

RESEARCH

Civil Resistance|In Accord with Nature – On the Bicentennial of H. D. Thoreau

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Editorial Essay

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On the occasion of Henry David Thoreau's bicentennial in 2017, with the world increasingly severed by the arrogance of majorities, the intolerance of minorities, and the growing anguish of overloaded, overburdened and indebted citizens, the American Studies Research Group of ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies) found the right moment to reflect upon individual consciousness and the pursuit of a more frugal life in accord with nature. The poet and essayist's ideas remain modern – libertarianism, ecology, conscientious objection, activism – and allow us to question the actions of governments which though elected may be ruled by dubious mechanisms of representativeness, demanding, therefore, resistance when those very actions violate the principles of everyone's freedom and conscience. The Thoreauvian ideals stand for intransigence to oppression, observation as a source of territorial knowledge, and discipline in daily contemplative experience and subsequent action. From them stems a call to digression, in the sense of physical undertaking and attentive movement through the surrounding environment, and, ultimately, an appeal to the discursive interrogation of the self in interdependence with the writing of nature.

In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), the first work published in Thoreau's lifetime, the author's essential philosophical traits are already present: to turn the discovery of the nearby territory into a wider historical-social context; the spiritual demand of man anchored on the land and carried by the course of its waters; a poetry imbricated with worldly action; an affinity with others defined by a universal empathy. Hereafter, through the significant *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), in essays such as "Walking" (1862), as well as in his diarist writings and prolific correspondence, Thoreau shows us that waking up with nature is a project that entails daily reawakening and constant vigilance on the part of our conscience as citizens. In "Walking," for instance, he sustains his faith in individual observation, in the necessary interdependence between the human being and the wilderness – "in Wildness is the preservation of the World" – and in that which is natural: "I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows" (*Collected* 239).

Thoreau's connection with the region where he was born, Concord, Massachusetts, was intimate. In his works, he traces its topography, observes its flora and fauna, inspects the watercourses, measures the water of the lakes, interprets the storms, and shows thorough knowledge of its surrounding fields and woods. His familiarity with this particular geography has led Robert D. Richardson, Jr. to state: "Almost every important aspect of his life and work is bound up, in one way or another, with Concord" (Richardson 12). In 1845, Thoreau built, on the Concord estate of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the mentor of American transcendentalism who was also his friend and protector, a lakeside cabin, and stayed there for two years, two months, and two days. From this experience, around which a whole mythology has developed, emerged the above-mentioned *Walden*, where, besides reflecting at length on the concept of nature, the author describes and advocates an economy of self-sufficiency and simplicity in opposition to the illusions of progress: "Our life is frittered

away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail" (*Walden* 86). Even if most of Thoreau's life was lived in a single place, his ideas are vast and they have been an endless source of inspiration for environmentalists and political activists when he advocates a simple way of life and an inner spirituality in harmony with the natural world. In addition, his statements about self-reliance, economy and simplicity are profoundly relevant today when the planet's resources seem too scarce to support eight billion human beings.

As Bill McKibben has recently suggested, Thoreau realized that human beings may choose between two ways to live by in this world: the first one is to increase their income, the second, to reduce their expenses (xv). His option was for frugality. More importantly, however, is the kind of questions Thoreau asks us to consider, namely, "how much is enough," which functions as a subversive question for contemporary society, as well as "how can I hear my own heart?" (McKibben xvi). Although Thoreau was politically engaged, his most daring questions, then as now, are directed at the human heart, forcing us to think about our deeper options and inner thoughts. In particular, Thoreau asks each of his readers to reflect upon the importance of silence, contemplation and solitude in their lives, upon our human relationship with the rest of the world, including the non-human world. Thoreau's concern with the local may also alert us to the excesses of today's mass consumption in a global scale. In McKibben's words, these aspects show that "Thoreau has become ever more celebrated in theory, and ever more ignored in practice" (xx). And yet, "the secret Thoreau has to offer [is] that promise that the world is sweet" (xxiii). In a passage of *Walden*, one can read:

[T]he indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature, – of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter, – such health, such cheer, they afford forever! And such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in mid-summer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (*Walden* 130)

