Cape Cod: A Thematic Study

A Thesis

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by

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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Making of Myth</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In a seminar led by Associate Professor Thomas Woodson at The Ohio State University Autumn Quarter, 1970, several students and I prepared reports on Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod* and reached the consensus that the work merited further study. In this thesis, then, which is an extension of work begun in that seminar, I have chosen to do a thematic study of the work since one of the criticisms of *Cape Cod* has been that it lacks serious thematic concerns. I have chosen the themes of Nature, death, and the making of myth because these themes seem to me to be related to the structure of the work. In this Introduction I shall examine briefly the work's structure and the related themes which will be developed in the following chapters, discuss the history of the writing and publication of *Cape Cod*, and finally, review the criticism of the work to date.

The frame of *Cape Cod* is the route of Thoreau's 1849 visit to the Cape around which are woven accounts of the second and possibly the third visits there. Thoreau does not attempt to present the book as the account of one visit—as he organizes two years' experiences into one in *Walden*, --but frequently compares and contrasts the experiences of the several visits. For example, he does not make the Highland lighthouse keepers into a single character, but indicates
that in 1850 a successor has replaced the keeper who had entertained him during the 1849 trip (p. 170). The frame—traveling from Concord to Provincetown—supports an underlying theme—the movement from civilization toward wilderness. John Harder has described this movement through the villages in the western part of the Cape, past the landmarks of civilization to the eastern, more primitive, tip of the Cape as a kind of "Pilgrim's Regress," during which Thoreau attempts to free himself from the binding influences of civilization in order to get at his—and America's—spiritual, physical, and historical roots. The purpose of this quest for origins is to gather the materials from which Thoreau can build an American mythology.

Thoreau develops his theme of the progression from civilization to Nature by constantly juxtaposing descriptions of nature with civilization. Perhaps a quick overview of the chapters of Cape Cod will make this clear: Chapter one describes the scene of the shipwreck at Cohasset and various responses to this tragedy, while chapter two takes up the lighter topic of the appearances of Thoreau's fellow stagecoach travelers and the villages through which the stage passes from Sandwich to Orleans. In chapter three Thoreau describes the tamer aspects of the landscape, with particular attention to efforts at cultivating the soil, and the chapter ends with
several long accounts from ecclesiastical histories. In contrast, chapter four, "The Beach," describes the wild beauty of the ocean and the marks of its wildness which it leaves upon the nature along the shore. Chapter five gives a detailed character sketch of a Wellfleet oysterman, but in the next two chapters the focus is again on nature. Chapter eight discusses Thoreau's visit to the Highland lighthouse and gives considerable attention to the characters of the keepers whose job it is to help sailors protect themselves from the ocean's destructiveness. In chapter nine the sea and the land at the tip of the Cape are described as the most wild and dreary of the entire visit. Chapter one turns, then, to the relative civilization of Provincetown.

Thus, Thoreau develops the dominant theme of Cape Cod—the journey from civilization to wilderness—by alternately looking for a time at the nature of the Cape, especially the ocean, and then at the people and their relationship to Nature. For this reason, my first chapter examines the theme of Nature, and chapter two, "Death," discusses the inevitable destruction which harsh Nature brings and Thoreau's attitudes toward that destruction. Chapter three returns to the dominant theme, showing how Thoreau's journey from civilization to wilderness has as its purpose the search for origins with which to build an American mythology.
Henry David Thoreau first visited Cape Cod in October, 1849, accompanied by Ellery Channing. He made three more visits to the Cape, in June, 1850, in July, 1855, and finally in June, 1857. Channing also accompanied him in 1855; in 1850 and 1857 he traveled alone. *Cape Cod*, at least the first half, appears to be an account of primarily the first two visits since publication of the first four chapters by *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* began in June, of 1855—before the third visit. The book published in 1865 does list the third visit, but curiously omits mention of the fourth (p. 3), and a reading of the journal of the 1857 visit reveals no accounts that were added to the main text.

Thoreau's method of writing appears to have been similar to the pattern he followed in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. The initial experiences were first recorded in his journal and later interwoven, with many historical extracts, into a whole. The work was probably begun in 1852, for a letter dated November 16, 1852, to George William Curtis, editor of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, indicates that the first three chapters had been completed, and the fourth chapter, "The Beach," was ready for its final copying:

I send you herewith 100 pages of 'Cape Cod.' It is not yet half the whole. The remainder of the narrative is more personal, as I reach the scene of my adventures. I am a little in doubt about the extracts from the old
ministers. If you prefer to, you may omit from the middle of the 86th page to the end of this parcel; (the rest being respected); or perhaps a smaller type will use it up fast enough. 5

As for the conditions of sale; if you accept the paper, it is to be mine to reprint, if I think it worth the while, after it has appeared in your journal.

I shall expect to be paid as fast as the paper is printed, and if it is likely to be on hand long, to receive reasonable warning of it.

I have collected this under several heads for your convenience. The next subject is 'The Beach,' which I will copy out and forward as soon as you desire it. 6

Why publication was delayed until the summer of 1855 is not entirely clear. Sanborn suggests two reasons--Thoreau's payment and the fact that Curtis objected to the tone which Thoreau adopted toward the people and region. A letter to Thoreau from Horace Greeley dated November 23, 1852, in which Greeley urges Thoreau to accept three dollars per printed page lends support to the first theory.

A comparison of the Putnam chapters and the first four of the published book shows that Curtis deleted paragraphs or sentences which he was evidently afraid would offend some readers. For example, the paragraph in which Thoreau describes the women in the stage as "pinched up," "dried specimens," while their husbands are said to be "pickled" (p. 24) is missing. And Curtis softens the sentence: "I was glad to have got out of the towns, where I am wont
to feel unspeakably mean and disgraced, --to have left behind me
for a season the bar-rooms of Massachusetts, where the full-grown
are not weaned from savage and filthy habits, --still sucking a
cigar" (pp. 41-42) to "I was glad to have got out of the towns... ."
In a letter to Curtis dated April 13, 1855, Thoreau defends a phrase
modifying moderate Calvinists, "said to be common in the writer's
day," by explaining that he took the phrase from the historian
James Freeman, who had used the present tense: "which is so
c9
common in the present time." Curtis did not accept Thoreau's
defense of the phrase and omitted it, but, interestingly enough,
Thoreau or perhaps Channing and Sophia Thoreau chose the Curtis
version for the book (p. 49).

Another reason for Thoreau's withdrawal of the manuscript
after only the first four chapters were published may have been
Curtis' reluctance to substitute revisions for chapters which had
already been accepted. A letter from Thoreau to Curtis dated
August 9, 1855, requests that ten pages of chapter six, "The Beach
Again," be replaced with revisions. For whatever reasons,
chapters five to ten were not published during Thoreau's lifetime,
although he may have used some passages for lyceum lectures.
After his death, Channing and Sophia Thoreau collaborated as edi-
tors in bringing to publication the entire work. Chapters five and
eight appeared in the October and December, 1864, editions of the Atlantic Monthly, and the complete book was published in late 1864, but dated 1865. An edition from the same plate was published in London in June, 1865, the first edition of any of Thoreau's work to be published under foreign imprint.

A review in the Atlantic Monthly of March, 1865, is basically positive. Certain passages border on bareness, says the reviewer, but he suggests that bareness is fitting for both the subject and author. The stern realism with which Thoreau describes the shipwreck is justified by explaining that it keeps the scene from becoming too repulsive to the reader. That the reviewer can find only two errors in factual reporting is given as proof of the book's accuracy. The review concludes with the following:

Yet the grand ocean-pictures which this book contains remind us that it was the domain of external Nature which was his peculiar province; and this sublime monotone of the surges seems his fitting dirge . . . .

Modern critics tend to contrast Cape Cod with Walden or A Week and find it "the least profound, but the most charming of Thoreau's work." Joseph Krutch classifies it as a holiday book and suggests that it was probably written with a magazine audience in mind and this explains the book's agreeable tone. In contrast to George William Curtis, Krutch finds little to challenge or of-
fend. Henry Canby contrasts *A Week* with Cape Cod, finding the writing of the former an example of a book in which the thread of the narration is used to record Thoreau's inner life, while the latter is simply a journalistic report of an excursion—"useful and suggestive rather than provocative and stimulating." Few critics have made *Cape Cod* the subject of serious study.

I am not trying to prove in this thesis that *Cape Cod* should be credited with the same literary merit as *A Week* or *Walden*, but believe that a work which is "useful and suggestive" may also be "provocative and stimulating," though perhaps in different ways than *Walden* or *A Week*. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* Thoreau spells out his belief that nature is the only source for myth making and journeys West to discover a new world, as Columbus did. Yet that journey West is not completely satisfactory to him for he senses that "we live on the outskirts of that region. Carved wood, and floating boughs, and sunset skies are all we know of it" (I, 409). This suggests the image of the dry land emerging from the water—an image repeated in *Cape Cod* when Thoreau turns East in search of origins.

In *Walden*, Thoreau shifts from observing nature and building myth through a journey West to attempting to discover those same qualities by putting his roots deep into the soil of a single location.
He says, for example, that we need to "settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality. . ." (II, 108). Thoreau found, though, the Walden experience too limiting and the Nature too tame to express completely the truths of which he was convinced.

