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Introduction

It is indeed commonly affirmed, that truth well painted will certainly please the imagination; but it is sometimes convenient not to discover the whole truth, but that part which only is delightful. We must sometimes show only half an image to the fancy; which if we display in a lively manner, the mind is so dexterously deluded, that it doth not readily perceive that the other half is concealed. Thus in writing Pastorals, let the tranquillity of that life appear full and plain, but hide the meanness of it; represent its simplicity as clear as you please, but cover its misery. (*The Guardian*, no. 22, 6 April 1713)[1]

I

Since the publication of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, and with the appearance of more recent work by him and by others connected with him, we have come to know a good deal more about the social history of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – about the emergence of a working-class-consciousness, and about the relations of rich and poor as they are revealed in legal, charitable, and other transactions.[2] The essays in this book are an attempt to study the image of rural life in the painting of the period 1730–1840, not exactly in the light of this new historiography, for this is not a social history of art, but taking advantage of the new freedom that Thompson's works have given us to compare ideology in the eighteenth century, as it finds expression in the arts of the period, with what we may now suspect to have been the actuality of eighteenth-century life. The essays examine how the rural poor are represented in the landscape and *genre* paintings of the period, and, more generally, how social relations are depicted in such paintings, and what place the poor are shown as occupying in the society of England seen as a whole. I shall argue that this vision of rural life can be understood only by understanding the constraints – often apparently aesthetic but in fact moral and social – that determined how the poor could, or rather how they could *not* be represented; and that we can understand these

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constraints by attempting to understand the imagery of the paintings I discuss, and how it relates to their organisation as pictures. The scope of the book is fairly modest, in that although I shall suggest that the painters I discuss may be seen in terms of a tradition, I have not tried to study that tradition as a whole, and have been content to discuss what I shall argue are its most important moments, for the most part as they are represented in the work of the three painters who are the subjects of my separate essays.

That paragraph begs a number of questions, the answers to which are perhaps sufficiently apparent in the essays that follow, but it will help if I make a preliminary attempt to discuss them here. Who are the 'rich' and the 'poor'? What are the 'constraints' I speak of, and why, if these constraints were social and moral, should they have appeared often as aesthetic constraints? How can we 'understand' the imagery of the paintings I consider, and understand it in the light of their composition? What is the 'tradition', and why have the three painters I discuss – Gainsborough, Morland, and Constable, who differ so much in their aims and achievements – been chosen to represent it?

II

If we can be sure of anything about the eighteenth century, it is that English society at the time was minutely stratified and subdivided, and there is no level at which a line can be drawn around the social pyramid, marking off the 'rich' from the 'poor', or the consumers of Britain's wealth from its producers. Thus the tenant-farmer – an occupation in itself too capacious to be generalised about with any confidence – may well feel himself to be a producer in relation to his landlord, and poor in comparison with him, while to his labourers he will often appear as the rich consumer of the fruits of their labour; and similar conventions of authority and deference which govern the relations of landlord and tenant will govern those of tenant and labourer. There are difficulties, too, in thinking of the 'labourers' as composing a homogeneous and recognisable class – for, as we shall see, many of them earned their living in a variety of ways, of which working in the fields of other men was only one, and there must have been significant differences in income among those who did, or did sometimes, thus hire out their labour. There is not one line but many, drawn by those in every station immediately above or below the position they feel themselves to occupy.

That is likely to be true, or course, in any developed or developing society; but what has often been denied about English society in the eighteenth century is that its members exhibit any consciousness of class at all, and it is asserted instead that in a society so stratified the

