

The Duck Pond

“To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society.” –Ralph Waldo Emerson

As an admirer of *Walden*, I can say I wrote this essay (or the bulk of it) while I was an impecunious college student living on the south side of Brigham Young University’s Provo campus. I lived crowded together with five unfortunate undergraduates in an apartment which I did not build myself, but despite our numbers we proved Henry David Thoreau to be more of a materialist than we were as we kept only two chairs in our living room. Our humble domicile was surrounded on every side with additional individuals who loudly pursued various quotidian affairs in a state of unceasing activity, and—having no other option—I came to view the university grounds as my second home. I endeavor to write this essay to provide readers, and perhaps the starving student, with a true account of my own experience living the penurious life, and how I was able to enjoy simple pleasures which are so often wasted on the wealth-cursed masses. I plead for the patience of the reader as I can only relate the narrowness of my own experience because I know no one else as well, and sincerely hope that these observations will be of some service to those who find themselves in similar situations.

Part I: The University Grounds

During the tumult of the Covid-19 era, I often sauntered the campus grounds like an ancient Greek in search of truth. It was partly to escape the narrow confines of my less than halcyon home (which was at random hours converted into a classroom by my living companions), but it was also a way of connecting with something grander than the stress of

midterms and finals, and I found that nature could heal a myopic soul. Indeed, I did not know how lucky I was until I studied the history of the grounds and realized I was a benefactor of the marvelous restoration project which took place in the autumn of 2010.¹ Long before my time, the hill of BYU's south campus was graced with the gurgling "Upper East Union Canal [which] flowed with water from the Provo River..."² Unfortunately, "Over the years, the need for that water diminished until the canal no longer was needed or used. For a time, Provo City even used the vacant waterway for storm water drainage after heavy rains."³ How human a reaction! As soon as something ceases to be of use—no matter the intrinsic charm—we relegate it to the same service as a refuse pile. Perhaps we forgot that almost every great civilization was birthed on the banks of a river or body of water. One might contemplate the Sumerians nursed between the Tigris and Euphrates, or the Egyptians taking their feluccas down the Nile like that famous cruise of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, or even the Maurya Empire expanding their city-states over the Ganges like the wind-tossed seeds of dandelions. From the Tiber to the Thames and the Yellow to the Tugela, rivers have been the *élan vital* of societies throughout the epochs. They are as practical as they are beautiful, and so what does it say about a community when they neglect the life-giving earth?

Luckily, there are still some men with a noble aesthetic proclivity strong enough to wrest a livable space from the mandibles of utilitarianism, as Mister Peterman—the BYU grounds director—showed us.⁴ His nature restoration project gave us the improved Bertrand F. Harrison Arboretum and Botany Pond, which is one of my favorite areas on campus. While some might

¹ "BYU's Renovated South Campus Stream and Trail to Officially Open in April," University Communications News, Brigham Young University, March 2011. <https://news.byu.edu/news/byus-renovated-south-campus-stream-and-trail-officially-open-april>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

think it was a waste of resources, the truth is that we need beautiful spaces around us. In the words of Thoreau, “A lake [or pond in this case] is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviatile trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows.”⁵ Nature nurtures, and as Emerson put it: “A nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty.”⁶ Considering the words of another great poet on the subject, if beauty is truth, and truth is beauty than all we know on earth, and all we need to know, can be learned lounging on a lawn in Utah.⁷ This seems to be a common theme among the followers of writers and transcendentalists who can, “Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.”⁸

Still, many students seem too preoccupied with their own lives, and others seem too preoccupied with the lives of their amatorculists (or inconsequential lovers) to recognize or appreciate the decades of work that went into the paths they walk and the trees under which they lounge. The first group is characterized by the celerity of their pace and determination to *go* somewhere. The second obvious examples are the mariturient (eager to get married) young adults who often take their lovers by the hand and promenade around the arboretum blissfully unaware of anything but the gaze of their beloved and perhaps the warbling of songbirds. They are characterized not by their desire to go somewhere, but to *be* somewhere with someone. At times I saw them tossing broken bread toward flocks of ducks as if they were in a sort of

⁵ Thoreau, Henry D. “Walden,” The Project Gutenberg eBook of Walden, by Henry David Thoreau. Project Gutenberg, January 1995. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm>.