In Cape Cod, in spite of his ambivalence toward the harsh nature he observes and the knowledge of the death which she brings to many, Thoreau rediscovers his physical, spiritual, and historical origins. From the positive tone he adopts at the end and the fact that he does not apologize for the inadequacies of the work, one can assume that he found the work an adequate expression of his "truth."
Notes to the Introduction

1. In this thesis nature will refer to the external world seen in purely descriptive and scientific terms; Nature will refer to that force which, though lower than God, transcends both man and nature. This distinction is outlined by Robert Dickens in "Henry David Thoreau: A Discussion of His Use of the Terms Nature and nature," Thoreau Society Bulletin, 71 (1960), 1-2.

2. Quotations from Thoreau are, unless otherwise noted, from the Walden Edition (20 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906). Quotations from Cape Cod (in vol. IV) are by page number alone.


5. Curtis followed the second suggestion, that of using smaller type for the Rev. Treat's sermon and parts of the local history. This letter gives support to the approach which Dudley Lunt used in his edition of Cape Cod (New York: Norton, 1951), that of omitting the longer passages of the extracts from the text and printing them in an appendix.


10. Correspondence, p. 379.


16. A dissertation by Emory Maiden, Jr. claims to be the first full-length critical study. See DA, 32 (Feb. 1972), 4571-A.
Nature

Before discussing the theme of Nature in Cape Cod, I want to examine the reasons for Thoreau's complex attitudes toward Nature. Thoreau's stance cannot be easily classified; he is not simply a naturalist, or a Transcendentalist, or a Romantic, but a hybrid of all three. In order to see how Thoreau relates to the category of nature writers, one must consider two factors—the role of observation in Thoreau's study of nature and the way in which Thoreau views man's relationship to Nature. In contrast to medieval nature writers whose primary interest in nature was to draw moral instruction, Thoreau belongs to the movement begun in the 15th century and continuing into the 16th and 17th centuries with writers like Konrad von Gesner, Malpighi, Swanmerdam, Leeuwenkoek, and Sir Thomas Brown whose writings reflect extensive personal observation of natural phenomena. Yet unlike many naturalists, Thoreau was not interested in facts for their own sake:

Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at her is fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone. I feel that I am dissipated by so many observations (Journal, V, 45).

Thoreau is able "look through and beyond" nature, in that the facts he observes are used to understand larger truths:
Facts should only be as the frame to my pictures; they should be material to the mythology I am writing; not facts to assist men to make money, farmers to farm profitably, in any common sense. . . .

My facts shall be falsehoods to the common sense. I would so state facts that they shall be significant, shall be mythic or mythological (Journal, III, 99).

This aim of using facts observed from nature to build myths links Thoreau with the Romantics and Transcendentalists who see in nature the materials which the Imagination transforms into greater truths. Yet Thoreau cannot accept the Transcendentalists' tendency to see nature as only hieroglyph. He disagrees with Channing who claims: "I am universal; I have nothing to do with the particular and definite" by explaining that one must begin with the particular in order to find the universal (Journal, III, 98). Although basically a Romantic, Thoreau differs from many Romantics in that he bases his love for Nature upon a scientific view of her, rather than upon a subjective knowledge of Nature.

Both the naturalists' insistence upon fact for fact's sake and the Romantics' and Transcendentalists' tendency to see nature as hieroglyph set man apart from Nature. It was Thoreau's belief that this detachment kept one from really knowing Nature, for one can achieve this knowledge only by feeling and participating with her.

God did not make this world in jest; no, nor in indifference. These migrating sparrows all bear messages that
concern life. I do not pluck the fruits in their season. I love the birds and beasts because they are mythologically in earnest. I see that the sparrow cheeps and flits and sings adequately to the great design of the universe; that man does not communicate with it, understand its language, because he is not at one with nature. I reproach myself because I have regarded with indifference the passage of the birds; I have thought them no better than I (Journal, III, 368).

This desire to feel with Nature—to lose his sense of separateness—implies that when Thoreau's Imagination builds myth from fact, the myth affirms that Nature feels and sympathizes with man, and that the relationship between Nature and man can be one of friendship. This stance toward Nature is not consistently maintained, for there are times when Thoreau can find no affinity with Nature and doubts her friendship with man. In a similar way, Thoreau is not consistent in his confidence in man's ability to analyze and codify Nature through observation. His confidence at one moment may give way to doubts as he is struck anew with the mysteries of Nature. Thoreau responds moment by moment, one sentence occasionally contradicts the preceding, but he does not appear to have been troubled by his lack of a consistent ideology.

In Walden one sees a Thoreau who, if not one with Nature, is at least at peace with her. Nature is benevolent. If man suffers, he suffers, like John Field, because of his own weakness, or he suffers because of the inhumanity of others. Breed's hut, for
example, is set on fire by mischievous boys, not by lightning (II, 285). Although Thoreau was content to spend most of his life exploring Nature in Concord and the immediate vicinity, he does seem to have regretted the benevolence and tameness of the Nature he found there:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wilderness, --to wade sometimes in marches where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk... at the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and inexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable (II, 349-350).

To find this wildness, this unfathomable quality in Nature, Thoreau took trips into Maine, Cape Cod, and Minnesota. Here he found untamed Nature: "... We have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her vast and drear and inhuman... savage and awful, though beautiful," he says of the primieval Maine woods (II, 7). In writing about his experiences climbing Mount Katahdin, Thoreau discusses this inhuman quality, and contrasts it with the nature of the plains:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him[the climber] at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pillores him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys (III, 71)?
Several critics, including Martin Pops and Krutch, associate this contrast between tamed Nature and pure Nature with a distinction between what Thoreau considered Beautiful and what he found to be Sublime. The Beautiful is associated with quietude and what is spatially finite, while the Sublime is associated with immensity, that which is spatially infinite. It is the Sublime which arouses sentiments of awe and reverence and a sense of vastness and power outreaching human comprehension. To find the Sublime Thoreau needed to go beyond Concord. To complete the quotation on man's need for Nature's wildness:

We can never get enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coasts with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed... (II, 350).

In order to feel his limits transgressed, Thoreau travels to Cape Cod:

Wishing to get a better view than I had yet had of the ocean, which, we are told, covers more than two-thirds of the globe, but of which a man who lives a few miles inland may never see any trace, more than another world, I made a visit to Cape Cod... (p. 3).

The new world which Thoreau observes is a world where, in contrast to Walden, Nature is harsh and ruthless. Thoreau spends his
time walking the beach, "that thin line between Man and Nature," trying to comprehend the vastness and power of the sea.

Thoreau later explained the purpose of the visits to Cape Cod as an attempt to find a unity with the ocean, as a letter written to a friend in September, 1859, reveals:

You seem not to have taken Cape Cod the right way. I think that you should have persevered in walking on the beach and on the bank, even to the land's end, however soft, and so, by long knocking at Ocean's gate, have gained admittance at last, --better, if separately, and in a storm, not knowing where you would sleep by night, or eat by day . . . I hope that you like to remember the journey better than you did to make it.  

His suggestion that his friend's memory of the journey may be more satisfying than the actual visit leads one to wonder if that may not also have been Thoreau's experience when reflecting on his own visits. Certainly in Cape Cod, which had been begun about seven years before this letter, the attitude toward the ocean is much less positive, for although Thoreau finds the ocean's sound, the sea jellies, and fauna interesting, he emphasizes much more the ocean's harshness: the sand makes walking difficult; the salt water coats his shoes and clothing; the clam he eats makes him ill. But more than these discomforts, he realizes the ocean's destructiveness, and Thoreau seems torn between his desire to find affinity with Nature and his desire to be awed--even frightened--with her wild-
ness. His attitudes are ambivalent and contradictory.

Because it is important to see how his attitudes can shift moment by moment, I have selected most of the passages to illustrate this point from one chapter, "The Sea and the Desert," which is typical of other chapters in that it contains a mixture of description, accounts from local history, world history and other travelogues, philosophic musings and terse observations of the people of the Cape and the tendency of government to mismanage public monies. On the other hand it is atypical in that it contains more organic unity than many chapters. (There is evidence that Thoreau reworked portions of the chapter—the *plus ultra* paragraph [pp. 178-179]—shortly before his death.) It begins with a dawn and a restatement of the book's theme—"We wished to associate with the ocean until it lost the pond-like look which it wears to a country-man" (p. 177)—and ends with a sunset, although chronologically two days have passed, and a restatement of the theme which indicates that the purpose of the trip has been satisfied:

As we stood looking on this scene we were gradually convinced that fishing here and in a pond were not, in all respects, the same, and that he who waits for fair weather and a calm sea may never see the glancing skin of a mackerel, and get no nearer to a cod than the wooden emblem in the State House (p. 211).
The first evidence of Thoreau's ambivalence appears in the third paragraph when he mentions briefly that one of the minor inconveniences of walking along the beach is the necessity of faithfully rubbing one's shoes with tallow so that they do not become stiff and discolored. Such inconveniences would not appear to be completely unexpected or severe, but Thoreau chooses to offset this inconvenience with an advantage of walking along the beach: that even though one's pants are frequently spattered with water and mud, they are not stained, as they would be if one were walking in the country, because the sea shore is extremely clean. An isolated incident of this sort of balancing has little significance, but when one realizes that very often an inconvenience is, to use Thoreau's word, "counterbalanced" with a convenience, one senses a conscious attempt to justify the ways of Nature. (This balancing will be developed more fully in chapter two on the theme of death.)

