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Élisée Reclus

On the Feeling for Nature in Modern Societies

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I

For some time now a genuine fervour has been showing itself in the loving feelings that bind men of art and science to nature. Travellers spread out in swarms across every easily reached country remarkable for the beauty of its scenery or the charm of its climate. Legions of painters, draughtsmen, and photographers roam the world from the banks of the Yangtze to those of the Amazon; they study the earth, the sea, the forests in their most varied aspects; they reveal to us all the splendours of the planet we inhabit, and thanks to their growing intimacy with nature, thanks to the works of art brought back from these countless journeys, every cultivated man can now form an idea of the features and physiognomy of the various regions of the globe. Less numerous than the artists, but even more useful in their work of exploration, the scholars too have become wanderers, taking the whole earth as their study; it was while travelling from the Andes to the Altai that Humboldt composed his admirable *Views of Nature*, dedicated, as he himself says, to "those who, through love of liberty, have been able to tear themselves away from the stormy waves of life."

The crowd of artists, scholars, and all those who, without claiming any connection to art or science, simply wish to refresh themselves in free nature, makes its way chiefly toward mountain regions. Every year, as soon as the season allows travellers to visit the high valleys and venture onto the peaks, thousands upon thousands of lowland dwellers flock to the most celebrated and beautiful parts of the Pyrenees and the Alps; most of them come, it is true, in obedience to fashion, out of idleness or vanity, but the originators of this movement are those drawn by love of the mountains themselves, for whom the climbing of rocks is a genuine delight. The sight of high peaks exerts on a great many men a kind of fascination; it is by a physical instinct, often unmixed with any

reflection, that they feel themselves drawn toward the heights to scale their steep slopes. By the majesty of their form and the boldness of their outline traced against the open sky, by the belt of clouds that winds about their flanks, by the ceaseless play of shadow and light across their ravines and buttresses, mountains become, so to speak, beings endowed with life, and it is in order to surprise the secret of their existence that men seek to conquer them. We feel drawn to them, too, by the contrast their virgin, untilled slopes offer with the monotony of cultivated plains, so often disfigured by human labour. And then do not mountains gather, within a small space, a summary of all the splendours of the earth? Climates and zones of vegetation are arranged in tiers around them: one can take in at a single glance the cultivated fields, the forests, the meadows, the rocks, the ice, the snow, and each evening the dying light of the sun gives the summits a marvellous appearance of transparency, as though that enormous mass were nothing but a light rosy drapery floating in the sky.

In ancient times peoples worshipped mountains, or at least revered them as the seat of their divinities. West and north of Mount Meru, that splendid throne of the gods of India, every stage of civilisation can be measured by other sacred mountains where the masters of heaven assembled, where the great mythological events in the life of nations took place. More than fifty mountains, from Ararat to Mount Athos, have been named as the peak on which the ark came to rest, bearing within its sides nascent humanity and the seeds of everything that lives upon the face of the earth. In the lands of the Semitic peoples every summit was an altar consecrated either to Jehovah, or to Moloch, or to other gods: such was Sinai, where the tables of the Jewish law appeared amid lightning; such was Mount Nebo, where a mysterious hand buried Moses; such was Moriah, bearing the temple of Jerusalem, Gerizim, where the high priest went up to bless his people, Carmel, Mount Tabor, and Lebanon crowned with cedars. It was toward these "high places," where their altars stood, that Jews or Canaanites went in crowds to slaughter their victims and burn their offerings. So too for the Greeks every mountain was a citadel of titans or the court of a god: a peak of the Caucasus served as Prometheus's pillory, he the father and type of humanity; the triple dome

of Olympus was the magnificent abode of Jupiter, and when a poet invoked Apollo, his eyes turned toward the summit of Parnassus.

Nowadays men no longer worship mountains, but those who have often roamed among them love them with a deep love. Such a peak as one has climbed seems to watch you; it smiles at you from afar; it is for you that its snows gleam and that, in the evening, it lights up with a last ray. With what happiness one recalls the smallest incident of the ascent—the stones that broke loose from the slope and plunged into the torrent with a dull sound, the root one clung to in scaling a wall of rock, the thread of melted snow-water that quenched one's thirst, the first crevasse one leaned over and dared to cross, the long slope so painfully climbed while sinking knee-deep into the snow, and finally the topmost ridge from which one saw spread out, to the misty edge of the horizon, the immense panorama of mountains, valleys, and plains! When one sees again from afar the summit conquered at the cost of so much effort, it is with genuine rapture that one makes out, or guesses by sight, the path once taken from the valleys at the base to the white snows of the summit. In that great picture offered by the mountainside, one finds again all the memories of a day of happiness.

Whence comes this profound joy felt in climbing high summits? First it is a great physical delight to breathe fresh, keen air that is not tainted by the impure exhalations of the plains. One feels, as it were, renewed in tasting this living atmosphere; as one rises, the air grows lighter; one draws longer breaths to fill the lungs, the chest expands, the muscles tighten, gaiety enters the soul. And besides, one has become master of oneself and answerable for one's own life. The walker climbing a mountain is not at the mercy of the elements as the sailor venturing upon the seas is; still less is he, like the traveller carried by railway, a mere parcel of humanity, ticketed, labelled, checked, and then dispatched at a fixed hour under the watch of uniformed employees. In touching the ground, he has regained the use of his limbs and his freedom. His eye serves him to avoid the stones on the path, to gauge the depth of the precipices, to discover the ledges and crevices that will make the scaling

of the rock-face easier. The strength and spring of his muscles allow him to cross chasms, to hold himself on steep slopes, to haul himself up step by step through the gullies. On a thousand occasions, during the ascent of a steep mountain, one realises that real danger would follow if one's balance failed, or if one's sight were suddenly clouded by dizziness, or if one's limbs refused to obey. It is precisely this awareness of peril, joined to the happiness of knowing oneself agile and fit, that doubles, in the mountaineer's mind, the feeling of safety.

As for the intellectual pleasure the ascent offers—closely bound up, moreover, with the bodily joys of the climb—it is all the greater the more open the mind and the better one has studied the various phenomena of nature. One catches in the very act the work of erosion by water and snow; one witnesses the movement of glaciers; one sees erratic boulders making their way from the summits down to the plain; one's eye follows the enormous horizontal or upturned strata; one sees the masses of granite heaving up the layers of rock; and then, once at last upon some high peak, one can contemplate as a whole the structure of the mountain, with its ravines and its buttresses, its snows, its forests, and its meadows. The combs and valleys that ice, water, and the weather have carved into that immense relief stand out clearly. One sees the work accomplished over thousands of centuries by all these geological agents. In tracing things back to the very origin of the mountains themselves, one forms a surer judgment on the various hypotheses put forward by scholars regarding the breaking of the earth's crust, the folding of its layers, and the eruption of granite or porphyry.

