

Brook Farm:  
The Shortcomings of a Transcendentalist Utopia

by

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## **Brook Farm:**

### **The Shortcomings of a Transcendentalist Utopia**

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The first half of the 19th century brought with it radical change across the world. Nations were emerging from colonialism, monarchies were falling, and democracies were rising. On both sides of the Atlantic, intellectuals were reexamining society with a desire to change the world in which they lived. In Europe, concepts of communism and socialism were sweeping the continent. Social theorists such as Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier were expounding new ways to organize society that they hoped would take hold across the globe—there were already Owenite communities taking hold in the United States. In the middle of the century, Marx and Engels would publish the Communist Manifesto, but the root of their desire for labor reform already existed.

In the United States, workers and intellectuals alike were calling for labor reform. People were working to end slavery and feminist writings were coming out in publications across the country. In the 1830s in Boston, there was a major contingent of workers calling for a ten-hour workday. The Transcendental philosophy that would inspire generations

of authors, artists, and thinkers began to be theorized—its nucleus was Concord, a small town outside of Boston. Those New England Transcendentalists can only be grouped together by one piece of their diverse philosophy—society was bad, and something needed to be done about it. For some Transcendentalists, that meant working towards labor reform and taking part in the ten-hour workday movement. Another contingent concerned themselves with fighting for the abolition of slavery. Still another made their goal to remove themselves from society as much as possible—even if it meant living in poverty. The Transcendentalists diversity in purposes led them in a variety of directions—for one man and his cohort, it led them down an idealistic path that ended up putting them at odds with the broader Transcendentalist movement. This essay aims to address the contradictions between Transcendentalism and utopian communities through the lens of George Ripley’s failed Transcendental utopia—Brook Farm.

George Ripley sent in his letter of resignation as the minister of Purchase Street Society in May of 1840, though he would not leave his post until October. Ripley, an admired Unitarian religious leader, was also a member of a group of forward-thinkers—the Transcendentalists. Their philosophy called on individuals to reexamine the society that they were a part of. “Transcendental metaphysics led inescapably to a social

philosophy and to a critique of existing institutions.”<sup>1</sup> For some Transcendentalists, their reexamination led them to emphasize the individual and cast off the society. For others, Ripley included, it would inspire them to reorganize and adjust society.

Ripley’s role as a Unitarian minister provided him with a universalist perspective on Christianity. Similarly to how Ripley’s Transcendentalism led him to become a social reformer, so too did his position as a Unitarian minister lead him to embrace more progressive ideas on Christianity and religion in general. On leaving the ministry, “he was considering the possibility of establishing a more independent pulpit than he knew could be enjoyed within the confines of the Unitarian Church.”<sup>2</sup> He believed that bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth was entrusted to the Church, “but the Church had failed to ‘bring the religion of society into accordance with the religion of Christ.’”<sup>3</sup> In addition to Ripley’s own evolving views on religion and society, in the summer of 1840 a publication by Albert Brisbane was being read among his circle of friends. Brisbane was, at the time, “America’s foremost expositor of Fourierism.”<sup>4</sup> The book circulating was *Social Destiny of Man; or Association and Reorganization of Industry*. In it, Brisbane described the

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<sup>1</sup> Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*, (Massachusetts: Belknap Harvard,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14.

radical theories of Charles Fourier, one of France's well known social theorists.

Late in the summer of 1840, Ripley attended a convention of like-minded people who had cast off the limitations of their respective churches to embrace their own religious thinking. There were several other attendees of note at the convention, three of whom became creators of utopian communities in the early 1840s: Adin Ballou, organizer of the "Hopedale Community," William Lloyd Garrison, organizer of the "Northampton Association," and Amos Bronson Alcott, one of the founders of "Fruitlands." Ballou—a former Unitarian minister—and Garrison were both outspoken abolitionists and social reformers. Alcott was a fellow Transcendentalist, and belonged to the same social circle as Ripley. Ripley must have been inspired by the talk of communities and associations, because in September of that year, "he had decided to renounce the ministry altogether and organize a community instead."<sup>5</sup>

George Ripley was able to organize a meeting with Adin Ballou in order to further flesh out his plans for a community. At first, Ripley was inclined to have a religious test for entry, but was eventually convinced to leave out any religious requirements for membership.<sup>6</sup> Immediately following his meeting with Ballou, Ripley set out for Concord to discuss his

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

plans with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller,<sup>7</sup> and Bronson Alcott. Ripley described plans for “a tract of land of perhaps 500 acres. Buildings would be constructed for lodging, lectures, and ‘conversations.’ Private cottages would be built for families. Everyone would work and live together harmoniously.” Alcott was left feeling “that he and Emerson wanted something simpler than the community envisioned by Ripley.”<sup>8</sup> Several years later, he would start Fruitlands, a community more in line with his own ideology.

Following their meeting, Ripley began his studies on farming. “He immersed himself in the pages of the *Farmer’s Magazine*, *Laudon’s Encyclopedia of Gardening*, and, the paper that he found most useful, the *New England Farmer and Horticultural Register*.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Ripley visited a number of farms in the area to see what information he could glean from them. This radical shift in lifestyle required a different type of study. It is worth noting that at the start, Ripley and the Brook Farmers had little to no experience in agriculture, “Fourteen years as a Unitarian minister obviously hadn’t prepared him for the demanding physical work required to run a farm. Neither had the dozens of calculations with which he filled the pages of his journal the previous winter.”<sup>10</sup> The one man with

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<sup>7</sup> Fuller never joined Brook Farm, but was a frequent visitor and well known in the community.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

any extensive agricultural experience was William Allen, a young man from Vermont who had been managing a farm in West Roxbury. The motley crew of gentlemen farmers began working the land in the spring of 1841. “The unusual amount of snow and rain in April and May considerably delayed the preparation of the fields for planting. It was one of the gloomiest spring seasons, in fact, that anyone could remember.”<sup>11</sup>

In a letter to Emerson, Ripley laid out what he hoped to accomplish with his communitarian experiment in the hope of gaining his friend’s support.

