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Birthplace

by Gary Leising

As I planned a second trip to London for college students, I wanted to be sure a day-trip to Stratford-upon-Avon was included. My colleague, a Renaissance and Restoration literature professor, wasn't so sure. "Stratford's too touristy," was his public stance, but his not-so-hard-to-discriminate secret reason was that, somewhere in his post-Jacobean gut, he carefully nursed an unnatural hatred of Shakespeare. I won the argument, explaining that the non-English majors on the trip wouldn't care whether any literary critics thought Beaumont or Fletcher were just as good, but they will have heard of Shakespeare, and if we could get them excited about the history of English theater via the tourist-friendly site of the Bard's nativity, they may find their ways to the obscurities he so cherishes. My secret reason for wanting a return, though, was that I was completely unimpressed with my visit on the previous year's trip. I recall walking out of the birthplace on a cool, slightly overcast morning, thinking that I wasn't sufficiently inspired or moved. There I had been, I thought, standing in the room where the greatest writer in English history had been born, and here I am now, trying to decide between the two arrows on the sign: "Garden Path" or "Gift Shop and Exit." As I took a photograph of four of the students on the trip (make that four photographs, as each one of them wanted the same photograph on their digital camera), I felt let down, and promised myself I wouldn't be let down when I visited the birthplace again.

While we waited at Gatwick airport with our travel-agent provided guide for the coach to arrive on trip number two, we chatted about what we had seen last year, what we kept in the itinerary. I mentioned "The birthplace," and the guide, a charming sixty-something British man, said, "Ah, the birthplace, everyone says it that way, like it's Bethlehem. No need for other identifications or qualifications." He was right, at least for me, for that moment in the trip. I was drawn to the Shakespeare house because there I'd touch a piece of history, walk through a historic place, talk with ghosts of the past, or whatever it was we tourists like to do when we visit sites that take us to far away lands and times.

But let me be specific: I wanted to be moved in the birth room. I didn't care about where the family's best bed was kept to show off their wealth or where John Shakespeare made gloves. I didn't care about the period wallpaper, the ship's timbers, or the mud and animal hair stuck in the plaster. I wanted William Shakespeare—not the one image in the National Portrait Gallery thought to be painted from life or the bust above his grave in Holy Trinity Church done recently enough after his death it's presumed accurate, but a child, a newborn, coming into life screaming and covered with the

otherworldly mess from his mother's womb. Weak, helpless, unformed, unable to speak, illiterate, the Shakespeare I wanted to touch was not the woodcut image on the frontispiece of a "Complete Works" I bought from a bookstore's remainder rack as a precocious literature loving high school student. That Shakespeare looked almost not human, the head too round, the cheeks too full, the perspective far too two-dimensional to be real. In the birth room, I was going to meet the memory of a child, of someone who hadn't written *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *MacBeth*, name your favorite play, the memory of someone human.

Of course, Stratford was day two on the itinerary. During the first day, we visited Oxford. In the middle of the day, we ate lunch at a pub called The Crown Inn, off Cornmarket Street, which, a tourist website, *The Scholar's Guide to Oxford* tells that Shakespeare visited and "was on very good terms with the landlord. But he was on even better terms with the landlord's wife, Jane Davenant (whom some believe is the 'Dark Lady' of The Sonnets) and is widely believed to have fathered her son...William." Was it hard to get away from Shakespeare, or was I just anxiously looking for him? Oxford has its own literary histories. In the great dining hall at Christ Church, we spied the hidden door that inspired Lewis Carroll to create the White Rabbit's secret entrances and exits. Way up the street were facing pubs—one, the Lamb and Flag, which I had visited before, played host to Thomas Hardy as he wrote *Jude the Obscure*; the other, the Eagle, was a gathering for C.S. Lewis and his crowd. That Oxford dining hall (more well-known at this point as the inspiration for a set in the Harry Potter movies) was lined with portraits of famous graduates of Christ Church. They looked generally the same to me—old school, drab, representational portraits—except for one just to the right of the exit. Much smaller than the rest and with a sad touch of color and thick, worried-looking, tired-of-the-twentieth-century lines through the face, hung W.H. Auden. Shakespeare wouldn't be the only icon—or should I just say it: *hero*—I'd encounter on this trip.

