PAUL WESTOVER

NECROMANTICISM: TRAVELING TO MEET THE DEAD, 1750-1860 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

Reviewed by Harald Hendrix

Literary tourism is at the heart of the Romantic project. In this well-informed and thoughtful book Paul Westover shows that the Romantics' urge to transcend the limits of time and space was anything but a purely virtual and intellectual exercise. It took a quite material turn in the widespread practice of visiting locations steeped in literary associations, particularly the graves of cherished authors. Here the Romantic traveler felt able to experience an all but physical communion with the imaginary world so evocatively portrayed in the works of the poets and novelists he or she admired. And visiting the graves or sepulchral monuments erected to honor the memory of these great authors enabled the Romantic tourist not just to pay his respect but to feel the presence of these dead heroes as if they were alive. This urge to travel and "meet the dead" is what Westover calls "necromanticism," thus defining it as a characteristically Romantic phenomenon. From what he sees as its first appearance in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), Westover traces the

development of this phenomenon in Anglophone letters until it becomes an ingredient of commercial mass tourism, somewhere in the 1860s.

What interests Westover is not literary tourism as a cultural or social practice, but its central position in Romantic literary culture itself. Consequently his documentation is pre-eminently literary, such as William Godwin's 1809 *Essay on Sepulchres*, Felicia Hemans' poems on her visits (real or imagined) to her favorite poets' graves, and -- from leading American authors like Washington Irving and Harriet Beecher Stowe -- sketches on their travels to sites of English and Scottish literary heritage. This focus on those who wrote about literary tourism distinguishes Westover's book from most of the other studies of its topic such as Samantha Matthews' *Poetical Remains. Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2004), Nicola Watson's *The Literary Tourist. Readers and Places in Romantic & Victorian Britain* (Houndmills, 2006), *Writers' Houses and the Making of Memory* (Harald Hendrix, ed.; New York, 2007/2012), and -- most recently -- Ann Rigney's *The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Memory on the Move* (Oxford, 2012).

Whereas these studies typically treat literary tourism as a field in which memorial practices move between authors and audiences, and

consequently between elite and mass culture, Westover prefers to concentrate on those who produced a Romantic discourse on literary tourism. This enables him to probe such discourse and identify its foundational texts, even if their actual impact was quite uneven: though Irving's *Sketches* (for instance) were highly influential, Godwin's *Essay* found only a fairly limited and hardly enthusiastic audience. Yet it is precisely Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres. A Proposal for Erecting Some Memorials of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot where Their Remains Have Been Interred* that informs Westover's reconstruction of the "necromantic" ideology. Essential to this reconstruction is the concept of "Ideal Presence."

Both in his Introduction and his first chapter, Westover argues at length that the desire to commune with the dead is characteristically Romantic, particularly in a literary context of readers wanting to intensify their contact with authors and their imagined worlds. Although he admits that this desire pre-dates the Romantic era, as Jurgen Pieters has shown in *Speaking With the Dead*(Edinburgh, 2005), Westover argues that it became an essential element of Romantic thought. Adumbrated by eighteenth-century philosophers such as David Hume and Lord Kames (who coined the very term "ideal presence" in his *Elements of Criticism*), it was

advocated by leading intellectuals of the early nineteenth century such as Isaac D'Israeli and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who--Westover claims--posits something very like "ideal presence" when he defines "poetic faith" as "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14). To substantiate his argument about ideal presence, Westover cites various manifestations of it, from the widespread interest in spirits to the new custom of separating burial grounds from the habitations of the living.

