# I

## ON THE ENJOYMENT OF UNPLEASANT PLACES

It is a difficult matter[1] to make the most of any given place, and we have much in our own power. Things looked at patiently from one side after another generally end by showing a side that is beautiful. A few months ago some words were said in the Portfolio as to an "austere regimen in scenery"; and such a discipline was then recommended as "healthful and strengthening to the taste." That is the text, so to speak, of the present essay. This discipline in scenery,[2] it must be understood, is something more than a mere walk before breakfast to whet the appetite. For when we are put down in some unsightly neighborhood, and especially if we have come to be more or less dependent on what we see, we must set ourselves to hunt out beautiful things with all the ardour and patience of a botanist after a rare plant. Day by day we perfect ourselves in the art of seeing nature more favourably. We learn to live with her, as people learn to live with fretful or violent spouses: to dwell lovingly on what is good, and shut our eyes against all that is bleak or inharmonious. We learn, also, to come to each place in the right spirit. The traveller, as Brantôme quaintly tells us, "fait des discours en soi pour se soutenir en chemin";[3] and into these discourses he weaves something

out of all that he sees and suffers by the way; they take their tone greatly from the varying character of the scene; a sharp ascent brings different thoughts from a level road; and the man's fancies grow lighter as he comes out of the wood into a clearing. Nor does the scenery any more affect the thoughts than the thoughts affect the scenery. We see places through our humours as though differently colored glasses. We are ourselves a term in the equation, a note of the chord, and make discord or harmony almost at will. There is no fear for the result, if we can but surrender ourselves sufficiently to the country that surrounds and follows us, so that we are ever thinking suitable thoughts or telling ourselves some suitable sort of story as we go. We become thus, in some sense, a centre of beauty; we are provocative of beauty,[4] much as a gentle and sincere character is provocative of sincerity and gentleness in others. And even where there is no harmony to be elicited by the quickest and most obedient of spirits, we may still embellish a place with some attraction of romance. We may learn to go far afield for associations, and handle them lightly when we have found them. Sometimes an old print comes to our aid; I have seen many a spot lit up at once with picturesque imaginations, by a reminiscence of Callot, or Sadeler, or Paul Brill.[5] Dick Turpin[6] has been my lay figure for many an English lane. And I suppose the Trossachs would hardly be the Trossachs[7] for most tourists if a man of admirable romantic instinct had not peopled it for them with harmonious figures, and brought them thither their minds rightly prepared for the impression. There is half the battle in this preparation. For instance: I have rarely been able to visit, in

the proper spirit, the wild and inhospitable places of our own Highlands. I am happier where it is tame and fertile, and not readily pleased without trees.[8] I understand that there are some phases of mental trouble that harmonise well with such surroundings, and that some persons, by the dispensing power of the imagination, can go back several centuries in spirit, and put themselves into sympathy with the hunted, houseless, unsociable way of life that was in its place upon these savage hills. Now, when I am sad, I like nature to charm me out of my sadness, like David before Saul;[9] and the thought of these past ages strikes nothing in me but an unpleasant pity; so that I can never hit on the right humour for this sort of landscape, and lose much pleasure in consequence. Still, even here, if I were only let alone, and time enough were given, I should have all manner of pleasure, and take many clear and beautiful images away with me when I left. When we cannot think ourselves into sympathy with the great features of a country, we learn to ignore them, and put our head among the grass for flowers, or pore, for long times together, over the changeful current of a stream. We come down to the sermon in stones,[10] when we are shut out from any poem in the spread landscape. We begin to peep and botanise, we take an interest in birds and insects, we find many things beautiful in miniature. The reader will recollect the little summer scene in Wuthering Heights[11]--the one warm scene, perhaps, in all that powerful, miserable novel--and the great feature that is made therein by grasses and flowers and a little sunshine: this is in the spirit of which I now speak. And, lastly, we can go indoors; interiors are sometimes as beautiful, often

more picturesque, than the shows of the open air, and they have that quality of shelter of which I shall presently have more to say.