It must be admitted, besides, that vanity too can mingle, and often does mingle, with the noble passion that drives the traveller to climb high summits. Not only is a man exalted by the natural pride that must arise in him from the joy of being able, despite his own smallness, to triumph by intelligence and will over the obstacles that bar his way; not only does he delight in conquering the mountain itself and proclaiming himself the conqueror of that formidable peak, the first sight of which had nonetheless filled him with a kind of religious dread—he also listens in

advance for the stir that is sure to be made around his name, should he succeed in setting foot on the coveted summit; perhaps he is even flattered in advance by the envy that less fortunate explorers will feel toward him. It is at once a great and a rather childish pleasure to be the first to reach a goal toward which several are looking at once, to be the first to plant a flag on a conquered rampart, to be the first to spring upon a longed-for shore: a famous traveller, recognising that he would try in vain to scale the highest peak of the Matterhorn, wished at least to reach the spire nearest the summit, then reputed inaccessible. "What is the use?" said his guide. "That rock has neither glory nor name." And the tourist, turning his back on the Matterhorn, took the road to another, unconquered peak. It is certain, moreover, that this childish vanity which consists in wanting to make a pedestal of some high, painfully climbed mountain is the chief, if not the sole, cause of those dreadful accidents that never fail to occur every year. If the climber is not absolutely sure of the clearness of his eye and the strength of his limbs, let him dare to turn back without false shame before every passage too difficult for him, and there will be no need to mourn those terrible mishaps whose mere telling makes one shudder!

The number of important ascents has grown considerably since the lovers of rock and glacier applied the all-powerful principle of association to climbing and to the intimate knowledge of the great summits. Societies made up of scholars, accomplished walkers, and leisured men wanting a purpose in life have formed in several countries of Europe, and, under the name of alpine clubs, have banded together so as to leave no rock spire, no avalanche-swept gully untouched by human footsteps. They have drawn up lists of every still unconquered peak, discussed the means of reaching them, prompted countless ascents, and through their maps, their memoirs, their many gatherings, have greatly helped to make known the architecture of the Alps. The collections containing the travel journals of the members of the various alpine clubs are unquestionably the works in which one finds the most valuable information on the rocks and ice of Europe's high mountains, along with the finest accounts of ascents. In time to come, when the Alps and the

other accessible mountain ranges of the world are perfectly known, the memoirs of the alpine clubs will be the Iliad of mountain-wanderers, and men will tell of the exploits of Tyndall, Tuckett, Coaz, Theobald, and the other heroes of this great epic of the conquest of the Alps, as men once told of the exploits of warriors.

It is unquestionably to the English that belongs the honour of having given the impetus to this whole great movement of exploration of the high peaks. A hundred and twenty-five years ago already, Pococke and Wyndham had, so to speak, discovered Mont Blanc. Since that memorable time, it has likewise been Englishmen who, surpassing in zeal and daring even the inhabitants of the Swiss Alps themselves, and still more the mountain-folk of Savoy, Italy, and France, have most often climbed Mont Blanc and the other giants of the Alps; it is they who have studied with the greatest ardour the Mer de Glace and the various glaciers of the western massifs, and who have explained to us the true topography of the little-known groups of the Pelvoux, the Grand Paradiso, and Monte Viso; it is they, finally, who, by founding the first Alpine Club, have since given rise to a great number of similar societies in the various countries of Europe.

What is the reason for this remarkable pre-eminence of the Anglo-Saxons in the exploration of mountains? Doubtless it must be sought largely in the very blood of the race. English travellers, whether sailors or climbers, descend from those bold Vikings who called themselves "kings of the wild wave," and who in their narrow boats ventured with such joy upon the short, dangerous seas of the North Sea. The Danes and the Normans, sons of the Vikings, settled in England, and, mingling with the original inhabitants and the earlier conquerors of the soil, added their daring and their love of adventure to Breton tenacity. The native environment did the rest. The gentle slope of the countryside inclining toward the sea, the deep indentations of the coastline, the broad river estuaries, the ease of maritime communication, the fortunate position of the harbours facing Germany and France—all these natural advantages drove the English toward trade and travel. Great Britain

became the chief market of the entire world for exchange, and consequently it was there that, with the progress of civilisation, the desire to know countries differing in appearance from England must have developed more than anywhere else. Even the structure of English landed property has had the effect of driving a great many energetic men out of their homeland, thereby increasing the taste and experience of travel of every kind. While workers and landless farmers exile themselves voluntarily in search of well-being and independence in another hemisphere, a number of well-off people, deprived of landed property by the institution of primogeniture, and having, so to speak, no tie binding them to their native soil, are always ready to change country. Having no fields of their own, they take the whole earth for their domain, and, like new Mamertines, leave in crowds the homeland that no longer needs them.

To understand the irresistible attraction that draws so many English tourists toward the crevasses of glaciers, the gullies swept by avalanches, and the ledges of rock, one must not forget that the Anglo-Saxon has at all times professed a genuine cult of physical strength. A great eater of meat nearly raw, he delights in every violent exercise in which the muscles strain, in which the whole human frame is driven like a machine to a powerful effort, in which the blood of the heart, rushing toward the skin, asks only to circulate. When this admiration—legitimate enough in itself—for the exercise of brute force is not balanced in the Englishman by more delicate feelings, it inevitably degenerates into cruelty—not the cruelty inspired by fanaticism, nor that which carelessness gives to the Latin peoples, but a cold, deliberate, systematic cruelty—the love of blood for blood's own sake. One is sadly compelled to note this depravity of the moral sense on seeing Parliament interrupt its sittings so that statesmen may enjoy the satisfaction of going to watch two boxers who, faces and chests bare, bruise, maim, and blind one another with blows until each becomes a mass of bleeding flesh. At the time of the Sepoy war, when in most churches one heard pastors invoking the God of armies to ask for the extermination of the rebels, and quite recently again, when coarse applause greeted, in various parts of English society, news

of the horrible butcheries in Jamaica, one was sadly forced to acknowledge that a great fund of native barbarism still exists in the English character. Brute force, considered in isolation as a kind of religious ideal, has even recently found among English writers, philosophers, and theologians such fervent apostles that public irony has given their doctrine the name of muscular Christianity. Despite this grotesque label, the new sect nonetheless represents an important fraction of English society; its recruits come chiefly from strong, courageous young men whose whole work in life consists in hunting, boxing, running, and developing the muscles of their chest and arms. In their love of strength, these Christians of a new kind often come to despise the weak: thus most of them did not fail, out of hatred of the Negro, to side with the planters during the last American war. To form an idea of the morality of muscular Christians, one need only read the novel *Sword and Gown*, written by one of the leading figures of the sect. All its heroes are made of flesh and pride. Among the Frenchmen he portrays, the author detests above all the peasant whom the Revolution made a landowner, and admires only an old nobleman, thoroughly rotten with vice but able to lose at gambling without so much as frowning.

Yet, while exclusive worshippers of physical strength forget that man is something more than a set of muscles obeying an unfeeling will, it is nonetheless true that, on the whole, the moral progress of the English people is remarkably hastened by the care young men and grown men take to develop strength, skill, and courage. It is truly a fine sight, a game of cricket on a lawn, or a race between two crews of rowers. These fine men, slim of build, sinewy of arm, in light and easy dress, who put such passion into winning an honorific victory, and who are followed with the eyes, the wishes, and the cheers of thousands of spectators—do they not resemble those Greek heroes of the Olympic games whose glory posterity still celebrates? To equal the Hellenic athletes in poetic charm, they lack only a setting like that of Greek antiquity; the beauty of the landscape, the purity of the azure sky, the splendour of marble temples and statues of divine form are not reflected upon them, and above all they lack that powerful charm given by the mirage of a past more than two

thousand years old. Nevertheless the young athletes of England certainly do not yield to those of Greece in courage, endurance, strength of will, or the passion they bring to their bodily education. Under the guidance of learned trainers who drill them like racehorses, they cheerfully submit to a long regimen of abstinence and fatigue, in which everything is calculated to give the eye more calm, the muscles more strength, the will more energy. Thanks to such training, these men learn to rely on themselves in every circumstance; they brave illness, weariness, and danger; they fear neither the open air, nor cold, nor heat; whether left alone in the desert or upon the ocean, they keep their unbending will as a compass all the same, and so long as their task is unfinished, they regret neither parents, nor friends, nor the great cities where life is so easy. These indeed are the men needed to scale the once inaccessible peaks of the Alps, the Andes, or the Himalaya, and to win for geography solitudes still unknown. One can only reproach them for the brutal coolness with which they brush aside everything not their own. Just as in the colonies squatters hunt down the natives like wild beasts and end by clearing them from the land, so English travellers, as soon as they discover a new country, hasten to suppress the poetic names given by its inhabitants and replace them with the most vulgar designations; thanks to them, the "Cataract of the Thundering Smoke" has become the "Victoria Falls," and the "Piercer of the Sky" is now called "Mount Cook."

