For hundreds of years people have felt the urge to do honor to great writers by visiting their homes, their haunts, and their graves, by walking the paths they trod, by looking at the world they saw. Of course the same urge has been associated with artists, composers, statesmen, saints, and others of great achievement. But authors, as a group, predominate in inspiring memorialization. Such literary pilgrimages may be deeply personal, serious and scholarly, or merely a part of casual, commercialized cultural tourism.

Literary historians and biographers are of necessity literary pilgrims, and their desire to connect with their subject’s milieu may seem obsessive. My wife Martha and I have engaged in many literary pilgrimages both serious and casual for five decades. In pursuit of her biography of Frederic Harrison, she and I sought out the London church where he was baptized and checked the baptismal record; dined at a hotel, once his childhood home, on the 100th anniversary of his wedding reception there; visited each of the five houses he occupied during his adult years, from Tudor manor to country cottage; went to his law office in Lincoln’s Inn and the Church of Humanity he helped found; and gazed reflectively at the urn containing his ashes in the chapel of Wadham College, Oxford. It seemed obvious to us that familiarity with each of these sites was essential to understanding his life and work.

In 1985 I spent two weeks traveling in the desolate mountains of western Iceland with a small party of scholars, all members of the William Morris Society, who were there because he had traveled there a century before. In 1991 Martha and I searched the steep medieval streets of Taormina and finally identified the house D.H. Lawrence briefly occupied and where he wrote “Snake.” And in 1997 we stood on a country road near Arras at 9 am on the 9th of April because on that spot a German artillery shell had mortally wounded the poet Edward Thomas precisely eighty years before.

How many pilgrims and tourists have trod the floorboards of Jane Austen’s house in Chawton, Surrey; or in London sought out number 48 Doughty Street, now a museum, where Dickens wrote Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby; or paid homage to George Eliot in Highgate Cemetery (a close neighbor there to Karl Marx); or tramped through the Lake District to visit Wordsworth’s Hawkshead, Grasmere, and Rydal; or nodded respectfully at Henry James’s neat brick house in Rye; or navigated Rome’s busy Spanish Steps to glimpse the dying Keats’s last abode; or ambled down Prague’s Golden Lane to find the house where Kafka visited his sister; or searched in vain for 221b Baker Street, where the fictional detective, not his creator, lived?

Even in the absence of corporeal remains, tombs and graves may inspire visitors: we may be deceived about their contents. As a young college graduate I visited Drumcliff churchyard near Sligo on the West coast of Ireland to locate Yeats’s gravestone with his famous lines, “Cast a cold eye/on Life, on Death./ Horseman, pass by!” Little did I know—nor did anyone else at the time—that Yeats was not there or that his remains were lost forever somewhere in a French cemetery. And in Florence the same year, in the Santa Croce, I stood reverentially before the monument to Dante, ignorant of the fact that he is entombed where he died, in Ravenna.
Westminster Abbey presents pilgrims with the prospect of just such ignorant error—unless they have done their homework. Are visitors to this national shrine in the actual presence of the mighty dead, or merely of names cut in stone? The Abbey has held the entombed remains of monarchs and prelates for a thousand years and, after Chaucer in 1400, of authors as well. Jonson and Johnson are here, as are Tennyson and Browning, Dickens and Kipling—but not very many other notables.

Dozens of authors are there in name only. Memorial plaques set in the walls and in the floor, mostly in “Poets’ Corner,” remind us that Shakespeare and Marlowe, Milton and Pope, Blake and the Brontes, Coleridge and Scott, Wordsworth and Keats, and even our near-contemporaries Eliot, Auden, and Dylan Thomas are the nation’s literary heritage. Almost all have been accommodated under the encompassing canopy of Christianity. But the greatness of Shelley (atheist) and George Eliot (Humanist) won them entry despite their heterodoxy. I have a vivid memory of the emplacement of the George Eliot memorial in 1980, when the invited guests, expecting a lecture, were electrified by an exalted chanting from on high of her Positivist poem “O may I join the Choir Invisible.”

Oscar Wilde’s tomb in Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, is the most visited destination in that Valhalla of cultural icons, and this may not be only because of the familiar story of his flamboyant notoriety and tragic downfall. Jacob Epstein’s tomb sculpture of a hovering androgynous Assyrian angel, which somehow echoes Wilde’s unsettling glamour, may help account for the fact that lipstick and graffiti constantly deface the stonework, requiring installation of glass shielding. He is surrounded by good literary companions: Moliere, Balzac, Proust, Colette, and Gertrude Stein (with, inevitably, Alice B. Toklas). A once famous philosopher’s grave brought us first to Pere Lachaise, but now only scholars know his name: Auguste Comte, founder of Positivism and the Religion of Humanity. Few pilgrims visit his grave or his statue at the Sorbonne, but his house near the Odeon is a museum which welcomes the occasional academic researcher. For years in London Martha and I paid an annual visit to the site of the Church of Humanity established in Bloomsbury by his English disciples—alas, now an office.

Much loved works of Shakespeare and Dickens have made their fictional worlds part of the imaginative landscape. Perhaps we have visited or dream of visiting the Forest of Arden, or the field of Agincourt, or Verona, or Elsinore. We will never find what Shakespeare created in these real yet mythic places, but the magic of their names is sufficient to render them sites of pilgrimage. So too is that of “Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre,” which has not existed since the seventeenth century but whose recreation in 1997 attracts a constant flow of tourist-pilgrims. “Dickens World” in Chatham, Kent, a commercialized theme park, demonstrates that quaint fabrications of fictional places can satisfy the public’s interest in cultural tourism—the least serious kind of literary pilgrimage.
My two most exotic visitation sites are associated with men of action who also qualify as significant writers. Here the pilgrimage was part of a larger travel agenda, a voyage to the remote islands of the South Atlantic in 1997. On St. Helena I saw the lonely and empty tomb of Napoleon, who was interred there for nineteen years before Paris reclaimed him for the ages. Later, on the sub-antarctic island of South Georgia, I stood with my small party of fellow travelers in the windswept Grytviken whalers' cemetery at the granite gravestone of the legendary Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, and toasted “the boss” with a tot of rum.

Such far-ranging expeditions may not be needed in order to establish a connection with admired writers. All over London the round Blue Plaques on their residences—discreet, standardized, minimal—tell us they once lived there. And in a single library, such as the Huntington, we can commune with them in an intimate way by scrutinizing their manuscripts. In a sense, too, writers live in our minds when we belong to the Shaw or Conrad or Wells or D.H. Lawrence or Edward Thomas Societies, attend their conferences, go on their field trips, and read their newsletters. If, for example, we subscribe to the quarterly *Gissing Journal*, we honor the novelist by sharing his experiences and interests, hopes and travails.

Beyond the diverse meanings of literary pilgrimage I’ve mentioned here is another I have not touched on at all. The best way to pay our dues to the authors we admire is to make the short and simple pilgrimage to their printed pages.