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Toward an Ecology of Place: Three Views of Cape Cod

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EcoLOGISTS in the twentieth century have taught us to recognize that the interrelationships of objects in a natural landscape are not only a source of wonder, but the principal reason why life endures, why a natural landscape seems more permanent than the rapidly changing social landscapes of man. Indeed, ecologists have sought to isolate those principles of connection between organisms which guarantee their survival as a prescription for the future of mankind.

How creatures fit in an environment is, therefore, of paramount importance in many nature essays. These essays demonstrate that the relationship of an organism to its environment is of such precision and balance that man in his own unnatural environments cannot hope to emulate it. The writers of these essays ask their fellow men to accept the idea that the elements insist on their own art; they depict a landscape at the disposition of natural forces rather than human enterprise. They see a natural landscape for its own sake rather than for man’s sake.

In this essay, I discuss three accounts of Cape Cod—Henry David Thoreau’s Cape Cod, Henry Beston’s The Outermost House, and John Hay’s The Great Beach to show examples of the development of an ecological sensibility in American thought. The subject of all three books is Cape Cod as a landscape which embodies and symbolizes change by virtue of its shifting sands, its migratory creatures, and its waters that change colors with the seasons and the weather. The living Cape stands in stark contrast to the Cape that men conventionally assume to be static, a mere surface upon which to build “permanent” structures that suit only their needs. The three writers find most interest in the Cape which Thoreau said is properly seen only on foot, and not seen with landed eyes. All three writers stand in awe of the Cape’s variegated brilliance, its sea-governed displays of raw power, its wind-sculptured shapes. All three are more or less aware, also, that civilization does not adapt well to these arrangements. Whether it is the ruins of a humane house (in Thoreau), the wreck of the Montclair (in Beston), or the deserted and decaying mil-

1. Cape Cod (1862; rpt. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893); The Outermost House (1928; rpt. New York: Ballantine Books, 1971); The Great Beach (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1963). All further references to these books are documented in the text.
tary installation of Camp Wellfleet (in Hay), all human enterprise seems to be reduced to a skeleton of itself by the forces of nature.

Of the three writers, Thoreau is the one most drawn to society and the one most terrified by the sea. Appropriately enough, he is the self-acknowledged land-bound tourist, the only one of the three who feels that the sea, in its machinations, "appeared to have no relation to the friendly land." Beston and Hay, more comfortable in isolation, transform the terrors of the deep into a "positive mystery." The sea is no less violent and the Cape sands no less austere in their descriptions than in Thoreau’s, but the sea and sand become in these later accounts part of a pageant, a ritual of grace and renewal as well as struggle. Most of all, man becomes part of the Cape’s measure. Man’s imaginative horizons expend only so far as he is able to perceive the Cape’s creative energies in its complex of associations. In this ‘outer and secret world,’’ this last undiscovered frontier, Beston and Hay are not tourists, but voyagers, full of ‘the fear and temptation that the undiscovered arouses in us.’ Yet they are drawn to the Cape to participate in an ongoing creation. They realize that the Cape is controlled, not by man, no matter how many of his kind populate the place, but by nonhuman forces. And they find a comfort in this fact. As Beston writes, "Live in Nature, and you will soon see that for all its nonhuman rhythms, it is no cave of pain . . . if there are fears, know also that Nature has its unexpected and unappreciated mercies" (p. 174). These mercies, which provide man a sense of orientation in nature, are what Beston and Hay seek to convey to the modern world.

