



FINDING THE DAPPLE

William Kentridge

The Problem of Green

I remember my sister's eleventh birthday. We piled into the Austin A95, and my father drove the family—my father, my mother, my sister, me—out of the city, past the mine dumps, the warehouses, and the factories that ring the south of the city, through the plots and smallholdings, to the edge of the countryside. In Johannesburg, the leafy suburbs correspond to the end of irrigation and white privilege. The millions of trees planted in the earlier twentieth century make the northern suburbs a rich forest (of mostly exotic trees, pin oaks, elms, plane trees). Left to themselves, the koppies, or small hills, and ridges of Johannesburg would be parched and scrubby, the wild grass a dry white in winter, the trees a dusty olive gray. Driving out of the city, we'd left the shade and the green. Barbed-wire fences rather than stone walls or hedges of the suburban divisions. The plastic bags caught in the barbed wire were the wild flowers of the English riverbanks. We were in a landscape defined as much by engineering as by geological formation. There were lines of pipes, power lines, firebreaks burnt in the veld. You need a ruler or a steady hand to depict much of the countryside around Johannesburg.

A small oasis of green, a thin river, reeds and willow trees, a rowing boat, and a box of cherries. What was the pleasure? Certainly the safe domesticity of the boat; the surprise of my mother joining us at seeing who could spit the cherry stones the farthest into the water, my father with his rolled-up trouser cuffs and shirt sleeves, handling the oar so masterfully (so it seemed to my nine-year-old self); the dappled light, the movement of the reeds, the wind in the trees. Even now, fifty-four years later, there is a perfection in the memory, and I pause, caught in a double memory. The wind in the trees was also *The Wind in the Willows*. Here we were, just messing about in a boat. My father

was Badger, and, while the rest of us were not Ratty or Mole, we were deep in that English idyll (the place of the picnic was even Henley-on-Klip).¹

I find it impossible to separate the somatic pleasure of the shade, the amniotic comfort of the water, the richness of the greens in the trees, the darker green reflected in the water—to separate this immediate pleasure from the secondary one of the imagined home this felt like, the terrain filled with how it was meant to be, a view of land learned rather than found. How much of the pleasure was innate, a relief from the dryness found in the shadows, a relief from the blinding brightness of the sun, the green itself a relief to the cones and rods of the eyes? And how much of this immediately felt relief was constructed?

Where did this English idyll come from? From children's books—from the illustrations in these books, from the greens of the paintings or reproductions of paintings, of a world drowning in green. *The Wind in the Willows* stands in for so many others that have, as their premise, a rural Englishness. The *William* books by Richmal Crompton, with their English village life, the barn, the brook, the vicarage, the field hedgerows, the outlaws, and William. How could I avoid some connection to William? If my name had been Chaim (my Hebrew name), would I have had a different sensibility? The surname Kentridge is complicit in this. (My great-grandfather, a cantor in the synagogue, changed the name from Kantorovich in 1908 to this invented English-sounding name.)

In winter, when we have no rain for four or five months, all remaining color is leached from the land, a mixture of the dryness and the glare of the unremitting sun. So the spring green and the wetness of the birthday picnic were a blessing.

To Unlearn Taste (If We Could)

The training of sensibility went beyond childhood books, though this is still so strong. What was provoked was a longing for a world different from my own, a disappointment at being at the edge of a promised land, even as it became clear that this promised land was itself illusory. I wanted the world to be as depicted in these books. I spoke English, I could understand the jokes, the wordplay in the books. How could it not be my world?

Secondhand Green

Let me say it again—I love the greens in the Constable painting. But I feel I should be able to hold a distance from this seduction. I avoid these greens in

my own work, but that is due to a cack-handedness in mixing colors rather than any stoic refusal of color. The beautiful unopened tubes of Winsor & Newton paints promised all the colors one could want, but, when I started to mix colors, the greens would be too heavily bright or turn into an olive ochre. I cannot hold a tune. When I sing, I hear the song in my head, but what comes out of my mouth is so far off, not just sharp or slightly flat but off by several tones. The same tone deafness dogs my attempts at mixing color. I would be glad to think that this might stem from a deep suspicion of oil paint and its universalizing tradition, but incompetence is a more accurate description.

There was a happy meeting of charcoal with the terrain outside Johannesburg when I started drawing it. There was no decision or principle involved. Charcoal was the medium I had been using for several years. And the landscape is a charcoal drawing itself, black stubs of grass after the winter fires. Drag a sheet of paper or a canvas behind a tractor, and the landscape draws itself (I did try this once, but the drawing was a dull gray; the burnt stalks of grass look like charcoal but do not have the richness of carbon needed for the blackness one hopes for).