Among the representatives of admirable Anglo-Saxon daring, none deserves more mention than Professor Tyndall, one of those rare men in whom the intelligence, the sagacity, the penetration of the scholar in no way harm the emotions of the artist. Having shed, through small preliminary ascents, the "bad fat" accumulated over winter in his London laboratory, the fearless climber thinks nothing of going up alone in shirtsleeves to scale Monte Rosa. "One does not know how much strength there is in four ounces of food," he says on setting out, having for sole provision a simple piece of bread. On another occasion he and several companions, roped together, slide head first down a snow slope below which a precipice suddenly opens. During that fearful descent he calculates, with perfect presence of mind, every chance of life and death,

and, working in concert with a guide whom he instinctively feels labouring alongside him, makes such skilful use of his staff, his arms, his legs, that the cluster of men, hurtling at full speed, finally comes to a stop at the very edge of the abyss. Yet it is when Mr. Tyndall braves fatigue and danger to solve some scientific problem that his daring and perseverance most deserve admiration. It is a fine thing to see him in the depth of winter making his way through snow that comes up to his shoulders, venturing above hidden crevasses into which he risks plunging, in order that he might, from some observatory lost in mist or snowstorm, rigorously measure the slow movement of stakes planted at intervals in the Montanvert glacier.

Thanks to this powerful love of nature that drives him to all these feats of daring and these difficult explorations, the famous professor—who without doubt must cherish his own renown—has come to set the moral and physical balance of his own being far above his scientific fame. The complete health of his person, that is, the joy of living through the exertion of his muscles and his mind, matters more to him than the opinion of his contemporaries and of posterity on the value of his work. "You know," he writes to a friend, "you know how little store I set by my scientific researches on the Alps. The glaciers and the mountains hold for me an interest far greater than that of science. In them I have found springs of life and joy; they have given me pictures and memories that will never fade from my mind; they have made the consciousness of my manhood pass through every fibre of my being, and now reason, soul, and body work together within me with a joyous strength that neither weakness nor weariness ever impairs. The practice of the mountains has raised the level of my pleasures and made my heart rival yours in its love of nature. That is what the Alps have given me!" Owing to the growing delicacy of feeling that a more intimate knowledge of earthly phenomena has given Professor Tyndall, the smallest details strike him and fill him with delight. Among physicists, how many would, like him, be moved by the beauty of a snowflake without fearing the gentle sarcasm of some amiable colleague? Is there one who, having described the branching patterns of frost-flowers on the window of an inn

room, would dare add "that these exquisite creations speak not only to his intelligence, but rejoice his heart and bring tears to his eyes"? And the man whose words we quote is no melancholy poet, but the scholar who, since Agassiz's first researches, has contributed more than any other to the progress of the science of snowfields and glaciers.

This passion of Mr. Tyndall's for mountains of difficult access is shared by his friends of the Alpine Club and by many other Englishmen, who, like him, never cease each year to add, through their ascents, to the sum of human knowledge of the orography of Europe. Moreover, it is not only in the exploration of glaciers and high peaks that a great many Anglo-Saxons distinguish themselves among the scholars of other nations; it is also in the study of every physical phenomenon of the earth. The astronomer Piazzzi Smyth spends whole months, together with his wife and the crew of a yacht, at 3,000 to 3,500 metres above sea level on the slopes of the Peak of Tenerife, conducting experiments on the purity of the atmosphere, learning the upper plains of the clouds as others know those of the earth, and witnessing the conflict between the trade winds and the counter-current coming from the equator. Bolder still, Mr. Glaisher rises into the heights of the air, far above the altitude corresponding to the highest peaks of the Himalaya. The learned meteorologist and his companions are resolved to climb as long as they can keep any sense of their own existence. The air, grown too thin for their lungs, forces them to gasp painfully; their hearts pound, their ears ring, the blood swells the arteries of their temples, their fingers grow cold and refuse to move; no matter—will sustains them, and they still pour sand from their basket to give themselves a fresh surge into the atmosphere. One of the aeronauts faints; but the others do nothing to halt the ascent, and, eyes fixed on their instruments, they note the gradual fall of the mercury columns in the barometer and thermometer, as if they were still at their observatory at Kew. A second of the three heroic travellers, utterly benumbed by lack of air and warmth, also collapses, helpless, and still the balloon rises. Already Mr. Glaisher, gradually overcome by torpor, has lost the use of his hands, but he holds the valve-cord between his teeth, and when he feels that a single second

separates him and his companions from death, he lets the gas escape, and the deflating balloon at last comes to a halt, to descend gradually toward the countryside lying eleven thousand metres below. What noble courage in these men, risking death with such simplicity of soul, and that for the sole advantage of studying the temperature of an atmosphere in which neither man nor bird can live! Surely it would be to debase that strength of soul and that scholarly calm to compare them with the brute courage of the soldier hurling himself into the thick of furious battle, drunk with powder, uproar, and blood!

While, moved by a twofold love of nature and of science, men like Messrs. Tyndall and Glaisher climb difficult summits or launch themselves by balloon into space, thousands of other Englishmen, whose calling is more modest—for very few of them can hope to win glory—risk themselves upon another element to snatch shipwrecked men from death. No doubt humane feeling plays a large part in the devotion of those tireless lifeboat oarsmen who venture upon the boiling waves amid the most dreadful storms, through those terrifying, dark nights when the helmsman can scarcely make out his crew, and cannot even make his voice heard above the howling of the wind; but in this admirable sacrifice of themselves, are not these rescuers also carried along by the immense attraction the beauty of the raging sea exerts upon them? It is a powerful joy, well suited to tempt great hearts, to struggle against the waves, the wind, the storm, the darkness, and to conquer all these enemies through courage, presence of mind, voluntary discipline, and heroic perseverance! Indeed the rough sailors who, on nights of shipwreck, rush to the aid of foundering ships are truly the descendants of the ancient sea-kings; they love the wild sea as much as their ancestors did, and like them they laugh at death; but their ambition is higher. Instead of placing their glory in murder and plunder, they have taken for their mission the snatching of victims from death, or even simply the recovery of their bodies. What were those expeditions devoted with such perseverance to the search for John Franklin and his companions, if not rescue attempts undertaken on a grand scale? The love of struggle and danger runs in the blood of man; but true heroes are beginning to understand that, to satisfy

their passion for combat, it is nobler to grapple with the forces of nature than to seek to slaughter their brothers.

