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"Getting Nowhere." : Edward Abbeys Quest for Shelter

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In *Desert Solitaire* (1968), the well-known paean of praise on the Southwest canyonlands, Edward Abbey designates the area of Utah's Arches National Monument (now Arches National Park) as a perfect place to live in, underlining that different locations may be considered to be favored spots for human habitation: "Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of *the ideal place, the right place, the one true home*, known or unknown, actual or visionary [emphasis added]" (i). In the meaningfully titled *The Journey Home* (1977), which, as its author admits, is partially an essay collection about how he discovered his home, Abbey further reveals: "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* [emphasis added]" (xiii-xiv). As widely known, the right place turned out to be the American West, which was not the only place Abbey designated as *home*. As Stacey Wicker notes, "The body of Abbey's writings, both published and unpublished, indicate an individual with a highly evolved and transformative conceptualization of home and one constant throughout Abbey's own lifepath trajectory is that he never stays too far from home. The inconstant, however, is how Abbey defines his home" (6). With a focus on selected writings by Edward Abbey, the article thus aims to discuss the places which the travel writer labels as *homes* in an attempt to see whether in search for his abode he finally got somewhere, paraphrasing the quote in the paper's title, derived from another essay compilation, *Abbey's Road* (193).

In the introduction prefacing the 1988 edition of *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey acknowledges that he was born in a place called Home, Pennsylvania (viii). In *Confessions of a Barbarian* (1994), Abbey's private diary edited by David Petersen after his death, we also read in a note for September 9, 1983, disclosing the author's support for anti-immigrant policies and his despondency over growing population numbers in the US: "Joy . . . where are you? Where were you on the night of January 29th, 1927, in that lamp-lit room in the old farmhouse near Home, Pennsylvania, when I was born?" (308). The fact is that in his non-fiction writings Abbey departed from the truth by inventing the story of his birthplace. According to his birth certificate, the information in his baby book compiled by his mother, and FBI files, Edward Paul Abbey came into the world at a hospital, in the town of Indiana, Pennsylvania, located over ten miles south of Home, his alleged birthplace (Cahalan, "My People" 97). The deliberate misrepresentation stemmed from Abbey's interest in names given to places and buildings, which he sometimes altered in order to reflect what he regarded as their characteristic features. For instance, in his essay on the New York City area, he nicknames the Empire, the easily recognizable symbol of midtown Manhattan, "Vampire State Building" (*The Journey Home* 92). With reference to the purported birthplace, Clarke Cartwright Abbey, the writer's fifth and last wife, asserts that "he just liked the way it sounded, the humor of being from Home" (qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 4). Moreover, as his biographer indicates, Abbey thought of himself more in connection with the backcountry of the Appalachian region than with the urban Indiana, which in the context of his nature writing also served better marketing purposes (Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 4). Interestingly enough, when under obligation to complete official documents, Abbey entered Indiana on forms, recording facts as an obedient citizen, although "the desert anarchist," as James Bishop, his another biographer, refers to Abbey (iii), or the "registered anarchist," as Abbey dubbed himself (qtd. in Payne 153), was well-known for his civil disobedience toward the US government.

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Be that as it may, the story of Home, Pennsylvania, is not pure fiction in non-fiction writing by Abbey. It is a fact that the family moved into a rented house located near the village of Home circa 1931, when the little Ned, as the relatives called him, was aged four, and most probably in 1936, they finally settled down in the hamlet itself, living there up to 1941 (Cahalan, "My People" 97). Nevertheless, it was not the house in the village of Home that Abbey used to bear in mind while thinking about his family nest. In 1941, Paul and Mildred Abbey, bought their first real estate property situated near Chambersville, with Home, not Chambersville, as their mailing address, since the Home post office offers rural delivery services, whereas Chambersville, a few miles away from the supposed birthplace, does not (Cahalan, "My People" 97–99; *Edward Abbey* 13). Nicknamed "the Old Lonesome Briar Patch," which again proves place names' appeal to the writer's imagination, the Chambersville house is the one that Abbey referred to as his boyhood home, perpetuating its image both in fictional and non-fictional works.

