

Klara Stephanie Szlezák. *“Canonized in History”: Literary Tourism and 19th-Century Writers’ Houses in New England.* American Studies – A Monograph Series 250. Heidelberg: Winter, 2015, 346 pp., 96 illustr., € 60.00.

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Literary tourism doesn’t necessarily have much to do with literature. Nevertheless, making sense of it can demand the kind of close reading skills that are a trademark of literary criticism. Klara Szlezák brings these skills to bear on three 19th-century writers’ houses in New England: the Longfellow House – Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site in Cambridge, the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, and Herman Melville’s Arrowhead in Pittsfield (the Berkshires). These houses have been “canonized in history” because “they come down the years to us bearing messages” (Coleman 1933: 3; see 42–43). This pronouncement, made by a former director of the American Association of Museums, inspires the title and epigraph of the monograph, but it is a bit misleading. Szlezák sets out to show how meanings are not merely borne but made. It is her contention that writers’ houses are meaningful because they are displayed in specific ways or “staged” (190). What they stage is domesticity, which is significant because the United States is a nation “obsessed with houses”: “The museum settings reiterate an iconography with which generations of audiences have been familiarized through period room displays and visualizations, such as paintings, etchings, and prints, so that the core images of a past domesticity have by now entered collective memory” (70–71; see also 27–28). Indeed, domesticity is more firmly lodged in “collective memory” than is literature (76). The writer’s house, then, is a kind of a text for a non- or post-literary public, and the meaning of literary tourism unfolds between its four walls – or across the imbricated spaces of house, region, nation, and marketplace – rather than between the covers of a book or across the page (78).

Szlezák approaches her topic through three exemplary case studies that are synchronic, since they involve actual museums that could be stops on any tourist’s itinerary, but also demonstrate through their grouping the historical genesis of literary tourism. The first case involves a once-popular author whose house has outlasted his fame (130). The Longfellow House, already an attraction in 1852, was present at the “[o]nset of [l]iterary [t]ourism” (114) and helped cement New England’s status as literary cradle for the nation (3, 117, 144). It was also one of the first of its kind to become a National Historic Site in 1972 (123). This had something to do with the house’s history as a former headquarters for General

Washington; Longfellow commemorated the former occupant in one of his most popular poems (107, 136). Szlezák tells the story of commemorating the poet himself with an archivist's eye for detail. One of the strengths of her book is the sheer amount of information it collects from diverse sources: entries in guest books, inventories of gift shops, bequests and bureaucratic memos, letters between relatives and to and from public trusts, real estate advertisements, newspaper articles, postal records about commemorative stamps. The story she tells through these diverse sources, while interesting in itself, also serves her larger argument about the extra-literary meaning of literary tourism. In Longfellow's case, visitors travel to the famous house to participate in "collective rituals" only tangentially related to the poems (139–140, at 139). The poet's oblivion underscores the contemporary irrelevance of writing.

The second case study connects domesticity and poetry in a more substantive way. Emily Dickinson is widely known as "the most private of poets", though scholars suggest that her reclusiveness may have been exaggerated for the sake of mythmaking (187, 188–189). The house she formerly occupied in Amherst has been arranged to publicly stage her privacy, the artful arrangement of spaces suggesting a lyrical connection between the interior of the house and the poet's interiority (216). The result is a kind of 'sanctified space' that "literary pilgrims" visit with "devotional reverence" (172), though of course the inner sanctum is only a few steps away from a "well-stocked gift store" (210). Szlezák is evidently quite taken with the museum. As is the case with Longfellow, she provides a detailed history of various preservation efforts, telling the tale of the two houses on the premises, the two warring Dickinson factions, and the multiple repositories of manuscripts and belongings. The museum does not attempt to gather Dickinson's scattered remains (it is unlikely that the Houghton library would ever give up its bequest anyway) but stresses the importance of the domestic space over "artefactual objective authenticity" (211–212, 214). It displays replicas of period furniture and a white dress similar to the one Dickinson might have worn to good domestic and literary effect. Indeed, visiting the Emily Dickinson Museum produces an experience very much like reading: "A close reading of the present-day version of Dickinson's bedroom thus suggests that the private nature of Dickinson's life, her character, and her work, in terms of its creation and circulation, translates into space in the form of the (reconstructed) privacy of her bedroom" (215). This house in particular shows how proper curation succeeds in transposing lyricism from the poetry to the poet's chamber.

