

Helen M. Dennis: On "In the Waiting Room"

I shall assume that what drives the tourist is the quest for a coherent sense of the self. Tourism provides an opportunity to arrive at a stable ego identity using the unfamiliar landscape or the exotic culture as the other against which one measures and defines the self. For the romantic poet the exotic foreign location allows a construction of the self that the familiar and domestic has apparently denied. Consider for a moment "In the Waiting Room" where the young Elizabeth does not want to be identified with Aunt Consuela:

Why should I be my aunt, or me, or anyone? What similarities? boots, hands, the family voice I felt in my throat, or even the National Geographic and those awful hanging breasts? held us all together or made us all just one? (161)

The quest for a sense of self, or a reassurance that one is anyone, involves an investigation of the "similarities", that is, what is common to humanity, what constitutes human identity and in particular, female identity? This poem also articulates a resistance to female and familial identity: she confuses herself with her aunt? whose voice screams?? but she does not want to be confused with her aunt. Nor does she want to be the women in National Geographic. Moreover these lines question the very notion of a unified whole, a common humanity. I also suggest that the movement of this poem enacts a characteristic version of the sublime with a three phase progress from an initial state of equilibrium into a state of terror and confusion brought about by the unsettling eruption of a sublime idea, to end with the mind's reappropriation of equilibrium, though on a higher or transcendent level. "In the Waiting Room" recalls a childhood moment of terror about individual and human identity and shapes it into a characteristic expression of the "sublime".

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