

Cape Cod: A Cosmos between Appearance and Reality

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In spite of the fact that Thoreau traveled to Cape Cod four times,¹ and worked off and on for ten years on what he had seen and thought during these trips, *Cape Cod*, if compared with *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience,” has not attracted much critical interest. Some critics regard *Cape Cod* as “the sunniest” and “less profound” book among Thoreau's works² while others as “a travel book” (Drake 7) and “an epic” (McAlear). There are also certain critics who deal with such issues in *Cape Cod* as illusion (Schneider), aspects of vision (Miller), spiritual quest (Couser), and shipwrecks (Breitwieser).

Among these critics, only Naomi J. Miller tries to “explore the significance of the relationship between seer and seen in *Cape Cod*, and the relevance of that relationship to Thoreau's presentation of the narrative as a whole” (185). However, what Miller covers is limited to aspects of vision in landscape and oceanscape, for example, Charity-house, the surface and bottom of the ocean, etc. As a matter of fact, *Cape Cod* is not a book limited in its aspects of vision merely to the relationship between nature and man, but rather explores the relationship between nature and all living beings. What Thoreau presents in *Cape Cod* is a cosmos full of various aspects of vision, the vision incorporating both appearance and reality.

At the very beginning of the book, Thoreau, with a rather Ishmaelian style, reveals the purpose of his trip. He went to Cape Cod, “wishing to get a better view than I had of the ocean.” In fact, the “view” Thoreau gets is not merely of ocean but also of landscape, inhabitants, flora, and fauna. He listens to various sounds and reads historical records about Cape Cod. As the number of his trips to the Cape increases, Thoreau enlarges, without the limitation of time and space, his vision, from Cape Cod to America, then to the whole world,

¹ Thoreau had been Cape Cod for four times. The first time (October, 1849) and the third (July, 1855), he went there with William Ellery Channing and stayed for a week and for eleven days respectively; the second time (June, 1850) and the fourth (June, 1857), he traveled there alone and stayed for five and for ten days respectively. The main outline of the book is the record of his first three trips. He wrote a 15,000-word account in the *Journal*, but none of that material was included in *Cape Cod*.

² In *The New Thoreau Handbook*, both Walter Harding and Michael Meyer argue that “*Cape Cod* is Thoreau's sunniest book and least profound” (66). Sherman Paul in *The Shores of America* and Willard H. Bonner in *Harp of the Shore* share Harding and Meyer's positive viewpoint, saying that the theme of the book is America—the growth of a new nation. By contrast, Richard Bridgman thinks that this book is full of dark images—“of sickness, drowning, mutilation, of whirling madness, of dwarfed trees, of lanced and grounded fish” (*Dark Thoreau* 161). In the middle of these two extremes is William Howarth, who remarks that “Thoreau's experiences on the Cape were a peculiar mixture of the tragic and the comic” (*The Book of Concord* 54).

and finally to the cosmos.

The first view Thoreau gets of the ocean is its grim and furious face, its power to destroy all materials and lives. In the chapter “Shipwreck,” Thoreau first of all confronts the stark fact of death caused by the ocean. There are one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset when the brig St. John is wrecked. The passengers from Ireland, embracing the same hopes as Columbus and the Pilgrims, “immigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of” (9).³ It is worth noting that the impact of shipwreck on Thoreau and on the local people is different. At first, Thoreau is surprised at the indifferent attitude of sea-weed collectors to those drowned: “Drown who might, they did not forget that this weed was a valuable manure. The shipwreck had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society” (7). With a man-centered viewpoint, he cannot bear thinking that the dead bodies of human beings, to the sea-weed collectors, are not as valuable as sea-weed, just because the former cannot be used, as the latter can, as fertilizer. In addition to this, being an inlander, he is “more surprised [than the local people] at the power of the waves” (7), which break everything into pieces.

Then, Thoreau tries to minimize the impact of shipwreck on him by saying “it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected” (8). At first glance, one may believe that he readily accepts death as a matter of course. Yet a little thought gives pause. If he regards death as a part of the economy of daily life and nature, what is the sense of dwelling on the topic of death again and again as he does? On the outside, Thoreau tries his best to maintain a look of composure. “If this was the law of Nature,” he argues, “why waste any time in awe or pity?” And then he reasons, “Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes” (9). However, it seems that this sort of argument is not strong enough to convince himself; therefore, he resorts to the transcendental belief to pacify his inner commotion.

