

## Introduction

LAUNCHING into an opening spectacle of death, but full of startling jokes; ambling yet dramatic; shifting rapidly among whimsy, natural history, polemic, diary, research paper, parody, sermon, history and wisecrack—Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* can amaze modern readers with its peculiar freshness. Contemporary books about places have their own excellences, but they don’t attain this unpredictable movement or this immediacy. Thoreau’s vividness of mind illuminates the Cape in what remains the place’s best portrait.

*Cape Cod*’s diverting manner—quirky, anecdotal, scholarly, casual, barbed—comes partly from the circumstances of its composition: it was written for performance, and in chronological sequence. That is, Thoreau wrote many parts of the book for lectures he would deliver to audiences; and his organization of its parts often relies on the order in which events—a storm, a visit to a lighthouse keeper or to the library—actually occurred. The mercurial texture reflects that structure (and Thoreau’s mind); but it also reflects a public speaker’s relation to a hall full of listeners, different from a writer’s relation to readers. Thoreau’s electric style combines the two related modes of writing and lecturing, with their distinct varieties of authority and intimacy.

The audience at Thoreau’s Cape Cod lectures for the Concord Lyceum “laughed till they cried.” Those are the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, working on the Secretary of the South Danvers Lyceum, to whom Emerson is recommending his friend for a speaking engagement. The prose of both Thoreau and Emerson should be understood in relation to the lecture form. A secular pulpit, an uplifting theater, and an

entertaining classroom, for these writers the lecture format was also a source of income.

The history of the lecture in nineteenth-century American life, and behind it the history of the sermon, must go beyond mere oratory to include the performed composition as a communal center, an intellectual base, and a public diversion. The sermon was a social ritual as well as a religious occasion; the secular lecture strove for improvement, for spiritual effect as well as amusement and literary cachet. The political importance of abolitionist oratory reflected and advanced an already highly evolved, central civic form.

The lecturer is an essayist in the old sense of “essay-ing” through terrain, not bound by assignment or research as is the journalist or the scholar. The lecturer, like the true essayist, is free to wander a bit, if the byways engage his audience and meander eventually back to the main road. Because the form is social and dramatic, the lecturer also plans for immediate response—most readily by being funny, as Emerson’s promotion of Thoreau as a speaker suggests. Smiles, chuckles, even the secular “amen” provided by a ripple of guffaws, build participatory confidence and rapport.

For example, an aria of comic variations based on the town of Eastham’s 1662 agreement “that a part of every whale cast on shore be appropriated for the support of the ministry”:

No doubt, there seemed to be some propriety in thus leaving the support of the ministers to Providence, whose servants they are, and who alone rules the storms; for, when few whales were cast up, they might suspect that their worship was not acceptable. The ministers must have sat upon the cliffs in every storm, and watched the shore with anxiety. And, for my part, if I were a minister, I would rather trust to the bowels of the billows, on the backside of Cape Cod, to cast up a whale for me, than to the generosity of many a country parish that I know. You cannot say of a country minister’s

salary, commonly, that it is “very like a whale.” . . . Think of a whale having the breath of life beaten out of him by a storm, and dragging in over the bars and guzzles, for the support of the ministry! What a consolation it must have been to him! I have heard of a minister, who had been a fisherman, being settled in Bridgewater for as long a time as he could tell a cod from a haddock. Generous as it seems, this condition would empty most country pulpits forthwith, for it is long since the fishers of men were fishermen. Also, a duty was put on mackerel here to support a free-school; in other words, the mackerel-school was taxed, in order that the children’s school might be free.

The deadpan first sentence might seem pious to the unalert, even after the comically pragmatic understatement of its second half. Then the passage extends more and more outrageously, building from the irreverent picture of the ministers perched on the cliff in every storm, anxiously watching for distressed whales. The audience is cued to smile by the alliterative “bowels of the billows” on the Cape’s backside, to grin knowingly at the expense of stingy country parishes, then chuckle appreciatively while being flattered by the allusion to *Hamlet*.

This is largely the performative comedy of personality, demonstrated by the rhythmically recurring first person: “I would rather trust . . . the billows”; “many a country parish that I know.” “I would rather have gone to the Falkland Isles with a harpoon,” he says. Reader and listeners marvel at Thoreau’s deliberate nerve, his ability to persist longer than expected, driving the joke ever further until the very silliness itself becomes funny. There’s a theatrical effect in how the comedy reaches its peak with the image of the beaten whale, dragging over the bars and guzzles “for the support of the ministry.” It is not hard to imagine an audience laughing out loud at “What a consolation it must have been to him!” The diminuendo from that punch line

into the artfully cornball joke on the word “school” has a theatrical, even virtuoso quality. (He is not above saying that in Provincetown the fish are cured and sometimes travelers are cured of eating them.)