Our objects, as you know, are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Ripley initially planned to start his community off slowly as a primarily agricultural venture with plans for a school. There would be just several families for the first few years before they “should be joined by all who mean to be with [them].”<sup>13</sup> There were few existing communities in New England for Ripley to draw ideas from for a secular, utopian community. However, there were already several established Shaker

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>12</sup> George Ripley, letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in *ibid.*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



communities in New England, but those communities were solely religious in nature, and besides, “Ripley felt only contempt for the Shaker communities.”<sup>14</sup>

Ripley and the Brook Farmers’ goal from the beginning of their venture was to create a new social order—one in which “everyone would work and live together harmoniously,” each individual laboring in the occupation that was best suited to that person.<sup>15</sup> They set out to found Brook Farm as a Transcendentalist utopia; a community in which Brook Farm’s members would be as active mentally as they were physically. Before any concrete steps were taken towards this dream, there were already plans for lecture halls and a school.

Ripley’s wife, Sophia, played an integral role in Brook Farm’s functioning. “Sophia Ripley was a pragmatist whose vision for Brook Farm was as lofty as that of her husband (...) Sophia was prepared to do whatever was necessary to ensure the success of the community.” Like George, Sophia was an intellectual and social reformer. She was “a gifted conversationalist (...) she participated regularly in Margaret Fuller’s ‘Conversations’ for women in 1839 and 1840 in Boston, which helped to inspire Sophia’s essay on behalf of ‘Woman’ that had just been published

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32.

in the *Dial* in January 1841.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to her feminist writings, she was a gifted educator, and taught at the Brook Farm school throughout its existence.

The first few months spent on the farm were some of the most pleasant that any of the community’s members had experienced. “Despite the rigor and sameness of their daily schedule, not to mention the physical demands placed on the ‘literary characters,’ most if not all the early participants found their new life in the community not only satisfying but downright invigorating.”<sup>17</sup> The Brook Farmers were embarking on an experiment that, they believed, would change society forever, and, as they might have hoped, society took notice. “Possibly because of its status as New England’s first secular community—though more likely because of its convenience to Boston—Brook Farm was from its earliest days always something of a Mecca (...) No other antebellum community—and eighty-four were in existence, at one moment or another, during the 1840s—attracted so many visitors.”<sup>18</sup> These visitors ranged from friends and family to curious onlookers; there were Transcendentalists, Unitarians, and Associationists all coming to get a glimpse at what the future might hold.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Notably absent from Ripley's cohort of utopian farmers was Orestes Brownson. Brownson was a friend and colleague of Ripley's; he was a fellow Unitarian minister and a Transcendentalist too. He was outspoken in his goal of fundamentally changing society—this likely influenced Ripley. Nevertheless, Brownson was not interested in committing himself to the Brook Farm project. Brownson's disinterest was similar to what Ripley encountered among other Transcendentalists. "Less than four months into his bold new venture, he was also without the support of the Transcendental community."<sup>19</sup>

One of the leading thinkers in the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, could not be convinced to involve himself in the project either. In spite of his friendship with Ripley, Emerson refused to support Brook Farm, both financially and otherwise. At first, Ripley hoped that Emerson would live at Brook Farm, but eventually he made it clear that any financial support would be greatly appreciated. Emerson could not bring himself to support the venture in either of these manners. This was not an especially easy decision for him, as it took him nearly five weeks to respond to Ripley's request for support.<sup>20</sup> Even though he felt there was something "so noble & humane" about the venture, there was

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 35.

something else about it that was at odds with the core of his being.<sup>21</sup> Emerson gets to the heart of this opposition in a journal entry where he wrote that, “To join this body would be to traverse all my trumpeted theory... that one man is counterpoise to a city,—that a man is stronger than a city, that his solitude is more prevalent and beneficent than the concert of crowds.”<sup>22</sup> Emerson’s Transcendentalism elevated the individual above all else—“The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”<sup>23</sup> He remarked in his journal on the inadequacy of a community in replacing the individual.

Friendship, fine people; yes; Association & grand phalanx of the best of the human race; the best, banded for some transcendent project; o yes; Excellent; but remember, that nothing & no society can ever be so large as one man. He in his friendship, he in his natural momentary associations enriches, enlarges, doubles himself; but the first hour in which he mortgages himself to two or ten or twenty he dwarfs himself below the stature of one.<sup>24</sup>

In his essay *Self-Reliance*, Emerson explicates the strength that comes from solitude. “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, letter to George Ripley, December 15, 1840, published in *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, ed. Ralph L Rusk, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 369.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Journals 1838-1841*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, (Massachusetts: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1911), 474.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff, (New York: Penguin, 2003), 181.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Journals 1841-1847*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald, (New York: The Library of America, 2010), 97-8.

every recruit to his banner. Is not a man better than a town?"<sup>25</sup> In addition, Emerson makes clear his belief that the individual should forever and always be at odds with the larger society. His emphasis on the individual reached the point that he did not think that an individual should be concerned with anything that does not affect him—he follows this line of thought almost to a fault.

