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The Past as a Theme Park

David Lowenthal

Nowadays all nature is seen as a theme park, a realm of limitless possibilities to satisfy every desire. Thus California touts the whole of Orange County as a park whose theme is that “you can have anything you want.” And you can have it all at once: “Tomorrowland and Frontierland [are] merged and inseparable.”¹

Long ago, medieval gardens were themed as paradise; they walled out the surrounding wilderness. Instead of excluding it, modern Edenic designers aim to incorporate the whole environment—the hubris Marc Treib notes of Japan’s Huis Ten Bosch in this volume. But our yearning for total environment is a vain hope. Savages ever storm the stockade; against them, the beleaguered denizens of our parks deploy defensive arsenals. Our theme parks, no less than the themed gardens of the Middle Ages, are Other: They come into being and thrive only by *opposing* the chaos or ruin of the untamed and untidy mess beyond.

“Anything you want” is, moreover, an ominous promise. Theme parks strive continually to please, but to do so they also paralyze us, as William Cronon argues.² Nothing untoward is allowed to disturb the even tenor of their layouts. There are no surprises, just postmodern ha-has—Arcadian tricks that fool us only at the first photo opportunity. The illusion of order allows of no disarray. Royal hunting parks of yore banned intruders on pain of death; today’s theme parks ban anything unseemly, lest they be sued for “loss of innocence”—as when three children at Disneyland by mischance came on characters in the midst of changing costumes. Seeing Mickey Mouse undressed exposed the awful truth that Disney folk are fake, a shattering blow to young innocence.³

The elderly nowadays retire to themed locales—“adult communities” in which the moribund can glide gently into some manipulated good night. Now flaunting Floridian features like sand or coral or palms, these pastel retreats may by and by mutate into Federation Space Beach or Deep Space Nine.⁴ But whatever their theme, such fabricated locales

¹ Quoted in Edward Soja, “Inside Exopolis: Scenes from Orange County,” in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 94.

² William Cronon, “Introduction: In Search of Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 40–41, 52–53.

³ Giles Whittell, “Disney Sued for Loss of Innocence,” *The Times* (London), 7 December 1995.

⁴ Arthur Brodsky, “Yuppies, Want to Retire? Try ‘Woodstock Palms,’” *International Herald Tribune*, 2 February 1996.

share with Disney's parks the aim of total control. In these landscapes we do as we are told—or else we get lost, in both senses of the phrase. Living by the rules is *de rigueur* at Poundbury in Dorset, the Prince of Wales's theme park village where inhabitants are forbidden to put up a hanging flower basket, told what kind of trees to grow, required to keep doves, and “have to ask permission to do anything,” complains one tenant.⁵

Disorientation is the rule at the Irvine campus of the University of California, because of its contrived meanders from which Cronon learned he must not stray. Routes through Aldrich Park (the twenty-one acre botanical garden in the center of the Orange County campus) are crafted to prevent moving straight across it, making the walker follow “curvilinear walkways that frustrate every attempt” to take the most efficient route. Its designers are “encouraging us—nay, forcing us for our own good—to slow down, become more meditative, and enjoy a brief respite in nature's greenery.” These genially deceptive pressures so irked Cronon that he “ignored the designated walkways and tramped straight across the lawn.”⁶

Thus the antecedents of theme parks are not to be found in mundane landscapes; rather, they lie in wishful and willful geographies of the mind. Back-to-the-land devotees in modern Britain hunt for hideaways with the help of maps, compiled by landscape architects, of ever-dwindling zones of tranquillity. But in the end we are cautioned: “[T]here can be tranquillity in one place alone, the personal landscape that lies between each individual's ears.”⁷

“The Past as a Theme Park,” as I titled this essay, is intended to echo my book, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.⁸ Nothing is more foreign than a theme park, whether it points toward Polynesia or some postmodern fantasia. Theme park Orange County boasts of being “no place like home.” Theme park Britain flourishes best not at home but in Ralph Lauren's America or far-off Japan. Meanwhile, Japanese pilgrims to England itself follow the lure of Peter Rabbit to Beatrix Potter's Hilltop Farm in the Lake District of England. So thick on the ground are such devotees that England, like the Swiss Alps, is said to dwindle “from ecstatic rapture to theme-park stature.”⁹

British landscapes redolent of “olden times” are common theme park foci, expressive of the same yearning to evacuate the present, as noted in this volume by Carla Corbin in a New World context. Jorvik, the fabulously successful invented tenth-century Viking village in the bowels of the city of York, has cloned a Canterbury Pilgrims Way, the Edinburgh Story, the Oxford Story, a Weymouth Time Walk, a Winchester Crusades Experience. The

⁵ Tony Turnbull, “In an Ideal World,” *The Times Magazine* (London), 2 August 1997, 23–25.

