

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AS A TRAVELLER

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“Traveling is living.”

This was the maxim of the most widely traveled author of his time – Hans Christian Andersen, who often described himself as a “bird of passage.”

Travel today is commonplace. International boundaries are blurred – a hop, skip and a jump and hey presto! - on to foreign soil. Tourism, which may be explained as a short period of travel for pleasure, is a thriving trade and tourism today offers a wide variety and scope of services that are truly mind-boggling. Travel on the other hand, would apply more to longer journeys, such as those undertaken by Hans Christian Andersen. Travel today is easy and innumerable facilities exist to ensure that the travel experience is pleasant and hurdle free. Nowadays, the Euro is becoming a reality and a united Europe is not fantasy. A united world force has even traveled into outer space – an international team of scientists is engaged in building a truly global space station, far removed from Mother Earth’s borders. Travel for business or pleasure – today it’s no problem, it’s a breeze! For some frequent travelers, the entire concept of travel is passé – they have traveled so often and lived in foreign countries for so long that it has failed to retain its novelty.

But in Hans Christian Andersen’s day, travel was not so commonplace. Commercial airplanes had not been invented and travel was usually a long and arduous process, hindered by the limitations of rough terrain and water bodies. It was on rare occasions that an intrepid traveler ventured outside the circumscribed boundaries of his own nation. Denmark in Andersen’s day was a self-sufficient nation and culture, well insulated within its own borders. This is what makes Hans Christian Andersen such a remarkable traveling phenomenon of his day and age. He was a truly global citizen – a man who felt at home as much in Germany or Italy as he did in his native land. His adventures during his travels in these various lands are woven into the fabric of his fairy tales, travelogues and journals – rich in artistic detail, transporting the reader into the beauty of lands he has never seen before, except by experiencing them through Andersen’s eyes and senses, vicariously re-living them through Andersen eloquence and the rich tapestry of his prose.

Andersen's urge to travel can be traced back to his early life. The inherent restlessness of his nature meant that he was practically born with 'wheels' on his feet. But it was perhaps the circumstances of his early life that truly set those wheels into motion. His childhood was a wretched one, since he was born to a poor shoemaker and his older wife. He had half siblings born out of wedlock, a grandmother who had been imprisoned for giving birth out of wedlock, and a grandfather who was referred to as "Crazy Anders". A mostly absent father and a superstitious mother added up to the fact that his family background brought Andersen nothing but shame. Adding insult to injury was the fact that he was too tall for his age, with an ungainly gait and an over large, bulbous nose that made him an object of ridicule among his peers, and was also the reason why he was constantly rejected by the ladies upon whom he lavished his affections. Having spent several years of his early life with only his fertile imagination for company – lonely, restless and unhappy, it was only natural that Andersen would experience the passionate urge to "spread his wings' as it were and journey out of the miserable parameters of his lonely life. He left home at fourteen and tried to become a singer but encountered more ridicule. It was only in 1832, when a grant from the King enabled him to travel for the first time to Germany, that Andersen experienced true happiness. It was the class conscious, condescending Danish society's treatment that proved to be the spur that finally overcame even his financial difficulties and set Andersen's travel wheels into motion.

Hans Christian Andersen traveled throughout Europe, visiting Germany, France, Italy, Malta, Switzerland, Spain, Morocco, Greece and Constantinople. Unlike other travelers of his day, he ventured further out, often taking circuitous routes and embarking on voyages through different lands so that he could experience more vicariously, the joys of travel. He expressed his love for travel thus:

"Oh traveling, traveling! (...) It is really the greatest joy in the world! It is my greatest desire! It would ease the restlessness that plagues me. But it must be far away! I would like to see the magnificent Switzerland, to travel to Italy..."

Andersen did visit Switzerland – twelve times! In fact, it was his destination on his last visit abroad. The "beautiful, mountainous country" as he often described Switzerland,

was one of his favorite destinations after Germany. The high mountains – so captivatingly different from his own native lowlands, fascinated him. His most important image of this country has been forever captured in the poetic beauty of his vision, as follows:

“The Alps appeared to me as if they were the folded wings of the earth, as if she lifted her wings, her great feathers spread with colorful pictures of the black forests, wild waterfalls, glaciers and clouds – what a picture! Oh Doomsday, she lifts her great wings, flies upwards to God and bursts like a bubble in his sunlight.”