Emerson criticized the notion of philanthropy, "Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?"<sup>26</sup> Emerson saw larger social and labor reform movements sweeping the country, such as the abolition of slavery, as outside the sphere of causes concerning him. This criticism relates to Brook Farm's larger goals, namely labor and social reform. Not only were Brook Farm's members outspoken reformers, but Ripley saw his community as part of a much larger communitarian movement, a movement that eventually shifted Brook Farm's focus from Transcendentalism to Associationism. "Ripley and the directors were still more preoccupied by the method than by the means of running the Association, a tendency, it should be added, that predisposed them to the detailed mathematical computations inherent in Charles Fourier's system

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<sup>25</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance", 202.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-80.

of ‘Groups’ and ‘Series.’”<sup>27</sup> A large portion of the communitarian movement sweeping the country was rooted in Associationism, and, not only joining that movement, but making Brook Farm the model phalanx<sup>28</sup> would, they hoped, solve the community’s financial woes. The support that was lacking from the New England Transcendentalists might be found from the New York Associationists. However, as to be expected, this shift did not improve their standings with Emerson. “Emerson agreed that one could not help feeling anything but great pleasure having such ‘gay and magnificent’ pictures described (...) [he] could not exempt it from ‘the criticism which we apply to so many projects for reform with which the brain of the age teems.’”<sup>29</sup> In his view, the Associationists were just replacing one societal system with another. In Emerson’s opinion, Fourier forgot about an important point in his calculations and detailed plans.

Fourier has skipped no fact but one, namely, Life. He treats man as a fine Thing, something that may be put up & down, polished, moulded, roasted, made into solid or fluid or gas at the will of the owner or perhaps as a vegetable from which though now a poor crab, a very good peach can by manure & exposure be in time produced; but skips the faculty of Life which laughs at Circumstance & can make or supplant a thousand phalanxes & New Harmonys [*sic*] with one pulsation.<sup>30</sup>

While Emerson was able to see the appeal of Fourier’s vision, his own philosophy was at odds with the idea of a structured community. He

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<sup>27</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> A phalanx was Fourier’s name for his envisioned communities.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fourierism and the Socialists,” *The Dial*, Vol, III, July 1842, quoted in *ibid.*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, *Selected Journals 1841-1877*, 90.

writes, "I do not wish to remove my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons."<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, however, Emerson's decision to not support his friend's venture was a personal aversion to the project. In a letter to Ripley he writes, "That which determines me is the conviction that the Community is not good for me. Whilst I see it may hold out many inducements for others it has little to offer me which with resolution I cannot procure for myself."<sup>32</sup>

If there were any part of Brook Farm that Emerson might find worthy of support, it would have been the school. Several years earlier, Bronson Alcott started the Temple School in Boston. It was notable for its progressive approach to education, stressing personal expression in students' writing. Emerson, a good friend and supporter of Alcott, likely found Alcott's emphasis on individual expression to be in line with his own ideology. Furthermore, the Temple School became infamous because his conversations with students about religious matters were considered blasphemous. Again, this is in line with Emerson's ideology, and the Unitarian belief that the miracles of the bible are not meant to be taken literally. Several decades later, in 1879, Emerson and Alcott were able to start their own school in Concord.

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<sup>31</sup> Emerson, *Emerson's Journals 1838-1841*, 473-4.

<sup>32</sup> Emerson, letter to George Ripley, December 15, 1840, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, 369.

The Brook Farm school was one of the only consistently successful parts of the utopian experiment. From its start, the school attracted people to the community, even some from abroad. Especially in the early years, the boarders were a primary source of income. Ripley stated the importance of the Brook Farm school in an article by Orestes Brownson in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in November of 1842. “Every community should have its leading purpose, some one main object to which it directs its energies. We are a company of teachers. The branch of industry which we pursue as our primary object, and chief means of support, is teaching.”<sup>33</sup> The school was divided into three sections: the infant program for children younger than six, the primary program for children six to ten, and the preparatory program for young people hoping to move on to college. In addition to the courses for young people, there were also evening classes for the interested adults. “No other antebellum American community—and that certainly includes those run by the Shakers—provided such an interesting or diversified evening educational program to so many of its members.”<sup>34</sup> The school offered courses across the educational spectrum—language, history, philosophy, and mathematics to name a few. The school’s faculty was as well-rounded as its curriculum; along with George and Sophia Ripley, there were George

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<sup>33</sup> Orestes Brownson, “Brook Farm,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol XI, November 1842, quoted in Delano, *Brook Farm*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.



Bradford and John Sullivan Dwight—both graduates of the Harvard Divinity School. A number of women living at Brook Farm, including Georgiana Bruce and Abby Morton, both of them outspoken women’s rights advocates and abolitionists, taught at the school. “The educational program at Brook Farm was so highly regarded locally that Harvard endorsed it for students ‘fitting for college.’”<sup>35</sup>

During Brook Farm’s brief existence, another experimental, Transcendentalist community was started nearby. The utopian experiment, dubbed Fruitlands, took the idea of a Transcendental community in a different direction. Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, Fruitlands’ founders, approached the significance of the Transcendental individual differently than the Associationists at Brook Farm. Alcott and Lane emphasized an essentially ascetic lifestyle—they would do without sugar, molasses, milk, butter, cheese, and meat, they wore unadorned, primitive clothing, and aimed to operate without the use of money.<sup>36</sup> Delano classifies the difference in approach to the Transcendentalist school of thought as a difference in the technique of social reform. “For Alcott and Lane, as well as for Emerson and Henry Thoreau, radical social change began with the individual; for George Ripley, and for other

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>36</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Transcendental Wild Oats*, (*The Independent*, Vol. XXV, No. 1307, 1873), published in *Transcendental Wild Oats and Excerpts from the Fruitlands Diary*, (Harvard: The Harvard Common Press, 1981), 33.