⁶ Cronon, “In Search of Nature,” 53–55.

⁷ “Silence of the Lambs,” *The Times* (London), 1 December 1995; letter commenting on the Council for the Protection of Rural England's “tranquil area maps” developed by Simon Rendel, *The Times* (London), 6 December 1995.

⁸ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁹ John Tagliabue, “Jumping aboard the Disney Bandwagon,” *International Herald Tribune*, 24 August 1995; Aurel Schmidt, “Alpine Idyll—Modern Thrills,” *Passages* 19 (autumn 1995): 39–41.

media tout all of Britain as a paradisiacal national theme park, epitomized in Julian Barnes's satire, *England, England*.¹⁰ Like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, we tour scenes whose true stars are "stately homes": Castle Howard is Brideshead; visitors to Stamford retrace Dorothea's footsteps in *Middlemarch*; Lyme Park, where the BBC filmed *Pride and Prejudice*'s Pemberley, has added a Darcy Walk for visitors, up tenfold since the film. Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* have enriched Bath almost as much as its Roman waterworks; Saltram was filmically lifted from Sussex to Devon, where it became the haunt of the feckless Dashwoods of *Sense and Sensibility*. Themed experience follows an ordered routine: "[F]irst watch the film. Then read the book. Then visit the stately home."¹¹ Then dine in the themed restaurant and sleep in a four-poster bed in the themed inn. Knole and Sissinghurst were mobbed when the BBC's *Portrait of a Marriage* conflated Virginia Woolf with another Vita Sackville-West lover, Violet Trefusis; thousands thronged these reputed lesbian love nests, whose guides were told to deny that anything like that ever happened in National Trust shrines.

English scenery need not even be in England to be archetypal: Ellis Peters's medieval detective in the television version of *Cadfael* glorifies an English landscape filmed not in Shrewsbury but in Budapest. A guest at Queen Elizabeth's birthday fete in Prague praised the British Embassy gardens as "so English"—even the grass smelled evocatively of home; no wonder, for the turf was actually imported from England.¹² In fiction filmed at home, no effort is spared for verisimilitude, as with the plovers' eggs painstakingly hand-speckled for *Brideshead Revisited*, the cast and crew of *Sense and Sensibility* plucking every single daisy from the lawn at Montacute House in June because they would be out of place in a filmic winter scene. "It took ages," recalled a National Trust agent; "I have never seen so many bottoms in the air."¹³

Garbed in clogs and shawls, occupying thatched cottages, mouthing pseudo-Tudor dialect, redundant British coal miners and farm laborers find employment mimicking their forebears. The Welsh condemn putting locals in glass cases for tourists to gawp at as "cultural prostitution." But a miner father tells his sulky son, "You'll work down the Heritage Museum, just like your mother and me."¹⁴ Besides, the Heritage Museum coal mine is a lot safer than the real thing. Global demands reshape theme park history thousands of miles away. Thus American preference for a "prettier England" led the BBC to replace *Adam Bede*'s harsh Derbyshire scenery with soft Cotswold contours. Such alterations soon become naturalized in native minds. "We ourselves have come to prefer the gussied-up ver-

¹⁰ George Macdonald and Stephen Alsford, "Museums and Theme Parks: Worlds in Collision?" *Museum Management and Curatorship* 14 (1995): 129–47; Kennedy Fraser, "Straying from the Way," *New Yorker*, 4 December 1995, 48; Barnes, *England, England* (London: Cape, 1998).

¹¹ "Bricks and Stardust," *The Times* (London), 22 January 1996.

¹² "Turfed in," *The Times* (London), 17 June 1995.

¹³ "Daisy Chore," *The Times* (London), 21 December 1995.

