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book review of

*Elegy Landscapes: Constable and Turner and the Intimate Sublime*  
by Stanley Plumly

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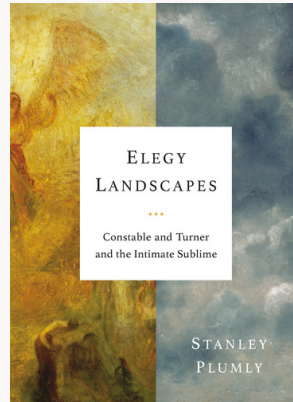
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Stanley Plumly,  
*Elegy Landscapes: Constable and Turner and the Intimate Sublime*.  
New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.  
237 pp.; 8 color illus.; selected bibliography; index.  
\$29.95 (hardcover)  
ISBN: 9780393651508

*Elegy Landscapes* is not an art history book in the typical sense. It is a meditation on the careers of nineteenth-century English artists John Constable (1776–1837) and J.M.W. Turner (1775–1831) through lyrical visual analysis of their paintings. The author is much-lauded poet Stanley Plumly (1939–2019), winner of the Truman Capote Award, the Paterson Poetry Prize, and director of University of Maryland’s creative writing program from 2009 to 2018. In addition to his poetry and criticism, Plumly published a nonfiction study of Keats in 2008 entitled *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (W.W. Norton & Company).

*Elegy Landscapes* is Plumly’s only foray into visual art. In the preface, he explains that the book arose out of his wonder that such distinctly different artists as Turner and Constable could emerge out of the same historical moment and both influence the later Impressionist movement. The title, *Elegy Landscapes*, describes Plumly’s writing as much as it does Constable and Turner’s paintings. Although biographical in nature, *Elegy Landscapes* is really a series of extended ekphrases in which Plumly creates word-scapes inspired by painted landscapes. Readers unfamiliar with Constable or Turner would benefit from first consulting more conventional studies of the painters before approaching Plumly’s book.

*Elegy Landscape*’s forty-one chapters are semi-independent units usually just a few pages long that follow a line of contemplation rather than being topically or thematically structured. Some of the chapters could stand on their own as excerpts, while others follow the same train of thought. The book moves chronologically but with frequent flashbacks and skips forward. Each chapter begins with a quotation or a phrase of Plumly’s own in place of a chapter title and focuses on either Turner or Constable. After three or so chapters dedicated to one artist, Plumly moves to the other for a few chapters before switching back, and so on.

Plumly begins *Elegy Landscapes* by setting up Constable and Turner as two polar-opposite characters. The juxtaposition of homebody Constable with venturesome Turner is neither

new nor contentious in itself. The first two chapters introduce readers to Constable and the land around the Stour River with which he identified so closely. Chapters three and four shift to Turner, who is presented as the antithesis of Constable. Constable is a socially awkward but good-looking man from the landed gentry who attempts to balance devotion to his family and to his art. Turner is an adroit lower-middle-class urbanite who is dedicated solely and perpetually to art. Constable is emotionally tethered to Dedham Vale; Turner travels constantly. Constable struggles for recognition; Turner is the youngest artist to become a full member of the Royal Academy. Chapter five compares the two artists' treatments of Salisbury Cathedral: "Constable's sketches and oils of the great church are really landscapes with cathedral; Turner's *South View* is really about architecture, shapes within shapes, without the hard edges" (22). The characterizations made here develop over the course of the book, with Constable intensely dedicated to nature, and Turner continuing to wear away at the "hard edges" of visual reality in favor of expressive truth.

Plumly often seems to be focusing on one thing while really talking about something else. The book's final chapter, for example, relates the details of Turner's death in 1851, but in terms of the women in his life. Turner died at the home of the widow Sophia Booth, with whom he was living out-of-wedlock under an assumed name. To mitigate scandal, Turner's friends moved the body to the artist's official residence, "[a] house that is itself a shadow of its former self, personified in the haggard person of Hannah Danby, niece of Sarah Danby (mother of Turner's two daughters)" (230). Plumly's comment sits uneasily—unelaborated, but too pointed to overlook. Just when it seems that Plumly is going to address Turner's complicated relationships head-on, the book ends abruptly.