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lines are drawn not by classes but by individuals, aware of relations of difference between themselves and others above or below them on the pyramid, but not of relations of similarity with those at the same level – for the levels are too many, the occupations too mixed and various, to allow generalisations in terms of class to be made by those alive then, or by us now.[3] This is not the place to discuss the issue in detail; but an acquaintance with eighteenth-century writing, whether with the imaginative literature or with the literature concerned more directly with the discussion of social problems, will reveal that the 'poor' were indeed coming to be thought of as a class, as the distant generalised objects of fear and benevolence;[4] and the widespread and continued necessity of keeping the labouring poor alive by supplementing their wages with public or private charity made the line dividing the poor from the rest of society brilliantly if misleadingly clear. And not to the politely literate only, but to the poor themselves, whose resentment of the erosion of their customary rights, of their own need – which appears to them often as the consequence of that erosion – for charity even when they were in full employment, and of the postures of cheerfulness, submission and gratitude they had to take up to receive it, was an important factor in creating a consciousness of solidarity among those who did, or did not quite, qualify for relief, and of difference from those who provided it, which must be understood as class-consciousness: us the poor, them the rich. It is this consciousness, on the part of the polite and vulgar alike, that I am appealing to when I appear to ignore the complexities of the society of the period, and refer so insistently to the 'rich' and the 'poor'.

That in the context of my argument the term 'rich' needs no further differentiation, I hope to show later in this introduction. Why in the eighteenth century the poor came to take on the status of an undifferentiated class, whose need for charity was their most distinguishing characteristic, is a problem that will not be resolved in this book; for it is by no means clear whether the poorest members of rural society did become significantly worse off between 1700 and 1800, or whether the greater awareness of the poor as a class that we observe among the rich in the last quarter of the century is in fact an awareness of the greater threat they posed to the stability of England, by reason of their increasing literacy and their own developing class-consciousness. There are good reasons for believing that the condition of the rural poor did indeed get worse. The long process of transforming the 'paternalist', and what has been called the 'moral' economy of English agriculture, into a capitalist economy resulted, as it was partly intended to do, in the reduction of the poorer members of rural society to the condition of a landless proletariat.

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At various times in different places, by different forces operating gradually or suddenly, the process enveloped many of the smallest freeholders and copyholders, and the miscellaneous individuals who had managed to put together a living by what they could earn as hired labourers and in some cases as the practitioners of crafts and trades, and by what they could make or find by exploiting the customary rights which, insignificant as they apparently often were, provided some sort of a cushion against the seasonal variability of agricultural employment, and some valuable sense of independence.

The enclosure of wastes and open fields, and the consequent extinction of common rights, was one method by which this proletariat was created, and we should not overlook the evidence that one motive for enclosure was, precisely, to make the labouring poor more dependent on their employers, and so more tractable to their discipline.[5] But in fact, whether or not the rural poor did generally become poorer in the course of the century, it seems likely that their material condition was as desperate in parishes where rights of common had not been extinguished as where they had. The steep rise in population, the decline of the outworker system in the face of the greater mechanisation of the textile trades, and the system of parochial settlement, meant that in many parishes there were more labourers than could be employed, who became wholly or partly dependent on public and private charity.

It remains, in any case, by no means clear that the material condition of the poor was appreciably worse by the end of the century – the evidence is neither adequate nor, drawn as it is from so many different regions, susceptible of generalisation. It does seem clear that many of them had lost much of whatever degree of independence thay had formerly enjoyed, and this contributed to the creation of that working-class-consciousness that, as we shall see in the essays that follow, was feared and resisted by the rich; but this loss of independence may not have led to an actual reduction in their material standard of living. That it was *evident* by the later decades of the century that rural labourers were in many regions unable to earn enough by their labour to support their families may equally plausibly be explained by what I have called a new awareness of the poor on the part of the rich, and I shall return to this point in my next section.[6]

Whichever explanation we prefer, the continuing transformation of the agricultural economy remains the context in which the condition of the poor, and the art of rural life, must be discussed. The customary rights of the 'moral' economy were not easily surrendered, nor the increasing emphasis on labour-discipline easily accepted, and in the works of Thompson there is much evidence of social conflict in the countryside in the period covered by this book.[7] This conflict

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should not be interpreted as a matter of local and casual lapses from an overall stability, inasmuch as it almost invariably takes the form of resistance to specific changes in the economic and social order – of attempts, mainly on the part of the poorer members of society, joined sometimes by the better-off when their interests were threatened by the largest landowners, to preserve the customs of the old economy against the encroachments of the new. 'The Plebeian culture', as Thompson has written, 'is rebellious, but rebellious in the defence of custom'.[8] And yet this conflict is largely ignored by the poetry of rural life until the last decades of the century, and it never breaks the surface of the painting of rural life, except, as I shall argue, in a number of paintings by George Morland. For the most part the art of rural life offers us the image of a stable, unified, almost egalitarian society; so that my concern in this book is to suggest that it is possible to look beneath the surface of the painting, and to discover there evidence of the very conflict it seems to deny. The painting, then, offers us a mythical unity and – in its increasing concern to present an apparently more and more actualised image of rural life – attempts to pass itself off as an image of the actual unity of an English countryside innocent of division. But by examining the process by which that illusion is achieved – by studying the imagery of the paintings, the constraints upon it, and upon its organisation in the picture-space – we may come to see that unity as artifice, as something made out of the actuality of division.