Later, Andersen would reproduce these same sentiments through his character Knud in the fairy tale: “Under the Willow Tree.” Switzerland was also the subject of many of his other fairy tales, such as “The Ice Maiden”. During one of his visits to Switzerland, he lost his galoshes but they were found and returned to him and Andersen commented that he was not permitted to lose his lucky galoshes! He was enchanted by the clean, white beauty of the land, the crisp cold, the high slopes and the charming inhabitants.

Andersen most frequently traveled to Germany – visiting that country thirty times during his lifetime! Germany was his second home and he visited and interacted with many artists of that age to broaden his horizons. He visited Henrik Ibsen, the famous playwright. He enjoyed his exposure to the rich, musical culture of Germany, of Mozart and Beethoven – an era that is now a part of Germany’s proud heritage. Andersen also met Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt, Brahms and Richard Wagner in the land of the great religious reformer Luther and the inimitable Goethe. Andersen’s own musical background was considerable, for he had aspired to be a singer at one time and this ensured that he was able to fully appreciate the genius of the musical prodigies of that era – the golden age of Germany’s history. Small wonder then, that being the consummate, creative artist that he was, Andersen traveled so frequently to Germany, thriving in the company of like-minded artists and intellectuals such as himself, absorbed in the realms of creativity that transcends all other considerations and brings together people of diverse backgrounds – a universal elevation of humankind that appealed to the idealistic Andersen. It would appear that Andersen’s flights into Germany were his journeys out of the harsh realities of the struggle for acceptance in his native land to the artistic, broadminded, creative arena of idealism in Germany. It’s

hardly surprising then that Hans Christian Andersen is considered by many to be almost as much a son of German soil as any other native.

But it was not only the artistic aura of that age that attracted Andersen to Germany. It was the natural beauty of the land itself and the warm acceptance of her people. It was in Germany that Andersen's stories first became popular. He loved traveling in Germany – visiting the Danube and the museums with child like enthusiasm. He was particularly fascinated by Germany's railways and canals. In his book "A Poet's Bazaar" wherein he described his travels, he has devoted a chapter to "The Railway" and describes it as a masterpiece of the mind. He says that he has now "...with all my consciousness, seen God face to face, as it were....Emotion and imagination are not the only rulers within the realm of poetry. They have a brother equally powerful, called intellect." Andersen appreciated the fact that the railway was the great invention in those days, facilitating and enhancing the ease of travel, providing a welcome mobility and access to distant places that had hitherto been near impossible.

Andersen also traveled frequently to Italy. His travels there were an excellent source of inspiration for him and caused a great influence on his perception of art and life. Andersen traveled to Sweden, Prussia and Bavaria and befriended their kings. Paris was another city that fascinated him, where he met Heinrich Heine and the great author, Victor Hugo. He visited England and befriended one of the most enduring authors of all time – Charles Dickens. This was a friendship that was mutually beneficial in the creative enrichment of two great literary minds. Andersen was a triumphant social success in England – his humble origins notwithstanding. Andersen was apologetic throughout his life about his lack of noble blood and his family roots, in spite of the stupendous success he enjoyed as an author with his works being widely published in German, English and numerous other languages. Charles Dickens, who saw him off at Ramsgate pier when he left England after his visit, was so fascinated by this aspect of Andersen's personality that he loosely modeled his character of Uriah Heep in David Copperfield on Andersen.

During the initial phase of his travels, Andersen was financially constrained and as he drinks in the beauty of Switzerland which reminds him in many ways of his native

country, not least on account of the corresponding colors of the respective national flags, he writes:

"Yes, it is beautiful here, how unique in this world, I see the Mount Blanc, my love, Oh if only I had the money I would have happily stayed here!"

Yet, while his initial visits were constrained by a lack of funds, they were a wonderful source of inspiration for his creative mind, enhancing his perception as he took in the breathtaking sights and sounds of new lands. During later visits, Andersen was financially well off, his works reaping him rich earnings, but he was often melancholic - preoccupied and weighed down by life's cares and worries. But although such mundane concerns dulled his perceptions, they did not completely diminish them. Andersen's travels provided him with rich fodder for his creative mill – especially his travelogues and fairy tales, wherein he incorporated his perceptions and observations gleaned from his travels and he thus leads his reader through fascinating new terrain, exploring them with abandon. His travels were the source of the richness of the material in his works. Since he was a widely traveled man, his mind had encompassed the universalities of mankind, unconstrained by narrow, physical borders or parochial differences among people. All his works reveal this universal aspect and perhaps this is the reason why his stories were and are accepted with equal enthusiasm in every part of the world and survive even to this day.