Transcendentalists such as Orestes Brownson, Theodore Parker, and William Henry Channing, reform began with the institutions.”<sup>37</sup> Alcott and Lane took the philosophy that Emerson preached and applied it to their lives—Fruitlands was to be an escape from the oppressive institutions that rule the rest of the world. Additionally, life at Fruitlands provided a more spiritual experience; the difference in lifestyle was stark enough to draw Isaac Hecker away from Brook Farm to the recently founded Fruitlands. “Life at Brook Farm was not demanding enough, not self-denying or self-sacrificing enough, ‘not Christ-like enough’ for the anguished young man.”<sup>38</sup> Members of Brook Farm attempted, at times, to alter their diets, but never as the residents of Fruitlands had.

Alcott was fed up with social institutions in a similar way to Emerson, yet he took that dissatisfaction further than Emerson was ever willing to do. “Alcott was associated with the Nonresistance Society, a radical offshoot of the abolitionist movement who believed in the systematic oppression of all human institutions.”<sup>39</sup> He removed himself from all institutions that he found to be oppressive, but soon found himself living in poverty. In 1842, Alcott made a trip to England<sup>40</sup> in order to meet with a group of like-minded reformers at the Alcott House, a school named

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<sup>37</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Jessica Gordon, “History of Fruitlands and The English Reformers,” ([transcendentalism.tamu.edu/fruitlands](http://transcendentalism.tamu.edu/fruitlands)).

<sup>40</sup> The trip was financed by Emerson.

after him for his work done in educational reform. There he met Charles Lane, the administrative head of the school.

Alcott and Lane returned from England, but, before beginning work on Fruitlands, they met with Emerson. Lane complained that “the Emerson’s table was ‘too good for my simplicity.’ Lane’s austerity went beyond diet. He criticized the girls’ high-spirited frolics and implied that Abigail’s open manner required more restraint.” Lane disapproved of Brook Farm entirely, “The Transcendentalists there were ‘playing away their youth and daytime in a miserable joyous frivolous manner.”<sup>41</sup> The utopianists at Brook Farm were not so keen on Lane either. One Brook Farmer commented that among Lane’s faults there was “exclusiveness, spiritual pride, egotism, and a certain supercilious supervising peeping.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Lane was the only one to invest in the Fruitlands project—he purchased a 90-acre, piece of land in Harvard, MA for \$1800. “Lane chose the Fruitlands property, rather than some available land closer to Concord, in order to put Alcott beyond reach of Emerson, whom he saw as ‘off the Railroad of progress’ and a rival of Alcott’s attention.”<sup>43</sup> Despite not believing in the institution of property, they conceded that it would be necessary to own the land on which they would be starting their utopian experiment.

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<sup>41</sup> Geraldine Brooks, “Orpheus at the Plough,” *The New Yorker*, January 10, 2005, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Brooks, “Orpheus at the Plough,” 63.

Along with Abigail—Alcott’s wife—their family and several other similarly eclectic and inspired members,<sup>44</sup> they began their experiment. However, not everyone got along in this new utopia. “In thrall to Lane’s flatteries and fantasies, Bronson believed that it was only a matter of spreading the word, and so would go off with Lane on proselytizing jaunts, leaving Abigail and the children to bring in the sparse crops alone.”<sup>45</sup> Lane’s ideology was so severe that he began to call for celibacy within the community, “insisting that Bronson’s devotion to the married state was stifling his spiritual development.”<sup>46</sup> As the experiment failed in the winter, Abigail forced an ultimatum—Alcott could either stay with Lane or leave with his wife and children; he chose the latter. Following the failure of Fruitlands, Lane and his son moved on to a Shaker community.

Lane’s move to a Shaker community highlights a major difference between him and Alcott. What made Fruitlands so appealing to the Transcendentalists was its efforts to remove itself from the larger society. The Shaker communities, in contrast, were entirely involved in their local economies, and were even relevant nationally with the Shaker Seed

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<sup>44</sup> “A man named Abraham Wood called himself Wood Abraham. Joseph Palmer wore a beard in a time when all men were clean shaven. Another man is said to have left Fruitlands to experiment with nudism upon deciding that clothing was spiritually stifling” (Gordon, *History of Fruitlands and The English Reformers*).

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, “Orpheus at the Plough,” 64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Company.<sup>47</sup> Just as Lane was able to ignore his position on property and ownership in buying the Fruitlands' property, so too was he able to look past his Transcendental ideology in pursuit of a more spiritual life. Alcott, on the other hand, went on to teach and promote his breed of Transcendentalism. In his journal, Emerson noted an important piece of Alcott's character: "It is speculation which he loves & not action. Therefore he dissatisfies everybody & disgusts many. When the conversation is ended, all is over. He lives tomorrow as he lived today for further discourse, not to begin, as he seemed to pledge to do, a New Celestial life."<sup>48</sup>

Fruitlands' existence was brief, even compared to Brook Farm; however, its failure points to some of the incompatibilities of a Transcendentalist philosophy within an intentional community. There was little organization that went into the actual labor necessary to keep a community functioning. In her satirical short story *Transcendental Wild Oats*, Louisa May Alcott describes some of the ways in which her community's members failed to live off the land.

