

# Max Weber Lecture Series

MWP – LS 2010/01  
**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

SIMULACRUM AND RE-ENACTMENTS: THE EXPERIENCE OF  
POMPEII IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Mary Beard



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE  
MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

*Simulacrum and Re-enactments:  
the experience of Pompeii in the nineteenth century*

MARY BEARD

This text may be downloaded for personal research purposes only. Any additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper or other series, the year, and the publisher.

The author(s)/editor(s) should inform the Max Weber Programme of the EUI if the paper is to be published elsewhere, and should also assume responsibility for any consequent obligation(s).

ISSN 1830-7736

© 2010 Mary Beard

Printed in Italy  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

## **Abstract**

This lecture traces the changing experience of visiting Pompeii through the nineteenth century. It argues against the standard idea that there was a shift over the century from a Romantic view of the site to a more archaeological approach (which stressed the reconstruction of Roman daily life). It suggests instead that two conflicting visions of the city (“city of the dead”/“city of the living”) were always held in tension.

## **Keywords**

Pompeii, history of archaeology, history of tourism, Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

*The lecture was delivered on Wednesday 16 December 2009*

*Mary Beard  
University of Cambridge*



This lecture concerns the complicated ways in which the distant past is represented to us. It is an attempt to undermine the still present archaeological myth of the uncovering and the preservation of the past. And, as the title hints, below the surface lurks the influence of Baudrillard and his ideas of the truth-value of the *simulacrum*.<sup>1</sup> But it is not focussed on theory. I am instead playing with some of the theoretical implications of one specific case study: that is the story of ancient Pompeii in the nineteenth century (albeit, I confess, I shall be concentrating largely on British and American reactions to the site). But I have also chosen this topic because Pompeii, which is even now the place where we imagine the ancient world survives “unmediated”, is where we see very clearly the role of “re-presentation” in our encounters with the very materiality of the past.

And this theme goes hand in hand, with another related, but different, *historical* issue: namely how the visitors’ experience did or did not *change* over the course of the nineteenth century. In particular, can we detect, as is often claimed, a shift in the standard visitor response from a Romantic to an Archaeological mode of viewing in the course of the nineteenth century? These are of course big generalisations, but intentionally so. I am trying to see beyond the infinitely varied individual responses to the norms and structures of viewing and visiting.

But let us start in the 1880s, because in May 1884 Pompeii was “revivified”. The city that had been overwhelmed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, and re-excavated gradually since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was brought back to life in three days of re-enactments, staged by a group of local antiquaries, artists and bigwigs – put on to raise money for the victims of a recent earthquake on the island of Ischia.

On the first day Roman chariot races were held in a newly built circus. These were opened with a procession in which the priests of the Egyptian god Isis had a starring role [Fig. 1], and the whole event was put on in the presence of a mock emperor, who watched from a throne. Wine meanwhile was served to the race-goers in replica “antique vases” from the original bar and shop fronts. On the second day, a Roman wedding was re-enacted in the morning, and in the afternoon a funeral cortege made its way to one of the main burial areas outside the city. On the third day gladiatorial games were held in the original amphitheatre, before the mock emperor departed in another procession, this time by torchlight.

Overseas reactions to these spectacles were mixed. There was admiration for the historical veracity of the proceedings: “Under the careful superintendence of Signor de Petra, the Director of the Naples Museum . . . all was arranged with strictest adherence to the truth,” the *Graphic* reassured its readers. “Skilful restorers have transformed the skeletons of wine-shops into a semblance of their old selves, and therein thirsty visitors were served with rich Falernian (that was the best known upmarket Roman wine) by waiters clad in veritable classic garb.”<sup>2</sup> But, there was still something uncomfortable about the whole affair. The regular “Notes from Naples” column in the *Athenaeum* had good things to say about the reconstructed musical instruments that had been specially made “after models long disinterred”, and about the imitation Roman music specially composed to be played on the specially made instruments. But wondered about “the questionable taste of converting the city of the dead into an overcrowded and gossiping theatre.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations”, in M. Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings* (Stanford, 1988), 166-84.

<sup>2</sup> “Pompeii revived,” *Graphic*, May 17, 1884, 478.