Wanting and Not Wanting

Every week, my mother would return from the CNA² with my sister's and my comics. They were three months out of date. These were English comics: *Hotspur, Princess, Tiger*. This was an era of great illustration and draftsmanship. In the way that I now look at a hand drawn by Rembrandt and wonder how he could render it so full of old age and softness and folds and with so few etching marks, I used to marvel at how perfectly a soccer ball could be drawn curling into the net, or the perfect balance of a schoolboy batsman following through on his off-drive (the boy who was chained to his bat, a favorite of my father's too³). I still love this draftsmanship, the double seeing it implies. The action, the figure (the goalkeeper at full stretch pulling off another unbelievable save to win the game), and the line used to make this. How did the illustrator know how the leg changed at the knee? How did he know how to draw the hand flexed at the wrist? There is a triple seeing—the line, the figure, and the movements before and after the moment fixed in the drawing.

The movement from what we see on the paper and the flowering of an image in the brain still astonish me. You don't just see the final image, you see the complete cricket stroke, the complete leap of the goalkeeper.

CONSTABLE'S WHITE HORSE

Aimee Ng

There are generally in the life of an artist, perhaps one, two or three pictures, on which hang more than usual interest—this is mine.

—John Constable to John Fisher, January 14, 1826

A towering figure in British art, John Constable has been credited with changing the course of European painting. Eugène Delacroix proclaimed him the father of French landscape painting, placing in his wake Romantic painters like Corot, Millet, and Rousseau. Consequently, it has also been suggested that the Impressionists were indebted to Constable, his art aligned with Cézanne's innovations and an influence on other French artists as diverse as Courbet, Manet, and Matisse. Lucian Freud, who saw something of Constable in Vincent van Gogh's *Boots*, chose his landscapes as the subject of a monographic exhibition he curated at Paris's Grand Palais at the turn of the twenty-first century. Constable has also been called, intriguingly, the "Jackson Pollock of the 1830s."¹

Such associations would have horrified Constable, who had no interest in French art, and may bewilder some present-day viewers, especially because J. M. W. Turner, Constable's contemporary and rival, was a more obviously experimental painter. These differences were highlighted in the artists' submissions to the 1819 Royal Academy summer exhibition, with Turner's dramatic depiction of sailors attempting to retrieve overboard cargo in churning foreign waters (fig. 1) pitted against the pastoral tranquility of Constable's portrayal of a slow-moving barge on an English river in the artist's hometown (see fig. 3), a painting that has come to be known as *The White*

Fig. 1
 J. M. W. Turner
Entrance of the Meuse: Orange-Merchant on the Bar, Going to Pieces; Brill Church bearing S. E. by S., Masensluys E. by S., exh. 1819
 Oil on canvas
 69 × 97 in. (175.3 × 246.4 cm)
 Tate Britain, London; Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856 (N00501)

Horse but which was then titled *Scene on the River Stour*.² But Constable's objectives were different from Turner's.³ Two primary artistic goals occupied Constable. One was to gain recognition for what he termed "Natural Painture"—a practice, ostensibly rooted in science and direct observation, of imitating in paint as closely as possible effects of light and shadow, forms of clouds, and the appearance of dew, and of finding beauty in quotidian scenes. His cloud studies (fig. 2) have been prized as both scientific observations and artistic expressions. Naturalism distinguished Constable's landscapes; in them, one could "feel the wind blowing on [one's] face," as one viewer put it.⁴ His other goal was to elevate what he called "English Landscape Scenery" as a respectable subject for high art, one that could rival portraiture and history painting. As he endeavored to attain the effect of "truth to nature" in local English subjects, an increasingly expressive, unfinished quality, with direct and unobscured brushstrokes, came to characterize his oil sketches and later paintings—hence the comparison to Pollock.⁵ In his day, this quality was considered inappropriate for public exhibition.

Constable never left England, even refusing to travel to France to receive awards for his paintings, among them a gold medal given by the French king, Charles X.⁶ England's countryside contained everything he wished to paint, and he believed himself to have been born to paint it.⁷ Over the course of the twentieth century, Constable's landscapes became identified with England and with Englishness itself, representing the purity of a world as yet unspoiled by industrialization. But even as he painted them, most of his landscapes were somewhat nostalgic. His most famous recall his childhood in the area around East Bergholt, Suffolk, and along the River Stour. Born in the year America declared independence from Britain, Constable (1776–1837) lived through more than two decades of Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793–1802, 1803–15). He was almost forty by the time injured soldiers returned from the British victory at Waterloo to unemployment in rural areas like Suffolk and general economic depression gripped agricultural communities across the country; his own family's businesses in mills and transport suffered for years after.⁸ In a letter of 1822 to John Fisher, archdeacon of Berkshire (part of the diocese of Salisbury) and a close friend, Constable lamented how crime-ridden his home region had become.⁹ None of this enters his paintings, however: he painted *The White Horse* nearly four years after Waterloo. With rare exception, Constable's art looked inward to his feelings and to his experience of places





Fig. 2

John Constable

Cloud Studies, ca. 1822

Oil on paper, laid down on board,
each 11½ × 19 in. (29.2 × 48.3 cm)

The Frick Collection, New York;

Bequest of Henrietta E. S. Lockwood

in memory of her father and mother,

Ellery Sedgwick and Mabel Cabot Sedgwick,

2000 (2001.3.133, 2001.3.134)