¹⁴ Robert Merrill, "Cefn Coed Coal & Steam Centre: The Interpretation of a Mining Community," *Interpretation*, no. 17 (1981): 13.

sion of our past,” mourns an English observer, “allowing foreigners to buy it, tart it up and then sell it back to us.”¹⁵

Like theme parks in the present, the landscape of the past as we see it is, by and large, an artifice, an invention, a construct, an illusion. It is less what actually was than what *should* have been, in the spirit of Michel Conan’s sketch in this volume of Arthur Hazelius, who more than a century ago at Skansen imitated Swedish nature as it *ought* to have been and so ensured that it would be henceforth remembered. Similarly, one of the great values of the English countryside, concludes sociologist Howard Newby, is that it “reassures us that not everything is superficial and transitory, that some things remain stable, permanent and enduring.” An illusion of continuity serves to sanction the status quo. Claiming rural roots, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin fancied himself “a man in a field-path, steeped in tradition and impervious to new ideas.” Few English people have had intimate rural links for one hundred fifty years. But the heritage of English landscape attracts farm subsidies as outré as in France. Only cultural heritage tourism can now save these scenes. “In 20 years’ time all Lakeland farmers will have given up farming,” forecasts a local. “They’ll be called field wardens. They’ll build up dry stone walls, then knock them down again to amuse the tourists. . . . Sheep will become pets, never sold or killed,” circled perpetually from field to field by collies, or perhaps by pigs, if “Babe” could be cloned.¹⁶

This is no mere fantasy. One calamity threatened by mad cow disease, which has required the culling of millions of British cattle, is its impact on the landscape. Spokesmen for Britain’s major conservation bodies—the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust, the World Wildlife Fund-UK, the Council for the Protection of Rural England—joined in a plea to rescue scenes traditionally linked with bovine grazing: hay meadows, hedged fields, permanent pasture, heath, and moor. Rural stewardship sustains not merely cattle but tourism—some say even the nation’s soul.¹⁷ Former Prime Minister John Major extolled British roast beef as a priceless icon of national identity. The stench of carcasses culled in Britain’s hoof-and-mouth crisis of 2001 sharpens such concerns.

In America, battlefields of the Civil War embody themed experience par excellence. But to manufacture such sites is felt to debase the “true” history these scenes memorialize. Hence the widespread outrage at the Disney Corporation’s proposed Historyland in northern Virginia. For this was a sacred realm, in the words of historian C. Vann Woodward, where brave soldiers had perished and their heirs had created “a national heritage, not a theme park.”¹⁸

¹⁵ These examples are drawn from David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London: Viking, 1997), 101.

¹⁶ Howard Newby, “Revitalizing the Countryside,” *Royal Society of Arts Journal* 138 (1990): 630–36; Stanley Baldwin, “The Classics” (1926), in Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London), quoted in Hunter Davies, “After the Banknote, Where’s the Book?” *Independent on Sunday* (London), 29 September 1991, 23; Dick King-Smith, *The Sheep-Pig* (London, 1984). *Babe* was a popular film about a humanized young pig facing slaughter.

¹⁷ “Need for Reforms in the Countryside,” letter, *The Times* (London), 5 April 1996.

¹⁸ Quoted in “A House Divided: Historians Confront Disney’s America,” *OAH Newsletter* 22:1 (August 1994), 8–9; “Public History and Disney’s America,” *AHA Perspectives* 33: 3 (1995), 1–12.

To avoid such imbroglios, theme parks usually deploy pasts as little known and generalized as possible. “Heroes and founding fathers . . . must be mythical characters like Romulus and Remus or King Arthur, obscured in the mists of the distant past,” argues historian Gordon Wood; “they cannot be, like Jefferson and the other ‘founding fathers,’ real human beings about whom an extraordinary amount . . . is known.”¹⁹ As Edward Chappell writes of landscape reconstruction in this volume, the less that is known, the more scope we have for imagination. This dictum is exemplified in the movie *Pocahontas*. So little known is her actual history that *Pocahontas* could be filmed as both utterly unreal and ecologically correct. Scholars who demurred at this hodgepodge were dismissed by Disney’s Native American consultants as “nitpicky anthropology-types.”²⁰

Like *Pocahontas*, the past in general is often biddable because it is beyond retrieval. Since few from yesteryear can answer back, the past harbors scope for invention denied the present. Take E. L. Doctorow’s rejoinder to an elderly Texan who scoffed at his novel *Welcome to Hard Times*, set in nineteenth-century Dakota:

‘Young man,’ she wrote, ‘when you said that Jenks enjoyed for his dinner the roasted haunch of a prairie dog, I knew you’d never been west of the Hudson. Because the haunch of a prairie dog wouldn’t fill a teaspoon.’ She had me. I’d never seen a prairie dog. So I did the only thing I could. I wrote back and I said, ‘That’s true of prairie dogs today, Madam, but in the 1870s . . .’²¹