II

If, in the great work of exploring nature that is now being carried on, the English distinguish themselves chiefly by their daring, their cheerful perseverance, and their contempt for danger, the Germans perhaps know how to appreciate the things of the earth in a manner at once more general and more intimate. They have not confined themselves to celebrating nature in every key in their poetry and their philosophical writings; they have at the same time studied it with love. Kant, the mighty renovator of modern philosophy, also occupied himself with the solution of problems relating to the earth, and with the same pen that had served him for the *Critique of Pure Reason* he wrote several works of physical geography. Goethe, the calm worshipper of the forces hidden within rock and plant, had as contemporaries Alexander von Humboldt, the tireless traveller who studied on the spot, in both hemispheres, the movements of the earth's life, and Carl Ritter, the heroic scholar who did not shrink from the thought of beginning, single-handed, an encyclopaedia of humanity's knowledge of the lands and peoples of the earth. After these two men, who were truly pioneers, came a great number of travellers and scholars who took it upon themselves to traverse the planet, to study it, and to describe it. Germany having no colonies and sending no legions of officials to every corner of the globe as Great Britain does, it is neither narrow patriotism nor the carrying out of an imposed mission, but truly a love of the earth, that drives so many German explorers toward regions rarely visited or wholly unknown. The list is already very long of those among them who have perished in Africa, in Australia, in the interior of Asia and of America, and yet new travellers constantly come forward to take up, where their predecessors left off, the work of discovery.

It is true, generally speaking, that the Germans, superior as interpreters of nature to their English rivals, do not equal them in fire and joyous daring in the exploration of mountains; but neither do they let themselves be carried so often by the intoxication of the ascent into those acts of reckless daring that cost several precious lives every year: they do not climb peaks solely for the purely physical pleasure of the climb; they climb also either to learn for themselves or to teach later, and, made cautious by reflection, they venture upon perilous slopes only when there is good reason. Without filling the world with the noise of their exploits as several English climbers do, whose only merit is knowing how to storm the most formidable peaks, geologists and naturalists such as Theobald and Vogt have certainly contributed as much as anyone to the progress of alpine science. Moreover, in Germany as in England, people are beginning to understand clearly how vitally important all bodily exercise is for the improvement of the human race, and gymnastic societies have been founded everywhere. These excellent institutions, which already number more than 150,000 members in the various parts of the confederation, render the race not only the immense service of developing it in strength, grace, and beauty; they also bring into daily contact, on a footing of free equality, men belonging to every class—scholars, physicians, engineers, merchants, workers. They gradually instil republican habits into society by giving every man, along with greater physical strength, a broader education, a fuller understanding of his rights and duties, and a greater familiarity with voting and debate. The gymnastic associations that are being organised one after another in every city will end by covering the whole country with a multitude of federated groups whose national contests are at once Olympic games and true parliaments. Thus gymnastics may be considered one of the great elements in the material, political, and social regeneration of the people. Nor will it fail, through its happy influence on the physical and moral balance of the citizen, to correct what is vague, false, and mystical in the German love of nature.

Whatever deviations it may have undergone since the dawn of recorded history, this love has always been one of the distinctive traits of

the peoples of Germany, as is shown by the legends and songs gathered in such great numbers throughout the various regions of Germany. The descendants of those Teutons who dwelt in the deep forests have never been ignorant of the beauty of their woods of oak, beech, or fir, of their springs welling up discreetly amid the meadow grass or beneath fallen leaves, of their rounded mountains all streaked with snow in winter. One of the best proofs one can invoke to establish the strength of the feeling that has always drawn the Germans toward nature is found in their family names. In France, unfortunately, base or at least vulgar surnames are very numerous. As for family names borrowed from the land, such as Dumont, Dubois, Lafont, Duplan, Durrieu, they merely indicate a place of residence or former property rights, and make no allusion to the beauty of the countryside. In Germany, by contrast, millions of people bear graceful or splendid names testifying to a lively poetic feeling even among the common people. On the other side of the Rhine, it is quite ordinary to be named Rose-Branch, Ash-Brook, Flowering-Shore, Birdsong, Light-Rock.

It must be said that the French, taken as a whole, do not always understand the splendours of grand nature as well as their northern and eastern neighbours. More sociable than the Germans and the English, they bear solitude, or even the temporary interruption of their habitual relations, with greater difficulty. In their work and in their pleasures they need the daily routine with the same companions or the same friends; they instinctively dread wild nature, where man finds no companions but trees, rocks, and mountain torrents. The nature the Frenchman understands best, and which he most loves to look upon, is the gently rolling countryside where varied crops alternate gracefully to the distant horizon of the plains. A row of green hills bounds the landscape, a small river winds beneath the branches of alders and aspens, clumps of trees appear here and there among meadows and wheat fields, white houses with red tiles gleam amid the greenery. The beauty of the scene seems complete when some ruin clad in wild vine, or a mill built across the river on uneven arches, adds its picturesque outline to the whole picture. Everywhere the man who contemplates this scene sees marks of the

industry of his fellow men: nature, shaped by labour, has become humanised, so to speak, and the onlooker likes to find himself again in this common work. Yet there is a great distance between these regions transformed by cultivation and the virgin lands whose original beauty remains still untouched.

The ideal our ancestors held of landscape is revealed by the sites that princes and lords chose for the building of their pleasure-castles. Very few of these palaces occupy a position from which one can contemplate a grand horizon of mountains or rocks; indeed, it has even been noticed that in many places, notably along the shores of Lake Geneva, the country houses built by wealthy lakeside landowners turned their backs on what would now seem to us the grandest part of the view. To this nature, too powerful and too wild to be looked upon with pleasure, men of that time preferred a bounded space in which the imagination could spread itself at ease—a screen of gently sloping hills, fine avenues of leafy trees, lawns and ponds adorned with statues. Grace—often false and affected grace—was placed far above the grand simplicity of vast horizons.

Yet, on seeing the picturesque fortified castles built upon sharp rocks, one might be tempted to believe that the feudal lords of French territory had a feeling for the beauties of wild nature, were it not too well known what reason led barons and petty nobles to raise their towers upon high crags. If they dwelt atop these isolated rocks, it was certainly not to enjoy the sight of the rising sun or to follow with their eyes the windings of rivers, but to spy out enemies or victims in the surrounding valleys. No doubt they came in the end to love the solitary retreat in which they had entrenched themselves: they had first seen the light of day through the narrow loopholes of the castle; as children, running along the platforms of the towers and leaning over the battlements of the walls, they had learned the names of the flowers blooming amid the crevices and of the trees growing far off on the hillsides; later, having become hunters, they had grown familiar with the beasts of the forest, had become accustomed to wind, to storm, to every kind of weather, and through long habit had

come at last to understand one side of the nature in the midst of which they lived. Yet, as the Germanic element in this class of conquerors became Frenchified through intermarriage and custom, the knights' love of solitude and wild nature was lost; they drew closer to the plains, settled in the towns, and gradually became princes or courtiers. It was in Germany, particularly along the banks of the Rhine, the Neckar, and the Moselle, and in the mountainous regions of the Palatinate, Swabia, and Franconia, that this terrible chivalry of fierce plunderers persisted longest, men who understood nature as wild beasts do, seeking in it only a lair and a place to bring their prey. One of the most formidable of these robber knights, the famous Eberhard, or Boar's Heart, of whom Uhland's ballads have given us a fanciful portrait, had taken for his motto: "Friend of God, enemy of all men!" And to make good this saying he did not fail to cut down hundreds of his fellow men. The fortified castle was an eyrie, and the lord himself took the eagle and the vulture as his ideal, as is shown by those strange figures of birds of prey which, despite all the progress achieved in the modern world, have remained the heraldic devices of families and states. Even the American republic, by a curious feudal echo, has taken the eagle as the symbol of its power. Whatever feeling the conquerors of the soil may have had for outward nature, it is certain that the enslaved masses could scarcely grasp the beauty of the earth on which their wretched lives were spent, and that the feeling they had toward the landscapes around them was bound to become perverted. The bitterness of existence was then far too keen for men often to indulge in the pleasure of admiring clouds, rocks, and trees. On every side there was nothing but discord, hatred, sudden terrors, wars, or famines. The master's caprice and cruelty were the law of the enslaved: in every stranger they feared to see a murderer; the two words "foreigner" and "enemy" had become synonyms. In such a society, the only thing a brave man could try to do to struggle against his fate and keep within himself the consciousness of his own soul was to be cheerful and ironic, to mock the strong man and above all his own master; but he had no use for being moved by the sight of nature. Besides, nature too was harsh toward him; she often refused to give back the grain he cast into the furrow; she