And if the texture is sometimes that of performance, the book’s structure is that of a diary. *Cape Cod*, though sections had been delivered as lectures and serialized in a magazine, was first published as a book posthumously, in 1865. It was edited by the author’s sister Sophia Thoreau, assisted by Ellery Channing, the poet friend who accompanied Thoreau on the October 1849 trip to the Cape that begins the book and returned with him in 1855. The organization of parts, meandering yet purposeful, expresses and follows the unpredictable nature of events, most notably violent weather. Even the placement of early historical material at the end of the book reflects the timing of Thoreau’s library research, conducted long after his series of four visits to the Cape, with Channing and alone.

Their first journey was planned as a walking trip from Provincetown at the tip of the Cape all the way back to the mainland, after first crossing to Provincetown by steamer from Boston. But a destructive gale and persistent bad weather changed their plans; they went to the beginning of the Cape by rail, and continued by stage to Orleans, nearly halfway to Provincetown. The stormy weather also presented the theme of *Cape Cod*’s first chapter:

On reaching Boston, we found that the Provincetown steamer, which should have got in the day before, had not yet arrived, on account of a violent storm; and, as we noticed in the streets a handbill headed, “Death! 145 lives lost at Cohasset!” we decided to go by way of Cohasset.

The laconic “we decided to go by way of Cohasset,” a cool and perhaps startling acknowledgment of the

writer's curiosity, represents part of Thoreau's ability to make tourism the material for a deeply engaging work. He is candidly a spectator as well as a wanderer, and he uses the tourist's preoccupations with diversion and observation like probes to touch profound human mysteries. This is no conventional tourist guide, and indeed it challenges and queries the touristic role with ruthless introspection, even as it raises observation to the level of art.

The travelers go toward the Cape by train, along with many mourners, mostly Irish, as were the emigrant passengers of the wrecked brig *St. John*. When the mourners stop at Cohasset, so does the writer, and he gives a masterly description of corpses on the beach, still being found and transported to the graveyard, and "a large hole, like a cellar, freshly dug." Some of what Thoreau writes might suggest that he is interested in pathos, though he maintains in it a clinical element, and a bizarrely fanciful, almost playful metaphorical element as well:

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 hulk, 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.

The passage feints or gestures in several directions, most of them cruel toward the reader or the drowning victim, all of them affecting perspective. One element reminds us of the social context—the Irish immigrants who sailed from Galway to America on the *St. John* would likely have become servants or laborers—an

immediate distancing corrective, maybe, to the sympathetic word “girl.” That social perspective is submerged in the detailed horror of the descriptive details; and embedded in those particulars, nearly overwhelmed by them, is the word “hulk.” That term for a wrecked ship is left behind, effaced by the bone and muscle, then by the speculation about rocks or fishes, then by the equally detailed description of the open but “lustreless” eyes that suddenly return us through “dead-lights” to the image of a wrecked hulk and its windows, in the sentence’s devastating monosyllabic climax, “filled with sand.”

The shipwreck begins Thoreau’s book by chance, because the *St. John* was wrecked in 1849 by an autumn storm that changed the author’s travel plans. But the dead on the beach, with their mourners and spectators and cleanup crews, enable Thoreau to establish a central concern: the nature of sight-seeing, and the nature of description. Some on the beach where he sees the drowned girl are carting off bodies and belongings, and other men there with carts are “busily collecting the sea-weed which the storm had cast up, . . . often obliged to separate fragments of clothing from it, and they might, at any moment, have found a human body under it.” This information comes a few paragraphs after Thoreau’s description of the drowned girl, and what he writes about the seaweed-gatherers applies to the literary traveler as well:

Drown who might, they did not forget that this weed was a valuable manure. This shipwreck had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society.

The word “fabric” echoes sardonically the “fragments of clothing” tangled in the seaweed, and the “rags” that “still adhered” to the drowned girl.

