
AN
ESSAY
ON THE
STUDY OF NATURE
IN
DRAWING LANDSCAPE.

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DRAWING LANDSCAPE.

BY W. M. CRAIG.

WITH ILLUSTRATIVE PRINTS, ENGRAVED BY THE AUTHOR.

The Rules of Art are few and simple. SIR J. REYNOLDS.

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TO

RICHARD COSWAY, ESQ. R. A.

SIR,

I do myself the pleasure of inscribing this little Essay to you, because it is written to enforce a position which you have always powerfully supported, both by your advice and example,—I mean the necessity of adhering closely to Nature.

I am conscious, notwithstanding, that it may seem impertinent to offer you any thing on a subject which you have already so perfectly investigated; yet you will, I am convinced, regard with pleasure an attempt, though feeble, to open the mind of the dilettante artist to a perception

of the true principles of the art, which the prevailing tide of fashion has nearly overwhelmed.

For the rest, I know you will do more than justice to any merit that may appear in my performance, and will view its imperfections through the medium of that friendship with which you have so long honoured me.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient and devoted servant,

WILLIAM MARSHALL CRAIG.

AN ESSAY, &c.

To imitate Nature has generally been considered as the object of the pencil. This, however, having lately been much controverted, and a distinct manner of practice having resulted from the negative opinion, it may be necessary to give the subject some moments consideration. It is argued, by some, that general, and not individual nature is to be imitated; and a late celebrated artist rejected even this.*

It appears a matter of some difficulty to ascertain what is meant by general nature, and, consequently, how it is to be imitated. Were it proposed to select, from various individuals of a species, those parts which

* “ Painting is, *strictly speaking*, no imitation at all of external nature.”

See Discourses to the Royal Academy.

might be esteemed the best, and thus give a perfect example of the kind,* we should commend the method: but this is not a general representation—it is a collection of individualities. Again, if we suppose that abstract ideas are meant to be represented,† the attempt will appear truly ridiculous. The operation of the human mind in forming abstract ideas, is, to reject whatever is peculiar to one of a species, and to retain only what is common to the whole: hence the impossibility of painting abstract or general resemblances of nature must be evident. For who, that is at all acquainted with the practice of the art of which we treat, or even who that has, for a moment, reflected upon it, would think of sitting down to paint a flower or a tree so, that the tree shall possess every thing that trees have in common with each other, without being

* Il pittore deve essere universale e solitario, e considerare ciò che esso vede, e parlar con seco, eleggendo le parti le più eccellenti delle specie di qualunque cosa che egli vede.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Trat. della Pittura*.

† The artist first quoted says, speaking of painting drapery, it should not be any particular kind of drapery, but merely drapery.

oak, ash, beech, elm, or walnut, and that the flower shall suggest strongly the idea of a flower, being at the same time neither a rose, a pink, an auricula, or a daisy, and being of a general colour inclining neither to blue, red, yellow, purple, or brown. This is, surely, too ridiculous to require further comment; and yet upon such a principle has the present prevailing mode of drawing been established.

Whoever truly loves the art must hear, with regret and indignation, what is unfortunately too true, that, amongst many practitioners in drawing, a certain set of signs has been employed, as by agreement, to represent, or signify, certain objects in nature, to which they have intrinsically little or no resemblance. This is, doubtless, the general imitation so much talked of, and general it certainly is; for, as we shall see in the conclusion, these signs are as much like one thing as another.

Such is the melancholy truth; and this disease of the pencil has spread, unresisted, its noxious influence,

and the dilettante artist yields at length to the contagion, as one who, being cast on a country of savages, submits, from necessity, to adopt their language; and long habit, blunting the nice edge of judgment and taste, reconciles him finally to the barbarisms with which it abounds.

A specimen of the manner here described may, perhaps, be thought necessary to make the subject more obvious; but as my intention in this Essay is merely to give outlines, I cannot exhibit this dangerous practice in its greatest extent: for the manner usually adopted in filling up such drawings is more extraordinary than the delineation. As far, however, as lines can exemplify, it is effected, as will be found, in one of the annexed plates. *

The works of a well known writer of Picturesque Tours † may be particularly recommended as further illustrations of the beauties of this manner of drawing by signs. In them the judicious observer will see

* See Plate the second.

