

2014

# Desert Odyssey

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## Recommended Citation

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Desert Odyssey

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May 9, 2011

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts of the City College of the City University of New York

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## I.

The activity for which Edward Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is famous (or infamous) for describing is known by many names: eco-raiding, eco-tage, eco-defense, and even, in some circles, eco-terrorism<sup>i</sup>, all of which signify the committing of some form of sabotage in the name of ecology or the environment. For example, Doc Sarvis, Bonnie Abzug, Seldom Seen Smith, and George Washington Hayduke, the four characters who comprise the eponymous Monkey Wrench Gang<sup>ii</sup>, want to blow up the Glen Canyon Dam, which has backed up the Colorado River and flooded a number of marvelous side canyons and drowned a number of small towns, including Smith's home in what was once Hite, Utah. For simplicity, and because it sounds better to me, I will use the term employed in the novel's title, monkey-wrenching.

Monkey-wrenching, as interesting and controversial as it is, is not what *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is about. It is merely an activity that is described, with exuberance, in the novel as a means to end. The end is civilization. Abbey, an anarchist, remained interested in and committed to civilization throughout his life and career. That interest is evident in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, if you are alert. This is a novel that is easily misunderstood, as Abbey was clearly aware. In order to make it understood, or at least to make it easier for people who are interested in understanding the novel, Abbey made frequent allusions to another, more famous story about civilization, *The Odyssey*. Abbey's novel is not a retelling of *The*

*Odyssey*. He simply uses the well-known, much-discussed epic poem to signify that his novel is about creation, not destruction, and order, not chaos.

## II.

### **Sireens of the Rio Grande**

I have two big points to make in this essay, one being that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is laced with references to *The Odyssey*, and the second being that these references are no accident, that there is a reason Abbey chose to lace his most famous novel with references to *The Odyssey*. My first order of business, the business with which I am concerned in this section, is to identify those references, the first of which is fairly minor, so small that the reader is likely to overlook it on a first reading. Reference No. 1 comes in the first chapter, before the formation of The Monkey Wrench Gang. Doc Sarvis and Bonnie Abzug are discussing taking a river trip through the Grand Canyon. They stop their car, after a little small-scale monkey business (burning down a billboard), on a bridge over the Rio Grande (they live in Albuquerque; most of the action in the novel takes place in Utah and Arizona). Doc can hear the river mumbling a message to him: “Come flow with me, Doctor, through the deserts of New Mexico, down through the canyons of Big Bend and on to the sea the Gulf the Caribbean, down where those young sireens [sic] weave their seaweed garlands for your hairless head, O Doc” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 19). The “sireens” reference is no doubt tongue-in-cheek, although it could also mimic Robert Fitzgerald’s<sup>iii</sup> spelling of Sirens: “Seirênês” (Homer XII.48). The “O Doc” might be another reference, a Homeric flourish that does not necessarily signify much but is used to set the mood, to gently prepare the

reader for some of the more important references to come. The use of the exclamatory O appears throughout *The Odyssey* (at least in translation, as Abbey would have read it). To offer one random example, here is *The Odyssey*'s narrator introducing a section of dialogue: "And you replied, Eumaios—O my swineherd—" (Homer XVI.71). Abbey does not use this stylistic flourish throughout the novel, but its use here could be a small sign to alert readers. If all the signs were this small I would not have much of an argument, but the cumulative weight of several small references combined with the more obvious references to come convinced me that the numerous *Odyssey* allusions are purposeful.

### **The Veteran Comes Home**

The next possible allusion is biographical. When the character of Hayduke is introduced he bears an immediate resemblance to Odysseus:

George Washington Hayduke<sup>iv</sup>, Vietnam, Special Forces, had a grudge. After two years in the jungle delivering Montagnard babies and dodging helicopters (for those boys up there fired their tumbling dumdums at thirty rounds per second at anything that moved: chickens, water buffalo, rice farmers, newspaper reporters, lost Americans, Green Beret medics—whatever breathed) and another year as a prisoner of the Vietcong, he returned to the American Southwest he had been remembering only to find it no

longer what he remembered, no longer the clear and classical  
desert, the pellucid sky he roamed in dreams. Someone or  
something was changing things. (23)

For anyone familiar with *The Odyssey*, the parallel is immediately obvious. Note that Odysseus, while not exactly a P.O.W., is not gung-ho to go to war.

Agamemnon has to go to Ithaca to convince Odysseus to join “the great sea raid on Troy” (Homer XXIV.132). He is essentially a prisoner, for twenty years, of his own promise. He pines for his homeland while he is away, and he returns, like Hayduke, to find that someone or something is changing things, or is trying to change things. Just as Hayduke does, Odysseus sets out to restore order.

Here is what Hayduke finds when he comes home:

The city of Tucson from which he came, to which he returned, was ringed now with a circle of Titan ICBM bases. The open desert was being scraped bare of all vegetation, all life, by giant D-9 bulldozers reminding him of the Rome plows leveling Vietnam. These machine-made wastes grew up in tumbleweed and real-estate development, a squalid plague of future slums constructed of green two-by-fours, dry-wall fiberboard and prefab roofs that blew off in the first good wind. This in the home of free creatures: horned toads, desert rats, Gila monsters and coyotes. Even the sky, that dome of delirious blue which he once had thought was out of



reach, was becoming a dump for the gaseous garbage of the copper smelters, the filth that Kennecott, Anaconda, Phelps-Dodge and American Smelting & Refining Co. were pumping through stacks into the public sky. A smudge of poisoned air overhung his homeland. (23)

Tucson, the desert southwest, was rich in certain natural resources—fresh air, sunshine, wilderness—which were being plundered by these companies, the developers, the people who didn't go fight in Vietnam but stayed right there to get rich. They bear a certain resemblance to Penelope's suitors, those "cold-hearted men, who never spare a thought / for how they stand in the sight of Zeus" (Homer XIV.100-101), and who squander Odysseus's resources, trying to get rich off his sacrifice (by marrying Penelope, and in the meantime by eating his food instead of their own). The suitors, Telemakhos tells Athena, "use / our house as if it were a house to plunder" (Homer I.293-294).

*The Monkey Wrench Gang* is related mostly to the second half of *The Odyssey*, where the suitors get what they deserve: "a slaughter here, and nothing paid for it" (Homer I.430), as Telemakhos says to his enemies. But Hayduke, upon his return from Vietnam, does have a sort of mini-odyssey: "After a month with his parents, he raced off to a girl at Laguna Beach. Found, fought and lost her. He returned to the desert, heading north by east for the canyon country, the Arizona Strip and the wild lands beyond. There was one place he had to see and

brood upon awhile before he could know what he had to do” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 24). The place here referred to is “Lee’s Ferry, the Colorado River, the Grand Canyon” (24), where, his odyssey concluded, he will wash up on the beach, disguised as a beggar, a familiar image to Homer’s readers.

Hayduke, the returning veteran, has no Penelope, at least no flesh-and-blood Penelope. His Penelope, that entity for which he pines and which complements and completes him<sup>v</sup>, is not a human companion but a landscape. His Penelope is his home, the desert. In this case he is like Abbey, who loves the Arizona desert but is tempted by Australia in *Abbey’s Road*: “If I ever have to, I thought, I could live here myself. It’s my kind of bloody country” (32). Australia is Abbey’s Calypso, desirable but not his true mate. He could have stayed on this far-flung island forever: “But I was pledged to another.... I was a long way from home” (*Abbey’s Road* 32). Like Hayduke, Abbey’s complement is not a woman (he was married five times), but the desert of the American southwest.

It would be a mistake to assume that Hayduke *is* Odysseus, some reincarnation of the ancient hero. He is not Odysseus, but he is in certain important aspects like Odysseus. It would be an even bigger mistake to look for other corresponding characters. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* contains no physical Penelope, no Telemakhos, Laertes, or Eumaios, and certainly no Athena. (However, when death comes for the suitors in Book XXII of *The Odyssey*, there are, not counting Athena, four members of The Suitor Slaughtering Gang, if you

will: Odysseus, Telemakhos, the swineherd Eumaios, and the cowherd Philoitios. It is possible Abbey had the number four in mind to parallel the death in the great hall; or it could be coincidence.) The only other corresponding characters would be Penelope's suitors, who appear (actually, most of the time their machines appear for them) in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* as the developers, the politicians, the members of the San Juan County Search and Rescue Team, generally all the people who run things (into the ground), and from here on out I will refer to these people, when I need a general term to identify them, as the New Suitors.