In the very first chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, in effect, in its second paragraph, while listing possible locations of residence that to different people may epitomize "the ideal place, the right place, the one true home," Abbey invokes the Old Lonesome Briar Patch by depicting it as "a gray gothic farmhouse two stories high at the end of a red dog road in the Allegheny Mountains" (1). As Cahalan remarks ("My People" 99–100), in *The Fool's Progress* (1988), the novel originally published one year before Abbey's death, the fondly cherished family farm turns into "Lightcap Hollow under the tunnel of trees" (Abbey, *The Fool's Progress* 61), situated in the surroundings mirroring the actual location of the original. Henry Lightcap, the main protagonist of the novel,

loved the red-dog dirt road that meandered through the smoky hills beside the sulfur-colored creek, into and through the covered bridge and up the hollow that led, beyond the last split-rail fence, toward the barn, the forge, the pigpen, the wagon shed, the icehouse, the springhouse and the gray good gothic two-story clapboard farmhouse that remained, after a century, still the Lightcap family home. (Abbey, *The Fool's Progress* 85)

By contrast, the original Old Lonesome Briar Patch was sold in 1967, the decision Abbey regretted (qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 19), which additionally explains his sentimental attitude to the house.

The most memorable picture of the Old Lonesome Briar Patch is likely to be found in *Appalachian Wilderness* (1970), Eliot Porter's photographic impressions of the Great Smoky Mountains abounding in lush vegetation, with the text provided by Abbey, the self-described "desert rat" (*Desert Solitaire* 298). Again, just under the meaningful subtitle "Coming Home," beginning the first chapter of the album publication, Abbey admits that "going back to the Big Smokies always reminds me of coming home" (Porter and Abbey 13). And, further, the writer recalls, complementing Eliot's photographs:

At the far end of the living tunnel, beyond it and in the open, under a shimmer of summer sun or behind a curtain of whirling snow or within a lavender mist of twilight condensing toward darkness, stood the house. An austere and ancient clapboarded farmhouse, taller than

wide when seen from the road . . . ; half the year there would be smoke winding out of the chimney and amber lamps burning behind the curtains of the windows. (Porter and Abbey 14)

There was also a dog "too shy to bark, . . . [whose] job was to guard those doors that, in nearly thirty years, had never been locked. Nobody even knew if there was a key. Home again," Abbey adds nostalgically (Porter and Abbey 14).

Far from romanticizing the Southwest landscape, not only did Abbey mythologize his birthplace, but he was also inclined to sentimentalize his boyhood home. In the above-quoted passage, admittedly, there are words such as "austere" and "ancient," yet the farm itself was never as arcadian as it may emerge from Abbey's depiction of the Old Lonesome Briar Patch (Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 19). In addition to facing regular family budget deficits, Abbey's father, more interested in commercial logging, was not a zealous farmer (Abbey qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 19; Bishop 55–56). Moreover, the adolescent Abbey, together with his siblings, was not enthusiastic about fulfilling regular farming duties, finding the comforts of city life more appealing than the harsh conditions they lived in, at the end of the valley, away from any kind of settlement. In the *Pacific Northwest* review of Wendell Berry's two books, the 1982 text entitled "On Going Home Again" with a clear reference to Thomas Wolfe's novel, *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), Abbey reminisces about his own Appalachian family nest:

My brothers and I called our place The Old Lonesome Briar Patch. The name reveals our attitude toward it. We liked the woods, the hunting and trapping, fishing in Crooked Creek and small-town baseball, but tired quickly of pitching manure, milking cows, husking corn, fixing fence, plowing up potatoes, and the fifty other daily and seasonal chores that required, we thought, too much of our time. . . . We envied our city cousins with their electric lights, indoor toilet, hot and cold running water, new car, neighbors living one hundred feet away, and the poolroom and movie-picture show only a few blocks down the street. When the war came and an opportunity to escape, we left – in a hurry. Without regret. (Abbey qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 18–19)

