EMERSON’S TRANSCENDENTALISM REVISITED:
THE CREATION AND COLLAPSE OF THE WESTERN FANTASY

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Introduction:

The Complexities of a Radical Movement in a Budding Land

*The Western Messenger*, founded as a liberal Unitarian magazine and proudly proclaimed by its editors to be “Devoted to Religion, Life, and Literature,” began in 1835 as the brainchild of Ephraim Peabody. Peabody founded and first published *The Messenger* out of Cincinnati, which had only been incorporated as a city sixteen years earlier. *The Messenger*’s additional publishing site, Louisville, Ohio, had only been incorporated in 1828, and both cities, despite their urban growth, had only just begun to emerge from the Western wilderness. Peabody, along with Christopher Pearse Cranch, William G. Eliot, James Freeman Clarke, and William Henry Channing, all eventually would contribute to and edit the magazine, with the aim of spreading the Unitarian beliefs that they had been raised on in New England. Unitarian congregations in the East had been horrified by the reports reaching them of the Western territory’s residents’ “infidelity” (“Article 1” 1) and rejection of Christianity. The editors of *The Messenger* were part of a wave of immigrant ministers, sponsored and sent forth by Eastern institutions, as part of Eastern Unitarians’ plan to save the West. Thus the significance of the magazine’s title originally referred less to the identity of the West and more to the role the editors’ roles sought to play—heralds of truth. Introducing themselves as “the Editors” (“Article 1” 2) in the first publication, they maintained from the beginning that their views were not necessary identical, but were products of each individual editor’s knowledge and values.
In 1836, in the midst of the rise of these concerns for the condition of Unitarianism in the West, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s controversial essay *Nature* was published. The new ideas the work offered concerning the state of the human soul and the relationship between God and nature immediately began to divide Unitarian congregations. This upheaval continued through 1837, eventually filtering into the West and reaching the young ministers struggling to shape the magazine. Rather than condemning these developing ideas as heretical as many Unitarian leaders in the East were quick to do, the editors of *The Messenger* cautiously embraced them. In fact, the editors printed defenses of and poetry by many authors now considered canon Transcendentalists, including Emerson, Orestes Brownson, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Nathanial Hawthorne. The editors urged their readers to look for the encompassing universal elements of the radical new sect, rather than focusing on the controversies this forward-thinking movement had caused among the intellectual elite of New England. These men saw the emerging Transcendental ideas of innate universal truths, the dignity and divinity of humanity, and connection to God through nature as having enormous potential in aiding the creation of an ideal Western society. Furthermore they viewed the questioning of established beliefs and creeds as absolutely essential to the progressive tone of the church. Throughout 1837 and 1838, under the editorship of Cranch and Clarke, the magazine became more and more connected with the “Emersonian Heresy” (Habich 23), and by the time Channing took over the editorship in May 1839, it was essentially a Transcendental magazine in content, if not in name. Considering the locations of the magazine’s editors in the
Western and still relatively isolated cities of St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati, Transcendentalism seemed to be a natural fit. Ohio was the frontier of the westward movement at this time, and these progressive, yet naïve, Unitarian ministers viewed the West as a place where their philosophy might take root and aid in forming a physical anchor. Society could start over, repairing traditional social tensions and inequalities. They sought to establish universal education, classless societies, and liberal congregations aware of the dignity of the human state, all virtues springing from the foundation of Transcendentalism.

Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) and *The American Scholar* (1837) most notably outlined what would eventually be termed Transcendentalism, though the movement itself was comprised of countless authors and philosophers, whose ideas or arguments varied greatly. These essays embody what can be called, in a manner, civil religion. In ironic opposition to the foundations of his Unitarian heritage, Emerson’s observations form a trinity of humanity, nature, and God. This three-fold relationship supplies a moral code, founded upon the idea that humans are elements of the divine expression found in nature. This intertwined, all-encompassing vision allowed Emerson to expand his philosophies to touch upon issues such as labor, class stratification, rural and urban life, scholarship, established religions, and vocation, among others. What his philosophies expressed principally though, was the idea that each individual must form and follow his or her own unique moral code. Emerson’s ideas are essentially and intrinsically abstract. They provide the framework necessary for each individual to form his or her moral code, but his philosophies as a whole were not intended for
implementation on a large scale. Despite this, many have attempted to apply Emerson’s ideas concerning the individual’s unique moral code to social reform and progressive movements, not excepting the editors of *The Western Messenger*.

The editors experienced Emerson’s philosophies from the East and considered them perfectly fitted for the Western society just being formed in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. The tracts of uncleared land, swarms of idealistic immigrants, and dearth of traditional religious or social structures all seemed to the editors to offer the perfect opportunity for creating the ideal Transcendental society they hoped could be brought about by the practical application of Emerson’s ideas. A close study of the last four volumes of the magazine (v. 5-8) reveals this fantasy, while also indicating the mounting doubts and disillusions of the editors, and eventually the collapse of this fantasy. The rapid development of the West inevitably led to increasing urbanization, burgeoning wealth and materialism, and the depletion of natural resources. The very land that had inspired the editors’ hopes for an ideal society quickly began to lose the characteristics essential to the development of the Transcendental fantasy—the wilderness, the purity, and the boundless opportunity of the land.

Scholarship concerning the magazine has focused largely on the personal trials of its editors in the West, the East’s reception of the magazine’s developing viewpoints, and the financial troubles surrounding the magazine. I propose to analyze the magazine as a work of literature, focusing on volumes 5-8, which were those most influenced by Transcendentalism. Rather than emphasizing the social or historical context revealed by the magazine, I seek to treat the editor’s work instead as one point
of origin for many of the literary tropes and themes applied to Western identity today. I will be considering the magazine’s treatment of minorities, social activism, and nature within the context of Transcendentalism. In order to trace the development of Transcendentalism in the magazine, I will be evaluating these issues within the magazine and comparing such representations to those found in canonical Eastern texts. This analysis will provide a clear comparison between the emerging characteristics of New England Transcendentalism and the magazine, while revealing the rejection of Transcendentalism as a basis for practical social reform.

Margaret Fuller, a feminist and Transcendental author from Massachusetts, completes the arc of creation, fantasy, and collapse concerning the West’s Transcendental potential with her 1843 work, *Summer on the Lakes*. Unlike *The Messenger*’s editors, who were focused on the religious and philosophical identity of the West as an extension of and correction to the East, Fuller traveled to the West with an open mind and with an idea of uncovering exactly which elements contributed to the territory’s unique nature. Her work provides a detailed impression of the unfortunate realities of a society she feared was progressing much too quickly. The editor’s fears of and warnings against materialism, intolerance, and over-urbanization are played out in Fuller’s narrative, yet she manages to end her journey positively. The fantasy has been destroyed, but a practical look at the advantages of the flourishing West reveals the prediction that all is not lost, and Fuller anticipates that Western society may indeed improve upon its Eastern counterpart.
Chapter One

Emerson’s Fantasy: Cultivating the Individual

“A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, The American Scholar

Though Emerson’s influences can be traced to late Romantics such as Carlyle, Goethe, and Kant, among others, his anonymous publication of Nature in 1836 places his philosophical organization of the relationship between humanity, God, and nature at the forefront of the emerging trend of Transcendentalism. So too does his discussion of this relationship lead inevitably to a re-thinking of many social questions of the time—labor, scholarship, progress, the state of the soul and of the world. In Our Common Dwelling, Lance Newman points to a question posed by New England labor reformer and Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson as the pinnacle to which all transcendental philosophy aspired: “How shall be introduced that equality of moral and physical well-being which is the expression of the equality of all men before God and the State?” (Newman 42). Newman answers that all Transcendentalists resembled each other by a common philosophical feature: “a conviction that the way to redeem society was to get back in touch with the divinely ordained laws of nature” (Newman 42). While this may be true for all Transcendentalists and certainly sounds like Emerson, it is important to analyze what this reconnection to nature meant for the individual.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate, through close readings of two of Emerson’s important early works, Nature and The American Scholar, that the
transcendental philosophy Emerson outlined in his writings was never meant for practical, social implementation. Emerson’s writings have produced tons upon tons of criticism and scholarship, and nowhere more so than in the realm of social reform. In “The Age of the First Person Singular,” Wesley T. Mott offers a word of caution when discussing Emerson in a social context: “But the matter becomes stickier when we invoke him [Emerson] to endorse political or social agendas. It matters a great deal what Emerson meant when, for example we quote him on virtues and qualities relating to moral value or national purpose” (Mott 63). Some have interpreted Emerson’s heavy use of natural imagery—the land, farming, seasonal progression—to argue that Emerson required an actual, physical return to the land, accompanied by an elevation of the laboring classes and the creation of an ideal society ruled by equality and morality. While it is true that Emerson’s worship of nature revealed to him morality, the dignity of labor, and the divinity of the human soul, he never intended for these revelations to be harnessed into a social system. Primarily, Emerson’s philosophies depict his hope for the potential of each individual soul to develop into an ideal version, modeled after the example set by nature. The model offered by nature would assist in developing an individual’s morality, spiritual regeneration, progress, and balance, regardless of their environment. His essays reveal that Emerson promoted the perfection and progress of the individual above all.

First though, I will provide some historical context for Emerson’s writing, in order to establish the audience for whom he was writing and to argue that he never intended for Transcendentalism to serve in transforming a society. Nature was
published in 1836, first anonymously and then publicly for the enjoyment of Emerson’s friends and colleagues. Since graduating from Harvard in 1821, he had taught at several schools in the Boston area. He taught, traveled, preached, and studied at the Harvard Divinity School until 1829, when he married and settled in Boston, an ordained pastor at Boston’s Second Church. Many biographies note this time as the beginning of the development of Emerson’s attitude towards the individual. In A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ronald A. Bosco notes that this period’s sermons and journals anticipated the idealism of his later works: “Drawing upon his readings in German Higher Criticism and the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Victor Cousin, among others, in sermons before his congregation Emerson rehearsed many of the themes that would later characterize his teachings for the public in lectures and essays” (Myerson 12). Emerson left the Unitarian church in 1832 over a dispute concerning his aversion to performing the Lord’s Supper, and began his introduction into the world of literature, acquainting himself with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle.

Upon publication of Nature, Emerson became a major force among the American literati. The publication, “a sweeping declaration of the divinity of human life and the universality of thought” (Myerson 22-23), set out a philosophy describing the balance and connectedness between God, the universe, and humanity. Emerson’s participation in the Transcendental Club, beginning in that year, cemented his attachment with other members of the movement, including Bronson Alcott, James
Freeman Clarke, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, among others.

The social contexts which prompted Emerson to write both essays include a demonizing of his Transcendentalist colleagues by the Unitarian Church and the American dependence upon European literature. Emerson and his progressive contemporaries saw the Unitarian Church falling into the same pattern of those religions institutions which it had been formed to replace. In *The Western Experiment*, Elizabeth McKinsey notes James Freeman Clarke’s disgust with the narrow-mindedness of Boston’s religious and philosophical institutions: “Shall I say a word of evil of this good city of Boston? Among all its virtues, it does not abound in a tolerant spirit. The yoke of opinion is a heavy one, often crushing individuality of judgment and action” (McKinsey 15). The East had become stale and rife with division; Emerson’s disgust with the squabbles and politics arising from these divisions is evident: “We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed frivolous and unsound” (Emerson, “Nature” 1111). It was the second aspect of this problem which affected Emerson and the editors directly, being “speculative men” themselves. The rising transcendental philosophy was decried as heresy by the older generation of Unitarians.