<sup>3</sup> *Athenaeum*, “Notes from Naples,” May 24, 1884, 670.



Figure 1

Jane Ellen Harrison, the charismatic, maverick and occasionally intensely irritating Classicist of Newnham College, in Cambridge had some characteristically acerbic observations. Writing of the occasion in the *Magazine of Art*, early the next year, 1885, she referred to the “little city [being] alive not merely with the footsteps of tourists, but with the tread of dead men’s ghosts being charmed back to life by archaeology.” “Some of us,” she goes on, “have perhaps felt that all this, amusing and archaeologically interesting though it is, is just a trifle out of tune. We may study the dead past to our profit, but we need not call it back to life and bid it dance for us.”<sup>4</sup>

Maybe the locals felt a bit the same. For the event recouped only 20% of the money spent, and nothing at all went to the Ischia earthquake victims.

Success or not, it is hard not to be struck by the contrast between this event in the 1880s and some of the most famous encounters with Pompeii earlier in the century – which repeatedly stressed the idea of Pompeii as the “City of the Dead”, *not* of living history. Some of the critics of the re-enactments that I have just quoted seem to have that regime in mind: Pompeii is being *revivified*; the *skeletons* of its wine-shops transformed, “dead men’s ghosts [are] charmed back to *life*”, “the city of the dead converted”. But the most famous – and possibly originary – formulation of this was Sir Walter Scott’s, who visited Pompeii on 9 February 1832, six months before his death. He was old, frail and lame, and was lent a sedan chair to be shown round by Sir William Gell, long-term British resident in Naples, and author of the first authoritative English handbook to the site. Thanks to the sedan, Scott was, in Gell’s words, “enabled to pass through the city without more fatigue, and I was sometimes enabled to call his attention to such objects as were the most worthy of remark. To these observations, however, he seemed generally nearly insensible, viewing the whole and not the parts, with the eye not of an antiquary but of a poet, and exclaiming frequently “The City of the Dead” without any other remark.” This image of the dying novelist being carried round the ruined town quickly became famous (with

<sup>4</sup> “Pompeii in Black and White,” *Magazine of Art* 8 (1885), 98–105



some help from Gell), and the story grew that Scott had actually coined the phrase “The City of the Dead” to refer to Pompeii.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not Scott *did* coin that rather obvious phrase, I’m not certain. But he was certainly echoing an approach and a reaction to the site that we often find among visitors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mrs Piozzi, for example, who visited in 1786, captured, and lightly parodied, the reactions of many of her contemporaries when she wrote: “How dreadful are the thoughts that such a sight suggests. How horrible the certainty that such a scene might be all acted over again tomorrow; and that we who today are spectators may become spectacles to travellers of a succeeding century.”<sup>6</sup> In a predictable romantic move, Pompeii as a city of the dead, necessarily reminded us of our own, modern, mortality.

These are two strikingly different presentations of and reactions to the ruined city Pompeii in the nineteenth century that lie at the heart of this lecture. I shall be wondering whether in fact they do instantiate the kind of development from Romance to Archaeology that is often claimed (and looks so plausible at first sight). At the same time I shall be exploring the ways that the experience of Pompeii always was an experience of representation, fiction, even fake – in a shifting, dialectical relationship with ancient “reality”.

But first we need to reflect in some detail on how Victorians encountered Pompeii – first of all those that made a visit. My material is drawn here largely from British accounts.

Obviously, the nature of visiting changes dramatically over the nineteenth century, both in terms of the ease and safety of travel, and in terms of what you could see when you arrived. The remains of Pompeii were first officially rediscovered and identified in the mid eighteenth century, and the excavation proceeded in fits and starts from that point. Throughout its modern history, the site (or part of the site) has been owned by the government of the region, whoever or whatever that was. And the progress of unearthing the city has depended on the enthusiasm, and also on the financial resources, and political distractions of the state.

