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"WALDEN": A TALE ON THE "ART OF LIVING" ¹

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Abstract

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) and his masterpiece, *Walden*, are both ingrained in our lives. Thoreau was neither a prolific writer nor a bestselling author; even his masterpiece was far from being a literary success. *Walden* is the testimony of a life seeking the unity of idea and action, of values and deeds. The reason why the author consider this book a pioneering classic within the already vast canon of environmental literature is related to the fact that, for Thoreau, as well for Emerson, there is no truly ontological barrier between humankind and nature. They are both modalities of thought. For Thoreau, humans are the creatures that are able to find themselves while looking for nature; or the beings that, when in silent meditation, achieve the clear notion that trees, birds, sunlight, running water, the shifting seasons, nature as a whole is a core element of our own identity.

Keywords: Nature, alternative lifestyle, sustainability, individual responsibility.

Resumo

"WALDEN": UM CONTO SOBRE A "ARTE DA VIDA"

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) e a sua obra-prima, *Walden*, estão ambos impregnados nas nossas vidas. Thoreau não era um escritor prolífico nem um autor de best-sellers; até a sua obra-prima estava longe de ser um sucesso literário. *Walden* é o testemunho de uma vida procurando a unidade entre ideia e ação, entre valores e ações. A razão pela qual o autor considera este livro um clássico pioneiro dentro do já vasto cânone da literatura ambiental

¹ Este artigo é uma republicação do texto original com o mesmo título, publicado em "Walden: A Tale in the 'Art of Living'", *Environment. Why Read the Classics?*, editado por Sofia Guedes Vaz, Sheffield, Greenleaf Publishing, 2012, pp. 23-35. O autor declara expressamente ter obtido consentimento da editora original para a sua republicação na Revista *Configurações*.

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está relacionada com o facto de que, para Thoreau, e também para Emerson, não existe uma barreira verdadeiramente ontológica entre a humanidade e a natureza. Ambas são modalidades de pensamento. Para Thoreau, os humanos são as criaturas capazes de se encontrarem enquanto procuram a natureza; ou os seres que, quando em meditação silenciosa, alcançam a noção clara de que árvores, pássaros, luz solar, água corrente, as estações que mudam, a natureza como um todo é um elemento central da nossa própria identidade.

Palavras-chave: Natureza, outro modo de vida, sustentabilidade, responsabilidade individual.

Résumé

«WALDEN»: UN CONTE SUR «L'ART DE VIVRE»

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) et son chef-d'œuvre, *Walden*, sont tous deux ancrés dans nos vies. Thoreau n'était ni un écrivain prolifique ni un auteur à succès; même son chef-d'œuvre était loin d'être un succès littéraire. *Walden* est le témoignage d'une vie à la recherche de l'unité de l'idée et de l'action, des valeurs et des actes. La raison pour laquelle l'auteur considère ce livre comme un classique pionnier dans le canon déjà vaste de la littérature environnementale est liée au fait que, pour Thoreau comme pour Emerson, il n'y a pas de véritable barrière ontologique entre l'humanité et la nature. Ce sont deux modalités de pensée. Pour Thoreau, les humains sont les créatures capables de se retrouver en cherchant la nature; ou les êtres qui, en méditation silencieuse, réalisent la notion claire que les arbres, les oiseaux, la lumière du soleil, l'eau courante, les saisons changeantes, la nature dans son ensemble est un élément central de notre propre identité.

Mots-clés: Nature, mode de vie alternatif, durabilité, responsabilité individuelle.

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and his masterpiece, *Walden*, are both ingrained in our lives. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to undertake a candid analysis of the book named after the beautiful lake, near Concord, without hearing a contemporary echo of the constellation of fears that haunts us. We are the fragile inhabitants of the grim and probably desperate, "Anthropocene era"². How can we accompany the thoughts and steps of Emerson's solitary friend and disciple without seeing him as a forefather of our anguish regarding the future, seemingly held prisoner by the shadows of economic doom and environmental collapse?