But let me return to Hayduke and Odysseus. Hayduke is not Odysseus reincarnate, as I said, but he is in some ways like him. Consider their physical characteristics. Here's Abbey's description of Hayduke:

Twenty-five years old, Hayduke is a short, broad, burly fellow, well-muscled, built like a wrestler. The face is hairy, very hairy, with a wide mouth and good teeth, big cheekbones and a thick shock of blue-black hair. A bit of Shawnee blood back in there, maybe, somewhere, way back in the gene pool. His hands are large and powerful, pale white under the black hair; he's been in the jungle and then in the hospital for a long time. (24-25)

Hayduke and Odysseus differ in age but are physically similar. Odysseus is bearded when we first see him (Homer V.334). Odysseus, too, is a broad, burly

fellow, with “hurdler’s thighs and boxer’s breadth of shoulder” (Homer XVIII.82).

Neither Odysseus nor Hayduke immediately recognize their homes when they return. Odysseus wakes up on his home island completely unaware of where he is:

The landscape then looked strange, unearthly strange  
to the Lord Odysseus: paths by hill and shore,  
glimpses of harbors, cliffs, and summer trees.  
He stood up, rubbed his eyes, gazed at his homeland,  
and swore<sup>vi</sup>, slapping his thighs with both his palms,  
then cried aloud:

“What am I in for now?

Whose country have I come to this time? Rough  
savages and outlaws, are they, or  
godfearing people, friendly to castaways? (Homer XIII.245-254)

Odysseus cannot recognize Ithaca because Athena does not want him to recognize it right away. Hayduke’s homeland is also different, even unearthly strange: “A blighted land, crisscrossed with new power lines, sky smudged with smoke from power plants, the mountains strip-mined, the range grazed to death, eroding away” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 31)—in other words, plundered. But it was no god that made the land strange; it was the people, the New Suitors.

This strange land is still his home, though:

Hayduke forged straight ahead at maximum cruising speed, in high range, hubs free, bearing steadily north-northwest past The Gap and Cedar Ridge...toward the Echo Cliffs, Shinumo Altar, Marble Canyon, the Vermilion Cliffs and the river. The Colorado. *The* river. Until, topping a long and final grade, he gained a view—at last—of the country he was headed for, the heartland of his heart, spread out before and beyond him exactly as he'd dreamed it all, for three years, lost in the jungle war. (32)

The language makes it clear that Hayduke's Penelope is simply this region, his homeland. It is true that Hayduke, later in the novel, has a romance with Bonnie Abzug, but it doesn't last, and she's new. He didn't know her before the war. It's not a woman for whom he pined, to whom he returns, but a landscape.

Unfortunately for Hayduke, his Penelope is not clever enough to keep the suitors at bay in his absence. His Penelope, when he returns, is ravaged.

Only a great domain like Odysseus's (Homer XIV.117) could withstand the suitors' plunder, and Odysseus knows that his wealth will be restored (Homer XXIII.402-403). Hayduke's domain, his home, is also great, but there is some doubt about whether he returns in time to restore it.

## Doc Sarvis and the Greeks

Abbey is in each character, but he is in Doc Sarvis the most. Doc, the most learned of the gang, has a neopagan air about him. Consider the following exchange between Doc and Bonnie:

“They’re way ahead of you,” she said. “Don’t panic, Doc.”

“Panic?” he said. “Pandemonium? Pan shall rise again, my dear. The great god Pan.”

“Nietzsche said God is dead.”

“I’m talking about Pan. *My God.*”

“God is dead.”

“My god is alive and kicking. Sorry about yours.” (54)

He makes frequent reference to the Greeks. Consider his comparison of Hayduke and Seldom Seen Smith to Charon and Cerberus (61). This is primarily character development. Doc is the smartest of the bunch, and he is not shy about his learning. It is Doc, for instance, who

told his comrades about a great Englishman named Ned. Ned Ludd. They called him a lunatic but he saw the enemy clearly. Saw what was coming and acted directly. And about the wooden shoes, *les sabots*. The spanner in the works. Monkey business. The rebellion of the meek. Little old ladies in oaken clogs. (68)

But it also reveals Doc's fascination with the Greeks, if not specifically *The Odyssey*. Doc has a lecture on civilization that he never really delivers: after Smith, with the gang trying to escape through the desert, echoes some of Abbey's views on agriculture<sup>vii</sup>—Seldom: “From hunters and ranchers down to farmers, that was one hell of a Fall” (308)—Doc prepares to counter him: “‘Nonsense,’ grumbles Doc, but he is too thirsty, too tired, too resigned to deliver his famous lecture on civilization and the birth of reason (O rarest and sweetest of history's flowers)” (309). He later starts to give it, after all: “‘The Greeks,’ Dr. Sarvis says hoarsely, hopelessly, with parched throat and heavy tongue, ‘were the first to make fully conscious—’ He tries to clear his throat” (310), but Smith interrupts him. He hears a frog croaking, the sound of water. In the Maze, a series of Utah canyons in which the gang is trying to hide out, Doc, though delirious, compares the canyons to the Minotaur's labyrinth: “*Dr. Sarvis*, someone calls, years away, a phantom voice, like the bellowing of the Minotaur off around the many turns of many sunken canyons in this labyrinth of red stone” (316). Doc's fascination with the Greeks echoes Abbey's fascination. References to the Greeks, especially Homer, appear throughout his writing. Abbey, an admirer of small-scale, self-reliant societies, idealizes the Greek polis. In *The Journey Home* he writes that “there are better ways to live than the traditional European-American drive for power, conquest, domination; better ways than the horrifying busyness of the Japanese; better ways than the totalitarian communes of the Chinese; better ways

than the passive pipe dreams of Hindu India” (234). One better way is the imperfect but still preferable model of “the independent city-states of classical Greece” (234), which he compares to “the free cities of medieval Europe; to the small towns of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century America; to the tribal life of the American Plains Indians; to the ancient Chinese villages recalled by Lao-tse in his boo, *The Way*” (234). Abbey could have chosen myths or stories from any of these cultures to make his point. He writes at length in *Desert Solitaire* on the virtues of early Mormon settlements in Utah, and he is familiar with certain Native American myths. (See his discussion of Anasazi art in *Desert Solitaire*). The narrative of *Hayduke Lives!*, the sequel to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is framed by the struggle of a tortoise buried by a Giant Earth Mover called GOLIATH to free himself:

Old man turtle emerges from his grave. The desert tortoise resurrects himself. Covered with dust but unbroken, uncrushed—uncrushable!—he clambers out, crawls forward, extends his four legs fully from his plated shell and stands erect. He squints to one side, to the other, then straight ahead, blinking. His dim old eyes reflect the gleam of the open sky, the growing light. He stares in wonder. He lifts his head high on its wrinkled neck and takes off, marching toward the invincible sunrise. (*Hayduke Lives!* 307-308)



The uncrushable desert tortoise is obviously symbolic, but it's also suggestive of various creation myths, none of which is as well-known as *The Odyssey*. So Abbey could have used a different story, perhaps one more appropriate to the regional setting of the novel, but no one would have noticed. Doc's interest in the Greeks flags in *Hayduke Lives!*, which was published (posthumously; Abbey died in 1989) in 1990, fifteen years after *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Abbey makes it clear from the beginning of the sequel that this is not a Greek novel. On the first page, as old man turtle ambles along (pre-burial), Abbey dismisses the Greeks: "The ancient Greeks thought the tortoise a kind of demon. So much for the Greeks. An ignorant people" (3). I don't take the "ignorant people" remark very seriously, except as an indication that there are other myths at work in this novel, notably David vs. Goliath. I mention all of this because I suspect the prevalence of Doc's general allusions to the Greeks in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, compared with the absence of allusions in *Hayduke Lives!*, indicates that even the non-Homeric Greek references are there to bolster the *Odyssey*-related references by keeping our minds on the ancient Greeks.