In paragraph five the note of ambivalence continues as Thoreau quarrels with those who delight in "the countless smilings of the ocean waves." Thoreau makes fun of the image of describing the waves as smiling, which suggests a degree of benevolence. He chooses rather to describe them as broad grins, perhaps suggesting that behind the surface friendship there may be a more mischievous or jesting spirit. Whether Thoreau describes the
waves as smiling, on the one hand, or broad grins, on the other, he is ascribing human characteristics to the waves, what John Ruskin labeled the pathetic fallacy. Ruskin objected to such descriptions because they "produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things," but Thoreau did not consistently see Nature's facade as neutral, as Ruskin did, and so would have disagreed that seeing the waves as broad grins created a false impression of Nature.

Another clue to the ambivalence which Thoreau feels toward the ocean is evident a few pages later (pp. 184-186) when he describes the beach birds, a fox, and a dog in relation to the sea. Instead of simply describing them objectively, he seems to identify with the animals and interprets their relation with the ocean as being characterized by fear:

The little beach-birds trotted past close to the water's edge, or paused but an instant to swallow their food, keeping time with the elements. I wondered how they ever got used to the sea, that they ventured so near the waves (pp. 184-185).

The tone of these sentences is in sharp contrast to the following, where Thoreau describes various birds along the shore in simple, naturalistic terms:

Sometimes we sat on the wet beach and watched the beach-birds, sandpipers, and others, trotting along close to each wave, and waiting for the sea
to cast up their breakfast. The former (Charadrînus melodus) ran with great rapidity, and then stood stock-still, remarkably erect, and hardly to be distinguished from the beach (p. 113).

He remembers that once he saw a fox looking at the Atlantic from a bank. What is the sea to a fox, a land animal? he asks. Another time a wrecker's dog barked at Channing and him and the bark "heard through the roaring of the surf, sounded ridiculously faint. . . That sound will do for farm yards. All dogs looked out of place there, naked and as if shuddering at the vastness" (p. 185). A cat and the peeps of the piping plover look even more out of place. In attributing human responses to the animals who must live with the harshness of the ocean, Thoreau momentarily gives a clue to his own fear of harsh Nature, but in the next moment he reasserts his affinity with the sea by remembering the ingratitude of a little dog which had barked at him, in spite of the fact that Thoreau had protected him on the previous day. He quotes a song from As You Like It which states that freezing Nature does not hurt as much as a friend who forgets:

"Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot;
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remembered not." (p. 186)

Thoreau continues by describing the sea-shore as "a sort of
neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world." The worn neutral implies a sort of no man's land between the tameness of civilization and the waves which are "too far-traveled and untamable to be familiar." But in the next sentence Thoreau recalls a contemporary theory, which was discussed even before Darwin published his Origin of Species, that man has evolved from the sea-slime. Believing that man's origins were in the sea blurs the distinction between harsh Nature and man and underlines man's relatedness to the ocean.

The shore is a "vast morgue" where

The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately up upon its shelf, rotting and bleaching in the sun and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them. There is naked Nature, inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray (p. 187).

In the first sentence the word stately is used to describe the way the carcasses rest on the shore. They lie with dignity. That Nature has deprived them of life does not make them small or mean. He describes the tide turning them gently, tucking fresh sand under them, as a mother might care for her sleeping child. Contradicting this image is the next sentence which states that naked Nature wastes no thought on man. She is "inhumanly sincere," that is, more sincere than a human can be. Thus both the gentleness of the
tide and the tide's destructive nibbling at the shore are not intended to harm or help man, but are a part of a larger pattern in the universe which man may comprehend only with difficulty.

The word nibbling is repeated elsewhere, as on page fifteen where the sea is pictured as "nibbling voraciously at the continent."

This phrase likens the sea to a predator, and the images of the sea's being a cat playing with its captured mouse or a pack of wolves waiting to spring upon their victims are also used:

The sea thus plays with the land holding a sand-bar in its mouth awhile before it swallows it, as a cat playing with a mouse; but the fatal gripe is sure to come at last (p. 155).

Think of making your bed there in the crest of a breaker! To have the waves, like a pack of hungry wolves, eying you always, night and day, and from time to time making a spring at you, almost sure to have you at last (p. 263).

Thoreau here interprets Nature as being intentionally malicious to man.

Yet chapter nine contains passages in which Thoreau seems to revel in the ocean's wildness. For example, he marvels that civilization has not changed the appearance of the sea. Although admitting that fewer whales are cast ashore now than formerly, he believes the sea has never been as wild as it is now. Neither savage nor civilized man has left traces:

The aspect of the shore only has changed. The ocean is
a wilderness reaching round the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens to our sea-side residences (p. 189).

From the parlor windows along the ocast Thoreau has seen families of seals. He is amazed that ladies who would consider walking in the woods too strenuous or rustic will sail on the sea: "To go to sea! Why, it is to have the experience of Noah,—to realize the deluge. Every vessel is an ark (p. 189)." What aspects of the Noah myth was Thoreau thinking of when he says that every vessel is an ark? The deluge in both Hebrew and Greek mythology is brought about by God or Zeus in an attempt to start anew with the human race. It is the opportunity for a new beginning, and in Cape Cod this beginning is associated in Thoreau's mind with a geographic location, that is, the New World. He quotes Humbolt who says that when Columbus approached the New World, he was approaching the garden of Eden, a Paradise (p. 121). Ships sailing for America, then, are arks sailing to a New World. In Walden, he discusses the Greek version of the flood myth in connection with the repeopling of the world, suggesting that man's stony nature may be explained by the fact that Deucalion and Pyrrha, the sole survivors of the flood, created new men by throwing stones over their heads behind them. In Walden he is concerned with the rebirth of
man's spiritual nature, so that the New World is internal, not external as it is in Cape Cod (II, 6).

Many readers have been puzzled by Thoreau's apparent lack of interest in sailing on the ocean. Twice in Cape Cod he mentions having had opportunities to go out with fishermen, one time to catch black fish (p. 144); another time in chapter nine he describes a three mile trip he made in a mackerel schooner from Duxbury to Clark's Island:

They landed me at Clark's Island, where the Pilgrims landed, for my companions wished to get some milk for the voyage. But I had seen the whole of it. The rest was only going to sea and catching the mackerel. Moreover, it was as well that I did not remain with them, considering the small quantity of supplies they had taken.

Now, I saw the mackerel fleet on its fishing ground, though I was not at first aware of it. So my experience was complete (p. 184).

The tone of his explanation for not going to sea is somewhat defensive. The word only in the third sentence is ironic—perhaps intentionally so. The word moreover in the fourth sentence indicates that he is about to present yet another reason in his defense. And when Thoreau remarks that seeing the mackerel fleet on its fishing ground completes the experience, one must contrast this with the Thoreau of Walden, who would not accept a second-hand experience in the place of a real one. One could theorize
that Thoreau's contempt for the fishing industry might explain that
his reluctance was not to going to sea, but to going to sea with
fishermen (p. 182). In *Walden* there is neither contempt for fishing
nor a willingness to avoid first-hand experiences:

> These experiences were very memorable and valuable to me, --anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with their tails in the moonlight, and communi-cating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below . . . (II, 194)

It is possible that Thoreau was simply afraid of sailing on the ocean--that although he states that man needs "the tonic of wilâness," he draws back from the more complete identification with the ocean which actually sailing on her would bring. He has, after all, pic-tured the ocean as a predator, and in comparing life in Concord with life on the Cape he suggests that life in tame Nature is safer. There are two examples of this in chapter nine. On page 182 he remarks that the gazetteer will tell one the number of boys and men engaged in the whale, cod, and mackerel fisheries on the Cape. Perhaps, he jests, he should keep statistics of the number of boys who fish in Concord during the summer. He is sure that the boys of Concord profit just as much morally and intellectually from fishing as do the men and boys of the Cape, but they do so
with far less physical danger. He also compares the way the men of North Truro work together harvesting mackerel to the way farmers plough a common field. The fishermen's daughters and wives are able to watch them as they work fifteen to twenty miles off the sea, just as farmers' wives can sometimes see their husbands at work in the distance (p. 130). Thoreau notes one difference: the fishermen's wives cannot call them home with a dinner-horn. Life in Concord is less dangerous, more comfortable. It is safer to feel at one with Nature there than on the Cape.

Although Thoreau may have feared to lose his physical life in the ocean, this does not negate the validity of his spiritual identification with the ocean. Indeed Thoreau's poem "The Fisher's Boy" asserts that one who walks the shore, examining carefully the rocks and shells which the tide washes in, knows more deeply the ocean than those who sail over its top:

My life is like a stroll upon the beach,

As near the ocean's edge as I can go;

My tardy steps in waves sometimes o'erreach,

Sometimes I stay to let them overflow.

My sole employment is, and scrupulous care,

To place my gains beyond the reach of tides,

Each smoother pebble, and each shell more rare,

Which Ocean kindly to my hand confides.

I have but few companions on the shore:

They scorn the strand who sail upon the sea;
Yet oft I think the ocean they've sailed o'er
Is deeper known upon the strand to me.

