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Thomas A. Prendergast, Poetical Dust: Poets' Corner and the Making of Britain

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Although T.S. Eliot, as Prendergast notes, never explicitly mentioned Poets' Corner in his works, his desire for "an orderly narrative of literary history" (10), made explicit in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," points at an orderly form of literature, pre-canonized and pre-digested. It is possible that this same desire was at the back, if not of the early interments of poets in Westminster, of the subsequent re-organizations of the Abbey space to accommodate this literary pantheon. Oscar Wilde, who for some years was the anonymous author of "The Poets' Corner," an anonymous column in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, suggested that one should divide the literary canon in two groups, the books one should already have read, and the books one should re-read (the third group included books one should not read at all): in a way he strikes at the very heart of the concept of national canon, indicating that the core authors are those that, whether read or not by the individual reader, form the collective consciousness of the nation. Thus late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers and intellectuals superimposed a modern ideology on a medieval artifact, and two separate burials (that of Edward the Confessor, who had been responsible for the construction of the church, in 1066, and that of Geoffrey Chaucer over three centuries later) became the founding stones of a cultural construction in which literature, politics and religion have a sometimes uneasy share. Since Westminster Abbey hosts the body of Edward the Confessor, a saint but above all a king, it becomes a site of national identity--something analogous to what is described in *St Erkenwald*. Of course, a medieval believer would inevitably associate the sacredness of the buried body with the sacredness of the space; it remains to be seen whether this may work also in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England, since the "cult" of Poets' Corner reached its apogee over the past two centuries. Prendergast is conscious of the fact that "the...attempt to make the Abbey of Westminster a special space that could at once produce reverence and money was a bit different from the larger medieval production of sacred space" (20), yet the clearer demarcation of this difference would be impossible, as shown in the Coda of the volume by the brief comparison with a space that is less religiously connoted, American Poets' Corner.

Edward the Confessor's canonization was, according to Prendergast, manufactured by the English community. The analysis of the canonization, set within the larger context of the cult of relics and (national) saints' bodies in medieval England, is fascinating, as is the wealth of historical details brought to the history of the Abbey in the late fourteenth century, and leading to a hypothesis concerning Chaucer's choice of his burial place. Prendergast makes clear the transition from saint's to king's body, from holiness to a kind of ideological sacredness. As Westminster moves more and more from the religious to the secular, its enshrining a king's (rather than a saint's) body becomes a sort of guarantee of the place as a shrine of the nation. But as the author correctly notes, only in the seventeenth century--after the burial of Edmund Spenser and the non-burial of William Shakespeare--did Poet's Corner

acquire the recognizable uniqueness for which it is famous today. In analyzing Spenser's role, Prendergast has some very shrewd intuitions--Spenser's own nostalgia authorizes and justifies the concept of a Poet's corner, but at the same time hits on the controversial center of the book: "The South Transept becomes a space that (like any cemetery) is driven by loss, but it is also a space that is different insofar as it necromantically repairs this loss with poetic phantasy" (43). Arguably any cemeterial space repairs the loss, though with a symbolic and emotional rather than a poetic phantasy; at the same time, the very idea of a physical monument to poetic fame clashes against the oft-repeated Horatian dictum that poetry is its own monument.

The paradox inherent in the construction is expressed, Prendergast argues, in the very structure of Poets' Corner, what he calls its "rational illegibility" (11), and in the incorporation of Poets' Corner in a medieval space like Westminster Abbey. The author seems less interested in another paradox, created by the Protestant reaction to a sacred space hosting the relics of saints and writers. Rather, the structure of the space thus adapted to Poets' Corner appears to fascinate him, so that at the end of the volume he provides not only a full alphabetical list of burials and monuments, but also a chronology of Poets' Corner, and a highly useful map of the space. This choice mirrors the highly systematic structure of the book, a structure on which he can build an articulate reading of the development of this consecrated space, and of the uses to which it was put, inserting also an analysis of the uses to which poets, critics and playwrights put the trope of funerary monuments and immortality in order to suit different agendas, as in the case of Ben Jonson (62) and Drayton (63-64), as well as their Victorian counterparts.

