

FORMS OF THE CHRONOTOPE IN THOREAU'S *CAPE COD*

Cape Cod is Thoreau's fourth and last full-length book. Though he did not live long enough to see it in print (it was published posthumously in 1865), Thoreau kept on working on it until literally his last months. Just as he did on *Walden*. The work on the two books often overlapped in the course of the extremely intense last decade of Thoreau's life, when the equation of Life with Art was not only the perfect mode of being for Thoreau, but when living had already been 'simplified' to writing – and writing to living – to such an extent, that the end of writing could only come – as it did – with the end of the writer's life.

In the very end of his life Thoreau is known to have wished for *Walden* to be further published without the subtitle; perhaps the subtitle "or Life in the Woods" already seemed limiting the limitless depths of his pure symbol; and perhaps his arranging for posthumous publication of *Cape Cod* –which was never given a subtitle – might have also influenced this final wish. While *Walden* is Thoreau's limitless and timeless universe, *Cape Cod* is Thoreau's limitless **narration** which "extends" Time under the shadow of death, thus suggesting a manner of *carpe diem* writing, hitherto unexplored by Thoreau. *Cape Cod* turns out to be that travelogue of Thoreau's whose very narration equals life – respectively, the lack of narration would have equaled death, or the end of (life)Time.

Though *Walden* and *Cape Cod* were written – and continuously revised – in the years of Thoreau's shift towards ecocentrism, the relation between the two books is not of that kind. While living at Walden Thoreau became a writer, as

Laura Walls so nicely emphasized that in her recent biography of Thoreau; after the two years at the pond, however, only the writing of *Walden* could bring Thoreau back to the lost harmony with nature; the experiment with life had been successful, but was over; more and more living ‘deliberately’ was becoming possible only through and in writing – until writing began to literally retain living. *Cape Cod* is exactly that kind of book – a book retaining life. *Walden* celebrates the triumph of life; *Cape Cod* also asserts the triumph of life – but in the face of death. If *Walden* is a narrative about Thoreau’s Homeric experiment, *Cape Cod* is Thoreau’s *Homeric narration* – his narration about human and nonhuman nature, his narration for the sake of narration itself which fully employs the classical epical, or Homeric life-asserting power.

Walden pond was Thoreau’s focus – the perfect place for a deliberate, ‘simplified’ life, as well as the perfect symbol of that life. Respectively, the writing about this life had to be perfect – crystal clean, ideally composed, symmetrical; *Walden* doubtlessly is Thoreau’s masterful artistic harmony. As most Thoreau scholars agree, there is something **heroic** in both the Walden experiment with life and the writing of it; quite naturally, during the two years at the pond the *Iliad* was Thoreau’s constant companion. But time had passed since those two years and though he had been “accustomed to make excursions to the ponds within ten miles of Concord”, as Thoreau says in the beginning of *Cape Cod*, he had “latterly extended [his] excursions to the sea-shore.” The ocean, however, cannot be a focus; it is all but the symbol of peaceful concentration; if Walden had been Thoreau’s “own” pond, the ocean could not possibly be “his”. This was as evident, as it was sought after; Thoreau had already stated in the end of *Walden* that he would not walk a trodden path, i.e. that he would not do again what he had already done. So he changed the place. This was a very different place; and this was a somewhat changed and changing Thoreau already. If in the last decade of his life Thoreau’s

thinking was shifting towards ecocentrism, as Lawrence Buell has so convincingly shown, Thoreau's travels to Cape Cod and the book they resulted in are rather the expression of *another shift* which has to do with accumulated life experience and thoughts of death.

In *Cape Cod*, however, there is no trace of desolation or Weltschmerz. Just like *Walden*, this last full-length book of Thoreau's is by no means an "ode to dejection"; just as in *Walden*, in *Cape Cod* Thoreau rejects such a Coleridgean state of mind again: but in different ways. One of these ways is *humor*. In *Cape Cod* Thoreau fully sets free his sense of humor – subdued in all his other work, in this book Thoreau's humor flows freely, often tending towards irony and sarcasm, but never towards bitter misanthropy. If *Walden* counterpoints ecstasy to quiet desperation, *Cape Cod* is Thoreau's humorous anti-ode to dejection.

