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The Abbey of Thebaid: A Literary Anthropology

Zane Johnson
Matrikelnummer: 11980852
Connollystr. 3 X06, 80809 München
zane.johnson@campus.lmu.de
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This study I am about to introduce will mark the next step forward in the increasing entanglements of religion and the environment in anthropological research. It presents a kind of magic, a magic whose benefits are now well known to psychologists and economists of the more honest variety, and which has been known to mystics of all ages and has been unceremoniously banished from consciousness in Western civilization for at least the last 400 years. The magic we are referring to is, of course, the magic of innocence. It has silently preserved the civilizations of Western Europe and North America, as the rainmakers of Southern Africa have preserved that region, and it is similarly under threat.

The last statements may seem shocking insofar as the object of our study may hardly appear to conform to what has come to be known as innocence. This is largely a world-historical development. Yet, surely, if these people are to be known by their fruits, it will be seen by the almost impossible health of the old wood forests and the anomalous level of biodiversity in the surrounding environs that through their practices and traditions preserved since their founding nearly 400 years ago (by their own attestation) they have created, in what is otherwise no more than a barren waste, that same locus of innocence from which our proverbial first parents fell incalculable eons ago.

The community in question has managed to remain hidden from the rest of the world since its founding and remarkably self-sufficient since then. From their records—not yet available in a full English translation—we can see that they first arrived in the United States around the time that other European settlers did. By their own accounts, they arrived as a missionary group of French monks who appeared quite unorthodox, to say the least. Though nominally Catholic, they appear to have a robust mythology of their own. Though space does not here permit giving a full account of the origin story told in their records, a brief outline is in order. They appear to hold in high regard a giant by the name of Gargantua, to whom they credit the founding of their order. They descend from an abbey in France by the name of Thélème, which will be translated in English as “free will”.

Beyond these preliminary accounts there is no further mention of the “home” Abbey of Thélème in France, nor can anything be surmised about the location or actuality of the Abbey, apart from vague literary accounts in medieval French. Nor can anything be said of its ensuing history, from its mythological founding to its present discovery, as the monks (as they will be referred to henceforth in this report, both male and female religious members, though the reader should bear in mind that there is no similar instance of this type of social formation in the historical record) do not keep records of their activities, aside from those that have presumably been passed down since their founding. It will be seen in the following sections that this kind of activity, namely, recordkeeping, is highly inimical to their primary functions within the cloister, and indeed, the monks’ very identity.

This American Abbey (henceforth referred to simply as “the Abbey”) was discovered in the fall of 2019 in the Appalachian range, when a development project finally pierced through the old growth forest that lined the exterior boundary of the Abbey. The nearest town is the small rural community of Thebaid whose only claim to fame is its annual hosting of a conservative evangelical conference. The developers’ plan is to erect a small parcel of homes which will be inhabited mostly by the employees of the new shale oil operation about five miles north. Given the size of the planned houses, it can be assumed that these will mostly be lived in by the directors and managers of the operation.

Suffice it to say that, for now, the development has been halted so that proper contact can be established with the monks and their present condition determined. However, it is uncertain how long this will last and every indication appears to be that the development will be completed after the moratorium has been lifted. Nevertheless, the monks do not appear to be disturbed by this and have resumed their activities. They have taken aggressive measures to invite those with whom they have come into contact with to their regular ceremonies. To date, all have declined, presumably due to the monks’ unusual exuberance which is understandably perceived as hostility.

In all likelihood, the invitation the monks extended to the developers' representatives is the same that is used to initiate novices into the order. It matches similar descriptions in the available records. The present writers assume these to be only relics of the practices of the ancient Abbey of Thélème, as it was deemed unlikely the pristine and clandestine condition of the Abbey could have been preserved if newcomers were permitted with such ceremony. This is due to the sheer fact that new initiates would render the Abbey no longer a secret. On the other, the opulence of the rituals is such that the Abbey has no visible waste disposal mechanism to accommodate for the fallout, to speak euphemistically, of such an event. The load that the land would have to bear for the quantities consumed would also be enormous, even when the Abbey's ample vineyards and pasturelands are taken into consideration. This is a mystery for which we will offer an account in later sections. For now, a brief summary of the rituals is in order.