### **The Bum on the Beach**

The early *Odyssey* references are relatively minor, but chapter five opens with a major reference, perhaps the major reference: "There was this bum on the beach," a bum described as "[f]iercely bearded, short, squat, malevolent, his motor vehicle loaded with dangerous weapons: this bum. Did nothing; said

nothing; stared” (55). The bum, of course, is Hayduke, who here quite closely resembles Odysseus on his return to Ithaca:

...on his island,  
his father’s shore, that kingly man, Odysseus,  
awoke, but could not tell what land it was  
after so many years; moreover,  
Pallas Athena, Zeus’s daughter, poured  
a grey mist all around him, hiding him  
from common sight.... (Homer XIII.236-242)

Athena transforms his perception of his homeland (which she soon restores), then goes on to transform other people’s perception of him, so that

“...not a soul will know you,  
the clear skin of your arms and legs shriveled,  
your chestnut hair all gone, your body dressed  
in sacking that a man would gag to see,  
and the two eyes, that were so brilliant, dirtied—  
contemptible.... (Homer XIII. 500-505)

In other words, she presents him as some bum on the beach. Nor is this the only time Odysseus appears in bum-guise. He looks like a bum when he comes upon Nausikaa at the river, in Book VI. And Helen tells Telemakhos how she comes across his father at Troy:

“He had, first, given himself an outrageous beating  
and thrown some rags on—like a household slave—  
then slipped into that city of wide lanes  
among his enemies. So changed, he looked  
as never before upon the Akhaian beachhead,  
but like a beggar, merged in the townspeople.” (Homer IV.262-  
268)

Odysseus, on the beach in Ithaca, actually appears to look much worse than  
Hayduke:

Speaking no more, [Athena] touched him with her wand,  
shriveled the clear skin of his arms and legs,  
made all his hair fall out, cast over him  
the wrinkled hide of an old man, and bleared  
both his eyes, that were so bright. Then she  
clapped an old tunic, a foul cloak, upon him,  
tattered, filthy, stained by greasy smoke,  
and over that a mangy big buck skin. (Homer XIII.538-545)

The difference is that Odysseus gets to turn back into his normal, handsome self,  
but Hayduke never shaves, never puts on fine clothes. He remains, at least on the  
outside, a bum.

When Doc, Bonnie, and Seldom Seen first see him, they are wary, but soon enough they see beyond the bum image: they see him for who he is, just as Telemakhos, Penelope, the nurse, the swineherd, and even the suitors will come to see Odysseus, not as a beggar or bum, but as himself. This is where Hayduke comes home, where the gang comes together, and where the plot to take down (or at least slow down) the New Suitors is hatched. Hayduke and his new friends set their plans in motion in the wilderness, just like Odysseus, who “‘came / to this wild place [the swineherd’s cabin], directed by Athena, / so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies’” (Homer XVI.275-277).

### **Hayduke the Cunning**

Of course, sometimes Hayduke’s friends (especially Bonnie) forget to look past his hairy façade. Unlike Odysseus, Hayduke never completely shakes off his bum-like image. Early in the novel Bonnie regards him as an oaf: “Abzug cast a cold eye on Hayduke’s face, or what could be seen of it behind the black bangs and the bushy beard. An oaf, she thought. All hairiness is bestial, Arthur Schopenhauer thought. Hayduke caught her look, scowled. She turned back to the others” (64). Hayduke is not as dumb or brutish as he acts and looks, and the others know it, or come to learn it, but the oafish mystique is never shed. Bonnie again mentally refers to him as “Hayduke the oaf” (147). Abbey misleads us about Hayduke, calling him “more destructive than bright” (96), which isn’t really the case. Consider the following passage: “Hayduke took pains, as he walked, to

stay on the sandstone. Making no pictures, leaving no tracks. Where it was necessary to cross intervals of sand or dirt he turned and walked backward, for confusion's sake, reversing his trail" (94). This is not exactly un-cunning. One can imagine Odysseus, in a similar situation, walking backward to mislead his pursuers. As the book progresses you see Hayduke's cunningness increase, but even Hayduke regards himself as an oaf: "Hayduke thought about that question. [I.e. how to bring about a counter-industrial revolution.] He wished Doc were here. His own brain functioned like crankcase sludge on a winter day. Like grunge. Like Chairman Mao prose. Hayduke was a saboteur of much wrath but little brain" (200). I would not argue that Hayduke is an intellectual, but he is not dumb. Consider Hayduke's escape from Bishop Love and his search and rescue gang. They have Hayduke cornered, in his Jeep, at the edge of a cliff, while they wait a mile away, out of rifle range (vengeful Hayduke does not take the no-killing oath quite as seriously as the others, but he never kills anyone). Love is willing to take his time approaching him, knowing that his prey has no escape route, his only hiding place a lone juniper tree. The approach is methodical, professional, by the book:

Love issued his orders and the Team spread out laterally toward the sides of the ridge. He raised his field glasses to check on the quarry but the rise of the land prevented direct observation. He looked to either side; his men were ready, watching him. He made

a forward motion with his right arm, the squad leader's signal to advance. All began to walk forward, crouching, keeping in the cover of junipers and pinyon pines, holding their weapons at port. (255)

It is also useless. By the time they arrive the quarry has vanished, along with his Jeep. Hayduke uses his Jeep's winch and 150 feet of cable to rappel down the cliff and hide under an overhang, out of sight, so that when the puzzled Team looks over the edge they see only "what was there: the bench of bare stone a hundred feet or so below, the corroded badlands, the gulches, draws and arroyos draining their arid beds of sand and rubble toward Comb Wash, the high sheer façade of Comb Ridge beyond the wash, the mountains beyond the ridge" (257), but no Hayduke, and no Jeep. Doc, for all his intelligence, would never have thought to rappel down a cliff in his Jeep. Even if he thought of it he wouldn't know how. It's a trick worthy of Odysseus. And in case Hayduke's nimble wit is not enough to draw an immediate parallel, Abbey sets the escape in the Valley of the Gods (250).

Hayduke's greatest escape comes at the end of the novel. The authorities do not know his real name; they know him only as Rudolf the Red. Hayduke is cornered on another cliff with no Jeep this time, and no rope, no way to get down or get away. He's up against more than the San Juan County Search and Rescue Team now. He also has to worry about the "police, the sheriffs of three counties

and their deputies, the assistant superintendent of a national park, two rangers” (345) and a helicopter. We witness Hayduke’s apparent demise through the point of view of Sam Love, the bishop’s little brother:

A fusillade of gunfire burst out from the entire length of the firing line: a dozen or more automatic rifles in rapid fire. Streams of bullets converged on one target.

“My God,” Sam muttered. He raised the glasses again, searching for the object of this concentrated interest. He looked and quickly found the target out on the point, within a few feet of the extreme edge of the cliff, a stiff awkward semihuman figure rising to the waist out of what appeared to be, from Love’s angle of vision, a solid mass of stone. He saw the yellow billed cap, a bristly shaggy sort of head, the shoulders, chest and torso of something clothed in faded blue denim, exactly as he remembered Rudolf’s garb from their hasty encounters before. The man’s arms seemed to be holding, or to be wrapped around, a rifle. At so great range, however, even though he was looking through field glasses, Sam could not be certain, could not be absolutely certain of identification—yet it surely must be the same person. Had to be. But with one obvious and significant difference: this man was being torn apart before his eyes. (344)

No positive identification is here possible because “[t]hey found no trace of flesh or bone. But there was a generous trail of blood across the stone, leading to the rim. They found Rudolf’s rifle” (345). Sam Love knows “[t]hat Rudolf has a funny way of disappearing over canyon rims” (344), but even he is convinced.

But Hayduke is still alive. He tricked them. Just like Odysseus uses a pseudonym, “Nohbdy” (Homer IX.366) (that is, Nobody), to trick the Cyclops, Hayduke uses a pseudonym to escape from his would-be captors. They have *no body*, but they are sure Rudolf is dead. Hayduke shows up at Seldom’s ranch in Green River, about two years later, where the other three members of the gang are living, Seldom in his home and Doc and Bonnie on a houseboat.

Doc sighs again. “They shot you to pieces at Lizard Rock.”

“Not me. Rudolf.”

“Rudolf?”

“A scarecrow. A fucking dummy.” (354)

This is a trick of which Odysseus would be proud. He differs from Hayduke in many ways. Odysseus is a king, Hayduke a man of the people. Odysseus is loyal to Penelope; Hayduke is borderline misogynistic. Odysseus is patient, Hayduke temperamental. But they are both strong, both sometimes hubristic. They are both cunning, even if Hayduke never gets credit for his craftiness. They both have a home for which they long while they are at war, and for which they will fight when they return. They want to restore order to their home, even if their personal



definitions of order differ somewhat. Hayduke both is and isn't Odysseus. He isn't simply Odysseus given a new name, placed in a new period. He is those parts of Odysseus that Abbey considers important for his novel—the cunningness, the sense of home, the desire for revenge and cleaning house.

