THE LIVING MOUNTAIN

NAN SHEPHERD

INTRODUCED BY
ROBERT MACFARLANE

AFTERWORD BY
JENNY ODELL

SCRIBNER

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

ELEVEN

The Senses

Having disciplined mind and body to quiescence, I must discipline them also to activity. The senses must be used. For the ear, the most vital thing that can be listened to here is silence. To bend the ear to silence is to discover how seldom it is there. Always something moves. When the air is quite still, there is always running water; and up here that is a sound one can hardly lose, though on many stony parts of the plateau one is above the watercourses. But now and then comes an hour when the silence is all but absolute, and listening to it one slips out of time. Such a silence is not a mere negation of sound. It is like a new element, and if water is still sounding with a low far-off murmur, it is no more than the last edge of an element we are leaving, as the last edge of land hangs on the mariner's horizon. Such moments come in mist, or snow, or a summer night (when it is too cool for the clouds of insects to be abroad), or a September dawn. In September dawns I hardly breathe – I am an image in a ball of glass. The world is suspended there, and I in it.

Once, on a night of such clear silence, long past midnight, lying awake outside the tent, my eyes on the plateau where an afterwash of light was lingering, I heard in the stillness a soft, an almost imperceptible thud. It was enough to make me turn my head. There on the tent pole a tawny owl stared down at me. I could just discern his shape against the sky. I stared back. He turned his head about, now one eye upon me, now the other, then melted down into the air so silently that had I not been watching him I could not have known he was gone. To have

heard the movement of the midnight owl – that was rare, it was a minor triumph.

Bird song, and the noises birds make that are not singing, and the small sounds of their movements, are for the ear to catch. If there is one bird-call more than another that for me embodies the spirit of the mountain, it is the cry of the golden plover running in the bare and lonely places.

But the ear can listen also to turmoil. Gales crash into the Garbh Choire with the boom of angry seas: one can hear the air shattering itself upon rock. Cloud-bursts batter the earth and roar down the ravines, and thunder reverberates with a prolonged and menacing roll in the narrow trough of Loch Avon. Mankind is sated with noise; but up here, this naked, this elemental savagery, this infinitesimal cross-section of sound from the energies that have been at work for aeons in the universe, exhilarates rather than destroys.

Each of the senses is a way in to what the mountain has to give. The palate can taste the wild berries, blaeberry, 'wild free-born cranberry' and, most subtle and sweet of all, the avern or cloudberry, a name like a dream. The juicy gold globe melts against the tongue, but who can describe a flavour? The tongue cannot give it back. One must find the berries, golden-ripe, to know their taste.

So with the scents. All the aromatic and heady fragrances – pine and birch, bog myrtle, the spicy juniper, heather and the honey-sweet orchis, and the clean smell of wild thyme – mean nothing at all in words. They are there, to be smelled. I am like a dog – smells excite me. On a hot moist midsummer day, I have caught a rich fruity perfume rising from the mat of grass, moss and wild berry bushes that covers so much of the plateau. The earthy smell of moss, and the soil itself, is best savoured by grubbing. Sometimes the rank smell of deer assails one's nostril, and in the spring the sharp scent of fire.

But eye and touch have the greatest potency for me. The eye brings infinity into my vision. I am lying on my back, while over

