NATURAL INSPIRATION

We seem to have involved the supposition that mountain influence is either unfavourable or inessential to literary power; but for this also the mountain influence is still necessary, only in a subordinate degree. It is true, indeed, that the Avon is no mountain torrent, and that the hills round the vale of Stratford are not sublime; true, moreover, that the cantons Berne and Uri have never yet, so far as I know, produced a great poet; but neither, on the other hand, has Antwerp or Amsterdam. And, I believe, the natural scenery which will be found, on the whole, productive of most literary intellect is that mingled of hill and plain, as all available light is of flame and darkness; the flame being the active element, and the darkness the tempering one.

In noting such evidence as bears upon this subject, the reader must always remember that the mountains are at an unfair disadvantage, in being much out of the way of the masses of men employed in intellectual pursuits. The position of a city is dictated by military necessity or commercial convenience: it rises, flourishes, and absorbs into its activity whatever leading intellect is in the surrounding population. The persons who are able and desirous to give their children education naturally resort to it; the best schools, the best society, and the strongest motives assist and excite those born within its walls; and youth after youth rises to distinction out of its streets, while among the blue mountains, twenty miles away, the goatherds live and die in unregarded lowness. And yet this is no proof that the mountains have little effect upon the mind, or that the streets have a helpful one. The men who are formed by the schools and polished by the society of the capital, may yet in many ways have their powers shortened by the absence of natural scenery; and the mountaineer, neglected, ignorant, and unambitious, may have been taught things by the clouds and streams which he could not have learned in a college, or a coterie.

And in reasoning about the effect of mountains we are therefore under a difficulty like that which would occur to us if we had to determine the good or bad effect of light on the human constitution, in some place where all corporal exercise was necessarily in partial darkness, and only idle people lived in the light. The exercise might give an advantage to the occupants of the gloom, but we should neither be justified in therefore denying the preciousness of light in general, nor the necessity to the workers of the few rays they possessed; and thus I suppose the hills around Stratford, and such glimpses as Shakespeare had of sandstone and pines in Warwickshire, or of chalk cliffs in Kent, to have been essential to the development of his genius. This supposition can only be proved false by the rising of a Shakespeare at Rotterdam or Bergen-op-Zoom, which I think not probable; whereas, on the other hand, it is confirmed by myriads of collateral evidences. The matter could only be tested by placing for half a century the British universities at Keswick and Beddgelert, and making Grenoble the capital of France; but if, throughout the history of Britain and France, we contrast the general invention and pathetic power, in ballads or legends, of the inhabitants of the Scottish Border with those manifested in Suffolk or Essex; and similarly the inventive power of Normandy, Provence, and the Bearnais with that of Champagne or Picardy, we shall obtain some convincing evidence respecting the operation of hills on the masses of mankind, and be disposed to admit, with less hesitation, that the apparent inconsistencies in the effect of scenery on greater minds proceed in each case from specialities of education, accident, and original temper, which it would be impossible to follow out in detail. Sometimes only, when the original resemblance in character of intellect is very marked in two individuals, and they are submitted to definitely contrary circumstances of education, an approximation to evidence may be obtained. Thus Bacon and Pascal appear to be men naturally very similar in their temper
and powers of minds. One, born in York House, Strand, of courtly parents, educated in court atmosphere, and replying, almost as soon as he could speak, to the queen asking how old he was—"Two years younger than Your Majesty’s happy reign!"—has the world’s meanness and cunning engrained into his intellect, and remains smooth, serene, enthusiastic, and in some degree base, even with all his sincere devotion and universal wisdom; bearing, to the end of life, the likeness of a marble palace in the street of a great city, fairly furnished within, and bright in wall and battlement, yet noisome in places about the foundations. The other, born at Clermont, in Auvergne, under the shadow of the Puy de Dôme, though taken to Paris at eight years old, retains for ever the impress of his birthplace; pursuing natural philosophy with the same zeal as Bacon, he returns to his own mountains to put himself under their tutelage, and by their help first discovers the great relations of the earth and the air: struck at last with mortal disease; gloomy, enthusiastic, and superstitious, with a conscience burning like lava, and inflexible like iron, the clouds gather about the majesty of him, fold after fold; and, with his spirit buried in ashes, and rent by earthquake, yet fruitful of true thought and faithful affection, he stands like that mound of desolate scoria that crowns the hill ranges of his native land, with its sable summit far in heaven, and its foundations green with the ordered garden and the trellised vine.

