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Guided by the dark: From thanatopsis to thanatourism

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Guided by the Dark: from thanatopsis to thanatourism

A.V. Seaton

Abstract

Death is the one heritage that everyone shares and it has been an element of tourism longer than any other form of heritage. This paper looks at the historical development of Thanatoptic elements in travel and shows how the Dark Tourism to which this issue is devoted can be located within a historical tradition which sheds light on how it should be defined, typified and viewed today

1. Van Doren Stern (ed), *Selected writings of Thomas De Quincey*. New York: Nonesuch Press, n.d., p.985.

2. Ibid. pp. 985, 987.

One afternoon in the early years of the nineteenth century Thomas De Quincey, essayist and associate of the Lake poets, was attending a literary tea party at a house in Berners Street, Central London. His host was Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, characteristically, was soon holding centre stage with a stream of improvised ideas on Greek philosophy. Suddenly, a commotion broke out in the street outside and cries of 'Fire! Fire!' cut across the Platonic soliloquy. The effect, remembered years later by De Quincey, was instantaneous:

All of us, master and disciples ... rushed out eager for the spectacle. The fire was in Oxford Street, at a pianoforte-maker's; and as it promised to be a conflagration of merit, I was sorry that my engagements forced me away from Mr. Coleridge's party.¹

This anecdote begins one of De Quincey's most celebrated essays, 'On murder considered as one of the fine arts'. First published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1827, it purported to be a paper which had been delivered to a wholly fictitious Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. It developed a premise that closely resembles that which underlies Dark Tourism – that an act or event which might be deplorable or repugnant from a moral point of view could have considerable attraction as a spectator experience. The main act De Quincey had in mind was murder.

Murder ... may be laid hold of by its moral handle (as it generally is in the pulpit and at the Old Bailey); or it may be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it – that is, in relation to good taste ... We dry up our tears, and have the satisfaction, perhaps, to discover that a transaction which morally considered, was shocking, ... when tried by the principles of Taste, turns out to be a very meritorious performance.²

De Quincey elaborated the argument with a history of murder through the ages, and suggested the criteria of taste necessary for distinguishing the good ones from the bad ones.

The essay, in addition to anticipating the editorial assumptions of popular journalism, offers a useful way into the subject of Dark Tourism, or as it will be characterised here – Thanatourism. This inquiry seeks to establish the

Keywords

Death
Thanatopsis
Tourism
De Quincey

philosophical and historical roots of the *mentalité* through which the publicly shocking and repugnant may be experienced as a source of private pleasure – and may achieve the status of a tourist attraction.

Thanatopsis in history

The novelty of De Quincey's arguments will be considered later but we will start by recognising what they owed to the past. The essay can be seen as a contribution to a longstanding cultural tradition which exists in all societies and which had been particularly foregrounded in Christian culture within Western Europe. It is a discursive field known as Thanatopsis. The dictionary (OED) definition of this is 'contemplation of death'. In this paper it will be interpreted more broadly to mean, not just the contemplation of death, but the stimuli by which such contemplations are generated and the forms of contemplative response such stimuli tend to produce. Thanatopsis, in these terms, includes all the signifying forms of representation, symbolisation and material evidence by which ideas of death are communicated to an individual in time and space within a given society. These thanatopic signifiers tend to produce meanings which comprise: ideas on death in general; conceptions of an individual's own death; and notions of the deaths of others, both close and distant in time and space.

From the Middle Ages to well into the nineteenth century thanatopsis was not just aided, but encouraged and induced, by the multiplicity of symbolic representations and material objects which kept death at the forefront of individual awareness. The rich had private artefacts – death's heads, hour glasses, death masks, and effigies which constantly reminded them of the hour of their passing to come. John Donne, actually slept with a coffin in his room. Thanatopsis was promoted to the poor by the church which stage-managed representations of death as a subject of public art and popular culture in signifying practices which included church paintings and carvings, monuments, tableaux, morality plays, displays and, of course, sermons.

One of the most widespread Thanatopic displays in European culture in the late Middle Ages was the Dance of Death. This was the symbolic depiction of Death as a terrifying, partly-fleshed skeleton carrying off people from all walks of life.

It was depicted in books, broadsheets and tableaux, on medals, on the walls, ceilings and pews of churches, on bridges and even danced in churchyards.³ The skeleton is still the staple form of representation of Death in modern films as varied as Hammer Horrors and the works of Ingmar Bergman. The Dance of Death acted as a *Memento Mori* which encouraged people not to set too much store by life or, conversely, to enjoy it as much as possible before it was snatched away.

