



LIVING IN THE BUSH

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"The only thing men do not desire is liberty, and for no other reason than this: because, if they desired it, they would obtain it" (Étienne de la Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire*).

I.

A Cabin at Walden Pond

For [Emerson](#), Thoreau's teacher, "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty." And for Thoreau, [Whitman's teacher](#), "Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you./You must travel it by yourself." Every book is born uninhibited of its predecessors, ready to join that great cemetery we call "literature." Memory. There is vibration in *Walden*. Contumacy and reverence. Longing and helplessness. Dream and prolapse. Talent and mimicry. Palpitation. I remember when I first read the book. Sleepless. When I closed it, I was someone else. I still am. It would have been better not to have read it. You know: youth. Age of derailment.

In contradiction is certainty. It is impossible to avoid comparisons when wondering why Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are not included in the History of Universal Philosophy. Perhaps it stems from a certain folly consisting in considering philosophy as a scrupulously European heritage; just as the novel was weighed. A political reason. The United States was a competitor and the reverse identification was necessary: what I am not will tell me what I am.

Or perhaps it has been that widespread tendency in our day to despise what is proper and traditional in the face of what is foreign and new. Suspicious of a country that continues to be governed by an eighteenth-century constitution, by its founding literature and by the philosophical values that established it. Proof of unequivocal authenticity. In Europe, we still think that a comfortable and accessible philosopher is contemptible compared to a cryptic and convoluted one. We continue to feed our deep thinkers with hemlock. Comparisons are odious.

In tracing the perennality of these trends, it is worth noting successive education laws enacted by a political community interested in creating impoverished graduates who, with conviction, are labeled "better prepared." Young people, insensitive to art and jaded by classics they do not know precisely because they have been forced to study them. For this political purpose, the sapience of Nausea

serves better than that of *Leaves of Grass*. In [Emerson's words](#): "The people, and not the college, is the writer's home." If the foundation of transcendentalist philosophy was to settle a new country, "the world exists for the education of man." To instruct. Not for nothing was the personal relationship between his three seminal authors one of mentoring: Emerson-Thoreau; Thoreau-Whitman. "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul," Emerson would say. And how to invite for [such education](#): "All conversation, as all literature, appears to me the pleasure of rhetoric, or, I may say, of metonymy."

Emerson's success abounds in creating an "American schoolboy" whose incarnated image has remained in American literature from Thoreau to Whitman. And from Whitman to Melville or Twain, he has gone on to permeate the rest of the writers framed in the realist wake. Each author is his generation and his community. Speaking of the subject, one speaks of the totality. Emerson has no "system," although in his work there is politics, there is morality, there is religion. Thoreau is a transgressor of labels. Whitman is poetry unchained. The seed of American literature transits in the decline of philosophy. The Emersonian influence is decisive in Borges. When the Argentine said he was proud of the books he had read and written about, he was following in the American's footsteps. For him, "reading well" was more valuable than "writing well."

The American "schoolboy" coexists away from society, narrating about it. The manly life he proposes is based on a useful concept of art—an idea of masculinity today much reviled by feminist theory, which designates them as "great narcissists," phalocrats or even "cyptocrats." The diagnosis is not fallacious, the diatribe is incomprehensible. I understand the apology for the mountain-life that these authors make, their rural and pure virility. If the American ideal is a self-made-man, their proposal is to pave the way—with his work and with his action. And it is in this praxis of the critical individual where the dignity of acting according to one's own moral principles lies, even if these are socially reprehensible. Thoreau would call it "civil disobedience" in a book of the same title. And he would carry it out at the end of his life in Walden by going to prison—refusing to pay taxes. The best way to be American and Democratic is to be anti-American and anti-Democratic, if you have betrayed your character. In that proclivity lies the determination that constitutes us.

When did we lose liberality? When did a qualifier, of which Don Quixote was said to be the guarantor, cease to signify the defense of freedom? Decadence set in. Thoreau was an avowed liberal and had a fledgling nation. He defined himself as follows: "I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot." His revolution was not the social revolt of the masses that dyed the old continent

red in the 20th century. His was the individual revolution of each conscience. Is this the life you want? Do you like it this way? Change it. Develop your project free of impositions.