But Thoreau's major way to counterbalance dejection in *Cape Cod* is *narration itself*. This book narrates with the immense passion and power of *the classical epic* to encompass everything; its narrative flows into the realms of history, philology, geography, geology, botany, zoology, ichthyology, fishing and whaling, local and ethnic history, sailing and navigation, the history of New France and that of New England, the Vikings and North America, etc., etc. Thoreau's vast competence in everything he narrates shows everywhere; what also shows everywhere is Thoreau's exceptional philological training, his fluency in Greek, Latin, and at least five modern languages included. In *Cape Cod* Thoreau's sense of language takes a yet unexplored in his other work *classical epic* direction, inasmuch as his narration in this book often acquires the Homeric functionality of language not only to preserve and perpetuate the told, but also to make existent only the told, or to truly "make happen". In *Cape Cod* Thoreau revives this essential power of language and transforms it into a life-saving instrument. If while living at Walden Pond he had had the *Iliad* with him, in *Cape Cod* he would rather

narrate like Homer – or in the most detailed manner, sticking to the very Homeric one-layer storytelling where everything is equally significant – the oyster on the Atlantic shore as much as the Atlantic itself. In addition, not only would *Cape Cod* be filled with quotations from Homer in the original, but the ocean itself would be made ‘speak’ ancient Greek. It is this classical, or Homeric power of narration which is the enormous Time- and Life-preserving power of Thoreau’s ‘oceanic’ narrative – *Cape Cod*.

Thoreau’s friend and fellow Concordian Amos Bronson Alcott thought of Thoreau as “belonging to the Homeric age;” Thoreau’s prose Alcott found unsurpassable in “substance and pith,” “dealing with objects as if they were shooting forth from his mind *mythologically*.”¹ Although focused on Thoreau the natural philosopher, Alcott seems to have been among the very first to point to Thoreau’s epicality of expression. *Cape Cod* offers a very interesting case here: it records Thoreau’s already more empirical or scientific thinking, still never losing its poetical or transcendental aura; at the same time, it unfolds as a narrative in a distinctively classical epical manner. As Lawrence Buell has noted, Thoreau often engaged a “strategy of substantialization,”² adding representational detail, particularly natural phenomena, to his excursion narratives. Thoreau pursues this strategy in *Cape Cod* on multiple registers, including the employment of typically epical modes and devices. In this book more than anywhere in his work Thoreau revives and explores the very essence and energy of classical narration with all its verbal powers to eternalize and entertain.

Cape Cod has been termed Thoreau’s epic (see J. J. McAleer), but this categorization has been more figurative and not a recognition of Thoreau’s debt to the epic tradition. Considering the text’s literary contexts and in particular its classical epicality helps to make sense of the antagonistic critical judgement the book has received, having been labeled both Thoreau’s sunniest³ and Thoreau’s

darkest⁴ book; moreover, classical epicality in this case promises to be a key to mature Thoreau himself – Thoreau of the last decade of his life, finding his ways to cope with the passage of Time.

Thoreau begins *Cape Cod* with an elliptical allusion to Alcott: “I did not see why I might not make a book on Cape Cod, as well as my neighbor on “Human Culture.” It is but another name for the same thing.” In addition, Thoreau offers a definition of his book: it will be “on the same thing”; the titles will be made synonymous, their meaning “sandy” enough to incorporate, in effect, everything. Besides being an instance of Thoreau’s typically metaphorical move to connect the specific with the abstract, this is also an advance notice of the large-scale scope of the book. *Cape Cod*, this is to say, will be an epic text.

Cape Cod opens with the author explicitly addressing his reader, a format that it will stick to throughout. The first thing Thoreau does in this book is turn to his readers and, thereby, outline his own figure as the author. The forthcoming narrative therefore directly acquires the character of a something *told* by somebody to somebody, its purely narrational, or epical capacities coming into focus. In fact, the phrases “we were told,” “it is said,” “we read” are abundantly present in the whole of Thoreau’s book as if to enforce the impression that it is *a story told*, or a narrative that fully explores all the potentials of narration and, moreover, makes its own narration explicit. In addition to evoking the age-old format of storytelling, Thoreau points to the “single companion” he had in his Cape Cod journey, which also contributes to the atmosphere of telling and listening, an ongoing process of conversing. While William Ellery Channing accompanied Thoreau on two of the three Cape Cod visits described in the book, Thoreau also had another and, what’s more, permanent companion in his travels and that was his reader.

In the course of his journey, Thoreau often reads and quotes from what he reads, making his reader read as if simultaneously with him and, moreover, making

him all the time aware that he, the writer, is a reader too: “The reader will imagine us, all the while, steadily traversing that extensive plain [...] and reading under our umbrellas.” The *reading process* thus becomes both narrative device and part of the narrated story: that of the two travelers/readers exploring Cape Cod. The enormous amount of often lengthy citations from histories, chronicles, “old accounts,” geography books, etc. in *Cape Cod* is not only offered in the format of vast reading done both during and before the travel, but also presented with a special emphasis on the reading process as a vital activity. *Cape Cod* shows Thoreau in the course of his excursion always with a book in his hands, his reading and writing flowing into one another and forming a narrative which lays bare its readability and perpetually provokes its own reading.

