ON GOING A JOURNEY, BY WILLIAM HAZLITT

SUMMARY:

One of the pleasantest things in the world is to Go on a Journey, but Hazlitt likes to go all by himself. He loves the company of people, but he prefers nature's company when he is out of doors.

The fields his study, nature was his book.

He is not one of those people who criticise the countryside while he is out of town or one who cannot forget his life in the town and carries his comfort with him wherever he goes.

When Hazlitt travels, he forgets about his existence in the town and enjoys the vegetative aspect of rural life, Nor those he require a companion with whom he can share his solitude.

He wishes to enjoy solitude for its own sake.

-a friend in my retreat,

Whom I may whisper solitude is sweet.

The soul or essence of a journey is to enjoy liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel and do as one pleases. The intention of a journey is to free oneself of all impediments and inconveniences, to escape from one as well as to get rid of others.

Instead of making conversation with someone about the same stale things, he likes a journey as it provides some breathing space to contemplate on matters without being disturbed.

All he needs is three hours of walking in the countryside that will whet his appetite. In fact, he has never felt happier than on such rambles; he laughs, runs, leaps and sings with joy. He feels like a child and experiences the unfettered happiness of an Indian as he plunges into the wave of a sea that sweeps him back to the shore.

Long forgotten memories crowd into his consciousness and his heart, undisturbed by forced wit or dull, commonplace conversation, he experiences perfect eloquence.
Though he can appreciate puns, alliterations, antithesis, argument and analysis, on a journey he would rather enjoy his solitude. It is of utmost importance to him though to an observer he may be wasting his time.

Like Mr. Cobbet he believes in doing only one thing at a time; he cannot think and talk or indulge in melancholy musings and lively conversations in fits and starts.

He does not agree with Sterne that a companion is required to appreciate the beauty of nature for the comparing of each other notes interferes with the involuntary impressions of the things on the mind; to hint about ones feelings makes the feeling itself insipid and having to explain a feeling to a companion destroys all pleasure.

Hence, he believes in storing all his feelings of happiness or melancholy instead of analyzing them while on a journey. Later those memories float down to him like the down of the thistle before a breeze and he analyses and examine them without any controversies.

He wants to have everything his own way. Moreover, a companion's reaction to a sight, a smell or a tone may be so different from his own that a feeling of uneasiness between them could transpire.

Ultimately, conflicting views might cause ill humor. Hence, he prefers solitude; he enjoys the sensation of withholding such objects and circumstances that affords him pleasure but is too delicate to communicate to others.

He declares that unlike his friend Coleridge he did not possess the capacity to understand, to appreciate something and to explain it simultaneously with perfection. Coleridge could turn hills and valleys, a summer's day or convert a landscape into a didactic poem or a Pindaric ode.

Quoting from the Faithful Shepherdess Hazlitt opines that had he the power to use such words and such fine images he too would attempt to produce them but he has
discovered that his fancy becomes inert when confronted by nature. He can do nothing on the spot and requires time to collect his thoughts.

Certain topics should be reserved for conversation at the table; similarly, people as Lamb, considered a great companion indoors is the worst one outdoors.

The only subject of discussion enjoyable on a journey is of the food, which awaits the traveller as he reaches his destination because a journey invariably whets one's appetite. Hazlitt observes that imperfect sympathies should not allow such solid, heartfelt happiness to be wasted.

He would rather enjoy the moment and write about it later.

*The cups that cheer, but not inebriate.*

Drinking goblets of tea is the best occupation while one wonders what dinner would constitute of and to store and remember such sacred hours in silent thoughts, as sources of future happiness.
A stranger is a better traveling companion than a friend is because each could remain aloof in his individual enjoyment and it is possible to remain ‘lord of one-self, uncumbere’d with a name’.

A friend might drop a hint of one’s profession or some unsavory moment of one’s life, that ties him firmly to his real identity from which he wishes to escape. A stranger poses no problem and he can confine himself to an imaginary character and pass off without being recognized.

It does not impose any expectations on him. His freedom is complete; in fact, an inn
restores a person to the level of nature and wins over a society negligent towards nature.