No doubt, we have reason to thank God that they have not been “shipwrecked into life again.” The mariner who makes the safest port in Heaven, perchance, seems to his friends on earth to be shipwrecked, for they deem Boston Harbor the better place; though perhaps invisible to them, a skillful pilot comes to meet him, and the fairest and balmiest gales blow off that coast, his good ship makes the land in halcyon days, and he kisses the shore in rapture there, while his old hulk tosses in the surf here. It is hard to part with one's body, but, no doubt, it is easy enough to do

³ All parenthetical page references concerning *Cape Cod* are taken from the first edition with the journal recreated in pictures by William F. Robinson, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1985.

without it when once it is gone. (*Cape Cod* 9)

Even after such reasoning, he is still obsessed by the aftermath of shipwreck: “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” (9). The reason why Thoreau is so shocked in facing the furious and brutal ocean, as R. J. Schneider has perceptively pointed out, is that he approaches the Cape with the same attitude with which he goes over to Walden Pond. In other words, it is his naive, optimistic, and romantic preconception that makes him believe, from a man-centered viewpoint, that nature and man are always in a harmonious relationship. As he observes the Cape more, by and by, he changes his standpoint, learning to cast away his preconceptions. And it is this sort of change, or more precisely, the enlargement of his vision, which lets him find the fact that nature is indifferent not only to man, but also to all things—animate as well as inanimate.

In fact, during the storm, the ocean also casts up driftwood, fish, crabs, sea-weed, kelp, shells, etc. On the one hand, the ocean indeed ruins certain living things brutally; but, on the other hand, through the same process of destruction, she nourishes others. Thoreau finds the comforting fact that the wrecks are one of the economic resources for the Cape Codders, who salvage everything useful from the beach. They also pick up drift-wood and sea-weed, using them as fuel and manure. In addition, dogs and birds live on the washed-up things. Probably, what Thoreau says in his *Journal* sums up best this notion: “Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is making room for another” (*The Living Thought of Thoreau* 174).

Since “the Cape landscape is a constant mirage” (37), it is difficult for people to predict or see things precisely. In some respects, appearances are deceiving and unreliable. For example, the soil of the Cape looks barren, and so travelers might deduce that vegetables, crops, fruit-trees are not fruitful. Yet the fact is totally opposite. The apple-trees are fruitful; “the vegetables raised in the sand, without manure, are remarkably sweet,” and look “remarkably green and healthy” (36); and crops are bountiful. This pattern of deception repeats itself again and again throughout the whole book. Even objects on the beach are not easily identified:

Whether men or inanimate things, [they] 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, seeming half a mile distant, what appeared like bold and rugged cliffs in the beach, fifteen feet high, and whitened by the sun and waves; but after a few steps it proved to be

heaps of rags—part of the cargo of a wrecked vessel—scarcely more than a foot in height. (*Cape Cod* 92)

Similarly, the smallest objects floating on the sea appear “indefinitely large,” but upon coming ashore, prove to be nothing but “ridiculous bits of wood or weed” (58). Therefore, Thoreau and Channing “began to doubt whether the Atlantic itself would bear a still closer inspection, and would not turn out to be a but small pond, if it should come ashore to us”(58). What they may have learned from these experiences is that appearance is different from reality. To see objects properly, besides setting aside preconceptions, one should pay attention to distance. Different distances between the observer and the observed produce different perceptions.

Another episode demonstrating visual illusion concerns a long chain of clear but shallow pools of water. When approached, Thoreau says, “they appeared to lie by magic on the side of the vale, like a mirror left in a slanting position” (160), even though the land is quite level. In the same fashion, Thoreau reports that “the inside half of the beach sloped upward toward the water to meet the other” half; “I was not convinced of the contrary till I descended the bank, though the shaded outlines left by the waves of a previous tide but half-way down the apparent declivity might have taught me better” (161).

