

## “In Wildness is the Preservation of the World”: Henry David Thoreau on the Relation between Human and Nature

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### Abstract

This research aims to discuss the contributions of Henry David Thoreau to the models of nature preservation, especially about how should be the relationship between human and nature regarding presence and interaction. Therefore, we initially propose to characterize the models produced since the 19th century, that is, the Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic; the Progressive-Utilitarian Resource Conservation Ethic; and the Evolutionary-Ecological Land Ethic, based on Callicott (1990), and other more recent movements, based on Diegues (2008). Next, we analyze how Thoreau addresses the relationship between the human and the natural environment in his works, notably *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, *Walking* and *The Maine Woods*. Finally, we articulate such considerations and argue, supported by Hunt (2019), and in contrast to what some interpretations claim, that his approach is centered on the harmony of human life with the natural environment, in an ecological perspective, and not in a relationship of merely instrumental use and contemplation. In view of the complexity of the theme, we propose to carry out an interdisciplinary analysis, bringing together different fields of knowledge in a complementary way, aiming to contribute not only to environmental ethics, but also to the dissemination of Thoreau's ideas in different areas of the human and social sciences.

**Keywords:** ecology; environmental ethics; environmentalism; freedom; harmony.

## 1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (Concord, Massachusetts, 1817-1862) was an American writer whose writings and speeches were largely devoted to the criticism of the way of life that was coming into existence in the time. Averse to war, slavery and the imposition of norms of conduct by society and the State, he was an important critic of institutions, and, above all, of what he called false necessities, imposed on individuals by them. His two main works manifest this focus: *Civil Disobedience* (1849) deals, in addition to a proposal for resistance against oppression, with important ethical and political issues in the society/state relationship. In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), in its turn, Thoreau develops problems of knowledge and the nature of nature itself and of the human (Hunt, 2019). His works have had a great influence since the 19th century and have contributed to rights claims movements, to environmental preservationism, and to counterculture movements, especially in the 20th century.

In this article, we will discuss Thoreau's contributions to the philosophies of environmental preservation models that emerged since the 19th century, especially in the United States, presented by Callicott (1990) as the Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic; the Progressive-Utilitarian Resource Conservation Ethic; and the Evolutionary-Ecological Land Ethic, as well as more recent movements, based on Diegues (2008). Based on this synthesis and the analysis of Thoreau's writings, mainly *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, *Walking* (1851) and *The Maine Woods*, we argue about the centrality of harmony in the relationship between humans and nature in his thought, stating that such relationship brings them closer rather than distances them. Our methodology will, therefore, be centered in the literature review.

In order to accomplish what is here proposed, and considering the complexity of the theme, we will carry out an interdisciplinary investigation. The interdisciplinary approach is an attitude to scientific research that puts several views together, but breaks with parallelism and proceeds to combination, useful for the understanding of broad objects (Pombo, 2008). According to Cavell (1992), only recently did Thoreau's thought come to the attention of philosophy. By mobilizing different fields of knowledge in this research, such as philosophy, literature, and geography, we seek an integrated analysis of the object, in addition to contributing to the dissemination of Thoreau's ideas in different areas of study.

## 2. Thoreau on the Relation between Human and Nature

For Thoreau, social life varies between a state of “undeclared war and absolute futility”<sup>1</sup> (Simões, 2010, p. 70) and his proposal seeks a “state of personal harmony with nature – the return to an original state, 'ontologically free' – that the individual choice not to exercise freedom in the name of something he considers as imperfect as civilization is repudiated”<sup>2</sup> (p. 62). Regarding Thoreau's experience in the woods in search of this state of harmony, Beppu (1974, p. 3) states that “this orientation in nature should not be confused with the 'back to nature' primitivism. Rather it must be understood as a religious retreat or in the transcendental context (...)”.

Nature is the cradle where his ethical conception originates (Altran, 2017, p. 275). Perhaps we can say, dialectically, that ethics is the cradle where his conception of nature originates. Similar to the perspective that each individual has value in itself regardless of association, tacit or not, in his environmental ethics nature has intrinsic value<sup>3</sup>. Thoreau is one of the pioneers of ecology<sup>4</sup>, and his biocentrist perspective has influenced U.S. American conservation philosophy since its inception and remains influential in current proposals for the renewal of environmental thinking.

