

Westward unto Eden: Thoreau, Emerson, and America's National Epic

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An Introduction

The Transcendentalists, a group of philosophers based in Concord, Massachusetts and including luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, are well known for their works extolling the importance of self-awareness and the divinity of the natural world. They are somewhat less well known for their strong participation in the pastoral tradition, the literary elements of which reach back to Virgil; neither are they known for portraying their country in the context of Virgilian pastoralism, a tradition of its own which reaches back to early European settlers and colonial figures such as Cotton Mather. Most are seen as having opposed America's westward expansion in the mid-nineteenth century, even with a series of specific and moral conditions. But indeed, the Transcendentalists—particularly Emerson and Thoreau—were also pastoral writers, engaged with Virgil, and ultimately supported expansion.

In their seminal works, Emerson and Thoreau drew upon Virgilian pastoralism to cast America in an idyllic agrarian light, fashioning it as the New World's Eden. Moreover, through their pastoralism, Emerson and Thoreau saw the American wilderness as a source of purification for the American people. And as such, they supported the country's westward expansion—though only offered their support to the cause if those who settled the West adhered to a higher moral standard, one more befitting the pure wilderness, and one that was not yet found in American society. The process by which Americans would settle the west, in Emerson and Thoreau's estimation, would be the stuff of epic—specifically, stuff of a national epic that Americans had been clamoring for since settlement, a theme which I provide historical background for later in the introduction. The untarnished and vast West merited its own epic, both in poetic form and

in legend. They modeled their ideal settlers after the New England farmer: the New World's best example of pastoralism's virtue in action, and a clear example of their engagement with the Virgilian tradition.

Beyond Emerson and Thoreau, other Transcendentalists engaged with the idea of American pastoralism and America-as-Eden: two main examples are the Transcendentalists and utopians George Ripley and Bronson Alcott. Their utopian experiments, Brook Farm and Fruitlands respectively, represent the final extension of Transcendentalism's vision for America as a new Eden: through living an agrarian lifestyle, Ripley and Alcott believed they could reach a higher state of self-awareness and purity that Thoreau and Emerson felt they could find in the West. Both based in Massachusetts, Brook Farm and Fruitlands were physical manifestations of the belief Emerson and Thoreau shared—that New England farmers possessed the ideal moral character to unlock the potential of the wilderness. They were the final extension of Emerson and Thoreau's beliefs, and provide a counterpoint to the arguments that tie pastoralism to expansionism. This thesis argues that the Transcendentalists were ardent but conditional supporters of American expansionism, and that they gave their support in the older intellectual context of the American pastoral tradition. I will explore how Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, and Alcott viewed the natural world, engaged with pastoral traditions, and envisioned how American expansion would succeed in unlocking the country's capacity for epic.

Traditional Pastoralism

From the first moments of European discovery through to the end of the mid-nineteenth century, America was frequently cast as a pastoral paradise and as a land of unprecedented potential. Early European settlers envisioned the continent as a staging ground for a New World epic, and the agrarian way of life that was standard from first settlement through to the mid nineteenth century encouraged the idea of America as an idyllic landscape. Fueling these projections of America-as-fertile-wilderness were the works of Virgil; his pastoral *Eclogues* and *Georgics* were widely beloved not only as poems of the earth that were immediately relevant to the New World, but also as poems that praised the kind of agrarian work ethic that was so ingrained in early American life.¹ The themes of Virgil's pastoral poems—living with and off of the land, celebrating the natural world, and the virtues of work—were deeply resonant with early core ideas of American life, and as such became widely popular with the educated American public as well as with American intellectuals from the seventeenth century onward.

Virgil's *Aeneid* also found a home amongst works that inspired visions of an American epic—though less popular with the educated American public as a whole, the *Aeneid* was a favorite and oft-invoked work of, among other luminaries, Cotton Mather, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. Where the *Georgics* and *Eclogues* were seen as romanticized representations of the potential of everyday life in America, the *Aeneid* (for those intellectuals who studied it) contained themes that were poignant on a national level. Virgil's epic tells the story of a divinely guided and transplanted people who were tasked with founding a new empire in a wild land. And while it is surprising, as Meyer

¹ Meyer Reinhold, "Virgil in the American Experience," in *Vergil at 2000: Commemorative Essays on the Poet and his Influence*, ed. John D. Bernard (New York: AMS, 1986), 191.

Reinhold notes, that for all of its thematic relevance the *Aeneid* did not leave more of an impact on popular American thought and literature,² it deeply impacted a select group of intellectuals and fostered an intellectual tradition of viewing America as the stage for a new epic—that is, the creation of a superior and divinely-guided society and nation. This tradition operated on two fronts: first, it demanded the creation of a literary American epic, which was seen as a crucial way to legitimize the young country’s culture and intellectualism. More importantly, though, there existed a belief that America itself—the land and the wilderness so romanticized by the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*—held a physical capacity for epic that no place in the Old World possessed. The wonders and vastness of the American wilderness imbued the country with some mythical, epic power that would propel it to exceptional heights, if only the power could be tapped. Such sentiments are at the core of Jefferson’s expansionist policy, as well as Manifest Destiny, though they existed both well before and after Jefferson. Cotton Mather stands as the most prominent example prior to the third president; after Jefferson, the nineteenth century produced a slew of intellectuals and scholars who continued the agrarian and expansionist tradition by building on Jefferson’s ideas of Manifest Destiny. People such as Edward Everett bridged the gap from Jefferson to other nineteenth-century scholars, and in his calls for an American epic, Everett imbued a new generation with ideas of epic and American exceptionalism—indeed, the intellectual tradition grew, for after Everett’s time, the Transcendentalists took up agrarianism and expansionism. Emerson and Thoreau were primary among those influenced Transcendentalists, and they represent the most politicized and philosophically impactful individuals who engaged with the tradition of

² Reinhold, “Vergil in the American Experience,” 191.

America-as-epic. But while they forwarded a unique vision of an American mythology, they were far from the first to articulate these ideas.

An Early American Epic

Cotton Mather's magnum opus, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, stands as the first prominent invocation of the classical tradition in a discussion of the history and future of America. Mather opened the *Magnalia* with an epic proposition, proclaiming, "I write the wonders of the Christian religion flying from deprivations of Europe to the American Strand," before borrowing the invocation of the *Aeneid* in a way that more fits the Puritan milieu: "The reader will doubtless desire to know what it was that "tot volvere casus / Insignes pietate viros, tot adire labores / Impulerit."³ The lines of Virgil that Mather references originally appear as follows, in context: "Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso, / quidue dolens, regina deum tot volvere casus / insignem pietate virum, tot adire labores / impulerit. Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?"⁴ Virgil's invocation of the muse sees him asking why Juno, not mentioned by name, was so irate at Aeneas that she caused so many troubles for the hero and forced him to wander, closing with the reflection, 'Can such anger dwell in the minds of heaven?' Virgil means for his audience to understand Aeneas' persecuted state right away, and for Mather to borrow these lines is no subtle deed—nor are his edits to them. By making the subject plural—changing "insignem pietate virum" to "Insignes pietate viros"—Mather allowed for all the Puritan forerunners to be included in this invocation (given the nature of the *Magnalia* as a

³ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967), 25, quoted in John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (New York: Cambridge, 1989), 18.

⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, I.8-11.

religious history of America to date). Importantly, he cast his religious forefathers as so many Aeneases, driven from their homes by forces beyond their control, duty-bound to settle in a new land with divine encouragement. The plurality allows Mather to speak not of one individual or the exploits of one man, but instead of the entirety of the culture, a tradition that continues through centuries of literature, where praise goes not to an individual or to the country but to the American people.⁵ For Puritans such as Mather, the New World was transformative, as if it gave them new sight. Jesper Rosenmeier has argued, quite intriguingly, that for early settlers, “the new world...was not necessarily a time and a place but a new way of perceiving and feeling about the old,” and so conversion experiences and transformations of perspective would become a key part of the New England mind.⁶ This trope indeed survives the centuries, and it emerges over and over again in Thoreau in his discoveries of the interconnectedness and beauty inherent in the natural world. Mather was so determined to cast the *Magnalia* as a Virgilian epic that he quotes directly from Virgil thirty times, and the majority of which come from the *Aeneid*.⁷

William Bradford and John Cotton are two additional examples of early settlers who embraced the idea of American as Eden. Bradford, the one-time governor of Plymouth Colony, published his journals under the title *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and they eventually became a seminal account of the colony. His views of Plymouth Colony and of the colonists’ mission in the New World, were very lofty, as evidenced by this selection from *Of Plymouth Plantation*:

⁵ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 18.

⁶ Jesper Rosenmeier, *The Language of Canaan* (XanEdu: 2010), 9-10.

⁷ Reinhold, “Vergil in the American Experience,” 193.

I have had a longing desire to see with my own eyes something of that most ancient language and holy tongue in which the Law and Oracles of God were writ, and in which God and Angels spake to the holy patriarchs of old time; and what names were given to things from Creation. And though I cannot attain to much herein, yet I am refreshed to have seen some glimpse hereof, as Moses saw the land of Canaan afar off.⁸

Bradford has not minced words: he desired to see Eden, where God, the angels, and Adam and Eve conversed in a sort of ur-Hebrew, and where Adam named gave names to all of the natural world. He did not quite get to Eden in his stay at Plymouth Plantation, but Bradford does say he caught a “glimpse hereof.” Jesper Rosenmeier notes that Bradford conceived of Plymouth as a “little handful of Israel” deposited in the New World, a tradition in keeping with Christian ideas that began to surface in medieval religious literature.⁹ Christians had long since considered the settler’s outpost and the agrarian village amidst the wilderness to be an ideal environment; they were seen as blessed places where humans could be closer to God. Moreover, Christians from the medieval era well through to Bradford’s time and beyond saw cultivating the land and reaping its harvest as an example of God’s love and the bountiful nature of his creation.¹⁰

John Cotton, teacher at the First Church of Boston, also viewed the Puritan’s role in the New World as divinely inspired. Cotton utilized the theme of Abraham’s journey to Canaan when preaching to his flock of New England Puritans about the hardships of their experience and the importance of perseverance. In Cotton’s mind, the New England Puritans were following an experience similar to Abraham’s, where the American

⁸ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York: Knopf, 1952), xxviii.

⁹ Rosenmeier, *The Language of Canaan*, 188.

¹⁰ Per Binde, “Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January 2001): 19, accessed via JSTOR.

continent was Canaan, and the vast lands were a gift from God ripe for the taking.¹¹

These early engagements with the America-as-Eden idea were almost strictly religious in nature: pastoralism hardly entered the language whatsoever. As time progressed, however, arguments positing that America would be the home of a new Eden broadened to include pastoralist language and imagery.

Samuel Sewall, the only judge who apologized for his role in the Salem Witch Trials, may stand for us as an intellectual and historical stepping stone from Mather to Thomas Jefferson. Apart from his involvement at Salem, Sewall is unique for his text *Phaenomena quedam Apocalyptica ad aspectum Novi Orbis configurata, Or Some Few Lines toward the Description of the New Heaven*. Published in 1697, Sewall's text perfectly illustrates the fusion between America's religious heritage and the pastoral and epic dream for the country's future. Through a series of exegetical twists and turns, Sewall painted America as the New Jerusalem, and affirmed America as a key component of the coming Millennium.¹² For the purposes of this paper, Sewall's ultimate significance comes in the form of one quotation he offers at the end of his essay, wherein he waxes on the pastoral beauty and national potential of America:

...[A]s long as any salmon, or sturgeon shall swim in the streams of Merrimack, or any perch, or pickerel, in Crane Pond...as long as any cattle shall be fed with the grass growing in the meadows...as long as any sheep walk upon Old-Town Hills...as long as any free and harmless doves shall find a white oak, or other trees within the township, to perch, or feed, or build a careless nest upon...as long as a nature shall not grow old and dote...so long shall Christians be born there; and being first made meet, shall from thence be translated, to be made partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. Now, seeing the inhabitants of...New England...we may expect that their rich and gracious Lord will continue and

¹¹ Jesper Rosenmeier, *'Spirituell Concupiscence': John Cotton's English Years, 1584-1633* (Lincoln, Lincolnshire: Ruddocks, 2012), 276.

¹² "Introduction," Reiner Smolinski, in Samuel Sewall, *Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica...Or, some Few Lines towards a description of the New Heaven*, 1697, ed. Reiner Smolinski. Accessed via Electronic Texts in American Studies database, Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

confirm them in the possession of these invaluable privileges: *Let us have Grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with Reverence and godly Fear. For our God is a consuming fire. Heb. 12. 28, 29.*¹³

Sewall has framed the natural beauties and bounties of America as a new Eden, a naturally rich and pastorally peaceful breeding ground for Christians, all overseen and bestowed upon a faithful people by their God. His language embodies so many classical elements of pastoral writing: he touches upon all forms of nature, from the landscape itself to animals of land and sea, before ending with invocations of a white dove (a classically Christian symbol) and a nod to nature itself. All of these elements are present together in Sewall's view of New England, and such is the setting for those Christian people who live there. In his description of the New England's natural harmony and Christian nature, Sewall connects one to the other, associating the maintenance and health of nature with the perpetuation of Christianity; not only does he make a strong pastoral argument for the importance of nature in a society, but he clearly casts New England as a new Eden. His language and pastoral approach create a logical midpoint between Mather's unbridled Christianity and Jefferson's agrarian focus. This theme of America as Eden resonates long beyond Sewall—we will next see it in Jefferson, but far beyond in Emerson, Thoreau, and both Ripley and Alcott as well.

Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and Manifest Destiny

Among all of those who participated in the American pastoral and epic tradition, none had so great an impact in bringing the country to fulfill its epic potential as

¹³ Sewall, *Phaenomena*, 69.

Jefferson. Westward expansion was an ever-present force in America's history up to the time of the Transcendentalists, with vast expanses of fertile and materially rich land having constantly motivated settlers and frontiersmen to extend America's borders. While 'Manifest Destiny' as a phrase and idea did not emerge until the 1840s, coined then by Jacksonian expansionists who were eager to spread across the continent and sought justification for doing so, America has always been an expansionist country.¹⁴ Historians have offered various explanations for the increase in expansionist interest over the course of America's history: Mark Joy, for one, suggests that the British motivations to expel the French and Spanish from North America were key drivers.¹⁵ Both Joy and Kris Fresonke point to America's Puritan roots as a key cause, arguing that John Winthrop's religious dream for a city upon a hill evolved, by the early nineteenth century, into a semi-secular party rhetoric adopted by Jacksonians who saw land for the taking and indigenous peoples ripe to be Christianized.¹⁶ Others, such as Peter F. Onuf, offer a more republican explanation for the rise of expansionist and even imperial language in America. Onuf notes that in the early years of America's nationhood, before Anglophobia set in, Americans were content to denounce only the institutions of monarchy and the corruptions of the system that they had fought against, but they had no issues with the ideas of empire and imperialism. In the late eighteenth century, ideas of making America into a republican empire emerged, acting as preludes to the more aggressive calls for continental dominance. Such expansionist ideology would later explode in the early to mid nineteenth century, first when the Monroe Doctrine appeared to satisfy desires for

¹⁴ Mark S. Joy, *American Expansionism: 1783-1860: A Manifest Destiny?* (London: Pearson, 2003), xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁵ Joy, *American Expansionism*, xxvi.

¹⁶ Kris Fresonke, *West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny* (Berkeley: California, 2003), 8-9.

hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and later with the rise of Jacksonianism.¹⁷ All of these arguments address root causes of America's early desire to expand—one might include the immediate economic interests of those settled there and entrenched in an agrarian economy as a motivating factor for expansion—but for whatever cocktail of explanations, America had always been expansionist.

The very act of colonizing America was an expansionist exercise, and things did not slow down after first contact. Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase stands out for most as the first and most prominent example of America's expansionist designs; while it certainly is the grandest example, it is far from the first—for that, one ought to rewind about forty years. In the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, France ceded all of its North American holdings east of the Mississippi to the British, but immediate westward expansion was not to be for American colonists.¹⁸ In an attempt to maintain semi-stable relations with the Native American tribes living in the then-formerly French territories, George III declared that all lands west of the Appalachian Mountains were prohibited to settlers, to be left as essentially an early reservation.¹⁹ The Proclamation of 1763, as it was formally known, proved deeply and immediately unpopular with colonists, and as Benjamin Carp has noted, engendered with white American settlers a deeper sense of resentment against their imperial overseers.²⁰ This resentment would prove to be so great that in the Declaration of Independence, one of the Continental Congress' grievances was

¹⁷ Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: Virginia, 2000), 57-8.

¹⁸ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001), 187.

¹⁹ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 162.

²⁰ Benjamin Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party & The Making of America* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 147-149.

that the king had “endeavored to prevent the population of these states; for that purpose obstructing the laws of naturalization of foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriation of lands.”²¹ The above grievance specifically targets the Proclamation of 1763 and the Quebec Act²² as having been seriously inhibitive to the colonies’ growth.²³ The anger colonists felt at being prevented from expanding translated cleanly into anger at their lack of autonomy; if they could not expand their own land holdings as they pleased, they saw themselves as simply cogs in Britain’s imperial machine. Such was the importance of expansionism to American settlers, even at such an early date.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jefferson did more than any of his contemporaries to further an idea of an agrarian America, both through his philosophizing and his political actions. His republican ideology necessitated an agricultural society, as did his dream of expanding America into the western reaches of the continent. As Harry Watson has summarized, Jefferson’s vision of republicanism required an agricultural society where small farmers worked their own plots of land and formed the majority of the populace, thereby imbuing the national government with a sense of individual liberty.²⁴ Before his presidency, Jefferson wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a seminal American text that represents his pastoral sensibilities at their strongest (along with other, less-savory sensibilities). In *Notes*, Jefferson mused, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people,

²¹ Declaration of Independence, accessed via archives.gov.

²² One of the Intolerable Acts of 1774, the Quebec Act gave large territories between the Mississippi and the Proclamation Line of 1763 to the Province of Quebec, thus inhibiting colonial settlers’ access to said lands.

²³ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 217; Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 57.

²⁴ Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill, Wang, 2006), 46.

whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”²⁵

Jefferson’s ideal society, then, was an agrarian one, and agrarianism was ideal because its practitioners were imbued with a sort of divine grace and a higher sense of virtue. His perception of yeoman farmers as fiercely and virtuously individual strongly colored his personal beliefs and politics, as Richard Hofstadter has noted; Jefferson even went so far as to state that “Farmers, whose interests are entirely agricultural...are the true representatives of the great American interest, and are alone to be relied on for expressing the proper American sentiments.”²⁶ Such beliefs resonated strongly throughout the early nineteenth century, particularly with followers of Jacksonianism, and they appear in almost identical fashion in both Emerson’s and Thoreau’s writings.

Since he had already defined the ideal society for his young nation, Jefferson took great steps as president to create exactly that society—and through one political maneuver, he gave life to his agrarian dream and produced the most successful and immediate instance of expansion in the country’s history. The Louisiana Purchase doubled America’s size, stretching its land holdings west to the Rocky Mountains, north to the Canadian border, and south and west to the Gulf of Mexico, at once, as historians Henry Adams and Joseph Ellis have stated, transforming the United States into a world power.²⁷ Acquiring 828,000 square miles of land did one thing to the national mindset: the country’s collective gaze and imagination for the future were cast westward. Jefferson, like Washington before him and Emerson and Thoreau after him, believed quite firmly that Europe was the past and the American west was the future. Moving to

²⁵ Quoted in Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 46.

²⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 36-7.

²⁷ Ellis, *American Creation*, 207.

acquire Louisiana and all its attendant territory ensured not only that America would have living room to spare, but it also erased the threat of a Franco-American conflict over control of North America, virtually ensuring America's hegemony in the New World.²⁸

Jefferson deeply believed in the promise of westward expansion and saw great potential in the American west; truly he, like Mather and others before him, believed America to contain an epic and unique potential. In the years immediately following the Purchase, Jefferson's dream was forwarded: the Lewis and Clark expedition returned tales of natural wonders and the promise of the Pacific Ocean, but the glow was short lived. Historian Joseph Ellis observes that Jefferson did not choose to list the Louisiana Purchase among his greatest accomplishments as displayed on his tombstone; his reasons for not doing so are painfully evident in hindsight.²⁹ Jefferson's management of the Louisiana Purchase allowed for the extension of slavery to the new territories—at least in that there was no ban placed on slavery in the newly acquired lands, despite his long-stated position that slavery ran exactly counter to America's republican values.³⁰ By acquiring such a grand amount of land all at once, Jefferson had knowingly and willingly opened the floodgates to settlers and by the nature of the purchase encouraged Americans to spread west in vast numbers, but by failing to raise the issue of slavery in these new territories, Jefferson embraced a sort of unconditional expansionism.³¹

The reasons why Jefferson considered the Louisiana Purchase a partial tragedy, or at least not among his greatest accomplishments, fall along the exact same lines. Emerson and Thoreau describe how the American west may achieve its true potential. The

²⁸ Ibid., 210-214.

²⁹ Ellis, *American Creation*, 210.

³⁰ Ibid., 234.

³¹ Ibid., 232-4.

developments Jefferson allowed to transpire are exactly what Emerson later cautioned against in the context of further expansion—and what Thoreau would come to caution against as well. The two Transcendentalists pay little attention to expansion’s ruinous effect on Native American populations, but they both single out slavery as a corrupting influence capable of completely nullifying the promise of the west. Jefferson allowed slavery to be perpetuated in the lands acquired by the Louisiana Purchase, primarily because he wished to avoid sparking a debate over slavery that would lead to internal conflict—an irony, Joseph Ellis points out, given that Jefferson’s inaction on the issue of expanding slavery into the Louisiana Territory became an issue in 1820 with the debate that resulted in the Missouri Compromise, placing the nation on a path to the Civil War.³² Jefferson came to realize his failings in dealing with these two issues, and both Emerson and Thoreau after him warned of the exact same things in regards to how America might become exceptional through the power and potential of its western lands. As we shall see next, Thoreau and Emerson were very conditional supporters of westward expansion, though they both had their criticisms of the government’s role in forwarding an agenda of Manifest Destiny.

Jefferson saw the territorial expansion of his country that he achieved through the Louisiana Purchase as expanding an “empire of liberty,” a statement that was immediately deeply ironic, considering how westward expansion stripped Native Americans of their lands and liberties, and a strongly nationalistic and xenophobic statement. The “empire of liberty” was one of liberty for white Americans; the possibility of having such liberty came at the cost of expelling the French from North America and

³² Ellis, *American Creation*, 236-239.

disenfranchising the native populations that lived in the American West, as would gradually happen over the nineteenth century.³³

More than anything, the Louisiana Purchase stands as the largest stride towards achieving America's epic potential that its leaders and intellectuals long saw as divinely ensured. Jefferson himself promised, in a letter to James Madison, that with the acquisition of territories from the Purchase, "we should have such an empire for liberty as she has never surveyed since the creation: and I am persuaded no constitution was ever before so well calculated as ours for extensive empire and self government."³⁴ His prediction of an empire of liberty the likes of which have never been seen since God's creation of the earth certainly appears bold—but more importantly, it furthers the Puritan idea of the 'city upon a hill,' translating it to an imperial and continental scale. Of course, the western "empire of liberty" would not exist were there not individuals to populate its new lands, and in Jefferson's vision, the waves of settlers that would roll into America's newly bought frontier would be the farmers and homesteaders of his agrarian visions. Emerson, Thoreau, and both Ripley and Alcott after them came to offer their own transcendentalist spin on Jefferson's ideal agrarian society; ultimately, they all came to support the core beliefs Jefferson held about agrarianism and its enriching powers, but the four Transcendentalists made a point of holding their country and its people to a higher moral standard than Jefferson did.

³³ Joy, *American Expansionism: 1783-1860*, 19; Ellis, *American Creation*, 233.

³⁴ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, April 27, 1809, via Library of Congress online.

