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'If it's Tuesday, this must be Jane Austen': Literary tourism and the heritage industry

'Dylan Thomas drank here' reads a sign outside Brown's Public House in Laugharne, South Wales. This, as those who know anything about the writer will be aware, hardly ranks as a claim to fame: one wonders if there was any pub in that part of the world which did not make a profit from the poet's legendary thirst. But to the thousands of tourists armed with the *Blue Guide* (Ousby 1990a) or *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain and Ireland* (Eagle et al. 1993) who every year make their pilgrimage to the birthplaces, graves, houses and haunts of their literary heroes, such sites provide access to a rich cultural experience, an opportunity to partake in rites of initiation and to experience *in the flesh* the mysterious workings of the creative mind. 'Listen for the nightingales in John Keats' garden' (Literature Comes to Life 1997). 'Run your fingers over the polished oak of Jane Austen's writing table'. With such promises the tourist industry lures prospective customers into a world of magic and genius, properties that, one assumes, are somehow absorbed together with the air and atmosphere of the locality and for which, incidentally, the Australian tourist must be prepared to part with approximately \$8000.

Recognising the diversity of its public, literary tourism caters for a variety of tastes, objectives and levels of expertise. The distinction between the traveller and the tourist, which has informed recreational travel (and travel writing) since the beginning of organised tourism, enabling the seasoned globe-trotter to look down upon the ill-informed and vulgar masses doing their organised tour (note 1), is everywhere in evidence. *All* literary tourists, by virtue of the high-culture nature of their pilgrimage, feel entitled to a status above that of the fun- and sun-seeking hordes flocking to sites of a lower cultural order. *Within* cultural tourism, there is also a marked distinction between the busloads (often referred to as the 'hordes') doing the tour of Stratford's Shakespeare properties (some 25,000 visitors per day in the high season) and the small handful who find their way to, for example, Dr Johnson's house in Gough Square, London. In Stratford, a smooth conveyor-belt of tour operators, guides, drivers and commercial hangers-on dispatch the camera-toting masses through the Birthplace, Ann Hathaway's Cottage, Mary Arden's House and so on, promising to 'do' the essential Shakespeare in about three hours. The most intellectually challenging part of the tour is the 'how many plays can this busload name?' competition. For those who still want more, The Waterside Studio Theatre offers thirty minute versions of selected plays, occasionally cut down to fifteen minutes for those in a hurry. Tourist operators catering to a more literary and 'upmarket' public seize upon their competitors' quick-fix approach with glee, promising *their* clients precisely what will allow them to feel superior to the common tourist: good seats at one

of the three theatres run by the Royal Shakespeare Company, fine dining and accommodation in picturesque surroundings off the beaten tourist track. Cultural tourism involves careful exercises in niche marketing, the most successful marketing device consisting in convincing the tourists that they are not really tourists at all. (note 2) The Australian-operated 'Literature Comes to Life Tours', for example, visit Mary Arden's House because 'all the tourists go to Ann Hathaway's Cottage' and make a point generally of avoiding the 'tourist traps' (the stereotypical 'ugly' tourist in such rhetoric used to be American, but is today more likely to be Japanese). Non-commercial operators in particular strive to rid their produce of the tourism taint. Thomas Hardy's Cottage, a National Trust property, is quite literally 'off the beaten track' - one has to walk for a mile or so along badly signposted forest paths to reach it. The resident curator takes little interest in visitors. On my visit in June 1996 I, and my camera, were regarded with distrust. I was later told that had I taken the time to discuss Hardy's writing with him, I would have found a willing interlocutor. It is not uncommon for informed visitors to find themselves detained for hours at the edge of Hardy's 'Egdon Heath', listening to the curator reciting poetry and explaining the literary significance of the site. Having actually read the work of the writer who provides the tourist attraction will earn the serious literary pilgrim the approval of exclusive sections of the industry, but it is by no means a prerequisite for literary tourism.

