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DOCUMENT A

Elizabeth Bishop, *Questions of Travel*, 1965

www.poemhunter.com/poem/questions-of-travel

Questions of Travel

- There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
5 turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
— For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.
- 10 But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.
- Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
15 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
20 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,
25 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?
- 30 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

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35 like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
— Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
40 (In another country the clogs would all be tested.
Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
— A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
45 in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.
— Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
50 between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
55 — Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
— And never to have had to listen to rain
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
60 and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

65 *"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?"*

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"*

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DOCUMENT B

Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, 2002 , Penguin Books, London (2003), pages 56-60

5 Hopper also took an interest in trains. He was drawn to the atmosphere inside half-empty carriages making their way across a landscape: the silence that reigns inside while the wheels beat in rhythm against the rails outside, the dreaminess fostered by the noise and the view from the windows, a dreaminess in which we seem to stand outside our normal selves and have access to thoughts and memories that may not arise in more settled circumstances. The woman in *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938) seems in such a frame of mind, reading her book and shifting her gaze between the carriage and the view.

10 Journeys are the midwives of thought. Few places are more conducive to internal conversations than a moving plane, ship or train. There is an almost quaint correlation between what is in front of our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our heads: large thoughts at times requiring large views, new thoughts, new places. Introspective reflections which are liable to stall are helped along by the flow of the landscape. The mind may be reluctant to think properly when thinking is all it is supposed to do. The task can be as paralyzing as having to tell a joke or mimic an accent on demand. Thinking improves when parts of the mind are given other tasks, are charged with listening to music or following a line of trees. The music or the view distracts for a time that nervous, censorious, practical part of the mind which is inclined to shut down when it notices something difficult emerging in consciousness and which runs scared of memories, longings, introspective or original ideas and prefers instead the administrative and the impersonal.

20 Of all modes of transport, the train is perhaps the best aid to thought: the views have none of the potential monotony of those on a ship or plane, they move fast enough for us not to get exasperated but slowly enough to allow us to identify objects. They offer us brief, inspiring glimpses into private domains, letting us see a woman at the precise moment when she takes a cup from a shelf in her kitchen, then carrying us on to a patio where a man is sleeping and then to a park where a child is catching a ball thrown by a figure we cannot see.

30 On a journey across flat country, I think with a rare lack of inhibition about the death of my father, about an essay I am writing on Stendhal and about a mistrust that has arisen between two friends. Every time the mind goes blank, having hit on a difficult idea, the flow of my consciousness is assisted by the possibility of looking out of the window, locking on to an object and following it for a few seconds, until a new coil of thought is ready to form and can unravel without pressure.

35 At the end of hours of train-dreaming, we may feel we have been returned to ourselves - that is, brought back into contact with emotions and ideas of importance to us. It is not necessarily at home that we best encounter our true selves. The furniture insists that we cannot change because it does not; the domestic setting keeps us tethered to the person we are in ordinary life, but who may not be who we essentially are.

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40 Hotel rooms offer a similar opportunity to escape our habits of mind. Lying in bed in a hotel, the room quiet except for the occasional swooshing of an elevator in the innards of the building, we can draw a line under what preceded our arrival, we can overfly great and ignored stretches of our experience. We can reflect upon our lives from a height we could not have reached in the midst of everyday business — subtly assisted in this by the unfamiliar world around us: by the small wrapped soaps on the edge of the basin, by the gallery of miniature bottles in the mini-bar, by the room-service menu with its promises of all-night dining and the view on to an unknown city stirring silently twenty-five floors below us.

45 Hotel notepads can be the recipients of unexpectedly intense, revelatory thoughts, taken down in the early hours while the breakfast menu ('to be hung outside before 3 a.m.') lies unattended on the floor, along with a card announcing the next day's weather and the management's hopes for a peaceful night.

50 The value we ascribe to the process of travelling, to wandering without reference to a destination, connects us, the critic Raymond Williams once proposed, to a broad shift in sensibilities dating back some 200 years, whereby the outsider came to seem morally superior to the insider:

55 From the late 18th century onwards, it is no longer from the practice of community but from being a wanderer that the instinct of fellow-feeling is derived. Thus an essential isolation and silence and loneliness become the carriers of nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society.

Raymond Williams, *the Country and the City*

60 If we find poetry in the service station and motel, if we are drawn to the airport or train carriage, it is perhaps because, in spite of their architectural compromises and discomforts, in spite of their garish colours and harsh lighting, we implicitly feel that these isolated places offer us a material setting for an alternative to the selfish ease, the habits and confinement of the ordinary, rooted world.

DOCUMENT C



James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No.2: The Little White Girl*, 1864-1865 (oil on canvas, 30 in x 20 in, Tate Gallery, London)