A CENTURY AGO, Thoreau, too, found Cape Cod an unexpected and unappreciated sight, but he hardly viewed it as merciful. Herein lies a fundamental difference between his nineteenth-century perspective on the “Great Beach” and the twentieth-century views of Beston and Hay. Thoreau came to the ocean as a sightseer. As he admits: “Having come so fresh to the sea, I have got but little salted. My readers must expect only so much saltiness as the land breeze acquires from blowing over an arm of the sea, or is tasted on the windows and barks of trees twenty miles inland, after September gales” (p. 1). Scholars have suggested that Thoreau resisted “saltiness” because he visited the Cape not to look at the sea and the sand, but as he had at Walden Pond, to transact some private business. Whether he came to the Cape as a chronicler of history, a spiritual adventurer, or a peddler of Transcendental correspondences, Thoreau found more than he bargained for. In the wilderness of Maine
he had seen country wilder than the most desolate stretches of Cape Cod, but nowhere had he seen more telling evidence of nature's savagery to man. In no other of his works did Thoreau so persistently raise doubts about reconciling the moral neutrality of brute nature with the hieroglyphics of Deity.

One reason why Thoreau set up a marked opposition of sea to shore is that he did not see the beach as an integrated geographic or ecological unit. By itself, the sea was presented as an object for Transcendental reflection. Martin Pops is correct in asserting that "Thoreau believed that the sea is meant to be travelled over to reach the other side, not to be enjoyed for its own sake." In fact, in listening to the sound of the sea or in watching ships on the distant horizon, Thoreau found it easy to imagine a sea where not only goods and people were ferried across, but thoughts too.

But the sea also kills; and Thoreau, knowing this fact, observes that a "chaos" reigns where the sea meets the land on the beach. The land farther onshore is "friendly" in that it is safe, but the land between the tidelines is a scene of violent tumult "which only anomalous creatures can inhabit" (p. 82). Whereas the spiritual voyager is associated with the sea of imagination, the wreck is the principal metaphor of the sea of chaos. Thoreau calls the body of a little girl "the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk" (p. 5). In the same scene, an old man and his son are observed to be collecting the "wrecked weed" of sea greens. In Chapter IV, Thoreau expresses the desire "to see that seashore where man's works are wrecks" (p. 75). Peering into the ruins of a charity-house, Thoreau sees "the wreck of all cosmical beauty there within" (p. 90). Finding an ale bottle half-buried in the sand, Thoreau imagines it "the wreck of a rowdy world" (p. 139). It is no wonder that at one point Thoreau asks, "What right has the sea to bear in its bosom such tender things as sea-jellies and mosses, when it has such a boisterous shore, that the stoutest fabrics are wrecked against it?" (p. 81).

With his penchant for analogy, Thoreau attempts to reconcile his love of nature with his fear of her murderous sea. Sherman Paul notes that the image of the wreck is often associated with discovery as well as death and disorder. Thoreau accepts death "with a certain matter-of-fact inevitability." He can with "affecting objectivity" transform a scene of chaos into a sublime experience.

There are, of course, several notable passages from Cape Cod where Thoreau creates a Transcendental meaning for the sea's beatings. In viewing the wreck of the St. John, Thoreau finds both awe and pity in his feeling that the dead have "emigrated to a newer world. . . . A just man's purpose cannot be split on any Grampus or material rock, but itself will split rocks till it succeeds" (pp. 11, 14). In another passage, he suggests

3. Pops, 424.
that the gulls that fly above the debris of the beach are “adapted to their circumstances rather by their spirits than their bodies” (p. 82). Interpreting Darwin freely, Thoreau speculates that the sea, the “laboratory of continents” (p. 152), gives rise also to an order of plants and animals higher than their sea ancestors. The land is a stage upward from sea to heaven. Thoreau seeks in these passages to transpose the order inherent in analogy onto the “annals of this voracious beach” (p. 192) in order to refine as spirit what is disturbing as fact.

But, as in The Maine Woods, Thoreau does not feel wholly comfortable in this view. The “out of doors, huge and real, Cape Cod” (p. 74) is like the burnt lands of “Ktaadn.”