It is interesting to note that the possible explanation to these two cases is not the problem of distance but rather the problem of angle. In the first case, Thoreau and Channing approached the pools “in a diagonal direction across the valley,” where “the smooth and spotless sand sloped upward by a small angle to the horizon on every side” (160). In other words, the pools are in a position lower than the valley. In addition, they reached the valley at noon that the light was brighter than it would be in the morning or in the afternoon. As they looked down toward the pools from a higher position, the surface of the water reflects the light, creating an image of itself on the opposite side of the sand. Due to the fact that the sand on every side is higher than the pools, the refraction makes the pool appear “like a mirror left in a slanting position.” It is the same for the second case. The bank is higher than the beach and the sea. The refraction of the water makes the beach look lower than the water.

Sounds in the Cape are also deceiving and unreliable. Thoreau includes three examples concerning aural hallucination. First of all, the cry of mackerel-gulls originally seems “like the sound of some vibrating metal,” then becomes like voices “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....” Finally, their sounds are transformed into “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” (160). It is difficult for Thoreau to tell which one is the real note of the gulls because their voices “harmonized well with the scenery and the roar of surf” (160).

This passage carries two possible implications. First, the “eternal melody” is changeless, but the listener is greatly influenced by his state of mind and situation. Consequently, “the same strain” can be either “a dirge” or “a morning song of rejoicing.” Secondly, it is the listener who subjectively interprets what he hears; and, to make things more complex, there are two sounds mixed together. In this case, the aural hallucination is not simply the result of the listener's subjective interpretation but also of the mixed sounds.

The next example of aural hallucination is the “Rut”—“a peculiar roar of the sea before the wind changes” (83). Standing on a hill not far from the shore, Thoreau

was startled by a sudden, loud sound from the sea, as if a large steamer were letting off steam by the shore, so that I caught my breath and felt my blood run cold for an instant, and I turned about, expecting to see one of the Atlantic steamer thus out of her course, but there was nothing unusual to be seen. (*Cape Cod* 82-83)

Being an inlander, Thoreau is not familiar with the Rut. His mistaking it as the sound from the steamer shows that he, in this situation, can think of nothing but the sounds that he knows and only make association with one of them. In other words, his spontaneous response reflects what he has in his mind. By contrast, the inhabitants of the Cape do not mistake the Rut for the sound of a steamer because they know both sounds, and the difference between them.

A final example concerning aural hallucination occurs when Thoreau returned to Concord. He says that “[he] seemed to hear the sea roar, as if [he] lived in a shell, for a week afterward” (217). As a sharp contrast to this experience, early in the book Thoreau and Channing met a school-boy on the plain of Nauset. When asked about the sea roar, the latter “hardly knew what we meant, his ears were so used to it. He would have more plainly heard the same sound in a shell” (36).

The keynote of this marked contrast is adaptability as a universal human trait. If Thoreau had lived at the Cape for a couple of years, he too would have grown used to, and heard less plainly, the roar of the sea, just as the school-boy did. However, the fact is that he spent only three weeks in the Cape. Before going there, he had not had any experience hearing the sea roar. When he came back to Concord, his sense of hearing was not immediately restored its normal function. So it is no wonder that he heard the sea roar at home “for a week afterward.”

In the Cape, the outward appearance of the buildings also does not necessarily match with their interior comfort as seen from three examples—the local house, Charity-house, and the lighthouse. In the chapter “Across the Cape,” Thoreau reports his impression of this region, saying: “In short, the country looked so barren that I several times refrained from

asking the inhabitants for a string or a piece of wrapping-paper, for I should rob them” (118). But later on, he changes his opinion because “[the] outward aspect of the houses and shops frequently suggested a poverty which their interior comfort and even richness disproved.” Then he gives an example to support what he has said:

You might meet a lady daintily dressed in the Sabbath morning,
wading in among the sand-hills, from church, where there appeared
no house fit to receive her, yet no doubt the interior of the house
answered to the exterior of the lady. (*Cape Cod* 183)

Compared with the visual and aural hallucinations mentioned above, the incongruity between outward appearance and interior decoration of the houses is caused not so much by the objects themselves as by the observer's predisposition to judge things by appearance. Commonly, a person approaches unfamiliar things and draws conclusions based on common sense and the knowledge he has about similar objects. Yet common sense and knowledge do not guarantee that what one sees is the real face of things, especially in the Cape.

