

“WALDEN”: THE «ART OF LIVING»¹

Viriato Soromenho-Marques

(Universidade de Lisboa)

Henry David Thoreau and his masterpiece, *Walden*, are both deeply embedded in our lives. It's almost impossible today to perform a candid walk through the pages of the book that brings in its title the name of the beautiful lake, near Concord, without carrying to our contemporary reading the constellation of fears that haunt us. We are the fragile inhabitants of the grim and probably desperate, “Anthropocene era”². How can we follow the thoughts and steps from the solitary friend and disciple of Emerson, without seeing him as a forefather of our anguish before the future, seemingly captured by the shadows of economic doom and environmental collapse?

1. The World of Walden

On the 4th of July 1845, when Thoreau left Concord towards his new dwelling in the wood cabin, by one of the best natural relics of the last Ice Age, the Walden pond, he was not bursting in distress, but probably looking hopefully to the fulfilment of a rather difficult decision. Going to the wild, meant for him the abolishment of the ancient institution that enslaved the human race in a kind of ethical minor age: the gap between values and deeds:

“I 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. [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life”³.

¹ Publicado pela primeira vez na revista RESURGENCE, nº 272, May/June 2012, pp. 40-41.

² Crutzen, P. J. and E. F. Stoermer (2000). “The ‘Anthropocene’”. *Global Change Newsletter* 41: 17–18.

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, New York, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 135.

The young practical philosopher was ready to abide by his own beliefs. He was very much aware of the wide world in rapid shift around him. America was already in the centre of the move. He couldn't know that, day by day, the growing threat to nature posed by growing numbers of humans, anticipated by Robert Malthus in 1798, would reach by the end of the 1840s the staggering figure of about 1260 million souls. However, he probably was informed about the exponential increase in the American population, jumping 35,9% from 17 069 453 inhabitants in 1840, to 23 191 876, in 1850⁴. He knew by experience the harm humans were able to bring into beautiful landscapes. The human waves, coming from Europe in quest of a dream arrived also near the shores of Walden. From the woodchoppers to the expanding railroad, from the Irish raising pigs by the water to the ice-men in winter, the outcome of the meeting between newcomers and the pond was far from being a bright one⁵.

Nevertheless, reading Thoreau without bias we may confirm that the world in which pond Walden was located was less important to the writer than the world he wanted to build in his inner house by the lake. A house, that wasn't the humble cabin where he slept at night, but his deeper moral self. The sounds and shades of the forest gave him the room he needed to his personal pursuit of his identity. So, Walden wasn't the final destination, but a geographical condition for a deeper psychological travel. Thoreau was entirely in accordance with his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when the latter targeted the urban condition for its strong spiritual limitations:

“Cities give not the human senses room enough. We go out daily and nightly to feed the eyes on the horizon, and require so much scope, just as we need water for our bath”⁶.

2. The World *in* Walden

The cornerstone of Thoreau's worldview is personal autonomy. To be what we are, or what we may arrive to be, no matter what other people say about us, that's the question. Or even worst, when we assimilate an estranged view about our own personal endeavours: “Public opinion is a

⁴ Viriato Soromenho-Marques, “Sinopse histórico-biográfica”, *Dissertação sobre o Governo*, de John C. Calhoun, Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores / Temas & Debates, 2010, pp. 67-71.

⁵ *Walden*, p. 240.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Other Writings*, edited by Peter Turner, Boston & London, Shambhala, 1994, p. 382.

weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion”⁷. Self-inflicted tyranny is just part of the riddle in which personal autonomy became just an empty word. Another crucial issue that affects the clearness of our moral sight is the wrong hierarchy of values:

“I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. [...] Who made them serfs of the soil?”⁸

Instead of *being* we chose *having*. It’s so easy to neglect the duties towards our own self when it seems possible to find an easier nest in the glamour of material richness and in the approval of a shallow public mind. Nevertheless, the bottom line lies in the hardship of the path toward actual ethical grandeur. Thoreau reminds his readers, bluntly:

“While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not to easy to create noblemen and kings”⁹.

No wonder that Thoreau may be considered, aside with the founder of American Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a kind of New World pioneer of European continental existential philosophy of the 20th century, with roots in 19th century thinkers like Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. For him, as for Nietzsche, the nature of philosophical truth is not a matter of logical coherence and linguistic order, but a question of practical courage. The great challenge is the ability to live at the same level of confessed ideals:

“There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. (...) To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust”¹⁰.

The road towards becoming an authentic person is hard and painful. Modern world created a huge maze of noisy objects that disturb our capacity to keep faithful to the basic principles of personal integrity. With-

⁷ *Walden*, p. 50.

⁸ *Walden*, p. 47.

⁹ *Walden*, p. 77.

¹⁰ *Walden*, p. 57. Emerson was among the preferred readings of Nietzsche. He considered Emerson as “twin-soul” (*Bruder-Seele*): Nietzsche, letter to Franz Overbeck 14.12.1883, *Sämtliche Briefe*, ed. Colli e Montinari, Berlin, DTV, 1986, vol.6, p. 463.

out knowing, Thoreau was challenging the Protestant work ethics in a rather similar way of the one performed in 1844 by a young contemporary, Karl Marx. They both wrote about a kind of work that deprives the labourer of his own psychological identity:

“Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be any thing but a machine”¹¹.

Thoreau was keen also in showing the process by which technology was able to reign over our lives, instead of serving our human ends with sweet docility: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us”¹².

3. The “Art of Living”

The concept of “Art of living” appeared in the pages of John Stuart Mill, in 1848, almost at the same time Thoreau was leaving Walden to resume modern urban life. Mill spoke about the boundless *spiritual* “Art of Living”, establishing a sharp contrast with necessary *physical* limits for material growth, within his proposal of economic stationary state, the true seed of any modern sustainability theory¹³.

For Thoreau the would-be sustainability concept wouldn’t be an end in itself, but rather the condition for personal freedom. The respect for nature, the moderate use of natural resources, or the careful attention towards signs of decline in natural systems, all those behaviours were connected with the capacity of self-listening that only solitude can bring. Only through the severe test of loneliness could one hope for the possibility of a society made of strong and free individuals¹⁴. Only those able to take care of themselves would be able to cherish and care for our home planet.

¹¹ *Walden*, p. 48. Marx developed the concept of “alienated work” (*entfremdete Arbeit*) in his 1844 manuscript: *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*.

¹² *Walden*, p. 136.

¹³ “[...] It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; (and) much room for improving the Art of Living [...]”, John Stuart Mill [1848], *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy*, New York, Reprints of Economic Classics, Augustus M. Kelley, 1965, p. 746.

¹⁴ “I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible, but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own way*, and not his father’s or his mother’s or his neighbor’s instead.”, *Walden*, p. 114.