Much of the natural imagery in Emerson’s essay arises from his discussion of individual morality, which, he argues, has its origins in nature itself. Himself, a product of Unitarianism’s “liberal Christianity, with its rejection of Calvinist doctrines of human depravity and its liberating emphasis on human potential for moral growth”
(Mott 70), Emerson began to question even Unitarianism’s liberal edicts concerning the necessity of the Lord’s Supper and the nature of miracles. Emerson rejected established religions or institutionalized ethical codes in favor of a moral code rooted in nature that was inherently inclusive of all humanity. This inclusive aspect of Transcendentalism, recognizing the dignity of all human souls, attracted the attention of those of Emerson’s contemporaries seeking to employ religion as an equalizing force in society. They erred though, in attempting to mold these ideas into a social policy, for Emerson’s moral code is fluid and unique to oneself, reflecting the varying aspects of nature and the individual. Channeling a neo-platonic view of the integral relationship between outward beauty and inward virtue—“Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (Emerson, “Nature” 1116)—Emerson consequently considered nature, the definitive emblem of outward beauty, the obvious model for virtue as well. An individual’s actions only had to reflect the order, goodness, and nobility found in nature to be considered virtuous:

Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and the violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child. Only let his thoughts be of equal scope, and the frame will suit the picture. A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the central figure of the visible sphere. (Emerson, “Nature” 1116-1117)

Thus an individual’s inner virtue will be apparent by an outward beauty.
Not only does an individual’s virtue reflect his or her relationship with nature, but nature actually lends itself to perfecting human virtue; nature “shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong” (Emerson, “Nature” 1124). Emerson, seeing the connectedness of all things, both natural and man-made, argues that the universe exudes virtue and is at all times offered as an example for humankind’s benefit:

All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun, -- it is a sacred emblem form the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields. […] Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment which thus scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul. The moral influence of nature upon every individual is the amount of truth which it illustrates to him. (Emerson, “Nature” 1124)

Emerson’s moral code applies the example set by nature, and thus, by God. Emerson argues that any and all individual moral codes, despite their differences, are divinely sanctioned if they too align with this example.

Emerson defends the divinity of all human souls by arguing further that established religions or socially-prescribed ethics wrongfully subordinate nature and God to the opinions of humankind. The very formation of a religious or ethical code by society is immediately at odds with nature: “The devotee flouts nature” (Emerson, “Nature” 1131). Standards set and observed by society, those “commencing from man” (Emerson, “Nature” 1130), lack the advantage of an individual’s moral code,
that is, its foundation and inspiration in nature. Religion and ethics, created by and intended for society as a whole will be inherently flawed, for “they both put nature underfoot” (Emerson, “Nature” 1130). It is the individual alone who can access the ideal moral model which nature has provided. Emerson solved his personal religious crisis by rejecting established religion altogether, favoring instead an individual moral philosophy inspired by nature itself.

In addition to his use of natural imagery to indicate the morality of the individual, Emerson also uses nature as a symbol of the individual’s potential for growth and renewal. Throughout *Nature*, images of land and farming figure prominently into Emerson’s discussion of abstract notions of nature and the soul. Rather than signifying Transcendentalism’s tangible ties to the earth, these natural images are presented as indicators of the need for spiritual and intellectual regeneration. Emerson’s use of pastoral and agrarian language is largely symbolic, employed to express two ideas essential to his vision of the human soul: regeneration and work. Before calling for spiritual regeneration through his symbolic use of natural imagery, Emerson first details why there exists such a need for regeneration. The introduction of *Nature* makes it clear that Emerson is addressing the “living generation” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110), a generation that depends far too much upon tradition. Emerson calls the current age “retrospective” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110), obsessed with old ways and old ideas. He urges today’s individuals to live for today rather than “grope among the dry bones of the past” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110) and blindly retain the religions, philosophies, and thoughts of “the sepulchers of the
fathers” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110). Emerson warns against placing the current age into the “faded wardrobe” of the preceding age. A new age is needed, with new ideas and experiences, with “an original relation to the universe” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110). This call for an original era sets Emerson up to detail exactly what this new period will look like and how it will be achieved—through a restoration of the individual.

Emerson utilizes symbolic images of the land, farming, and the regenerative characteristics of nature to signify how humanity’s reconnection with nature will assist in this restoration. A reconnection with nature, whose “floods of life stream around and through us” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110) will signal, in turn, an influx of human growth. In nature he sees signs of birth, growth, and progress, thus humanity’s reconnection with nature will inevitably impart a preoccupation with life, vigor, and newness: “In the woods is perpetual youth” (Emerson, “Nature” 1112). A return to nature will ensure the soul’s regeneration. Thus the reminder that “there is more wool and flax in the fields” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110-1111) is not meant to indicate the bounty of the land available to humanity but the bounty of humanity itself. The wool is the “poetry and philosophy of insight” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110) and the flax a “religion by revelation” (Emerson, “Nature” 1110). The fields, ripe for reaping, are the limitless planes of the human mind. Emerson’s assertion that there are “new lands, new men, new thoughts” (Emerson, “Nature” 1111) is not a literal call for new lands or social reconstructions. Emerson is urging the restructuring of the human soul, not the world.
Accompanying his use of natural descriptions to express regeneration, Emerson also employs pastoral, rustic imagery in an attempt to elevate the laborer. This is not an expression of class concern or of the advantage of agrarianism. Instead Emerson depicts the laborer as a symbol of the necessity and dignity of all work. In several passages, Emerson romanticizes the notion of the farmer or the country-dweller, which may have seemed, to his contemporaries, like a criticism of or concern over the social stratification of laborers. Indeed his claim that their closeness with nature lends a “piquancy to the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or back-woodsman” (Emerson, “Nature” 1119) seems to promote a rural lifestyle. It may seem that Emerson is endorsing the “advantage which the country-life possesses for a powerful mind” (Emerson, “Nature” 1120). But these agrarian images ultimately serve only to elevate labor in and of itself, not simply the manual labor of a romanticized rural society. Mott goes so far as to consider the “robust qualities” of the agrarian figure irreconcilable with the “somewhat anemic, religious, philosophical, educational, and reform elements that Emerson often criticized in Transcendentalism itself” (Mott 85). Emerson makes use of this agrarian language in an attempt to recapture the dignity of work, whether it takes place in rural or urban environment. The emphasis Emerson places upon work becomes important as its role in the process of human progress becomes clearer.

Emerson’s true aim in elevating the laborer was to recapture the dignity inherent in all individual work, owing to its contribution to what he saw as a dynamic relationship between nature and progress. Human progress, for Emerson, required all
individuals to participate in some aspect of labor: “A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work” (Emerson, “Nature” 1114). In turn, nature offered itself as a resource to labor: “It [nature] offers all its kingdoms to man as raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up” (Emerson, “Nature” 1123). Thus human development depends upon this cooperation between the resources of nature and the work of individuals. Emerson argues that human progress is an inevitable product of the labor of humanity and the “steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens” (Emerson, “Nature” 1113). Emerson sees nature everywhere as a means to facilitate humanity’s progress: “Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him” (Emerson, “Nature” 1113). And this aid isn’t merely to ensure humanity’s survival, but to see it soar and thrive, metropolises and all:

To diminish friction, he [mankind] paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon! The private poor man hath cities, ships, canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post-office, and the human race run on his errands; to the book-shop, and the human race read and write of all that happens, for him; to the court-house, and nations repair his wrongs. He sets his house upon the road, and the human race go
forth every morning, and shovel out the snow, and cut a path for him.

(Emerson, “Nature” 1113-1114)

In this context, nature becomes the very means by which humanity builds it cities and settles it lands. Nature’s complicity in human affairs suggests the idea that labor is not only an appropriate part of human existence, but an essential one. Whether rural or urban, Emerson admires labor for its role in the beneficial interplay of human and nature, and his hope for a new age includes industry, business, trade, machinery, and urban development. Despite Emerson’s obvious admiration for nature in its typical designation—“essences unchanged by man” (Emerson, “Nature” 1111)—his philosophies do not encourage an existence strictly limited to the forest or field. Emerson also considers all things man-made—“the mixture of his [man’s] will with the same things” (Emerson, “Nature” 1111)—important elements in his overall consideration of nature.

As long as humanity and nature work cooperatively in the relationship towards progress, then Emerson indeed regards all labor as noble, but he argues that it is the individual alone who can maintain a relationship with nature without tipping the balance in favor of humanity. The individual soul, and not society, is alone capable of a transformative balance: “The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. […] The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself” (Emerson, “Nature” 1136). Emerson’s admiration of the development of civilization does not prevent him from a recognition that the masses are apt to love utility, profit,
and order. This recognition reveals Emerson’s doubt that a society could ever really attain balance with nature. Emerson does not see this ideal balance in society, nor does he seem confident that it is even possible:

We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine. Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which hath a grandeur, a face of him? Yet this may show us what discord is between man and nature, for you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by. (Emerson, “Nature” 1133)

Here, surprisingly perhaps, Emerson devalues the very laborer who earlier was fulfilling the noble potential for human advancement. The contradiction is no matter to Emerson; it is the masses who are out of balance, and Emerson’s hope is for the individual. Emerson sees realistically that it is the individual who must be transformed first, and it is, indeed, only the individual who can ever approach the fantasy that Transcendentalism, in its most ideal concepts, outlines: “Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. […] Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform you life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions” (Emerson, “Nature” 1137). This privileging of the individual, in relation to the individual’s ability to exist harmoniously with nature, makes clear that Emerson is not concerned with the possibility that his philosophies and those of other Transcendentalists could be successfully integrated into a social policy. While
Emerson considers development and individual labor essential to human progress, he also recognizes propensity of society as a whole to tip the essential balance between nature and civilization, leading to his privilege of the individual, who is better able to maintain balance.

Making the realization of Transcendentalism’s practical application even less feasible is Emerson’s relegation of the individual to the idealized poet. While the individual is more likely to maintain a balance between nature and humanity, Emerson still considers it difficult for the common man to resist the influence of society. Revealing his elitist attitude towards the educated class, Emerson argues that it is poet who is best equipped to progress to Transcendentalism’s ideal state of connection with nature. Emerson portrays the poet as a kind of intermediary between the natural world and the human psyche, alone in the ability to appreciate nature without a thought for profit or utility; the sole distinguisher of “the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet” (Emerson, “Nature” 1112). A farmer may be nearer to the land than a lawyer or a sailor, but a farmer sees fields where a poet sees landscapes: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (Emerson, “Nature” 1112). It is the poet alone, who, upon observing nature, “finds something ridiculous in his delight, until he is out of the sight of men” (Emerson, “Nature” 1133). Emerson’s philosophies may outline a guide to attaining an ideal existence by observing the model proffered by nature, but it is only the most focused, intuitive individuals who are capable of attaining that ideal.
Emerson’s contemporaries may have interpreted his utilization of natural and agrarian imagery throughout the essay as a suggestion to literally reconnect to nature through a return to the land and an argument for the primacy of the laboring class; Emerson though, utilized this imagery purely to express the regenerative and transformative potential of the individual human soul. He makes clear in several passages that his philosophies are abstract only, purely theories and reflections for individual consideration. Where some have seen in Transcendentalism a set of philosophies fit for practical application, Emerson sees only theoretical truths, whose practical ends pale in comparison to the significance of their philosophical means: “But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical” (Emerson, “Nature” 1111). Emerson is not advocating for a society transformed by Transcendentalism; instead he seeks to transform the individual through the spiritual elevation brought on by a life in balance with God and nature. A Transcendental society is not practical, but, Emerson argues, an individual soul, affected by the truths of Transcendentalism, can be transformed. This truth, at which transcendental philosophy aims, holds the secret to a new world, though a world contained inside each person: “This view […] carries upon its face the highest certificate of truth, because it animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul” (Emerson, “Nature” 1133). For Emerson, the attraction of transcendental philosophy was not the possibility for social renovation or reform, but the potential of each individual for realization of truth, balance, morality, and growth.
It is this emphasis of the individual over the group which comes to dominate Emerson’s transcendental philosophies and which makes clear that Emerson was primarily concerned with individual transformation rather than with social reorganization. Published just a short time later, in 1837, Emerson’s *The American Scholar* solidifies this privileging of the individual over society.