### 2.1 Notes about the Preservationist Models Approaches

According to Keith Thomas (2010), the preservationist ideas emerged in England, in the beginning of the 19th century, with the development of natural history<sup>5</sup> and as a reaction to the consequences of industrial progress. The romantic writers of the period considered “the search for what was left of 'wild nature' in Europe the place of discovery of the human soul, of the imagery of the lost paradise, of the childlike innocence, of refuge and intimacy, of the

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<sup>1</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “guerra não declarada e a absoluta futilidade”. This and all other translations from Portuguese language were made by us.

<sup>2</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “estado de harmonia pessoal com a natureza – o retorno a um estado original, 'ontologically free' – que a escolha individual de não exercer a liberdade em nome de algo que considera tão imperfeito como a civilização é repudiada”.

<sup>3</sup> According to Callicott (1990), the proposals of conservationists and preservationists are anthropocentric and only man has an intrinsic value (p. 17). For John Muir, however, an important preservationist largely influenced by Thoreau, nature has intrinsic value, although he appeals to biblical grounds of the goodness of creation in God's eyes and that therefore it is not man's right to undo His work to strengthen his point of view.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Haeckel is said to have coined this term in 1866, but Thoreau had already used it in 1858 (before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859) (Ferri, 1980, p. 313).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the relevance that natural history reached until the 18th century, see *The Dark Abyss of Time: the History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, by Paolo Rossi (1979), in which the author presents, especially in the first chapter, named *The Earth, the time, the shells* interpretations about the origin, dynamics and mutability of the Earth, discussing the interpretations regarding shell fossils found in non-marine regions, and how such discussions impacted European thinking about the origins of civilization, language and religion, articulating reflections on geology and theology.

beauty and the sublime”<sup>6</sup> (Diegues, 2008, p. 26). These spaces were considered as places of great aesthetic value and conducive to meditation, to the divine. In the United States, in the 19th century, the preservation movement paid “reverence to nature in the sense of the aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of wildlife (wilderness)” and “intends to protect nature against modern, industrial and urban development”<sup>7</sup> (Diegues, 2008, p. 32).

Some of the greatest figures in the preservationist movement were Thoreau, with his understanding of nature as endowed with body and spirit, in an ecological and sacred perspective, with aesthetic and spiritual value, similar to Emerson's conception; George Perkins Marsh, who preached the need for a political and moral revolution and for the control of technology, as humanity imposed itself as a destroyer; and, mainly, John Muir, whose biocentrism gained strength when the preservationist perspective was aligned with the evolutionary-ecological paradigm from Darwin's onwards (Diegues, 2008, p. 33). Muir's efforts to create conservation areas even resulted in the establishment of the world's first national park, Yellowstone, on March 1st, 1872.

For Muir, according to Callicott (1990, p. 16), nature in the New World was sufficiently vast and rich to satisfy the most manifest material needs and also the spiritual needs of men, and, following Thoreau, he criticized the destruction of nature for greed (Cohen, 1984). Critics of this view argue that the consideration that certain satisfactions promoted by nature are morally superior to others would be anti-democratic and classist (O'Connor, 1988), as well as the needs that certain people wish to satisfy in order to obtain pleasure is different from the aesthetic and spiritual ones touted by the romantics. Callicott (1990, p. 16) states that the latter is directly linked to utilitarianism<sup>8</sup>, according to which “human happiness, defined ultimately in terms of pleasure and pain, should be the goal of both individual and government action. And one person's pleasure is not necessarily another's”. Furthermore, the perspective of preserving nature with the creation of isolated and uninhabited areas, as was done, has serious ethical and social consequences. In addition to deepening the dichotomy between human and nature, the export of the Yellowstone model, especially to the Third World, had serious consequences for traditional communities that reproduced their lives for tens or hundreds of years with sustainable and integrated to nature practices, which were expelled (like the ones from Yellowstone) – this, in fact, is one of the main critique of Diegues (2008). For this author, following Redclift (1984), environmentalism in countries at

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<sup>6</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “fizeram da procura do que restava de ‘natureza selvagem’, na Europa, o lugar da descoberta da alma humana, do imaginário do paraíso perdido, da inocência infantil, do refúgio e da intimidade, da beleza e do sublime”.

<sup>7</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “reverência à natureza no sentido da apreciação estética e espiritual da vida selvagem (wilderness)” and “pretende proteger a natureza contra o desenvolvimento moderno, industrial e urbano”.

