“The spirit which dictates them”: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Transcendental Decision to Decline the Social Reform of Brook Farm, 1840

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s decision to decline George Ripley’s invitation to join the proto-socialist Brook Farm in December of 1840 has been a definitive event for understanding both Emerson’s complex relationship to associationism and his reasons for abstaining from utopian ideology. Historians and critics have correctly pointed out the practical considerations Emerson faced with moving his family to the farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts and stifling his literary work, while concurrently addressing his long-trumpeted notion of “self-reliance,” in which individual reformation preceded societal transformation. What has been partially misunderstood, however, is the authoritative nature of Emerson’s Transcendental theory in relation to Brook Farm. This paper attempts to re-clarify and establish this former point as an essential component to Emerson’s self-reliance and how it contributed to the rejection, proving to be an irreconcilable barrier to commit his residence, money, and intellectual support to Brook Farm in 1840.
On a cool October evening in 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson sat utterly bored. He listened to the foolish, idle conversation—at least to him—between several of his Transcendental companions concerning a plan to establish the utopic, proto-socialist community of Brook Farm, near West Roxbury, Massachusetts.\footnote{Sterling F. Delano, \textit{Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 30.} He shifted his weight to and fro, leaned back with listlessness and drifted into uninterested daydreaming, “aloof and thoughtless.”\footnote{Ralph Waldo Emerson, \textit{The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson}, ed. William H. Gilman and J.E. Parsons, vol. 7, 1838-1842 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 408.} He attempted to feign interest and perked up his ears occasionally to catch the enthusiasms of his friends, but inevitably, as he remarked in his journal, “the new social plans” failed to conjure up the “infamed” sentiments he so desired.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 407-408.} He even opined a thought on the farm, although, almost instantaneously, his words “faltered and fell” into apathy.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 408.} The night wore on; more intriguing topics arose, but for Emerson the fiery thoughts launched by his friends from across the room simply chilled his intellect and smothered his spirit. That night Emerson withdrew within himself, refrained from public endorsement or condemnation of the community, and privately retired for the evening. In brief, Emerson’s mild cynicism of Brook Farm extinguished any prospect of setting his mind ablaze. Amidst his associates’ utopian ramblings, Emerson simply could not find the right kindling within himself to ignite the sparks.

Emerson’s home in Concord, Massachusetts had served as the meeting place that evening for the “Transcendental Club,” a series of informal intellectual gatherings for the Transcendentalists. And it was hoped that even though the cold winds swirled outside, Emerson
would be somehow sympathetically warmed by, if not tentatively supportive of, his friends’
endeavors. However, it was evident to Emerson at least—for he hid his disappointment well—
that he would not be “thawed” by this social reform. Brook Farm’s mastermind, George Ripley,
sat across from Emerson passionately elucidating the particulars of the community’s plans to
him, while his wife Sophia agreed, nodding in silence as he spoke. Ripley had witnessed the
beginnings of American industrialism in New England, the financial panic of 1837, and the
scenes of unemployment, poverty, and spiritual depravation which filled local cities throughout
the 1830s. The clearest salvation to his mind for social reform resided in the plans he laid before
Emerson as a long-time personal friend and cousin. The two had more than a personal
relationship, for both men served as Unitarian ministers in the 1820s and 1830s, and eventually
left the pulpit, inadvertently becoming leaders in the obscure, yet profoundly influential
intellectual and spiritual movement of Transcendentalism throughout the mid-nineteenth century.

Transcendentalism was the flowering of a philosophical, literary, and educational
revolution in thought—eventually mutating into several forms of social reform—that splintered
from the Unitarianism of eastern Massachusetts, and oriented itself around Nature’s interrelated
divinity, spiritual idealism, the infinitude of man’s moral goodness, and a strain of spirited, if not
feverish individualism. A reductionist perspective of the movement does not truly capture the
multifaceted nature of Transcendentalism, nor does it tell of the fifty to seventy-five men and
women—Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Theodore Parker and the
Peabody Sisters included—that arose in the New England states over several generations, and
whose often idiosyncratic understandings of the movement led to, as in Emerson and Ripley’s
case, profound disagreements. Notable critic Joel Myerson has even gone so far as to say
Transcendentalism in definition is “a lot like grasping mercury: both are fluid and hard to pin

5 Ibid., 407.
down.” Hence more thorough exposition will be provided in later sections as to contextualize the Emerson-Ripley conflict, necessary for evaluating the Brook Farm decision of 1840. While both men shared mutual philosophies, agreeing on much throughout their friendship, that night, the two could not have been less concordant.

Amos Bronson Alcott was equally lost as he sat patiently hearing out Ripley’s plans for social reform. More known for the paternity of his daughter Louisa May Alcott, author of the novel *Little Women*, Alcott was a committed teacher, writer, reformer, and Transcendentalist as well and was quite fond of radical ideas. In fact, Alcott would start a similar utopian experiment, Fruitlands, in June of 1843, although it failed miserably, lasting a dismal seven months. Even for Alcott, Brook Farm appeared to be far more than he could handle. The last Transcendentalist in Emerson’s parlor that night was a woman by the name of Margaret Fuller. She was an intellectual companion and confidant to Emerson, which she used as a platform to grow her status as a public intellectual and published author. Daniel Bullen has even suggested the two had romantic interests beyond their close friendship, however, nothing was ever acted upon. An intellectual giant for a woman in the 1840s, Fuller learned to read Latin by the age of six, was tutored in Greek and German throughout her adolescent years, extensively studied ancient philosophy and poetry, served two years as editor for *The Dial* publication, wrote a number of seminal Transcendental works, including the polemical *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), acted as champion for women’s rights, and was the first woman admitted to use the

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sacrosanct, Harvard College Library. Even so, Fuller’s impressively erudite credentials and powerful female intellect could not entirely stand behind an idea so revolutionary for its time. She would nevertheless visit Brook Farm occasionally, yet her relationship to the community would be mixed at best.

So there conversed some of the most crucial players in American Transcendentalism, each attempting to understand one another and the lofty dream of Ripley’s imagination. But as Fuller and Alcott wrestled in their own minds with the implications of Brook Farm, Emerson was also conflicted over his future and the possibility of joining the community with his family. Although he passed the evening disillusioned with Ripley’s plans, the succeeding months proved to be surprisingly uncertain and restive. Ripley was a personal friend and Emerson did not wish to disappoint him. Moreover, Emerson certainly yearned to experience social reform in his day, but not through the proposed mechanisms and means Ripley suggested that night. Beyond intellectual objections, Emerson had to consider his household in Concord, the family’s health, and the financial and emotional feasibility of moving to an upstart utopian farm outside of Boston. Emerson delayed as long as possible throughout late October and early November in 1840, even postponing a response to Ripley’s letter requesting his residential, financial, and intellectual support for the community. The return correspondence did not arrive at Ripley’s door for another five weeks. In the letter, Emerson declined Ripley’s offer, providing several reasons for his unwillingness to join Brook Farm. After several tense months Emerson had finally settled the matter for himself. He moved on to publishing his landmark *Essays: First Series* (1841) in

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10 Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia*, 38.

the immediate January and Ripley launched the farm in the early spring of 1841. The two men remained close friends, even after the short-lived Brook Farm failed in 1847. Still beneath the list of objections to Brook Farm, Emerson was above all else transfixed on a sole idea that would define his career and ultimately his rejection of Brook Farm.

Emerson’s self-proclaimed “long trumpeted theory” of self-reliance was the notion and remained at the heart of his blank stare towards Ripley in the parlor and in the refusal letter several months later.  

12 Self-reliance, as will be discussed in greater depth, was the bedrock of Emersonian Transcendentalism and embodied the essential hermeneutical lens for understanding man’s relationship to Nature and himself.  