The middle sea contains no crimson pulse,
Its deeper waves cast up no pearls to view;
Along the shore my hand is on its pulse,
And I converse with many a shipwrecked crew.

Just before sunset of the first day described in chapter nine, Thoreau sees the autumnal landscape which is the "most novel and remarkable sight" of his journey. He is walking in the hill and swamp country just north of Provincetown, and he describes the richness and variety of the colors and the bush or tree responsible for each color. No rug or carpet he has ever seen can match its beauty. This is tame Nature, and Thoreau seems to prefer it to the wild ocean.

The next morning Thoreau and his companions again return to the beach, this time to the shore south of Race Point. No vegetation is visible except for beach grass and the only animals are very low forms:

It was the dreariest scene imaginable. The only animals which we saw on the sand at that time were spiders, which are to be found almost everywhere whether on snow or ice-water or sand, --and a venemous-looking, long, narrow worm, one of the myrapods, or thousand-legs (pp. 201-202).

In two other passages Thoreau has associated the word dreary with a sense of the spiritual:
But through all the dreariness we seemed to have a pure and unequalled strain of eternal melody, for always the same strain which is a dirge to one household is a morning song of rejoicing to another (p. 71).

On this second day when the nature they saw is the most primitive and the ocean the most wild of their visits, it is the dirge which seems to ring in Thoreau's ear, and not the song of rejoicing.

On this second day Thoreau is not only troubled by the stormy ocean, but seems also to doubt the firmness of the ground beneath his feet. For example, he spends several pages describing the way beach grass helps preserve the harbor from the wind and water erosion. The cycle begins in the spring and summer when the grass grows about two and a half feet, only to be nearly covered over with sand during the storms of autumn and winter, but in spring the cycle begins anew. It is this frail beach grass, ponders Thoreau, which keeps Cape Cod from falling into the ocean:

Thus Cape Cod is anchored to the heavens, as it were, by a myriad little cables of beach-grass, and, if they should fail, would become a total wreck, and ere long go to the bottom (p. 209).

Even those who never venture out to sea face the possibility of wreck and drowning.

The wreck motif is repeated when Thoreau says that he and his companion returned to Provincetown, almost ready, as shipwrecked sailors, to take shelter in a charity house. It is at this
point that Thoreau is persuaded that fishing in the ocean and in a pond are not the same, that: "he who waits for fair weather and a calm sea may never see the glancing skin of a mackerel and get no nearer to a cod than the wooden emblem in the State House" (p. 211). Thoreau's identification with the shipwrecked sailors is repeated elsewhere. In the last line of "The Fisher's Boy" the narrator of the poem mentions conversing with a shipwrecked crew, and Thoreau states in Cape Cod that only a shipwrecked sailor could write "the annals of this voracious beach" (p. 163).

Although Thoreau saw his walk along the shore as an attempt to gain a spiritual admittance to the ocean, in Cape Cod that ideal is certainly not realized. Rather Thoreau seems to feel a tension between his fear of untamed Nature, on the one hand, and his desire for its tonic, on the other. McIntosh sees in Thoreau's wavering between a desire to merge with Nature and a need to preserve self a pattern of involvement, detachment, and reconciliation, which does not always take place sequentially, but is rather a "mosaic of constructed wholes." I would describe it in more psychological terms: there is in Thoreau a discrepancy between what he believes intellectually and what he feels experientially. Like all men his instinct for self preservation is strong. Yet he believes that there is more for man in the universe than physical being--that is man's finding
his place in Nature. This is the idealism with which Thoreau is able to accept the destructiveness and death that Nature brings, and it is the theme that my next chapter develops.
Notes to Chapter One


10. This quotation is from Thoreau's translation of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, V, 340, ll. 89-90. At least three others have translated the word laughter, where Thoreau uses smileings. Certainly the word laughter has connotations nearer to broad grins, than the word smileings, with which Thoreau found fault.


13. McIntosh, p. xiii.
Death

The shipwreck may be seen as a framework and motif for Cape Cod. In the first chapter, Thoreau describes the wreck of the St. John, in which 145 persons lost their lives, and the book ends with an account of a lumbering schooner, which was wrecked in the same storm. Fortunately, all the lives of the crew were saved. Other wrecks include that of the Franklin, in which nine or ten people were killed, those of the Brutus and the Cactus, for which no casualty statistics are given, and the wreck of Bellamy's pirate ship in 1717, in which 100 men were killed. Another 100 bodies were washed ashore following a storm on October 3, 1841. Even those who stay on shore are not safe, as the death of three boys who were running from the tide when the waves caused the bank to collapse upon them illustrates.

Thus, Thoreau sees death brought on by the sea as a normal part of the life cycle for the men of the Cape:

Palfrey said, in his oration at Barnstable, the duck does not take to the water with a surer instinct than the Barnstable boy. (He might have said the Cape Cod boy as well.) He leaps from his leading-strings into the shrouds, it is but a bound from his mother's lap to the masthead (p. 218).

The women share in this cycle in that they are left to mourn the loss of their fathers, brothers, and husbands:
I found that it would not do to speak of ship wrecks there, for almost every family has lost some of its members at sea. 'Who lives in that house?' I inquired. 'Three widows,' was the reply (p. 160).

It is not surprising, then, that Thoreau interprets as a dirge the peep of the piping plover, which for him is the most characteristic sound of Cape Cod.

But if I were required to name a sound the remembrance of which most perfectly revives the impression which the beach has made, it would be the dreary peep of the piping plover (Charadrius melodus) which haunts there. Their voices, too, are heard as a fugacious part in the dirge which is ever played along the shore for those mariners who have been lost in the deep since first it was created. But through all this dreariness we seemed to have a pure and unqualified strain of eternal melody, for always the same strain which is a dirge to one household is a morning song of rejoicing to another (p. 71).

Even though Thoreau is constantly aware of the death which harsh Naure brings, he is able to affirm her goodness. This chapter will show how Thoreau believes that Nature compensates for the evil which she brings and also discuss his belief in a transcendence beyond death.

On the first day of their first visit to Cape Cod, Thoreau and Channing stop at Cohasset in order to visit the scene of the shipwreck of the St. John, which had been wrecked the day before. In chapter one Thoreau describes the scene and the responses of the many people who have come to identify loved ones, help bury the
dead, or, like Thoreau, simply to watch.

The tone of Thoreau’s description is objective and detached. One of the reasons for this tone is that he records the detachment of those around him, rather than focusing upon those who have lost relatives in the wreck and are emotionally involved in the scene. Only several sentences describe an emotional response, and that he relates second-hand. He has since heard, he reports, that one mother came to identify the bodies of her child and sister, found them lying together in a coffin, and within three days died from her grief (p. 7). Thoreau also reports how he tried to question one survivor whom he describes as a "sober-looking man," but the man walked away after having answered only a few questions, evidently unwilling to describe the terrors which he had witnessed (p. 10).

Of the attitude of those involved in finding bodies, placing them in coffins, writing names on the coffin lids after the bodies had been identified, loading coffins on wagons, and hauling them to the mass grave, Thoreau writes: "I witnessed no signs of grief, but there was a sober dispatch of business which was affecting (p. 6)." For these natives of the Cape, this shipwreck is not the first, nor will it be the last which they will witness. They accept the destructiveness of the sea as a part of Nature’s immutable law.

It is this acceptance which explains the presence of the farmers
who are gathering seaweed in the middle of those who are getting bodies ready for burial. In order to gather the seaweed, which was valuable manure for them, the farmers had to separate pieces of clothing from it. That and the fact that they may find a human body under some weeds did not daunt them:

The old man had heard that there was a wreck, and knew most of the particulars, but he said that he had not been up there since it happened. It was the wrecked weed that concerned him most, rockweed, kelp, and seaweed, as he named them, which he carted to his barnyard; and those bodies were to him but other weed which the tide cast up, but which were of no use to him (p. 11).

Still that the inhabitants went about their work of either gathering bodies or seaweed with little grief, did not mean that they lacked any emotional involvement in the scene. Although Thoreau emphasizes their detachment from and acceptance of the death around them, he does perceive that

... the inhabitants of the shore would be not a little affected by this event. They would watch there many days and nights for the sea to give up its dead, and their imaginations and sympathies would supply the place of mourners far away, who as yet know not of the wreck (p. 12).

In contrast to the inhabitants are the sportsmen who came to Cohasset only to satisfy their curiosity, to gape at the suffering of their fellowmen. They are not moved emotionally by the scene, as their questioning of a slim, young mate who has survived the wreck
reveals:

'Well, I don't see but he tells a straight story enough. You see, the weight of the water in the boat broke the painter. A boat full or water is very heavy,'---and so on, in a loud and impertinently earnest tone, as if he had a bet depending on it, but had no humane interest in the matter.

Another, a large man, stood near by upon a rock, gazing into the sea, and chewing large quids of tobacco, as if that habit were forever confirmed with him.

'Come,' says another to his companion, 'let's be off. We've seen the whole of it. It's no use to stay to the funeral' (pp. 9-10).

Men who can see such a scene and continue chewing and spitting tobacco are not men who are interested in the emotional or spiritual significance of this tragedy; they cannot be bothered with the funeral, for example. One senses that Thoreau judges them for their callousness, their lack of "humane interest in the matter."

