

Tradition and Transformation in Cape Cod Literature: Robert Finch's *The Primal Place* and Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod*

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Introduction

Cape Cod has inspired many literary imaginations. Contemporary Cape Cod nature writer Robert Finch, for instance, is greatly influenced by Henry David Thoreau. Finch admires Thoreau because “he both touches the genre’s [nature writing] roots and anticipates in its flowering in this century” (*Norton Book of Nature Writing* 22). He also says, “Everybody has to come to terms with Henry David.” (Trimble 177). Finch’s *The Primal Place* (1983) and Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* (1865) have in common such themes as excursion, the edge, the change of seasons, a sense of history, the cycle of life and death, and the mutual dependence of man and nature. In these themes, 120 years of tradition and transformation can be found and discussed.

Excursion/Edge

Both Thoreau and Finch made excursions to Cape Cod, and both of them paid attention to its geographical characteristics such as the edge between land and sea. Finch says in a dialogue with Terry Tempest Williams and Edward Lueders, “There seems to be a natural pattern for a lot of nature writing. I know it is true in mine,” (Lueders 60). Thoreau, Finch said, was the first one to establish it. The natural pattern for the nature essay is what Thoreau called “the excursion’— the venture out into something unknown or not familiar, something that he wanted to explore, and then coming back and shaping that experience into something” (Lueders 60).

Thoreau published the collection of essays called *Excursions* in 1863. He says of Cape Cod, “I have been accustomed to make excursions to the ponds within ten miles of Concord, but latterly I have extended my excursions to the seashore” (*Cape Cod* 3). In fact, *Cape Cod* is a record of his journey from Concord to Cohasset, Orleans, Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown and beyond before returning to Concord.

The Primal Place consists of 13 chapters, and the book appears to be simply a random collection of essays. However, it has a consistently circular structure: Part I, “Digging In” corresponds to Part II, “Going Out.” Part I of the book describes the landscapes: the forest (chapter 1), the view beyond the yard through the glass doors (chapter 2), the graveyard (chapter 3), the garden (chapter 4), the roads (chapter 5), and

the section of West Brewster known as Punkhorn (chapter 6), while part II of the book describes the seascapes or waterscapes: the bog in Berry's Hole (chapter 7), Stony Brook stream (chapter 8), the Mill Ponds (chapter 9), the salt water tidal river called Paine's Creek (chapter 10), the seashore (chapter 11), the bay (chapter 12), and the landing at Paine's Creek (chapter 13). The author digs into the landscapes and moves beyond them into the seascapes.

Paying attention to the geographical characteristics of the Cape, Finch described it as "one of the world's great edges" (*A Place Apart* xx), for it is a peninsula thrusting thirty miles out into the sea. The edge between land and sea is ecologically fertile, producing more species than most areas. The edge is also artistically fertile, appealing to the imaginations of its writers. Finch comes and goes from the Cape, making the excursion to the edge between the land and sea.

Thoreau also took an interest in the edge and enjoyed life there. His cottage was situated on the edge between Walden Pond and the forest. He writes in *Walden*, the record of his two years and two months there, "My house was on the side of a hill, immediately on the edge of the larger wood" (126). The house was also situated on "the water's edge." (*Walden* 193). Similarly, Cape Cod is "the edge of a continent" (*Cape Cod* 270). The seashore of the Cape is described as a sort of "neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world" (*Cape Cod* 186). Many nature writers other than Robert Finch revealed an interest in the edge. Rachel Carson, for instance, wrote *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). Thoreau initiated such writing.

Thoreau made an excursion to Cape Cod to seek the wildness, while Finch explored its mystery. In chapter 1 of his book, Finch enters into the maze of the forest "to solve or enter the mystery" (9); the mystery in the sense of "something unknown or not familiar." Finch says that the trees are like the original Cape Cod forest encountered by the Puritans during their initial landfall at Provincetown in 1620. Gov. William Bradford described the forest as "open and fit to go riding in" (8). Finch tried "re-entrance" into the maze and began his excursion to and exploration of the mystery.