The printed word was the major medium of thanatopsis. One of the earliest books published by Caxton was the *Ars Moriendi*, a treatise on how to live and



Figure 1. The Medieval Dance of Death depicted in an engraving of 1815

3. The two most comprehensive treatments of the subject are: F Douce, *The Dance of Death with a treatise on the subject*, London: Pickering, 1833 and E.-H. Langlois, *Essai historique, philosophique et pittoresque sur les Danses des Morts*, Rouen: A. Lebrument, 1852.

Figure 2. The first page of
Caxton's *Ars Moriendi*
(late 15th century)

4. J. Huizinga, *The
waning of the Middle
Ages*, Harmondsworth:
Penguin, 1968 (first
published 1924).

5. Edith Rickert,
Chaucer's World, London:
Oxford University Press,
1949, pp.267-268.

¶ Here begynnyth a lxxij treatise schortly
compyled and called ars moriendi that is
to saye the craft for to dye for the helthe of
mannes soules.

When any of this worlde shal dye: thynke
is moste necessarye to haue a saynall
furnish the which wyll helpe and praye
for hym: therfore counseyll the syle for the
deth of his soule: more ower to see that alle
other so to aduise hym for elles apptyly for to
make hym depart. ¶ Thynke is to be remem
berd the grete benefytes of god done for hym
Synce that tyme and specially of þe passion of
our lord: and thynke is to be wote some storye
of sayntes or the vij psalmes wyth þe letanye
or our lady psalter in parte or toke wyth othe
¶ And eue the praye of the crucyfyxe is to be
hede in his syght wyth othe. ¶ And helpe
be is of tyme to be cast vpon and about hym
for anoynting of euill spryde: f. Deluyth thine
be full vnto to take there anoyntage of the
soule of thyng may. ¶ And thynke and eue
make hym crye for mercy and grace: for the

¶ i

die well. It was followed by thousands
of religious texts which concentrated
people's mind on the inevitability of
death and the precautions necessary
to avoid hellfire, as well as a more
general literature, particularly poetic,
on death.

Thanatopsis was a political and
religious issue. Inculcation of the fear
of death in general encouraged
dependence on the consolations of
religion and the church which
controlled it, while the horror of
particular kinds of death was
associated by powerful interest groups
with political and religious enemies.
Fox's *Book of Martyrs*, first published
in English in 1563 and frequently
reprinted, featured verbal and pictorial
accounts of tortures and the forms of
violent death endured by Christian

martyrs, particularly Protestant ones executed by Catholics. It did more than
anything to create an image of the Spanish Inquisition which has persisted to
this day.

The effects of these thanatoptic presentations were two fold. Death was kept
highly visible in everyday life; and it was made to appear terrifying. Huizinga
devoted a chapter of a book to representations of death in the Middle Ages which
concluded:

At the close of the Middle Ages the whole vision of death may be summed up in
the word macabre, in its modern meaning ... (The) sentiment it embodies, of
something gruesome and dismal, is precisely the conception of death which arose
during the last centuries of the Middle Ages.⁴

Access to many of the Thanatoptic presentations just described often involved
travel. Thanatopsis was a major element in pilgrimages made to the sites of the
martyrdom or internment of saints where pilgrims viewed shrines to the dead
and brought back mementoes, relics and ampullae – vessels which contained
such thanatoptic talismans as oil or nails from the Cross and earth from the
tombs of martyrs. Pilgrimage was the highest form of thanatopsis since it
involved physical presence at a setting of death, rather than its symbolic
contemplation in books and images. So highly was it valued that the rich left
money in their wills so that, after their death, others could make pilgrimages on
their behalf, to holy places of thanatoptic importance.⁵

Thanatopsis served a number of functions in the communal life of Christian
societies. It could be a form of catharsis in the sense Aristotle imputed to the
effects of exposure to tragedy; by experiencing the pity and terror of
representations of Death, a person could be inoculated against, or purged of, its

terrors in real life. Thanatopsis could also be a form of spiritual preparation – if people were ready for Death it could not take them by surprise (as, for instance, was the fate of all the figures featured in the Dance of Death). Like Greek philosophy, Christianity taught the importance of learning how to die. Representations of the dead were also commonly invoked as learning models and anti-models for the living. As late as the eighteenth century, books such as *Fables and Dialogues of the Dead* written by the Archbishop of Cambrai for the Dauphin of France (1723) and *Admonitions from the Dead in Epistles to the Living* (1754) examined the lives of the dead as texts for the living.