The sowing was equally peculiar, for, owing to some mistake, the three brethren, who devoted themselves to this graceful task, found when about half through the job that each had been sowing a different sort of grain in the same field; a mistake which caused much perplexity, as it could not be remedied; but,

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<sup>47</sup> The Shakers were the first seed distributors to start selling seeds in small packets by weight—a practice that is commonplace today.

<sup>48</sup> Emerson, *Selected Journals 1841-1877*, 92.

after a long consultation and a good deal of laughter, it was decided to say nothing and see what would come of it.<sup>49</sup>

The goal was to have “each member perform the work for which experience, strength, and taste best fit him (...) thus drudgery and disorder will be avoided and harmony prevail.”<sup>50</sup> In spite of this well thought out plan, the community’s attempt to adhere to its own strict guidelines made the farming difficult, if not impossible. “As manure was not allowed to profane the virgin soil, few of these vegetable treasures ever came up. Purslanes reigned supreme, and the disappointed planters ate it philosophically.”<sup>51</sup> Alcott and Lane’s experiment took the notion of self-reliance as far as it could go. Not only did they set themselves apart from their utopian contemporaries, they made do without the exploitation of animals—this went beyond the swearing off of meat, it meant making their farmland fruitful without the use of animal labor. Their extreme emphasis on individual, spiritual growth was not enough to bring success to their venture. The experiment failed within six months of its start.

One key similarity between the two experiments was the desire to create a community of gentlemen-farmers. Something about the physical labor of farming was supposed to elevate the individual intellectually and spiritually. In both Brook Farm and Fruitlands, the founders began their

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<sup>49</sup> Alcott, *Transcendental Wild Oats*, 40-1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

experiments with little to no real farming experience. The Transcendental goal of self-reliance was enough to draw them into a venture that had little chance of succeeding. Nevertheless, where Brook Farm failed in drawing the support of Emerson, Fruitlands succeeded. Fruitlands' emphasis on the individual, along with Alcott's friendship with Emerson, is likely what gave Emerson a more positive outlook on the project. Nevertheless, his support for his friend did not come without doubt; he wrote in his journal, "I will not prejudge them successful. They look well in July, we will see them in December."<sup>52</sup>

In the same vein as Louisa May Alcott's *Transcendental Wild Oats*, there was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. While Alcott's satirical piece was short and to the point in its criticism of Fruitlands, Hawthorne's novel was a longer and more veiled critique of Brook Farm. From the time of its publication, readers and critics would draw parallels between its characters and the people associated with Brook Farm. Before examining *The Blithedale Romance's* fictional depiction of life in the community, it is necessary to explain Hawthorne's relation to Ripley's venture.

Hawthorne was one of the first members of the Brook Farm Association. He initially invested 1000 dollars into the venture with the

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<sup>52</sup> Emerson, *Selected Journals 1841-1877*, 185.

hope that he would be able to start a family on the property with his soon-to-be wife, Sophia Peabody. “He didn’t come to West Roxbury imbued with religious zeal or lofty social ideals. His decision to support Ripley’s venture was a pragmatic one.”<sup>53</sup> Hawthorne only ended up staying and working at Brook Farm for several months before becoming disillusioned with the experiment. Within a few months of his arrival, he was already beginning to doubt the viability of Brook Farm as his future home, “The physically demanding work and the disproportionate amount of time that had to be devoted to physical rather than intellectual labors were beginning to trouble him.”<sup>54</sup> Hawthorne’s issues with the project went beyond the amount of labor required, he was well aware that Brook Farm was far from being financially sustainable, and although he made his concerns clear to the farm’s founder, Ripley’s “zeal will not permit him to doubt of eventual success.”<sup>55</sup> After five months of hard work, the farm had no steady source of income nor any plan to assure the project’s future operations.

By September, six months or so after arriving, Hawthorne was convinced that he could not start a family at Brook Farm as he had initially intended. “I cannot and will not spend the winter here (...) the time would

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<sup>53</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-6.

<sup>55</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, letter to David Mack, July 1841, printed in *Selected Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Joel Myerson, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 89.



be absolutely thrown away (...) so far as regards any literary labor to be performed.”<sup>56</sup> He left the community for good the following month. After his marriage to Sophia in July of 1842, Hawthorne first attempted to recoup some of his investment. Ripley and the association agreed to convert half of Hawthorne’s initial thousand dollar investment into a promissory note for \$524.05.<sup>57</sup> Due to Brook Farm’s numerous financial ailments, it took several years before Hawthorne would see any of that money, and only after suing the association, “the court later awarded him \$560.62, plus the cost of \$25.28, for a total judgement of \$585.90.”<sup>58</sup>

*The Blithedale Romance* was initially published in 1852, only several years after Brook Farm’s collapse. As mentioned above Hawthorne’s novel was immediately viewed as a “barely disguised autobiographical account of the author’s brief sojourn at Brook Farm and, with that, Hawthorne’s final judgement on the experiment itself.”<sup>59</sup> The narrator of the romance, Miles Coverdale, was understood as a projection of the author. Hollingsworth, one of Blithedale’s leaders, was seen as parallel to Orestes Brownson or George Ripley, and the novel’s female protagonist, Zenobia, was a representation of Margaret Fuller.<sup>60</sup> In spite of the clear parallels

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<sup>56</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 70-1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>59</sup> Annette Kolodny, introduction to *The Blithedale Romance*, (Ohio: Penguin, 1983), ix-x.

