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The Theme of Time in Thoreau's *Cape Cod*: The Crisis of the Present Shore

Benjamin Vilhauer

In the last paragraph of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau writes that Cape Cod is "wholly unknown to the fashionable world, and probably it will never be agreeable to them" (214). If this remark is referred to the geographical Cape Cod, it is sorely in error; if we instead connect with it Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, however, it is an impressive forecast. This book has been the subject of much less scholarship than Thoreau's other major works. Critics' readings have sometimes been so deficient that Walter Harding and Michael Meyer have described *Cape Cod* as Thoreau's "sunniest" and "least profound" book (66). This has to some degree been redressed by more recent writing, such as Joseph Moldenhauer's excellent "Historical Introduction," but many critics' investigations have still been limited to the shallower waters of *Cape Cod*. In an effort to begin charting one of its deeper channels, I will look at the way this text seeks to fathom the nature of time.

In the analysis of Harding and Meyer, one of *Cape Cod*'s weakest points is the accumulation of "undigested historical source material" in the tenth and final chapter, entitled "Provincetown" (67). They go so far as to recount the story that Thoreau's editor at *Putnam's* had the same criticism; Thoreau replied that he supposed he could put the text in question in "smaller type" (67). They imply that this response should be seen as Thoreau's own admission of his book's weakness. But the "undigested" material in chapter ten is integral to the book as a whole. Thoreau's remark about putting it in small type can only be understood in terms of his attitude toward history as a whole, clearly enunciated throughout his writings: that too great a reverence for history is one of the chief ills of civilization. In *Walden*, he tells us that "man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried" (10). In *Cape Cod*, his admonition becomes terse and ironic: "No people ever lived by cursing their fathers, however great a curse their fathers might have been to them" (17). This is the sense in which historical material belongs in small type.

Harding and Meyer's observation that the material is "undigested," however, provides food for thought in a different way than they intended, for digestion is a prominent trope in *Cape Cod*. Standing on Cape Cod, Thoreau watches "the sea nibbling voraciously at the continent" (12). In fact, the historical material in chapter ten remains intentionally undigested in

precisely the same way the Cape remains undigested.

The history Thoreau includes concerns the discovery and exploration of the Eastern coast of North America, and much of it focuses upon Cape Cod. But Thoreau does not lay out a clearly defined, determinate timeline; instead, he describes the inconsistencies and arguments for priority and property in discovery and colonization. He considers the possibility of Viking landings and the claim that "This land . . . was accustomed to be visited by Gauls from the very dawn of history" (195-96). Preferring truthful historical accounts, Thoreau attacks English settlers' tall tales, as when he ridicules an account by John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts, that recounts the expedition of another man who "found much 'Muscovy glass,' and 'could rive out pieces of forty feet long and seven or eight broad'" (186). By contrast, Thoreau praises the precision and seriousness of French explorers, according them priority:

> While the very inhabitants of New England were thus fabling about the country a hundred miles inland, which was a *terra incognita* to them,—or rather many years before the earliest date referred to,—Champlain, the *first governor of Canada*, not to mention the inland discoveries of Cartier, Roberval, and others, of the preceding century, and his own earlier voyage, had already gone to war against the Iroquois in their forest forts, and penetrated to the Great Lakes and wintered there, before a Pilgrim had heard of New England. (186)

Later in the chapter, Thoreau asks us to "consider what stuff history is made of,—that for the most part it is merely a story agreed upon by posterity" (197). But the texts he excerpts demonstrate that posterity has come to no agreement at all.[1]

While unreflective common sense may assume that history forms a determinate continuum, Thoreau instead sees it take shape as a shifting, amorphous landscape—a temporal landscape with all the attributes of the Cape's physical landscape. Here, Thoreau finds, the "sand is steadily travelling westward at a rapid rate, 'more than a hundred yards,' says one writer, within the memory of inhabitants now living" (120). Thoreau hears accounts of the bizarre phenomena that result from the Cape's motion; for example:

