Thoreau's Hut

In a life notorious for its contradictions and argumentative casuistry, one of Henry David Thoreau's most studious evasions in *Walden* was of the word "hut", yet a "hut" it has become, both in national and international heritage culture.

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from my neighbour, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachussetts, and earned my living by the labour of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilìsed life again.

So a hut (used once by Thoreau to describe his dwelling) or a house (hundreds of times)? Hut has become a popular and instrumental retrospective term in heritage culture's inscriptions of Thoreau's structure, consolidating it within an exceptional American ideology. The will to make Thoreau redoubtably American and nothing but, appears to be expressed by hut. A letter by Thoreau in which he refers to Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* perpetuates this notional Americanness, albeit with the implication of a cultural cringe:

> …[it] is made of good stuff; but, as I remember, there is too much about art in it for me and the Hottentots . . . . Our house is as yet a hut.

It is odd that the hut should have become such an icon of consolidation. Territorial, social and economic precariousness has always been a vital part of the ongoing narrative of the White American project, and so many of our impressions of American scenes and architecture are occupied by temporary structures (therefore testaments to temporality): the covered-wagon, the log cabin, the shack, the French-Canadian shanty, the trailer-park, cardboard city. Floridians seem to build houses that dare the hurricanes to blow them away, Californians construct tinderbox wood-frame bungalows on forested, bushy, inflammable hillsides. Provisionality is a fundamental attribute of any hut, and is a fundamental part of Thoreau's theory of architecture, ecology, literature and life, but the citing of his house as a hut paradoxically delimits and contains both the building and its maker in culture.

What we witness with the making of Thoreau's hut is the conversion of a prototype of American experience (Thoreau and his house as an experimental phenomenon) into an archetype of white American experience, a model of behaviour for Americans to follow (both Philip Roth and his narrative altar-ego Nathan Zuckerman have wound up living and writing "in a cabin in the woods by a lake" (the Walden scenario), Stephen King also fixates on the figure of the cabined fugitive in *Misery*, and more recently, *Secret Window*. Cabin fever strikes in King's *The Shining* too, despite being set in a vastly labyrinthine hotel, as its protagonist creates an ever-narrowing cabin of the imagination. Less frivolously, the archetype of the hut-dwelling philosopher found an incarnation in the

Unabomber, who was presented by his legal team (at least until he pleaded guilty) as being a victim of a Thoreauvian precedent. To show the fine line between being an American intellectual hero or his bizarro counterpart, the Hutty Professor, Ted Kazcyinski's lawyers insisted that his hut was valuable material evidence of how Kazcyinski had fashioned himself as a twentieth century Thoreau, and a purpose-built trail was constructed to facilitate dragging the hut down the mountain. The now notorious Thoreau defence pleaded insanity and a tragic misreading of *Walden*. The hut was all the proof they needed. Kaczyinski had sufficient lucidity to demand that the line of argument not be pursued. The Unabomber's hut remains in a gigantic FBI evidence locker, its iconicity assured.

The notion of the American hut as a place where only isolatoes go is a fiction of WASP America. For native Americans, African Americans and immigrants, huts were often environments of impoverished claustrophobia where no-one was ever alone, or places of internment. This is made particularly clear in an African-American novel published in 1859, *Blake; or the Huts of America* by Martin R. Delany. As the novel's title character moves peripatetically from one slave hut to another, an incremental vision of the deprivations of hut-life builds to a demand for black insurrection.

Thoreau was aware of such lives, and conscious that the life he described was not a representative one. As so often with Thoreau, paradoxes proliferate; he has become a representative man, even as his writing appears dedicated to principles of self-reliance that do not allow for deference to any such notion of there being a representative man. Simultaneously, however, there is considerable immodesty in Thoreau , and he did not want the individuality of his experiment and achievement to go unremarked. *Walden* is a remarkably dandyist text, and some of its early passages dedicated to denouncing the moral benefits of a hard day's toil and a three-page discourse on shirts make this clear: "…our shirts are our liber or true bark, which cannot be removed without girdling and so destroying the man."

Not even Bertie Wooster has expressed himself so feelingly on the subject. And there are suggestions of aristocratic hauteur throughout Walden, when Thoreau expresses reverence for the ways of the Native American but simultaneously associates their caves and wigwams with degeneracy, and in particular when he contemplates the Irish Immigrant's brand of hut life. The fundamental opposition of Irishman and dandy permeates the entire text, not least because it manifest two poverties, one noble, the other hapless; the Irish permitted their indigence to occur, persevering with squalid lives complicit with the luxurious class in civilization. Against this, Thoreau advocated a poverty based on a deliberate economy, a calculated meanness of material resources and abstinence: "If one designs to construct a dwelling-house . . . consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary."