If *Walden* has its chapter on “Reading,” *Cape Cod* is very much a book about reading and writing which *tells* extensively and, at the same time, discusses extensive telling, hereby reviving *literary traditions* of genuinely epic nature such as those of the earliest times of the genre of the *novel*. There are moments when Thoreau, fully in the novelistic manner of Henry Fielding, an epic writer of his own right, focuses the reader’s awareness on the reading process as if to “measure” the sense of what is being told. For example, at the end of “The Plains of Nauset,” following a series of excerpts from historical and liturgical sources, Thoreau says: “There was no better way to make the reader realize how wide and peculiar that plain was, and how long it took to traverse it, than by inserting these extracts in the midst of my narrative” (887). While Walter Harding finds Thoreau here merely laughing “at the dullness of one of his chapters,”⁵ the narrator’s auto-commentary in this instance, very much in the tradition of Henry Fielding’s, Tobias Smollett’s, or Laurence Sterne’s novels, is a clear case of a markedly present epic situation⁶ which goes along with the narrative about the Cape Cod journey. Besides, the allusion to this very literary/epical context is enforced by

Thoreau's noting that his Cape Cod excursion was not intended "for a sentimental journey."

Thoreau's mode of openly addressing the reader for the sake of providing a most vivid image is also apparent in his focus on sound. Thoreau's reader should not only read, but hear too: "Though we might have indulged in some placid reflections of late, the reader must not forget that the dash and the roar of the waves were incessant". Thoreau may even reach a fully onomatopoeic effect at the moment when he finds himself too focused on the desert and turns to the sea: "All the while it was not so calm as the reader may suppose, but it was blow, blow, blow, - roar, roar, roar, - tramp, tramp, tramp, - without interruption". Such a passage expects as if to be *heard*, invites an *audience* in the strict meaning of the word, and thus calls to mind Homer and the oldest form of epical performance, that of singing and listening. When the inherent musicality of Thoreau's writing (so astutely noted by American composer Charles Ives) combines with the policy of directly involving the reader, one can even sometimes imagine Thoreau as the ancient rhapsodist playing his harp and singing his story before his audience. The impression is so strong that it sounds very natural when Thoreau makes a note like "Homer and the Ocean came in again with a rush," as well as that this happens in Greek. "I put in a little Greek now and then - Thoreau explains - because it sounds so much like the ocean" and "we have no word in English to express the sound of so many waves, dashing at once." Thoreau thus implies that the proper reading of his book should also include it "hearing," or the involvement of the ear along with that of the eye, and he finds the sound of Homer's language best for the purpose. For Thoreau the Transcendentalist, Homer's expression was "as if nature spoke," the pristine sound of nature's own language.

Cape Cod's many citations – predominantly in Greek, but in Latin too, – provoke and engage the reader's *knowledge* in the reading process and this

happens far not merely on a linguistic level. Thoreau presumes a reader quite knowledgeable in Greek and Latin in order to adequately read Thoreau's book, *as knowledgeable in the classics as the author*, so as to share the same literary context and thus properly handle all the references to Homer, Ovid, Ossian, Rabelais, Chaucer, Boccaccio, or Shakespeare and to recognize who is "the blind bard of "Paradise Lost and Regained", or catch the allusion to *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. In addition, Thoreau's *Cape Cod* reader should have substantial knowledge in botany, zoology, history, geography, topography, etymology, philosophy, sailing, navigation, etc. Obviously, Thoreau's *Cape Cod* reader is supposed to be an inherent part of human culture themselves in order to be able to read this book on human culture. And this comes into focus here more than anywhere else in Thoreau's work exactly because of the overall format of explicit discourse with the reader.

Thoreau invites, or rather requires his reader's *active participation* in the making of the meaning of his narrative, thus creating an image of a reader very "sagacious,"⁷ and hence somewhat equal to his writer. This requirement is sometimes as intense as even to include the reader's own life experience: "The reader may remember this wreck, from the circumstance that a letter was found in the captain's valise [...] and from the trial which took place in consequence." In such cases author and reader share knowledge about realities of life as if independent of the processes of writing and reading, as if coming directly from their own daily experience. Having achieved such a degree of *closeness* to his reader, Thoreau can even ask him favors: "The reader will excuse my greenness, - though it is not sea-greenness, like his, perchance, - for I live by a river shore." Or he can safely play with his own name: "But whether Thor-finn saw the mirage here or not, Thor-eau, one of the same family, did." Along with so much more, *Cape Cod* is also, in fact, very much a book about names and naming. With the pristine

energy of an American Adam Thoreau would seek back to the very origins of the names of places, or people, or plants, etc., and would retrace the history of a name to the fullest extent. And, of course, he would need the constant partnership of his reader in his exploratory journey in **etymology**, which would unfold into journeying into the history of a place (Nauset, Cohasset, Truro, etc.), or into that of a botanical or zoological species, or into the legendary or mythological past. All of these joint journeys with the reader are journeys in Time; but they are also journeys for the sake of Time – for the sake of the time “spent” with the reader; the more, the better – just as in the classical epic, just as in the classical epicality of the early novel. But also – in Thoreau’s specific case – for the sake of the time grasped through writing: the more the better again.

