

OPEN SECRETS/
INWARD PROSPECTS

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PREFACE

I wrote these thoughts down on about two thousand sheets, two to three thoughts per paper, and I kept them in some used manila envelopes, the earliest of which bore a postmark of 1972. The sheets themselves had no dates or venues and no proper names on the now somewhat comical assumption that these jottings were timeless and universal. And indeed, decades later they are still tightly attached to times, places, and attendant persons, whose images snap back with great vividness. Yet if the same should happen to a possible reader of these abstractions from life, they would be proved to have a certain scope.

Whether about 5000 articulated notions per person per lifetime is about average or over or below I cannot tell; they certainly stacked up high.

Because they made a heap rather than a composition, they naturally have a number of alternative titles. Among them are:

Skariphemata: an obscure Greek word, meaning *Scribblings*,

Maxims and Minims: “Maxims” was suggested by La Rochefoucauld; a minim is, serendipitously, a fluid measure equal to one twentieth of a scruple, or a half note,

Reflections and Refractions,

Diary of Delight and Depression—the title on all the envelopes,

Drop by Drop: Distillations

Open Secrets/Inward Prospects won out because all these scribbles divided in a rough but ready way into two sorts: 1. observations about our external world well known to all but not always openly told, and 2. sightings of internal vistas and omens, looking at myself as a sample soul.

“Reflections” is meant in the double sense as when thinking bends pensively back on itself and when the mind casts a coolly critical glance at what is before it.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE:

Open anywhere and if it irks you try another page. This book can be long or short—As You Like It.

1 NATURE: SIGHTINGS

Once we live in an environment that is altogether an artifact, artificial, we live in a world that has no being in the ancient sense: “Being” is cognate with *physis*, that which grows on its own, that is, nature.

Living entirely out of nature, even if that artificial or even virtual world has become second nature to us, means being entirely encompassed by human rationality and human irrationality: Then only we and the dust mites will be as nature made us—well now, only the dust mites.

Nature is to science a mystery beckoning to be profaned, an X asking to be solved for. The wonder is that it works, that she is amenable to construal, to answering to a lucid, beautiful rationalization that leaves appearances and perceptual affect behind to reveal mathematical structures, patterns, processes, and creations of superlative interest. And then, a second miracle: This second nature, the nature of the intellect, which “saves the appearances” for reason by superseding their sensory affects with abstractions of number and shape, turns out to be eminently useful. We can bind nature to our convenience and comfort by applications of hypernatural construals: The theory of nature is practical! This is the wonder of

wonders. The great question is how far this grand transformation of nature into second nature, of natural growth into sheer materiel can go before aboriginal nature simply gives out, and its transformed residue grows vicious towards us and mounts the ultimate slave rebellion against its masterpiece, the human animal.

Landscapes and the slow-growing cityscapes sealed within them are the most heartliftingly beautiful sights there are. That's because cultivated nature environing human sociality is the soul laid out in space.

Nature always achieves her comeuppance, when every solution develops an unforeseen problem and every cure an unexpected side effect and every plan an unintended consequence. Then that's not benevolent nature at work anymore; it's nature gone rebelliously rampageous. What if she were to shut down on us, like any abused system?

A double engagement, of mind and imagination: reading severely intellectual texts within sight of magical beauty. A porch hanging out into a spacious landscape. The *Critique* on my lap and out there in the blue middle distance the conical cinder hills against the very far off long light blue mountains. What a strange experience: to look now and then into so enchanting a spaciousness while reading of the transcendental sources of that sensibility within myself: St. John's College, Santa Fe, in the seventies.

Sign of the times: A student, asked what is meant by second nature, offers this example: "Take a can opener."

(He meant the kind they call a church key hereabouts.)
“That’s nature. Now take an electric can opener. That’s second nature.”

My own state still has in stretches that beauty the early colonial “Relations” note: a soft, mellow, pastoral, muted beauty, especially in fall, quite different from New England’s brilliant displays. The hills are low, the little brick towns moderately elegant. A friend calls Maryland the shallow South. It really is the betwixt and between state; I’m fond of it.

The sights of nature come home to us in different modes: the robust romance of natural picturesques, the fragrant romance of old cultivated scenes, the surprised delight at nooks and crannies overlooked by development, the planned astonishment at natural wonders, etc.

Weeping willows close up, clumps of majestic trees behind and beyond ranks upon fading ranks of mountain ranges, and a church spire in the middle distance: the Blue Ridge. I love its rocks and rills, its woods and templed hills—except the temples tend to be communications installations.

The world used to offer a free bonus, the bonus of beauty nearby, the free and easy sight of natural beauty. Now that, like everything else, needs arranging. But though it’s receded, it’s not gone. This is a big land.

Pleasant breezes, glorious vistas: The heart expands and the intellect is activated.

There are natural settings so intensely atmospheric that the *genius loci* seems to step out from among the trees and regard the willing watcher, like that “Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” Pan to the ancients.

A beautiful natural scene enters the memory much more permanently than the events that came and went in it.

Unforgettable: lovely talk in the sight of beauty.

Ducks in Walla Walla, at it in spring: A thingy like those rolled-up trumpets you blow out on New Year, a brief commotion, an unconcerned fluffing of feathers, he struts off with a waddle, she looks deeply uninterested; all this in view of a far from uninterested public, me.

Landfall on a Greek island, in phases: a thin dark swath of blue haze lies on the edge of the wine-dark sea; a blue outline like a shield upon the waters develops; it grows detailed; a beach is discernible; we land and find a sunken path between banks of glowingly blown red poppies, wildflowers, and fragrant warmth; the nausea of the sea recedes; soon we come to the habitations of men. Though the meat is not a cut from the chine of a boar broiled on a spit (it's *kephtedes*, savory meatballs), it's an archetypal memory image.

Landscape is a setting for love and friendship but it is older; it comes before and survives human affairs, and that is how it enters the imagination.

Golden stubble where the wheat's been harvested, chocolate brown earth where the fields have been plowed, mauve where they've dried under the sun—for mile upon spacious mile like an endless standing wave broken by canyons, gold on one side, dark on the other with clumps of cotton trees and silvery shacks. Beyond the sharp-faceted foothills and way beyond, far off, the blue saw-toothed mountain range, and above it all a pastel blue sky with clouds enough for live shadows to play over the scene. And bouncing before the car mat-gold balls of tumbleweed and little whorling dust devils, like sprites showing the way. I saw this a quarter-century ago: Walla Walla, Washington, where I was playing hooky from my college.