Much less mystical than *Nature*, *The American Scholar* might have seemed to readers in Emerson’s generation and socio-economic class like a rallying cry for social and intellectual upheaval, giving “voice to the restlessness and idealism of his age” (Myerson 62). Indeed, the essay was first presented at the commencement of Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society, the graduates serving as symbols of the emerging literati—intellectual and philosophical leaders. Emerson later changed the title from “An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837” to “The American Scholar” to express that he was addressing all intellectual and philosophical leaders becoming aware of the need for an American Renaissance.

Indeed, in several places, Emerson’s language seems to imply the need for a rebirth of the American consciousness. Emerson was keenly aware that America was young and unformed, and had been dependent upon European (especially German) literature and philosophy for far too long. Indeed, Myerson notes in his introduction that “Emerson’s life was lived against sweeping changes in a rapidly developing young nation. When he was born, America had not been a country for even three decades” (Myerson 5). The upcoming generation of leaders, of which Emerson was a part, seemed balanced on the brink of a new era, and his language reflects this
awareness of youth and surging life: “Our days of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1138). The vigor of Emerson’s generation inspires these images in his writing, and his assertions of independence and urgency seem to coincide perfectly with a possible social reform agenda. Emerson applies similar revolutionary language to the historical circumstance of his generation, scoffing at those who would fear and “regret the coming state as untried” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1148). Instead he urges them to embrace the new and unknown:

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, — is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1148)

These uplifting words, directing young, American leaders “to destroy the old or to build the new” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1148), would have predictably inspired the possibility of social reform. Close reading of the entirety of The American Scholar though, reveals exactly the kind of revolution Emerson sees developing: a revolution of the individual, and though less prominent, of American literature.

While the essay’s revolutionary language may have inspired in some the hope for social reform, Emerson himself was rather more concerned with the toll society
had been taking on the soul. Emerson actually saw humanity as a group, i.e. “the multitude” as “sluggish,” “perverted,” and “slow to open to the incursion of Reason” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1143). This “reason,” of course, was Emerson’s direct rejection of the Enlightenment institution of understanding, and one of his philosophy’s most important tenets. Lockean philosophy suggested that “the mind perceives truth from external facts and experiences mediated by the senses” (Mott 71). Emerson believed that human knowledge and morality was innate, existing within each individual from birth, rather than learned through empirical processes. This reliance on intuitive understanding leads naturally then to his veneration for the individual soul, which must “defer never to the popular cry” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1150). He observed in the force of society a disturbing capacity for negatively influencing the individual and obscuring the influence of Reason. The only means, according to Emerson, by which to preserve and connect with this innate store of knowledge was to focus solely on oneself, one’s “own orbit” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1140). Unfortunately, Emerson saw everywhere the distressing effects of “‘the mass’ and ‘the herd’” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1147) upon the individual soul. The traditional gathering of individuals into social groups threatened the capacity for personal revelation. The worrying, herding effects of society formed an obstacle within the soul to the implementation of Reason, and in Emerson’s mind, this situation was an epidemic: “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn” (Emerson, “The American
Disgust evident, Emerson details the harmful pattern which had developed from the society’s persistence in amassing individuals—reason is clouded and the soul shrinks into a pale imitation of the former individual:

In a century, in a millennium, one or two men; that is to say, — one or two approximations to the right state of every man. All the rest behold in the hero or the poet their own green and crude being, — ripened; yes, and are content to be less, so that may attain to its full stature. […] They are content to be brushed like flies from the path of a great person, so that justice shall be done by him to that common nature which it is the dearest desire of all to see enlarged and glorified. They sun themselves in the great man’s light, and feel it to be their own element. (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1145)

In this twisted association, the part loses its defining element in the lure and draw of the whole. This detrimental influence of society upon the individual’s inborn capacity is what repels Emerson from social associations.

It is Emerson’s continuous return to “self-trust” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1145) that demonstrates his philosophy’s purpose of empowerment of the individual rather than practical social realization. In Emerson’s philosophy of self-trust, conceptual exploration of moral and ethical issues for the philosophical advancement of the individual trumps any attraction for concrete social progress. Not only would the influence of “the herd” complicate and weaken any attempt at the realization of transcendental philosophy into reality, but the attempt would be further broken down by the subtle nuances and complex facets of any one of a multitude of
social issues facing America at the time. Reforms aimed at abolition, temperance, and women’s rights all suffered dissent and division among their proponents, leading to quagmires of controversy. He saw the ease with which individuals “rose above, or transcended, the messy world of social unrest” (Mott 66). Emerson, though by no means denying the morality of such movements, recognized the incompatibility of personal moral codes and the inability of individuals to cooperate successfully on a large scale; debate was the inevitable result:

He [the individual] and only he knows the world. The world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depend on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1142)

Emerson advocated “severe abstraction” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1142), with the final objective being transformation, not of society, but of the individual—“happy enough, if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1142). While advocates of social reform mistakenly attempt to reconcile the beliefs of several individuals into a mold with the aim of solving a community problem, Emerson believes that individual revelation is the only possible means of change.
Despite his strong advocacy for self-reliance, Emerson was aware of the disadvantages arising from a rejection of convention. He faced fierce backlash himself for his unique philosophies. Emerson received rave reviews of his works by other leading Transcendentalists, “among members of the literary, educational, and religious establishment, however, [Nature and The American Scholar] represented the gibberish of a pantheistic romantic, who had lost control of his ability to think and write clearly” (Myerson 25). In a passages that foreshadows the personal crises the editors of The Western Messenger would face (discussed in the next chapter), Emerson describes the impressions of dejection and isolation, “poverty and solitude” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1147) that can plague those who would seek to resist the lure of social conformity:

For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time, which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society. (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1147)

Emerson acknowledges the difficulties of adhering to self-trust, though the advantages of “the upbuilding of a man” rather than a society, far outweighed any social stigma in his mind.
Though Emerson fears for the state of the individual and recognizes the difficulties of maintaining one’s individuality in a world that insists on conformity, he actually identifies what he sees as an emerging concern for the preservation and celebration of the individual. Emerson expresses hope that “the new importance given to the single person” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1150) will give rise to a society where “man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1150). The transformation of society will take place, not through social reform, but by the growing realization that “help must come from the bosom alone” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1150). The growing popularity Emerson observes regarding this belief inspires his hope that Transcendentalism will bring about a revolution after all.

Further collapsing the argument that Transcendentalism is capable of transforming a society or a division other than the individual are Emerson’s recurrent assertions that geography, physical boundaries, and region have no place in Transcendental principle. The import Emerson places upon the individual cannot be reconciled to the idea that a particular place could contain or envelope a practical application of Transcendentalism. Though Emerson rejects the tangles of political and social reform, he also declines to present Transcendentalism as some ideal, untouched fantasy: “he refuses to offer as an alternative a retreat into some ideal, uncontaminated solitude” (Mott 81). Tangible perimeters have no significance when faced with the limitlessness of the individual: “The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy, — more formidable than its enemy, more sweet and serene in its influence
to its friend, than any kingdom in history” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1147).

The potential of the human soul cannot be restrained any more than growth of nations:

“The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person, who shall set a barrier on any one side to this unbounded, unboundable empire” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1147). For Emerson, to be restrained by limits—geographically, politically—of any kind is the greatest tragedy in life:

Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; — not to be reckoned one character; — not to yield that particular fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south? (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 1150)

This dismissal of labels, generalizations, and limitations of any kind reinforces Emerson’s faith in the individual and refusal to surrender any part of his hope that the capability of individual human spirit for infinite growth will bring about a revolution.

Emerson’s privileging of the individual certainly affected Transcendentalism in New England, and the next chapter will explore its affect on a group of young men transplanted in the Ohio Valley, struggling in the wilderness.
Chapter 2

The Western Fantasy: The Rise and Collapse of Transcendental Ideals in *The Western Messenger*

“The Life-Poetry of this Western world, has been of a grander style, than we of this age oftentimes are aware of. Never yet, in civilized times, has Man been so free, so fearless, as in the Valley of the Mississippi, in the earlier days of the settlements.”

“Body and spirit, the old hunters and pioneers were manly; they were Poets in life; and breathed in the silence, the immensity, luxuriance and fresh beauty of forest and prairie, river and lake, as we do not, perhaps cannot.”

- William Henry Channing, 1841

In 1835, Ephraim Peabody, a young Unitarian minister living in Cincinnati, founded *The Western Messenger*, with the primary aim of spreading the Unitarian faith to the largely Calvinist Western population. James Freeman Clarke, William Henry Channing, and Christopher Pearse Cranch, and William G. Eliot, all native New England Unitarian ministers, soon joined Peabody in the mission to spread Unitarianism to the frontier. Though it was not their objective when they set out, these men all took part in pioneering what would become one of the first American Transcendental periodicals. When Peabody returned East for health reasons, Channing, Clarke, and Cranch took over the running of the magazine from their respective pulpits in Cincinnati and Louisville, with Channing acting as editor from 1840 on. Though several Unitarian tracts and periodicals pre-dated *The Western Messenger*, it was the first magazine with a literary, as well as, a religious objective. Its inclusion of literary reviews, original poetry, progressive social debate, and “its combination of liberal religion with literature, Western, Eastern, and European” (McKinsey 6) made it unique. Though Elizabeth McKinsey argues in *The Western Experiment* that Clarke, Cranch, and Channing “were Transcendentalists, yet
unconsciously so when they went to the Ohio Valley” (McKinsey 7), these men only began to identify with Transcendental philosophy as they became more and more involved with the magazine and the discussions of faith, reform, and society included in it. Whatever category its editors fall under, *The Western Messenger* “stands as the first of all Transcendental periodicals” (McKinsey 7) and for this reason serves as an important component of Transcendentalism’s role in the development of the fantasy of the West as a kind of social utopia.

The men primarily associated with *The Western Messenger*—Clarke, Channing, and Cranch—were all immigrants in their respective Western cities. They all had been born, lived, and studied in the East, more specifically the New England area. They were from Unitarian families and dedicated to spreading the religious ideals with which they were raised. This wish to spread liberal Christianity led them West, to a land still rich in opportunity—scholarly, religious, and economic opportunity. The West served as a geographical anchor for these scholars; it represented a region of unexplored potential for the transplantation of their liberal and ideal philosophies, a “vast frontier of freedom and illimitable resources” (McKinsey 1). The West offered “the prospect of experimentation and lack of routine, of ‘freedom’” (McKinsey 4), a freedom springing both from ideological and literal sources. The newly settled cities of the West suggested boundless potential for unique and innovative ideas, equally reflected in the far-reaching vistas and vast, rolling lands. The editors saw the unformed land as physical place where they could rebuild society, a society based on the equality and innate dignity of all its members. More
specifically, Cranch, Clarke, and Channing, who dominated the editing of the magazine, sought to transform Emerson’s ideal Transcendental philosophy into practical social reform, and transplant it into the West. Despite the fantasy of an idyllic Western society which the magazine illustrated, a disillusion developed, and the editors’ vision of the West as an ideal began to collapse. Rising materialism, industry, socioeconomic stratification, and societal evils contributed to the breakdown of the editors’ fantasy; the “gap between their expectations and the reality they encountered” (McKinsey 7) led to the eventual dissolution of the fantasy of the West and the demise of *The Western Messenger*.