Charity-house provides another example of the incongruity between outward appearance and inward facilities. Originally, Charity-house was built for shipwrecked mariners and passengers when they came ashore in the freezing winter. However, after putting his eyes to “a knot-hole in the door,” Thoreau finds that

there were some stones and some loose wads of wool on the floor,
and an empty fireplace at the further end; but it was not supplied
with matches, or straw, or hay, that [I] could see, nor
'accommodated with a beach.' Indeed, it was the wreck of all
cosmical beauty there within. (*Cape Cod* 64)

Thoreau, looking “through the knot-hole into the Humane house, into the very bowels of mercy,” realizes “how cold is charity! How inhumane humanity!” Then he concludes that the inside of the Charity-house is “night without a star” and its outward appearance looks like “a sea-side box.” It is anything but “a humane house” (65).

It is also interesting to note that light, without regard to its naturalness or artificiality, is untrustworthy. At the Highland Light, Thoreau reports that the lighthouse lamps had in previous years nearly gone out because the oil allotted to the lighthouse was of poor quality. The lighthouse keeper “was obliged to warm the oil in a kettle in his house at midnight, and fill his lamps over again” (144). In addition, the windows of the lighthouse had been of small, thin panes of glass that a severe storm would sometimes break; thus, “when the mariner stood most in need of their guidance, they had... nearly converted the light-house into a dark lantern, which emitted only a few feeble rays, and those commonly on the land or lee side” (144). Sometimes its lights were dimmed by frost, moths, or small birds. Furthermore, there are as

many as three lighthouses operating around the Cape. No wonder mariners would sometimes mistake a mackerel fisherman's lantern or a cottager's light for that of the lighthouse, or would miscalculate distances when they used the lights for reference. A lighthouse is supposed to use its light to warn passing ships that it is dangerous around the region, but ironically enough, these lights are either invisible until the mariners sail their ships against rocks, or are too weak making them to think that they are still a long way from the shore. In the second case, the light of the lighthouse can become a fatal attraction.

In the same fashion, the sun is also untrustworthy. One lighthouse keeper tells Thoreau of a “looming” of the sun which he had witnessed. Rising to walk on the shore half an hour before sunrise, the keeper was astonished to see the sun already two-thirds above the horizon. Thinking his clocks must be wrong, he returned to the lighthouse and extinguished the lamp, but the sun remained at that height for about fifteen minutes and then rose as usual. The fact that even the sun is unreliable suggests to Thoreau that we must “keep our lamps rimmed and burning to the last, and not trust to the sun's looming” (146).

What Thoreau emphasizes in the conclusion of this episode lies not so much in the unreliability of the sun's looming as in the need for every man to trust his own inner light and not to depend too much on the light of nature to observe Nature. Everyone must be self-reliant, especially when engaged in a spiritual quest, like the one Thoreau himself makes in the Cape.

Another matter concerning appearance and reality in the Cape is its inhabitants. Of all the inhabitants, Thoreau thinks, the old oysterman, John Y. Newcomb, is the perfect model of a human being. Thoreau admires him because he has “a sense of his own nothingness” and is willing to live “just as God sees fit and disposes” (70). Thoreau characterizes him as “the merriest old man that we had ever seen, and one of the best preserved” (79). However, the actuality of the old man's presence is rather different. He is garrulous, opinionated, and self-centered in his own world. One time when his wife tells him that he had better stop his gabbing (he “talked a steady stream”), he impatiently says: “Don't hurry me; I have lived too long to be harried” (84).

The old man is so opinionated that he, at one moment, tells Thoreau that oysters can move “just as much as [his] shoes,” while at another moment saying that oysters “bedded themselves down in the sand, flat side up, round side down” (71). When asked to explain the contradiction, he stubbornly argues that oysters “merely settled down as they grew; if put down in a square they would be found so; but the clam could move quite fast” (72). He also shows the other side of his nature—self-centeredness—in the wreck of the Franklin. After having been informed by a boy that there was a vessel in distress, he “first ate his breakfast, and then walked over to the top of the hill by the shore, and sat down there, having found a

comfortable seat, to see the ship wrecked” (80). It is hard to believe that he saw nine passengers drowning without doing anything to help them.