Attempts have been made to frame Thoreau in different ideologies such as anarchism. But you cannot pigeonhole a freethinker. One should not. Ideologies interpret reality with a theoretical truth formulated in advance. Dogmatic. The philosopher observes without prejudice and rules. The theorist loves theory, the philosopher loves life. He does not impose his truth on others. He laments for those who, without meditation, have condemned themselves. He invites them to renew themselves. His dynamite is only hurled at the bien-pensantes truths that demand to be accepted without being subjected to the examination of reason.

This moment of the end of a civilization, in full formulation of the outlines of the subsequent one, is perhaps the right time to scrutinize Thoreauian philosophy. It is a way to mitigate the fear of freedom that, many times, hides the particular anguish in the gregariousness that Étienne de La Boétie defined: "The only thing that men do not desire is freedom, and for no other reason than this: because, if they desired it, they would obtain it." It is more pleasant to prescribe formulas on how to change the world from the turmoil than to take the determination to live a life where failures (and successes) are exclusively one's own.

The incomprehension of any philosophical project lacking in application. The need to intervene in the face of opprobrium. What does philosophy mean to Thoreau? He answers: "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. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically." In this philosophical conception, life and work form one and the same element: "My life has been the poem I would have writ/ But I could not both live and utter it." In the wake of Montaigne, he writes about his life while living it. In this way, life becomes an essay and writing becomes poetry: "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." Without this construction of the critical individual, we are blind to the truth. Depending on our decisions, we will become who we are: "We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins at once to refine a man's features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them." It confers serenity: "For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position. Through an infirmity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out." Nothing is so enriching: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth." Latent embers of the Sophia Perennis.

Whitman said that with *Leaves of Grass* he was touching a man. This assertion is only valid in great literature, like a torrent that submerges us. It reproduces life in a way that can replace it. But in *Don Quixote* there was also the self-consciousness of that rapture. The virtue of the writer consists in having something to tell and knowing how to tell it. The merit of the reader consists in reliving it authentically. What *Walden* narrates is the vital experiment of an existence dedicated to writing, the conclusions drawn from it, a search for pure reality by the philosopher or poet. After squeezing out his experience, he feels ready to leave the woods. That is, to give up the physical Walden to bequeath to the reader a literary Walden. A spiritual Walden. That is the transcendence capacity of literature, of transcendentalist philosophy and of *Walden* itself. As long as there are books, there will be men, which will touch them.

Why live if life is tragedy and our future is oblivion? For the dignity of living and questioning, even knowing we are defeated beforehand. For creating art by trying to establish a dialect with our fellow man. For putting all our insignificance on a blank sheet of paper, and on another, until it becomes a whole with meaning. For the hope of transcending one's own experience of life, of literature, of death. Then one can speak of a philosopher, of a poet; and what doubt is there that Thoreau was more than anyone else? He does not want us to move to live in Walden. He hopes that by reading the vicissitudes of his experience, we will understand that there are alternatives, a way of life of our own according to our moral principles. In his writing there is not the vehemence of the prophet: "I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself." No arrogance. He denies himself as a present entity by narrating an event of his past life, anchoring himself. One cannot write without paying a price; that is, in a certain way, the privilege of living. Later Semprún would be right with his formula: "writing or life." One writes or one lives; better said: one lives by writing. Every writer is a Being of the Word.

II.

Archaeology of the Rebel

In all cultures we find the myth of the rebel. In those two currents that founded the Western world, the Greek (Athens) and the Jewish (Jerusalem), they are represented in two key myths: that of Adam and Eve eating the Forbidden Fruit and that of Prometheus giving fire to men. The transgression of the divine command carries with it the doom of the Fall. In the ancient world, rebellion was an unjustified act of violation of a sacred taboo and, therefore, the rebel was to be severely punished. Several

twentieth-century literary authors have seen in rebellion a virtue and in the rebel a modern anti-hero. Thus, Albert Camus took up the myth of Sisyphus to portray the absurdity inherent in the human condition. In his great novel *The Stranger* (1942), Meursault, his protagonist, represents the greatest example of the "rebel" in literature: heir to Wether himself, he commits a symbolic suicide by repeatedly shooting an Algerian, leaving a bullet in the revolver barrel: the one destined for himself; thus becoming a public enemy who deserves to be judged and executed for his antisocial attitude represented in the negative act of not crying at his mother's funeral.

