

Place and Inspiration

By Susan Tekulve

Book Review:

The Literary Traveler, by Walter Cummins and Thomas E. Kennedy.
De Sol Press, 2005.

In the final narrative of this collection of literary travel essays, Thomas E. Kennedy sets out to visit numerous places where artists lived and worked in New York City. He seeks out the basement apartment where Marianne Moore wrote poetry and worked as a librarian, the seedy hotel where Bob Dylan composed “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” and the café frequented by William Styron, Miles Davis and Tennessee Williams. At the beginning of his “impossibly ambitious” quest, Kennedy asks, “Is it of value to cultivate our awareness of great things that have been accomplished just across the street from where we toil in drudgery? I think it is. I want to know these things. I want to know the geography of it, the housing.” Co-authored by fiction writers Thomas E. Kennedy and Walter Cummins, this essay collection explores the necessary connection between geography and artistic expression. While recounting their own physical journeys to the homes and haunts of renowned writers and artists, both authors explore how these places acted upon these artists’ imaginations.

In the tradition of the best literary travel writers, each author seeks out obscure places or hidden paths in well-traveled destinations. They relate a journey of discovery through anecdotes and descriptions, sometimes risking comfort and safety in order to contemplate and define the literary significance of their destinations. In “The Alps,” Walter Cummins confronts his first “real Alpine mountain.” Looming over the Swiss village of Grindelwald, the mountain stuns the author with its terrifying height and beauty; but Cummins can’t resist climbing it, “stepping

up footholds in rock, passing a glacier," watching the safe buildings shrink beneath him. On the verge of panic, he discovers a coffee house in the middle of his snowy mountain path and a cable car to carry him down to safety. Still, he can imagine the terror of those who lived in the Alps centuries before and how the "fearsome beauty" of the mountains inspired the Romantic writer Mary Shelley. Cummins reveals the joy and terror of the landscape that served as the perfect refuge for Shelley's outcast "Creature." Cummins writes, "Are the mountains, the Romantics asked implicitly, a place for humans to enjoy a magnificent beauty or a realm beyond us, fit only for the Other, our transcendent longings or our greatest fears?"

Kennedy relives his own time of isolation and longing in his essay "Debtor's Prison: Memories of My Early Exile in Voltaire's Ferney." On his way to another destination in France, Kennedy revisits "that dour Calvinist ville in a beautiful countryside" best known as the place where Voltaire lived and wrote *Candide*, and where, 30 years ago, Kennedy himself spent two years working for an international company in order to pay off student loans and credit-card debt. During his time of youthful exile, he saw the town, Ferney-Voltaire, only as a debtor's prison "littered with half-finished, jerry-built, cheesy Mediterranean-modern six-story apartment complexes—cranes and rusted iron girders jutting up against the scenic green backdrop upon which cows grazed and shat." Upon his return, he realizes that time and distance have softened his dreary assessment. He recalls the two kindly spinsters who ran the Bellevue Hotel where he lived; the au pair/ballerina from Pittsburgh who revealed her misshapen feet to him one night; the American from Colorado nicknamed Charlie Potatoes who passed his passport around a Geneva pub, imploring everyone to inscribe it with an anti-American, anti-war sentiment. Kennedy realizes that the memory of a place, more than a faithful description of its geography, often stirs a writer's imagination.

A blend of literary history and personal memoir, many of these essays explore the line between memory and imagination

that nonfiction writers must be willing to bend in order to create intriguing narratives. In his haunting and lovely essay "A Dreamlike Distortion," Cummins declares that Venice is the ultimate destination for writers because it is surreally beautiful and reminds us of loss. Looking beyond its palazzos and streets of water, he sees the dark heart of this unreal city where narrow alleys twist like the paths of a labyrinth and where a solitary gondola gliding through a canal at dusk reminds him of Dante's journey into hell. Venice has inspired so many writers and artists because it mystifies and sets the mind off balance; it terrifies and saddens because it is on the verge of sinking slowly and inexorably into the sea. This splendid city, Cummins writes, "may be more disturbing than comforting, forbidding because it is so unfamiliar, unsettling our assumptions of what a city should be, how people should live. Why else does so much writing about Venice conjure such sinister forces, hidden, mysterious, haunting, lurking at its very heart?"

Whether they write about the luxurious home of an eccentric baroness in Copenhagen, the Victorian pubs of London or the self-created tomb of an obscure artist in Oslo, the well-traveled, well-read authors of these spellbinding essays remind the reader that artists must travel to cities that both unsettle and exhilarate. They must live in places that allow the mind to question, to discover, to imagine and to roam.