

IX. Inspiration

It was Watt who told King George III. that he dealt in an article of which kings were said to be fond,—Power. 'T is certain that the one thing we wish to know is, where power is to be bought. But we want a finer kind than that of commerce; and every reasonable man would give any price of house and land and future provision, for condensation, concentration, and the recalling at will of high mental energy. Our money is only a second best. We would jump to buy power with it, that is, intellectual perception moving the will. That is first best. But we don't know where the shop is. If Watt knew, he forgot to tell us the number of the street. There are times when the intellect is so active that everything seems to run to meet it. Its supplies are found without much thought as to studies. Knowledge runs to the man, and the man runs to knowledge. In spring, when the snow melts, the maple-trees flow with sugar, and you cannot get tubs fast enough; but it is only for a few days. The hunter on the prairie, at the right season, has no need of choosing his ground; east, west, by the river, by the timber, he is everywhere near his game. But the favorable conditions are rather the exception than the rule.

The aboriginal man, in geology and in the dim lights of Darwin's microscope, is not an engaging figure. We are very glad that he ate his fishes and snails and marrow-bones out of our sight and hearing, and that his doleful experiences were got through with so very long ago. They combed his mane, they pared his nails, cut off his tail, set him on end, sent him to school and made him pay taxes, before he could begin to write his sad story for the compassion or the repudiation of his descendants, who are all but unanimous to disown him. We must take him as we find him,—pretty well on in his education, and, in all our knowledge of him, an interesting creature, with a will, an invention, an imagination, a conscience and an inextinguishable hope.

The Hunterian law of **arrested development** is not confined to vegetable and animal structure, but reaches the human intellect also. In the savage man, thought is infantile; and, in the civilized, unequal and ranging up and down a long scale. In the best races it is rare and imperfect. In happy moments it is reinforced, and carries out what were rude suggestions to larger scope and to clear and grand conclusions. The poet cannot see a natural phenomenon which does not express to him a correspondent fact in his mental experience; he is made aware of a power to carry on and complete the metamorphosis of natural into spiritual facts. Everything which we hear for the first time was expected by the mind; the newest discovery was expected. In the mind we call this enlarged power Inspiration. I believe that nothing great and lasting can be done except by inspiration, by leaning on the secret augury. The man's insight and power are interrupted and occasional; he can see and do this or that cheap task, at will, but it steads him not beyond. He is fain to make the ulterior step by mechanical means. It cannot so be done. That ulterior step is to be also by inspiration; if not through him, then by another man. Every real step is by what a poet called "lyrical glances," by lyrical facility, and never by main strength and ignorance. Years of mechanic toil will only seem to do it; it will not so be done.

Inspiration is like yeast. 'T is no matter in which of half a dozen ways you procure the infection; you can apply one or the other equally well to your purpose, and get your loaf of bread. And every earnest workman, in whatever kind, knows some favorable conditions for his task. When I wish to write on any topic, 't is of no consequence what kind of book or man gives me a hint or a motion, nor how far off that is from my topic.

Power is the first good. Rarely can tame a wild horse; but if he could give speed to a dull horse, were not that better? The toper finds, without asking, the road to the tavern, but the poet does not know the pitcher that holds his nectar. Every youth should know the way to prophecy as surely as the miller understands how to let on the water or the engineer the steam. A rush of thoughts is the only conceivable prosperity that can come to us. Fine clothes, equipages, villa, park, social consideration, cannot cover up real poverty and insignificance, from my own eyes or from others like mine.