brought him cold and storms, though he did not always have clothes enough to cover himself; sometimes she breathed a pestilential wind over the land and made whole populations vanish within a few weeks. The splendour of the surrounding natural scene was bound to remain unknown to men who, under the weight of a vague terror carefully nourished by sorcerers of every kind, never ceased to make out, in caves, in sunken lanes, in mountain gorges, in woods full of shadow and silence, shapeless ghosts and horrible monsters partaking at once of beast and demon. What a strange idea of the earth and its beauty those medieval monks must have had who, on their maps of the world, never failed to draw, beside the names of every distant country, fire-spewing beasts, men with horses' hooves or fishes' tails, griffins with the heads of rams or oxen, flying mandrakes, and decapitated bodies with wide, wild eyes set in their chests!

To form even an approximate idea of what society was like in the Middle Ages, and of the feelings nature inspired in it, one would need to go into remote countries where ancient traditions have been preserved, where the night of ignorance still keeps all its thickness. In France, there certainly no longer exists a single one of those regions that modern ideas, in some form more or less mixed with error, have not already visited; but, although the true Middle Ages can nowhere be found there again, it is at least quite easy to recognise its traces. Twenty years ago, belief in spells, in devilry, in wonders of every kind, still reigned absolutely over the minds of millions of villagers in central France and in Brittany. To understand the dread that nature caused our ancestors, there is no need to go back to the age of Étienne Marcel and Charles the Bad; many of us need only recall our own childhood and the naïve credulity with which we welcomed any assertion likely to satisfy our inclination to fear. Very many of us, in our young years, poor trembling little creatures by the hearth, have heard old women tell us in low voices terrible tales of monsters and demons. Toward dusk we have seen hideous mist-shapes rise from the river and walk noiselessly across the meadows, stretching their long transparent arms toward us. On moonlit rambles we have shivered like leaves on hearing the howling of werewolves posted at the

crossing of paths. If, among the various fancies that thus rise before haunted minds, some are graceful, they are, like the rest, entirely cut off from any bond with the reality of things. I had recently the pleasure of seeing again an old countrywoman who had once taught me that, to go to Rome, to Santiago de Compostela, and to Jerusalem, one must walk upon the stars and follow the Milky Way. The good woman was greatly surprised when, in my turn, I tried to teach her that the true "road to Santiago" passes through Bordeaux and Bayonne, and that the pilgrims' stages are not to be found upon the vault of heaven. She did not contradict me, but shook her head in silence, and no doubt kept her faith deep within her heart.

Bearing in mind how exceptional such notions about the things of nature have always been, it is easy to understand how ignorance, superstition, poverty, fear, or love of gain must have darkened men's minds and veiled from them, at least in part, the beauty of the earth. Peasants, or bourgeois exploiters of the soil, could scarcely conceive the beauty of the countryside from any point of view but that of usefulness, and literature, the natural interpreter of the thought of the people, could for its part only translate, while idealising, this way of seeing things. For centuries French writers wholly refrained from celebrating anything but man and society, or else, when they spoke of nature, it was only to sing of "cool shades, flowering meadows, and yellowing harvests." And even this was generally due to some classical reminiscence, and doubtless they would not have dared sing of nature had Virgil not celebrated it before them. Very often, in their many wars in Spain and in Italy, French armies crossed the Pyrenees and the Alps, and yet they seem to have seen nothing of the singular beauty of these regions, to which travellers now flock from every corner of the world: they were struck only by the steepness of the slopes and the difficulty of the paths. Having crossed the charming pastures of the Col de l'Argentière, having seen the superb peaks of Chambeyron, Grand Rubren, and Monte Viso, Francis I found no other word to describe the Alps than "a strange country," and reserved all his admiration for the beautiful, so coveted plains of Piedmont and the Milanese. Likewise most of the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors,

men so great in their daring, so atrocious in their cruelty, seem not to have seen that admirable nature of the New World in the midst of which they found themselves transported as if by magic. The high mountains, the virgin forests, the blue and transparent sea—all this was but a dream to them; their greedy eyes sought only veins of gold through the thickness of the rocks and the soil.

In modern times, Rousseau, himself born at the foot of the Alps, was the first to reveal the joys felt amid wild nature, in sight of great lakes, free forests, and the magnificent prospect of mountain horizons. And yet, despite his deep and sincere love of solitude, despite the misanthropy that made him recoil even from the mere traces of man, Rousseau never ventured into the high valleys, upon the snow gullies, or onto the ice fields; he was content to wander through and admire the landscapes at the foot of the mountains, where dwellings and cultivated fields bear witness to the labour and presence of the husbandman. As for Chateaubriand, that great artist who nonetheless knew how to paint with breadth certain views of the sea and the mighty rivers of the New World, he found the Alps too lofty for him, and flatly denied beauty to "those heavy masses," which seemed to him "not in harmony with the faculties of man and the weakness of his organs." He declares that "this grandeur of the mountains, of which so much has been made, is real only through the traveller's fatigue"; wherever the mass of peaks, pressed too closely together, fills the whole field of view and does not form a mere backdrop on the horizon, he finds the mountains "hideous."

Nowadays there would doubtless scarcely be found men bold enough to maintain the same propositions as Chateaubriand and to confess so plainly their inability to understand nature under one of its grandest aspects. The collective education that all civilised peoples now enjoy, owing to their ceaseless contact with one another and to the constant borrowings they make from each other in the arts, the sciences, and customs, no longer allows anyone to remain ignorant of the beauty of rugged passes, rocky spires, and slopes of ice or snow; but it is certain that, despite the progress successively achieved in the understanding of

nature, the French have contributed less than their neighbours to the study of their own mountain ranges, as well as to the broader work of exploring the globe. This inferiority, moreover, is in no way absolute, and must not be set up as a rule. The number of those who free themselves from daily routine to go and contemplate free nature, whether in distant lands or within the very bounds of their homeland, is rapidly increasing and cannot fail to grow still further, thanks to the ever-greater ease that travel now affords. There is no doubt that if children in the schools did not have to endure that harsh discipline which too often results in blunting all individuality, and if the demands of military service did not afterwards come, with discipline more terrible still, to seize by the hundred thousand and reduce to passive obedience the strongest and most adventurous young men, the French people would fill, in the history of travel and discovery, the great role to which the admirable position of their country—lying at the western edge of Europe, between the Mediterranean and the Ocean, between the Alps and the Pyrenees—destined them.

