**Going a Journey with Students**

**AWP Writer’s Notebook (On-line)**

**John Bennion | August 2018**

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[NOTES](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

[[](https://www.awpwriter.org/application/public/uploads/content/4498/GoingtoJournal1.jpg)](https://www.awpwriter.org/application/public/uploads/content/4498/GoingtoJournal1.jpg)[](https://www.awpwriter.org/application/public/uploads/content/4498/GoingtoJourney2.jpg)

In “An Apology for Idlers,” one of many British essays about the connection between perambulation and thinking, Robert Louis Stevenson writes, “Extreme busyness, whether at school or college, kirk or market, is a symptom of deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies… a strong sense of personal identity.”[1](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) The continuously occupied are “dead-alive, hackneyed.” If one could force these walking dead to go idling they would be shown to “have no curiosity.” Their dirty secret, that “the whole breathing world is a blank to them,” would be uncovered. I have more faith in human curiosity than Stevenson did; I believe that taking students walking and hiking—well away from the university, that center of busyness, where everything fits inside its proper box and where professors lecture rows of listeners—enlivens their minds and imaginations, especially when they are asked to write about their experiences. Directors of outdoor and study abroad programs too often believe that merely getting students into a foreign setting is sufficient, but having students essay as they travel prompts reflection, which enables growth.

Our tour is in the tradition of Wordsworth, who walked across mountains and valleys in the Lake District, wandering in body and mind. Wordsworth admitted that “nine-tenths of [his] verses ha[d] been poured out in the open air.”[2](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

In “Wordsworth, a Wandering Poet: Walking and Poetic Creation,” Florence Gaillet-De Chezelles writes that the poet composed while pacing back and forth on set pathways and while rambling longer distances, generally walking more than twenty miles a day. She writes, “Undoubtedly, this regular, mechanic, almost hypnotic movement cut his mind off from everyday concerns while facilitating concentration and inner harmony. His self-absorption-in-motion greatly stimulated his creative faculties, and he rarely failed to compose verses while so occupied.”[3](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Gaillet-De Chezelles describes this as “the pedestrian viewpoint,” through which

the walker experiences a world of ever-changing appearances, and his comparatively slow motion makes him fully alert to the detailed features of the landscapes he passes through and to the various successive views subtly fading into each other. Fully immersed in nature, he is exposed to a multiplicity of sensory stimuli, and this sensuous engagement at once increases his awareness and renews his perceptions. Furthermore, his leisurely, variable pace—often coupled with solitude—favours meditative reflection and contemplation, while his almost complete freedom of movement gives him the indulgence to leave main roads, make detours, explore or pause at will.[4](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

The walker, who has escaped the constraints of time, can linger and look backward, a process conducive not only to poetry but also to reflective essaying.

While Steve and I walked with our students, conversation happened, mostly between the members of our group but also with British hikers on the trails and in the hostels. We placed one foot in front of the other, walking through sheep pastures and along streams, and one word after another in our journals until the walking, talking, reading, and writing blended, feeling like a becoming. What each student could discover was not dictated by a tight curriculum, nor could it be. We had objectives, a list of essays and poems to read, 150 pages of journals to write, and the beginning of four essays to draft. In addition to these academic objectives, we had physical destinations—getting down from a mountain or from the high moors to dinner and bed—but for the most part we escaped the busy world of schoolwork and programmatic discourse. The writing produced was honest, detailed, and significant. All this is confirmed by my twenty-five years of experience taking writing students on treks, not only across England as a way of studying literature but also throughout Utah as a way of studying human and natural history. A formula of what I’ve observed has been articulated by Stacy Taniguchi, a disciple of John Dewey and my co-director in a wilderness writing program: experience + reflection = meaningful experience.