Proving his thrift, Thoreau was anxious to remind his readers that much of the material for his house was second-hand, notably its planks and bricks. This reinforces our notion of Thoreau the ecologist, effectively recycling other peoples' structures to make his own. Furthermore, it also allows Thoreau to begin his narrative of regeneration with an act of

regeneration. However, there is also a degree of WASPish sniffery. The boards that Thoreau used for covering his house-frame were purchased from James Collins, a flitting Irish labourer; in his description of the purchase, then the laying-down and sun-bleaching of Collins's boards, Thoreau is performing a rite of purification, blanching the planks and erasing the stain of their drab immigrant poverty. Creating a *tabula rasa* with the walls of his house, Thoreau sheds history, and seeks to draw a line between the victimhood of abject poverty — "dark", "dank, clammy, and aguish"— and his self-determined aesthetic and philosophical passage of principled economy. Such a *tabula rasa* was also a blank canvas, and it is vital to register the artistic self-consciousness of Thoreau's project; more readily discussed as a philosopher, ecologist, economist or life-scientist, the maker of the house at Walden is determinedly an artist, and even the terms under which his house is made replicate those of the making of an art-work. Thoreau the artist had an *atelier* in his house and nature, and had a philosophical and material patron in Emerson, giving his enterprise theoretical legitimacy, plus occasional sustenance to his otherwise exclusively bean-fed belly and the vital raw material of land to build on. Of course, the patronage of Emerson seems to render any claim that Thoreau might be making to hermitage or to wilderness-living laughable, but in truth it is a claim he never made. Thoreau was exhibiting himself in the house, not inhibiting himself, projecting rather than withdrawing. A dandy, but also a Jeremiah, a decryer of contemporary decadence and an admonitory prophet. Both roles are determinedly public. Even as Thoreau claimed to be erasing history and starting afresh, he also knew he was making it, and wanted to be seen to be doing it.

Although he professed to have no interest in the mechanics of construction (he referred to carpenters as "coffin-builders") the building of the house was informed by an ecological aesthetic of dwelling with nature rather than within it, and this is mirrored by Thoreau's representation in words of how the hut's construction follows a natural cycle of the seasons. *Walden* charts the course of one year, even though Thoreau spent two years and two months on and in the house; the book's architecture mirrors the growth of the house in its first year, as detail was added owing to the demands of the particular season. So, Thoreau's construction of his chimney and the plastering of his walls only occur three-quarters of the way through *Walden*, as a response to the chill of Autumn. This reinforces the increasing unity of Thoreau and his house as the book progresses; the house becomes a skin, to keep cold out while you are nevertheless still with nature. The house is not a second skin, however, but a first one. It is incorporated not put on, "like the tenement of the shell-fish". At the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau had stated that man only requires "Food, Shelter, clothing and Fuel"; at the onset of winter, he simplifies that list to simply food and shelter, because his shelter has become his clothing. This does not represent a retreat from nature, however, but a process of complete accommodation to it. The weight of Thoreau's metaphorical troping is always towards naturalization.

Yet even as Thoreau appears to be signalling a thoroughly harmonious symbiosis between man, house and nature, he is also signalling the opposite. *Walden* is cladded with heroic similes, mostly from the *Illiad*, a troping which suggests that the house may after all be a Trojan Horse, only meaningful in that it has facilitated Thoreau's experiment.

Thoreau's metaphors of the nest and shell in turn implied a metonymic circuitry of representation between man, hut, pond and nature. His similes imply rather the prevailing force of the *logos* which the hut (in essence, hollow to the core) was serving. In a sense, this renders a shadowiness over all of Thoreau's occupancy of the house, implying something spectral about it. Maybe Thoreau's real aim was to be the genius or mystic consciousness of Walden Pond rather than its neighbour. And a shell is just a shell.

