Assessing New Books on English and American Literature of the Nineteenth Century

The Author's Effects: On Writer's House Museums

By Nicola J. Watson
Reviewed by LuAnn McCracken Fletcher on 2020-07-09.

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Reading this book feels a lot like visiting a museum. Watson clearly intends this effect: witness her clever chapter titles, from "Introduction: Entrance this way . . . " to "Exit through the gift shop." Beyond invoking a witty extended metaphor, she curates discrete artifacts--such as skulls, spectacles, dresses, desks, a cat, a coffee-pot, and a cabin--and displays them one by one to the reader's view, moving from "the remains of the writer's body" to "writers' possessions," "whole houses and their grounds," and "tourist affective practices at the site of writer's houses" (18). As is often the case when one visits a museum, it's easy to be waylaid while reading this book: to be drawn away from its overall plan by the fascinating history of a single object. Fortunately, Watson is a good tour guide. After her introduction helpfully previews her book's assumptions and claims, she reminds readers that "specific authors or places" can be tracked via the index (21) and distills her argument in a take-away final section appropriately titled "A postcard." Part cultural history, part phenomenological and psychological study, part exercise in reader response (especially as the author inserts herself into her own text), The Author's Effects engagingly insists that we attend to the presence and particularity of its examples, that we share Watson's fascination with the ability of each to "effect" the author it evokes.

Reading this book, however, recalls visiting a museum not just because of its organizational structure, but also because of its theoretical framework. According to Watson, her study is "an exercise in literary and cultural history, an exploration of the history of the idea of the author within the history of reading" (17). Thinking of the writer's house museum as a "quasi-literary genre" (7) allows her literally to read museums as well as chosen individual objects that, she suggests, "house a writer" (11). Surveying objects and spaces comparatively, she seeks to understand "how the very idea of the writer's house and by extension that of the writer's house museum first emerges and becomes culturally recognizable" (7). In this book, then, Watson builds upon her groundbreaking study of literary tourism as cultural phenomenon in The Literary Tourist (2006) as well as on her successive work in this field, including her edited collection Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture (2009).

Watson's analysis deploys Jean Baudrillard's theory of how antique objects signify time, particularly the "fold" that both signals and suspends the collapse of space and time between such objects and the subject perceiving them (Baudrillard, "Subjective Discourse," in Candlin and Guins, eds., The Object-Reader, 2009). Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space (1958) also informs her readings of museums and their displays as "spaces of the imagination" (14). Scrutinizing the space between the noun "effect" and the verb "effect," Watson also probes "the variable meanings and power of the possessive apostrophe" in the phrase "writer's house museum" (7). Whereas other studies of literary tourism approach this museum as the site of writing, Watson sees the museum, as well as objects that share its function, as sites of reading "which disavow the medium of the book, erasing it in favour of a fantasy of immediate intimacy with the author" (21). Emphasizing the nexus of space, time, author, and reader, Watson periodically reminds the reader of her own space, time, and authorial subjectivity:

Throughout, I have made a note of the date when I visited museums--this is because museums change and update their displays with what is, from my point of view, dismaying frequency, and from another, commendable energy. I have also occasionally mentioned where I drafted my various chapters. I have done this because no reader will think this of the slightest interest, as a reflection on the way that academic writing conventionally eschews any suggestion that it emerges from a particular body, place, and time, and on the nature of the quite other sorts of writing and reading that do elicit the desire in their readers to date and locate them more fully through searching out writer's houses. (21)

Watson's obvious pleasure in assembling an abundance of scholarly "fun facts" about author's "effects" and their relationship to observers, collectors, and curators makes this book a delightful read. Discussing, for example, the portable loo-seat that traveled to Iraq with Agatha Christie as she worked on Murder in Mesopotamia (1936), Watson considers what connects a questing reader to an object or location associated with an author--and what short-circuits that connection. Some of the objects and sites whose history she treats are familiar to academic readers (who are also likely to be literary tourists, whether secretly or openly): Shakespeare's skull, birthplace, and New Place; Charlotte Brontë's wedding bonnet and Emily Dickinson's white dress; Henry David Thoreau's cabin in the woods, no longer extant but commemorated by many replicas, including one adjacent to Walden Pond's car-park that seems to satisfy less ambitious tourists (175). In writing of other familiar authorial mementos such as Poe's raven, Watson shows how conventional associations between object and
author have been rewritten. The original raven, Watson notes, was a pet named Grip that belonged to Charles Dickens. As the third of three ravens he owned, Grip was eventually stuffed, displayed at Gad's Hill, and immortalized (so to speak) as a character in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), illustrated below, as well as mentioned by Dickens in his 1849 preface to the novel (59).