The most important effect of these thanatoptic presentations was to make death a highly normal and present element in everyday life, a position it retained until the twentieth century.

Thanatopsis and Romanticism

So far we have attempted to locate De Quincey's essay, and the Dark Tourism which it anticipates, within a broad thanatoptic tradition centrally enshrined in Christian culture. We turn now to three crucial ways in which his essay lay outside it.

The first difference between De Quincey's Thanatoptic discourse and earlier ones was that it made its central focus violent, secular death. Though violent death had been a feature of thanatopsis in the Middle Ages (most saints died violently) violence was not the central issue. The main point was not the form of death, but the moral it inculcated which derived from the status of the dead as individuals (e.g. as religious figures). Even in generalised thanatoptic presentations such as the Dance of Death the emphasis had previously been on the subject of Death (Death carrying off the knight, the bishop, the merchant etc.) rather than the manner of death. In De Quincey's essay the emphasis was on the form of death, murder, rather than the person-specific characteristics of the subject.

The second departure in De Quincey's thanatoptic treatise was to shift contemplation of death from the public, communal sphere to the private sphere by focusing, not on the moral or religious significance of particular deaths, which could be shared by all, but on their significance in the realm of individual aesthetics – that of personal taste. Violent death became a consumer commodity, a spectator sport like tourism. This was a revolutionary shift which De Quincey did not invent. His essay incorporated influences which we can now recognise as emergent contemporary ideologies of Romanticism which tended to privilege subjective, aesthetic taste at the expense of older notions of communal morality and belief. A secular taste for murder and violence had begun to develop from three related ideological quarters.

The first of these was the concept of the Sublime as a mode of subjective experience. This had first been systematically theorised by Edmund Burke ⁶ in a book which had a profound influence on Romantic attitudes to art, literature, landscape and, crucially, to tourism. The Sublime was defined as a sense of elevated pleasure produced by exposure to phenomena that inculcated terror and awe. Burke inventoried numerous properties of phenomena likely to induce Sublime effects including: infinity, darkness, solitude, vacuity and uniformity. The one which concerns us here is his notion that pain might produce Sublime pleasure:

6. Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1757.

7.Ibid, pp.13 & 71.

8. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford: University Press, 1933.

9. Francis Claudon, *Concise Encyclopaedia of Romanticism*, Ware, Herts: Omega, 1986, p.25.

10. Quoted in Holbrook Jackson, *Anatomy of bibliomania*, London: Faber & Faber, 1950, p.169.

11. See N.H.H. Graburn, 'The anthropology of tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol.10, no.1, pp.9-33.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime ... The idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it.⁷

This directly anticipates De Quincey's spectator interest in murder and violent death, the subject of Dark Tourism. It also leads to the more pathological participatory yearnings of De Sade and his acolytes.

The second influence on De Quincey's article was the fashion for the Gothic. This was a literary taste for the morbid and sensational which had been created during the last half of the eighteenth century in novels by Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, M.G. Lewis, C.R. Maturin and others, and to a lesser extent, in gloomy poetic works such as Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1743) and Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-45). The main feature of Gothic literature was a preoccupation with death and disasters, often historical ones, set in castles, wild ruins, and picturesque landscape. Scenes of execution, torture, dismal incarcerations, ghostly appearances and hauntings were common. All of these elements entered the Romantic psyche, as well as affecting burgeoning tourism tastes.

Finally, De Quincey's essay owed something to an emerging aesthetic disposition for what Mario Praz has called Black Romanticism,⁸ an unholy trinity of preoccupations with 'flesh, death and the Devil' in which, 'pleasure became confused with pain, beauty and horror'.⁹ Black Romanticism was associated with a self-conscious rejection of conventional morality and the espousal of sin and damnation. Its early exponents included the notorious Hell Fire Club, established in a former Cistercian Monastery at Medmenham (later, the subject of a Shell tourism film presented by John Betjeman in the 1950s). Lord Byron affected a black romantic persona in his verse, once writing to his friend, Samuel Rogers, that he had 'supped full of horror in two cantos of darkness and dismay'.¹⁰ Its later acolytes included De Sade, Baudelaire and other French Romantics and, in the 20th. century, the black magician, Aleister Crowley. Though De Quincey's essay was partly written tongue-in-cheek, its imp-of-the-perverse arguments fall within tendencies in Black Romanticism.

