

Juggling and indian jugglers

Philosophy



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Indian Jugglers and the meaning of life I've just come across a superb essay entitled 'The Indian Jugglers' from William Hazlitt's 19th century collection Table Talk (1828).

Hazlitt starts the essay by describing his absolute astonishment upon watching Indian Jugglers perform in London's Olympic Theatre. Hazlitt was known for his wildly exaggerated style. However, his genuine amazement is clear: Coming forward and seating himself on the ground in his white dress and tightened turban, the chief of the Indian Jugglers begins with tossing up two brass balls, which is what any of us could do, and concludes with keeping up four at the same time, which is what none of us could do to save our lives, nor if we were to take our whole lives to do it in.

Is it then a trifling power we see at work, or is it not something next to miraculous! It is the utmost stretch of human ingenuity, which nothing but the bending the faculties of body and mind to it from the tenderest infancy with incessant, ever-anxious application up to manhood, can accomplish or make even a slight approach to.

Man, thou art a wonderful animal, and thy ways past finding out! Thou canst do strange things, but thou turnest them to little account! - To conceive of this effort of extraordinary dexterity distracts the imagination and makes admiration breathless. " Hazlitt was clearly gobsmacked. He goes on to state next that " As to the swallowing of the sword, the police ought to interfere to prevent it. ".

But it was the juggling act that astounded Hazlitt to such an extent that he was left questioning his own worth: " The hearing a speech in Parliament,

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drawled or stammered out by the Honourable Member or the Noble Lord, the ringing the changes on their common-places, which any one could repeat after them as well as they, stirs me not a jot, shakes not my good opinion of myself: but the seeing the Indian Jugglers does. It makes me ashamed of myself. I ask what there is that I can do as well as this! Nothing.

What have I been doing all my life! Have I been idle, or have I nothing to shew for all my labour and pains! " Hazlitt went on in his exasperating vain: " have I passed my time in pouring words like water into empty sieves, rolling a stone up a hill and then down again, trying to prove an argument in the teeth of facts, and looking for causes in the dark, and not finding them? Is there no one thing in which I can challenge competition, that I can bring as an instance of exact perfection, in which others cannot find a flaw?

The utmost I can pretend to is to write a description of what this fellow can do. I can write a book: so can many others who have not even learned to spell. What abortions are these Essays! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions! How little is made out, and that little how ill! Yet they are the best I can do.

I endeavour to recollect all I have ever observed or thought upon a subject, and to express it as nearly as I can. Instead of writing on four subjects at a time, it is as much as I can manage to keep the thread of one discourse clear and unentangled. I have also time on my hands to correct my opinions, polish my periods: but the one I cannot, and the other I will not do. " A juggling act then left a great critic deeply critical of his own worth.

The mere act of juggling four balls was all that was needed to ignite Hazlitt's needling sense of failure and lack of confidence. Most of us as writers, I think, occasionally or very often feel like Hazlitt. Hazlitt, unfortunately, died a poor outsider not long after this essay was published.

No doubt the troupe of Indians he saw, presumably far away from home and very likely getting paid a pittance, amazed many in London and elsewhere. But Hazlitt, the enlightened post-1789er, saw something more. What he witnessed deeply affected him personally but is also suggestive of his general approach to criticism.

The skill of the juggling that night left him open-mouthed and his response has to be written down and shaped into words. Hazlitt saw something new and different and could describe the act with freshness and verve.

He said of the juggling: " To catch four balls in succession in less than a second of time, and deliver them back so as to return with seeming consciousness to the hand gain, to make them revolve round him at certain intervals, like the planets in their spheres, to make them chase one another like sparkles of fire, or shoot up like flowers or meteors, to throw them behind his back and twine them round his neck like ribbons or like serpents, to do what appears an impossibility, and to do it with all the ease, the grace, the carelessness imaginable, to laugh at, to play with the glittering mockeries, to follow them with his eye as if he could fascinate them with its lambent fire, or as if he had only to see that they kept time with the music on the stage - there is something in all this which he who does not admire may

be quite sure he never really admired anything in the whole course of his life.

" Hazlitt's own description of juggling illustrates his own talent and skills, sadly only appreciated in full after his death in 1830. Hazlitt appeared to make criticism as art appear easy and effortless, whether critiquing the plays of Shakespeare, writing biographies or discovering his own astonishment about Indian jugglers.

Hazlitt's reputation and own skill as a literary and social critic lived on long after his death, latterly prospering, in part because of this internalised child-like wonder and fascination alongside his undoubted ability to see and describe the world anew, not least when viewing jugglers from the East.