† Mr. Gilpin.

truth sacrificed on all occasions, and, poor compensation! a strong opposition of black and yellow, or red, substituted in its place. This ingenious and fashionable writer has, however, fairly deduced his practice from his principles. What shall we say, or how shall we express our gratitude, to one who, having travelled over the whole of an extensive and beautiful kingdom to observe Nature, liberally advises his readers to reject all attempts at a characteristic resemblance of the objects they undertake to delineate, because it cannot be acquired without much labour, and should therefore be left to professors? nay, farther, as we proceed, we find ourselves admitted, by the same authority, to greater liberties, and are allowed to add altitude to mountains,* to manufacture trees and foregrounds, † where necessary, and even to turn the course of rivers

* It is an extraordinary assertion of this writer, that to give mountains their apparent altitude, they must be drawn much higher than they appear.

† “ Trees he,” speaking of the artist, “ may generally plant or remove at pleasure. If a withered stump suit the form of his landscape better than the spreading oak, which he finds in nature, he may make the exchange; or he may make it, if he wishes for a

at pleasure. Thus the picturesque hand acquires a power, before unknown, and we may hope soon to see a Skiddow or Helvellyn represented as rising from the fertile plains of Berkshire; or the Thames, and its numerous sails, gliding through the deep valleys of Cumberland. It may, and perhaps will, be thought by some, that I have carried this idea too far; but surely there is no conclusion, however extravagant, that may not be expected where false principles are assumed for the premises.

We come now again, after a long digression, to our first position, which I shall endeavour to establish by recurring to the greatest authorities—I mean the great schools of painting, which in other countries have preceded the institution of one in ours.

If, with this view, we look back to a period, many spreading oak where he finds a withered stump.—He may certainly break an ill-formed hillock; and shovel the earth about him as he pleases, without offence.—He may pull up a piece of awkward paling—he may throw down a cottage—he may even turn the course of a road, or a river, a few yards on this side, or that." See *Observations on the Mountains and Lakes of Westmoreland, &c.*

centuries removed, when the arts flourished in Greece, we shall find minute similitude so far considered as the criterion of a good picture, that an artist, perhaps more than the Raphael of his time, condemned one of his works, for ought he knew, to ruin, because he had failed in the representation of so trifling a part of it as the foam from a horse's mouth. Other circumstances might be adduced, on the authority of historians, to prove that painting was then practised upon this principle; and it is strongly contended, that the pictures of that period were infinitely superior to any thing that has appeared in the art since. Pursuing our researches in the history of the art still further, we discover, with regret, that after the muses were banished from Greece and Rome, painting shared the fate of the countries in which it had been cherished, and, accommodating itself to the barbarous taste of many barbarous nations, became too mean to deserve historical remembrance. What the practice was during the latter part, at least, of that period, we may conjecture with some

degree of certainty from the illuminated manuscripts, and the painted glass that have been handed down to us ; which are, perhaps, scarcely equal to the performances of the Chinese at present. It may appear wonderful that the art should have remained so long in this low state, till we reflect, that it was esteemed a crime for any practitioner to deviate, even in a single line, from what his predecessors had done before him. Such indeed, with this disadvantage, it might have continued still longer, had not Giovanni Cimabue burst, indignant, the bonds that had restrained so many others, and pointed out, though faintly, a path which, being afterwards cleared and improved by his pupil and successor, Giotto, led finally to the perfection of painting in Italy.

It will be necessary for our purpose to inquire, in what this great improvement consisted ? we shall then find, that Cimabue was the first, after a period of two centuries, who attempted to paint from Nature.* Suc-

* See Vasari, Vita di Cimabue.

ceeding artists saw in his works the advantage of this practice, and followed it, and the estimation of painting has since been in proportion as its approximation to the works of Nature.