'Literary tourism' covers a number of different activities, interests and locations. On the one hand there are the sites that are physically associated with the lives of famous writers: their houses, their graves, places where they studied, ate, drank, walked, wrote, fought - or whatever else it is writers do. These sites may simply be marked by a commemorative plaque, or they may be developed into full tourist attractions: turned into museums, preserved or reconstructed to look exactly as they were at the writer's time. They tend to host collections of memorabilia: personal or family relics, photographs or paintings, letters, manuscripts and early editions. Some museums provide audiotapes or videotapes of various kinds, occasionally (but surprisingly rarely) including readings of the writer's work. Museums and displays may also be 'displaced' to other locations: the Dublin Writers' Museum, for example, brings together exhibits from the literary history of a whole nation. In Dorchester, the County Museum contains a faithful reconstruction of Thomas Hardy's study from his Max Gate house (now demolished), and in various locations in the United States, reconstructions or replicas of the 'worlds' of Shakespeare and Dickens are given the full theme-park treatment. Then there are events, tours or performances of various kinds, in which the tourist attends, or participates in, a re-enactment or commemoration. Examples include literary 'walks', with guides or with the aid of published itineraries - literary pub crawls are particularly popular in London and Dublin, and have recently started in Edinburgh. Most of these are tied to sites frequented by writers, many rely for their effect on the performance value of the tour guide, and some, it would seem, on the capacity of brews like Guinness or Jameson's whiskey to provide literary inspiration. The Edinburgh literary pub crawl announces its theme as 'Why do writers drink?' By the time they reach the final watering hole, participants will presumably have found the answer. The yearly Bloomsday celebration apparently has the capacity (much like *Ulysses* itself) to recreate the literary site in new locations - not only do the faithful follow Leopold Bloom's carefully scripted tracks all over Dublin, but Joyce enthusiasts follow suit by tracing similar odysseys from pubs to cemeteries to libraries to brothels in cities all over the world. (note 3) Literary festivals and other events featuring living writers are also, and increasingly, marketed as cultural tourism, often organised as part of a tour which also includes visits to literary sites as well as gourmet restaurants and

other tourist activities of a more mundane order. (note 4) Festivals have characteristics of their own which I will not be able to analyse in detail in this paper (note 5), but they share with the cult of dead authors such features as a preference for personality over writing, a tendency to confuse art and life and a desire to recreate the author as representative of and spokesperson for national, social or ethnic groups.

Literary tourism, according to some commentators, provides a 'quick fix' literary experience; it appeals primarily to people who are too lazy, or insufficiently educated, to appreciate literature in its 'normal' mode of consumption, the silent communion between text and reader. Market research into the audiences of literary tours and events suggests otherwise. (note 6) While there may be segments of the market that prefer touring to reading, most literary tourists are well read, and their reading is directly related to their tourist experience: they will brush up on certain authors in anticipation of a tour or event, or pick up books and read them after having 'encountered' a writer at a festival or in a museum. What, then, one may ask, does the tour or festival add to their appreciation? Is there anything such activities can do to enhance the literary experience as such, or are they (as some will suggest) an irrelevant distraction? To go by the promises made by organisers of these activities, the add-on is both significant and significantly different from the textual experience. The problem, it would seem, with simply reading literary texts is that they never provide the answers to all our questions: there is always a degree of uncertainty about our interpretations, an interminable deferral, as literary theory has it, of the signs and their meaning, which somehow leave our questions hanging in mid-air. It is perhaps the promise of grounding certainties that attract sections of the public to literary sites and events. 'You may know the "who"', reads the promotion for the 'Literature Comes to Life Tours', 'we will show you the "where", the "why" and the "how."' And how do they do it? By providing tangible realities, in the shape of bricks and mortar, gravestones, relics of various kinds, and in the case of 'live' events, the tangible body of the writer, to counteract the shiftiness of language artifacts. (note 7) It is no wonder, then, that academic literary criticism, with its penchant for theory and its carefully mapped demarcations between art and life, between authors and their texts, receives particularly bad press in literary tourism. The usually polite audience of the Adelaide Writers Week in 1994 booed a slightly theoretical question at a 'meet the author' session, and a particularly anti-academic discussion session at the 1996 Hay-on-Wye festival was entitled 'Whose literature is it anyway?' Authors often share their audiences' feelings in this respect, as evidenced by V.S. Naipaul's much applauded outburst at Hay: 'Literature should be read by people privately. English should be abandoned as a silly course, and all the professors should be put out of a job.' (qu. 'Diary' 1996, p. 8)