Thus, in a more somber mood, Thoreau writes, “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 the gardens of our seaside residents.” A savage wilderness, lying just beyond the farthest breaker, surrounds all of civilization. Although the aspects of wildness may recede as civilization advances upon the land, the sea remains forever wild to civilization, as “the most populous and civilized city cannot scare a shark far from its wharves” (p. 226). On this Cape—this land of “barrenness and desolation” (p. 306)—Thoreau senses that the numerous “wrecks” he has observed are not simply links with a moral realm of static forms; rather, they are links with a majesterial but foreboding world of frightening power. Thoreau concludes his description of a human house with the conviction “that it was not a humane house at all, but a seaside box, now shut up, belonging to some family of Night or Chaos... and that it was not proper for us to be prying into their concerns” (p. 91). He makes a similar remark when he observes a set of human bones on the beach: “They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my snivelling sympathies” (p. 127).

Thoreau, however, does not attribute man’s occasional exclusion from the wild simply to the mind’s inability to comprehend certain, mysterious arrangements in nature. Although modern ecological knowledge was not available to Thoreau, he was, nonetheless, so sensitive an observer that he was able to perceive, even during his short visits, that the beach was a landscape in motion, and that if man chose to venture forth on the beach, he would be well advised to heed its death-dealing tricks of coastal fogs,
shifting sandbars, and eroding sand banks. When he sees a new Provincetown lighthouse going up, he notes its precarious position and realizes that “the light of your life” (p. 318) will be readily extinguishable by the mighty forces of ocean. But Thoreau also knew that, dangerous as nature was in its random workings on the Cape, men would continue to populate the Cape in ever-increasing numbers. Throughout Cape Cod, Thoreau senses that a disparity is developing between the Cape under human authority and the Cape as a “self-sufficient countryside” (p. 5). In the final pages, Thoreau chooses to side with the former view; but as a Transcendentalist, he emphasizes the belief that the Cape’s power and transience are emblematic of spiritual truths. He concludes his book in the fall, the season in which it opens, for these days are “the thoughtful days” when the transparency of sky as well as the power of storm enable men to understand the sea better. Thoreau prophesies the day “when this coast will be a place of resort for those New-Englanders who really wish to visit the seaside” (p. 330). But it will not be a place for the fashionable. Wanting the Cape to remain relatively uninhabited so as to bring hardy visitors closer to a sense of the sublime, Thoreau declares, “This shore will never be more attractive than it is now. Such beaches as are fashionable are here made and unmade in a day, I may almost say, by the sea shifting its sands. . . . A light-house or a fisherman’s hut [is] the true hotel” (pp. 330–331). Perhaps the most disquieting aspect of this seemingly invigorating quotation is the use of the word “hotel.” In light of Thoreau’s marked ambivalence about wild nature throughout Cape Cod, this word recalls what Thoreau implies when he first sets eyes on the Cape. He is, first and last, a Transcendental tourist, a visitor to nature rather than a native returning to his home.

II

In the decades between Thoreau’s last visit in 1855 and Beston’s year on the Cape in 1927, it appeared that the conquest of nature was both a desirable goal and an inevitability. Yet the new evolutionary biology posed a serious challenge to the onrushing, materialist civilization of America. Evolution implied that man was linked to forces of change beyond his control. When the nature writers of the twentieth century compared their culture with what remained of the natural world, they saw the former as a denial of the latter. Unlike the majority of nineteenth-century literary naturalists, who viewed the natural world as fuel for thought, the twentieth-century literary naturalists viewed it more as food for survival. The patterns of civilized life were somehow to be linked to those of the natural world.

Thus, Henry Beston, unlike Thoreau, was not merely a tourist in nature. But neither did he simply side with nature against man. Rather, Beston tied his idea of man’s humanity directly to an attitude towards
“outer” nature. In 1948, Beston wrote, “The past is gone, together with its formal arts, its rhetoric, and its institutions, and in its place there has risen something rootless, abstract, and alien, I think, to human experience. Nothing of this sort has ever occurred in history.” His complaint, however, occurred in the context of a comparison he made between a “convenient and artificial” world, “bulwarked against the seasons and the year,” where “time . . . having no natural landmarks, tends to stand still,” and the country, where time “moves ahead again.” Beston felt that human culture could find sustenance only in its ties to the cycles of nature: “The country cannot avoid being a part of its own era; the abstract world is about us, yet we are not without a past and never shall be. . . . Linked with this past, moreover, is all the human past of man as a part of Nature, of one living by the sun and moon, and waiting for the clearing in the west.”