**Reflecting on the Rock Walls of Edinburgh**

When we first arrived in the United Kingdom in 2015, we walked the Royal Mile between Edinburgh Castle and Arthur’s Seat. The next day, the students wandered Edinburgh on their own, still jetlagged, a mingling of sensations making them vulnerable. Lydia Mongie, a literature student who was recovering from a flirtation with chemistry as a career, recorded her impressions,

Standing in the center of a cobblestone walkway with the rain on my cheeks, I think that perhaps I am forgetting something, but brush the feeling away. We travelers weave through a thousand new things, smelling curry, rainfall, pipe and furnace smoke, hungry for whatever experience the world can dish up. We walk and walk, long enough to finally discover that we are not actually lost.[5](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

She and her companions stumbled across a bookstore, and she found herself in familiar territory again—Hardy, Keats, Eliot, Austen, Scott. Later in the day, she wrote, “Funny how the simple things uproot us. As we continue to walk, we gawk like the tourists we are at the funny crosswalks, at kilted men, at tiny picturesque shops.”

That first night, Lydia woke when it was still dark because of the eight-hour time difference. She left the hostel, freeing herself: “I walk up and down the sidewalk just outside, trying to detect a feeling.… An unlatched gate? A page tugged from a journal? A balloon snipped from its tether? Yes, I think that perhaps I have floated away from somewhere, but that I have not yet reached somewhere else.” Knowing that she had to write 150 pages in a journal, Lydia was prompted to record her feelings of liminality and to reflect on her experience walking through the city.

Annalee Norton, a Southern woman, wanted direct experience with the cityscapes and landscapes of England and Scotland so that she could enliven British literature for American high-school students. Exploring Edinburgh with two companions, she bit into a deep-fried Mars bar and got a whiplash memory of deep-fried Oreos at a fair in Georgia. She had come to Britain not to be reminded of home but “to get to know the land I read of, dreamed of.”[6](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) The feeling of doubled geography disoriented her. She and her companions descended from the streets to stroll along the Leith River, “into a world of wildflowers, trees and green.” Annalee “breathed in cool, damp, earthy air, and felt that familiar sense of home.” The river was “penny colored and edged with green moss and leaning tree branches, it looked just like the Chattahoochee River.… All that it was missing was florescent pink and green inner tubes.” This familiarity was not what she had paid thousands of dollars and traveled thousands of miles to experience. But then, she and her companions came to stone walls unlike anything in Georgia: “Something in me constricted and paused—I knew those walls before. Perhaps through all my books, movies, and pictures of Britain, they somehow grew into the fibers of my subconscious dream of this land.… As we continued down the river walk framed by the stone walls, our talk turned both reverent and jubilant.” Annalee touched the rough stones and “moss and vines” growing in the gaps, and “that physical detail filled something [she] didn’t know was empty.… [she] finally felt steadied.” Ironically, she was steadied by the first stage of what happens to study abroad students—being bathed in the sensation of foreignness. Many never grow beyond that plateau, never seeing past novelty. Still, she started the process. Her realizations came first from her conversation with the other women; they essayed aloud before they put pen to journal. Knowing she had a writing assignment due, she urged herself toward seeing connections and contradictions. Both acts, the talking and the writing, helped her grapple with her tourist mentality. Her finished essay evokes the layers of familiarity and unfamiliarity humans pass through as they travel.

**A Messy System: Walking, Talking, Writing**

As teachers, we often cling to the idea that solitude, wandering “lonely as a cloud,” is the best way to reflect. But both Lydia’s and Annalee’s essays involved conversation with others, out of which their solitary musings grew. British essayists have various attitudes about the virtues of solitude and the possibility of thinking and conversing while walking; their essays can be instructive to directors planning the curriculum for study abroad programs. In “On Going a Journey,” William Hazlitt, a contemporary and a careful reader of Wordsworth, writes, “The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do, just as one pleases.”[7](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) However, he says, “I like to go by myself.” He leaves society behind because he doesn’t see “the wit of walking and talking at the same time.” While Wordsworth composed to the rhythm of his walking, Hazlitt complains (if you can call it a complaint) that the natural world swallows up all our vision, revealing the limits of what we could imagine while in our regular domiciles. “The landscape bares its bosom to the enraptured eye, we take our fill of it, and seem as if we could form no other image of beauty or grandeur.”[8](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) So talking while walking can only be a distraction, a lessening of the experience. He is not alone in this view. Walking in the outdoors, many British essayists claim, whatever it might do for the constitution, does not produce good thinking.