Thoughts let us into realities. Neither miracle nor magic nor any religious tradition, not the immortality of the private soul is incredible, after we have experienced an insight, a thought. I think it comes to some men but once in their life, sometimes a religious impulse, sometimes an intellectual insight. But what we want is consecutiveness. 'T is with us a flash of light, then a long darkness, then a flash again. The separation of our days by sleep almost destroys identity. Could we but turn these fugitive sparkles into an astronomy of Copernican worlds! With most men, scarce a link of memory holds yesterday and to-day together. Their house and trade and families serve them as ropes to give a coarse continuity. But they have forgotten the thoughts of yesterday; they say to-day what occurs to them, and something else to-morrow. This insecurity of possession, this quick ebb of power,—as if life were a thunder-storm wherein you can see by a flash the horizon, and then cannot see your hand,—tantalizes us. We cannot make the inspiration consecutive. A glimpse, a point of view that by its brightness excludes the purview is granted, but no panorama. A fuller inspiration should cause the point to flow and become a line, should bend the line and complete the circle. To-day the electric machine will not work, no spark will pass; then presently the world is all a cat's back, all sparkle and shock. Sometimes there is no sea-fire, and again the sea is aglow to the horizon. Sometimes the Æolian harp is dumb all day in the window, and again it is garrulous and tells all the secrets of the world. In June the morning is noisy with birds; in August they are already getting old and silent.

Hence arises the question, Are these moods in any degree within control? If we knew how to command them! But where is the Franklin with kite or rod for this fluid?—a Franklin who can draw off electricity from Jove himself, and convey it into the arts of life, inspire men, take them off their feet, withdraw them from the life of trifles and gain and comfort, and make the world transparent, so that they can read the symbols of nature? What metaphysician has undertaken to enumerate the tonics of the torpid mind, the rules for the recovery of inspiration? That is least within control which is best in them. Of the *modus* of inspiration we have no knowledge. But in the experience of meditative men there is a certain agreement as to the conditions of reception. Plato, in his seventh Epistle, notes that the perception is only accomplished by long familiarity with the objects of intellect, and a life according to the things themselves. “Then a light, as if leaping from a fire, will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and will then itself nourish itself.” He said again, “The man who is his own master knocks in vain at the doors of poetry.” The artists must be sacrificed to their art. Like bees, they must put their lives into the sting they give. What is a man good for without enthusiasm? and what is enthusiasm but this daring of ruin for its object? There are thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls; we are not the less drawn to them. The moth flies into the flame of the lamp; and Swedenborg must solve the problems that haunt him, though he be crazed or killed.

There is genius as well in virtue as in intellect. 'T is the doctrine of faith over works. The raptures of goodness are as old as history and new with this morning's sun. The legends of Arabia, Persia, and India are of the same complexion as the Christian. Socrates, Menu, Confucius, Zertusht,—we recognize in all of them this ardor to solve the hints of thought.

I hold that ecstasy will be found normal, or only an example on a higher plane of the same gentle gravitation by which stones fall and rivers run. Experience identifies. Shakspeare seems to you miraculous; but the wonderful juxtapositions, parallelisms, transfers, which his genius effected, were all to him locked together as links of a chain, and the mode precisely as conceivable and familiar to higher intelligence as the index-making of the literary hack. The result of the hack is inconceivable to the type-setter who waits for it.

We must prize our own youth. Later, we want heat to execute our plans: the good-will, the knowledge, the whole armory of means are all present, but a certain heat that once used not to fail, refuses its office, and all is vain until this capricious fuel is supplied. It seems a semi-animal heat; as if tea, or wine, or sea-air, or mountains, or a genial companion, or a new thought suggested in book or conversation could fire the train, wake the fancy and the clear perception. Pit-coal,—where to find it? 'T is of no use that your engine is made like a watch,—that you are a good workman, and know how to drive it, if there is no coal. We are waiting until some tyrannous idea emerging out of heaven shall seize and bereave us of this liberty with which we are falling abroad. Well, we have the same hint or suggestion, day by day. "I am not," says the man, "at the top of my condition to-day, but the favorable hour will come when I can command all my powers, and when that will be easy to do which is at this moment impossible." See how the passions augment our force,—anger, love, ambition!—sometimes sympathy, and the expectation of men. Garrick said that on the stage his great paroxysms surprised himself as much as his audience. If this is true on this low plane, it is true on the higher. Swedenborg's genius was the perception of the doctrine that "The Lord flows into the spirits of angels and of men;" and all poets have signalized their consciousness of rare moments when they were superior to themselves,—when a light, a freedom, a power came to them which lifted them to performances far better than they could reach at other times; so that a religious poet once told me that he valued his poems, not because they were his, but because they were not. He thought the angels brought them to him.