But what of Thoreau's attitude? He too seems, at least superficially, insensitive to the scene around him. His description of the drowned Irish serving girl---the same description which Robert Lowell used in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"---is vivid, but detached:

I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl, --who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family, --to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human
bulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless, -- merely red and white, --with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand (pp. 6-7).

The body is described thoroughly and vividly with no emotional feelings whatsoever, just as Thoreau might describe a fallen bird or an unusual plant. Indeed the corpse is just another weed which the tide has cast up.

Thoreau admits that the scene does not affect him as much as he might have expected. One might as well sympathize with the waves and winds whose mangling of bodies simply fulfills the law of Nature. Besides, it is an individual's lot which affects one. When one sees many corpses, death does not appear to be an exception to the rule, but the rule itself--"the common lot of humanity." A man, says Thoreau, can only grieve once in his life, perhaps meaning that he has already experienced that grief, probably at the death of his brother John (pp. 11-12). Thus, Thoreau does not identify emotionally with the tragedy, but does have a "humane interest in the matter." He looks beyond the immediate fact of death to affirm larger truths.

One of the truths which Thoreau affirms is that a storm which brings evil also brings good; Nature is "impersonally compensative." Not only did the storm which wrecked the St. John wash
up valuable seaweed for the farmers as mentioned above, but it also brought other benefits. For example, when Channing and Thoreau begin walking up the Atlantic shore, they are able to walk more rapidly by raising their umbrellas behind them, allowing the strong wind of the storm to blow against the umbrellas like sails (pp. 31-32). Also the wind makes the sound of the ocean more "inspiriting"—to use Thoreau's word. "On the whole," he says, "we were glad for the storm, which would show us the ocean in its angriest mood" (p. 40). For Thoreau, the ocean's beauty becomes more sublime as he perceives its destructiveness.

The wreck of the Franklin is also repeatedly mentioned in terms of the good that has come from it, especially the fruit and vegetable seeds the tide has washed ashore from the wrecked vessel. The Wellfleet oysterman gives Thoreau an eyewitness account of that wreck and then asks Thoreau to identify the plants—cabbage, broccoli and parsley—which he has grown from these seeds. (It is significant to note that the oysterman exhibits the same detachment from the wreck of the Franklin as Thoreau maintains in chapter one from the wreck of the St. John; when he learns that the Franklin is in trouble, he eats his breakfast first and then finds a comfortable place at the top of a hill from which he watches the ship wreck.) In two additional places Thoreau mentions seeing plants which have
grown from seeds salvaged from the **Franklin**. One man shows him pear and plum trees grown from these seeds; his turnip seeds have also come from the **Franklin**, and he has other plants grown from seeds which came from the wreck of the **Cactus** (p. 115). When Thoreau visits the Cape in early July of 1855, he speculates that the turnips, beets, and carrots which he sees along the shore have grown from seeds washed from the **Franklin**:

> This suggests how various plants may have been dispersed over the world to distant islands and continents. Vessels, with seeds in their cargoes, destined for particular ports, where perhaps they were not needed, have been cast away on desolate islands, and though their crews perished, some of their seeds have been preserved (p. 166).

From the death of some sailors has come new life—vegetable life, to be sure, —but just as important to Thoreau as human life. Less interesting to Thoreau, but more important to the wreckers for economic reasons than the seeds are the wood, iron, and tow cloth which are washed ashore from the **Franklin** (p. 73; p. 108; pp. 114-115). Of a wrecker who earns his livelihood from salvaging the debris which the ocean casts up, Thoreau says he is "the true monarch of the beach, whose 'right there is none to dispute,' and he is as much identified with it as a beach bird" (p. 60).

These lines, adapted from the first two lines of William Cowper's poem "Verses Supposed to Be Written by Alexander Sel-
kirk During His Solitary Abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez, " are used by Thoreau in chapter two of Walden to describe himself as a "spiritual wrecker." In walking around the farms of Concord he carries away in his Imagination the landscapes, which are the true possessions of the poet. Thus, Thoreau identifies his search for beauty with the wreckers' search for debris with which they support their lives.

Showing that Thoreau appreciates the good which Nature's destructiveness brings to some does not, however, prove that he believes that in this way Nature compensates for her evil. Although he does not use the word, three passages seem to support his belief in Nature's compensation. On page 176 Thoreau maintains that in order to keep the salt water from discoloring his shoes and making them stiff, he needed to put tallow on them faithfully. To offset this inconvenience from walking along the shore—Thoreau uses the word counterbalance—is the fact that salt water is clean and does not stain his best pants. The use of the word counterbalance suggests an attempt to justify the ways of Nature.

In another passage, Thoreau suggests that seeds from wrecked ships washed to uninhabited islands adapt to the new soil and climate, drive out native plants and prepare the land for man's inhabitation:
It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and for a
time lamentable shipwrecks may thus contribute a new
vegetable to a continent's stock, and prove on the whole
a lasting blessing to its inhabitants. Or winds and currents
might effect the same without the intervention of man.
What indeed are the various succulent plants which grow on
the beach but such beds of beets and turnips, sprung origin-
ally from seeds which perhaps were cast on the waters
for this end, though we do not know the Franklin which
they came out of? In ancient times some Mr. Bell (?)
was sailing this way in his ark with seeds of rocket, salt-
wart, sandwort, beach-grass, samphire, bayberry,
poverty-grass, etc., all nicely labelled with directions,
intending to establish a nursery somewhere; and did not
a nursery get established, though he thought that he had
failed? (pp. 166-167)

Thoreau uses the proverb in the first sentence ironically. He agrees
that the storm brings no good, but not because it brings death, but
because in spreading seeds and making desolate places habitable,
it makes it possible for man to live in new places. But then he
changes his approach and seems to say that although people for a
time mourn the loss of the sailors, in the long run the wreck may
be a blessing.

A third illustration is Thoreau's describing the way in which
the sand which is being eroded from the eastern shore of the Cape is
buidling up the western shore. Thoreau speculates that "perhaps
what the Ocean takes from one part of the Cape it gives to another, --
robs Peter to pay Paul" (p. 153). In these passages Thoreau is
doing more than simply showing that Nature brings both good and
evil; he sees Nature as working out a balance between the evil and good which she brings. A man who thinks in terms of his immediate life and not in terms of the universe's design may not appreciate or perceive this balancing.

In this idea, Thoreau is very close to the philosophy which Emerson explained in his essay "Compensation." Although Emerson's primary concern is with the balancing or dual aspect operative in man's existence, he finds in Nature the metaphor for this:

In brute nature no creatures are favorites but a certain compensation balances every gift and every defect. A surplusage given to one part is paid out of a reduction from another part. If the head and neck are enlarged the body and extremities are cut short. 'Economical nature has prescribed to herself a Civil list, a budget in whose single chapter she reserves to herself entire freedom, but in the sum total ever remains true to herself since if on one side too much is given she immediately subtracts it on the other and in the most decided manner makes all square.' [quote from Goethe, Werke, L, 241] All things are administered under the same law. --Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse: it is to answer for its moderation with Life. 3

Emerson also sees in the shellfish's need to leave his shell when he has outgrown it, a metaphor which illustrates man's need to leave his body in order to reach a new level of being:

Such also is the natural history calamity. The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men are advertisements of a nature whose law is growth. Every soul is by this intrinsic necessity quitting its whole system of things, its friends and home and laws and faith, as the shellfish crawls out of its beautiful
but stony case, because it no longer admits of its growth, and slowly forms a new house. In proportion to the vigor of the individual these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant and all worldly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming as it were a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not, as in most men, an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many cates and of no settled character, in which the man is imprisoned. 4

Like Emerson, Thoreau sees men as being imprisoned with earthly, physical concerns. Thus, when the emigrants sailing toward America are drowned, he is able to affirm that they may now have reached another world:

Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did, -- they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal evidence--though it has not yet been discovered by science--than Columbus had of this (p. 12).

Some critics see in Thoreau's belief in a transcendence beyond death the influence of Christianity. Martin Pops has said, for example, that Thoreau appears to agree with Father Mapple that though the ocean may shipwreck a man, it can shipwreck him into heaven.

James McIntosh labels Thoreau's belief in a transcendence his "Christian idealism." Michael Moloney doubts that Thoreau really escaped from his religious heritage, in spite of his formal rejection
of Christianity, and finds "the texture of Christianity . . . woven closely into Thoreau's conception of life." Serious questions, however, about Thoreau's orthodoxy remain. His emphasis upon the inner man, while playing down the importance of the physical man, reminds one of St. Paul's writings. And Thoreau does share with Christianity the hope that beyond life the just individual may take his place in the universe's pattern for good:

It is hard to part with one's body, but, no doubt, it is easy enough to do without it when once it is gone. All their plans and hopes burst like a bubble! Infants by the score dashed on the rocks by the enraged Atlantic Ocean! No! No! If the St. John did not make her port here, she has been telegraphed there. The strongest wind cannot stagger a Spirit; it is a Spirit's breath. A just man's purpose cannot be split on any Grampus or material rock, but itself will split rocks til it succeeds (p. 13).