Samuel Johnson, writing half a century before Hazlitt, claims that “though learning may be conferred by solitude, its application must be attained by general converse.”[9](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Max Beerbohm, writing a full century later than Hazlitt, thought it impossible to walk well and talk well at the same time—walking “stops the brain.”[10](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Walkers in the country will lose what they had when conversing indoors, “the kindling fancy that played like summer lightning over any topic that was started.”[11](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) These curmudgeons may be partly right: hiking vigorously up a mountain, especially in bad weather, precludes both conversation and ordered thought. In addition, students who only chat, never looking around them, generally don’t produce good writing. But my experience confirms that a balance of meditation and conversation is advantageous for writing.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf found that walking and flexible thought are not inimical. Of course, she writes about a less strenuous exercise—strolling across a few neighborhoods in the city, not crossing a peak in the Lake District; she draws more from the tradition of flâneur essaying by such writers as Stevenson than from Wordsworth. In “Street Haunting,” she uses her need to buy a pencil to “indulge… in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London.”[12](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) She describes the feeling of being transformed as she and a companion “shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers.”[13](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Like Hazlitt, she happily became another self, leaving behind the ardent familiarity of her flat and the knowledge others have of her. Shutting the door behind her, she finds that the “shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye.”[14](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) As she allows her eye to skim the surface of the scene before her, she discovers herself focusing on “the maimed company of the halt and the blind,” but she makes it clear that this focus is accidental; her eye might have fallen on some other slice of humanity or series of objects and her mind could have found other patterns to consider. After buying the pencil, she walks homeward, remembering the people she had observed. “Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.”[15](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) This is reminiscent of another city dweller’s claim, that of Philip Lopate, who writes that in essaying, “the trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish.”[16](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Woolf writes that using imagination to inhabit the minds of others enables the observer to experience the “delight and wonder” of leaving “the straight lines of personality” and deviating “into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men.”[17](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) In walking from Bloomsbury to the Strand, she undertakes an expedition, exploring human behavior in a manner that is philosophical, poetic, and psychological. A tourist or study abroad student could take that same one-mile walk and see merely shops, crowds, and old buildings. That mode of traveling is more like quick sex than like the slow process of lovemaking. In fact, tourists often say such things as, “Today I did the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and Kew Gardens.” The essayistic bent of mind marries experience, reflection, conversation, and journaling and enables the construction of meaning.

**Essaying, Pragmatism, and Cognitive Psychology**

Haunting across London, observing grotesque others, Woolf demonstrates that stories happen to people who know how to tell them. I’ve found this statement attributed to Ira Glass, Paul Auster, and Henry James. Whoever said it first, the idea fits what happens to traveling students who learn to tell stories about themselves. But what exactly does meditative essaying do to students’ brains as they walk and trek?

In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate describes the personal essay’s ability to observe the “contractions and expansions of the self.”[18](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Essayists ask, “what it is they don’t know—and why. They follow the clue of their ignorance through the maze. Intrigued with their limitations, both physical and mental, they are attracted to cul-de-sac: what one doesn’t understand, or can’t do, is as good a place as any to start investigating the borders of the self.” Essayists are “fascinated with the changeableness and plasticity of the materials of human personality.”[19](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) In fact, gathering narratives and meditations on human limitations, inconsistency, and contradictions reveals a “humanity enlarged by complexity. The fulsome confession of limit carries the secret promise of an almost infinite opening-out.”[20](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

I observed with this group and with other traveling groups this process of using writing to open-out. As students take notes in journals about their journey, read passages out loud to others, talk about their experiences with the group, read literature about the landscapes they are hiking through, and create personal essays, they impose order on their experience and develop into slightly more complex individuals. The validity of this process feels self-evident, but I’d like to consider briefly what some philosophers (primarily the American pragmatists) and some psychologists (primarily those interested in the connection between narration and cognition) have said about language and the personal creation of meaning. What students bring with them conditions how they see, and this creation of meaning is a social act, despite the fact that hiking and writing are portrayed as something an individual does by him- or herself.