The giving of pathos and sympathy and then taking them away is a repeated gesture of *Cape Cod*, keeping

the reader off balance, suggesting a conventional sermon and then denying it. Like the comic passage about the ministers dependent on beached whales, this encounter with death is performative and introspective. He writes about the scene on the beach, which he has evoked impressively, at length:

On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle those poor human bodies was the order of the day.

The casual expressions “On the whole” and “the order of the day,” bracketing what I have quoted, call up the realm of ordinary speech in order to put it in its place. This is no more a work in the spirit of conventional piety than it is a conventional guidebook.

A repeated mode of Thoreau’s is the mock-sermon, almost a parody-sermon. After his cool disclaimer of much emotion on his part beyond that of the manure-gatherers, he speaks lyrically of the drowned immigrants as “coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did,” though instead they “emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of,” toward “a shore yet further west, toward which we all are tending. . . . No doubt, we have reason to thank God, that they have not been ‘shipwrecked into life again.’” If we begin to feel comfortable on this rhetorical height, the writer unsettles us by a whimsical process of not-quite-conventional exaggeration and specificity:

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 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 till it succeeds.

The piety here is tilted by a subtle irony, one that does not so much dispute the Christian commonplaces as make them uneasy. The specificity of "Boston harbor," and the hyperbole of kissing the shore "in rapture" contrast with the deflating "easy enough to do without it," a laconic remark that can be as agnostic or skeptical as religious. (Similarly, the passage ends not with Our Lord, but with the humanistic spirit of "a just man's purpose.") This nuanced undermining becomes more pointed, becomes practically vocal, with the series of exclamations: the plans and hopes did indeed burst, and infants "by the score" have indeed been dashed on rocks, but "No, no!"

That negative cry, making explicit a satirical or skeptical element in the passage, simultaneously asserts a Christian idea of the afterlife and teases the glibness of standard piety. "Telegraphed," like "Boston harbor," embodies a modernizing and temperature-lowering element of the quotidian. And the piety that is most significantly Thoreau's target may not be religious at all, but a journalistic glibness of sympathy. The exclamations about plans burst like bubbles and infants dashed on rocks are, formally speaking, parodic headlines. Part of Thoreau's genius is that he understood modern American life as it was first forming—almost before it formed. The opening chapter of *Cape Cod* is among other things a corrective to the solemn righteousness of the television anchorperson reporting a disaster.

Choosing to imagine the wrecked brig *St. John* “telegraphed” to heaven, he brilliantly evokes and inspects the sanctimony of the observer, snug in the undisturbed fabric of society.

Great writing can be disagreeable where mediocrity goes down easily. After the first four chapters of *Cape Cod* had appeared in the June, July, and August 1855 issues of *Putnam’s Monthly*, the arrangement to serialize was broken. Prof. Joseph Moldenhauer, in his very useful “Historical Introduction” to the Princeton University Press textual edition of *Cape Cod*, cites an early correspondence with the magazine in which Thoreau alters a passage involving Calvinists and the word “Scripture,” because the religious sensibilities of editor, publisher, or readers “had been abraded by Thoreau’s apparent ‘heresies’ of wording or tone on religious matters.” The magazine seems to have aborted publication partly because of Thoreau’s impolite references to such matters as the stupidity of Cape Cod guidebooks, the unattractiveness of Cape women, the coarseness of manners in Cape villages. Passages excised in the magazine but present in the book and lectures include references to the seed-pod of marine creatures, to the manuring of apple trees, and to an excessively effective sermon. Newspapers mentioned the offense these magazine pieces had given to the residents of Barnstable County.

The idea that Thoreau’s book scandalously criticized or mocked the Cape’s villages or inhabitants has become literary folklore, more a part of the book’s reputation than of a modern reader’s experience. But as with all folklore, the notion of Thoreau mocking his subject contains a truth. The book may or may not have upset local feelings or contemporary pruderies, but it surely does undermine conventional expectations.

What Thoreau mocks and questions is not Barnstable County but himself and the reader and the traveler—the greedy, naïve appetite for “beauty” and “interest” and eloquent “reflections,” the questing enterprise of moving to and through places in the world. In *Cape Cod* that enterprise perpetually questions itself, by shifting perspective from the personal to the grand, from the historical to the local, from the eternal to the idiosyncratic. It is an enterprise brilliantly pursued a generation later by the travel books of Mark Twain. Some passages, in particular certain gags, feel as if they must have inspired Twain directly: as when Truro’s Highland Light shines directly into Thoreau’s bed-chamber so that he “knew exactly how [it] bore all that night, and I was in no danger of being wrecked.”