I have focused my study on the last four volumes of the periodical, published from 1838 to 1841 and coinciding with the rise and development of Transcendentalism within the literary class. These volumes were edited mainly by Channing, with Clarke and Cranch contributing considerably to the criticism and discussion. These three “guiding spirits” (McKinsey 6) were also the most liberal of the magazines’ various editors and the most closely connected with what would be termed Transcendentalism, so in the interest of simplicity, the term ‘editors’ refers to these three men as the primary contributors of the final four volumes. Though many of the articles in these volumes are the works of other scholars or authors, the editors’ inclusion of them indicate that Channing, Clarke, and Cranch subscribed to the opinions expressed in the magazine’s various articles and reviews. As the editors became aware of the radical new philosophy led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, they began to see how some of its main tenets corresponded with the fantasy suggested by the
West’s potential for reform. They sought to ground the ideas of Emerson and other Transcendentalists in the landscape of the West, “the land which, by logical extension of their own ideals, should have been the most congenial setting for Transcendentalism” (McKinsey 6). The editors fantasized that the West, as a geographic region embodying the ideal Emersonian balance between civilization and wilderness, was the ideal place in which to create a society based on equality, universal education, tolerance, appreciation of labor, and respect for all of humanity. This fantasy developed primarily from the Transcendental philosophy forming in New England, a philosophy emphasizing an intimate relation to nature. This reconnection with nature would then develop to become a connection among humanity. The editors believed this universal connection among humankind would lead to a realization of the dignity of all humans and to an increase in the social reform movements, which would benefit their ideal society and establish equality among its members. The editors of *The Western Messenger* sought to employ the progressive tenets of Transcendentalism in shaping their fantasy of a Western society built on equality, appreciation of labor, universal education, and a balanced relationship with nature.

The editors’ New England roots spurred their Western migration, and would continue to shape their growing Transcendental philosophies in the West. Just as Emerson’s growing disgust with the social and religious crises of Eastern institutions led to his controversial new ideas, the editors growing realization of the East’s entrenched intolerance and stagnation led to their Western migration: “Under the pressure of rapid and often brutal national expansion, industrialization, urbanization,
and above all, class stratification and conflict, many among the elite had lost faith in once-reliable truisms about their identity as a class” (Newman 39). Like Emerson, they were part of a young generation of intellectuals experiencing an identity crises. Though still faithful Unitarians, they were part of a more liberal offshoot than the preceding generation; they editors were those “young Unitarians appalled by the cold rationalism of their fathers” (McKinsey 6). New England’s new culture of industry and subsequent materialism made it more difficult than ever to uphold ideals of equality and financial modesty, and Lance Newman briefly discusses New England’s industrial shift in Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature:

Economic and political power that had been relatively dispersed among the merchants, clerics, and farmers of colonial New England was consolidated into the hands of the increasingly wealthy owners of commercial and industrial capital. [...] Concentration of capital and power produced a society increasingly organized around one goal: pursuit of profit. (Newman 25)

The editors were part of the very elite intellectual class deeply affected, Newman argues, by the rising movement to reconcile the tenets of their traditional moral codes with the increasingly materialistic New England culture. Newman identifies the very phenomenon which led the editors West: “The dissonance between visions of a just, natural society on one hand, and the stark contradictions of life in New England’s growing cities on the other, united elite radicals into a broad movement in which they participated in a wide range of social and ideological experiments” (Newman 43). The
editors’ dissatisfaction with the increasingly intolerant Eastern Unitarians’ philosophical development required a geographic adjustment as well.

The editors’ realization that their liberal beliefs had no anchorage in the East shaped their experiment and led them to the Western frontier, a land lacking established or entrenched social systems and thus representative of the freedom which the editors’ sought. In stark contrast with the ingrained character of the East, the West offered a platform tied to a geographical place where the editors could rail against the confines of established and corrupted ideas, where a society could develop “without institutional restraint in a land of freedom” (McKinsey 13). The young cities occupied by the editors—Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Louisville—were indicative of the overall sense of “freshness” (McKinsey 15) of the West as place ripe for change, development, and innovative experimentation. The “freer and more active” West attracted people and ideas “free from traditional bias and restraint, [which] would reinvigorate and refashion liberal religion” (McKinsey 15-16). The undeveloped land of the West and wilderness of the frontier paralleled the editors’ sense of potential for a progressive society: “an understanding broad like the plains, powers of thought clear and fresh like the sky, an intellect on a scale as grand as rivers, mountains, and forests” (McKinsey 17)—these liberal attitudes, inspired by nature, would shape the editors’ Western fantasy.

Affected by the social and religious climate of the East, the editors set out to realize their fantasy in the West, clearly expressing their hope for the revitalization of progressive Unitarian beliefs through their magazine. A letter sent to the editors and
published in 1838 illustrates clearly how much significance the editors placed on their
Western locality, utilizing it as a means of articulating the liberal aspects of
Unitarianism. The editors’ championing of Western ideals functions as a direct
response to the intolerance and close-mindedness of Eastern establishments:

The idea of liberal Christianity has been slipping out of the minds of the
Eastern Unitarians through lapse of time; they lay stress on the casual features
and external forms of their faith too much, while they half forget the high
principles of mutual freedom and individual independence which it was the
principal mission of the first Unitarians to defend. (“MONTHLY RECORD”
67)

The editors sought, with the message of their magazine, to renew the first liberal ideals
of the Unitarian church and transplant them in the West. The letter stresses this
Western location, the editors’ “position as pioneers” (“MONTHLY RECORD” 67)
and notes that a proper Western existence requires “the development and illustration
of these great principles daily, hourly” (“MONTHLY RECORD” 67). The editors saw
their position in the West and the opportunities it offered for religious reform as
integral to their fantasy for the creation of an idyllic, liberal society.

In another discussion of the character of the West, the editors express their
fantasy that abundant natural resources of the frontier will combine with the vitality of
its people to create the ideal Transcendental balance between civilization and nature.
The editors were keenly aware of the ideological possibilities lying dormant in the
uncleared land of the West: “A great nation is in the germ here. It is thursting [sic]
down its roots into very solid soil, it is piercing the sod with its cleft head, it will soon be in the air and light of day” ("The Hesperian” 71). In the population of the West, “busy living, doing, growing” ("The Hesperian” 71), the editors hope a compromise between human civilization and progress and the Transcendental connection to the wilderness would become manifest. The editors fantasized that the laboring population of the land would create an ideal society wherein nature and humanity coexisted for the benefit of all; “The great West, having felled its forests, dug its canals, built its cities, laid its rail-roads, and changed a wilderness into a garden” ("The Hesperian” 72), would, in the editors’ minds, undoubtedly fulfill its destiny to become the host of an ideal society. The editors of The Western Messenger believed their position in the undeveloped West gave them an opportunity to create the embodiment of Emerson’s ideal society.

Expanding upon the importance of labor for the creation of a balanced Western society, and echoing Emerson, the editors argued that manual labor was indispensible to the success of the frontier. The controversial issue of labor and its class connotations was expanding as the editors developed The Western Messenger, and in their hope to eliminate class lines, they sought to elevate the position of manual labor. In other words, they looked forward to the time when all social positions and occupations might be equal. To illustrate this movement toward the elevation of manual labor, in 1840 the editors published a speech by William Ellery Channing, the conservative-leaning uncle of William Henry Channing. W.E. Channing enumerates the many benefits of manual labor to demonstrate its economic and emotional
necessity to society, especially to Western society: “Manual labor, is a school in which all men are placed to get energy of purpose and character, a vastly more important endowment than all the leaning of other schools” (Channing, William Ellery 35). Indeed well-rounded labor is essential to the editors’ idea that the West will give rise to a more perfect society:

You will see here that to me labor has great dignity. It is-not merely the grand instrument, by which the earth is overspread with fruitfulness and beauty, and the ocean subdued, and matter wrought into innumerable forms for comfort and ornament. It has a far higher function, which is to give force to the will efficiency, courage, the capacity of endurance, and of persevering devotion to far-reaching plans. (Channing, William Ellery 36)

Channing acknowledges the existence of class, and yet urges the elevation of laborers, not to place them at a level with higher classes, but to eliminate a class system based on shallow materialism, to urge the world to “not associate the idea of Dignity of Honour with certain modes of living or certain outward connections” (Channing, William Ellery 39).

Closely connected to their hope for a society that appreciates labor was the hope for universal education, as the editors fantasized that intellectual equality would lead to social equality. In another speech published by The Messenger in 1839, Channing expresses the notion that appreciation for the laborer results in appreciation for the education of the laborer, an idea the editors sought to establish in the West. They were reacting to the common notion, especially in urbanized societies, that “the
mass of the people need no other culture than is necessary to fit them away for their various trades” (Channing, William Ellery, Self-Culture 353). Instead the editors, equipped with their Western fantasy, sought to build a society which would promote education to fulfill the potential for physical as well as intellectual labor of each man: “His powers are to be unfolded on account of their inherent dignity, not their outward direction. He is to be educated, because he is a man, not because he is to make shoes, nails, or pins” (Channing, William Ellery, Self-Culture 353). Channing and the editors recognize the ability of all genders, classes, and races to tap into their innate wisdom and to benefit by a growth of that wisdom: “How often when the arms are mechanically plying a trade, does the mind, lost in reverie or day dreams, escape to the end of the earth! How often does the pious heart of woman mingle the greatest of all thoughts, that of God, with household drudgery!” (Channing, William Ellery, Self-Culture 353). The editors see all classes, including menial laborers, as divine and worthy of education, spiritual instruction, and progressive reform: “The laborer is not a mere laborer. He has close, tender, responsible connexions [sic] with God and his fellow creatures. He is a son, husband, father, friend, and christian. He belongs to a home, a country, a church, a race; and is such a man to be cultivated only for a trade?” (Channing, William Ellery, Self-Culture 354). The editors included this address as it outlines perfectly how they sought to employ Transcendental philosophies, to “transform Channing’s liberal doctrine into an egalitarian theology that sought to realize heaven on earth” (Newman 102). The editors emphasized a connection
between God, nature, and humanity to elevate the laborer and diminish class
hierarchies through the recognition of the dignity of all.