> [An inhabitant] 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." (120-1)

Due to the shore's ceaseless altering, its own form is inconstant, and

through Thoreau's perceptions this uncertainty is passed on to the objects resting upon the shore:

> Objects on the beach, whether men or inanimate things, look not only exceedingly grotesque, but much larger and more wonderful than they actually are. Lately, when approaching the sea-shore several degrees south of this, I saw before me, seemingly half a mile distant, what appeared like bold and rugged cliffs on the beach, fifteen feet high, and whitened by the sun and waves; but after a few steps it proved to be low heaps of rags,—part of the cargo of a wrecked vessel,—scarcely more than a foot in height. (84)

These excerpts show us a landscape in flux, defined and redefined at the point of the shore. In this historical material, history is defined and redefined in the present, as Thoreau tries to bring texts into agreement where posterity has not.

In metaphorically equating history with the landscape, Thoreau parallels the shore with the present. Thoreau makes this connection explicit (or at least as explicit as his more complex thoughts ever are) at the end of chapter ten, after concluding his reflections upon the history of discovering America. In the last paragraph, after wondering about "the fashionable world" on the Cape in times to come, he returns from his meditations upon the future:

> But this shore will never be more attractive than it is now. Such beaches as are fashionable are here made and unmade in a day, I may almost say, by the sea shifting its sands . . . 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. (214)

If we keep in mind that these lines come at the end of a chapter primarily concerned with history—one that suggests (though tacitly) that history must be constructed in the present if it is to exist at all—it becomes clear that Thoreau's analysis applies every bit as much to the now, or the present, as it does to the shore. The tastes of the "fashionable" are for static forms constant through time that do not challenge our standards of conceptualization, but on Cape Cod, such forms are "made and unmade" daily: there is no concrete solidity, only the flux of the present. The answer to the question he poses, then, is twofold: the "spring of springs" and "waterfall of waterfalls" is spatially understood as where the ocean comes ashore, and is temporally understood as the present, with "spring" and "waterfall" representing the point of genesis of all forms. The subsequent declaration that the spring and the waterfall are "Here" once again is intentionally ambigu-

ous to allow the dual reference to the "shore" and the "now." Thoreau maintains this dual reference in the next sentence through the use of "it" immediately before the semicolon.

The second half of the sentence, when Thoreau identifies the lighthouse and the fisherman's hut as the best vantage points upon "it," at first seem so specific as to violate the abstractness and ambiguity necessary in the dual reference for which I am arguing, but it is important to remember the symbolic functions of both the lighthouse and the fisherman. The lighthouse serves as the union of the ideas of illumination and reflection, as illustrated in chapter eight, "The Highland Light." The lighthouse, casting its rays out into stormy darkness to preserve imperiled mariners, clearly functions as a symbol of transcendental guidance; it can, however, work in an optically and symbolically reversed way:

> The keeper remarked that the centre of the flame should be exactly opposite the centre of the reflectors, and that accordingly, if he was not careful to turn down his wicks in the morning, the sun falling on the reflectors on the south side of the building would set fire to them, like a burning-glass, in the coldest day, and he would look up at noon and see them all lighted! When your lamp is ready to give light, it is readiest to receive it, and the sun will light it. (137)

This passage illustrates a reciprocal relation, or a kind of circulation, between the finite mind and the infinite, which can only occur when the "center of the flame" is "opposite the center of the reflector." This "centeredness" has a variety of connotations, but among them is the idea of attention, or of presence of mind.

The figure of the fisherman also has symbolic ramifications in religious mythology, which can be overlooked amidst the details of the actual practice of fishermen that Thoreau chronicles in *Cape Cod*: "it is long since the fishers of men were fishermen" (35). The metaphorical connotations of both the lighthouse and the fisherman's hut allow them to become abstract enough again for us to read the second-to-last sentence of the book without violating the carefully ambiguous reference. Then, in the final sentence, it becomes clear that the place to stand to "put all America behind" you is not only the lighthouse or fisher's hut, but also the geographical and historical margin—the shore, and the present.