The reason why Thoreau thinks so much of the old oysterman is that the latter presents the simplicity of Indians,⁴ in his living as well as in his thinking. And simplicity, as is well known, is one of the principles that Thoreau tried to practice throughout his whole life. For example, in order to pursue a simple life, he moved to Walden Pond, not only building his cottage but also growing vegetables by himself. Similarly, he comments in *Cape Cod*:

What a serious business men make of getting their dinners, and how universally shiftlessness and a groveling taste take refuse in a merely ant-like industry. Better go without your dinner, I thought, than be thus everlastingly fishing for it like a cormorant. (*Cape Cod* 154)

What Thoreau presents in *Cape Cod*, of course, includes flora and fauna. Being a hard-working traveler, he reads books concerning local history, vegetation, and animals before setting out on a trip. During the trip, he observes everything, taking notes and comparing what he reads with what he sees. Therefore, he always presents a detailed description about what he comes across. As far as vegetation is concerned, Thoreau focuses his attention on thorn-apple, poverty-grass, and beach grass, because they are different from other plants in several aspects. First of all, they are the major and widespread plants in the Cape. Secondly, they are so vital that they can survive anywhere. Thirdly, these plants beautify and protect the area. But, most important, they suggest the difference between outward appearance and reality.

In appearance, the thorn-apple is an innocent plant, blooming in the summer and bringing delightful colors to the desolate and barren Cape. However, in reality, according to Thoreau, it is not innocent. Thorn-apple is a cosmopolite, and, at the sight of it, Thoreau feels “as if [he was] on the highway of nations.” And it “suggests not merely commerce, but its fibers were the stuff of which pirates spin their yarns” (11). In addition, it is said that thorn-apple is able to “produce mental alienation of long duration without affecting the bodily health” (11). The difference between the outward appearance and the reality of thorn-apple is not caused by its assuming different faces, but rather by the projection of Thoreau's vision. Since he knew a lot about thorn-apple through reading books, inevitably he sees more than its outward appearance.

Poverty-grass looks like moss. This plant is so called because “it grew where nothing else would” (19). At Dennis, no tree is in sight, only some “little weather-stained,

⁴ In the *Journal I*, Thoreau says: “The charm of the Indian... is that he stands free and unrestrained in Nature” (253). The Indians differ from the Pilgrims in that the former do not occupy lands in Cape Cod while the latter do.

one-storied” (21) houses scattered here and there. It is covered with poverty-grass. In the Cape, poverty-grass is “despised by many on account of its being associated with barrenness” (116).

There are certain special things about this plant. First of all, poverty-grass adapts to bleak, desolate places, where nothing else can grow. If the trip to the Cape, for Thoreau, is to learn something which he cannot learn at Walden Pond, Nature has revealed to him through the agent of poverty-grass the importance of adaptability for all living things. Secondly, though this plant is not very useful, from an economic viewpoint, it helps protect houses from being buried by the invading sand; besides, it “might well be adopted for the Barnstable coat-of-arms, in a field sableux” (116). It can also be buried as fertilizer when local people plant pines. On the soil or sand grew the poverty-grass originally, “the pines had come up admirably and grown the first year three or four inches, and the second six inches and more” (118).

As for the beach grass, in outward appearance it is “two to four feet high, of a seagreen color” (167), and has “heads somewhat like rye, from six inches to a foot in length, and it is propagated both by roots and seeds” (168). Each spring, it sprouts anew to keep the sand from being blown away. Figuratively, this plant is the anchor which keeps the ship, Cape Cod, from being wrecked:

Thus Cape Cod is anchored to the heavens, as it were, by a myriad little cable of beach-grass, and, if they should fail, would become a total wreck, and erelong go to the bottom. (*Cape Cod* 174)

In fact, the beach grass, as Richard J. Schneider points out, is very important to the ecology of the Cape's coastline. It offers homes for night-hawks, killdeer-plovers, spiders, turtles, wild mice, toads, etc. It also provides places in which strawberries and shadbush can grow. Furthermore, to certain people, this plant can be used to make mats, pack-saddles, bags, hats, paper, and cattle feed. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the beach grass is more valuable than it appears outwardly.