In many of the chapters, the mysteries of the natural world are explored. For instance, chapter 2 describes the incredible mysteries of the ants, chapter 5 describes the dramas and mysteries of the changing surfaces of the roads in response to the seasons, chapter 7 describes the mysterious disappearance of frogs from Berry's Hole during the summer, chapter 9 describes the mysteries of the pond caused by the fish, and chapter 11 describes the mysterious death of large schools of short-finned squid stranded in Cape Cod Bay.

In the final chapter, Finch returns from his excursion. His circular excursion of

Cape Cod, beginning with the forest on land, and moving past landscapes into seascapes, ends at the landing at Paine's Creek. Since the journeys are circular, "it is both an end and a beginning for journeys" (233). Finch also says that spring is the time of year to start with. He would like "to see what the winter has left to start with" (238). He writes that spring pushes up "from under the accumulated debris and the storms of winter, a new re-entry into life" (241). The book ends at the beginning of the new excursion, the new cycle of seasons, and the new life.

Change

Change of Seasons, Change of Nature

Finch seems to be influenced by Thoreau in his sensitive perceptions of the change of seasons. Thoreau, in *Walden*, describes the cycle of seasons returning to spring. Finch also stresses the importance of the changes in nature according to the change of seasons, saying, "Change is the coin of this sandy realm":

Change is the coin of this sandy realm, and as long as we are not too close to it, such change delights us. The seasons flow in their rhythmic variety, a little out of sync with the mainland due to the ocean's moderating influence—which pleases our sense of separateness. With them come in the streaming tides of shorebirds, migrating alewives and striped bass, pack ice in Cape Cod Bay, spring peepers in the bogs, gypsy moths in the oaks, and tourists in the motels and restaurants. (3)

Shorebirds and alewives migrate according to the change of seasons. The primary geographical characteristic of Cape Cod—the edge between land and sea—enhances the variety of natural changes in both areas. Finch, in his dialogues with Williams and Lueders, affirms that Cape Cod is "a very seasonal land" (Lueders 53).

Finch writes about the migration of alewives more in detail later in chapter 8:

The alewife is an anadromous fish, that is, like the salmon, it makes an annual spring migration from its saltwater home up coastal rivers and streams to spawn in freshwater ponds and lakes....

Unlike the larger salmon, however, most alewives do not die after spawning, at least not in the shorter runs. Instead, they return to the ocean, where they may travel hundreds of miles during the winter before returning to their home stream once again the following spring. (139)

Finch again uses the coin metaphor when he says, "Alewives are one of the great common coins of the natural realm" (144). It is because alewives have been increasingly recognized as "an important component and link in a broad chain of aquatic

environments” (144). In their journeys and the complexities of aquatic food chains, alewives offer us “grist and nourishment for our lives” (145).

Change Brought by Humans

In addition to natural change, Finch describes change brought by humans. Finch points out that traffic makes it unsafe to cross the road, and woods are cleared and turned to roads and buildings. The open stretch of coastal bluffs are clotted with condominiums. Along the highway, houses and tennis courts are constructed where deer used to be seen. In back roads and open fields, fox and woodcock disappear, and in their stead, shopping malls, golf course, new schools, and sewage treatment plants appear (*The Primal Place* 4).

Finch, in “The Once and Future Cape,” published 9 years after the publication of *The Primal Place*, deplores the human destruction of the natural world he once celebrated. For instance, he praised in *The Primal Place* a small landing at one of the herring ponds for “its extraordinary plant and animal diversity which flourishes in unredeemed heathen health,...such pools of peace” (165). But recently he noticed natural degradation because of soil erosion as well as evidence of human abuse: “Tires, plastic buckets, and other refuse litter the shore and shallows. The landing has become, in essence, a slum, ugly and insulted” (“The Once and Future Cape” 23).