Vagueness is a prime virtue that theme parks share with the past. A modicum of knowledge is plenty, the less precise the better. “For theming to manipulate memory, it must lack specific referentiality,” writes Shelton Waldrep. Thus at Orlando, Fla., the themed site of “Canada” elicits more interest than “France” because it is far less recognizable; “one can imagine Disney’s ‘Canada’ as the ‘essence’ of the country without being reminded of an actual place . . . The aura of a country, a time, a place is best tapped by theming that doesn’t remind you of something that actually exists and [that] you may have seen in the original, but [is rather] a generalized myth.” Just as the musical *South Pacific* meant tropical seas and sex, so Orlando’s “Dixie” simply spells plantations and cane poles, and “France” means wine, women, and song.²²

For celebrants of the past, as for visitors to theme parks, ignorance and distance keep beady historical scrutiny at bay. Few Finns know the *Kalevala*, the fount of Finnish identity, firsthand: “[S]imply the knowledge of its existence [is] enough to inspire general enthusi-

¹⁹ Gordon Wood, “Jefferson at Home,” *New York Review of Books*, 13 May 1993, 6–9.

²⁰ “Disney Assailed for Pocahontas Portrayal,” *International Herald Tribune*, 27–28 May 1995.

²¹ E. L. Doctorow quoted in Bruce Weber, “The Creative Mind: The Myth Maker,” *New York Times Magazine*, 20 October 1985, 24–26.

²² Shelton Waldrep, “Monuments to Walt,” in *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 204–5.

asm.” The vaguest details of their Hebridean roots suffice Canada’s Prince Edward Islanders; when their plight is likened to the Scottish Highlands after the Clearances, or Glencoe after the Massacre, few know what this means, but so much the better: “[T]he mere sound of the words arouses a homing instinct, a feeling of belonging to something tragic but durable.”²³ The Islanders “belong” to the Hebrides in a way that explicit knowledge would not enhance but weaken.

The theme park past is a triumphal realm of faith, not of fact. “We have a history here, you know,” say Greek villagers content to leave its details to scholars and intellectuals. For the villagers what counts is the certitude that “here a history existed,” that Greece had a history when no one else did. In America, the past’s precise content is often otiose: “We don’t know what *sort* of history Adamsville has had,” a Rhode Island village’s roadside heritage display implies, “but we feel certain that it *had* a history.” Faith in having had a lot of history matters more than recalling any specific events.²⁴

The more casual the history, the more engrossing it is. “Play with history—in the ancient hills of Judea . . . pursued by a Philistine who is trying to kill you!” runs a video game lure; “*No Prior Knowledge of the Bible Is Required*.” Featuring a “playful approach to history,” clothing and jewelry fashions stress “heritage” but shun particular roots. As with Disney World’s “Canada,” ancient concepts make for popular designs, so long as customers are “never sure exactly where they are from.”

Exotic enigmas enrich relics of the past; drab factual details are off-putting. Academics who seek to explain Easter Island statues or Alpine Stone Age ice men thereby “diminish the world’s mysteries and replace them by lifeless certainties,” charges a critic. “Why do we have to know everything? Where is reverence? belief? feeling?” A performer from India explains the exotic attraction of Indian dance and art for many English people: “[T]he fact they can’t understand it is part of the mystique.”²⁵

Conflation, a habitual jumbling of various times, is another common feature of the theme park past. Both the architects and the audiences lump it all together, commingling epochs, disregarding calendars and contexts. Indifferent to linear chronology, they assign events to generalized “good old days” (or bad old days) or to the storyteller’s “once upon a time.” Living history locales favor period crafts over particular historical episodes, as if, in Christina Cameron’s phrase, one were at the Bread-Baking or Barrel-Making National Historic Site. Like theme parks, they tend to display not a sequence of events but a timeless fabric, a cavalier conjoining of places and periods. Thus in Israeli kibbutzim museums, specific kibbutz histories are storified into a generic tale. “Well, it may not have happened

²³ Martii Ruutu (1941) quoted in William A. Wilson, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland* (Bloomington, Ind., 1976), 119; Stephen Maly, “The Celtic Fringe,” *Institute of Current World Affairs Newsletter* SM-10, 30 April 1990.

²⁴ Roger Just, “Cultural Certainties and Private Doubts,” in *The Pursuit of Certainty*, ed. Wendy James (London: Routledge, 1995), 294; Kent Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 6–7.