Jacob Behmen said: "Art has not wrote here, nor was there any time to consider how to set it punctually down according to the right understanding of the letters, but all was ordered according to the direction of the spirit, which often went on haste,—so that the penman's hand, by reason he was not accustomed to it, did often shake. And, though I could have written in a more accurate, fair, and plain manner, the burning fire often forced forward with speed, and the hand and pen must hasten directly after it, for it comes and goes as a sudden shower. In one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together at an university."

The depth of the notes which we accidentally sound on the strings of nature is out of all proportion to our taught and ascertained faculty, and might teach us what strangers and novices we are, vagabond in this universe of pure power, to which we have only the smallest key. Herrick said:—

“ ‘T is not every day that I
Fitted am to prophesy;
No, but when the spirit fills
The fantastic panicles,
Full of fire, then I write
As the Godhead doth indite.

Thus enraged, my lines are hurled,
Like the Sibyl's, through the world:
Look how next the holy fire
Either slakes, or doth retire;
So the fancy cools,—till when
That brave spirit comes again.”

Bonaparte said: “There is no man more pusillanimous than I, when I make a military plan. I magnify all the dangers, and all the possible mischances. I am in an agitation utterly painful. That does not prevent me from appearing quite serene to the persons who surround me. I am like a woman with child, and when my resolution is taken, all is forgot except whatever can make it succeed.”

There are, to be sure, certain risks in this presentiment of the decisive perception, as in the use of ether or alcohol:—

“Great wits to madness nearly are allied;
Both serve to make our poverty our pride.”

Aristotle said: “No great genius was ever without some mixture of madness, nor can anything grand or superior to the voice of common mortals be spoken except by the agitated soul.” We might say of these memorable moments of life that we were in them, not they in us. We found ourselves by happy fortune in an illuminated portion or meteorous zone, and passed out of it again, so aloof was it from any will of ours. “It is a principle of war,” said Napoleon, “that when you can use the lightning it is better than cannon.”

How many sources of inspiration can we count? As many as our affinities. But to a practical purpose we may reckon a few of these.

1. Health is the first muse, comprising the magical benefits of air, landscape, and bodily exercise, on the mind. The Arabs say that “Allah does not count from life the days spent in the chase,” that is, those are thrown in. Plato thought “exercise would almost cure a guilty conscience.” Sydney Smith said: “You will never break down in a speech on the day when you have walked twelve miles.”

I honor health as the first muse, and sleep as the condition of health. Sleep benefits mainly by the sound health it produces; incidentally also by dreams, into whose farrago a divine lesson is sometimes slipped. Life is in short cycles or periods; we are quickly tired, but we have rapid rallies. A man is spent by his work, starved, prostrate; he will not lift his hand to save his life; he can never think more. He sinks into deep sleep and wakes with renewed youth, with hope, courage, fertile in resources, and keen for daring adventure.

“Sleep is like death, and after sleep
The world seems new begun;
White thoughts stand luminous and firm,
Like statues in the sun;
Refreshed from supersensuous founts,
The soul to clearer vision mounts.”

A man must be able to escape from his cares and fears, as well as from hunger and want of sleep; so that another Arabian proverb has its coarse truth: “When the belly is full, it says to the head, Sing, fellow!” The perfection of writing is when mind and body are both in key; when the mind finds perfect obedience in the body. And wine, no doubt, and all fine food, as of delicate fruits, furnish some elemental wisdom. And the fire, too, as it burns in the chimney; for I fancy that my logs, which have grown so long in sun and wind by Walden, are a kind of muses. So of all the particulars of health and exercise and fit nutriment and tonics. Some people will tell you there is a great deal of poetry and fine sentiment in a chest of tea.

