

New Nonfiction: The Footsteps of Giants by David James



Harold Bloom writes of the anxiety of influence that has afflicted writers going back, in the Western tradition, to Homer. We could stretch the metaphor to include not just writers, or artists, but all classes of people. For military leaders, for example, one recalls Plutarch's anecdote of a middle-aged Julius Caesar weeping when confronted by a statue of Alexander the Great in the province of Spain. "He had conquered the world by the age of 27. I am 32 and have done nothing!" he said. Alexander himself, during his destruction of the rebellious city of Thebes before launching the invasion of Persia, ordered that only the house of the poet Pindar to be spared the flames. After crossing the Hellespont into Asia he then paid homage to the grave mound of Achilles (his

ancestor!) at Troy. Lucian of Samosata in the 2nd century A.D. writes of Greco-Roman tourists visiting the birthplaces of philosophers like Zeno and Epicurus. He also mentions streams of pilgrims to the site in Cappadocia where the thaumaturge Apollonius of Tyana ascended bodily to heaven. Likewise, Suetonius notes that Virgil's Mantua home or just north to Catullus' Lake Garda palace were itineraries growing in popularity with well-to-do Romans. Petrarch's frescoed house in the Euganean Hills near Padua has been visited by poetic disciples since the early Renaissance (I took my students on a school trip two years ago). All this is to say that pilgrimage is not for religious journeys alone, but for any act of traveling that takes us to a place of special cultural significance.

I myself have walked the ancient trail of the Camino de Santiago, visited the holy sites of Jerusalem, and been half a dozen times to Rome, all charged with numinous spiritual energy. Moreover, I have looked upon battlefields dating from the sack of Troy itself, to the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, the Punic wars, to the more modern Napoleonic wars, American Revolution, American Civil War, Italian wars of Independence, and dozens of sites from both World Wars (to say nothing of the two years I myself spent in Afghanistan). Rambling around a Gettysburg, or Waterloo, or the Normandy beaches (not to mention an ancient Thermopylae or Lake Trasimeno) evokes sentiment of strong collective memory and tragic action, but such sites nevertheless remain anonymously hallowed grounds that center around no single individual. Napoleon himself comes closest to a lone evocative "hero" who overpowers the masses of nameless men buried wherever he went, and whose legacy is ubiquitous across Europe and beyond. Seemingly everywhere I go, from Spain, to Egypt and Israel, to Russia, to the Northern Italian plain where I live, Napoleon has walked the ground and left traces to be followed and remembered. I once slept fitfully on the floor of a dilapidated villa over Lake Como which housed a billiard table

once played on by the Corsican. Religious pilgrimage, battle and bloodshed, Caesar and Napoleon, these things hold our imagination and compel us to pay respect, even when given begrudgingly. For it can become a respect that is too big, too weighty, almost inhuman. The things that touch us more are the remnants and relics we glimpse of our forebears who were fallible, down-to-earth humans, not deities. Artists, whether writers, painters, musicians, whether giants or geniuses, and of certain kinds and to varying degrees, are all-too-human, and thus allow us to walk in their footsteps, to see ourselves more clearly through them, to be inspired and influenced, even enriched and blessed, by them.

Shakespeare, setting aside Homer, is Bloom's quintessential artist who was himself uniquely free from the anxiety of influence, while simultaneously creating it in every subsequent writer. Such was not necessarily the case for his earthly estate—his famous Tudor-style birth house in Stratford-Upon-Avon only became a protected property and tourist destination in the mid-19th century due to the efforts of Charles Dickens. It was in fact during this Victorian period when modern tourism at cultural destinations became increasingly popular for the upper classes, and which accelerated again after the end of the First World War for the middle classes. Today, Shakespeare's house could be considered a model of the overpriced commodification of culture that lacks artistic authenticity. Authenticity is the crucial word here, because it is this that gives power to the places we seek out, or discover by accident, on our various pilgrimages. I would exchange a simple artifact, or monument, or plaque freely situated *in loco* for any expensive entrance fee crowded amongst tourists who are often more in search of a momentary escape from boredom than an authentic intellectual experience and its accompanying reverence.

In Venice, for example, there were times during a single day-trip when I wandered without purpose down narrow lanes, away

from the sardine-packed tourist routes, haunted by the past, in search of nothing in particular, but open to whatever may come. I glanced up at various times to notice humble marble plaques adorning old buildings: an old palazzo in Cannaregio where Jean-Jacques Rousseau spent a frustrated year as French ambassador; a statue of Carlo Goldoni outside the palace where he was born; another noble palace (which later became the official Casinò of Venice) where Richard Wagner had died. This last contains a poetic inscription written by Gabriele d'Annunzio, who consciously designed his own living tomb and memorial at a sprawling villa over Lake Garda, which serves as both a site for school trips and an ongoing *site d'hommage* for fascist *Mitläufer*. In Florence, I once glanced up to find a plaque on the house that Dostoevsky wrote *The Idiot* while in self-imposed exile after his release from a Siberian prison colony. In Milan, likewise, I espied a plaque outside the old Red Cross hospital near the Ambrosiana where Hemingway recovered from his shrapnel wound, inspiring *A Farewell to Arms*.