In the “Scratching” chapter of *The Primal Place*, he praised clam flats as “remarkably unscathed,...despite the increasing intensity of human activity” (184). But now these words sound naive as he writes in “The Once and Future Cape,” “each week seems to bring notices of more closings of swimming beaches and shell-fish beds due to pollution, more evidence that we are poisoning with our own excrement, in insidious and often untraceable ways, the generous bounty of the ocean” (23).

Finch points out that even the portion of the ocean beach protected by the Cape Cod National Seashore is not exempt from such debilitating change. He is more than aware of “the smothering presence of human consumption and waste than if the entire beach had been plastered with the bodies of summer sunbathers” (24).

While Finch is depressed to see the negative environmental change brought by human abuse, such as pollution and the wrack line of plastic debris, he encourages human participation in and dependence on nature. Finch insists that Cape Cod has “an extraordinary human scale” (Lueders 48). He continues to say:

The overriding presence of the ocean defines the character of that land, and the ocean is change. That is not a metaphor; that’s a reality. The ocean is mutable. It changes things. *It* changes. And on Cape Cod, we see our

geography, our topography, changed over our lifetime. It seems to have a scale that answers to the human scale of motion (Lueders 48).

Finch admits in the preface to *The Primal Place* that he is attracted by the landscape of Cape Cod because it is “neither natural nor human, but an amalgam of the two” (xi). Finch calls such a setting “a historical landscape,” which adapts from something of its past to something of its future.

Conversely, Thoreau asserts that the ocean is a wilderness untouched by humans and beyond human scale, and he denies the mutability of the oceans:

We do not associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always. The Indians have left no traces on its surface, but it is the same to the civilized man and the savage....The ocean is a wilderness reaching round the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and gardens of our seaside residences. Serpents, bears, hyenas, tigers rapidly vanish as civilization advances, but the most populous and civilized city cannot scare a shark far from its wharves. (*Cape Cod* 188)

It is known that Thoreau fathomed Walden Pond and examined its bottom. But for him, the sea was “unfathomable.”

Thoreau even denied the Indians’ friendly ties to nature in his description of a remarkably tricky method of catching gulls derived from the Indians. It was practiced in “The Gulls’ House” fixed in the ground on the beach. The man, placed in the house, draws in the gulls while they are eating the flesh of the whale put on top of the poles. This is perhaps the origin of the word, “gulled.” (*Cape Cod* 72).

Finch celebrates the continuing ties of the original Indian inhabitants to the Stony Brook stream:

In an age when most towns have lost what John Hay calls their “rooted continuity,” the Stony Brook run represents an unbroken and vital tie with our beginnings. There is still a living memory stored in its currents, and in the fish that swim in them. Whether we gather them to eat, to bury in our gardens, or simply to feel in them the raw, cold power of the sea coursing through our inland veins, they remind us of our continued participation in and ultimate dependence upon the natural cycles and free passage of life upon this planet. (159-60)

Hay gives an example of “rooted continuity” by referring to a gardener who uses alewives as fertilizer of corn plantings. He writes in *The Run*, “An ambitious gardener

can bury the rest of [the alewives] under his corn plantings to serve as fertilizer,...It is a practice that we inherit from the Indians” (27).

Finch also writes that through all the variety of natural change, there is “a continuity,...an interplay of great and connected forces” (*The Primal Place* 4). This sense of belonging to a people and a place, Finch calls “rootedness” in his interview with Lueders (Lueders 47). Finch, like Hay, uses the metaphor of putting down roots. He calls this rootedness with a tradition or history a “rooted continuum” (Lueders 47), as well as “local history” (Lueders 44). This is “a sense of history, which is ultimately a sense of story,” he says (Lueders 45). It is not a history told by rulers or settlers, but a story in the sense of storytelling of Native Americans and “your own history” (Lueders 45).

A Sense of History

Finch celebrated the Indians’ friendly relationship with nature as the beginning of “the rooted continuity” or “rooted continuum.” Like the gardener in Hay’s writing, Finch still maintains the practice he learned from the Indians of using alewives as fertilizer: “I had gone down to the run that day to collect a few dozen herring to put beneath my hills of corn, in the old Indian fashion” (*The Primal Place* 153).