13 A skeleton outline of the theory posits man must concurrently ignore the traditions of the past and the opinions of present society, introspectively contemplating one’s own thoughts to live by one’s own creeds. The Oversoul—the universal spirit of Emerson’s theology and the foundational source of all virtue, original thought, and right action—was the fountain of consciousness to be depended upon to transcend existence and live an enlightened life. On the surface, Emerson’s self-reliance can ostensibly appear to be an attempt to champion individualism and a misanthropic disdain for others. Certainly Emerson prized the individualistic spirit and a desire to think and act for himself on his own terms, but such a prosaic understanding overlooks the profoundly spiritual and deeply complex philosophical underpinnings which Emerson believed to be critical to his Transcendental paradigm. To make matters more convoluted, subtle nuances and intricate evolutions in his theory of self-reliance took place over the course of his public intellectual career, making it all


the more necessary to situate and pinpoint with precision his exact thinking at the particular moment of the Brook Farm decision. Emerson may have been frozen in his convictions on the October 18 meeting in Concord, unwilling (or unable) to be stirred into intellectual solidarity with Ripley, but by the time of his final decision in December of 1840, Emerson’s reasons were explicit and none clearer than self-reliance. For Emerson, the primary decision was purely Transcendental and the rest, secondary.

**Thesis**

Primary and secondary objections aside, one must be careful not to deduce hasty generalizations from Emerson’s thought at any one time. Critical shifts, solidifications, and sometimes haphazard evolutions reshaped the sifting sand that is Emersonian revelation. If the modern reader imposes the expectation upon Emerson to be consistently unswerving in a programmatic Transcendentalism or explicit in a coherent, systematic outline of such thought, an egregious error has been committed. The mistake lies in assuming Emerson set out to elucidate a step-by-step process of self-reliance in the course of his private mind and public career and it bypasses Emerson’s skepticism of strict theory. Emerson would famously quip, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” and if contradiction became noticed by one’s self or neighbors, his advice did not change, “Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.”14 So Emerson’s concomitant desire to preach his message of reliance upon the “aboriginal Self” and his allowance for elasticity in its contents to evolve and mature into new forms must be considered if an accurate assessment is to be made on Emerson and Brook Farm.15 It is certainly


true self-reliance was Emerson’s central barricade to Brook Farm. The letters, journals, and other writings of Emerson immediately preceding and following December 1840 attest to this fact. But if Emerson’s decision is self-evident, and if critics have presumably settled the Brook Farm question, resting the primary objection on self-reliance theory, what potentialities exist in understanding the decision historically or in terms of its philosophical and theological weight?

I intend to answer this somewhat elusive question by approaching the Brook Farm decision through a revised understanding of Emerson’s self-reliance theory, thereby evaluating the rejection within a more precise framework. Discussion will center on how Emersonian biographers, literary historians, and critics have characterized the decision over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Critical reception has been accurate in implicitly sifting through the secondary reasons (functional, financial, family, and household concerns) and separating out the primary reason of Emersonian self-reliance. In addition, the veracity of critics’ explanations has most assuredly been careful in its evaluations of the theory and has progressively neared a consensus. Generally, Emerson’s primary decision has been either relegated to pithy summations and broad-sweeping axioms or inaccurately outlined in the fullness of its complexity.

Consequently, a subsequent delineation of historical and cultural background, including a biographical sketch, will situate Emerson and his philosophical assumptions in an appropriate context. That is, a shorthand evolution tracking Emerson’s thought will be necessary to capture the motivations for the decision leading up to and at the exact time of George Ripley’s request for Emerson to join Brook Farm in 1840. I plan to demonstrate that while the structural bifurcation of the decision is a suitable appraisal, self-reliance theory has been particularly mischaracterized in several respects.
At the time of the Emerson-Ripley split, Emerson had been furiously working throughout the year on his seminal *Essays: First Series*, which was his first public attempt to articulate not only his arguments for various philosophical topics, but most importantly, self-reliance. By looking to these literary essays, along with correspondence, Emerson’s journals, and several of Emerson’s non-literary sources, a more proper depiction of the decision will be reached. In the ostensible draft of Emerson’s final rejection letter to Ripley, Emerson penned a peculiar paragraph in which he criticized Brook Farm’s fundamental process for reform, yet oddly enough, in the literature this entry was never addressed, nor was it ever considered vital for understanding Emerson’s rejection. And while this is comprehensible, since the section was left out of the final letter to Ripley, one problem still remains. This particular argument was expressed by Emerson not only in 1840, but was reiterated several times throughout the decade. While scholars have certainly identified this specific element in Emerson’s general writings on reformers, much later than 1840, none have applied this rationale as one of the reasons intricately connected with his self-reliance theory in the denial of Brook Farm.

I argue that Emerson’s fundamental disagreement with Brook Farm in 1840, self-reliance theory, has missed an indispensable element to its mixture, that as Ripley proposed a reformation of man through external pressures and codified rules, Emerson believed that reliance upon the Oversoul enacted the reformation in man to produce social reform naturally to its conclusion. Moreover, the trend in the literature has persisted in characterizing this spiritual entity as a force which passively guides the individual to reform much like a tour guide or as an oracle which resides within man’s consciousness speaking to him revelatory truth. But as I will demonstrate, Emerson’s Oversoul, in specific relation to his opposition with Brook Farm, was rather an authoritative spirit which would inevitably dictate man’s social relations and complete the reform
of society through its own direction, only if each individual would submit to this sovereign being’s designs. Consequently, Emerson envisioned this benevolent, dictatorial spirit commencing with one reformed individual and then through a spiritual encounter, others would become divinely reformed, and thereby all, in theory, would serially become transformed in the process. The way to social reform was not through Ripley’s programmatic and pre-established rules for achieving perfection in a utopic, isolated community, but rather by the trust placed in the Oversoul’s commanding power to spiritually revolutionize man into reformed individuals able to think and act in a morally virtuous manner within informal communities. It is this authoritative nature which has been diminished in historical and literary analyses of Emerson’s decision, but by clarifying and establishing this fact, the rejection of Brook Farm was, at least in part, for Emerson a fundamental disagreement on whose authority was to be trusted for reform: Ripley’s human-constructed scheme in which man was legalistically directed towards communal harmony or the authoritative spirit of existence, able to initiate, conduct, and bring about reformation within individuals and execute its providence to envelope each person within its transformational power to inevitably engender collective unity. Emerson would choose the latter.

**Critical Reception**

Understanding Emerson’s objections to joining Brook Farm has puzzled literary historians, biographers, and critics for much of the twentieth century and into our own. The confusion has not resulted from prosaic scholarly speculation or ambiguous source materials that typically characterize historical disputes. Rather, the uncertainty lies with Emerson himself. When Emerson sent his rejection letter to Ripley on December 15, 1840, he did not submit one definitive reason for his abstention, he offered several. Further complications arise when one peruses the private journals of Emerson, revealing even more subtle and nuanced trepidations he felt towards the farm. The letters, public lectures, and essays exchanged with loved ones and
shared with intellectual audiences—both contemporarily and retrospectively—expose other problems Emerson had with the utopian community at West Roxbury. Even two remarkably similar drafts of the letter, yet significantly divergent, offer critics greater perplexing motivations behind the decision.