The death of the author, in the discourse of literary tourism, means not the liberation of the text and the birth of the reader so much as an invitation to worship at the graveside. (note 8) If tourism, as a number of cultural theorists have pointed out, functions as a kind of secular religious practice, then authors are the modern-day saints and our pilgrimages become rites of initiation into their mysteries. 'You'll be amazed...at what a tour like this can do for your life,' gushes the 'Literature Comes to Life' promotion. The Irish writer Mary O'Donnell complains that literature and the arts today are required to provide a cure for the psychic, moral and spiritual ailments of the modern world: 'cultural tourism seems to have the appeal of a magic potion that can be democratically supped at by all while at the same time nodding in the direction of culture and some spurious moral betterment' (1995, p. 265). The cult of personality is a widespread phenomenon in our media-saturated culture, and, as the literary industry is well aware, an author profile in a

newspaper is likely to sell more books than a book review, and a biography of a writer frequently outsells the writer's own work. Fame is the most reliable marketing device, and in literary circles as elsewhere, the pecking order is established without too much concern for the niceties of literary taste. When asked how he would celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Hay-on-Wye festival in 1997, its director, Peter Florence, was unequivocal: 'I'll get ten Nobel Prize winners' (note 9), he said. At Hay in 1996, Peter Carey, promoted as a Booker Prize winner and so able to claim considerable status in his own right, had to suffer the indignity of having all eyes, and all cameras, turn from him to a member of his audience, who by necessity arrived unannounced. Carey got his moment in the spotlight after the session, when Salman Rushdie put his arm around him and posed with him for the cameras.

The adoration of famous writers, living or dead, is in the practices of tourism dependent on physical proximity: the body, or bodily remains, of the writer become the repository for literary genius, and paying homage becomes synonymous with experiencing, through one's own body, a sense of continuity and contact. 'Feel the heritage under your feet,' reads an advertisement (note 10), as if the aura of history, cultural tradition and art could somehow be transmitted by touch. The cultural power of the literary greats even eclipses that of other historical figures, as evidenced in Westminster Abbey, where Poets' Corner attracts more visitors than the more sumptuous royal grave chambers. On my visit there I observed a tourist discovering that she was, inadvertently, standing on the grave of Charles Dickens. 'Oh, my God!' she exclaimed, jumping off the stone only to find herself weighing down the remains of Rudyard Kipling, whereupon she repeated the performance, finally coming to rest, quite exhausted, on a stone seemingly safe from the danger of sacrilege. The symbolic value of the writer's body received its rather grotesque confirmation on the death of Thomas Hardy, who had made public his dislike of the Abbey, and his wish to be buried in his family graveyard in Stinsford, outside Dorchester. Upon his death in 1928 he was nevertheless buried, with much ceremony, in Westminster Abbey, but his heart was removed from his body and transported to Stinsford for separate burial. A possibly apocryphal story adds further spice to the Hardy legend: while the heart of Hardy was awaiting burial in Stinsford, a dog apparently managed to open the biscuit tin in which it was contained and ate it. The burial place thus contains nothing but an empty biscuit tin! Whether true or not, the story testifies to the fact that the *absence* of a body can inspire a fascination as potent as its presence. Hence, perhaps, the recurrent speculations that Shakespeare never lived and that his works were penned by other writers. Hence also the almost obsessive curiosity surrounding recluse writers like J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon.

The writer's possessions, and the localities in which he or she lived and worked take on special significance through association with the body - touching the table at which Jane Austen worked is the closest one can come to direct, physical contact. There is a sense, perhaps, that some of the aura of fame and genius has attached itself to these possessions and will 'rub off' on the pilgrim. One of the problems with writers, as opposed to other historical figures, is that they mostly live obscure and rather unspectacular lives, and their houses lack the intrinsic interest associated with stately homes and places of historical significance. Visits to Vita Sackville-West's homes at Knole and Sissinghurst offer the tourist literary associations together with spectacular buildings and gardens, and their popularity is undoubtedly due to this combination, but most writers' houses have little to recommend them in their own right. In order to 'sell' the Brontë sisters' Haworth Parsonage or Jane Austen's Chawton home it becomes necessary to insist on the writers' continuing presence, endowing the unexceptional premises with a special

aura, an elusive, almost mystical value absorbed through bodily and spiritual communion.