Armed with this idealistic philosophy concerning the necessity of education for
all classes, the editors fantasized that the West’s rapid development and sense of
freshness would serve in attracting intellectual progressives and educational reformers.
The West’s newness, its air of opportunity, led the editors to hope that the new society
which they set out to form would be a well-educated one. In an article praising
Cincinnati for its recent successes in educational institutions, the editors express their
hope that this trend would continue, so as to perfect the education of an ideal society.
They see that perfection as of yet unreached: “We feel as yet but imperfectly our
social duties; though all intelligent men are well convinced that interest commands
society to educate every citizen” (“A PROUD MONTH” 140). An essential part of the
editors’ Western fantasy is their “hoping for a time when all children will be taught,
and all teachers suitably honored and recompensed” (“A PROUD MONTH” 140). The
editors earnestly anticipate a future society wherein education will be readily available
to all, as a means of achieving equitable existence: “But a higher era of improvement
will be introduced, when it shall be established as an axiom, that every child has a
right to the highest education society can give it; and that it is the duty of society to aid
every human being to become in character and mind all that it is fitted by natural
endowment to be” (“A PROUD MONTH” 140). This goal of universal education
extends quite explicitly beyond the typically white-focused monopoly of culture and
reform—“among our schools we must not overlook those for colored children” (“A
There can be no doubt though that education is the means by which the editors hope to improve society and eradicate socioeconomic and racial inequality: “Our colored population would have been even more improved than they are, had they not been so long wrongfully deprived of the benefit of the school-fund, to which they contribute their fair proportion” (“A PROUD MONTH” 140). The editors argued that universal education would benefit more than just individual groups; it would contribute to the transformation of their entire ideal society: “By such means as classes, lectures, libraries, and reading rooms, our mechanics will raise themselves to a just level in the social scale, and make intelligence and character the true test of men” (“A PROUD MONTH” 141). Their concern for manual laborers and minorities signifies that in their anticipation of a universally educated Western society, the editors imagine a tolerant and socially balanced one as well.

An essential part of both the Transcendental philosophy that influenced the editors and the balance motif permeating their Western fantasy, a threefold connection between humanity, nature, and God ties the editors’ arguments for tolerance to the undeveloped, pastoral condition of the frontier. Just as the leaders of Transcendentalism saw nature as the means by which to connect all of humanity to one another and to God, so too did the editors see the natural setting of the West as a means to express and justify the ideals of their fantasy society, a society of “Western traits fashioned by the Western environment” (McKinsey 17). Despite the editors’ roots in Unitarianism, they recognized and acknowledged the advantages that Transcendentalism’s religion of nature held. Many poems and reflections included in
the magazine by the editors acknowledge the “restorative discipline of nature (Newman 43), its role as the true basis for piety, morality, and equality. In “Musings in the Temple of Nature,” by Horace Smith, an English poet, the editors identify with the privileging of the spirituality of nature over the temporal aspects of established religion. Smith relegates all man-made religious structures beneath the perfect structures of nature:

The wondrous world which He himself created,

Is the fit temple of creation’s Lord;

There may his worship best be celebrated,

And praises poured! (Smith 337)

The wonder and beauty of nature trump any man-made concept of religion and “From royal Solomon’s stupendous fame, / Down to the humble chapel of the Quaker, / All, all are vain!” (Smith 337). Not only does nature present a more perfect option for worship, but it also offers a non-divisive, completely inclusive opportunity for worship, indicating God’s equal affection for all members of humanity:

Hence learn we that our Maker, whose affection

Knows no distinction—suffers no recall.

Sheds his impartial favor and protection

Alike on all. (Smith 337)

Just as nature illustrated God’s all-encompassing affection for humanity, it also served as a model for the editors’ fantasy of a society lacking division, racial or otherwise. Nature reflects God’s will, thus it is by “divine example” (Smith 337) that humanity is
instructed “That every race should love alike all others, / Christian, Jew, Pagan—
children of one Father, / All, all are brothers” (Smith 337). As a result of these lessons
of nature, the West and its bountiful natural aspects offered a means by which to
escape the divisive religions institutions of the East.

In “Hymn to the Flowers,” another work by Smith, nature provides the moral
instruction and pious revelations normally limited to religious teaching, thus the
population of the West could develop morally by following the example set by the
elements of nature surrounding them, rather than upon traditional religious
institutions. Flowers, as representatives of the purity and moral directives of nature,
become means by which to access the teachings of God directly, without human
intercession: “Your voiceless lips, O flowers! are living preachers, / Each cup a pulpit,
every leaf a book, / Supplying to my fancy numerous teachers” (Smith 12). These
“floral apostles” (Smith 12) impart the truth of God to all who are capable of
observing nature, thus making the work of discordant and partisan religious
institutions obsolete:

Were I, O God, in churchless lands remaining,

Far from all voices of teachers and divines,

My soul would find in flowers of thy ordaining,

Priests, sermons, shrines. (Smith 12)

Here Smith expresses the idea that established churches and religions are inferior to
the moral guidance of nature. It is this untainted moral directive that the editors hoped
would inspire the population of the West to create an idyllic society: “a more just and

humane social estate will come not through conscious striving, but when people, rich and poor, learn from nature, when the nation reads the rural landscape of the border country and cultivates the modesty, decency, and fairness recorded there” (Newman 77). Though the editors all considered themselves Unitarians and sought to establish their church in the West, they also stood as witnesses to the damaging effects institutionalization had had upon Unitarianism in the East. Thus a moral sense derived from the natural elements of Western society was preferred to any kind of formal—and exclusive—religious institution.

In “Familiar Things,” Robert Cassie Waterston, a Bostonian clergyman, similarly denotes the presence of God, and, accordingly, virtue, throughout nature—virtue which the editors of The Western Messenger sought to employ in the creation of their Western fantasy. God’s will is diffused throughout nature, the visible world of nature representing the invisible edicts of virtue, for “in each breeze that wanders free, / […] Living souls may hear and see, / Freshly uttered words from God!” (Waterston). Indeed, nature’s manifold elements illustrate truth and virtue, and those willing to look upon nature as a model will undoubtedly realize “All her [nature’s] are types of truth! / Mirrors of celestial light!” (Waterston). In this hymn, Waterston expresses a sentiment well-publicized by the Transcendentalists, that nature offers a moral and spiritual guide to its human inhabitants, a guide which the editors saw as readily accessible by a Western population existing in balance with the natural elements of their environment.

The editors emphasized the distinct ‘Western’ characteristics of the frontier’s populations throughout the magazine, and a growing trend throughout the articles is
the realization that the West is indeed a unique region, fertile ground for the spread of freedom, intellectual growth, and individualism. On the other hand, as evidenced by the less hopeful articles in the magazine, the editors begin to doubt the certainty of their fantasy. Their doubts began to surface throughout The Messenger even in the earliest of the Transcendental articles, though volumes seven and eight, published from May 1839 to April 1841, reveal most clearly the collapse of the editors’ idyllic hopes. The rapid growth of the population and the urbanization of the frontier settlements began to take their toll on the social reforms which the editors hoped for, while simultaneously breaking down the essential connection between humanity and nature which was the basis of their Transcendental ideal.

In an article early in 1838, the editors detail with horror how perverted the “courage and spirit of the West” (“Article 2” 143) had become. The article condemns the rise and proliferation of murder throughout the West. The editors reveal that the resourcefulness and daring spirit of the Western population has turned in upon itself in violence. Instead of hope for an ideal fantasy, the editors now merely hope for a cessation of bloodshed:

When the citizens of the West come to realize that there is no true courage in trampling on the law of God—that the bulley [sic], who goes with pistols trapped under his coat, and a Bowie knife in his pocket, is generally a coward as well as a ruffian—that heroism is not quarrelsome or murderous, but calm, and self-sustained—then we may hope that scenes of blood may terminate.

(“Article 2” 143)
Here, the editors begin to realize that the opportunistic spirit of the West, which they had hoped to harness for social reform, has decayed into an uncontrollable expression of individual interest.

In another article, the editors, noting the progress and expansion that the West’s relationship to the Ohio River had brought to the region, unhappily observe that this relationship has become distorted and unnatural due to the increasing materialism of the Western population. The river facilitated transportation and industry, contributing to the increasing wealth of the local population. This increased wealth led to a concurrent increase in the focus on material goods, which began to tilt the ideal balance between humanity and nature. Westerners had begun to cultivate a lifestyle of utility and wealth rather than one rooted in agriculture and resourcefulness. A recent rise in the river’s level had led to a boom in business and economic growth, demonstrating nature’s provision for the comfort and progress of humanity:

A new life seems to pervade our streets and landings. The well known puffing of the steam-boat speaks in our ears once more. Merchants rush by with eager footsteps and straining eye. Clerks bustle about with account books. Draymen drive furiously roaring at their horses. Bales and boxes block up the pavements. All is noise, life; very bee-hives are our cities. (C 140)

The author though, signed only as C, laments that amidst all this activity, the people of the West forget the forces behind their prosperity, nature and God, asking “How many of our business men turn their thoughts to the Great SOURCE of this change? Whence comes the water that bears to their warehouses their long expected goods?” (C 140).
The author answers, simultaneously urging the population of the West to keep level the balance between themselves, God, and nature, from which all growth springs: “From those rills and fountains far up and away among the woods. […] HE sendeth the springs among the hills. […] He turneth the wilderness into a fruitful valley” (C 140). This article reveals the growing materialism of the West and the doubts the editors begin to share about their fantasy: “May Heaven send us more spiritualmindedness amidst our money-getting glory!” (C 141). This burgeoning emphasis on wealth demonstrates that the editors’ fantasy for a society based in nature and on equality might have been collapsing, as early as December 1838, when the article was published.

In a similar article signed by C and published in the same volume, the magazine reports that the territory west of the Alleghany Mountains, worth about $26,000,000 only 40 years before, now carries about $70,000,000 in property down the Mississippi annually. To the author and editors, this seemingly endless progress presents a problem, read “almost with sorrow and trembling” (“TEMPORAL”):

Where are the regulating and counteracting influences that should accompany these floods of wealth? Where are the schools, lyceums, books, teachers, churches, refinements of art and society, that should be borne along on this annual money-stream? […] Are we to draw our whole sustenance, soul, as well as body, from floods of gold and paper rags, from freighted boats and crowded warehouses? Will this seventy million feed our minds and hearts? Or will the
waters of our Ohio and Mississippi purify us from the moral corruption that is in our midst? ("TEMPORAL")

Rather than encouraging social reform, the promising progressive tone of the West and the success of its population had led only to rampant materialism. Where the editors saw potential for an increase in education, religious innovation, and social equity, the only aspect improved upon was the value of West’s industrial potential. This focus on the material worth of nature rather than its moral inspiration contributed to the disillusionment of the editors of *The Western Messenger*.

Further contributing to the editor’s dashed hopes for a non-materialistic, open-minded population was the divisive attitude accompanying religious sects, which spread to the frontier from its entrenchment in the East despite the geographic differences. Contrary to the editors’ hope for a community based on the tolerance which arises from a recognition of the connection between all beings, the prejudice existing between religious groups of all kinds continued to thrive in the West. The editors’ report of a horrific clash between the residents of a Missouri town and a Mormon sect illustrates the intolerance permeating Western society. Despite their devotion to the proliferation of Unitarianism, the editors still preached respect for all beliefs, and they decried the violence perpetrated against the Mormons of Haunn’s Mills as a violation of “all law, human and divine, of all right, natural and civil, of all ties of society and humanity, of all duties of justice, honor, honesty, and mercy, committed by so called freemen and Christians” (Channing, William Henry 209). They were aware of the various reports of violence and injustice against Mormons in
Missouri, but it was that most recent unprovoked attack that had left eighteen Mormons dead which pushed the editors to speak out. Revealing their fantasy for Western society, the editors declare their shock that such an incident could have taken place “in a land of laws and freedom” (Channing, William Henry 210); in their unwillingness to accept the reality of their Western home, they grieve that the violent incident “seems like some horrid dream” (Channing, William Henry 209).