Consequently, scholars have left an equally convoluted historiography by emphasizing one reason over another, pitting several objections against others, and establishing hierarchies of primary and secondary motivations. The complications began prior to the mid-twentieth century, when scholars rarely showed substantial interest in the Brook Farm decision, often breezing by it with oversimplified explanations and arriving at myopic conclusions. Some did not bother with Brook Farm, viewing it as incidental to both the transcendental theology of Emerson’s thought and his personal life. In 1929, Phillips Russell’s biography, *Emerson: The Wisest American*, characterized the Brook Farm decision with scant analysis and inaccurate conclusions. As so often was the case, scholars framed Emerson’s decision around the notion of an individualistic man unconcerned with collective social reform. For Russell, Emerson’s decision was a misanthropic disdain for human collectivity in the reformation of society. Furthermore, the decision revealed Emerson’s exemplification of his “ardent belief” in the salvation of society through “the leadership of individual genius” and his “love of personal insulation.” Russell even claimed Emerson’s central objection to the farm rested on his awareness that he was only “an inspirer and distributor of ideas” and was thereby incapable of “putting any of them into practice.” In short, Emerson was presented as a firm individualist and isolated intellectual,

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unable to collaborate with others for the regeneration of society. In addition, Russell’s representation of Emerson’s incapacity to do the physical work of reform, only the intellectual, positioned Emerson as an individualistic thinker uncommitted to man’s actual reform. Hence, both the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of Emersonian individualism were removed in Russell’s depiction of the Brook Farm decision, presenting Emerson’s choice as nothing more than a fierce individualist who abstained from group-think and preferred solitude to reform the individual. Russell’s work was largely representative of the period and established a clichéd, albeit foundational trope that would circulate through future scholarly works.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, literary historians and critics posited similar interpretations of the Brook Farm decision, while also offering far more nuanced and complex explanations. Ralph L. Rusk’s critical biography, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, once again portrayed Emerson as an “individualist,” repelled by the mere “suggestion” of participation in any sort of “communal scheme.”19 Rusk’s assessment also treated Emerson as sympathetic to the endeavors of the social reform, but not wholeheartedly convinced Brook Farm was a site of societal transformation. Most interestingly, Rusk does not devote any coverage to Emerson’s actual decision via correspondence to George Ripley on December 15, 1840 and only focuses on the Brook Farm meeting at Emerson’s house in October, but failed to put forth any pertinent discussion on the crucial events following this meeting.20 Perry Miller, a leading critic of the time, would echo Rusk by suggesting in his book, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology*, that Emerson predicated his decision on man’s necessity for the renewal of the “self’s private

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But what made Miller’s claim unique was its assumption that Emerson’s choice severely ruptured the Transcendentalist movement into the “Emsonian individualists” and the “associationists.” This bifurcation in the movement distinguished Emerson’s individualistic reform of man through self-emancipation versus the collectivist approach of George Ripley. Miller further envisioned Emerson’s repudiation of Brook Farm as a severe death blow to the relationships the Transcendentalists had fostered throughout the 1830s, neglecting the Emerson-Ripley friendship which persisted throughout both men’s lives. Nevertheless, the understanding of Emerson’s decision was filtered through the narrow lens of individualism, sometimes with minor deviations, yet rarely was expanded upon.

The strand of individualism continued in the scholarship for two succeeding decades. Far from progression in new critical directions, biographers and critics recycled, and often regurgitated perspectives of their predecessors. Warren Staebler argued in his 1973 intellectual biography, that Emerson retained an “inveterately individualistic” philosophy, believing that no one “person could renovate society who was not himself renovated.” Staebler further insisted Emerson held a dichotomous perspective on the self and community, which precluded him entirely from the compatriotism of Brook Farm. In consequence, no explanation was provided on Emerson’s philosophical reasons for abstention, nor was there discussion on the spiritual and economic objections Emerson maintained throughout the fall of 1840. Individualistic self-reliance was championed as the primary reason for Emerson’s refusal, but in connection to

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22 Ibid., 464.

Brook Farm itself, this philosophical concept was inaccurately evaluated in both its content and implications for understanding Emerson’s rejection. Certainly Staebler and others were correct in placing Emerson’s self-reliance at the heart of his decision, however, the idea was grossly misunderstood and the egregious act of omitting Emerson’s secondary objections to Brook Farm was serially repeated. Still, by the later decades of the twentieth century scholars began to perceive the slight distinctions and evident errors of misreading in the past.

_Waldo Emerson_ was the first critical biography to rework the Emersonian individualism thesis and subsequently others followed suit. Gay Wilson Allen hinted Emerson may have been persuaded to join Ripley’s farm if the right rhetoric had been employed.24 However, this was not to be. Allen maintained Emerson’s decision came down to his self-reliant theory, of course, but he added Emerson was not socially comfortable with Ripley’s multi-familial farm. Concord possessed the perfect living conditions he desired, and his family was not suited for the robust exertions of farm labor.25 Albeit minute, this shift had far-reaching implications, for the field now began to understand the decision far more holistically than it had ever done so prior to the 1980s and envisioned new possibilities in Emerson’s decision.

John McAleer, in his exhaustive biography, _Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter_, expanded Emerson’s objections to include both his disdain of extended, congested communal living which he experienced during his childhood days at a boardinghouse stay following his father’s death and Ripley’s initial move to request Emerson’s financial support for Brook Farm.26 McAleer incorporated many, if not all, of Allen’s objections concerning the Brook Farm rejection, including the psychological and emotional needs of his own family and himself. For


McAleer, Emerson required more than philosophical individualism, he needed to be alone for peace and solitude. Also, McAleer addressed Emerson’s appeal for advice to a nearby friend and farmer by the name of Mr. Hosmer on whether Brook Farm was a practical means to social reform. Emerson found the hard-driving practicality and skepticism of Hosmer to be another sufficient set of reasons to question the community’s quixotic aims and non-pragmatic means.

It is important to pause on McAleer’s work because of its emphasis on the “tally of reasons” Emerson found irreconcilable in the Brook Farm project. These reasons would encompass the long-neglected objections debated, omitted, and presented to Ripley in the final rejection letter, opening up the possibilities for understanding the depth of Emerson’s decision. But through the seemingly endless list of secondary concerns Emerson faced with the farm, McAleer appropriately pointed to the primary reason in the oft-repeated narrative of Emersonian individualism. More importantly, it was McAleer’s spiritualized, philosophically-fixed framework that properly situated Emerson’s individualistic thoughts, significantly altering the course of criticism on the Brook Farm decision up until the present.

*Emerson’s Emergence: Self and Society in the Transformation of New England, 1800-1845* and *The Harbinger and New England Transcendentalism: A Portrait of Associationism in America*, written by Mary Kupiec Cayton and Sterling F. Delano, respectively, supported McAleer’s assertions and stayed within the confines of the day’s contemporaneous studies. But, with the 1995 publication of *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Robert D. Richardson condensed his evaluation of the decision to a few critical objections, positioning his argument primarily on

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27 Ibid., 308.
28 Ibid., 309-310.
29 Ibid., 308.
Emerson’s belief in the individual’s reformation antecedent to societal transformation.\textsuperscript{30} Hence, Emerson’s self-reliant individualism ran into diametric opposition to the socialistic and collective schemes of the Brook Farm community. Richardson highlighted this conflict by noting Emerson’s “faith in the power and the infinitude of the individual” over the “collective action” of utopian plans.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, Richardson astutely pointed out Emerson did not necessarily object to the community’s hopes, rather in its methods, driving Emerson to conclude independence was the more appealing alternative versus the organizational complexity of Brook Farm and its ineffective means of farming. But what is strikingly different from McAleer’s account of Emersonian individualism, in comparison to Richardson’s, is the lack of transcendental theory necessary for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the concept.

At the same time, Carl J. Guarneri’s classic work, \textit{The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America}, was the first work to revolutionize our understanding on the Brook Farm decision by reframing Emerson’s choice in transcendent terms. Guarneri’s was the first assessment to offer Emerson’s self-reliance theory as inextricably tied to a spiritual impetus. Guarneri argued Emerson’s decision was diametrically opposed to the farm not only because it was an “individualist” Transcendentalism that butted heads against the communitarian approach of Brook Farm, but Emerson’s belief that with the “divine spark” a personal “call” to moral “integrity and self-reliance” was issued and through this spiritual “self-culture the individual could transcend material circumstances.”\textsuperscript{32} However, Guarneri does not limit his analysis to this primary reason, but provides the well-known secondary reasons concerning Emerson’s desire to


\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, 344.

work through reform issues alone, daily manual labor necessary for personal development, the contentment of living in an informal community, like Concord, and the privacy of simple living which it afforded him. Moreover, Guarneri highlights Emerson’s positivity on some particulars of the community which he would reiterate throughout the 1840s in his journals and literary works and thereby refrains from oversimplifying Emerson’s complex relationship to Brook Farm. In addition, Guarneri fleshes out the overlooked source materials of Emerson’s later writings on Fourierism and astutely points out part of the decision was based on Emerson’s repudiation of Brook Farm’s attempts to mold community members via extrinsic means, such as community rules and mechanized daily schedules, into newly reformed persons. However, he works slightly against his spiritual thesis by claiming Brook Farm attempted to “impose system on the messy vitality of life” and straitjacketed “individual expression.” But as I will return to later on this point, the word life in context is not referring to the general state of common existence for Emerson, but rather is in direct relation to his spiritual, self-reliant theory and has far different implications in understanding Emerson’s decision. Nonetheless through Guarneri’s ground-breaking study, not just on the ideology of Fourierism in the nineteenth-century, but on Emerson’s Brook Farm decision as well, new perspectives opened up in the following years.