It goes without saying that the paintings I discuss were produced for those who by this account, and at least from the perspective of the poor, were rich; and the 'constraints' I have referred to were the constraints which governed how the labouring, the vagrant, and the mendicant poor could be portrayed so as to be an acceptable part of the *décor* of the drawing rooms of the polite, when in their own persons they would have been unlikely to gain admission even to the kitchens. These constraints still operate in subtle ways today, as I shall try to show in a brief discussion of Stubbs later in this introduction; so that when in the essays that follow I refer to 'our' response to a picture, or to what 'we' demand to see in the image of the eighteenth-century poor, it is not to be thought that I am confusing the amateurs of art today with the connoisseurs of the period covered by this book, but rather that we should ask ourselves whether we do not still, in the ways we admire Gainsborough, Stubbs, and Constable, identify with the interests of their customers and against the poor they portray. I am not suggesting that we should do anything else, merely that we should ask what it is that we do; to identify with the exhausted and underfed labourers is impossible for us, and would be insulting if it were not.

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III

The tradition of the art of rural life that I am concerned with can loosely be defined as one involved in the attempt to portray the social life of the rural poor of England; but that definition must be qualified as soon as it is uttered. To begin with, Gainsborough, who appears in this account as one of the initiators of the tradition, claimed as we shall see to take as little account as possible of the figures in his landscapes; while in the work of Constable, with which the tradition closes, the figures are often so small as almost to escape our notice. In the second place, this concentration on the social life of the poor might suggest that the painters are concerned to produce an actualised image of that life, and so in a limited sense they are; but often this seems to involve little more than that their figures are to be taken as representatives of humble life in England, and not that life in Italy or in an imagined classical or theatrical Arcadia. The treatment of the figures may still seem to us ideal, as it does in much of the work of Gainsborough and in almost all that of Francis Wheatley; but the disjunction between this ideal image of the rural life and its actuality was not one that preoccupied the artists themselves, for as I have argued the point of the enterprise was to suggest that no such disjunction existed, and in that way to offer a reassurance that the poor of England were, or were capable of being, as happy as the swains of Arcadia, their life as delightfully simple and enviable.

It remains, however, the unmistakable Englishness of the figures, and the discreet hints of actuality provided by tattered clothes, heavy boots and agricultural implements, which distinguish the paintings of this tradition – by Gainsborough, Wheatley, Morland, Constable and a few others – from the surviving Italianate tradition, represented in eighteenth-century England by the art of Zuccarelli, for example, still elaborately Arcadian in its frivolous recreation of the world of Claude and Poussin. It is equally distinct from the work of such a painter as Richard Wilson, whose landscapes are entirely free of the reek of the human, the figures in them simply objects of colour insufficiently particularised to contribute anything to our sense of the meaning of his pictures, and judged appropriate to their surroundings by the criteria of art, not of experience.

The demand for both poetry and painting to offer a more English image of rural life was understood to be the same thing as the demand for a more actualised image of that life. This demand is clearly heard in discussions of pastoral poetry at the beginning of the century; it takes some time for it to be taken up by writers on painting, for a greater realism was seen to involve a willingness to break with classical and European conventions of Pastoral, as established by

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Virgil for poetry and by Claude and Poussin for painting; and for various reasons, perhaps more to do with the greater variety of traditions available to the poet of rural life, than with the wider social base of his public, the poets were more able to make such a break than the painters. Thus realism is an issue in the quarrel, on the proper nature of Pastoral, between Pope, Gay, and Ambrose Philips in the early 1710s; a decade later, Jonathan Richardson notes of landscape painting that it