With regard to animals, Thoreau describes not only birds and reptiles but fish and shell-fish as well. He centers his attention on mackerel-gulls, phalaropes, and oysters. The first two symbolize the adaptability of wild life in struggling with indifferent, cruel Nature, while the last one is one of the major economic resources for Cape Codders. All of them also show different aspects of incongruity between what they look like and what they really are.

In their outward appearance, mackerel-gulls are “as delicate organizations as sea-jellies and mosses” (60). It is hard to imagine that such small birds must struggle with the tremendous, brutal ocean to get what they need—food. Yet the fact is that they are “quite at home in the storm” (60). This incongruity between what they look like and what they do

leads Thoreau to reason that “they were adapted to their circumstance rather by their spirits than their bodies. Theirs must be an essentially wilder, that is, less human nature than that of larks and robins” (60). For Thoreau, their physical structures are disproportional to their courage and adaptability.

Similarly, a phalarope is not larger than a sparrow in physical size. Small as it is, a phalarope does not simply grasp its food from the threatening ocean, but rather sports with the breakers, “as perfect a success in its way as the breakers in theirs” (98). Like a courageous and bold adventurer, the bird explores the ocean and the seashore, enjoying its own surroundings. Furthermore, like an acrobat, it

would alight on the turbulent surface where the breakers were five or six feet high, and float buoyantly there like a duck, cunningly taking to its wings and lifting itself a few feet through the air over the foaming crest of each breaker, but sometimes outriding safely a considerable billow which hid it some seconds, when its instinct told it that it would not break. (*Cape Cod* 98)

What a phalarope shows—skill, boldness, self-confidence, courage, adaptability—does not match well with what it looks like—a sparrow-sized bird.

Oysters, as mentioned above, are one of the major economic resources for Cape Codders, especially natives of Wellfleet, who supply and keep almost all the oyster shops and stands in Massachusetts. In his book Thoreau presents different opinions about the survival of oysters in the winter, and the question of whether oysters are able to move. Thoreau was told that oysters would be frozen in the winter if planted too high. So some people would keep their oysters in cellars all winter. But, in reality, oysters are not as vulnerable as people think they might be, unless it is extremely cold. The old Wellfleet oysterman told Thoreau that oysters can move, but must settle down as they grow, while the oystermen of Long Island said that “oysters are found in large masses attached to the parent in their midst” and show “no motion for five or six years at least” (72). The truth is that the young oysters which once fix themselves can never make a change again. Only those remaining loose at the bottom of the sea are able to move.

History is the last subject related to the incongruity between outward appearance and reality. History, especially the history of the discovery and exploration of America, as Sherman Paul remarks, is one of the major projects which occupied Thoreau in the last decade or so of his life. Of all Thoreau's travel books, *Cape Cod* moves most richly into the past. He uses history for digression, contrast, and humor. Yet more often than not he finds the historical records are not always correct if tested against his own observation. For example, there is a continuity of report that the Cape's soil is fertile. On this matter, Thoreau observes:

The recent accounts are in some instances suspectable repetitions of the old, and I have no doubt that their statements are as often founded on the exception as the rule, and that by far the greater number of acres are as barren as they appear to be. (*Cape Cod* 34)

The "suspectable repetitions" in history lead Thoreau to use historical accounts carefully, on the one hand, and to base his own judgment on what he observes, on the other.

The rumor that the cows in Provincetown eat cod's heads is another matter concerning the discrepancy between the historical accounts and the fact. The first response Thoreau makes to this rumor is that a cod's head, like the human head, is "curiously and wonderfully made ..." Thoreau imagines: "coming to such an end! To be crunched by cows! I felt my own skull crack from sympathy" (182). However, one inhabitant assures Thoreau that "they did not make a practice of feeding cows on cod's heads" (182). Thoreau does not feel satisfied with this account and tries to find out the origin of the rumor. He traces the rumor as far back as Pliny and the Journal of Nearchus (an admiral of Alexander the Great). After surveying the whole history of the matter, he comes to the conclusion that "in balancing the evidence I am still in doubt about the Provincetown cows" (182).