<sup>60</sup> Zenobia was an outspoken women’s rights advocate, much like Margaret Fuller. In addition, both died in similar ways: Zenobia by drowning herself; Fuller in a shipwreck.

between *The Blithedale Romance*'s characters and the Brook Farmers, Orestes Brownson cautioned against this reading by saying that "very little of the actual persons engaged in it, or of the actual goings-on at Brook Farm' were to be found in its pages."<sup>61</sup> In his preface, Hawthorne even advises his readers to not take his characters as literal representations, "These characters, he feels it right to say, are entirely fictitious."<sup>62</sup>

The receptions of the novel were varied, but even in light of the author's preface, most critics agreed that the characters of Hawthorne's Blithedale were too easily related to the actual residents of Brook Farm. A critic in *The Christian Examiner* noted that "he gives us such distinct and sharp boundary lines, and deals so boldly with matters and persons, the truth of whose prose life repels the poetry of his fiction that we are induced to confide in him as a chronicler, rather than to indulge him as a romancer."<sup>63</sup> This critic only had good things to say about Hawthorne's writing with the exception of this concern. In the *American Whig Review*, a critic takes a different view more in line with the author's preface, "We believe that if Mr. Hawthorne had intended to give a faithful portrait of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>62</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852), republished in *The Blithedale Romance*, (Ohio: Penguin, 1983), 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance," *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, (series 4: volume 18, 1852), 292-3.

Brook Farm and its inmates, he would have signally failed.”<sup>64</sup> The critic makes the point that in his romance, Hawthorne’s goal is not to present a reality but an imaginary world.

While the novel can be understood as a thinly veiled critique of Brook Farm, it also offers some explanation of the appeal of the experiment. Early on in the novel, Coverdale explains to Zenobia that, “I hope (...) to produce something that shall really deserve to be called poetry—true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which we are going to lead.”<sup>65</sup> Coverdale, as well as Hawthorne, saw their respective communities as an inspiration to create something profound and beautiful in their writing. The hard, manual labor had a purpose beyond agriculture—it was supposed to elevate the laborer both spiritually and intellectually. There was an appeal in farm work, an appeal that developed well before any Transcendentalist saw the spiritualization of agriculture. From the time of the genesis of the United States, agriculture was seen as a spiritually elevating activity. In a letter to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson writes, “Agriculture (...) is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals & happiness.”<sup>66</sup> However, as Coverdale quickly realized, “[Their] labor symbolized

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<sup>64</sup> “‘The Blithedale Romance,’ American Whig Review,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. John L. Idol and Buford Jones, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 208.

<sup>65</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, (Ohio: Penguin, 1983), 14.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Jefferson, letter to George Washington, August 14, 1787.

nothing, and left [them] mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise.”<sup>67</sup> His hope of being able to spend a few hours working the farm and the rest writing quickly proved itself to be impossible.

Beyond the spiritualization of agriculture, another draw to the experiment was the movement of social reform. “My hope was, that, between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out, and that, even should we ultimately fail, the months or years spent in trial would not have been wasted.”<sup>68</sup> As mentioned above, social and labor reform were key factors in the creation of Brook Farm—Hawthorne’s Blithedale is no different. Hollingsworth, Hawthorne’s parallel to Ripley, was principally concerned with social reform, even more so than he was concerned with the functioning of the community. His philanthropic goals are alluded to throughout the novel, “It is a sad pity that he should have devoted his glorious powers to such a grimy, unbeautiful, and positively hopeless object as the reformation of criminals.”<sup>69</sup> The members of Blithedale refer back to Hollingsworth’s philanthropic obsession with consistently negative views, “His heart, I imagine, was never really interested in our socialist scheme, but was forever busy with his strange, and, as most people thought it,

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<sup>67</sup> Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 66.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

impracticable plan for the reformation of criminals.”<sup>70</sup> Upon returning to Blithedale after an extended absence, Coverdale remarks,

The moral which presents itself to my reflections, as drawn from Hollingsworth’s character and errors, is simply this:—that, admitting what is called Philanthropy, when adopted as a profession, to be often useful by its energetic impulse to society at large, it is perilous to the individual, whose ruling passion, in one exclusive channel, it thus becomes. It ruins, or is fearfully apt to ruin, the heart; the rich juices of which God never meant should be pressed violently out, and distilled into an alcoholic liquor, by an unnatural process; but should render life sweet, bland, and gently beneficent, and insensibly influence other hearts and other lives to the same blessed end.<sup>71</sup>

Coverdale’s critique of Hollingsworth’s philanthropy is strikingly similar to Emerson’s notion of philanthropy; furthermore, through his Blithedale counterpart, Hawthorne’s larger issues with the goals of Brook Farm become apparent. In the same way that Emerson saw Brook Farm as contradictory to what he believed in, so too did Hawthorne. In another shot at Hollingsworth’s philanthropy, Coverdale criticizes his plans for a school, “His specific object (of which he made the public more than sufficiently aware, through the medium of lectures and pamphlets) was to obtain funds for the construction of an edifice, with a sort of collegiate endowment.”<sup>72</sup> Hollingsworth’s school is explicitly philanthropic in the sense that its purpose is to educate and reform criminals. Brook Farm’s school was not the same philanthropic enterprise, but it is telling that Hawthorne includes a critique of the community’s most successful

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 56.

venture—more so than agriculture and industry, what the Brook Farmers excelled at was education. It is too simple to interpret this critique of the educational aspect of Blithedale directly as a critique of one of Brook Farm’s consistent sources of income. Instead, examining the intentions of Hollingsworth’s educational goals point to the same distinction between Emerson and Ripley’s respective ideologies. Emerson and like-minded Transcendentalists’ goal regarding education was to provide individuals with the tools and knowledge to be self-reliant. Ripley’s was a much more socially focused education in line with his larger goals of social reform for his experiment. The school geared towards a progressive education simply by way of its location. Additionally, its teachers were well-educated, progressive thinkers and reformers—he was educating a new generation of social reformers.