With all this in mind, I have often been tempted to put forth the paradox that any place is good enough to live a life in, while it is only in a few, and those highly favoured, that we can pass a few hours agreeably. For, if we only stay long enough, we become at home in the neighbourhood. Reminiscences spring up, like flowers, about uninteresting corners. We forget to some degree the superior loveliness of other places, and fall into a tolerant and sympathetic spirit which is its own reward and justification. Looking back the other day on some recollections of my own, I was astonished to find how much I owed to such a residence; six weeks in one unpleasant country-side had done more, it seemed, to quicken and educate my sensibilities than many years in places that jumped more nearly with my inclination.

The country to which I refer was a level and treeless plateau, over which the winds cut like a whip. For miles on miles it was the same. A river, indeed, fell into the sea near the town where I resided; but the valley of the river was shallow and bald, for as far up as ever I had the heart to follow it. There were roads, certainly, but roads that had no beauty or interest; for, as there was no timber, and but little irregularity of surface, you saw your whole walk exposed to you from the beginning: there was nothing left to fancy, nothing to expect, nothing to see by the wayside, save here and there an

unhomely-looking homestead, and here and there a solitary, spectacled stone-breaker;[12] and you were only accompanied, as you went doggedly forward by the gaunt telegraph-posts and the hum of the resonant wires in the keen sea-wind. To one who has learned to know their song in warm pleasant places by the Mediterranean, it seemed to taunt the country, and make it still bleaker by suggested contrast. Even the waste places by the side of the road were not, as Hawthorne liked to put it, "taken back to Nature" by any decent covering of vegetation. Wherever the land had the chance, it seemed to lie fallow. There is a certain tawny nudity of the South, bare sunburnt plains, coloured like a lion, and hills clothed only in the blue transparent air; but this was of another description--this was the nakedness of the North; the earth seemed to know that it was naked, and was ashamed and cold.[13]

It seemed to be always blowing on that coast. Indeed, this had passed into the speech of the inhabitants, and they saluted each other when they met with "Breezy, breezy," instead of the customary "Fine day" of farther south. These continual winds were not like the harvest breeze, that just keeps an equable pressure against your face as you walk, and serves to set all the trees talking over your head, or bring round you the smell of the wet surface of the country after a shower. They were of the bitter, hard, persistent sort, that interferes with sight and respiration, and makes the eyes sore. Even such winds as these have their own merit in proper time and place. It is pleasant to see them brandish great masses of shadow. And what a power they have over the colour of the world! How they ruffle the solid woodlands in their

passage, and make them shudder and whiten like a single willow! There is nothing more vertiginous than a wind like this among the woods, with all its sights and noises; and the effect gets between some painters and their sober eyesight, so that, even when the rest of their picture is calm, the foliage is coloured like foliage in a gale.[14] There was nothing, however, of this sort to be noticed in a country where there were no trees and hardly any shadows, save the passive shadows and clouds or those of rigid houses and walls. But the wind was nevertheless an occasion of pleasure; for nowhere could you taste more fully the pleasure of a sudden lull, or a place of opportune shelter. The reader knows what I mean; he must remember how, when he has sat himself down behind a dyke on a hill-side, he delighted to hear the wind hiss vainly through the crannies at his back; how his body tingled all over with warmth, and it began to dawn upon him, with a sort of slow surprise, that the country was beautiful, the heather purple, and the faraway hills all marbled with sun and shadow. Wordsworth, in a beautiful passage[15] of the "Prelude," has used this as a figure for the feeling struck in us by the quiet by-streets of London after the uproar of the great thoroughfares; and the comparison may be turned the other way with as good effect:

"Meanwhile the roar continues, till at length,
Escaped as from an enemy we turn,
Abruptly into some sequestered nook,
Still as a shelter'd place when winds blow loud!"

I remember meeting a man once, in a train, who told me of what must have been quite the most perfect instance of this pleasure of escape. He had gone up, one sunny, windy morning, to the top of a great cathedral somewhere abroad; I think it was Cologne Cathedral, the great unfinished marvel by the Rhine;[16] and after a long while in dark stairways, he issued at last into the sunshine, on a platform high above the town. At that elevation it was quite still and warm; the gale was only in the lower strata of the air, and he had forgotten it in the quiet interior of the church and during his long ascent; and so you may judge of his surprise when, resting his arms on the sunlit balustrade and looking over into the Place far below him, he saw the good people holding on their hats and leaning hard against the wind as they walked. There is something, to my fancy, quite perfect in this little experience of my fellow-traveller's. The ways of men seem always very trivial to us when we find ourselves alone on a church-top, with the blue sky and a few tall pinnacles, and see far below us the steep roofs and foreshortened buttresses, and the silent activity of the city streets; but how much more must they not have seemed so to him as he stood, not only above other men's business, but above other men's climate, in a golden zone like Apollo's![17]