As seen above, apart from the boys' reluctance to perform the farming chores, the fragment also suggests that, to Abbey, the value of the homestead lay in its environs rather than in the building itself. Even if jealous of urban facilities as a child, the writer appreciated the immediate natural surroundings the farm blended with, the neighboring brook and forest in the Allegheny Mountains, which, as Abbey recollects, were "high enough to excite the imagination of a boy" (qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 16). Of great importance is also the fact that while camping overnight in an area the family members called the Big Woods, Abbey did feel the need to domesticate some part of the Pennsylvania backcountry so as to create a physical home, even temporarily. In a letter to his father, regarded as the earliest sample of his writing, Abbey, probably aged eleven, records: "Hoots [his brother Howard] built a fireplace and I built a shelter," postscripting "Shelter – down!" to communicate the end

of the campout (Abbey qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 15). The urging need to leave home and the willingness to domesticate the wilderness by building a shelter, in a way, illustrates what later became one of the defining characteristics of Abbey's future writing, namely, in the words of Daniel Payne, "a typical Abbey paradox," frequently revealing the writer's contradictory, or even incomprehensible opinions (153).

In the summer of 1944, before high school graduation and his draft into the US Army to serve as a military policeman in Italy, Abbey took his first trip to the American West, the memorable event that finally led up to his moving there and making it, as he claims, his home (*The Journey Home* xiii-xiv). In "Hallelujah on the Bum," the account of his 1944 peregrination in the collection *The Journey Home*, Abbey writes about the feeling of "strange excitement" accompanying the discovery of his physical as well as spiritual home, the moment when the imaginary turned into the real (*The Journey Home* 5). While thumbing a lift on the edge of Needles, a town on the Arizona-California border, the eponymous bum, with a postal address in Pennsylvania, describes his experiences while observing the sunburnt hilly desert landscape environing the Colorado River: "For the first time I felt I was getting close to the West of my deepest imaginings – the place where the tangible and the mythical become the same" (*The Journey Home* 5). With the cross between the tangible and the mythical, Abbey's displacement the author touches upon in the introduction to *The Journey Home* came to an end to a certain extent. He finally found the physical reflection of "the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home" whose exemplifications he lists on the first page of *Desert Solitaire*, mentioning that the epitome of home may remain "known or unknown, actual or visionary" (1).

It should be stressed, nevertheless, that the first literary visions of Abbey's West were quite stereotypical and predictable. *Jonathan Troy* (1954), the author's first and immature novel he disowned and forbade a reprint (Cahalan, "My People" 95), but whose price ranges now from \$1,000 to \$6,500 on the book market, presents to us the title protagonist, still anchored in the East, who desperately longs for the Western Arcadia, the scenery he never actually enjoys in the narrative: "I'm homesick too. Sick for the home I've never seen. Beyond the farthest hills, towards the evening sun, under a magic moon, away out West where the coyote howls" (Abbey qtd. in Ronald 12). It is hard to disagree with Ann Ronald, to whom the protagonist's depiction is an "idealistic notion of the West" (15), as a matter of fact, stimulated by the romanticized representation of the region as shown in westerns, the film genre Abbey tremendously enjoyed watching. As the writer revealed in a 1975 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, "I'd always been strongly drawn by the Western landscape, mostly because of the movies" (Abbey qtd. in Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 23).

Having discovered the place where, with some intervals, he lived until his last days, Abbey, hardly ever a stay-at-home type in the traditional meaning of the term, surprisingly frequently employs the word *home* with reference to various locations in his desirable canyonlands. In the introduction to *The Journey Home*, usurping quite a large portion of his motherland, he firmly declares: "My home is the American West. All of it" (xiii-xiv). In "the BLOB Comes to Arizona," originally published in a 1976 issue of *New York Times*, Abbey limits the size of his home territory to one state exclusively: "I am describing the place I love. Arizona is my natural native home," emphasizing that "nobody in his right mind would want to live here" (*The Journey Home* 148). And in the essay "The Great American Desert," also issued in the 1977