<sup>8</sup> As demonstrated by Simões (2013), Mill does not share this conception of the utilitarians who preceded him.

the center of capitalism emerged from criticisms of industrial society, and rarely took poverty and poor income distribution into account (Diegues, 2008, p. 40). More recent criticisms of this model are from those perspectives with a socio-environmentalist focus, that is, which integrate the environmental movement with different social movements, resulting in proposals such as social ecology and socialist (or neo-Marxist) ecology (Diegues, 2008, p. 40). Deep ecology, in its turn, refers to a contemporary proposal that is based on the Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic as "this approach is predominantly biocentric, but has great spiritualist influence, whether Christian or of Eastern religions, bringing together often a quasi-adoration of the natural world"<sup>9</sup> (Diegues, 2008, p. 46).

Gifford Pinchot, in some opposition to preservationism, formulated an environmentalism that transformed the "nature" of the romantics into "natural resources", even stating that in the world there are only people and natural resources (Callicott, 1990, p. 16), and that these should be used in such a way that they can be available to present and future generations, in addition to guaranteeing their multiple uses – with the absence of a hierarchy of value – with maximum efficiency. Pinchot also argues that the market is not capable of carrying out such a proposal, as it would submit the statement of efficient use to profit. Therefore, government action to regulate and control the use of natural resources would be necessary. According to Diegues (2008, p. 31), Pinchot was a precursor of sustainable development, arguing in favor of improving the management and of efficient exploitation of resources, taking a stand against development at any cost, but, as considered that development is a principle of conservation, "acted within a context of transforming nature into a commodity"<sup>10</sup>. The sustainable development ideology is an attempt to harmonize the ethic of resource conservation with economic development under the aegis of the market. Its link with capitalism is, however, reason for justified hesitation. Pinchot's proposal assumes that "all competing uses of resources should be weighted impartially and that the fruits of resource exploitation should be distributed broadly and equitably" (Callicott, 1990, p. 17). In a society based precisely on competition and on the unequal distribution of resources, such a proposal cannot be considered less inapplicable than the romantic one, however, it is more adjustable to economic interests by attributing to them, at least<sup>11</sup>, the same value as the others.

Influenced by the evolutionary-ecological paradigm arising from Darwin's works, Muir understood the human being as a small part of the whole, as well as any other being in nature,

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<sup>9</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: "esse enfoque é preponderantemente biocêntrico, mas tem grande influência espiritualista, seja cristã, seja de religiões orientais, aproximando-se frequentemente de uma quase adoração do mundo natural".

<sup>10</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: "agia dentro de um contexto de transformação da natureza em mercadoria".

<sup>11</sup> According to Pinchot's proposal, the values would be the same for the multiple uses. We make this observation to highlight how the proposal was incorporated and implemented under the interests of certain economic groups.

with each element having its contribution to the unity of the whole, but his conceptions still had bases on theological elements. The web of life proposed by Capra also comes from this conception of community (Capra, 1996), based on the Deep Ecology from Arne Naess. While Muir attributes intrinsic, and not just instrumental, value to all beings in nature from a theological foundation, Aldo Leopold, in turn, based himself on the ecological argument of the common contribution to the biotic community, inaugurating a new paradigm of nature conservancy named Land Ethic (Callicott, 1990, p. 18). Leopold, then aligned with Pinchot's conservationism, moved away from it when he began to consider that nature should be seen as a system of complex processes, as an organism, and not as a mechanism (Callicott, 1990, pp. 17-18).

The picture presented above is summarized by Callicott (1990, p. 18) in three models: Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic; the Progressive-Utilitarian Resource Conservation Ethic; and the Evolutionary-Ecological Land Ethic, respectively. The first is the initial model, with primordial influence from Thoreau; the second was the dominant model in the 20th century and still today, which is, to some extent, opposed to the first; and the third deals with contemporary perspectives, with connections to Thoreauvian thought both in their origins and in movements that incorporate them, such as the counterculture of the 1960s and the hippie movement (Diegues, 2008, p. 41).

Obviously, the history of preservational thought cannot be reduced to a few pages. The intention here was to present an overview in order to discuss some of Thoreau's contributions to environmental reflection.