When, however, our inquiry thus branches into the successive analysis of individual characters, it is time for us to leave it; noting only one or two points respecting Shakespeare. He seems to have been sent essentially to take universal and equal grasp of the human nature; and to have been removed, therefore, from all influences which could in the least warp or bias his thoughts. It was necessary that he should lean no way; that he should contemplate, with absolute equality of judgment, the life of the court, cloister, and tavern, and be able to sympathize so completely with all creatures as to deprive himself, together with his personal identity, even of his conscience, as he casts himself into their hearts. He must be able to enter into the soul of Falstaff or Shylock with no more sense of contempt or horror than Falstaff or Shylock themselves feel for or in themselves; otherwise his own conscience and indignation would make him unjust to them; he would turn aside from something, miss some good, or overlook some essential palliation. He must be utterly without anger, utterly without purpose; for if a man has any serious purpose in life, that which runs counter to it, or is foreign to it, will be looked at frowningly or carelessly by him. Shakespeare was forbidden of Heaven to have any plans. To do any good or get any good, in the common sense of good, was not to be within his permitted range of work. Not, for him, the founding of institutions, the preaching of doctrines, or the repression of abuses. Neither he, nor the sun, did on any morning that they rose together, receive charge from their Maker concerning such things. They were both of them to shine on the evil and good; both to behold unoffended all that was upon the earth, to burn unappalled upon the spears of kings, and undisdaining, upon the reeds of the river.

Therefore, so far as nature had influence over the early training of this man, it was essential to his perfectness that the nature should be quiet. No mountain passions were to be allowed in him. Inflict upon him but one pang of the monastic conscience; cast upon him but one cloud of the mountain gloom; and his serenity had been gone for ever—his equity—his infinity. You would have made another Dante of him; and all that he would have ever uttered about poor, soiled, and frail humanity would have been the quarrel between Simon and Adam of Brescia,—speedily retired from, as not worthy a man’s hearing, nay, not to be heard without heavy fault. All your Falstaffs, Slenders, Quicklys, Sir Tobys, Lancies, Touchstones, and Quinces, would have been lost in that. Shakespeare could be allowed no mountains; nay, not even any supreme natural beauty. He had to be left with his kingcups and clover;—pansies—the passing clouds—the Avon’s flow—and the undulating hills and woods of Warwick; nay, he was not
only painted human nature as he saw it in his own time. They will find, if they look into his work closely, as much antiquarianism as they do geography, and no more. The commonly received notions about the things that had been, Shakespeare took as he found them, animating them with pure human nature, of any time and all time; but inquiries into the minor detail of temporary feeling, he despised as utterly as he did maps; and wheresoever the temporary feeling was in anywise contrary to that of his own day, he errs frankly, and paints from his own time. For instance in this matter of love of flowers; we have traced already, far enough for our general purposes, the mediaeval interest in them, whether to be enjoyed in the fields, or to be used for types of ornamentation in dress. If Shakespeare had cared to enter into the spirit of the early fifteenth century, he would assuredly have marked this affection in some of his knights, and indicated even then, in heroic tempers, the peculiar respect for loveliness of dress which we find constantly in Dante. But he could not do this; he had not seen it in real life. In his time dress had become an affectation and absurdity. Only fools, or wise men in their weak moments, showed much concern about it; and the facts of human nature which appeared to him general in the matter were the soldier’s disdain, and the coxcomb’s care of it. Hence Shakespeare’s good soldier is almost always in plain or battered armour; even the speech of Vernon in Henry the Fourth, which, as far as I remember, is the only one that bears fully upon the beauty of armour, leans more upon the spirit and hearts of men—“bated, like eagles having lately bathed”; and has an under-current of slight contempt running through the following line, “Glittering in golden coats, like images”; while the beauty of the young Harry is essentially the beauty of fiery and perfect youth, answering as much to the Greek, or Roman, or Elizabethan knight as to the mediaeval one; whereas the definite interest in armour and dress is opposed by Shakespeare in the French

1 1 Henry IV, iv, 1.

