This essay considers the assumptions and motivations underlying the three utopian experiments conducted in 1840s Massachusetts: the relatively large-scale community of Brook Farm (1841-1847), the smaller one of Fruitlands, which collapsed after just six months (June 1843-January 1844) and Thoreau’s community of one at Walden Pond (1845-1847). I will explore what utopia meant to these Transcendentalist reformers, and will endeavour to clarify that definition by considering its opposite, which I suggest is waste. In this context one could make the claim that the antonym of utopia is excrement.

Utopia is an odd word, from our point of view, because it pre-exists its meaning. Human society has never established a utopian community. Utopia does not refer to anything that exists in the real world. It refers to something that may exist in a future real world, or to something that exists in a fictional world – and that indeed is where the word has its provenance, in a work of literature. But this is not true for the communities under discussion because they are located in a neo-Platonic, Christian, pre-Darwinian culture where the concept of utopia can be grounded in a way that has not been subsequently possible, except in certain fundamentalist circles. In short, for the New England Transcendentalists, the word “utopia” does not merely look forwards: it can refer backwards as well, back towards the Garden of Eden.

Even Hawthorne’s sceptical Miles Coverdale, in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) makes reference to this original community, however ironic his comment inevitably is. Coverdale sets off for the Blithedale community in a snowstorm:
Nobody else in the world … – nobody, at least, in our bleak little world of New-England – had dreamed of Paradise, that day, except as the Pole suggests the tropic. Nor, with such materials as were to hand, could the most skilful architect have constructed any better imitation of Eve’s bower, than might be seen in the snow-hut of an Esquimaux.¹

The architectural recreation of Eve’s bower is a memorable evocation of the utopian impulse at this time and place, even if from Coverdale’s sceptical point of view the resulting building is likely to be as insubstantial as an igloo – to be an example of what Emerson called “frolic architecture”.² It means that the word “utopia” is validated by a past reality.

There was a perfect community. It was created by God, and inhabited by Adam and Eve. In other words, instead of trying to un-knot the philosophical conundrums involved in the human invention of a word which means something that does not exist in the world, we can refer the paradox to the mystery of the Almighty. In the beginning was the word. That states the problem, and solves it.

And this original utopia was characterized by harmony between humans and the natural world. It was when the first humans divorced themselves from nature by eating of the Tree of Knowledge that history began.

Nature is – and remains – the imprint of God’s mind. It is eternal, patterned, absolute – and we are separate from it. “What does Rome know of the rat and lizard?” asks Emerson.³ History is now the human domain. It is transient, chaotic, wasteful. The utopian dream, as it was dreamed by the New England Transcendentalists, was to bring history to an end and re-enter the natural world. A few years after the Transcendentalist experiments, Darwin was to find his own solution to the conflict between nature and history, by proposing that nature itself was historical. But that was hardly the resolution for which the Transcendentalists were looking. They wanted nature to gobble up history, not history to gobble up nature.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Snow-Storm”, in The Dial, I/3 (January 1841), 339.