The revisions to thanatoptic discourse found in Romanticism and De Quincey's essay can be related to a dynamic which has been seen as a major tourism motivation – a quest for the The Other, modes of experience inverted from those of 'everyday' life.¹¹ Just as tourism has been seen as a turning away from the physical and cultural landscapes of industrialising or industrialised societies (a tendency that was also an effect of Romanticism), so Romantic versions of thanatopsis were a turning away from its mental landscape. The elements of the Gothic, the Sublime and Black Romanticism in attitudes to death developed at precisely that moment when, in Western Europe, traditional religious and superstitious attitudes to death were in retreat under the assault of science, calculation and the other rationalising tendencies which have been identified with capitalistic, industrial development (observed by many sociologists, most notably Marx and Weber). Just when Death's Sting was coming to be seen as a field for scientific inquiry into antecedent conditions and causes, rather than as a subject for moralistic, emotive representation, Romanticism gave it back its Otherness.

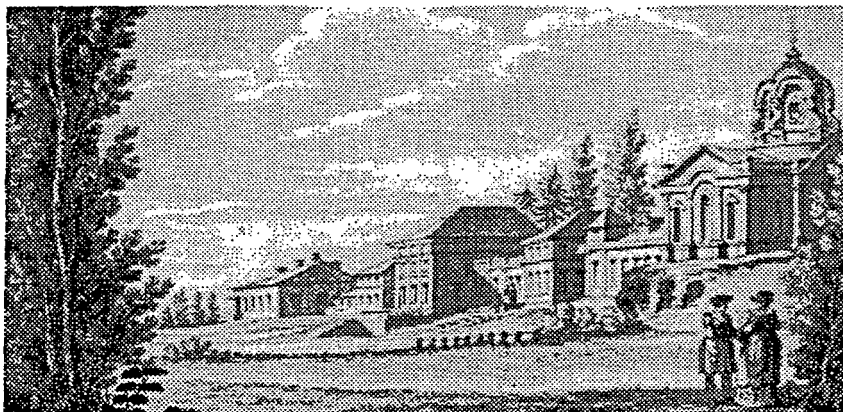


Figure 3. The Palace of Roboscha where Czar Peter III was murdered. An engraving from Edward Clarke's travel memoirs (1823)

How did these discourses of Death affect habits of travel and tourism? During the high Romantic period, 1770-1830, there was a great expansion of European travel which included thanatoptic elements. Memoirs and diaries record visits to locations of death and violence, both contemporary and historical, including castles, prisons, graveyards, battlefields and public executions. Wordsworth and his sister visited the grave of Burns during their tour of Scotland in 1803¹² as did Keats in 1818¹³. Edward Daniel Clarke visited the Palace and apartments at Roboscha in Russia where Czar Peter the Third was strangled by his soldiers and his body displayed in a collar to conceal the manner of death.¹⁴

Battlefields such as Flodden and Culloden were sought out by the Howitts,¹⁵ Walter Scott, and many others. Howard, the penal reformer, described prisons in Switzerland which were open for tourists.¹⁶ Schama describes how from the 17th century onwards the correction houses of the Rasphuis and Spinhuis in Holland were 'obligatory stops' where tourists from England, France, Germany, Scandinavia and Hungary could watch inmates being disciplined (recalcitrant ones were subjected to the water room where they had to keep baling out to avoid drowning).¹⁷ Edward Stanley, later Bishop of Norwich, describes tourist trips to France between 1802 and 1816, during which he witnessed guillotinations, walked the Catacombs of Paris where the bones collected from all the charnel houses of the City were stored, and ploughed his way through partly exposed corpses on the field of Waterloo. Waterloo was the first battlefield to become a mass tourism attraction to which visitors flocked in 1816 and later.¹⁸ The tourist route from Calais to Paris in the second decade of the nineteenth century included Wimille, a village 'rendered interesting' by a roadside monument to the aeronauts, Rosier and Pilatre, and six miles from the capital, St Denis, the burying place of French kings was a major attraction.¹⁹ The greatest thanatoptic travel destination of the Romantic period was Pompeii, the Roman City which had been destroyed by volcanic eruption in 79 AD. Its discovery from 1748 onwards was the terrestrial equivalent of finding Atlantis, a lost City which had been engulfed by a cataclysmic disaster. It produced a European sensation which was as much because of the bodies, found 'frozen' in the positions they were in when eruption overtook them, as the city's classical significance.