In all possible ways Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* reader is kept absorbed in an overall sense of journeying throughout the book. After all, Thoreau is telling the story of his own Cape Cod journey and is therefore both the narrator and the main character in his book, which duly qualifies as a travelogue too. Thoreau’s Cape Code travelogue properly unfolds as the story of a journey in both Space and Time – the space of the Cape the two companions ‘traverse’ and the time of the journey(s); in other words, the chronotope of this story is that of a journey with its beginning, its course, and its ending in space and time. However, the chronotope of the Cape Cod journey – Thoreau’s “extended excursion” in space and time, – is one thing, while the Time of *Cape Cod*’s metanarrative – or the constantly kept discourse with the reader – is another. *By sticking to this metanarrative throughout the book Thoreau extends Time, or rather the configuration of Time in the book.* On the one hand, he does that in a distinctively traditional *literary* manner, by making his book deal *explicitly* with the processes of its own writing and reading; but on the other hand, in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau’s last full-length book, such Time-extension acquires specific *existential*, or life-preserving significance.

Constantly implying⁸ its reader, or rather the function of the reader, *Cape Cod* ‘gains’ Time with that reader through extensive narration meant predominantly – in the classical epical tradition – to entertain. The many *Cape Cod* anecdotes certainly serve that purpose. However, they do not only bring in the fun of the story told, but also the fun of the *telling* of the story. They come in the main narrative as inserted stories in the same manner the numerous lengthy citations from books come, but, unlike them, bring in the book the lively energy of the *spoken word*, thus contributing to the overall impression of a sustained *oral* epic. *Cape Cod* thus evokes the age old format of **storytelling**. Thoreau’s Wellfleet oysterman is the perfect storyteller: he is never done with his stories, his style of conversations is “coarse and plain,” he talks “a steady stream,” and is always ready to resume – just like Homer, or Scheherezade, or Chaucer, or Boccaccio, – or, of course, Henry Thoreau.

In fact, *Cape Cod* is very much a narrative consisting of stories told and listened to in the course of a journey and is thus very similar to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, for instance. But before all it is a narrative that richly and panoramically unfolds as storytelling under the shadow of death very much in the manner of *The Arabian Nights*. *Cape Cod* opens with a most naturalistic picture of death, and death persists throughout the book in the form of shipwrecks, dead bodies, and the vast, black bottomlessness of the ocean. This of Chaos and Matter can only be grasped in and neutralized by the grand power and energy of narration. Just as in *The Arabian Nights*, where “for Sheherezade narrative equals life and the lack of narrative equals death,” as Tzvetan Todorov astutely observes,⁹ so too Thoreau’s narrative equals life. And just as Scheherezade’s model is applicable to Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, *Cape Cod* compares to *The Decameron* in being a narrative in the face of death. Boccaccio’s book opens with a horrifying picture of the plague in Florence and points to the indifference at the sight of

hundreds of dead bodies; Thoreau's book begins with the horrifying picture of the shipwreck and the realization that "It is the individual and private that demands our sympathy. A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse." Both books, that is to say, unfold as full-length narratives celebrating life.

So Thoreau did not see why he "might not make a book on Cape Cod" – and why not make this book be at the same time a book on America, a book on travel and adventure, on reading and writing, on nature and walking, that is a book on "human culture." The classical epicality of *Cape Cod* is what makes it this book.

"In literature it is only the wild that attracts us," Thoreau declares in "Walking," and if "in wildness is the preservation of the world," then it is the classical "wildness" of *Cape Cod*'s *narration* that represents the preservation of life. *Cape Cod*'s extensive *narration* is mature Thoreau's *writerly way* to "improve," as he puts it in *Walden*, "*the Nick of Time*."

Usually Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is seen, in H. Daniel Peck's words, as his "most insistently and explicitly temporal work." Thoreau's last book is also an insistently and explicitly temporal work; but its temporality is different. In *Cape Cod* Thoreau does not explore the powers of memory; nostalgia is no more his driving force; instead, in a masterfully *classical literary* manner *Cape Cod textifies Time*, thus keeping its nick wide open – the *epically extended chronotope* of the excursion of Life.

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³ Walter Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p. 76.

⁴ Richard Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 161.

⁵ Walter Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook*, p. 78.

⁶ See Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (Stockholm: Norwood Editions, 1979), pp. 33-5.

⁷ Henry Fielding's favorite attribute for his reader.

⁸ See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 74.