The birthplace (I keep wondering if it should be The Birthplace, or The Birthplace, or maybe even in some Middle English font not available to modern computer users?) began our agenda for the second day. Our over-anxious tour guide roused us too early, and we ended up outside the Shakespeare Center exhibition next to the birthplace with a half-hour until opening time. It was nice that we could get photographs of the street side of the house without the usual crowds of tourists around. The downside: we had to dodge the frequent van making a delivery to one of the shops or cafes on this typically pedestrian-only street. The wait was probably good, because it allowed the students time to do whatever it is college students do when they're bored (i.e., listen to their iPods or flip their far-out-of-signal-range cell phones open and closed, hoping for a miracle text-message about what their friends were up to) and gave me some quiet time to think, to prepare myself for the moment of inspiration I had been building up to.

In these reflective moments, I considered how Stratford was touristy—the street we were on was filled with small cafes and restaurants, most of which appeared interchangeable—don’t like our food, no worries, you can get the same food next door in a place with a color scheme and tablecloths that are more to your liking. (Don’t like tablecloths at all? Try three doors down.) I also thought about Anne Hathaway’s cottage on the outskirts of Stratford: we had visited it last year, and one of my concessions to my Bard-hating colleague was to eliminate it from this year’s schedule. I thought back to the year before, recalling how this thatch-roofed home set among its own perfectly maintained English gardens had the non-commodified charm (despite its gift shop and machines which, for a pound, would press the lines of a sonnet into a flattened one pence coin), not to mention a sprawling green area with sculptures inspired by Shakespeare plays. These ranged from a massive bronze wall with the British Isles cut out of its shape to represent the history plays. The cut out islands were placed in a gravel bed behind the wall—one couldn’t help but wonder if this suggested that the United Kingdom, in Shakespeare’s historical conception, had been divinely ripped from some place and put right where they were meant to be; or if some other force—the human wills of kings, queens, nobles, and peasants—led to this drop from the sky, a fall from grace similar to Adam and Eve’s, with its own calamitous and somehow solidly reassuring results for Western civilization. What could be a better way to explain the divine right of kings than time studying that sculpture? Should such weighty issues not interest visitors, though, elsewhere was a sculpture of Bottom, as a donkey, bestially giving his best to a bent over Titania. Hee-haw.

Days later, I’d be seeing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Globe (hee-haw) in the pouring rain. As the then de-assed Bottom (it strikes me that anyone unfamiliar with the play may have a very odd *Titus Andronicus* sort of image in their minds at that phrase) played the death of Pyramus, the shirtless actor dove across the wet stage on his bare chest and stomach like it was a child’s slip-and-slide. About a week later, I was among the groundlings at a matinee performance of an exquisite *King Lear* (probably made more exquisite by my proximity to the wonderfully mad, noble, pathetic, insightful, and hurting king played by David Calder, not to mention the bloody bedlamite beggars circulating through the standing crowd). Ironic that, as the 16th century machines for making the sounds of winds and the cymbal-crash thunder sounded, the London sky was clear blue, the sun brilliant over the theater’s wooden O, and a light breeze tugging at the standards and flags above the thatched roof. As a student on the trip put it, “We had *Lear* weather for *Midsummer*, and *Midsummer* weather for *Lear*.” That’s London, I thought, always handing you something other than what you want or expect. Of course, like Oliver Twist, we travelers eat it up and ask for more. It rained when our group took a cruise on the Thames in 2007. The same thing happened in 2008. But we’ll do another cruise on our next trip to London, and probably never consider planning some kind of educational trip to the

Caribbean or a cruise around the Mediterranean instead of down the Thames, in rainy weather, toward the Tower's Traitor's Gate. "Please sir...."