Intellectual Transitions in the Antebellum Years

America's epic potential and national expansion remained a popular topic after the Louisiana Purchase, and ideas of American epic were highly present in the minds of the intellectual elite during the Early Republic. John McWilliams points out Edward Everett's 1824 Phi Beta Kappa speech at Harvard—a mere thirteen years before Emerson would deliver his famous “American Scholar” address—as a strongly Virgilian example of epic's role in developing American culture. In Everett's speech, there is a predominant understanding held between speaker and audience that all great cultures and nations must produce appropriately great epic literature. America, Everett believes, is too grand to go without an epic—he quotes George Berkeley about the westward expansion of empire, a sentiment Thoreau touches later, and then muses:

There are no more continents or worlds to be revealed; Atlantis hath arisen from the Ocean... There are no more retreats beyond the sea, no more discoveries, no more hopes. Here then a mighty work is to be fulfilled, or never by the race of mortals.³⁵

He encourages the dissemination of American ideals across the continent, as his rhetoric is laced with the liberal republican ideology befitting the thinkers of the Early Republic—but the important aspects are that Everett, like so many others, sees America as a place worthy of the status of Homeric and Virgilian epic, as a kind of final frontier in both a literal and metaphorical sense for human accomplishment on the grand scale of epic. Everett's focus on epic is not accidental: we have seen Mather's disposition for the genre, but many furthered the between 1700 and the early nineteenth century. Jefferson and Adams stand out among a crowd of neoclassicist Founding Fathers with their

³⁵ Edward Everett, *An Oration Pronounced at Cambridge, Before the Society of Phi Beta Kappa* (New York: J.W. Palmer, 1824), 39.

unrivaled love of classics: Adams was perhaps more devoted to Virgil than Jefferson, but Jefferson embraced the entire epic tradition, as evidenced in his familiar quote, “But as we advance in life...things fall off one by one, and I suspect that we are left with Homer and Virgil, perhaps with Homer alone.”³⁶ Virgil’s pastoralism was loved and adopted by many from the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries in the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*, perfect for the American—and particularly New England’s—lifestyle that so valued work ethic and interacting with and living by the land.³⁷ Everett’s classical tendencies, then, are no accident, appearing when they do in a long tradition, and his message of carrying Greco-Roman epic into the American context did not fall on deaf ears: he was professor to both Emerson and Thoreau while they were at Harvard, and the ideas of American exceptionalism through epic status are deeply ingrained in both men’s work.³⁸

The Transcendentalists

Transcendentalism was America’s first homegrown philosophical movement. Birthed in Concord in the 1830s, Transcendentalism arose from a theological debate between two factions of Unitarian clergy in nineteenth-century New England: “New Light” proponents of religious revivals and their “Old Light” opponents. Emerson and other Transcendentalists-to-be saw the Old Lights—who composed the entirety of the established Unitarian intellectual and theological elite, largely based at Harvard Divinity School—as stymieing the intellectual capacities and traditions of both Massachusetts and

³⁶ *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Memorial Edition (Washington: 1905), 18:448, quoted in Reinhold, “Vergil in the American Experience,” 195.

³⁷ Reinhold, “Vergil in the American Experience,” 190.

³⁸ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 20.

America.³⁹ Transcendentalist thinkers drew their inspiration largely from German philosophy, particularly from the Idealist school of thought from Kant to Hegel, while German theologians such as Emanuel Swedenborg were primary influences as well.⁴⁰ From this German philosophical foundation—that will be explored more in Chapter 1—arose a belief common among Transcendentalists (perhaps the only such commonality) in the primacy of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and an individual’s perception.⁴¹ Beyond this idea, there does not exist one particular thing which unifies the Transcendentalists under one philosophical banner or creed—indeed, the movement draws its uniqueness from the great disparity of thought among its participants.⁴²

By the 1840s, Transcendentalism became a well-known national phenomenon, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and guided by other prominent figures such as Margaret Fuller. Ministers such as George Ripley participated in the movement, and Emerson’s protégé, Henry David Thoreau, was among the more enthusiastic members. Nathaniel Hawthorne was perhaps the movement’s most famous half-member; something of a social Transcendentalist, he never committed to the philosophy over his Romantic fiction. The movement’s definitive works largely come from Emerson and Thoreau: Emerson’s essays, “Nature” and “Self-Reliance” have enjoyed great staying power, while Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience” and *Walden* have gained relevance and reach over time. Of course, there are many more individuals and noteworthy works to emerge from the Transcendentalist movement, but an exploration of them would necessitate a very different paper. For the purpose of this thesis, Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, and the

³⁹ Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill, Wang, 2007), 5-10.

⁴⁰ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 12, 59.

⁴¹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 12.

⁴² Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petruionis, Laura Dassow Walls, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Transcendentalism*, eds. Joel Myerson, et al., (New York: Oxford, 2010), xxiii-xxiv.

reformer-educator-abolitionist-utopian Bronson Alcott will stand as a representative sample of Transcendentalists.

For the Transcendentalists, the tradition of American pastoralism was something more than their intellectual inheritance. Virgil's celebration of nature and the pastoral-agrarian world he constructs in his *Georgics* and *Eclogues* directly resonated with the Transcendentalists' participation in the budding Naturalist movement, first transplanted from Europe to America by the likes of Emerson. In turn, Virgil's pastoralism and the Transcendentalists' naturalism fused with their liberal Christianity, as seen in works like "Nature," to construct a reality in which divinity presents itself in and through the natural world. The pastoral idyll of Virgil and Jefferson became, for Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists like George Ripley and Bronson Alcott, a very real representation of the divine. "Nature" explicitly makes this point, as does Thoreau's essay "Walking"; the utopian experiments of Brook Farm and Fruitlands, launched by Ripley and Alcott, respectively, stand as real-world implementations of this belief.

Epic in America: A Very Brief History

From its earliest days, the British American colonies viewed and defined itself in epic terms. Mather's *Magnalia* attempted to reach epic status, and while it possessed Virgilian styling as discussed above, the work fell short of becoming a national epic. The American Revolution brought a fresh wave of attempts to write a national epic in addition to an increased trend in Americans self-identifying with the epic tradition. As John McWilliams noted in his work *The American Epic*, during the Revolution recruiting

posters bore such epically-styled slogans as “Let’s Look to Greece and Athens,” both an allusion to classical republicanism and the heroism of epic tradition.⁴³ When the Revolution was won, heroes of the war were cast in an epic light. George Washington was often compared to Cincinnatus, and American intellectuals and literati worked to bring the heroism of epic poetry into their New World while stripping it of its pagan barbarity.⁴⁴ And after the war, the desire for a national epic grew. John Adams, for one, wanted a national epic: in 1785, he wrote to the artist John Trumbull, reflecting that “I should hope to live to see our young America in Possession of an Heroic Poem, equal to those the most esteemed in any Country.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, at some point in the late eighteenth century, American intellectuals concluded that an American epic with a spirit and subject matter unique to the new world was a requirement for the nation to be truly great—and it had yet to be written.

Certain individuals tried to produce an American epic, though. Nathaniel Tucker, for one, attempted with his “America Delivered: An Heroic Poem,” but he stopped in 1783. He did not progress far enough in his work to need to describe America’s landscape and nature in great detail. Had he reached a point in his poem where a description of the nation’s natural wonders was necessary, McWilliams points out that Tucker’s language may not have been capable of describing the country—possibly because American English was growing more colloquial and therefore less suited to epic, or possibly because describing the landscape would detract from the heroic narrative required of an epic.⁴⁶ Either way, McWilliams’ observation points to a larger problem in

⁴³ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 20.

⁴⁴ McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 21, 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

the quest for an American epic: the country included a natural wilderness so vast and grand it could not possibly be ignored in an epic, yet a proper epic requires an heroic tale of war. For some time, the Revolution provided that heroic context—but in the early nineteenth century, the Revolution grew more and more distant from public memory.⁴⁷ It thus became less of a source for a national epic, and the period between the Revolution and early nineteenth century provided little in the way of material. The idea of an epic about the War of 1812, for example, is laughable, given the disappointing nature of the war—for an American to write about a stalemate with the British, a failed invasion of Canada, and the burning of the White House would be equivalent to a Trojan writing the first book of the *Aeneid*. And so, come the nineteenth century, America was without an epic and its one epic element was fading.

By the 1830s and 1840s, the Transcendentalists had risen to prominence in America, and their country still lacked an epic, largely because it lacked a subject matter suited to the stringent, traditional requirements of epic. During the early years of the century, however, an intellectual watershed began in Europe and spread to America by the time Emerson and Thoreau began writing. The scholarship and debate surrounding new ideas of epic is far too detailed to explore here, but as Christopher Phillips has stated, the definition and acceptable limits of epic were changed drastically.⁴⁸ America could yet have the epic work it had so longed for.

Speaking from the present day, there has been no definitive American epic written. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* seems to have come close in the minds of some

⁴⁷ Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

⁴⁸ Christopher N. Phillips, *Epic in American Culture: Settlement to Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2012), 139.

scholars, but if we have to question whether a work stands as America's national epic, it likely does not. But Emerson and Thoreau were not able to see centuries into the future and discern the quest for an American epic would be an arduous one, so in their present, they both identified a subject matter that they saw as perfect for the American epic. As a great deal of this thesis will discuss, Emerson and Thoreau eventually came to envision the American West as the subject for a national epic. The landscape of the West provided a pastoral backdrop that had always been present in America's history, and the process of settling the land would provide epic material in several ways. First, the very act of moving from civilization to an unknown wild is deserving of epic—see the *Aeneid*. Second, Emerson and Thoreau envisioned the West as not being settled in the traditional sense, meaning that people would be one with their untamed natural surroundings. Such an idea has serious Edenic overtones, which was not foreign to the tradition of contemplating America's settlement and expansion, as seen earlier in this introduction. Third, as I also later argue, Emerson and Thoreau believed that settling the western wilderness in the fashion of Eden would spiritually enrich Americans, giving them a sense of the divinity present in nature and increasing their self-awareness. Such was the Transcendental perception of a possible American epic: a grand tale of the West and of how the vast natural landscape of America created a more virtuous people.

Historiography

Given the wildly diverse nature of the Transcendentalists, academic study of the movement has been appropriately varied. Scholars have examined Transcendentalism in

the contexts of Enlightenment Philosophy, nineteenth-century print culture, Native American rights, feminism, economics, literary criticism, architecture, music, evolutionary theory, and global revolutions, to name a few.⁴⁹ More obvious studies of the Transcendentalists have focused on their role in creating nature writing as a genre, their impact on environmentalism, activism, and their influence on twentieth-century American literature. Few scholars, however, have identified the Transcendentalists as participants in a broader American intellectual tradition of viewing America as a pastoral landscape and of conditionally supporting westward expansion. Kris Fresonke and Lawrence Buell are two such scholars who place the Transcendentalists, particularly Emerson and Thoreau, in the context of American expansion and manifest destiny. This thesis is both indebted to their works and challenges some of their conclusions.

Buell's essay, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," illustrates the temporal relationship between the rise of Transcendentalism and the rise of Manifest Destiny in the late 1830s and early 1840s. When he addresses Emerson and Thoreau, Buell acknowledges the expansionist nature of some of their works, but often either downplays the presence of pro-expansionist arguments, the conditions Emerson and Thoreau set forth, and most of all, the classical influences that informed Emerson and Thoreau's language and thought. In regards to Emerson's "Nature," Buell states that Emerson's description of man taking over nature "might easily be seen as seconding if not embracing a this-land-is-ours interpretation," especially since, in Buell's words, Emerson "often downplayed the violence and rapacity of the so-called civilizing process

⁴⁹ I am quoting topics from the table of contents to the *Oxford Handbook of American Transcendentalism*.

as an inevitable stage of evolution toward something better.”⁵⁰ Nationalist attitudes are certainly present in “Nature”—indeed, as a work, “Nature” is a manifesto of Emerson’s philosophy first and a rough account of his conditional support for expansionism second. But Buell errs, or at least trivializes Emerson when dismissing the author as often downplaying the violence of the civilizing process. He quotes two lines from Emerson’s poem, “Ode Inscribed to W.H. Channing,” as evidence for his claim, which read “Tis fit the forest fall, / The steep be graded.”⁵¹ In the context of the poem, however, these lines hardly downplay the “so-called civilizing process.” Instead, Emerson offers them in this context:

There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled,—
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.

‘Tis fit the forest fall,
The steep be graded,
The Mountain tunneled,
The sand shaded,
The orchard planted,
The glebe tilled,
The prairie granted,
The steamer built.
Let man serve law for man;
Live for friendship, live for love,
For truth’s and harmony’s behoof;
The state may follow how it can,
As Olympus follows Jove.

Yet I do not implore
The wrinkled shopman to my sounding woods,
Nor bid the unwilling senator

⁵⁰ Lawrence Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Transcendentalism*, eds. Joel Myerson, et al. (New York: Oxford, 2010), 186.

⁵¹ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 186.

Ask votes of thrushes in the solitudes.⁵²

Emerson has created a dichotomy very similar to that at the end of Virgil's fourth Georgic, where the institutions of man and the state run in opposition to the natural world. The falling of the forest and the grading of the steep that he all deems "fit" are in actuality man's undoing. The tasks of seeming improvement are "fit" because such was the direction of progress, and are exactly representative of how the "law for thing.../ doth the man unking." Such a statement certainly does not downplay the consequences of civilization and society intruding upon the natural world.

In many ways, Buell's essay touches upon key elements of the Transcendentalists' involvement with Manifest Destiny: at one point, he notes that the Transcendentalists "clearly viewed the ongoing history of the European settlement of North America with a sense of epic grandeur."⁵³ And later, he acknowledges the presence of the "America as wilderness trope" in Thoreau's writings, but he fails to illustrate the classical roots of Thoreau's pastoralism and the importance of Thoreau's choice of style.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Buell reaches a conclusion similar to that of this thesis when he writes "I have rarely found...that serious immersion in [Transcendentalist texts] reinforces uncritical allegiance to the status quo," which is to say the Transcendentalists never offered full-throated support for Manifest Destiny.⁵⁵ However, Buell misses out on the depth of pastoralism in Emerson's and Thoreau's works and the significance of that element; by not acknowledging the significance of pastoralism, Buell does not highlight the American intellectual tradition that Emerson and Thoreau built off of, nor does he

⁵² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ode Inscribed to W.H. Channing," in *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. David Mikics (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012), 509-511.

⁵³ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 187.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

unlock the full significance of their writings as he misses the Virgilian aspects. Above all else, Buell neglects to emphasize the conditional nature of Emerson and Thoreau's support for expansionism in any real detail. He touches upon it, but dismisses the cause as "one item on the Transcendentalist menu, though hardly the top priority."⁵⁶ In fact, the issue of American expansionism was a top priority for the Transcendentalists: it was the issue that would be most affected by all of the other issues they were embroiled in.

Expansion's success depended upon the success of abolitionism and the improvement or purification of society; the country's epic potential could only be fulfilled if individuals reached a transcendental state of self-awareness. The West would be the proving ground for all Transcendental beliefs and interests—accordingly, Emerson and Thoreau were deeply invested in American expansion, to the point where they were explicitly clear about the conditions whereby they would support it, and whereby it would succeed.

Fresonke's work, *West of Emerson*, does a very strong job of representing Emerson in the political context of Jacksonian America, yet it offers a limited and political view of Emerson, neglecting his classical influences and the larger American pastoral tradition in which he participates. Fresonke and I agree that Emerson advocated for American expansion, and that he provided a set of conditions for doing so. We also both identify "Nature" as having surprisingly expansionist undertones, the political significance of which has been largely ignored or missed by scholars. Our arguments diverge where Fresonke dismisses Emerson as incorrect in his description of America's expansion and of the character of the west. Fresonke spends the majority of her time

⁵⁶ Ibid., 195.

focused on Emerson's teleological argument from design⁵⁷, and how he employed it to sidestep the unpleasant consequence of allying himself with Jacksonian Republicans.

Fresonke's argument tends far more to the political side than this paper's does, and like Buell, Fresonke misses certain elements of Emerson's thought, both in "Nature" and in the rest of his body of work. Not once does Fresonke address the classical and pastoral influences at play in "Nature" or the centuries of intellectual precedent for such American pastoralist thinking. For example, at one point in her discussion of "Nature," Fresonke writes, "It seems methodologically useful, then, for Emerson to fail to distinguish nation from nature."⁵⁸ Emerson does not fail when he combines nation and nature in his essay: he simply participated in a centuries-old pastoral tradition established around the time of Cotton Mather wherein no meaningful distinction exists between America—or, at that time, the colonies—and the natural world of the continent. Fresonke also only mentions "The Young American" once in her text, using it among a list of texts she classifies as "invaded pastoral[s]" while discussing a work of Thoreau's.⁵⁹ As this thesis argues, "The Young American" offers the most explicit example of Emerson's attitudes towards expansionism, and yet Fresonke pays it no attention when discussing his expansionist ideology.

When discussing Thoreau, Fresonke paints him as a conflicted, if not misguided, patriotic dissenter. In short order, she writes, "Thoreau praises wildness; America excels at wildness; thus Thoreau praises America."⁶⁰ But this position has a certain narrowness of scope. For Thoreau, conflating America's natural landscape was wonderful for his

⁵⁷ The crux of Emerson's design argument was that there was order in the natural world, and that order necessitated the existence of a God who ordered it.

⁵⁸ Fresonke, *West of Emerson*, 124.

⁵⁹ Fresonke, *West of Emerson*, 140.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

pastoral works. In the scope of the American pastoral tradition, when one praises natural wonders, one may then praise America for containing vast natural wonders—but such a relationship need not always exist. And in his political works, he takes care to separate nature from state, as I show later. Additionally, the conditions that Emerson and Thoreau offer for their support of expansion make demands upon America to improve itself morally; they state such conditions in order for the land to be used to its greatest potential, and for the sake of the land's wildness. Emerson and Thoreau were able to speak about both America the land and America the state in the same breath, yet they did not always do so: their political views and pastoral language were more complex than Fresonke credits. I argue this point, along with an expanded historiographical discussion on Buell and Fresonke, with greater detail in Chapters 1 and 2.

An Outline

Chapter 1 focuses on Emerson, beginning with an examination of his role as the first Transcendentalist, his historical present, and the theological and scientific climates that gave birth to Emerson as a thinker. The chapter proceeds to focus on two of Emerson's works: "Nature," his seminal 1836 essay, which is examined as a definitive example of his philosophy, his understanding of the natural world, and his disposition for pastoral writing. "Nature" also sheds light on Emerson's thoughts regarding American expansionism, and through a close textual analysis, the chapter examines Emerson's conditional support of America's westward progress, as well as the purifying influence and epic promise contained in the natural world. The second text examined is Emerson's

little-known 1844 lecture, “The Young American,” in which Emerson puts forth a detailed framework for his conditional support of American expansion and exceptionalism through a strongly pastoral argument. Also at play in “The Young American” are ideas of ethnic whitewashing as Emerson puts forth views of America as a homogenous, Anglicized country. The remaining part of the chapter will examine the pastoral elements present in “The Young American,” and while balancing them with the philosophical framework of “Nature,” it will synthesize Emerson’s views on the American pastoral tradition and his ideas for promise in the American West.

Chapter 2 transitions to Emerson’s protégé, Thoreau. After providing a background of the philosopher/author, the chapter begins in earnest with an analysis of Thoreau’s pastoral literary style, as seen in some early travelogue works of his, including the essay “A Walk to Wachusett” and his full-length work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. These two pieces illustrate Virgil’s influence on Thoreau’s writing, and their examination will provide a foundation for exploring Thoreau’s pastoral ideas in the context of his more political—and more famous—later works. More than Emerson, Thoreau offers a brand of distinctly New England pastoralism in his writings: he engages with and romanticizes the land and region to such a great degree that he constructs a New England ideal. Furthering the ideas of Emerson’s “Young American,” Thoreau idealizes the New England farmer, with the help of Virgilian pastoralism, and builds his vision of the American West upon this New England idealism. This chapter largely focuses on Thoreau’s political activism and his conditional support of American expansion in light of his abolitionist views, and concludes with an analysis of Thoreau’s hope and vision for the American wilderness and the country’s epic potential.

Chapter 3 shifts the thesis' focus eastward to explore two Transcendentalist utopian experiments: George Ripley's Brook Farm, and Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands. Ripley and Alcott serve as a counterpoint to the expansionist discourse Emerson and Thoreau offered: instead of attempting to find the country's true potential in the west, Ripley and Alcott attempt to construct new Edens in the East—specifically, in Massachusetts. They are a capstone to the Transcendentalists' pastoral dream, and in many ways a continuation of the thoughts Emerson and Thoreau put forth—while the two men did not go west, they embraced the idea of creating a new American Eden in New England. This final chapter discusses the establishment, life, and failure of both Brook Farm and Fruitlands, all while viewing their existence and founders as a counterpoint and culmination of the Transcendentalist drive to see a purer America created in the fashion of New England.

Through an exploration of Emerson's and Thoreau's writings, along with Ripley's and Alcott's utopian experiments, this thesis argues that the Transcendentalists offered strong support for westward expansion in the nineteenth century, and do so because of their interpretation of the American pastoral tradition. Emerson and Thoreau viewed nature as a gateway to and representation of the divine, and I will argue that, to varying degrees, the two Transcendentalists saw the American West as a place in which the American people could gain understanding of the natural world as a divine entity—in short, becoming the all-perceiving “transparent eye-ball” Emerson describes in *Nature*. Westward expansion could, then, bring the American people to a higher plane of spiritual awareness, enriching them with the understanding of the divinity of the self, as Emerson describes. Such a result was not guaranteed, though, and both Emerson and Thoreau

clearly state that the West will not produce such results on its own. The corrupting influences of American society—in particular, slavery—would ruin the potential of the West if brought to the unspoiled lands. As Thoreau insists in his essay “Walking,” the “wild” nature of the West must remain unharmed in order for America to retain and fulfill its potential to be a stage for a New World epic. The final extension of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s conditional endorsement of expansionism, when considered with their theology and the tradition of dreaming for America-as-epic, is as follows. The American West contains the potential for Americans to attain a religious, spiritual, and social purity, and if the West is approached without the corrupting and amoral elements of American society, the American people will achieve this awareness—that achievement would be the fulfillment of America’s epic potential.

Chapter One
Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature and the American Epic

A Brief Biography

Ralph Waldo Emerson stands, for many scholars and casual readers alike, as the First Transcendentalist. His early writings and thought, particularly during the 1830s and 1840s, spurred a younger generation of thinkers into an intellectual fury. Though he resented the idea of being labeled or systematized, Emerson became the de facto figurehead for the Transcendentalist movement from its early years in Concord.⁶¹ All of his seminal works came at the beginning of the movement: “Nature,” his first published essay, was published anonymously in 1836. One year later, Emerson delivered “The American Scholar” to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. 1838 saw Emerson deliver his “Divinity School Address” at Harvard. The speech, which offered discourse on Emerson’s doctrine of personal divinity and morality resulted in some at Harvard Divinity School labeling him an atheist.⁶²

His rise to fame in the 1830s also saw the beginning of his lecturing career, for which he grew even more famous, and by which he would sustain a rather handsome lifestyle until his death in 1882.⁶³ It is perhaps by this mode of employment more than anything that Emerson distinguishes himself from all others in the movement that he began: only he managed to turn Transcendentalist thought into material wealth, and only he attracted so much popular attention.

⁶¹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 69-71.

⁶² Ronald A. Bosco, “Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1812-1882: A Brief Biography,” in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford, 2000), 23-6.

⁶³ Bosco, “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” 32, 43.

Emerson's historical moment was one of great tumult: the peak of his career came during the antebellum period, when the reality of impending war was sinking in. Slavery and abolitionism were the topics du jour, and by the late 1840s, Emerson's theological focus had taken a backseat to matters of national significance.⁶⁴ Emerson did not become an outspoken abolitionist until relatively late in his career as a public intellectual, but before he spoke out against slavery, he engaged in another debate that had pressing national significance: namely, the discourse around American expansionism.