²⁵ Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade*, 136.

in Ein Shemer, perhaps it was in Ein Harod,” says the guide, “but it did happen someplace, so what difference does it make?”²⁶

Tourism and the media amalgamate medieval, Renaissance, and recent times into an indiscriminate prototype much like the Vauxhall Pleasure Garden scenes Heath Schenker describes in this volume. Hampton Court Palace and the Tower of London, architecturally and historically utterly unlike, merge in the public mind as Tudorbethan bastions of tragic queens and bloody axes. Heritage centers and history museums guide visitors from b.c. to a.d., all the centuries ending up much the same to most viewers.²⁷ Nostalgic fashion sometimes dwells on a particular period but often denotes anything fancied from any bygone time, a general aura of pastness, such as that felt to inhere in old photo reproductions. The American equivalent of Poundbury, Disney’s new residential paradise at Orlando, “Celebration,” commingles classical, Colonial Revival, French Country (steep roofs), Mediterranean (red tiles), Victorian, Low Country, and other stylistic themes, each evoking some past.

In popular recall the Gauls come close to de Gaulle, Elizabeth I joins Elizabeth II, Salem witches and Watergate twisters tread the same American stage.²⁸ Tradition conflates Greek classical culture to a single entity from Homer through Aristotle and beyond. For Americans, “[T]here’s the present and then there’s this dumpster of undifferentiated synchronic trivia called ‘history.’ Ask a kid which happened first, the Peloponnesian Wars or the Korean War—no clue.”²⁹

Commemorative needs mandate theme park conflation. Long after the *Mayflower* Pilgrims landed, the city of Plymouth, Mass., installed a suitable rock on which they ought to have stepped ashore, and later still erected a bizarre classical canopy. Plymouth Rock’s mythic function is manifest in tourist queries at the site: “Why doesn’t the rock say ‘1492?’” some wonder; others ask, “Where is the sword?” The presence nearby of a *Mayflower* replica reinforces the spurious Columbus connection. “Where are the *Niña* and the *Pinta*?” ask visitors. And, most awesomely: “How did he get all those animals on that little boat?”³⁰ All the past is one; the planting of New England merged not merely with the discovery of America but with medieval lore and biblical legend. The rock and the *Mayflower* stand for all beginnings, all voyages to new worlds, all paths to new ways.

Like theme parks, commemorative sites reshape the past to make it embraceable. Some revisions are overt, others unconscious; most are unashamedly crafted and eagerly greeted. Departures from historical accuracy distress only a handful of high brows; most viewers neither seek objective veracity nor mind its absence. Echoing Washington Irving’s indul-

²⁶ Christina Cameron, “Commemoration: A Moving Target?” Paper presented at Parks Canada’s Place of History symposium on the Commemoration of Canadian Heritage, Hull, Ontario, November 1994; Tamar Katriel, “Remaking Place: Cultural Production in an Israeli Pioneer Settlement Museum,” *History and Memory* 5:2 (1993), 113.

²⁷ Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade*, 138.

²⁸ *Twister* is defined in one entry in *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, as *liar* or *falsifier*.

²⁹ Mark Leyner, “Eat at Cosmo’s,” *New Yorker*, 7 March 1994, 100.

³⁰ John McPhee, “Travels of the Rock,” *New Yorker*, 26 February 1990, 108–17.

gence of spurious Shakespeare relics at Stratford in 1815, they are “ever willing to be deceived, where the deceit is pleasant, and costs nothing. What is it to us, whether these stories be true or false, so long as we can persuade ourselves into the belief of them?”³¹ Irving himself was a practiced spinner of historical yarns; both he and his readers relished such deceptions.

Israel still deploys Masada as an icon of national identity, though literary and material evidence totally discredit the old tale of first-century mass suicide—that “rather than be taken as slaves, nine hundred sixty-seven zealots committed suicide; only one family survived to tell the tale.” Masada remains an Israeli ritual mecca; scouts gather around campfires, intoning Yitzhak Lamdan’s “Masada Shall Not Fall Again” while guides read aloud the speech that Josephus invented for the last Jewish survivor. Just as the Donation of Constantine lost little potency after being exposed as a forgery, so the Masada fable is no less gripping for being shown untrue to the facts. People visit Masada not for tangible evidence of the ancient legend but to experience a modern passion play of national rebirth.³² Masada is a theme park par excellence.

Knowing that a site has been themed (that is, *invented* or *copied*), far from provoking cynical scorn, makes visitors *more* appreciative; after all, it is for their sake that history has been recreated. Indeed, themed sites improve on those that are merely faithfully preserved. Learning that “authentic Old Tucson” is not the original, but the 1939 film set built for *Arizona*, increases rather than impairs viewers’ pleasure. A visitor to Beatrix Potter’s Hilltop Farm in the Lake District exclaims, “This is how I always imagined it!”³³ That Scotland, not the Lake District, engendered Peter Rabbit is beside the point; the visitor’s fulfillment was not one of fact but of fancy. We crave imagined locales more than we do actual ones.

