MODERN PAINTERS.

VOLUME I.

CONTAINING

PARTS I. AND II.

BY A GRADUATE OF OXFORD.

"Accuse me not
Of arrogance.
If, having walked with nature,
And offered, as frailty would allow,
My heart a daily sacrifice to Truth,
I now affirm of Nature and of Truth,
Whom I have served, that their Divinity
Revolts, offended at the ways of men,
Philosophers, who, though the human soul
Be of a thousand faculties composed,
And twice ten thousand interests, do yet prize
This soul, and the transcendent universe
No more than as a mirror that reflects
To proud Self-love her own intelligence."

Wordsworth.

FOURTH EDITION.

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1848.
CHAPTER II.

OF TRUTH OF CLOUDS:—FIRST OF THE REGION OF THE CIRRUS.

Our next subject of investigation must be the specific character of clouds, a species of truth which is especially neglected by artists; first, because as it is within the limits of possibility that a cloud may assume almost any form, it is difficult to point out, and not always easy to feel, wherein error consists; and secondly, because it is totally impossible to study the forms of clouds from nature with care and accuracy, as a change in the subject takes place between every touch of the following pencil, and parts of an outline sketched at different instants cannot harmonize, nature never having intended them to come together. Still if artists were more in the habit of sketching clouds rapidly, and as accurately as possible in the outline, from nature, instead of daubing down what they call "effects" with the brush, they would soon find there is more beauty about their forms than can be arrived at by any random felicity of invention, however brilliant, and more essential character than can be violated without incurring the charge of falsehood,—falsehood as direct and definite, though not as traceable as error in the less varied features of organic form.

The first and most important character of clouds, is dependent on the different altitudes at which they are formed. The atmosphere may be conveniently considered as divided into three spaces, each inhabited by clouds of specific character altogether different, though, in reality, there is no distinct limit fixed between them by nature, clouds being formed at every altitude, and partaking according to their altitude, more or less of the characters of the upper or lower
regions. The scenery of the sky is thus formed of an infinitely graduated series of systematic forms of cloud, each of which has its own region in which alone it is formed, and each of which has specific characters which can only be properly determined by comparing them as they are found clearly distinguished by intervals of considerable space. I shall therefore consider the sky as divided into three regions, the upper region, or region of the cirrus; the central region, or region of the stratus; the lower region, or the region of the rain-cloud.

The clouds which I wish to consider as included in the upper region, never touch even the highest mountains of Europe, and may therefore be looked upon as never formed below an elevation of at least 15,000 feet; they are the motionless multitudinous lines of delicate vapour with which the blue of the open sky is commonly streaked or speckled after several days of fine weather. I must be pardoned for giving a detailed description of their specific characters as they are of constant occurrence in the works of modern artists, and I shall have occasion to speak frequently of them in future parts of the work. Their chief characters are—first, Symmetry: They are nearly always arranged in some definite and evident order, commonly in long ranks reaching sometimes from the zenith to the horizon, each rank composed of an infinite number of transverse bars of about the same length, each bar thickest in the middle, and terminating in a traceless vaporous point at each side; the ranks are in the direction of the wind, and the bars of course at right angles to it; these latter are commonly slightly bent in the middle. Frequently two systems of this kind, indicative of two currents of wind, at different altitudes intersect each other, forming a network. Another frequent arrangement is in groups of excessively fine, silky, parallel fibres, commonly radiating, or having a tendency to radiate, from one of their extremities, and terminating in a plummy sweep at the other:—these are vulgarly known as “mares’ tails.” The plummy and expanded extremity of these is often bent upwards, sometimes back, and up again, giving an appearance of great flexibility and unity at the same time, as if the clouds were tough, and would hold together however bent. The narrow extremity is invariably turned to the wind, and the fibres are parallel with its direction. The upper

clouds always fall into some modification of one or other of these arrangements. They thus differ from all other clouds, in having a plan and system; whereas other clouds, though there are certain laws which they cannot break, have yet perfect freedom from anything like a relative and general system of government. The upper clouds are to the lower, what soldiers on parade are to a mixed multitude; no men walk on their heads or their hands, and so there are certain laws which no clouds violate; but there is nothing except in the upper clouds resembling symmetrical discipline.