In 1997, Richard Francis’s monograph *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* forwarded the conversation in Guarneri’s direction by expanding Emerson’s self-reliance and the Brook Farm decision to examine the greater spiritual underpinnings for turning down Ripley. Francis’s broader argument for the book


was to push against the tendency to view Transcendentalism through the recycled critical lens of “individualism,” but instead to see the movement in a light which established “the all-embracing principle of seriality, the doctrine of the law of series.” In essence, Francis laid out within the Transcendentalist movement, and more precisely, within their utopian endeavors, the belief that every individual unit, for example a leaf, is connected to the totality of existence by a series of intermediate stages of spiritual “hidden laws” binding the wide diversity of phenomena in life to one another. Francis used this theoretical backdrop to understand Emerson’s primary reasons to leave Brook Farm alone. Francis selectively cited Emerson’s journal to conclude the rejection was based upon Emerson’s belief that a misstep in the “principle of seriality” had been breached in Ripley’s designs for Brook Farm and Emerson could not reconcile his self-reliance theory (now spiritually contextualized) with Ripley’s lapse in social plans for the community. But Francis proceeded further and periodically offered typical secondary reasons for Emerson’s decision, but ultimately asserted that in the choice Emerson did not side with the reformist impulse of the day to en masse large bodies of persons for social reform. Instead, Francis underlined Emerson’s belief that “one [man] is enough,” implying the individual received reform from sporadic, progressive divine calls to reform. This spiritual context was appropriately applied and assisted in understanding Emerson’s writings on the subject, but once again following in suit of Guarneri’s criticism, Francis framed the word life around the concept of

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37 Ibid., 71.

38 Ibid., 71.

39 Ibid., 31.
historical development and the “creative cycles of nature.” These creative cycles were intermittent evolutionary impulses in the mind which helped occasionally in history to reveal the series of steps necessary to discover the pathway to social reform on an individual and collective level, and which according to Francis, reconciled the “fluid world of consciousness” in the mind to the “universe it inhabits.” In short, Francis left his commentary to address only Emerson’s idea on the historical development of reform and to illuminate the type of series which progressed the reform of one man to the reform of all. Francis is correct in the former and latter points, and in his assertion that Emerson believed the reformers often neglected the creativity of transcendental spirituality for their own devices. But as we will see, his discussion deals surprisingly little with Emerson’s actual decision against the pre-fourierist Brook Farm in 1840 and omits how the process of reform is initiated, conducted, and enacted to its end. These particular issues will be attended to in later sections, for they are pertinent to obliquely understanding the decision.

Closely following on the heels of Guarneri and Francis, Linck C. Johnson echoed both authors in his critical essay, “Emerson, Thoreau, and American Manhood.” It was Johnson’s contention that Emerson’s disavowal of Brook Farm was predicated on self-reliance theory and argued Brook Farm’s plans for achieving social reform via “external, mechanical means” ran in contradistinction to Emerson’s theology of “obedience to the very soul of the self, the individual’s only secure and reliable guide.” Moreover, Johnson argued Emerson was not convinced the “spiritual rewards of involvement outweighed the possible loss of personal

40 Ibid., 30.

41 Ibid., 31.

freedom, physical autonomy, and material comforts” Johnson insisted for a spiritualized analysis of the Brook Farm decision and captured this distinctive element of Emerson’s thinking. But in representing Emerson’s soul as a “guide” who pulls the man along toward total reform or by characterizing it as a celestial entity whispering divine truths, Johnson disregarded an important truth to Emerson’s theory. Simply, the soul does the reform of the individual, not the man merely listening to it. Johnson may have slightly missed the mark, but inched closer to the point and helped to propel the critical discussion.

In the 1990’s, Richardson, Guarneri, Francis, and Johnson had accomplished much in clarifying Emerson’s individualism, but scholarly writing in the opening years of the twenty-first century on Emerson and social reform reached its apex. And with the upsurge, literary historians, biographers, and critics achieved general concordance on Emerson’s decision, tacitly prioritizing the primary and secondary objections and shifting Emerson’s individualism toward its appropriate spiritual context. Lawrence Buell, one of the foremost scholars on Emerson, had appropriately brought attention to Emerson’s adherence to a spiritually-grounded understanding of self-reliance theory, both in his recent intellectual biography Emerson and anthology The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings. And Joel Myerson’s, Transcendentalism: A Reader, did a similar analysis and explained the decision as Emerson’s attempt to seek the reform of democratic citizens through self-culture, with spiritual undertones, instead of Ripley’s proposal to externally reorganize small coteries through imposed rules, procedures, and sanctions. Even Sterling F. Delano’s recent scholarly publication on the subject, Brook Farm:

43 Ibid., 45.


45 Myerson, Transcendentalism: A Reader, 307.
The Dark Side of Utopia, portrayed Emerson’s decision as a carefully planned, considerate refutation of Brook Farm’s lack of the individual’s spiritual reform, self-reliance, including a host of lesser reasons previously noticed by scholars.46 So it is in weighing these arguments, I set out to provide a new inlet and a fresh understanding of self-reliance theory which Emerson used as justification for denying Brook Farm. But this task must be done with tedious precision, targeting Emerson’s understanding of this spiritual concept within the early 1840s and how it was applied specifically to the utopian commune of Brook Farm. It must first be seen, however, how Emerson reached this philosophy and what ramifications resulted in its translation to declining George Ripley’s invitation.

Emerson’s Transcendence

Emerson had been no stranger to new, radical ideas. Raised as a boy by the Unitarian minister Reverend William Emerson, Ralph had been kindly, yet rigorously instructed in the liberal Christianity of Unitarianism that had engulfed the eastern half of Massachusetts, including Boston and the Harvard Divinity School, since the late eighteenth century.47 Unitarians had rejected the traditional doctrine of Trinitarianism—one God in three persons—for the oneness of God, a unity. Emerson followed suit in other Unitarian beliefs such as free will agency over the pre-ordained universe of the Calvinists, the infinite capacity of man’s rational and moral nature, and humanity’s propensity for goodness amidst a fallen world. Although his father’s death to stomach cancer at the early age of eight had the chance to derail young Emerson’s ministerial career and the long family tradition of producing ministers, his mother Ruth Haskins did her best to raise young Emerson, along with the other seven children (three

46 Delano, Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia, 37.

47 Miller, The Transcendentalists: An Anthology, 10-11.
died in childhood, two more before age thirty). The impecunious family struggled to establish a sense of financial and emotional stability throughout Emerson’s adolescence. However, it was Emerson’s well-educated and high-spirited aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who helped to support the family and worked closely with Emerson to cultivate lifelong passions for reading, composition, and theology, and later her influence would assist him in enrolling in the Boston Latin School and Harvard College. By the time Emerson had graduated from the Unitarian indoctrination of the Harvard classrooms in 1821, he had also dabbled in largely non-ecclesiastical, European imports in the dormitories with classmates. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, Emerson meditated deeply upon the prose and poetry of the English Romantics, Kantian philosophy, German Idealism, sacred texts from eastern Asia, and the Higher Criticism of German biblical scholars who challenged the scriptures’ historical validity and intentions. Concisely, Emerson’s pastoral education was not a purely Unitarian affair. And with the death of his beloved first wife Ellen Tucker to tuberculosis, he both questioned his faith and gradually moved far beyond the pages of the Old and New Testaments and the theology of his Harvard professors to embrace a new paradigm for understanding the world, Transcendentalism.