A year later Beston, in the Foreword to the second edition of The Outermost House, reiterated the importance of “the meditative perception of the relation of ‘Nature’ (and I include the whole cosmic picture in this term) to the human spirit.” Looking back on the book he had written in 1928, Beston realized that man’s experiencing the “divine mystery” of Nature was essential “if he was to remain man”: “When the Pleiades and the wind in the grass are no longer a part of the human spirit, a part of every flesh and bone, man becomes, as it were, a kind of cosmic outlaw, having neither the completeness and integrity of the animal nor the birthright of a true humanity” (p. x). He implied that what he feared most about civilization was its artifice, its living by the clock rather than by the sun. He knew that the events in nature that comprise a year of life on the “Great Beach” would remain the same, but what was man-made was at the mercy of time and the elements. Beston implied that nature’s rhythms are not given significance by the mind; rather the mind is given significance when it strikes an accord with the pulse of nature’s rhythms. Beston’s goal is to celebrate all those natural phenomena which cannot be altered by man. He prefers the community of nature to the community of man, not because the cultural world is evil (Beston has a fondness for Cape Codders), but because “the beauty and mystery of this earth” so possess him (p. 8).

Like most twentieth-century nature writers concerned about the rapid decline of wilderness, Beston tends to treat the wild as a “brave new world.” He comes to Cape Cod as an explorer of “the last fragment of an ancient and vanished land,” a land so timeless in its appearance that Beston thinks it “the end and beginning of a world” (pp. 1–2).

Thoreau could not embrace this vision of a primal world so easily as Beston because, in part, he looked out at or through nature, not into nature. Beston, on the other hand, comes to Cape Cod to live with nature,

to immerse himself in its sights and sounds. He calls his house, the *Fo’castle*, suggesting that his home is a vessel in nature. Beston feels that “in this silence and isolation ... a whole region was mine whose innermost natural life might shape itself to its ancient courses without the hindrance and interferences of man. No one came to kill, no one came to explore, no one even came to see. Earth, ocean and sky, the triune unity of this coast, pursued each one their vast and mingled purposes as untroubled by man as a planet on its course about the sun” (p. 72).

Beston’s remarkable ear for the sounds of outer nature enables him to match the rhythms and sounds of his own language to the rhythms and sounds of ocean, to recreate an organic identity between them. But this identity differs from Transcendentalist ideas about language. Beston does not want to call attention to his mind’s creativeness. He believes that it is his ability to absorb within himself the life in nature that enables him to create analogies. Language is a transmitter, not a transformer. Thus, in one remarkable passage, the seas, which are “the systole and diastole” (p. 38), beat in his words:

... hollow boomings and heavy roarings, great watery trumblings and trampings, long hissing seethes, sharp, rifle-shot reports, splashes, whispers, the grinding undertone of stones, and sometimes vocal sounds that might be the half-heard talk of people in the sea. And not only is the great sound varied in the manner of its making, it is also constantly changing its tempo, its pitch, its accent, and its rhythm, being now loud and thundering, now almost placid, now furious, now grave and solemn-slow, now a simple measure, now a rhythm monstrous with a sense of purpose an elemental will. (p. 35)

In another passage, Beston creates an analogy between the mechanics of a breaker and the strains of a symphonic tone poem. Beston believes that when man absorbs the sense of ocean within himself, he discovers a beauty that complements his awe and terror of the ocean.