### **Winedark Skies and Rosy Dawns**

Abbey uses two well-known Homeric epithets to call attention to *The Odyssey*. Early in the river trip of chapter five we get a picture of the moon: “While glowing dumbly in the east, above the red canyon walls, the new moon hung in the wine-dark firmament like a pale antiphonal response to the glory of the sun” (58). Wine-dark<sup>viii</sup> is a Homeric compound modifier typically describing the sea. See Book I, lines 224-226 of *The Odyssey*, when Athena, disguised as Mentor, says: “I came by ship, with a ship’s company, / sailing the winedark sea for ports of call / on alien shores.” By my count the phrase “winedark sea” appears eleven times in Fitzgerald’s translation of *The Odyssey*.

Why the wine-dark sky, though? Why not the wine-dark river down which they’re floating? The answer lies in Abbey’s self-identification as a desert rat.

This is from *Desert Solitaire*:

...I prefer the desert.

Why? Because—there’s something about the desert. Not much of an answer. There are mountain men, there are men of the sea, and there are desert rats. I am a desert rat. But why? And why,

in precisely what way, is the desert more alluring, more baffling, more fascinating than either the mountains or the oceans?

The majority of the world's great spirits, from Homer to Melville and Conrad, have felt the call of the sea and responded to its power and mystery, its rhythm, antiquity and apparent changelessness.... The desert, however, has been relatively neglected. (*Desert Solitaire* 239)

As a desert rat, Abbey is not a writer of the sea. It would not work to try to force Homer's sea imagery onto a river, but there is something sea-like in the desert: the sky. Abbey repeatedly uses sea imagery to describe the sky, not only with "wine-dark firmament," but also in the scene where Seldom and Hayduke stop on a bridge over Glen Canyon and Seldom gets down and prays for the bridge's destruction: "He paused, cocking an eye upward to the sky where a procession of clouds in stately formation, like an armada of galleons, floated eastward on the prevailing winds, out of the sunrays of the west toward approaching night" (141). (Seldom is supplicating God, or the gods, the way Odysseus does when he needs a favor, but Seldom's gods aren't there to hear him.) Later on the gang sees "the dawn flowing toward them, violet clouds lighting up on the east" (166). Abbey first uses the sky-as-sea imagery in *Desert Solitaire*: "The sun is not yet in sight but signs of the advent are plain to see. Lavender clouds sail like a fleet of ships across the pale green dawn" (4).

With “wine-dark firmament” Abbey appropriates Homer’s language and applies it to the sky, which he describes as a floating ocean. This is, after all, an inland battle. There’s no sea within a thousand miles (although there is a river—the Colorado—that once led to a sea, and that the gang would like to lead to the sea again). Abbey describes a wine-dark sky in order to use the Homeric language without forcing it.

Aside from “grey-eyed,” describing Athena, and variations on “cunning,” the only epithet that appears more often than “winedark sea” in *The Odyssey* is the rosy-fingered dawn. The rosy dawn is a hallmark of Homer. I counted nineteen uses in *The Odyssey*. Take a random example: “When Dawn spread out her finger tips of rose, / Lord Nestor of Gerênia, charioteer, / left his room for a throne of polished stone” (Homer III.436-438).

Abbey uses the rosy dawn epithet twice in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, first when Hayduke, after performing his first act of revenge—stealing and trashing the patrol car of a police officer who had arrested him before the war for the crime of staring at the officer while he harassed an Indian (27-30)—awakes after a night spent in the wilderness, where he sleeps well, “[u]nder the diamond blaze of Orion, the shimmer of the Seven Sisters...” with “[t]he satisfaction of a job well done. He dreamt of home. Wherever that is” (30). (There’s the notion of home again.) The dawn to which Hayduke awakes changes colors, from “the silver-blue dawn” (30) when he first rises to “the rosy dawn” (31) into which he

rolls on his way down the mountain to the Colorado River. Abbey returns to the rosy-fingered dawn image later in the novel: “They marched back the way they’d come, past the quiet, spayed, medicated machinery. Those doomed dinosaurs of iron, waiting patiently through the remainder of the night for buggering morning’s rosy-fingered denouement” (88). In this case the reference is perhaps tongue-in-cheek.

### **So Few Against So Many**

Bonnie has doubts about their work: ““But they have everything. They have the organization and the control and the communications and the army and the police and the secret police. They have the big machines. They have the law and drugs and jails and courts and judges and prisons. They are so huge. We are so small”” (161-162). Her doubt is reminiscent of Telemakhos, who laments that he and his mother

“have no strong Odysseus to defend us,  
and as to putting up a fight ourselves—  
we’d only show our incompetence in arms.

Expel them, yes, if I only had the power.” (Homer II.62-65)

He later says to his father: ““If we go in against all these / I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance”” (Homer XVI.301-302).

Even Odysseus, speaking to Athena, doubts his chances of defeating the suitors:

“I am one man; how can I whip those dogs?

They are always here in force. Neither

is that the end of it, there’s more to come.

If by the will of Zeus and by your will

I killed them all, where could I go for safety?” (Homer XX.44-49)

Athena’s answer is that she is on his side. Bonnie doesn’t receive such a reassuring response. She is told only that ““this very minute there’s guys out in the dark doing the same kind of work we’re doing. All over the country, little bunches of guys in twos and threes, fighting back”” (162). She, like most people, would probably have felt better with a god on her side.

### **A Bird Sign**

There are, says Penelope, two gates through which dreams might pass:

“one gateway

of honest horn, and one of ivory.

Issuing by the ivory gate are dreams

of glimmering illusion, fantasies,

but those that come through solid polished horn

may be borne out, if mortals only know them.” (Homer XIX.653-658)

The dream in question involves twenty fat geese who feed by her house and who are killed by a mountain eagle. She cries, in the dream, and

“Then down  
out of the sky he drops to a cornice beam  
with mortal voice telling me not to weep.  
‘Be glad,’ says he, ‘renowned Ikários’ daughter:  
here is no dream but something real as day,  
something about to happen. All those geese  
were suitors, and the bird was I. See now,  
I am no eagle but your lord come back  
to bring inglorious death upon them all!’” (XIX.621-639)

The dream is explained for her while she dreams, but she does not know whether to believe it. Homer uses bird flight symbolically several times in *The Odyssey*.

Consider also this sign that comes to Telemakhos and the suitors:

Now Zeus who views the wide world sent a sign to [Telemakhos],  
launching a pair of eagles from a mountain crest  
in gliding flight down the soft blowing wind,  
wing-tip to wing-tip quivering taut, companions,  
till high above the assembly of many voices  
they wheeled, their dense wings beating, and in havoc  
dropped on the heads of the crowd—a deathly omen—  
wielding their talons, tearing cheeks and throats.... (II.155-162)

The suitors are warned by an old reader of bird flight that these eagles augur Odysseus's return and the suitors' death, but Eurymakhos, speaking for the suitors, dismisses him: "Bird life aplenty is found in the sunny air," he says, "not all of it significant" (II.191-192). It's obvious, though, what the eagles (both in Penelope's dream and the pair seen by the suitors) signify: destruction for the suitors.

Abbey includes, irreverently, his own avian augury: "One thin scream came floating down, like a feather, from the silver-clouded sky. Hawk. Redtail, solitaire, one hawk passing far above the red reef, above the waves of Triassic sandstone, with a live snake clutched in its talons. The snake wriggled, casually, as it was borne away to a different world" (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 74-75).

So what, if anything, does Abbey's red-tailed hawk augur? Should we read this as a sign that Hayduke, himself something of a solitaire, is coming to clean house, to get the snakes out of his den, so to speak? Abbey doesn't say, and there are no readers of bird flight to comment on it for us. The significance of this bird flight is described in one word: "Lunchtime" (*Monkey Wrench Gang* 75).

### **The One-Eyed Jack**

Abbey throws in a red herring with the sudden appearance of a one-eyed man. Hayduke is monkeying under a bulldozer when he hears a voice order him to finish the work he is doing. He assumes the voice belongs to the night watchman, and when he slides out from under the bulldozer

Hayduke stared harder at the face before him, ten feet away in the starlight, gradually becoming clear. He saw that the stranger was wearing a mask. Not a black mask over the eyes but simply a big bandanna draped outlaw-style over the nose, mouth and chin.