As a further complication, when Thoreau exhorts his reader to stand "here" in a "storm," he suggests that what is done at the shore of the present is done in danger and chaos. The combination of an imperative to engage with the present and an intuition of danger also appears on the very first page of the book:

> As for my title, I suppose 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. It is also the safest part to take a serpent by. (3)

A "forelock" is a tuft of hair upon the forehead, usually of a horse. It is the part presented to us when we face something; taking "Time by the forelock" could mean nothing other than taking it by the present. Immediately after telling us this about time, however, Thoreau reminds us that it is also safest to grasp a serpent by the head; this implies that there is danger involved here as well. What is the danger? To understand, we must follow yet another chain of reference.

In the above reading of the final lines of the book, I argued that the ambiguous indexical words, such as the "here" of the spring and waterfall, and the "there" where we stand to put America behind us, should be interpreted as referring in two ways, to the shore and to the present. But there is a third reference: to the text itself. The genesis of form is "here" at the point of writing as well as the point of the present. In *Cape Cod*, as in all Thoreau's works, the work of writing as the creation of form happens in the foreground of the text, and an appreciation of this is crucial to grasping Thoreau's mission. For Thoreau, the work of the writer is to transmute experience into linguistic form—to capture the present in the network of a conceptual scheme, thereby forcing it into a determinate historical order.

The place in the text most helpful in understanding how this works is in chapter four, when Thoreau first quotes and then recasts a poem by Longfellow on seaweed:

> "Ever drifting, drifting, drifting
> On the shifting
> Currents of the restless main."
>
> But he was not thinking of this shore, when he added—
>
> "Till, in sheltered coves and reaches
> Of sandy beaches,
> All have found repose again."
>
> *These* weeds were the symbols of those grotesque and fabulous thoughts which have not yet got into the sheltered coves of literature.
>
> "Ever drifting, drifting, drifting
> On the shifting

Currents of the restless heart,"
And not yet "in books recorded
They, like hoarded
Household words, no more depart." (*Cape Cod* 54)

The key phrases in this excerpt are "this shore" and "*these* weeds." Once again, they do not have a single reference. First, "This shore" is not the one Longfellow had in mind because the beach of Cape Cod is too dangerous to offer "repose" to "all." Second, Longfellow could not have though of "this shore" because it is the one Thoreau is creating, *Cape Cod* in the moment of writing it. This becomes clear when Thoreau explains that "*these* weeds" symbolized the "grotesque and fabulous thoughts that have not yet got into the . . . coves of literature." The weeds symbolize thought and experience, and more specifically, *these weeds* represent *these words*, that is, the words with which Thoreau salvages thought and experience in the present of his writing. They have not yet got into literature because Thoreau draws them in as he writes and as we read. Similarly, *these* weeds "'drifting / On the shifting / Currents of the restless heart,'" are "*not yet* 'in books recorded'" because the construction of the text is the construction of language, the recording in books, in the present moment of writing.

Thoreau, as a writer, "hoards" his weed-words like "household words" and prevents them from "departing"; transforming alien "fabulous thoughts" into "household words" evokes an idea of intimacy with language, of domestication of chaos into the sphere of the human. This is Thoreau's mission, but it can only be fulfilled through disciplined engagement with the present, with the now that is the point of flux and genesis of form. This idea is elaborated later on the same page, when Thoreau tells us that "Before the land rose out of the ocean, and became *dry* land, chaos reigned; and between high and low water mark, where she is partially disrobed and rising, a sort of chaos reigns still, which only anomalous creatures can inhabit" (54-55). Here, the present is represented as "where [land] is partially disrobed and rising"; its existence relative to the constructed temporal continuum is nothing more than a place "between high and low water marks." Within the structure of our language, we construct the past as a linear continuum, but when we are centered upon the now, "where chaos reigns still," we see that there is no objective order in the relationship of the present to other times. The ocean of chaotic formlessness may be at one level now, at a higher level at another moment, and at a level lower than both of the others at yet a different moment, but within the formal structure of our language, we construct a linear progression from a determinate past to a determinate

future. Only "anomalous creatures" can inhabit the chaos of the present, creatures not governed by the laws of our existing concepts. What we encounter when centered in the present is the atemporal and the preconceptual; language use, epitomized by writing, names the anomalous, and the named becomes absent from the present.