For Thoreau, the place in the universe for the just man whose body has been dashed on the rocks is not in an orthodox heaven where man is rewarded for having been faithful to the dogma of the church, but in Nature. Finding a shipwrecked corpse, Thoreau is surprised that the bones with a little flesh adhering to them are not repulsive. In contrast, Thoreau finds that the bones

... grew more and more imposing. They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my snivelling sympathies. That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a
certain majesty which belonged to it (p. 108).

Having completed Nature's cycle, the bones have achieved a sacred majesty over her.

In another passage, Thoreau, after having picked up from the shore a bottle half full of red ale, muses that man is not able to experience the ocean as that bottle has:

Man would not be man through such ordeals as it had passed. But as I poured it slowly out on to the sand, it seemed to me that man himself was like a half-emptied bottle of pale ale, which Time had drunk so far, yet stoppled tight for a while, and drifting about in the ocean of circumstances, but destined ere-long to mingle with the surrounding waves, or be spilled amid the sands of a distant shore (p. 117).

As the person who corked the bottle kept the ale from merging with the waves, so Time, the limits of physical being, keeps man from a complete union with Nature. When time for the individual is no longer a limiting factor, a deeper communion in Nature will be possible.

Thoreau's response to the death of Emerson's son in a letter dated March 2, 1842, shows similar themes:

As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn? He had not even taken root here. I was not startled to hear that he was dead; it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organization demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived. Neither will nature manifest any sorrow at his death, but
soon the note of the lark will be heard down in the meadow, and fresh dandelions will spring from the old stocks where he plucked them last summer.

Dying gently from natural causes is not the same as drowning in a stormy—perhaps angry—ocean, and Thoreau admires the courage of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, who was able to overcome his "snivelling sympathies" when face to face with Nature's destructiveness:

I could then appreciate the heroism of the old navigator, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, of whom it is related that, being overtaken by a storm when on his return from America, in the year 1583, far northeastward from where we were, sitting abath with a book in his hand, just before he was swallowed up in the deep, he cried out to his comrades in the Hind, as they came within hearing, 'We are as near to Heaven by sea as by land.' I saw that it would not be easy to realize (p. 123).

Sir Humphrey's limits are transgressed to the breaking point; he is experiencing the ocean's sublimity, and it is costing him his life. Still he remains affirmative, able, as Thoreau hoped to be able, to live in the "nick or time," standing at the point where two eternities meet, making the most of the present moment (II, 18). He is a Thoreauvian hero, a topic which chapter three examines.

It is through a belief in Nature's compensation and through a process of symbolization that Thoreau is able to come to terms with Nature's destructiveness. One eye views the fact of death, while the other interprets it in terms of transcendental possibilities. In contrast to Ahab, and perhaps to Melville as well, Thoreau
can accept this aspect of Nature's facade because he is sure of the moral force behind it: "As his eye is on the fact, his mind's eye is simultaneously on the symbol, concentrated on the All, beyond Man's limited understanding of what is really Evil and what Good. Such is Thoreau's capacity for Dialectical synthesis." As desirable as achieving a dialectical synthesis may be, Thoreau does so at the expense of shutting off feelings of grief. Sensitivity for the tragedy of the individual is lost in his quest for universal truth. Naturalistic writers of the 20th century have found an alternative, emphasizing the fate of the individual and denying the validity of the universal. They have not shut off their feelings of grief, as Thoreau has, but, on the other hand, they have affirmed little hope. Perhaps hope is more important.
Notes to Chapter Two


3. This quotation is from the section "Ethics" in The Philosophy of History, The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., Stephen W. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press of Harvard Univ., 1954), II, 153. The same idea was repeated in the essay "Compensation," although not as succinctly. For this reason I have chosen the earlier essay.


5. Pops, 424


The Making of Myth

Thoreau's announced purpose in visiting Cape Cod is "to get a better view than [he] yet had of the ocean." Not only does viewing the ocean impress Thoreau with Nature's wildness, but he finds in the ocean a symbol of origination and in the Cape the site of America's beginnings. One eye observes the nature or reads in the local histories while Thoreau's inner eye interprets what is seen, formulating a new American mythology. At the end of Cape Cod, Thoreau asks:

What are springs and waterfalls? Here is the spring of springs, the waterfall of waterfalls. A storm in the fall or winter is the time to visit it; a light house or fisherman's hut the true hotel. A man may stand there and put all America behind him (p. 273).

This chapter will show in what ways Thoreau understands the Cape to be the spring of springs, the source, where all America is behind one, and why he appreciates the lighthouse keepers and the oysterman as examples of the American hero.

The image of the man who is facing East with all America behind him recalls Thoreau's description of the Cape as a Promethean figure:

Cape Cod is the bared and bended arm of Massachusetts: the shoulder is at Buzzard's Bay; the elbow, or crazy-bone, at Cape Mallebarre; the wrist at Truro; and the sandy fist at Provincetown, --behind which the State stands guard, with her back to the Green Mountains, and her feet
planted on the floor of the ocean, like an athlete protecting
her bay, --boxing with northeast storms, and, ever and
anon, heaving up her Atlantic adversary from the lap
of earth, --ready to thrust forward her other fist, which keeps
guard the while upon her breast at Cape Ann (p. 4).

Since the figure's back is to the Massachusetts mountain, the face
is obviously facing East--toward the dawn, the ocean, and Europe,
from whose ports sailed the first settlers of America and where the
civilization of the Greeks and Romans took root and grew. The Cape's
geography and history, even the name, are significant in Thoreau's
quest for origins. There is geographic significance in that Thoreau
accepts the Cape as the point which extends most eastward on the
coast. That the Cape was the site of the first Pilgrim settlement
has historic import. Of the name, Thoreau writes that

the word Cape is from the French cap; which is from the
Latin caput, a head; which is perhaps, from the verb
capere, to take, --that being the part by which we take hold
of a thing: --Take Time by the forelock . . . And as for Cod,
that was derived directly from the "great store of codfish"
which Captain Bartholomew Gosnold caught there in 1602;
word codde, "a case in which seeds are lodged," either
from the form of the fish, or the quantity of spawn it
contains . . . (pp. 3-4).

The seed image is particularly effective for one attempting to find
origins. (Chapter two discussed Thoreau's interest in the way seeds
are spread by the ocean after a shipwreck, thus helping to make
possible new civilizations.)

Like the Promethean figure's, Thoreau's physical and
and spiritual stance is toward the East. He leaves tame Concord for Boston where he travels by ship to Cohasset and by railroad from Bridgewater to Sandwich, by coach from Sandwich through Barnstable, Yarmouth, Dennis, and Brewster, to Orleans, where he begins walking up the Atlantic shore to Provincetown. He purposefully leaves civilization behind, ignoring the towns, choosing instead to explore Nature:

We cannot say how its towns look in front to one who goes to meet them; we went to see the ocean behind them. They were merely the raft on which we stood, and we took notice of the barnacles which adhered to it, and some carvings upon it (p. 259).

This pilgrimage back to the source of things is a type of "Pilgrim's Regress" during which Thoreau attempts to free himself from the imprisoning aspects of civilization.

As Thoreau and Channing walk up the coast, the nature they observe becomes increasingly wild and dreary. In chapter nine Thoreau reports that no vegetation other than beach grass is visible and that the only animals are of low forms. It is also at this point that the ocean is the stormiest that he has witnessed. At the point where Nature is most primitive and wild, Thoreau has reached the climax of his pilgrimage. As he observes and records untamed Nature, his Imagination transposes upon the scene fragments of classical writings and myths, and he rewrites the history of the
discovery of America so that it will be consistent with the American mythology he is writing.

In the ocean Thoreau sees the source of all life—a contemporary idea which was discussed before Darwin published his *Origin of Species*. He quotes Pierre Desor, a French glacial geologist who did research in America between 1846 and 1852:

>'There is no instance known . . . of an animal becoming aquatic in its perfect state, after having lived in its lower stage on dry land,' but as in the case of the tadpole, 'the progress invariably points toward the day land.' In short, the dry land itself came through and out of the water in its way to the heavens, for 'in going back through the geological ages, we come to an epoch when, according to all appearances, the dry land did not exist, and when the surface of our globe was entirely covered with water.' We looked on the sea, then, once more, not as [atrugetos], or unfruitful, but as it has been more truly called, the 'laboratory of continents' (pp. 127-128).2

This scientific view supports the belief of ancient philosophers and poets that the origin of all things is in the ocean, and it also echoes the Genesis account: "And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so" (1:9). Thoreau paraphrases the Biblical account: "Before the land rose out of the ocean, and became dry land, chaos reigned" (p. 71). At another point he describes the soil of Dennis as "the bottom of the sea made dry land the day before yesterday" (p. 25). The theory that man is a product of the ocean's
slime is also accepted by Thoreau (p. 186).

Not only did the dry land of the Cape originally emerge from the ocean, but the motion of the waves beating on her rocky shores is constantly making new sand, which measures to a depth of three hundred feet at some places and makes up almost the entire soil of the Cape. The sand, perhaps because of its birth from the ocean, is also thought to have activity or life. The inhabitants tell Thoreau many stories of items which had been buried in one place being uncovered at another:

Another told us that a log canoe known to have been buried many years before on the Bay side at East Harbor in Truro where the Cape is extremely narrow, appeared at length on the Atlantic side, the Cape having rolled over it, and an old woman said, "Now, you see, it is true what I told you, that the Cape is moving" (pp. 153-154).