Closely linked and contributing to the issue of class which the editors sought to overcome were material acquisition and economic success. Several conflicting articles included in the magazine demonstrate the problems posed by materialism for these men who were hoping to diminish the importance of socioeconomic position through education, religion, and connectedness to nature. In “The Right and Duty of Accumulation,” Huidekoper makes an argument for the material profits of industry and labor, arguing that “our present social system rests on the principle of accumulation, and the destruction of that principle, would inevitably resolve society again into a state of barbarism” (H 147). In a rather conservative argument which deviates from the markedly liberal tone of most of The Messenger, Huidekoper defends the phenomenon of material gain as the natural development of divinely-sanctioned labor while rejecting the suggestion that surplus gain should be shared or donated: “But the doing so would be destructive of industry, and would deprive business of much of its intellectual and moral influence” (H 146). Still, Huidekoper’s argument does find a parallel in the editors’ hope for a progressive, flourishing society based on labor of the people:
If it be unlawful to accumulate, then there is an end to our public improvements, for these are all made, not with the small surplus earnings of the day laborer, but with the accumulated funds of capitalists. If it be unlawful to accumulate, then there is an end to all our colleges, hospitals and other benevolent institutions, for all were originally founded or endowed, or are now supported, by the fruits of accumulation. If it be unlawful to accumulate, then there is an end to the art of printing, that great engine of civilization and improvement; for the establishment of a printing press requires that accumulation should have preceded it. (H 147)

This argument, written by a (unsurprisingly) wealthy and business-oriented Huidekoper, seems out of place in *The Messenger*, but its divergent message shows the extent to which the editors were struggling with issues of materialism and morality, and how complex the reconciliation of economic progress to moral reform actually was.

Another issue threatening the idyllic vision the editors had formed for the West were the issues surrounding marginalized U.S. citizens, that is, the controversies over abolition, Native American extermination, and the social position of women. Even the editors themselves struggled with and varied in their opinions on how to successfully incorporate populations traditionally excluded from the ruling elite of Eastern society. Their wariness at getting involved in the debate over abolition demonstrates that, despite all their preaching of tolerance, the editors themselves found that they were unable to shake some residual social narrow-mindedness. Abolition movements had
already exploded in the East, and (disregarding for a moment the obvious moral rightness of abolition) were beginning to tear Western communities apart; even those who abhorred slavery were silent if abolition debates meant the division of a congregation. In an article entitled “Abolition in Mobile,” James Freeman Clarke maneuvers his way round the question of slavery’s place in society, instead asking his audience “What are the duties of conscientious ministers of the gospel at the South, who are opposed to slavery, believing it a great evil? Is it their duty to come out and preach against it, or is it not?” (Clarke 184). Clarke chooses not to address the moral implications of slavery and instead argues that “there are some cases […] in which we are not to continue to preach the truth to those who will only be exasperated by it” (Clarke 186). Clarke places the spread and proliferation of Unitarianism above the importance of eradicating slavery, urging those ministers who would alienate their congregation with talk of abolition to instead fight against slavery by “omitting all direct appeals on this subject, and in attacking it by spreading a spirit of religion of an opposite character” (Clarke 187). Such conservative statements illustrate how the many-faceted social ills of the West would challenge the establishment of an ideal society.

*The Messenger* also includes discussions of women and their place in society, and in “The Woman Question” the author, S.O., acknowledges the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimke, and those of his personal acquaintance who argue that “there can be no justice in the world, where women are not allowed equal, social and political privileges with men” (S.O. 15). The author seems sympathetic to the cause,
praising “female eloquence” (S.O. 15) and admitting that the discussion holds “an important place in the thoughts of the thinking part of the community” (S.O. 15). Alas, he reveals the limit to his open-mindedness—women’s suffrage: “Give women the same political duties and privileges which man enjoys, and you take from her all the graces which give her a charm, and all the privileges, that now ensure to her courtesy and protection from the stronger sex” (S.O. 16). Even considering this political double-standard, the author’s argument for social reforms benefiting women fits with the editor’s vision for an enlightened community, and the author’s recognition of the necessity of reform in gender relations reveals the kind of society against which the editors are rebelling:

We should have far more sympathy for the champions of women’s rights, if they would talk more of social, and less of political privileges; if they would speak of the moral degradation and mental stupidity in which so many women are kept; the tyranny and often the indifference by which they are treated by those, whom the law calls their husbands; the little attention, which is paid to home and domestic pleasures and refinements by the majority of men of business; the need of doing something to raise the dignity of the family home, and the mistress of it, and to give due importance to that place, which is the cradle of the young, the school of the forming mind, the nursery of public virtue or of public vice. (S.O. 16)

The author sends the message that the role of women as mothers lends power, the power of influence over society’s future, embodied in its children. The editors may not
support the political equality of the sexes, but their Western fantasy would include the social and intellectual elevation of women as influential members of the community.

Contrary to Margaret Fuller’s preoccupation with Native American issues in the West (discussed in the following chapter), the editors of *The Western Messenger* seem too caught up in the reformation of Eastern society through their Western experiment to concern themselves with the destruction of an entire segment of Western inhabitants. Indeed, the numerous printed abuses and almost nonchalant degradation of Native Americans, even within articles urging tolerance for other groups, illustrate the editors’ oversight concerning a group of people that could have greatly benefitted from progressive social reform. In his critique of Brownson’s labor policy, Huidekoper likens Native American dwellings to “hovels” (H, “BROWNSON” 29). In a discussion on abolition, W.E. Channing mentions that while a slave may often protect the life of his master, “the North American Indian, in like circumstances, would stab to the heart” (Channing, William Ellery, “ART.” 628). Most significant is the jarring absence of any mention of Native American decimation, resulting from removal and relocation, among other destructive changes, especially considering the proximity of the editors to the tribes’ former lands. Despite the several dozen articles concerning the historical role Native Americans played in the former wilds of Western cities, the editors neglect to mention the eventual fate of those tribes. This omission is perhaps more telling than any prejudices that the editors might have expressed, and illustrates the editors’ own inabilities to embody the fantasy to which they held the rest of the West’s population.
Chapter 3

Documenting the Decline: Fuller’s Farewell to the Western Fantasy

“He walked up close to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat into it.”

-Margaret Fuller, on Niagara Falls

In 1843 Margaret Fuller started out on a journey through the Great Lakes and Wisconsin territories with Sarah Freeman Clarke, sister to James. The two women traveled to Niagara Falls, Chicago (founded only ten years earlier), and together saw the last of the dwindling Native American tribes. History has not left us Sarah’s impressions of Fuller as a travelling companion, but Sarah does describe Fuller’s methods as the leader of their conversation club:

In looking for the causes of the great influence possessed by Margaret Fuller over her pupils, companions, and friends, I find something in the fact of her unusual truth-speaking power. She not only did not speak lies after our foolish social customs, but she met you fairly. She broke her lance upon your shield. Encountering her glance, something like an electric shock was felt. Her eye pierced through your disguises. Your outworks fell before her first assault, and you were at her mercy. And then began the delight of true intercourse. Though she spoke rudely searching words, and told you startling truths, though she broke down your little shams and defenses, you felt exhilarated by the compliment of being found out, and even that she had cared to find you out. […] Many of us recoiled from her at first;
we feared her too powerful dominion over us, but as she was powerful, so she was tender; as she was exacting, she was generous. She demanded our best, and she gave us her best. To be with her was the most powerful stimulus, intellectual and moral. It was like the sun shining upon plants and causing buds to open into flowers. This was her gift, and she could no more help exercising it than the sun can help shining. This gift, acting with a powerful understanding and a generous imagination, you can perceive would make an educational force of great power.

Few or none could escape on whom she chose to exercise it. (Emerson, R.W., W.H. Channing, and J.F. Clarke 117-118)

Despite Fuller’s ‘dominion,’ Sarah and Margaret were close friends, and Sarah, an accomplished artist, even consented to illustrate the travel account. Though Fuller constantly grieves that her observations are tainted by the descriptions she’s read of the West, most notably the prolific male descriptions in circulation at the time, Fuller’s travel account reveals a uniquely open-minded and radically feminist woman, filled with foresight for the future and character of the West. Fuller had been close friends with the Clarke family, and had contributed poetry and literary reviews included in several volumes of *The Western Messenger*. Fuller was also closely connected or interacted with several of the leading New England Transcendentalists, thus it is not surprising that she is considered a mainstay in the movement, as well as a leader in the feminist tradition. She taught at Brownson Alcott’s controversial Temple School and began to edit *The Dial*, the New England Transcendental magazine in 1839. Her sister married William Ellery Channing, and Fuller herself developed a close friendship with
Emerson. Her connection to *The Messenger* is unmistakable, yet she continued to live and work in the East, even after her journey through the West. Her *Summer on the Lakes*, published in 1844 and based on that journey the previous year, depicts a Western society that had developed much as the editors of *The Messenger* feared it would. Her work is especially significant when viewed alongside *The Messenger*, with its clear literary tone. *Summer on the Lakes* provides a clear, narrative look at the populations of the frontier territories. Fuller’s observations concerning the epidemics of utility, materialism, Native American decimation, and the destruction of nature make clear that the West is following an inescapable pattern, inherited from the East, of the destruction wrought by the imbalance between humanity and nature. Despite her misgivings about the West’s imbalance in nature though, Fuller does ultimately end her journey with hope intact, hope for the future of the West as an improvement upon Eastern society, if not an ideal society in and of itself.

The short poem “To A Friend,” which acts as preface to the work, encapsulates Fuller’s mourning for the destruction of the uncultivated land of the West and the inescapable consequences stemming from that destruction. Fuller expresses the harmful effects of human settlement upon the wild environs of the West using language that evokes images of death and decay. The prairies and plains are nothing but “dried grass-tufts” and the remnants from the shores of the lakes are simply “muscle [sic] shells” (Fuller 69). These images of skeletal lifelessness denote the underlying forces of destruction throughout the lands of the frontier. The eradication of vast tracts of primordial forest especially resonate with Fuller, as their decline
symbolizes the broader decline of nature as a whole and of those who had learned to live in balance with nature, that is, Native Americans: “Some antlers from tall woods which never more / To the wild deer a safe retreat can yield, / An eagle’s feather which adorned a Brave, / Well-nigh the last of his despairing band” (Fuller 69). The positioning of the poem at the beginning of the narrative establishes the message that nature’s destruction is the root of all the social ills that Fuller witnesses on her journey West.

Throughout Summer, Fuller observes a constant tension between the civilizing and settling forces of humanity and the natural environment to which the forces are applied. Upon Fuller’s visit to Niagara Falls, she’s appalled to find an eagle chained as an amusing feature of the Falls’ attractions. The chained bird, who ignored the insults of his spectators “silently, with his head averted” (Fuller 75), called to Fuller’s mind the “glorious sight” (Fuller 74) of seeing a free eagle, “soaring slow in majestic poise above the highest summit, the bird of Jove” (Fuller 74). Fuller’s opposing views of the eagle embody the ongoing war waged between settlers and nature in the West. The wild lands of the frontier, unfettered by human interference, denote majesty and freedom, while the phenomenon of settlement and civilization strike Fuller as cruel and counterintuitive.