> is like Pastoral in Poetry; and of all the Landskip-Painters *Claude Lorrain* has the most Beautiful, and Pleasing ideas; the most rural, and of our own Times. *Titian* has a Style more Noble. So has Nicolas Poussin, and the Landskips of the Latter are usually Antique, as is seen by the Buildings, and Figures

and he goes on to suggest that 'Poussin has sometimes Err'd in the Figures he has put into his landskips'.[9] There is a hint here of a desire for a more realistic portrayal of country life, more than undercut by the belief that Claude's figures are 'of our own Times', and hardly yet articulated into a demand. It does become articulate, later in the century, in this remark, for example, by Horace Walpole:

> As our poets warm their imaginations with sunny hills, or sigh after grottoes and cooling breezes, our painters draw rocks and precipices and castellated mountains, because Virgil gasped for breath at Naples, and Salvator wandered amidst Alps and Apennines. Our ever-verdant lawns, rich vales, fields of hay-cocks, and hop-grounds, are neglected as homely and familiar objects.[10]

But by this time, the 1760s, the poets he speaks of have vanished, and the issue is one to be faced by painters only.

In the history of literature we usually relate this demand for a greater realism to the rise of a middle-class readership, in the terms established by Ian Watt in his book *The Rise of the Novel*.[11] But it is not clear how far this holds good for the readership of poetry: the subscribers to the 1730 edition of James Thomson's *Seasons* – the most influential of the georgic poems of the eighteenth century – include the queen, ten dukes, thirty-one earls and countesses, and a larger number of the lesser peerage, of the sons and daughters of the nobility, of men shortly to be ennobled, of baronets, and of miscellaneous women entitled to style themselves 'lady'; while it may not have been until the second half of the century that there was any considerable interest on the part of the middle-classes in the poetry of rural life.[12] It is still less clear how far the demand of a middle-class public may help to explain the emergence of what was thought to

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be a more actualised image of rural life in the visual arts. It is certainly the case that from the middle of the century at least the buying of pictures was not confined to the very highest classes, but it is not possible to attach the demand for actuality to any particular class of buyers. There may have been no great market for the rustic scenes that Gainsborough produced in Suffolk in the 1750s, and before he had access to the richer and more prestigious customers he met in Bath and London: some of these pictures may have been given away to friends,[13] some were probably bought by members of the local gentry, two were sold to the Duke of Bedford, who may also have been the original purchaser of the two distinctively English landscapes produced by George Lambert in the 1730s, and discussed later in this book. The English pastorals of Gainsborough's Bath period were, a number of them, bought by members of the peerage, who were also eager to buy the fancy pictures of mendicant children from his final, London period. In the same way Morland was solicited by the Earl of Derby,[14] one of the richest men in the country, to sell him some pictures, but prints of his work must also have been sold to the petty-bourgeoisie of London – and as we shall see the demand of the buyers of his prints was for a more idealised image of the English peasantry than his oil-paintings offered.

It is the taste of the aristocracy here that seems to stand most in need of explanation – why, while they were still interested in buying the Arcadian images of Zuccarelli, they also showed an interest in more workaday images of English rustic life, which we might well have expected to have been more attractive to the rural professional class[15] and to the urban middle-class. The explanation may be found, perhaps, in the nature of the aristocracy itself, and the changing image it wished to project of its own role in the economic and social life of England. These subjects have been amply studied elsewhere, and the briefest of summaries will be adequate – I am thinking particularly of the increasing *rapprochement* in the early eighteenth century between the court and the city; of the increasing interest on the part of the aristocracy in the efficient management of their estates, if less often in the details of husbandry itself; of the increasing exploitation of the mineral resources on their lands; of the increasing opportunities for them to engage in manufacturing projects;[16] in short, of all the activities by which the landed aristocracy maintained its political hegemony through the eighteenth century, as the economic basis of power shifted from agriculture to industry and commerce. The practical aspects of estate management were no doubt matters of concern to the aristocracy before 1700, but they certainly became more so later; and more to the point the greater respectability attaching to an interest in economic issues in the

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eighteenth century – when the greatness of Britain came to be measured as much by its wealth as by its military power – evoked in them a greater willingness to demonstrate that concern in 1750 than in 1680.