12. E. de Selincourt (ed), *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, London: Macmillan, 1941, Vol. 1, p.198.

13. The letter Keats wrote to his brother Tom describing the visit, and the poem celebrating it are reproduced in Carol K. Walker, *Walking north with Keats*, London: Yale, 1992, p.160.

14. Edward Daniel Clarke, *Travels in various countries of Europe, Asia and Africa*, London: T. Cadell, 1823, Part 3, Section 2, pp.531-532.

15 William Howitt, *Visits to remarkable places: Old halls, battle felds and striking scenes illustrative of striking passages in English history and poetry*, London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1840, 2 vols.

16. John Howard, *The state of prisons in England and Wales*, Warrington, 1777-84.

17. S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, London: Collins, 1987, pp.21-22.

18. Jane H. Adeane & Maud Grenfell (ed), *Before and after Waterloo: Letters from Edward Stanley 1802, 1814, 1816*, London: T Fisher Unwin, 1907.

19. Anon, *Doctor Syntax in Paris or a tour in search of the Grotesque*, London: Wright, 1820.

20. Raleigh Trevelyan,
*The Shadow of Vesuvius,
Pompeii, AD 79*. London:
The Folio Society, 1976

Fragonard painted the discovery of a skeleton; Samuel Palmer painted the street of the tombs in 1837, and volcanoes and earthquakes became a major subject in art.²⁰

Romanticism thus not only promoted a general interest in travel and tourism (Shelley, Byron, Keats and Wordsworth were inveterate tourists and two of them died abroad), it also established the main ideological motivations, one of which was thanatourism to which we now turn.

Thanatourism defined and typified

This historical sketch suggests that Dark Tourism, far from being a recent phenomenon, springs from a thanatoptic tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages, but which was decisively modified and intensified under the impact of Romanticism. It also suggests how we might define, delimit and typify Dark Tourism today. Dark Tourism is the travel dimension of thanatopsis which is why we shall rename it Thanatourism and define it as follows:

Thanatourism is travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death, which may, to a varying degree be activated by the person-specific features of those whose deaths are its focal objects.

The main elements of this definition are these:

1. It is a behavioural, rather than an essentialist definition, which defines thanatourism by the traveller's motives rather than by an attempt to specify the discrete features of the travel destination.
2. It recognises that Thanatourism is not an absolute form but exists across a continuum of intensity according to a) whether it is the single motivation or exists with other motivations b) the extent to which the interest in death is person-centred or generalised. The purest form of Thanatourism is travel motivated exclusively by fascination with death in itself, irrespective of the person or persons involved. It is not initially focused on the dead as individuals or collectivities with differentiated features (though it may come to be so), but on the forms or scale of death in itself (e.g. visits to graveyards, catacombs, scenes of disasters, Black Museums undertaken with no knowledge of the personal or public qualities of the dead). At the other extreme is Thanatourism in which the dead are both known to, and valued by, the visitor (e.g. a visit to a war memorial commemorating a dead relative). The more differentiated and comprehensive the traveller's knowledge of the dead, the weaker is the purely thanatouristic element.

Finally, it is worth adding that the definition excludes judgmental evaluations. It would have been possible to define Thanatourism as 'morbid fascination with death' but its widespread occurrence suggests that it is a taste all share to some extent.

Thanatourism comprises five distinct travel activities:

- a) Travel to witness public enactments of death. This is the strongest and, in modern Western societies, the most morally proscribed form of Thanatourism, though common in the past in the form of gladiatorial combats to the death and Christian martyrdoms in Rome, and political executions and public hangings in Britain which were legal until 1868. Public executions produced huge crowds where seats were sold with prices graduated according to the nearness to the

action, and commemorative song sheets and broadsides were sold in numbers that exceeded best selling novelists of the time.²¹

In 1849 Dickens attended the execution in Horsemonger Lane of Frederick George and Maria Manning, sentenced for murdering a former-lover of Mrs. Manning. Witnessing death can still be seen, to a limited degree, in modern Europe in the sightseers who rush to disaster scenes of air crashes, ferry sinkings and terrorist explosions, or slow down their cars to gaze at motorway pile-ups.