collection, when presenting his own geographical division of the canyon and cactus country, Abbey cherishes just one locality – Death Valley in the state of California – as “home sweet home” (16). In *Desert Solitaire*, the place that fits the image of the ideal home is even smaller, as it constitutes the area circling the town of Moab, Utah, the gateway for all flocking to visit Arches National Park, where Abbey spent two formative seasons in the 1950s. In addition to designating particular geographical regions to be his dreamlike abode, Abbey employs the word *home* when he means a temporary shelter. In one of the stories on his experience as a ranger in Utah’s Arches, Abbey, instead of dwelling in the house trailer assigned to him, opts for sleeping under the thatched roof of his ramada, his “home without walls” where “the floor is sandstone, swept clean by the winds” (*Desert Solitaire* 119). And during his five-week stay in the wilderness, in the Havasupai tribe’s territory in Arizona, he makes a very small sandy cove near the waterfall his “permanent bedroom,” actually big enough for a cot (*Desert Solitaire* 248–249). Thus, as Wicker confirms, “Transcending normative notions of home as a mere physical dwelling or a place of primary residence, Abbey found his home, ironically, in the virtually uninhabitable barren lands of the entire desert Southwest” (20).

It is necessary to emphasize that even after the discovery of his desert-like Arcadia, Abbey uses the term *home* in regard to other locations than the enticing Four Corners area and the village of Home, his alleged birthplace in Pennsylvania. An avid environmentalist, who classifies himself as an earthiest, that is, the one “true to the earth” (*Desert Solitaire* 231), Abbey, in his *Confessions*, predictably regards our planet as “my home, my mother, my grave” (8). While journaling his sojourn in Scotland, on a Fulbright Fellowship to Edinburgh University, he also mentions the United States as “my home,” startled, as a matter of fact, by his patriotism he openly confesses to (11). And in the notes recording his work as a fire watcher in Glacier National Park, Montana, we find a reference to the Numa Ridge lookout as his “glass-walled home” (*The Journey Home* 55). By curious paradox, the primitive two-storey cabin is considered to be his abode, although the desert rat felt unwelcome in “the homeland of the grizzly bear,” the humid territory, which turned out to be too green to him (38).

Bearing in mind the aforementioned fragments derived from selected writings by Abbey, it may be concluded that the idea of home usually offered by the earthiest differs significantly from what the majority of the human race has traditionally equated with the notion of *home*, an oasis of peace, safety, and comfort guaranteed by public utilities taken, by most westerners, for granted. In the mode of Thoreau, who adheres to simplicity as well as opposes “life . . . frittered away by detail” (82), the author of *The Journey Home* similarly ponders over “Positive Poverty,” which is nothing but the capitalized celebration of homeliness (45). A fire watcher in the Numa Ridge lookout, the grown-up Abbey, in contrast to his childhood experiences, praises the austere existence devoid of conveniences, easily tolerating a primitive latrine, which he finds “a perfectly adequate, comfortable and even pleasant substitute for the elaborate bathrooms of the modern home” (45). Sitting in a pit toilet, and smoking a cigar to deter mosquitoes, he continues his ruminations over the advantages of the spartan lifestyle, asking himself and the reader:

What more does one need? And no freezing pipes, no water pump, no septic tank to worry about, no awful plumber’s bills. And the basic good sense of it: Instead of

flushing our bodily wastes into the public water supply, we plant them back in the good earth where they belong. Where our bodies must go as well, in due course, if we are to keep the good earth productive. (Abbey, *The Journey Home* 45–46)

