

HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND THE YANKEE ELM

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THE American elm (*Ulmus americana*) has always occupied a hallowed place in the pantheon of our native trees, and nowhere was its presence greater than in New England. Planted by the thousands on streets and town commons throughout the region, the elm was a defining symbol of Yankee life. Charles Joseph Latrobe, a Briton who toured New England in the 1830s, summed it up best when he christened the Yankee elm “the glory of New England.”¹ Indeed, elms moved pens. Paeans to the tree and its beauty abound in the literature of nineteenth-century New England. Hawthorne, Lowell, Longfellow, Holmes, and Henry James all penned eloquent tributes to the tree. So did literary visitors such as Trollope and Dickens.

But no writer who lifted pen to elm did so with more grace and insight than the bearded scribe of Walden Pond. Henry David Thoreau was the poet laureate of the Yankee elm. A prolific writer, Thoreau’s pen roved far beyond his celebrated sojourn at Walden. His journals record nearly twenty-five years of observation and bristle with exacting detail. These books map the geography of Thoreau’s intellect, a terrain well timbered with elms.

To Thoreau, elms consecrated the landscape. Mircea Eliade has written in *The Sacred and the Profane* that we “found” the world by investing it with religious meaning, and fix sacred space with signs and totems.² In the traditional New England landscape, writes John Stilgoe, meetinghouse spires and church steeples functioned as architectural exclamation points that “made the cellular countryside intelligible to resident and traveler alike.”³ Thoreau’s leafy steeples were rougher hewn, but they too linked earth and soul. For in Thoreau’s church of nature, elms were the beacons of moral and spatial order.

If they rose more leisurely to the sky, once there the elms challenged the lofty white spires themselves. “Some are so lifted up in the horizon,” he wrote of elm crowns spied from afar, “that they seem like portions of the earth detached and floating off by themselves into space.” Below, Thoreau imagined harmony and spatial order, for where elms brushed the sky, below lay a town or home. “When I see their magnificent domes, miles away in the horizon, over intervening valleys and forests,” wrote Thoreau, “they suggest a village, a community, there.” Spying the “dark little dome” of a far-off elm, Thoreau was reminded of the “rural and domestic life passing beneath it.”

Homestead telegraphs to homestead through these distant elms seen from hill-tops. I fancy I hear the house-dog’s bark and lowing of the cows asking admittance to their yard beneath it. The tea-table is spread; the master and mistress and the hired men now have just sat down in their shirtsleeves.

In summer the great canopies cast shelter over house and town, harboring a chorus of insects whose gentle hum induced in Thoreau “contemplation and philosophic thoughts.”

The “Washington” elm (a misnomer; see Sheila Connor, *New England Natives*, page 111) on Cambridge Common, Massachusetts, and the “Whitfield” elm on the right, photographed in 1860. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

But Thoreau's tree was no mere totem of pastoral retreat from the "great world." For him, elms objectified a range of human values. He saw in the elm stoicism, perseverance in the face of adversity. Elms "adjourn not night nor day," he wrote, "they stand for magnificence; they take the brunt of the tempest; they attract the lightning that would smite our roofs, leaving only a few rotten members scattered over the highway." Thoreau was hardly a misanthrope—he attended dinner parties even during his Walden sojourn—but he did favor the company of trees.

When comparing elms with men, however, Thoreau could not help but see the former as more worthy. "I have seen many a collection of stately elms," he confided to his *Journal* in January 1856, "which better deserved to be represented at the General Court than the manikins beneath." Elms may have been set out by villagers, but they towered—literally and figuratively—above mere mortals. "I find that into my idea of the village," he wrote, "has entered more of the elm than of the human being." Indeed, the elms were "worth many a political borough," and certainly more than most politicians.

The poor human representative of his party sent out from beneath their shade will not suggest a tith of the dignity, the true nobleness and comprehensive-ness of view, the sturdiness and independence, and the serene beneficence that [the elms] do. They look from township to township. A fragment of their bark is worth the backs of all the politicians in the union.

Thoreau then extended his metaphor far beyond the environs of Concord. Elms became a medium through which he channeled his outrage over slavery, particularly over the Fugitive Slave Law, which authorized federal agents to return to their owners slaves who had escaped to north of the Mason-Dixon line, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which cleared the way for extending slavery into territories not yet granted statehood. Passage in 1854 of the Kansas-Nebraska Act prompted outbreaks of violence across Kansas and drew an impassioned response from Thoreau—"Slavery in Massachusetts"—which he delivered to a convention of abolitionists.⁴

In Thoreau's writings, the Concord elms are a metaphor for the abolition movement, particularly for the Free Soil Party, which had been formed in response to the indecisiveness of the Whigs and Democrats on the expansion of slavery.⁵ In a remarkable passage, Thoreau implores the freedom-lovers to remain true to their principles and to seek equilibrium between old and new, past and progress, conservative and radical. The elms, writes Thoreau, "are free-soilers in their own broad sense."