From his naturalist works, especially "Nature," to his more politicized lectures, such as "The Young American," Emerson proclaimed America's promise as a nation of epic proportions. He, like Jefferson before him, engaged with the American pastoral tradition and held an agrarian vision for the country's future. By the early 1840s, Emerson had grown firm in his belief that Americans were destined to expand across the continent.⁶⁵ His calls for westward expansion were based in his belief that the American West would have a purifying influence on the people who settled it, a theme which this chapter examines in detail. But Emerson's idea of the west is a redressing of Jefferson's interpretation of Augustan virtues: the third president's view for a republican empire was built upon the idea of moving westward and inland away from the corrupting nature of cities, a theme with which Emerson directly interacts. Agrarianism, for Jefferson, was the tool by which the American people were purified from outside influence and urban vice. Afterwards, the rural landscape and the trade of farmers would become models for

⁶⁴ David M. Robinson, "Introduction," in *The Political Emerson: Essential Writings on Politics and Social Reform*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 15.

⁶⁵ Daniel Robert Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 43-4.

virtue.⁶⁶ Emerson took up this pastoralist ideal, and subsequently updated it for his time. For all of his advocacy of expansion, as this chapter shows, he put forward one condition that defined expansionism's ability to create the long-sought American epic. In Emerson's mind, slavery was a great moral wrong, and were Americans to bring the institution with them westward, the opportunity for a clean beginning in the West would be lost. Quite simply, America could only realize its full potential if it rejected slavery and embraced the naturalizing influences of the unsettled West.

This chapter begins with a brief biography of Emerson, and then focuses first on how the combination of contemporary European naturalism and Emerson's Unitarian background developed him as a naturalist. I then analyze his seminal work, "Nature," and illustrate how it stands as an example of his conditional support of American expansionism. In discussing "Nature," I also argue that, within the text, Emerson portrayed America as the stage for a New World epic. Finally, I demonstrate how Emerson's essay, "The Young American," illustrates his expansionist desires and his belief that the West held the potential for America to achieve its epic promise.

Emerson: The Man, The Myth, The Theologian

Before Emerson was a naturalist and a Transcendentalist, he was an increasingly progressive Unitarian minister embroiled in a conflict over liberal Christian theology. He was also a significant player in the theological debate that shaped the development of Transcendentalism: in the battle between the conservative Old Lights and the liberal New Lights, as discussed in the introduction, Emerson eventually became one of the most

⁶⁶ Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire*, 69.

vocal and increasingly radical voices of the High Criticism movement against the Old Lights.⁶⁷ The Old Lights, anti-revivalist and hardline Unitarians, viewed religion as an intellectual pursuit, one of rigor and not one of passion, while their opponents were far more emotional practitioners of religion—theologians like Jonathan Edwards and William Ellery Channing—believed in a far more personal religion and direct interaction with both Scripture and God. Emerson’s theology, true to the New Light way of thinking, evolved along deeply emotional lines, and climaxed in “Nature,” as we see later. The two groups debated at length over Scriptural meaning, with the crux of the debate being whether or not the Bible and the word of God had to be interpreted or if it had a transcendent meaning.⁶⁸ William Ellery Channing, a minister who acted as a proto-Transcendentalist and whom Emerson referred to as “our Bishop,” took the position that the Bible was not a literal representation of God’s word, but contained it.⁶⁹

Later, Emerson would take Channing’s idea of the Bible containing God’s word and transmute it to the natural world, eventually arguing that nature contained God and divinity itself—but that skips ahead several transformative years. Channing’s stance left the Bible with its divine state, but also as a text that required human probing and comprehension of the text.⁷⁰ As a young minister in the early 1830s, Emerson took strongly to these ideas. After he explored Scripture at length, seeking literal and historical meaning while also probing for the deeper and intuitive truth of the faith, Emerson reached the conclusion that he could no longer administer Communion. He reasoned “Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance when he ate the

⁶⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 23; 43-5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

Passover with his disciples.”⁷¹ Simply put, Emerson did not wish to preach and practice a faith based on institutions and tropes that the Church created based off of how Jesus came to be represented in a text influenced by humans, but instead sought to pursue the more natural essence of the religion. His drive to find an essential Christianity laid the groundwork for “Nature.”

Liberal Christian, Budding Naturalist

Developing in tandem with his desire to practice a more essential Christianity was Emerson’s fascination with science and the natural world. Just as his break with institutional Christianity was a long time in the making, so too was his ultimate fascination and deep dedication with science and naturalism. Emerson had read natural histories and scientific works in the late 1820s and in 1830 with a decided interest, but never obsessively. His interest in scientific thought eventually exploded, however, and did so in the months following his wife Ellen Tucker’s death in February 1831.⁷² He had begun an exploration into the field of natural science earlier, in 1830, inspired by his study of Coleridge and J.G. Herder.⁷³ His life took an inward turn after Ellen’s death as he coped with the loss of his love. It seems, though, that from an intense period of mourning and self-reflection, defined by daily visits to Ellen’s grave in Roxbury, that Emerson developed an acute awareness of the world around him, as recounted in his

⁷¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Lord’s Supper,” in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, XI.I. Accessed via RWE.org, <http://www.rwe.org/i-the-lords-supper.html>.

⁷² Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: California, 1995), 121.

⁷³ Richardson, *Emerson*, 92-3.

journals from May 1832.⁷⁴ He began to note examples of intricacy and beauty in the natural world around him, and found himself increasingly amazed by nature. Emerson was particularly moved by his brother Charles' sea shell collection, of which he wrote: "I suppose an entire cabinet of shells would be an expression of the whole human mind; a Flora of the whole globe would be so likewise, or a history of beasts; or a painting of all the aspects of the clouds. Every thing is significant."⁷⁵ This quotation shows Emerson at the dawning of his naturalist thinking, and it illustrates how he was coming to understand the sense of universality in being that will later appear in "Nature."

1832 saw Emerson reading more and more voraciously, devouring many scientific works and natural histories while also building upon his already extensive knowledge of European philosophy. Among those he read in 1832 were the agricultural chemist Sir Humphry Davy, the natural philosopher Sir John Leslie, James Drummond's *Letter to a Young Naturalist* (a work tellingly sub-titled 'The Study of Nature and Natural Theology), and François Hubert's *New Observations of Bees*.⁷⁶ These figures would join men like Galileo, Kepler, and Newton as significant intellectual influences upon a developing Emerson.⁷⁷ More impactful than these books, though, was J.F.W. Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*. Herschel's work emphasizes the relationship of the mind to the external natural world, and this, for Emerson, was grand inspiration.⁷⁸ Such inspiration, combined with the loss of Ellen, led Emerson to take the final step in his break with institutional Christianity: less than a year after the sea-shell revelation, Emerson resolved to leave his pulpit, citing his disbelief in what he

⁷⁴ Richardson, *Emerson*, 122.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁷ Neal Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2009), 75.

⁷⁸ Richardson, *Emerson*, 123.

saw as overwrought sacramental practices and arguing that such practices interfered with the essential points of practicing Christianity. In mid-June of 1832, Emerson left the parish to refine his thoughts regarding institutional Christianity, and to collect his own inward life.⁷⁹ The summer saw him retreat into the mountains of New Hampshire, and both the break with his parish and the change in setting fueled an increased interest in science and the study of the natural world in Emerson. But it also set him very much afloat. Having lost his wife and resigned his role in the church, he spent several listless months alarmed at his lack of direction, before heading, mostly on a whim, to Europe on Christmas Day, 1832.⁸⁰

Emerson's European tour spurred a fundamental shift in the thinker's perspective. After travelling through Italy and Switzerland, Emerson reached Paris during the summer of 1833, and there experienced a revelation that would forever impact his thought. On July 13, he visited the Jardin des Plantes, and was moved by the connection he felt with the natural world, writing in his journal, "Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer."⁸¹ A deeply personal observation, it represents Emerson's take on natural theology. A school of thought driven by seventeenth-century deists, natural theology was a way of seeking knowledge of God through the order of the natural world.⁸² Emerson eventually developed his own natural theology. Informed by his study of naturalism, he expanded upon it in both "Nature" and "Self-Reliance."⁸³ The Parisian garden continued to inspire

⁷⁹Richardson, *Emerson*, 125.

⁸⁰ Bosco, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," 14.

⁸¹ Emerson, *Journals*, quoted in Richardson, *Emerson*, 141.

⁸² William Rossi, "Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford, 2000), 104.

⁸³ Rossi, "Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science," 109, 111, 115-116.

Emerson along this line of thought to the point where, also in his journals, he later reflected, “I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say continually, I will be a naturalist.”⁸⁴ This drive to pursue a study of the natural world was fueled by Emerson’s readings and the deeply personal experiences he underwent when meditating upon nature, first at home in Concord and then in Paris.

His journal entries from later in his European trip emphasize the sea change in his thought: one entry from August 11 lists “Goethe, Mackintosh, Cuvier, Bentham, [and] Hegel” as intellectuals who have grasped an essential truth. Neal Dolan notes that all those named are men of science and reason, and not of faith, a significant change from his influences while at Harvard Divinity School.⁸⁵ Emerson’s declaration “I will be a naturalist” was not to mean that he would pursue the study of natural science with an academic rigor—he was not aiming to be Darwin before Darwin, nor was he following in Jefferson’s footsteps. William Rossi has noted that it is unclear just how seriously Emerson considered becoming a professional naturalist—but eventually, Emerson realized he had no patience for dull taxonomical work, and turned his focus towards the philosophy of nature.⁸⁶

While naturalism was wildly popular among the upper classes in Europe and America before and during Emerson’s time, the fad emphasized a scientific approach towards nature, replacing spiritual contemplation and harmony with the natural world with analytical study and collection of natural objects. Jefferson himself stands as the greatest American representation of the scientific and learned naturalist-as-hobbyist, and

⁸⁴ Emerson, *Journals*, quoted in Richardson, *Emerson*, 141-2.

⁸⁵ Dolan, *Emerson’s Liberalism*, 71.

⁸⁶ Rossi, “Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science,” 114.

the cabinet of natural objects he assembled at Monticello illustrates his desire to further scientific study and knowledge of the natural world.⁸⁷ In the context of Emerson's intellectual background, with special consideration to Herschel's influence, "I will be a naturalist" ought to be interpreted as Emerson proclaiming his desire to study the spirituality of the natural world and the potential of the individual's relationship with nature, and not that he would follow Jefferson's scientific tradition. His rigorous study of the natural world encouraged Emerson to develop his philosophy in pastoral terms, and while he did not embrace naturalism like many others of his time, the texts he read on the subject clearly impacted his works. With Emerson's mind deliberately set upon nature—and the connection between nature and the human mind that he discovered in Herschel—the foundation was set for his later works.

A further compulsion to study nature was Emerson's discovery of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian who inspired many of New England's young Unitarians with his idea that the natural world was a direct emanation of God and that there was a "correspondential" relationship between spirit and the natural world.⁸⁸ By the late 1830s, a new wave of ministers began adopting the idea that divinity was represented but not explicitly stated in the Bible and thus had to be found within the text. Among this group was the minister George Ripley, who eventually became a major Transcendentalist figure, and out of their swelling ranks rose an interest in the philosophy of language. These ministers began to view Scripture as, in Philip Gura's words, "a kind of primitive poetry of the soul...draped most effectively in the language of nature."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Joyce Henri Robinson, "An American Cabinet of Curiosities: Thomas Jefferson's "Indian Hall at Monticello,"" *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1995),: 41, 45, accessed via JSTOR.

⁸⁸ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 60.

⁸⁹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 44.

Swedenborgianism and ideas of the spirit in nature came to be a base for Transcendentalist thought. When in Paris, Emerson came to discover such ideas of the natural world. His ideas of nature—and more importantly, of consciousness and the idea that the universe is interconnected, came to shape the intellectual movement and Emerson’s writings.⁹⁰

The Roots of Emerson’s Philosophy: “Nature” and the Transparent Eye-Ball

“Nature,” published in 1836 was not only Emerson’s first published work, but was a manifesto of his new philosophy, a declaration of the limitless expanses of human thought and the divinity to be found in nature. It is at turns mystical and pastoral, a celebration of the natural world, what it represents, and what may be found in it. Emerson made his purpose plain at the work’s outset when he rhetorically asked, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of [our fathers]?”⁹¹ Such a sentiment notably echoes the calls for an American epic that were described in the introduction, particularly in the shared desire for unique thought. As a whole, “Nature” does not explicitly engage much with American pastoralism: Emerson only mentions the country by name once. But as this section shows, “Nature” contains a substantial amount of discourse on American expansionism that Emerson delivers in pastoral language. Given that, while his reflections on nature are

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68; Bosco, “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” 20-23.

⁹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford, 2000), 125.

intended to be universally applicable, certain parts of the text as evidenced later are meant for an American context.

At the beginning of “Nature,” Emerson offered mostly pastoralism and philosophizing, though he initially remained restrained in his descriptions of landscapes, withholding florid details in exchange for spiritual revelations. But he understood the power of nature, knowing that:

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man.⁹²

The remark about retaining infancy speaks to a central element of Emerson’s philosophy and pastoralism. That the lover of nature retains his infant spirit into adulthood because of his love for the natural world speaks to something essential and timeless in the land, something with restorative properties. Emerson himself clearly felt such a love for nature, and he encouraged others to this love, praising the natural world for its beauty and for its ability to free minds from the trappings of society to reflect on eternal matters.⁹³

“Nature” was Emerson’s definitive work, in respect to his philosophy of being and relationship with the natural world. While the entirety of the essay reads rich with meaning and thought, one particular passage had stood out over the years as the definitive section of a definitive work. In “Nature,” Emerson managed to articulate a central element of his philosophy in but a handful of sentences, which are as follows:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God...I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty...In

⁹² Emerson, “Nature,” 127.

⁹³ Len Gougeon, *Emerson & Eros: The Making of a Cultural Hero* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007), 158.

the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.⁹⁴

His transparent eye-ball is an appreciator of the natural world. If Emerson was self-reflective in his philosophy, then here we see what it was for Emerson to be a naturalist. In nature he saw the “thoughts of the Supreme Being,” by which he became separated from any boundaries of the self, free to enter into communion with the entirety of the world at once.⁹⁵ Emerson here declared that when one is properly attuned to the omnipresence of the divine, nature—the natural world, all around us—was the gateway to the divine, and in fact, was itself divine.⁹⁶ Emerson’s pastoralism and naturalism, then, draws deeply upon his personal theology. He integrated Channing’s liberal Christianity with Swedenborgianism and the tradition of American pastoralism to produce the philosophy of “Nature.”

Emerson’s brand of Transcendentalism combined natural history, autobiography, nature writing, and philosophy, extending the ideas of Unitarian reformers and incorporating older Puritan convictions.⁹⁷ “Nature” is then a roadmap for satisfying the demands of the spirit, for understanding one’s own essence and relationship to the natural world and the divinity therein apparent. It is an instruction manual of mystical proportions informed by Emerson’s own experiences, and it eventually became recognized not only as a seminal text of Emerson’s. And as unlikely as it may seem, “Nature” also showcases Emerson’s earliest published ideas regarding Manifest Destiny, particularly his warnings and conditional support of American expansionism.

⁹⁴ Emerson, “Nature,” 128.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹⁶ Gougeon, *Emerson and Eros*, 89.

⁹⁷ Don Scheese, *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 23.

Hinting Westward: Expansionism in "Nature"

"Nature" contains early examples of Emerson's politics, particularly in regards to westward expansion. Though an ardent abolitionist—at first quietly, and later somewhat vocally—Emerson seems to have consistently and from an early date supported manifest destiny, though tentatively. Kris Fresonke has identified Emerson's expansionism in "Nature," but as I discussed in the introduction, she emphasizes Emerson's politics to the exclusion of his spirituality and pastoralism.⁹⁸ In so doing, Fresonke does not capture the scope of Emerson's thought regarding Manifest Destiny. He detested the nationalistic trappings attached to the term, but Emerson advocated westward expansion at least in the sense that the country and the American people would expand into greater reaches of nature to the Pacific coast.⁹⁹ The West's uncorrupted nature would, by Emerson's calculation, provide an opportunity for realizing an American epic; it would also give those who settled it an opportunity to become "transparent eye-ball[s]" as well. Westward expansion appears explicitly as a topic, albeit briefly, in "Nature," when Emerson celebrates, almost surprisingly, the coming "kingdom of man over nature."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, "Nature" may be seen as a text that offers a solid endorsement for manifest destiny, as historian Kris Fresonke has argued in her work *West of Emerson*. But counter to Fresonke's view, matters of spirituality and personal philosophy outweigh anti-Jacksonian politics in the essay. Emerson reflected on the average individual's relationship with the natural world, ultimately to pronounce his disapproval for the means by which Americans are expanding—but not expansion itself:

⁹⁸ Kris Fresonke, "Emerson's *Nature*: West of Ecstasy," in *West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny* (Berkeley: California, 2003).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Emerson, "Nature," 157; Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 185.

At present, man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone...his mind is imbruted and he is a selfish savage. His relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding; as by manure; the economic use of fire, wind, water, and the mariner's needle; steam, coal, chemical agriculture; the repairs of the human body by the dentist and the surgeon. This is such a resumption of power, as if a banished king should buy his territories inch by inch, instead of vaulting at once into his throne.¹⁰¹

The average American, to Emerson, is thus a selfish savage, and the institutions by which Americans and America itself are expanding westward are crude ones, cast into the company of manure and surgery. Fresonke interprets this as a rejection of Jacksonianism and its blunt unapologetic land-grabbing dreams for the west. By conflating the American nation with the as-of-yet unspoiled nature of the American West, Fresonke argues that Emerson made a political statement.¹⁰²

A Short Cut to Jacksonianism

Given the historical context of "Nature" and Fresonke's anti-Jacksonian argument, it seems useful to include brief description of exactly what Jacksonianism was in Emerson's time. Broadly, Jacksonianism was a populist movement championed by its namesake, President Andrew Jackson. Jackson himself was a skilled politician who tailored his politics to the American masses. He was also perhaps the most vocal proponent of Manifest Destiny in America's history (while his successor, James K. Polk, may have embraced the policy further).¹⁰³ During his two terms as president, which he

¹⁰¹ Emerson, "Nature," 155.

¹⁰² Fresonke, *West of Emerson*, 124.

¹⁰³ John M. Belohlavek, "'Let the Eagle Soar!': Democratic Constraints on the Foreign Policy of Andrew Jackson," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter, 1980), 36; Thomas S. Langston, "A Rumor of Sovereignty: The People, Their Presidents, and Civil Religion in the Age of Jackson," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Fall, 1993), 677.

won both times with the majority of the popular vote, Jackson practiced a form of democracy that resulted in a more fluid economy and a less stratified social order.¹⁰⁴ To invoke a cliché, the common man elected Jackson, as the majority of states had adopted universal male suffrage by the time of his first election.

Emerson understood the need for such democracy in theory, but had difficulty accepting it in practice. Jackson's populist politics were a sharp attack on the status quo; of course, before Jackson was elected, it was understood that the propertied elite of Massachusetts and Virginia essentially controlled the nation, both politically and economically. Emerson belonged to the Massachusetts elite, which meant Jackson represented something that was counter to his stability.¹⁰⁵ To his credit, Emerson did not embrace outwardly elitist arguments in criticism of Jackson, but he did express concern that giving a large number of relatively poor men the vote could lead to economic instability.¹⁰⁶

Jackson embraced Jeffersonian agrarianism, which challenged Emerson more than any other aspect of the president's politics. Old Hickory believed that, in his words, "the majority is to govern," and "the wealth and strength of a country are its population, and the best parts of that population are the cultivators of the soil. Independent farmers are everywhere the basis of society and true friends of liberty."¹⁰⁷ Jackson's support of the farmer was in step with Emerson's ideological views, but Emerson was anything but a populist who embraced majority rule. Farmers were economically important and

¹⁰⁴ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism*, 116.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Jackson, quoted in Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 98.

pastorally virtuous, but were not supposed to vote.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, Emerson viewed the populism that propelled Jackson and James K. Polk to the presidency with disdain. He could not forgive either man for being elected by so-called mob rule, and saw in Jackson and Polk only “withering selfishness and impudent vulgarity,” as Perry Miller has told.¹⁰⁹ Most of all, Emerson took issue with Jackson, and Polk after him, for embracing a reckless and militarized form of westward expansion.

An Agrarian Republic, An Agrarian West

“Nature” interacts with Jacksonianism insofar as Emerson had a history of engaging with the political movement he felt to be so troubling—but to effectively examine “Nature,” one must do so in a broader context, including but not limited to these political issues. Emerson had nothing against expansionism; he simply wishes the American people would in one grand motion take up their westward throne instead of gradually eating into it accompanied by their petty institutions.

This kind of earnest anger directed towards Jacksonianism and ill-practiced expansionism shows that Emerson still had a dream for the West: he was invested in America’s capacity for epic, and still believed that the American people were capable of remarkable deeds, as he later showed in “The Young American.” He only wished for the West (and the Wild it contains) to be occupied and used by those who appreciated and could understand it. As he wrote in “Nature,” Americans were all banished kings, and the natural world was their throne: the coming of the “kingdom of man over nature,” then,

¹⁰⁸ Perry Miller, “Emersonian Genius and the American Democracy,” in *Critical Essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Robert E. Burkholder, Joel Myerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 282-3.

¹⁰⁹ Miller, “Emersonian Genius and the American Democracy,” 282.

was the westward expansion of Americans who would respect the land.¹¹⁰ In this way, Emerson's pastoral tendencies and expansionist ideologies agreed with and built off of Jeffersonian agrarianism.

Returning to Jefferson briefly, the Virginian planter expressed an affinity for farmers, and in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, described them as “the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people,” but as Paul Thompson and Douglas Kutach have noted, Jefferson embraced agrarianism in the early republic largely because farmers' personal interests both supported and necessitated the state. As the two historians describe, because these yeomen farmers were not mobile and not financially liquid, they and their farms required both military protection and a strong economy, which equates to needing support from a government. Moreover, Jefferson saw yeomen farmers as a buffer against potentially corrupting special interests in the formative years of the republic.¹¹¹ Moving forward to the nineteenth century, Emerson developed a sort of American naturalism that was less rooted in agrarian economics and political motivations as it was in the older tradition of viewing America as a New World Eden, and its citizenry as divinely-guided settlers of a wilderness, as discussed in the introduction.¹¹² Emerson's interactions with the American West and the natural world were far less politicized than Jefferson's. Though he was mindful of Jacksonian politics and opposed them, “Nature” is not so totally a political tract. Fresonke's portrayal of “Nature” as such misses elements of the piece, as she places Emerson's writing in the context of Jacksonian politics while ignoring the traditions of American epic and pastoralism, in which Emerson participated.

¹¹⁰ Emerson, *Nature*, 157.

¹¹¹ Paul B. Thompson, Douglas N. Kutach, “Agricultural Ethics in Rural Education,” in *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 67, no. 4 (Summer 1990), 134-135.

¹¹² Thompson, Kutach, “Agricultural Ethics in Rural Education,” 136.

A Generation of Agrarian Expansionists

“The Young American,” a lecture given in 1844, would make Emerson into the staunchest supporter of Manifest Destiny, if it were not understood in the context of his greater philosophy and political opinion. The speech advocates for westward expansion, only with great social and political cautions. For its content, the essay seems surprisingly unpopular among historians: Fresonke mentions “The Young American” only once in her work, and the essay has not found its way into many anthologies or collections of Emerson’s works, even those devoted to his later lectures. Perhaps it has been overlooked for running contrary to the strains of other political essays of Emerson’s, such as “Fate” or his 1855 “Lecture on Slavery,” but regardless, “The Young American” stands as an extraordinary example of an intelligently reasoned idea of manifest destiny.