This excerpt illustrates *Walden* as an experiment in human ecology, though it preceded the term, an example of environmental writing that, according to Lawrence Buell, in his influential *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, "tries to practice a conceptual restorationism in reorienting the partially denaturalized reader ... to an artifactual version of environment designed to evoke place-sense" (Buell 267). For Buell, in the process of delineating a place-sense for himself, Thoreau creates one for the reader as well, presenting Thoreau's *Walden* project (both the event and the book) "as a record and model of a western sensibility working with and through the constraints of Eurocentric, androcentric, homocentric culture to arrive at an environmentally responsive vision" (Buell 23). The fact that Thoreau's late naturalist writings show greater mastery of scientific knowledge evinces that his was a career to be understood "as a process of self-education in environmental reading, articulation and bonding" (Buell 23). In this line of thinking, one might suggest that the contemporary environmental crisis is also related to the fact that we – teachers, academics, critics – have been failing to convey the human predicament in a narrative form that accounts for the dynamics between self and place.

Claiming a life as simple and as close as possible to nature, Thoreau's ideas oftentimes seem tainted with nostalgia for the past and with abhorrence for progress (Warner 672). He did not fail to let it be known how upset he was by the railroad that came to pass just a couple of miles from his beloved lake, mourning the loss of the landscape and expressing a legitimate concern for the social costs of progress: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man ... The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them" (*Walden* 37). On the other hand, he truly believed that the best path was the least trodden, that of unwieldy nature: "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (*Collected* 241–242). With all his devotion to language, manifest in amusing and multifold word puns, he foreshadowed with distrust the repetitive and fast quality of communication only technologically incipient in his time: "The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper" (*Walden* 88).

In his last years, Thoreau grew more and more interested in science and in the workings of nature, but always trying to relate nature's processes with those connected to human life. In "The Succession of Forest Trees" (1860) as well as in the posthumously published book *Faith in a Seed* (1993), we find the

origin of an ethics and praxis of environmental conservation. In *The Maine Woods* (1864), he supports the creation of natural parks. As argued by McKibben, even though Thoreau's writings could not have directly addressed the realities that plague us today, like the extinction of biodiversity and natural resources, carbon emissions, or global heating, they still raise issues that are crucial to the rethinking of our contemporary lifestyle, inextricably bound up with sufficiency and necessity. In that sense, both *Walden* and "Walking" offer us examples of how to counter global heating, inciting us to consume only what we need, to live close to what is essential, to avoid excess and ostentation. Furthermore, as suggested above, Thoreau's concerns are seminal to what we call today *Ecoliterature*, an attempt to break away from the discourse of an exclusively anthropomorphic intellect, allowing for wild life and natural landscape to enter the rhythms of writing:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; (*Collected* 244)

Taking up this legacy of Thoreau, Gary Snyder, the beat-inspired contemporary poet, has given us a great number of poems and essays since the 1950s where he develops the command of hearkening to the voice of nature. As the Concord poet, Snyder insists that we are one with nature, questioning, though, the artificial separateness implied in thinking of nature as something outside the human self. Therefore, inspired by the remarkable title of his poetry collection *No Nature* (1992), in 2017 the organizers of the bicentennial celebration of Thoreau's birthday promoted the translation and launch of Snyder first poetry collection.

With respect to politics and civil responsibility, Thoreau's thoughts on interdependence and autonomy are articulated in the essays where he develops his notion of self-government, such as "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849, later published as "Civil Disobedience"), *Life Without Principle* (1863), or "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859). In these texts, he unequivocally refuses unreasonable economic growth and populist sectarianisms and whims, while supporting insurgency as a stronghold against slavery, expansionism, servility and all the unequal and mechanical treatment of others.

The first taxation objector in history, Thoreau spent one night in prison during his time at Walden Pond. Convinced that the poll tax was an aberration which was used to fund the war with Mexico and slavery, he refused to pay it, maintaining that civil disobedience was the only means whereby individual reason could prevail over the abuse of power. For him, non-connivance with active discrimination and territorial usurpation, imposed by legal systems and entrenched powers, were essential to any form of human decency: "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even to most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support" (Thoreau *Collected* 209). Moreover, a just man who questions the legitimacy of an unjust state can only end up in prison: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison" (213). Thoreau not only refuses to pay taxes to a government which imprisons unjustly, but also wishes to prevent that very government from functioning, writing in "Civil Disobedience": "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine" (211). This is a variety of activism which aims to bring to a halt the machine of government, causing civic disorder and chaos, its proponents knowing full well that states, with their police bodies, armies and prisons, are by their very nature violent entities, because they have the monopoly of force. Ultimately, the type of civil disobedience that Thoreau calls for is more radical than the peaceful and non-violent protest Mahatma Gandhi and Luther King advocated, representing in a certain way, as Michael Warner argues, the highest form of citizenship (673).

