

TRAVELLING TO SOME PURPOSE

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WHEN you close the door behind you and start on a journey, something important begins to happen. You are making an act of faith in mankind. And if that seems too pompous a description, then at least let it be conceded that any journey is a trip to the unknown. The elaborately equipped explorer, setting out for Antarctic wastes or Himalayan mountains, is, we admit, asking for adventure, and we marvel at his news from nowhere when he returns. But the more modest wanderings of most of us—whether to the Pyrenees or the Italian lakes, or, for that matter, along the coast-line of Sussex or into the Shropshire hills: there seems little here for wonder. A stolen passport, a puncture, losing one's way, whether on a map or on an unfamiliar menu—this is the small price we may have to pay for abandoning the safety of the holiday-camp or the boarding-house lounge on the front.

And yet the most staid of journeys is always more than it seems, for it is a *human* thing to do: with possibilities, therefore, which we can never guess at in advance. The most domesticated dog is incapable of travel: he is moved by the necessity of food and the demands of his kind. He is quite incapable of *arriving*, early or late. For travel is always a choice: something to be begun, and, let us hope, to be safely ended; but to be interrupted and altered, too. And it involves other people. However solitary a traveller may think himself to be, however silent he may stand on a peak in Darien, the point of his wonder, the purpose of his journey, is always in the end linked up with his freedom. He might have stayed at home, he might have crossed the mountains by another pass. And all would have been different.

It is perhaps a little daunting to let metaphysics in by the side door, to turn what is a simple and single pleasure into a high debate of moral choice. Heaven help us indeed if the philosophers, or—even worse—the psychologists, get busy with their jargon: analysing our motives and finding a place for our most innocent intentions within their fearful categories. All the same, the urge to travel, to leave home, is so universal a habit that we may well

be grateful for it, and especially nowadays, when, for the rest of the year we are, most of us, tied down to a day's work that gives little room for the defiance of saying 'No'. I have even heard of a man whose holiday consisted of staying in bed, of listening to the alarm as it went off every morning at six-thirty, and of experiencing the luxury of paying no attention to it at all!

The point about travel is that it is pointless: its mercies should be wholly uncovenanted ones. That is why a holiday that has been too thoroughly planned can end by being something of a nightmare. True, we must be back on the job by Monday the 15th, but in the meantime there is a fortnight—the only one of the year—that is blessedly unscheduled and free. A pity if it, too, should be overshadowed by the need for clocking-in.

To travel, if only on a cheap day-trip to Canvey Island, is to abandon the ordinary round, and it is one of the most liberating of human joys. We may not share the feelings of Joseph Craddock, for instance, in his account of climbing Snowdon in 1770:

'As our situation was exalted above the globe, so were our ideas. And the nearer we were to the ethereal regions, the more our souls seemed to partake of their purity. Our minds, like the serene face of the sky, undisturbed with the storms of the passions, became equal and composed. We were inspired with sentiments of commiseration and contempt, in contemplating the vain magnificence of human grandeur; and the pursuits of the world for a few pieces of ore, which nature prudently concealed in the bowels of these mountains.'

We may not like his rhetoric, but we can hardly fail to see his point. When we travel, we see that our closed world is not the only world. For some travellers—for a Joseph Craddock—the joy is to get away from the world, to experience the illusion of being exempt from the invasions of society. That no doubt explains the attraction of high mountains, uncharted seas and remote deserts. But you have to be human to appreciate the fact of separation from humankind. 'Never so little alone as when alone.' It is true, and you do not need to be a mystic to believe it.