“With fairest flowers
While summer lasts, and I live here, Fidele,
I’ll sweeten thy sad grave. Thou shalt not lack
The flower that’s like thy face—pale primrose, nor
The azure harebell—like thy veins; no, nor
The leaf of eglandine, whom not to slander,
Outsweetened not thy breath. The ruddock would
With charitable bill bring thee all this;
Yea, and furrd moss besides, when flowers are none,
To winter-ground thy corse.

Cui. Prithee, have done,
And do not play in wench-like words with that
Which is so serious.”

Imogen herself, afterwards, in deeper passion, will give weeds—not flowers—and something more:

“And when
With wildwood leaves and weeds, I have strewed his grave,
And on it said a century of prayers,
Such as I can, twice o’er, I’ll weep, and sigh,
And, leaving so his service, follow you.”

(Cymbeline, iv, 2.)
(meaning to depreciate them), to the English rude soldierliness:

Con. Tut, I have the best armour in the world. 
Would it were day!

Orl. You have an excellent armour, but let my horse have his due.

And again:

My lord constable, the armour that I saw in your tent to-night, are those stars, or sums, upon it? while Henry, half proud of his poorness of array, speaks of armorial splendour scornfully; the main idea being still of its being a gilded show and vanity—

Our gayness and our gilt are all besmirched. This is essentially Elizabethan. The quarterings on a knight’s shield, or the inlaying of his armour, would never have been thought of by him as mere “gayness or gilt” in earlier days. In like manner, throughout every scale of rank or feeling, from that of the French knights down to Falstaff’s “I looked he should have sent me two-and-twenty yards of satin, as I am true knight, and he sends me security!” care for dress is always considered by Shakespeare as contemptible; and Mrs Quickly distinguishes herself from a true fairy by her solicitude to scour the chairs of order—and “each fair instalment, coat, and several crest”; and the association in her mind of the flowers in the fairy rings with the

*If the reader thinks that in Henry the Fifth’s time the Elizabethan temper might already have been manifesting itself, let him compare the English herald’s speech, act 2 scene 2 of King John; and by way of specimen of Shakespeare’s historical care, or regard of medieval character, the large use of artillery in the previous scene.

2 Henry V, iii, 7; iv, 3.
3 Henry IV, i, 2.
4 Merry Wives of Windsor, v, 5.

Sapphire, pearl, and rich embroidery,
Buckled below fair knighthood’s bending knee;
while the true fairies, in field simplicity, are only anxious to “sweep the dust behind the door”; and

With this field dew consecrate,
Every several chamber bless
Through this palace with sweet peace.5

Note the expression “Field dew consecrate”. Shakespeare loved courts and camps; but he felt that sacredness and peace were in the dew of the Fields only.

There is another respect in which he was wholly incapable of entering into the spirit of the Middle Ages. He had no great art of any kind around him in his own country, and was, consequently, just as powerless to conceive the general influence of former art, as a man of the most inferior calibre. Shakespeare’s evidence in matters of art is as narrow as the range of Elizabethan art in England, and resolves itself wholly into admiration of two things—mockery of life, as in the instance of Hermione as a statue, or absolute splendour, as in the close of Romeo and Juliet, where the notion of gold as the chief source of dignity of aspect, coming down to Shakespeare from the times of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and, as I said before, strictly Elizabethan, would interfere seriously with the pathos of the whole passage, but for the sense of sacrifice implied in it:

As rich shall Romeo by his lady lie
Poor sacrifices of our enmity.6

And observe, I am not giving these examples as proof of any smallness in Shakespeare, but of his greatness; that is to say, of his contentment, like every other great man who ever breathed, to paint nothing but what he saw; and therefore giving perpetual evidence that his sight was of the sixteenth, and not of the thirteenth century, be-