A factor which contributed to Thoreau's suspicion of government was the cause of abolitionism, most likely through the influence of his mother and sister, who were politically active in the movement. Thoreau supported the underground railway network and wrote for William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. In texts such as "Slavery in Massachusetts," "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown," his ideas on abolitionism are clearly evident. In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," for example, it is possible to grasp the radicalism of Thoreau's views on the issue, not just his clear opposition to the institutions that sustained the peculiar institution, but above all his antagonism to those whom he labels as accomplices of the state on account of the material rewards they reap from bonded labor. In "Reform Essays," slavery is described as a problem of modern political systems, from which the notion of justice is absent, suggesting that individual conscience is irrelevant and has, regretfully, no direct implication in the way states are

funded. Indeed, modern states have been taken over by entrenched interests which undermine the principle of representative democracy. Citizens may vote, but they vote as subjects rather than as free individuals. As Thoreau observes in “Civil Disobedience”: “All voting is a sort of gaming like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it” (*Collected* 209). In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” conscious of the political readings that may be made of his ideas, he observes: “My thoughts are murder to the state” (*Collected* 346). Unquestionably, a certain mythology has evolved over time on the substance of some of Thoreau’s ideas concerning slavery. As Michael Warner rightly observes, in those essays in which Thoreau discusses the issue of human bondage, very little does he have to say on the actual racial experience of negroes, preferring to focus his attention on the political debate abolitionism raised in American society, including moral causes (673). Thoreau’s interest in the way of life of American Indians, attested by the innumerable notes he left on the subject, was, on the other hand, manifest. He was steadfast in his sympathetic exploration of Native American culture, acknowledging the presence of the Indian tribes of his native Massachusetts in his wanderings. However, this is not a simple issue, for, in “Thoreau and Indian Selfhood,” Barbara Novak points out that there was agreement with the “the teleological idea (shared even by Thoreau) that the Indians must go to make way for the white man, who had been God-blessed in his mission to receive the bounties of America” (44).

In other ways, Thoreau’s thought may be said to epitomize American individualism. By suggesting that we turn onto ourselves (and to the natural world), emphasizing self-rule, self-reliance and individual consciousness, it asks us to disregard to a certain extent the collective as well as one’s responsibility to others. It is a blind spot in Thoreau’s thinking as it does not take into account the fact that what applies to the individual at a personal level also applies to the community as a whole. If all citizens exhibited in due measure their sense of self and justice, the common good would be safeguarded. The question is that self-interest and personal egoism frequently tend to override collective interest, an issue which is especially true regarding environmental protection, as Stoll has pointed out in connection with Thoreau’s ideas: “Must government defend the common interest in the environment against private profiteering, or has the government hurt the public good by preserving nature?” (39). It seems clear that if the common good is not protected by the state, unrestrained individualism will fill in the vacuum and prevail over the interests of the many. The values of nineteenth-century America, informed as they were by the notion of an *invisible hand*, by the idea that a state uncommitted to the regulation of the activities of citizens, institutions and markets was best, seem to confirm just that.

The editors of this volume of *Anglo Saxonica* wish to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding Thoreau’s ideas and to their dissemination overseas and particularly in Portugal. It is hoped that this debate, for which a number of foreign academics were invited, will help to clarify the somewhat tardy reception of Thoreau’s ideas among us, the first reference to him dating from 1903, in Raul Brandão’s “Primavera.” Of late, though, they have received some attention in this country in the form of translation and artistic representation, two examples being the cinema of Rodrigo Areias and the music of Tiago Sousa. Both were showcased in the biblio-iconographic exhibition at the National Library of Portugal (April 10 through May 5, 2017), which, in bringing out a catalogue entitled *Thoreau em Portugal*, accomplished the goal of disseminating Thoreau’s works, and their past and present relevance. The essays here collected complement our endeavor by contributing to a multifaceted discussion of his ideas as they emerged from the academic discussions which took place during two seminars also convened at the time: “Resistência Civil|Acordo com a Natureza: Bicentenário de H. D. Thoreau,” held at the National Library of Portugal and the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, on April 10 and April 26, 2017.