Two generations ago Evelyn Waugh told of a little girl at Cana peddling wine jars as “true relics” of the miracle enacted there; but if he preferred smaller jars, she assured him, these too were authentic. Waugh stressed the girl’s ignorance and cupidity. Today, such tales spell local *sophistication*. The guide who tells tourists, “This is a piece of Noah’s Ark; or maybe it’s just a symbol,” and “Here is the spear that pierced Christ’s side. Though maybe

³¹ Washington Irving, “Stratford-on-Avon” (1815), in his *Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (London, n.d.), 253. On Shakespeare frauds, see Ian Ousby, *The Englishman’s England: Taste, Travel, and the Rise of Tourism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 39–55.

³² Yael Zerubavel, “The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors,” *Representations* 45 (1994): 74–75; Barry Schwartz et al., “The Recovery of Masada,” *Sociological Quarterly* 27 (1986): 147–64; Neil Silberman, *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Holt, 1989), 87–101; Amos Elon, “Politics and Archaeology,” *New York Review of Books*, 22 September 1994, 14–18.

³³ Donna Morganstern and Jeff Greenberg, “The Influence of a Multi-Theme Park on Cultural Beliefs as a Function of Schema Salience: Promoting and Undermining the Myth of the Old West,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18 (1988): 584–96; Adrian Mellor, “Enterprise and Heritage in the Dock,” in *Enterprise and Heritage*, ed. John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (London: Routledge, 1991), 93–115; Shelagh Squire, “Meanings, Myths and Memories: Literary Tourism as Cultural Discourse in Beatrix Potter’s Lake District,” Ph.D. dissertation, University College London, 1991, 203–22.

it's a copy—who knows?" would once have been rebuked for libeling Scripture; now he is lauded for deconstructing it. A tour conductor leading a group of nuns in Christ's footsteps says, "This isn't the way He actually came. But it's a more interesting route"; the guide is not mocking the sacred past but proffering a more accessible, postmodern Via Dolorosa.³⁴

The modern guide echoes Henry James's Bardic "birthplace" curator. A true Shakespeare devotee, the curator at first refuses to lard the fragmentary facts, thereby discouraging visitors—and reducing receipts. Warned to improve his pitch or lose his job, he veers to the opposite hyperbolic extreme:

Across that threshold He habitually passed; through those low windows, in childhood, He peered out into the world that He was to make so much happier by the gift to it of His genius; over the boards of this floor—that is over some of them, for we mustn't be carried away!—His little feet often pattered. . . . In this old chimney corner—just there [is the very] angle, where His little stool was placed, and where, I dare say, if we could look close enough, we should find the hearthstone scraped with His little feet.³⁵

Far from getting him sacked, visitors lap up this subversive stuff. "Don't they want then any truth?—none even for the mere look of it?" asks an appalled crony. "The look of it," says the curator, "is what I give!" The look of it equally suffices modern film audiences. "If historical accuracy were the thing people went to the movies for," says producer John Sayles, "historians would be the vice presidents of studios."³⁶

Yet the public does insist on a *semblance* of accuracy. Historical films must be touted as "based on a true story." As with much heritage, the problem is that many producers still share D. W. Griffith's faith that what they contrive *is* true "history"—and are dismayed when customers who *claim* to care about verisimilitude in detail seem blasé about the broader messages of their chronicles.³⁷ Unaware how radically they are reshaping history, heritage mongers themselves naively swear fidelity to truth. At historical theme parks such self-delusion is widespread.

Fifty years' experience at Colonial Williamsburg illustrates the point. "Authenticity has been virtually [our] religion," avowed its director in 1941, "sacrifices have been offered before its altar. Personal preferences, architectural design, time, expense, . . . even the demands of beauty have given way to the exacting requirements of authenticity." Fifty years

³⁴ Evelyn Waugh, "A Pleasure Cruise in 1929," in Waugh, *When the Going Was Good* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1951), 24; other references from David Lowenthal, "Counterfeit Art: Authentic Fakes," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 1 (1992): 85–86.

³⁵ Henry James, "The Birthplace" (1903), in James, *Selected Tales* (London: Dent, 1982), 335–36, 345.

³⁶ John Sayles, "A Conversation [with] Eric Foner," in *Past Imperfect: History according to the Movies*, ed. Mark Carnes (New York: Holt, 1995), 22.