Hemingway deserves his own paragraph, for it is he as much as any other modern writer who has left a solid geographical legacy whence tourists can easily follow. Italy, Spain, France, Cuba, not to mention Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, or Idaho—there are a plethora of houses, bars, and various monuments and specious museums once haunted by Hemingway. His statue is outside the bullring in Pamplona, where one arrives after running with the bulls; Harry's Bar in Venice charges outrageous prices (and enforces a strict dress code, which is why I was denied entrance) just for visitors to say they drank at the bar where Hemingway sipped copious Bellinis; in Paris there is more than one bar that tries to do the same to cash in on his 'Lost Generation' years there; even the town where I work, Bassano del Grappa, has a dedicated Hemingway Museum in the old villa along the Brenta River where his Red Cross ambulance unit was based at the end of the war. His larger-than-life persona (even if this was as much about marketing as

reality), and international adventures (big-game safaris, deep-water fishing, multiple wars corresponding, multiple wives left in his wake...) make him a household name and an easily accessible target for mass tourism.

The writer who most warmed to the idea of literary pilgrimage for its own sake is Max Sebald. His novels often consist in his retracing the footsteps of various literary forebears, and investigating the palimpsest of intellectual and architectural history that abounds below the surface of our cities and our lives. In his novel *Vertigo*, especially, he makes a trip from Venice to Verona, around Lake Garda, and back to Germany. Along the way he writes about the connection to each place of writers like Stendhal, Casanova, and Kafka. In the final section, he reluctantly returns to his tiny hometown of Wertach, where he shares nothing in common with the ignorant villagers. Despite that, playing on the growing fame of Sebald, someone today has newly created a "Sebald path" through the nearby countryside. One of my friends who appreciates Sebald even more than I has made this pilgrimage and confirmed its strange existence.

In both Trieste and Dublin, visitors can follow in the footsteps of James Joyce's life and works, though I'd wager that very few who do so have ever read anything by Joyce. In fact, there is a statue of Joyce along the Grand Canal in Trieste, near the old Berlitz school where Joyce taught English for 15 years, including to the writer Italo Svevo (who has his own statue). In Duino, near Trieste, there is a romantic castle that once hosted the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and inspired his *Duino Elegies*. There is a beautiful walking path along the cliffs named after him because of his own typical walks overlooking the Gulf of Trieste. On a hill above Bolzano I once found a path where Freud used to take daily walks during his summer visits, when it was still part of the Austrian empire. In Greece, I stayed in a village with a small beach-side cottage that Nikos Kazantzakis lived in for two

years (1917-18) with the real-life Georgios Zorbas. The pair tried to establish a nearby coal mine, which became the basis for the later character of Alexis Zorba of the famous novel (and film). Just outside Geneva, one can visit a chateau built by Voltaire in a town now named after the genius philosopher (genius especially for his unique ability amongst philosophers to make himself rich in order to guarantee his own financial, and thus political, freedom).

If we enter Geneva, in the cemetery precisely, we can find the final magically realist resting place of the Argentinian (but Old World in spirit) Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, it is in cemeteries in general where we often find and reflect on great lives lived. One of their upsides is that they are free of charge, and generally free of tourists (two things I value more than over-priced and over-crowded), not to mention authentic. What could be more authentic than the final physical remains of a once living spirit who lived, created an artistic legacy, and died. Thus does the Pantheon in Rome become more powerful by containing the incongruous tomb of Raphael (for it is only he and the first two kings of Italy who are interred in the Augustan edifice). The most famous cemetery of all is no doubt Père Lachaise in Paris, where one can find the resting place of scores of famous artists of all stripes, from Balzac to Oscar Wilde. Here you can find surely the most touristed tombs in the world, those of Chopin and Jim Morrison, and yet the lingering presence of the monstrous dictator Trujillo desecrates all around him. In Venice, the island cemetery of San Michele is a place for respectful rumination that is not as populous, but just as evocative as its Parisian cousin. Then to Nafplio, in the Peloponnese, we find the final resting place of that most infamous Doge of Venice, Francesco Morosini, who was responsible for the reconquest of Greece from the Ottomans, at the expense of the destruction of the Acropolis on his orders. Back to Kazantzakis, his own tomb is situated on the Venetian ramparts outside Heraklion, Crete, because his excommunication by the

Church meant that he could not be buried in a cemetery. The epitaph reads “Δεν ελπίζω τίποτα. Δε φοβάμαι τίποτα. Είμαι ελεύθερος (‘I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free’).”