If we were to judge by the art of the period, we would come to the conclusion that in the decades after the Restoration the chief characteristic of the truly aristocratic attitude was disregard for the productivity of one's estate, and an easy unconcern for what, in the necessary extravagence of daily life, one wasted. This is evident, for example, in the relentlessly contemptuous references to provincial life in Restoration comedy, and equally so in the nearest equivalent to an art of landscape produced in England around 1700, the likenesses taken by Kip, Knyffe, and Siberechts of the houses of English Lords and Gentlemen. These pictures may be sprinkled with figures, but those near to us are all wigged and mounted, and only occasionally in the distance do we find what we often see in the topographical art later in the century, the gardeners and other labourers who dressed and worked the landscape. The land in the Roman landscape paintings which in the first half of the eighteenth century were so assiduously collected in England is a golden age landscape, and so almost never cultivated – perhaps thinly grazed by sheep or cattle – and the figures are often the shepherds of Arcadian Pastoral, who were not, as I shall suggest, identified simply as rustics. The pastorals of Claude were especially valued for the classical, and more especially for the Virgilian, associations they evoked,[17] and so valued as identifying their owners as the Augustan patricians they aspired to be.

The absence in the early eighteenth century of an indigenous pastoral painting – at the time the English seem to have wanted portraits of themselves or their estates only – means that we must look to pastoral poetry to understand the connection, if any, in the minds of the aristocracy, between the landscape of Virgilian Pastoral and the English agricultural landscape; and we discover that poetry to have been characterised by an extreme reluctance to mention the practical aspects of rural life. The eclogue by Mrs Singer, for example, 'Love and Friendship', which is preserved among Prior's works,[18] is a pastoral inasmuch as its setting is rural and its form the eclogue; but the word 'shepherd', which occurs in the ninth line, is the only reference in a poem of over fifty lines to the pastoral life. Prior's reply to Mrs Singer contains also, one brief reference to the shepherd's life, in the prayer –

> *Pan* guard thy Flock, and *Ceres* bless thy Board
> ('To the Author of the Foregoing Pastoral', line 20)[19]

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– a reference that has as its function not only to remind us that this is a poem about shepherds, but also to allow us to forget it – if Pan does the guarding, and Ceres the reaping, then Sylvia, or Mrs Singer, can love and sing. Of Prior's other occasional pastorals, 'The Despairing Shepherd'[20] dramatises a shepherd who has lost his crook, and leaves his flock, to 'nourish endless woe', and the point is clear, that emotions worth writing about in poetry don't occur to the sheperd who joins in the rural life, and thus identifies himself with the other shepherds, but only to those who leave that life alone; and Alexis having once abandoned his pastoral responsibilities in the first stanza, neither he nor Prior refers to them again.

In Pope's eclogues, similarly, the shepherds, so far from preoccupying themselves with rural business, show an easy disregard of it:

> Let other Swains attend the Rural Care,
> ('Summer', line 35)

says Alexis, preferring a life of love and music to the acquisitive drudgery of shepherding. Aegon, in Pope's 'Autumn', with still more insouciance sees no point in saving his sheep from wolves if the price of pastoral vigilance will be to have insufficient time in which to bewail the faithlessness of his wayward lover. In this world, no moral value is ascribed to industry, or to a servile vigilance, for the shepherds live in a nature which is responsive, productive, and itself servile. The chorus in Handel's *Acis and Galatea*,[21] a pastoral opera for which Gay wrote the libretto, celebrate their liberation from the life of labour in these lines:

> O the Pleasure of the Plains,
> Happy Nymphs and happy Swains,
> Harmless, Merry, Free, and Gay,
> Dance and sport the Hours away.
> For us the Zephyr blows,
> For us distils the Dew,
> For us unfolds the Rose,
> And Flowers display their Hue,
> For us the Winters rain,
> For us the Summers shine,
> Spring swells for us the Grain,
> And Autumn bleeds the Vine.
> (Act 1, lines 1–12)

This sort of attitude is so much a commonplace that it may seem unnecessary to label it as aristocratic, but the appropriateness of the adjective becomes clear when we discover, in John Gay's *The*

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