In another shift of perspective, Thoreau reports something that happened at Cohasset days after he and Channing had interrupted the railroad part of their journey, perhaps after they had already begun their walking tour of the Cape. He says that “something white was seen floating on the water by one who was sauntering”—a characteristic verb—“on the beach.” When a boat went to investigate, this white object turned out to be:

the body of a woman, which had risen in an upright position, whose white cap was blown back with the wind. I saw that the beauty of the shore itself was wrecked for many a lonely walker there, until he could perceive, at last, how its beauty was enhanced by wrecks like this, and it acquired thus a rarer and sublimer beauty still.

The sublime beauty and the grotesquerie, wrecked and restored and wrecked again, the perspective of one sauntering alone and, also in solitude, the ghostly replication of that sauntering by the body bobbing upright with its white cap lifted back by the wind: this is the writer’s echo of the ocean itself, claiming and giving up

and reclaiming, peaceful then turbulent, reassuring and then disturbing and in a cycle without end reassuring again. In this image as throughout, a theatrical panache dominates attention before yielding to the immense perspective of eternity, terrible and sublime.

A third characteristic move, like the wisecrack and the mock-sermon, is the rhetorical flight, an extravagant excursus demonstrating how adeptly the writer can contradict himself, or skim from whimsy to tragedy to philosophy and back again. These performances show how far the writer can journey in a few paragraphs: each course of rhetoric itself a feat of travel. One such figurative journey begins with the rhetorical standby that the ocean's vastness dwarfs human life. Particularly horrible is the remoteness of the invisible ocean floor. The ever darker and deeper water, he writes, seemed unrelated to the "friendly land" or to the bottom. He begins with the nightmare of tremendous depth, of drowning without touching the sandy floor:

—of what use is a bottom if it is out of sight, if it is two or three miles from the surface, and you are to be drowned so long before you get to it, though it were made of the same stuff with your native soil?

Then on through quoting the Veda ("there is nothing to give support, nothing to rest upon, nothing to cling to"), and through the first-person "I felt that I was a land animal." Then how, unlike the sailor fathoms above the bottom, a "man in a balloon even may commonly alight on the earth in a few moments." Then, a new admiration for the drowning navigator who cried out to his companions, "We are as near to Heaven by sea as by land." To that brave dying statement Thoreau responds, "I saw that it would not be easy to realize."

Then the passage, which has begun with the terrible-ness of not seeing the bottom or reaching it, moves erratically enough to that staple of American humor, inventive exaggeration:

Every Cape man has a theory about George's Bank having been an island once, and in their accounts they gradually reduce the shallowness from six, five, four, two fathoms, to somebody's confident assertion that he has seen a mackerel-gull sitting on a piece of dry land there. It reminded me, when I thought of the shipwrecks which had taken place there, of the Isle of Demons, laid down off this coast in old charts of the New World. There must be something monstrous, methinks, in a vision of the sea bottom from over some bank a thousand miles from the shore, more awful than its imagined bottomlessness; a drowned continent, all livid and frothing at the nostrils, like the body of a drowned man, which is better sunk deep than near the surface.

So, through an astonishing route of digressions, he has navigated from horror of the nearly bottomless, profound depths to the opposite horror of the shallow, visible bottom where an undersea bank rises far offshore. Speeding from the mackerel-gull to a drowned continent "all livid and frothing at the nostrils," we barely notice the complete reversal. In this turn, too, the voyage is through performance to what is enormous and eternal, and the spectacle of mortality.

He says of the sea-shore, "It is even a trivial place." Also, "there is no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor-clams, and whatever the sea casts up,—a vast *morgue*, where famished dogs may range in packs, and crows come daily to glean the pittance which the tide leaves them." Almost gleefully sardonic, he notes how human and animal carcasses alike "lie stately" as they rot and bleach together, and in one of his inspired, grotesquely extended metaphors "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.”