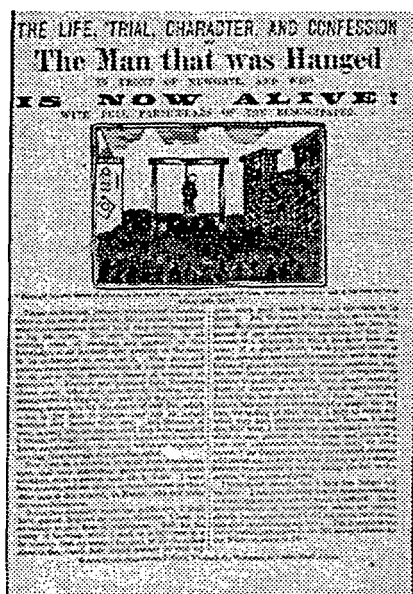


Figure 4. Samuel Palmer's painting of the Street of Tombs in Pompeii (1837).

21. For discussion of, and examples of broadsides sold at executions see Charles Hindley, *Curiosities of street literature*, London: Reeves & Turner, 1871. Leslie Shepard, *The history of street literature*, Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973, pp.196-199 and Robert Collison, *The story of street literature*, London: Dent & Sons, 1973, pp.31-51.

b) Travel to see the sites of mass or individual deaths, after they have occurred: This is the most common form of Thanatourism which encompasses a great amount of tourism behaviour. It may be travel to mass death sites (Auschwitz, Culloden, the Colosseum in Rome, Lockerbie) or to sites of individual deaths (the book depository in Dallas from which Kennedy was assassinated, the room where the Princes in the Tower of London were murdered, the road where pop figures such as Marc Bolan, James Dean or Eddie Cochrane were killed). The haunts of famous murderers and serial killers are other examples; in London there are now tours of the East End where Jack the Ripper stalked his victims and the houses of the Yorkshire Ripper and Frederick West have also attracted sightseers.

c) Travel to internment sites of, and memorials to, the dead. This kind of Thanatourism includes visits to graveyards, catacombs, crypts, war memorials
Figure 5. A broadside commemorating a public hanging (c.1850)



and cenotaphs. In the eighteenth century graveyards produced meditations on mortality, a pleasant melancholy in which regret for the anonymous departed was often accompanied by a secret satisfaction that one was not yet one of them (Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* written in 1750 at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, is the paradigm text). In the nineteenth century a fashion for epitaph collecting produced a literature of inscriptions found in graveyards. The purely Thanatouristic element in all this varies, according to how well known the dead are to the visitor. Some cemeteries and memorials may be particularly sought out because because of the celebrities interred or commemorated (e.g. El Escorial, the mausoleum to Spain's kings and queens, and the Franco memorial,

outside Madrid, the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, where the Oscar Wilde, Berlioz, Henri Murger and Jim Morrison are buried, Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, the Jewish Cemetery in Prague where Kafka is buried). Mass War Memorials such as the Menin Gate in Belgium, and the Stalingrad monument, may achieve a national, or international, cultural importance.

d) Travel to view the material evidence, or symbolic representations of death, in locations unconnected with their occurrence. This kind of Thanatourism is directed towards synthetic sites at which evidence or simulacra of the dead have been assembled. It includes museums where weapons of death, the clothing of murder victims and other artefacts are put on display. The Museum of the Revolution in Cuba exhibits the blood-spattered, bullet-ridden clothing of heroes of the Revolution and torture instruments used under the Battista regime. Madame Tussaud's in London has always included wax effigies of famous murderers. The Kremlin used to exhibit the embalmed body of Lenin as a political tourist attraction.

e) Travel for re-enactments or simulation of death. This form was, until the twentieth century, largely confined to religious presentations which restaged the death of Christ or other Christian figures, often at Easter. The Passion Play at Oberammergau in the German Alps is the most celebrated example, but other Catholic regions have their own plays, pageants and processions in which effigies of Christ's body are carried through the streets. Since the war, secular derivations have developed in the form of battle re-enactments staged by members of societies dedicated to particular wars e.g. the English Civil War Society. 'Murder Weekends' have been staged as tourism events where detective story fans assemble to solve a 'murder'.