In 1836, Emerson published his new theory in the essay-manifesto *Nature*, which fleshed out his Transcendental beliefs on the relationship between man, the natural world, and divinity. Emerson saw not only humans, but nature, animal species, and the entire universe as a spiritually interconnected system beyond simple material matter. Nature no longer was a locality of primitive, dark, and inconsequential phenomenon, nor was it only a separate facet of existence created by God for the sole purpose of human resources. Instead, Emerson envisioned Nature as

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benevolent and a place of spiritual renewal containing a well-spring of divine truths to be
discovered, if man would only seek to commune with and study the natural creation. The
Unitarian God was replaced by a nonanthropomorphic spirit, the Oversoul—often referred to by
a host of pseudonyms—that resided not only in nature, but within the mind and body of each
man, woman, and child.\textsuperscript{50} This transcendent spirit was in essence the foundational source of all
existence and God, nature, and man were divine emanations radiating out from this
Transcendental force. As Myerson succinctly summarizes, “[A]ll [humans] partake of divinity,
that there is divinity within humankind and within nature, and that all divinity is perceivable by
each person who lives a life in a way that is in harmony with spirit.”\textsuperscript{51} For our purposes, the
emphasis should fall on the latter half of the statement: the divine perception of the individual
and the life which results from the synchronization of the spirit and the self.

While Emersonian Transcendentalism was a multi-layered and multipurpose theory, in
terms of individual and social reform, the perception of divinity within one’s self for right
thinking and right living, also known as self-reliance, as noted earlier, was at the core of
Emerson’s thoughts on Brook Farm in 1840. Emerson had a conception of this spiritual notion in
the later 1820s, throughout the 1830s, and in the years preceding its explicit delineation in the
1840s and he was intentional in the practice of it in his own life, including Ripley’s schemes for
utopia. However, the idea evolved in unique ways over time and even a cursory reading of
Emerson’s journals, letters, and literary writings attest to these slight, yet significant alterations.
But my focus only pertains to Emerson’s deployment of the concept in the early 1840s and in
direct relation to the rejection of Ripley’s Brook Farm. What is most advantageous to this study,
then, is Buell’s accessible outline of self-reliance on Emerson’s landmark and appositely entitled

\textsuperscript{50} Myerson, Transcendentalism: A Reader, xxviii.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., xxviii.
essay, “Self-Reliance,” published in his Essays: First Series in January 1841, only a few weeks after the rejection letter was sent to Ripley in December 1840. Emerson had been feverishly working on this collection of essays throughout the year and certainly the genesis for essays like “History,” “Over-soul,” and “Compensation,” had originated in his mind long before its publication. Yet by 1840-1841, his clearest elaboration on the spiritual dynamics for self-reliant theory and the divine spirit’s operations within mankind were to be found in the essays. Therefore, Buell’s explication of the theory and the essay sources themselves, offer a more accurate understanding of Emersonian self-reliance and assists in scrutinizing the Brook Farm decision and the slight missteps literary historians and critics have made. For if Emerson was settled in the conviction, as he wrote in his journal, that to “join this body [Brook Farm] would be to traverse all my long trumpeted theory,” a thorough understanding of this conception cannot be underestimated, nor can it be displaced in assessing Emerson’s reservations for the farm.52

First, Buell identifies that the initial stage in Emerson’s self-reliance presupposed that the vast majority of mankind, at least in Emerson’s time, subscribed to an “unhappy conformism,” in which men and women’s default condition readily accepted the thoughts, opinions, and actions of others and of the past as truth, without consideration for the individual’s own perspective.53 The socialization process from early childhood to adult maturation had overtime deteriorated the capacity to live a life predicated on one’s individual principles and therefore had molded man into a conformist of popular sway, a receptor of recycled thought, and more likely than not, a person accustomed to regurgitate common information, rather than produce new knowledge.

Second, Emerson realized a panacea must be supplied, a universal solution to the dilemma of this


53 Buell, Emerson, 64.
particular human condition, and Buell’s appraisal of the answer is astute, for the second step involves “trusting instinct more and reasoned judgment less.”54 Emerson believed in order for man to liberate himself from the shackles of this dependency, the individual had to submit in obedience to the overpowering reality of the divine spirit which preexisted and resided within the person. The Oversoul had been labeled with a seemingly infinite set of names, but by the time of the early 1840s, Emerson had become well-versed in the sacred literatures of Hinduism and subsequently appropriated the Hindu concept of an all-pervading soul, subtly refashioning its theological implications for self-reliance. A free-will act of submission to this spirit would permit man to communicate and live out a life in harmony with divinity. Once yielded to this entity, man no longer listened to societal notions, nor was the historical past and the mind’s indecisiveness to be trusted. Instead, by turning inwardly and placing trust in the Oversoul, man received an immediate spiritual relationship to the divine. Consequently, the third step became the “activation” of a spiritual revolution within the “newly liberated person” in which man resisted external opinions, shallow impulses of base desire, and historical realities and spoke from the only reliable spring of truth. This is precisely what self-reliance means, in that one places absolute reliance upon the higher “Self” for instruction and spiritual reformation for the purposes of a transcendent life.55 A fourth and final step then resulted for the self-reliant individual. The “transcendence” of spiritual elevation achieved in this process not only renews, but “energizes” the man or woman to act.56 For it is the Oversoul which authoritatively directs the individual to act in right relation to its purposes and through each serial act of submission or

54 Ibid., 64.
56 Buell, Emerson, 66.
production of self-reliance in the world, others become inspired to do likewise. And like a pebble in a pond, the spiritual ripples pulsate out, bringing all into conformity, not with the world, but the transcendent.

Emerson’s self-reliance was far more intricately fine-tuned than is presented above, but this short-hand version encapsulates the barebones semblance of Emerson’s theorization on man’s reform by 1840-1841. And for Emerson, theory met practice when Ripley’s offer was presented. Emerson was skeptical about the functional practicality of the community, but several significant discrepancies arose when the utopian designs of Ripley’s farm collided with the ideological weight of Emerson’s theological-philosophical convictions. In an era of secular and religious reform, utopian communities sought to provide a communal escape from the supposed failures of everyday life, and starting with the Shakers in the 1770s to the Oneida Community’s disbanding in the 1880s, approximately 100,000 individuals across the American continent established over 100 communities all promising a way to bring down the kingdom of God to earth in matters of gender equality, theological holiness, industrial reform, communal property and sharing of possessions, intellectual cultivation, non-resistance, family structures, and harmonious personal relations. America, and especially New England, desired a way to redeem society and for many Transcendentalists utopian communes offered the best opportunity to build an earthly paradise from the ground up.

George Ripley’s 170-acre farm on the outskirts of Boston was one promising avenue for the future of the Transcendentalist movement. Ripley had been attracted to the idea by a convention on universal reform in the summer of 1840 and another on Chardon Street in Boston.

soon after. He and his wife had also met with the Christian reformer Adin Ballou who led the utopian community of nearby Hopedale and also talked regularly with fellow Transcendentalists throughout the summer and fall on the subject. Ripley desired a practical implementation of Christian reform and Transcendental thought that would translate theoretical musings into pragmatic reality. He soon resigned from the Purchase Street Church pulpit, preaching his last sermon on March 28, 1841 and set out to put into practice the fiery ideas which had been simmering in his mind for many months. Brook Farm was to be a community principally based on Ripley’s idea of a “natural union between intellectual and manual labor.” For Ripley, a harmonious brotherhood and sisterhood was to unite humanity in common affection and the farm established a space for men and women to labor together both in the fields and in the home to produce crops, garden vegetables, and other domestic products. Furthermore, this manual labor was accompanied by leisurely activities of cultural enrichment and various intellectual pursuits, along with a rigorous education through the farm’s school. Ripley was also disgruntled with the exploitation of the capitalist system, neither was he pleased with what he saw as spiritual corruption in American cities. In consequence, Ripley sought to pay each community member (eventually peaking at approximately one hundred persons) equally ten cents per hour and allowed for an atmosphere of shared responsibility in the workload. It was this tripartite combination of rewarding labor, academic study, and leisure to engender social reform that made it appealing to Emerson in several respects. But ultimately Ripley’s hope to construct a city of God on earth through rigid schedule and schooling, moral instruction, prescribed regulations for

