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### **Transcendentalism's Useful Failures**

Being a Transcendentalist meant having grand ambitions, from Emerson's "old largeness" of the philosophical imagination to Fuller's strong intent "to share and impel the general stream of thought" in her work as a journalist. Members of the Transcendental Club were activists, authors, innovators, and architects of utopia in their own time, which led them to achievements we now both celebrate and critique. Still, we often neglect the value of the failures that dogged each one of these figures in turn. Focusing primarily on the intersecting uncertainties, doubts, and disappointments of Emerson, Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Thoreau, this paper argues that Transcendentalism's staying power comes not just from its will to transform the world, but from its beautifully handled failures to do so.

As she told William Henry Channing about George Ripley's vision of a utopian community at Brook Farm, Fuller expressed impatience that he "will not say, however, that he considers his plan as a mere experiment, and is willing to fail, or can well bear to fail. I tell him that he is not ready till he can say that." For Fuller, failure makes utopia possible; it was the very earnestness of Ripley and Bronson Alcott, who fervently believed that Fruitlands would turn "the whole earth" into "a Happy Valley," that made her skeptical of utopia at first. Although Alcott was devastated by the failure of his utopian community, his daughter Louisa May mitigated this loss by gathering what she called the "invisible harvest" of Fruitlands and recognizing the love, optimism, and humor that survive disaster.

Writing against such utopian absolutes, Emerson asserts in "Circles," "I simply experiment," and Thoreau exits his two years at Walden Pond by characterizing them as "my experiment." Building on Robert D. Richardson's studies of Emerson's creative process, I explore Emerson's understanding of failure as a necessity for thinking and becoming, instead of just being. Perhaps the most successful utopian of all the Transcendentalists, Thoreau actually dismissed the concept of success in favor of the "satisfaction" of work and the "truth" of humility. As much as the Transcendentalists teach us about genius, they are also startlingly articulate about what it means to fail, especially on one's own terms. Drawn from the final chapter of my book in progress, *Dwelling in Possibility: Atlantic Utopias and Countercultures*, this paper pursues a counterintuitive route by asking whether the Transcendentalists' deliberate failings might make them especially useful to us today.