To illustrate this: if you compare the plan of the excavated portion of the city between 1819 and 1888, you find a vast extension. What had been in 1819 little more than an excavated *street*, had become a small excavated town. This huge extension is not due to the Bourbon monarchs of Naples, who were in effective charge of Pompeii from its rediscovery until 1860 (interrupted by one decade of Napoleonic rule). For the last 20 years or so of their regime, up to Garibaldi’s capture of Naples in 1860, their mind was on internal political unrest and revolutionary fervour, not on excavating Pompeii. One visitor in March 1849 reported that the site itself was deserted and no excavations were going on: “The ruined city lay in all its desolation; the silence of its streets unawakened by a single other voice than those of our own party. The *cicerones* . . . had fallen into a state of lethargy well suited to the silence and slumber of the place. “Where are you excavating now?” I asked. – “‘Nowhere’ was the reply.” It was not until the victory of Garibaldi and the unification of Italy in 1860-61, when the site came under the control of the new government, that the excavations really got underway again.

Even then it was a bit of a shaky start. In one of the least happy of many links between nineteenth-century fiction and the site of Pompeii, Alexandre Dumas (père) was appointed by Garibaldi as Director of the excavations.<sup>7</sup> The *New York Times* welcomed this: “All travelers, and particularly all lovers of archaeological researches, will be rejoiced” it wrote. And Dumas himself had ambitious ideas about using Roman antiquity to re-energise the popular culture of Southern Italy. But he couldn’t

---

<sup>5</sup> William Gell, *Reminiscences of Sir Water Scott’s residence in Italy*, ed. James C. Corson (London, 1957), 8

<sup>6</sup> Hester L. Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections made in the course of a journey through France, Italy, and Germany*, 2 vols. (London, 1789), 2:35

<sup>7</sup> A. Collet, *Alexandre Dumas et Naples* (Geneva, 1994), 139-171.

deliver (and malicious gossip said that he only visited the site once – and was gone within a couple of years). *De facto* control, anyway, lay with Giuseppe Fiorelli – an ex-revolutionary turned archaeologist, the first of a series of more or less professional scholars to direct the excavations throughout the rest of the century.

One of Fiorelli's "inventions" was to change dramatically the visitor experience. Bodies and skeletons had been part of the allure of the city from very soon after its rediscovery. In fact what gave the Villa of Diomedes its particular fame was the group of 20 skeletons of women and children unearthed in its basement. But in 1863 Fiorelli, devised the technique of pouring plaster of Paris into the cavities left by the bodies to create dramatic "life-like" images of the Pompeian dead. [Fig. 2] These offered a new face-to-face encounter with ancient people, the opportunity to glimpse their death throes – but also prompted a rethink of some of the most cherished truths about ancient Rome (there was, for example, tremendous excitement at the trousers that appeared to be worn by the men – not a toga in sight).



Figure 2

The practicalities of visiting also changed over the period. There were two main turning points. The first was in the early 1840s when the railroad was built south from Naples. Up to that time, the only way to come was in a carriage from Naples (which took two hours or so). The normal point of entry was then through the street of tombs to the north (so you were effectively entering Pompeii by its grave-yard, past the Villa of Diomedes). You would get your carriage to pick you up at the southern entrance, usually at the Hotel Diomede – and take you round to the amphitheatre, then home. After the railroad, it was much easier to come by train, which deposited passengers at the south of the city, where more hotels quickly grew up. One option (and eventually it became the norm) was to enter the site on foot and make your way round to the entrance by the Marine Gate. But as late as 1868, more than 20 years after the opening of the railway, guidebooks were still recommending that you took a carriage from the hotels and entered by the street of the tombs.

The other major change was post-Garibaldi. In the early and mid years of the century, all visitors were required to take a guide (a *cicerone*) – this appears largely to stop them removing bits and pieces. The guides were veteran soldiers, wore uniforms and by the 1850s were 15 in number. They also spoke what was, to most English, an incomprehensible Neapolitan dialect, unless you were lucky enough to get Jacopo – who knew French and some English. You paid the guides directly and were encouraged to tip; you also had to pay extra to see some of the major buildings and to get the little boys, beggars, on the site to sweep the mosaics clean for you.