59 Ibid., 1-2.

labor, and a communal system secluded from daily life would prove to be problematic for how Emerson saw reform to be carried out to its furthest extent.61

Ripley would recruit fifteen original members by the inauguration of the farm in spring of 1841, but Emerson’s growing popularity and his money would be valuable assets for the farm’s start-up, sustainment, and legitimacy. Emerson had been made vaguely aware of Ripley’s plans by September and Ripley pushed for discussion of the farm in October. On November 9, 1840 a formal letter of request was sent to Emerson. He weighed the complexities of reservations he had toward the farm and finally mustered up the courage by the middle of December to send Ripley his refusal. A few drafts and a supposed finalized version of the letter exist, but scholars have been consistently puzzled as to which one was actually delivered to Ripley. Buell and Richardson have suggested the “draft” document was sent to Ripley as the primary letter, while Delano and many others classified the “final” letter as the true correspondence sent to Ripley since it is the only letter dated and signed by Emerson.62 Even so, whatever speculation and controversy that has surrounded the Emerson-Ripley letters, both convey nearly identical lists of objections and reflect Emerson’s points of departure from Brook Farm’s goals. Therefore, each letter will be incorporated, for they offer a window into the circulation of reasons for Emerson’s denial of Brook Farm.

Thinking like Emerson, The Decision: 1840

Emerson’s reply was not a blatant rejection, but was done “very slowly & I [Emerson] may almost say penitentially.”63 He had praised the community for its “noble and humane”

61 Ibid., 204.


63 Myerson, Transcendentalism: A Reader, 311.
designs and for the farm’s “manly & expanding heart & mind” to bring persons together for social reform, but what lingered for Emerson was a series of “personal” reasons, often relating to functional and practical reasons regarding his family, lifestyle, and financial means. But as the letter progressed, Emerson became more fixated on the various features in the incompatibility of his self-reliance theory and Brook Farm’s schematics for reform. Emerson noted, “It seems to me a circuitous & operose way of relieving myself of any irksome circumstances, to put on your community the task of my emancipation which I ought to take on myself” and added, “Yet I think that all I shall solidly do, I must do alone.”64 Emerson’s individualist streak was prominent throughout the letter, including his wish to do reform in his private home, his skepticism of strict community, and the desire for solitude. Other minor concerns pertained to the family’s health and Emerson’s apparent own literary comforts. Self-reliance though was at the heart of both the “draft” and “finalized” version and even in the former letter, Emerson attached a disjunctive section of a local framer’s opinion, Edmund Hosmer, on why the farm’s agricultural and financial intentions lacked both pragmatic sense and self-reliant labor.65 The primary objection and secondary reasons had been laid out for Ripley, but when it came to the reform process for Brook Farm, Emerson had a particular strand of his self-reliance theory which could not be reconciled to the farm. Emerson wrote:

I ought to say that I do not put much trust in any arrangements or combinations, only in the spirit which dictates them. Is that benevolent and divine, they will answer their end. Is there any alloy in that, it will certainly appear in the result.

I have the same answer to make to the proposition of the school. According to my ability and according to your’s, you and I do now keep school for all comers, and the energy of our thought and of our will measures our influence.66

64 Ibid., 311, 312.


66 Ibid., 206.
The “arrangements or combinations” Emerson had alluded to were Ripley’s systematic attempts to construct a community of harmonious labor relations, educational rigor, spiritual perfectionism, and the “highest mental freedom” and leisure necessary for the reform of each person and the collective society gathered at Brook Farm. Ripley aimed to superimpose a theoretical proto-socialism on the utopian venture in order to produce through methodical persistence “a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons” and whose personal relations would permit a “more simple and wholesome life” in the face of society’s increasingly capitalist “competitive institutions.”

Emerson may not have been opposed to such dreams, but the process by which this social reform was to be developed was both inconsistent with self-reliance and placed trust in an unreliable source, human beings. Emerson noted that these external systems were not to be trusted because their genesis originated in man’s mind that was spiritually separated from the Oversoul. The process of reform, consequently, started at the end with highly engineered plans rather than at the beginning with the transcendent mind. Ripley’s reform sought to establish utopia without the spiritual aid and authoritative nature of divinity. It was solely through each person’s trust in and harmonization with the “spirit which dictates” individual and societal arrangements that enduring social transformation was to take place. In fact, Emerson claimed that the spirit’s “benevolent and divine” process for enacting reform would produce the similar effects Ripley had imagined by the sovereignty of the Over-soul. Furthermore, Emerson employed the language of “alloy” to describe the figurative, metallic-like strength of the spirit’s process of reform, suggesting the spirit was resistant to failure. Emerson even applied this

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68 Ibid., 202.
argument to Brook Farm’s school and saw it as a deficient failure of the farm as well. In other words, the dictatorial spirit was involved in a universal, historical determinism, in which man’s renovation depended upon abiding in divinity’s successive and inevitable completion of man’s reform. Emerson was sure that if this was followed to its furthest extent, the reformation would “certainly appear in the result.” That is, the spirit not only speaks to man and instructs him on the direction he should take, but also “dictates” reform by its own resolve and will eventually achieve its spiritual ends, man only needing to trust in providential control. This was a crucial component Emerson noticed was missing in the schematics of Ripley’s plan and although the farm was technically a Transcendentalist experiment, Emerson felt much of the theological basis for the movement had been stripped away and dissociated in Ripley’s farm. The absence of this particular component in self-reliance theory would be one more objection for Emerson’s decline of Brook Farm and an integral piece to self-reliance theory.

In a letter to Margaret Fuller on December 1, 1840, two weeks before the final rejection letter, Emerson had discussed Ripley’s community in some detail and told Fuller his indecision was soon to be resolved. Other letters show Emerson’s wavering mind on joining Brook Farm during the fall of 1840, but in the letter to Fuller the authoritative providence of self-reliance theory was articulated through an interesting metaphor. Emerson wrote on Brook Farm:

The “Community” has that attraction for me that it may bring friends together conveniently & satisfactorily. But perhaps old towns & old houses may learn that art one of these days, under the kingdom of the New Spirit. I should have many many things to say to you if you lived within a mile. Farewell!  

The distinction Emerson communicated to Fuller on joining Brook Farm may not have been an exact duplicate of the argument laid out in the final or draft rejection letters, but the theological

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nature of the divine spirit remained the same under an analogous parallel. The social relations of Brook Farm promised to “conveniently & satisfactorily” bring together men and women for the completion of reform. However, Emerson felt individuals did not have to remove themselves to isolated communities, but could naturally complete reform in their current towns and households under the authority of the “New Spirit.” Emerson drew upon traditional Christian imagery of Christ’s second coming with the “kingdom” of God, only interchanging Christ’s omnipotent kingship over a perfected, harmonious world with his divine spirit reigning instead with supreme power. Emerson noted that only under the kingdom established by the Oversoul could the reform be completed, at least in terms of social relations. Moreover, Emerson distinguished in the letter that men and women should not only “learn” from the transcendent soul, but be submitted under its commanding dominion. Emerson was certainly attracted to the community in several respects, especially in many of the results Ripley planned, yet the authority of the Oversoul was undermined in Brook Farm.