Secondly, Sharpness of Edge: The edges of the bars of the upper clouds which are turned to the wind, are often the sharpest which the sky shows; no outline whatever of any other kind of cloud, however marked and energetic, ever approaches the delicate decision of these edges. The outline of a black thunder-cloud is striking, from the great energy of the colour or shade of the general mass; but as a line, it is soft and indistinct, compared with the edge of the cirrus, in a clear sky with a brisk breeze. On the other hand, the edge of the bar turned away from the wind is always soft, often imperceptible, melting into the blue interstice between it and its next neighbour. Commonly the sharper one edge is, the softer is the other, and the clouds look flat, and as if they slipped over each other like the scales of a fish. When both edges are soft, as is always the case when the sky is clear and windless, the cloud looks solid, round, and fleecy.

Thirdly, Multitude: The delicacy of these vapours is sometimes carried into such an infinity of division, that no other sensation of number that the earth or heaven can give is so impressive. Number is always most felt when it is symmetrical, (vide Burke on "Sublime," Part ii. sect. 8,) and, therefore, no sea-waves nor fresh leaves make their number so evident or so impressive as these vapours. Nor is nature content with an infinity of bars or lines alone—each bar is in its turn severed into a number of small undulatory masses, more or less connected according to the violence of the wind. When this division is merely effected by undulation, the cloud exactly resembles sea-sand ribbed by the tide; but when the division amounts to real separation we have the mottled or mackerel skies. Commonly, the greater the division of its bars, the
broader and more shapeless is the rank or field, so that in the mottled sky it is lost altogether, and we have large irregular fields of equal size, masses like flocks of sheep; such clouds are three or four thousand feet below the legitimate cirrus. I have seen them cast a shadow on the Mont Blanc at sunset, so that they must descend nearly to within fifteen thousand feet of the earth.

Fourthly, Purity of Colour: The nearest of these clouds—those over the observer's head, being at least three miles above him, and nearly all entering the ordinary sphere of vision, farther from him still,—their dark sides are much greyer and cooler than those of other clouds, owing to their distance. They are composed of the purest aqueous vapour, free from all foulness of earthy gases, and of this in the lightest and most ethereal state in which it can be, to be visible. Farther, they receive the light of the sun in a state of far greater intensity than lower objects, the beams being transmitted to them through atmospheric air far less dense, and wholly unaffected by mist, smoke, or any other impurity. Hence their colours are more pure and vivid, and their white less sullied than those of any other clouds.

Lastly, Variety: Variety is never so conspicuous, as when it is united with symmetry. The perpetual change of form in other clouds is monotonous in its very dissimilarity, nor is difference striking where no connexion is implied; but if through a range of barred clouds, crossing half the heaven, all governed by the same forces and falling into one general form, there be yet a marked and evident dissimilarity between each member of the great mass—one more finely drawn, the next more delicately moulded, the next more gracefully bent—each broken into differently modelled and variously numbered groups, the variety is doubly striking, because contrasted with the perfect symmetry of which it forms a part. Hence, the importance of the truth, that nature never lets one of the members of even her most disciplined groups of cloud be like another; but though each is adapted for the same function, and in its great features resembles all the others, not one, out of the millions with which the sky is chequered, is without a separate beauty and character, appearing to have had distinct thought occupied in its conception, and distinct forces in its production; and in addition
to this perpetual invention, visible in each member of each system, we find systems of separate cloud intersecting each other, the sweeping lines mingled and interwoven with the rigid bars, these in their turn melting into banks of sand-like ripple and flakes of drifted and irregular foam; under all, perhaps the massy outline of some lower cloud moves heavily across the motionless buoyancy of the upper lines, and indicates at once their elevation and their repose.

Such are the great attributes of the upper cloud region; whether they are beautiful, valuable, or impressive, it is not our present business to decide, nor to endeavour to discover the reason of the somewhat remarkable fact, that the whole field of ancient landscape art affords, as far as we remember, but one instance of any effort whatever to represent the character of this cloud region. That one instance is the landscape of Rubens in our own gallery, in which the mottled or fleecy sky is given with perfect truth and exquisite beauty. To this should perhaps be added, some of the backgrounds of the historical painters, where horizontal lines were required, and a few level bars of white or warm colour cross the serenity of the blue. These, as far as they go, are often very perfect, and the elevation and repose of their effect might, we should have thought, have pointed out to the landscape painters that there was something to be made out of the high clouds. Not one of them, however, took the hint. To whom, among them all, can we look for the slightest realization of the fine and faithful descriptive passage of the “Excursion,” already alluded to:

But rays of light,
Now suddenly diverging from the orb,
Retired behind the mountain tops, or, veiled
By the dense air, shot upwards to the crown
Of the blue firmament—aloft—and wide:
And multitudes of little floating clouds,
Ere we, who saw, of change were conscious, pierced
Through their ethereal texture, had become
Vivid as fire,—clouds separately poised,
Innumerable multitude of forms
Scattered through half the circle of the sky;
And giving back, and shedding each on each,
With prodigal communion, the bright hues
There is but one master whose works we can think of while we read this; one alone has taken notice of the neglected upper sky; it is his peculiar and favourite field; he has watched its every modification, and given its every phase and feature; at all hours, in all seasons, he has followed its passions and its changes, and has brought down and laid open to the world another apocalypse of Heaven.