The feeling for nature, like the taste for the arts, is developed through education. The peasant, who lives in the midst of the countryside and freely enjoys the sight of green expanses, doubtless loves instinctively the land he cultivates, but he is not conscious of his love and sees in the soil only the dormant riches that cultivation calls forth. The mountaineer himself is most often unaware of the beauty of the valley he inhabits and of the crags surrounding him: he reserves all his admiration for the level ground of the plains, where one can walk in every direction without fatigue or danger, where the ploughshare sinks everywhere to a great depth into the fertile soil; it is only after he has gone far from his mountains and travelled through foreign lands that love of his own country awakens in his soul, and that, through nostalgia, he begins to understand the grand splendour of the horizons he now misses. Yet, while education can teach an appreciation of nature to those who did not yet grasp its profound charm, it can also, when it is misdirected, corrupt taste and give monstrous or ridiculous notions of beauty. Thus the Chinese, that ancient people now renewing itself at the cost of the

bloodiest revolutions, have come, in their petty love of the baroque and the symmetrical, to the point of stunting the sap within tree trunks in order to produce dwarf varieties, giving trees geometric shapes or the bizarre appearance of monsters and demons. Likewise a number of petty German princes, corrupted by a lamentable mania for sentimentality, have spoiled the most charming landscapes by carving pedantic inscriptions on the rocks, by decorating lawns with fanciful tombs, and by posting their soldiers as sentries before the viewpoints they wish to point out to visitors. The lover of free nature must possess a taste of rare delicacy if he is to touch the earth without destroying its grace, or even while giving it a greater harmony of line and colour. And yet that is precisely the result that must be achieved if societies are to advance in civilisation in a normal manner, and if each of their advances is not to be won at the expense of the earth that serves as their dwelling. Henceforth, thanks to travel, it is the planet itself that will refine the taste of its inhabitants and give them an understanding of what is truly beautiful. Those who wander through the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Himalaya, or merely the high cliffs along the Ocean's edge, those who visit virgin forests or gaze upon volcanic craters, learn, at the sight of these grand scenes, to grasp the true beauty of less striking landscapes and to touch them only with respect when they have the power to alter them.

III

It matters all the more that the feeling for nature should develop and refine itself, since the multitude of men driven from the countryside by the very force of circumstances increases day by day. Pessimists have long been alarmed at the ceaseless growth of great cities, and yet they do not always fully grasp the rapid rate at which the movement of populations toward privileged centres can now take place.

It is true that the monstrous Babylons of former times had also gathered within their walls hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of inhabitants: the natural interests of trade, the despotic centralisation of

every power, the great scramble for favours, the love of pleasure, had given these mighty cities the population of entire provinces; but, since communications were then far slower than they are today, the flooding of a river, bad weather, the delay of a caravan, the incursion of an enemy army, or the revolt of a tribe sometimes sufficed to delay or halt supplies, and the great city, amid all its splendours, was constantly exposed to the danger of starvation. Moreover, during those ages of pitiless wars, these vast capitals always ended by becoming the scene of some immense slaughter, and at times the destruction was so complete that the ruin of a city was at the same time the end of a people. Quite recently, indeed, one could see, from the example of certain Chinese cities, what fate awaited great agglomerations of men under the rule of ancient civilisations. The mighty city of Nanking has become a heap of rubble, while Wuchang, which some fifteen years ago appears to have been the most populous city in the entire world, has lost more than three-quarters of its inhabitants.

To the causes that once drew populations toward great cities, and that have not ceased to exist, must be added other causes, no less powerful, bound up with the whole of modern progress. Lines of communication—canals, ordinary roads, and railways—radiate in ever-greater numbers toward important centres and surround them with a network of ever-closer meshes. Travel now takes place with such ease that the railways can, in a single day, throw five hundred thousand people onto the pavements of London or Paris, and that, in anticipation of some mere festival, a wedding, a funeral, or the visit of some notable person, millions of men have at times swollen the floating population of a capital. As for the transport of supplies, it can be carried out with the same ease as that of travellers. From every surrounding countryside, from every corner of the country, from every part of the world, goods flow by land and by water toward these enormous stomachs that never cease to absorb, and absorb again. If London's appetite required it, she could, in less than a year, have brought to her more than half the produce of the earth.

This is certainly an immense advantage that the great cities of antiquity did not possess, and yet the revolution that railways and other means of communication have brought into our customs has scarcely begun. What is an average of two or three journeys a year for each inhabitant of France really worth, especially when a mere quarter-hour excursion into the suburbs of Paris or of some other great city is counted as a journey by official statistics? It is certain that every year the multitudes on the move will grow in enormous proportions, and that every forecast in this respect will probably be exceeded, just as it has been since the beginning of the century; thus, for the city of London alone, the present movement of travellers in a single week is as great as it was, around 1830, for the whole of Great Britain in an entire year. Thanks to the railways, countries are ceaselessly shrinking, and one can even establish mathematically the proportion in which this diminishing of territory takes place, since it suffices to compare the speed of locomotives with that of the stagecoaches and diligences they have replaced. Man, for his part, detaches himself from his native soil with ever-greater ease; he becomes a nomad, not in the manner of the ancient herdsmen, who always followed accustomed paths and never failed to return periodically to the same pastures with their flocks, but in a far more complete fashion, since he makes his way indifferently toward one point of the horizon or another, wherever interest or mere fancy drives him: very few of these voluntary expatriates return to die in their native land. This ceaselessly growing migration of peoples now takes place by millions upon millions, and it is precisely toward the most populous human anthills that the great multitude of emigrants makes its way. The terrible invasions of the Frankish warriors into Roman Gaul perhaps had, from an ethnological point of view, less importance than these silent immigrations of labourers from Luxembourg and the Palatinate who come each year to swell the population of Paris.

To form an idea of what the great commercial cities of the world may one day become, unless other causes acting in the opposite direction come sooner or later to balance the causes of growth, it suffices to see how enormous an importance towns assume in modern colonies relative

to villages and isolated houses. In these countries, populations freed from the bonds of habit and free to group themselves as they please, with no motive but their own will, crowd almost entirely into the towns. Even in colonies that are especially agricultural, such as the young American states of the Far West, the regions of the River Plate, Queensland in Australia, and the North Island of New Zealand, the number of town-dwellers far exceeds that of country-dwellers: on average it is at least three times greater, and continues to increase as trade and industry develop. In colonies such as Victoria and California, where special causes—such as gold mines and great commercial advantages—attract multitudes of speculators, the crowding of inhabitants into the towns is even far more considerable. If Paris were, relative to France, what San Francisco is to California, or what Melbourne is to fortunate Australia, the "great city," then truly worthy of its name, would have no fewer than nine or ten million souls. Clearly it is in all these new countries, where civilised man has only just set foot, that one must seek the outward ideal of nineteenth-century society, since no obstacle prevented the newcomers from distributing themselves in small groups over the whole surface of the land, and yet they preferred to gather together in vast cities. The example of Hungary or of Russia, set against that of California or of some other modern colony, may serve to show what a span of centuries separates countries whose populations are still distributed as in the Middle Ages from those where the phenomena of social affinity developed by modern civilisation have free play. In the plains of Russia, in the Hungarian puszta, there are scarcely any cities properly so called; there are only villages of greater or lesser size; the capitals are administrative centres, artificial creations that the inhabitants could well have done without, and which would at once lose a notable part of their importance were the government not to maintain there an artificial life at the expense of the rest of the nation. In these countries the working population consists of farmers, and the towns exist only for officials and men of leisure. In Australia and California, by contrast, the countryside is never anything but a suburb, and the peasants themselves—shepherds and farmers alike—have their minds turned toward the city: they are

speculators who, for the sake of their business, have temporarily moved away from the great commercial centre, but who will not fail to return to it.

