You've Read the Book, Now Take a Look!

Arriving in London for the first time many years ago, I hadn't shaken off my jet lag before heading directly to London Bridge, where I walked with the morning crowds ("so many, I had not thought death had undone so many"). And, fixing my eyes before my feet, "bowed up the hill and down King William Street, / to where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours" with a dead sound on the final stroke of nine." Following in the footsteps of T.S. Eliot's dreary commutation to his tedious job at Lloyds Bank, a path memorialised in the lines of The Waste Land, I engaged in what has since become a part of all my travels: literary tourism.

That visit felt like Ann Quinlivan's account in Imagined London: A Tour of the World's Greatest Fictional City (National Geographic, 2004), in which she marvels at the city's array of literary sites: "I had been to them all in my imagination before I ever set foot in England. So that by the time I actually visited London... for the first time, it felt less like an introduction and more like a homecoming."

In The Literary Tourist (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Nicola J. Watson, of the Open University, in England, calls the titular activity a secular variant of religious pilgrimage. Harvard's Lawrence Buell, discussing the "Thomian Pilgrimage" to Walden Pond in The Environmental Imagination (Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1995), doesn't scruple to label such tourism avowedly sacred: recounting the naturalist John Muir's 1893 visit to Concord, Buell describes the power of Concord as a place of "holy calm," which "conveys a sense of treading in the footsteps of the 'great man'... Muir "concentrates his attention and reverence on the famous shrines... and he acquires iconic mementos." Buell compares each hagiographic devotion to the via crucis, the pilgrim's re-enactment of Jesus' procession to Calvary.

In the 18th century, travelers began visiting the graves, birthplaces, and preserved homes of dead literary figures, Watson writes, which led eventually to "reinventing whole regions of the national map as 'Shakespeare Country,' 'Wordsworth's Lake District,'... 'Dickens's London,' 'Hardy's Wessex,' and so on."

Watson calls literary tourism "a deeply counterintuitive response to the pleasures and possibilities of imaginative reading." She describes "the embarrassment palpable among professional literary scholars over the practice of literary pilgrimage" because, in the age of Baudelaire and Foucault, "only the amateur, only the naïve reader, could suppose that there was anything more... to be found on the spot." Using a phrase from Jacques Derrida, she calls the landscape sought by literary tourists a "dangerously supplementary" text.

Other academics, too, denigrate the phenomenon: In a conference paper called "Site Specific: Wordsworth's Two Visions of the Lake District," Frank Dubu of Millersville University of Pennsylvania, looks at a video produced by the Cumberland tourism board featuring "a six-foot-tall busker in a red squirrel costume reciting an updated 'rap' version of Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.'" (This has to be seen to be believed: please Google "MC Nuts," sit back, and enjoy.)

As Dubu describes: "MC Nuts trapeses through the Lake District, visiting forests, topiary gardens, and of course daffodils. The only human being is a waiter serving champagne. Here is the official rationale behind this rapping squirel: 'Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' poem has remained unchanged for 200 years and to keep it alive for another two centuries, we wanted to engage the YouTube generation who want modern music and amusing video footage on the Web.'" The video bespeaks a deep ambivalence about the poet's legacy, Dubu argues.
"Wordsworth's Lake District is perhaps a bit austere for tourist councils, with its beggars and farmers and shepherds, but no trains, no four-star hotels, and certainly neither champagne nor topiary gardens. Those very things that make the "NCN" video an ad for the Lake District—the country gardens, the beverage service—are foreign to Wordsworth's vision. And as soon as the language of Wordsworth is changed, the poem is no longer Wordsworth's, but the property of the tourist board."

Indeed, ownership of literary heritage is what's at stake here. Literary tourism involves a cheap appropriation, an amateurish displacement of the text's aesthetic sanctity, critics claim, still in charge of a writer's reputation? Who are the audiences, the ideal readers—our students or the day-tripping proletariat, an engagement with the text outside the scholar's realm of influence (the classroom, the archive, the manuscript), may threaten the profession as market forces infringe on our careful critical deliberations.