Further disconcerting Fuller was the unmistakable fact that the settlers seemed to be winning the war, acquiring territories faster than they could be responsibly settled and inflicting mass devastation upon the natural terrain of the West. The rapid rate of acceleration at which the natural features of the West were being destroyed
alerted Fuller to the harsh reality of the imbalance that had developed in the West. Avoiding the trap of idealism into which the editors fell, Fuller anticipated the realities she would face; she prepared herself for the “distaste” she expected would color her experience of the “mushroom growth” (Fuller 86) of the frontier towns. Her preference for gradual expansion stems from her contempt for the uncontrolled “go ahead” (Fuller 86) motto of the settlers and from the feeling of natural growth that accompanies slower development: “In older countries the house of the son grew from that of the father, as naturally as new joints on a bough. And the cathedral crowned the whole as naturally as the leafy summit the tree” (Fuller 86). In stark opposition to this method, the ruthless, uncontrolled development of the West invoked for Fuller images of “warlike invasion” (Fuller 86). Slow growth, which mimics the patterns of nature, instead gave way to the detrimental effects of rapid Western development: “The old landmarks are broken down, and the land, for a season, bears none, except for the rudeness of conquest and the needs of the day, whose bivouac fires blacken the sweetest forest glades” (Fuller 86). This unprecedented destruction of nature by ‘civilization’ conveyed to Fuller the impossibility of a Western society existing harmoniously within its wild environment.

The Western settlers whom Fuller describes are a far cry from the socially-advanced members of the idealistic society anticipated by the editors of The Western Messenger. Where she expects to find immigrants engaged in progressive growth and innovative endeavors, she often finds dirty, struggling families, fighting their environment and exiled from the polite aspects of civilization. She clearly expresses
the incompatibilities between her hopes for a unique, elevated Western society, and
the realities of what she finds there:

But sad and quickening to the enthusiast who comes to these shores, hoping
the tranquil enjoyment of intellectual blessings, and the pure happiness of
mutual love, must be a part of the scene that he encounters at first. He has
escaped from the heartlessness of courts, to encounter the vulgarity of a mob;
he has secured solitude, but it is a lonely, a deserted solitude. Amid the
abundance of nature he cannot, from petty, but insuperable obstacles, procure,
for a long time, comforts, or a home. (Fuller 142)

She stands witness to the precise collapse of the Transcendental ideal which the
editors of The Western Messenger so feared. Rather than create a society balanced
between the positive aspects of civilization and nature, the Western settlers seemed to
Fuller to have taken on and exacerbated the negative aspects of both. Fuller describes
many of the settlers she encounters as distasteful masses, as “swarms […] whose aims
are sordid, whose habits thoughtless and slovenly” (Fuller 91). Fuller sees these
settlers at odds with the best aspects of nature and civilization; they are out of balance
with the natural aspects of the Western environment, yet they also have failed to create
a civilized culture, one that goes beyond “satisfying the grossest material wants”
(Fuller 96). Fuller expects the failure to properly balance nature and civilization to
destroy the unique character of the West:
Sometimes they looked attractive, the little brown houses, the natural architecture of the country, in the edge of the timber. But almost always when you came near, the slovenliness of the dwelling and the rude way in which the objects around it were treated, when so little care would have presented a charming whole, were very repulsive. […] But most of these settlers do not see it [beauty] at all; it breathes, it speaks in vain to those who are rushing to its sphere. Their progress is Gothic, not Roman, and their mode of cultivation will, in the course of twenty, perhaps ten, years, obliterate the natural expression of the country. (Fuller 96)

Fuller saw the evidence everywhere that “the traces of a man’s hand in a new country are rarely productive of beauty” (Fuller 117). Whereas the newness Emerson celebrated in his Transcendental philosophies inspired the editors of *The Messenger* to embrace the freshness of the frontier, Fuller witnesses the failings of the West’s new inhabitants.

Further decimating the fantasy that the West would make plain the inherent link between the beauty of nature and ideal human virtue, thus inspiring the rise of a balanced, ideal population, are Fuller’s descriptions of Western dishonesty and immorality. A close observation of the populations of Illinois reveals Fuller’s fears that the dishonesty and vice developing in the West may dismantle any innate goodness provided by the natural environment: “Illinois is, at present, a by-word of reproach among the nations, for the careless, prodigal course, by which, in early youth, she has endangered her honor” (Fuller 132). The vices of Western living serve
to disabuse her readers of any notions Fuller might have held about the ideal society which was thought to be forming on the frontier.

While Fuller suggests Western promise might be tapped by women like her who could recognize its potential for moral and spiritual excellence, she nonetheless witnesses troubling limits to gender equity in the early Ohio Valley settlements. She observes that a woman’s experience in the West is much more physically and mentally draining than a man’s, and that women are “least fitted” (Fuller 106) for the rough life of frontier existence. Whether they were unfit through lack of experience or through lack of assistance, Fuller despairs to find that most women on the frontier are destined to become drudges or failures: “The wives of poor settlers, having more hard work to do than before, very frequently become slatterns; but the ladies, accustomed to a refined neatness, feel they cannot degrade themselves by its absence, and struggle under every disadvantage to keep up the necessary routine of small arrangements” (Fuller 106). Aside from their weighty domestic duties, Fuller notes that women also lack the opportunities men have for recreational pleasure, limited by their established gender restrictions to a life of exhausting domesticity, and “confined to a comfortless and laborious indoor life” (Fuller 139):

With all these disadvantages for work, their resources for pleasure are fewer. When they can leave the housework, they have not learnt to ride, to drive, to row, alone. Their culture has too generally been that given to women to make them ‘the ornaments of society.’ They can dance, but not draw; talk French, but know nothing of the language of flowers; neither in childhood were
allowed to cultivate them, lest they should tan their complexions. Accustomed to the pavement of Broadway, they dare not tread the wildwood paths for fear of rattlesnakes! (Fuller 106)

Again, Fuller despairs that the settlers continue to combine the worst aspects of civilization and nature. Women on the frontier are subjected to isolation and harsh toil, which they are even less suited for thanks to the domestic gender roles of the cities, which have followed women West. Fuller’s keen gender observations impart the inevitable sense that the social ills and inequalities of civilized life were encroaching upon Western populations despite, and often because of, their intrusion into the wilds of the frontier.

The utility and materialism of the frontier population, ills which the editors of The Western Messenger saw contribute to the collapse of their ideal Transcendental society, run rampant in the scenes Fuller describes, and indicate the ongoing cycle of environmental destruction and greed that Fuller saw as the downfall of the West’s potential for balance. Fuller describes the West’s developing utilitarianism as embodied perfectly in the well-known passage of a man spitting into Niagara Falls: “He walked close up to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat into it” (Fuller 73). Fuller describes this attitude of incorporating nature into some kind of useful function as an age’s “love of utility” (Fuller 73). Fuller’s apprehension for the future of the West only grows as she encounters more of its future inhabitants. Upon a
boat traveling through Michigan, Fuller observes those traveling West in hopes of settling, and despairs at the attitudes and habits of these future Westerners:

They had brought with them their habits of calculation, their cautious manners, their love of polemics. It grieved me to hear these immigrants who were to be the fathers of a new race, all, from the old man down to the little girl, talking not of what they should do, but of what they should get in the new scene. It was to them a prospect, not of the unfolding nobler energies, but of more ease, and larger accumulation. It wearied me, too, to hear Trinity and Unity discussed in the poor, narrow doctrinal way on these free waters; but that will soon cease, there is not time for this clash of opinions in the West, where the clash of material interests is so noisy. (Fuller 80)

Fuller’s firsthand observations of the eventual residents of the West make clear the true ideals of the West: wealth and accumulation.

In direct opposition with the hopes of the editors of The Western Messenger and further extending the theme of imbalance which runs throughout her work, Summer makes clear that Fuller considers it almost impossible to reconcile scholarship or intellectual development with an existence closely linked with nature. Dashing the fantasy that the West would give rise to the intellectual laborer, the scholar-farmer, Fuller concludes that the two forms are best practiced separately. Thus Fuller’s firsthand accounts of Western existence serve to dismantle the editors’ fantasy of an intellectually driven society dwelling seamlessly in nature. Revealing a trend that had
been plaguing the leading Transcendental discussions of her day and would continue to disrupt Transcendental theory, Fuller describes what she sees as an innate opposition between intellectual development and the physical labor accompanying a close connection with nature: “Men, whose life is full and instinctive, care little for the pen” (Fuller 192). In this context, Fuller does not seem overly critical of this opposition, but in other instances she encounters, the tendency of physical labor to stifle cultural or intellectual development does indeed alarm her. A family possessing grace and intelligence troubles Fuller by the weariness which the hardships of Western living have bestowed upon its members:

Refined graces, cultivated powers, shine in vain before field laborers, as laborers are in this present world. You might as well cultivate heliotropes to present to an ox. Oxen and heliotropes are both good, but not for one another. With them [the family] were some of the old means of enjoyment, the books, the pencil, the guitar; but where the wash-tub and the axe are to constantly in requisition, there is not much time and pliancy of hand for these. (Fuller 143)

In describing this phenomenon, Fuller was contributing to the constant theme of tension running through *Summer on the Lakes*. The dual nature of a human, one instinctual and one learned, emphasizes the irreconcilable opposition found on a larger scale between civilization and nature:

As man has two natures—one, like that of the plants and animals, adapted to the uses and enjoyments of this planet, another, which presages and demands a
higher sphere—he is constantly breaking bounds, in proportion as the mental gets the better of the mere instinctive existence. As yet, he loses in harmony of being what he gains in height and extension; the civilized man is a larger mind, but a more imperfect nature than the savage. (Fuller 204)

Here the innate opposition Fuller saw between mental development and instinctive behavior works in subduing man’s innate connection with nature. Whether the opposition degraded the intellectual or natural aspect of an individual, Fuller saw the two characteristics as incompatible, and the Western fantasy of balancing intellectual and physical labor utterly defeated.

Further weakening the editors’ fantasy of a Western society which improved upon the religious, urban, and social ills of the East was Fuller’s observation that the West was actually following an inevitable path of imitation based upon Eastern traditions. Fuller admits that there is “nothing real in the freedom of thought at the West” (Fuller 80). She considers, rather, that it is only the newness of the West that makes it seems so, but it will inescapably develop the traditional social strictures of the East: “So soon as they have time, unless they grow better meanwhile, they will cavil and criticize, and judge other men by their own standard, and outrage the law of love every way, just as they do with us” (Fuller 80). Despite the resources and opportunities available to them, Fuller fears that Westerners will only strive to imitate their Eastern roots, rejecting the unique, but simple ways of the frontier for the luxury and familiarity of Eastern traditions: “Everywhere the fatal spirit of imitation, or reference to European standards, penetrates, and threatens to blight whatever of
original growth might adorn the soil” (Fuller 107). Despite the abundant natural resources available to them, the opportunity to start anew, and the removal from stagnant Eastern traditions, Fuller fears that the inevitable pattern of urbanization that served to form the East will continue to spread until the West becomes an extension of New England society.