Prendergast harks back to his earlier *Chaucer's Dead Body. From Corpse to Corpus* (2004) by noting that, when eighteenth century viewers expressed concern at the absence of bodies in correspondence with some monuments, and vice versa, they were indicating "a discomfort with the absence of the body that can be traced to a kind of early modern version of the medieval obsession with the relic" (78). In fact it might be argued that the present book is a continuation of the previous study, only here the clear thesis set out in the 2004 work--the monumentalized poet as a lay version of the monumentalized medieval saint--has to take into account also the centuries following the fifteenth. This allows Prendergast to consider individual striking cases, from Edmund Spenser to John Dryden to Alexander Pope, thus retracing a tentative history of the construction of a literary canon in England. Incidentally, this also allows him to touch on a number of points more or less directly related to the monumentalization of poetry, such as the question of patronage, or the emergence of the concept of author's copyright.

Of course, the risk of this kind of book is to superimpose some kind of order on what is, Prendergast himself admits, "the anecdotally irresistible history of the Abbey" (105). Just as Poet's Corner cannot function as a systematic catalogue of canonical writers, so this book cannot attempt a unified reading of its cultural significance. It goes to Prendergast's credit that he is aware throughout of the dangers of his enterprise. By choosing a chronological path, he can point out absences and lapses (notably in the nineteenth century) that mark the encounters and clashes of literature and politics, as in the case of Byron, buried at Newstead given the unspoken assumption that his body would not have been received at the Abbey. Thanks to his historically-based approach Prendergast can engage in a dialogue with his sources (of which there are many) and thus highlight the contradictions inherent in a process of monumentalization of the nation's literary heritage, from the quasi-absence of women writers to the contrast between the desire to memorialize each English poet and the paradox inherent in the absence of some of these poets' bodies, which contradicted the "seemingly organic or naturalistic idea of Poets' Corner" (116) evoking instead, in the words of its

nineteenth-century critics, "a kind of registration office," as William Morris noted (117). A surprisingly apt conclusion to the story of Poets' Corner, and to Prendergast's book, is provided by the last burial: the funeral service (and subsequent interment of the ashes) of Laurence Olivier provides, as Prendergast notes, a satisfactory avatar for the absent Shakespeare, but at the same time reinforces the ambiguity in the perception of the possibility of a physical embodiment of poetry.

It would perhaps have been useful to set this analysis in a more wide-ranging comparative context: apart from a brief allusion to Ludwig's Walhalla (sometimes spelt Valhalla here, with a conscious allusion to the sacred space of Norse mythology) and from a flitting allusion to the Italian Campo Santo (presumably a reference to the Camposanto Vecchio in Pisa), the devising and development of Poet's corner is seen in isolation, which does not help us to understand its meaning or import; a comparison, for instance, with the Pantheons in Rome and Paris (or the planned Pantheon in Moscow) might have given a clearer sense of the change of perspective between the late Middle Ages and the late modernity in the European consciousness of its cultural past, while a reference to Ugo Foscolo's poem *Dei Sepolcri* (1806), which devotes a long section to the burial of writers in the Florentinian church of Santa Croce, would have shown that the emergence of a conscience of its literary past appear to accompany the birth of the idea of nation. Rather, by dedicating the Coda of the volume to the American Poets' Corner Prendergast reinforces an Anglo-centric perspective that obscures some of the meaning of the early modern and Victorian reflections on Poets' Corner. This sensation is reinforced by an obvious unease with Scottish writers, in spite of the "Britain" of the title. The effort to read in the detail of such an articulate and time-constructed cultural artifact may also lead the analysis to find meaning in what may be only incidental details. However, these are secondary considerations; this book teases out the finely interwoven strands of literature, politics and religion with rare ability, offering us a convincing alternative history of English poetry and its reception.