In the USA, then the world's leading power at the end of the two great European civil wars, the figure of the literary "rebel" was revalued through different works and authors influenced by each other: 1) *Ask the Dust* (John Fante, 1939); 2) *The Catcher in the Rye* (J. D. Salinger, 1951); 3) *A Confederacy of Dunces* (John Kennedy Toole, 1980); 4) *Ham on Rye* (Charles Bukowski, 1982). Continuers of a series of autobiographical novels by such disparate authors as Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929) or Thomas Wolfe (*Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929); and of a theme, that of the American dream and its failure, brilliantly represented by F. Scott Fitzgerald in two immortal novels, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender is the Night* (1934). We find different variations of the same motif in these authors: the religious (Toole), the impressionistic (Salinger), the realistic (Fante) and the ironic (Bukowski). The least known of this series of books, but still the most noteworthy, is *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs* (written 1924-1928; published 1989) by the Nietzschean Robert E. Howard.

The "apprenticeship" genre in relation to initiation into adult life is one of the most important in literature: it occurs in characters such as Theseus, from *The Odyssey*, or in characters such as the bachelor Samson Carrasco, in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. The academic term, *Bildungsroman*, comes from the two volumes dedicated to Wilhelm Meister by Goethe. Authors such as Dickens, Stevenson, Mann, Joyce or London, to name a few, have explored it brilliantly. However, these modern authors demonstrate, with respect to the ancients of the whole tradition, an aspect proper to the modern world: the impossibility of spiritual self-discovery in a panorama dominated by "technique" and "the reign of quantity." Therefore, the modern rebel is obliged to "ambush" himself in order not to succumb to the dynamics of his surroundings.

Learning, in the modern world, does not lead to the inner self or classical *nosce te ipsum*, but to the nothingness of a material world. In other words, Theseus cannot get out of the labyrinth. As in Howard, Fante, Salinger, Toole or Bukowski, destiny is nothing but a constant dance of precarious jobs and incessant disillusionments that help to cement a wandering condition of constant uprooting and uneasiness.

That is the reason why all the selected novels end at a point that is apparently irrelevant and insubstantial, because life has no meaning, and because only the assumption of that principle can lead to transgress it ethically with an action that posits "as if" life had a meaning; "as if" one still inhabited an earlier time—the attitude of being a rebel, of going "against the grain;" the attitude of reacting, in short, the attitude of reacting.

Marx or Nietzsche criticized with early lucidity the figure of the bourgeois. Along the same lines, several Spanish authors of the misnamed "generation of '98," purely Germanophile and Schopenhauerian—surely via Krausists—continued this criticism through various autobiographical novels of great philosophical depth, the most outstanding of which are *The Tree of Knowledge* (Pío Baroja, 1911) and *La voluntad* (José Martínez Ruiz "Azorín," 1902), both featuring two rebels in the context of a Spain that was shipwrecked. The capitalist world is the world dominated by the figure of the "merchant," where everything has a price and man is reduced to a mere homo oeconomicus. Against this perspective, Nietzsche opposes the "superman" (*Übermensch*), who represents opposing and conflicting values. Let us recall that, for Emmanuel Mounier, "the bourgeois is the man who has lost the sense of being, who moves only among things, and usable things, stripped of their mystery."

Cinema has also explored, from a nihilism very similar to Howard's, this figure of the American hero/anti-hero in numerous films, such as *The 400 Blows* (1959), *The Hustler* (1961) or *The Misfits* (1961); or in the entire filmography of Nicholas Ray or Sam Peckinpah, which represent a violent reaction to progress. For this, the protagonist figures of weirdos or misfits are necessary, such as the protagonists of films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) or *Easy Rider* (1969). American society went from portraying the "pioneer" to portraying the "rebel" as an alternative figure to a bourgeoisie in continuous expansion and evolution.

