2016

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol12/iss1/7

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The Man in the Field: Thoreau’s ‘Concern to Be Observed’

DON BOIVIN

Up among the jagged rocks and cliffs,
Just west of Erving town,
There is a noted spot, the Hermit’s Cave,
A place of great renown.

From far and near they come,
The high, the low, the rich and gay,
To see this strange and curious man,
And unto him their homage pay.

Then let us mingle with the crowd
That daily gathers at his door,
And learn the reason, if we can,
Why he calls this world a bore.

Why he shuns the haunts of men,
And leads a hermits life,
Never sighs for the innocent prattle of a child,
Or the gentle ministrations of a wife.

From The Hermit of Erving Castle, 1871 (J. Smith)

The term hermit was on the tips of American tongues in the early nineteenth century, likely a result of what the critic Coby Dowdell refers to as “a sustained cultural interest in both male and female hermitic figures during the post-Revolutionary period” (121). Hermits populated poetry, prose, music, and wax museum exhibits. It’s no surprise then that Thoreau, as a result of his two-year experiment confronting “the essential facts of life” at Walden Pond (Thoreau 172), came to be known, both affectionately and resentfully, as the Concord Hermit. The myth persists to this day, despite the indisputable facts surrounding Thoreau’s close ties to family, friends, and the Concord community during his stay at Walden, let alone his involvement with the utopian socialist Association movement at Brook Farm and the didactic social motives behind Walden. Emerson himself affectionately referred to his friend as a “hermit and stoic” at Thoreau’s funeral. If Emerson had a soft spot for hermits (the Oxford English Dictionary cites Emerson twice under its entry for “hermit”), then his casual reference can be excused, though in the words of critic Walter Harding, the eulogy “had a most devastating effect on [Thoreau’s] fame” (22). The sentimental and romantic fascination with hermits was not without literary and historical provenance, but the fact is, it distorted both readers’ and critics’ expectations, interpretations, and reviews of Thoreau’s Walden, thus conceiving and perpetuating an unwarranted myth whose steady course centuries of debating critics have been unable to alter. Thoreau was in no way hiding from the people of Concord, and in fact wanted to be seen and thought about by them. The hermit fallacy, along with its consequent view of Thoreau as a “failure” for associating often with his townspeople, stands only as an obstacle toward a genuine understanding of the true and public quality of Thoreau’s model experiment at Walden Pond.

The romantic notion of the wizened old hermit sequestered in a gloomy cave pervaded eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American society. The Massachusetts Hermit, the Pennsylvania Hermit, and the Hermit of Erving Castle were some of the well-known recluses romanticized in narrative form. These works made up a “previously unrecognized American genre” Dowdell calls “the hermit’s tale.” “Hermit manuscripts,” he writes, are a “direct legacy of Defoe’s unique fashioning of the castaway narrative” in Robinson Crusoe (135). The much-besotted cave-dweller of Erving, Massachusetts personifies this ocean-crossing textual unfolding in his claims to have been a “professional hermit” in England.
An article in the Athol Worcester West Chronicle establishes his assertion: “Among the domains of England’s nobility, it is customary to have a romantic spot inhabited by a hermit, with long disheveled hair, matted beard, and fingernails like the talons of an eagle, who daily adds additional charms to render the surroundings more and more picturesque” (J. Smith). If the citizens of Concord and Boston imagined Thoreau to be their very own hermitic curiosity, their fantasies were destined to be disillusioned, as the man had little interest in entertaining another’s agenda: “Ne look for entertainment where none was” he quotes (Spenser’s The Fairie Queen) in the “Visitors” chapter of Walden (210).

Originally denoting one who retires to solitude from religious motives, the term hermit has evolved to encompass just about anyone withdrawing into self-imposed solitude (“hermit, n.”), though contemporary undertones are of a negative nature; in most of the American hermit narratives, the hermit has been damaged or victimized by a person or group of people (the hermit of Erving suffered the betrayal of his lover, the Pennsylvania hermit saw his sister executed for infanticide) and has shunned convention and propriety in favor of a reclusive life far from the perceived failings of society. “The hermit’s backstory represents the main thematic thrust of the hermit’s tale, explaining his or her reasons for withdrawal while underscoring the central critique of society that the hermit’s actions point to” (Dowdell 131). Herein lies both the refutation of and possibly the source of the myth surrounding Thoreau. Thoreau’s soul was not damaged, he was no victim, and he was not living in seclusion; yet Walden was most certainly a critique of society, and was born in a hermitage of sorts, or more aptly labeled by the critic Lance Newman, “an experimental community of one” (517).