5 Midsummer Night’s Dream, v, 2.
6 Romeo and Juliet, v, 3.
neath all the broad and eternal humanity of his imagination. How far in these modern days, emptied of splendour, it may be necessary for great men having certain sympathies for those earlier ages, to act in this differently from all their predecessors; and how far they may succeed in the resuscitation of the past by habitually dwelling in all their thoughts among vanished generations, are questions, of all practical and present ones concerning art, the most difficult to decide; for already in poetry several of our truest men have set themselves to this task, and have indeed put more vitality into the shadows of the dead than most others can give the presences of the living. Thus Longfellow, in the *Golden Legend*, has entered more closely into the temper of the Monk, for good and for evil, than ever yet theological writer or historian, though they may have given their life’s labour to the analysis: and, again, Robert Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages; always vital, right, and profound; so that in the matter of art, with which we have been specially concerned, there is hardly a principle connected with the mediæval temper, that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged rhymes of his. There is a curious instance, by the way, in a short poem referring to this very subject of tomb and image sculpture; and illustrating just one of those phases of local human character which, though belonging to Shakespeare’s own age, he never noticed, because it was specially Italian and un-English; connected also closely with the influence of mountains on the heart, and therefore with our immediate inquiries. I mean the kind of admiration with which a southern artist regarded the stone he worked in; and the pride which populace or priest took in the possession of precious mountain substance, worked into the pavements of their cathedrals, and the shafts of their tombs.

Observe, Shakespeare, in the midst of architecture and tombs of wood, or freestone, or brass, naturally thinks of gold as the best enriching and ennobling substance for them;—in the midst also of the fever of the Renaissance he writes, as every one else did, in praise of precisely the most vicious master of that school—Giulio Romano, but the modern poet, living much in Italy, and quit of the Renaissance influence, is able fully to enter into the Italian feeling, and to see the evil of the Renaissance tendency, not because he is greater than Shakespeare, but because he is in another element, and has seen other things. I miss fragments here and there not needed for my purpose in the passage quoted, without putting asterisks, for I weaken the poem enough by the omissions, without spoiling it also by breaks.

*The Bishop orders his tomb in St Praxed’s Church*

As here I lie
In this state chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours, and long hours, in the dead night, I ask
Do I live—am I dead? Peace, peace seems all:
St Praxed’s ever was the church for peace.
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know;
Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care.
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner south
He graced his carrion with.
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o’ the epistle side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats;
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam’s sure to lurk.
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And ’neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet, where Anselm stands;
Peach-blossom marble all.
Swift as a weaver’s shuttle fleet our years:

7 Vide *Romeo and Juliet*, v, 3, line 299.
8 Vide *Winter’s Tale*, v, 2.
9 The last bishop.
10 His favourite son; nominally his nephew.
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?  
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—  
’Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else  
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?  
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,  
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance  
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,  
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,  
St Praxed in a glory, and one Pan,  
And Moses with the tables . . . but I know  
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,  
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope  
To revel down my villas while I gasp,  
Bricked o’er with beggar’s mouldy travertine,  
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!  
Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then!  
There’s plenty jasper somewhere in the world—  
And have I not St Praxed’s ear to pray  
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts?  
That’s if ye carve my epitaph aright,  
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully’s every word,  
No gaudy ware like Gandolf’s second line—  
Tully, my masters? Ulpius serves his need."

I know no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice put into as many lines, Browning’s being also the antecedent work. The worst of it is that this kind of concentrated writing needs so much solution before the reader can fairly get the good of it, that people’s patience fails them, and they give the thing up as insoluble; though, truly, it ought to be to the current of common thought like Saladin’s talisman, dipped in clear water, not soluble altogether, but making the element medicinal.11

11 Vide Scott: Talisman, 1, 8–9.
accurate limitation of his sympathies to such things as he
had known in his youth; and his entire preference of hu-
man interest, and of courtly and kingly dignities, to the
nobleness of the hills. This is most marked in Cymbeline,
where the term "mountaineer" is, as with Dante, always
one of reproach, and the noble birth of Arviragus and
Guiderm is shown by their holding their mountain cave as

A cell of ignorance; travelling abed;
A prison for a debtor;

and themselves, educated among hills, as in all things con-
temptible:

We are beastly; subtle as the fox, for prey;
Like warlike as the wolf, for what we eat;
Our valour is to chase what flies; our cage
We make our choir, as doth the prisoned bird.\textsuperscript{12}

A few phrases occur here and there which might justify
the supposition that he had seen high mountains, but never
implying awe or admiration. Thus Demetrius:

