

These Books Were Made for Walkin': literary guidebooks as cultural tourism

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Western cultural tourism has been around for a long time. In his book *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry notes that 'a fairly extensive pattern of travel for pleasure and culture existed for the elite' of Ancient Rome. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Christian pilgrimages had developed their own substantial infrastructure, often mixing cultural sightseeing with religious devotion. After the Reformation and up until the French Revolution sons of the gentry and upper middle classes rounded off their educations with the customary Grand Tour (4).

But what we now understand as mass tourism only fully arrived on the back of complaints about tourists themselves. In 1826 Stendhal peevishly remarked that 'Florence is nothing better than a vast museum full of foreign tourists' (cited in Culler 130). Yet this was in the context of a tourist guidebook to Italy which he himself was writing. No doubt Stendhal regarded himself and his audience as travellers rather than tourists: culturally sensitive individuals, that is to say, rather than the gawping masses who would later find their ideal coach captain in the form of Thomas Cook. It's a distinction that's alive and well even today, and Urry critiques it in terms of the actively 'romantic' versus the passively 'collective gaze'.

But there is really no essential difference between the romantic and collective gaze. As Dean MacCannell argues in his seminal 1976 study, *The Tourist*, each are searching for signs of a fugitive authenticity that eludes them in the endless multiplicity, the ineluctable differentiation of modern life:

unique to the modern world is its capacity to transform material relations into symbolic expressions and back again, while continuing to differentiate or multiply structures. The expansion of alternative realities makes the *dialectics of authenticity* the key to the development of the modern world. (145, emphasis added).

As perhaps the key topos of modernity, nostalgia for the authentic affects elite and popular cultures alike. For MacCannell the tourist is an allegorical 'hero' of modernity, a representative type like the *flâneur* or the detective, those metropolitan figures also on journeys in search of truth. Prefiguring the tourist (and perhaps the *flâneur*), however, is the pilgrim.¹ Implied in MacCannell's account is that tourism is actually a kind of pilgrimage, a quest for direct experience of the auratically sacred – be it an encounter with a gothic cathedral, the Guggenheim, or Gracelands. It's not surprising then to find that Robert Nicholson in the introduction to his *Ulysses Guide: Tours Through Joyce's Dublin* declares that: 'To follow the steps of Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus and their fellow-Dubliners from one landmark to the next has become an act, not merely of study, but of homage. It is, in effect, a sort of pilgrimage' (vii).

Ironically, though, modernity generates such a plethora of sacred sites that signs inevitably substitute for unmediated experience. Do you even have to have read *Ulysses* to go on a *Ulysses* tour? Isn't it enough to have perused the guidebooks with their clear and concise instructions rather than Joyce's labyrinthine novel? Donald Horne, discussing the 're-presentation of history' in his 1984 book *The Great Museum*, describes the restless lack of focus in the tourist gaze and its reliance on mere markers of authenticity:

it is tourists who are the main modern pilgrims, carrying guide books [sic] as devotional texts. Moving from one architectural feature of the church to the next, or, in museums, passing from glass case to glass case or from painting to painting or, in the streets, from famous square to historic fountain, they may scarcely look at the exhibit or the monument: their essential function is to read the guide books, the explanatory cards or commemorative plaques, or to listen to hired cassettes. What matters is what they are told they are seeing. The fame of the object becomes its meaning; what finally matters may be a souvenir postcard, perhaps even the admission ticket, kept for years afterwards with other mementoes of passing visions of how life might have been. (10)

What for Horne is a source of modernist lamentation becomes for poststructuralism a truth about semiotic processes and postmodernity. Jonathan Culler sees tourism as an exemplary case of the way in which cultural practice renders 'everything as a sign of itself' (127). 'The denigrators of tourists', he writes, 'are upset by the proliferation of tacky representations – postcards, ashtrays, little silk pillows, ugly painted plates – and fail to grasp the essential semiotic functions of these markers' (133). Yet it is these markers which bestow meaning to the sight; in effect, create it through a process of sacralisation (MacCannell 44-5). 'More important than the sight', says MacCannell, 'is some marker involvement' (113), because it turns a mere *site* into something worth seeing (a *sight*).

Markers may be indexical, such a bottle of coloured sands or a stuffed cane toad;

or they may be iconic: a snowdome depicting the Surfers Paradise skyline. Or they may be symbolic, like the miniature yellow chamber pot, a po for a pixie, mysteriously inscribed *Ettalong*, which as a child I once found pushed to the back of a cupboard. All these are what MacCannell calls 'off-sight markers'.

