carried farther than any I have done before; particularly a highly elegant group of trees (ashes, elms, and oaks), which will be of as much service to me as if I had bought the field and hedge row which contain them; I have likewise made many skies and effects; we have had noble clouds and effects of light and dark and colour, as is always the case in such seasons as the present. The great Claude does not come to the Academy this year (a young lady is copying it), but they expect it next year, and it would have been madness for me to have meddled with it this season, as I am now behindhand with the bridge. The beautiful Ruysdael, ‘The Windmill’ which we admired, is at the Gallery. I trust I shall be able to procure a memorandum of it; and there is a noble N. Poussin at the Academy, a solemn, deep, still summer’s noon, with large umbrageous trees, and a man washing his feet at a fountain near them. Through the breaks in the trees are mountains, and the clouds collecting about them with the most enchanting effects possible. It cannot be too much to say that this
landscape is full of religious and moral feeling. It is not large, about three and a half feet, and I should like to, and will, if possible, possess a facsimile of it. I must make time. If I cannot come to you, I will send you the results of this summer's study. My wife and children are well, we have not had an hour's illness all the summer.

Fisher wrote on September 26th 1821 to say that he had defended the extensive sky in one of Constable's paintings against 'a grand critical party', and that he had silenced them by referring to prints of works by the Dutch painters Wouvermans and Van der Neer. In the same letter he reported on a recent day's fishing in the New Forest when he had been as happy as when he was 'a careless boy'. Constable responded.

Hampstead, October 23rd, 1821

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

How much I wish I had been with you on your fishing excursion in the New Forest! What river can it be? But the sound of water escaping from mill-dams, &c. willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things. Shakespeare could make every thing poetical; he tells us of poor Tom's haunts among 'sheep coats and mills'. As long as I do paint, I shall never cease to paint such places. They have always been my delight, and I should indeed have been delighted in seeing what you describe, and in your company, 'in the company of a man to whom nature does not spread her volume in vain'. Still I should paint my own places best; painting is with me but another word for feeling, and I associate 'my careless boyhood' with all that lies on the banks of the Stour; those scenes made me a painter, and I am grateful; that is, I had often thought of pictures of them before I ever touched a pencil, and your picture is the strongest instance of it I can recollect; but I will say no more, for I am a great egotist in whatever relates to painting. Does not the Cathedral look beautiful among the golden foliage? its solitary grey must sparkle in it.

Charlotte Street [London], November 17th [1824]

My dear Fisher, Thank you for your letter of yesterday [1824]... John Dunthorne is here; he cheers and helps me so much, that I could wish to have him always with me; he forwards me a good deal in subordinate parts, such as tracing, squaring, &c. This morning a gentleman called on me who has nine telescopes; you may judge how thick they soon got; it is John's forte, he is to see them to morrow. I am planning a large picture, and I regard all you say; but I do not enter into that notion of varying one's plans to keep the public in good humour. Change of weather and effect will always afford variety. What if Vander Velde had quitted his sea pieces, or Ruysdael his waterfalls, or Hobbema his native woods. The world would have lost so many features in art. I know that you wish for no material alteration; but I have to combat from high quarters, even from Lawrence, the plausible argument that subject makes the picture. Perhaps you think an evening effect might do; perhaps it might start me some new admirers, but I should lose many old ones. I imagine myself driving a nail; I have driven it some way, and by persevering I may drive it home; by quitting it to attack others, though I may amuse myself, I do not advance beyond the first, while that particular nail stands still. No man who can do any one thing well, will be able to do any other different thing equally well; and this is true even of Shakespeare, the greatest master of variety. Send me the picture of the shady lane when you like. Do you wish to have any other? The sketch-book I am busy with for a few days; it is full of boats and coast scenes. Subjects of this sort seem to me more fit for execution than for sentiment. I hold the genuine pastoral feeling of landscape to be very rare, and difficult of attainment. It is by far the most lovely department of painting as well as of poetry. I looked into Angerstein's the other day; how paramount is Claude!...

Charlotte Street, December 17th [1824]

My dear Fisher... How much I should like to pass a day or two with you at Bath; but after such an interrupted summer, and so much indisposition in the autumn, I find it quite impossible to leave London, my work is so much behind hand. We hear of sad illnesses all round us, caused, no doubt, by the excessive wet. I have just received a letter from Sir George Beaumont; he has been seriously ill, and quite unable until lately to touch a pencil. Every thing which belongs to me belongs to you, and I should not have hesitated a moment about sending you the Brighton sketch-book, but when you wrote, my Frenchman was in London, we were settling about work, and he has engaged me to make twelve drawings, to be engraved here, and published in Paris, all from this book. I work at these in the evening. This book is larger than my others, and does not contain odds and ends, but all regular compositions of boats or beach scenes;
there may be about thirty of them. If you wish to see them for a few days, tell me how I
am to send them to you. My Paris affairs go on very well. Though the Director, the
Count Forbin, gave my pictures very respectable situations in the Louvre in the first
instance, yet on being exhibited a few weeks, they advanced in reputation, and were
removed from their original situations to a post of honour, two prime places in the
principal room. I am much indebted to the artists for their alurum in my favour; but I
must do justice to the Count, who is no artist I believe, and thought that as the colours
are rough, they should be seen at a distance. They found the mistake, and now
acknowledge the richness of texture, and attention to the surface of things. They are
struck with their vivacity and freshness, things unknown to their own pictures.
The truth is, they study (and they are very laborious students) pictures only; and as
Northcote says, 'They know as little of nature as a hackney-coach horse does of a
pasture'. In fact, it is worse, they make painful studies of individual articles, leaves,
rocks, stones, &c. singly; so that they look cut out, without belonging to the whole,
and they neglect the look of nature altogether, under its various changes. I learnt
yesterday that the proprietor asks twelve thousand francs for them. They would have
bought one, 'The Waggon,' for the nation, but he would not part with them. He tells me
the artists much desire to purchase and deposit them in a place where they can have
access to them. Reynolds is going over in June to engrave them, and has sent two
assistants to Paris to prepare the plates. He is now about 'The Lock,' and he is to
engrave the twelve drawings. In all this I am at no expense, and it cannot fail to
advance my reputation. My wife is translating for me some of the criticisms. They are
amusing and acute, but shallow. After saying 'It is but justice to admire the truth, the
colour, and the general vivacity and richness of surface, yet they are like preludes in
music, and the full harmonious warblings of the Æolian lyre, which mean nothing'; and
they call them 'orations and harangues, and high flowery conversations affecting a
careless ease', &c. However, it is certain they have made a stir, and set the students in
landscape to thinking. Now you must believe me, there is no other person living but
yourself to whom I could write in this manner, and all about myself; but take away a
painter's vanity, and he will never touch a pencil again.

5 Antoine Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849) from *Imitation in the Fine Arts*

Quatremère de Quincy was a man whose ideas were formed in the eighteenth century but
who exercised influence well into the nineteenth century through his powerful administra-
tive position as Permanent Secretary of the Institut des Beaux-Arts, a position he held
from 1816 to 1839. He initially studied sculpture in the French school at Rome in the
1770s, where he was a contemporary of the painter Jacques-Louis David. Here he was
influenced by Winckelmann's ideas on the pre-eminence of classical Greece. Subsequently
he defended the ideal, and the view of art as a significant form of intellectual accomplish-
ment, against the encroaching naturalism and Romanticism of the early nineteenth century.
For Quatremère, a supporter of Ingres, the value of art had relatively little to do with truth to
external nature, just as the pleasures to be derived from art were not to any significant
extent pleasures of the senses. His *Éssai sur la nature, le but et les moyens de l'imitation*