Paradoxically, however, even as we are led by Thoreau to appreciate the insubstantiality of his house, in the wake of his abandonment of it and Walden Pond so that he might remake it in words, a vestigial goose chase has begun. In the conversion by heritage culture of house into hut, and the appropriation by capitalism of the hut as a marketable version of an otherwise unpalatable American hero, new narratives have abounded, giving the building in itself unprecedented significance. The appeal of Thoreau to late capitalism is fundamental; his independence is most conventionally related to traditions of hermitry, but his call for self-reliance also readily finds adoption in neo-conservatism, where men must and will *pay* for their independence. In this culture, Thoreau's hut has been remade, but it rests on wheels rather than directly on land: the SUV, offering off-road trajectories of self-discovery and an illusory insularity. The Ford Motor Company cemented this powerful misreading by presenting *Walden*'s most celebrated quote as an epigraph to its brochure for the Excursion, its most uneconomic and unecological vehicle. Thoreau's retrospective *desiderata* — "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." — becomes so much heavy revving.
The hut on wheels reminds us of the fundamental dilemma that Thoreau's hut poses: is it part of nature, or part of us? For 150 years, more or less, we have liked to favour the former option. But with Thoreau's thorough rebuke to the decadence of consumption-culture having been filtered down to its lazy rationalization, it is perhaps apt to talk in terms of a crisis in Thoreau's legacy. To over-emphasize the importance of Thoreau's hut in itself, whether that is to make it into a marketable culture-object *or* to make it into a dynamic and uncanny kernel of monadic in-dwelling (as Bachelard does), is to aggressively diminish the anarchic unaccountability that Thoreau creates within and without it. Thoreau's hut is most remarkable for the fact that it is so forgettable, its topography obscure. We are aware of its basic dimensions, but Thoreau rarely refers to it as a cornered or angled space, a site of containment (except, significantly, when he has overbearing guests). The most-used words in his descriptions of the house are *threshold* and *door*. This confirms that the insubstantiality of this hut is what abides; a biodegradable structure, Thoreau's hut was *supposed* to disappear, literally. But it also disappears in his writing, even as he provides a record of its construction. The real excitement of *Walden* lies in its passages that collapse the walls of both hut and Yankee common sense. The hut may feel real enough, and the account of its construction is aptly prosaic and dull, but the mature reality of Thoreau's dwelling is in the imaginary. Thoreau's house is a high-concept phenomenon (a space in which to think) rather the low concept hut (one in which to live); The house is a work of fiction and speculation, part of a process of ever-inventive reverie, perhaps most marked in the moonstruck passages of "Sounds" where Thoreau tunes into owlsong.

> They give me a new sense of the variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling. *Oh-o-o-o-o* that I never had been *bor-r-r-r-n!* sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the gray oaks. Then- *that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* echoes another on the farther side with tremulous sincerity, and- *bor-r-r-r-n!* comes faintly from far in the Lincoln woods.

Even as he discovers a Keatsian immersion in himself, Thoreau remains an exteriorist, and the markers of his growth are remarked in the outside world. Thoreau does not become his house or his house him, rather it withers away as it is enmeshed in nature (which is not just around him, but running through). The more opened-out Thoreau becomes to nature, the more we realize that *Walden* is a text dedicated to plenitude rather than solitude. His house is largely circumsribed rather than described or incscribed, not because it is a space too powerful to be written of, but because it is not the centre of its maker's concern. So we have no isolation, no solipsism, rather Thoreau was immersed in the pleasures of the *limina*, and everyday was an in-between day. If we find reality digging myth in the ribs with irritating persistence when we read *Walden*, and tension between outside and inside, that is in fact its virtue, its incorrigible undecidability. Thoreau wrote that he wanted to live in "precisely the present moment . . . in the meeting of two eternities, the past and future". With this will to perpetuate the threshold moment, Thoreau expands his sense of the *limina*, until the lakeshore of "Walled-In Pond" is reached as a satisfactory analogue for his sense of self. The house is laid waste in the process.

So Thoreau's hut is not a site of refuge, but one of generation and creation, a starting point for a metamorphosis but definitely not its end. Simultaneously, Thoreau understood that people would gravitate towards fixating on the hut whatever he did or said; in the section of *Walden* entitled "Visitors", he composes a verse to inveigh against the "self-styled reformers" who continually sought to interpret his enterprise for him, to tell him what it was all about:

> who thought that I was forever singing, —
>
> This is the house that I built;
> This is the man that lies in the house that I built;
>
> But they did not know that the third line was, —
>
> These are the folks that worry the man
> That lives in the house that I built

Thoreau knew. He knew they'd see the house and the man, and pay no attention to the world he lived in or the one he imagined. And they still do it. What can you say to the master-ironist who makes nickel-plated replicas of the Unabomber's hut, parodying the fetishizations of our Franklin mint culture, but who still looks for 95 dollars a time for them? What can you say to the driver of the SUV, the renter of the simulacrum vacation

cottage? You can’t be part of nature driving a jeep, or sitting in a hut. Why not? Because you’re driving a jeep, and you’re sitting in a hut.