These things seem small and indistinguishable,
Like far off mountains, turned into clouds.\textsuperscript{13}

"Taurus snow", and the "frosty Caucasus", are used
merely as types of purity or cold; and though the aven-
lanche is once spoken of as an image of power, it is with
instantly following depreciation:

Rush on his host, as doth the melted snow
Upon the valleys whose low vassal seat
The Alps doth spit, and void his rheum upon.\textsuperscript{14}

There was only one thing belonging to hills that Shakes-
peare seemed to feel as noble—the pine tree, and that was
because he had seen it in Warwickshire, clumps of pine
occasionally rising on little sandstone mounds, as at the

12 \textit{Cymbeline}, III, 3.
13 \textit{Midsummer Night's Dream}, IV, 1.

place of execution of Piers Gaveston, above the lowland
woods. He touches on this tree fondly again and again:

As rough,
Their royal blood encafed, as the rud'st wind,
That by his top doth take the mountain pine,
And make him stoop to the vale.\textsuperscript{15}

The strong-based promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
The pine and cedar.\textsuperscript{16}

Where note his observance of the peculiar horizontal roots
of the pine, spurred as it is by them like the claw of a bird,
and partly propped, as the aiguilles by those rock promo-
tories at their bases which I have always called their spurs,
this observance of the pine's strength and animal-like
grasp being the chief reason for his choosing it, above
other trees, for Ariel's prison. Again:

You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops, and to make no noise
When they are fretted with the gusts of heaven.\textsuperscript{17}

And yet again:

But when, from under this terrestrial ball,
He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines.\textsuperscript{18}

We may judge, by the impression which this single
feature of hill scenery seems to have made on Shake-
peare's mind, because he had seen it in his youth, how
his whole temper would have been changed if he had
lived in a more sublime country, and how essential it was
to his power of contemplation of mankind that he should
be removed from the sterner influences of nature. For the
rest, so far as Shakespeare's work has imperfections of
any kind,—the trivialness of many of his adopted plots, for

15 \textit{Cymbeline}, IV, 2.
16 \textit{Tempest}, V, 1.
17 \textit{Merchant of Venice}, IV, 1.
18 \textit{Richard II}, III, 2.
instance, and the comparative rarity with which he admits the ideal of an enthusiastic virtue arising out of principle; virtue being with him, for the most part, founded simply on the affections joined with inherent purity in his women, or on mere manly pride and honour in his men;—in a word, whatever difference, involving inferiority, there exists between him and Dante, in his conceptions of the relation between this world and the next, we may partly trace, as we did the difference between Bacon and Pascal, to the less noble character of the scenes around

* I mean that Shakespeare almost always implies a total difference in nature between one human being and another; one being from the birth pure and affectionate, another base and cruel; and he displays each, in its sphere, as having the nature of dove, wolf, or lion, never much implying the government or change of nature by any external principle. There can be no question that in the main he is right in this view of human nature; still, the other form of virtue does exist occasionally, and was never, as far as I recollect, taken much note of by him. And with this stern view of humanity, Shakespeare joined a sorrowful view of Fate, closely resembling that of the ancients. He is distinguished from Dante eminently by his always dwelling on last causes instead of first causes. Dante invariably points to the moment of the soul’s choice which fixed its fate, to the instant of the day when it read no farther, or determined to give bad advice about Penestro. But Shakespeare always leans on the force of Fate, as it urges the final evil; and dwells with infinite bitterness on the power of the wicked, and the infinitude of result dependent seemingly on little things. A fool brings the last piece of news from Verona, and the dearest lives of its noble houses are lost; they might have been saved if the sacristan had not stumbled as he walked. Othello mislays his handkerchief, and there remains nothing for him but death. Hamlet gets hold of the wrong foil, and the rest is silence. Edmund’s runner is a moment too late at the prison, and the feather will not move at Cordelia’s lips. Salisbury a moment too late at the tower, and Arthur lies on the stones dead. Coneril and Iago have on the whole, in this world, Shakespeare sees, much their own way, though they come to a bad end. It is a pin that Death pierces the king’s fortress wall with; and Carelessness and Folly sit sceptred and dreadful, side by side with the pin-armed skeleton.

19 Inferno, iv, 135; xxvii, 102.