One of the ideas of the American pragmatists (for example, Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey) is that thought engages with and affects reality rather than simply being a lens for viewing or describing reality. In *Art as Experience*,Dewey says that an “experience” (as distinct from general, continuous experience) occurs when the practical sensibility finishes with something, separates it, marks it, gives it shape.[21](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) This process involves strong emotion, unsettledness, and an expressive desire to move outward. Creating (artistic expression) is a pragmatic act, not one experienced only by those with specialized ability (artists). Even people who don’t write much create and shape their experience by telling the story of it to themselves; those who write in a journal may use writing to enhance the process. All these ideas resonate with me as I watch students transform a blizzard of sleet into Romantic sublimity or a near-death experience with anorexia into a communion with Gothic sisters. As Yeats wrote in “Among School Children,”

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?[22](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

In 2015, the students’ reflections on their experiences created the experience. But they didn’t do it in isolation from each other, despite the Romantic image of an isolated, tortured artist. This is not news; constructivist psychologists following the ideas of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger, and others believe that meaning is socially created out of the interaction between experiencing and thinking and that a person’s various discourse communities use specific language and modes of communication to shape the reality of those in the community. As we hiked, the nature of our group of peripatetic literature and writing students conditioned how we talked with and wrote for each other. In “Life as Narrative,” one such narrative psychologist, Jerome Bruner, writes,

I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold: Freud's psychic reality.[23](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

This transcendence of the self can work only if the walking is done within a human context—that of both the dead British authors we read and of our companions, American students, the other hikers we met. As we walked, the students talked about the silly, the mundane, the profound, and these conversations worked into their journals and fledgling essays, a few of which I describe in the rest of this essay.

**Ben Lomond and Styhead Pass**

We climbed Ben Lomond in a sleet storm, an elevation gain of 3,250 feet. While Natalie Hopkins ascended, her “breath was saved for wheezing” and “the mountain became more and more barren.”[24](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Slight of build and afflicted with asthma, she felt she didn’t measure up. Her disappointment in herself and the landscape influenced her view of the others in our group, who “were still much like strangers; to look in their eyes would be to betray how inadequate I was, how afraid.” Maddie, who also suffers from asthma, wrote that, despite the pain, whenever someone asked how she was doing, she responded carefully because she thought “negativity would bring the others down.”[25](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Finally, she summited and took a picture with frozen fingers. The wind gusted so powerfully that someone slipped and fell to the ground. This frightened her thinking she might herself fall from one of the grades that were almost as steep as cliffs and on every side of her. “The wind spits shards of ice at my face, and I’m so cold my body sweats. I crunch down like a crumbled corpse and bury my nose into my scarf until my fellow hikers decide it’s time to descend. I follow them, sliding until someone offers me their hand. I take it, offering mine to someone else.” Holding hands didn’t help because then she didn’t have a free hand to catch herself in the case of a fall. Her connections to the other members of the group seemed like webs of negativity. Soon, frightened that they might pull each other down, she let go of their hands. Later, essaying from the comfort of a chair in the warm hostel, she remembered another thought intruding—her fear of the foreign:

We tend to crave the familiar—the comfort of the plush armchair in your childhood living room, the forest path you’ve trod down hundreds of times—and so there’s an edge of fear to uncertainty. We fear it like we fear the dark mountaintop shrouded in fog, and we fear revealing our uncertainty because we want others to trust us, to look up to us.

In her essay, she tries to embrace uncertainty—of her body and her will and of human networks. She suggests that human connection and growth itself are both uncertain.