But back to the big "May I have another" moment on this trip: my return to Shakespeare's birthplace. I was determined it wouldn't be a letdown this time around. As we finally made our way to the first entrance to the exhibition on the Bard's life and times, I tried hanging back rather than rushing ahead to get to the room I so desperately wanted to be moved by. Maybe I can let the students get ahead so I could be more alone, solitary, contemplative in the birth bedroom. Just me, my thoughts, the inspiration of the ages, and a guide/interpreter in period costume. But that didn't work. Some of our students weren't all that interested in Shakespeare, so I tried to be a good teacher and engage them with the exhibit. "See these small wooden paddles? They were 'books' in the school young William attended, with the alphabet or math problems on them. And, even in elementary school, he would have learned Latin." When one young woman looked at me like I had just told her Shakespeare was educated by aliens, I added, "These 'books'" (here I made air quotes with my fingers) "were also disciplinary." And I brought the flat side of the panel down on the crown of her head.

Thus having brought a desire for learning into my charges, I led them to the displayed copy of the first folio. "If not for this book, who knows what we'd know of Shakespeare's works, whether everyone would love *Hamlet*?" One young woman's look said, "*Hamlet*'s boring, so I added, "or *Romeo and Juliet*?" A visible expression of "awwww, true love" lit her face. Well, Shakespeare scholars could give an answer, but the question seemed to set a suitably reverential tone among our small group. From there, we happy few set off for the house, pausing only momentarily so one souvenir hunting young woman could pay a pound to press the writer's profile into a flattened penny, which was worth two American pennies that day.

I tried my "hang back" strategy again, but as one of only two people on the trip who had been to this place before, everyone waited for me to lead. (In the previous day, the students had learned that my colleague got lost on any venture that, geometrically speaking, involved more than one point: "Continue down Cornmarket Street until you get to Carfax Tower" in Oxford led him far past the tall tower, then left to Christ Church meadow.) Of course, exiting the exhibition into the garden puts you in clear sight of the entrance to the house; still, the students dutifully followed me. Whether that was out of deference or uncertainty, I couldn't say. I also couldn't speak of my desire to see the birth bedroom as a point of inspiration out of fear of my colleague's (and, then, with that sanction, the various smart-alecky students') ridicule. All of them seemed infected with the post-modern irony and cynicism that deems ideas of inspiration, of interest, of fascination, of—dare I say—true love for anything as corny,

false, distrusted, and useless. (I think of one student's comment on a teaching evaluation from a poetry course: it described my interest in the subject as "passionate and peculiar, but sometimes corny.")

I felt this way in part because, as we sat in the Cleveland airport waiting for our flight to Gatwick, my colleague pulled out his guidebook and proclaimed to the group that he made a poor choice because he hadn't checked out the contents before purchasing it. "Look," he said, "there's a section on a 'blue plaque hunt.' Who the hell wants to hunt blue fucking plaques?" Since I think some of the students still thought I was "cool"—I was wearing a pretty trendy pair of shoes that day—I didn't make a passionate speech about the list of blue plaque houses I had tucked in my carryon, about the desire to see the houses the writers I admire had lived in. It even made sense to me to walk in the footsteps of the fictional characters I loved, too. How many people (myself included on two separate trips) spend time in Dublin searching out the gold plaques embedded in sidewalks bearing lines from *Ulysses*, or climb the stairs in Joyce's Martello to emerge at its sea-windblown turret-top thinking of "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan" doing the same? After Stratford, we'd be taking a bus through the Cotswolds, stopping for shopping and a walk through Bourton, the town, I kept telling everyone, where young Clarissa Dalloway spent time in the confused relationships of the youthful well-to-do with Peter, Sally, and Richard. As the only one on the trip who had read *Mrs. Dalloway*, that pleasure would be mine alone—wondering off the tourist path, I imagined each of the large, creek-front, walled in mansions could have been where Clarissa kissed Sally. Each tree-lined walk, each garden could have been where Clarissa chose Richard over Peter or where she finally told Peter of her decision. I wasn't in 2008 necessarily, but I was in the stream of literature and history, part of something larger than myself and the place and the book—part, in short, of the whole world. How do you say that while you're sitting in the Cleveland airport discussing the pros and cons of Fodor's, Frommer's, and Lonely Planet and not sound corny, especially when your colleague wins the students over with his judicious use of the f-word?