Above the mask one dark right eye, vaguely shining, peered at him from under the droopy brim of a black hat. The other eye stayed closed in what appeared to be a permanent wink. Hayduke finally realized that the man's left eyeball was gone, long gone, lost and forgotten no doubt in some ancient barroom quarrel, some legendary war. (210)

Or lost in some cave, perhaps, is the first thought of the *Odyssey*-minded reader. This one-eyed, shotgun-wielding man appears to be an obvious Cyclops figure, but he turns out to be not an enemy of Hayduke (Odysseus) but an ally. (In *Hayduke Lives!* he is almost a father figure.) The one-eyed outlaw is a fellow saboteur. His presence is not really explained within the novel, but the mysterious stranger, whom they call the Lone Ranger, is a reincarnation of Jack Burns, the hero of *The Brave Cowboy*, Abbey's second novel (which was made into a movie starring Kirk Douglas and renamed *Lone Are the Brave*, with a screenplay by Dalton Trumbo). Burns figures more prominently in *Hayduke Lives!* and is a main character in *Good News*.



I have a theory about this mysterious stranger: my first thought was that he was Polyphemos, my second impression was that he was not Polyphemos, that he wasn't in any way related to *The Odyssey*, but it now seems possible that he is a sort of Cyclops figure, someone who represents the not-quite civilized. He is the man in the wilderness, a completely negative character in *The Odyssey*: ““In the next land we found were Kyclopês,”” says Odysseus, ““giants, louts, without a law to bless them”” (Homer IX.113-114). But for Abbey the man in the wilderness is not automatically a negative figure.

In 1977, the Boise State University Western Writers Series published a monograph, written by Garth McCann, called *Edward Abbey*. McCann's remarks on the coffee-table book *Cactus Country* (for which Abbey wrote the text), shed light on what one-eyed Burns represents: “Abbey believes that the desert's lesson of survival is especially important for the ‘overcivilized American’ who lives stupidly and unknowingly inside a life system over which he has little control but which must be preserved if he is to survive” (McCann 34). Think about Ithaca in Odysseus's absence: it has become both over-and -under-civilized. The decadence of the suitors has led to a breakdown in civilization. Odysseus aims to restore civilization, not over-civilization. Odysseus the king and Abbey the absolute democrat would have certain political differences, but they also share certain sensibilities. Abbey believed “Everyone should learn a manual trade: It's never too late to become an honest person” (*A Voice in the Wilderness* 101). Some

might construe that as Luddism, but there's also something very civilized about the concept. Compare that statement with the olive tree that is so important to the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope. "An old trunk of olive / grew like a pillar on the building plot" (Homer XXIII.216-217), says Odysseus. He leaves the trunk in place and builds the house around it and uses the trunk as one of the pillars of their marriage bed. The tree, in the context of where it comes up in the narrative, is an example of Odysseus's ever-turning mind, but it is also a symbol of the balance between the natural and the manmade: Odysseus's home is rooted, literally, to the spot of earth on which it rests. A modern, over-civilized man not only would not build his own house, he would order his bed from Ikea. The bed would have been made in China. Homer seeks balance between the uncivilized (or under-civilized) Cyclops and the over-civilized (decadent) suitors. Abbey seeks the same balance. Abbey "views the future in terms of *possibility*. If we can control industrialism, prevent technological monsters from taking over, curb our own selfishness and ignorance, and implement our individual and collective intelligence, it will be possible for us to be masters"—like Odysseus—"of our civilization. We *can* do it. But there is no assurance that we will" (McCann 43). Just as Hayduke both is and isn't Odysseus, Burns is and isn't a Cyclops.

There are no flesh-and-blood gods in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and no flesh-and-blood monsters, no Skylla or Kharybdis or Polyphemos. The monsters here are mechanical: "Down below the metal monsters roared, bouncing on

rubber through the cut in the ridge, dumping their loads and thundering up the hill for more. The green beasts of Bucyrus, the yellow brutes of Caterpillar, snorting like dragons, puffing black smoke into the yellow dust” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 77). The real Cyclops in the novel is not the one-eyed stranger but the machine. As Doc puts it: “We’re up against a *mad machine*, Seldom, which mangles mountains and devours men” (189). That description is not accidental: Polyphemos, the Cyclops, mangles mountains—“The blind thing in his doubled fury broke / a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us” (Homer IX.524-525)—and devours men. The *mad machine* is blind like Poseidon’s son, blind to everything but growth. For Abbey, the tools and symbols of what is commonly called civilization are actually the monsters of un-civilization.

### **Homer City**

Past the midpoint of the novel the Homer references aren’t coming at you fast and hard. If they were you’d be distracted, you’d be on the lookout for them and might treat *The Monkey Wrench Gang* the way people sometimes do *Ulysses*, which is to only look out for the *Odyssey* parallels. On the other hand Abbey doesn’t want you to forget about Homer, which is perhaps why his hometown of Home, Pennsylvania, gets transformed by Hayduke (who imagines it as the hometown of a certain pilot at whom he’s pointing a gun in order to rescue Bonnie) into “Homer City, Pennsylvania” (230)<sup>ix</sup>. Home, Pennsylvania, is an important reference point to Abbey throughout all of his writing. (See, especially,

*The Journey Home*.) This is a significant transformation. Home, both lower-and - uppercase, is his Ithaca. The book jacket of the tenth-anniversary, R. Crumb-illustrated edition of the *Monkey Wrench Gang* proclaims (as do almost all his book jackets): “Edward Abbey was raised on a farm in Home, Pennsylvania.” But this isn’t strictly accurate, as James Cahalan, in *Edward Abbey: A Life*, notes: “Edward Abbey was not born in Home, Pennsylvania; he resided in several other places before his family moved close to Home. And he never lived in Oracle, Arizona. Yet he convinced almost everyone that he had been ‘born in Home’ and ‘lived in Oracle’” (xi). Abbey “simply liked the sounds of ‘Home’ and ‘Oracle.’ They had a nice ring on book jackets and in letters to the editor in which this sometimes prophetic troublemaker could sign off from ‘Oracle’” (Cahalan xi-xii). The idea of being from Home is important to Abbey. Changing the name to Homer City is a sly nod both to his hometown and the work of literature at the heart of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

#### **“Warriors, Farewell”: The Deus Ex Machina**

Hayduke and the gang have no gods on their side. There are no gods. They’ve been replaced by lawyers. The potentially endless cycle of violence in *The Odyssey* ends when “Both parties later swore to terms of peace set by their arbiter, Athena” (Homer XXIV.611-612). The *deus ex machina* in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is the American judicial system. There is no hard evidence against the three apparent surviving members of the gang (and Hayduke is assumed

dead). The Gang's arbiters, a pair of well-connected lawyers hired by Doc Sarvis, get them off with suspended sentences and probation.

### III.

Abbey focused on both Home and Homer throughout his career. See his introduction to his 1977 essay collection *The Journey Home*, which “like its predecessors *Desert Solitaire* and the others, is partly a book of personal history, one man’s odyssey in search of Ithaca” (xiii). His home, in a strict sense (i.e. it is the place he is from), is Home, Pennsylvania, but his Ithaca is Hayduke’s Ithaca, the American southwest. Abbey just did not have the luxury of being born there: “Like so many others in this century I found myself a displaced person shortly after birth and have been looking half my life for a place to take my stand. Now that I think I’ve found it, I must defend it. My home is the American West. All of it” (xiii-xiv). The journey home described in the first essay, “Hallelujah on the Bum,” is both a journey home to Home, and a journey to his real home, away from Home.

Abbey was interested in Homer, but his “literary idols...have always been people like Rabelais, Knut Hamsun, B. Traven, Theodore Dreiser, Celine, Steinbeck—the unloved” (*The Journey Home* xii). His attitude toward Homer was more ambivalent. He refers to him, in *Desert Solitaire*, as a great spirit, but somewhere in his journals, according to Loeffler, is a list of writers who fall under the categories of good, bad, and “?” (124). Homer was a ?. Loeffler notes that Abbey read Homer, as well as Henry James, Brecht, Forster, Twain, Baudelaire,

Joyce, and Carl Jung, in the winter of 1960 (124). Abbey also read Homer in 1968, according to a journal entry from October 8, 1968:

Like a bloody idiot, I accepted a teaching job here at Redneck U.  
[In Cullowhee, North Carolina] All for monetary greed...