After Unification, things became much more regimented. From the 1860s, you paid a flat fee of 2 francs or lire for admission, and a guide came with that (there was strictly no tipping, though they were allowed to sell photographs). There were more of them: 30 by 1868, and even more later, each wearing a numbered badge. Sunday though was a free day: no fee and no guide. (If you ask how they prevented pilfering on the free day, the answer is that they probably didn't. One regular visitor wrote in 1895, "I regret to say that . . . I have come to the conclusion that it is not only the 'Arries of Naples who spoil the frescoes with their autographs, but it is the English, American and German tourists who on free days collect quantities of mosaic, and break off pieces of fresco . . . At the table d'hôte of the Hotel Suisse, and also at the Hotel del Sole, I have frequently heard one tourist ask another how much mosaic he had managed to tear up." )

What you actually *saw*, when you got into the city, in the 1860s and 70s was quite different from today. For a start, although the souvenir photographs seem to do their best to disguise it, there were the mounds of earth everywhere. It wasn't until the 1860s that Fiorelli installed a little train to take the earth and volcanic debris away. But even then a lot of the material still lay piled up where it had been dug. You entered the site over mountains of the stuff, and mounds surrounded many of the individual buildings. In addition, the buildings had not been restored. Our image of a Pompeian house has a roof, and lofty walls. We tend to forget that the town had actually been destroyed by a volcano, and that, for the most part, everything you now see above 3 metres or so is entirely rebuilt. It was only around 1900 that this kind of reconstruction began to be attempted – the average Victorian visitor was walking round ruins.

Some of them, however, mainly the celebrities, got the added treat of an excavation before their very eyes. The Pompeian trick of staging a dig in front of a visiting dignitary (and miraculously uncovering the skeleton that you knew was there all along) is often thought of as a distinctively eighteenth-century charade. In fact it continued right through the nineteenth century. Fiorelli was very skilled at what he called "preparing" excavations, "to gratify the curiosity of those whom it delighted the Director to honour".<sup>8</sup>

There are vivid descriptions of various notables getting this treatment – even if not always with spectacular results. Gladstone visited Pompeii on 9 January 1889:

Mr Gladstone with untiring energy walked from house to house, and temple to temple, discoursing learnedly on what he saw and giving his opinion on the various objects which had been excavated. Mrs Gladstone however soon tired . . . contenting herself with a casual view of the objects of interest. . . . After the principal sites . . . had been visited, the party stopped opposite the house . . . where an excavation was specially made for Mr Gladstone's delectation. Although everyone anxiously watched to see what would be discovered, nothing beyond a few earthen oil lamps, some valueless vases and household utensils were brought to light. These were very good specimens of their class, but not in any way remarkable.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Athenaeum*, March 16, 1861, 363

<sup>9</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, January 15, 1889, 5.

The truth is, however, that the reaction of many visitors was more like Mrs Gladstone's than Mr's. To be sure, some were excited. But many nineteenth-century writers express their disappointment at visiting the ancient city. In the late 1830s, for example, James Fenimore Cooper had this to say: "I think we were all a little disappointed with Pompeii. Perhaps our expectations were wrought up too high, for certainly I have approached no place in Europe with the same feverish excitement." The problem was that it was just *too ruined*: "It would be possible to render Pompeii," he wrote, "immeasurably more interesting than it is at present, by roofing a few of the houses; or by covering them with arches and using them as places in which to exhibit the different articles found there."<sup>10</sup> And in 1840 a fellow of St John's College Cambridge had a similar reaction:

I had expected too much from it and . . . my over-wrought expectation made me dissatisfied with the reality. I had always pictured Pompeii to myself as now subsisting in the precise identical state in which it stood in the reign of Titus [that is 79] . . . I looked in vain. . . There is nothing to be seen now but the mere skeleton of the city -- bare walls and empty houses.<sup>11</sup>

Visitors struggled to find a useful comparison for what they saw. The fellow of St John's decided that the houses looked as if they had been designed on the model of a Cambridge College, but that otherwise it was like a city destroyed in war. In the late 1830s another observer thought that it would look to an English soldier much like "a city destroyed by the French last year".<sup>12</sup>

As to numbers, we can get some idea from the takings on the gate. In January 1863, it is said that 1668 francs was raised<sup>13</sup> – that means just over 800 visitors (plus some more on the free day). By the very end of the century a rather inflated figure for entrance fees suggests 50,000 paying visitors (still trivial in comparison with, say, the British Museum, whose annual visitor numbers topped 2 million at the time of the Great Exhibition). The majority of visitors were said to be non-Italian, but how the proportions worked out between the UK, US, France and Germany or elsewhere is unclear. The hotel trade on the site was definitely Italian and French speaking – in fact British periodicals try to raise a jingoistic laugh from their readers for more than a decade by reprinting the terrible English translation of the prospectus from the Hotel Belle-Vue. Not that the laughs were all one way. In the 1870s Lord MacDuff took his bagpiper in full highland dress when he visited the site, which "created no small astonishment among the natives" – "astonishment" must have been a nice way of putting it.