2. The experience of writing letters is one of the keys to the *modus* of inspiration. When we have ceased for a long time to have any fulness of thoughts that once made a diary a joy as well as a necessity, and have come to believe that an image or a happy turn of expression is no longer at our command, in writing a letter to a friend we may find that we rise to thought and to a cordial power of expression that costs no effort, and it seems to us that this facility may be indefinitely applied and resumed. The wealth of the mind in this respect of seeing is like that of a looking-glass, which is never tired or worn by any multitude of objects which it reflects. You may carry it all round the world, it is ready and perfect as ever for new millions.

3. Another consideration, though it will not so much interest young men, will cheer the heart of older scholars, namely that there is diurnal and secular rest. As there is this daily renovation of sensibility, so it sometimes if rarely happens that after a season of decay or eclipse, darkening months or years, the faculties revive to their fullest force. One of the best facts I know in metaphysical science is Niebuhr's joyful record that after his genius for interpreting history had failed him for several years, this divination returned to him. As this rejoiced me, so does Herbert's poem “The Flower.” His health had broken down early, he had lost his muse, and in this poem he says:—

“And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.”

His poem called “The Forerunners” also has supreme interest. I understand “The Harbingers” to refer to the signs of age and decay which he detects in himself, not only in his constitution, but in his fancy and his facility and grace in writing verse; and he signalizes his delight in this skill, and his pain that

the Herricks, Lovelaces, and Marlows, or whoever else, should use the like genius in language to sensual purpose, and consoles himself that his own faith and the divine life in him remain to him unchanged, unharmed.

4. The power of the will is sometimes sublime; and what is will for, if it cannot help us in emergencies? Seneca says of an almost fatal sickness that befell him, "The thought of my father, who could not have sustained such a blow as my death, restrained me; I commanded myself to live." Goethe said to Eckermann, "I work more easily when the barometer is high than when it is low. Since I know this, I endeavor, when the barometer is low, to counteract the injurious effect by greater exertion, and my attempt is successful."

"To the persevering mortal the blessed immortals are swift." Yes, for they know how to give you in one moment the solution of the riddle you have pondered for months. "Had I not lived with Mirabeau," says Dumont, "I never should have known all that can be done in one day, or, rather, in an interval of twelve hours. A day to him was of more value than a week or a month to others. To-morrow to him was not the same impostor as to most others."

5. Plutarch affirms that "souls are naturally endowed with the faculty of prediction, and the chief cause that excites this faculty and virtue is a certain temperature of air and winds." My anchorite thought it "sad that atmospheric influences should bring to our dust the communion of the soul with the Infinite." But I am glad that the atmosphere should be an excitant, glad to find the dull rock itself to be deluged with Deity,—to be theist, Christian, poetic. The fine influences of the morning few can explain, but all will admit. Goethe acknowledges them in the poem in which he dislodges the nightingale from her place as Leader of the Muses:—

MUSAGETES

“Often in deep midnight
I called on the sweet muses.
No dawn shines,
And no day will appear:
But at the right hour
The lamp brings me pious light,
That it, instead of Aurora or Phœbus,
May enliven my quiet industry.
But they left me lying in sleep
Dull, and not to be enlivened,

And after every Lite morning
Followed unprofitable days.
“When now the Spring stirred,
I said to the nightingales:
‘Dear nightingales, trill
Early, O, early before my lattice,
Wake me out of the deep sleep

Which mightily chains the young man'
But the love-filled singers
Poured by night before my window
Their sweet melodies,—
Kept awake my dear soul,
Roused tender new longings
In my lately touched bosom,
And so the night passed,
And Aurora found me sleeping;
Yea, hardly did the sun wake me.
At last it has become summer,
And at the first glimpse of morning
The busy early fly stings me
Out of my sweet slumber.
Unmerciful she returns again:
When often the half-awake victim
Impatiently drives her off,
She calls hither the unscrupulous sisters,
And from my eyelids
Sweet sleep must depart.
Vigorous, I spring from my couch,
Seek the beloved Muses,
Find them in the beech grove,
Pleased to receive me;
And I thank the annoying insect
For many a golden hour.
Stand, then, for me, ye tormenting creatures,
Highly praised by the poet
As the true Musagetes.”