In direct opposition to the Western settlers’ inability to maintain balance between progress and nature, scholarship and labor, or domestication and wilderness, Fuller presents the Native American as an ideal image. She establishes the example of Native Americans as stewards of the land and embodiments of the Transcendental ideal. Their intimate ties to the land and the overwhelming sense of harmony with nature characterizing their existence embodied what Fuller saw as the indispensable aspects of balanced living. Though aware of the discriminatory attitude of the period, Fuller manages to look past the traditional stereotypes of the primitive or savage Native American, enabling her to appreciate the advantages of their lifestyle. Fuller saw the Native American life as embodying the ideal relationship between humanity and nature, and even as their numbers were dwindling, she admired that they had achieved what modern white civilizations had never been able to, nor would be able to, even in the West:

They may blacken Indian life as they will, talk of its dirt, its brutality, I will ever believe that the men who chose that dwelling-place were able to feel emotions of noble happiness as they returned to it, and so were the women that received them. Neither were the children sad or dull, who lived so familiarly
with the deer and the birds, and swam that clear wave in the shadow of the
Seven Sisters. (Fuller 100)

Fuller’s most obvious evidence indicating the failure of the Western ideal—and the
phenomenon that most disillusioned her—was the decimation of the Native American
tribes across the Western frontier. In her mind, the Native American embodied the
perfectly balanced relationship between humanity and nature, and as civilization
spread through the West, both Native Americans and nature declined. Fuller, at odds
with the racist majority of the times, admired the Native Americans for the non-
invasive way they interacted with nature, and considered them the rightful heirs to a
country slowing being stolen from them: “Seeing the traces of the Indians, who chose
the most beautiful sites for their dwellings, and whose habits do not break in on that
aspect of nature under which they were born, we feel as if they were the rightful lords
of a beauty they forbore to deform” (Fuller 96). Indeed, Fuller considers the Native
American so intrinsically linked with and better suited than the white settlers flooding
the plains for a life in the woods and prairies that she posits that the extermination of
one indicates the doom of the other: “The Indian breathed the atmosphere of the
forests freely; he loved their shade. As they are effaced from the land, he flees too; a
part of the same manifestation, which cannot linger behind its proper era” (Fuller 188).
In this view, Fuller offers the opinion that nature serves as an anchor to the land for
the Native Americans. As white civilization encroached upon the frontier, so did it
further eradicate the way of life of the Native Americans, one which balanced nature
and humanity.
It was the eradication of these tribes and their ideal existence that Fuller considered the most convincing evidence that the Transcendental fantasy of the editors of *The Western Messenger* was unfit to play out in the West. For Fuller, Native Americans embodied the Transcendental ideal of humanity and nature existing in harmony, and as the progress of the West continued to displace the tribes, that ideal became more and more intangible. The mere discrimination and exploitation of the Native Americans by the Western settlers indicated that the unifying and equalizing effect modeled by nature could not be successfully implemented. Not only were the settlers displacing the tribes and stealing their traditional lands, but through their trade and acquaintance, had degraded and corrupted them as well, teaching them drunkenness, greed, theft, and dishonesty: “The men of these subjugated tribes, now accustomed to drunkenness and every way degraded, bear but a faint impress of the lost grandeur of the race” (Fuller 180). Fuller ironically notes that the settlers expressed extreme disgust for the immoral behavior they viewed in Native American tribes, qualities that only developed under white influence. The settlers’ hateful attitude toward the tribes especially disconcerted Fuller, as she considered many of the vices for which they were blamed to be the fault of the settlers’ influence in the first place. The settling of the West had made beggars of the tribes, and the white settlers mercilessly discriminated against a people whom they had helped to shape: “‘Get you gone, you Indian dog,’ was the felt, if not the breathed, expression towards the hapless owners of the soil. All their claims, all their sorrows quite forgot, in abhorrence of their dirt, their tawny skins, and the vices the whites have taught them” (Fuller 180).
Fuller notes that the unjust, expectant attitude of the settlers in regard to Native American vices serves as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy; the settlers’ anticipation of Native American violence, dishonesty, or ingratitude lends a disdaining, hateful air to their treatment of Native Americans. Sensing this, the Native Americans understandably respond with violence, dishonesty, or ingratitude. Fullers describes this cycle with the example of a white woman fostering a Native American child:

A lady said, ‘do what you will for them, they will be ungrateful. The savage cannot be washed out of them. Bring up an Indian child and see if you can attach it to you.’ The next moment, she expressed, in the presence of one of those children whom she was bringing up, loathing at the odor left by one of her people, and one of the most respected, as he passed through the room. When the child is grown she will consider it basely ungrateful not to love her, as it certainly will not; and this will be cited as an instance of the impossibility of attaching the Indian. (Fuller 180)

The mistreatment and decimation of the Native American tribes, as well as the settlers’ failure to learn from the model of harmony within nature that the tribes exemplified, indicated to Fuller the West’s inability to achieve any kind of social ideal.

Despite Fuller’s predictions that the West was on an inevitable path of becoming just as urbanized as the East, many of her observations also indicate an optimistic possibility that the West, though not conducive to a Transcendental fantasy
based on harmony with nature, would become a different kind of urban society, which would preserve, at least partially, its roots in nature. Though she regrets the destruction of the prairies and forests and mourns the loss of beauty and balance that their destruction heralds, she does not lose all hope for the possibility that the West’s progress can indicate something positive. At times she even seems to embrace the period’s popular notion of utility, viewing the sacrifice of the forest as a potential advantage to the intellectual and cultural development of the coming civilization:

I have come prepared to see all this [development], to dislike it, but not with stupid narrowness to distrust or defame. On the contrary, while I will not be so obliging as to confound ugliness with beauty, discord with harmony, and laud and be contented with all I meet, when it conflicts with my best desires and tastes, I trust by reverent faith to woo the mighty meaning of the scene, perhaps to foresee the law by which a new order, a new poetry is to be evoked from this chaos, and with a curiosity as ardent, but not so selfish as that of Macbeth, to call up the apparitions of future kinds from the strange ingredients of the witch’s caldron. Thus, I will not grieve that all the noble trees are gone already from this island to feed the caldron, but believe it will have Medea’s virtue, and reproduce them in the form of new intellectual growths, since centuries cannot again adorn the land with such. (Fuller 86)

She imagines that the West may yet give rise to a new order, and though it will not resemble the nature-focused ideal that Transcendentalism outlines, its dependence on agriculture rather than industry lends a legitimacy that the East lacks. According to
Fuller, the West has not completely lost the potential to improve upon established society:

But let him come sufficiently armed with patience to learn the new spells which the dragons require, (and this can only be done on the spot,) he will not finally be disappointed of the promised treasure; the mob will resolve itself into men, yet crude, but of good dispositions, and capable of good character; the solitude will become sufficiently enlivened and home grow up at last from the rich sod. (Fuller 142)

Fuller’s direct observations of the developing West has imparted to her the knowledge that a Transcendental fantasy has no place in the harsh environment of the frontier, though a realistically flawed, yet unique, society may yet take shape.

In the younger generation especially, Fuller finds hope that a society situated in the West, though urbanized to a point, and unable to capture the Transcendental ideal, will still be an improvement upon the restrictive, regimented lifestyle she sees in the East. Fuller looks upon the upcoming generation of women as the key to unlocking the potential of a hardy, resourceful Western population, while she pities the current generation who, accustomed to easy Eastern urban life, are sometimes ill-prepared for the rigors of frontier life: “Seeing much of this joylessness, and inaptitude, both of body and mind, for a lot which would be full of blessings for those prepared for it, we could not but look with deep interest on the little girls, and hope they would grow up with the strength of body, dexterity, simple tastes, and resources that would fit them to
enjoy and refine the Western farmer’s life” (Fuller 106). Though she does not devalue traditional education, Fuller yearns for a wider societal appreciation of the “language of nature around,” so that a combination of “good schools near themselves, planned by persons of sufficient thought to meet the wants of the place and time” along with “plenty of exercise, the woods, the streams” may create a population inherently different from the East’s purely urban societies (Fuller 107). This upbringing, Fuller hopes, will bestow upon the upcoming generation a uniquely Western character, one particularly enfranchising for women: “An elegance she would diffuse around her, if her mind were opened to appreciate elegance; it might be of a kind new, original, enchanting, as different from that of the city belle, as that of the prairie torchflower from the shopworn article that touches the cheek of that lady within her bonnet” (Fuller 107).

Though Fuller’s travels through the West have convinced her that it will not give rise to an ideal Transcendental paradise, she does offer a hope that the West will retain enough semblance of its wild origins to create a society that improves upon the stark urbanization of the East. Fuller notes that the beauty of the West’s natural imagery may be preserved in small increments and mixed with civilizing processes that, combined, create a slightly inferior landscape, which pales in comparison with the original untamed Western plains, but improves upon the unadulterated urbanization of the East:

Here a man need not take a small slice from the landscape, and fence it in from the obtrusions of an uncongenial neighbor, and there cut down his fancies to
miniature improvements which a chicken could run over in ten minutes. He may have water and wood and land enough, to dread no incursions on his prospect from some chance Vandal that may enter his neighborhood. He need not painfully economise [sic] and manage how he may use it all; he can afford to leave some of it wild, and to carry out his own plans without obliterating those of nature. (Fuller 105)

Here Fuller holds out hope that the vastness of the West, the inescapable wildness of the land, and the ancient supremacy of nature may yet hold out against the rapid, yet relatively new influence of humanity.
Afterward

From Emerson’s abstract ideas came the idealistic notions of The Western Messenger editors, and from the expansion of their fears came the frank observations of Margaret Fuller. All three were Transcendentalists in their own right, and all three held vastly different expectations for what the movement meant for literature, reform, and society. Fluidity is, after all, the identifying factor of Transcendentalism, for those who have studied it closely. Though many attempt to contain it within a narrow set of definitions or canonical writers, Transcendentalism is innately indescribable and resists coagulation. It is not limited to Emerson or Thoreau anymore than it is limited to New England or to nature worship. It is this inherent variety that has allowed for a long legacy of arguments and movements, both extensions of and reactions against Transcendentalism.

An almost immediate backlash followed the rising popularity and diffusion of Transcendentalism in literature. One such reaction, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Blithedale Romance, published in 1852, argues that dwelling intimately within nature makes it impossible to also develop a scholarly or intellectual lifestyle. The novel is based upon Hawthorne’s real experiences at Brook Farm, the utopian, socialist experiment founded by George and Sophia Ripley, both of whom contributed work to The Western Messenger. The aim of the communal society was to equally distribute the agricultural labor of the farm, thereby creating time for all members to pursue cultural and intellectual endeavors. Blithedale makes clear that Hawthorne views the rigors of manual labor as incompatible with the cultural aims of zealous idealists.
Other critics of Transcendentalism have responded to what they see as the moral dilemma contained within Emerson’s quote from *Self-Reliance*: “but if I am the devil’s child, I will live then from the devil” (Emerson 1165). Critics like Edgar Allen Poe and Herman Melville were concerned with what they saw as a dangerous dependence on one’s individual moral code and intuition, a dependence which could lead to ghastly consequences, if one’s moral code happened to be at odds with the rest of society’s. Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” both illustrate the dangers posed by a man living according to his own moral code, especially when that man’s impulses do indeed spring from the devil. Melville’s *Moby Dick* offers similar discussions concerning the tensions between the individual and the group, and the dangers of both conformity and isolation.

Though its reliance on the individual worried some, others welcomed the celebration of individuality that formed the foundation of Transcendentalism. Walt Whitman, now considered one of the most influential American poets, explores many Transcendental themes throughout his work, most notably the elevation of the individual and the deification of nature.

The direct legacy of *The Western Messenger* is, though less obvious, just as essential as that of Emerson or Fuller. Though often excluded from canonical Transcendental discussions or lists, mainly because of its geographic focus, the magazine served as an invaluable tool for the spread of Eastern intellectualism and culture to the frontier. Usually trumped by *The Dial* in scholarship and prestige, *The Messenger* nevertheless was the first Transcendental periodical, and the first to defend
and publish many writers considered important Transcendentalists today. Not only does it offer glimpses of the beginnings of Transcendentalism in the East, if also offers a unique view of the East from the vantage point of the West. Standing in the West, looking back toward the East, these western messengers clung to their fantasy that human society, following the track of the sun, could reach new heights. It was with sadness that they finally accepted the twilight of their vision.
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