

## Emerson and the Disapproval of Brook Farm and the Utopian Ideas on Social Reform

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إيمرسون ورفض مزرعة بروك والأفكار الطوباوية حول الإصلاح  
الاجتماعي

الملخص:

يستكشف هذا المقال كيف ارتقى رالف والدو إيمرسون كشخصية  
أدبية وفلسفية مميزة في القرن التاسع عشر من خلال الإصرار على مبادئه  
الأساسية المتمثلة في الفردية والاعتماد على الذات. تميزت المبادئ  
التأسيسية لفلسفة إيمرسون عن معظم الفلاسفة المتعصبين والباحثين عن  
الإصلاح. كان الحدث الرئيسي الذي ميز انفصاله عن مؤيدي الجمعية  
والجماعة هو رفضه الانضمام إلى جمعية بروك فارم.

الحجج التي طرحها حول سبب عدم قدرته على أن يكون عضواً  
في مثل هذا المجتمع حددت مثله المتسامية بشكل وثيق وصنفته على أنه  
مفكر بارز في واحدة من أكثر الأوقات اضطراباً في مرحلة ما قبل الحرب  
الأهلية الأمريكية. لذلك ، فإن وضع إيمرسون في سياق خاص يساعد

في تفسير طبيعة مشاركاته اللاحقة في القضايا القومية الأمريكية مثل  
حقوق المرأة ومناهضة العبودية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإصلاح الاجتماعي ؛ أمريكا ما قبل الحرب؛

إيمرسون ؛ الفردية ؛ الفلسفة التجاوزية

### Emerson and the Disapproval of Brook Farm and the Utopian Ideas on Social Reform

#### Abstract:

This article explores how Ralph Waldo Emerson rose as a distinguished literary figure and philosopher of the nineteenth century through insisting on his key principles of Individualism and Self-reliance. The foundational principles of Emerson's philosophy set him apart from most of the Transcendentalists and reform seekers.

The key event that marked his split from the supporters of association and collectiveness was his refusal to join the utopian community of Brook Farm. The arguments he put forth of why he could not be a member of such a society defined his Transcendental ideals pertinently and classified him as a notable thinker of one of the most turbulent times of the antebellum North. Therefore, the understanding of his attitude towards Brook Farm puts Emerson in a special context and helps explain the nature of his later involvements in American national issues such as women's rights and antislavery.

**Keywords:** social reform ; antebellum America ; Emerson ; individualism ; transcendental philosophy.

### Introduction

Brook Farm as a utopian association founded and supported by the Transcendentalists invokes an intriguing controversy. Most probably, the Transcendentalists were extreme advocates of individualism, and promoters of non-conformity. However, the community they established was a thoroughly structured socialist society wherein every member is expected to give up part of his personal freedom to the common good, something that goes against the very essence of Transcendentalism.

In 1841, George Ripley and Sophia Ripley, together with Charles Dana founded the utopian social community of Brook Farm on a space of more than 170 acres, located in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, in order “to combine the thinker and the worker...to guarantee the highest mental freedom...to do away the necessity of mental 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” (qtd. in Tiffany 2010: 308). Since several of Emerson’s “closest intellectual allies” believed “that society needed to be transformed,” they “created Brook Farm, a joint-stock utopian farming community. The organizers, George and Sophia Ripley approached the Emersons about joining.” As a reaction to that in his journals, “Emerson chastises himself for his lack of candor toward his friends and then justifies his refusal to participate by the belief that one (self-reliant) individual is stronger than an entire city” (Sacks 2008: p xxiv).

The Transcendental Club was a space to discuss the ways in which church and society should be reformed. The urge for reform from inside the group led to the trial of a utopian society at Brook Farm, with Ripley as its founder after his resignation from the Unitarian ministry. “That year, Emerson as well was enthusiastic about the idea of an

alternative learning community, a university or gathering place for lecturers and like-minded individuals, a sort of permanent year-round Transcendental Club,” however, George and Sophia Ripley’s project of a utopian community was somehow “a different format than Emerson’s envisioned university” (Tiffany 2010: 13). Ripley was certainly hopeful that Emerson would join him and contribute greatly to the community. Emerson though declined both taking part and financially supporting the project, insisting strongly on his faith in individual reform over being bound to a communal organization.