I have now, I flatter myself, established, beyond a doubt, my first position, that the object of the pencil is to imitate Nature. Nor let it be supposed that I have been too diffuse in this particular; for, as I have already shewn, the matter has been contested, and to know precisely the object of our pursuit, is necessary in order to determine the means of attaining it.—I will now endeavour to settle a second disputed point, and then proceed to the few practical rules, which I have proposed as the object of this Essay.

The pleasure derived from surveying the works of art is occasioned by finding the end obtained bearing a certain proportion to the means of obtaining. Thus the satisfaction we feel in contemplating the sketches of a great master, is not because we consider them as

the promise of something more,* nor that the imagination is delighted by having something left to supply:† the satisfaction is occasioned by finding the end in view so far obtained by a degree of labour apparently inadequate. This admitted, it follows consequently, that as the end of painting is to imitate Nature, any subject imitated in proportion to the extent of the means employed for that purpose, will give pleasure in the subsequent contemplation.‡ It should, however, be understood that any subject, more pleasing than another, in Nature, will have the same effect in painting.—We will now proceed.

“ Copy exactly what you see, that you may copy exactly what you imagine,” § is a principle of which every artist must know the value. It is not meant by this, that the mind so habited acquires a power to

* See Burke on the Sublime and Beautiful. † See Gilpin on the Lakes, &c.

‡ Hence we see drunken boors imported from Holland and Flanders by the man of taste, and cart-horses, pigs, blacksmiths, bar-maids, and carriers, bought up with avidity at the Morland gallery.

§ See Discourses to the Royal Academy.

invent or delineate any thing that has not, either wholly or in part, been previously offered to the eye, but that the practice of copying accurately, impresses objects so forcibly upon the mind, that whenever we have occasion to employ the materials thus collected, even differently combined from what they were when first presented to us, we can give them the same energy and truth of character, as if derived immediately from Nature.

Distant objects should certainly be rejected by the student at the commencement, and his first essays confined to single and near objects, as a tree, a piece of rock, or broken ground, or any thing that may conduce to the future composition of landscape. In these, too, he should not begin with sketching the whole, and then retouching and repairing the several parts till they become right, but with drawing some one small part in clear and distinct lines;* allowing none to remain that are in the least erroneous, nor any that

* See Plate the first.

do not relate something characteristic and interesting in the subject. The advantage of beginning by a part rather than sketching the whole, is this: the eye can more easily measure a small space or distance than a large one, and a part being accurately drawn, becomes a scale, or means of comparison, by which the remaining parts may be successively drawn with a great degree of certainty. Likewise, the practice of drawing, at once, the precise line that is proposed to remain, makes the eye correct; and, further, as, to do this, each little particular must be impressed upon his mind by attentive observation, the student will insensibly form an intimacy with the various characters which Nature ever exhibits, and gradually make himself master of those little details of circumstance, in which so much of picturesque beauty consists.

No person can make a slight drawing well, that has not, previously, been accustomed to make finished drawings.* The early works of every great master in

* Quando vorrai far buono e utile studio, usa nel tuo disegnare di fare adagio,—

painting will be found, on examination, to be strongly decided in every line, and much more hard than any thing appears in Nature. The reason is obvious. The habit of studying any object, or objects, minutely, induces a laboured manner, from the desire of expressing every particular; but this, in the end, by imparting a perfect knowledge of the subject, gives a facility of expressing it so, that every touch of the pencil may have its peculiar energy. On the contrary, we find nothing but difficulty and error arise from attempting, at first, what is called *a bold and free manner*. In the first stages of this practice Nature is in some degree attended to; but this is soon laid aside, and the manner rapidly degenerates into that, which I have before described, of representing things by signs to which they have intrinsically no resemblance. For, as the artist aims not at particular imitation, he sketches merely the forms of things, and fills up the interior

e quando harai fatto l'uso e la mano à quella diligenza, ti verra fatta la pratica presta, che tu non ten' avvedrai.