![Barnaby Rudge and Grip, painting by Fred Barnard](image)

But what about Edgar Allan Poe? Though Poe discussed the character of Dickens's raven in reviewing *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841 and four years later wrote his own famous poem on the bird, Watson notes that its connection to Dickens's bird remains "conjectural" (61). In 1870, after Dickens died, his stuffed raven was auctioned off as his source of inspiration and eventually bought by an American collector named Richard A. Gimbel, whose passions included Dickensiana.

In turn, Gimbel donated Grip (along with various other objects) to the Free Library of Philadelphia. But while Grip's connection to Dickens has been largely forgotten, the public imagination has come to identify the stuffed, imported raven as Poe's source of inspiration and the embodiment of American Romanticism. The process by which Dickens's pet bird became attached to Poe, Watson concludes, "may be viewed as paradigmatic of the entire nineteenth- and early twentieth-century project of founding American authorship through various systems of appropriation of British literary relics, manuscripts, and sites" (60).

The case of the raven also illustrates the difference between focusing on a writer's house, as do most studies of house museums, and thinking about houses and material objects historically and generically (5-6). Initiated by William and Mary Howitt in 1847, the practice of writing about the "homes and haunts" of famous writers persists today in coffee-table books, and with few exceptions, academic studies tend to analyze single authors or locations rather than investigating how an author may be "housed" through historical conventions, curatorial practices, and emotional associations. (The exceptions include Harald Hendrix's *Writer's Houses and the Making of Memory* [2008], Alison Booth's *Homes and Haunts* [2016], and Linda Young's "Writers' House Museums," in my *Literary Tourism and the British Isles* [2019].)

As noted above, *The Author's Effects* is not only a cultural history but also a study in perception and psychology. Besides recalling the history of Dickens's raven, Watson examines other objects associated with writers and speculates about the nature of their imaginative power to conjure the author. Taking as examples Dorothy Wordsworth's shoes, Charlotte Brontë's corset, and Emily Dickinson's reputed white dress, she compares women's clothing to men's accessories--Cowper's nightcap, Ibsen's top-hat--as signs of the author. "Generally," she suggests, "clothing belonging to women writers demonstrably teeters closer to the pornographic than to the iconic and metonymic, for it tends to insist upon presenting the actual body of the woman writer in its entirety rather than arguing its apotheosis into authorship" (92).

Beyond clothing and accessories, writers' desks tell their own stories. According to Watson, the extent to which a displayed desk--even an inkwell--can conjure up the writer at work depends upon whether the object is perceived to be "at home" (108). For example, a writing table in Chawton Cottage--which may or may not have been used by Jane Austen--can more effectively conjure an image of Austen writing her novels than the writing-desk housed in the British Library, even though it's more likely the one she used (107). Also, while commenting on Samuel Johnson's coffee-pot, she astutely notes the power of captions to "[enable] objects to tell their secret history of the author" (123). Watson's caption commentary could be the key to her critical enterprise: when she writes that "it is diverting to imagine a writer's house museum as all captions and no objects" (123), she has, in fact, described her book.

Indeed, even though Watson periodically reminds us where she's been and where she's going, her habit of furnishing extended historical and interpretive "captions" for each item sometimes makes the larger thread of her discussion hard to follow, as I noted at the outset. Losing the forest for the trees can be a particular risk for cultural studies in general, since they tend to feature narrative juxtapositions or riffs, open-ended speculations, and the linking of seemingly disparate details, all with the goal of richly contextualizing the often overlooked artifact.
Nevertheless, Watson's approach is precisely what is required to theorize literary tourism more broadly and writer's house museums more specifically, and, even more narrowly, to decode the objects that "house" an author. It's fascinating to follow Watson's well-informed mind as she wends her way among archival records, museum exhibits, critical discussions of writers and locations, and theoretical frameworks. I found her chapter on "the rhetoric of glass" (140) particularly provocative and insightful. As she contemplates examples of the vitrine, spectacles, window, and mirror, she suggests:

Glass is the material by which the writer's house museum thinks through, dramatizes, and fetishizes impossibilities: the desire to see the writer in the flesh, the desire to see what the writer once saw in the here and now, and the desire to share in the writer's visions for real. It enables--and disables--these ambitions. (141)

Approaching her conclusion, Watson considers the likelihood that some writer's house museums--Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford, Washington Irving's Sunnyside--may be at risk of becoming "monuments to forgotten national treasures" (199). Even as developing nations have created new, state-funded writer's house museums, Anglo-American cultural critics have challenged the idea of a national literature, which propelled the creation of many such museums in Britain and the U.S. during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (231). But Watson is not pessimistic. Having tried to show that writer's house museums "are all designed to pull off much the same trick" of putting "the reader into the imagined presence of the author," of bringing about "an illusion of intimacy" (227-28), she optimistically imagines how that connection may be sustained, whether through literary biographies focused on material objects or by immersive technologies that help the museum visitor achieve the imagined connection (230-31)--including inviting the selfies that now substitute for old-fashioned postcards.

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