The selection of essays included in this volume purports to represent the variety of aspects covered in our discussion of Thoreau’s writings: two articles are dedicated to Thoreau’s scientific knowledge and environmental mindedness and their pertinence in our day and age, one assessing the philosophical import of Thoreau’s rejection of conventional social restraints and his praxis of spiritual accordance with nature, the other tracing the roots and impacts of the author’s libertarian thought. Three essays examine Thoreau’s impact in our time: one is a pragmatic analysis of the ecocriticism and immigration policies aroused by Thoreau’s eco-social consciousness, while the remaining two address reconfigurations of his ideas by subsequent art forms, namely experimental music (John Cage) and Portuguese cinema (Rodrigo Areias).

Antonio Casado da Rocha, in “Thoreau and Scientific Culture,” engages with the topic of Thoreau’s scientific curiosity, his experimental practice, and his eclectic apprenticeship, positioning it in contrast with the factors that contribute to today’s “enlightened illiteracy”: the vast information we access against our scant capacity of integrated knowledge; the standardization and marketing strategies of disseminating knowledge; the convictions of technological “solutionism,” or the delegation of knowledge through the belief in technological advancement. Within the framework of the dimensions of knowledge posited by Beyjin Yang,

Casado goes on to argue that Thoreau trod the path from explicit to implicit (practical) knowledge, and finally to the “emancipatory” stance displayed by his work and his public involvement as a naturalist, that of an “enlightened amateur.”

In his essay, Paulo Eduardo Guimarães aims to find possible contacts between rapidly changing Portuguese contexts and the industrial universe of which Thoreau was so critical. It is not so much the identification of possible influences in his thinking that is at stake as the revelation of popular behavior in reaction to environmental changes brought about by mercantile ambitions and the newly institutionalized relationship with the “natural environment.” Guimarães’s text highlights the conflictual nature of Portuguese modern industrial development as it relates to the environment, taking into account the fact that the emerging struggles for environmental justice involved both the weakest sections of society and some political and economic elites. Although a number of environmental conflicts affecting Portuguese agriculture and fisheries during the second half of the nineteenth century are identified in the essay, the author’s attention is focused on the mining sector and, primarily, the pyrites and cassiterite mining industries.

Paulo Borges’s essay takes up Thoreau’s question in his correspondence with Harrison Blake, “Why put up with the almshouse when you may go to heaven?,” equating an “almshouse” with an hospice in order to bring up Jean Yves-Leloup discussion of “normosis” against the emancipatory stance already highlighted in Casado’s essay. Borges’s perspective tends more towards the spiritual quest of Thoreau’s contemplative and wandering nature, equating these with the possibility that they might enlarge our common perception of the world through the awakening of one’s consciousness.

The modern libertarian tradition arguably initiated by the essay on “Civil Disobedience” is addressed in António Cândido Franco’s contribution to the volume, in which he draws a parallel between the political ideas of Thoreau and those of Proudhon and Bellagarique. The essay offers a discussion of how the notion of “self-government” allows us to establish a link with libertarian thinking, favoring Thoreau’s reception as a seminal theoretician of anarchism. It also highlights the contingencies that might have delayed this perception among Portuguese libertarian and anarchist groups and their press, as well as Thoreau’s growing importance in those milieus from the mid-70s onwards, after the overthrow of the totalitarian regime of Estado Novo.

