

Writers' Houses

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Houses programmatically built or simply inhabited by poets and novelists feature a number of qualities that allow them to become significant cultural landmarks. This may occur because these buildings mark the birth or death of a canonical author, as in Goethe's houses in Frankfurt and Weimar, and hence evoke by this liminality the very genius that has provoked admiration amongst readers. Other houses stand out because they mark a particularly fertile phase in a literary career, and sometimes occur as a vital part of the work there produced: Proust's apartment on the Parisian Boulevard Haussmann amongst many others. Some of these dwellings even have been conceived and designed by their inhabitants as works of art that supplement their literary production – the villa erected by Horace Walpole in Twickenham, for example – thus offering opportunities for experimenting alternative artistic expressions.

To visitors most writers' houses reveal some of the living and working conditions of their dwellers, purposely arranged or not, and thus allow them through an immersion in this material setting to gain some insight into the immaterial workings of the creativity here deployed. This opportunity to come close to an admired author, both physically and metaphysically, is at the origins of literary pilgrimages, an ancient phenomenon documented already in classical Greece and popular ever since. Paying tribute to beloved writers in their private dwellings could even become a ritualized performance, as in the “visite aux grands écrivains” popular in France since the 18th century.

This semi-religious passion for visiting locations charged with literary memories linked to the biographies of poets and novelists at certain moments in time led to the invention of new genres, like the reports in the *Homes and Haunts* series produced in the mid-19th century anglophone world. It also gave rise to commercial developments centred on such writers' houses, from an abundant editorial production of guidebooks of all sorts to the establishment of sometimes elaborate museological installations focused on these buildings. Whereas these structures have become an important asset in cultural tourism, particularly in the last decades, occasionally they also attracted critical comments, from the satire

on the exaggerated cult of Petrarch's houses in the early 16th century to more recent pamphlets like the *Skeptic Guide to Writer's Houses*.

References

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Further Readings

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