³⁷ D. W. Griffiths, quoted in Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), viii–ix; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 230–31.

on, Williamsburg staff can see that it was all wrong back then—and express confidence they are *now* getting it right. Even the toll-free telephone number, 1-800-HISTORY, implies fidelity to truth. Staff takes pride in purveying real history, as opposed to the fictions of Disneyland.

Worried about Disney's prospective history theme park in their backyard in northern Virginia, Colonial Williamsburg staff were shocked to find that most people saw little difference and were not bothered if they did. Asked if they thought Williamsburg "authentic," ten discussants drawn from the general public all agreed that it was:

"And Disneyland?" and without a pause, every one of them said, "Oh yes, yes, Disneyland is authentic too." [The moderator] asked, "How can this be? We all know that Disney's America . . . is going to be totally made up. It isn't even a real historical site. Everything will be artificial. And you all know that Colonial Williamsburg is a real place, even if much restored." "Sure," they said, but . . . "Disney always does things first-class, and if they set out to do American history, they'll hire the best historians money can buy . . . to create a completely plausible, completely believable appearance of American history."³⁸

In the public view, plausibility is as good as truth, and historians are worthy of their theme park hire.

Similar salutary deceit is the *raison d'être* of Peter Shaffer's play *Lettice and Lovage*. Hired for the summer open-days at a moth-eaten old manor house, the play's eponymous tour guide thrills visitors with flights of fancy that bring "Fustian Hall" to life as the recital of bald facts signally failed to do. "Enlarge—enliven—enlighten" is her maxim; "fantasy floods in where fact leaves a vacuum." (She is found out and fired but finally persuades her employer she was right.) Such tales not only delight in hyping history, they suggest our *need* for historical fantasy. Gluttons for false facts, we bring to the most improbable past an "immense assumption of veracities and sanctities, of the general soundness of the legend," as Henry James concluded; like Washington Irving at Stratford, we swallow the reliquary shell's "preposterous stuffing" almost whole. But not *quite* whole; for we know we are being fed this legacy by partisans. "Scepticism about one's heritage," says playwright Alan Bennett, is an "essential part of that heritage."³⁹ But as I suggested above, such skepticism is not mordant but happily enthralled; like theme park visitors, we enjoy being fed a bunch of codswallop.

Theme park pasts also generate agendas for imagined futures. On retiring as head of Britain's Nature Conservancy Council in the year 2020, Timothy Hornsby envisages an

³⁸ Kenneth Chorley (1941), quoted in Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of History in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 373n; Cary Carson, "Who Owns History? Conversations with William Styron and Cary Carson," *Humanities* 16, no. 1 (1995): 9.

³⁹ Peter Shaffer, *Lettice and Lovage* (London: Deutsch, 1988), 25; James, "The Birthplace" (as above, note 34), 304, 307, 325; Alan Bennett, *Writing Home* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 211.

outing to

“Center Parc,” a wonderful, enormous dome, under which private enterprise conserves rare and representative re-created countrysides and stunning holographs of romantic landscapes now lost. On the way back, I visit the small thatched mock Tudor cottage . . . with blownup photographs of some striking buildings the National Trust used to run before they were either inundated or made way for the wonderful motorway. I sail over to a splendidly landscaped golf course for the senior Japanese businessmen whose microchip factories stretch to the horizon. Packed densely behind them lie corduroy stripes of Sitka spruce with an inviting notice to “Pick Your Own”; I garner some genetically manipulated bananas.⁴⁰

A different if no less menacing millennial landscape, less theme park than gated rustic retreat, is foretold by the Breton folklorist Pierre-Jakez Hélias:

After the peasants abandoned the countryside, all fell into ruins. But the new masters began living there. The richest acquired entire farms and villages. But no one was around to keep up their estates or to serve them. They themselves were forced to cut their own lawns, prune their own trees, care for their animals, and fight against wild vegetation. And of course they began to love the land. They took pride in picking, harvesting, and eating what they themselves had grown. They rediscovered the taste of fruit and even bread. Their country homes became their only homes. Protected from the common people now locked up in the cities, they formed exclusive regional clubs where it was forbidden to speak anything but Provençal, Basque, and Breton. So the former bourgeoisie became professional peasants, while descendants of the former peasants consoled themselves with electronic toys.⁴¹

Themed museum landscape panoramas in Michael Lind’s fantasized American future extol successive national archetypes:

- Early nineteenth-century vision: An austere Ceramicus from ancient Athens’s garden of heroes exalts Anglo-American virtues; a Doric colonnade leads to a Palladian temple with statues of Moses, Christ, British Reformers, and icons of republican liberty; a mural limns Saxon glory from Hengist and Horsa through George Washington.