But the fact is that in Britain and America many more people went to Pompeii in their heads than ever set foot on the site itself – or they experienced the city (along with the eruption of Vesuvius that both killed and preserved the town) in reconstructions of all kinds, from panoramas and pyrodramas to the more sedate Pompeian court in the Crystal Palace. These forms of "entertainment" and "education" have been well studied recently and I am not examining them closely here – although they do bear significantly on my arguments towards the end of this lecture. I want instead to pick out one or two different themes, starting from Bulwer-Lytton's famous blockbuster novel, first published in 1834, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (sixpenny editions of Bulwer-Lytton's novels were selling at the rate of 80,000 copies a year in the late nineteenth century – including all his novels of course, not just *Last Days*, but it still is a good indication of the popularity<sup>14</sup>).

---

<sup>10</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *Excursions in Italy*, 2 vols. (London, 1838), 1:212.

<sup>11</sup> "Letters from the Continent", *Monthly Chronicle*, October, 1840, 303-304, 306.

<sup>12</sup> Moyle Sherer, *The Imagery of Foreign Travel: Descriptive extracts from Scenes and Impressions in Egypt, India &c &c* (London, 1838), 225.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of Principe di S. Giorgio, February 6, 1863, in P. Poli Capri and H. B. Van der Poel, *Pompeii, More Letters and Documents* 12 vols. (Rome, 1998) 1:102

<sup>14</sup> W. St. Clair, "Following up *The reading nation*," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Volume 6, 1830-1914, ed. David McKitterick (Cambridge, 2009), 717.

The plot of *Last Days* is well known– with its now famous combination of a pair of proto-Christians, Glaucus and Ione, pitted against the wicked priest of Isis, Arbaces. Glaucus and Ione are helped to escape from the eruption by the blind flower seller, Nydia (who is also in love with Glaucus and conveniently kills herself, after the rescue, so as not to be in the way). The end sees Glaucus and Ione, safe and Christian, living in Athens. That is a sketch – though it hardly does justice to some of the ideological complexities of the book.

Two factors about this novel and its influence are often stressed. First, it invested heavily in archaeological accuracy. Bulwer-Lytton studied the site in the early 1830s, in the company – like Scott – of William Gell (in fact, in one of his footnotes, he refers to Scott’s “City of the Dead” slogan). He tied his narrative down to precise archaeological locations on the site, basing Glaucus’ house on the so-called “House of the Tragic Poet”, which had recently been excavated and was the star item in the 1832 edition of Gell’s handbook to Pompeii. And he even provided a back-story to some of the skeletons – including those in the Villa of Diomedes – that had been found. These turn out to be some of his characters and we learn why they ended up where they did.



Figure 3

Second, the popularity of the novel launched a range of spin-offs in art and literature, including some of the most famous visual representations of the nineteenth century – from the most famous sculpture of Nydia the blind flower girl by Randolph Rogers to a whole range of less renowned images. [Fig. 3]

Two points need stressing. First, the *Last Days* is not quite as innovative as it is supposed to be. One inspiration for the novel, outside the site of Pompeii itself, is often said to be a vast painting, which Bulwer-Lytton saw in Milan on his way to Naples – Briullov's *Last Day of Pompeii* painted 1830-33, giving the destruction of the city a definitely Christian tint. True. But there had also been a famous 1820s Pacini opera *The Last Day of Pompeii* (whose story of adultery ended in the eruption). More striking though is the 1830 novel by Thomas Gray, called *The Vestal* – which already pulls most of Bulwer-Lytton's tricks. It features a pagan Vestal Virgin who is a secret convert to Christianity, as well as a priest of Isis (though a rather more clubbable one than the vicious Arbaces). Even more to the point though, this novel also roots its narrative in the archaeological fabric of the town, right down to providing the back-story for those skeletons in the Villa of Diomedes.