The rituals seem to fall within a tradition of courtly banqueting which would corroborate the monks' claim that they are descendants of the original order of French monks, though certainly, they feature practices which would have been scrupulously avoided by any medieval Catholic religious orders. The ceremony begins with the most excoriating abuse the initiating monks (notably, these are usually the novices) can muster against the approaching party. Anticipating the concomitant flight of the outsider, the initiating monks come bearing sundry ropes and devices to subdue the prospective entrant, which being accomplished, the abuse continues as she is "borne" to the banqueting table. The choice of verb in the preceding sentence is prudent, as this ritual bears much in common to similar initiation rituals in religious societies the world over, at once announcing its universal and utterly bizarre qualities, in so far that it seeks to abase the individual, sometimes to her death, in order to be born again to the society.

The following ritual sequence will make clear the distinctive Christian quality of the order's behaviors. After being affixed to a seat at the banqueting table, the entrant is then served chalice after chalice of a common eucharistic wine of a characteristically high proof

from their own vineyards while the verbal abuse continues. After she has vomited for the first time (unfortunately, it will not be the last), the senior monk climbs the table while the others enact a barbaric episode of cannibalism, presumably a grotesque parody of the eucharistic ritual. The present writers can only interpret these acts as a veiled (no pun intended) warning against improper consumption, which should occur with respect to the bounty at the feasting table and not the brothers and sisters in company, the first and perhaps only moral teaching that is explicitly imparted to the entrant. This completes the death of the individual celebrant and their birth among the whole, and the feast proper begins.

Given the antiquity of the themes of this ritual, there is no doubt about the ancient nature of the ritual itself. Perhaps encoded within it is an ancient longing for abundance that spewed forth temporarily in the carnival culture of the high middle ages. Such a mix of courtly banqueting customs and folk culture is a profound discovery indeed, and perhaps a clue to the sustainability of the Abbey despite the high level of consumption that takes place at their rituals. Another eating practice of the monks will perhaps serve to expand upon this point. For the ritual abuse of the initiation ceremony forms not merely the liturgy of a backwards, occasional ritual, but also flares up in certain moments at regular mealtimes. This has been observed by the present writers on only two occasions in the short time we have been made welcome at the Abbey. One was when we sat in silence, faces tilted downwards to our plates, not engaging in the social life of the banqueting table for more than approximately ten minutes. The next is when we left to avail ourselves of the lavatory outside of the cloister walls, refusing to avail ourselves of the doorless shack in the corner of the dining hall which the monks seemed to avail themselves of as frequently as they pleased without any noticeable trepidation. In fact, the excretory practices of the monks seemed to play as key a role as the eating practices did. They affirmed the primacy of community in perpetual witness to all, but especially the unsavory, processes of the human body. The entirety of their culture seems to depend upon the careful observation of a highly delicate—yet bewildering—regulatory

order of feasting and enjoyment of abundance. The writers are curious to witness their death and burial practices.

(As an aside, it will be noted that there do not appear to be any gravesites on the Abbey grounds nor cremation sites. They certainly could not dispose of bodies outside the grounds for fear of discovery. But lest they are immortal, living still as the first missionaries of the order in the New World, or the threat of cannibalism implicit in the initiation rite be explicit, we assume for now the unconventional practice of expulsion of the elderly to live their last days in the wilderness.)

As mentioned above, there could be a key here to solving the mystery of the cloister walls' almost supernatural tenacity against the combined gales of time and place. By choosing to punish the slightest affronts to the communal life of the order, the monks very heartily affirm the collective good and the social aspect of living in community within the cloister. This, indeed, is a mark of all religious orders, even those of a more conventional character. By only taking meals together and making mandatory the participation in dining room conversation, the monks discourage individual greed and foster a spirit of concern for the common wellbeing of the order. It should be noted here that the feasting cycle of the Abbey seems to follow the medieval Church calendar to a tee, keeping pace with the regular feasts recognized by conventional religious institutions. The writers had the opportunity to participate on the feast preceding the Lenten season commonly known as Mardi Gras. We were surprised to note no overt fluctuation in the intensity or duration of the feast in relation to all other liturgical feasts celebrated by the monks. This should come as a great surprise to those living in North American or Western European countries.