me huge cumuli tear past upon a furious gale. But beyond them, very far away, in a remote pure sky, there float pale exquisite striations of cloud that can hardly be detected. I close one eye and they recede, only with both eyes open do they come into sharp enough focus for me to be sure that they are there. So now I know that the mountain makes its own wind, for these pale striae float almost motionless, while still the gale above my head drives the monstrous cumuli on. It is the eye that discovers the mystery of light, not only the moon and the stars and the vast splendours of the Aurora, but the endless changes the earth itself undergoes under changing lights. And that again, I perceive, is the mountain's own doing, for its own atmosphere alters the light. Now scaur and gully take on a gloss, now they shimmer, now they are stark – like a painting without perspective, in which objects are depicted all on one plane and of the same size, they fill the canvas and there is neither foreground nor background. Now there are sky-blue curves on the water as it slides over stones, now an impenetrable tarry blackness, slightly silvered like tar. The naked birches, if I face the sun, look black, a shining black, fine carved ebony. But if the sun is behind me it penetrates a red cloud of twigs and picks out vividly the white trunks, as though the cloud of red were behind the trunks. In a dry air, the hills shrink, they look far off and innocent; but in a moisture-laden air they charge forward, insistent and enormous, and in mist they have a nightmare quality. This is not only because I cannot see where I am going, but because the small portion of earth that I do see is isolated from its familiar surroundings, and I do not recognise it. Nothing is so ghostly as mist over snow. On a March day, I am climbing into the corrie that holds Loch Dubh; the snows have melted from the lower slopes and the burns are turbulent. They can be crossed only on snow bridges, levels of snow down which runs a sagging uneven line that shows where the water is pouring underneath. Further up, it is all snow. And now the cloud sinks down on me, a pale mist that washes out all the landmarks the snow had not already obliterated.

Rocks loom out of it, gigantic, monstrous. The lochan below Loch Dubh seems enormous; the steep climb beyond it towers upwards so giddily into nothingness that I am assailed by fear: this must be the precipice itself that I am climbing – the lochan was the loch. I have passed it and am clambering towards the cliff. I know it can't be true, but the dim white ghostliness out of which stark shapes batter at my brain has overpowered my reason. I can't go further. I scramble downwards, and the grey, rather dismal, normality below the mist has a glow of comfort.

On another misty day – a transparent mist – I saw a peregrine falcon fly out from a precipice. There were the curved and pointed wings, the rapid down-beat of the pinions. Yet I stared incredulous. I was gazing upwards at a fabulous bird. No peregrine could be of such a size. It was only when he stood still on the air, before sailing back to the crag, that I believed my own eyesight; and it was only then that I understood what Hopkins meant when he wrote:

> *To see the eagle's bulk, render'd in mists*
> *Hang of a treble size.*

Mist, oddly, can also correct the illusions of the eye. A faint mist floating in a line of hills brings out the gradations of height and of distance in what had seemed one hill: there is seen to be a near and a far. In something the same way, the reflection of land in glassy water defines and clarifies its points, so that relative distance and height in a tumble of hills, so deceptive to the eye, are made clear in the loch reflection.

The eye has other illusions, that depend on one's own position. Lying on my back, and looking across the Garbh Choire to the scree slopes above Loch an Uaine, I see them as horizontal; just as from immediately below it, the Lurcher seems a horizontal plain with erect rock masses rising from it. One year we pitched our tent below the curve of the hill above Tullochgrue, on the far

side from the Cairngorms. We looked out on a field that ran upwards, and above it the whole line of mountains, cut off about the 2500 feet level: the intervening moor and forest had vanished. As I lay night after night outside the door of the tent, watching the last light glow upon the plateau, I had an odd sensation of being actually myself up there. My field felt the same height, I also lay bathed in the afterglow that had gone from all but the summits. Half-closing the eyes can also change the values of what I look upon. A scatter of white flowers in grass, looked at through half-closed eyes, blaze out with a sharp clarity as though they had actually risen up out of their background. Such illusions, depending on how the eye is placed and used, drive home the truth that our habitual vision of things is not necessarily right: it is only one of an infinite number, and to glimpse an unfamiliar one, even for a moment, unmakes us, but steadies us again. It's queer but invigorating. It will take a long time to get to the end of a world that behaves like this if I do no more than turn round on my side or my back.

Other delights the eye can catch – quick moments that pass and are gone for ever: spray blown like smoke from a mountain loch in a gale; a green gleam on the snow where I know a loch lies, caught before I can see the water itself; Loch Avon, glimpsed on a rainy day from the side of the rocky burn above it, as deep a green as Loch an Uaine itself; a rainbow wavering and flickering, formed on a small shower blown by a furious wind; the air quivering above sun-filled hollows on drowsy summer afternoons; a double rainbow, dark sky in between, arched over the river, its reflection stretching from bank to bank.