They send their roots north and south and east and west into many a conservative's Kansas and Carolina, who does not suspect such underground railroads—they improve the subsoil he has never disturbed—and many times their length, if the support of their principles requires it. They battle with the tempests of a century. See what scars they bear, what limbs they lost before we were born! Yet they never adjourn; they steadily vote for their principles, and send their roots further and wider from the *same centre*. They die at their posts, and they leave a tough butt for the choppers to exercise themselves about, and a stump which serves for their monument.

Writing of the relationship between the living sapwood (alburnum) and the dead heartwood (duramen), Thoreau continues to develop his metaphor. The elms "combine a true radicalism with a true conservatism." Yet,

Their radicalism is not cutting away of roots, but an infinite multiplication and extension of them under all surrounding institutions. They take a firmer hold on the earth that they may rise higher into the heavens. Their conservative heartwood, in which no sap longer flows, does not impoverish their growth, but is a firm column to support it; and when their expanding trunks no longer require it, it utterly decays. Their conservatism is a dead but solid heart-wood, which is the pivot and firm column of support to all this growth, appropriating nothing to itself, but forever by its support assisting to extend the area of their radicalism. Half a century after they are dead at the core, they are preserved by radical reforms. They do not, like men, from radicals turn conservative. Their conservative part dies out first; their radical and growing part survives.

In the end the elms (and Free Soilers) will "acquire new States and Territories, while the old dominions"—the slaveholding South—"decay, and become the habitation of bears and owls and coons."

On most days, however, the elms of Concord were simply Thoreau's companions, soul mates he loved and mourned. In January of 1856 Thoreau witnessed the felling of a great elm. The tree, which measured more than fifteen feet in circumference, had made creaking noises in a recent storm, frightening neighboring homeowners into believing that the great mass of wood was about to crash onto their roofs. For Thoreau, the destruction of this tree represented the slaughter of a priceless witness to the history of the community.

"I have attended the felling," he wrote in his *Journal*, "and, so to speak, the funeral of this old citizen of the town . . . I have not known a fitter occasion for a sermon of late." Having "taken the measure of his grandeur," Thoreau spoke "a few words of eulogy at his grave, remembering the maxim *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* (in this case *magnum*)" [speak nothing but good of the dead (in this case *the best*)]. But only the woodchoppers and passersby heard his words. The shattered tree had hardly come to rest than the "axe-boys had climbed upon it like ants" and begun hacking at its limbs. "How have the mighty fallen!" eulogized Thoreau, "Methinks its fall marks an epoch in the history of the town."

How much of old Concord falls with it! The town clerk will not chronicle its fall. I will, for it is of greater moment to the town than that of many a human inhabitant would be. Instead of erecting a monument to it, we take all possible pains to obliterate its stump, the only monument of a tree which is commonly allowed to stand. How much of old Concord was cut away with it! A few such elms would alone constitute a township. They might claim to send a representative to the General Court to look after their interests, if a fit one could be found, a native American one in a true and worthy sense, with catholic principles.

"Our town," concluded Thoreau, "has lost one of its venerables." The woodcutters "have laid the axe . . . to one of the king-posts of the town." "Is it not sacrilege," he asked, "to cut down the tree which has so long looked over Concord beneficently?"

Once the tree had been felled, its great size awed even Thoreau. His fellow Concordians seemed oblivious to the glory of the living elm and would not appreciate this magnificent specimen of plant life until it lay prostrate on the earth. At a dinner party shortly before the woodchoppers laid low the tree, he tried to convey the sense of wonder that the behemoth stirred in him. "I surprised some the other day," he wrote in his journal, recounting the incident, "by saying that when its trunk should lie pros-

trate it would be higher than the head of the tallest man in the town, and that two such trunks could not stand in the chamber we were then in, which was fifteen feet across; that there would be ample room for a double bedstead on the trunk, nay, that the very dinner-table we were sitting at, with our whole party of seven, chairs and all, around it, might be set there."

Just as he had plumbed the depths of Walden Pond, Thoreau recorded the girths of the elms of Concord.⁶ These records were for him "the quantitative expression of his immersion in Nature," writes Alfred Kazin, "proof positive that he touched Nature on every side."⁷ In the winter of 1846, Thoreau had measured the waters of Walden Pond, in part to prove that local wisdom regarding its depth was utterly in error. "It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond," he wrote, "without taking the trouble to sound it."⁸

With its annual rings exposed by the axe, the trunk of the great elm offered a precise record of the tree's journey in time. Yet it seems that only Thoreau possessed the imagination to count them. "Men have been talking now for a week at the post office about the age of the great elm," he wrote, "as a matter interesting but impossible to be determined." Even the very men who felled the tree "stood upon its prostrate trunk and speculated upon its age, as if it were a profound mystery." He endeavored to show them that in fact there was no mystery at all, but his words fell on deaf ears.