Emerson’s Essay: First Series comprised the fullest articulation of his self-reliance theology on the transcendent, but as scholarship has long known, the essays, and certainly “Self-Reliance,” were subtle responses to George Ripley’s and other reformers emphasis on communal reform. The essays are littered with vague allusions to the reform efforts of the day and Emerson’s divinity seemed to belie society’s methods of reformation. Hence in perusing the essays we not only receive the clearest picture of self-reliance chronologically in terms of the Brook Farm rejection, but also the Oversoul’s authoritative nature. As Emerson expounded in “Self-Reliance” upon the virtues and necessity of dependence upon a higher “Self,” near the end of the essay Emerson summed up the failures of society’s conventional means and human-trusted methods for social reform when he observed, “It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must
work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.”⁷₀ Beyond the diverse reforms Emerson recorded, the point is evident: only the higher “Self” can work out and bring to a final conclusion the transformation in the various “offices and relations” of humans. Once again the reform of the divine spirit does not only speak to man with divine truth or presents a pathway to individual cultivation, but actually manifests the reformation itself and spiritually controls the outcomes of reform to their inevitable ends. In this sense, reform is not in possession by man, but relinquished to the Oversoul to enact the “revolution” within man and between men, whether it be for the communal sharing of property or in education. Emerson’s self-reliance was wide enough to include the soul’s divinely spoken words to man, its illuminating force to offer a direction to reform, and a zealous individualism, but when it came to the rejection of Brook Farm, the essays reveal also an authoritative power divinely interceding to bring about reform. Man only needed to submit and the process could begin.

But was Ripley’s failure to include the authority of transcendent divinity in the designs of Brook Farm as important of an objection for Emerson as I assert. Could the entry in Emerson’s rejection letter and alluded to in other writings be nothing more than the enigmatic ramblings of Emerson? Scholarship has steered away from this component within self-reliance theory and its relationship to Brook Farm, but what is important to Emerson’s decision is that the authority of the Oversoul to enact social reform became a reiterated objection in several sources on the topic of Brook Farm throughout the early 1840s. Emerson’s short article, “Fourierism and the Socialists,” published in 1842 for the Transcendentalist literary magazine, The Dial, and the 1844 essay and lecture, “New England Reformers,” demonstrated an Emerson who was fixated

⁷₀ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841), 147.
on the argument he supplied against the farm in 1840 and proved to be a persistent issue which plagued him in his thoughts on the social reform. By turning to these sources, Emerson’s argument maintained its core points, but explicated out the theological component in greater detail, allowing for a far more in-depth perspective on the specific issue of the spirit’s authority.

After 1840, Emerson visited the farm occasionally and discussed its positive attributes publicly and privately, while picking apart its weaknesses as well, even as Brook farm made slight successes in proving its legitimacy and worth as a successful utopian enterprise. However, around the time of the late 1830s and early 1840s a new systematized proto-socialism emerged in New England, created by the French philosopher named Charles Fourier. Fourierism sought many of the same reforms Brook Farm had set out to accomplish: human cooperation, labor production, redefinitions of gender equality, regulated communal living, and social regeneration in communities known as “phalanxes.” Although Ripley had not initially intended to launch a full-scale community based on the teachings of Fourier, Ripley’s knowledge of these principles undoubtedly colored his designs for Brook Farm. It would not be until 1844 that Brook Farm switched from an association to a Fourieristic commune, but already in the later 1830’s and early 1840s a devout disciple, Albert Brisbane, had begun to popularize Fourierism in his book, The Social Destiny of Man and his writings in the newspaper New York Tribune, including occasional public lectures. Emerson had attended one of these lectures in 1842 and wrote a short review of Brisbane’s remarks. Emerson’s response is both a complicated laudation of the system’s pursuits and a serious critique, albeit at times directly satirical, of Fourierism and other utopian socialist communities. The essay started with a general explanation of Fourier’s aims and how the ideology increased its popularity in both America and Europe, but as the piece progressed

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Emerson outlined the basic impressions he received from Brisbane’s talk, and inserted a thorough discussion on the tenets of the social philosophy. But amidst several other critiques, Emerson noted that “so many projects for reform with which the brain of the age teems,” including the Brook Farm experiment and “Fourier” as well, offered a plan for reform which “had skipped no fact but one, namely, Life.” The one misstep Emerson zeroed in on in his analysis of Fourierism and other reform communities was their ignorance of “Life.” Here Emerson interchanged a synonymous pseudonym for the Oversoul, as he often did, and reiterated in far greater detail the same essential argument from his 1840 rejection letter to Brook Farm. The argument obviously stuck with Emerson as a troublesome fault in the followers of Fourierism and the pre-fourierist community of Brook Farm.

Emerson felt this one point was above all “not exempt…from…criticism” and he made sure to expose its shortcomings, even though many argued it was “widely discriminated” from other reform efforts. Emerson wrote:

He [Fourier] treats man as a plastic thing, something that may be put up or down, ripened or retarded, moulded, polished, made into solid, or fluid, or gas, at the will of the leader; or, perhaps, as a vegetable, from which, though now a poor crab, a very good peach can by manure and exposure be in time produced, but skips the faculty of life, which spawns and scorns system and system-makers, which eludes all conditions, which makes or supplants a thousand phalanxes and New-Harmonies with each pulsation.

As noted earlier, Guarneri had understood “life” to be in reference to the general state of human experience, rather than the spiritual foundations of the divine spirit of Emersonian Transcendentalism. Additionally, Francis came closer to a more accurate understanding of this

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73 Ibid., 1207.

74 Ibid., 1207.

75 Ibid., 1207.
specific language when he noted the central theme of the passage was the cyclical revelation of nature’s direction toward reform. But in the context of the essay, “life” is an active force shaping man’s spiritual state, conducting social reform to its ends, and even jumpstarts the beginning processes of reform. Emerson was also known throughout the 1840s to exchange Oversoul for the word *life*, as he did in the essay “Self-Reliance,” when he stated, “you have life in yourself” or people’s spiritual sharing of “life.” And if this connection between the Oversoul and “life” appears dubious for some, Emerson’s deployment of “private light” and “private being” within the passage also strongly indicates the Oversoul is Emerson’s focus. Even in Emerson’s journal entry on Fourierism, a nearly word for word regurgitation of the essay, Emerson jotted down the hope that man would be “lovers & servants of the Soul.” But in the final published copy, Emerson urged man to be “lovers and servants of that which is just.” The discrepancy was not a negation of the Soul since Emerson left out the word, but rather emphasized Emerson’s consideration of the Oversoul’s role in social reform at the time, and within the context of the passage, the primary subject of the passage was Emerson’s transcendent, universal soul, “life.”

Therefore, “life” was ascribed the spiritual quality of Emerson’s theology, that is, “pulsation,” in which the Oversoul either “makes or supplants” social reform by its own authority and determinist directions. In fact, Emerson noted the Oversoul’s “pulsation” power was able to bring about “a thousand phalanxes and New-Harmonies,” an allusion to the nearby

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76 Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841), 143, 141.


78 Emerson, “Fourierism and the Socialists” (1842), 1208.

New Harmony utopian community and Fourier communities, by its own designs and purposes.\textsuperscript{80} Furthermore, the spirit “spawns” social reform, literally creating it through its own spiritual means and “scorns” the “system and system-makers,” like Fourier and Ripley, who attempted to externally impose regulations on persons to accomplish their own utopian ends.\textsuperscript{81} Emerson was once again concerned that his transcendental theory of self-reliance had been removed and trust in human-constructed plans had replaced the true process of reform, the allowance of the divine spirit to have its way in the origination, processes, and conclusions of social reform. It was a question of authority and Emerson remarked man could not be reformed by “rigid execution” by “the will of the leader,” nor “moulded” by other men’s opinions, nor “by force of preaching and votes on all men.”\textsuperscript{82} Reform, in short, could not be “imposed” through a “particular order and series” on human beings, but through the authoritative spirit of Transcendental theology.\textsuperscript{83}

In particular, the “true and good” pathway to social reform was what Emerson had so astutely articulated in his decline of Ripley’s Brook Farm in 1840.\textsuperscript{84} The authority of the Oversoul in the reformation of each individual person “must not only be begun by life, but must be conducted to its issues by life.” \textsuperscript{85} The transcendent mind would begin and conduct the reform goals to their corresponding ends by man’s trust in not only their divine wisdom they proffered, but also in the spirit’s capacity to dictate reform by its own spiritual power. The historical determinism in Emerson’s theology was an understanding in which the “truth” in a theory, such