There is scarcely a painting of Turner's, in which serenity of sky and intensity of light are aimed at together, in which these clouds are not used, though there are not two cases in which they are used altogether alike. Sometimes they are crowded together in masses of mingling light, as in the Shylock; every part and atom sympathizing in that continuous expression of slow movement which Shelley has so beautifully touched:—

Underneath the young grey dawn
A multitude of dense, white fleecy clouds,
Were wandering in thick flocks along the mountains,
Shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind.

At other times they are blended with the sky itself, felt only here and there by a ray of light calling them into existence out of its misty shade, as in the Mercury and Argus; sometimes, where great repose is to be given, they appear in a few detached, equal, rounded flakes, which seem to hang motionless, each like the shadow of the other, in the deep blue of the zenith, as in the Acro-Corinth; sometimes they are scattered in fiery flying fragments, each burning with separate energy, as in the Temeraire; sometimes woven together with fine threads of intermediate darkness, melting into the blue, as in the Napoleon. But in all cases the exquisite manipulation of the master gives to each atom of the multitude its own character and expression. Though they be countless as leaves, each has its portion of light, its shadow, its reflex, its peculiar and separating form.
SEC. III. CHAP. II.] 1. OF THE REGION OF THE CIRRUS.

Take for instance the illustrated edition of Rogers's Poems,¹ and § 11. His vignette, Sunrise on the Sea. open it at the 80th page, and observe how every attribute which I have pointed out in the upper sky, is there rendered with the faithfulness of a mirror; the long lines of parallel bars, the delicate curvature from the wind, which the inclination of the sail shows you to be from the west; the excessive sharpness of every edge which is turned to the wind, the faintness of every opposite one, the breaking up of each bar into rounded masses; and finally, the inconceivable variety with which individual form has been given to every member of the multitude, and not only individual form, but roundness and substance even where there is scarcely a hair's breadth of cloud to express it in. Observe, above everything, the varying indication of space and depth in the whole, so that you may look through and through from one cloud to another, feeling not merely how they retire to the horizon, but how they melt back into the recesses of the sky; every interval being filled with absolute air, and all its spaces so melting and fluctuating, and fraught with change as with repose, that as you look, you will fancy that the rays shoot higher and higher into the vault of light, and that the pale streak of horizontal vapour is melting away from the cloud that it crosses. Now watch for the next barred sunrise, and take this vignette to the window, and test it by nature's own clouds, among which you will find forms and passages, I do not say merely like, but apparently the actual originals of parts of this very drawing. And with whom will you do this, except with Turner? Will you do it with Claude, 'and set that blank square yard of blue, with its round, white, flat fixtures of similar cloud, beside the purple infinity of nature, with her countless multitude of shadowy lines, and flaky waves, and folded veils of variable mist? Will you do it with Poussin, and set those massy steps of unyielding solidity, with the chariot-and-four driving up them, by the side of the delicate forms which terminate in threads too fine for the eye to follow them, and of texture so thin woven that the earliest stars shine through

¹ I use this work frequently for illustration, because it is the only one I know in which the engraver has worked with delicacy enough to give the real forms and touches of Turner. I can reason from these plates, (in questions of form only,) nearly as well as I could from the drawings.
them? Will you do it with Salvator, and set that volume of violent and restless manufactory smoke beside those calm and quiet bars, which pause in the heaven as if they would never leave it more?