Three days later, we crossed Styhead Pass in England’s Lake District, Natalie found that her experience was different, even though the weather was worse. She felt better as we set out, partly because “friends were nearby (there are certain things that turn strangers into friends, and summiting a mountain is one of them).” She climbed higher, into “good English country, with its rolling green, the green of my imaginary England. The drizzling, earnest rain brought out the brilliance of the color; I thought the world glowed.” Even when the climb became steeper and the weather worse, she maintained her feeling that the world was “fae-like and mystical.” As we climbed, the wind picked up, blowing rain and sleet horizontally, and the mist became thick enough that the we could hardly see the trail. But having tested their legs with about twenty-four miles of hiking, the students had become more confident, and they were more able to process their fears. Afterward, Natalie wrote that climbing Wasdale Head, she felt like a leaf blown by the whim of the weather. She understood the danger but didn’t feel the pain of climbing because

the wind whisked it away. Even the heavy rain felt like a kind of caress. I remembered the Romantics and how they sought a certain feeling—the sublime—when the world is so big and dangerous and beautiful and terrifying, it both scares and excites you. For the first time in my life I understood why. I understood what it meant to be free within nature. I understood the yearning to feel so alive that your body cannot contain all the emotion inside of you.

Meditating on this experience, she could not understand why she “was cold and wet to her very soul” but still remembered the day with “fondness.” When she was younger, she often hated the circumstances of her life:

I hated my body and my shyness and the way I never seemed to belong. Books were the only thing I never could hate; they protected me from myself, giving me a haven from the torrent of my mind. I waited inside of stories, waited and waited for things to improve, for my life to change, for good things to come. But they didn’t.

As she wrote, she decided that both emotions could exist together. “I have decided to look at the positive things around me. Of course, the miserable things are still there, creeping in the shadows of the corners, biding their time before they descend again. I am not sure what the best way to deal with them is, but, sometimes, the miserable things are all we get.” Meditation on the experience built even misery into a meaningful structure of values, at the same time transforming that structure.

The landscape and the literature of Britain conditioned their experience, but these extracts also show that the group functioned as part of the context. The way students thought about their own experience was profoundly influenced by their perceptions of the way others thought. It was both an instigation of and a support to their essaying. This tension would not have been so quickly recognized if they had walked in solitude.

**Wordsworth’s Death Mask: Choosing What to Keep**

The next day we walked to Rydal Mount, Wordsworth’s final home. One student, Anne Bennion, who is both gregarious and introspective, a city dweller and a veteran walker, a violinist and a writer, observed the startling contrast between the living poet she imagined walking along the flowered pathways, whose “heart with pleasure fills and dances with the daffodils,” and the blank lifelessness of his death mask. She wondered which the better memorial to the poet might be. Nearby, she found a bookshelf with a collection of poems that she leafed through. In “Helvellyn,” Walter Scott writes about a hiker who fell to his death and wonders whether nature is the best burial ground or if this man should have been interred where a mother, friend, or stranger could honor him. Anne decided she would rather do away with “all the fuss of coffins and flowers” because they don’t change “the unavoidable fact of death.”[26](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Still, she admitted, “people have a need to remember.” After leaving Rydal Mount, she walked with the rest of the group across Coffin Road, now just a hillside path, toward Dove Cottage, where Jeff Cowton, curator for the Wordsworth Trust Archive, raised the issue of which books and manuscripts should be saved and how they should be saved—locked in light-, moisture-, and temperature-controlled cases or put on shelves for people to read. Anne saw the sterile archive room as “a mortuary for books” because only a few people can get access to them. Jeff told them that everything is deteriorating; the archivist’s goal is to slow decay. Anne observed that, “He made preservation sound like a futile battle against inevitable death and deterioration, and yet he felt that there was a purpose for keeping these books.” She then considers the music she plays; the written notes appear lifeless on a piece of paper, but an artist with an instrument can enliven them.

Anne concluded that the garden at Rydal Mount, inevitably changing because nothing that lives can remain static, was perhaps a better memorial for the poet than his death mask. The garden was full of “changeful life.” Handling a dry and rotting book that had a live poem inside also changed her mind about the uselessness of memorials: “The words from that mummified book were embalmed in my mind.” She ended with a contradiction that she can live with: “Perhaps Jeff is right that everything is rotting, and perhaps it is possible for dead things to stay green.” Knowing she had to write her impressions in her journal, and knowing these written fragments must be gathered into a narrative of her thoughts, she became more aware of the process of sifting, testing, and essaying experience to determine what will remain and what will fade. In this she came to think like Wordsworth about memorializing. According to one of his biographers, Stephen Gill, Wordsworth loved the idea of continuity between the stages of a person’s life and between the generations. For him poetry was the means of refining and preserving enduring values. He had the “deepening conviction that values could not be nurtured other than by continuity of transmission across the generations” (112). Anne began to see memories and recorded memorials as a means of preserving vital human understanding.