In London, we'd be staying not far from Regent's Park, where Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith cross paths, and also not far from the Bloomsbury area, a rich game trail for anyone on a blue plaque hunt. My search plan included a visit to, of course, some Virginia Woolf homes, and a few poets' houses: W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Sylvia Plath. I found the Woolf homes easily enough—on our first evening in London I led our group through Gordon Square on a walk toward the West End in search of dinner. There's a plaque at 50 Gordon Square commemorating the various Bloomsbury group members who lived in the area. Woolf herself lived at 46; a plaque there marks the home of John Maynard Keynes. The number of homes with more than one famous resident does make it easy for an itinerant plaque hunter—or for someone who just wonders past and happens to notice as

much—really feel the eddies and streams of history. Another Woolf house—on Fitzroy Square—also bears a marker as a residence of G.B. Shaw.

The search for plaques, though, isn't only about seeing the homes. It's also about the walking. Clarissa Dalloway knew as much about the vibrancy of walking in London, as she wonders, "did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely"? The answer is no, since, "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived." But it's not just her that survives: surviving, too, there's "part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself." Virginia Woolf survives; so, too, does Clarissa Dalloway, despite the fact that she never lived.

It's easy to think of the misty connections between people in London, both because of the ever-present mists and rains and because so many homes and streets have more than one historical importance. I had a pint of cask ale in a small pub called *The Queen's Larder*. It got that name because King George III, when mad, often stayed in an apartment nearby. To make him comfortable, his wife stored his favorite foods and drinks in the building that housed this pub. Because the pub was near the offices of Faber and Faber, when he is in London on business, supposedly, Seamus Heaney stops in *The Queen's Larder* for a drink. Just across the street stands St. George the Martyr Church, where Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were married. As I sipped an oaky-flavored bitter, I imagined Heaney nearby, or Queen Charlotte stocking her larder, worrying about her husband's health (as well as giving birth to fifteen children and establishing Kew Gardens), or Hughes and Plath just married, walking out of the church happy, unaware of what the future holds for the two of them. Hughes wrote about that day in the remarkable book *Birthday Letters*, where the poem "A Pink Wool Knitted Dress" described what seems like a rather unremarkable wedding at his parish church (which he didn't know he had) because Westminster Abbey was out of the question. St. George's sexton was their best man, despite the children he had just loaded into the bus for a trip to the zoo: "All the prison animals had to be patient," Hughes writes, "While we married." To Plath, he writes, "You shook, you sobbed with joy, you were ocean depth / Brimming with God." I imagined that moment, that pink wool dress, Plath's eyes, which Hughes describes as "great cut jewels / Jostling their tear-flames" and think of this couple in that moment, not much different from any other anxiously marrying couple. I hold that image in my mind in stark contrast with the various images of these two as literary Titans, an icon for feminism and a future laureate, locked amid the battles of literary critics. As I downed the last bitter swallow of my pint, I expected a couple to emerge from the church, rich with unyielding possibilities.

I'd make my way to see Sylvia Plath's home on Chalcot

Square near Primrose Hill a few mornings later. It was raining as I made my way there, but by the time I got to her house, the rain had turned into that mist Clarissa Dalloway thinks of. It was chilly, and damped one to the bones, but wasn't heavy enough to justify the carrying of an umbrella. On the way there I passed Dylan Thomas's old home on Delancey Street, where I noticed a large jar of Nutella on the table in the front window. That and the pink sweater over the back of a chair brought the present into focus, and helped explain London. There are, as Mrs. Dalloway says, parts of people we'd never meet everywhere. I imagined someone coming home the night before, taking off her sweater while she waited for a piece of toast, spreading the hazelnut sauce over it, then packing off to bed. Perhaps at the same window decades ago Dylan Thomas was struck with a line or image and began at a different table to write a poem; perhaps he sipped a glass of whiskey. I wondered if that woman's Nutella was less important than Thomas's whiskey; was her taking off her sweater less of an important act than Thomas's jotting down a sonorous phrase?