The French have a proverb to the effect that not the day only, but all things have their morning,—“Il n'y a que le matin en toutes choses.” And it is a primal rule to defend your morning, to keep all its dews on, and with fine foresight to relieve it from any jangle of affairs—even from the question, Which task? I remember a capital prudence of old President Quincy, who told me that he never went to bed at night until he had laid out the studies for the next morning. I believe that in our good days a well-ordered mind has a new thought awaiting it every morning. And hence, eminently thoughtful men, from the time of Pythagoras down, have insisted on an hour of solitude every day, to meet their own mind and learn what oracle it has to impart. If a new view of life or mind gives us joy, so does new arrangement. I don't know but we take as much delight in finding the right place for an old observation, as in a new thought.

6. Solitary converse with nature; for thence are ejaculated sweet and dreadful words never uttered in libraries. Ah! the spring days, the summer dawns, the October woods! I confide that my reader knows these delicious secrets, has perhaps

“Slighted Minerva's learned tongue,
But leaped with joy when on the wind the shell of Clio rung.”

Are you poetical, impatient of trade, tired of labor and affairs? Do you want Monadnoc, Aglocochook, or Helvellyn, or Plinlimmon, dear to English song, in your closet? Caerleon, Provence, Ossian, and Cadwallon? Tie a couple of strings across a board and set it in your window, and you have an instrument which no artist's harp can rival. It needs no instructed ear; if you have sensibility it admits you to sacred interiors; it has the sadness of nature, yet, at the changes, tones of triumph and festal notes ringing out all measures of loftiness. “Did you never observe,” says Gray, “‘while rocking winds are piping loud,’ that pause, as the gust is recollecting itself, and rising upon the ear in a shrill and plaintive note, like the swell of an olian harp? I do assure you there is nothing in the world so like the voice of a spirit.” Perhaps you can recall a delight like it, which spoke to the eye, when you have stood by a lake in the woods in summer, and saw where little flaws of wind whip spots or patches of still water into fleets of ripples,—so sudden, so slight, so spiritual, that it was more like the rippling of the Aurora Borealis at night than any spectacle of day.

7. But the solitude of nature is not so essential as solitude of habit. I have found my advantage in going in summer to a country inn, in winter to a city hotel, with a task which would not prosper at home. I thus secured a more absolute seclusion; for it is almost impossible for a housekeeper who is in the country a small farmer, to exclude interruptions and even necessary orders, though I bar out by system all I can, and resolutely omit, to my constant damage, all that can be omitted. At home, the day is cut into short strips. In the hotel, I have no hours to keep, no visits to make or receive, and I command an astronomic leisure. I forget rain, wind, cold, and heat. At home, I remember in my library the wants of the farm, and have all too much sympathy. I envy the abstraction of some scholars I have known, who could sit on a curbstone in State Street, put up their back, and solve their problem. I have more womanly eyes. All the conditions must be right for my success, slight as that is. What untunes is as bad as what cripples or stuns me. Novelty, surprise, change of scene, refresh the artist,—“break up the tiresome old roof of heaven into new forms,” as Hafiz said. The sea-shore and the taste of two metals in contact, and our enlarged powers in the presence, or rather at the approach and at the departure of a friend, and the mixture of lie in truth, and the experience of poetic creativeness which is not found in staying at home nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible,—these are the types or conditions of this power. “A ride near the sea, a sail near the shore,” said the ancient. So Montaigne travelled with his books, but did not read in them. “La Nature aime les croisements,” says Fourier.