## 2.2 Wildness, Wilderness: the Harmony between Human and Nature

Part of the interpretation that contributes to the political realization of the Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic comes from Thoreau's statement that "in wildness is the preservation of the world" (1906, A, p. 224). According to Hunt (2019, p. 61), this passage has been distorted to "in the wilderness is the preservation of the world", transforming the original meaning:

A wilderness is an area, a sector of the world. Wildness is a characteristic, a feature of the world (...) something that is present in the world far outside the boundaries of those sacrosanct wilderness areas. There might be a wild aspect of the world that pervades most of the world, perhaps all of it, including the surroundings in which most people leave their lives. (Hunt, 2019, p. 61)

The sense of wild in Thoreau is presented as part of the composition of the self, in addition to a spiritual condition. In *Walden*, the author states:

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. (Thoreau, 1906, B, p. 232)

A lesser-known, but equally noteworthy excerpt can be found in *The Maine Woods*, where the author questions:

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Why should not we, who have renounced the king's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be "civilized off the face of the earth,"—our forests, not to hold the king's game merely, but to hold and preserve the king himself also, the lord of creation,—not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains? (Thoreau, 2009, p. 144)

The suggestion of creating reserves in order to differentiate certain spaces in nature for "inspiration" and "true recreation" is evident. The question of human presence in nature, however, is controversial. Given the sacred, or spiritual, character of nature, derived, to some extent, from the myth of the terrestrial paradise - and, being paradise, humans would have been expelled and would wander the world awaiting their return -, the preservation movement included in its program that the areas to be preserved should be untouched. In *Walden*, however, in the introduction to the chapter "Solitude", we read that "this is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, **a part of herself** (Thoreau, 1906, B, p. 143). In *Walking's* opening words, Thoreau says: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and **wildness**, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, - **to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature**, rather than a member of society" (Thoreau, 1906, A, p. 205) (emphasis added). In the development of such book, he also expresses: "let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness" (p. 218). According to Hunt (2019, p. 72), "what we have here is a call for wilderness preservation, perhaps the first one ever published. **It comes from someone who believes that wilderness is not a park and a park is no wilderness**" (emphasis added).

This aspect is especially important to us. When looking at Thoreau's thought through the prism of the models of environmental preservation that he influenced, one can be led to believe that there is a profound dissociation between the human and the natural, and a priority of the urban dweller over rural and traditional communities. We argue that this perception does not hold when we observe some of his writings, especially in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, in which he narrates his experiment in coexistence in the midst of nature with the objective to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life" (Thoreau, 1906, B, p. 101), presenting a laudatory analysis of life linked to nature:

The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature (...). But lo! Men have become the tools of their tools (...); now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper. (Thoreau, 1906, B, pp. 41-2)

Thus, it is not a question of linking life to nature based on simple, sporadic contemplation, in visits to invigorate the spirit, as can be seen to some extent in the Romantic-Transcendental Preservation Ethic to the intellectuals and romantics, but of realization of life in the midst of

it, in a perennial way, and one can even state the opposite: sporadic visits are those to the city, as Thoreau practiced while living on the shores of Walden Pond.

Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approaches her with expectation. (Thoreau, 1906, B, pp. 232-3)

Sometimes, the author mentions the importance of natural areas for the life in the cities and for the invigoration of people. However, he does not confirm any detachment or prioritization of the “civilized visitor”, what became linked to the preservation model inspired by Thoreau.

Regarding Thoreau's critique of urban-industrial society and his defense of nature protection, this finding is verifiable in several of his writings, such as *Walking*, when he states that “nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap” (Thoreau, 1906, A, p. 212).

It is important to mention, too, that the theme of nature is also present in Thoreau's thought, especially in *Walden*, influenced by Christianity, as a re-entry door into Eden, unaffected by the Fall:

The reinvention of the Christian theme of the Fall in Thoreau's texts, a reinvention that was only possible after the liberation originated in Unitarianism, is one of his most emblematic moments. Everything happens as if Nature were deaf to the Fall, passing unharmed and preserving this “pagan integrity” as a re-entry door to Eden, an opportunity for our rebirth (Medeiros, 2018, p. 26)<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the ethical and political elements of Thoreau's formulations, there is also an important geographic appeal. According to Wulf (2016, p. 372), it is after leaving Walden Pond that Thoreau became a “serious naturalist” after delving into the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, especially *Views of Nature* (1850). Humboldt (1769-1859) was a Prussian naturalist, one of the pioneers of the systematization of modern geography. Much influenced by Goethe and Schiller, for example regarding the importance given to the empirical and the sensitive (Silveira, 2008, p. 108), Humboldt was not concerned with proposing normatives for the discipline that was being professionalized. For him, Geography's interest would be in the “contemplation of the universality of things, of everything that coexists in space concerning substances and forces, of the simultaneity of material beings that coexist on