2 Crutzen, P. J. and E. F. Stoermer (2000). "The 'Anthropocene'", *Global Change Newsletter*, Nr. 41, pp.17-18.

1. The author and the book

Thoreau is both a writer and a cultural legend; a giant of American literature and a hero for those who praise typical American individualism, albeit the milder, more elaborate and intellectually-oriented New England type. During his lifetime, Thoreau lived within the sphere of attraction of the great founder of the so-called American transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson. He shared the ideas and ideals of that spiritual stream that boasted an alien German, or even Prussian resonance, and which stemmed from the philosophical works of Immanuel Kant (1724-1824). However, the gulf between Emerson and Kant is much wider than the apparent identity derived from the "transcendental" concept. Thoreau was just one of Emerson's followers and companions, much like Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, Theodore Parker. Nevertheless, we can clearly see that he was too intensively engaged in the process of personal knowledge and self-transformation to worry about fame, economic and social rewards, or even his place in American literary history.

Thoreau was neither a prolific writer nor a bestselling author; even his masterpiece was far from being a literary success. The basis for *Walden's* lasting influence lies deep in the collective American psyche. In a sense, Thoreau, alongside Whitman, constructed the two forms of 19th-century American soul. The latter was able to listen to the songs and aspirations of millions of men and women, struggling to achieve their dreams in a new, vibrant and labouring nation, while the former was a walking philosophical manifesto for the courage of trying to explore the maze of the inner conscience, and the hidden grounds of moral judgement³. *Walden* is the testimony of a life seeking the unity of idea and action, of values and deeds. The reason why we consider this book a pioneering classic within the already vast canon of environmental literature is related to the fact that, for Thoreau, as well for Emerson, there is no truly ontological barrier between man and nature. They are both modalities of thought. Becoming a true moral human being is the path that leads us to the understanding that ultimately, instead of a chasm between things and ideas, it is the unity of natural beauty and moral good that will prevail. For Thoreau, humans are the creatures that are able to find themselves while looking for nature; or the beings that, when in silent meditation, achieve the clear notion that trees, birds, sunlight, running water, the shifting seasons, nature as a whole is a core element of our own identity. Nature is not only our home, but also the best part of ourselves.⁴

3 I believe that the poem "I hear America singing" may be considered as Whitman's *ex-libris*: Walt Whitman, *Selected Poems*, New York/Avenel, Gramercy Books, 1992, p. 177.

4 Among the extensive secondary literature on *Walden*, I would recommend two subtle essays dealing with the architectonic complexity of Thoreau's masterpiece; Richard J. Schneider, "Walden", *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. By Joel Myerson, Cambridge, The Cambridge University Press, 1995,

Walden was published in 1854, in Boston, by Ticknor and Fields. It was not Thoreau's first literary outing and he already had a few titles to his name. His first attempt at the contemplation of nature and philosophical appraisal appeared in 1849: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In that same year, he published the short essay that would put him on the shortlist of major Western political philosophers: *Civil Disobedience*. *Walden* saw the light of day in the same year as an essay on the contentious topic that would force the USA onto the bloody battlefields of Civil War: (1849); *Slavery in Massachusetts*. This would be followed by an essay on the controversy surrounding a hero who was executed as a criminal; *A Plea for Captain John Brown* (1859).

2. The world of *Walden*

On 4th July, 1845, when Thoreau left Concord, on the way to his new dwelling, a wood cabin by one of the finest natural relics of the last Ice Age in Massachusetts, the Walden Pond, he was not overly distressed, but probably looking forward hopefully to the outcome of a rather difficult decision. From him, going to live in the wild meant doing away with the ancient institution that enslaves 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"⁵.

The young and practical philosopher was ready to live according to his own beliefs. He was very much aware of the rapidly shifting world around him. America was already at the centre of this movement. He could not know that world population growth, which constituted an increasing threat to nature anticipated by Robert Malthus in 1798, would reach the staggering figure of about 1,260 million by the end of the 1840s. However, he probably knew about the exponential increase in the American population, which leapt 35.9%, from 17,069,453 inhabitants in 1840 to 23,191,876, in 1850⁶. He knew from experience the harm humans were capable of doing to beautiful landscapes. The waves of immigrants coming from Europe in search of a dream came close to the shores of Walden. From the woodchoppers to the expanding railroad, from the Irish raising pigs by the water to the ice-men in

pp. 92-106; H. Daniel Peck, "Thoreau's Lake of Light: Modes of Representation and the Enactment of Philosophy in Walden", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (2004), pp. 85-101.

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, New York, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 135.

⁶ Viriato Soromenho-Marques, "Sinopse histórico-biográfica", *Dissertação sobre o Governo*, de John C. Calhoun, Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores / Temas & Debates, 2010, pp. 67-71.

winter, the outcome of the meeting between newcomers and the pond was far from ideal⁷.