Beston displays his greatest sensitivity to the sea in his description of oceanic forms and motions, and he uses metaphor to depict his feeling of organic identity. He notes that the wave coursing in from the sea is an illusion, “only a force shaped in water, a bodiless pulse beat, a vibration” (p. 38). With his “inner” eye, he perceives what he thinks to be the beat of a force at the heart of matter, a beat “so great and intricate” (p. 38) that it goes unperceived by man and will continue so until “the secret heart of earth strikes out its last slow beat and the last wave dissolves upon the last forsaken shore” (p. 39). In this view, the earth is conceived to be a vast, living body in which the wave acts as an electrocardiogram. Beston, however, prefers to look with his “outer” eye; and he sees that “the embodiment of the wave beat is an almost constant shape”; the succession of waves appears as “the same travelling mass of water” (p. 39). The shape of waves capture “the decorate imagination of the world” (p. 41). The wave performs a double function: it represents nature’s artistry at work; and it dignifies man so far as he is capable of perceiving this artistry. In fact, what Beston reveres most about the ocean is its
ceaseless activity which, “with infinite variation obeying an unalterable rhythm moving through an intricacy of chance and law” (p. 42), can create a form—the wave—to embrace the contours of the land. This basic fact of merging together, of sea dissolving into land through the action of a breaker, is an emblem of what Beston seeks in all his observations on the Cape—to feel “the thousands of cyclic and uncounted years” (p. 146) in a unity of form, in an instant of time.

If Beston describes the relationship between ocean and land as a unity of form and force, he suggests that a different kind of unity exists between animals and their environment. Beston’s favorite creatures are the shore birds. He does not see them as symbols of imaginative flight or human freedom, but of a conscious artistry at work in nature. In “Autumn, Ocean, and Birds,” his most important chapter on birds, Beston sees a flock of birds, upon taking flight, turn “into a constellation of birds, into a fugitive pleiades whose living stars keep their chance positions... The constellation... forms in an instant of time, and in that same instant develops its own will” (p. 18). Beston speculates whether such a single-mindedness of purpose can be the expression of “mere mechanisms of flesh and bone so exquisitely alike that each cogwheel brain, encountering the same environmental forces, synchronously lets slip the same mechanic ratchet? or is there some psychic relation between these creatures? Does some current flow through them and between them as they fly” (p. 19)? Beston favors the latter view, and he uses these mysterious currents of communication to measure man’s means of comprehending his place in nature:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for the incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth. (pp. 19–20)

The word “measure” in this passage suggests the fundamental difference between a pre-Darwinian, subjective view of nature, shared by many of the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, and a post-Darwinian, pluralistic view of nature. Beston’s birds are not measures of man’s creativity and dreams, but measures of nature’s creativity. Their beauty and exuberance for life reminds Beston of a special grace that only nature bestows: “Their passing was more than music, and from their wings descended the old loveliness of earth which both affirms and heals” (p. 28).

It is no wonder that Beston urges his fellow men “to keep all senses vibrant and alive. Had we done so, we should never have built a civiliza-
tion which outrages them, which so outrages them, indeed, that a vicious circle has been established and the dull sense grown duller” (p. 150). The tragedy of modern society, in Beston’s view, is that society, in insulating man from nature’s “grim arrangements,” denies him nature’s blessings. Beston ends his “ritual of the sun” (p. 172) with the reflections of a night spent under the stars. In these final pages, he writes with the religious ardor of one who came to look and has discovered during his stay that he really came to worship. He thinks of his birds again, whose actions and beauty readily dispel for him all fang and claw notions of nature. With them in mind, he offers a final benediction from what he has gradually come to see as the temple of nature. Beston takes himself to be both a member of the congregation and the priest, delivering God’s word to his fellow men:

Whatever attitude to human existence you fashion for yourself, know that it is valid only if it be the shadow of an attitude to Nature. A human life, often likened to a spectacle upon a stage, is more justly a ritual. The ancient values of dignity, beauty, and poetry which sustain it are of Nature’s inspiration; they are born of the mystery and beauty of the world. Do no dishonour to the earth lest you dishonour the spirit of man. (p. 174)

In this prayer, Beston hopes that other men will recognize that the alliance between nature and man is a spiritual bond which in its promise of renewal, is like the “resurrection and the life.”