Necromanticism had precedents. As chapter 2 reveals, the visit to literary locations -- places associated with authors or their works -- drew on three traditions: religious pilgrimages, the Grand Tour, and the passion for the picturesque. From these came certain features that also characterised literary tourism in the Romantic era: the semi-religious vocabulary, the text-dominated tourist's gaze, the blurring of boundaries between the fictional and the real, and the mixture of admiration with disappointment or irony as the literary tourist confronts an authorially sacralized site. Given the persistence of these features, it is hard to see just how much Romantic literary tourism differs from its predecessors, as Westover claims. Here his focus on literary texts reveals itself as an obstacle. Besides considering a greater number of travelers, he could have surveyed the unprecedented

opportunities for tourism created at the start of the nineteenth century by dramatic changes in such things as transportation. Westover also tends to to overlook the political dimension of literary tourism. While he takes for granted that necromanticism is purely national in orientation (including the American tourists visiting English and Scottish literary heritage), he does not weigh the political implications of the link between romantic tourism and nationalism. What of the English men and women of letters -- starting with Lord Byron -- who made their way to literary sites outside their nation, as did their cosmopolitan Grand Tour predecessors? Discussion of such figures would have shed more useful light on the distinctiveness of the "necromanticism" here explored.

Westover is certainly more at ease with the literary texts he foregrounds, Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* in chapter 3, and--in chapter 4--the intimate grave poetry written by Felicia Hemans in tribute to her literary heroes, particularly Walter Scott, Mary Tighe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But when Westover goes beyond close reading of these texts and contrasts them with other kinds of writing -- such as Hemans' letters-- he exposes one of the most characteristic paradoxes of "necromanticism": though Hemans' poetry had glorified the unseen grave of Mary Tighe, her letters reveal that the sight of it strongly disappointed her. This implies not that

necromanticism is fake, but that it is much more driven by Lord Kames's "ideal presence" than by any actual one. We may also infer that literary tourism ambivalently combines belief and disbelief in "ideal presence," so that actual sites sometimes elicit disillusionment or just the language of irony.

Westover probes this complexity when he convincingly demonstrates the fossilizing effect of romantic literary tourism: it viewed living authors as if they were already dead. In the numerous curious examples given -- the old Coleridge appearing as the Ancient Mariner, Wordsworth observed as if he were a monument to himself -- the literary tourist seeks not the real author but only the reflection of a cliché derived from reading. The great man of letters is no longer visited for the sake of intelligent conversation -- as he was until the end of the eighteenth century -- but to be gazed at as a monument, thus becoming what Isaac d'Israeli called a *Literary Character*.

This shift from what has been defined as an interrogative to a possessive kind of travel coincides with the advent of transatlantic tourism, specifically nineteenth-century Americans visiting sites of British literary heritage. In his elaborate discussion of this phenomenon, Westover highlights the irony and even sarcasm expressed in the travel writings of

authors like Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though Westover might well have linked this trait of style to the shift from interrogative to possessive tourism, or to nationalism, he does not do so. But he sharply observes the striking ambivalence with which these American authors responded to British literary sites. While Irving, for instance, criticized Scott's Abbotsford, he reverentially used it as a template for the design of his own Sunnyville.

It is thus no surprise that Westover ends his book with a chapter dedicated to Walter Scott, who in so many ways exemplifies the intersections of romantic literature, memorial culture, and commercial tourism. Much of this topic has already been studied, notably in Rigney's *Afterlives*. Westover concentrates on a still understudied type of publication where commerce meets literature and tourism. Illustration books -- as distinct from *illustrated* books -- offered images of landscapes and locations that readers associated with literary texts they cherished. First applied in the late eighteenth century to classical authors like Shakespeare and Milton, the format was quickly adopted to exploit the commercial value of Scott's reputation in books such as John Christian Schetky's *Illustrations of Walter Scott's Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1808) and James Skene's *A Series of Sketches of the Existing Localities Alluded to in the Waverley*

Novels (1829). For Westover, Scott's personal involvement in such endeavours underscores not only his entrepreneurial spirit but his eagerness to promote literary tourism, and to be seen from a "necromantic" perspective.

Westover's *Necromanticism* offers a rich and thoughtful analysis of literary tourism's central role in Anglophone Romantic culture. In his well-chosen case studies, as well as in his well-informed introductory chapters, he convincingly shows how Romantic writers turned their fascination with history and "talking to the dead" into a genre, both in writing and in traveling. Although Westover's strictly literary outlook somewhat limits his understanding of this phenomenon as a more comprehensive cultural practice, he acutely grasps the various ambivalences that characterize it, primarily its irony and its fossilizing effect.

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