Seeing the natural world this way as “sincere” and “without flattery” entitles him to write as a meticulous naturalist, turning to the sand of Provincetown with the informed, analytical eye that inspects the ice of Walden, the abundant details colored, but not distorted, by his personality. The minute, extended, contagiously attentive prose requires a long quotation:

The highest and sandiest portion next the Atlantic was thinly covered with Beach-grass and Indigo-weed. Next to this the surface of the upland generally consisted of white sand and gravel, like coarse salt, through which a scanty vegetation found its way up. It will give an ornithologist some idea of its barrenness if I mention that the next June, the month of grass, I found a night-hawk’s eggs there, and that almost any square rod thereabouts, taken at random, would be an eligible site for such a deposit. The kildeer-plover, which loves a similar locality, also drops its eggs there, and fills the air above with its din. This upland also produced *Cladonia* lichens, poverty-grass, savory-leaved aster (*Diplopappus linariifolius*), mouse-ear, bearberry, &c. On a few hillsides the savory-leaved aster and mouse-ear alone made quite a dense sward, said to be very pretty when the aster is in bloom. In some parts the two species of poverty-grass (*Hudsonia tomentosa* and *ericoides*), which deserve a better name, reign for miles in little hemispherical tufts or islets, like moss, scattered over the waste. They linger in bloom there till the middle of July. Occasionally near the beach these rounded beds, as also those of the sea-sandwort (*Honkenya peploides*), were filled with sand within an inch of their tops, and were hard, like large ant-hills, while the surrounding sand was soft.

The Linnaean names, the observation, the shapely sentences with their active verbs (the kildeer-plover *loves*, *drops*, *fills*; the upland *produced*; the aster *made*; the poverty-grass varieties *deserve* and *linger*): this masterly nature writing is in a different key from the sermonizing, the rhetorical cadenzas, the deliberately cornball wit that says of the wide cart tires demanded by

Provincetown's sand roads "the more tired the wheels, the less tired the horses." Among the various kinds of performances, always deferring eventually to the perspective of eternity, Thoreau's matchless attention to natural detail constitutes a kind of credential. With the emphasis on information, the ingenious personality that thinks poverty-grass deserves a better name, then has it "reign" for miles, remains distinct, but relatively muted. The meticulous, even exhaustive natural history, interrupting the performer's reckless flights and pranks and burlesque preachings, is another way of surprising the reader, another drastic change of perspective.

Natural history, and also history. But history serves mainly as something to be put behind us, a demonstration of the void. Thoreau composed the pages about early European exploration of the Cape not long before his death in 1862. Here near the very end of the book he peers into the past, and his account of it is based in skepticism, advancing the knowledge and skill of the French, Italian, and Portuguese explorers, and elevating the claims of the Vikings, in order to mock the English. The particular objects of his scorn include Governor Winthrop and the Pilgrims. Thoreau questions both their knowledge and the truthfulness of their accounts. But his main point is more general:

Consider what stuff history is made of,—that for the most part it is merely a story agreed on by posterity. . . . 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.

Here the superhuman perspective is treated comically, an effect he emphasizes by alternating Pilgrim descriptions of coming into Provincetown harbor with his own arrangements at Provincetown hotels and conversations. ("The Pilgrims say: 'There was the greatest store of fowl that ever we saw.' *We* saw no fowl there, except gulls of various kinds.")

What does that italicized first-person perspective mean? What is the meaning of the Cape in this book? A kind of haunting and haunted absence, a refutation of the traveler as dilettante. In his final pages he writes: “When we reached Boston that October, I had a gill of Provincetown sand in my shoes. . . . I seemed to hear the sea roar, as if I lived in a shell, for a week afterward.” The meaning of that haunting sound is suggested by this book’s concluding paragraphs. The Cape is an available remoteness, a rough rebuttal of the traveler’s comfortable, habitual viewpoints: “strange and remote,” twice as far from Boston as England is from France, yet only hours away by train. In the book’s closing passages, he distinguishes the place from the Newport of his day (or the Martha’s Vineyard of our own?), saying of Cape Cod:

At present, it is wholly unknown to the fashionable world, and probably it will never be agreeable to them. If it is merely a ten-pin alley, or a circular railway, or an ocean of mint-julep, that the visitor is in search of,—if he thinks more of the wine than the brine, as I suspect some do at Newport,—I trust that for a long time he will be disappointed here. But this shore will never be more attractive than it is now.

He says of the “bare and bended arm” of the Cape that it makes the bay in which Lynn and Nantasket “lie so snugly.” This book with its terrors and uneasy cackles, its bottomless ironies, is like an obverse of the withdrawal and relatively serene immersion of *Walden*. This book supplies a wintry corrective to an overly soft understanding of that one. In *Cape Cod*’s final sentences he says:

A storm in the fall or winter is the time to visit it; a light-house or a fisherman’s hut the true hotel. A man may stand there and put all America behind him.

—Robert Pinsky  
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