The temptation to cheat is, not surprisingly, enormous, and the famous dilemmas of touristic discourse, between the authentic, the fake, and the 'fake authentic', is nowhere more pervasive than in literary tourism. There are several reasons for this. One I have already mentioned: writers often live relatively obscure lives, the details of which may be unknown, or come across as uninteresting to a public fed on contemporary notions of spectacle and celebrity. Hence the tendency to bring in 'period' pieces of furniture to make writers' drawing rooms and studies more historically 'authentic' than they were when inhabited by the writer, hence efforts to embellish houses, gardens and personal histories to please those tourists for whom literary genius is not quite enough. Stratford-upon-Avon provides an outstanding example of the blending of biography, myth and heritage industry into what can only be described as a Shakespeare theme park. Serious guides to Stratford all stress that most sites and stories are only 'traditionally' associated with the writer's life, but that doesn't prevent tour leaders from lowering their voices when they approach the 'Birth Room', encouraging their charges to worship in respectful silence at what Henry James in 'The Birthplace' calls 'the Mecca of the English-speaking race.' (1909, p. 134) (note 11) Another powerful reason behind this disregard for historical accuracy has to be the writing for which these people are famous in the first place: if the writer's life is frequently dull, the fictions are not, and while the ontological confusion between life and art may trouble the academy, it certainly makes for more interesting story-telling. The visitor to St. Petersburg doing the Dostoyevsky tour is first taken to the house in which *Crime and Punishment* was written, and then, in the same street, to the attic where his character Raskolnikov committed his murder (see Wolf 1977). Hardy country has practically renamed itself Wessex after his fiction, and a plaque in Dorchester identifies the house where the Mayor of Casterbridge lived. Fictions are added to fictions as tourists are invited to visit both 'the real and filmed locations of Jane Austen's novels' (Literature Comes to Life Tours 1997). Indeed, the 'Darcymania' which hit England after the television production of *Pride and Prejudice* even invaded Chawton, and Colin Firth's brooding Darcy staring down from a wall in Austen's home threatened to overtake the author herself in the popularity stakes.

In the world and discourse of tourism, literary texts and authors are invariably, it would seem, associated with the idea of nation: national heritage, national identity, national culture. Dead writers are appropriated into patriotic discourses whatever their own attitudes towards their home countries may have been. Ireland's belated elevation of James Joyce to the status of cultural hero shows that major writers can posthumously effect a redefinition of the national culture. Living writers present more of a challenge in this respect, both because they have a tendency to question the values other cultural groups (politicians, for example) hold up as the national norm, and because many of them choose to distance themselves from the very idea that they somehow 'represent' their national or ethnic group, and that their writing should be centrally concerned with questions of national culture. Most literary festivals include sessions in which panellists are requested to debate questions of national, regional or ethnic identity, and, almost invariably, either refuse to do so or argue that models for cultural identity are stereotypes at best. This does not mean that some of them do not, on occasion, enjoy performing in accordance with certain stereotypical models (the Aussie larrikin, for example), nor does it deter audiences, publishers or event organisers from classifying them according to convenient cultural categories. In Australia, 'identity' debates in the public sphere tend to turn rather nervously around a sense of constantly shifting cultural identities, or, conversely, aggressively

proclaim that our culture and its various manifestations are 'world class', thus, as festival organiser Barrie Kosky once pointed out, suggesting that they are not-or at least that the cultural cringe is still an important undercurrent in the national psyche. (note 12) Interestingly, a similar nervousness characterised the debate on the topic 'A very British literature' at the Hay-on-Wye festival in 1996. Contemporary Britain, it would seem, has an 'identity problem' not unlike that of its former colonies. Only the peripherals (the Welsh, the Scots) and ethnic minorities had a secure sense of identity; writers from the majority culture made vague gestures toward regional identities, towards English as the language of a 'world culture' and towards the inevitable multiculturalism of all cultures, but they really didn't know who they were. It may be precisely this kind of uncertainty that has produced the recent obsession with literary heritage as a foundation for cultural identity. In Stratford and Chawton, there is absolutely no doubt what it means to be British, or English: it means Shakespeare, Austen and history, thatched cottages and 'Tudorbethan' architecture, charming country villages, and the greatest poetry and fiction in the world. In England, and to an even greater extent in Ireland, notions of a national culture are intimately linked to literature, and to fictions about literature and authors. The often simplistic images and myths fabricated for tourist consumption are harnessed to the task of nation-building, particularly at times when the national image seems tarnished and in need of regeneration. In Australia, writers like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson are similarly conscripted in efforts to uphold notions of national identity increasingly distanced from contemporary cultural realities.

