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Review: Love Among the Ruins

There are two kinds of travel. "Pilgrimage" implies a purpose; "tourism" merely looking around.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By Willard Spiegelman

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In 'Questions of Travel' Elizabeth Bishop asks: "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?" Why travel in the first place? What centrifugal impulse makes us hungry for strangeness? All travel, from the cushiest package cruises to the most daring and dangerous explorations, inspires such questions.

Another pair of questions: What do readers expect from travel writing? How does this genre differ from others?

These matters occurred to me as I read Patricia Vigderman's enthralling account of several forays to the Mediterranean, detailing her search for pleasure and enlightenment in the ancient world. Ms. Vigderman is not a professional archaeologist, classicist or art historian. She is a literary person. Her deeply personal book mixes memories of an American adolescence spent in Athens with mature and informed speculations on ancient life, observations on contemporary Greek culture, and rapturous descriptions of landscape and artworks. In her nuanced analyses of the complex issues regarding the provenance of those artworks, their plunder and their repatriation, she rehearses the old controversies without attempting to settle them.

The work is a sequence of beautifully interwoven meditations. Like any wide-awake traveler, Ms. Vigderman asks questions. Should the British Museum answer Melina Mercouri's 1986 call to send the Elgin Marbles to Athens, or do the Parthenon fragments now belong in Russell Square owing to long residency there? Should a vase

or limestone statue return to native soil or may it stay at the Metropolitan Museum or the Getty Villa in California? What are the practical and ethical, as well as existential, ramifications of stewardship? Where do people, as well as things, belong? Even the book's title implies questions: about the "real" life of an iconic building, or how an artwork might establish a life independent of its history, its changes, its visitors. Ms. Vigderman takes no sides, but weighs alternatives, refraining from judgment.

THE REAL LIFE OF THE PARTHENON

By Patricia Vigderman

Mad Creek, 195 pages, \$21.95

Her book succeeds in two ways. First, it is a series of 10 individual essays, some of which were published in literary quarterlies (including one that I formerly edited). An essay is not a position paper. It is an exploration, a wandering. The pleasures of reading it are like those of

traveling. You want to be surprised; you don't want to be battered by too much information; you don't want to be lectured to. When traveling, you are grateful for prior arrangements but you try not to fret when they are disrupted. Disappointment is part of life. Trains go on strike; museums close for restoration; your recommended restaurant has been shuttered; weather interferes with the anticipated seashore excursion. You recalibrate.

Second, the book is greater than the sum of its parts. It is "a mighty maze," as Alexander Pope might say, "but not without a plan." This is because it also has an overarching narrative structure: The author first visits, and then revisits—following a temporary setback—the sites that she cherishes, notably Athens and Pompeii. Ms. Vigderman's story begins with the "nested confusions of opposing claims to antiquity's beautiful objects and [her] own impulse to revisit a lost past." Owing to bravura writing, this book is as rewarding for an armchair traveler as for a first-time or seasoned one.

At its heart is the Parthenon, with its well-documented history of occupation, destruction and renovation. In the fifth century A.D., it became a Christian church. It served both western and eastern Orthodox Christianity. The decisive blow came in 1687 when the Venetians, under Francesco Morosini, decided to liberate the Athenians from Ottoman occupation. They shelled it. By 1801, many surviving figures had disappeared. Some of the marble was being ground up to make mortar. Then Lord Elgin removed his pieces. According to the commonsensical British classicist Mary Beard, Elgin did not ransack an "archaeological site" but a ruin that had been "colonised by a mosque, encroached by a garrison shanty-town." History marches on.

There are two kinds of travel. "Pilgrimage" implies purpose and destination; "tourism" suggests the vagaries of merely looking around. The best travel, like the best travel writing, embraces both. When Ms. Vigderman arrives at an intended destination—Athens, Sicily or Naples—she may have a purpose, but then she gives in to surprise and chance. She finds it hard to think of excavations, tomb robbing, plunder, spoliation when she is entranced by the immediacy of ordinary life: men mowing the fields, the beauty of local flora, the market complex, the food.

To wander in writing, one needs a very good style. She's got it. We accompany her with

considerable gratification, stopped by the unexpected image or metaphor, as a traveler is by a new sight: “Abandoned stone farmhouses were roofless punctuation, speaking of desolation and hardship if you were listening that way, but in our immediate context pure aesthetic bonus.” Travel itself is like writing: “My traveling companion compared the trip to a rough draft, the way groping toward language feels partial, he said, only vaguely in touch with what needs to be said.” Ms. Vigderman’s polished prose is never vague; it never gropes, nor does it disappoint.

Neither does her narrative strategy. A bit after the book’s halfway point, the unplanned, the unimagined happens. In Naples, local thugs grab the author’s purse, which contains, well, everything: wallet, iPod, camera, sketchbook, notebook, cellphone, photos, all the stuff she requires for her work. All has been lost: “My encounters with the past”—her personal past as well as antiquity—“would indeed become an excavation of loss, past observation hijacked by a present suddenly and most sharply defined by its feeling of unreality.” The history of her time among ruins becomes itself a heap of fragments if not ruins: “The abduction of my notebook—my little catalogue of deferred reflection—into the Italian underworld was a forceful demonstration that the tricks invented to hold onto the moments as they pass are doomed to fail.” And memory is fallible.

Many travelers can identify with this event. Some readers may also recall Francis Steegmuller’s gripping memoir “The Incident at Naples,” whose starting point is a similar heist, but whose focus is on medical and sociological rather than creative consequences. (Other readers will find visual echoes of W.G. Sebald in Ms. Vigderman’s unlabeled black-and-white photos—captions are given in an appendix—which pop up in the text like unexpected revenants from the past.)

Once burned, Ms. Vigderman is not twice shy. She makes another journey, a reminder that life is a series of repetitions, a theme with variations. Her book ends with a return to the Parthenon, after the 2009 opening of the astounding new Acropolis Museum. She confronts the glories of the Parthenon frieze, now indoors, with empty spaces and plaster reproductions for sections lost or in London. She sees a reconstruction different from the original, and in some ways superior to it: “Here was the conception whole and, simultaneously, the sense of what was not here.” All artistic representation involves both presence and absence. Within this elegant 21st-century edifice is “a continuing note of insubstantiality and uncertainty, the quiet acknowledgment of ruin as the basis for everything here.” Reconstructing the past requires an acknowledgment of its dispersals.

The absence of the Elgin Marbles in the new museum is part of the distance of that past. Ms. Vigderman acknowledges that “Diaspora’s song is always a little sad, but it is the indifferent sadness of history, which rolls endlessly on like the sea.” She concedes as well that “the past is also in need of the present’s care and memory in order for it to have meaning and worth.” Such levelheaded judiciousness inspires gratitude as well as assent.

—*Mr. Spiegelman is the author, most recently, of “Senior Moments,” a collection of essays.*

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