Sooner or later, there can be no doubt, the Russian peasants, today so firmly rooted in their native soil, will learn to detach themselves from the land to which, until yesterday, they were enslaved; like the English, like the Australians, they will become nomads and will make their way toward the great cities, called there by trade and industry, and driven there by their own ambition to see, to know, or to improve their condition.

The complaints of those who lament the depopulation of the countryside cannot, therefore, halt this movement; nothing will avail, and all outcry is useless. Having become, thanks to greater prosperity and the relatively low cost of travel, the possessor of that primordial freedom "to come and go," from which all other freedoms might in time flow, the landless farmer obeys a perfectly natural impulse when he takes the road to the populous city of which he has heard so many marvels recounted. Sad and joyful at once, he bids farewell to his native hovel to go and gaze upon the wonders of industry and architecture; he gives up the regular wage on which he could count for the labour of his hands, but perhaps he too will attain comfort or fortune, as so many other children of his village have done, and if he ever returns to his country, it will be to have a mansion built in place of the squalid dwelling where he was born. Very few of these emigrants are able to fulfil their dreams of fortune; many find poverty, sickness, and an early death in the great cities; but at least those who live have been able to broaden the circle of their ideas, they have seen lands differing from one another, they have been shaped by contact with other men, they have become more intelligent, better educated, and all these individual gains constitute an inestimable advantage for society as a whole.

It is well known how rapidly this phenomenon of country-folk emigrating to Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, and the great seaports is taking place in France. Every increase in population benefits the centres of

attraction, while most small towns and villages remain stationary, or even decline, in their number of inhabitants. More than half the departments are becoming less and less populated, and one may cite as an example the Basses-Alpes, which has certainly lost a good third of its inhabitants since the Middle Ages. If one also took into account journeys and temporary migrations, which necessarily increase the floating population of the great cities, the results would be still more striking. In the Pyrenees of Ariège there are certain villages that all the inhabitants, men and women alike, completely abandon during the winter to go down into the cities of the plain. Lastly, most Frenchmen engaged in trade, or living on their incomes, not to mention multitudes of peasants and workers, never fail to visit Paris and the principal cities of France, and the time is long past when, in remote provinces, a travelling workman was identified by the name of the great city in which he had lived. The same social phenomena are taking place in England and in Germany. Although in these two countries the excess of births over deaths is far greater than in France, there too agricultural regions, such as the duchy of Hesse-Kassel and the county of Cambridgeshire, are losing population to the benefit of the great cities. Even in North America, where population is increasing with such astonishing speed, a great many farming districts of New England have lost a large proportion of their inhabitants through a double emigration, on one side toward the regions of the Far West, on the other toward the commercial cities of the coast—Portland, Boston, New York. And yet it is a well-known fact that the air of cities is laden with the seeds of death. Although official statistics do not always offer the desirable candour on this point, it remains no less certain that in every country of Europe and America the average lifespan of country-dwellers exceeds that of city-dwellers by several years, and that immigrants, on leaving their native fields for the narrow, foul streets of a great city, might calculate in advance, with some approximation, by how much they are shortening their lives according to the laws of probability. Not only does the newcomer suffer in his own person and expose himself to an early death, but he also condemns his descendants. It is well known that in great cities, such as London and Paris, vital strength is rapidly exhausted,

and that no bourgeois family carries on there beyond the third, or at most the fourth, generation. If the individual can withstand the deadly influence of the surroundings, the family at least ends by succumbing, and without the continual immigration of provincials and foreigners marching cheerfully toward death, the capitals could not recruit their enormous populations. The features of the city-dweller grow finer, but the body grows weaker and the springs of life run dry. Likewise, from the intellectual point of view, all the brilliant faculties that social life develops are at first overstimulated, but the mind gradually loses its strength; it wearies, and at last gives way before its time. The Paris street-urchin, no doubt, compared with the rough young countryman, is a creature full of liveliness and spirit; but is he not the brother of that "pale guttersnipe" whom one may compare, in body and in mind, to those sickly plants growing in cellars amid the darkness? In the end, it is in the cities, and above all in those most renowned for their wealth and their civilisation, that one certainly finds the most degraded of all men—poor hopeless creatures whom filth, hunger, brutal ignorance, and the contempt of everyone have placed far below the happy savage roaming freely through forests and mountains. It is beside the greatest splendour that one must look for the most abject misery; not far from those museums where the beauty of the human body is displayed in all its glory, rickety children warm themselves at the foul air breathed out from the mouths of sewers.

If steam brings into the cities ever-growing crowds, it also carries back into the countryside an ever-increasing number of city-dwellers who go, for a time, to breathe the free air and refresh their minds at the sight of flowers and greenery. The rich, free to arrange their leisure as they please, can escape the occupations or the wearisome pleasures of the city for months at a time. Some even reside in the country, and make only fleeting appearances in their town houses in the great cities. As for workers of every kind who cannot stay away for long because of the demands of daily life, most of them nevertheless wrest from their tasks the necessary respite to go and visit the fields. The most fortunate take weeks of leave, which they spend far from the capital, in the mountains

or by the sea. Those most enslaved by their work content themselves with escaping, from time to time and for a few hours, the narrow horizon of their accustomed streets, and one knows how gladly they take advantage of their holidays when the weather is mild and the sky clear: then every tree in the woods near the great cities shelters a joyful family. A considerable proportion of merchants and clerks, especially in England and America, boldly settle their wives and children in the country and condemn themselves to making, twice a day, the journey separating their place of business from their domestic hearth. Thanks to the speed of modern communications, millions of men can thus combine in themselves the two characters of town-dweller and country-dweller, and every year the number of those who thus live two halves of their life keeps on increasing. Around London one must count by the hundreds of thousands those who plunge every morning into the whirl of business in the great city and return every evening to their peaceful home in the green suburbs. The City, the true centre of the commercial world, is emptying of its residents; by day it is the busiest of human hives, by night it is a desert.

Unfortunately this ebb of the cities outward does not take place without disfiguring the countryside: not only does refuse of every kind clutter the space lying between the cities and the fields, but, what is graver still, speculation seizes upon every charming site in the vicinity, divides it into rectangular lots, encloses them with uniform walls, and then builds upon them, by the hundred and by the thousand, pretentious little houses. To strollers wandering along the muddy lanes of these so-called rural districts, nature is represented only by clipped shrubs and flowerbeds glimpsed through railings. By the seaside, the most picturesque cliffs and the most charming beaches are likewise, in many places, monopolised either by jealous landowners or by speculators who appreciate the beauties of nature in the manner of money-changers assessing a gold ingot. In frequently visited mountain regions, the same rage for appropriation seizes upon the inhabitants: landscapes are cut up into squares and sold to the highest bidder; every natural curiosity—the rock, the cave, the waterfall, the crevasse of a glacier, everything, down

to the very sound of an echo—can become private property. Promoters lease out the cataracts, surround them with wooden barriers to prevent non-paying travellers from gazing upon the tumult of the waters, and then, through relentless advertisement, turn into ringing coin the light playing upon the shattered droplets and the breath of wind that spreads veils of mist through the air.