Cape Cod was a landfall for the early explorers of North America. The pilgrims first touched the New World in November, 1620, near the later site of Provincetown; and, from that moment on, a national story began. So Thoreau feels particularly interested in those earliest Pilgrims' historical accounts of the Cape. However, he finds their reports generally unreliable. For example, they describe Cape Cod "not only as well wooded, but as having a deep and excellent soil" (206). Yet as far as his vision can reach, Thoreau finds neither bough nor bush nor excellent black soil. He concludes that the scenery the Pilgrims present is too beautiful to be true of the Cape. Then he tries to assign a cause for this, saying: "They naturally exaggerated the fairness and attractiveness of the land, for they were glad to get to any land at all after that anxious voyage" (207).

To Thoreau, history is nothing but "a story agreed on by posterity" (204). It is hard to know history exactly, not simply because what history involves is something past, but rather because different historians record the same event from different angles. Accordingly, Thoreau observes:

I believe that, if I were to live the life of mankind over again myself (which I would not be hired to do), with the Universal History in my hands, I should not be able to tell what was what.
(*Cape Cod* 204)

On the one hand, history is of little value in terms of understanding something past, because it is filled with "suspectable repetitions." But on the other hand, historical accounts

are rich in topography, which Thoreau mines with delight. He can use these accounts for his purposes—digression, contrast, and humor. In addition, historical records help him to enlarge his vision. Instead of fixing his vision to a limited range offered by certain historians, Thoreau learns to embrace many different accounts from different historians' standpoints.

The purpose of Thoreau's quest is not to seek “that... which another man has lost,” but rather to seek “what no other man has found or can find” (140). In other words, he tries to find an original and personal belief. If he finds that the ocean, landscape, inhabitants, flora, fauna, and history of Cape Cod always present multiple aspects of vision, this does not mean that he is frustrated by “the failure of his own perception to measure the Cape itself accurately” (Schneider 189). On the contrary, everything he observes on the Cape becomes stimulus to sharpen his vision, to affirm the significance of his quest. The spiritual quest he makes is not a smooth way, and the incongruity between appearance and reality he encounters on his way serves as a kind of test of his transcendental faith. And it is this kind of test that, by and by, makes him remove preconceptions, enlarge his capacity for different aspects of vision, and come to a state of satori or become Emerson's “transparent eyeball” at last.

Satori is an insight which has no limitation of time and space, no egotism, and no preconceptions. On the way to satori, Thoreau finds that the relationship between the ocean and all living things is that the former is “the principal seat of life” and “the laboratory of continents” (107). He also finds that “the dry land itself came through and out of the water in its way to the heavens” (107). But, interestingly enough, he finds that the relationship between the ocean and human beings is that “we, too, are the product of sea-slime” (157). In other words, man is only one member of all living things which come from the ocean—no more and no less.

Thoreau has trouble in drawing a line between the ocean, the land, and all living things (of course, human beings included) because the more he observes Cape Cod, the more he realizes all of these are One—a giant organism. They are nothing but parts of the One; each part cannot be independent without the help of the others.

In the same way, Thoreau finds that Cape Cod is the place where the Pilgrims landed, and so is the place where America begins. In a sense, Cape Cod is the epitome of America in its culture, religion, history, and the Pilgrims' dream. In the exploration of North America, the French and Spanish also participated, and also left some traces of their discovery in the history of Cape Cod. So it is reasonable to say that Cape Cod had once been the central stage for the explorers and sailors from different countries. Looking ahead to the Atlantic, Thoreau finds that what presents itself before him is Europe and what exists behind him is America. So, in one sense, he is standing at the center of the world. As his vision enlarges from Cape

Cod to America, then from America to the whole world, and finally to the cosmos, Thoreau remarks: “A man may stand [here] and put all America behind him” (220).

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