Long before his journey to Walden Pond, Thoreau underwent a kind of profound and silent academic and literary preparation. Modern readers cannot help being struck by the encyclopaedic knowledge that jumps from the pages of his literary masterpiece. Modern-day universities do not provide students with anywhere near the bountiful information and wisdom that Thoreau received during his school years at Harvard University, between 1833 and 1837. Reading Thoreau, we encounter a vivid example of the blending of humanities and natural sciences, before the definitive arrival of the great "two cultures" divide⁸. Having mastered both classical languages and quantitative methodology, he was able to combine Homer with empirical data from natural sciences, as well as acute quantitative remarks with elaborate moral reflection, drawing upon classical moral philosophers.

En-route to his calm and pleasant destination, Thoreau was well aware that the world he was living in was in the throes of a rapid and breathtaking shift. The huge impact of an industrial revolution was quickly spreading from its small British source. Huge urban areas were swallowing up millions of peasants and large areas of forest and farmland. Acid smog was taking the place of mild fog in the wake of cities. Speed was everywhere, demanding more tasks in less time; in the way people talked, thought, or moved from one place to another. Nevertheless, reading Thoreau, we can confirm that the world where Walden Pond 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 was not the humble cabin where he slept at night, but rather his deeper moral self. The sounds and shades of the forest gave him the space he needed for the personal pursuit of his own identity. As such, Walden was not the final destination, but a geographical condition for a deeper psychological journey. Thoreau was entirely in agreement with his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, when the latter critically targeted the urban condition for its major spiritual shortcomings: "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"⁹.

7 *Walden*, p. 240.

8 The concept of the "two cultures" divide was cited in C.P. Snow's famous 1959 lecture; however, it mirrored a much older scientific and philosophical debate: Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures*, with Introduction by Stefan Collini, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

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

3. The World in *Walden*

The cornerstone of Thoreau's worldview is personal autonomy. To be what we are, or what we may become, regardless of what other people say about us. Worse still, we need to shed prejudices about ourselves, formulated when we assimilate an estranged view about our own personal endeavours: "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion"¹⁰. Self-inflicted tyranny is just part of the riddle in which personal autonomy became just a hollow phrase. Another crucial issue that affects the clarity of our moral vision 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?"¹¹ Instead of being, we chose having. It is so easy to neglect the duties towards our own self when it seems possible to find an easier nest in the glamour of material wealth 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 so easy to create noblemen and kings"¹².

It is no wonder that, alongside the founder of American Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau is considered as a kind of New World pioneer of 20th-century continental European existential philosophy, which has its roots in 19th-century thinkers, like Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. For him, much like Nietzsche, the nature of philosophical truth is not a matter of logical coherence and linguistic order, but rather a question of practical courage. In his sober and imperative style, the German thinker asked himself and his readers: "How much truth can a spirit carry upon its shoulders, how much truth can a spirit dare to bear? For me, those have been more and more the real measure of value"¹³. Thoreau could be considered a living example of the courage involved in the pursuit of truth against all odds. The great challenge is the ability to live at the same level as such praised and chosen 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"¹⁴.

¹⁰ *Walden*, p. 50

¹¹ *Walden*, p. 47.

¹² *Walden*, p. 77.

¹³ „Wie viel Wahrheit erträgt, wie viel Wahrheit wagt ein Geist? Das wurde für mich immer mehr der eigentliche Werthmesser.“ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Colli e Montinari, Berlin, DTV, 1980, vol.6, p. 259.

¹⁴ *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.

The road to becoming an authentic person is hard and painful. The modern world created a huge maze of noisy objects that disturb our capacity to remain faithful to the basic principles of personal integrity. Without knowing, Thoreau was challenging the Protestant work ethic, much like a young contemporary called Karl Marx did in 1844. 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"¹⁵. Thoreau was also keen to show the process by which technology was able to dominate our lives, instead of serving human ends: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us"¹⁶. However, contrary to Marx, Thoreau did not believe that salvation from the "factory system" would be a social and political revolution, grounded on a global theory of history and on a systemic understanding of capitalism as a "mode of production". Still in the domain of work and production, Thoreau asked his permanent fundamental question: what can I do? Once more, ethics was the key to liberation. Social emancipation should start with the individual's capacity to set his own agenda, his mastering of time and occupation: "I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living (...) In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely; as the pursuits of the simpler nations are still the sports of the more artificial."¹⁷