Emerson wholeheartedly embraced American exceptionalism and the idea that America’s mission of expansion was divinely supported. He began his work discussing expansionism quite literally, with reflections on how the railroad has changed America, and declared, “An unlooked for consequence of the railroad, is the increased acquaintance it has given the American people with the boundless resources of their own soil.”¹¹³ The resources and bounty of the West were long since imagined, but Emerson pointed out that in his time, Americans could begin to understand the natural wonders of their country. For Emerson, such increased awareness of America’s treasure trove of nature intensified the dream of a truly epic America stretching across the continent. He took no care to hide or hedge his position on expansionism, but supported it with the force of his craft. Early in the piece, as if flexing his rhetorical muscles, he wrote, “The

¹¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” in *Miscellanies; Embracing Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 352.

bountiful continent is ours, state on state, and territory on territory, to the waves of the Pacific sea.”¹¹⁴ Expansionist rhetoric at its finest, Emerson articulated the sentiment of Manifest Destiny in one short sentence. It merits noting, though, how Emerson described the continent as “ours.” As one might expect, that first person plural was not meant to include all Americans. Emerson delivered “The Young American” to a group of young New England merchants, all white and of similar breeding, education, and status as himself. These were the people he included when he said “ours”—for Emerson had a tendency to view all Americans generally as Anglos, and even more specifically to project the New Englander onto the rest of America.¹¹⁵

After establishing his audience and clarifying who he viewed as American, Emerson continued “Young American” to address the issue of expansionism. He did not mention westward expansion in a vacuum, though, but raised it while also talking about slavery and the generally reprehensible nature of politics he saw in America. And in one fell swoop, he promised a solution to these societal ills: “The land is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture,” he claimed. “The continent we inhabit is to be physic and food for our mind, as well as our body. The land, with its tranquilizing, sanative influences, is to repair the errors of a scholastic and traditional education, and bring us into just relations with men and things.”¹¹⁶ In a nod to one of the themes found in “The American Scholar,” Emerson diagnosed the ills of New England society (overly formalized, educated, disconnected from the land) and promised the wide expanses and untamed nature of the west as the perfect tonic that will bring man back to his purer state.

¹¹⁴ Emerson, “The Young American,” 353.

¹¹⁵ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 186.

¹¹⁶ Emerson, “The Young American,” 354.

“Young American” would not be a proper paean for the wilderness without praise of agrarianism, and Emerson did not disappoint on that front. In describing how the country has shifted and would shift, Emerson praised the farmer and discussed how agrarianism was key to the growing nation:

The habit of living in [cities]...has naturally given a strong direction to...young men to withdraw from cities and cultivate the soil...this seemed a happy tendency. For, beside all the moral benefit which we may expect from the farmer’s profession, when a man enters it considerately, this promised the conquering of the soil, plenty, and beyond this, the adorning of the country with every advantage an ornament which labor, ingenuity, and affectation for a man’s home, could suggest.¹¹⁷

The farmer, in Emerson’s reckoning, was a moral figure. He was the sort of American, one with an understanding of the land, who would be ideal for settling the West. Moreover, the farmer was perfect for expansion for he would find, settle, and cultivate as much land as he humanly could. There could be no greater tool for expansion, in Emerson’s estimation, as the farmer. He would bring to America all the industry and virtue of Augustus’ republic, and would turn the fields that stretch from the Middle West out to California into those of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Long had agrarianism been the vision for the American west, and by making statements such as these, Emerson echoed Jefferson’s ideas that the countryside would act as a purifying model against the vice and corruption of cities.¹¹⁸ Incidentally, this idea of agrarianism-as-purifying-influence may be traced back far longer than Jefferson: Augustus embraced agrarianism among other noble values that represented the best of the Roman Republic. Virgil supported Augustus’ conscious effort through his *Georgics*, poems designed, as Christine G. Perkell has noted,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 354-5.

¹¹⁸ Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire*, 69.

to “recall the Roman people to the putative peacefulness and morality of rural life.”¹¹⁹

Augustus, Virgil, Jefferson, and now Emerson all operated in the same tradition of embracing agrarianism for its easily romanticized virtues at times of political strife and national expansion.

The West’s Conditional Capacity for Epic

Emerson made a clear argument in “Young American”: America was to expand westward, led by the idealized farmer, and with the goal of entering a national epic. The essay showcases Emerson’s excitement over this vision of expansion, and at several points in the text it becomes clear that Emerson firmly believed America would achieve its epic potential. In foretelling the promise of America, Emerson wrote:

The nervous, rocky West is intruding a new and continental element into the national mind, and we shall yet have an American genius. How much better when the whole land is a garden, and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise...I think we must regard the *land* as a commanding an increasing power on the citizen, the sanative and Americanizing influence, which promises to disclose new virtues for ages to come.¹²⁰

The West was a rawer, fresher America, and the land was very much alive. His prediction that “we shall yet have an American genius” builds off of Edward Everett’s Phi Beta Kappa address, where speaking of America’s epic potential, Everett declared, “Here then a mighty work is to be fulfilled, or never by the race of mortals.”¹²¹ Emerson brought the intellectual tradition of viewing America as staging ground for an epic forward. He

¹¹⁹ Christine G. Perkell, “Vergil’s Theodicy Reconsidered,” in *Vergil at 2000*, ed. John D. Bernard (New York: AMS, 1986), 67-8.

¹²⁰ Emerson, “The Young American,” 358.

¹²¹ Edward Everett, “Oration on The Peculiar Motives to Intellectual Exertion in America,” quoted in McWilliams, *The American Epic*, 19.

guaranteed the fulfillment of the nation's potential, and stated that the land itself would help the nation and the people do so. In a deeply Emersonian view, he predicted that the land itself would allow and foster the "American genius" and the disclosure of "new virtues." These sentiments address two key issues: first, they injected the core of Emerson's philosophy into the tradition of the American epic. Second, mentioning "new virtues" spoke to the purified state the American people might have been able to achieve. Emerson updated a great American intellectual tradition and embedded his Transcendentalist thought at its very core, dressing it all in the appropriate Augustan and pastoral terms. But now it is important to examine exactly what Emerson meant by "American," an even more specific task than unpacking "ours" from earlier in the text.

Emerson played with some circuitous logic when he suggested the land would have an "Americanizing influence" on American citizens—in effect, arguing that America (the West) would make Americans (those yet in the West) American. What exactly it meant to be American, then, bears defining. Marek Paryz observes that in Emerson's time, the idea of America's strength being derived from God was central to American identity.¹²² The idea of a generic Anglo-Saxon whiteness was also naturally present in Emerson's compilation of "American," as was a sense of individuality, autonomy, and to a lesser degree, self-government.¹²³ This subject also raises issues of race: the "Young American" whom Emerson instructed, as mentioned earlier, hardly represents the country as a whole, but instead a distinct group of white New England males. By engaging in this ethnic whitewashing, Emerson constructed an idea of New

¹²² Marek Paryz, *The Postcolonial and Imperial Experience in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 93.

¹²³ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 186; Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism*, 181.

England exceptionalism; he envisioned the country's expansion as fueled by the values and identities of his fellow New Englanders. Such an attitude makes sense: Emerson's disposition to perceive of America as a thoroughly Anglicized country demanded, for the sake of philosophical consistency, that those who expand the country be those, who in his eyes, best represent the country—and so he landed on the white male of New England. Additionally, Emerson's qualifications for expansionism require an adherence to a higher morality, and in Emerson's eyes, likely no one but the men of New England would be able to meet such a standard.

As represented in "The Young American," the West was an unspoiled representation of America with an epic capacity. Exposure to the West would wash away the stains of society and modernity, leaving behind a more virtuous and much improved generation of Americans. Emerson did not guarantee this end, though: plenty of corrupting influences existed that the American people had to overcome, not the least of which was slavery. National exceptionalism was not enough for Emerson, and while he made it plain that America was a very remarkable place, he did so only in the context of discussing America in a domestic context. But, as all who preach exceptionalism do, Emerson soon turned to the rest of the world and offered a challenge. Emerson asked the young, ambitious, and well-heeled audience before him to:

...obey your heart, and be the nobility of this land. In every age of the world, there has been a leading nation, one of a more generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens were willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity, at the risk of being called, by the men of the moment, chimerical and fantastic. Which should be that nation but these States?¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Emerson, "The Young American," 375.

Implied in this exhortation was a call to action in regards to the Civil War. Earlier in the piece, Emerson qualified a statement by saying “inasmuch the great political promise of [American government] is to hold the union staunch,” but here he called outright for the bright young minds of his time to do just that and hold the nation together.¹²⁵ 1844, the year in which he delivered this speech, is considered by scholars to be at the end of Emerson’s “Silent Years” in regards to his anti-slavery stance: by this time, he began to speak out as an abolitionist, increasing in volume into the 1850s.¹²⁶ While brief and far from overt, Emerson clearly made a statement to his audience that they must act on the issue of slavery, and act morally. More topically, though, Emerson made an almost shamefully undisguised play encouraging the dominance of the United States. He framed international hegemony among issues of morality, saying America should lead with “a more generous sentiment,” minding the interests of justice and humanity around the globe—but he also was calling for the United States to be the “leading nation,” to be internationally dominant. Between such a desire and his pastoralist tendencies, Emerson practically doubled down on his imitation of Augustus—and his pastoralism was not been left out of his dream for a reinvigorated America.

Expansionism and the Edenic American Epic

With the closing lines of “The Young American,” Emerson painted a picture of America as an ancient land with ancient tendencies and grand powers. The land was home to a new sort of man, and was watched over and encouraged by a divinity. In

¹²⁵ Ibid., 351-2.

¹²⁶ Len Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: Georgia, 1990), 85.

keeping with the rest of the essay, Emerson created this sketch using grandiose language—but he also used pastoral imagery for the first time in the piece. He offered a declaration that celebrated America’s natural characteristics, while also emphasizing the role of the divine in crafting America as a new kind of nation:

This land, too, is as old as the Flood, and wants no ornament or privilege which nature could bestow. Here stars, here woods, here hills, here animals, here men abound, and the vast tendencies concur of a new order. If only the men are employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit who led us hither, and is leading us still, we shall quickly enough advance...into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded.¹²⁷

After so much unfiltered nationalist rhetoric, it is refreshing to hear mention of stars and woods and of hills and animals. That said, the natural descriptions were not included for their beauty alone: the stars, woods, hills, and animals appeared because they were very essential part of what defined America, and Emerson of all people recognized that. Such a landscape had power, too, as Emerson made plain in “Nature.” Central to the West’s allure was the idea that a purer wilderness could make it easier to achieve a higher state of being. To split hairs, Emerson did not believe actually gaining the understanding of nature would be *easier* in the West, since in his essay “Experience,” he noted “the world is all outside,” meaning nature is present everywhere equally. But the lack of any society and corruption in the West made for a more fertile landscape in which to gain such an understanding of nature.¹²⁸

Emerson opened the above quotation with a Biblical allusion, which served several purposes, not the least of which was to remind the reader of an important context for reflecting on the idea of America. By his mention of the Flood, we are reminded that

¹²⁷ Emerson, “The Young American,” 382-3.

¹²⁸ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1975), 77.

America was a Christian nation, and Emerson cleverly tied the physical age of the land to its belief system. The Biblical opening also primed the reader for the end of the quotation, in which Emerson made some very grandiose statements. He spoke of a “Spirit” that had “designs.” Moreover, that “Spirit” was “leading us” forward. Emerson could not more plainly say that America was a divinely led country, chosen and anointed over the rest of the world. Emerson also made a promise that America would be led by this “Spirit” “into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded.” In other words, God would lead America into a golden age where Americans would prosper in a way greater than the greatest societies and civilizations of human history.

All of this promise and praise came with a condition, however. Emerson wrote that such prosperity could only be realized “If only the men are employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit.” He thus called his audience to believe and to be moral, all in the context of expansionism and pastoralism. Emerson stated that in order to fulfill the epic potential of the West and of America, the American people must act morally and to obey the Spirit, or God. At face value, this may be a call to live an obedient life, free of sin, but the deeper point is clear: slavery must not be allowed to expand westward if America is to see its epic potential come true.

Emerson the Abolitionist: National Potential and Moral Failure

“The Young American” stands as Emerson’s call to a younger generation to make the country truly great. It represents his desire for America to achieve its dream of being a model for a new kind of civilization and world. One need remember, that for all of

Emerson's calls to expand westward and multiply, he was not advocating blind expansion: there was a very precise kind of America he looked to spread, it had to be spread by a particular sort of person. Just as Thoreau later asserts in "Walking," the West contained a power that would make America more purely American, and West contained a wildness by which the country was defined. Even at his most aggressive, Emerson did not abandon his principles and give into the Jacksonian argument. But he did make himself known quite clearly as a full-throated advocate of expansionism, at least when certain criteria could be met.

He later opposed Manifest Destiny in essays such as "Fate" and "Slavery," because the principles for expansion he laid down in "The Young American" were so thoroughly violated by slavery and its expansion. Emerson thus felt putting a halt to expansion was better than expanding the nation and bringing slavery along.¹²⁹ Lawrence Buell observes in the same vein that an essay Emerson published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the spring of 1862 strikes the same chord. Titled "American Civilization," Emerson argues in the lecture that material progress and expansionism would count for nothing if it was not grounded in morality, and that the only way the North and the lagging, "still-barbarian South" could be restored to a perfect Union was through emancipation. Any lesser result would separate the halves of the nation on different moral planes.¹³⁰ Through a study of Emerson's more political writings, we can see that Emerson was most decidedly not opposed to America's expansion—indeed, he fully approved it, but only if it was done in such a way that the people expanding westward *understood* the land, grew from it, and were imbued with a higher sort of morality as a result of it. Slavery's

¹²⁹ Kenneth Sacks, "Introduction," in *Emerson: Political Writings*, ed. Kenneth Sacks (New York: Cambridge, 2008), xxx.

¹³⁰ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 189.

association with Manifest Destiny violated many core principles for the Concord philosopher, and as such caused him to speak out against expansion.

From an historical perspective, the peak of Emerson's career came during the antebellum period, when events were pointing towards war but not yet forming a head. For much of his career, Emerson was decidedly anti-slavery, which was evidenced well enough in his later lectures, though he only made his stance known after a long period of public silence on the matter. Historians Sandra Harbert Petrulionis and Len Gougeon have observed that though Emerson believed abolitionism to be a "just cause...all social reform efforts impeded self reform."¹³¹ Emerson was not first and foremost an abolitionist; indeed, one would likely term him a philosopher, writer, naturalist, and poet before the word 'abolitionist' would enter into consideration. Eventually, he changed his position and took his views public. Perhaps he felt what historian Barbara Pecker has posited, that by the eve of the Civil War, the Transcendentalists became self-aware of their role "as moral philosophers" and acted accordingly.¹³²

Ultimately, Emerson's abolitionist tendencies became more and more publicized, and understandably, were taken to mean that Emerson was unilaterally opposed to Manifest Destiny. As this chapter has shown, that conclusion misses the mark fairly significantly, for Emerson was highly supportive of ideas that the American people were divinely destined and entitled to move into the West; he simply laid down conditions under which he would support such expansion, and those conditions were not met.

Emerson redefined the American intellectual tradition, from his advancement of the idea of America-as-epic to texts that I have not addressed, such as "The American

¹³¹ Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "Antislavery Reform," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, et al. (New York: Oxford, 2010), 212.

¹³² Petrulionis, "Antislavery Reform," 219.

Scholar.” His contributions were countless, and his influence nearly boundless. Next, this paper explores the works of his most notable pupil, Henry David Thoreau. In Thoreau’s own way, he further advanced the ideas of America’s capacity for epic and the promise of the American west. Indeed, Thoreau also offered support, at times strongly, for western expansion—but very much along the same conditional lines as Emerson. Thoreau’s interactions with issues of manifest destiny and American expansionism were generally more politicized than Emerson’s, but he always returned to the same issues of natural purity and individual harmony with the land that motivated Emerson’s arguments.

Chapter Two
Henry David Thoreau: America's Screaming Conscience

Thoreau, like his mentor Emerson, became a significant contributor to the American intellectual tradition over the course of his career. More than any other American figure (possibly except John Muir), Thoreau advanced the literary aspect of the American pastoral tradition. Where Emerson blended his philosophy and politics in pastoral works like “Nature,” Thoreau embraced a narrative approach; certainly *Walden* and many of Thoreau’s lesser-known works have philosophical and political merit, but they are works of literature first and foremost. While also a philosopher and an activist, Thoreau stands as the chronicler of the American landscape and as the literary prophet for the potential of the American West.

Thoreau, like Emerson, came to offer conditional support for the westward expansion of America. Unlike Emerson, though, Thoreau set far more defined terms by which expansion was acceptable. He was also an active and outspoken abolitionist from early in his career, and the essence of Thoreau was his changeable nature: At one moment, he may write in lush, pastoral praise of the eastern woods or the western wild, and then immediately pivot to a scathing criticism of the American government over the Mexican-American War or slavery. Thoreau’s politics are almost always present in his writings, and while he was quick to lambaste the nation’s government, Thoreau constantly expressed faith and hope in the American people. This idea emerged in Emerson, particularly in “The Young American,” but Thoreau drives it home further: in his vision of westward expansion, the American people and the American people alone—free of any corrupting societal influences, from slavery to even the lesser

trappings of society such as newspapers and town gossip—are able to benefit from and preserve the Wilderness of the West. His faith in the people’s potential for greatness was enormous. And so, like Emerson before him, Thoreau advanced the American pastoral tradition, and he too predicted that America will fulfill its destiny as a grander country, as a place of epic, as long as it contains and cures itself of its ills. He very clearly and consistently advocated for America’s westward expansion while managing a rather fluid conception of America. Importantly, Thoreau emphasized that the West’s potential depends upon the Americans who settle it being virtuous—and so Thoreau’s construction and vision of western settlers does not allow for just any (or all) Americans to go west. Instead, Thoreau selected the Americans who he deems most morally fit for the task, and does so by engaging with his pastoral background as well as a tradition developed through history and a sense of place. The New England farmer became his ideal western settler, for reasons of pastoralism, historical traditions, and New England cultural conceptions that this chapter explores.

Thoreau’s pastoral writings often merge the natural landscape of America and the country itself; doing so makes sense given his argument that America derives its capacity for greatness from the nature and wilderness it contains. Political works, however, show Thoreau separating the state from the landscape and setting an essential boundary: in such works, he argued that if the corrupting influences of the state and its attendant society extend to the wilderness of the West, then the wilderness would become polluted, and the land’s potential would be squandered. This chapter focuses in depth on Thoreau’s perceptions of the American wilderness and its relationship to the American state, all in the context of Thoreau’s highly conditional support for America’s westward expansion.

Because Thoreau stands as the most literary contributor to the American pastoral tradition, I spend a significant portion of this chapter analyzing his more literary (i.e. less political) writings to illustrate his blend of pastoralism. I consider two texts: Thoreau's early travelogue "A Walk to Wachusett," and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Above all other influences, Thoreau was very impacted by Virgil, and fittingly so—his engagement with the Roman poet is the most active and in-depth of any prominent writer and/or intellectual who forwarded the idea of America-as-pastoral-epic. Thoreau frequently invokes the *Aeneid*, as well as the *Georgics* and *Eclogues*, and I offer detailed textual analysis of Thoreau's selections of Virgil, when appropriate. Thoreau's literary tendencies and engagement with the pastoral tradition create a foundation upon which his more political and overtly expansionist works may be analyzed and understood. Once I construct a substantial literary and pastoral profile of Thoreau, I will move to consider Thoreau in his historical moment, then focusing on such texts as "Civil Disobedience," "A Plea for Captain John Brown," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "Walking." Exploring his more political texts after having a pastoral grounding allows for a fuller understanding of Thoreau's views regarding expansionism and slavery.

Pastoral Beginnings

"A Walk to Wachusett" shows a younger Thoreau attempting to find his voice amidst a blend of pastoral odes and experiential philosophizing. Written in 1842, it appeared in *The Boston Miscellany* in 1843, becoming his first published travelogue

piece.¹³³ Before “Wachusett,” two of Thoreau’s works were featured in Margaret Fuller’s Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, while the *Yeoman’s Gazette* of Boston printed his first public work.¹³⁴ He had faced far more rejections than acceptances for publication, however: after his first two pieces appeared in Boston publications, he headed to New York in May 1843 seeking better fortune in the literary world. His connections in Boston did little to help him in New York City, and his trip was brief.¹³⁵ Thoreau returned to Massachusetts disillusioned, a condition that was not helped by receiving rejections from Margaret Fuller at *The Dial* for two pieces, including “Wachusett.”¹³⁶

With one or two notable exceptions, the Transcendentalist writers were not known for their savvy or success in publishing their works, and Thoreau was among the more inept at the beginning of his career. Fortunately, both for Thoreau and for the American literary tradition, his friend, peer, and Transcendental hanger-on Nathaniel Hawthorne had a good deal of business sense in regards to the publishing industry. By Hawthorne’s encouragement, Thoreau took “Wachusett” to Nathan Hale, editor of *The Boston Miscellany*, and succeeded in having the work published.¹³⁷ It would become the first of two wildly successful early pieces (the second being his *Natural History of Massachusetts*), and would go a good ways toward launching Thoreau’s literary career.

¹³³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 201-2, 206.

¹³⁴ “Library,” The Walden Woods Project, accessed 28 November 2012, http://www.walden.org/Library/The_Writings_of_Henry_David_Thoreau:_The_Digital_Collection/Essays.

¹³⁵ Robert Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know: What the Prophet of Environmentalism Really Meant* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 109-110.

¹³⁶ William Howarth, ed., *Walking with Thoreau: A Literary Guide to the Mountains of New England*. (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 18.

¹³⁷ Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 18. The familiarly named editor was the nephew of the more famous Nathan Hale, patriot and spy during the Revolution.

Thoreau's Classical America

Most of Thoreau's writings probe the wilderness for the epic spirit and nature of America, as first shown in "Wachusett" while embracing the Virgilian and American pastoral ideal. Thoreau consciously and vocally modeled his narrative structure after Homeric and Virgilian epics.¹³⁸ "Wachusett," for one, is a tale of a traveler who separates himself from his familiar surroundings (society), visits new climbs and realms, and subsequently undergoes revelations and/or periods of personal development, after which he is ready to return to his home. While this structure is highly Homeric/Virgilian, even in the context of Thoreau it should not sound unique. "Wachusett" is the first of Thoreau's works to follow this pattern, but is certainly not the only one, for *Walden*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and *The Maine Woods* all follow the same loose formula borrowed from classical epic.

In addition to basic guidelines, Virgil provides a sort of touchstone and point of grounding for Thoreau. Where the *Aeneid* offers Thoreau a structure that turns his often free-flowing stream of ideas and musings into something more orderly and logical,¹³⁹ Virgil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues* offer a point of contact and a source of legitimation for Thoreau's pastoral sensibilities. It is not that Thoreau would have avoided his naturalistic musings were it not for Virgil, but that Virgil's work some two thousand years earlier provided evidence for Thoreau of a grander tradition of the earth and the splendor of nature that has existed throughout history. Virgil became Thoreau's main point of reference in adding a literary perspective to the American pastoral tradition. His literary approach contrasts with Emerson's. Where Emerson focused more on the relationship of

¹³⁸ Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 18.

¹³⁹ Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 18.

the self to nature, Thoreau mainly engaged with the idea of pastoralism and the natural world itself.

As an early work, “Wachusett” nicely represents Thoreau’s Virgilian pastoralism, and shows the beginnings of his relationship with the land. Thoreau’s description of his westward hike from Concord and his ascent up Mount Wachusett is steeped in classical references and pastoralist imagery, crafted to deliberately present and apply Virgil in the context of the New World. From the lines where Thoreau and his hiking companion, John Fuller, departed from Emerson’s house in Concord, and through to the end of the piece, Virgilian references abound. The opening passage of the work describes a lushly romanticized view of the mountains of western Massachusetts as seen from Concord. The “dim outlines of mountains in our horizon,” Thoreau wrote, inspired in Fuller and him “allusions” that they, “with Virgil and his compeers roamed the Etrurian and Thessalian hills.”¹⁴⁰ The introduction to “Wachusett” brims with the same earnestness that enabled Thoreau to embark upon his later experiment at Walden—though an easy target for a cynic, Thoreau’s nostalgia for older traditions and a past he never experienced is deeply palpable in this text, and unbridled in its sincerity. The passage also very intentionally and deliberately invokes classical pastoralism, with Thoreau’s references to Virgil functioning as signposts for the rest of the piece. Not only does the passage prime the reader for both the subject matter and style that is to come (a tactic that Thoreau used often in his early writings, before both he and his style were better known), but it allows Thoreau to explicitly declare that he and “Wachusett” are with a very deep tradition, translating the classics to the American frontier.

