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THOMAS A. PRENDERGAST. *Poetical Dust: Poets' Corner and the Making of Britain*. Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 256. \$59.95 (cloth).

Poets' Corner is Britain's national literary shrine located in the South Transept of Westminster Abbey, London. It is a frankly peculiar heritage landmark: cold, stony, crowded with heterogeneous memorials and inscriptions, incoherent, unlovely, yet evocative. Various lauded as sacred ground and dismissed as an English curiosity, it evades the factual explanations of guidebooks such as James Wilkinson's *Poets' Corner* (2007). *Poetical Dust* is the first full-length modern cultural history, a chronologically wide-ranging multi-stranded narrative exploring also the intangible affect of this tiny but symbolically dense site.

Thomas A. Prendergast, Professor of English at Wooster College, Ohio, is preoccupied with a complex of material and metaphorical relations between writers' bodily remains, their literary corpora, readers, and society, as demonstrated by his previous monograph, *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus* (2004). While recent scholars such as Philip Connell, Matthew Craske, and Samantha Matthews have produced shorter, period-specific studies of Poets' Corner, medievalist Prendergast offers an in-depth, transhistorical, revisionary history. Presenting the fruits of detailed research in the Westminster Abbey archives and informed by recent theories of the body, affect, space and place, and literary tourism, *Poetical Dust* is full of rich and strange stories of burials, monuments, commemorative inscriptions, exhumations and relocations—and of the mixed emotions they elicit.

The book's original thesis is that Poets' Corner is shaped as much by dead writers buried elsewhere—e.g., William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, and all women authors—as by those whose remains lie under the stone pavement, led by Geoffrey Chaucer, “the first poetical corpse” buried there (29). Many people with no link to the arts, and obscure and

third-rate writers with little claim to fame, are buried in this eccentric pantheon. Prendergast shows how, over five centuries, the often fraught interactions of sacred and secular, Catholic and Protestant, public and private, political and literary, material and immaterial have produced the idiosyncratic commemorative space of “Poets’ Corner” (a name not coined until 1733).

The book has five chapters. “Westminster Abbey and the Incorporation of Poets’ Corner” explores the importance of the material body to the Abbey’s sacred space, and proposes that a 1378 violation of sanctuary enabled a distinctive secular corporeal aesthetics before Chaucer’s interment. “Melancholia, Monumental Resistance, and the Invention of Poets’ Corner” argues for Edmund Spenser as a foundational Protestant figure of “constructive melancholia,” and lays out Ben Jonson’s ambivalence about the space’s “metaphorical potential” (13–14) through debates about whether to relocate Shakespeare’s remains from Stratford. Focusing on Dryden and Pope, “Love, Literary Publicity, and the Naming of Poets’ Corner” shows how it became defined as the national commemorative space despite anxiety that poetry was devalued by publicity. “Absence and the Public Poetics of Regret” proposes that in the nineteenth century Poets’ Corner was energized then diminished by the exclusion of major writers such as Byron and George Eliot due to prejudices about morals, beliefs, or gender; retrospective commemorations only confirmed the site’s creeping stasis. Finally, “Poetic Exhumation and the Anxiety of Absence” reads the controversial 1938 exhumation of Spenser as evidence of the failed Victorian project of literature as a model for civil society. Appendices—a graveplan, burial and monument list, and chronology—used in combination help the reader envisage the site at different times, though Abbey records are incomplete, so “we will never know everyone who is buried there” (165).

For Prendergast, Poets' Corner is inherently paradoxical, and produces paradoxical emotions and behaviors in those who make and visit it. The cause is that it attempts "a material commemoration of that which was necessarily immaterial" (15)—poetry, which according to the influential Horatian trope outlasts material monuments because it is preserved in readers' memories. Prendergast boldly attributes agency to Poets' Corner, arguing that the accumulation of multiple actions over time creates a "larger sensibility" (xi), even an "authorial consciousness" (xiii) that influences visitors. This supports his view that the visitor's encounter with the space replicates the reader's encounter with the text, forming a metaphorical canon or "legible history of literature in stone" while generating elusive affective responses produced "by a kind of ghostly absence" (123). In my view, this analysis underestimates the complexity of readers' experiences of literary texts (particularly poetry), and overestimates the attentiveness of many visitors' "readings" of commemorative space. More persuasive is Prendergast's model of narrative emplotment, whereby the site generates an increasingly powerful (if paradoxical) internal narrative logic that diminishes again due to mass tourism, poetry's weakened cultural status, and closure to new burials and memorials.

This self-assured contribution to British Studies is nonetheless bookended by discussions of American responses: writings by Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the nineteenth century and the late-twentieth-century construction of the American Poets' Corner, in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, New York. Prendergast's gesture demonstrates the "temporal and geographical reach" of Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner (x), but also suggests anxiety that American readers will not fully grant the significance of such a "profoundly English space" (x). Engagement with scholarship in the field is good, though there are omissions, notably Paul Westover's *Necromanticism: Traveling to Meet the Dead, 1750–1860* (2012). One might also take issue with loose descriptions of Poets' Corner as "essentially a graveyard" (xii) or "cemetery" (xiii), terms denoting outdoor burial sites,

when its character as an intramural burial-place (within the church walls) is a key factor in its declining modern status, an anachronism at odds with the prevalent anti-monumental, back-to-nature aesthetic for poets' graves.

Prendergast argues with energy, presents his case with critically discriminating use of textual evidence, and in the main writes clear and readable prose; *Poetical Dust* is an engagingly lively account of a potentially dusty subject. Occasionally, though, it falls into a vein of verbal impressionism and approximation that exceeds the judicious qualification necessitated by presenting contentious or speculative interpretations or describing quasi-mystical affect. The use of "poetical" to mean "of poets"—hence a "poetical graveyard" (3)—casts a speciously figurative aura over factual statements; a poet's corpse is far from "poetical." The formula "a kind of" is a compulsive stylistic tic; within a few sentences we are told that "This inscription would seem to be a kind of elegy," "We move [...] through the poem as a kind of narrative," it laments "a kind of lost former self," and Robert Hauley is "a kind of 'martyr'" (35). The reader might legitimately ask, "what kind exactly?" The book would be better—and a couple of pages shorter—if every redundant "a kind of" was cut. However, this quibble does not diminish Prendergast's achievement; *Poetical Dust* is the authoritative modern account of Poets' Corner.

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