III

UNLIKE Thoreau and Beston, John Hay began writing about Cape Cod when it had finally begun to bear the impact of tourism and overpopulation. In fact, the issue of man’s presence on the Cape is Hay’s point of departure from Beston’s book. Perhaps because he is a resident, Hay realizes that the Cape, “in spite of its stretches of comparatively uninhabited sands and its wooded areas...is caught up in the human scheme of things, and we can hardly avoid looking at it with modern eyes, for good or ill. We own it, and that is the way we are inclined to see it, not for its sake but ours” (p. 6). Hay’s major emphasis, then, is on lordship over nature.

Hay writes that “Americans have an affinity for distance—which is also a capacity for laying the distance bare” (p. 6). They have, in particular, an affinity for the sea, perhaps because the sea suggests openness and escape. Hay’s love for the sea, though, is not based on any daydreams it might inspire, but on its unchanging aspects and the limits they place on man. Such limits provide a measure of how man may come to “live with place.” In outer nature, freedom comes with acceptance and compliance, not defiance. Realizing that he, like most men, is a measurer, Hay seeks to measure his own sense of human history against the history of a place. In Cape Cod, as in any natural area, the connections between earth, air, and water, and the dependencies between creatures,
measure history. Man, though he belongs to these multitudes of life, acts as an isolated species on earth and denies himself the lessons of earth's larger history. The history of the Cape is one of "consummate change" based on the movement of water. But this natural order will now "have to endure a human association that was itself on the waters of change" (p. 54). The Cape's "slow, accumulative history" of millennia will be lost in a few decades under "human auspices," and thus Hay conceives our problem with the Cape to be reconciling "universal commitment with inviolable nature of a single place" (p. 55).

Throughout the book, Hay records in detail the Cape that has evolved from the millennial workings of natural forces. Against this idea of history he compares the relatively recent history of man's presence on the Cape and, in particular, the sense of place man brings to the Cape. Hay resolves the two historical forces for himself by linking his creativity to the measure of natural forces. Hay, like Beston, does not want language to reflect any distinctly anthropomorphic view of nature, but to convey his participation in the larger order of natural forces. Absorbing nature into the very marrow of our lives does not require an active imaginative faculty so much as an acute perceptivity and humility that will admit to things greater than man. Hay implies that all creativity must reflect an order and rhythm in nature that predates man.

Hay sees the beach in 1963 as more foreign to his society than Beston did in 1927-28. In fact, what makes Hay's writing so contemporary is his ability to capture our current mobile society, infatuated with its technological power, encroaching on nature, and creating a vast gulf between nature and itself by virtue of its enterprise. Hay writes, "All roads lead to a Cape Cod beach, or to Los Angeles, or Yellowstone. Every place is invested with human importunity, and the crowd will tell you where you are." What is disturbing to Hay about this human crush on nature is the aimless, abstract manner in which it happens, the empty show of power that it represents. "Abstracted, in the summer months especially, to the terms of the contemporary world, some of Cape Cod's more crowded areas have a familiar continental look. They are covered with asphalt, cars, motels, cheap housing, shops full of grotesque souvenirs with no relation to the place they serve, and they amount, when you come right down to it, to receiving grounds for power made by a conquering civilization" (p. 6). Although Americans find it easy to conquer space, they find it harder to lay claim to this space with any real sense of belonging. Watching tourists at an aquarium and then looking at the fish, "strangers in the perfection of their remoteness," Hay conceives the glass barrier between air-breathing tourists and water-bound fish to represent an "unbridgeable distance" (p. 20).