He also notes that the Indians had their own fishing culture long before the Europeans settled there.

The sheer bulk of stone axes, broken hammer stones, flakes, and other objects points to a long and continued use of the area by local prehistoric peoples. Some, such as certain stone spear points designed for catching fish, suggest the presence of a halieutic Indian culture in the valley as much as 7,000 years ago. (*The Primal Place* 142)

In the long history of “rooted continuity,” Finch also estimates the achievements of pilgrims. Because of the *Mayflower’s* first landing in Provincetown Harbor in 1620, Cape Cod is “an undeniably special place” (*A Place Apart* xviii). Finch quotes the central section of Conrad Aiken’s poem “Mayflower,” which evokes and celebrates the vanished first inhabitants of his house:

...Here lies

Mercy or Thankful, here Amanda Clark,
the wife of Rufus; nor do they dread the dark,
but gaily now step down the road past Stony Brook,
call from the pasture as from the pages of a book,
their own book, by their own lives written,

each look and laugh and heartache, nothing forgotten.
Rufus it was who cleared of bullbriar the Long Field,
walled it with fieldstone, and brought to fabulous yield
the clay-damp corner plot, where the wild grape twines.
Amanda planted the cedars, the trumpet-vines,
mint-beds, and matrimony vine, and columbines.
Each child set out and tended his own tree,
to each his name was given. Thus, they still live, still see:
Mercy, Deborah, Thankful, Rufus and Amanda Clark,
trees that praise sunlight, voices that praise the dark. (qtd. in 87)

This passage praises the pilgrims' participation in and dependence on the land. They cleared the land, planted their own trees, and made a large yield without dreading the dark.

Finch, in the current multiethnic and multicultural age, portrays the pilgrims as part of the "rooted continuity" that began with the Indians. He demythologizes the pilgrims as the first settlers. "To seek identity," he explains in a dialogue with Terry Tempest Williams, many come to Cape Cod not just because it's a pleasant place to live but because of "its sense of history, which is ultimately a sense of story...We're nearly all what they call 'wash-ashores' on Cape Cod. And we all become instant natives, and outdo the real natives" (Lueders 44-45). It is a creation of story, even a "mythology" of its own (Lueders 45). Pilgrims were not sacred, special people, but were only among the explorers and settlers who became natives in their own way. This is the conflict of globalization and localization.

Thoreau likewise did not overestimate the pilgrims:

It must be confessed that the Pilgrims possessed but few of the qualities of the modern pioneer. They were not the ancestors of the American backwoodsmen. They did not go at once into the woods with their axes. They were a family and church, and were more anxious to keep together, though it were on the sand, than to explore and colonize a New World. (*Cape Cod* 256)

The wrecker on the beach, a socially marginalized wanderer, "may have been one of the Pilgrims,— Peregrine White, at least,—who has kept on the back side of the Cape and let the centuries go by" (*Cape Cod* 59). Thoreau assessed Pilgrims' accounts as "generally false." He also made "some allowance for the greenness of the Pilgrims in these matters, which caused them to see green" (*Cape Cod* 255).

In fact, Thoreau took an interest in other European explorers, such as the French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, who came to America before Pilgrims. Chapter 10,

“Provincetown,” traces the records of settlers preceding Pilgrims. Among these, Thoreau respected French explorer Champlain and his “Voyages,” which recorded his visit to Cape Cod in 1605. Thoreau also referred to the Norsemen, Eric the Red and his son Thorwald, who reached Cape Cod in the 10th century, accordingly to Icelandic manuscripts.

By referring to earlier European settlers, Thoreau demythologized the Pilgrim Fathers. He portrayed the pilgrims as only one of the first groups of settlers. Both Thoreau and Finch have positioned Cape Cod as a place of historical multiethnicity and multiculturalism.