### **Declining Ripley’s Invitation**

Emerson was greatly impressed by the reformatory movements of his time that were characterized by “many projects for the reformation of the world.” Alongside the agitation sparked by the Transcendentalists, there was a wide uproar of ideas seeking to establish better social and educational norms for humanity.

The founders and leaders of Brook Farm were among his intimate friends, but he did not sympathize fully with its purposes. Brook Farm embraced the doctrine of Fourier in 1844, and a year later, “the teachings of Swedenborg were eagerly studied by nearly all its members. With the last phase of this movement, Emerson sympathized largely, but not so much with the first” (Cooke 1882: 91-94).

Almost everyone of Emerson’s close friends was linked to these reforms, such as Thoreau who was imprisoned for disapproving the tax scheme and afterwards lived by the side of Walden Pond. Parker started to shake the firm theological standards. Margaret Fuller started her brilliant conversations in Boston and Alcott established Fruit-lands. Emerson sympathized with all these trends, as long as they conveyed principles out of sincere intentions.

What sounds absurd about Brook Farm is that many dedicated libertarians supported it while it contradicted the essence of individualism. The concern issued forth by this combination of inconsistent principles caused a split amongst the Transcendentalists and made an ultimate distinction between the pair of Emerson and Thoreau and the rest of the Transcendentalists.

Partly through Emerson's ideological patterning of the shared but inchoate feelings of a literary generation, Transcendentalism evolved in the later 1830s from a spiritual ferment among young, well-educated New England Unitarians into a locus for potentially *counterhegemonic* activity (Porte & Morris 1999: 61).

Brook Farm was meant to unite the thinker and the worker, to ensure the greatest intellectual freedom, and to make a society of freethinking, educated individuals, whose dealings with each other would allow for a more natural and simpler living than could be experienced amid the anxiety of bloodthirsty societies. Yet, it lasted only six and a half years. During that time, it was part of multiple reform efforts of mid-nineteenth century including abolitionism and women's rights.

This utopian community attained fame due to the membership composed mainly of leading Transcendentalist figures. However, the would-be Transcendentalist leader, Emerson, declined an invitation to join Brook Farm. This action marked his real split from the rest of the Transcendentalists and reform seekers. His refusal came in form of a letter, sent in December 1840, as a direct response to Ripley's invitation, addressing him personally. His answer sounded very straightforward and somehow stated the

essentials of why he declined joining the new established society or any other with more or less the same principles: "I have decided not to join...The ground of my decision is almost purely personal to myself. I have some remains of skepticism in regard to the general practicability of the plan, but these have not much weighed with me" (Sacks 2008: 97).

Other Transcendentalists shifted towards what would be known today as communism. After walking out of his Unitarian pulpit, Ripley started the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, and "it has often been said by those best qualified to know...that the veracious history of Brook Farm will never be written. Some of the most important records of its institutional life are hopelessly lost," as stated in the preface of Lindsay Swift BROOK FARM, Its Members Scholars and Visitors (qtd. in Swift 1900: preface). Emerson admired the people who lived at Brook Farm and he completely "sympathized with their anxious desire to make life better; but he saw the folly of their experiment, its weaknesses, and he quickly discovered the evils which it fostered in place of those it attempted to escape" (Cooke 1882: 99).

The Transcendentalists demanded the moral reform of the individual whereas the major Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau, had a strong faith in individualism. Some of the less renowned Transcendentalists gathered in groups that ranged between eight to over a hundred members and started communities in which they endeavored to live considerately. It is important to note that the idea of being part of such communities never appealed to the most renowned Transcendentalists. Thoreau had an indifferent position towards Brook Farm, and Emerson gave a positive feedback but he turned down the offer of becoming a member. Until the 1840s, Emerson was not the actual leader of the Transcendentalists. Instead, it was Ripley and Brownson.

When the Civil War came to an end, many of the Transcendentalists had died mainly Parker, Thoreau, and Fuller. Others shifted their attention to new grounds. Following the breakdown of Brook Farm towards the end of the 1840's, Ripley moved to New York City, taking the place of Fuller as book reviewer at Greeley's Tribune. Brownson turned into a defender of Roman Catholicism. That allowed for Emerson to become the most renowned figure of Transcendentalism.