Tourist versions of literature become over-simplified as they are packaged for popular consumption. We may believe that our academic "interpretive community" (Stevan Fish's phrase) uniquely appreciates the intellectual property, the legacy, the brand, of the writer, whose integrity is sullied by less devout caretakers.

The problem of authenticity rumbles: While our discipline meticulously certifies authoritative texts and editions, the tourism industry has less stringent standards. Florence's Casa di Dante is actually an early-20th-century assertion of what the poet might have lived, displaying the sort of house he might have lived in. All of Baker Street spreading out from 221B has been "Boosted up." Quinidine writes, with globs of tawky Sherlock Holmes memorabilia and little more. Even Shakespeare's Stratford birthplace, the holy grail of literary tourism, isn't what it seems. It's a Victorian construct, transformed to look "more like the home of an aspiring bard" in the spirit of "19th-century fascination with 'twee and old England," writes Julia Thomas, of Cardiff University, in Wales, in a new book from Palgrave Macmillan, Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture, edited by Nicola J. Watson.

The enterprise strikes some as unseemly. In "Literary Tourism and Dublin's Joyce," Victor Lufit, of the University of Virginia, complains that Joyce's name is "used to draw business to establishments built in a contemporary Dublin he never knew." Lufit quotes the Irish writer Declan Lynch protesting that "perhaps the primary function of Irish artists is to persuade foreign people to discover themselves in establishments which hijack the artist's name many years after they have turned up their creative toes."

A final outrage, as Samantha Matthews, of the University of Sheffield, in England, explains in "Holio-Hunting, Graffiti, and Other Acts of Homage: The Literary Pilgrim's Busy Hands" (also forthcoming in Watson's book), involves actual desecration: 19th-century literary tourists chipped away at the ornaments on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's tomb and wrote their names on walls and windows in Shakespeare's birthplace. She paraphrases Mark Twain in The Innocents Abroad calling tourists "as invading force made up of 'hunting relics' and 'specimens,' stone fragments chipped from ancient monuments and religious buildings."

With all that in mind, I made my way recently to the North of England for a conference, "Texts and Tours," at Leeds Metropolitan University's Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change, to consider the topic from another perspective. While the center includes literary scholarship in its purview, it also draws upon anthropology, sociology, museum studies, planning, and public policy: a very globalist enterprise.

I discovered that, as we English professors fear, literary tourism does indeed involve a concerted and full-on cultural commodification. Presenters discussed strategies to maximize visitors, publicity, merchandising, and revenues, and angled to network literary houses into creative partnerships with the larger VisitBritain tourist agenda. More literature may become overwhelmed among many competing interests and "stakeholders."

But I didn't feel, as I'd thought I might, an aggrieved sense that my goals were being prostituted; instead, I left this gathering with interesting insights into how a different group of people with different objectives and approaches shared "my" authors. There was the occasional suggestion that struck me as a bit craven. (One tour operator suggested ads in novels promoting local tourist link-ups "You've read the book, now take a look!") But when it comes down to it, publication is itself an act of commodification, as is composing a syllabus. I tried not to get overly sanctimonious since I, too, make a living off these writers.

Conference attendees—curators of such institutions as the Charles Dickens Museum, Dr. Johnson's House Trust, the Freud Museum, the D.H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum, the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, the World of James Herriot—spoke of their commitment to using their locations as springboards for cultural education. The Dahl Centre's director, Amelia Foster, promotes creative writing "by stealth," with activities and workshops designed to draw on the literary atmosphere and get people writing. "A story is like a dream," she said. "If you don't write it down, you know you had one but you don't know what it was about." Dahl's career didn't take off until he was in his 50s, Foster reminds us, so there's still time to discover latent literary gifts.

These curators love their houses—Stephanie Pickford, of Dr. Johnson's House, spoke glowingly of the "jarred with his dictionary as "the shrine of the English language"—and strive to spotlight the enduring cultural resonance and relevance of their writers. Henry Lytton Cobbold, who runs Knobworth House, the home of his great-great-great grandfather the Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton ("It was a dark and stormy night..."), has perhaps as hard a task as anyone in this regard. Contemporary artifacts, like a Dark and Stormy Beer he said he found in Australia, help make connections with a modern audi...
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