The other purpose of the order's strict enforcement of communal life within the Abbey is expressly practical. Though the size of the feasts is great (all prior attempts at measuring the kilocalorie per day intake of the average monk having failed, being considered antisocial and thus very richly punished) they are strictly vegetarian, deriving this curious rule of monastic

life from a cryptic poem left by an ancient patron of their order, warning against the dangers of meat consumption in future times:

*“...Even the hindermost / And meekest shall be caught fighting and shall be drowned.
/ And rightly so because mankind shall not have found / In his pugnacious heart
indulgence for the least / Mercy towards his friend, the inoffensive beast. / How many
wretched animals seized by the scut / Have been deprived by man of sinew, bowel, and
gut / Not for due sacrifice to the high gods but merely / For the base human needs man
cherishes too dearly.”*

This monastic rule is fastidiously observed. Further, the text is interpreted by the monks as a prophecy of a dry age that precedes an era of even greater bounty which will be inaugurated by a sacrifice of cosmic proportions to one Supreme Lord of the Thirsty. It is unclear where the monks situate themselves within this system of eonic succession. Given the nature of the feasts, we can tentatively assume it to be the latter age, which raises the inevitable question of the Supreme Lord of the Thirsty and his identity or non-identity with the Christ. It will be observed that despite the polytheistic cadence of the passage above quoted, it is couched in terms expressive of the highest New Testament values of charity and pity for the poor. This itself is suggestive of a high degree of syncretism and perhaps more ancient origins than the order itself professes in their highly mythologized accounts. Though we cannot take the literature at face value, what we read into it can be just as useful to our present understanding not only of the order alone but also to the secrets of their sustainability for our own future.

This shall remain an open question for future anthropological study of the importance of literary texts not only understanding the population in question and the process of intracultural self-reflection but of how we understand the mutual coproduction of meaning in any given moment of cultural encounter.

The reader will forgive the short digression. In a word, this mythological complex has been translated into the most sustainable farming practices which are only now being implemented

on a small scale. Crop rotation is practiced on their extensive vineyards of both red and white grapes used to fuel their grand feasts, resembling contemporary permaculture practices. The inner boundary of the cloister is rung about by a seven-tiered garden featuring all varieties of tropical fruits and ordinary roots and tubers alike which is graciously supported by an amiable environment. A system of dew collection and primitive purification by boiling is made use of in the humid subtropical climate for their own private consumption which frees up the water irrigated from a nearby lake for use on their crops. The crops are then manured with the compost produced mainly by the rudimentary lavatory facility in the dining hall, there being virtually nothing inoffensive to the soil contained within the vegetarian manure. As a result, and as noted in the introduction to this report, there is thus a level of biodiversity on the Abbey grounds inconsistent with the surrounding landscape, which in parts qualifies as blasted due to extensive mining and industrial waste.

The monks' agriculture practices are roughly consistent with discoveries in early modern Europe of the same type, namely of manuring, which is further evidence for the veracity of their claims about their origins. That later innovations of the same period do not appear in their technical repertoire also corroborates their claims. However, as already noted, several aberrative practices and ideals are exhibited which suggest a non-European origin. Their willingness to extend sanctity to virtually all corporeal practices suggests either a radical rereading of the central Christian mysteries of the eucharist and the incarnation, which their documents nominally profess, or they are pagan in origin. The practice of moral vegetarianism also presents a quandary. Though typical of early Christian ascetic practices, this practice died out after the early centuries of church history, and never expressed the explicit concern for non-human beings that the poem suggests, but was purposed towards a denial of the body.

It has already been vociferously suggested to the writers in the many letters we have received since we began our work at the Abbey that it somehow represents a survival of an ancient pagan cult that took root in the New World, seeking refuge in an open, religiously

plural society. Alternatively, it has been suggested that the Abbey is an example of Christian and American Indian religious syncretism, or an unusual attempt on the part of the first missionaries at the revival of Native customs. Besides the fact that there is virtually no agreement between the monks' practices and those of the Eastern Woodlands tribes, either contemporary or historical, there are at least four conceivable problems with these theories.

The first is that it suggests a positive danger of the heathen which was only thinly veiled in the words of caution we received from our readers and supporters. This attitude is alien to academic inquiry and should be rooted out, especially in the interest of working sensitively and responsibly in pursuit of understanding a living culture. The second problem is the reification of a myth of the New World as tolerant to outsiders and oppressed—while turning a blind eye to the exclusion and othering of those already living there—which the persistence of immigration quotas through the mid-20th century in the United States should surely disprove. The third problem, and perhaps the crux of the whole issue, comes as a question: namely, to what degree we are able to incorporate in our understanding of Western European civilization and history those things which have been seen until now as objectionable, those things which we have invariably tabooed and ascribed to the least among us or those far removed from us spatially. The issue seems, to the present writers, to be one of cultural heritage, and whether allowance can be made therein for the aberrant.