By Thoreau's measure, the elm had lived 127 years, but no one took seriously his method or his result. Some villagers insisted that the tree was 200 years old; one maintained it was closer to 150 years, having spent 50 years growing, another 50 standing still, and a final 50 dying. ("Wonder what portion of his career he stood still!" Thoreau wrote.) As with the storied depths of Walden Pond, Thoreau was incredulous that men would choose to remain ignorant when the truth lay within easy reach, requiring but a simple act of measurement to bring forth. "Truly they love darkness rather than light," he wrote in his *Journal*.

They dwell within an integument of prejudice thicker than the bark of the cork-tree, but it is valuable chiefly to stop bottles with. Tied to their buoyant prejudices, they keep themselves afloat when honest swimmers sink.

Mary Emerson alone offered this rational poet a measure of consolation: "It was not the fashion to be so original when I was young," she told Thoreau, before agreeing that indeed the fallen elm had revealed its truths only to him.

The autumnal elm, with its "early and golden maturity," made a particularly strong impression on the Concord naturalist. "It would be worth the while," he wrote in *Autumnal Tints*, "to set out these trees, if only for their autumnal value."

Think of these great yellow canopies or parasols held over our heads and houses by the mile together, making the village all one and compact—an *ulmarium*, which is at the same time a nursery of men! And then how gently and unobserved they drop their burden and let in the sun when it is wanted, their leaves not heard when they fall on our roofs and in our streets; and thus the village parasol is shut up and put away!

Thoreau saw autumn as symbolic of the glorious destiny he predicted for the United States. It was an appropriate metaphor, for the vibrant colors of the northern deciduous forests rank among North America's greatest natural wonders. The seasons of human progress had brought the American to these autumnal shores, where a rich bounty would be harvested as its people grew in wisdom and maturity.⁹

The great fall of elm leaves in October transformed Concord into “a scene of a great harvest-home,” its paths and walks strewn with the summer’s spent array. In their form and color, the great yellow masses reminded Thoreau of sheaves of wheat; it was “as if the harvest had indeed come to the village itself.” Now, he suggested, “we might expect to find some maturity and *flavor* in the thoughts of the villagers at last.” Would there be, he wondered, an “answering ripeness” in the lives of the men who lived beneath these glorious domes. He found it untenable that such beauty could accompany mean and illiberal thoughts. “Under those bright rustling yellow piles . . .” wrote Thoreau, “how can any crudity or greenness of thought or act prevail?” As he watched a farmer disappear beneath the village elms, his wagon creaking beneath the fruits of his summer, Thoreau was tempted to follow the man to the granary, perchance to witness a “husking of thoughts, now dry and ripe, and ready to be separated from their integuments . . .” But he turned away, knowing it would be “chiefly husks and little thought . . . for, as you sow, so shall you reap.”

For all his seriousness of purpose, Thoreau never lost his playful, rhapsodic voice. Standing beneath a cluster of October elms, “warm from their September oven,” he imagined that he stood “within a ripe pumpkin-rind”; “I feel as mellow as if I were the pulp,” he quipped, “though I may be somewhat stringy and seedy withal.” For this man, walking beneath the October elms of Concord was itself a harvest—of seeds and thoughts he had sown himself—and which many generations would reap.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Henry David Thoreau can be found in the Riverside editions of *The Journals of Henry David Thoreau*, VIII (Nov. 1, 1855–Aug. 15, 1856), 117, 130–132; 139–142; X (Aug. 8, 1857–June 29, 1858): 89 (edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906); and “Autumnal Tints” in *Excursions* (Houghton Mifflin, 1883), pages 233–234.

¹ Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 43–44.

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 20–31.

³ John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 57.

⁴ William Howarth, ed. *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1981), xxiv

⁵ Robert L. Gale, *A Cultural Encyclopedia of the 1850s in America* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993), 139–140. The Free Soilers, established in 1848, “adopted a platform with three main planks. no slavery in the territories, no slavery in any new state, and free homesteading rights for public domain settlers. The spirited slogan of the new party—‘Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Men’—gave the party its name.”

⁶ Thoreau made the following entry on 23 January, 1856: “Holbrook’s elm measured to-day 11 feet 4

inches in circumference at six feet from ground, the size of one of the branches of the Davis elm . . . Cheney’s largest in front of Mr. Frost’s, 12 feet 4 inches, at six feet, 16 feet 6 inches, at one foot. The great elm opposite Keyes’s land, near by (call it the Jone’s elm): 17 feet 6 inches, at two behind and one plus before; 15 feet 10 inches, at four, 15 feet 5 inches, at six; 16 feet at seven and a half, or spike on west side. At the smallest place between the ground and branches, this is a little bigger than the Davis elm, but it is not so big at or near the ground, nor is it so high to the branching . . . nor are the branches so big, but it is much sounder, and its top broader, fuller, and handsomer.” See Thoreau, *Journal*, 135–136.

⁷ Alfred Kazin, *A Writer’s America Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 61.

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, “The Pond in Winter,” in *Walden and Other Writings*, William Howarth, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 256.

⁹ William Howarth, xxvii.

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