How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry? – the world of light, of colour, of shape, of shadow: of mathematical precision in the snowflake, the ice formation, the quartz crystal, the patterns of stamen and petal: of rhythm in the fluid curve and plunging line of the mountain faces. Why some blocks of stone, hacked into violent and tortured shapes, should so profoundly tranquillise the mind I do not know. Perhaps the

eye imposes its own rhythm on what is only a confusion: one has to look creatively to see this mass of rock as more than jag and pinnacle – as beauty. Else why did men for so many centuries think mountains repulsive? A certain kind of consciousness interacts with the mountain-forms to create this sense of beauty. Yet the forms must be there for the eye to see. And forms of a certain distinction: mere dollops won't do it. It is, as with all creation, matter impregnated with mind: but the resultant issue is a living spirit, a glow in the consciousness, that perishes when the glow is dead. It is something snatched from non-being, that shadow which creeps in on us continuously and can be held off by continuous creative act. So, simply to look on anything, such as a mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being. Man has no other reason for his existence.

Touch is the most intimate sense of all. The whole sensitive skin is played upon, the whole body, braced, resistant, poised, relaxed, answers to the thrust of forces incomparably stronger than itself. Cold spring water stings the palate, the throat tingles unbearably; cold air smacks the back of the mouth, the lungs crackle. Wind blows a nostril in, one breathes on one side only, the cheek is flattened against the gum, the breath comes gaspingly, as in a fish taken from water – man is not in his element in air that moves at this velocity. Frost stiffens the muscles of the chin, mist is clammy on the cheek, after rain I run my hand through juniper or birches for the joy of the wet drops trickling over the palm, or walk through long heather to feel its wetness on my naked legs.

The hands have an infinity of pleasure in them. When I was a girl, a charming old gentlewoman said something to me that I have never forgotten. I was visiting her country home, and after lunch, going for a walk with her niece, I picked up my gloves from the hall table where I had laid them down. She took them from me and laid them back on the table. 'You don't need these. A lot of strength comes to us through the hands.' Sensation also.

The feel of things, textures, surfaces, rough things like cones and bark, smooth things like stalks and feathers and pebbles rounded by water, the teasing of gossamers, the delicate tickle of a crawling caterpillar, the scratchiness of lichen, the warmth of the sun, the sting of hail, the blunt blow of tumbling water, the flow of wind – nothing that I can touch or that touches me but has its own identity for the hand as much as for the eye.

And for the foot as well. Walking barefoot has gone out of fashion since Jeanie Deans trudged to London, but no country child grows up without its benediction. Sensible people are reviving the habit. They tell me a tale up here of a gentleman in one of the shooting lodges who went to the hill barefoot: when he sat down for lunch the beaters crowded as near as they dared to see what manner of soles such a prodigy could have. But actually walking barefoot upon heather is not so grim as it sounds. I have covered odd miles myself here and there in this fashion. It begins with a burn that must be forded: once my shoes are off, I am loth to put them on again. If there are grassy flats beside my burn, I walk on over them, rejoicing in the feel of the grass to my feet; and when the grass gives place to heather, I walk on still. By setting the foot sideways to the growth of the heather, and pressing the sprays down, one can walk easily enough. Dried mud flats, sun-warmed, have a delicious touch, cushioned and smooth; so has long grass at morning, hot in the sun, but still cool and wet when the foot sinks into it, like food melting to a new flavour in the mouth. And a flower caught by the stalk between the toes is a small enchantment.