The fourth problem is language. The monks appear to speak in a dialect of medieval French consistent with their records. This puts to rest all questions of the monks' origins. Despite the availability of the documents it was difficult to ascertain whether the written and spoken languages of the Abbey matched as the monks appear to observe a rule of silence. There is no known rule to this effect in the documents of the order, as if their own abstention from speech itself were enshrined in silence. The only times that extensive speech was observed was at feasts. However, our recording devices were not permitted at the table, as they indicated a tendency toward anti-social behavior. Fortunately, the present writers studied

French as a second language. Though it seemed that modern French was to them unintelligible, it was at least acceptable and halted the abuse at mealtimes.

An opportunity came one day during a work period in the garden. When trying to ascertain the origin of a novice monk we proffered a series of questions in our modern French to which we received no reply. The monk continued reaching for the grapes atop a tall vine to no avail. The questions posed were of the variety of “where are you from?” or were geared to produce an answer to that question. By evening, exasperated at the young monk’s silence, we began posing our questions in English. To our surprise, our English words produced an answer. He halted momentarily and gazed at the Appalachian range in the distance, now becoming populated with sparse lights underneath the setting sun. He muttered something in his medieval French, turned inside, and drank heartily of a goblet of wine. Thankfully, our voice recorder was still on and we captured what he said. After working out a rough translation of his reply, we can cautiously assume that his answer was, “I am poor.”

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ADDENDUM: We now stand in solidarity with the monks of Thebaid upon a precipice. All attempts at negotiation with the developers have halted and the moratorium is scheduled to be lifted tomorrow, there being no recognizable deed to the land held by the Abbey. The developers refuse to be banqueted, which is the only mode of communication with outsiders acceptable to the monks. Governmental assistance is non-existent given the election season and non-governmental assistance is ineffectual and scant. Bewilderingly, the monks have formally decided to abandon the monastery in face of this external pressure. They have lately been prone to nakedness and each day bricks and heraldry have been removed from the Abbey so that tomorrow the deconstruction will be complete. Last night they slept under the stars with nothing but the most rudimentary of coverings to shield them from insects and cold. They have entered into a “wine fast,” completely unprecedented in their records. Crops have been left in the ground and stored provisions left out at the edge of the boundary to be eaten by

those that would have them. Though we are still awaiting a full transcription in translation of the proceedings leading up to the decision (our recorders were either allowed or overlooked), we can confirm that the watchword has been “Reform,” according to preliminary results. We will offer our final analysis here of the project of the Abbey and the monks’ decision to vacate, and speculate about its grave importance for our times.

Our readers will forgive us if we wax poetic, if only in a summary fashion. The magic referred to in the introduction is precisely this: that the monks were able to enjoy the fruits of the earth without damaging the source of their pleasure, and this happened precisely because they neither sought to subdue their impulse to pleasure nor its source. The particular act of transubstantiation by which they converted consumption into innocence was always at risk of being perverted by individual greed, which they gave witness to in their most basic rituals and surely recognized in the delegates’ refusal to engage with them on their terms. It is likely that by this act they mean to disengage with the dangerous tendency that they saw inherent in the developers’ refusals combined with the looming threat of their machines, choosing instead to exit the rapidly developing cycle of violence completely. In this light, their strange liturgies appear to have prepared them perfectly for what is to come.

Therefore, in dismantling the Abbey, the monks set forth naked and caked with mud, as did the first fathers of the monastic tradition to which they belong, however remotely; to abandon the pleasures corrupted by power to seek communion once more in the vast desert outside the cloister walls, risking their own consumption by wild things. To give up their robust rites of consumption, which had become desecrated by individual salvation, and enact a reformation for the sake of regaining a peaceable way of being. For now, the developers and the people of Appalachia ring the demolished Abbey in waiting, mouths agape, while the wine cellar in the center of the ruins below remains untouched, hatch open, the monks’ final offering of harmlessness to the poor in spirit.

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