Thoreau gained the unbecoming title of “hermit” quite early on. In 1849, well before the release of Walden, a critical letter in the New York Daily Tribune, responding to a favorable piece by Horace Greeley on Thoreau’s Lecture “Life in the Woods,” questions the paper’s endorsement of this “Concord Hermit” (Thorough 16). The word “hermit” shows up again and again in early book release notices and reviews. Their content implies not only an unfounded assumption that Thoreau meant to live as a hermit, but that as such, he was doing a very poor job of it. A Boston Atlas review of 1854 stated, “He was no true hermit. He only played savage on the borders of civilization; going back to the quiet town whenever he was unable to supply his civilized wants by his own powers” (“D’A” 32). James Russell Lowell, one of Thoreau’s most vehement critics, wrote, “He was forever talking of getting away from the world, but he must be always near enough to it, nay, to the Concord corner of it” (48). Lowell goes on to contrast Thoreau’s quarters unfavorably to that of “a genuine solitary who spent his winters one hundred and fifty miles beyond all human communication” (49).

Many of the critics of this vein also “accuse” Thoreau of quitting after two years, implying the author disproved his own theories by not living out his days in the woods. “When he had enough of that kind of life,” mocks Robert Louis Stevenson, “he showed the same simplicity in giving it up as in beginning it.” (67). Charles Frederick Briggs writes, “He was happy enough to get back among the good people of Concord, we have no doubt; for although he paints his shanty-life in rose-colored tints, we do not believe he liked it, else why not stick to it?” (27). Even his good friend Emerson contributed to the rhetoric: “As soon as he had exhausted the advantages of that solitude, he abandoned it” (26). No doubt, Emerson’s eulogy was not meant to undermine the reputation of the man he believed was “born for great enterprise,” (38) but Emerson’s praise was oblique, accompanied as it was by such comments as “that austerity which made this willing hermit more solitary even that he wished,” or “the severity of his ideal,” which “interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society” (37). Such are the sentiments that remain in the minds of Americans today.

Richard Smith, a current-day Thoreau impersonator and historian at Walden Pond, complains that the hermit myth is as pervasive as ever, citing one visiting teacher who arrogantly stated, “You know, Thoreau was a hypocrite – he told everyone he was a hermit, but he came home every day to get his laundry done!” (R. Smith). In fact, Thoreau reveals without equivocation in his Walden chapter “Visitors” that “every day or two I strolled to the village to hear
some of the gossip” (228). Myths travel widely and quickly through the mouths of non-readers, sans the facts to slow the projectile, but readers and scholars as well, both friend and foe, are as guilty. In John Updike’s “A Sage for all Seasons,” an ambiguous expression of reverence sounds strangely similar to Emerson’s eulogy: “A century and a half after its publication, Walden has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mindset, and Thoreau so vivid a protestor, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book risks being as revered and unread as the Bible.”

Of course, one can hand-select quotes from Walden to disprove these perpetual characterizations of Thoreau as antisocial, hypocritical, and crotchety, but this has been done continually and unsuccessfully for years. As the critic Robert D. Richardson points out, “Walden can be cited on both sides of many issues, and rather easily if one’s irony detector is switched off…Individual lines and phrases do not outweigh the serious and long-held charges against him” (237). And besides, proving that Thoreau was a nice guy, a good friend, or a philanthropist won’t contradict the specifications of the “highly formulaic” hermit’s tale, in which “the hermit is invariably hospitable, inviting the travelers into his or her humble dwelling and treating them to a simple (often vegetarian) meal” (Dowdell 130-1). The people want a hermit, they’ve chosen their man, and changing their minds is going to take a wholly new tactic, one that rather than focusing on Thoreau’s actions and words, digs to the heart and purpose of Walden and other writings. If the myth is ever to be dispelled, Thoreau’s views on social reform rather than environmental preservation, economy, or self-reliance must become more widely known and understood.

In “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” Thoreau makes it quite clear that his motives for writing Walden were far from those of the authors of the hermit tales: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (168). Besides revealing a clear intention to influence and enlighten his readers, this leads to a question of place, as a rooster crowing from the depths of the insulated woods would be a most ineffectual alarm. Just how deep “In the Woods” was Thoreau’s rustic abode? Not very, according to the author of “Emerson’s ‘Wyman Lot’: Forgotten Context for Thoreau’s House at Walden,” who discusses the legendary cabin’s site and its social bearing. Maynard cites recent studies that determine Thoreau’s wood would have been “more like a clearcut” and numerous resources that make it clear his house lot was of an “open, sunny character” (Maynard). Thoreau himself corroborates this openness—and proximity to civilization—in “Solitude”: “I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself, a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other” (201). It is the proximity of this woodland road that comes to bear on Lance Newman’s argument that Thoreau’s Walden Pond experiment was most definitely of an intended public nature.