*Elegy Landscapes* is enchanting when read as poetic prose but resists any reduction into basic arguments and structure. Some of the book's highlights include chapters ten through fourteen, which cover Constable's creation of his famous "six-footers," large oil paintings depicting scenes on the Stour River executed between 1816 and 1822. Chapters fifteen through nineteen are devoted to Turner. Here, Plumly's writing seems to pick up the vague, swirling quality of Turner's paintings. There is little concern with chronology or dates, and instead the focus is on attempting to describe what Turner is doing in his dematerialization of form, and who Turner is as an artist.

In the first nineteen chapters Plumly discusses periods "before" a key moment in the careers of each artist, while in the rest of the book he explores the "after." The watershed events are the deaths of Constable's wife and Turner's father. In Plumly's view, these losses inspire the emergence of elegiac and intimate sublimity in each artist's work. "Fragility and vulnerability have always been two of the fundamental qualities of the emotional intelligence of the elegy, and beginning in the era of the 1830s, soon after his father's death, the elegiac will purge the substances and elevate the light-as-color effects in nearly every painting Turner touches," Plumly explains (143). Similarly, Plumly reads the many studies executed by Constable of the clouds and skies over Hampstead in 1821 and 1822 as a kind of mechanism for coping with his wife's tubercular wasting. These studies occupy chapters twenty through twenty-three, and Plumly returns to them again in chapter thirty-six.

Chapter twenty-five addresses the death of Turner's father and the next two chapters look at *Skeleton Falling Off a Horse in Midair* (ca. 1833) and *Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846) as direct

responses to this loss. It is in these paintings that “Turner, in his lifelong search for the grand sublime in great nature and his need to achieve a sense of reconciliation within himself, especially in these many years after his father’s and several of his respected colleagues’ deaths, has begun to realize a different kind of sublime—lowercase, personal, and intimate” (151–52). It is this intimate sublime that drives Turner’s “decline,” as Ruskin saw it, increasingly working towards the dissolution of vague forms in all-consuming light.

Chapters twenty-nine, thirty, and part of thirty-one examine Constable’s 1826 *The Cornfield*, which, according to Plumly, “explores an intimacy mostly otherwise sublimated or suppressed in previous country studies: with the exception of the cloud paintings, never before has Constable’s authorial presence within the work been as apparent; never before has his defining nostalgia become so edged with personal memory” (167).

The chapters on Constable are loosely structured by the artist’s biography. Those on Turner, by contrast, tend to be more about technique and questions of interpretation. A leitmotif throughout the book is the treatment of light by each artist. Plumly characterizes Constable’s relationship to light through the English sun, which illuminates and causes the dew to sparkle, but is heavy. Turner’s light is fire: a blinding sun that burns and blazes. Other recurrent themes are the question of what constitutes landscape, and the distinction of “finished” vs. “unfinished” painting.

Plumly sprinkles quotations from recent art historians like Michael Bockemühl and Timothy Wilcox throughout the book. These citations are usually visual descriptions that Plumly uses as bolsters or pivots for his own words. Readers are offered a selected bibliography and in-text citations with the author’s name and the year of publication, but no page numbers. Other than these direct quotations, no sources are given for the information Plumly presents. Ruskin’s 1834 *Modern Painters* is the only primary source listed in the bibliography. The first chapter opens with an excerpt from an 1832 letter from Constable to his friend David Lucas, but Plumly’s source for this letter and its current location go unmentioned. This relative lack of documentation would make it difficult to use *Elegy Landscapes* as a source for scholarly research; however, that is not its intended purpose.

*Elegy Landscapes* includes full-color images of eight paintings, but Plumly discusses over thirty paintings in detail, and many more in passing. Printing and licensing costs naturally limit the number of possible illustrations, but there is more at work here than simple pragmatics: Plumly’s descriptions *are* the images. The book sits somewhere between poetry inspired by paintings (the literary equivalent of Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*) and conventional art historical visual analysis. These are ostensibly descriptions of oils and watercolors by Turner and Constable, but in truth what Plumly produces are self-supporting images in their own right, not substitutes for the “real” painting. Some passages are particularly striking. For example, Plumly observes that for Turner, ships “represent not only history but a kind of flight from the tired gravity of mortality” (176). Indeed, poetic license is the only way Plumly could get away with the massive run-on sentences, fragments, and similar excesses that would be unacceptable in most modes of writing. Semicolons abound, and a single sentence can cover half a page.