¹⁴⁰ Thoreau, “A Walk to Wachusett,” quoted in Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 19.

Thoreau also played with issues of expansionism in “Wachusett,” articulating in the essay his earliest written views on the matter. His hike out to Wachusett is a hike westward, in theory to the frontier, and though the mountain was only about thirty-five miles from his home, the movement west holds significance. Thoreau scholar Robert Sullivan has observed “the west [was] a direction with classical significance to Thoreau—into the west is a trip to the past for the writer interested in the ancients.”¹⁴¹ moreover, the idea of traveling westward on foot from an American city into the wilderness strongly channels ideas of expansionism and Manifest Destiny. Ideologically, Thoreau would eventually embrace an altered view of Jefferson’s expansionist agrarianism, and in “Wachusett” he offered an update to Jefferson’s rural mindset by calling for a re-ruralization of the urban. Like Emerson before him, Thoreau encouraged an embracing of the land and both a partial rejection and expulsion of the trappings of civilization from the frontier lands. He saw these lands as essential, and believed it was crucial to ensure they remained wild and untamed. In this context and for these ends, Thoreau cast Virgil as both muse and forerunner, and in “Wachusett,” Thoreau drew inspiration and wisdom from the Roman poet as he worked to define his own neo-classical American pastoralism.

Where Emerson is the “transparent eyeball” from “Nature,” marveling at the divinity of the American landscape, Thoreau became a farmer, enjoying the land at ease. His pastoral sensibilities become evident early in “Wachusett” after he provides a sort of mission statement for his writing and his thought. Beginning with a deeply pastoral

¹⁴¹ Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don’t Know*, 102.

description of a mid-day rest he and Fuller took, possibly atop Wataquadock Hill in Bolton, on their journey out to the mountain, Thoreau described their surroundings:

Before noon we had reached the highlands... (affording the first fair and open prospect into the west), and there, on the top of a hill, in the shade of some oaks, near to where a spring bubbled out from a leaden pipe, we rested during the heat of the day, reading Virgil and enjoying the scenery.¹⁴²

This picture of rest and repose could only be more pastoral if Thoreau and Fuller were farmers resting after a day's work. Thoreau's lofty reflections continue, reflecting on Virgil and the passage of time, as he wrote, "we could get no further into the Aeneid than '*atque altae moenia Romae*'¹⁴³... before we were constrained to reflect by what myriad tests a work of genius has to be tried; that Virgil, away in Rome, two thousand years off, should have to unfold his meaning, the inspiration of Italian vales, to the pilgrim on New England hills."¹⁴⁴ This is the first obvious point in "Wachusett" where the author spun his neoclassical pastoralism into his Transcendental philosophizing: that is, Thoreau did not simply use Virgil for decorative purposes, but deployed him to probe deeper into the human experience, to search for some timeless essence that the self-described "pilgrim" sought in the weather-beaten mountains of New England. Thoreau conveyed as much himself after the above lines, continuing to write, "This life so raw and modern, that so civil and ancient; and yet we read Virgil mainly to be reminded of the identity of human nature in all ages."¹⁴⁵ Virgil's pastoralism provided Thoreau with an anchor, a point of reference for a human experience that is unaffected by time. That Virgil could translate so well to the "New England pilgrim" and his landscape stands as a sign of America's

¹⁴² Thoreau, "Wachusett," quoted in Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 24.

¹⁴³ Translating to 'And the wall of high Rome,' this is the seventh line of Book I of the Aeneid. They did not make very much progress with the text before their minds began to wander.

¹⁴⁴ Thoreau, "Wachusett," quoted in Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 24.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

uniqueness: the landscape thus contains the ancient, as these Virgilian themes resonated with the land, and so Thoreau offered his praise for America's wild. The American landscape reflects and contains the classical, while surpassing the Old World in its pure, newly born state.

Anti-Urban, Looking Westward

“Wachusett” also contains the anti-urban strain of Thoreau, an identity that he creates by mining the Virgilian and Augustan traditions of embracing the land and its purity over urban life. Thoreau sought to rekindle a celebration of the pastoral, to praise the land and to defend it from increasing urbanization. Like Emerson, Thoreau found urbanization to be a barrier to finding a truer identity in the land. At the end of the first day of hiking, Thoreau and Fuller stayed in an unnamed village (now West Sterling), after hiking twenty-five miles from Concord.¹⁴⁶ Upon finding their lodgings, the men were presented with a copy of a local newspaper, which Thoreau took to be an unseemly reminder of civilization that did not belong in an area he saw as being carved out from the woods, where the “forest look[ed] wilder than ever.”¹⁴⁷ He reacted in curmudgeonly fashion, and snapped at his audience, demanding them to ““Let [the country] recline on its own everlasting hills, and not be looking out from their summits for some petty Boston or New York in the horizon.”¹⁴⁸ In his own way, Thoreau here plays Tityrus, a

¹⁴⁶ Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 27.

¹⁴⁷ Thoreau, “Wachusett,” quoted in Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 26.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27. It is worth noting that now, on a clear day, one can see the Boston skyline from the summit of Mount Wachusett, and that if one were to eavesdrop on visitors to the mountaintop, most would at some point exclaim that they could see the John Hancock Tower. Doubtless Thoreau would be pained by this overly literal disobedience to his demand.

farmer from Virgil's Eclogue I, aware that he "used to be silly enough to think the big / City of Rome was comparable to the town."¹⁴⁹ In Thoreau's estimation, the countryside harbored a far superior intellect and environment than any city could.

Above all else, Thoreau sought through his hike to reach a place where he might gain a greater communion with the earth and become his own sort of "transparent eye-ball." He found this atop Wachusett, whereby he increased his pastoral language and dropped his accusations against the urban in favor of a more contemplative discourse on the populations of New England. As the sun began to set, Thoreau and Fuller took in the lands below them from the summit, "[their] eyes rested on no painted ceiling nor carpeted hall, but on skies of Nature's painting, and hills and forests of her embroidery...it was a place where gods might wander, so solemn and solitary."¹⁵⁰ The image of gods wandering across a serene countryside is hardly restricted to Virgil, but this is yet another classical allusion—the goddess Diana comes to mind via this subtle invocation. As he prepared to cap off the night, Thoreau's pastoral paean reaches a climax as he draws from the ending lines of Virgil's Eclogue I, quoting "*et iam summa procul villarum culmina fumant, / Maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae,*" or "and now the tops of the villas smoke afar off, / and the shadows fall longer from the high mountains."¹⁵¹ Thoreau and Virgil both captured a certain stillness, a rural idyll that lies at the core of pastoralism—they portray intimate moments of earnest, good-naturedness, and marry man with his natural surroundings. Take, for example, Thoreau's description of how "the moon silently rose up, and took possession of that part [of the sky]. And then the same

¹⁴⁹ Virgil, "Eclogues," in *The Eclogues of Virgil*, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 8.

¹⁵⁰ Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 30.

¹⁵¹ Thoreau, "Wachusett," quoted in Howarth, *Walking with Thoreau*, 30, Thoreau's translation.

scene was repeated on the west side, as far as the Connecticut [River] and the Green Mountains, and the sun's rays fell on us two alone, of all New England men."¹⁵² The calm Thoreau and Fuller discovered and the pleasantness they achieved when they reached a sort of communion with nature vastly overruled the displeasure incurred by the newspaper in West Sterling or by the trappings of society. These two "New England men," just as Virgilian farmers did, achieved a peace and stillness that can only be found in the land. This, then, is what Emerson and Thoreau came to see in the West—the power and possibility for such moments of revelation and perspective, for seeing the beauty and divine in nature. Thoreau had to search for this Wildness, but he believed the West to be rife with such a natural spirit—and so for this reason, we see Thoreau eventually evolve his pastoralism to support the issue of America's westward expansion.

A Week, and Eclogue VII

Thoreau's next travelogue piece, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, continued the themes of pastoralism and human experience, as well as the Virgilian influence that the author explored in "Wachusett." In *A Week*, Thoreau wrote more consciously, was more precise in his naturalistic musings, and above all, was more explicit in his thoughts relationships between Americans and the wilderness. Thoreau first found his thoughts drifting to Virgil when resting on the banks of the Merrimack River during *A Week*. After gathering some plums along the riverbank, he mused:

Virgil's poetry...has often an acquired and accidental value...proving that man is still man in the world. It is pleasant to meet with such still lines as,

¹⁵² Ibid., 30. Howarth notes that the Connecticut and Green Mountains are 70 miles northwest, meaning Thoreau had an unusually clear evening on the summit.

“Iam laeto turgent in palmite gemma”;
Now the buds swell on the joyful stem.

“Strata iacent passim sua quaeque sub arbore poma”;
The apples lie scattered everywhere, each under its tree.

In an ancient and dead language, any recognition of living nature attracts us. These are such sentences as were written while grass grew and water ran. It is no small recommendation when a book will stand the test of mere unobstructed sunshine and daylight.¹⁵³

Thoreau’s selection of Virgil comes from Eclogue VII, which bears notably bittersweet and foreboding overtones, more so than the rest of the work. It features four characters—Meliboeus, Daphnis, Corydon, and Thyrsis—all of whom have appeared earlier in the work, but two of the characters seem to buck fate in the poem. Eclogue V mentions a character named Daphnis, who was depicted as “*crudeli funere*,” or cruelly dead, and while Eclogue VII is a different poem and thus perhaps this is a different Daphnis, the commonality is striking and doubtless intentional.¹⁵⁴ Meliboeus first appeared in Eclogue I: a goatherd deprived of his pastures, he is the tragic figure of the first poem, and stands to represent the overtaking of the rural by the urban, as shown in Thoreau’s usage of the character in “Wachusett.” In Eclogue VII, Meliboeus is shown to be in possession of his lands again. Combining this with the state of Daphnis, Virgil has created a unique state of affairs—it is possible Daphnis is another individual, not the named dead, and it is possible that the events of this poem take place before both Eclogues I and V. Were the events of Eclogue VII to take place before those of I and V, the poem then bears a very grim sense of foreboding: Meliboeus is to lose his land, the

¹⁵³ Henry David Thoreau, “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,” in *Henry David Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden; or, Life in the Woods, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 73-4.

¹⁵⁴ Ferry, *The Eclogues of Virgil*, 36-7; xiii.

pastoral dream dying, and Daphnis is to lose his life, an even more regrettable extension of the death of the countryside. If it is to occur after I but before V, Meliboeus ought to be glad in being restored to his land, though the audience's joy for him is tempered, for a more serious fate is to be meted out to one of his companions. Lastly, one could argue the poem falls in chronological order with the rest of the Eclogues, and the Daphnis we meet is a different person—but as an explanation, that does not suffice to describe the eeriness of having a character named after a previously dead man, and so we are left to feel uneasy about Virgil's pastoral descriptions here.

Eclogue VII takes place in limbo: it showcases the idle pleasures of the rural, pastoral life, but the poem does so while illustrating the fleetingness of the lifestyle, its appreciation, and its ability to exist in an ever-modernizing world—all certainly elements for which Thoreau deliberately invoked it, and which resonated with his historical present. Translator and Virgilian scholar David Ferry describes the use of Daphnis in Eclogue VII as being holy and magical, with undertones of resurrection, and he also argues that there is a deeper reassurance to Daphnis' words when he tells Meliboeus: *“huc ades, o Meliboee, caper tibi saluus et haedi; / et, si quid cessare potes, requiesce sub umbra. / Huc ipsi potum venient per prata iuuenci, hic uiridis tenera praetexit harundine ripas / Mincius, eque sacra resonant examina quercu.”*¹⁵⁵ In the midst of strife and uncertainty, this instruction is deeply calming. Daphnis is telling his companion to ‘Come here, o Meliboeus, your goats and kids are safe, and if you can cease what you are doing, rest in the shade. Your steer will come by here themselves, through the green meadow, to drink from Mincius, where the tender reeds border the riverbanks, and

¹⁵⁵ Ferry, *The Eclogues of Virgil*, 52.

swarms [of bees] echo around the equally ancient oak.’¹⁵⁶ There is a sense of tranquility, an idea that the world will continue on by itself as it always has. Daphnis is reminding his fellow goatherd that nature has its own ways, and is capable of seeing after itself—and Thoreau’s sense of pastoralism very much ties into this idea of nature as self-reliant.

To return to the lines Thoreau used specifically, there exists a very clear sense of nature’s independence and the pleasure one can derive from the wilderness. Thoreau saw timelessness in Virgil’s pastoral descriptions and their simple pleasures. And he also expressed his amazement at how Virgil’s representation of nature allowed reader and writer to span two thousand years in the simple appreciation of natural surroundings. “Man is still man in the world,” as Thoreau wrote, because man still appreciates the world around him and pauses to reflect on the rhythms of nature.¹⁵⁷ Virgil’s subject matter, the same as Thoreau’s, is timeless—nature was present when he wrote the Latin, and still exists in Thoreau’s time, despite the departure of Virgil’s language. Such endurance, being able to pass “test of mere unobstructed sunshine and daylight” that Thoreau spoke of, is what Thoreau attempted to reach in his writings on the connection between the individual, the land, and to a lesser extent, society. He searched America for something that may be common to all human experience, across time and place, and he took his inspiration from that timelessness he finds in Virgil.

¹⁵⁶ My translation.

¹⁵⁷ Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 73.

Natural Divinity and Book VI of the Aeneid

The essence of nature and the unchanging and human experiences it can provide are Thoreau's intellectual and spiritual fascinations, and he uses Virgil to better understand and appreciate nature. Later in *A Week*, Thoreau offers a quotation from the *Aeneid* to describe those who live with an awareness of the world around them:

There have been heroes for whom this world seemed expressly prepared, as if creation had at last succeeded; whose daily life was the stuff of which our dreams are made, and whose presence enhanced the beauty and amplex of Nature herself. Where they walked, "*Largior hic campos aether et lumine vestit / purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.*" "Here a more copious air invests the fields, and clothes with purple light; and they know their own sun and their own stars."¹⁵⁸

The quotation from Virgil comes from Book VI of the *Aeneid*, wherein Aeneas visits Hades and meets with a variety of shades, including Dido, and his father Anchises. The passage Thoreau chose, however, describes the precise moment when Aeneas enters the "*fortunatorum nemorum*" or fortunate/blessed woods, otherwise known as the Elysian Fields.¹⁵⁹ The most idyllic part of the underworld, the Elysian Fields are the resting place of heroes, and in the *Aeneid*, Virgil identifies many of the great figures of the epic cycle. In subject alone, these lines from Virgil are striking, given what they describe and the heroes associated with the landscape. But the passage has even more power when the reader remembers the present context—that Aeneas has traveled across Styx and into Hades, a rare feat reserved for the loftiest of Greco-Roman heroes (and he does so in better fashion than Odysseus before him).¹⁶⁰ Book VI of the *Aeneid* is entirely spectacular in its scope as well as its language. As one of the more powerful parts of the epic, it is

¹⁵⁸ Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 308.

¹⁵⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.639.

¹⁶⁰ Elanor Winsor Leach, "Viewing the *Spectacula* of Aeneid 6," in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1999), 112-127.

appropriate that from it Thoreau selected a naturalistic quotation to describe those who lived perfectly within creation. Those individuals, by Thoreau's invocation of Virgil here, were truly heroic, exceptional among humanity. Such is the state of being to which Thoreau strives, and which Emerson emphasized in "Nature." Becoming someone who knows his or her "own sun and...own stars" may very well be the ultimate goal for the Transcendentalists. As was the case with Emerson, and as Thoreau eventually came to believe, the American west presented a grand and unique opportunity for the American people to become such individuals.

From Naturalist to Idealist

Thoreau's travelogues are tidy representations of his naturalistic idealism: through pieces like "Wachusett" and *A Week*, readers can gain a sense of how Thoreau perceived and valued the natural world. He invoked Virgil frequently, and spared no lush sensory detail when describing a plain or the view from a summit. Looking to the rest of his writings, the most powerful of Thoreau's works do not follow this travelogue convention. Consider first his two most famous works—*Walden* and "Resistance to Civil Government," or "Civil Disobedience," and two of his most under-appreciated yet deeply significant works, "Slavery in Massachusetts" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown." In these four pieces, Thoreau displayed an increasing amount of activism to accompany his idealism. He engaged more with the historical landscape of his present, as opposed to idly reflecting on Virgil on a hilltop. Like Emerson eventually did, Thoreau updated his pastoralism to interact with his historical and political present.

The ideas Thoreau espoused in his early travelogues are very apparent in *Walden*, “Civil Disobedience,” and “A Plea” alike: his early works form the abstract foundation for his more activist discourses on society, government, and the role of the individual. Where “Wachusett” is almost strictly intellectual and reflective, *Walden* shows Thoreau’s values in action, and while *A Week* vaguely attacks elements of society for repressing nature, “Civil Disobedience” and “A Plea” mount an attack on society for allowing the existence of slavery. One other work, “Walking,” an essay written first in 1851 and published posthumously in 1862, strikes a balance between travelogue and political tract, musing on both landscapes and the nature of America. “Walking” ultimately emerges as Thoreau’s most directly engaged work with the intellectual tradition of America-as-epic and westward expansion, and this chapter explores his engagement in great detail. More than anything, Thoreau’s abolitionist sentiments color his expansionist philosophy. Unlike Emerson, Thoreau offered vocal criticism of slavery first, and only later did he come to support westward expansion, albeit conditionally. Evaluating his more activist pieces in the light of his earlier pastoralist and Virgilian works lets us see the evolution of Thoreau’s opinions on government and society. Moreover, it lets us see the development of Thoreau in historical context, and how his works and philosophies changed and were shaped by the issues of his time.

Thoreau’s Historical Present and the Evolution of Manifest Destiny

For Thoreau, the greatest issue standing in the way of a moral and virtuous process of westward expansion was the institution of slavery. As was discussed in the

introduction, Jefferson's failure to enact restrictions on slavery in the territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase left the west open to slavery. By the time Thoreau delivered "Slavery in Massachusetts" in 1854, the prospect of civil war was increasingly evident, and slavery had already spread westward significantly. One can imagine that the Missouri Compromise, passed in 1820, at one point gave a young Thoreau hope for a West free of slavery, but the landscape changed quickly. 1850 saw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, which Thoreau spoke against in his lecture-cum-essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts" for how the law required northern states to actively work in returning runaway slaves.¹⁶¹ And in 1854, shortly before Thoreau delivered "Slavery in Massachusetts," the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed, effectively undoing the Missouri Compromise's geographical restriction on slavery.¹⁶² The last blow to any prospect of containment came in 1857, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, thus removing the only geographic barrier against slavery.¹⁶³

Thoreau's vision of a morally purer West grew less and less plausible with each step towards war, and in his abolitionist works, we may see an intersection of his political and pastoral sides. Given how rapidly slavery was expanding in the 1840s and 1850s, Thoreau's fight for abolition was also a fight for the preservation of the American west. In this fight, Thoreau's conditional support of expansion became very well defined, and his personal vision for a morally purer West came into focus, even if it was fairly implausible: in short, Thoreau believed the West could only reach its potential as a

¹⁶¹ Sam McGuire Worley, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the role of the Cultural Critic* (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 51.

¹⁶² T.K. Hunter, "Geographies of Liberty: A Brief Look at Two Cases," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, eds. Timothy Patrick McCarthy, John Stauffer (New York: New Press, 2006), 58.

¹⁶³ John S. Vishneski, III, "What the Court Decided in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*," *The American Journal of Legal History*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October, 1988): 390, accessed via JSTOR.

purifying force and American Eden if slavery was not extended into its wildernesses, if American (specifically East Coast urban) society did not infringe upon the lands, and most importantly, if the West was populated by virtuous people. The remainder of this chapter deals with how Thoreau reached this set of conclusions, how his pastoral perspective influenced these conclusions, and the solutions he proposed for meeting said conclusions. Abolishing slavery was one of Thoreau's answers, rather obviously, but when envisioning who could settle the West best and in the most virtuous fashion, Thoreau's pastoral perspective and native character provided an answer: the New England farmer. And like Emerson before him, Thoreau was a very conditional supporter of westward expansion, but a far more vocal political voice and critic of the government's role in forwarding an agenda of Manifest Destiny.

A New England Tradition: The Importance of Place

Whenever Thoreau cast his gaze westward, his perception of the vast wilderness and its potential was informed by his identity as a New Englander. The combination of Thoreau's focus on place with his understanding of the historical and traditional New England way of life explains how he came to choose the New England farmer as the ideal western settler. Like Emerson, Thoreau's perception of the west and love of agrarianism departs sharply from Jefferson's politically and economically motivated agrarianism, as discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁶⁴ Instead, Thoreau's pastoral background motivated his praise and love of the farmer. Where Jefferson was limited in his praise of farmers as

¹⁶⁴ See chapter 1, section titled: *Hinting Westward: Expansionism in "Nature"*. Relevant source: Thompson, Kutach, "Agricultural Ethics in Rural Education," 134-6.

virtuous men, Thoreau openly praised farmers for the pastoral virtues they embodied. Both Emerson and Thoreau more specifically cast New England farmers as the ideal settlers for the West—but where Emerson chose New England farmers almost exclusively on the basis of his whitewashed, highly Anglicized view of America, for Thoreau, the decision was more informed by a sense of historic place and identity.

The tradition of American pastoralism in which he participated had its roots in New England. While all farmers were virtuous for reasons of pastoralism in Thoreau's mind, such virtues were, for reasons of historical identity and place, most evident in New England farmers. Regional and geographic elements of New England imbued its farmers with an elevated set of virtues in this tradition of place; as Joseph Wood has described, traditional New England settlements—i.e. villages founded as loosely-defined farming communities—were altered, beginning in the nineteenth century, and came to represent the idea of a new Eden.¹⁶⁵ In the minds of nineteenth-century Americans, rugged, hardworking, and virtuous Puritans lived in village similar to theirs. But this belief, as this chapter discusses later, was based on nothing more than a myth.¹⁶⁶ Wood places the beginnings of the New England village tradition with William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation," and as the introduction to this thesis discussed, Bradford's language was strongly Edenic. Thoreau's interpretation of New England was less overtly influenced by his religious beliefs, but he certainly subscribed to the ideas of the land imbuing one with greater virtue and to the ideas of the New England village as representing a moral idea.

The conception of village-as-ideal-construct, however, was created in the early nineteenth century in perhaps the most significant alteration ever made to the American

¹⁶⁵ Joseph S. Wood, "'Build, Therefore, Your Own World': The New England Village As Settlement Ideal," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 81, no 1. (March 1991), 32-34.

¹⁶⁶ Wood, "'Build, Therefore, Your Own World," 34.

pastoral tradition. Puritan villages, as Joseph Wood carefully observes, were disparate farming settlements with little communal unification. But in the nineteenth century, when increasing urbanization and industrialization began to seriously challenge Jeffersonian agrarianism, Romantic New Englanders forged a link to their puritan forbearers, thus preserving the pastoral-agrarian idea New Englanders had come to see in their past. In this false history, as outlined in the introduction, villages represented the pastoral ideas of gaining virtue by working the land and so forth.¹⁶⁷ Emerson and Thoreau rose into this movement, not only at the right time but also in a very appropriate place, as nineteenth-century Concord was exactly the kind of village the myth romanticized. This myth's construction becomes even more stunning given the rapidity of its spread: M.J. Bowden has observed that the myth of the Puritan village, as well as the idea of a generic New Englander descended from Puritans was held as fact after only one generation.¹⁶⁸ Such quickness, in turn, shows how willing nineteenth-century New Englanders were to embrace a past that aggrandized them. Without considering historical reality, the rest of white America soon followed in perceiving New England as a homogenous landscape populated by virtuous descendants of Puritans and representative of America's early days of Edenic settlement in the wilderness.¹⁶⁹ Given the speed and earnestness with which Americans accepted the myth, Thoreau was easily able to cast the new Eden of the West in New England's image. As his writings grew more political, Thoreau's conditional advocacy for westward expansion grew more apparent. As the rest of this chapter will

¹⁶⁷ Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997), 136; 135-160.