This was the sort of pleasure I found in the country of which I write. The pleasure was to be out of the wind, and to keep it in memory all the time, and hug oneself upon the shelter. And it was only by the sea that any such sheltered places were to be found. Between the black

worm-eaten headlands there are little bights and havens, well screened from the wind and the commotion of the external sea, where the sand and weeds look up into the gazer's face from a depth of tranquil water, and the sea-birds, screaming and flickering from the ruined crags, alone disturb the silence and the sunshine. One such place has impressed itself on my memory beyond all others. On a rock by the water's edge, old fighting men of the Norse breed had planted a double castle; the two stood wall to wall like semi-detached villas; and yet feud had run so high between their owners, that one, from out of a window, shot the other as he stood in his own doorway. There is something in the juxtaposition of these two enemies full of tragic irony. It is grim to think of bearded men and bitter women taking hateful counsel together about the two hall-fires at night,[18] when the sea boomed against the foundations and the wild winter wind was loose over the battlements. And in the study we may reconstruct for ourselves some pale figure of what life then was. Not so when we are there; when we are there such thoughts come to us only to intensify a contrary impression, and association is turned against itself.[19] I remember walking thither three afternoons in succession, my eyes weary with being set against the wind, and how, dropping suddenly over the edge of the down, I found myself in a new world of warmth and shelter. The wind, from which I had escaped, "as from an enemy,"[20] was seemingly quite local. It carried no clouds with it, and came from such a quarter that it did not trouble the sea within view. The two castles, black and ruinous as the rocks about them, were still distinguishable from these by something more insecure and fantastic in

the outline, something that the last storm had left imminent and the next would demolish entirely. It would be difficult to render in words the sense of peace that took possession of me on these three afternoons. It was helped out, as I have said, by the contrast. The shore was battered and bemauled by previous tempests; I had the memory at heart of the insane strife of the pigmies who had erected these two castles and lived in them in mutual distrust and enmity, and knew I had only to put my head out of this little cup of shelter to find the hard wind blowing in my eyes; and yet there were the two great tracts of motionless blue air and peaceful sea looking on, unconcerned and apart, at the turmoil of the present moment and the memorials of the precarious past. There is ever something transitory and fretful in the impression of a high wind under a cloudless sky; it seems to have no root in the constitution of things; it must speedily begin to faint and wither away like a cut flower. And on those days the thought of the wind and the thought of human life came very near together in my mind. Our noisy years did indeed seem moments[21] in the being of the eternal silence: and the wind, in the face of that great field of stationary blue, was as the wind of a butterfly's wing. The placidity of the sea was a thing likewise to be remembered. Shelley speaks of the sea as "hungering for calm,"[22] and in this place one learned to understand the phrase. Looking down into these green waters from the broken edge of the rock, or swimming leisurely in the sunshine, it seemed to me that they were enjoying their own tranquillity; and when now and again it was disturbed by a wind ripple on the surface, or the quick black passage of a fish far below, they settled back again (one

could fancy) with relief.

On shore, too, in the little nook of shelter, everything was so subdued and still that the least particular struck in me a pleasurable surprise. The desultory crackling of the whin-pods[23] in the afternoon sun usurped the ear. The hot, sweet breath of the bank, that had been saturated all day long with sunshine, and now exhaled it into my face, was like the breath of a fellow-creature. I remember that I was haunted by two lines of French verse; in some dumb way they seemed to fit my surroundings and give expression to the contentment that was in me, and I kept repeating to myself--

"Mon coeur est un luth suspendu,[24]
Sitôt qu'on le touche, il résonne."

I can give no reason why these lines came to me at this time; and for that very cause I repeat them here. For all I know, they may serve to complete the impression in the mind of the reader, as they were certainly a part of it for me.

And this happened to me in the place of all others where I liked least to stay. When I think of it I grow ashamed of my own ingratitude. "Out of the strong came forth sweetness."[25] There, in the bleak and gusty North, I received, perhaps, my strongest impression of peace. I saw the sea to be great and calm; and the earth, in that little corner, was all alive and friendly to me. So, wherever a man is, he will find

something to please and pacify him: in the town he will meet pleasant faces of men and women, and see beautiful flowers at a window, or hear a cage-bird singing at the corner of the gloomiest street; and for the country, there is no country without some amenity--let him only look for it in the right spirit, and he will surely find.