The critic cites passages from “The Bean Fields,” in which Thoreau discusses his “daily work” of cultivating beans in “two acres and a half of upland…the only open and cultivated field for a great distance on either side of the road.” In Thoreau’s mind, travelers on this road see him as a “home-staying, laborious native of the soil” (220-1). Drawing on this and other writings and research, Newman shows how this sentiment attests to Thoreau’s engagement with the ideas and ideals of the ongoing utopian socialist Association movement, whose flagship community was the nearby Brook Farm: “This self-consciousness, this concern to be observed, is no matter of mere pride. It is a sign of his close attention to the central process by which his splendid self-reliance, his moral progress, will inspire those who live off the labor of others to follow his lead” (531). Thoreau was well aware of Brook Farm, had made a sympathetic visit in 1843 (517), and despite his oft-quoted journal comment that hell would be preferable to membership in such communities, was a living manifestation of the principles of the Association movement. In a Dial article about Brook Farm, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody writes: “The hours redeemed from labor by community, will not be reapplied to the acquisition of wealth, but to the production of intellectual goods” (Newman 528). This was the goal of the Association, further
elucidated in the words of Brook Farm’s founder George Ripley—
“to level all upward…the energy now thrown into the brute law of
self-preservation, becoming love of God and man” and to “insure
a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor” (520-
1). Newman points out two possible methods toward achieving this
desired balance: to reduce the number of hours devoted to labor,
which Brook Farm accomplishes by taking advantage of economies
of scale and Thoreau by reducing his needs; and to “transform
[labor] into an activity that develops spiritual integrity and character
in its own right” (529). Newman’s article points out Hawthorne’s
success in this latter goal at Brook Farm, while Walden in its entirety
is testament to Thoreau’s. To quote but one passage from “The
Bean Fields”: “Labor of the hands, even when pursued to the verge
of drudgery, is perhaps never the worst form of idleness. It has a
constant and imperishable moral, and to the scholar it yields a classic
result” (Thoreau 221).

Newman goes on to draw additional parallels between
the views of the Association and Thoreau, views on poverty,
commerce and its resultant “spiritual inertia” (527), and harmony
with nature. He explains that Thoreau’s only real disagreement
with the Association was its artificiality, that Thoreau’s solution to a
socially and spiritually bankrupt society begins much closer to home:
in one’s individual relationship with nature, or in Thoreau’s words,
through “intelligence with the earth” (Newman 534). Thoreau was
a great respecter of “spontaneous organic order” (536), and thus
was offended by the prospect of intentional community, but he also
understood that nature’s fundamental laws were laws of evolution
and change—“living poetry,” he called it. Newman quotes Thoreau:
“And not only [earth], but the institutions upon it are plastic like
clay in the hands of the potter” (537). To extend the metaphor in
an analogy: in fashioning a vase or a bowl, the artist looks to those
vessels currently in existence, and especially to those most functional
and beautiful, for inspiration in the creation of his or her own work
of art. Thus Thoreau, in his bean field by the side of the road, in
his much-visited humble abode over the rise, and ultimately in his
“simple and sincere account of his own life” (Thoreau 107), would
serve as that inspiration.

So much for the hermit who “calls this world a bore” and
“shuns the haunts of men.” Unlike the popular hermit’s tale, in
which “withdrawal itself is a perceptible political gesture” (Dowdell
131), Thoreau, if the world insists on calling him a hermit, was “a
very public hermit” (Maynard). “Some must work in fields if only for
the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day,”
writes Thoreau, lightly mocking his self-imposed appointment as
farmer/intellectual/story-teller (224), but clearly revealing his desire
to be a living, visible, published, and publicized illustration of a more
spiritually enriching and morally sustaining way to live.

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Don Boivin lives in Hyannis, Massachusetts. He is graduating from Bridgewater State University in May 2016 with a BA in English and plans to enroll in BSU’s post-baccalaureate licensure program for secondary education. Don wrote this essay for a course on U.S. Literature of the 19th Century taught by Dr. John Kucich (English).