Signposts and plaques that tell us that so-and-so lived in this house, or that such-and-such a battle took place on this field constitute 'on-sight markers' (110-111). The blue plaques scattered throughout London offer perhaps the most famous examples of inscribing an authenticity otherwise not immediately evident on sites where the famous and, increasingly, not so very famous have lived. Over the last decade Sydney has boasted an ever-expanding Writers' Walk consisting of a series of fifty bronze plaques embedded in the pavement around Circular Quay, from the Rocks to the Opera House. Forty-nine local and visiting, living and dead authors are commemorated, each with a quotation from their work, with the fiftieth plaque – in fine civic fashion – celebrating the project itself. A small brass plate on a hotel in Lydiard Street, Ballarat – a city notable for its historical markers – bears the ironic, desecralising inscription 'On this site in 1897 nothing happened' – thus, in a further irony, rebadging both the hotel itself and 'Ballarat' as tourist sights.

The specialist literary guidebook is a relative newcomer to the field of cultural tourism. Beyond their role in cataloguing places where writers lived, worked and died – a hagiographical function inherited from the nineteenth century Baedeker – literary guides have a broader interest in completely inauthentic places: *representations* of landscapes, buildings and spaces in literature where notable fictional events have taken place. Take this example from Don Herron's *The Literary World of San Francisco & Its Environs*, referring to the Monadnock Building in Market Street:

The leftwing gumshoe Riley Kovachs has his office here in Gordon De Marco's hard-boiled detective novels *October Heat* (1979) and *The Canvas Prison* (1982). The political scene for *October Heat* is San Francisco, October 1934, two months after the longshoreman's strike, 'Bloody Thursday,' and the General Strike in July, with socialist author Upton Sinclair running for governor in the upcoming elections ... (12-13)

The Monadnock Building is a real place (indeed, the historical context of the novel is based in fact) yet no detective called Riley Kovachs ever had an office there. In a semiotic inversion typical not only of tourism, the physical sight has become a marker for the fictional site, rather than vice versa.² Similarly, which is the touristic signified in the following sentence from Ed Glinert's *A Literary Guide to London*, the real tower or Dickens' novel?: 'On walking past Holburn Circus with Bill Sykes, *Oliver Twist* looks up at the St Andrews church clock and notices it is 'hard upon seven!' (100). And what status does the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy occupy in this entry from *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*?: 'The public baths, pubs and dishevelled communal households of Fitzroy are the setting for some of the action in Helen Garner's first novel *Monkey Grip* (1977) and of her two novellas *Honour and Other People's Children* (1980)' (247).

Of course, in the pages of the literary guidebook 'the Monadnock Building', 'St Andrews tower' and 'Fitzroy' are each themselves only off-site markers of the physical objects/places to which they refer. But so too are 'October Heat', 'Oliver Twist' and 'Monkey Grip' – despite the fact that these, at least, can be 'souvenired' by quotation. As objects made of words, guidebooks will always exist in an ultimately inauthentic relationship to the people, places and texts they describe, a relationship based inescapably on the logic of *différance*. Nevertheless, when you use a guidebook *in situ* as part of the direct, contiguous experience of a place, you activate a certain indexical potential of the text. It's a potential based on storylines of place, and can be conceptualised via a distinction that Michel de Certeau makes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* between the seemingly complementary activities of touring and mapping.

De Certeau argues that stories are part of the prehistory of maps, and that it is only since the Enlightenment that cartographers have discarded any traces of their narrative origins. Before maps became panoptic tableaux they were more concerned with the organisation of movement across space: 'The first medieval maps included only the rectilinear marking out of itineraries (performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages) ... Each of these maps is a memorandum prescribing actions. The tour to be made is predominant in them' (120). In 'Dutch Seacoast' from his sequence 'The Atlas', Kenneth Slessor characterises the way in which maps still the very movements which give rise to them:

Sky full of ships, bay full of town,
A port of waters jellied brown.
Such is the world no tide may stir,
Sealed by the great cartographer. (74)³

De Certeau suggests that what seem like mere decorations on Renaissance charts – the exotic beasts, sea monsters, galleons, and puffing putti – represent traces of these itineraries; they 'mark on the map the historical operations from which it resulted' (121). Before the map, then, was the journey, which became conventionalised as the *tour*.⁴

Guidebooks are maps of a kind, but they most frequently function to memorialise particular tours, and include advice on directions and transport. The following paragraph from Noëlle B. Beatty's *Literary Byways of Boston & Cambridge* is typical:

At this point, intrepid walkers may carry on along tree-shaded streets to the homes of Robert Frost and James Russell Lowell, and to Mount Auburn Cemetery. The cemetery is a half-hour's walk from Longfellow Park, and you can return by a trolley-bus after strolling around the grounds. (70)

A large-scale work like *The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, on the other hand, works more like a map – or indeed an atlas, since it takes in the whole continent. The

introduction states that it 'explores the notion of place in Australian literature' (xiii), and then quotes Stephen Muecke from *Reading the Country*, a text which draws upon different sign systems – Aboriginal marks and traces, as well as Western painting and writing – to represent the Roebuck Plains in Western Australia. Part of the quote from Muecke reads 'The study of specific, local places puts things more on the scale of everyday living' (xiii), and the implication is that the *The Oxford Literary Guide* does something of the same order in terms of the relationship between literature and place. The sheer scale of the project, however, makes the book less practical as a local guide. Writers and texts are connected to particular towns, cities and suburbs, but often without specific information as to where, precisely (in terms of street name and number) a particular author lived or a notable work was written. The introduction concludes with a recognition of this limitation, and the suggestion that precise itineraries will be developed by individual pilgrims: 'The maps of states and cities suggest literary topographies: they should be used to complement more detailed maps when travellers set out on literary pilgrimages, be they to Coober Pedy or Carcoar, Cairns or Campbell Town' (xvi).

