

Antonio Casado da Rocha

Why read *Walden* in Spain? Certainly not because we are required to in school! With some honorary exceptions, Thoreau's works are not compulsory reading here, even for many of those who study English in college. However, and surprisingly enough for an author who is so difficult to translate into other languages, Thoreau is well known in Spain. This is especially true of certain circles: environmental and animal rights activists, pacifists and civil disobedients, political activists, philosophers with a taste for heterodoxy. The philosophically sophisticated would have heard about Stanley Cavell's book *The Senses of Walden*; but when most young Thoreauvians read from the book, they remember better the scene in the film *Dead Poets Society*.

A few words about the history of its translations might be of help to understand the Spanish reception of *Walden*. In 1970, Justo Gárate published the bibliography *Thoreau in the Spanish Language* (Thoreau Society Booklet no. 24). He was a Basque exile who translated *Walden* in 1949 and found the first recorded mention of Thoreau in the writings of the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, who shared with Thoreau contempt for the news that "a ready wit might write a twelvemonth or twelve years beforehand with sufficient accuracy" (*Walden*, 94-5; and do not miss the following humorous allusion to the state of affairs in nineteenth-century Spain).

The earliest Spanish translation of *Walden* that I have been able to find is from 1907. In a review of this edition, the poet Antonio Machado wrote that "every Spanish intellectual should read this book, and even learn it by heart, for Thoreau was an intellectual who dreamed as a Latin man does, but turned his dreams into reality as an Anglo-Saxon." Other great poets of twentieth century Spain such as Gabriel Celaya or Juan Ramón Jiménez read Thoreau, but I think that the general interest for his life and writings has been greater in Latin America than in Europe. After all, the next translations of *Walden* were published in Argentina (1945-49), and only after the end of the Franco regime did new ones appear in Spain (1976).

One of those translations, published in Barcelona in 1983, is today the most widely available Spanish translation of *Walden*. It features a preface in which Henry Miller portrays Thoreau as an anarchist; Miller was fashionable in the 1970s and 80s, and architects, travelers and bohemians claim to have read this version of *Walden*, which is also mentioned as an example in guides for people who wish to leave the city and go back to the countryside. Still, Thoreau is more known as the author of "Civil Disobedience" than as the guy who wrote *Walden*, perhaps because of the massive movement of civil disobedience against military conscription in Spain during the 1980s and 90s.

However, Thoreau's political activity has been more invoked than studied, while his travel and nature writing remains virtually unknown and untranslated amongst us. *Walden* is actually read more as a critique of society than as a celebration of Nature. Why? On the one hand, Thoreau's nature writing is difficult to translate into languages whose flora and fauna are not similar to those of New England. Woods and ponds do not travel well, and for this reason I prefer the worst English edition of *Walden* to the best translation into any other language. On the other hand, the kinds of things that Thoreau did not like about democracy in America have, indeed, traveled very well all around the world. Therefore, Thoreau's political criticism is still of use in many places. Today, in a time of much resentment against the foreign policy of the US government, many Europeans still think that Thoreau remains "a nice American," as I heard once. In sum, people in Spain read Thoreau's *Walden* because Spaniards (including many Basques, of course) find in the book a message of individualism and romanticism—two doctrines still present amongst us—and because, as Machado suggested, Thoreau knew about building castles in the air and then putting the foundations under them. That is a lesson we still have to remember, even in Castile, the land of castles.