**The Brontë Parsonage Cemetery**

A few days later we visited Haworth and a guide from the Brontë Parsonage Museum talked to our group about the graveyard below the south windows of the house where the sisters had lived. Water seeping through the graveyard had carried typhoid and cholera from the coffins into the town’s drinking water, killing more people and creating an unnatural cycle of death. The Brontë children observed burials almost daily. Later in their lives, the siblings watched each other die from tuberculosis until only Charlotte and their father were left, and then Charlotte died. Appropriately, our walk outside the Parsonage and through the village was on a misty, sunless day. Luke Bushman, a friendly and empathetic young man, wrote, “The tour guide made it clear that the Brontës… were ill fated, and seemed to go the way of their novels: into darkness, with symbolism that breaks the heart.”[27](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) For example, Charlotte’s father Patrick warned that she’d die in childbirth, and she did. But Luke understood that there is more to the story. “I had already learned that it was wrong to assume that Charlotte Brontë’s life was tragic and miserable. After all, she was endowed with an incredible gift.” He described her long wait to fall in love because of her father’s fear of losing her. “While she did not live to achieve her fullest desires, she lived passionately, and understood people more than most people do.” In talking about the structure of thought in essays, I often use the idea from Hegel of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. This is a natural pattern, one understood by Luke and others, who created paradoxical formulations such as the following: death is tragic, but its threat can stimulate reflection, terrible weather can be sublime, something can be dead and green.

Maddie Olsen, following our injunction to link something from the present journey to something from her past, compared death in the Brontë sisters’ writing with her own experience with anorexia. Much earlier in her life she was so malnourished that she nearly died:

One night I found myself lying in bed, listening to my heart squeeze and sputter quick, quick, and then slow. My cheeks suctioned to my teeth with needling numbness. My hands shook. I was dying. I, at thirteen, was dying; my heart wouldn’t last much longer. An odd mixture of awe and terror shivered through my corpse of a body as I looked Death in the face and acknowledged that if I closed my eyes, I might never wake up again.[28](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

After hearing about the deaths, the Brontë sisters observed—so many deaths—Maddie stood in the Parsonage kitchen, where she learned that a window had once opened out on the moors. She thought that Charlotte might have stood there, imagining the ghosts of the dead, maybe accompanied by one living soul, Jane Eyre, who through wandering on the moors had become disoriented about the relationship between life and death, crying, “Hopeless of the future, I wished but this—that my Maker had that night thought good to require my soul of me while I slept; and that this weary frame, absolved by death from further conflict with fate, had now but to decay quietly, and mingle in peace with the soul of this wilderness.”[29](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) For Maddie, the Gothic was a visceral sensation, no longer merely a literary theory. She learned to see death differently than ever before, “as a peaceful slumber during which the soul reunited with God and nature.”[30](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) She also described in her essay her long process of healing, pulling herself back from the brink of death. She knew that her victory was incomplete, her anorexia merely in remission. She concluded,

I won’t be a professional ballerina as I once planned, but I’ll take a boxing class, and I’ll move on my toes again, and the rigidity ballet demands will melt away as I step around punches. Then, like the teenage girl I am, I’ll giggle with my friend about the teacher’s abs; the next day I’ll roll out of bed and groan at the stabbing pain in my shoulders. I’ll laugh too, laugh because it hurts and that hurt proves I’m alive. Then, I’ll eat some chocolate, the kind that bleeds cherries with each bite, and I’ll eat it without guilt. Maybe. It’ll depend on how Death is feeling that day.[31](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

Through grappling with these issues, Maddie left behind easy answers and trite understanding of life and death, and of herself. Her essay and the others also show that, while the students may have believed that the objects they used as touchstones—the death mask, the rocks, the mountain top, the cemetery—created meaning for them, it’s clear that what they brought with them—their previous reading and ideas—created what they saw. Their prior experience both limited and enabled their vision.