Hans Christian Andersen's passion for travel arose out of his feelings for his native country. He loved his native land deeply and passionately, with an intensity that he never lost through all his travels and he expressed this love thus:

"In Denmark I was born, 'tis there my home is.... 'tis you I love – Denmark, my native land!"

Yet, after his first visit to Germany, he wrote to a friend, "I am convinced that unless I am torn away from my momentary surroundings, I will amount to nothing, I shall perish if I remain here!" Andersen's passion for travel arose out of these conflicting feelings – he loved his homeland and could not live without it and simultaneously, despised her pettiness and parochialism. He always felt that due to the rigid class

structure in his own country, his lowly birth would never permit the Danes to appreciate his work and his status the way that foreigners did. In the year 1855, Andersen finally published his autobiography in Danish, titled: "The Fairy tale of my life" and what is remarkable about this book, written at the height of his fame, is the great human insecurity it betrays and the constant tone of self defense that permeates the entire work. Andersen never felt accepted among his own people – in his own land, and his frequent travels were in search of the warmth, appreciation and acceptance he found on foreign shores. But his deep love for his native country is indisputable – he loved it with a deep, abiding love, which could never be replaced by any other land. His conflicting feelings are best expressed in his work titled "Svanereden" in which the swans nest is a poetic metaphor for the mother country while the migrating swans are like the traveling author – leaving their home for a better world. Paradoxically, the swans express their love and devotion to their home by migrating to other territories! Andersen in his work tries to make the swans vindicate their home and expand her horizons – by leaving it! The emigrants leaving and performing their deeds overseas bestow immortality on the mother nest. Andersen's constant travel can thus be interpreted as a function of the love he bore for his motherland and his strong desire to immortalize her. Throughout his travels, Andersen appears to view his beloved home country as an idealized land of beauty, where petty class-consciousness and prejudices do not exist. The ridicule and rejection Andersen experienced during his childhood and youth in his native land were forever a part of his psyche and his incessant travels during an era when travel was tiresome and difficult, appears to have been born out of an inner desire to transpose the love and affection he received overseas onto the people of his native land, amongst whom he never felt fully accepted, due to his low birth, his notorious family and his abject poverty early in his life. A typical example of Andersen's state is the story of The Ugly Duckling in which the duckling needs to travel away from the place of his birth to far off lands in order to discover the beauty within himself and to find acceptance among his peers.

Andersen's travels reveal that he was truly a remarkable human being - a universal citizen of Planet earth, although born a Dane. His cultural interactions with other races during his travels and the acceptance he received in far off lands helped him to incorporate these ennobling virtues of love and kindness into his works, even as he depicted the harshness and cruelties of the world based on the experiences of his

youth. His frequent travels were the inevitable consequence of his active, restless mind. His travels and stories were his escape into the high idealism of his dreams – away from the harsh realities of the world, which Andersen saw and registered all too clearly. Andersen is like a paradox – a beautiful mind entrapped in an ugly body, in a narrow pond. A beautiful mind that set itself free through periodic flights of fantasy and regular physical journeys – soaring into the realms of imagination where all things are possible and everyone can be happy and successful. Yet, the inventor of the fabulous, immortal fairy tales is unable to completely break free – returning time and again to the narrow pond, drawn by the strength of the bonds of love that anchor him to it. The beauty of Andersen's prose is the function of these flights away from home – the love and acceptance he received being so profoundly moving as to impart richness to his work. Yet the intensity of emotion and the touch of immortality in Andersen's work really betray his intense love for the land of his birth – adding that touch of poignancy that never fails to move every human heart. It becomes clear that it's the adversity that Andersen faced in his youth that has enabled him to plumb the depths of the human soul and discover that element of divinity that shines forth in his writing ability.

In every aspect of his life and work, Andersen embodies the triumph of the human spirit – finally gaining the love and affection of his countrymen and women through the beauty of his immortal works. The prejudices and the travels, the poverty and the variety – all have gone into shaping Andersen's genius – that unique combination of abilities and circumstances that has made Andersen one of the greatest story tellers of all time!