It is folly to compress the essence as something fixed, not to understand the transience of movement as its true being. To die is not to perish, but to dispossess consciousness of its sensibility; to dissolve, to console oneself with the understanding that the lagoon will continue when we have disappeared. The argument for the love of life, the mere fact of contemplating the beauty of that change, is the spur for the tragedy of being alive; its justification and its meaning. We can recreate that idyllic place by cultivating our soul. Thoreau did it with beans. Opening a random page of that book one finds an orchard of peace. As if the human soul does not mind being torn apart while contemplating a captivating image.

This is how poetry begins: wanting to legitimize beautiful figurations. In *Walden* they proliferate. Their triumph is the apparent simplicity that entails so much; that mystery that we cannot solve: that an instant of placidity appeases the onerous burden of Adam, Prometheus and Sisyphus. Ernst Jünger's great discovery in the middle of the twentieth century is that it is not necessary to build a cabin in the forest to live in in the bush (*Waldgänger*), since ambush is an inner state of being that the free man grants to himself by means of his will:

The world we are in resembles a ship that at times exhibits traits of comfortable luxury and at others shows signs of terror. To most passengers it goes unnoticed that they simultaneously inhabit a different world. So superior is the second of these realms to the first that it seems to contain it within itself like a toy. The second of these realms is port, is homeland, is peace and security, things we all carry within us.

I would like to end by recalling the death, just a few years ago, of the great Philip Roth. It evoked a sick writer who lived ascetically in a cabin in the woods: he was Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's literary alter ego, at the end of his days, while living a philosophical ideal, a moral creed, a way of looking at society and nature: life. Roth:

"The palliative of a primitive hut. The place where you are stripped back to essentials, to which you return – even if it happens not to be the place you came from – to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving. The place where you disrobe, moult it all, the uniforms you've worn and the costumes you've gotten into, where you shed your batteredness and your resentment, your appeasement of the world and your defiance of the world, your manipulation of the world and its manhandling of you ... Think of those Chinese paintings of the old man under the mountain, the old Chinese man all alone under the mountain, receding from the agitation of the autobiographical. He has entered vigorously into competition with life; now, becalmed, he enters into competition with death, drawn down into austerity, the final business" .

Roth's passing does not mean the end of this ideology, but the constitution of one more link that stipulates its development—of writers still willing to hunt the white whale of their literature: that "great American novel." The "great Spanish novel" existed in *Galdós*. But there is no persistence left in our literature. Its gold is already meager. We lack recognition in those precedents. Of the desire to find us. This is a discontinuity applicable to most facets of contemporary identity, especially in Europe. Still valid is Chesterton's criticism of a deconstruction that assembles nothing in its place; the emptiness of

nihilism pointed out by a concerned Dostoevsky. The European carries generations of men without attributes, dwarfing in a stinking prosperity. Our "intellectuals," far from reacting against this horizon, invite us to wallow in it. What is there to say about the rest.

After a century of avant-gardes and existentialisms, Duchamp ended up by decapitating art, deducing it to its market value. An aesthetics of "the Good, the Beautiful and the True" was eroded, devastating the Christian essence of Europe. It put an end to an identitarian Spanish literature, ranging from [*The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*](#) to [*La Defensa de la Hispanidad*](#); an ideal of universal concepts ranging from [*The Apology of Socrates*](#) to [*The Critique of Pure Reason*](#). When "all that is sold melts into air," there is room for resignation to a relativism irreconcilable with the possibility of constituting oneself as a human being. That leaves us as a being unbound. Those of us born in this time are children without parents—after life. Doomed to a world of digits. We were born foreigners, when the walls of Rome collapsed and the barbarians entered. We are us. The immediately preceding generations believed in destroying a finished world in order to extract a utopia. With the promise of freedom and equality they found an abyss to give to their descendants. They are childless parents.

The concept of family has been relegated to that: to parents without children; dust. To children without parents; ashes. To nothing. Nothing lives in Europe. Except the euro. This is the end. It is hard not to resort to comparisons, even if they are odious. Because they are. Knowing that in some remote part of a forest in Massachusetts, the Socrates of Concord is still alive; the Plato of Walden Pond. To touch a lake, to touch a tree, to touch an idea, is to touch a man. To long for the snow or to gaze at the stars. To admire the dark and appreciate the dawn. To listen to a sparrow. To let the wind cut one's face while walking. To stay alive.

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Featured: [*Home in the Woods*](#), by Thomas Cole; painted in 1847.