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<sup>12</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “A reinvenção do tema cristão da Queda nos textos de Thoreau, reinvenção que só foi possível depois da liberação originada no Unitarismo, é um de seus momentos mais emblemáticos. Tudo se passa como se a Natureza fosse surda à Queda, passando incólume e preservando esta 'integridade paga' como uma porta de reentrada ao Éden, oportunidade para nosso renascimento”.

Earth”<sup>13</sup>. The sensitive and contemplative character of his proposal is didactically illustrated by the chapter in the introduction of his main work, *Cosmos* (1845), entitled “*The different Degrees of Enjoyment Presented by the Contemplation of Nature*”.

The thinking about the nature of the Romantics, whose ontological-epistemological principle was the unity between man and nature, opposing the Newtonian-Cartesian perspective, contributed enormously to the development of Geography, e.g. the influence of Goethe on Humboldt, the Schelling's philosophy of nature, and Elisée Reclus's definition of man as nature becoming aware of itself.

Goethe's morphological method, arising from his interpretation of the function of art and contributions from philosophy and science, was incorporated by Humboldt. In it,

science, art and philosophy would be integrated in the search for intuiting in form the dynamics of a whole-parts, subjective-objective, expansion and contraction relationship. (...) Intuition plays a fundamental role in this process; it is the capture of the dynamics in the moment; it is a way of appropriating a broad relationship through a penetration of the subject into the object, through a link between being and totality; it is, finally, man's way of presenting himself as part of this dynamic (Silveira, 2008, p. 112)<sup>14</sup>.

There is a debate whether Kant's conceptions influenced Thoreau or not, and, if so, if directly or indirectly, and to what extent, as Medeiros (2018) discusses. Humboldt, in his turn, produces his understanding of the world largely influenced by Goethe and his method, who kept constant contact with Schiller, also influenced by Kant (Silveira, 2008). We are not going to analyze such genealogy now, but it is certainly a fertile research topic to be developed in future studies to better address Thoreau's conceptions and to place him in the history of geographical and philosophical thoughts.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, we reaffirm the relevance of Thoreau's works to movements for the preservation of nature, and we suggest that, based on influences such as romanticism and naturalism, he elaborated an ecological approach that brought together, rather than distanced, human and nature, centering this relation on the harmony of human life with the natural environment, in an ecological perspective, and not in a relationship of merely instrumental

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<sup>13</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “contemplação da universalidade das coisas, de tudo que coexiste no espaço concernente a substâncias e forças, da simultaneidade dos seres materiais que coexistem na Terra”.

<sup>14</sup> From the original, in Portuguese: “ciência, arte e filosofia se integrariam na busca por intuir na forma a dinâmica de uma relação todo-partes, subjetivo-objetivo, expansão e contração. (...) Papel fundamental nesse processo tem a intuição, ela é a captação da dinâmica no instante; é a forma de se apropriar de uma relação ampla por um penetrar do sujeito no objeto, por uma ligação do ser com a totalidade; é, enfim, a maneira do homem apresentar-se como parte dessa dinâmica”.

use and contemplation. Such can be noticed through the experience he reported in *Walden* and other ideas expressed throughout his writings.

As pointed out by Hunt (2019), the interpretation given to the expression “in the wildness is the preservation of the world”, understanding the term “wildness” as “wilderness” significantly changed the meaning of the Thoreauvian proposal, and suggested a distancing between human and nature, privileging preservation for use – exploratory or contemplative – rather than that for coexistence and dwelling. According to our research, such interpretation is imprecise when observing the expanded scenario of his intellectual production.

The discussion of the relationship between human and nature in Thoreau feeds and expands into discussions about ethics, social and spatial relationships, from freedom to power relations, and from the experience of place and analysis of the landscape to territorial dynamics. Thus, it is possible to verify the potential of his works for studies in the areas of philosophy, geography, and other fields of human sciences, and to the improvement of how environmental issues are addressed today.

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