In fording a swollen stream, one's strongest sensation is of the pouring strength of the water against one's limbs; the effort to poise the body against it gives significance to this simple act of walking through running water. Early in the season the water may be so cold that one has no sensation except of cold; the whole being retracts itself, uses all its resources to endure this icy delight. But in heat the freshness of the water slides over the skin like shadow. The whole skin has this delightful sensitivity; it feels

the sun, it feels the wind running inside one's garment, it feels water closing on it as one slips under – the catch in the breath, like a wave held back, the glow that releases one's entire cosmos, running to the ends of the body as the spent wave runs out upon the sand. This plunge into the cold water of a mountain pool seems for a brief moment to disintegrate the very self; it is not to be borne: one is lost: stricken: annihilated. Then life pours back.

TWELVE

Being

Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think. Each sense heightened to its most exquisite awareness is in itself total experience. This is the innocence we have lost, living in one sense at a time to live all the way through.

So there I lie on the plateau, under me the central core of fire from which was thrust this grumbling grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow – the total mountain. Slowly I have found my way in. If I had other senses, there are other things I should know. It is nonsense to suppose, when I have perceived the exquisite division of running water, or a flower, that my separate senses can make, that there would be nothing more to perceive were we but endowed with other modes of perception. How could we imagine flavour, or perfume, without the senses of taste and smell? They are completely unimaginable. There must be many exciting properties of matter that we cannot know because we have no way to know them. Yet, with what we have, what wealth! I add to it each time I go to the mountain – the eye sees what it didn't see before, or sees in a new way what it had already seen. So the ear, the other senses. It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then, unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details – a stroke here, a

stroke there – come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.

These moments come unpredictably, yet governed, it would seem, by a law whose working is dimly understood. They come to me most often, as I have indicated, waking out of outdoor sleep, gazing tranced at the running of water and listening to its song, and most of all after hours of steady walking, with the long rhythm of motion sustained until motion is felt, not merely known by the brain, as the 'still centre' of being. In some such way I suppose the controlled breathing of the Yogi must operate. Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, *transparent*, or *light as air*, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body.

It is therefore when the body is keyed to its highest potential and controlled to a profound harmony deepening into something that resembles trance, that I discover most nearly what it is *to be*. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.

So I have found what I set out to find. I set out on my journey in pure love. It began in childhood, when the stormy violet of a gully on the back of Sgoran Dubh, at which I used to gaze from a shoulder of the Monadhliaths, haunted my dreams. That gully, with its floating, its almost tangible ultramarine, *thirled* me for life to the mountain. Climbing Cairngorms was then for me a legendary task, which heroes, not men, accomplished. Certainly not children. It was still legendary on the October day, blue, cold and brilliant after heavy snow, when I climbed Creag Dhubh above Loch an Eilein, alone and expectant. I climbed like a child stealing apples, with a fearful look behind. The Cairngorms were forbidden country – this was the nearest I had come to them; I was delectably excited. But how near to them I was coming I could not guess, as I toiled up the last slope and came out above

Glen Einich. Then I gulped the frosty air – I could not contain myself, I jumped up and down, I laughed and shouted. There was the whole plateau, glittering white, within reach of my fingers, an immaculate vision, sun-struck, lifting against a sky of dazzling blue. I drank and drank. I have not yet done drinking that draught. From that hour I belonged to the Cairngorms, though – for several reasons – it was a number of years until I climbed them.

So my journey into an experience began. It was a journey always for fun, with no motive beyond that I wanted it. But at first I was seeking only sensuous gratification – the sensation of height, the sensation of movement, the sensation of speed, the sensation of distance, the sensation of effort, the sensation of ease: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life. I was not interested in the mountain for itself, but for its effect upon me, as puss caresses not the man but herself against the man's trouser leg. But as I grew older, and less self-sufficient, I began to discover the mountain in itself. Everything became good to me, its contours, its colours, its waters and rock, flowers and birds. This process has taken many years, and is not yet complete. Knowing another is endless. And I have discovered that man's experience of them enlarges rock, flower and bird. The thing to be known grows with the knowing.

I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain. The journey is itself part of the technique by which the god is sought. It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.