Pilgrims to the Wild

Everett Ruess
Henry David Thoreau
John Muir
Clarence King
Mary Austin

John P. O'Grady

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Preface

> *The time and my intents are savage-wild,*
> *More fierce and inexorable by far*
> *Than empty tigers or raring sea.*
> —Romeo and Juliet *(V:iii 37–39)*

This preface should have been written atop a mountain. I tried. Before I wrote the bulk of this book, I climbed Koip Peak, in the Yosemite High Sierra, late one dark afternoon in August 1990, outfitted with notebook and good intentions, but an immense thunderstorm—outstanding disturbance—interrupted my jottings, routing me from the peak in a panic of self-preservation. Yosemite National Park was set afire, I almost perished from hypothermia, and that preface was never completed. It's just as well. The word *preface* itself is a contradiction—literally a "speaking before"—and, as every reader knows, the preface is the final bit of book indited. Herein lies an austere beauty: The last written shall be the first read. The beginning is the ending.

Koip Peak offered me no words. A mountain needs no preface, requires no apology, no explanation. So I turn instead to literature, to a poet who lived his most significant days beyond the mountains. In the late 1930s, Kenneth Rexroth composed a book-length manuscript entitled "Camping in the Western Mountains." Written under the auspices of the Federal Writers Project, the book for some reason never saw publication. Perhaps it was ahead of its time—or maybe just too idiosyncratic, too ornery, to have found a market. In any case, this manuscript, yellowed and languishing now in a prosaic library, provides a thorough introduction to all aspects of backcountry camping as it was understood at the time; its subjects range from sleeping-bag construction to the arcana of equine constipation. Although he clearly intended his book to be a technical self-help manual for the outdoor enthusiast, Rexroth, the poet-litterateur-anarchist could not refrain from interjecting his own unmistakable voice into the treatise and, in so doing, revealing his love for the subject matter.

Toward the end of the manuscript, he suggests a number of books that might be useful to readers unfamiliar with the "philosophy" of roughing it. He says, "There are books that have nothing to do with camping, and less to do with the Western mountains, that are valuable preparations for a camping trip."[1] Rexroth recommends that the novice camper stuff a remarkable assortment of books into the pack: Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selbourne*, and—most remarkable of all—John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Although the first two books are tangentially related to outdoor pursuits, the backpacking reader may wonder why Rexroth declares Bunyan's work to be among "the three best manuals for camping and woodcraft that will ever be written." Lofty praise indeed, even exaggerated, but Rexroth's words are insightful, providing us with a point of departure: The pilgrim is a spiritual bushwhacker. Or to phrase it in more anthropological terms: "A pilgrim is one who divests himself of the mundane concomitants of religion . . . to confront, in a special 'far' milieu, the basic elements and structures of his faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance" (Victor and Edith Turner 15).[2]

Pilgrims to the Wild is a series of meditations on literary journeys to "the wild," what I call secular pilgrimages. Though Bunyan's pilgrim traveled only with his soul, tracking his bliss into heavenly oblivion, the five figures I will be following traveled in real places, with their bodies as well as their souls. Furthermore, Bunyan's Christian violated the cardinal rule of pilgrimage: He didn't come home. The pilgrim, by definition, is supposed to return to his formerly mundane existence, his community, in a state of spiritual enlightenment. In this sense, Bunyan's Christian is no pilgrim at all, but a traitor to his community. Sometimes this also happens, as we shall see in the case of Everett Ruess, among travelers who venture into the wild. But if one is a writer—that is, one whose fundamental role within the community is to communicate to that community—this pilgrim must return, even if only through the medium of the written word.

In approaching the varied terrain covered by my pilgrims to the wild, I do not ask, "What are these texts about?" but, rather, "What is happening here—and to whom?" I am less interested in making arguments than in following trails and sometimes leaving those trails for a cross-country excursion. Friends who have traveled with me through the California wildlands occasionally complain of my propensity for free and not-so-easy wandering, where the way is seldom clear; they are particularly peeved when we come back covered with horrendous mementos of poison oak, a plant the Pomo Indians called *Ma-tu-ya-ho*, "the southern fire doctor." The itch we receive from this renegade member of the sumac family offers nothing to intellection, but it does stick with us, a tangible mark of our journey, for weeks afterward. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Each of my pilgrims to the wild—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Hunter Austin, and Everett Ruess—is a writer who documents the crossing of thresholds. The fundamental assumption I employ—call it a perception—is that "the wild" is erotic space, and the pilgrimages I am concerned with are journeys through that space. A caution here: By identifying the wild as "erotic space," I by no means intend to be reductionist, but just the opposite—which has its own risks. In my various meditations, I frequently resort to use of the word *desire*, but I take great pains to show the special way(s) in which I use this word. It is slippery. Yes. Perhaps I should have settled for a term like the Taoist *Wu-yü*, which has a meaning akin to "the absence of material desires," or what David L. Hall has translated as "objectless desire," a seemingly odd locution but perhaps more effective. "The claim here is that enjoyments are possible without the demand that one define, possess, or control the occasion of one's enjoyment" (Callicott 109). The danger in relying so heavily on a single word to convey one's meaning is that the meaning finally disappears under the definition. It is this moment of disappearance that—more than any-

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1. The manuscript is housed in the Special Collections of the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California.

2. The Turners claim that "pilgrimage has been surprisingly neglected by historians and social scientists. But perhaps it has merely shared in the general disregard of the liminal and marginal phenomena of social processes and cultural dynamics by those intent either upon the description and classification of orderly institutionalized 'facts' or upon the establishment of the 'historicity' of prestigious, unrepeated events" (1).

thing else—intrigues me. I seek it in the writings of all my pilgrims.

That I have chosen the lives and works of five particular American writers should not be interpreted as a gesture of "canon formation," the identification of a core of literary texts that stakes out a tradition. I am not interested in canons, but in affinities. With the exception of Everett Ruess (and it is because of his constant "exception" that I begin my meditations with him), all of my pilgrims to the wild belong to the tradition of American nature writing, all have been included in the recent *Norton Book of Nature Writing.* Rather than an addition to the burgeoning body of critical inquiry directed toward nature writing, *Pilgrims to the Wild* is a contribution to the study of American spiritual autobiography. All of these writers share a lineage with William Bradford, Jonathan Edwards, Elizabeth Ashbridge, and John Woolman. In this sense, *Pilgrims to the Wild* is concerned with individual perception and psychological transformation—not historical materialism or sociological analysis, which in themselves could generate a worthy academic exposition, but not the book I have written.

The literary scholar too often resembles Bunyan's Christian, hauling an awkward bundle of "stuff" that hinders progress. The scholar's bundle is stuffed with words. *Pilgrims to the Wild* is my bundle. Yet perseverance furthers. When it comes to my writerly intentions, I think of the lines from Bunyan's own Preface (which he called an "Apology"): "This book will make a traveller of thee." Such is my hope. Though fearing the reproach of excessiveness, I indulge in bricolage, working with ideas at hand, no matter how far afield in space and time their respective provenances may lie. This approach can be messy. I assume the repeatability of ideas and events across cultures and over time, and that the boundaries fashioned to separate these ideas and events are subject to dissolution. Thus, the thirteenth-century Japanese philosopher Dogen and the nineteenth-century American Thoreau are mutually illuminating. In taking this approach, I realize that I confront the margins of acceptable scholarship: My critical practice puts me right on the limen, and perhaps—wayward scholar that I am—I occasionally step too far. But I have been out gathering, and this is what I have brought back.