But for most people things seen and heard are better shared. There is an irrepressible human instinct which wants to say 'Isn't that wonderful?' or 'Doesn't that remind you of Kenilworth?' I once met a man in Wigan—it really was in Wigan—who told me of a tour he had made of France and Switzerland. The party started out from the Market Place in Wigan in a luxury-coach, and in this coach they travelled to London, on to Dover and over

the English Channel to Dunkerque, Paris, Bâle and so to Switzerland. He told me that it was wonderfully reassuring when of an evening the party sat down to dinner in some foreign place—with the unfamiliar language, the strange faces and the even stranger food, and the immense mountains all about them—to see through the window the familiar yellow coach parked in the square outside, with *So-and-so's Luxury Tours, Wigan, Lancs.* printed in bold letters as an undeniable reminder of home, as a constant standard of comparison. 'You see', he explained, 'it was good to feel that there was always Wigan to return to.'

It may be that one of the chief advantages of travel is that it provides fresh motives for appreciating one's own home. To become in the truest sense a citizen of the world can never mean abandoning the loyalties of place and nation. There is a good deal of careless talk about the virtues of internationalism, as though all that is necessary is a sudden opening of frontiers and the lunacy of the wrong sort of nationalism would be at an end. Even a federal Europe must be a federation of nations, each with its own history and tradition that have grown through long centuries and will outlast the devices of political change.

When the holidays are over all that is left of them is a collection of snapshots, a luggage label or two, and a depressing sense of how much money it all cost. But that is not really all. We have learned a lot, however unconsciously: new friends we have made, new places we have seen, even new queues we have joined—it all goes together and helps us more than we suspect in the business of living a human life. For being human means being available to other people, being aware of other sights and sounds than those we are always accustomed to. 'Can one man teach another anything?' asked St Thomas more than seven hundred years ago. He reached the gloomy conclusion—gloomy until you see what he really meant—that all a teacher could do was to help the learner to help himself. He can't impart knowledge like a blood-transfusion, for knowledge isn't that sort of commodity. But he can make the learner use his eyes and ears; he can help him to awake to the world about him. And that is what travel does—even an afternoon walk in the park. It's not only a question of ruins to see, landscapes to admire. Rather is it the business of opening your mind and heart to a world that is yours for the taking; of seeing that surprise and what we call coincidence can be most providential.

One of the most encouraging things to see any summer since the war is the procession of young people seeing other places, and often other lands, for themselves. They have little money, and do little—one supposes—to adjust our economic difficulties. But they certainly do a vast amount for themselves and for the world that will be theirs tomorrow. The cyclists from Swansea or Swanage that you meet in the Place Bellecour in Lyons are achieving more than they know, and the Swedish schoolboys grappling with British money and Welsh place-names in a bus somewhere in Merioneth are, after all, an essential part of the programme of Strasbourg. It is foolish to exaggerate the importance of foreign travel, to make of it, for instance, a substitute for the hard work of learning a grammar or getting to know a nation's history. And the goodwill of those who are free to travel abroad is alas not always the reflection of the mood of the men who rule them. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worthwhile now and then to see a journey for what it ought to be, and what it can so easily become—a recognition that men are still free whatever the pundits may say; a recognition, too, that life isn't always earnest, and that there are few pleasures more real than altering your plans with a clear conscience.

'Travelling is the ruin of all happiness', says Mr Meadows in Fanny Burney's novel, *Cecilia*. And the reason? 'Because there's no looking at a building here after seeing Italy.' It is the same Mr Meadows who says later: 'One really lives nowhere; one does but vegetate, and wish it all at an end.' Certainly travel is the end of the happiness of vegetable monotony. And men are more than vegetables: they are meant to move, meant to be surprised, meant to be free. So it is that taking one's ticket is a splendid gesture of defiance to all those prophets of disaster who say that men have *ceased* to be free. And one of the joys of travel lies in anticipation: no sooner is one back in the front parlour than one thinks of next year's opportunity. The totalitarians might be surprised to hear it, but one of the greatest safeguards of human freedom is the *will* to be free. And that can survive, and most blessedly does survive in the least likely circumstances. Perhaps a trip to the seaside is one of the pillars of democracy. There are others with more imposing names: there are few so permanent.