Thoreau also related his interest in people’s settling to plants putting down their roots. At the scene of the shipwreck of the Irish immigrants, he wrote, the thorn-apple, carried in the ballast, planted its roots and was springing from the edge of the shore:

The *Datura Stramonium*, or thorn-apple, was in full bloom along the beach, and at sight of this cosmopolite, this Captain Cook among plants, carried in ballast all over the world, I felt as if I were on the highway of nations. (*Cape Cod* 14)

Life and Death (Seashore as a Vast Morgue)

Both Thoreau and Finch thought the sea or beach symbolizes the reality of death. Thoreau’s *Cape Cod* begins with the description of the wreck of the brig from Ireland laden with emigrants. Thoreau made a visit to Cape Cod in 1849 to get a better view of the ocean, which “covers more than two thirds of the globe” (*Cape Cod* 3), only to see dead bodies and wreckage from the ship strewn across Cohasset beach. He faced the hard reality of death when he saw “many marble feet and matted heads as the clothes were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl...” (*Cape Cod* 6).

Thoreau wished their souls had emigrated to the newer and safer port in heaven. “Why care for dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes” (*Cape Cod* 12), he wrote. Transcendental Thoreau believed that the dead bodies were of the earth, and that the souls of the dead left the earth for heaven.

Thoreau became less transcendental when describing the seashore as “a vast morgue”:

It [The Seashore] is a wild, rank place, and there is no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horseshoes, 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. The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately up upon its shelf, rotting and bleaching in the sun

and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them. There is naked Nature,—inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (*Cape Cod* 186-87)

In this quotation, there is no transcendental exchange of human soul and nature. There is only a harsh acknowledgment of death. Sherman Paul says, “Thoreau accepted death, as the inhabitants of the Cape did, with a certain matter-of-fact inevitability, as a part of the economy of daily life and nature” (382). Paul continues to argue that Thoreau “did not have a shred of sentimentality” (382). Nature reveals the dead bodies as they are. It is indifferent to man since it is “inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man.”

Finch, in his dialogue with Lueders and Williams, points out that “the ocean almost aggressively reminds you of the presence of death as part of the whole cycle” (Lueders 49). Finch closely evaluated this passage by Thoreau in commenting that Thoreau was really appalled—one of the few times, you know, something cracked that hard shell—when he was on the beach and he referred to the ocean as “a vast morgue” (Lueders 49). In *Common Ground*, he mentioned it again, noting “Even hard-shelled Thoreau was shaken by the shameless display of death on the Outer Beach and called it ‘a vast morgue’” (*Common Ground* 10).

In the introduction to the Parnassus edition of *Cape Cod*, Finch praises this passage as “one of the most powerful passages in the book” (xiii). He continues to write that the naked nature is “...‘sincere,’ that is, unbiased and truthful by its very refusal to reflect and confirm human values and desires” (viii). Richard Bridgman says that the seashore, with its incapacity for flattery, was “quite simply superior to any anthropocentric system” (185).

One of the reasons why Finch thought of Thoreau as “hard shelled” is “Thoreau’s popular reputation as an antisocial misanthrope” (xi). For instance, in the book, Thoreau was disappointed with the charity house by discovering all the evidence of man’s dubious humanity. “It [the charity house] was not supplied with matches, or straw, or hay, that we could see, nor ‘accommodated with a bench’” (*Cape Cod* 78). He perceived “the wreck of all cosmic beauty there within” (*Cape Cod* 78), and exclaimed “how cold is charity! How inhumane humanity!” (*Cape Cod* 78). Thus, it is no wonder that Thoreau turned his back to human society, which he considered contemptible, and turned instead to nature. It is convincing that he was greatly moved by nature, which he found “inhumanly sincere.”

Finch quoted Thoreau calling the seashore “a vast morgue” when he wrote about the mysterious stranding and death of large school of short-finned squid in Cape Cod

Bay in chapter 11 of *The Primal Place* (215). While the land may conceal such death, the ocean discloses the death of creatures as “the reality of survival in the wild” (213). He quotes a poem written by Lewis Thomas at the beginning of chapter 11: “It is the nature of animals to die alone, off somewhere, hidden” (202). Lewis Thomas himself marveled that he had lived all his life surrounded by the squirrels in his backyard, yet had never seen a dead one.