⁶ Ralph W. Emerson. “Beauty: Nature,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson Central, October 20, 2020. <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/nature2/beauty/>.

⁷ John Keats. “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Poetry Foundation, 2020. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>.

⁸ William Shakespeare. “As You Like It Act II,” Open-Source Shakespeare, George Mason University, 2020. https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=asyoulikeit.

sacramental preparation. And yet, disregarding both groups' obliviousness to the long history of the grounds, I cannot help but think that Jack and Mary Wheatley would have been pleased with the fruits of their sacrifices even if their monetary donations provide only a backdrop to the students' campus careers.⁹

Part II: Thrift

Personally, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the contributions of others because I attended the university on a scholarship, and this led me to develop a habit of frugality. When I did not want to hear my roommates cachinnate (guffaw) or caught whiffs of that all-too-common scent of musty cheese, I would go and appreciate the short nature trails, open lawns, gurgling streams, plethora of plant and animal life, and the charming duck pond just a few yards from my abode. Because I did not have the monetary means to travel far, I walked in the company of my own two feet housed in well-worn shoes which had seen more than I cared to recount. In fact, I remember a conversation I had with my brother after returning from my mission to Mexico. I mentioned that I owned only two pairs of shoes and he responded, "That's one more than you need." I never forgot that comment and it resonates in my mind every time I look at my wardrobe.

Regardless, it was as a junior that I learned if one does not have a living-room in which to pass the unoccupied and lassitudinal hours of the day, Mother Nature provided ample space for her own, free of charge. The same year I learned that I would rather sit on an empty plot of grass, and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a dorm room couch. Indeed, the grass was more comfortable than any carpet, the lighting better than any fluorescent bulb, and the sounds more

⁹ Charlene Winters. "The Roots of Generosity." *BYU Magazine*. Brigham Young University, June 30, 2017. <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/the-roots-of-generosity/>

appealing than any electric hum. Instead of decorating the inside of my apartment like I had seen many others do, I went out into nature where the original inspiration was on display for free.

Who would buy plastic gourds and imitation leaves when they sprung up in the open air without a price-tag in sight? As the temperature turned cooler and the days shorter, I enjoyed the sounds of kexy fall leaves crackling underfoot and the crimson sunsets which bathed the landscape in colors which the latest iPhones were keen on copying, even if my shoes were worn and my clothes reflected none of the fashionable trends.

I sometimes saw fellow classmates who had the “misfortunes” of living in nice homes, owning stylish cars, and dating attractive partners, and I could not help but feel for them. Why would one go on walks if all the comforts of the world were supplied on their own property? Why would anyone brave the cold and snow to watch for rabbits if videogames and warm cups of cocoa kept them company? Why would anyone leave their significant other to seek out the company of sylvan creatures if the option was given? Certainly, no one in their right mind. Thus, I often found myself alone to contemplate the squirrels, jays, ducks, deer, and turtles whose homes I frequently visited like an unannounced family guest.

In these circumstances, I often felt like a paragon of frugality, similar to the famous Diogenes of old until I too came across an example of an even more parsimonious person. Diogenes was said to have given up everything in order to pursue the ascetic life; he lived in a barrel on the streets of Athens and owned only a cup as a personal possession, but one day he saw a young urchin using his hands to drink water and realized that he had been too materialistic—throwing the cup away in that very instant.¹⁰ Thoreau recounted in *Walden* a story about paperweights and said, “I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to

¹⁰ Joshua J. Mark. “Diogenes of Sinope,” Ancient History Encyclopedia, Ancient History Encyclopedia Foundation, October 31, 2020. https://www.ancient.eu/Diogenes_of_Sinope/

find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust.”¹¹ For me, my prodigal opulence was made manifest when I read about Neil J. Reed, a BYU student who went an entire year spending only eight dollars on food (and that was because he took a date to get an ice-cream).¹² He would forage, scavenge, or receive free food in creative ways and even went so far as to subsist off berries for an entire week during the dead of winter.¹³ With these stories in mind, I saw myself as less of a pauper going to the duck pond out of necessity and more of a privileged student going to enjoy time alone.