But oh! the horror the tedium the *drudgery* of academic life. How I despise it. How I loathe it. All those pink faces in the classroom three fucking hours, five fucking days per week. All them unspeakable truly hideous little bluebook themes...

...And the hours and hours of preparation, reading filthy garbage like Homer and Shithead Plato and Dante and that ancient archaic bore Wm. Shakespeare.

Harsh words—Abbey never had anything nice to say or write about Plato or Dante, but his attitude here toward Homer and Shakespeare is colored by his distaste for teaching. He thought enough of Shakespeare to use two lines of *Julius Caesar* (III.i.269-270: “O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth, / That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.”) as an epigraph to *Hayduke Lives!*, and his admiration, whatever questions or reservations he may have had, of Homer is obvious.

References to Homer appear throughout his work, though not with the frequency, even in *The Fool’s Progress*, his other *Odyssey*, they do in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. For example, *Good News*, the first novel Abbey published

(in 1980) after *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, contains exactly one *Odyssey* reference. Jack Burns, the brave cowboy of *The Brave Cowboy* and the mysterious Lone Ranger of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is riding his horse through a near-future, post-apocalyptic version of Phoenix, Arizona (the perfect city in which to set a post-apocalyptic novel, the only perfect thing about *Good News*). Among the signs and marquees he sees is a sign for “*Odyssey Records & Tapes: ‘All Prices Slashed.’*” The narrator adds: “Slashed, slashed, slashed. And slashed” (61). In *Beyond the Wall*, a 1984 essay collection, he describes a river guide who has “in profile the classical Homeric look” (171). On a more personal level, he was even co-owner, in the late fifties, of a Dalmatian named Homer (Cahalan 58).

I have not come across any comparisons of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Odyssey*, but I am not the first person to discuss Abbey in Homeric terms. James Cahalan, in his biography of Abbey, sees one of his later novels, what he referred to for years as his “fat masterpiece,” as his *Odyssey*:

If [*Jonathan*] *Troy*<sup>x</sup> had been his failed *Iliad*, then he was determined to make *The Fool’s Progress* his successful *Odyssey*. There is no doubt that Abbey conceived both novels partly in terms of the Homeric framework: it is no accident that his first protagonist was named “Troy” and that Henry Lightcap thinks to himself in *The Fool’s Progress*, “Yes, I am Ithaca-bound.”

Jonathan watches his father fight the good fight, and, after he loses



it, Jonathan leaves to conquer other kingdoms. *The Fool's Progress* is all about Henry Lightcap's odyssey to Home, after the wars (both worldly and personal). Abbey had written in his journal as early as November 1951 that he hoped "to write a book called *Ithaca*—an improvement on the *Odyssey*. Man seeking Home—a man trying to get home, after years of sorrow and danger, reaches home, to find it." This remained the basic premise of *The Fool's Progress*, published thirty-seven years later. (245)

Lightcap also thinks: "All who aren't Greeks are Barbarians" (*The Fool's Progress* 135).<sup>xi</sup> Cahalan does not spend much time on the *Odyssey-Fool's Progress* parallel, other than to note the positive reviews that followed the novel's publication in 1988: "John Murray noticed that it was 'a modern version of the story of Ulysses'" (252). Although there are many more allusions to *The Odyssey* in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* than in *The Fool's Progress*, I agree with Cahalan's idea of the latter novel's Homeric framework. I would, however, amend his argument: *The Fool's Progress*, published after but begun before *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is modeled on the first twelve books of *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus travels home. "Home," in Lightcap's definition, "is where when you have to go there you probably shouldn't" (*The Fool's Progress* 10). "Where is home?" he asks. "Home is where you shall find your happiness. Whatever that may be" (72). Lightcap remains preoccupied with the idea of home (just like his

creator). The novel is concerned with Henry Lightcap's journey home, and it ends when he arrives there. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is also a novel about home, but it isn't so much about going or coming home as restoring order to home, like in the second half of *The Odyssey*.

John Opie, writing in the *Environmental Review*, saw Abbey's entire life as a Homeric struggle between Agamemnon and Odysseus. He casts Agamemnon as a symbol of hubris and Odysseus as a symbol of civility and interprets them from an ecological perspective:

In environmental terms, *hubris* involves the unthinking use of humanity's irresistible power over nature, irresponsible even in human terms. Environmental civility involves the capacity to learn the rules of nature's community in which humanity lives, and judiciously to exercise overweening power for the good of both the community and humanity. (Opie ii)

Abbey, he says, "wanted desperately to be Odysseus, but found himself inexorably drawn closer to Agamemnon. Such is the human condition in an age of the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect and nuclear winter. Abbey's tragedy was that he recognized in himself, and in *Everyman*, *hubris* where *civility* should have been" (Opie ii). Abbey was closer to Agamemnon, for Opie, because he threw beer cans out the car window, and because "[i]n his later life and writings, he

became irascible and curmudgeonly, raging at himself, at the world around him, and even at his fellow environmentalists” (Opie i).<sup>xii</sup>

I am not much interested in how Abbey lived his life here, but Opie’s definitions of hubris and civility are useful. ““Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven, / contempt for what men say of you hereafter,”” (Homer XII.41-42) Odysseus tells the hubristic suitors<sup>xiii</sup>. The gods of *The Odyssey* have methods for dealing with hubris, but there are no gods in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* or life to punish the hubristic New Suitors. There are, of course, laws, but—at least when it comes to punishing the powerful—they are only minor gods. So here is the heart of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*: Abbey is trying to find balance between hubris and civility, and The Monkey Wrench Gang is there to punish the New Suitors, albeit without all the bloodshed.

Abbey, intentionally or not, explains the point of his novel’s Homeric framework through a conversation between Seldom Seen and Hayduke:

“All this wire cutting is only going to slow them down, not stop them. Godfuckingdammit, Seldom, we’re wasting our time.”

[This is George Hayduke speaking, if the double-expletive wasn’t enough to identify him.]

“What’s the matter, George?”

“We’re wasting our time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we ought to really blast this motherfucker. This one and all the others. I mean set them on fire. Burn them up.”

“That there’s arson.”

“For chrissake, what’s the difference? You think what we’re doing now is much nicer? You know damn well if old Morrison-Knudson was out here now with his goons he’d be happy to see us all shot dead.”

“They ain’t gonna be too happy about this, you’re right there. They ain’t gonna understand us too good.”

“They’ll understand us. They’ll hate our fucking guts.”

“They won’t understand why we’re doin’ this, George. That’s what I mean. I mean we’re gonna be misunderstood.”

“No, we’re not gonna be misunderstood. We’re gonna be hated.”

“Maybe we should explain.” (84)

The Gang might be misunderstood, just as the novel might be misunderstood. It would not be hard to see *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, as does Bill Croke, writing in *The American Spectator*, as nothing more than “an excellent how-to manual for...eco-terrorism.” But *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a lot more than a how-to manual. It is a cry for civilization. All the Homeric allusions are there to draw attention to the civilizing heart of the novel. This is why *The Monkey Wrench*

*Gang* is not a simple retelling of *The Odyssey*. It has to be more than that. Abbey cannot footnote his own novel and insert clarifications, explanations, and justifications for the (what would probably be clinically diagnosed as) antisocial behavior described in the novel. But he can let Homer do it for him.

A cairn is a pile of stones used as a landmark, a common sight in the desert. Every Homeric reference is a literary cairn, a landmark within the novel. The smaller references are small cairns, and the more obvious references are larger cairns that can be seen from a great distance. For example, the bum on the beach is a large pile of stones placed atop a ridge so it can be seen from miles away. It is a major landmark. These landmarks are Abbey's way of explaining his novel.

It helps—it might even be necessary—to be familiar with Abbey's other books in order to understand *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. The key to that understanding is in *Desert Solitaire*: "No, wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself" (169). The ending of *Desert Solitaire* actually leads directly into *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Abbey is reluctant to leave Utah for New York, and he tells his friend Bob Ferris, who is driving him to a train station, to turn around and go back.

But he only steps harder on the gas. “No,” he says, “you’ve got a train to catch.” He sees me craning my neck to stare backward. “Don’t worry,” he adds, “It’ll all still be here next spring.”

The sun goes down, I face the road again, we light up our after-dinner cigars. Keeping the flame alive. The car races forward through a world dissolving into snow and night.