A short walk away was 23 Fitzroy Road, bearing a blue plaque in honor of "poet, dramatist and playwright" W.B. Yeats. Before I got there, I saw the streetlight posts studded with yellow signs bearing the silhouettes of what looked like meerkats perched above their underground homes, emblazoned with the legend, "Neighborhood Watch." Trepidation filled my walk toward 23: someone—maybe the man who appeared to be resting in that lorry parked on the corner?—would call the police, tell them, "I've spotted another American literature-nut taking a picture of Yeats's flat." I'd be stopped with an official "What's all this, then?" and hauled away to a penal colony, forced to copy out Dickens or Milton by hand. But in the misty rain, no one seemed to notice me. As I approached the light green house and read the plaque, I thought of another person who did the same thing: Sylvia Plath, looking for a flat for herself and her two children, saw this one for let and took the fact that Yeats had lived there as a good omen. As on Delancey Street, I could see into the downstairs window, and noticed the Delft-style pottery. Was that the flat occupied by the kindly older neighbor from whom she bought stamps? Through the upstairs window—was that Plath's?—I could see the glowing ball of a chandelier, a fan-like pattern stretched out around where it entered the ceiling. I thought of her putting the manuscript of *Ariel* together beneath that light. I thought, too, of the scene from the movie made about her life: she is taken out of the door I was standing feet from, her entire body covered with a red blanket, loaded into an ambulance which drives off through London's snowy streets, her now motherless children left in the care of a nurse.

Thinking of the past, it's hard to separate the lives and births from the inevitable deaths. Time brings everything to an end: describing the practice of giving one last cup of ale to someone walking to his execution, London's biographer Peter Ackroyd tells us that the city "consoles those whom it is about to consume." That relationship seems to exist with travelers

and tourists, too. In Stratford, we'll all part of the bardolatry enterprise, but we're moved and comforted by the memorial and grave of Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, especially since it is so near to the baptismal font probably used for his very baptism. And there we have it, his baptism and death: two dates we know from his life with historical certainty, both commemorated in the same building. An ale cup and the scaffold in London past; a baptismal font and a grave forever in Stratford.

It's always intrigued me that we don't have a written record of Shakespeare's birth, though I suppose there are scores of famous people that's true for. (Think, too, how many unknown men and women have left no record of their lives at all.) But we have the Shakespeare birthplace, the house that drew pilgrims like Charles Dickens, John Keats, Mark Twain, and Thomas Hardy. (P.T. Barnum, supposedly, once wanted to buy the home and ship it piece by piece to the U.S.—think of the money I'd have saved on travel, not to mention not getting shafted on the weakness of the dollar, had he followed through with that plan.) And there I was, walking into the room where Shakespeare was born, students and disinterested colleague in tow. Immediately, the costumed guide lit up and began talking about the lives of women during Elizabethan days. She also talked about the chamberpot, how it would be emptied out the window into the street. (Interestingly, she didn't mention that it was filth that led to the discovery that this house was owned by William's father, John Shakespeare: according to a BBC website, there was an instance of John "leaving a muck pile outside his Henley street home and records show he was fined for this offence, proving he did indeed own a house there!" Shakespeare's birthplace, uncovered because of a pile of shit—this is what I wanted, I think, the body of the Bard himself, in all its stinking, human glory.)

That's when *it* hit me—not the awe-inspiring moment I had expected, but a feeling of satisfaction with the visit. I started asking questions about the birth itself, about what the medical procedure of giving birth would have been like. I imagined not the infant William Shakespeare, but the ordinary, discarded pieces of tissue, the expelled fluids, the human "waste." The placenta may have been buried in the backyard as a superstition. No doctors would have been present—no men at all would have been around—but the mother-to-be would have had her close, married, women friends there. These "gossips" as they were called, would have had some idea of what to do, probably from their own experience; one them, I thought, must have cut the umbilical cord. It's possible, but unlikely, that forceps would have been used in the birth. I was satisfied as I walked down the back stairs—stairs added when later generations turned the house into an inn—that I had touched greatness, if only because I had seen through the greatness of the Bard to his humanity, especially at a moment of weakness, at his earliest moments of life.