Many readers understood Zenobia as a representation of Margaret Fuller; nevertheless, this parallel is not so precise. Zenobia is, in many ways, the female at the center of the Blithedale community. Her position as an outspoken and largely independent woman is consistent with Fuller. In spite of this, her relationship to Hollingsworth points to a parallel between her and Sophia Ripley. During a discussion between Coverdale, Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla,<sup>73</sup> Hollingsworth makes the claim

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<sup>73</sup> Priscilla is another denizen of Blithedale. Coverdale ultimately takes a romantic interest in her.

that “Man is a wretch without woman; but woman is a monster—and, thank Heaven, an almost impossible and hitherto imaginary monster—without man.”<sup>74</sup> Instead of contradicting Hollingsworth, as Coverdale expects her to, Zenobia simply brushes the remark aside saying, “I, at least, have deep cause to think you right. Let man be but manly and godlike, and woman is only too ready to become to him what you say!”<sup>75</sup> While it is difficult to entirely equate the relationships between Hollingsworth and Zenobia and that of George and Sophia, there is a clear commentary on Hollingsworth’s impact on his female counterpart. At the start of the novel, Zenobia is the embodiment of the empowerment and independence of woman; at the end, Hollingsworth can be viewed as responsible for her suicide. Sophia Ripley’s relationship with her husband was far from Hollingsworth and Zenobia’s; however, through Hawthorne’s parallel of the two relationships, it becomes clear that he views George Ripley’s influence on his wife as a negative force. Sophia was involved in conversations about women’s rights, and was a dedicated teacher and reformer, but was held back from her full potential in Hawthorne’s view. She was integral to the operation of Brook Farm, but her work was chiefly in tasks already designated to women.

She never hesitated at Brook Farm to perform the most demanding domestic work, as her title “chief” of the washing and ironing departments indicates. She

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 124.

scrubbed floors, nursed the sick, washed clothes, and taught classes in history and foreign languages. Brook Farmer J. Homer Doucet later recalled that Sophia, “so refined and cultured, was working like a slave, often ten hours a day, in the sloppy wash room or in the hot ironing-room.”<sup>76</sup>

Readers understood Zenobia as a representation of Margaret Fuller for good reason, yet by viewing her as a parallel to Sophia Ripley, another of Hawthorne’s critiques of Brook Farm becomes apparent—namely that the Brook Farmers had lofty goals of social reform, but were unable to practice the new social order that they preached.

Miles Coverdale is drawn to the experimental community in a similar way as his creator was to Brook Farm. Hawthorne intentionally sets up his narrator as a Transcendentalist and socialist. “I read interminably in Mr. Emerson’s Essays, the Dial, Carlyle’s works, George Sand’s romances, (lent me by Zenobia,) and other books which one or another of the brethren or sisterhood brought with them.”<sup>77</sup> The books that Coverdale reads point to the roots of the experiment. Emerson’s essays, and the Dial especially<sup>78</sup>, allude to Brook Farm’s Transcendental origins.

Coverdale also mentions the French social theorist in his list of books. “Fourier’s works, also, in a series of horribly tedious volumes, attracted a good deal of my attention, from the analogy which I could not

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<sup>76</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 52.

<sup>78</sup> The Dial was a Transcendentalist journal edited by Margaret Fuller, and later Emerson. It was briefly printed at Brook Farm.



but recognize between his system and our own.”<sup>79</sup> Throughout the novel, Coverdale alludes to Fourier’s theories, but never with a positive view. Ultimately, he takes an entirely negative opinion of Fourierism. “The experiment, so far as its original projectors were concerned, proved long ago a failure, first lapsing into Fourierism, and dying, as it well deserved, for this infidelity to its own higher spirit.”<sup>80</sup> Coverdale’s final verdict on the experiment is that it strayed from its original, lofty goals. Although Hawthorne did not reside at Brook Farm long enough to witness the project’s shift to Fourierism, he would have been well aware of the developments and changes taking place. One such change was a shift away from the construction of private cottages to larger communal living spaces. As Hawthorne began his stay at Brook Farm with the intention of eventually raising a family there, this shift likely went against his own vision for the community.

Although Brook Farm’s founders arranged their enterprise with a number of aspects that were in line with the writing’s of Fourier, at its start Brook Farm had no ties to the Fourierist movement that would soon sweep the country. In June of 1842, Albert Brisbane published an article that, among other things, “addressed the interesting question of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 52-3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 246.

necessary conditions for a practical trial in ‘Association.’”<sup>81</sup> Brisbane gave several conditions for what might be the model phalanx, namely, “400 persons cultivating a 1500-acre tract (...) located near a city (...) operated administratively by a ‘Council of Industry’ (...) organized as a joint-stock company rather than one requiring community of property.”<sup>82</sup> Besides its size, Brook Farm already met these conditions. Ripley, and the community’s other leaders saw the Fourierist movement as an opportunity to save their project. By aligning their utopian experiment with the broader Fourierist movement, the Brook Farmers hoped to gain the support of a number of proponents of Fourierism residing in the northeast.