NOTES

This article first appeared in the Portfolio, for November 1874, and was not reprinted until two years after Stevenson's death, in 1896, when it was included in the Miscellanies (Edinburgh Edition, Miscellanies, Vol. IV, pp. 131-142). The editor of the Portfolio was the well-known art critic, Philip Gilbert Hamerton (1834-1894), author of the Intellectual Life (1873). Just one year before, Stevenson had had printed in the Portfolio his first contribution to any periodical, Roads. Although The Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places attracted scarcely any attention on its first appearance, and has since become practically forgotten, there is perhaps no better essay among his earlier works with which to begin a study of his personality, temperament, and style. In its cheerful optimism this article is particularly characteristic of its author. It should be remembered that when this essay was first printed, Stevenson was only twenty-four years old.

[Note 1: It is a difficult matter, etc. The appreciation of nature is a quite modern taste, for although people have always loved the scenery which reminds them of home, it was not at all fashionable in England to love nature for its own sake before 1740. Thomas Gray was the first person in Europe who seems to have exhibited a real love of mountains (see his Letters). A study of the development of the appreciation of nature before and after Wordsworth (England's greatest nature poet) is exceedingly interesting. See Myra Reynolds, The

Treatment of Nature in English Poetry between Pope and Wordsworth (1896).]

[Note 2: This discipline in scenery. Note what is said on this subject in Browning's extraordinary poem, Fra Lippo Lippi, vs. 300-302.

"For, don't you mark? We're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see."]

[Note 3: Brantôme quaintly tells us, "fait des discours en soi pour se soutenir en chemin." Freely translated, "the traveller talks to himself to keep up his courage on the road." Pierre de Bourdeille, Abbé de Brantôme, (cir. 1534-1614), travelled all over Europe. His works were not published till long after his death, in 1665. Several complete editions of his writings in numerous volumes have appeared in the nineteenth century, one edited by the famous writer, Prosper Mérimée.]

[Note 4: We are provocative of beauty. Compare again, Fra Lippo Lippi, vs. 215 et seq.

"Or say there's beauty with no soul at all--
(I never saw it--put the case the same--)
If you get simple beauty and nought else,

You get about the best thing God invents:
That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
Within yourself, when you return him thanks."]

[Note 5: Callot, or Sadeler, or Paul Brill. Jacques Callot was an eminent French artist of the XVII century, born at Nancy in 1592, died 1635. Matthaeus and Paul Brill were two celebrated Dutch painters. Paul, the younger brother of Matthaeus, was born about 1555, and died in 1626. His development in landscape-painting was remarkable. Gilles Sadeler, born at Antwerp 1570, died at Prague 1629, a famous artist, and nephew of two well-known engravers. He was called the "Phoenix of Engraving."]

[Note 6: Dick Turpin. Dick Turpin was born in Essex, England, and was originally a butcher. Afterwards he became a notorious highwayman, and was finally executed for horse-stealing, 10 April 1739. He and his steed Black Bess are well described in W. H. Ainsworth's Rookwood, and in his Ballads.]

[Note 7: The Trossachs. The word means literally, "bristling country." A beautifully romantic tract, beginning immediately to the east of Loch Katrine in Perth, Scotland. Stevenson's statement, "if a man of admirable romantic instinct had not peopled it for them with harmonious figures," refers to Walter Scott, and more particularly to the Lady of the Lake (1810).]

[Note 8: I am happier where it is tame and fertile, and not readily pleased without trees. Notice the kind of country he begins to describe in the next paragraph. Is there really any contradiction in his statements?]

[Note 9: Like David before Saul. David charmed Saul out of his sadness, according to the Biblical story, not with nature, but with music. See I Samuel XVI. 14-23. But in Browning's splendid poem, Saul (1845), nature and music are combined in David's inspired playing.

"And I first played the tune all our sheep know," etc.]

[Note 10: The sermon in stones. See the beginning of the second act of As You Like It, where the exiled Duke says,

"And this our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything."

It is not at all certain that Shakspere used the word "sermons" here in the modern sense; he very likely meant merely discourses, conversations.]