In Vicenza, where I lived for many years, there is a plaque on a building on the main piazza commemorating one single night that Giuseppe Garibaldi slept there. It was in 1867 after Venice was finally captured from Austria in the Third War of Italian Independence, and when Garibaldi was very likely the most famous and admired person in Europe. The plaque merely reads “Garibaldi, who cried ‘Rome or Death’, stayed here.” Likewise in Torbole, a windy town washed by the northern tip of Lake Garda, there is a low arch equipped with a fountain and a plaque recounting one single night that Johann Wolfgang Goethe slept there in 1786, on the trip that inspired his memorable *Italian Journey*. A few blocks away in this same small town there is a memorial to Colonel William O. Darby, a US Army Ranger commander who was killed by German artillery on this spot on April 30, 1945. This was the same day Hitler killed himself, and almost the last day of the war in Europe. This same commander gave his name to the infamous obstacle course, the ‘Darby Queen’, that all candidates at Ranger School in Fort Benning will forever remember.

Nearby Vicenza, and Bassano del Grappa, is the picturesque hill town of Asolo, which was where the British adventurer and travel writer Freya Stark made her home until dying there at the age of 100. Stark was one of the first westerners, and certainly the first woman, to travel alone across the Arabian Desert, and recounted some of her earlier adventures in excellent *The Valley of the Assassins*. Murals about her life can be seen in the town, and one can also visit her tomb, which happens to be next to the tomb of Eleonora Duse, Gabriele d’Annunzio’s muse and lover, and the greatest actress of her day. Further down the Italian peninsula to the Tuscan hills near Siena, we can find the scenic country estate of Gregor von Rezzori, a German-Romanian post-war writer of the

memoirs *The Snows of Yesteryear*. This estate still hosts a retreat for writers including the likes of Bruce Chatwin and Michael Ondaatje. In nearby Orsigna, an Apennine village near the ancient tree-lined border of Tuscany and Emilia, we can visit the home of Italian journalist and travel writer Tiziano Terzani, whose *Letters Against the War* greatly influenced my thinking during my own participation in the War on Terror. A film was made there based on his last book, *The End is My Beginning*. Further down the peninsula in Ravello, overlooking the beautiful Amalfi coast, we can visit the Villa Rondinaia, where the great American writer Gore Vidal lived and worked for decades. And yet another nearby villa on the island of Capri is tucked away near the many villas of the emperor Tiberius, a modernist design that was the residence of the WWII-era Italian writer Curzio Malaparte. This setting is so unique and memorable that Jean-Luc Godard chose it for his film *Le Mépris* (Contempt).

On Corfu, one can dine at an expensive restaurant called the White House that used to be the residence of Lawrence Durrell, where he wrote his many travel books, and part of his underrated masterpiece, *The Alexandria Quartet*. It was also here that his good friend Henry Miller spent one year, which inspired *The Colossus of Maroussi*, his favorite (and mine) among his own novels. Further down on Corfu, there is a palace called the Achilleion which was built for the Austrian Empress Sissi, and was later purchased by Kaiser Wilhelm II, who spent much of his post-war exile there, engaging in his passion for hunting (apparently he had not caused enough death already in the first war) and archaeology. The Empress Sissi also left her mark in Merano, where an incredible castle with beautiful gardens markets itself to visitors today as 'Sissi's Castle', even though she only stayed there for one month.

Back to Napoleon, on Elba Island there is a small palace where the former Emperor "ruled" the island during the nine-months of his first exile, and designed the golden-bee flag of Elba

(which was itself a version of the old Medici flag of Tuscany). Back to Garibaldi, there is a small island north of Sardinia that was privately owned by the great general himself, and where he spent his self-imposed retirement and exile after single-handedly conquering the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and gifting it to the new King of Italy, *sine ulla conditione*. Back to Venice, one finds a palazzo looking out over the lagoon's northern expanse where Nietzsche resided for seven of his most productive literary years. Then to Turin, we can look around the Piazza Carignano where Nietzsche witnessed a violent horse flogging and desperately went to embrace the horse, his final lucid moment before the final 11 years of syphilis-induced madness and death. If we continue down the Italian coast to La Spezia, we find the beautiful and aptly-named Gulf of Poets, which was famously visited by Byron and the Shelleys. D.H. Lawrence, who loved Italy (Sardinia in particular), as well as Henry James, also visited this Gulf. Back to Venice (for all literary roads lead not to Rome, but to Venice), one can visit the chamber in the Palazzo Barbaro where Henry James lodged and wrote several works, including *The Aspern Papers*. Moving to Rome, we find another room near the Aventine hill that hosted James while writing *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Back to Greece, we can visit a memorial to Lord Byron, whose poetic heart remains interred at Missolonghi where he died of fever while fighting in the Greek War of Independence. Further south in the Mani peninsula of the Peloponnese, we find the charming sea-side villa of the British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, who fought in the Greek resistance against the Nazi occupation in Crete.

Back to my home of Vicenza once more, there is a little-known plaque on a certain palace near Corso Palladio that reveals it to be the birthplace of Luigi da Porto, the little-known original author of the old story of Romeo and Juliet that inspired Shakespeare. And so we end where we began—with the divine Bard. Guided by him, we can let our anxieties rest and our inspirations lead us where they will, rambling amongst

cultural artifacts and collective memory, part of a rich history and an infinite world where giants have always walked.