Ripley and Brownson started losing ground to Emerson gradually as he rose as a major Transcendentalist spokesperson after his infamous "Divinity School Address" (1838), when he upset the Harvard theological faculty by arguing that their preaching was boring, and the publication of his first book of essays three years afterwards further endorsed his standpoint and commitment. He hereby offered the Transcendentalists an alternative way to act on their principles, one that puts the individual at the core of all reform efforts rather than engaging in a collective social reform.

Emerson's decision to refuse Ripley's call to join the proto-socialist Brook Farm in December of 1840 has been an ultimate episode to figure out both Emerson's multifaceted relationship to collectiveness and his arguments for not being part of a utopian community.

Emerson's ideas about the individual and society had roots in past ideas predating the Brook Farm question, the contemporaneity of the two episodes, combined with certain shared questions, suggests that neither facet of his reflections during this period can be fully appreciated

without reference to the other (Worley  
2001: 8).

Therefore, anyone trying to qualify Emerson as a supporter of community has apparently a great impediment to overcome which is “his emphatic refusal of George Ripley’s invitation to join the Brook Farm experiment in communal living” (4). Emerson himself, the center of the Transcendentalist movement, “remained aloof from practical reforms, preferring for reasons of temperament and talent the insulated role of podium speaker” (Porte & Morris, 1999: 61).

Nevertheless, Emerson is of the same mind regarding “the affirmative principles” of the “democratical” groups, which endeavor to dismiss the unessential through building up a trust in the private, autonomous powers of the individual. Yet, the problem is that the reformers themselves are not remodeled and there is not only one thing that should be opposed because the wave of evil, as Emerson maintains, washes all our institutions alike. Reform seekers place themselves in a position that is superior to institutions though they are part of society and those institutions are formed by individuals. Emerson therefore considers it a waste of time to just condemn without acting effectively.

### **The Disapproval of Utopian Dogma**

Apart from preconception and bias, Emerson categorizes a new problem with reform in its dependence on “association,” which supposes that individuals are unable to make effective changes unless a big number of them work together under the name of reform. He points out the three communities already established in Massachusetts and questions why those who have the patience to undertake such things cannot find satisfaction away from the communities where compromise is not a requirement. Such requirements and rules are degrading to the individual. He hypothesizes that those who are attracted to such communities are individuals

who lack faith, and hope to become strong by joining other individual losers; “the union is only perfect,” when every member is “isolated.” As an example, Emerson saw the real union as the one between “friends who live in different streets or towns.” This view goes against the principles of the Brook Farm members and even discredits their efforts since “each man,” who endeavors to be part of a larger group, “is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union the smaller and the more pitiful he is.” Emerson argues that such character should be left alone, “to recognize in every hour and place the street soul; he will go up and down doing the works of a true member,” and surprisingly, “the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke.” And, the bottom line, according to him, is that “the union must be ideal in actual individualism” (Emerson 1908: 205).

Emerson thinks that “every man is a lover of truth.” This is a more positive view of humanity compared to that of the reformers, who suppose that individuals must be driven into doing the right things. We should have faith in the universe: “the good globe is faithful, and carries us securely through the celestial spaces... we need not interfere to help it on.” This is a very Transcendentalist view to how real reform should be and that, ultimately, “the future will be worthy of the past” (Emerson 2009: 281).

In “Politics,” an essay published as part of his Essays: Second Series in 1844, Emerson speaks about a more impartial account, seeming doubtful about, for instance, the fanatic communitarian options being expressed in his time, like the denunciation of private property by Thoreau and the utopian societies of Brook Farm and Fruitland. He notices that since it is difficult to clear up the impartiality of this matter, he is moderately having a tendency to find its solution in our spontaneous defenses. Explicitly, nature will resolve the issue

of the protection of possessions and such communities can never tell what is ideal for all people.

“New England Reformers” (1844), as an address, is not particularly concerned with the issue of slavery though it was delivered before an audience of active reformers. Instead, Emerson tackles utopianism and education reform. His disapproval of “association” is a straightforward indication about the neighboring utopian communities at Brook Farm and Fruitland. The latter was also an “attempt at communal living, at nearby Harvard, Massachusetts, and was begun by “Bronson Alcott, his family, Charles Lane, and a few others” (Myerson 1997: 291). His verdict, that such communities are a magnet for those in despair and those who did not succeed in other projects, economic or domestic, is particularly a strong language used against these associates and other community members. He found it hard to refuse the invitation of Ripley to join Brook Farm. Ultimately, his confidential response to Ripley was in harmony with his public message in all of his addresses and literary works on reform: “I think that all I shall solidly do, I must do alone” (Tilton 1939: 437).