Yes, I agree, that’s a good thought and it better be so. Or by God there might be trouble. The desert will still be here in the spring. And then comes another thought. When I return will it be the same? Will I be the same? Will anything ever be quite the same again? If I return. (269)

These could be the thoughts of George Hayduke.

The idea of civilization was important to Abbey. Better to let him speak for himself:

Civilization, if it means anything and if it is ever to exist, must mean a form of human society in which the primary values are openness, diversity, tolerance, personal liberty, reason. It appears doubtful that such a society has existed in the past and at present more doubtful that it will come to be in the near future—that is, within the next century or two. (Until some debris has been cleared

away.) Nevertheless, civilization as here defined seems to me the one clear purpose implied in the martyrdom of prophets, the wisdom of seers and poets and thinkers, the suffering and torture of common people, that have characterized human history for the past five thousand years. If there is such a thing as human evolution (and I suspect there is) then the slow, painful effort toward a free community of men and women, with a full flowering of the individual personality, must be the ideal—always opposed but never wholly suppressed—which has inspired our long travail. If there is no such goal, then human history is indeed, as some have called it, nothing but a nightmare. (*One Life at a Time, Please* 179-180)

He is careful to distinguish between culture and civilization, and spends two pages doing so in *Desert Solitaire*. “Culture, we [Abbey and a visitor at his trailer] agreed, means the way of life of any given human society considered as a whole. It is an anthropological term referring always to specific, identifiable societies localized in history and place, and includes all aspects of such organizations—their economy, their art, their religion” (245). The U.S.A. and U.S.S.R., for example, are both cultures, not civilizations. His definition of civilization, here, is less anthropological. It is ineffable. He can only define it by example. For example:

Civilization is the vital force in human history; culture is that inert mass of institutions and organizations which accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life;...

Civilization is tolerance, detachment and humor, or passion, anger, revenge; culture is the entrance examination, the gas chamber, the doctoral dissertation [or master's thesis] and the electric chair;...

Civilization is the wild river; culture, 592,000 tons of cement;

Civilization flows; culture thickens and coagulates, like tired, sick, stifled blood. (246)

Civilization, in *The Odyssey*, is the trunk of the olive tree; culture the stool the suitor throws at Odysseus. Civilization, in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is those “free creatures: horned toads, desert rats, Gila monsters and coyotes” (23); culture is bulldozers and billboards and tumbleweeds. (The tumbleweed, symbol of the Old West, is an invasive species, a weed, and thief of water.) Civilization is what the Gang wants; culture what they're fighting against.

In the essay “Down the River,” from *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey describes a float trip with river guide Ralph Newcomb (the model for Seldom Smith). In this early essay he identifies the point of his work and the point of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*:



Why, we ask ourselves, floating onward in effortless peace deeper into Eden, why not go on like this forever?... If necessary, we agree, a man could live out his life in this place, once he had adjusted his nervous system to the awful quietude, the fearful tranquility. (160)

The answer comes a few pages later:

“Because they need us. Because civilization needs us.”

“What civilization?” [Ralph Newcomb] says.

“You said it. That’s why they need us.” (181)

Abbey and the Monkey Wrench Gang are there, like Odysseus, to restore or create civilization. If you read all his books you will find two themes that appear more than any others, home and civilization, the very themes of *The Odyssey*.

Abbey calls himself a sort of extremist, and no doubt many people would agree with that designation, but his actual goal is moderation. He seeks a middle way between over-civilization (i.e., over-development, technocracy, over-industrialization) and un-civilization. Garth McCann identifies Abbey’s desire for the middle way:

Philosophically, *Desert Solitaire* centers on the concepts of opposition, compromise, and balance. The demands of the wilderness and of modern industrialized man are mutually exclusive. But, paradoxically, it is both unwise and impractical to

let either of these sets of demands exclude the other. Although they are admittedly on a collision course, it becomes the task of modern man to find and implement a method of avoiding the catastrophe which would result if either force should get out of control....

Abbey does see a way out of the contraries, a method for getting back to a state of cultural sanity and for avoiding the economic and psychological collapse of our civilization: compromise. He believes...that it is possible through fair and reasonable compromise for man to achieve a balanced steady-state, part of the way between the extremes of the pastoral ideal and the urban nightmare. The New West provides both challenge and space for man's only hope and greatest duty: to imagine and achieve an enduring equilibrium. (21)

This steady-state is a Homeric idea. Consider what could have happened in Ithaca if Athena had not descended and imposed equilibrium: either Odysseus and Telemakhos would have been killed by the suitors' families, or the suitors' families would have killed Odysseus and his family. The result, either way, would be chaos. An essential ingredient in civilization is balance. In *The Odyssey* Athena is there to bring balance, but in the modern world the task of finding a balance falls to the people. "Out of chaos, order," (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 269), Abbey writes as the Gang prepares to take out a bridge, an action that would, in

another context, seem to signify creating chaos out of order. “Out of chaos, order”—those four words sum up the entire meaning of both *The Odyssey* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Abbey at times promoted an almost redneckish image of himself—the beer-swilling, gun-toting, profane, politically incorrect “Cactus Ed” who once wrote a letter to *Ms.* magazine in which he facetiously claimed that “Out here a womin’s place is in the kitchen, the barnyard and the bedroom in that exackt order and we dont need no changes” (*Abbey’s Road* xvi) [sic, sic, and sic]—but we should not forget that he held a master’s degree in philosophy from the University of New Mexico. He wrote his master’s thesis on anarchism and considered himself an anarchist throughout his life. The term anarchy is apt to conjure images of bombs and chaos. In order to avoid such an oversimplification and mischaracterization and to avoid an overly technical, theoretical discussion of anarchy, I offer Abbey’s own definition, taken from his “Theory of Anarchy,” collected in *One Life at a Time, Please*: “Anarchism does not mean ‘no rule’; it means ‘no rulers.’ Difficult but not utopian, anarchy means and requires self-rule, self-discipline, probity, character” (*One Life at a Time, Please* 27).

Odysseus, of course, was a ruler, and Ithaca was no democracy. But *The Odyssey* is still a viable reference point. Even if he disagrees with the form of government in Ithaca, Abbey idealizes the autonomy of Ithaca and the early Hellenistic societies. “An anarchist society,” he writes,

consists of a voluntary association of self-reliant, self-supporting, autonomous communities. The anarchist community would consist (as it did in preagricultural and preindustrial times) of a voluntary association of free and independent families, self-reliant and self-supporting but bound by kinship ties and a tradition of mutual aid. (*One Life at a Time, Please* 26)

The latter idea seems very Greek.

For Abbey, anarchism is simply democracy, and Doc, Bonnie, Seldom, and Hayduke represent democracy in action. “Like a bulldozer, government serves the caprice of any man or group who succeeds in seizing the controls. The purpose of anarchism is to dismantle such institutions and to prevent their reconstruction” (*One Life at a Time, Please* 27). It is certainly possible to disagree with Abbey’s theory of anarchy, but within the context of that theory it is clear that the characters in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* are intended to be a democratic force; not a band of vigilantes, vandals, or terrorists, but citizen-police, serious democrats, a healthy community in an unhealthy society. I say unhealthy because, as Abbey puts it, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell” (*One Life at a Time, Please* 21). It is also the ideology of the New Suitors.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This is not a term I can take seriously; not that I take any of the other terms very seriously, but one of the central tenets of eco-what-have-you is that no people should be harmed. I'm not really comfortable equating industrial sabotage with mass murder.