The starting point of Reinaldo da Silva’s essay is Thoreau’s *Walden*, especially the episode in chapter X, “baker farm.” It discusses Thoreau’s environmental concerns by way of focusing on Otherness, while, at the same time, stressing Thoreau’s complicity with racial stereotyping. Parallel to Thoreau’s view of nature as a retreat into the primitive, da Silva is also interested in pointing out how for Portuguese immigrants, nature, through gardening and farming, was a means whereby they could retreat from the harsh conditions imposed by factory life, commercial fishing, the whaling or dairy industries and intensive farming, common activities amongst Portuguese communities in the United States. The essay argues that strong rhetorical strategies employed by late-nineteenth-century American eugenicists portrayed immigrants from Southern European countries as parasitic. As shown by da Silva’s text, it was believed that immigrants from this part of the world – like the Irish in Thoreau’s *Walden* – would weaken the fitness of Americans of Anglo origin. Although recognizing Thoreau’s concern for the survival of ecological systems, Reinaldo da Silva underlines Thoreau’s views as those of a man racially accommodated to the WASP mainstream, its prejudices and values.

In “Palestra sobre o Tempo: John Cage e Henry David Thoreau,” Ana Luísa Valdeira examines John Cage’s (1912–1992) *Lecture on the Weather* (1976), a musical piece commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to celebrate the bicentennial of the independence of the United States of America, and which Cage composed around excerpts from Thoreau’s *Walden*, *Journal* and *Civil Disobedience*. Valdeira maintains that in this musical piece, which evidences the close poetical affinities between both creators, Cage underscores the importance of empirical experience derived from present moment awareness. Valdeira shows that Cage’s “silent pieces” have much in common with passages from *Walden* and *Journal* in the sense that they also are “drawn from immediate experience and the durational flow of the current moment,” as she puts it. She argues that *Lecture on the Weather*, a landscape of multiple discourses, just like a natural landscape, forces the listener to pay attention to the uniqueness of each experience at a particular moment in time, in accordance with Cage’s own musical propositions. The poetics of John Cage, therefore, is not one which can be measured by reason, but by experience, she concludes.

In “Desobediência Civil em Estrada de Palha: Um Western Português Alentejano,” Maria Antónia Lima argues that the film *Estrada de Palha* (*Straw Road*) (2012) of the Portuguese filmmaker Rodrigo Areias evokes not only the American western as a film genre, but also transcendentalist thought and ideas stemming from the poetic and political appeal of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience.” The story of a man who returns to his village to avenge the death of his brother, the film is set in a country beset by corruption, exploitation, and

governmental abuse. It possesses an aesthetics which aims to raise the awareness of Portuguese spectators to the social and political situation in their own country, though it is neither ideological nor pamphlet-like, so as to show how urgent acts of civil disobedience are in present-day Portuguese society. According to Lima, the western is a genre particularly suited to portray social and political instability, its codes being used in *Estrada de Palha* to depict Portuguese reality. As Lima sees it, a dialogue is established between cinematic fiction and real life in Portugal – excessive taxes, imposts and duties –, impelling us to think about ways of resisting, questioning and protesting against current social and political realities.

The unifying elements in Thoreau's brief life are his steadfast observation of the landscape which surrounded him, his obstinate articulation of thoughts that are his own and equanimous with the universe itself, his hopeful premonition of morning as an invitation to a projective alliance between nature and history, a passport to a world where we may supersede ourselves: "Morning brings back the heroic ages" (*Walden* 83). His ideas have inspired those who resist the ever-growing pressure to abide by unregulated exploitation and lack of protection as far as the limited natural resources of our planet go. The time has come for us to face the conundrum posed by our post-industrial societies, including the drift towards an individualism that might hold its ground against conventional order but at the price of social isolation. Thoreau shows us that to be "in accord with nature" requires constant watchfulness on the part of our individual consciousness as citizens, refusing unchecked economic growth, sectarianism and populist political demagoguery. As Mark Stoll has aptly put it, Thoreau's writings set forth for future generations the concerns shared by an ever-growing number of active citizens worried about environmental protection, individual freedom, and independence from abuse of power. Moreover, he proposed the love of poetry and of the records of sympathetic observation of nature as a way forward to more justice and equality in the world, notwithstanding his emphasis on individual action over collective or communitarian governance. It is hoped that this volume of essays clearly demonstrates that Thoreau's texts have a word to say about the possibility of a deeper understanding of nature and the human bond to it, encouraging readers to accept and cherish humanity as part of a larger ecological community. All in all, Thoreau's most daring legacy is an invitation to wakefulness and attentiveness to all forms of life, in particular when he asserts that from the recognition of our interconnectedness with the rest of the living world comes "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness" (*Walden* 124).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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