Lionardo da Vinci, Trattato della Pittura.

parts with a twirl, a flourish, or a zig-zag of his pencil,* to which he associates the ideas of the particulars they are supposed to represent. This association becomes, by habit, so strong, that the artist, forgetting others are not informed of the compact he has made with himself to adopt this short-hand kind of representation, frequently produces drawings that few can understand. By way of illustration, we will refer to the second Plate,† where, in the second figure, we see the same zig-zag line (*a a a*) used to express ruined windows, masses of ivy, and reflections in water. In the third figure, rocks, shrubs, grass, and men, or women, are expressed by the same kind of blotted lines. The subject at the bottom of this plate is copied from a drawing after Nature, now in my possession. It is to represent a beautiful valley inclosed by craggy and verdant mountains, with a fine river meandering

* Così, ancora che esse macchie ti diano inventione, esse non t'insegnano finir alcun particolare, e questo tal pittore fece tristissimi paesi. Trattato della Pittura.

† See Plate the second. The subjects of this Plate, except the last, are copied from Gilpin's observation on the river Wye.

through the whole. Such are “those irregular dashes of the pencil, which,” as Mr. Gilpin happily expresses it, in his eulogium on this manner of drawing, “if they are not one thing, may be easily conceived to be another!”*

In drawing distant objects, care must be taken that the hand be not guided by the mind rather than the eye: for the memory is ever too ready to supply what the eye cannot discern. The best general rule that can be given on this subject is, that the same character † of line which would be used to express the individual parts of an object, when near, will be proper in describing its masses when seen at a distance.

The difference between a slight and a finished drawing should be only this: the first exhibits all that can be observed in the objects represented, and the other only what is characteristic of, and peculiar to, them. This, however, unless preceded by much practice or good instruction, involves considerable diffi-

* Gilpin's Lakes, Vol. I. page 104.

† See the third Plate.

culty. It requires a nice taste to select, and a practised hand to execute.

Every different subject or material should be expressed by a different kind of line or touch, which Nature * will always point out, if attended to. It is the constant application of one certain kind of execution to all objects indiscriminately that constitutes what, in painting, is called *manner*, and which should be sedulously avoided.

Whatever memorandums are made for the shadows of objects, let them be made diagonally, from the right hand to the left. † This, being once established as a rule of practice, will be found highly advantageous, as it readily points out a method of indicating shadow, and will enable the student to distinguish, on a future revision of his studies, the depths that represent shadow, from those which, being marked in lines of a different direction, may represent degrees of colour.‡

* See the fourth and fifth Plates. † See the fourth and sixth Plates. This is not exactly explained by the Plates, as the printing reverses them. ‡ See the seventh Plate.

This parallel tendency of the lines in the shadows produces a degree of unity, or harmony, in the appearance of a drawing, so managed, that is highly pleasing.

Wherever the quantities of shadow are small,* or where any inconvenience may result from adopting the preceding rule, let the lines marking the shadows take a direction parallel to the direction of the part to be shadowed.

Wherever the subject presents an even surface, let the lines, that include or represent it, be drawn with perfect clearness and unity,† and never let an affected rejection of straight lines ‡ be the means of introducing broken and irregular touches which the subject does not authorize.

I have here offered a few rules for the management of the black lead pencil, which is the material to be recommended on a first application to the study of

* See the eighth Plate.

† See the first Plate.

‡ See the first figure in the second Plate, *bbb*.

Nature in landscape; and I flatter myself, that whoever takes the trouble to form his hand by these instructions, will soon concur with me, in allowing that the rules of art are few and simple.

At a future opportunity, I propose giving to the public two subsequent parts of the present little Essay; one on an easy Theory of Light and Shadow, and the other on Composition and Colouring. I shall therefore conclude, for the present, by repeating what I have before endeavoured to enforce, that to imitate Nature exactly is the only sure way to arrive at any tolerable degree of excellence in drawing, and that the adopting, at first, a slight and sketchy manner, as it weakens the imitative powers of the artist, increases the numerous obstacles that oppose his progress; while the contrary practice, though it present difficulties at the commencement, sees them diminish at every step, and, finally, gives the student a facility of execution that will make his works little inferior to the vivid productions of Nature herself.