Pristine nature is the place where the roots of ethical judgment can best find their way to the human soul. However, the issue of ethics leads us to the need to make decisions regarding others in a shared and noisy world, the basis of which goes deep into the silent realm of personal identity. The society of landscapes and natural creatures is the most suitable nourishment for self-knowledge. Solitude is a pre-condition for virtue: "I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude (...)". "Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other."¹⁸ Thoreau has a good understanding of how humans can have a negative impact on nature. However, he tends to emphasize nature's resilience, bringing together the regenerative strength of natural cycles and the remembrance of his youthful reverence towards a world in the never-ending process of revelation. "Though the woodchoppers have laid bare first this shore and than that, and the Irish have built their sties by it, and the railroad has infringed on its border, and the ice-men have skimmed it once, it is itself unchanged, the same water which my youthful eyes fell on; all the change is in me."¹⁹

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

16 *Walden*, p. 136.

17 *Walden*, pp. 112-114.

18 *Walden*, pp. 180-181.

19 *Walden*, p. 240.

Nature works for Thoreau as a kind of ethical *topos*. From nature flows the power that is able to enhance personal development, and moral autonomy. Humans are, therefore, very interested in nature. However, Thoreau strictly follows Emerson's teachings regarding the need to distinguish sheer pragmatic and material interest from the involvement in nature for spiritual and ontological reasons²⁰. Walking along the shores of Walden, feeling the languid texture of time, using the lenses of leisure for sharp natural observations, Thoreau revered the diversity and plenty of nature, and used it as a blueprint for a human commonwealth, vibrant with people, eager to absorb and develop their uniqueness and individuality: "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."²¹

4. The Politics of *Walden*

The same man who was able to live alone in a humble cabin by the water, listening to the signs and noises of an expanding Concord at a distance, was the same person who was about to gain the enduring status of a cosmopolitan hero in the fight for political justice and civic fairness within modern republican politics. For Thoreau, there is no contradiction between the fierce pursuit of self knowledge and moral autonomy in the universe of personal singularity, on one hand, and the need to create the political fabric on solid foundation, based on the rule of law and mutual respect, on the other. Individualism and republicanism belong to the same sphere of concern and action: the never-ending struggle for a better world, either within the reaches of the inner soul, or in the wider realm of the outer world.

As in the quest for natural contemplation, for Thoreau, the case for political justice also began at his own doorstep, in the heart of his home town, in his native state and everywhere in his beloved America. The short essay on the concept and praxis of civil disobedience, published five years before *Walden*, is a strong statement against the way America was severing the links with the best of its own political tradition. The former beacon of liberty, beaming a hopeful light through the darkness of a cruel world of tyranny and suffering, was drifting away from its principles and towards sheer economic growth and brutal territorial expansion.

20 "Nature may be selfishly studied as trade. Astronomy to the selfish becomes astrology", Emerson, *op. cit.*, pp.387-8. Emerson also denounces in a rather surprising way the artificial barriers between mind and nature, showing that all beings are different modes of thought: "Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought, again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind of natural objects, whether inorganic or organic. Man imprisoned, man crystallized, man vegetative, speaks to man impersonated.", Emerson, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-401.

21 *Walden*, p. 114.

The essay, written in 1849, will forever stand as a landmark in terms of the method for shifting from ethical reflection to blunt political grounds, in a transition that is able to overcome any resistance and opposition placing itself on a superior level of reasoning; a single man against the overwhelming majority of his nation and the universal trends of his time; that was the fight chosen by Thoreau when he refused to pay taxes to a country that was waging war against both human dignity and international law. Vindicating American slaves and Mexicans, Thoreau was prepared to start his own personal revolution: "When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to the military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize."²²

Justice has everything to do with coherence. In nature, beauty is the sign of a perfect matching of parts in a landscape aiming for a certain kind of completeness; justice is society's surrogate for beauty. Every polity shall look towards harmony, in the distribution of social and politically common goods. Liberty cannot be the preserve of some citizens, and the desperate, distant dream of so many others. It is easy to acknowledge the way he masters the contradiction between America's promises and the harsh realities of the time. However, the core of Thoreau's argument does not belong to history, but rather to the merging of ethics and politics. In a truly Kantian insight, Thoreau affirms the identity between the moral subject and the concerned citizen. They both identify the profound abyss between the inner core of societies and individuals; an abyss between good and evil. Only "action from principle" will allow the former to prevail over the latter: "Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides family; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine."²³