I thought back to Shakespeare after leaving the house where

Yeats and Plath had both lived. Not far from there on Chalcot Square was a blue plaque for Plath herself. Plath's daughter tells us that this house was "where my mother and father had their first London home, where they had lived for twenty-one months, where my mother wrote *The Bell Jar*, published *The Colossus*, and gave birth to me. This was a place where she had truly lived and where she'd been happy and productive—with my father." Of course, the biographers can also tell us that, when Hughes returned late from an appointment at the BBC, Plath destroyed the papers on his desk and his treasured copy of Shakespeare out of suspicion and jealousy. When the young, small family moved out of London to Court Green in Fall 1961, this home was turned over to David and Assia Wevill.

I entered the square down the street from it, but because I was too afraid of looking like a tourist, stopping to figure out the numbering system before rushing to the plaque-embazoned home (probably a bit wary a meerkat or two would pop out of the ground and point at me—*You don't belong here!*), I ended up walking the entire perimeter of the square before finding that house. It was painted violet, a soothing color, especially that day as the rain was softening to a mist. The small yard in front was full of some bushy plant with tiny violet flowers budding on the ends of tiny stems. Their color was calming, and the plants looked as fragile as spider webs, like they might break if the rain came back harder. I didn't stay long, but thought quickly of Plath and Hughes taking their daughter to the square's green. Because of road construction or repairs of some sort, it was impossible to get to the green. (I had been able to walk into Gordon Square, a few days earlier, where the Bloomsbury group are commemorated with a small sign including a picture of Woolf and Strachey on a bench; I sat where I imagined that picture was taken, imagining Virginia Woolf sitting there nearly a century ago, saddened by the deaths in her family but full of the possibility of her remarkable writing career.) It seemed right that I couldn't go to Plath's green, as if that was a personal space cordoned off, just as so much of her life (of anyone's life really) remains separate from everyone who later seeks to know them. I thought of Auden's (whose portrait I'd seen in the dining hall he ate at as a young man) elegy for Yeats (whose home I had just come from): "The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living." The life, too, it seemed, changed as we reimagine it for ourselves.

I decided to walk the long way back to my hotel near Euston Station, since the rain had softened to a mist. It was so soft that an umbrella seemed unnecessary: it blocked so little moisture, and the mist was so fine that it seemed to hang in the air long enough to fill the space under the umbrella's moving shelter. With my map I knew to make my way up Primrose Hill, then down toward the zoo and through Regent's Park. The zoo, where Plath and Hughes had taken their children, and Primrose Hill, where Plath also would have taken them. At the top of the hill, the view was stunning, even in the mist. I could see St. Paul's easily; Wren's dome was instantly

recognizable. I was able to guess which tower was Parliament, which craggy building was Westminster Abbey. A silver sign bore an engraving of the view and legends for the buildings, but the beaded up layer of water made it hard to read without wiping it clean.

Two men were there with surveying equipment, and one of them said, "It's hard to make out that sign on a day like today." Recognizing my American accent in my answer, he began asking where I was from, what I was doing in London, and so on. He told me that they were up there checking the sight lines for new buildings. "Nothing new can go up if it blocks the views from Primrose Hill—the one good thing London Planning does." Even amid the mess of newer buildings, the kind of postmodern architecture that Prince Charles complains about, London's monuments dominated the skyline. Though cranes are visible everywhere, St. Paul's dome still looms over it all. As I walked down the hill toward London on what happened to be my last day there, I realized London's other monuments—its great literature and its history of varied individuals—stood clearly, too. Shakespeare, Plath, Yeats, Thomas, Shaw, Woolf, everyone who played out some part of their life in this city left a piece of who they were here somehow, yet each of them left something larger than the small houses they were born in, lived in, or died in. Like Christopher Wren who, the inscription on the floor of St. Paul's tells us, needed no monument but the cathedral, these writers need only as monuments *King Lear*, *Ariel*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*. London Planning doesn't need to worry about sight lines to preserve their homes; their work does that well enough. But some small preservation of the past, of their homes, connects us to the London of the past, and despite all that city's rich, royal, and imperial history, seeing their homes and walking in their footsteps connects us to their everyday lives. Understanding that, finding that transforms the tourist checking off a list of places to visit and monuments to see into a traveler, a human traveler who is one with the world's distant parts and past times in small and large ways.

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