Fig. II.

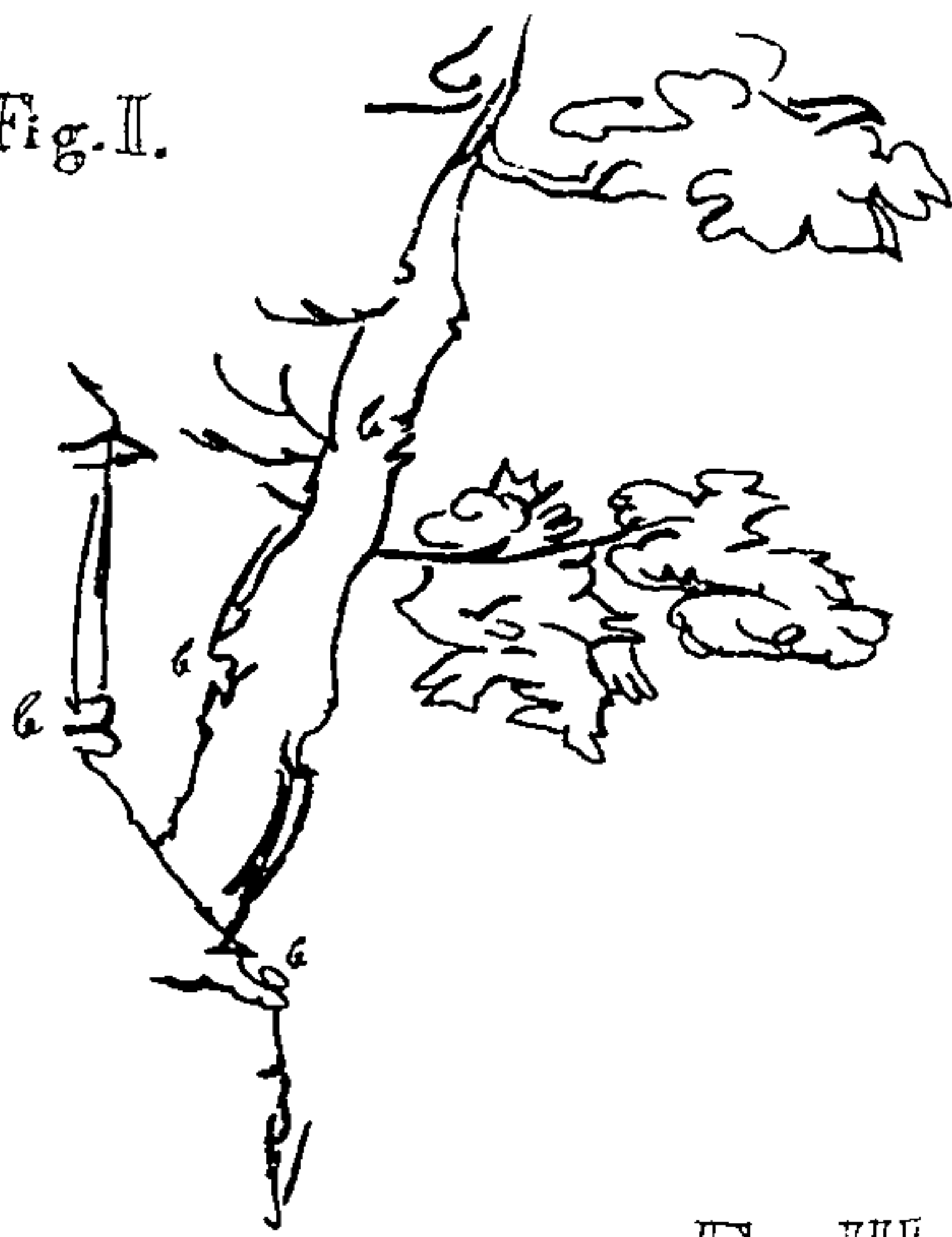


Fig. III.



Fig. III.







