

“Rivers of England,” and Rogers’s “Vignettes.” These drawings were engraved during Turner’s lifetime and under his active superintendence ; they are, therefore, amongst the best known of his works. The whole of the finished drawings have, moreover, been constantly on exhibition for more than fifty years. There remains, therefore, little either of praise or blame to be said of them that has not already been said many times. While, on the other hand, the studies and sketches are only now on the point of being made accessible to the public.

The practically complete series of Turner’s sketches and studies from nature seems to call for comprehensive treatment. Their careful study throws a wholly new and unexpected light upon the fundamental and essential qualities of Turner’s attitude towards nature, and therefore upon the essential character and limitations of his art. Or where the light is not altogether unexpected—as it would not be perhaps in the case of a diligent and methodical student of Turner’s completed works—the sketches amplify and illustrate in an abundant and forcible way what before could only have been surmised. I propose, therefore, to devote the remainder of my limited space to an attempt to indicate as briefly as possible the main features of Turner’s conception of nature, as it is revealed in his sketches, and to point out its importance both for the proper understanding of his finished work and for its bearing upon some adverse criticisms that have been brought against his work.

In my opening remarks I ventured to contrast Turner’s attitude towards nature with the attitude of the majority of contemporary artists. My intention in thus opposing these two different methods of work was not to suggest that one of them was either right or wrong in itself, or that one way was necessarily better or worse than the other. My intention was exactly the opposite. There is not one type of art production to which all artists must conform, and two totally different methods of procedure may each be positively right and equally valid. I will even go farther than this and confess that I regard the present-day method of working from nature as the only right and proper way of attaining the results that are aimed at. But it is the result, the purpose of the artist, that justifies the means, and this applies with just as much force to Turner’s way of working as to the modern way. To condemn Turner’s procedure, therefore, simply because it differs from that now in vogue, would be as unwise and unfair as to condemn the modern way because it differed from his. Different conceptions of the aim and scope of art involve different attitudes towards nature, and necessitate different methods of study.

Let us begin with the current conception—the conception of the landscape artist of to-day and of the public for which he works. The



aim of this art is what is called "naturalness," that is, the picture should be made to look as much like nature as possible. The standard of excellence here is just the ordinary common appearance of physical reality. A picture that looks like nature is good, and one that looks "unnatural" is therefore bad. This kind of art is capable of giving a great deal of innocent pleasure to people who like to be reminded of scenes they love or are interested in. But it has its limits. It cannot go beyond the bare physical world. And it is bound to treat even this limited area of experience from a strictly limited point of view. It is bound to take the physical world as something which exists in entire independence of the spectator, as something which is indeed given in sense-perception, but which the spectator emphatically finds and does not make. Now so far as we take nature in this sense we have to do with an external power which is utterly indifferent to our merely human aims and purposes, and the artist can only look upon himself as a passive recipient, a *tabula rasa*, on which external nature is reflected. This is the standpoint of the prosaic intelligence, the level upon which much of the ordinary reflection and discussion of the day moves.

But man is not really a passive mirror in which a foreign nature is reflected, nor is he satisfied merely to submit himself to natural influences and vicissitudes. Man is never really satisfied to take the world as he finds it, but sets to work to transform it into what he feels it ought to be. The social and political world, with its realms of morality, art and religion, came into existence as a protest against the merely natural. In this world, created and sustained by human intelligence and will, the physical world is not abolished or destroyed, but it is transformed into a more or less willing accomplice of a strange and higher power. It is in this new form which nature assumes under the sway of intelligence and will that we find it in Turner's works.\* In his presence the external world loses its stubborn indifference to human aims and becomes saturated with purely human aspiration and emotion. Its colours and shapes cease to belong to the merely physical world. They become instead the garment in which the inward spiritual nature of the artist robes itself. Nature in this new aspect is no longer a merely hostile and mechanical system of laws; a soul has been breathed into it which we recognize as identical with our own.

Now it is evident that these two kinds of art, the passive and

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\* Turner's conception of nature, I may remark, is identical with that of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who says: "My notion of nature comprehends not only the forms which nature produces, but also the nature and internal fabric and organisation . . . of the human mind and imagination." (Seventh Discourse.)