Hazlitt's stays at several inns have given him much pleasure for the liberty he had experienced allowed him to do whatever he had wanted to. He had contemplated over metaphysical problems, paintings, read books, ate and drank as he desired, or went on walking tours with the greatest of pleasure.

On a certain occasion, when he had been walking on the banks of the river Dee, he was reminded of his friend Coleridge's brilliant description of hills and valleys and of the bleating of sheep far below.

However, on experiencing the physical beauty of the same place his inward sight registered a heavenly vision, of the highest esteem for the words Liberty, Genius, Love, and Virtue.

The beautiful is vanished and returns not.

Though he concedes that he may not experience the same beauty, again he believes that he will return to these spots and he will once again prefer to travel alone.

No doubt, he will find enormous differences on his re-visits but they will give him the same pleasure that he had felt earlier.

His friend Coleridge may not be there; he has himself changed and everything would have changed from the days of his first visit; yet the river and the valley would continue to be an undiluted source of pleasure.

Travelling exposes the shortsighted and capricious nature of the imagination. As soon as a traveller leaves a place for some other destination the memory of the place becomes dim and the long forgotten scenes of the new place present itself clearly to the memory.

If the mind were compared to a canvas then it would seem that the imagination could only paint one set of objects, which immediately effaces all others. It does not imply an enlargement of conceptions as a shift in one's point of view.

The mind registers whatever it sees and hence when one travels through a wild barren country it becomes impossible to imagine a woody and cultivated one.
Sir Fopling Flutter’s statement ‘Beyond Hyde Park all is a desert’ becomes relevant only when accepted in this sense. When one is in the town, one cannot visualize the countryside and the mind believes that there is no world beyond that seen by the eyes.

China, with its physical territory and population, means nothing more than a name on a map or inches of pasteboard on a globe. Things that nearby appear life-size while things at a distance are at the mercy of understanding.

Each individual perception measures the universe and forms an idea of one’s self. In this way, the mind remembers an infinite variety of things and places. It is comparable to a mechanical instrument one that plays a variety of tunes but only one after the other.

One particular idea recalls another idea but simultaneously blocks out other ideas. Since it is impossible to refer to the myriad images that the mind collects every instance it confronts an idea, it is necessary to pick out single threads from the entire body of impressions.

As soon as one arrives at a destination, earlier impressions of the place appear vividly to the mind. Circumstances, feelings, persons, faces, names that had remained hidden in memory appear magically while other memories disappear.

Hazlitt lists a number of exceptions to his desire for solitude on a journey. He enjoys the company of his friends while visiting places of historical interest, aqueducts, pictures because the sentiments aroused by these are communicable and overt rather than tacit.

The expectations from a pleasure trip is usually a deliberation over where to go to; while when on a solitary ramble the consideration amounts to what might be met on the way. The second exception is when he goes on a foreign tour.

Being an Englishman he shared the involuntary antipathy that his compatriots felt about foreign notions, manners and needs the assistance of social sympathy to carry it off. Besides, he loves to hear the sound of his own language when he is far away from his country.
France, during the time of Napoleon, was the only exception and he had felt truly at home in the French town of Calais. However, with Napoleone’s exile and subsequent death everything had vanished: pictures, heroes, glory, freedom had all gone only the Bourbons and the French people under them remained.

There is undoubtedly immense pleasure in foreign travel but they are momentary and not lasting. It cannot be associated with daily modes of life because of their foreign nature and so remain like a dream or a different state of existence, animated but momentary hallucination.

Dr. Johnson remarked that a person who travels abroad was not necessarily a better conversationalist than one who had never travelled beyond the borders of his own country.

However, since it is delightful as well as instructive, it creates a very different human being; the person does not remain the same. He is lost to himself as well as to his friends. This is the reason of the poet’s quaint song,

*Out of my country and may I go.*

It is perfect for those who wish to forget painful thoughts as it helps to forget earlier ties and bonds. Yet it is only in one’s own motherland that one can fulfill one’s destiny.

Hazlitt would love to spend his whole life travelling abroad if only he could borrow another life to spend afterwards at home.