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}, 1207.
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.}, 1207.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, 1207-1208.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid.}, 1207.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, 1208.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}, 1208.
as Fourier’s and Ripley’s, was “destined to be fact” in their results, but the process toward those ends would have to be carried out by the spirit’s authority, not man’s. But Emerson had one more critical component to integrate into his belief on the dictatorial nature of the Oversoul for social reform. Emerson continued on:

Could not the conceiver of this design have also believed that a similar model lay in every mind, and that the method of each associate might be trusted...let us be lovers and servants of that which is just; and straightway every man becomes a centre of a holy and beneficent republic, which he sees to include all men in its law, like that of Plato, and of Christ. Before such a man the whole world becomes Fourierized or Christized or humanized, and in the obedience to his most private being, he finds himself, according to his presentiment, though against all sensuous probability, acting in strict concert with all others who followed their private light.87

As the spirit worked out its providence in humanity’s social reform, it also began in every individual mind via a free-will act of submission and through trusting this divine knowledge man would “become a centre of a holy and beneficent republic.”88 Once spiritually transformed, the newly reformed individual would become an enlightened person in which all who encountered him or her would soon become reformed and the process would continue from person to person until the world acted in concordance with the Oversoul’s direction. By following divinity and acting in concert through its commands, reform would be accomplished first through individual reformation and then to the collective whole. Divinity did not limit itself to spoken truth to man, but spiritually regenerated man and also maintained spiritual sovereignty over social reform in orchestrating the entirety of the process. Whether or not man would commit to such Transcendence was always problematic, but this initial spiritual submission would be a necessary and sufficient condition to activate the divine spirit to carry out reform. Authority of the spirit

86 Ibid., 1208.
87 Ibid., 1208.
88 Ibid., 1208.
rested at the heart of Emerson’s rejection for Brook Farm in 1840 and it was reargued more than a year later by him against the utopian schemes of Fourier and proto-socialist communities like Brook Farm. Self-reliance was certainly more than a divine soothsayer or passive guide and Emerson asked nothing less than complete obedience to the dynamic soul.

Emerson did not stop his criticism of utopian communities on this point, specifically Brook Farm, when he approached the lectern at Amory Hall on Sunday, March 3, 1844. The lecture, later an essay in Emerson’s Essay: Second Series, discussed the hopeful facets to the age of reform which swept New England in the 1830s and 1840s, along with its disappointments. Reformers of varied endeavors met to hear Emerson, and so he not only addressed the issue of social reform, but spoke directly to reformers of all stripes he criticized.89 On the matter of communal projects like Brook Farm, Emerson saw the beneficial workings of divinity within utopian projects and nearly three years after the farm was founded he had surely observed the considerable developments and growth it had sustained. However, Emerson reverted back to the same disagreements he had communicated to Ripley in the rejection letter almost four years prior. Principally, in his section on the utopian “projects,” Emerson could not imagine communal reform by way of “covenants” or rigid agreements on how to think, behave, and live, but instead insisted on “a reverse of the methods” the reformers had attempted.90 Emerson pushed further and argued an “inward” “union” between man and the immortal “secret-soul” was required to carry out reform by the Oversoul in each individual and then to the spiritual unification of each person to one another working in harmony with the spirit.91 Man’s activity was only to be


91 Ibid., 410.
conducted by the authoritative “ethereal power” of divinity to its conclusions.\textsuperscript{92} Here again Emerson harkened back to one of the main objections he found irreconcilable to his self-reliance theology. Emerson’s Transcendentalism necessitated a reform process that originated with the Oversoul and was subordinated to its dictates both in the celestial truth it supplied man in the mind and in the providence it exercised over social reform. Emerson had even noted in the essay, that the social reformers were emblematic representations of the spirit’s “incessant advances” which had made and continued to make progressive inroads toward the “salvation of the world.”\textsuperscript{93} It was these successes by Emerson’s Oversoul that had certainly “guided,” “taught,” and sought obedience from each individual.\textsuperscript{94} But what Emerson also acknowledged was that an omnipotent power was unleashed into the world when humans surrendered to and trusted in the divine providence of the transcendent Soul to do the work of social reform.

\textbf{Conclusion}

A theological schism had separated Emerson from Ripley on several technicalities and ultimately split the Transcendentalist movement not in two, but in an infinite set of directions where consensus on their theological and literary outlook for the future now seemed to be in a hopelessly disjunctive state. Emerson persistently recycled the same theological quarrels he had in the rejection of Brook Farm throughout the early 1840s and beyond the secondary concerns of family health, a burgeoning literary career, and the financial practicality of moving to Brook Farm, the primary concern rested on a set of principles, subsumed under the interconnected theology of self-reliance and transcendent spirituality. Self-reliance theory contained an

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}, 409.

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, 403, 402.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Ibid.}, 418.
interrelated group of components Emerson identified as inconsistent and impracticable to executing the Transcendentalism Emerson yearned to see in the world and in himself. Emerson was an individualist who desired to be away from a communal set of regulations, he disagreed with Brook Farm’s lack of self-reliant action, the reform was beyond his comfort level, and the theological implications of Emerson’s thinking had been severed from Ripley’s vision for utopian reform.

But as this paper has demonstrated, Emerson’s decision to decline the social reform of Brook Farm in the December of 1840 had a final component of self-reliance theology long overlooked by historians and literary critics. Assessments of the decision had claimed a variety of objections precluded Emerson from participation at the farm, but self-reliance emerged at the forefront. The Oversoul’s characterization had been captured in some respects and scholars had evaluated the full list of objections offered by Emerson to Ripley, except for one crucial element, the authoritative nature of the divine spirit to providentially coordinate social reform. Emerson still retained the intuitive principles and spiritual instruction of self-reliance that typified Emersonian Transcendentalism. But even the most experienced reader of Emerson’s works would have to parcel out the Oversoul’s divine attribute of potency in creating and sustaining the social relations, arrangements, and objectives of reform. According to Emerson, Ripley had reversed the reform processes by starting on the macrocosmic scale, imposing rigid, mechanized procedures for collective reform instead of with the spiritual regeneration of each man, naturally allowing the spirit to spread its influence from person to person and to dictate how the reform would be conducted. Furthermore, Emerson mistrusted reliance upon a source outside of the transcendent and Ripley’s human-constructed associationism and eventual fourieristic farm failed to honor this theology. By returning to the Oversoul’s sovereignty in the decline of Brook
Farm both in the actual rejection letter of 1840 and in successive years, Emerson demonstrated self-reliance was more than just a disembodied, sagacious inner voice or a spiritual entity of enlightenment to guide man toward social reform. It certainly included the aforementioned qualities, but Emerson extended his theology to embrace a historical determinism in which the “spirit which dictates” the reform of humanity would accomplish the spiritual restoration of society from its ailments. Brook Farm lasted for most of the 1840s, but its failure in 1847 had perhaps been reconfirmation that Ripley’s decision to exclude self-reliance theology from the community was an egregious mistake. I have sought to clarify self-reliance theory within its early 1840s context and in its relationship to the utopic commune of Brook Farm. And in doing so, the emphasis was to articulate a reason, the incompatibility of Emerson’s authoritative spirit, neglected in prior evaluations of the decision. More analysis on Emerson’s complex relationship to Brook Farm is ripe for further studies, yet in relation to the decision, Emerson required “obedience” to spirit, for only then could the transcendental force “arise before…man and lead him by the hand out of all the wards of prison.”95 Humanity was incarcerated and isolated from divinity and the Oversoul would not only guide, instruct, and spiritually liberate man to individual reform, but would inevitably dictate the outcomes of social reform. Emerson simply could not trust an authority foreign to his theological paradigm and figured sovereignty as one of the critical elements necessary for Emerson’s model of reform. In the Brook Farm decision of 1840, Emerson was left without this premise, amongst others, and delivered Ripley his answer.

95 Ibid., 418.
Works Consulted

**Primary Sources**


Secondary Sources