Part III: The Ducks

It was at the duck pond that I became aware of an entirely new world full of intrigue and power dynamics which would rival any human society. Mallard Ducks or *Anas platyrhynchos* (from the ancient Greek meaning billed nose) are clumsy things on land and only slightly more dignified in the water.¹⁴ Life for Mallards is a dangerous pursuit. Having many natural predators and living in a state of constant danger, they have evolved to sleep with one eye open at all times.¹⁵ Females, or hens, have also been known to feign injury like an opossum so that their brood can escape when threatened by predators.¹⁶ From such unassuming and banal protagonists, one would not expect such primeval energy and vigor, but when threatened, challenged, or in a

¹¹ Henry D. Thoreau. “Walden.” The Project Gutenberg eBook of Walden, by Henry David Thoreau. Project Gutenberg, 1995.

¹² Faith, Blackhurst. “Stalking the Wild Blueberry: Y Student Lived Off Campus Plants,” BYU Magazine, Brigham Young University, August 2, 2017. <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/stalking-wild-blueberry/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Mallard Duck.” National Geographic. National Geographic Society, September 24, 2018. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/m/mallard/>

¹⁵ Rattenborg, N., Lima, S. & Amlaner, C. “Half-awake to the risk of predation,” *Nature* 397, 397–398 (1999). <https://doi.org/10.1038/17037>

¹⁶ “Mallard Duck,” National Geographic, National Geographic Society, September 24, 2018.

state of concupiscence, these dabbling ducks show a vicious side that would make even Solzhenitsyn nod his head in acknowledgment.

The simple Mallard defies expectations and has established itself in every continent (except Antarctica), flown to heights of 21,000 feet, and been heralded as the most adaptable species of the genus. Male mallard ducks are called drakes, which I had always thought was a hilarious hyperbole. Aside from smaragdine plumage and canary bills, what did these diminutive creatures have in common with the great dragons of myth? Indeed, they seemed to have more in common with the unfortunately named drake mayfly than they did with the Old English *draca* or sea-monster. And yet, the more I became acquainted with my aquatic neighbors the more I was impressed with their sometimes-brutal tenacity.

The male ducks establish a firm pecking order and even amidst the madness of thrown bread, there is a hierarchy of duck supremacy. Males will also become hyper-aggressive during the mating season (October-November) and will tear feathers from opponents' bodies when egged on by females (pardon the pun).¹⁷ For birds which place such an emphasis on preening, this is war. After these displays, Mallard Ducks, like some other species of birds, pair off with their mates until the eggs are laid. At that point the males fly away forming a "sord," and leave their young to fend for themselves.¹⁸ Outside of this established pattern, there are outliers in the Mallard population (as with any society). The unsuccessful males will desperately try to corner and violate unaccompanied females if they can manage which generally leads to ferocious fights among the drakes, or copulation.

While this might sound savage, from what I have observed, Mallards are quite lackadaisical for most of the time. In fact, these drastic changes in temperament are the reason

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

why I find them much more interesting than the peristeronic branches of ornithology, but most days, they simply quacked and waddled and dozed in the sun without so much as a cursory thought of a serious power play or *coup d'état*. They lazed with all the confidence of Roman elites during the late periods of decadence and self-interest; what once might have been a fierce tribe of feathered bipeds had sunk into a disinterested assemblage of senators drunk on their own indulgences. A quick glance over the flock, showed their complete lack of concern with any dangers. Instead, their energies were spent in the rapacious pursuit of breadcrumbs, hens, and sunlight. Clearly, they had among their ranks dozens Commodus' for every Aurelius.

Before jumping to conclusions about the moral compasses of the Mallards, however, the tendency towards languor could be traced to their current and corrupting habitat which we provided them. Thus, the entire population of ducks can trace their current difficulties on the corrupting power of an institution, which is something we are only now becoming comfortable in admitting. The BYU grounds crew reported on the state of the Mallards when they said: “While most ducks are migratory, these ones seem to like campus too much to leave—either because the stream-fed pond never freezes or because visitors are always feeding them.”¹⁹ And so in a twist of irony, the ducks stay put in their botanical pond haven, while students migrate semester after semester looking to form their own families and join their own communities. I now feel guilty that the generations of Mallards who have inhabited the Bertrand F. Harrison Arboretum and Botany Pond have been stunted in such a way by a well-intentioned institution and can only hope that the preening students who pass them by are more aware of the unseen factors that shape their lives.

¹⁹ Jessica Reschke. “Duck . . . Duck . . . Duck,” BYU Magazine, Brigham Young University, October 21, 2015. <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/duck%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89duck%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89duck/>