Emerson’s statement in “New England Reformers” that union is workable only when its members do their best in private was applicable to any social relation and was remarkably identical to that of literary and social critic, Margaret Fuller, on marriage, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, first published in book form in 1845. Both Emerson and Fuller had profound discussions about marriage, friendship, and unions during this time period.

Emerson paid visits to Brook Farm, but apparently with no other frame of mind than when he went to a different place. This neutral attitude coupled with his disrelish for membership earned him respect.

His attention was shifted towards social and political issues due to the climate of “social experiment and political

reform in the 1840s,” which made many people of his circle consider political commitment as a foundational component of religion. By nature, Emerson was not oriented toward political involvement, but he happened to witness that in some areas, slavery in particular, “it was the right and necessary step for this moment in history.” He observed with consideration and concern fellow Transcendentalists such as Ripley and Alcott start a utopian society at Brook Farm and Fruit-lands, “and although he remained skeptical about the viability of such experiments, he shared the alienation from conventional social patterns and practices,” and went along with the hope for a social scheme “that shared goods and power more justly, and was less competitive and materialistic” (Myerson 2000: 168).

Emerson never controlled groups by force of personality. His most excellent thoughts were elaborated in private. Yet, the time during which he lived was one of remarkable social agitation; reformers were actively engaged to make changes through the foundation of cults out of unconventional attitudes. It was the period of utopian and philosophical societies, Brook Farm and Fruit-lands. As the leading figure of the transcendental circle, he was sought after for advice by “everyone who had a new system, by the genuine prophets as well as the cranks and crackpots.” All these categories of people were warmly received in his house. However, Emerson, having no inclination towards “community enterprises,” persistently “disassociated himself from them.” To him, they seemed like “one-sided affirmations” (Atkinson 1950: xvii).

### The Transcendental Approach to Reform

In the different essays he wrote, Emerson consistently tackled the idea of reform and that the commitment to this cause did not necessitate any membership. The so-called

reformers are not the only seekers of change for the better because “we all have a certain intellection or presentiment of reform existing in the mind, which does not yet descend into the character, and those who throw themselves blindly on this lose themselves.” He even stated that the efforts and energy of these reformers would be invested in vain and “whatever they attempt in that direction, fails, and reacts suicidally on the actor himself.” This emphasis on “antiformalist politics” stimulates a curiosity that urges the reader to find out what “the grounds for political commitment” are. Unexpectedly, Emerson’s direct statement of “the sources of social change come not in his lectures and essays” (Worley 2001: 21-22) written purposely for the subject of reform.

Emerson’s decision to turn down Ripley’s request of becoming a member of the short-lived utopian experiment in Brook Farm (1841-1847) was a defining moment to value his intricate attitude towards associationism and the wisdom behind staying away from utopian dogma. Indeed, a committed membership to Brook Farm would conflict with Emerson’s most preached notions, “individualism” and “self-reliance,” where self-reformation was the basis of any hoped reform. In his letter to Ripley, Emerson insists that “that which determines me is the conviction that the Community is not good for me” (Sacks 2008: 97). His “instinct and commitment to self-reliance repelled him from the communal scheme” and he further criticized the members of the utopian community as being way different than the actual farmer, and stated that, in reality, such communities “betrayed the separation between idea and execution.” Emerson’s judgment on the Brook Farmers was that “they were not true farmers,” and their motivation was political and social before being eager to a “personal connection with nature” (Tiffany 2010: 105-106). In fact, “his demand was, that men should trust in themselves, sit alone, and read the laws of their own natures,”

and the criticism of institutions “had made it plain that society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him”(Cooke 1882: 95-96).