¹⁶⁸ M.J. Bowden, "Invented Tradition and Academic Convention in Geographical Thought about New England," *GeoJournal*, vol. 26, no. 2, History of Geographical Thought (February 1992), 188, accessed via JSTOR.

¹⁶⁹ Bowden, "Invented Tradition and Academic Convention in Geographical Thought about New England," 189-191.

discuss, Thoreau used the pastoral tradition to project New England's identity as the first Eden-esque settlement in the New World onto the West and what would be the second possibility for creating an American Eden, all the while emphasizing his conditions for supporting expansionism.

Disobedient Man

“Resistance to Civil Government,” based on a lecture delivered in 1848 and published in 1849, was Thoreau's earliest and one of his loudest condemnations of the United States government. Most famous for its role as an anarcho-pacifist manifesto, “Civil Disobedience” shows Thoreau in his most politically engaged state. In a relatively short span of pages, he offered passionate discourse on the Mexican-American War and his view of the United States government, before moving onto the Fugitive Slave Act, the issue of Bleeding Kansas, and the possibility of disunion. In considering these issues, he also broached the topics of Manifest Destiny and the institution of slavery. Thoreau wasted no time in attacking the government over the Mexican-American War: he began his essay by stating that government is a corruptible tool that does not always serve the will of the people, and called for his audience to “witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.”¹⁷⁰ Here, his rhetoric meets with historical fact, to a degree. The war was popular among landholders in southern and western states, largely because the war would expand slavery. Even in the historical moment, there were no illusions about the war's true purpose, which was

¹⁷⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 1.

acquiring territory from Mexico. Southern slaveholders, then, were eager for the U.S. to acquire land to the west of Texas and to the south of the 36°30' line that limited slavery's expansion under the Missouri Compromise, and were likely hopeful about bringing slavery to any lands acquired in the west, regardless of the Compromise line. However, many northerners and abolitionists staunchly opposed the war, which would have been Thoreau's perspective.¹⁷¹ Additionally, President Polk's *casus belli* rang hollow: he claimed that Mexican soldiers crossed the Rio Grande, killed American soldiers, and then returned to Mexico, thereby committing an act of war.¹⁷² Among Whig dissidents, John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln challenged Polk's story, but the majority of Congress feared seeming anti-American or inadequately patriotic, and so supported Polk's cause. As Thoreau criticized in "Civil Disobedience," Polk was able to use the standing government as a tool for actions that the citizenry did not necessarily support.

This historical landscape makes Thoreau's words ring truer, though they were not immediately received as such. The original lecture in 1848 was sparsely attended, and despite the growing appetite in the North—especially in Massachusetts—for such radicalism, "Civil Disobedience" in its first form was a flop. Elizabeth Peabody, the Transcendentalist writer, bookstore owner, and publisher, offered the piece a second life in 1849 when looking for submissions for her new journal, *Aesthetic Papers*. Unfortunately for Thoreau at the time, the journal's audience was miniscule, and those who did review it were dismissive of "Civil Disobedience" to the point of calling it

¹⁷¹ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 185.

¹⁷² Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2002), 6-7.

“crazy,” as the *Boston Post* did.¹⁷³ These perspectives changed sharply one year later when, in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. Suddenly Thoreau’s radical doctrine of abolitionism, anti-expansionism, and anarcho-pacifism became far more appealing to his contemporaries in the North; individuals began agreeing with his declaration that if a law “requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then...break the law.”¹⁷⁴ Over the course of the early 1850s, abolitionist sentiment intensified, particularly in Massachusetts. Other Transcendentalists, from Theodore Parker to Emerson, began supporting and trumpeting Thoreau’s idea of resisting immoral laws. The enthusiasm in turn electrified Thoreau, and he proceeded to give more incendiary speeches (for which he was recognized more): two among them were “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” which are discussed later. In “Civil Disobedience,” while slavery ultimately becomes the focus of the work, the essay also addresses issues of expansion and Manifest Destiny.

On the matter of westward expansion, Thoreau took care to effectively separate the American people from their government before levying criticism. After his first attack on the likes of Polk and Congress, Thoreau continued speaking about the government:

*It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way.*¹⁷⁵

This is clearly another assault on the corruptible and impeding nature of government—particularly that of the United States. He also frames the government as something that is un-American, in a sense, by using ideas and values that are so crucially

¹⁷³ Linck Johnson, “The Life and Legacy of “Civil Disobedience,”” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, et al. (New York: Oxford, 2010), 631.

¹⁷⁴ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 8; Johnson, “The Life and Legacy of “Civil Disobedience,”” 631.

¹⁷⁵ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 2.

American and central to the American identity at the time to describe what the government does not do. Thoreau's language here, though, also contains an implicit endorsement of certain things. In language that would now only be found in a pickup truck advertisement, he offers support for the causes of national freedom and "settling the West." These are clearly great accomplishments in his eyes, and Thoreau gave credit to the American people for having made such things happen. Given the critical and tone of the piece, it is evident that his support for "settling the West" does not equate to a full-throated support of Manifest Destiny in its most nationalistic form. As he would write two years later in the first draft of *Walking*, "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World."¹⁷⁶ To Thoreau, settling the west is not building railroads and the beginnings of urban sprawls, but is incorporating the wildness he so prizes into—or back into—America's identity. Such an attitude is present in all of his travelogues and earlier works, and it very much resonates with his Virgilian influences. It is striving for the fulfillment of America's epic potential.

Both the West and the Wild hold an unspoiled form of nature. It is also important to note that the "American people" Thoreau praised does not address all Americans equally or appropriately. As Lawrence Buell points out, the Transcendentalists were affected by "romantic racialism," causing them "to lump "Americans" together as "English" and to accept "Anglo-Saxon" energies as the primary conduit of Euro-American vigor and enlightenment...[as] an identity of generic American whiteness."¹⁷⁷ Given that "Civil Disobedience," deals with slavery, among other things, such a racial

¹⁷⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (LaVergne, TN: Watchmaker, 2010), 57.

¹⁷⁷ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 186.

whitewashing appears comical, if not a touch ironic. And when Thoreau discussed settling the West, both in “Civil Disobedience” and in his later works, he did not make mention of Native Americans, nor did he include them among the American people. Moving forward through “Civil Disobedience,” though, it becomes clear that Thoreau believed in the moral capacity of the American people—and he also believed that the government was an encumbrance upon them.

After attacking the US government for general corruption and ineptitude, Thoreau became more specific with his complaints: he began to attack the institution of slavery in addition to growing more pointed about the Mexican-American War, and in so doing, offered his first and main criticism of expansion. He proclaimed that there is no way to respectably interact with the American government: a man “cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.”¹⁷⁸ After this first mention of slavery in the work, Thoreau continued on the theme, invoking the American Revolution as an appropriate precedent for men to rebel when they live under oppressive conditions, as he viewed his present day:

When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.¹⁷⁹

Of course, Thoreau’s is a doctrine of anarcho-*pacifism*; he did not deal in threats of revolution, but in moral rhetoric and wake-up calls. America exhibited great corruption in Thoreau’s view, displayed by allowing slavery to perpetuate, and by rapacious expansionism. These two issues dominated Thoreau’s qualifying arguments he later made

¹⁷⁸ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 4.

when offering support to the cause of expansion. His revolutionizing was one of non-violence: it was also one of non-payment. After several digressions on the nature of morality in America, Thoreau turns his attention to the relationship between citizen and government on a direct and local level.

Thoreau's Abolitionism

“Slavery in Massachusetts,” published in 1854, takes up the torch of “Civil Disobedience” with more of a vitriolic attitude towards the institution and an eye towards the dangerously immoral state of America, which threatened to taint the West. A jeremiad and by all accounts his most outwardly political work, “Slavery” comes from a speech Thoreau delivered at a mass gathering titled the Anti-Slavery Celebration, on the 4th of July, 1854, in Framingham, Massachusetts; shortly after the event, Thoreau’s work appeared in William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* and Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*, the two most prominent abolitionist publications of the antebellum period.¹⁸⁰ Organized by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, the Celebration was an annual event that had been held since 1846 at Framingham’s Harmony Grove, known as “a splendid picnicking area...about sixteen miles outside of Boston.”¹⁸¹ The 1854 meeting would prove particularly noteworthy, with a lineup of speakers that included William Lloyd Garrison and Sojourner Truth. As it pertains to westward expansion, Thoreau’s increasingly outspoken abolitionist stance was his way of cautioning against the pollution of the West; abolitionism also afforded Thoreau another outlet for portraying the New

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, “The Life and Legacy of “Civil Disobedience,”” 631-2.

¹⁸¹ “A Covenant With Death and an Agreement With Hell,” Donald Yacovone, Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed 1 February, 2013, <http://www.masshist.org/objects/2005july.cfm>.

Englander as an individual of higher morality, as evidenced in “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

The event and the timing both offered a powerful and immediately significant context for Thoreau’s speech. Not only would Independence Day provide significant rhetorical ammunition, but more pressingly, this was not long after the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law.¹⁸² On a more local level, the end of May had produced another atrocity relating to slavery. As Thoreau later addresses in his speech, state and federal authorities seized a man named Anthony Burns as a fugitive slave in Boston that past May. Boston abolitionists mounted an effort to save Burns from the authorities, but to no avail. Burns’ re-capture and transport back to the South incensed the abolitionist community even further, and turned many New Englanders who were previously compromising, pro-Union Whigs into abolitionists or abolitionist sympathizers.¹⁸³ In the immediate context of these events, Massachusetts abolitionists were particularly incensed—William Lloyd Garrison, for example, delivered one of his most controversial speeches ever in front of a backdrop featuring an upside-down American flag trimmed with black crepe, before burning copies of the Fugitive Slave Act and the Constitution.¹⁸⁴ Such was the political and national atmosphere in which Thoreau delivered the most ardently abolitionist speech of his lifetime.

“Slavery in Massachusetts” shows Thoreau double down on his attacks against the corrupt nature of government and the moral bankruptcy of those who would support slavery, surpassing “Civil Disobedience” in its abolitionist fervor. Thoreau employed notably fiery language throughout the essay, which can in part be attributed to his

¹⁸² The Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law on May 30th, 1854.

¹⁸³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 120.

¹⁸⁴ “A Covenant with Death and an Agreement with Hell.”

audience. But more significantly, the enhanced and occasionally violent tone he takes points to his developed stance on abolitionism. But later in the speech, for all of his abolitionist fire, Thoreau also incorporated imagery and arguments with which Thoreau was far more familiar.

In a rare moment for his more aggressive and political speeches, Thoreau allowed his pastoral sensibilities to creep into his rhetoric. In a fashion representative of his pastoral views and the New England village myth, Thoreau ended his speech with a moving passage that extolls the virtues of the countryside:

I am more and more convinced that, with reference to any public question, it is more important to know what the country thinks of it, than what the city thinks. The city does not *think* much. On any moral question, I would rather have the opinion of Boxboro' than of Boston and New York put together. When the former speaks, I feel as if somebody *had* spoken, as if *humanity* was yet, and a reasonable being had asserted its rights,—as if some unprejudiced men among the country's hills had at length turned their attention to the subject, and by a few sensible words redeemed the reputation of the race. When, in some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special town meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing the land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States.¹⁸⁵

At no prior point in the speech did Thoreau allude to or discuss farmers or the countryside in this manner, but in the context of his body of works, his meaning is clear: the true America may be found in the countryside, and the truest American may be found in the form of a farmer. Injecting pastoralism here provides a tonic to the immoral state of the country. Not only does Thoreau draw on the inherent morality and purity of nature as a point of contrast, but also he the country he was so fiercely criticizing was at the time becoming increasingly more urban. His pastoralism may thus be seen as a moral lesson to the United States; it is also worth noting that his model pastoral town directly follows the

¹⁸⁵ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 24.

myth of the New England village as Edenic and morally pure.¹⁸⁶ And while Thoreau never explicitly mentions westward expansion in this speech, the above quote outlines exactly what he sees in the West—the “obscure country town” as “the true Congress” made up of “unprejudiced men” and farmers. It also shows what he feared: that the West would be overtaken by the unthinking and immoral city.

In keeping with his idea that what is natural is best, and that man-made machinations are only damaging, Thoreau exhorted the crowd “to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour. No matter how valuable law may be to protect your property...if it do not keep you and your humanity together.”¹⁸⁷ Even in his anti-slavery arguments, all Thoreau ever called for, whether in regards to social/governmental reform, morality, understanding oneself, or the natural world, was for people to appreciate things in their simplest form. For Thoreau, things are purest and best when in their most simplified state. Such sentiments have ancient roots; we may see them even in Virgil.¹⁸⁸ And later, after declaring “my thoughts are murder to the state,” Thoreau manages to meld the naturalistic elements of Transcendentalism with abolitionism in a way no one else managed prior to his speech or since.¹⁸⁹

Redemptive Pastoralism

Thoreau, as all Transcendentalists did, derived energy and calm from the natural world, and saw in nature a model for what is just: by this attitude, Thoreau combined his

¹⁸⁶ Wood, *The New England Village*, 141-2.

¹⁸⁷ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 26.

¹⁸⁸ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 188.

¹⁸⁹ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 30.

classically-informed pastoralist sensibilities with his Transcendental thought and abolitionist fervor in a rousing ending to “Slavery in Massachusetts.” Immediately after uttering “my thoughts are murder to the state,” Thoreau completely shifted his tone to one of hope, optimism, and reflection. He launched into an eloquent ending, with, quite fittingly, a description of nature:

But it chanced the other day that I secured a white water-lily, and a season I had waited for had arrived...What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not soon despair the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man’s deeds may smell as sweet...If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her integrity and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, too, who is fitted to perceive and love it. It reminds me that nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily.¹⁹⁰

Thoreau was not a grand abolitionist, but among the Transcendentalists, he was the most powerful anti-slavery voice and the only individual able to truly translate the spirit of Transcendentalism to the antislavery argument—and this passage may stand as evidence.¹⁹¹ Thoreau took a harsh, attacking speech and ended it with a strongly encouraging message. His words are not abrasive here; they simply bring Thoreau’s audience to reflect on nature, and thereby to understand something more essential—that the “kind of laws [that] have prevailed longest” are those which govern over the simplicity and order of the natural world. Along with the pastoralism, Thoreau championed the idea of being men without trappings or nations or governments or other encumbrances. By using the natural world as an example, Thoreau asked his audience to boil things down to their constituent parts, to understand themselves, to understand

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹¹ Petrulionis, “Antislavery Reform,” 217, quoting Ann Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement* (New Haven: Yale, 1981), 222.

humanity. Lofty, perhaps, but this was the very crux of Transcendentalist thought. He showed his audience America's promise—the possibility for a purer, enlightened America that lives with the Wildness of the land—and he used the Wildness as a pure counterpoint and rebuke to the morally bankrupt institution of slavery.

Here Thoreau encouraged essentially the same kind of reform he called for in “Civil Disobedience,” that is to say, a reform of conscience. The context shifted somewhat, though: his appeals to action in “Slavery in Massachusetts” were more forceful, to begin. The main thrust of “Civil Disobedience” was Thoreau calling on his fellow citizens to wake up and understand the injustices being perpetuated by their government. In “Slavery,” Thoreau pivoted somewhat. His audience was already alert, already awake—at least far more so than the average citizen (or Northerner), and so he demanded the awakening of a national conscience, insisting that his country understand its evils and ills and to subsequently purge itself of them. All of these calls and encouragements would prove to be Thoreau's loudest, fiercest, and most pointed, though they are true to his ideological roots. Thoreau's abolitionism began to wane after “Slavery in Massachusetts,” insofar as his lectures and written works are concerned, though he still had one final performance in him that further combined issues of slavery, expansion, and national morality.

Captain John Brown and Thoreau the Abolitionist

“A Plea for Captain John Brown” is a near-perfect combination of Thoreau's developed abolitionist sensibilities and his tendency (one shared by most, if not all other

Transcendentalists) to both romanticize New England and equate being American with being English. It is also the most unbalanced work in Thoreau's library, in that its historical significance was overwhelming, yet "A Plea" has largely been ignored among the body of his works. Yet another essay developed from a speech, its purpose appears in the title. Thoreau originally delivered the speech on October 30th, 1859, fourteen days after John Brown and his band of recruits mounted a raid on the armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and just more than a month before John Brown was executed for murder, inciting slaves to rebel, and treason against the state of Virginia.¹⁹²

The Concord Transcendentalist was fiercely moved by Brown's actions, both at Harpers Ferry and years earlier in his involvement in Bleeding Kansas—though while Thoreau credits Brown with helping ensure Kansas would enter the Union as a free state, he makes little mention of the fairly grotesque acts of violence Brown and his men committed, even glossing over the Pottawatomie Massacre of 1856.¹⁹³ Historian Sandra Harbert Petrulionis remarks that negative news coverage of Brown's raid and "abolitionist posturing" drove Thoreau to write his "longest, most enraged" journal passages about slavery. If we are to believe Thoreau himself, he was maddened enough to have kept pencil and paper under his pillow for several weeks after Harpers Ferry, such was the impact of John Brown upon Thoreau.¹⁹⁴ Thoreau's speech was intensely well received at the time, and did much to attract more positive public attention to John Brown's story. Occasionally, students of history and historians alike speculate whether or

¹⁹² Joel Myerson, "Henry David Thoreau: 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,'" in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. Joel Myerson, (New York: Oxford, 2000), 628.

¹⁹³ Karl Gridley, "'Willing to Die for the Cause of Freedom in Kansas': Free State Emigration, John Brown, and the Rise of Militant Abolitionism in the Kansas Territory," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006), 155.

¹⁹⁴ Petrulionis, "Antislavery Reform," 218.

not the Civil War would have occurred, at all or as it did without John Brown; in adding to this sentiment, historian David S. Reynolds has credited, “If...without John Brown there would have been no Civil War, we would add that without the Concord Transcendentalists, John Brown would have had little cultural impact.”¹⁹⁵ The majority of the credit given to the Transcendentalists, in turn, may well be given to Thoreau, for he was the first among them to embrace Brown, and certainly the first among them to speak in both defense and praise of the radical abolitionist.

Given the increasingly vitriolic anti-slavery tone of Thoreau’s previous well-known speeches, it is in some part surprising to see his abolitionist rhetoric fade in “A Plea.” Instead of hammering on issues of slavery, Thoreau devoted most of his speech to a discussion of Brown’s exemplary morality. Given the subject matter, issues of slavery may simply be understood as implied. In any event, Thoreau’s praise of Brown was largely moral, and he held Brown up as the highest example of a moral human. His descriptions of Brown are appropriately gushing: to Thoreau, Brown was “a man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life.”¹⁹⁶ Ideas, principles, carrying out a purpose—these are the themes that Thoreau returned to over and over again.

Brown’s behavior precisely models what Thoreau asked of his fellow citizens in “Civil Disobedience” and what he asked of his country in “Slavery in Massachusetts.” Finally, Thoreau found an individual who lived in this rare manner, and as such, Thoreau cast Brown as the ideal American:

¹⁹⁵ David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist* (Knopf, 2005), 4.

¹⁹⁶ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 33.

I wish I could say that Brown was the representative of the North. He was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with real things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all.¹⁹⁷

Brown is given to us as Thoreau's own American Übermensch, self-governed, armed with a superior sense of morality, and adherent to those principles which are essential (truth, manhood, dignity, human nature) while being wise enough to dismiss that which is unnecessary and unjust (government, slavery, etc.). Brown very clearly stands as a human manifestation of the potential Thoreau sees for his country and his fellow Americans, and this picture of him perfectly describes Thoreau's model citizen for settling the west.

The Ideal American: John Brown, Abolitionist, Puritan, New England Farmer

At the beginning of his speech, Thoreau admitted that he knew little of "Captain Brown," but his actions were enough for Thoreau to know that Brown "kn[ew] himself for a man." This somewhat hyperbolic essentialist praise is continued through the body of the speech, tied together by the common thread of Brown being hailed as the consummate man and as a true American. The most comical example of this behavior on Thoreau's part comes at the beginning of the "Plea." When describing Brown's background, Thoreau engaged in some over-the-top sentimentalism, in addition to making a fairly barefaced ethnic appeal to his audience to recognize and accept Brown as a classically white individual.¹⁹⁸ Thoreau drew on his pastoral background to depict

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹⁸ Buell, "Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute," 187.

Brown as the ideal American, but he also added a very important regional spin to his description. He painted Brown as:

...A New England farmer, a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical as that class is, and tenfold more so. He was like the best of those who stood at Concord Bridge once, on Lexington Common, and on Bunker Hill, only he was firmer and higher principled than any I have chanced to hear of as of there.¹⁹⁹

The historical romanticizing is almost too much to tackle at once. First, Thoreau offers us a beautifully Augustan idea of the farmer, but transplanted to New England. He is deliberate, practical, armed with common sense, and respectable. And of course, Thoreau bats not an eye at making these claims—he instead grows bolder in his invocations. Few things are more resonant and more charged with significance for his audience than the Revolution, and the men who fought in these earliest of battles, perceived as the truest and purest of the patriots, are the Revolution’s ultimate patriots. To compare Brown to them—never mind to hold Brown in higher regard than them—is a very strong assertion, one that Thoreau made quite knowingly and calculatingly. And in the earlier context of Brown being the ideal American for settling the West, Thoreau’s identification of Brown as a New Englander only further builds off of the nineteenth-century perceptions of Puritans that were discussed earlier.

Thoreau’s final step in depicting Brown necessitated traveling further back in America’s history, all the way to its roots. Toward the end of his speech, Thoreau cast Brown as a Puritan, and in completing his re-imagining of Brown as an ideal American, Thoreau offered an accessible, appealing counterpoint for New Englanders who resented their fellow Northerners who kowtowed to Southern interests. Thoreau claimed Brown “was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at

¹⁹⁹ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 32.

all—the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him. He died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he reappeared here.”²⁰⁰ The reasoning Thoreau offered for casting Brown as “a latter-day Cromwellian Puritan”²⁰¹ was that Puritans were “men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful; not thinking much of rulers who did not fear God, not making many compromises, nor seeking after available candidates,” and Brown was, by Thoreau’s inference (and admiration) such a man.²⁰² It is almost remarkable that Thoreau manages to so completely whitewash Brown’s identity, transforming him into a kind of transcendent New Englander. Thoreau’s John Brown was a farmer and a saint, a hard-working New Englander and an enlightened human. He was what the Wild could make of people, in Thoreau’s eyes. In opposition to Southern interests penetrating the North—namely the Fugitive Slave Act—Thoreau raised up this perfect figure of abolitionism, this greatest American, Captain John Brown, and imbued him with all the greatest characteristics of an entire region.²⁰³ Of course, the power derived from Brown’s identity as an honorary New Englander stemmed from the artificial nineteenth-century myth of the puritan New England village. But in Thoreau’s present, the village construct was recognized as truth and not as historio-cultural fabrication, and it had great power when deployed in a moral argument.²⁰⁴

After “A Plea” was published in 1860, Thoreau’s abolitionist fervor subsided considerably. Between then and his death in 1862, Thoreau would produce five more works: among them, yet another two were about John Brown (though “Remarks After the

²⁰⁰ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 32.

²⁰¹ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 187.

²⁰² Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 33.

²⁰³ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 187.

²⁰⁴ Joseph S. Wood, “New England’s Legacy Landscape,” in *A Landscape History of New England*, eds. Blake Harrison, Richard W. Judd (Cambridge: MIT, 2011), 263-4.