The land may cloak its deaths in blankets of leaves and quick decomposition, but the ocean, less decorous than honest, throws up its casualties to view, at times so candidly and in such numbers, however, that we seem to live on a sinking island of life surrounded by a vast morgue. (214-15)

In this quotation, “honest” and “candidly” echo Thoreau’s “sincerity.” Like Thoreau’s passage, “naked nature” is revealed because nature is “honest” and “candid.” (*The primal Place* 214). “Death is the stranded testament of life in these waters” (229) Finch says again in chapter 12. Both Thoreau and Finch thought of the ocean as “a vast morgue” that did not hide the “evidence of life and death” (Lueders 49), and the reality of death was the “source from which we get the notions like change” (Lueders 49).

Man and Nature (Humans as Part of landscape)

It has been generally believed that for Thoreau, a spiritual or mental relationship with nature was more important. “Higher Laws” chapter in *Walden* confirms that a spiritual life is higher and asserts that the body is the temple to the god he worships (*Walden* 245). But in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau was less transcendental, more realistic and more scientific; he wished to “associate with the ocean until it lost the pond-like look which it wears to a countryman” (*Cape Cod* 177). His wish was fulfilled when he realized that the ocean was “a vast morgue” and identified himself with the wrecker on the seashore.

The wrecker was an idealized figure for Thoreau. He was “a regular Cape Cod man,” and his “bleached and weather-beaten face” was “like an old sail endowed with life,—a hanging-cliff of weather-beaten flesh,—like one of the clay boulders which occurred in that sand-bank” (*Cape Cod* 59). He was a part of the Cape landscape and was identified with the land. His image matches “hard shelled” Thoreau because he was “too grave to laugh, too tough to cry; as indifferent as a clam.” The wrecker was “the true monarch of the beach,” and was “as much identified with it as a beach-bird” (*Cape Cod* 60).

In Sharon Talley’s writing about transcendentalism and sensory perceptions, she summarizes Thoreau’s conception of transcendentalistic sensitivity: “Like most of the

people labeled transcendentalist, Thoreau rejected Lock's theory that *all* knowledge is gained directly through the senses. In fact, Thoreau believed that people are born with innate knowledge, which he, like Emerson, equated with the voice of God within" (Talley 7). However, she points out that for Thoreau, senses are also important as we know from his journal: "He that hath ears, let him hear. See, hear, smell, taste, etc., while these senses are fresh and pure" (qtd. in Talley 23). The sense of touch is absent here: Thoreau was antisocial, misanthropic, and uncomfortable touching people physically. A lack of affectionate physical touch with his mother's body prevented him to develop mature and sensual love with the opposite sex. In fact, Talley notes (32) that Thoreau urges the reader to follow his "tracks in the sand" and make "an impression on the Cape" (269). Thoreau in *Cape Cod*, enjoyed this tactile relationship with nature.

Finch, 120 years later, still found the seashore of Cape Cod as Thoreau had described it:

Thoreau's 'huge and real Cape Cod...a wild, rank place with no flattery in it,' becomes the Chamber of Commerce's 'Rural Seaside Charm' —until forty tons of dead flesh wash ashore and give the lie to such thin, flattering conceptions, flesh whose stench is still the stench of life that stirs us to reaction and response. That is why we came to see the whale. Its mute, immobile bulk represented the ultimate, unknowable otherness that we both seek and recoil from, and shouted at us louder than the policeman's bullhorn that the universe is fraught, not merely with response or indifference, but incarnate assertion (*Common Ground* 104).

Both Thoreau and Finch respected the body both in life and death, but Finch paid more attention to his physical and sensory relationship with nature. While Thoreau's sea as a vast morgue was an indifferent force of nature that "wasted no thought on man," Finch wrote about reactions and responses between humans and nature.