I know there is room for whims here; but in regard to some apparent trifles there is great agreement as to their annoyance. And the machine with which we are dealing is of such an inconceivable delicacy that whims also must be respected. Fire must lend its aid. We not only want time, but warm time. George Sand says, “I have no enthusiasm for nature which the slightest chill will not instantly destroy.” And I remember that Thoreau, with his robust will, yet found certain trifles disturbing the delicacy of that health which composition exacted,—namely, the slightest irregularity, even to the drinking too much water on the preceding day. Even a steel pen is a nuisance to some writers. Some of us may remember, years ago, in the English journals, the petition, signed by Carlyle, Browning, Tennyson, Dickens and other writers in London, against the license of the organgrinders, who infested the streets near their houses, to levy on them blackmail.

Certain localities, as mountain-tops, the sea-side, the shores of rivers and rapid brooks, natural parks of oak and pine, where the ground is smooth and unencumbered, are excitements of the muse. Every artist knows well some favorite retirement. And yet the experience of some good artists has taught them to prefer the smallest and plainest chamber, with one chair and table and with no outlook, to these picturesque liberties. William Blake said, "Natural objects always did and do weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in me." And Sir Joshua Reynolds had no pleasure in Richmond; he used to say "the human face was his landscape." These indulgences are to be used with great caution. Allston rarely left his studio by day. An old friend took him, one fine afternoon, a spacious circuit into the country, and he painted two or three pictures as the fruits of that drive. But he made it a rule not to go to the city on two consecutive days. One was rest; more was lost time. The times of force must be well husbanded, and the wise student will remember the prudence of Sir Tristram in *Morte d'Arthur*, who, having received from the fairy an enchantment of six hours of growing strength every day, took care to fight in the hours when his strength increased; since from noon to night his strength abated. What prudence again does every artist, every scholar need in the security of his easel or his desk! These must be remote from the work of the house, and from all knowledge of the feet that come and go therein. Allston, it is said, had two or three rooms in different parts of Boston, where he could not be found. For the delicate muses lose their head if their attention is once diverted. Perhaps if you were successful abroad in talking and dealing with men, you would not come back to your book-shelf and your task. When the spirit chooses you for its scribe to publish some commandment, it makes you odious to men and men odious to you, and you shall accept that loathsomeness with joy. The moth must fly to the lamp, and you must solve those questions though you die.

8. Conversation, which, when it is best, is a series of intoxications. Not Aristotle, not Kant or Hegel, but conversation, is the right metaphysical professor. This is the true school of philosophy,—this the college where you learn what thoughts are, what powers lurk in those fugitive gleams, and what becomes of them; how they make history. A wise man goes to this game to play upon others and to be played upon, and at least as curious to know what can be drawn from himself as what can be drawn from them. For, in discourse with a friend, our thought, hitherto wrapped in our consciousness, detaches itself, and allows itself to be seen as a thought, in a manner as new and entertaining to us as to our companions. For provocation of thought, we use ourselves and use each other. Some perceptions—I think the best—are granted to the single soul; they come from the depth and go to the depth and are the permanent and controlling ones. Others it takes two to find. We must be warned by the fire of sympathy, to be brought into the right conditions and angles of vision. Conversation; for intellectual activity is contagious. We are emulous. If the tone of the companion is higher than ours, we delight in rising to it. 'T is a historic observation that a writer must find an audience up to his thought, or he will no longer care to impart it, but will sink to their level or be silent. Homer said, "When two come together, one apprehends before the other;" but it is because one thought well that the other thinks better: and two men of good mind will excite each other's activity, each attempting still to cap the other's thought. In enlarged conversation we have suggestions that require new ways of living, new books, new men, new arts and sciences. By sympathy, each opens to the eloquence, and begins to see with the eyes of his mind. We were all lonely, thoughtless; and now a principle appears to all: we see new relations, many truths; every mind seizes them as they pass; each catches by the mane one of these strong coursers like horses of the prairie, and rides up and down in the world of the intellect. We live day by day under the illusion that it is the fact or event that imports, whilst really it is not that which signifies, but the use we put it to, or what we think of it. We esteem nations important, until we discover that a few individuals much more concern us; then, later, that it is not at last a few individuals, or any sacred heroes, but the lowliness, the outpouring, the large equality to truth of a single mind,—as if in the narrow walls of a human heart the whole realm of truth, the world of morals,

the tribunal by which the universe is judged, found room to exist.