- Early-twentieth-century vision: In Euro-America’s Beaux Arts imperium, Columbus wades ashore at Hispaniola, Jefferson and Lincoln beckon to the Statue of Liberty and the promised land of the melting pot; murals feature pioneers (without Indians), the

⁴⁰ Timothy Hornsby, Speech, Royal Society of Arts, Future Countryside Programme, Seminar 1: A Stake in the Country, 29 September 1989.

⁴¹ Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978), 335–36.

Civil War (without blacks).

- Today's Heritage Center advances from a Pre-Columbian arcadia (without Aztecs), to Paradise Lost (European genocide and slavery), to redemptive Paradise Regained, in a fringing diorama portraying separate and equal ethnic groups surrounding a hollow center; like Bill Clinton's and Newt Gingrich's Washington, Multicultural America is all Beltway with nothing but evil inside.

- Lind's Trans-American future is largely cribbed from ecotechnic scale models of architectural wonders common in 1930s to 1950s world's fairs. But with the solitary exception of an adobe Spanish mission with a Liberty Bell in its belfry, this is a Disney theme park of America's natural wonders: miniatures of Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone geysers and the Painted Desert, all reflecting our preference for wild over cultivated scenes, for nature as vista but not as home. It reifies a sublime wilderness devoid of threat, without blizzards or black flies, ticks or tornadoes—the American garden “as untouched as the world on creation's first day.”⁴²

In rebellion against the sordid reality of our environmental history, images of morally superior pristine nature ever replace degraded scenes of culture. At least since Henry David Thoreau, Americans repelled by the ruthless stains of Progress have erased traces of human occupancy to reify the wild. In his chapter in this volume on Cades Cove, Terence Young shows how early this bias was engrained in U. S. National Park Service policy.

The establishment of St. John's National Park in the Virgin Islands, under Laurance Rockefeller's aegis, reinforces Young's point. Did the very name “Virgin” persuade Rockefeller to turf out local inhabitants, re-create a tropical wilderness, and restore a Pre-Columbian paradise by expunging traces of three centuries of shifting cultivation? No wonder St. Johnians were mystified by this appetite for wilderness. For what ensued was no primeval forest but a tangle of bush and thorn (imported to distance slaves from plantation mansions), jackasses, mongooses (imported against snakes), and mosquitoes.⁴³

Even at historical sites, the National Park Service long insisted on an initial *tabula rasa*. To display the story of the 1775 Revolutionary skirmish at the Minute Man National Historical Park in the 1960s, residents were evicted, post-Revolutionary houses demolished, and traditional farming brought to an end. The remaining houses were boarded up, fields and pastures reverted to brush, and within a few years the whole countryside ceased to bear any resemblance to the Revolutionary epoch's usage. Instead of a living landscape with past and present visibly and functionally linked, elaborate notices along wood-chipped trails depict the historical views that could have been seen before the National Park Service obliterated them. To restore the original scene, the Park Service has spent millions on massive archival and archaeological research to determine the species of two centuries ago with

⁴² Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 352–59, 384–88.

⁴³ Karen Fog Olwig, “National Parks, Tourism, and Local Development: A West Indian Case,” *Human Organization* 39 (1980): 22–31; idem, *Cultural Adaptation and Resistance on St. John: Three Centuries of Afro-Caribbean Life* (Gainesville, Fla., 1985), 162–73.

the aim of the “eventual recreation of the landscape which once existed on that momentous day.”⁴⁴ Only now is the lesson being learned that no amount of expertise can retrieve a state of nature—if such ever existed—from which history has sundered us.

Pastoral pleasures work better in our parks—sometimes too well. So good were Frederick Law Olmsted’s illusions of nature that he came, within a few years, to rail at those his creations had deceived, for failing to credit him with the artifice or even to let him continue it. “He planted trees to look like ‘natural scenery’ and then felt frustrated,” Ann Whiston Spirn wryly observes, when those who accepted “the scenery as ‘natural’, objected to cutting the trees he had planned to cull.”⁴⁵ Modern theme park creators are more blatantly inventive than Olmsted. And maybe, too, they are prouder to be mistaken for God.

⁴⁴Joyce Lee Malcolm, *The Scene of the Battle, 1775: Historic Grounds Report*, Minute Man National Historical Park (MMNHP): Cultural Resource Management Study, U.S. Dept. of the Interior (Boston, 1983), 6; N. Nelson, “Vision for Minute Man National Historical Park’s Future,” MMNHP Broadside, 15 April 1995.

⁴⁵Anne Whiston Spirn, “Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted,” in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 111–12.