For Hay, mid-twentieth century America's insulation from nature goes hand-in-hand with its assault on nature. Like Beston, Hay considers man's denial of his intuitive powers to be the chief cause of his displace-
ment from nature. Hay goes farther, though, in suggesting that we are accelerating the pace of our conquest of nature and thus accelerating the destruction of our humanity and our integrity as a species in nature. Hay writes, “we have air and tides in us that know the energies of earth from past acquaintances, but we are much too ready to mistrust these depths and to let other authorities do our work for us. Perhaps our natural senses are becoming atrophied” (p. 70). Because we deny our natural senses, “we only see, we only live, a fraction of the possibilities allowed in so great a range; and being restricted, we oversimplify, cutting life and land down to size . . . a poverty that makes for poverty” (p. 72). Man destroys nature, not so much with a malice born out of conscious design—he is not inherently evil—but because he lacks an “affinity for place, an organic knowledge of [his] own part in the physical world” (p. 73).

According to Hay, we need to realize how animals are more in tune with their environment than man, and in ways man can only glimpse indistinctly, and usually with artificial aids. “In the eyes of birds . . . is a special kind of closeness to truths of nature which we might only see through a glass” (p. 99). These “other societies”—Beston’s “other nations”—may receive the secrets of earth in unexciting ways which still are “our envy to discover” (p. 100). Sight, which for man entails symbolic assessment, may be in other animals “the expression of an alliance with the world in lives twitching and quivering toward mutual attachment and effect” (p. 102). Animal communication, then, is “another language of unexplored dimensions” (p. 105). Hay, like Beston, loves birds, not only for their beauty and song, but for their gestures, which indicate how good they are at the business of living. What men learn from these gestures are “the nonhuman advents that pass the limits of a man. There is a common realm of action and perception, whose boundaries we may never reach, where men can be more grateful for their belonging than their isolation” (p. 105).

In order to discover more about the Cape’s “unfinished depths,” its “unexplored dimensions,” Hay concedes more ignorance about nature than Beston does. What Hay discovers about the beach is similar to what Melville articulated about the sea in Moby-Dick. Hay terms the beach “unknown,” “undiscovered,” “unexplored,” “inscrutable,” “impenetrable,” “silent,” “lacking fixed ways,” with changes “quite beyond catching,” and ultimately a realm of “cryptic mastery.” The beach is the last “unimagined frontier,” whose continuity, deliberateness, and environmental stability seem strangely ill-suited to man.

As a mystery, the sea is also a measure for man’s own feelings of uncertainty about his future. Hay says of the sea’s wild resources, “I know no more about them than I know about myself. The depths are still ahead” (p. 25). The sea’s foreboding qualities can actually comfort man with “a stillness, a suspension . . . that gives a provision of relief for those in
want." At the same time, the sea holds no promises: "And if we wait and watch, there might be more to the beach and sea than what we came for. Waiting, in fact seems to be its essence, since it gives no answer to what it is, being a wide surface brightness, a tidal beat, a sounding whose monumental depths are concealed, suggesting too, that we might wait for it forever and know nothing" (p. 7). To understand it, man must abdicate his claims to it. Hay believes that the sea often terrifies man not only because it can kill him, but because it defies measure. Because the sea is not their natural environment, men find it easy to hate. Yet within these waters, "So close is the association of the sea and its lives . . . that it is almost tempting to inquire whether the sea does not have an organic nature of its own" (p. 23).

These organic and spatial relationships in outer nature are what Hay holds up as the ultimate measures for man, who because he has nearly lost an organic relationship with the land, is in danger of perishing. Man builds a house or a road on the Cape, or simply congregates in great numbers on its beaches. In doing so, he reduces the Cape to human proportions. But the Cape is an "agent of dynamic energy" (p. 33), a "place of flying, falling, and tumbling" (p. 41), its dunes a "continual dip and rise of contours" (p. 52), its tidal zone the scene of the ebb and flow of life. The Cape is an "indefinite combination of things in a universe of motion" (p. 130). With its brilliance and desolation, it is "life pared down to absolute standards of simplicity" (p. 122).