<sup>ii</sup> Why they, individually, do what they do: they all, naturally, have the general love of nature that would be a prerequisite for any type of eco-monkeying, but their reasons for turning to monkey-wrenching vary. Seldom Seen Smith does it because, as a river guide, the dam is bad for business, and the dam destroyed his hometown. He's also a native Utahn, and probably has the strongest land-love:

Like Hayduke his heart was full of a healthy hatred. Because Smith remembered something different. He remembered the golden river flowing to the sea. He remembered canyons called Hidden Passage and Salvation and Last Chance and Forbidden and Twilight and many many more, some that never had a name. He remembered the strange great amphitheaters called Music Temple and Cathedral in the Desert. All these things now lay beneath the dead water of the reservoir, slowly disappearing under layers of descending silt. How could he forget? He had seen too much. (36)

Hayduke does it because of what he saw in Vietnam, specifically the things he saw in Vietnam that he now sees in his own country:

I don't care, thinks Hayduke. Let them try it. Just let them try something, the fucking swine. Whatever they try I'm taking seven into hell with me. Seven of them for every one of me, sorry about that, men, but that's regulations. He caresses the polished walnut of the pistol-grip stock, which fits so fitting to his hand. Who needs their bloody stinking law? Who needs their filthy polluted water? I'll drink blood if I need it. Let them try something, the fuckers, I'll never let them forget. I'll never let them do it here. This is my country. Mine and Seldom's and Doc's—yeah, hers too—and just let them try and fuck up any of this and they're in real trouble. Real deep trouble, the fuckers. Got to draw that line somewhere and we might as well draw it right along Comb Ridge, the Monument Upwarp and the Book Cliffs. (312)

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Doc fights because, as he tells Seldom, he's seen

“too much insulted tissue under the microscope. All those primitive blood cells multiplying like a plague. Platelets eaten up. Young men and women in the flower of their youth, like Hayduke there, or Bonnie, bleeding to death without a wound. Acute leukemia on the rise. Lung cancer. I think the evil is in the food, in the noise, in the crowding, in the stress, in the water, in the air. I've seen too much of it, Seldom. And it's going to get a lot worse, if we let *them* carry out their plans. That's why” (159).

The *them* to whom he refers are the New Suitors.

Bonnie's motivation is less clear. Sometimes you get the feeling she's just along for the ride, but there's also a clear sense that she enjoys monkey-wrenching: “It was something to do. For the first time in years Ms. Abzug felt the emotion called delight in her cold Bronx heart. She was learning anew the solid satisfaction of good work properly done” (48).

It's not that they have an in-born desire for destruction (except maybe Hayduke). They've been pushed to their limit and are fighting back the only way they know how.

<sup>iii</sup> I do not speak Greek, just as Edward Abbey did not, so far as I know, speak Greek. At best he had a smattering of Greek. Witness the etymology of the vulture that introduces the twenty-eighth chapter of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*: “*Cathartes aura*, his Latin title, derived from the Greek *katharsis*, meaning purification, and *aura* from the Greek for air, emanation or vapor. The airy purifier” (302), which only really shows that he knew how to use a dictionary. So let's assume Abbey's Greek was as good as Shakespeare's. I know, based on his books and journal entries, that Abbey read Homer, but I do not know what translation he used. For this essay, all quotations from *The Odyssey* are from the Robert Fitzgerald translation, which appeared in 1961 (thus Abbey easily could have read it) and which I use because “[t]his is our classic version, effortlessly passing its several successors” (Carne-Ross x).

<sup>iv</sup> It is no accident that Hayduke's middle name is Washington, and there is no need for me to comment further on it. Hayduke's last name is also significant. Jack Loeffler, a friend of Abbey and the author of *Adventures With Ed: A Portrait of Abbey*, provides a thorough explanation:

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The word is thought to be of Turkish or Magyar origin. During the fifteenth century Christian landlords and Turkish conquerors became ever more heavy-handed with the peasants, who were forced from their lands or who lived in perpetual serfdom. As conditions became untenable, the displaced peasants and escaped serfs sought places where they could found free communities. Fighting men emerged from this free peasantry and founded a tradition that spanned cultural boundaries, resulting in the *klepthes* of Greece, the Cossacks of Russia, the *haidamaks* of the Ukraine, and the haiduks of Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula.

Not all haiduks were of the moral caliber of Robin Hood. Some actually became “hired crossbows” for threatened Christian or Turkish nobles. Others defended their rights as freemen and became robbers by trade, avengers of the people, and perpetrators of guerilla movements, resistance and liberation. If fortune smiled, the lifestyle of the bandit was certainly better than that of the peasant-serf. Indeed, the haiduks were brigands who haunted mountain passes and discomfited the gentry. The haiduks were insurrectionists and became a recognized social group. Their chieftains changed and their sway was held in common, their existence dependent on the collective rather than the exploits of a single individual. They were all heroes, their tales told in myriad ballads. (78)

Abbey first uses the name Hayduke in his third novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, in which “Hayduke’s place” is “a combination general store, post office, and bus stop” (9).

<sup>v</sup> I am not a Homer scholar, but I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that Penelope and Odysseus complement and complete each other. Abbey uses this kind of language to describe the relationship between civilization and wilderness. Here it is in *Desert Odyssey*: “Mountains complement desert as desert complements city, as wilderness complements and completes civilization” (129). He comes back to this idea in *Down the River*, a book of essays:

Wilderness complements and completes civilization. I might say that the existence of wilderness is also a compliment to civilization. Any society that feels itself too poor to afford the preservation of wilderness is not worthy of the name civilization.

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A completely man-made environment would not be a civilization at all but merely another kind of culture, in the anthropological sense of that word, merely another *village*, though it be of global dimensions. (118)

<sup>vi</sup> This is exactly what foul-mouthed Hayduke would have done.

<sup>vii</sup> This is from *Down the River*:

We gave up the free, spacious, egalitarian, adventurous life of the hunting-gathering societies.... We submitted to the organization required by the first great social machines, machines that were made...not of metal but of flesh, human blood and bone, of living men and women—and children. An army, for example, is a machine with men for its component parts, each part subordinated to the working of the whole. The same is true for a royal household, the pyramid construction gangs, the field hands of plantation or manorial estate...

Robin Hood, not King Arthur, is the real hero of English legend. Robin Hood and his merry rebels were free men, hunters, woodsmen, and thus—necessarily in their lifetime—outlaws. (116-117)

<sup>viii</sup> Abbey uses “wine-dark” in several other books. E.g. *Desert Solitaire*: “The clouds have disappeared, the sun is still beyond the rim. Under a wine-dark sky I walk through light reflected and reflected from the walls and floor of the canyon, a radiant golden light that glows on rock and stream, sand and leaf in varied hues of amber, honey, whiskey—the light that never was is here, now, in the storm-sculptured gorge of the Escalante” (176). *Black Sun*: “Above them was only the sun, the solitary star in a burning wine-dark sky” (115-116). *Down the River*: “The new moon floats like a slice of lemon on the wine-dark sky” (60).

<sup>ix</sup> This variation on Home, PA, also appears in *Abbey’s Road*, published in 1979, when Abbey tells an American he meets in Australia that he is from Homer City, Pennsylvania (43).

<sup>x</sup> *Jonathan Troy* is Abbey’s first novel. Abbey refused to have it reprinted, so it is difficult to find a copy. I didn’t have the funds either to buy a copy for \$1,000 or travel to the University of Arizona in Tucson, where Abbey’s papers are held, and I was unable to borrow a copy through my local library, which does not have it on shelf and was unable to acquire it through interlibrary loan. In short, I have not



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read *Jonathan Troy*, so I do not know how important *The Iliad* is to the framework of that novel.

<sup>xi</sup> Which statement we should compare to the remark in *Hayduke Lives!* about the Greeks being “An ignorant people” (3).

<sup>xii</sup> Opie is right. For an example of Abbey’s later curmudgeonliness, here is one of the last journal entries included in *Confessions of a Barbarian*, from March 2, 1989, less than two weeks before his death:

Why book reviewers hate my books:

Because the books are really no good? Perhaps. But I think I’ve got a better explanation. Almost all reviewers, these days, are members of and adherents to some anxious particular sect or faction. I.e., they are lesbians or New Agers or fem-libbers or (even worse) male fem-libbers or technophiles or self-hating white liberals or right-wing conservatives or Growth maniacs or Negroes or female Negroes or Third-World lesbian militant Negro poetesses or closet Marxists (Marxoids) or futurologists or academical specialists or Chicano ideologues or ballerinas or Kowboy Kultists or Kerouac Kultists or Henry James Minimalist Perfectionists or one-tenth Chippewa “Native American” Indians or at very least and all-inclusive Official Chickenshit Correct-Thinking Liberals etc. etc.

As such, any member of any one of those majority minorities is going to find *for certain* a few remarks in any of *my* books that will offend/enrage “s/he” to the marrow, leading inevitably in turn, on the part of such sectarian book reviewers, to a denunciation not merely of the offending passage, but of the *entire book*, and not merely of the book, but of the author too. (352-353)

<sup>xiii</sup> See Book XXII, lines 69-73 of *The Odyssey*:

“Some god has killed the suitors,  
a god, sick of their arrogance and brutal  
malice—for they honored no one living,  
good or bad, who ever came their way.  
Blind young fools, they’ve tasted death for it.”

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