What launched Bulwer-Lytton's novel, but not Gray's, to stardom is another matter (the fact that – for all his archaeological accuracy – Gray felt he had to move the date of the eruption to 90, so that it fell in the reign of the bad emperor Domitian, cannot have helped). But it is important to see that Bulwer-Lytton comes out of a more general engagement with the fictional recreation of Pompeii, in the 20s and 30s.

But perhaps even more important is the sheer diversity of literary and popular responses to the book. It was almost instantly turned into a stage play, and soon also into an opera (a nice attempt to pay tribute to, or upstage, its Pacini predecessor). But various forms of revival or parody of the book continued, at intervals, right through the century. The early 1870s was a boom time, partly helped – I suspect – by major recent eruptions of Vesuvius.

In early 1872 there was a much hyped revival of *The Last Days* on the London stage – which became renowned for its disastrous first night, on which a tight rope walker fell off his tightrope, and the special effects weren't special (the earthquake didn't come off and Vesuvius hardly erupted), reducing the audience to helpless laughter. Almost simultaneously a parody was put on at a theatre nearby, *The Very Last Days of Pompeii*, taking off both the novel and the recent revival. It was billed as “a complete Bulwer-ment of the Classic drama” – and indeed it was: for it turned the heroic Nydia into a jealous monster, who wanted Glaucus for herself. And with an eye on the failed stage effects of the “serious” version, it represented the earthquake by rolling a canon ball across the stage.

It is fair to say, I think, that Pompeii (Bulwer-Lytton's or not) was common property through the middle and later nineteenth century, from adaptations and models, to feeble jokes or commercial or charity charades.

So to return now to the contrast I drew at the beginning between the re-enactments of 1884 and the visit of Sir Walter Scott in 1832 – and to the bigger issues of the representation of the past that come out of this material in general.

As I said, there is an obvious temptation, in thinking about how Pompeii “works” in, and for, nineteenth-century culture, to see a development from Scott's image of the *City of the Dead* to the image of Pompeii as material for the *reconstruction* of the living past. In fact, you can sustain that view only by very selective quotation: the image of the “City of the Dead” is a powerful one right through the century, just as the idea of the reconstructed city as window onto ancient life is there from almost the moment it is discovered. Let me give you some examples.

First let's go back to the casts. I emphasised earlier that the normal route for early visitors into the city was down the Street of the Tombs, in effect through the cemetery (what better way to enter the City of



the Dead?). And I also noted that even after the arrival of the railway, until about 1870, guidebooks still encouraged visitors to take that route, however inconvenient. So was it the case when that practice lapsed, and the Marine gate became the usual entry point to the city – was it the case that the powerful image of entering a city of death had gone?

No. For one of the other innovations of Fiorelli in the 1860s was building a museum on the site, just next to the Marine gate, and through which many visitors passed on their way in. The star exhibits here were – of course – the plaster corpses. So visitors did not now enter the city through a cemetery, they entered it through what they took to be the bodies of the dead and dying. If anything (thanks to Fiorelli's technical innovation in casting), Pompeii was even more a City of the Dead in the late nineteenth century than in the earlier. [Fig 4]



Figure 4

But there is of course an irony in those corpses, one that relates to my other theme of representation and reconstruction. On the one hand, they were for most visitors and still remain the most vivid examples of the immediate face to face contact with the inhabitants of the ancient city, body to body (so they appear in Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* – where the embracing Pompeian corpses remind

Bergman of the emptiness of her own relationship). On the other hand, these objects are most emphatically not bodies at all. They are an amalgam of plaster of paris filling the vacuum from which bodies have disappeared; they are a reconstruction out of absence.

At the same time, there are plenty of cases even early in the century where we already find versions of those later re-enactments or arguments in that direction. A report in the *Times* in 1837 claims that an Englishman “had recently obtained permission to live for a fortnight in one of the houses recently cleared at Pompeii, had it completely restored in the original style and, with his family and servants, having assumed the ancient Roman costume lived there. . . making the perusal of the classics his sole amusement”.<sup>15</sup> More than a decade earlier a Mr Taylor claimed to have “taken up my residence in the House of Diomede . . . untouched by the hand of time”.<sup>16</sup>

What we are dealing with here is not any linear change in the appropriation of Pompeii, but a constant and unresolvable tension in the nineteenth-century vision of the city between on the one hand a place of death and destruction and on the other a place where the living past can be re-enacted.