Hanging of John Brown” included little of Thoreau’s own thought, and “The Last Days of John Brown” did little to escape the shadow of “A Plea.”). The remainder of his works took Thoreau back to his roots: in the late 1850s, he finished “Walking,” and in 1862, completed “Autumnal Tints” and “Wild Apples” before his death.²⁰⁵ When looking at his works, the titles are so overwhelmingly those of nature essays that to see mention of John Brown or slavery is almost confusing. Yet, throughout all of Thoreau’s work, he carried his core philosophy with him, one that he discovered and developed while in communion with the natural world: being a man first, holding allegiance to humanity and the earth over institutions of government comes from what he found in nature. When Thoreau discovered someone, something, or some ideal that he particularly thought understood this naturalism, he romanticized it and characterized it for understanding something essential, just as he did with the New England farmer. He praised John Brown so because he was a man who understood and observed natural laws. Brown, like Thoreau, understood something essential about existence.

Expansionism Embraced

“Walking,” finished in the late 1850s and published posthumously shortly after Thoreau’s death in 1862, contains a fusion of Thoreau’s two main pursuits: the exploration of nature alongside some gentler political discourse. Above all else, “Walking” is a celebration of the natural world and how one can experience it, if one pays attention: Thoreau told that “you must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast which ruminates when walking,” and reflected on his own ends in walking

²⁰⁵ David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2004), 150.

when he asks, “What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?”²⁰⁶ In the essay, it feels as if Thoreau revealed some of his secrets to his audience—how he encouraged himself to thought, how he entered into harmony with nature. The entire piece is a celebration of Thoreau’s love for the pastoralist idea of nature; it was his last georgic, an active and short footnote to *Walden*, in that vein. But it also presents a very strong argument for expansionism. Into “Walking,” he mixed a sense of nationalist pride colored by optimism for the country’s future, appropriate given that he worked on the essay over the course of the 1850s. He pulls no punches in his praise of country—or more specifically, as he did in “Civil Disobedience,” in praise of the American people: he at one point proclaimed “If the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar.”²⁰⁷ Certainly a bold claim, Thoreau makes it with the belief that America, for its vastness and unspoiled “Wild” western reaches, contains something older and purer that could charge its inhabitants with unique wisdom and ability.

“Walking,” in many ways, was Thoreau’s version of “The Young American,” for all of its national optimism and expansionist rhetoric. He continued to wax eloquent, embracing the country in which he lives with his naturalist’s love of land. And he predicts America’s future, promising:

That our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky,—our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains,—our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning...else...why was America discovered?²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Thoreau, *Walking*, 40, 42.

²⁰⁷ Thoreau, *Walking*, 55.

²⁰⁸ Thoreau, *Walking*, 55-6.

Almost taken verbatim from Emerson's "Young American," this is another definitive marriage of Transcendentalism's view of the Western promise and American expansionism. We may consider Thoreau's calculus as a sort of intellectual American exceptionalism: he saw the point of the country as being the home for the super-intellectual, and for an uncommonly pure society.

America was divorced, Thoreau's mind, from the European traditions. Something has allowed America an opportunity to think in terms newer and bolder; later in "Walking," he waxed classical and states, "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions."²⁰⁹ Thoreau embraced an idea of America as fully different from the rest of the world, as a home for the western tradition reborn of clearer head and of superior morality. It may be somewhat of a stretch, but in the context of colonizing a new land apart from older territories, there is at least a vague allusion or connection to Aeneas' unusual crossing of the Styx in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Forgetting the Old World while traveling over Lethe has made America a place of simplicity, it has gone back to older, classical beginnings. Consider his sentiment in the context of this passage from *Walden*:

Homer has never yet been printed in English, nor Aeschylus, nor Virgil even—works as refined, as solidly done, as beautiful almost as the morning itself...for later writers, say what we will of their genius, have rarely, if ever, equaled the elaborate beauty and finish of the lifelong and heroic literary labors of the ancients... That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated...and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Thoreau, *Walking*, 51.

²¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Crowell, 1966), 136.

He seemed quite confident that the American people would offer grand contributions to this international canon he envisioned, placing them in the company of Virgil as well as (mentioned later on) Dante and Shakespeare. But for America to accomplish such things, it must retain its identity and that which makes it special—the wild.

Thoreau's praise of the west and expressed desire to expand westward delicately avoided endorsing Manifest Destiny, though without the context of his broader works it could easily be interpreted as such. Throughout his career, Thoreau had never been one to advocate for nationalistic causes or governmental expansion—as is obvious after we examine "Civil Disobedience," and as becomes increasingly clearer when we read his abolitionist works. But parsing out "Walking" requires careful managing of Thoreau's language, especially when he wrote things like "To Americans I hardly need to say,—”Westward the star of empire takes its way,”” a quote adopted from George Berkeley and found as the epigraph of George Bancroft's History of the United States.²¹¹ It would seem, to the untrained eye, an endorsement of the American empire spreading westward, to the untrained eye. He continued in this vein, and offered the reflection that "I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving."²¹² Thoreau here appears to have willfully ignored the trends of urbanization and industrialization that were gripping the nation, but his sentiment that the American *people*—particularly the New Englanders—were inclined to move westward is key to understanding his line of reasoning. Westward

²¹¹ Thoreau, *Walking*, 56; Wikiquote, "George Berkeley."

²¹² Thoreau, *Walking*, 50.

expansion and the American wilderness were more tropes for Thoreau in his musings than endorsements for the expansion of American government to the Pacific.²¹³ These were a people he viewed as capable of higher thought and morality, a newer and more essential strain of humans—in touch with nature, agrarian, with the best example of them being New England farmers.

Two quotes from “Walking” are particularly illustrative of Thoreau’s use of the New England farmer’s identity. First, when he wrote that “the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter,” and later when he quoted George Berkeley, writing, “westward the star of empire takes its way,” there exists a definite allusion to John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill.” Only here, the city lies on the west coast, and the hills very well may be the Sierra Nevada. But the similarities of diction are important, for Thoreau earnestly believed that the West would contain another “city upon a hill,” at least if it were settled properly. The West was to be Eden, and how Thoreau outlined a successful settling of the West relied upon the mythologized view of New England Puritans. The strength and moral rectitude Thoreau assigned to nineteenth-century New England farmers came in part from the New England village myth, and in part from the older tradition of American pastoralism: when combined, the power of the village mythology and classically-informed pastoralism offered great prerequisites as well as justifications for westward expansion.²¹⁴ If the West could be cast in the model of righteous New England farmers, expansion was clearly a good thing. And on a more practical level, Thoreau saw farmers as essential to America, for “it is said to be the task of the American “To work the virgin soil,” and that...the farmer [by farming] makes

²¹³ Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” 188.

²¹⁴ Wood, “New England’s Legacy Landscape,” 264.

himself stronger and in some respects more natural.”²¹⁵ In the lands west, Thoreau saw a new home for a stronger and more naturally attuned American people.

American Farmers: Thoreau’s New Englanders vs. Jefferson’s Yeomen

In many ways, Thoreau very much bought the agrarian dream of Jefferson, though he did not wish for the institutions that Jefferson had supported to proliferate. Thoreau’s West came down to this: “the future lies that way,” he wrote, but expansion must be done carefully, for “the West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.”²¹⁶ At first we may only see this quote as a powerful environmentalist creed (having been adopted as a motto by the Sierra Club).²¹⁷ But it is more than a call to preserve the wilderness of the country; it is a call to preserve those who make the country. Thoreau made it quite clear that Americans are headed west, that they are naturally inclined to and the future lies over that horizon, away from the Old World. In this context, he called for the preservation of Wildness and asked for a preservation of the brand of American for which he has such admiration. The farmer who lives on the land, who embraces how, when “left to herself, nature is always more or less civilized, and delights in a certain refinement.”²¹⁸ He dreamt an Augustan dream, pining for older virtues and an embracing of nobler professions. While critical of national expansion in practical, governmental terms—as seen in his railing against the Mexican-American War, for one—Thoreau still

²¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walking*, 63.

²¹⁶ Thoreau, *Walking*, 49; 57.

²¹⁷ Lance Newman, “Environmental Thought and Action,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford, 2010), 177.

²¹⁸ Howarth, 26.

retained faith in America, and that faith came from his belief in the American people.²¹⁹

The whole piece was cast in the language of expansionist epic that Thoreau knew so well from the *Aeneid*—and indeed Thoreau is well-versed in writing in epic (or mock-epic) of his own making, which makes the one political barb he includes in “Walking” all the more interesting.²²⁰

The Wilderness and America’s Future

When looking to the future, Thoreau included what may be the piece’s only reference to the impending Civil War: he wrote, “perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past,—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present,—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.”²²¹ This American mythology would be written by (or about) those Americans who went West, into the Wild—for Thoreau, the settlers of this Wild would be the next iteration of Jefferson’s American farmer. The jab about liberty gives the quote even deeper context. At face value, “American liberty” may very well stand in for America-as-nation in this quote, but Thoreau also challenged the existence of American liberty in his present, a clear reference to slavery and the impending war. At the same time, he put forth a counterpoint of “mythology,” of some story or identity of America that was presumably so virtuous and idealized that it may qualify as the stuff of myth in the Classical tradition. This is the myth of the American West, the myth that he earlier claimed the country

²¹⁹ Scheese, *Nature Writing*, 59.

²²⁰ Phillips, *Epic in American Culture*, 150-156.

²²¹ Thoreau, *Walking*, 66-7.

would write and that would take a place in the global canon he discusses in *Walden*. But for all his neo-classical musings on the Western climbs of the country, Thoreau ended “Walking” with a properly classical and pastoral thought:

We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening.²²²

The heavenly warmth of the Elysian Fields and the pastoralist comfort of a “gentle herdsman”—nothing could be more quintessentially Thoreau in his descriptions of nature, nor could it be more informed by Virgil. Thoreau’s American mythology, then, may very well be that the lands contain such great beauty that the settings of classical mythology are rendered on earth, in the New World, on American soil.

The pastoralism found in “Walking” may be Thoreau’s most definitive: *Walden* takes its time, and his travelogues celebrate the idleness of nature in the slow, languid manner of a summer’s day—but “Walking” offers a distinct set of ideas and makes clear Thoreau’s views on the relationship of man and nature. In many ways, “Walking” is a re-dressing of Emerson’s “Nature”; when we read Thoreau telling us of the Wild, it immediately hearkens back to Emerson’s sentiments of universality and consciousness.

In his journals, Thoreau expanded upon his idea of the West and the Wild, writing:

It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord, i.e., than I import into it.²²³

²²² Thoreau, *Walking*, 82.

²²³ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (1906; Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1984), 9:43, quoted in Scheese, *Nature Writing*, 60.

Wildness is the essence of the individual, man is made from nature, a nature which has remarkable powers and is boundless—even though Emerson covered this territory before, Thoreau’s contribution to the thought is stirring. His pastoralism can often read as being overly rich in detail, but here he explained the importance of pastoralism in very transcendental terms. The natural world is so important and must be celebrated to such extent because it offers a key to understanding the self in a way that cannot be duplicated elsewhere. If the concept is Emersonian and unoriginal, the justification for his pastoralism is entirely unique and Thoreau’s own. He even made plain the classical roots of his pastoralism: “The civilized nations—Greece, Rome, England—have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand.”²²⁴ Wilderness nurtures men, it unlocks their greatest possibility, and these civilizations achieved what they did because of their relationship with the natural world. Conversely, when their connection with nature declined, the civilizations did as well.²²⁵ To that end, his exhortation to preserve the Wild when the American nation moves westward is deeply important: civilization and the wild, in Thoreau’s mind, were co-dependent upon one another, acting as foils for mutual maintenance and encouragement; the destruction of one would certainly spell disaster for the other. Losing the Wild from the American west would mean America—and more significantly, the American people—would have failed at their task to create a new, unprecedentedly wild world in the fashion of epic.

²²⁴ Thoreau, *Walking*, 63.

²²⁵ Scheese, *Nature Writing*, 60.

Thoreau's Nature and a Sense of Place

Over the course of his career as a public intellectual, Thoreau developed a philosophy that was rooted in pastoral ideals. Much of the foundation to his thought came from Emerson, but Thoreau built upon his mentor's ideas, specifically in regards to the power of the natural world and the particular nature of expansionism. His philosophy of the natural world developed Emerson's ideas of the divinity in nature, and reframed them in the context of a pastoral celebration of the landscape. The praise he laid upon America's nature and the wildness he saw within it gave Thoreau cause to believe as well that America would be the stage for a new epic.

His literary works contributed greatly to the American pastoral tradition. He blended Virgil with older American influences to write pastoral literature that furthered the myth of New England's communal agrarian identity and its Puritan past. By idealizing his New England as having the same agricultural framework, village structures, and moral virtues as his Puritan forbearers did, Thoreau essentially modeled an ideal America. By employing the New England village myth when he engaged with older sources of pastoralism such as Mather, Jefferson, and even Virgil, Thoreau successfully cast New Englanders—specifically New England farmers—as the ideally virtuous American.

Thoreau's politics were the loudest of any Transcendentalist, and through his very vocal opposition to slavery, his position of conditional support for westward expansion became evident. All elements of Thoreau's thought converge in the context of expansionism: his love and reverence of the land, his pastoralism, his abolitionism, and his representation of the New Englander as an ideal American. Moving westward was a

complicated matter, and Thoreau supported it to a degree: but only insofar as the power and wildness he saw in the land would be maintained, which could only happen if slavery was confined or abolished, and if the New England farmer settled the west. In short, Thoreau also envisioned the West as the setting for America's Eden, and in his view, all the elements to create Eden were present. The natural landscape was pure, untouched by society and in possession of its essential elements. In his mind, people existed who were worthy of settling the land: those New England farmers who derived their virtue from how the pastoral tradition valued them and from how the New England village myth cast them as present-day Puritans. The land was grander, the wild was larger, and the people were of virtuous stock: all that stood in the way of Eden was slavery. Such was Thoreau's conception of the American West during his lifetime.

Eden was not created in the American West, of course. Thoreau's terms were violated, slavery expanded outwards, and the virtuous farmer he had held up as exemplary faded when the Civil War neared and American pastoralism as a whole began to wane. But the West did not hold the only capacity for Eden in the eyes of the Transcendentalists. As the next chapter discusses, two Transcendentalist movements grew up in the East with the stated goals of reaching a higher state of being and a purer social order through connecting with the land. Brook Farm and Fruitlands represent the final extension of the Transcendentalists' search for an American Eden powered by pastoral and agrarian virtues; were they to succeed at their goal, there would be Eden in the East once more.

Chapter Three

Eastern Edens: George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, and Transcendentalist Utopias

For Thoreau and Emerson, the American west had a purifying allure. Part of the Transcendentalist dream of expansionism was to establish, through the land and wildness of the west, a purer social order wherein humans functioned at a higher moral level.

Though Thoreau and Emerson differ on exactly how effective the “virgin west” could be at helping the creation of such a utopian society, thus was the shared vision and dream at an essential level.²²⁶ For much of the early 19th century, visions of more wholesome, if not fully utopian societies were tied in with ideas of expansionism: the American west was seen as a new beginning, a place for the unique strengths of the American people to flourish. The lofty language and pastoralist paeans used in support of westward expansion were not confined to that arena, however; many of the same ideological and stylistic elements associated with westward expansion may be found in the utopian movements of the 19th century. Given the scope of this paper and the rather broad history of utopian experiments in America, this chapter focuses on two projects that were born out of the Transcendentalist movement: the almost-successful Brook Farm, founded by the Unitarian minister George Ripley, and Fruitlands, its far less successful counterpart, run by the schoolmaster Bronson Alcott.

In the context of this thesis, Ripley and Alcott are the final extension of a Transcendentalism that began in a state of abstraction with Emerson and then moved into an arena of localized action with Thoreau. In their experiments as utopian farmers, Ripley and Alcott translate Transcendentalist views of pastoralism into reality, embracing the land for its natural beauty and attempting to live off of it. More importantly, their utopian

²²⁶ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 77.

ideology and the agrarian means by which they attempted to fulfill said ideologies came from the same dream that Emerson and Thoreau shared for the American West. Ripley and Alcott took the idea that unspoiled nature would allow for individuals to attain a higher state of understanding and morality and transplanted it the east. This transplantation was an ideologically simple task, given the New England village myth discussed in chapter 2. Nineteenth-century New Englanders had a direct, if not artificial connection to their Puritan forbearers through said myth, which allowed them to romanticize the Puritans, play up the pastoral-agrarian virtues they saw in Puritan society, and celebrate their own society as a direct extension of an older, virtuous way of life.²²⁷ Since Ripley and Alcott sought only spiritual enrichment, whereas Emerson and Thoreau were always to an extent politically concerned, they did not need the West, especially since the landscape of their home had been charged with such a strong connection to America's first attempt at Eden.

While Emerson and Thoreau considered the west a more ideal place for creating the new epic America and the enlightened American individual, Emerson couched his visions of the West's power. In his essay "Experience," Emerson mused, "the world is all outside," meaning revelations about the natural world and the individual's connection to nature can occur anywhere.²²⁸ Such was the rationale behind Brook Farm and Fruitlands: that pastoralism and the agrarian lifestyle were perfect conduits for the individual to elevate one's state of being, and one did not need to go west to do so.

²²⁷ Bowden, "Invented Tradition and Academic Convention in Geographical Thought about New England," 188.

²²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. David Mikics (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012), 236.

Ripley and Alcott may then be viewed as a counterpoint to the intellectual tradition of American pastoralism and expansionism—they bought into the basic agrarian dream shared by Jefferson, Emerson, and Thoreau, but only to a point, and ultimately they were unable to achieve success in their dream. As agrarian utopian experiments, Brook Farm and Fruitlands are commonly defined by their failure, and understandably so. But the importance of these ventures should not be gauged by their economic success, but instead by the philosophy and intellectual traditions they embodied and added to.

Ripley and Alcott were perhaps the final Transcendentalist participants in the tradition of American pastoralism. Temporally, the two experiments came into being towards the end of the Jacksonian era (Brook Farm was founded in 1841; Fruitlands, in 1843), while industry continued to boom and not long before the issue of slavery took absolute center stage on a national level. In many ways, Brook Farm and Fruitlands existed at the last possible time they could: the Civil War redefined the nation in such a drastic way that the American west was no longer seen as the purifying force it was once dreamed to be, and the industrialization of the North that so thoroughly took place during and after the war did away with virtually all thoughts of agrarianism and pastoralism in the eastern United States. This final chapter will examine Ripley's Brook Farm and Alcott's Fruitlands in tandem, interacting with the philosophical and pastoral-agrarian motives behind both ventures while considering them in the context of the westerly-fixated American pastoral tradition.

George Ripley: Minister, Transcendentalist, Utopian

George Ripley was among the first Transcendentalists, and his transition from Unitarian minister to failed utopian farmer may act as a chronicle of the movement. Transcendentalism's first generation, of which Ripley was a leading part, began as theologians, became pastoralists, and then began to wane as an intellectual whole after the 1850s. A second generation of Transcendentalists carried the movement into the Gilded Age, but their philosophy did not include such intense pastoralism as their forerunners.²²⁹ And so in the 1840s and 1850s, George Ripley held the noteworthy position of being an early Transcendentalist, and one of the last to celebrate the pastoral tradition.

In 1836, Ripley attended a meeting held by Emerson, Frederick Henry Hedge, and George Putnam—the former a writer and minister in Bangor, Maine; the latter, a Unitarian minister in Roxbury. The men gathered to discuss the “state of current opinion in theology and philosophy,” and Ripley’s presence at this meeting places him very solidly in the ranks of founding Transcendentalists, were such a distinction to reasonably exist for so loosely organized a movement.²³⁰ Much like his three companions, Ripley found the intellectual and theological climate in Massachusetts at the time to be highly unsatisfactory. A fervent Unitarian, he spent the first years of his ministry (from 1826 to roughly 1832) defending his views while attempting to enlighten his flock with his theological discoveries. From 1832 to 1836, Ripley pushed the boundaries of his liberal Unitarianism to such an extent that the conservative members of his parish accused him

²²⁹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 8.

²³⁰ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 69-70.

of heresy.²³¹ His liberal take on Christianity, in addition to his outspoken adherence to the philosophy of European Idealism and the concept of social reform did not ruffle the majority of his congregation, in large part because most of the attendees of Purchase Street Church, where he preached in Boston, were highly apathetic practitioners of their religion.²³² 1840 found Ripley faced with a harsh reality: in May, Purchase Street ran short of money to maintain the parish, a sign of declining attendance and contributions (if not also of mismanagement). Ripley assumed blame for this blow, and suggested that he resign in favor of a minister better suited to lead the church. Though the proprietors of the parish declined, Ripley remained disillusioned.

In this trying period, a self-prescribed tonic for Ripley's malaise was for he and his wife, Sophia Dana Ripley, to spend the summer in West Roxbury on their friend Charles Ellis' farm. The couple had summered at Ellis' place, named Brook Farm, for two years prior. And as both husband and wife fell in love with the land, it became a place for them to relax and reflect on the relationship between the natural world and the divine.²³³ In a November 1840 letter to Emerson, Ripley described Brook Farm as "a beautiful estate...we might search the country in vain for anything more eligible."²³⁴ Sophia was more effusive and spiritual in her praise of the land, saying that "in this tranquil retreat I have found that entire separation from worldly care and rest to the spirit which I knew was in waiting for me somewhere...Even George lies for hours on green banks...whistling to the birds, who sing to him."²³⁵ The landscape and the tranquility of

²³¹ Henry L. Golemba, *George Ripley* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 26.

²³² Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 90.

²³³ Golemba, *George Ripley*, 36.

²³⁴ George Ripley to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 9 November 1840, reprinted in *Autobiography of Brook Farm* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1974), 6.

²³⁵ Sophia Ripley to John S. Dwight, 1 August 1840, reprinted in *Autobiography of Brook Farm*, 3-4.

the farm had very clearly made an impression on them both; indeed, as Ripley's tenure at Purchase Street grew gloomier and gloomier he and his wife fell further and further into their love of the West Roxbury land and the opportunities for inward reflection and solitude that it offered.

The Birth of Brook Farm

Ripley's tipping point for leaving the ministry was a peculiar event known as the "Groton Convention," where, in the small town of Groton, Massachusetts, a large and diverse crowd of reformers gathered. A group called the "Come-Outers" particularly struck Ripley: an association of men and women from Cape Cod who had "come out" of their churches in order to pursue a more personal religion, they rejected Christian sacraments and formality, held that the Bible was simply a book that had transcribed God's word—the word itself was contained in one's own heart—and lived in highly simplistic fashion.²³⁶ To Ripley, their lifestyle was a path to unlocking certain basic truths about religion and being. This conclusion, of course, echoes many other Transcendentalist assertions: consider Emerson's "Nature" and the currents of the universal being, or Thoreau's conception of the American west and the "Wild." Ripley's perception of the Come-Outers represents yet another iteration in how the Transcendentalists perceived the natural world and an agrarian lifestyle as a key to spiritual understanding and human enrichment. He was convinced that the Come-Outers were onto something, and between his love for Brook Farm, his increasing distaste for

²³⁶ Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2004), 21-23.

Purchase Street, and the impending change of season from summer to fall, Ripley grew more emboldened. By November of 1840, he developed a vision for a utopian community at Brook Farm. Ripley laid out his goals in a letter to Emerson, writing:

Our objects...are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing them all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry...and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions.²³⁷

While meant as a sales pitch to Emerson, whom Ripley was soliciting as an investor in the joint-stock company that would fuel Brook Farm, this description may well stand as a manifesto for Transcendentalism in practice. Facetiousness aside, Emerson's *Man Thinking* becomes for Ripley, *Man At Work, Thinking*, or the *Thinking Man at Work*. Appropriately assigned and managed labor, when combined with education, would, in Ripley's mind, nourish the individual and foster an uncommonly positive group dynamic. His goal was the same that both Emerson and Thoreau included in their stated dreams for the American west: but while Ripley sought the same understanding of the natural world and higher morality, instead of searching for it in the American West, he would look for it in West Roxbury, with agrarianism as a cornerstone of his project. He told Emerson that, "To accomplish these objects, we propose to take a small tract of land." Simple as it is, it merits interjecting that the "small tract," along with the estate and buildings for the initial families, would cost \$30,000, no small sum in 1840.²³⁸ Continuing with his pitch, Ripley laid the agrarianism on Emerson with redoubled force, predicting:

²³⁷ George Ripley to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 9 November 1840, in *Autobiography of Brook Farm*, 6.