If the first case study shows how domesticity can take the place of literature, and the second shows how domesticity can approximate literature, the third shows how it offers a productive contrast to 'high' literature: "Herman Melville's Arrowhead lends itself to the exploration of strategies through which so-called

'high-brow' literature can be made usable and non-popular forms of culture can be adapted in the context of literary tourism" (218). Most people don't read Melville, but everybody has heard of *Moby-Dick* (265). The fame of the novel, Ishmael-like, floats free from the wreck of Melville's career (267). It is popularly assumed that this shipwreck even proves the author's greatness. He is misunderstood today; he was misunderstood in his own lifetime; and this "legendary neglect" rather than Melville himself is revealed through the history of his house: "Just when Arrowhead was sold out of the Melville family in 1927, the name Melville was thus after long years of insignificance reemerging in the popular mind" (237). Szlezák, once again, provides wonderfully engaging accounts of the history of the house and the author's relation to it, with delicious details like the worthless biscuit tin in which Melville's widow stored his final manuscripts, and the north-facing piazza which ostensibly gave its name to the *Piazza Tales*, only to be disassembled and shipped to New Jersey by a subsequent owner. Melville himself aired some of his domestic grievances in short pieces like "I and My Chimney" (1856). The author who was ambivalent about domesticity during his life has remained strangely 'homeless' after his death. It is Melville's ambivalent relation to home that is on display at Arrowhead, and this ambivalence is marketed as a sign of the author's significance.

Just as Melville has been neglected, so too has literary tourism (19). Szlezák's study is an attempt to find a home within American studies for this orphan discipline. It does not offer an apology for not reading books, rather a plea for reading tourism with the same rigor scholars apply to their primary texts. Stemming from the recognition that there are more literary tourists than readers, "*Canonized in History*" mounts a rearguard action to preserve high culture by finding a place for it in popular culture (268, 19). In this sense, the houses are not only canonized *in history*, they also help form the canon. Houses domesticate literature, and in doing so become mediators between past and present, "between readers and writers" (25), popular and high culture, tourists and scholars (25, 49, 51, 269). Indeed, writers' houses are places where tourists and specialists can actually meet, and if they provide less rigorous settings than seminar rooms, they are also potentially more inclusive – or at least more likely to turn a profit.

Writers' houses are asked to do so much, however, that it is hard to know what to do with them. The first 100 pages of the book, devoted to defining the object, history, and methods appropriate to the study, struggle in vain to define the conceptual parameters of literary tourism. I have already mentioned Szlezák's outstanding archival work. It is so outstanding that it turns up a plethora of sources and artifacts: biscuit tins, chimneys, dresses, spinning wheels, a harpoon, pianos, postcards. Theories seem to turn up in equal profusion. In her efforts to explore the spatial, historical, artifactual, and economic components of

literary tourism (16, 11, 23, 30), Szlezák invokes concepts of high and popular culture, material culture (38), thing theory (39), memory studies (35), collective identity (43), heritage and nostalgia (51–52), the usable past (54–55), “iconographic reference[s] to national history” (56), civil religion, and the notion of the sacred (90–94, 145). It is this final concept, understood through the anthropological studies of the Turners and Dean MacCannell’s work on the semiotics of tourism, that ultimately proves to be most useful (87). Even in secularized America, the home is still sacred, and this sacredness – like other forms of authenticity – can and indeed must be staged (94, 101–102). The recognition that authenticity is *staged* collapses the difference between tourist and scholar. It is the curator, charged with housing both artifacts and archives, who unites sacred texts with sacred places. “*Canonized in History*” is concerned with “how culture turns places—former homes of writers—into ‘somewhere to go’”, but it also advocates the curatorial art of turning places into destinations effectively (21). Szlezák shows herself to be adept at this art in the arrangement of her case studies, but there is still some work to be done in putting theory on display.

Still, the story she tells has a discernable plot, which means it has protagonists (tourists, scholars, curators) and an antagonist as well. The latter takes the improbable form of a middlebrow literary popularizer who went by the name of Ted Malone and broadcast a series of 32 book-related radio shows for NBC starting in 1939. Malone pops up as a mercurial figure in all three case studies because he broadcast from writers’ houses – or as close as he could come to them – though he never succeeded in doing a show on Melville. Malone’s centrality to the story is illustrated by the photographs of his broadcast from the Longfellow house (and the numerous photographs, many of them taken by the author, are another strength of the study [168–169]). However, while Malone made use of various artifacts like squeaky chairs and clocks and drawers for sound effects, he could not invite visitors into the actual spaces.

[T]he “magic of radio” only gratifies one of the senses, resulting in an imbalance between the experiences that a literary pilgrimage should provide and those that radio actually can provide. No matter how well a radio program is done, it cannot substitute the experience furnished by a pilgrim’s physical presence in the very spaces that a poet occupied. (149)

Szlezák knows that these spaces are staged, just as she knows that domesticity is much an ideology as it is a place; however, actual homes do seem to have a residual magic that “come[s] down the years to us bearing messages”. Her study is thus also a guidebook for scholars inclined to make the pilgrimage. When tourists don’t read books in the seminar rooms, the seminar should go to the tourist attraction.

Works Cited

Coleman, Laurence Vail. 1933. *Historic House Museums*. Washington, D. C.: The American Association of Museums.