In chapter 10 of *The Primal Place*, Finch enjoyed scratching and said, "I am plucked out of myself like a hermit crab from his borrowed shell and left stranded, naked and unfinished, on the sands" (*The Primal Place* 196). He pointed out that the scratching had a cathartic, purifying effect on his senses (196). Finch criticized Thoreau as "hard-shelled" for he was stubborn and rarely became one with the real and physical world, but Finch was easily plucked out of his shell and became one with nature on the physical and sensory level.

He continued to write: "[O]ur love is not misplaced here on earth,...our sense of wonder and beauty is locked at the very deepest levels into the knotted reality and texture of the physical world from which we wrest a daily living" (*The Primal Place* 198).

This sense of belonging is a “true belonging...born of relationships not only to one another but to a place of shared responsibilities and benefits...The more he [a man] allies himself to some varied and interdependent whole, the less he is subject to sudden and wholesale bereavement by chance”(*The Primal Place* 201), Finch concluded the chapter.

For both Thoreau and Finch, the ideal relationship with nature is for a man to become one with nature or to become a part of nature. Thoreau’s wrecker is a case in point. Finch uses Charlie Ellis, who looks after “41 Doors,” Conrad Aikens’ house, as an example. He goes about raking leaves, checking the house after a storm, fixing up the grounds in spring, putting a new roof on one of the outbuildings in summer. Charlie Ellis, Finch comments, resembles Stubb, “Cape Cod man,” the second mate in *Moby Dick* for his easy going and impersonal good humor (*The Primal Place* 94). He is to Finch a part of nature:

He is one of the fixtures there, like the glossy-necked mourning doves that build their fragile nests in the open pitch-pine boughs in the yard each May or like the small brown deer that cross Stony Brook Road in October to feed on the ungathered apples that have fallen in the Aikens’ side orchard. (*The Primal Place* 92)

In *Common Ground*, Finch himself is a part of landscape, for he is now like a pigeon hawk:

Like the pigeon hawk, I, too, now implied a landscape, though it might be a too-human one, one that needs leavening and allying with that more inclusive natural one. I carried more weight around with me now than I had during my first encounter with the hawk. But these things had become my roots, sinking deep, and putting me on an equal footing, or perch, with it. So that as we passed one another, going in opposite directions across the pond, I felt a kinship with the hawk that might last the rest of my days here. (*Common Ground* 142)

Finch here uses his favorite metaphor of rootedness. While admitting his anthropocentrism, Finch is proud that he himself had “roots, sinking deep” into the land.

Conclusion

Both Thoreau and Finch revealed the same interest in Cape Cod’s characteristics: the edge between land and sea; the seashore as “a vast morgue” where the presence of death is visible as part of the whole cycle of life and death; the cycle of the seasons

returning to spring; its history as one of the oldest settled areas in North America where the first settlers, including pilgrims, landed.

Conversely, the lapse of 120 years between them resulted in transformations caused by human activity and natural processes. Thoreau, in “Economy,” the first chapter of *Walden*, cursed America’s early industrial capitalism and economic human activity. Today, human economic activity is more active and industrial capitalism is more developed. The loss and destruction of nature is becoming more serious. The human body is endangered by pollution. An awareness of the importance of the body along with spirit in relation to environment is becoming more urgent. Faced with the reality of life and death, Thoreau might have agreed with Finch when he wrote in *The Primal Place* that “we know life in part from our acquaintance with death, and we know death *solely* from the life it harvests” (*The Primal Place* 229).

Both Thoreau and Finch told us how to live with nature, and how to live as part of nature. Thoreau wrote that he went to the woods because “I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (*Walden* 100-01). He probably went to Cape Cod for the same reason.

Finch also addresses a single question “how shall we live? In our age that question has taken its most urgent form in relation to the natural environment” (Introduction to *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* 28). Cape Cod continues to be the primal place in an endangered earth for us to reconsider the fundamental question how we should live.

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