

Helen M. Dennis: On "Questions of Travel"

The best one can do as a "tourist" is get into it "like Indians"?but acting "like" is not the same as "being". In this reading of the Kantian sublime, the sympathetic imagination is no longer a sustainable solution, and we are left only with the recognition of inadequacy and difference. And that perhaps leaves one wondering, why bother? And that, I take it, is precisely the question in "Questions of Travel":

Think of the long trip home. Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? Where should we be today? Is it right to be watching strangers in a play in this strangest of theatres? what childishness is it that while there's a breath of life in our bodies, we are determined to rush to see the sun the other way around? The tiniest green hummingbird in the world? To stare at some inexplicable old stonework, inexplicable and impenetrable, at any view, instantly seen and always, always delightful? Oh, must we dream our dreams and have them, too? And have we room for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity not to have seen the trees along this road, really exaggerated in their beauty, not to have seen them gesturing like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.

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?And never to have had to listen to rain so much like politicians? speeches: two hours of unrelenting oratory and then a sudden golden silence in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come to imagined places, not just stay at home? Or could Pascal have been not entirely right about just sitting quietly in one's room?" (93-94)

Metaphors and similes operate here, but they tend to emphasize difference not similarity. The rain is not like politician's speeches in any fundamental way; trees are not actually noble pantomimists. Her previous assessment of the landscape and all it contains is more accurate: "inexplicable and impenetrable, at any view," pretty much sums it up. The self is not reflected in nature, one does not find confirmation of one's individual identity by travelling the tourist road. Instead, one finds inconsequential disruptions and discontinuities. But the effect of this experience of being alien in an alien landscape is to prompt one to ask, as Bishop does at the end of this poem, "Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?" That is to question not only "travel" but its binary opposite "home."

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