[Note 11: Wuthering Heights. The well-known novel (1847) by Emily Bronte (1818-1848) sister of the more famous Charlotte Bronte. The

"little summer scene" Stevenson mentions, is in Chapter XXIV.]

[Note 12: A solitary, spectacled stone-breaker. To the pedestrian or cyclist, no difference between Europe and America is more striking than the comparative excellence of the country roads. The roads in Europe, even in lonely and remote districts, where one may travel for hours without seeing a house, are usually in perfect condition, hard, white and absolutely smooth. The slightest defect or abrasion is immediately repaired by one of these stone-breakers Stevenson mentions, a solitary individual, his eyes concealed behind large green goggles, to protect them from the glare and the flying bits of stone.]

[Note 13: Ashamed and cold. An excellent example of what Ruskin called "the pathetic fallacy."]

[Note 14: The foliage is coloured like foliage in a gale. Cf. Tennyson, In Memoriam, LXXII:--

"With blasts that blow the poplar white."]

[Note 15: Wordsworth, in a beautiful passage. The passage Stevenson quotes is in Book VII of The Prelude, called Residence in London.]

[Note 16: Cologne Cathedral, the great unfinished marvel by the Rhine. This great cathedral, generally regarded as the most perfect Gothic church in the world, was begun in 1248, and was not completed

until 1880, seven years after Stevenson wrote this essay.]

[Note 17: In a golden zone like Apollo's. The Greek God Apollo, later identified with Helios, the Sun-god. The twin towers of Cologne Cathedral are over 500 feet high, so that the experience described here is quite possible.]

[Note 18: The two hall-fires at night. In mediaeval castles, the hall was the general living-room, used regularly for meals, for assemblies, and for all social requirements. The modern word "dining-hall" preserves the old significance of the word. The familiar expression, "bower and hall," is simply, in plain prose, bedroom and sitting-room.]

[Note 19: Association is turned against itself. It is seldom that Stevenson uses an expression that is not instantly transparently clear. Exactly what does he mean by this phrase?]

[Note 20: "As from an enemy." Alluding to the passage Stevenson has quoted above, from Wordsworth's Prelude.]

[Note 21: Our noisy years did indeed seem moments. A favorite reflection of Stevenson's, occurring in nearly all his serious essays.]

[Note 22: Shelley speaks of the sea as "hungering for calm." This

passage occurs in the poem Prometheus Unbound, Act III, end of Scene 2.

"Behold the Nereids under the green sea--
Their wavering limbs borne on the wind like stream,
Their white arms lifted o'er their streaming hair,
With garlands pied and starry sea-flower crowns,--
Hastening to grace their mighty Sister's joy.
It is the unpastured sea hungering for calm."]

[Note 23: Whin-pods. "Whin" is from the Welsh çwyn, meaning "weed." Whin is gorse or furze, and the sound Stevenson alludes to is frequently heard in Scotland.]

[Note 24: "Mon coeur est un luth suspendu." These beautiful words are from the poet Béranger (1780-1857). It is probable that Stevenson found them first not in the original, but in reading the tales of Poe, for the "two lines of French verse" that "haunted" Stevenson are quoted by Poe at the beginning of one of his most famous pieces, The Fall of the House of Usher, where, however, the third, and not the first person is used:--

"Son coeur est un luth suspendu;
Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne."]

[Note 25: "Out of the strong came forth sweetness." Alluding to the

riddle propounded by Samson. See the book of Judges, Chapter XIV.]

## II

## AN APOLOGY FOR IDLERS

BOSWELL: "We grow weary when idle."

JOHNSON: "That is, sir, because others being busy, we want company; but if we were idle, there would be no growing weary; we should all entertain one another."[1]

Just now, when every one is bound, under pain of a decree in absence convicting them of lèse-respectability,[2] to enter on some lucrative profession, and labour therein with something not far short of enthusiasm, a cry from the opposite party who are content when they have enough, and like to look on and enjoy in the meanwhile, savours a little of bravado and gasconade.[3] And yet this should not be. Idleness so called, which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself. It is admitted that the presence of people who refuse to enter in the great handicap race for sixpenny pieces, is at once an insult and a disenchantment for those who do. A fine fellow (as we see so many) takes his determination, votes for the sixpences, and in the