In “Man the Reformer” (1842), Emerson particularly addressed the member of the utopian reform experiment at Brook Farm which later in 1844 was restructured as a Fourierist phalanx. In the address, he showed a rather positive attitude towards the idea of cooperative agriculture as a form countering property ownership and inheritance “and abstaining from whatever is dishonest and clean, to take each of us bravely his part, with his own hands, in the manual labor of the world,” and even referred to the community as was a way of nobler living by supposing that “if the accumulated wealth of past generations is tainted, no matter how much of it is offered to us, we must begin to consider if it were not the nobler part to renounce it, and to put ourselves into primary relations with the soil and nature” (qtd. in Turner 2012: 37). Though Emerson did not basically disagree with Charles Fourier who thought that each would do work according to his or her talent or inclination,” he could not support the idea of founding groups on these principles, “fearing that eventually the ideas would rule rather than individuals” (Tiffany 2010: 162).

Emerson “protested against the phalansteries, in favor of the separate house, and declared it was individualism men needed, rather than having all things in common.” Yet, it was not his faith in individualism and in the advantageous undertaking of great men that he disproved the Brook Farm method of revolutionizing the world. Rather, it was a light he thought men were in lack of, “an inward seeing of the truth, a wholeness of the spiritual life. Reform must commence, not with the communities, but with the individual soul, in its harmony with itself and God” (Cooke 1882: 94-95). Though he noticed a lot of positive aspects in each of these reform

attempts, he completely entered into the realm of dismissing old institutions that restrict and hamper new innovations.

His plea was that men should have faith in themselves as individuals, stand apart, and examine the very nature of every law. Actual reform happens when each individual fulfills his duty with the utmost candor, makes sure the laws of the world remain inviolate, and harmony and peace are settled. When a personal sense of truth is developed at the level of individuals and conformity is no longer the norm we act upon, only then the ground is laid for true reform. Clearly, such criticism is directed at the utopian communities of communal living that did not embrace the idea that the right actions should be performed out of a personal motive instead of surrendering to the norms set forth by society. "If each individual is faithful to his own duties, keeps inviolate all the laws of the world, all is well...It must be a personal motive, a personal sense of truth, which leads us to do right, and not an act of conformity." He would not deal with people as representatives of groups with a common drive, but would wish an individual able of renouncing everything and react to the call of personal sense of duty. "To redeem the life of men, to establish character, to bring men into genuine relation with nature, themselves, and God, was his aim" (Cooke 1882: 94-95). Thus, the essence of reform is to understand what nature necessitates, and abide by her laws.

### Conclusion

From the analysis of Emerson's key concepts such as individualism, self-reliance, and nonconformity and a stance at his attitude towards associanism, it became clear that he would never enthusiastically be a member of any group that did not go along with his principles. Indeed, his sheer commitment to his own values and philosophy set him apart from the rest of the Transcendentalists. The foundation of Brook Farm happened to be the event that marked Emerson's

distinction from a sort of reform seekers who relied more on collective effort and thereby dismissing the value of independent thought and individual power that Emerson had long cherished and preached.

Emerson powerfully opposed the scheme that would bring everything to the lowest standards, as in the example of communism. The cherished equality would be invalidated as soon as it is put in place. But, this standpoint does not owe to his principles of individualism, or his faith in the advantageous role of great men, that he did not support the Brook Farm method of restructuring the world. It was an enlightenment that had to originate in the soul of every individual. Reform thus had to start not with a collective effort, but at the level of individuals whose souls should be in unity with themselves and the Universal Spirit. Though he did not deny the positive side of all reform efforts, showed some form of support, fully shared the spirit of objecting to classical abuses and institutions that restrict and hamper, to him, they were mistaken.

Therefore, declining Ripley's invitation was a Transcendental response which bore the commitment to the ideas that Emerson started to promote prior to the foundation of Brook Farm. In fact, he went on to defend the same principles even when the Civil War was on the verge of breaking out. His opinions on issues such as slavery and women's rights also went in line with his principles reaching a point where his contributions to such causes, social or political, could specifically be defined as Transcendental.

Overall, Emerson's reaction to reform groups, whether in literary form or with a physical action, all point to the fact that his approach to social change and political progress are only subject to his principles of "self-reliance" and "individualism." Therefore, his attitudes towards communities such as Brook Farm pertinently defined his philosophy of

reform within the context of antebellum and postwar America and set his literary endeavor to culturally free his nation from the influences of the Old World within a well-defined framework.

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