In addition to his conscious choice of inconvenience over comfort in a dwelling, Abbey's recurring vision of home, his perfect place for habitation, is far from providing a sense of security. The Havasupai territory in Arizona, where he built his "permanent bedroom" near the waterfall, spending there almost two months, is marked as "Eden" (*Desert Solitaire* 249), yet Abbey's paradise is perilous rather than blissful or safe, although it remains stunningly picturesque. As he notes in "The Great American Desert," part of *The Journey Home*, "everything in the desert either stings, stabs, stinks, or sticks. You will find the flora here as venomous, hooked, barbed, thorny, prickly, needled, saw-toothed, hairy, stickered, mean, bitter, sharp, wiry, and fierce as the animals" (14). Potentially hazardous, the localities Abbey calls *homes* are also remote backcountry spots, frequently destitute of people. While traveling to "Cape Solitude," a real but unspecified place with a false name invented not to disclose its exact location, Abbey aims to escape from the human world by "getting nowhere," as he claims, which for him actually denotes "going home," as well (*Abbey's Road* 193). Otherwise put, with the intention of heading toward his longed-for, secluded, and peopleless Eden, the writer is determined to stay in Cape Solitude as long as it is necessary for him to regain strength so as to be able to face society again (192–193), which, paradoxically, constitutes a basic human need sought after in all kinds of home environment. In Abbey's unpublished journals, Wicker found the following note: "he who at home anywhere is home nowhere; i.e., has no home, lives in a vacuum, in empty space" (Abbey qtd. in Wicker 22), so "getting nowhere" for Abbey denotes a place far away from any human habitation where he may actually feel at home.

Hungry for adventure and usually unconcerned about household management, Abbey despises domestic routine, necessary to keep any house running. With reference to family life led by his New Mexico friends, he speaks of "the mire of domesticity," overjoyed he is single again after divorcing his first wife, Jean, in 1952 (*Confessions* 92). "How truly satisfying," he continues, "it is to be responsible only for myself, to be alone and solitary again, to have the whole world as my private park" (92). In his *Confessions*, under date of April 22, 1959, mentioning marriage difficulties with Rita, his second wife from 1952 up to 1965, and the unstable financial situation the family faced, expecting the second child, the writer admits:

Continual insecurity, frequent moving about with all the nagging chores and perplexities that entails. In the last three or four years, we've lived in - how many? - at least a dozen different places: Albuquerque, Moab, Hoboken, Moab, Half Moon Bay, Beavershead (Hoboken for Rita), Santa Fe, Casa Grande, now Albuquerque again. A maddening waste of time and money and effort and nerves. (Abbey, *Confessions* 147)

In November of 1964, domesticated in the Hoboken flat, on the East coast in New Jersey, with Rita and their two sons, Abbey complains: "Suffocating with

boredom here on the bosom of my family, but scared to death to try to leave" (*Confessions* 192). A few months later, he finally plucked up the courage, since he "bolted," leaving his "wife and kids and job for exile in the desert. Am I mad? Literally, clinically insane? Must be – no other explanation is possible" (*Confessions* 194). In other words, Abbey, who had felt displaced in childhood, did not draw on his firsthand experience to spare his family the ordeal of moving again and again. Pleased to be responsible for himself, he displayed a tendency to reject Levinas's untransferable responsibility for the Other (Levinas 7), thus being unwilling to respond to the needs of his subsequent wives until his fifth marriage, the most successful, when he also became "a dotting father," as his biographer asserts (Cahalan, *Edward Abbey* 177; 185).

Playing with the word *home*, Abbey, first of all, mythologized the story of his birthplace. In his recollections, he also sentimentalized his boyhood home, "the Old Lonesome Briar Patch," appreciating more its location than the farm itself. Intoxicated with the landscape of the American West, he repeatedly called its various parts his home, even if the canyonlands offered no protection or safety, and remained unshakably indifferent to him (*Desert Solitaire* 240), in contrast to his nearest relatives. By opting for the peopleless, desert-like West, Abbey, in his unconventional view, was "going home," as he penned in *Abbey's Road* (193), usually leaving behind his families with the exception at the end of his life. Thus, it maybe concluded that despite the feeling of displacement experienced in childhood, Abbey found his home in the American West that turned out to be the "true home," yet not the only one (*Desert Solitaire* 1). In *The Fool's Progress*, published one year before his death, the author meaningfully wrote: "The foothills of Appalachia at last. Now we're getting somewhere. . . . My people" (431–432) – people he escaped from for most of his adult life.

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