There is an almost linear continuity between the role of individuals in the moral voyage undertaken in *Walden*, and the tasks individual citizens have to perform within the boundaries of society. In both situations, the key lies not in quantitative majorities, but in the fact of being right or wrong. Thoreau introduces the formidable concept of "a majority of one" as a revolutionary strength based upon moral righteousness²⁴. Therefore, we may also look towards history, using respect for individual rights as a parameter of evaluation, as a kind of indicator of progress; according to Thoreau, that is the true essence of a meaningful reading of apparently contradictory events throughout universal history. Much

²² Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 389.

²³ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 395.

²⁴ "(...) I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine (...) I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already", Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, pp. 396-7.

better than technical achievements, moral and legal improvements can establish a philosophical metric for the history of humankind: "The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. [...] Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man?"²⁵

5. The "Art of Living" and *Walden's* legacy

It is almost impossible to gauge the full historical impact of *Walden*. Several generations later, the book still belongs to both academic and popular culture. It helps us to understand the way American environmental public policy began and developed, as well as being a common gift given to children by parents worried about the transition from childhood to the turbulent challenges and ordeals of youth. It is difficult to find a single American public figure in the annals of environmental policy that was not moved by the sunsets Thoreau experienced near Walden Pond. Two years after his passing, George Perkins Marsh published his pioneering *Man and Nature* (1864). John Muir, President Theodor Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot (President of the U.S. Forest Service during the Theodor Roosevelt years), Harold Ickes (who managed the U.S. National Park Service during F. D. Roosevelt's presidencies), Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Kenneth Boulding...all these prominent personalities owe an intellectual debt to the author of *Walden*. From the extraordinary Forest Reserve Act (1891), drawn up in a rare benign gesture from Congress to the conservation efforts of three different presidents (Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland and William McKinley), to the expansion of nature reserves during Theodor Roosevelt's presidencies and modern dreams and adventures, like that of young Christopher McCandless' pilgrimage, with its tragic ending, depicted in Sean Penn's famous movie, *Into the Wild* (2007), Thoreau's profound and widespread cultural influence never ceases to surprise us²⁶.

The influence of *Walden* can also be found in other classic environmental literature, which is dealt with in other chapters in this book. At different literary levels and narrative places, it is impossible to ignore the living shadow and footprints of Thoreau's pilgrimage around the shores of his beloved lake in the other acute contemplation of nature depicted in the pages of *A Sand County Almanac*, from Aldo Leopold, or in the quest for knowledge and wisdom developed by Rachel Carson in her surprising and politically influential *Silent Spring*²⁷.

25 Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 413.

26 If we go beyond *Walden*, we have to remember how Civil Disobedience was key to the political gesture and methods that drove Mahatma Gandhi to the independence of India.

27 In 1956, Rachel Carson published an essay dedicated to her nephew, Roger, in the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine, entitled "Help your child to wonder". Recently this essay was published with photos: Carson, Rachel & Nick Kelsh, *The Sense of Wonder*; Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1998. The link

I believe, however, that the most essential source of strength, which even the contemporary reader can sense in the pages of *Walden*, lies in his militant involvement with the idea of life as both an ethical and aesthetical endeavour, reminiscent of "Art of Living". The concept of the "Art of living" appeared in John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, in 1848, almost at the same time Thoreau was leaving Walden to return to modern urban life. Mill spoke about the virtually boundless *spiritual* and cultural progress and development contained in the notion of the "Art of living", establishing a sharp contrast with the necessary *physical* limits for material growth, within the framework of his proposal for the economic stationary state, probably one of the most elaborate pioneering bases of any modern sustainability theory²⁸.

For Thoreau, the future concept of sustainability would not be an end in itself, but rather the condition for personal freedom. Respect for nature, the moderate use of natural resources and an acute awareness of signs of decline in natural systems were all behaviours connected to 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 up of strong and free individuals. Only those able to take care of themselves would be able to cherish and care for our planet. Only those who dare to dream of and act for a better world will inherit the Earth²⁹.

between a reverence for nature and moral improvement, a key element in Thoreau's stance, is clearly also found in Carson's pedagogical approaches to natural beauties and landscapes.

28 "(...) 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.

29 "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.", *Walden*, p. 372.