The theme for the Festival Debate which concluded the Hay-on-Wye festival in 1996 was 'It is the duty of every European to resist the impact of American culture.' The British team dismissed the term 'American culture' as an oxymoron, speaking fervently about the need to protect their heritage against the invasion of the debased cultural output of the American popular media. With Shakespeare on one side and Mickey Mouse on the other, the choice, they argued, had to be simple. Their argument was a version of the by now all too familiar diatribe against popular culture: the 'war' between 'high' and 'low' literature, and between 'real' and 'commercial' value systems. It relied on similar false oppositions: assuming that 'popular' and 'good' in the area of literature is incompatible, or that 'high' culture is not commercial. The American team got an early advantage by pointing out that the British had in fact swallowed American popular culture without the least resistance; at that particular point in time they were far too busy fighting a shadow 'culture war' against the Europeans to notice the extent to which they had become Americanised. Salman Rushdie who, interestingly, appeared for the American team on that occasion, then ensured the decisive victory for his side by arguing that it is the *old* world, countries like England and France, which have most emphatically embraced a Disneyland approach to culture. By erecting barriers around selected local customs and sites, by perpetuating myths about a cultural heritage which, if it ever existed as such, certainly has lost its currency, England may be in the process of turning itself into a giant theme park for tourists in which Shakespeare, rather than protecting his nation against Mickey Mouse, on the contrary has become the greatest Mickey of them all.

Notes

1) Well-known examples of such travel writing include Daniel Boorstin's *The Image* (1967) and Paul Fussell's *Abroad* (1972). For an incisive critique of the

tourist/traveller distinction, see Dean MacCannel, *The Tourist* (1976) and Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign* (1988). Return to text

2) The 'off the beaten track' rhetoric, as Dean MacCannel has argued, is the most beaten track of all: all tourists prefer to regard themselves as travellers (see MacCannel 1976). Return to text

3) See Frances Devlin-Glass' contribution to [this volume](#). Return to text

4) The program for the 1999 Vancouver Literary Festival included an advertisement for an organized tour to the 2000 Melbourne Writers' Festival, featuring a book, a beach and a kangaroo. The Canadian tourists may have been disappointed to find that Melbourne in August is not the best place for a beach holiday. Return to text

5) See Michael Meehan's paper in [this volume](#); see also Ommundsen 2000 and 2004. Return to text

6) See Devlin-Glass in [this volume](#). A recent study of festival audiences conducted by the 'Australian literature and public culture' project team at Deakin University (mentioned in the introduction to this volume) confirms that festival audiences tend to be voracious readers, as do surveys carried out by organizers of various literary festivals in Australia. Return to text

7) 'And it may also be that, like literary biographers, those audiences have a sense of the writer's body as something tangible, solid, stable, reliable: an anchor for all that endless, shifty language.' (Goldsworthy 1992/1993, p. 50). Return to text

8) For a further exploration of the function of literary gravesites, see Ommundsen 1997. Return to text

9) Interviewed by the author on 2 June, 1996. He did not, by the way, achieve this ambitious aim. Return to text

10) From promotional bookmark, 'Literature Comes to Life Tours' (1997), referring to Trinity College, Dublin. Return to text

11) I am grateful to Jane O'Sullivan for first pointing out to me the relevance of James' novella for my topic. For an account of the Shakespeare 'industry' of Stratford, see Ian Ousby, 'Literary Shrines and Literary Pilgrims' (1990b) and Graham Holderness, 'Bardolatry: or, The Cultural Materialist's Guide to Stratford-upon-Avon' (1988). Return to text

12) In Kosky's speech, given at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, 10 November 1996, he quoted from John Ralston Saul's, *The Doubter's Companion*: 'World class is a phrase used by provincial cities and second-rate entertainment events, as well as a wide variety of insecure individuals, to assert that they are not provincial or second-rate, thereby confirming that they are.' See Burchall (1996). Return to text

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