Thanatourism in Modern Times

Thanatourism has greatly expanded in the last 200 years, not just because the numbers of the Great Majority (one of many Victorian euphemisms for the Dead) have been greatly added to, but also with the influence of the media. Thanatourism always depended upon communication to establish the thanatographic mapping linking the dead to specific locations. The development of the press and, later the broadcast media, greatly increased the number of such locations as editors and producers discovered, what printers of broadsides and ballads had always known, that the attraction of murder and violent death increased the more geographically specific it was. Many famous murders and disasters, past and present, have been coded principally by their location (The Tay Bridge Disaster, the Whitechapel Murders, 10 Rillington Place, the Boston Strangler, the Yorkshire Ripper – and the Radcliffe Highway Murders described at length in De Quincey's essay).

A largely unintentional effect of this geographical emphasis has been to promote tourism. Murder coverage in the nineteenth century press produced stampedes of visitors to death locations for sightseeing and souvenir hunting. In 1828 the Maria Marten murder by Corder excited great interest with people from Wales, Scotland and Ireland travelling to visit the barn where the body had been buried, many of whom took memorials including pieces of the barn door and tiles

from the roof. Her clothes became collectors' pieces and a lock of her hair was sold for two guineas. In 1837 the murder of Hannah Brown by Greenacre in Camberwell Lane required a police presence to stop sightseers taking away chairs, tables and doors. The maniac, Courtenay, who was shot at Boughton near Canterbury in 1838, attracted the gentry from a distance of 150 miles. The tree against which he fell when shot was stripped of its bark by the curious, and pieces of his beard and hair were sold. Ropes used for hanging at public executions were bought at a guinea a foot including that which hanged Thurtell for the Weare murder and Fauntleroy for forgery.²² In the 1840s, a pond near London where a murder by drowning had occurred, was almost drained within a week by souvenir hunters taking away tumblers of water.

In the early 20th century Thomas Burke, one of the most successful travel writers before the war, recalled Sunday afternoon outings with his adopted family in the East End of London to Vernon Hill to visit a house linked to a murder reported in the press, in the company of a local grocer called Fremantle who had made himself an authority on murder:

When we came to the house, a commonplace large villa, and stood with a crowd of cyclists and walkers looking at it, it seemed to my heated fancy to have been made for what had happened ... What with Mr. Fremantle's description and the pictures of crime that I had seen in the Police Budget, which was displayed with the middle pages open in the windows of newspaper shops, I could see the business in action²³

Several of these murders and many others were celebrated in wax in the Chamber of Horrors, one of the most popular features of Madame Tussaud's from the late nineteenth century through to the twentieth. As late as 1930 Greenacre and Thurtell were exhibited alongside Burke and Hare, the body snatchers, Crippen, the first murderer to be captured through the use of wireless and Kemmler, the first murderer to go to the electric chair (in New York in 1890). Among the other 77 attractions in the Chamber of Horrors of 1930 were: a guillotine, the last of the treadmills, the skull of Mrs. Nicholson (the lady who attempted to assassinate George III), a pillory and the old toll bell from Newgate Prison.²⁴

Conclusion

In its purer form Thanatourism is a minor tourism form. It commonly exists alongside other motivations (e.g. a military historian's interest in a battlefield for its strategic significance as well as, or rather than, its rating on a scale-of death measure), or to be less a fascination with death per se, than feelings for the particular people who have died (personal, nationalistic or humanitarian).

Until the 20th. century Thanatopsis was a central and recognised feature of society and an overt motivation for travel. In this century Britain has tended to conceal death²⁵ and to regard any dwelling on it as morbid and even pathological. Yet death continues to exert a fascination and motivate travel in ways which are rarely openly admitted. The central paradox of Dark Tourism is that, like much popular journalism, it addresses desires and interests which are not supposed to have a legitimate existence within the secular, moral discourse of

22. Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of popular delusions and the madness of crowds*, London: National Illustrated Library, 2nd edition, 1852, Vol 2, pp.306-307.

23. Thomas Burke, *The wind and the rain, A book of confessions*, London: Thornton Batten North, 1924, p.30.

24. Madame Tussaud's *Exhibition Catalogue*, 1930, pp.50-55.

25. Tony Walter, 'Ritualising death in a consumer society', *Royal Society of Arts Journal*, Vol CXLIV, No.5468, April, 1996, pp.32-40.

the 20th century which is why it is frequently presented as heritage, education, or history.

The work of Lennon and Foley thus stimulates debate, not just about an important but neglected, form of tourism, but about contemporary attitudes to death. This paper has attempted to trace some of the historical and philosophical links between attitudes to, and representations of, death, and the kinds of tourism they produced and still produce.