The Cape's stark simplicity, motion, and tidal beat suggest depths that cannot be comprehended. Simply by what it is, the Cape's "roving ways invite man to the space in which life is shaped and perpetuated" (p. 125). In that space, Hay says, one discovers that "we are all helplessly interdependent and obligated to tides that none of us can turn" (p. 123). Other creatures seem adept and capable in this outer world; but man, who denies his intuitive powers and wallows in his conscious attempt at mastery of nature, feels naked and displaced, deprived of resources to exist here.

Yet, where nature seems most a denial of man, there man is curiously free. Where man accepts the reign of nature, he does not feel the need for mastery. Hay tells of his own experience in Camp Wellfleet. Standing on what he calls "barren grounds," where nature is already beginning to take over, he compares the depressing authority of the army with the authority of the sea and its gloom that puts all gloom in jeopardy. "Perhaps it [the sea] is best approached in misery of soul, because then it stands out . . . as the raw room that owns us, the desert without illusion" (p. 60). Because the sea holds no promise, save that it endures, it becomes a comfort. "How could the sea do anything about reassuring mankind as to whether or not we would survive our own acts and commitments. . . . Perhaps, we love the sea for its denial of us" (p. 62).

Hay indicates that the desire for measure is man's greatest burden. In
outer nature, Hay observes not a single instance of conscious mastery in the countless levels of life; on the contrary, he observes perfect adaptations. The beach is "the beautiful arrangement of all contrary, separated, and divided things" (p. 130). Things live and die on the Cape "with a natural mortality which our world denies" (p. 92). Hay does not exactly fault man for his destruction of nature; destruction has happened because man has lost perspective and a sense of proportion. He implies that we still live against the grain and apart from the landscapes of our continent, as if we will never believe that we have no special distinction above the rest of nature. If nature beats in man as much as it does in any other creature, then the following arrangements provide a balance for him to emulate:

Everything in this landscape, from gulls and ducks to driftwood, marsh grasses, and deer, had a vital distinction. The beach with its perpetual reshaping and scouring worked on each stone and lifted each grain of sand, so long as there was stone and sand. The gulls hung overhead, colors fitting the shore and sky. Even the boat had a fitness, a sea size of its own, and so with feathers, logs, or purple stones, all in solitary nobility, but swept and washed into a mutual keeping by the air and the tidal presence of the sea. (pp. 91-92)

What man finally needs to see are all "the unimagined combinations of being" (p. 131). Only then does vision imply more than sight.

IV

In comparing Thoreau’s account of Cape Cod with the accounts of Beston and Hay, one notes an anthropocentrism in Thoreau’s account which is resisted by Beston and Hay. Thoreau makes the lighthouse the most prominent building in Cape Cod perhaps because he seeks to “illuminate” the sea, to penetrate a disconcerting literal and metaphoric fog that is prominent where the land meets the sea. But Beston and Hay seek illumination from the Cape. They trust their “animality” with a sincerity made possible by their assimilation of evolutionary and ecological fact. Having come to some understanding of man’s biological heritage, their concern is with man’s present adaptations, not his future strivings.

Perhaps one can say, to borrow Meyer Abrams’ terms, that Thoreau sees the mind as a lamp in outer nature; Beston and Hay see the mind more as a mirror. 6 Thoreau had at his elbow, available to his art, an enormous amount of open space and wildness into which to project himself and thereby to achieve an identity between matter and spirit. Beston, and particularly Hay, believe that man has alienated himself from nature because he has commandeered space and saturated it with himself. In the new landscape, man meets only himself and sees little of the physical forces and diversity of life which have sustained him and are still necessary for his continued survival. If the experience of Beston and Hay ap-

pears at times like that of pilgrims, the reason is that they see in outer nature the only source of renewal left for their lives. It is not that the imagination does not afford them the means to define their uniqueness; rather it is only in the natural world that the imagination can continue to flower.

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