9. New poetry; by which I mean chiefly, old poetry that is new to the reader. I have heard from persons who had practice in rhyming, that it was sufficient to set them on writing verses, to read any original poetry. What is best in literature is the affirming, prophesying, spermatic words of menmaking poets. Only that is poetry which cleanses and mans me.

Words used in a new sense and figuratively, dart a delightful lustre; and every word admits a new use, and hints ulterior meanings. We have not learned the law of the mind,—cannot control and domesticate at will the high states of contemplation and continuous thought. “Neither by sea nor by land,” said Pindar, “canst thou find the way to the Hyperboreans;” neither by idle wishing, nor by rule of three or rule of thumb. Yet I find a mitigation or solace by providing always a good book for my journeys, as Horace or Martial or Goethe,—some book which lifts me quite out of prosaic surroundings, and from which I draw some lasting knowledge. A Greek epigram out of the anthology, a verse of Herrick or Lovelace, are in harmony both with sense and spirit.

You shall not read newspapers, nor politics, nor novels, nor Montaigne, nor the newest French book. You may read Plutarch, Plato, Plotinus, Hindoo mythology and ethics. You may read Chaucer, Shakspeare, Ben Jonson, Milton,—and Milton's prose as his verse; read Collins and Gray; read Hafiz and the Trouveurs; nay, Welsh and British mythology of Arthur, and (in your ear) Ossian; fact-books, which all geniuses prize as raw material, and as antidote to verbiage and false poetry. Factbooks, if the facts be well and thoroughly told, are much more nearly allied to poetry than many books are that are written in rhyme. Only our newest knowledge works as a source of inspiration and thought, as only the outmost layer of liber on the tree. Books of natural science, especially those written by the ancients,—geography, botany, agriculture, explorations of the sea, of meteors, of astronomy,—all the better if written without literary aim or ambition. Every book is good to read which sets the reader in a working mood. The deep book, no matter how remote the subject, helps us best.

Neither are these all the sources, nor can I name all. The receptivity is rare. The occasions or predisposing circumstances I could never tabulate; but now one, now another landscape, form, color, or companion, or perhaps one kind of sounding word or syllable, “strikes the electric chain with which we are darkly bound,” and it is impossible to detect and wilfully repeat the fine conditions to which we have owed our happiest frames of mind. The day is good in which we have had the most perceptions. The analysis is the more difficult, because poppy-leaves are strewn when a generalization is made; for I can never remember the circumstances to which I owe it, so as to repeat the experiment or put myself in the conditions:—

“‘T is the most difficult of tasks to keep
Heights which the soul is compotent to gain.”

I value literary biography for the hints it furnishes from so many scholars, in so many countries, of what hygiene, what ascetic, what gymnastic, what social practices their experience suggested and approved. They are, for the most part, men who needed only a little wealth. Large estates, political relations, great hospitalities, would have been impediments to them. They are men whom a book could entertain, a new thought intoxicate and hold them prisoners for years perhaps. Aubrey and Burton and

Wood tell me incidents which I find not insignificant.

These are some hints towards what is in all education a chief necessity,—the right government, or, shall I not say? the right obedience to the powers of the human soul. Itself is the dictator; the mind itself the awful oracle. All our power, all our happiness consists in our reception of its hints, which ever become clearer and grander as they are obeyed.

Revision #1

Created 2019-04-18 16:00:32 UTC by Textpedia

Updated 2019-04-18 16:00:44 UTC by Textpedia