In Thoreau's Imagination the Cape's movement is not from west to east, but from east to west. Perhaps, he muses, the day will come when the ocean will have moved sand all the way to the Boston harbor and will be able to influence the city.

The ocean—that source of biological life, whose motion creates soil in which vegetation grows—is linked by Thoreau to the heavens:

When we have returned from the seaside, we sometimes ask ourselves why we did not spend more time gazing at the sea; but very soon the traveller does not look as at the sea more than at the heavens (p. 129).

As Thoreau, looking at the horizon, cannot distinguish between the
ocean and the heavens, so the ocean becomes a symbol of the link between spirit and matter. In *Walden* Thoreau illustrates this linkage by showing how the pond reflects the colors of both the heavens and the land. When one views the pond from a hill top, it reflects the color of the sky, but viewed near at hand, the pond is the color of the shore. Thus, the ocean, the source of life, reflects the sand upon which man builds his civilization (matter) and the heavens, the mysterious, unknowable aspects of the universe (spirit).

The ocean is a successful image to convey Thoreau's views of origination. His efforts to link the nature of the Cape to the writings of the Ancients is less successful. He is persuaded that the brave people who live on the Cape are as fit to be characters in myths as the Argonauts:

> In ancient times the adventures of these two or three men and boys would have been made the basis of a myth, but now such tales are crowded into a line of shorthand signs, like an algebraic formula in the shipping news (p. 141).

Thoreau tries to make up for this absence of myth making in his time by quoting classical writers like Homer. Ethel Seybold has identified eight quotations from Homer (pp. 58, 66, 104, 120, 127, 149, 176, 211), five of which quote the original Greek. Thoreau justifies using the Greek by explaining that it sounds very much like the ocean, although he doubts that the Mediterranean Sea ever sounded as loud
to Homer as the Atlantic does to him (p. 67). In a footnote, he explains that

we have no word in English to express the sound of many waves, dashing at once, whether gently or violently [poluphloisboios], to the ear, and, in the ocean's gentle moods, an [anarithmon gelasma] to the eye (p. 66).

Certainly the effect is limited to those readers who know classical Greek.

In addition to quoting classical writers like Homer, Thoreau sometimes builds his descriptions from stock classical images:

The breakers looked like droves of a thousand wild horses of Neptune, rushing to the shore, with their white manes streaming far behind; and when at length the sun shone for a moment, their manes were rainbow-tinted. Also, the long kelp-weed was tossed up from time to time, like the tails of sea-cows, sporting in the brine (p. 58).

Since this quoting of Homer and using stock images is not truly integrated into the whole of the work, as the ocean image is, the effect is somewhat ornamental and gratuitous. Thoreau is more successful in using the Ancients' myths when he finds parallels between classical figures and the inhabitants of the Cape whom he meets or reads about in the local histories.

In order to understand the discovery and settlement of America, Thoreau studied the works of Englishmen like William Bradford, Mourt, William Wood, Josselyn, Thomas Morton, Nathaniel Morton, John Winthrop, Edward Winslow, Francis Higginson, Thomas
Shepard, and French historians like Champlain, Lescarbot, Charlevoix, Sayard-Théodet, and the Jesuit fathers. He read, but did not overly value, his contemporary historians including Bancroft, Hildreth, Warden, John Marshall, and John Barry. Through his reading, Thoreau became dissatisfied with the Pilgrim settlers and found them unfit to be considered the founders of America. They were judged unfit because of their lack of interest in exploration, their inaccuracies in observing and recording nature, their mis-treatment of the Indian and their misguided religiosity.

Thoreau documents thoroughly the case against the Pilgrims. To show their lack of interest in exploration, Thoreau points out that although they landed at Plymouth on the 9th of December, it was not until January 8th that Francis Billington went to look at a pond which was two miles distant (pp. 256-257). Another proof that the Pilgrims were not "good travellers," to use Thoreau's words, is that they carried few provisions—only butter and doughnuts—when they did venture forth.

Their inaccuracies in observing and recording nature is shown to Thoreau by the way they exaggerated the attractiveness of the Cape, reporting that it was well wooded, with excellent black soil and deep valleys filled with shrubs, long grass, and springs of fresh water. Admitting that the Cape may have changed in the
centuries since the Pilgrims landed, Thoreau still believes that we must make some allowance for the greenness of the pilgrims in these matters, which caused them to see green. We do not believe that the trees were large or the soil was deep here. Their account may be true particularly, but it is generally false. They saw literally, as well as figuratively, but one side of the Cape (p. 255).

The Pilgrims' concern for material success motivated their tricking the Indians of land. When asked by the Pilgrims who owned Billingsgate, the Indians replied, "not any." The Pilgrims then claimed the land for their own:

The Pilgrims appear to have regarded themselves as Not Any's representatives. Perhaps this was the first instance of that quiet way of 'speaking for' a place not yet occupied, or at least not improved as much as it may be, which their descendants have practiced, and are still practicing so extensively. Not Any seems to have been the sole proprietor of all America before the Yankees (p. 43).

The Pilgrims' zeal for religiosity is perhaps most severely criticized by Thoreau. In preparation for the camp meetings at Eastham a man cleans out the pump while the ministers are clearing their throats. Thoreau is sure that the pump delivers a purer stream than the ministers do and suggests that the people who come to the meeting could profit more by listening to the ocean (p. 48).

In another town a man may be beaten for denying the Scriptures or set in stocks for not attending Sunday services (p. 46). Thoreau himself sees the Sabbath laws enforced in Provincetown when a man
is restrained from painting. His activity, Thoreau notes, does not break the calm of the day nearly as much as the noise of a ranting minister (pp. 252-253).

He gives an account of a council which convened to test the orthodoxy of a Rev. Mr. Osborn, accused of embracing the religion of Arminius. He was found guilty and dismissed from his post (pp. 53-54). It is this type of intolerance for independent thinking for which Thoreau judges the Pilgrims, along with the fact that they choose to live on Nature, not in her:

It must be confessed that the Pilgrims possessed but few of the qualities of the modern pioneer. They were not the ancestors of the American backwoodsmen. They were a family and church, and more anxious to keep together, though it were on the sand, than to explore and colonize a New World (p. 256).

Thoreau attempts then to rewrite history, showing that the English were not the first discoverers of Cape Cod. He prefers to believe that the Keel-Cape which the Northman Thorwald discovered in 1004 was Cape Cod. In contrast to the Pilgrims,

these Northmen were a hardy race, whose younger sons inherited the ocean, and traversed it without chart or compass, and they are said to have been 'the first who learned the art of sailing in a wind' (pp. 248-249).

(Emerson has similar praise for the Northman in his essay, "Race."

Thoreau also discredits the common belief that the English made
the first settlement in North America north of St. Augustine by pointing out that fifteen years before the Pilgrims landed on Cape Cod, the French had a settlement at Port Royal in Nova Scotia. Thoreau also explains that the French explorer Champlain had published as early as 1613 an account of his explorations of New England, which he called New France, complete with charts and maps. The French, says Thoreau, were better fitted to be explorers because they "possessed more imagination and spirit of adventure than the English" (p. 234-235).

In rewriting the history of Cape Cod, Thoreau identifies himself personally—-not with the Pilgrims—-but with the Northmen: he is Thor-eau, a descendent of Thor-finn, a Northman (p. 192). It should also be pointed out that Thoreau did, in fact, have Norman ancestors.

Although Thoreau rejected the Pilgrims as the spiritual ancestors of America, he did, however, find one native of the Cape who is fit to be considered the "spiritual Adam of America." Thoreau compares the Wellfleet oysterman to Ossian, Panurge, and Silenus:

This was the merriest old man that we had ever seen, and one of the best preserved. His style of conversation was coarse and plain enough to have suited Rabelais. He would have made a good Panurge. Or rather he was a sober Silenus, and we were the boys Chromis and Mnasillus, who listened to his story.

'Not by Haemonian hills the Thracian bard,
Nor awful Phoebus was on Pindus heard
With deeper silence or with more regard' (p. 91).

In comparing the oysterman to Ossian, the legendary Gaelic hero
and poet, Thoreau may have been thinking of their relatedness to
Nature. (In *A Week* Thoreau regards Ossian as being closer to
Nature than Chaucer, [I, 393].) Rabelais' Panurge is noted for his
rascality, a characteristic shared by the oysterman. Ethel Seybold
has pointed out that the reference to the sober Silenus' telling tales
to Chromis and Mnasilus refers to Vergil's sixth Eclogue, in which the
boys bind the sleeping Silenus with his own garlands and demand a
song of him when he awakes. The song he sings is, significantly
enough, the story of the creation of the world and various other
myths.

The creation story which the oysterman tells Thoreau and
Channing is that of the United States. The oysterman was fourteen
years old at the time of the Battle of Concord. He heard the noise
of the cannons across the Bay (p. 81), and he saw George Washington,
commonly accepted as the "father of our country." The oysterman
had been present at the creation of the American state.

The oysterman shows a deep interest in the Biblical myths.
He reads his Bible often and is impressed with the fact of his worth-
lessness:
I am a nothing. What I gather from my Bible is just this: that man is a poor good-for-nothing critter, and everything is just as God sees fit and disposes (p. 82).

