

UNDER THE SKY

TRAVEL in the younger sort is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience,' announced the disconcerting Bacon, but I think there is more to be said for travel than that. 'The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases,' declares Hazlitt in the most charming of his essays. For him travel was a journeying into solitude—none of your collective hiking for him. 'For once let me have a truce with impertinence,' he says. 'Give me the dear blue sky over my head and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before.' And in the same essay: 'I cannot talk and think, or indulge in melancholy musing by fits and starts. "Let me have a companion of my way," says Sterne, "were it but to remark how the shadows lengthen as the sun declines." It is beautifully said; but, in my opinion, this continual comparing of notes interferes with the involuntary impression of things upon the mind, and hurts the sentiment . . . I am for the synthetical method on a journey in preference to the analytical.' There is no need to deny the sympathy that Sterne's beautiful sentence invokes, even though in principle Hazlitt may command our assent. At the heart of the essayist's rather forcibly expressed preference is a pleasure in the continuous addition of impressions in tranquillity; his notion of a journey is a solitary pilgrimage to the very bosom of a peaceful countryside; he is the dreaming watcher of sunset skies who resents unnecessary talk. Quoting a fine passage from Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess* he says: 'Had I words and images like these, I would attempt to wake the thoughts that lie slumbering on golden ridges in the evening clouds: but at the sight of nature my fancy, poor as it is, droops and closes up its leaves

like flowers at sunset.' Released from the perturbations of abrupt contacts with others, he will, while solitary, avoid argument, shun the cold face of philosophy, and touch beauty diffidently, with a delicate imagination.

'Now to be properly enjoyed, a walking tour should be gone upon alone,' the Peter Panish Stevenson corroborates, with his gesturing manner. 'A walking tour should be gone upon alone because freedom is of the essence; because you should be able to stop and go on, and follow this way or that, as the freak takes you; and because you must have your own pace and neither trot alongside a champion walker, nor mince in time with a girl.' (The ignorant fellow couldn't know about our modern girl hikers—he was born too soon). 'And then you must be open to all impressions and let your thoughts take colour from what you see. You should be as a pipe for any wind to play upon. "I cannot see the wit," says Hazlitt, "of walking and talking at the same time when I am in the country. I wish to vegetate like the country."' Having quoted his forerunner like this, Stevenson continues his own lively gossip in the essay *On Walking Tours*. By way of contrast to Hazlitt's favourite recollection of quiet evenings, R.L.S. finds that the morning is the more worthy of mention as the time of intoxication with freedom, of meditative silences, of unperturbed communion with peace. But he takes a boyish delight in the bright air, in manly strides, in dragon-flies by the canal, complacent kine at pasture, and in a gesticulating and comic stranger who passes by. In the spirit of a boy, too, he dwells on his bivouacs and any sort of picnic. And then he turns into a contemplative elder, finding in the peace of escape room for wisdom. 'We are all so busy, and have so many far-off projects to realise, and castles in the fire to turn into solid, habitable mansions on a gravel soil, that we can find

Blackfriars

no time for pleasure trips into the Land of Thought among the Hills of Vanity.' And when we have run hither and thither and raised a lot of dust, suppose we ask if we had not done well to 'sit by the fire at home, and be happy thinking. To sit still and contemplate, to remember the faces of women without desire, to be pleased by the great deeds of men without envy, to be everything and everywhere in sympathy, and yet content to remain where and what you are—is not this to know both wisdom and virtue, and to dwell with happiness?'

Stevenson certainly has claims to the title of a true wayfarer, and yet I cannot conceive of Hazlitt introducing the idea of 'pleasure trips' into such a passage as the foregoing. 'It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths,' Hazlitt does indeed declare. 'I laugh, I leap, I sing for joy.' It is the enthusiasm of a liberated man. This is what a boy would do, but what only a man would say. Stevenson, the boy, vociferates 'Bravo!' in quoting the older writer.

There is much danger in yielding too readily to the lure of Hazlitt and Stevenson on the subject of Travel, with a capital. They might make us truants, and against them we need the antidote of the sapient and practical Bacon, blind though he be to the ultimate horizons. For he seems to regard travel as a kind of university extension course of lectures. The accumulation of facts is always a laudable pursuit, and to educate ourselves into broad-mindedness is an excellent reason for visiting many countries. Not in this way, though, is the true wayfaring achieved; but it may be that the deliberate pursuit of education is a means to unforeseen ends. 'It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better,' says Thoreau, characteristically, in *Walden* exhorting us to look in-

ward and become expert in home cosmography. 'Our voyaging is only great circle-sailing,' he declares, 'and the doctors prescribe for diseases of the skin merely. One hastens to Southern Africa to chase the giraffe, but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcock also may afford rare sport, but I trust it would be nobler game to hunt one's self.'

Thus in urging us to be the Columbus of the undiscovered world within ourselves, Thoreau does not exactly denounce travel of the external sort. He merely stresses the nature of its virtue, as something which is obtainable wherever we may be, and however small the back garden. Such an attitude is more enlightened than Samuel Johnson's burly contempt—'the fierce and boisterous contempt of ignorance,' Macaulay termed it—which made the Doctor say: 'What does a man learn by travelling? Is Beauclerk the better for travelling? What did Lord Charlemont learn in his travels, except that there was a snake in one of the Pyramids of Egypt?'

It is not for many of us to be quite independent of our external experiences, and I confess that the atmosphere of strange places may be a stimulus and contribute something that one would perhaps miss by staying always in the back garden. What is gained by travel, however, is undoubtedly a measure of the traveller rather than the places visited. Like Lord Charlemont, I have been to see the Pyramids of Egypt, and I shall not forget the surprise of my first ascent of the great monument of Cheops. As I climbed I saw the widening prospect below of uncovered catacombs, rather like a black and white chessboard, and the smooth, undisturbed desert rolling up to Libya in the west. To the north-east were the Mokkaṭṭam hills hiding Cairo. When the last few blocks of granite had been scaled I found myself standing on

Blackfriars

the rough, flattened top of the pyramid where once had been the peak of alabaster, and my fascinated gaze was held by two abandoned empty lemonade bottles. Almost every inch of stone within reach of eye or hand was covered with the scratched and cut inscriptions of visitors, who would have been as great as Cheops himself, no doubt, in egotism, if they had been able to command his power. Would it be unfair to assume that there are many people who have got nothing more out of such a visit than the right to say that they have left their initials behind them?

The true wayfarers know that all our journeys are but stages in the longer journey of life. Although the essential marvel is within, the journeying has its value if only by yielding rich memories. We gather into ourselves the booty of our travels, and from burned out camp fires some fragrance remains in the heart.

R. L. MEGROZ.