D. Transcendentalism and Earthly Utopias

Burton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, G. W. Curtis, and his brother Burrrill Curtis. The place was a farm of two hundred acres of good land, eight miles from Boston, in the town of West Roxbury, and was of much natural beauty, with a rich and varied landscape. The avowed object of the association was to realize the Christian ideal of life by making such industrial, social, and educational arrangements as would promote economy, combine leisure for study with healthful and honest toil, avert collisions of caste, equalize refinements, diffuse courtesy, and sanctify life more completely than is possible in the isolated household mode of living.

It is a remarkable feature of this establishment that it was wholly indigenous, a genuine outgrowth of the times in New England, and not at all derived from Fourierism [French cooperative socialism], as many supposed. Fourier was, in fact, not known to its founders until Brook Farm had been a year or two in operation. They then began to study him, and fell finally into some of his fantasies, to which in part is to be ascribed the ruin of the institution.

Of the life of Brook Farm I do not intend to say much, for I was there only one day, though I knew nearly all the members. It was a delightful gathering of men and women of superior cultivation, who led a charming life for a few years, laboring in its fields and philandering in its pleasant woods. It was a little too much of a picnic for serious profit, and the young men and maidens were rather unduly addicted to moonlight wanderings in the pine-grove, though it is creditable to the sound moral training of New England that little or no harm came of these wanderings—at least not to the maidens. So far as the relation of the sexes is concerned, the Brook Farmers, in spite of their free manners, were as pure, I believe, as any other people.

The enterprise failed pecuniarily, after seeming for some years to have succeeded. Fourierism brought it into disrepute, and finally a great wooden phalanstery [main building], in which the members had invested all their means, took fire, and burned to the ground just as it was completed. Upon this catastrophe the association scattered (in 1847, I think), and Brook Farm became the site of the town poorhouse.

3. Henry David Thoreau Praises Spiritual Wealth (1854)

Henry David Thoreau, a leading transcendentalist, had worn a green coat to the Harvard chapel because the rules required black. He tried his hand at teaching, but when the authorities criticized his use of moral suasion, he whipped a dozen surprised pupils, just to show the absurdity of flogging, and forthwith resigned. While the Brook Farmers sought stimulation in association, he sought it in solitude. Building a hut on the shore of Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts, he spent over two years in philosophical introspection and in communion with the wildlife, including fish and moles. His experiences unfolded in his classic Walden, which was socialistic enough to become a textbook of the British Labour party. James Russell Lowell accused Thoreau of trying to make a virtue out of his indolence and other defects of character. Which of Thoreau’s observations in Walden have been weakened or strengthened by the passage of over a hundred years? Which ones would we regard as absurd today?

Chapter 15  The Ferment of Reform and Culture, 1790–1860

For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.

I have thoroughly tried schoolkeeping, and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure.

I have tried trade. But I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil. I was actually afraid that I might by that time be doing what is called a good business.

When formerly I was looking about to see what I could do for a living, ... I thought often and seriously of picking huckleberries. That surely I could do, and its small profits might suffice—for my greatest skill has been to want but little—so little capital it required, so little distraction from my wonted moods, I foolishly thought. While my acquaintances went unwisely into trade or the professions, I contemplated this occupation as most like theirs; ranging the hills all summer to pick the berries which came in my way, and thereafter carelessly dispose of them. ... But I have since learned that trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business. ... For myself, I found that the occupation of a day-laborer was the most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty or forty days in a year to support one. The laborer's day ends with the going down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor. But his employer, who speculates from month to month, has no respite from one end of the year to the other. ...

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open.

The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now. ...

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in Paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace.
The town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they are above being supported by the town; but it often happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable.

Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me.

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.

4. Emersonisms and Thoreauisms

The following pithy sayings are culled from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, who were close transcendentalist friends and nonconformists. In what areas does there seem to be a close similarity in thinking? How many of these observations have been borne out by personalities or experiences in American history?

Government

The less government we have, the better—fewer laws, and the less confined power. (Emerson)

I heartily accept the motto "That government is best which governs least." Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe: "That government is best which governs not at all," and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. (Thoreau)

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. (Thoreau)

Of all debts men are least willing to pay the taxes. What a satire this is! on government! (Emerson)

Reform

We are reformers in spring and summer; in autumn and winter we stand by the old; reformers in the morning, conservatives at night. Reform is affirmative, conservatism negative; conservatism goes for comfort, reform for truth. (Emerson)

Every reform was once a private opinion. (Emerson)

Beware when the Great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. (Emerson)

There is no strong performance without a little fanaticism in the performer. (Emerson)

Every burned book enlightens the world. (Emerson)

Every reform is only a mask under cover of which a more terrible reform, which dares not yet name itself, advances. (Emerson)

*In 1846 Thoreau was jailed for one night for refusing to pay his poll tax to a state (Massachusetts) that supported slavery. The tax, much to his disgust, was paid by an aunt. Legend has it that Emerson visited him in jail, saying, "Why are you here?" Thoreau allegedly replied, "Why are you not here?"