Something similar might be said about those spoof or “prepared” excavations that I mentioned. For modern students of Pompeii, this is one of the most comic aspects of the early excavations. How could these elite visitors be so gullible as to think that these finds were really spontaneous? How could they not recognise the charade? Well, of course, they probably did. But that was not the point. The charades were actually more complicated for two reasons. First: fictionality, representation and reconstruction were built into the visitors’ experience of the site, right down to processes of excavation. Pompeii was a site where you were prepared to suspend disbelief about what you saw. Second, those processes of excavation were very high on the agenda of nineteenth-century visitors, unlike their modern counterparts – you did not come to Pompeii just to see the remains of the past, but to see the *process* by which the remains of the past could be revealed.

I cannot dwell on this now, as it would be the subject of a whole other lecture, but let me just say in passing that there are plenty of other traces of the importance of archaeological *process*. For example, until late in the century, Murray’s *Handbook* – by then the English standard guide – noted for every major monument its ancient date and the date of its excavation. It is as if the visitor were expected to go round the site bi-focally, thinking both about the ancient history of the city and its modern recovery.

But let me finish by highlighting a bit more sharply the constant slippage we find between fictional representations of Pompeii (particularly Bulwer-Lytton and his spin-offs) and the “historical”, between representations and the “real thing”. This goes beyond the obvious point that *The Last Days* took great care to parade its own archaeological authenticity. More striking is that almost straightaway the book was recommended, and used, as the best way of understanding the life of the ancient town – more or less as a guidebook itself. And discussions of Pompeii, and of the events of 79, in newspapers and periodicals regularly reprints Bulwer-Lytton’s version – as if a historical account. Indeed even the classical fellow of St Johns who visited, to some disappointment, in 1840 admitted later “At the risk of losing all reputation as a classic, I thought of Bulwer not Cicero and Pliny”. It was *The Last Days* which gave a vision of a whole city, which of course didn’t actually exist on site.

And so it was, when various forms of reconstruction of the city are attempted in England, it remained perilously uncertain whether it is Bulwer-Lytton’s fiction or the dead city that is being brought to life (or of course both). It was no coincidence that the reconstructed house in the Crystal Palace was based on the House of the Tragic Poet, which was the model of the house of Glaucus in *The Last Days*. And indeed in the 1840s, towards the end of the life of Burford’s Panorama of Pompeii in Leicester Square,

---

<sup>15</sup> *Times*, October 20, 1837, 1

<sup>16</sup> *Nouvelles Annales des Voyages de la Géographie et de l’Histoire*, 24 (1824) 424-425.



it is discussed not only as a panorama of the ancient city, but as a panorama specifically of Bulwer-Lytton's novel.

Throughout this material you sense these and other kinds of slippages. One of my favourite glimpses of this is in the account of a visit to the site itself by someone who had already been to the Crystal Palace – one of the first things they noticed was that there was a turnstile on the gate “just like at the Palace”.

But I want to close with a wonderful *reductio ad absurdum* of the fictionalisation of Pompeii, though in fact written decades before *The Last Days*. It comes from a travel account to South Italy by Lewis Engelbach, *Campana Felice* – written in English despite the title and author's name. In the course of this he claims to visit the site of Pompeii in the company of a free-thinking Neapolitan: who claims that the whole site of the ancient city is a modern hoax. “All you here behold,” he says to the eager visitor,

has been fabricated (at immense expense to be sure) by our Neapolitan government . . . chiefly to attract travellers from all parts of Europe, and to make them spend money in the kingdom. . . . Whenever these pretended excavations were carrying on, the greatest care was taken not to admit anyone but those that were absolutely necessary to the execution of the work: much work was done by night . . . in short the greatest secrecy and mystery was used in the whole operation.<sup>17</sup>

Pompeii in other words was not a fiction, it was a fake.

---

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Engelbach, *Naples and the Campagna Felice: in a series of letters, addressed to a friend in England in 1802* (London, 1815), 61