As well as the major differences, it is important to note that Transcendentalism and Fourierism come out of the same impulse—a reevaluation of society’s institutions. The most notable distinction between the two doctrines is that in Transcendentalism the individual should reevaluate society in order to discover that the individual needs no society. In Fourierism the necessity of reevaluating society is inherent, yet instead of casting off society, Fourierists aim to reform it. While Brook Farm in its early years might be labeled a Transcendentalist community, this has to do more with its members’ ideology than with the community’s

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<sup>81</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 89.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

operations. In so far that Brook Farm was a structured community, it was at odds with the Transcendentalist philosophy.

In order to shift the farm's mission to one more explicitly Fourierist, the leadership only had to change a few of the experiment's core operations. The most important of which was expanding the farm's main focus as a primarily agricultural venture to one that focused on a number of other industries as well. This is not to say that Brook Farm would no longer be a functioning farm. Whereas before the community was primarily focused on the operation and success of the farm, after the shift to Fourierism, Brook Farm also focused on a number of different industries, such as shoemaking and cabinetry—the farm's purchase of a steam engine points to this shift.

If Brook Farm's industries were to be competitive, such a costly capital expenditure seemed necessary. The installation of the steam engine (...) is another powerful reminder that Brook Farm had broken irrevocably with the past when it was principally an agrarian and romantic retreat whose prosperity, Ripley then thought, would be assured by the piles and piles of rich manure (the 'gold mine,' he called the fertilizer) that were spread around the farm. The past was now forgotten amid calculations of caloric and the clangor echoing from the Workshop in the new Fourierist Phalanx.<sup>83</sup>

Since its start, Brook Farm struggled financially—this was so for a number of reasons. Apart from the ill-advised purchase of the steam engine, one of the primary causes of the community's financial strife had to do with the number of people flocking to the community, and not all of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 209.

those people intended to work for their room and board. “One important consequence of having so many boarders and students is that they outnumbered associates fifty-five to fifteen by August.”<sup>84</sup> Aside from having to feed the massive influx of people, they also needed to house them. This led to the community undertaking a number of building projects that they were, financially, not ready for. Another cause of the community’s difficulties was the fact that in spite of being a primarily an agricultural venture and situated on a dairy farm, the Brook Farmers at one point had to bring in their dairy from elsewhere—they were far from self-sufficient.

The shift to Fourierism did not put to rest all of Ripley’s financial woes. In fact, his strong desire to make Brook Farm the model phalanx in North America ended in failure. Shortly after Hawthorne’s lawsuit, Ripley received a letter from Brisbane informing him that the New York Associationists were shifting their support from Brook Farm to the North American Phalanx in Red Bank, New Jersey. Things only got worse from there. In the late winter of 1846, tragedy struck the community. A large building project, the Phalanstery, caught fire and burned to the ground. “All that was left of the nearly completed Phalanstery were charred bricks and Roxbury pudding stone from the building’s foundation, and a

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

smoldering heap of ashes.”<sup>85</sup> Additionally, “Because the Phalanstery was not yet in use by the Association, ‘no insurance had been effected.’”<sup>86</sup> The Brook Farmers were passionate about crafting a new type of society, but financially, the project was unsustainable. Brook Farm was unable to overcome this setback.

Brook Farm’s short tenure marks a major turning point for the Transcendentalist movement. It marks a shift from one generation of thinkers to another—from Emerson’s emphasis on the individual above all else to Ripley’s desire to reform the way society is structured. The Brook Farmers were not concerned with self-sufficiency, and even adapted a Fourierist model though, “no phalanx would be wholly self-sufficient.”<sup>87</sup> At Brook Farm’s start, self-sufficiency may have been something to work towards, especially in regards to their agriculture, but the model Phalanx was designed to function within an already existing economy—after the Fourierist shift self-sufficiency was not a necessity. Emerson and Fruitlands were aiming towards self-sufficiency as their primary goal. Even though Fruitlands was far from successful, they strived towards self-reliance. This difference points to a larger distinction between the two ideologies. On the one hand, Emerson preached the individual over the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>87</sup> Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 127.

group—man should become self-reliant so that he has no need for the burden of society. On the other hand, the Brook Farmers' goal, primarily and from the start, was social reform. Brook Farm marks a shift from Emerson's antisocial Transcendentalism to Ripley's social Associationism.

Brook Farm's ultimate failure was a result of a couple of factors. First and foremost, the project's initial form failed to meet the expectations of, or draw support from its most valued allies. Its Transcendentalist roots could not be reconciled with its Associationist direction. Second, and more directly related to the project's failure, were the varied goals of its leadership, and the speed at which it adjusted to address these goals—George Ripley wanted the community to be too many things at once. This led to the community's undertaking of a number of projects that were not financially viable. Brook Farm failed in that it did not last, but it succeeded in becoming a far-from-perfect model for a community in which “everyone would work and live together harmoniously,” each individual laboring in the occupation that was best suited to that person.<sup>88</sup> A number of people associated with the project went on to become outspoken advocates for social change. Brook Farm's great success is that during its brief existence, it was able to inspire a generation of forward-thinking people.

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<sup>88</sup> Delano, *Brook Farm*, 32.

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