Now we have just seen how Turner uses the sharp-edged cirri, when he aims at giving great transparency of air. But it was shown in the preceding chapter that sunbeams, or the appearance of them, are always sharper in their edge in proportion as the air is more misty, as they are most defined in a room where there is most dust flying about in it. Consequently, in the vignette we have been just noticing, where transparency is to be given, though there is a blaze of light, its beams are never edged; a tendency to rays is visible, but you cannot in any part find a single marked edge of a rising sunbeam—the sky is merely more flushed in one place than another. Now let us see what Turner does when he wants mist. Turn to the Alps at Daybreak, page 193 in the same book. Here we have the cirri used again, but now they have no sharp edges; they are all fleecy and mingling with each other, though every one of them has the most exquisite indication of individual form, and they melt back, not till they are lost in exceeding light, as in the other plate, but into a mysterious, fluctuating, shadowy sky, of which, though the light penetrates through it all, you perceive every part to be charged with vapour. Notice particularly the half-indicated forms even where it is most serene, behind the snowy mountains. And now, how are the sunbeams drawn? No longer indecisive, flushing, palpitating, every one is sharp and clear, and terminated by definite shadow; note especially the marked lines on the upper clouds; finally, observe the difference in the mode of indicating the figures, which are here misty and indistinguishable, telling only as shadows, though they are near and large, while those in the former vignette came clear upon the eye, though they were so far off as to appear mere points.

Now is this perpetual consistency in all points, this concentration of every fact which can possibly bear upon what we are to be told, this watchfulness of the entire meaning and system of nature, which fills every part and space of the picture with coincidences of witness, which come out upon us, as they would from the reality, more fully and deeply in proportion to the knowledge we possess and the
attention we give, admirable or not? I could go on writing page after page on every sky of Turner's, and pointing out fresh truths in every one. In the Havre, for instance, of the Rivers of France, we have a new fact pointed out to us with respect to these cirri, namely, their being so faint and transparent as not to be distinguishable from the blue of the sky, (a frequent case,) except in the course of a sunbeam, which, however, does not illumine their edges, they being not solid enough to reflect light, but penetrates their whole substance, and renders them flat, luminous forms in its path, instantly and totally lost at its edge. And thus a separate essay would be required by every picture, to make fully understood the new phenomena which it treated and illustrated. But after once showing what are the prevailing characteristics of these clouds, we can only leave it to the reader to trace them wherever they occur.

There are some fine and characteristic passages of this kind of cloud given by Stanfield, though he dares not use them in multitude, and is wanting in those refined qualities of form which it is totally impossible to explain in words, but which, perhaps, by simple outlines, on a large scale, selected from the cloud forms of various artists, I may in following portions of the work illustrate with the pencil.

Of the colours of these clouds I have spoken before, (Sec. I. § 14. The colour of the upper clouds.) but though I then alluded to their purity and vividness, I scarcely took proper notice of their variety; there is indeed in nature variety in all things, and it would be absurd to insist on it in each case, yet the colours of these clouds are so marvellous in their changefulness, that they require particular notice. If you watch for the next sunset, when there are a considerable number of these cirri in the sky, you will see, especially at the zenith, that the sky does not remain of the same colour for two inches together; one cloud has a dark side of cold blue, and a fringe of milky white; another, above it, has a dark side of purple and an edge of red; another, nearer the sun, has an under-side of orange and an edge of gold; these you will find mingled with, and passing into the blue of the sky, which in places you will not be able to distinguish from the cool grey of the darker clouds, and which will be itself full of gradation, now pure and deep, now faint and feeble; and all this
is done, not in large pieces, nor on a large scale, but over and
over again in every square yard, so that there is no single part
nor portion of the whole sky which has not in itself variety of colour
even for a separate picture, and yet no single part which is
like another, or which has not some peculiar source of beauty, and
some peculiar arrangement of colour of its own. Now, instead of
this, you get in the old masters—Cuyp, or Claude, or whoever they
may be—a field of blue, delicately, beautifully, and uniformly shaded
down to the yellow sun, with a certain number of similar clouds,
each with a dark side of the same grey, and an edge of the same
yellow. I do not say that nature never does anything like this,
but I say that her principle is to do a great deal more, and that
what she does more than this,—what I have above described, and
what you may see in nine sunsets out of ten,—has been observed,
attempted, and rendered by Turner only, and by him with a fidelity
and force which present us with more essential truth, and more
clear expression and illustration of natural laws, in every wreath of
vapour, than composed the whole stock of heavenly information,
which lasted Cuyp and Claude their lives.

§ 15. Recap-
tilation.

We close then our present consideration of the upper clouds, to
return to them when we know what is beautiful; we have at present
only to remember that of these clouds, and the truths connected
with them, none before Turner had taken any notice whatsoever;
that had they therefore been even feebly and imperfectly represented
by him, they would yet have given him a claim to be considered
more extended and universal in his statement of truths than any of
his predecessors; how much more when we find that deep fidelity in
his studied and perfect skies which opens new sources of delight to
every advancement of our knowledge, and to every added moment
of our contemplation.