The dust-jacket summary ends by saying that “*Elegy Landscapes* takes a wide-angle look at the philosophy of the sublime.” This is misleading, as *Elegy Landscapes* is not concerned with the *philosophy* of the sublime whatsoever. Rather, Plumly is channeling the sublimity of Turner and Constable’s paintings into the written word. Plumly uses the word “sublime” a small handful of times until the final quarter of the book when the title’s meaning begins to take shape. By “intimate sublime” Plumly means the sublimity infused by Turner and Constable into their paintings in their quest to express the inner, numinous, transcendent core of landscapes to which they as individual artists feel drawn on a personal level. In other words, Constable’s Stour landscapes are sublime insofar as Constable draws on his deep love for that place. He strives (successfully, in Plumly’s view) to make visible in his paintings not simply the optical appearance of a site, but rather the existential reality of the place that shines through its surface.

When discussing Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844), Plumly observes: “Turner has once again closed the separation between making and meaning, but on a scale of the sublime at once intimate and transcendent” (183). This almost suggests that the sublime is somehow not already fundamentally transcendent by definition. What Plumly seems to be saying is that Turner’s transcendence occurs through the self, the sublime pulling him further in and deeper down, as opposed to a spilling outward and expansion away from the self. Similarly, Constable achieves sublimity by painting from an internal, emotional core that lies too deep for words. Paraphrasing art historian Jonathan Clarkson, Plumly explains: “Constable’s art is the autobiography, regardless of the apparent subject, of a feeling” (32).

The idea of an intimate sublime as constructed by Plumly is slightly problematic. “Intimate” tends to imply something that is unique to a specific human individual and their lived experience. The sublime, however, is almost by definition that which lies beyond human experience. It is what exists at the edge of our perception, the thin film formed where human perception and knowledge bump up against that-which-lies-beyond—be it God, the spiritual broadly conceived, the universal life-force or the Unknown, depending upon the theorist. Plumly suggests that the sublime he sees in Constable and Turner is somehow different from the sublime theorized by Pseudo-Longinus, Burke, or Kant. This distinction is debatable, however. The Longinian-Burkean-Kantian sublime is massive, to be sure, but hardly impersonal or distant. In fact, if the sublime were not inherently intimate, it would not be the sublime, but something else. The mistake is to assume infinite vastness correlates with experiential distance. The existential “size” of the sublime may be immeasurable, but we know about it and experience it precisely because it breaks into our very existence and day-to-day perceptions of the world. Perhaps, however, this point-of-view is too Romantic, and Plumly is trying to explain the sublime by going around the Romantic mindset rather than through it.

Plumly does specify that the sublime of Constable and Turner is the “lowercase” sublime, which may shift us from the metaphysical to the adjectival. In that case, Turner and Constable’s paintings are unquestionably sublime. More than simply beautiful, they are emotionally moving images that show us not *what* things are, or how things *look*, but *how they are*. In this sense, what Plumly says is not radically new, but he’s saying it in a uniquely moving way that gives us a new vantage point from which to view the work of these artists afresh.

Although Plumly devotes equal space to each artist and there is no overt favoritism, he seems to have a greater affinity for Constable, for it is Plumly's treatment of Constable that really shines. Turner has long been seen as operating in the realm of the sublime and transcendent (a pre-Symbolism symbolist) and Plumly's masterful readings of his paintings are beautiful, but not new. Unlike Turner, Constable is usually labelled as more picturesque than sublime. Experts on these artists will have to make their own assessments of the accuracy of Plumly's statements. Speaking as a non-specialist, however, I have never had the slightest interest in Constable until reading *Elegy Landscapes*. Plumly subtly removes the tacky veneer from Constable's paintings. He lets them hold space without the scholarly discussions of English industrialism and land rights that sometimes seem to crowd out the paintings themselves. Whether or not Plumly's poetics crowd out the paintings instead is up for debate, but he does bring the images to life. Constable's landscapes breathe and shine under Plumly's treatment.

Stanley Plumly passed away on April 11, 2019 at his home in Maryland from complications of multiple myeloma at age 79.<sup>[1]</sup> *Elegy Landscapes* was his last book-length publication. It would have been interesting to see where Plumly would have gone next, whether he would have continued in his writing on visual art, and what form it would have taken.

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## Notes

[1] Richard Sandomir, "Stanley Plumly, Lyrical Poet Influenced by Keats, Dies at 79," *New York Times*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/obituaries/stanley-plumly-dead.html>.