Since nature is profaned by so many speculators precisely because of its beauty, it is not surprising that, in their works of exploitation, farmers and industrialists neglect to ask themselves whether they are not contributing to the disfigurement of the earth. It is certain that the "hard-handed labourer" cares very little for the charm of the countryside and the harmony of landscapes, provided the soil yields abundant crops; swinging his axe at random through the groves, he fells the trees that are in his way, shamefully mutilates the others, and gives them the look of stakes or brooms. Vast regions that were once beautiful to behold and pleasant to wander through are now utterly disfigured, and one feels real repugnance at the sight of them. Moreover it often happens that the farmer, poor alike in science and in love of nature, errs in his calculations and brings about his own ruin through changes he unknowingly introduces into the climate. Likewise it matters little to the industrialist, working his mine or his factory in the open countryside, that he blackens the atmosphere with coal smoke and fouls it with pestilential fumes. Without even mentioning England, there exist in western Europe a great many manufacturing valleys whose thick air is almost unbreathable for strangers; the houses there are smoke-stained, the very leaves of the trees are coated with soot, and when one looks at the sun, it is almost always through a thick haze that its yellowed face appears. As for the engineer, his bridges and viaducts are always the same, whether on the flattest plain or in the steepest mountain gorges; his concern is not to bring his constructions into harmony with the landscape, but solely to balance thrust and resistance in his materials. Man must certainly take possession of the surface of the earth and learn to make use of its forces; yet one cannot help regretting the brutality with which this taking of possession is carried out. Thus, when the geologist Marcou informs us that the

American falls of Niagara have noticeably decreased in volume and lost some of their beauty since they were tapped to drive the factories along their banks, we think with sadness of the time, still quite close to us, when the "thunder of the waters," unknown to civilised man, fell freely from the height of its cliffs, between two walls of rock laden with great trees. Likewise one wonders whether the vast prairies and free forests, in which the eyes of imagination still see the noble figures of Chingachgook and Leatherstocking, could not have been replaced by something other than fields all of equal size, all oriented to the four cardinal points in accordance with the land survey, all regularly enclosed by fences of the same height. Wild nature is so beautiful: is it really necessary that man, in taking possession of it, should proceed geometrically in exploiting every newly conquered domain, and mark his taking of possession with vulgar buildings and property lines drawn with a measuring cord? Were it so, the harmonious contrasts that are one of the beauties of the earth would soon give way to a dismal uniformity, for society, which grows by at least ten million people every year, and which through science and industry commands a force increasing in prodigious proportions, is marching rapidly toward the conquest of the entire surface of the planet; the day is near when not a single region of the continents will remain that has not been visited by the civilised pioneer, and sooner or later human labour will have left its mark on every point of the globe. Happily, beauty and usefulness can be allied in the most complete manner, and it is precisely in those countries where agricultural industry is most advanced—in England, in Lombardy, in certain parts of Switzerland—that those who work the soil know how to make it yield the richest produce while respecting the charm of the landscape, or even skilfully adding to its beauty. The marshes and bogs of Flanders, transformed by drainage into countryside of exuberant fertility; the stony Crau, changed by irrigation canals into a magnificent meadow; the rocky flanks of the Apennines and the Maritime Alps, hidden from summit to base beneath the foliage of olive trees; the reddish peat-bogs of Ireland replaced by forests of larch, cedar, and silver fir—are these not admirable examples of the power farmers have to exploit the earth for their own

profit while making it more beautiful?

The question of what, in the work of man, serves to beautify or instead contributes to degrade outward nature may seem trivial to so-called practical minds: it is nonetheless of the first importance. The development of humanity is bound up in the most intimate manner with the surrounding nature. A secret harmony is established between the earth and the peoples it nourishes, and when imprudent societies allow themselves to lay hands upon whatever constitutes the beauty of their domain, they always come, in the end, to repent of it. Wherever the soil has been disfigured, wherever all poetry has vanished from the landscape, imagination dies out, minds grow impoverished, and routine and servility take hold of souls and dispose them toward torpor and death. Among the causes that, in the history of humanity, have already made so many successive civilisations disappear, one must count first and foremost the brutal violence with which most nations treated the nurturing earth. They felled the forests, dried up the springs and made the rivers overflow, ruined the climates, surrounded their cities with marshy and pestilential zones; then, when nature, profaned by them, had turned hostile toward them, they came to hate her, and, unable like the savage to renew themselves in the life of the forests, let themselves be more and more brutalised by the despotism of priests and kings. "Great estates ruined Italy," said Pliny; but it must be added that these great estates, tilled by the hands of slaves, had disfigured the soil like a leprosy. Historians, struck by the astonishing decline of Spain since Charles V, have sought to explain it in various ways. According to some, the chief cause of this ruin of the nation was the discovery of American gold; according to others, it was the religious terror organised by the "holy brotherhood" of the Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, and the bloody autos-da-fé of heretics. The iniquitous alcabala tax and despotic centralisation on the French model have likewise been blamed for Spain's fall; but is the kind of fury with which the Spaniards cut down trees for fear of the little birds, "por miedo de los pajaritos," truly without any part in this terrible decline? The earth, yellow, stony, and bare, took on a repellent and forbidding aspect; the soil grew impoverished; the

population, diminishing for two centuries, fell back partly into barbarism. The little birds had their revenge.

It is therefore with joy that we must now greet this generous passion that carries so many men—and, we may say, the best of men—to roam virgin forests, sea-shores, and mountain gorges, to visit nature in every region of the globe where she has kept her pristine beauty. One feels that, on pain of intellectual and moral decline, it is necessary to counterbalance, at all costs, by the sight of the earth's grand scenes, the vulgarity of so many ugly and mediocre things in which narrow minds see the proof of modern civilisation. The direct study of nature, and the contemplation of her phenomena, must become for every complete human being one of the primary elements of education; it is also necessary to develop in every individual skill and muscular strength, so that he may climb the heights with joy, look without fear upon the abyss, and keep, in his whole physical being, that natural balance of forces without which one never perceives the most beautiful sights except through a veil of sadness and melancholy. Modern man must unite in his own person all the virtues of those who went before him on the earth: without giving up any of the immense privileges civilisation has conferred upon him, he must lose nothing of his ancient strength either, and must let no savage surpass him in vigour, in skill, or in knowledge of the phenomena of nature. In the fine days of the Greek republics, the Hellenes proposed nothing less than to make heroes of their children through grace, strength, and courage: it is likewise by awakening in the younger generations every manly quality, by bringing them back to nature and setting them to grapple with her, that modern societies can guard themselves against all decline through the regeneration of the race itself.

Rumford said it long ago: "One always finds in nature more than one sought there." Whether the scholar examines the clouds or the rocks, the plants or the insects, or studies the general laws of the globe, he forever discovers, everywhere, unforeseen marvels; the artist, in quest of beautiful landscapes, has his eyes and his mind in perpetual festivity; the

industrialist who seeks to put the produce of the earth to use never ceases to see around him riches not yet exploited. As for the simple man who is content to love nature for its own sake, he finds his joy in it, and when he is unhappy, his sorrows are at least softened by the sight of the open countryside. Indeed, the outcasts, or those poor *déclassés* who live like exiles on the very soil of their homeland, never cease to feel, even in the most charming setting, that they are isolated, unknown, friendless, and the wound of despair forever gnaws at them. Yet even they come in the end to feel the gentle influence of their surroundings; their bitterest sorrows gradually turn into a kind of melancholy that allows them to understand, with a sense refined by suffering, all that the earth offers of grace and beauty: more than many of the fortunate, they know how to appreciate the rustling of leaves, the song of birds, the murmur of springs. And if nature has so much power over individuals, to console or to strengthen them, what might she not do, over the course of centuries, for entire peoples? There is no doubt that the sight of great horizons contributes in large measure to the qualities of mountain peoples, and it is not by any empty figure of speech that the Alps have been called the bulwark of liberty.