²³⁸ Delano, *Brook Farm*, 35.

Our farm would be a place for improving the race of men that lived on it; thought would preside over the operations of labor, and labor would contribute to the expansion of thought; we should have industry without drudgery, and true equality without its vulgarity.²³⁹

Ripley, in short, advertised farming as a cure to all social ills and as a means of improving man to a degree that has never occurred. He not only brought the pastoralist tendencies of Transcendentalism into action, but also enhanced the nature of the tendencies and claims. When Emerson and Thoreau waxed agrarian, they celebrated the wilderness' and the farmer's capacity to improve society and mankind's morality in an abstract concept, always divorcing it from the present, whether through Virgilian allusions or westward predictions. Ripley, though, took the bold step of bringing the enriching capacity of agrarianism to his backyard.

Ripley was also bold enough to draw direct connections between his proposed project and the divine. Later in his letter to Emerson, Ripley wrote:

I can imagine no plan which is suited to carry into effect so many divine ideas as this. If wisely executed, it will be a light over this country and this age. If not the sunrise, it will be the morning star...I believe in the divinity of labor...I should have a city of God, on a small scale of my own; and please God, I should hope one day to drive my own cart to market and sell greens.²⁴⁰

With diction similar to John Winthrop, William Bradford, Thoreau's "Walking," and more, Ripley made explicitly clear his hopes and dreams to create a new Eden in America. But in case the imagery of "a light over this country" and the "morning star" were not obvious enough indications of his intent and beliefs, Ripley explicitly states his plan when he addressed "the divinity of labor," having "a city of God," and selling his own greens. His dream for Brook Farm was to create an agrarian Eden, and nothing evidences that more clearly than this letter to Emerson.

²³⁹ Ripley to Emerson, 9 November 1840, 6.

²⁴⁰ Ripley to Emerson, 9 November 1840, 6.

Ripley ultimately failed in convincing Emerson to support the farm—Emerson took five weeks to respond, and was so disrupted by Ripley’s request that he experienced what historian Sterling Delano has identified as a time of personal crisis for Emerson. The Concord philosopher did not wish to give offense to his friend, and took pains to communicate his denial gently. Emerson offered a piece of self-insight to Ripley in explaining why he could not join the farm—he wrote, “I think all that I shall solidly do, I must do alone.”²⁴¹ Ripley did not receive the news well, though, and both men were impacted by the exchange so much so that it affected their future relations. With Emerson behind him, Ripley had to pursue funding the farm through other sources, which he eventually was successful in doing.

As his dream began to take shape, Ripley briefly turned his attentions back to Purchase Street in the early winter of 1840/1841. He knew after the rejection of his previous resignation that he had to make a concerted effort to divorce himself from the parish: this time, his approach was to demand radical changes to the mass, calling for a return to “the state of original Christianity when converted fishermen gathered on the shore to speak with Jesus.”²⁴² His requests for reform were predictably unachievable. By New Year’s Day, 1841, Ripley decided they could not be met and his parish could not be saved from its apathy; on March 28, he gave his last sermon. After years of struggling with his flock, Ripley left Purchase Street. In April he purchased 179 acres from his friend Charles Ellis for \$10,500, and soon thereafter began welcoming visitors to Brook Farm.²⁴³ On September 29, ten individuals signed the Articles of Association to formally

²⁴¹ Delano, *Brook Farm*, 36-7.

²⁴² Golemba, *George Ripley*, 29.

²⁴³ Golemba, *George Ripley*, 78.

establish Brook Farm, which would become the most successful attempt to bring the spirituality and naturalism of Transcendentalism into a practical form.²⁴⁴

1844 found the Brook Farmers enjoying a time of increased visibility and relative success: the community had attracted a good deal of residents and Boston-area intellectuals, and financial ruin was still a ways off. So in that year, the leaders of the community drafted and published a Constitution for the community, and circulated it, as well as an introductory note describing the farm's goals, around Boston. While the constitution itself holds little material of interest, the introductory note that was published alongside it offers great insight into the goals and rationale of the agrarian utopia. In the note, written jointly by George Ripley, Charles Dana, and Minot Pratt, the directors explain the goals and geographic benefits of Brook Farm:

...when men are in true social relations their industrial organization will necessarily assume those forms... We wish, therefore, to bring Brook Farm before the public, as a location offering at least as great advantages for a thorough experiment as can be found in the vicinity of Boston. It is situated in West Roxbury, three miles from the depot of the Dedham Branch Rail Road, and about eight miles from Boston, and combines a convenient nearness to the city with a degree of retirement and freedom from unfavorable influences, unusual even in the country. The place is one of great natural beauty, and indeed the whole landscape is so rich and various as to attract the notice of even casual visitors.²⁴⁵

In Brook Farm, Ripley saw a landscape of remarkable beauty: and since, as Emerson noted in his essay "Experience," that "the world is all outside," Ripley believed the Brook Farmers could achieve a more perfect social order in West Roxbury as easily as they could on the frontier. And with a place of such "great natural beauty" as the farm itself, Ripley and the Brook Farmers would truly experience the pastoral idyll that could allow them to grow from the land. Another aspect of Brook Farm's philosophy and goals

²⁴⁴ Delano, *Brook Farm*, 69; Golemba, *George Ripley*, 29.

²⁴⁵ *Constitution of the Brook Farm Association, for Industry and Education, West Roxbury, Mass. With An Introductory Statement*, reprinted in *Autobiography of Brook Farm*, 94.

becomes apparent after the mention of the farm's proximity to the "Dedham Branch Rail Road" station. Ripley saw in Brook Farm a place of natural beauty that had the equally significant benefit of being in the city: from West Roxbury, his utopian message could be heard in Boston. He and the Brook Farmers wanted to actively educate the masses and bring them to an understanding of "true social relations" and their humanity, whereas Emerson and Thoreau believed the western wilderness would do that on its own. Ripley believed that an Eastern Eden was possible, but he realized that any chance he had of spreading his message depended upon being both successful as an enterprise and near a city. His counterpart in Transcendentalist utopianism, Bronson Alcott, realized neither of those things.

Bronson Alcott and the Seeds of Fruitlands

Bronson Alcott was a jack-of-all-trades intellectual of the mid-19th century, having been involved in all manner of causes and schools of thought, from abolitionism to education reform to Transcendentalism and utopianism. His early years were spent in a small Connecticut town, where he relished the sense of community a close-knit rural environment produced; and while his philosophy evolved over time, his desire for such a community remained, and may be found at the heart of his Fruitlands experiment.²⁴⁶ Alcott's background is of little importance here: he began life as a Yankee peddler, then as a progressive schoolteacher in Boston, Philadelphia, and Boston again, all the while embracing ideas of social reform, particularly in regards to abolitionism, up to the point

²⁴⁶ Frederick C. Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography* (East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University, 1982), 28.

when he became aware of the growing Transcendentalist movement in the mid-1830s. In July of 1835, Alcott met Emerson at the latter's Concord home, and deemed him "a revelation of the divine spirit."²⁴⁷ He became deeply intrigued with Transcendentalism, and following his reforming instincts and natural tendencies, ran with the movement's ideas of reforming the Unitarian church.

Alcott's usefulness as a counterpoint or final extension of the American pastoral dream comes, in part, from his role as an extreme articulator and practitioner of Transcendentalist thought first pioneered by Emerson. While Emerson clearly and frequently argued for the divinity of the individual, he did not come right out and declare such a thing to be true; Alcott, however, did not blush at claiming that the "infinite capacities" of humans' spiritual nature enabled them to be the "Sovereign of the Earth, fitted to subdue all things," imbued with an inner divinity.²⁴⁸ Fruitlands would be Alcott's ultimate push to encourage individuals to realize their inner divinity and capacity. "Few there are," he mused, "that have retained the perception of their original glory: with the loss of the virtue that fed their flame of the spirit, has the spirit been dimmed, and all its primal glories lost, in the shades of the Senses!"²⁴⁹ These are Emersonian thoughts dressed with greater ardor: the self is divine, and one must divorce oneself from any "mean egoism" in order to realize one's true potential and capacity for being. Where Emerson and Thoreau both came to see the American west as the ideal staging ground for individuals to realize their potential, Alcott, like Ripley, participated in romanticizing the New England land, and eventually settled on the idea of a pastoral utopian experiment in New England as the ideal venue for self-discovery.

²⁴⁷ Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott*, 134.

²⁴⁸ Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott*, 134, 47.

²⁴⁹ Dahlstrand, *Amos Bronson Alcott*, 134.

An American Eden

Fruitlands was birthed from the seeds of a failed venture. Alcott's Temple School in Boston, a place of progressive and Transcendentalist education where the schoolteacher instructed children on matters of the Universal Spirit, was a philosophical success for the progressive educator, but an economic failure. His spiritual teachings attracted the attention of an English reformer and intellectual named James Greaves, who wrote Alcott in the fall of 1837, proposing the two were connected by the Universal Spirit as "friend[s] and companion[s] in the hidden path of Love's most powerful revelations."²⁵⁰ The two began a correspondence and immediately resonated with one another philosophically. May of 1842 found Alcott travelling across the Atlantic to visit Greaves in London; when he arrived, he learned Greaves had just recently died, but he subsequently met Charles Lane, a disciple of Greaves, with whom (and on whose dime) Alcott founded Fruitlands.²⁵¹ His pitch to Lane was simple. They would:

...select a spot whereon the new Eden may be planted, and man may, untempted by evil, dwell in harmony with his Creator, with himself, his fellows, and with all external natures...[New England would be] the field wherein this idea is to be realized in actual experience... We propose not to make new combinations of old substances, the elements themselves shall be new...[A] better body shall be built up from the orchard and the garden...[an] unvitiated generation and more genial habits shall restore the Eden on Earth.²⁵²

Alcott offered an uncomplicated explanation: in the fashion of Samuel Sewall, he advertised America as the home for a new Eden. To Alcott, America—New England particularly—was a land of pastoral beauty that could provide the setting for an agrarian community whereby he and his companions could create an "unvitiated generation" with

²⁵⁰ James Pierrepont Greaves to A. Bronson Alcott, quoted in Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 29.

²⁵¹ Clara Endicott Sears, *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 11.

²⁵² Quoted in Francis, *Fruitlands*, 82.

higher moral capacities and greater virtues. His language and the explicit identification of a “new Eden” feels like a stronger recasting of William Bradford’s statement in *Of Plymouth Plantation* that “I am refreshed to have seen some glimpse [of Eden], as Moses saw the land of Canaan afar off.”²⁵³ Where Bradford merely saw Eden at a distance after attempting to recreate it in the New World, Alcott charged ahead, writing that the new Eden would very much “be built up from the orchard and the garden.” From a philosophical perspective, Alcott’s goals are not unique: his language bears similarity to Bradford because the two men pursued the same dream of creating an Eden in America.

For all of his pastoral and Romantic sensibilities, Alcott’s decision to create his Eden in New England was likely driven by economic necessity. He only had about \$1,800 to \$2,000 from Lane with which to finance the creation of utopia, and such a sum would not support a trip west.²⁵⁴ But that he could pursue his goals in the east speaks to the power Alcott saw in the divinity of the individual and the presence of the Universal Spirit in the land. Such things, in Alcott’s mind, did not change depending on one’s location. Ultimately, Alcott and Lane decided on a plot of land known as Wyman Farm in Harvard, Massachusetts. The farm encompassed ninety acres of land and offered the prospective utopians views of Mounts Wachusett and Greylock—so was the land intended to be America’s new Eden.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, xxviii.

²⁵⁴ A. Bronson Alcott to Junius S. Alcott, 7 March, 1843, in *The Letters of A. Bronson Alcott*, ed. Richard L. Herrnstadt (Ames, IA: Iowa State, 1969), 100.

²⁵⁵ Francis, *Fruitlands*, 1.

Agrarian Edens: Brook Farm and Fruitlands in Action

Brook Farm and Fruitlands are surprisingly different for two failed Transcendentalist utopian experiments, both located in Massachusetts and founded within two years of one another. As an attempt at creating Eden, Fruitlands was nothing short of a train wreck: formed in May 1843, the community disbanded in January 1844, with its members bitterly disillusioned and the enterprise underwater financially.²⁵⁶ Ripley's Brook Farm survived until October of 1847, a good six years after its establishment, and though it too was done in by financial ruin, it enjoyed a period of intellectual and communal flourishing, unlike the short and concentrated bitterness experienced at Fruitlands.²⁵⁷ Alcott's farm in Harvard was home to his family and an oddball cast of characters, including a nudist who saw his practice as imitating Adam and Eve, and a peculiar man named Joseph Palmer who hailed from the equally strange No Town, Massachusetts (by Fitchburg) and who once was jailed for wearing a long beard.²⁵⁸ Contrast these individuals with the inhabitants of Brook Farm: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles A. Dana, of the venerable Cambridge family, are two striking examples, but not unrepresentative in their intellectual and social capacities.²⁵⁹ In effect, where Fruitlands was a roughshod experiment, Brook Farm was a truer communal living experience that attracted a good number of Boston-area intellectuals.²⁶⁰ Alcott attempted to make Fruitlands an extension of Transcendentalist principles to an untenable extreme: the participants' belief in the divinity of all living beings—animals included—caused them to

²⁵⁶ Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1997), 209.

²⁵⁷ Delano, *Brook Farm*, 310.

²⁵⁸ Francis, *Fruitlands*, 118.

²⁵⁹ Katharine Burton, *Paradise Planters: The Story of Brook Farm* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939), 52-53 for a representative list of Boston and Cambridge intellectuals and social elites at Brook Farm.

²⁶⁰ Zoltan Haraszti, *The Idyll of Brook Farm* (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library, 1940), 8.

adopt a vegan diet, which acted as one of many unbearable restrictions upon the utopian participants. Ripley and the Brook Farmers were more relaxed in these beliefs; the group effort was a communal exercise in Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance (as contradictory as that may seem), but Alcott could not bear to operate in so large a community, instead leaning on the idea of self-reliance so thoroughly as to decline Ripley's invitation to join Brook Farm and instead to found his own venture.²⁶¹

Differences aside, Brook Farm and Fruitlands share two very important aspects: agrarianism was at the core of both communities, and both ventures failed with varying degrees of spectacle. Alcott's failure—and more broadly, Fruitlands' failure—stemmed at least partially from a total misapplication of the agrarian and pastoral dream that led Alcott, Lane, and others to create their utopia on a farm in the first place. The strict dietary requirements Alcott mandated, which amounted to veganism a century before the practice received a name, were ludicrous given the community's gross inability to farm the crops they deemed acceptable. Alcott scholar Odell Shephard put it succinctly when he observed that Alcott ignored “that basic rural wisdom which he must have had”—being the understanding that in order to live off the land, one must cooperate with the land and bend to its whims. The utopian farmer, Shephard notes, was content to view himself as an exception to nature's machinery, for perhaps he were miles away from the farm, in Boston or New York, engrossed in spiritual conversation when the rye was ready to harvest. How could a philosopher of the spirit be held to the rules of the land?²⁶² In short, Alcott's agrarianism existed as an ideal only—he was not committed to seriously farming at Fruitlands, but was merely interested in the idea as an appropriate setting and

²⁶¹ Sterling F. Delano, “Transcendentalist Communities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford, 2010), 251.

²⁶² Odell Shephard, *Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), 361.

element of his new Eden. His relationship to the land was more spiritual than agricultural, largely consisting of pastoral praise and love for the natural world without much understanding or desire to actually work and live off the land. Ripley, to his credit, actually ran farming initiatives at Brook Farm (making it much less of a misnomer than ‘Fruitlands’) to the point where those tasked with farmwork consisted one of the largest working groups in the community.²⁶³ But even then, Brook Farm’s successful realization of its agrarian and pastoral ideals could not keep the enterprise afloat.

Compared to Alcott, Ripley’s failure may be simpler: Brook Farm required a great deal of start-up capital (roughly \$30,000), and the project was financially insolvent basically from inception. In its later years, a fire destroyed part of the farm, and the community could not foot the cost to restore the building. Combining this incident with a general waning interest in utopianism spelled the end of Brook Farm and Ripley’s pastoral Eden.²⁶⁴

But while both Brook Farm and Fruitlands failed, their stories are remarkable, and rooted in the earth. Both institutions sought to elevate individuals to a greater state of being by engaging with the natural world through agriculture, and while both failed, they are excellent active representations of the Transcendentalist and broader American tradition of engaging with the land to reach greater heights. They are the ultimate extensions of Transcendentalist philosophy, and both ventures were embodiments of the American tradition of viewing both the landscape and nation as divinely charged and endowed with a higher power. While Alcott’s and Ripley’s attempts to recreate Eden

²⁶³ Joel Myerson, Brook Farm, “Two Unpublished Reminiscences of Brook Farm,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2 (June 1975), 254.

²⁶⁴ Delano, “Transcendentalist Communities,” 254, 256.

failed quite splendidly, both men reinforced and furthered the philosophical tradition of American exceptionalism.

Conclusion
Building Domestic Edens

From their vantage point in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the Transcendentalists grew their philosophies out of a combination of older traditions. First, they heavily interacted with the tradition of viewing America as Eden, a jointly pastoral and religious narrative that extends back to John Winthrop's "city upon a hill" message. Second, they engaged with eighteenth century ideas of agrarian republicanism that Jefferson pioneered. Emerson and Thoreau particularly embraced Jeffersonian agrarianism, to the point where they saw an agrarian republic as a virtuous society in an idealistic form, where Jefferson had constructed his vision to serve a politically stabilizing purpose in the early years of the republic. All four men used the New England village myth as a link in the process of creating an Eden. It connected them to their ancestors who had first attempted to settle the wilderness; the Puritans had come the closest to creating Eden, and so any attempts going forward would do well to embrace their experience, or so the Transcendentalists reasoned. Though the Puritans did not succeed in their efforts, the western frontier was an opportunity, in Emerson and Thoreau's eyes, to attempt creating an Eden in the wilderness once more.

Emerson and Thoreau saw promise in the West as a blank slate where Americans could remove themselves from polluting influences: instead of traveling from England to New England like their forerunners, they envisioned a great westward migration. The idea and motivation remained the same: to create an American Eden. But the execution was different, as the West held all manner of political implications. Emerson and Thoreau's argument for expansion was more pastoral and nationalistic than it was

outwardly religious, and they had a deep tradition of attempting Eden in America from which to draw support and inspiration. The Puritans thus became a moral benchmark for the possible expansion. Through a combination of the New England village myth and pastoralism, Thoreau particularly came to see nineteenth-century New England farmers as the most exact representation of Puritans and Puritan values in America at the time. They were thus to be the chosen people: the model Americans who would found America's Eden, an experiment that would, if successful, bring the whole nation to a higher moral state.

God was still guiding America in the nineteenth century, as the Transcendentalists believed in varying capacities. But there existed grave challenges to successful expansion, namely slavery and an unbridled zealotry for expansion held by the likes of Jackson and Polk. Emerson and Thoreau had to finesse an argument for supporting expansion. And they successfully did so by incorporating political calls against slavery into discourse regarding expansionism. Their argument for expansionism, then, was that expanding should happen and had to happen in order to fulfill America's epic potential and create an American Eden. But if slavery were to expand along with the country's borders and population, then all hope for Eden would be lost. The power of the land drew Emerson and Thoreau west in their quest for Eden, but there were attempts in the older part of the country as well.

Ripley and Alcott focused on creating agrarian Edens at home. Their attempts at utopia sought more actively to reach communion with nature and influence those around them. Ripley in particular sought to directly influence the spiritual awakening of others, as he made clear when explaining why he chose to situate Brook Farm right outside

Boston. He and Alcott drew strongly on the New England village myth to create agrarian communities that they considered to be updated utopian versions of old Puritan settlements. But since Ripley and Alcott were far less political than Emerson and Thoreau, the West was less of an issue: they could fashion Eden at home.

Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, and Alcott all shared a belief in creating a New World Eden. They all saw God as guiding America, and they all believed in the spiritual power of the natural world. Emerson and Thoreau's conditional support of expansion rests on these beliefs. Let us revisit a quotation from "Young American" that I discussed in the previous chapter, as it will shine in this context. Reflecting on America, Emerson wrote:

This land, too, is as old as the Flood, and wants no ornament or privilege which nature could bestow. Here stars, here woods, here hills, here animals, here men abound, and the vast tendencies concur of a new order. If only the men are employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit who led us hither, and is leading us still, we shall quickly enough advance...into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded.²⁶⁵

His message, we can now see, was very straightforward. Emerson conceived that "the Spirit," or God, would lead America into a golden age where human society would prosper in a way greater than the greatest societies and civilizations of human history. This is a fair and literal interpretation of Emerson's words, and his meaning was plain: God created the country and has steered it towards its ultimate purpose—he would bring America into the Millennium, the thousand year period of Christ's reign on earth before Judgment Day. Viewing the New World as a fresher and purer stage for God's work in contrast to the corruption of the Old World was a classically Puritan idea, present in the thinking of those who first came to Massachusetts, as was the idea of the Millennium.²⁶⁶

It should not be surprising to see Emerson engage with this Puritan tradition: his

²⁶⁵ Emerson, "The Young American," 382-3.

²⁶⁶ Rosenmeier, *Language of Canaan*, 13.

argument directly draws upon Puritanism, which was at a certain level, is very much part of the core American identity. His philosophy of nature and political positions regarding expansionism and abolitionism all shared the same end: the creation of a moral and enlightened society. When combined with the American pastoral tradition and the New England village myth, which emphasized America's Puritan background, these elements all point to one thing: the creation of an Eden, and the coming of the Millennium in America.

Emerson and Thoreau desired Americans to embrace the divinity of the land and recognize the divinity of the self in order to produce a people of a higher morality and usher in the American Millennium. Ripley and Alcott wished for the same, but they sought to jumpstart the Millennium in New England. All four men strove for the same goal, reached for the same moral enlightenment—and if their visions were realized, America would have its golden age. To these four men, the manifest destiny of America was not necessarily that the country would grow to the Pacific: it was that America and its divinely guided people would create an Eden from the wilderness, thus bringing the Millennium and truly fulfilling America's potential for epic.

Afterword

As national movements and schools of thought, American pastoralism, expansionism, and the search for Eden all changed direction significantly after the first generation of Transcendentalists moved on. Whitman, of course, embraced America's natural beauty in *Leaves of Grass* like no one before him, but generally the traditions in which Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, and Alcott participated in faded during the decades after their involvement. Transcendentalism as a whole quieted down, and while a second generation of thinkers carried the movement into the Gilded Age, the atmosphere and intellectual production was a far cry from Concord in the 1830s and 1840s.²⁶⁷ Even a general glance at the history of the nineteenth century reveals some very obvious reasons for the changes in national atmosphere: the Civil War wrought such destruction in America, and inflicted so much trauma on the American people that little of American life was the same. Religious beliefs were called into question, and believing in the idea of a benevolent God was something many Americans had difficulty with during the war.²⁶⁸ In such a context, not only would it be hard to imagine the country as divinely guided, but it would also be difficult to envision wonderful bucolic scenery when newspapers constantly featured photographs of the battlefield dead.²⁶⁹

Over the broader scope of history, American pastoralism lived through the war, though did not enjoy much attention until the post-war years when the National Parks movement began. Settlers eventually saw the Pacific Ocean, and one could argue that

²⁶⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, 8.

²⁶⁸ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and The American Civil War* (New York, Vintage, 2008), xviii.

²⁶⁹ Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body* (North Carolina: 2004), 106.

after reaching the West, the spirit of Manifest Destiny metamorphosed into modern American imperialism, but that would be too much a digression.

Eden, it seems, has still not been found in America. But if the politics and national visions of Emerson, Thoreau, Ripley, and Alcott are outmoded, their philosophies are still applicable. Through their writings and stories, a form of American pastoralism still lives on—certainly one very different from how it existed in the 19th century, but it exists and endures largely thanks to the Transcendentalists.

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