**The Imperial War Museum**

Adrian Thayn, the leader of the day, calculated the best way to get across the river to Lambeth, close to the Imperial War Museum. For many of the students this visit was one of the most profound of our trip. Although the museum houses displays about many wars, Sarah Syphus, a graduate student in fiction, spent all of her time in the World War I exhibit. She realized that this conflict affected the British profoundly “because it was fought differently. Millions were killed by technology rather than by a close and noble battle, and many of the men who were fighting and dying were dying to defend an empire that didn’t really treat them well at all since so many of them lived in poverty compared to the ruling class.”[32](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Annalee wrote, “Britain always lived under the threat of invasion, especially in the World Wars. The people live with that fear, and it shows in their writing.”[33](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) After our visit the whole group was somber, talking about the Holocaust Museum, the exhibits of the two world wars, and the antiwar art exhibit upstairs. At the bus stop, we realized that Anne was missing. Someone tried to text her, someone else went back for her, while most of the group went to the Borough Market for lunch. Later that day she caught up with us. She had spent extra time in the museum, and then she had wanted to be alone. Writing about her experience later, she connected her visit to the war museum to the play we saw at Stratford-upon-Avon. She wrote that on our journey she discovered her sensitivity “to violence and the suffering of other human beings. I was so affected by the war museum and the torture in *Othello*that I felt sick and couldn't interact very well with people for a while after.”[34](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Anne’s first reaction was shock and deadness when she experienced violence that had already been processed, arranged by a curator or the company performing the play. Writing helped her remember the violence but also contextualize it and render it meaningful in a complex way, allowing her to think beyond the idea that life is brutal or that brutality should be conquered.

**Canterbury: Finals**

After a coach carried us from Dover Castle to five miles from Canterbury, we walked into town along the Great Stour River. We walked slowly and talked a lot, knowing this was the last hike. Before any of us wanted, the stone spire of Canterbury Cathedral rose, and we entered the walled city. Nobody articulated it at the time, but probably the spire created ambivalent feelings because we knew it would be our parting stone. We ate together that night, and the next day the students scattered across the city to write their final, which was to answer two questions: “What did you learn about literature? What did you learn about yourself and your relationship to others?” Many wrote about the bonding they had experienced in our traveling community. Maddie wrote, “Being stuck with the same twenty-nine people for two months ensures that you love everyone, and it also ensures that you will get sick of being with the same twenty-nine all the time.… It forced me to find a balance between solitude and community participation.”[35](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)Many wrote about the relationship between literature and landscape. Abbie added that the British writers we read were also powerfully influenced by the cultural landscapes: “Owen and Woolf, for example, saw the devastation, illusion, and fragmentation of a post-war world, giving their writing a stark and fragmented feeling; Wordsworth saw beauty and glory in nature, and his writing reflected that glory.”[36](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

A few compared our physical wandering to essaying. Anne wrote, “As we have been ambling through the United Kingdom, I have realized that literature and creative writing is really an amble. There is a lot of freedom to roam through ideas in the way that we do our hikes. We are less concerned with making it to our destination than we are with making connections along the way.” She also wrote that she learned the value of leisure time: “I like to work hard and be productive, but this trip has taught me that having quiet, slow, chill time is so good for my overall happiness. I have learned that being with people, exercising, eating good healthy foods and being creative makes me happy. I am the most grateful that on this trip I have learned or relearned how to love myself.”[37](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES) Adrian, whose response is a fitting end to my essay about rambling in body and mind, wrote about the continuous and progressive nature of our musings about experience:

In the end, the past rises up in images, …like a montage from a wonderful old movie: a dandelion behind Hadley’s ear, a comforting arm around the shoulder from John, a final hug from Steve, Henry’s innocent laughter as we turned up another hill.… How much of it actually happened? What remains? I’ll let you know after I finish processing.[38](https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/286/going_a_journey_with_students#NOTES)

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