Guidebooks have a panoptic function which is bound up with their status as maps. When they are performed in the act of tourism, however, other possibilities emerge in relation to their properties as spatial narratives: turn left, turn right, look here, look there. Actually walking the map becomes, in effect, a form of rewriting it. Once on the ground you can, after all, disobey its instructions or disagree with its choices; you can skip certain sites, take detours and byways, or find objects of interest other than those stated in the guidebook or proclaimed by a plaque. Certeau acknowledges this in the distinction that he draws between *place*, as an ordered, stable location with a designated meaning, and *space*, as the transformation and temporalisation of place through mobility: '*space is a practiced place*' (117) whose meanings are more open and potentially multiple.

Meaghan Morris offers a useful insight here. In her essay on the tourist experience, 'At Henry Parkes Hotel', she deconstructs the question of touristic authenticity in terms of de Certeau's concept of space-as-practice:

One useful consequence of this definition is that no distinction can be made between authentic and 'inauthentic' places. At the same time, it avoids any move to predetermine the kind or the *tempo* of spatial (reading, walking ...) practices deemed appropriate to particular places. A written text on a motel wall or restaurant plaque may be spatially practised in ways, in directions, and at velocities as various as any street, or literary text. By definition, no one spatial practice can correspond to a 'proper' use of place, and there are no exemplary users. Nor is there a simple disjunction between the place and its use as a space. (56)

There can be no singular, 'authentic' experience of a tourist site, because there are so many ways of reading it, *practising* it. Culler sees the tourist's engagement with

even the tackiest souvenirs as active rather than passive: 'the touristic experience involves a *production* of or *participation* in a sign relation between marker and sight' (133, emphasis added). The tourist therefore *makes* meaning of these signs whose significations seem to have been pre-packaged.

I'd like to end on a personal – and cautionary – note. One of the problems that Jill Dimond and I faced when putting together *Literary Sydney: A Walking Guide* was the relative absence of 'authentic' literary places in the CBD. So many had been demolished in the high-rise boom of the 1960s and 70s that we were frequently left with sites rather than sights. What do you say about the tower block that has replaced a writer's former residence or a once-renowned theatre? This problem was identified by one critic, who complained, 'where is the fascination in staring at the Australia Square Tower knowing that Banjo Patterson [sic] had a flat in a building predating it?' (Meyer 95). The reference is to the former 13 Bond Street where the poet lived in the 1890s and wrote such well-loved poems as 'The Man from Ironbark' and 'The Geebung Polo Club'. While here Paterson also vigorously defended the authenticity of that absent signified, the Bush, against Henry Lawson's vision of outback hell in the famous *Bulletin* debate of 1892. Might not urban-dwelling Paterson's ironic relationship with pastoral be used to re-read the monolith of heroic modernism that now occupies the site of his former home, thus transforming Australia Square from one kind of place into quite another kind of space?

Notes

- ¹ In his essay 'From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity' Zygmunt Bauman suggests that the pilgrim prefigures a typology of postmodern identities that includes the vagabond and player as well as the tourist and stroller (as an historical extension of the *flâneur*).
- ² In analysing of the sight/marker relationship in tourist attractions, MacCannell assumes that 'the arbitrariness of the relationship of signifier to the signified is only a corollary of a more fundamental principle: namely, that of the *interchangeability* of the signifier and the signified' (118).
- ³ In 'The Atlas' each poem takes as its cue descriptions from a catalogue of *Old Maps of the World*, and reimagines fantastic elements of the vestigial narratives represented there. Thus 'The Seafight' brings to life a conflict represented on a 1692 map of the Gulf of Mexico by Nicholas Sanson (Slessor 357-8, 361):

Here in a gulf of golden leaf
 You'll find a seafight ringed with flame;
 Cannons that cry Tirduf, Tirduf,
 Daggers that collop, guns that main;
 Jaws beaked with blood, men flung to hell,
 Men blasting trumpets, men that flee,
 Men crimped by death, and under all
 Old patient, baleful, spying Sea. (76)
- ⁴ Paul Carter's concept of spatial history, first outlined in *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), also tries to reclaim from imperialist cartography the more polysemous 'literary' possibilities of explorer narratives.

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