I promised, though, that by following the chain of reference from the text to itself, we would come to understand the danger of the present. The danger becomes clear when we feel a tension between Thoreau's ideas here that may not be immediately apparent: if language conceptualizes the anomalous and forces it from the present, yet we try to heed Thoreau's admonition to center ourselves in the present, then how are we to conceive of what it means to be a writer? To inhabit the chaos of the present permanently, we must become anomalous creatures: we must accept that our words are but partial expressions, that genuinely present experience can never be captured within concepts, that we are severed from ourselves by the razor edge of our form of language, half human and half inhuman, half living and half dead. This understanding recalls some lines from *Walden*:

> If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. (98)

In *Cape Cod,* the idea is the same, but the tone has changed: the edge is perhaps not so sweet, the conclusion not so happy. Perhaps it is because of the focus on the alien, uncaring Nature of the Cape instead of the nurturing Nature of Walden.[2] This intuition of the omnipresence of death is the crisis of the shore in *Cape Cod.* This is the reason the figure of the wrecker holds sway over *Cape Cod*, and the reason why the first chapter concerns a shipwreck; this chapter, too, attests that symbols are signs of wreckage:

> A little further was the flag of the St. John spread on a rock to dry, and held down by stones at the corners. This frail, but essential and significant portion of the vessel, which had so long been the sport of the winds, was sure to reach the shore. (8)

The only reason that the flag "was sure to reach the shore" is its "*sign*ificance," that is, its power to represent something absent. For Thoreau, what is absent is absent through a kind of death, in this case, the "'one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset'" (4). Thoreau explicitly avows the role of wrecker, and generalizes it to all humanity:

> Are we not all wreckers contriving that some treasure may be washed up on our beach, that we may secure it, and do we not infer the habits of these Nauset and Barnegat wreckers, from the common modes of getting a living?
>
> The sea, vast and wild as it is, bears thus the waste and wrecks of human art to its remotest shore. There is no telling what it may not vomit up. It lets nothing lie; not even the giant clams which cling to its bottom. It is still heaving up the tow-cloth of the Franklin, and perhaps a piece of some old pirate's ship, wrecked more than a hundred years ago, comes ashore to-day. (90)

The second paragraph of this passage again highlights the close relationship between the condition of wreckage and the imposition of temporal order upon the timeless: the sea tosses ashore signs of the *Franklin*, wrecked not long before Thoreau's visit, at the same time as it washes ashore signs of a pirate ship wrecked at a time much more distant into the past.

There is, however, more than one way of being a wrecker. Human life, determined by our form of language, may inevitably partake of wreckage. But how we accept this condition makes a difference to how we understand what it means to be human. Thoreau discusses the way wreckers can establish property in wrecks. He quotes another writer who explains that in Greenland,

> Whoever finds drift-wood, or the spoils of a shipwreck on the strand, enjoys it as his own, though he does not live there. But he must haul it ashore and lay a stone upon it, as a token that some one has taken possession of it, and this stone is the deed of security, for no other Greenlander will offer to meddle with it afterwards. (46)

On Cape Cod, however, a wrecker appropriates a wreck by "sticking two sticks into the ground crosswise above it" (46). Later, Thoreau describes claiming wrecks for himself:

> From time to time we saved a wreck ourselves, a box or barrel, and set it on its end, and appropriated it with crossed sticks; and it will lie there perhaps, respected by brother wreckers, until some more violent storm shall take it, really lost to man until wrecked again. (91-92)

This is an example of wrecking gone wrong. When we interpret these wrecks as symbols of experience taken into language, and notice that the passage begins "from time to time," they become an allegory for a

relation to experience that does not merely acknowledge the condition of wreckage, but glories in devastation. It is inevitable that experience must be wrecked against language if it is to be human experience. This is the condition of our separateness and finitude. Here, however, the wreck is not even experienced as such. In other words, what is symbolized here is the crossing and abandoning of one's own experience. One establishes that this is one's *own* experience, not anyone else's. But one fails to *take* ownership of it, thereby accepting a kind of alienation from one's own experience.

Most of Thoreau's works contain criticism of institutionalized religion, and *Cape Cod* is no exception. For this reason, it is significant that Thoreau brings to our attention the fact that while some ocean cultures simply place stones upon their wrecks, the inhabitants of Cape Cod cross their wrecks. This observation might be taken to imply that Thoreau finds an inherent predisposition in Christianity towards alienation from experience, an interpretation borne out by the longest passage of religious criticism in the book, which comes in the second half of chapter three, "The Plains of Nauset." This segment concerns the religious history of the Cape Cod town of Eastham. It begins and ends with explicit references to the passage to time:

> As it will take us an hour to get over this plain, and there is no variety in the prospect, peculiar as it is, I will read a little in the history of Eastham the while. (33)

> There was no better way to make the reader realize how long and peculiar that plain was, and how long it took to traverse it, than by inserting these extracts in the midst of my narrative. (43)

Here, Thoreau gives us a perspective from which traversing the plains of Nauset seems boring or undiverting. He also declares that the best way of evoking this experience is to provide religious history of the vicinity. There are at least two ways to read this. Certainly, at the surface, it implies that institutionalized religion is boring. In a deeper sense, however, Thoreau is implying that a certain attitude towards existence, which perceives the world as featureless and uninteresting, is the perspective from which institutionalized religion naturally springs.

Institutionalized religion serves as a surrogate for experience: instead of resolving our dissatisfaction with the world present in experience by seeking greater engagement and intimacy with it, we deflect our relations with experience into the future through the myth of heavenly salvation. This is exactly the sense of the passage on wrecking quoted earlier. Dogmatic Christianity confuses us into "crossing" the wrecks of human experience against the promise of heavenly eternity, a myth constructed

within language that appeals to the objective reality of the temporal continuum which is also a construction within language. This has the effect of crippling our ability to engage with the present, which, as Thoreau more explicitly explains in *Walden*, is the only real access to the transcendent:

> In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. (97)

If, as we have seen, there are different attitudes we can take toward the fact that wreckage is a condition of experience, then what might it mean to ignore, or reject, this condition? There are moments toward the end of chapter one, "The Shipwreck," when Thoreau illustrates the pull of such a desire. For example:

> As I looked over the water, I saw the isles rapidly wasting away, the sea nibbling voraciously at the continent, the springing arch of a hill suddenly interrupted, as at Point Alderton,—what botanists might call premorse,—showing, by its curve against the sky, how much space it must have occupied, where now was water only. On the other hand, these wrecks of isles were being fancifully arranged into new shores, as at Hog Island, inside of Hull, where everything seemed to be gently lapsing into futurity. This isle had got the very form of a ripple,—and I thought that the inhabitants should bear a ripple for device on their shields, a wave passing over them, with the *datura*, which is said to produce mental alienation of long duration without affecting the bodily health, springing from its edge. (12)

The notion of "gently lapsing into futurity" is the focus of this passage—it evokes a way of being in time that refuses to acknowledge wreckage and loss as conditions of authentic experience. If we make it our goal to lapse gently into futurity, our "bodily health" may not be affected, but we will have exchanged our experience for a "mental alienation of long duration." That this way of being does in fact constitute a refusal to acknowledge the real conditions of our experience is indicated in a passage at the very end of the chapter that evokes the same mood:

> The ocean did not look, now, as if any were ever shipwrecked in it; it was not grand and sublime, but beautiful as a lake. Not a vestige of a wreck was visible, nor could I believe that the bones of many a shipwrecked man were buried in that pure sand. But to go on with our first excursion. (14)

The mood that in the previous excerpt produced the impulse to transcend time here produces an impulse to transcend the sublime into the beautiful, in opposition to the predominant tendency of *Cape Cod*. Mitchell Robert Breitweiser draws from *Cape Cod* the conclusion that "Beauty is enjoyed by the closed mind: the destructive power of the sublime [is] made known to the unrepentant" (7). To choose beauty over sublimity is to abandon the present, and to select form over generative chaos, voluntarily amputating that part of itself which is the anomalous creature inhabiting chaos, is to seek a closed wholeness of artifice rather than the split openness of self-division that acknowledges the real conditions of being human.

The last sentence of this excerpt is especially telling. On a surface reading, it would seem to say that the preceding text was a digression from the central narrative, but this is not the case. With this fact in view, the sentence can be seen to do something quite different. It acknowledges that the desire to turn sublimity into beauty is a desire to *stop*, and it reflects this desire.[3] But the sentence nonetheless declares an intention to go on. The way it goes on, however, is by stopping: it is the last sentence of the chapter. Thoreau's point seems to be that we can only really go on by acknowledging the end of something. Here, it is a part of the text, but with reference to us, it is ourselves. Whatever our words can contain is swept away the moment we give it form, to be wrecked against the shore of the past; what remains of us is washed in anomaly without hope of a harbor. We are at sea in the storm of the present, and our words are our wrecks.

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NOTES

[1] John Lowney argues that there is in *Cape Cod* an "assertion of a historical relativism," but his approach is sociological and does not inquire after Thoreau's outlook upon time in general (Lowney 246).

[2] The way language divides us from ourselves in *Cape Cod* has affinities

with the theme of ecstasy in *Walden*, specifically, Thoreau's thought that "we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense" (135). For valuable discussions of this theme, see Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*; Stephen Hahn, *Thoreau*; and Alan Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness.*

[3] The way *Cape Cod* reflects the desire to turn sublimity into beauty may explain why so many readers take it to be Thoreau's most cheerful book.

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Walden's Political Thoreau

Paul Friedrich

Of the myriad ways *Walden* can be read, one of the most popular and also most profound is as a book of nature in the familiar sense—describing it, intuiting it, knowing it, and I think this is what Henry Thoreau intended—in part. But he intended other things and as he says near the beginning, "I went there [to Walden Pond] to transact some private business," and "private business" can cover a lot beyond intuiting the deeper meanings of a loon, even one he called a "silly loon." If we explore many of Thoreau's basic ideas and concerns and passions, because he was a very passionate man in his Yankee style, we can trace how a concern with nature can radiate out to other themes to be spelled out and interwoven in what follows. These themes are 1) his idea of nature, both concrete and abstractly philosophical; 2) the Transcendentalist world view which it reflects; and, 3) the crucial early Indian sources, notably the *Gita*. All three of these themes are integral with the fourth: his politics, his political thought, and his political activism. My more pointed objective is to show that his politics was partly masked but also made more persuasive by the way it was tucked into his nature writing.

Nature

Let's turn to some vivid pages about this nature. Many involve the red fox, the most intelligent citizen in "the civilization of nature"—including the wily fox who circled back to where the hunt began only to be bowled over by the wily hunter who had been waiting for him to do just that. One great page gives us the demonic loon who repeatedly outwits Henry during a long chase and then, aided by the god of loons, vanishes into the mist with a howl of a laugh. Yet other pages represent hawks in some of *Walden*'s most achieved sentences:

> The hawk is aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea. Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternatively soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts. (*Walden* 159)