This belief, which may help him accept his place in Nature, does not lead him to lose his freedom of thought. When he was young he went once to hear thirteen kinds of religious teaching in one month, but he did not accept any of them, preferring to stick to his Bible and his private interpretations. He also exhibits an intellectual curiosity: he is interested in observing and describing nature, asks Thoreau questions about surveying, and has puzzled for years over the meaning of the name Axy.

He has been a voyager, claiming to have sailed around the world in his day. Perhaps it was that contact with the ocean which has made him accept its destructiveness, an acceptance which is evident in the matter-of-fact way he describes the wreck of the Franklin. Although he is an old man, he has not lived long because he has protected himself from Nature's destructiveness. Rather, his exposure to Nature had made him robust, which Thoreau is able to observe when the oysterman exposes his legs before going to bed and allows his wife to salve them.

The oysterman contrasts sharply with a Pilgrim like Deacon John Doane

who died in 1707, aged one hundred and ten. Tradition
says that he was rocked in a cradle several of his
last years. That, certainly, was not an Achillean life.
His mother must have let him slip when she dipped
him into the liquor which was to make him invulner-
able, and he went in, heels and all (p. 45).

Longevity, Thoreau is saying, is not as important as the heroism of
one's life. It is better to be vulnerable and face life--wild Nature--
squarely than to live safely and have to be rocked in a cradle before
one dies.

Several minor characters are also accepted as being fit to be
seen as America's spiritual Adams. The keepers of the Highland
lighthouse are two such characters. (The plural is used because
two different men filled the post during the 1849 and 1850 visits.)
They perform their task seriously, with a deep sense of responsibil-
ity, in spite of the fact that the government provides them with cheap
oil which congeals when it becomes very cold, making it necessary
for the keepers to heat the oil during the middle of the night. "Thus
he struggled, by every method, to keep his light shining before
men" (p. 170).

One keeper had the experience one morning of observing the
sun when it seemed to stand still two-thirds above the horizon for
some time before rising as usual. Thoreau suggests several scien-
tific explanations for this phenomenon—a cloud may have risen with
the sun or the keeper may have witnesses a looming, caused by
horizontal refraction—but it is clear that he approves of the keeper and his close relationship with the sun:

He certainly must be a son of Aurora to whom the sun looms, when there are so many millions to whom it glooms rather, or who never see it till an hour after it has risen. But it behooves us old stagers to keep our lamps trimmed and burning to the last, and not trust to the sun's looming (p. 174).

Thoreau describes the keeper as a man of "singular patience and intelligence" (p. 175) who entertains them well and answers their questions clearly.

One woman is described as facing life squarely and living heroically. In Nauset they see a woman

of a hardness and coarseness such as no man ever possesses or suggests. It was enough to see the vertebrae and sinews of her neck, and her set jaws of iron, which would have bitten a board-nail in two in their ordinary action, --braced against the world, talking like a man-of-war's-man in petticoats, or as if shouting to you through a breaker; who looked as if it made her head ache to live; hard enough for any enormity. I looked upon her as one who had committed infanticide; who never had a brother, unless it were some wee thing that died in infancy, --for what need of him?--and whose father must have died before she was born (p. 47).

The oysterman, the lighthouse keepers, and the woman of Nauset have many of the characteristics of the new hero which R. W. B. Lewis outlines in his book The American Adam. This hero is an individual who is freed from history, including the domination of
family and race. Rather than relying on traditions from the past, he stands alone, is self-reliant and self-propelling, meeting the challenges of life with his own unique resources. The oysterman has not accepted the religious dogma of the past; he is an independent thinker. The woman from Nauset possesses such strength that she does not need male assistance; she is not playing a traditional feminine role. The lighthouse keepers use their ingenuity to keep their lights burning in spite of the poor quality of oil with which the government supplies them. All four face their life in untamed Nature confidently and courageously; they are fit to be the parents of American pioneers.

In Cape Cod Thoreau turns East—toward the dawn, the ocean, and Europe, searching on the site of the first Pilgrim settlement for America's physical and spiritual origins. Although there is much in the work which Thoreau may have changed had he had the opportunity, one senses a certain satisfaction on his part with the mythology he has written. After writing Cape Cod, Thoreau did not continue looking eastward, but turned westward again. As he points out in the essay "Walking," the path for the walker is westward and forward, not eastward and backward: "We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and
adventure" (V, 218). The *Ne plus ultra* passage in *Cape Cod* also points westward. As he walks along the Atlantic shore, Thoreau lets his Imagination rest on the beaches of Spain and Portugal on the other side of the ocean:

A little south of east was Palos, where Columbus weighed anchor, and farther yet the pillars which Hercules set up; concerning which when we inquired at the top of our voices what was written on them, --for we had the morning sun in our faces, and could not see distinctly, --the inhabitants shouted *Ne plus ultra* (no more beyond), but the wind bore to us the truth only, *plus ultra* (more beyond), and over the Bay westward was echoed *ultra* (beyond) . . . we advised them to pull up stakes and plant those pillars of theirs on the shore of California, whither all our folks were gone, --the only *ne plus ultra* now (pp. 178-179).

Although the quest for a time has turned Thoreau eastward, he looks again toward the West, perhaps because in the westward movement of the pioneer there is again an opportunity for man, unhampered by civilization, to confront wild Nature.
Notes to Chapter Three


2. Ethel Seybold in Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics (New Haven: Yale, 1951), p. 111, note 1, points out that philologists now translate the word unresting, not unfruitful.

3. Harder, p. 6.


7. Wilson, 175.


Conclusion

In walking the beach of Cape Cod, Thoreau views himself as a lone pilgrim who is knocking at the ocean's gate for admittance (see letter quoted on p. 17). This desire to unite with and lose his separateness from Nature stems from Thoreau's belief that in Nature—not in man-made civilization—one can find the real stuff that life is made of and the only fit material the poet-philosopher can use to build his mythology. As Thoreau's Imagination interprets the material of his observations, he does not, however, develop a consistent stance toward Nature. Sometimes, like the Romantics he affirms Nature's conscious benevolence, and it seems easy for him to feel at one with her. But in other instances when the wildness of the ocean impresses him with the possibility of its destroying him, the images which he uses to describe the ocean suggest intentional maliciousness, and one senses his reluctance to put himself at Nature's mercy. Between these extremes are those times when Nature's facade is simply neutral, and Thoreau's descriptions are journalistic and factual, with no attempt to find spiritual truths in the data he is reporting. This shifting stance toward Nature is much more characteristic of Cape Cod than of Walden or A Week where the Nature described is tame and there is less threat of destruction if one gets too close to her.
In confronting the destruction which harsh Nature brings, Thoreau is able, for the most part, to remain detached and objective. This does not necessarily mean that he lacks sympathy for the wives and mothers who have lost their loved ones in a shipwreck. Rather Thoreau is able to see in death larger truths which persons tied too closely to a physical, temporal existence may not perceive. There is a spiritual aspect of the universe which transcends the physical. Thus a just man's hopes cannot be forever dashed even though the ocean may dash his body against the rocks. The sight of the shipwrecked body lying on the beach—in Nature—is not repulsive, for Thoreau's Imagination perceives that in completing Nature's cycle, the body possesses and rules over the shore with majesty, perhaps sacredness, in a way that a man still clutching for physical existence never can. Thoreau, of course, is still enjoying physical existence, but his inner man is not controlled by the "snivelling sympathies" which keep some men from affirming spiritual truths in the face of death.

Perhaps the greatest truth which Thoreau affirms in Cape Cod is the source of his physical, spiritual, and historical origins. It was for this purpose that he turned East toward the ocean, the Ancients, and the European ports from which America's first discoverers, explorers, and founders sailed. Thoreau finds in the
energy and motion of the ocean an adequate symbol for man's physical origins. Dry land emerged as the waters of the ocean separated, and Thoreau sees that creativity still evolving as the force of the waves beating upon the shore still forms sand. Man, too, he affirms has developed from the ocean's slime.

Looking toward Rome and Greece Thoreau sees the Ancients as his spiritual ancestors for they, too, lived in Nature and were involved in the making of myth. Thoreau finds in the Cape a few individuals, the oysterman, the lighthouse keepers, the woman of Nauset, who live confronting Nature like the Ancients. These are the American Adams and Eves, fit to father and mother the pioneers who will settle America.

Because the English were preoccupied with building civilizations—living on Nature, not in her—Thoreau rewrites American history. The English were not the first discoverers, explorers, and settlers of Cape Cod. Rather it is the Northmen with their tendency to cast their door posts overboard who first discovered America, and the French with their "imagination and spirit of adventure" who first explored and settled in the Cape Cod area. These were men who confronted and lived in untamed Nature, who had an awareness of values beyond the safety of civilization.

Perhaps the "spirit" which led the Frenchmen to explore the
New World is related in Thoreau's mind to the wind, which he describes as a "Spirit's breath," and to the body lying on the beach which has achieved a "certain majesty"—a spiritual quality. It is tempting to want to see in Thoreau an integrated cosmology, but wiser perhaps to admit that observing his belief in a Transcendence is not the same as defining what that Transcendence means to him. The material of Cape Cod resists such a definition.
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