West Street: Nexus of Boston Reform, 1835-1845

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West Street: Nexus of Boston Reform, 1835-1845

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A Thesis in the Field of English
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Two adjoining row houses in Boston were known as the social and organizational centers for the transcendentalists and for William Lloyd Garrison's select core of abolitionists known as the "Boston Clique." These transcendentalists and abolitionists came from a common religious tradition – the Unitarian culture of William Ellery Channing. As philosophical siblings, they were more aware of their differences than their similarities. But over time, their core values, inculcated in the school of Channing, allowed them to collaborate in reform efforts in the years leading to the Civil War.
Acknowledgments

This thesis was only possible due to the extraordinary research that has been done in the field of abolitionism and transcendentalism by a long list of inspiring scholars. It is with no small trepidation that I place my humble brick on the foundation of their historiography. Though they are too numerous to mention here, I would like to express my gratitude in particular to the unheralded archivists of the Boston Public Library who have made digital access to the Weston Sisters’ correspondence possible. This work would not have been logistically possible without the luxury of that technological advancement.

Personally, I am indebted to friends and scholars Phyllis Cole and Megan Marshall. Little do they know how their uncommonly generous support, advice and sharing has changed the course of my intellectual life. They provided entrée to the world of Elizabeth Peabody and her “atom of a shop” – an act of true serendipity. I could not have foreseen how the little brick building off the Boston Common would engage my life – and imagination – for a decade to come.

Lynn Hyde
Seattle, WA
October 15, 2018
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Introduction

Many have assumed that Transcendentalism had an important bearing and influence upon abolitionism, but the two movements actually ran in separate channels.

– Henry Mayer, 354

In the year 1840, on a short, narrow street between Boston Common and the Publishers Row of Washington Street, four Federal style row houses from the 1810s stood facing a livery stable. West Street only measured one block long, but in the antebellum period, it packed a significant punch as a center of social, literary, educational and church reform. The neighborhood was in transition, evolving from one of residential character to one of mixed use. It made a proper home for a well-bred family from Salem, elevated in education, but markedly diminished in their prosperity. Transcendentalist Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, 36 years old, was the oldest of three unmarried sisters who had long been keeping schools to support themselves and their aging parents. Seized by an entrepreneurial spirit, she brought her family to No. 13 West Street in 1840, housing them on upper floors, while she generated income with a foreign language bookstore and circulating library on the first floor.

Peabody’s clientele would be the controversial radical intellectuals of Boston known as the Transcendentalists – a broad spectrum of dissatisfied thinkers, mostly current and former Unitarian ministers, who nurtured hopes of wholesale societal reform. Discontented with their conservative mainstream brethren and their rational, corpse-cold
theology, the transcendentalists turned to the Romantic thinkers of Germany and England for inspiration and direction as they charged deeper into the nineteenth century. For some, the muse carried them into liberalizing the Unitarian church itself; others explored new kinds of spirituality, educational reform, the formation of proto-socialist communities, and the intellectual and social advancement of women.

The Peabody Book Room evolved to serve the broad spectrum of interests of Peabody’s fellow Transcendentalists, offering hard-to-obtain foreign language journals and books from England and the Continent, and offering a circulating library of those materials for a reasonable subscription price. But the shop became much more than just a bookstore; it became a literary salon for an elite clientele, in which one might find on any given morning William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Horace Mann – among many other illustrious names. Margaret Fuller held many of her famed Conversations for women here, and George and Sophia Ripley held gatherings to plan their Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education – a utopian experiment in communal living. Publication of the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial* (1840-1844), edited in turns by Margaret Fuller, George Ripley and Emerson, was transferred to Peabody herself under her own West Street imprint in November of 1841.

“Desultory, dreamy, but insatiable in her love for knowledge and for helping others to it” (Higginson, *Yesterdays* 86), Peabody acted as a great social switchboard operator for the movement. Correspondence of her clients and customers reveals her role as postmistress for a vast network of shared literary materials and news; plans to drop letters, books and journals for friends “at Miss Peabody’s” percolate persistently
throughout their correspondence. Thomas Wentworth Higginson dubbed her book room “an atom of a shop.”

In 1840, when the shop opened, one of the few major social issues that did not actively engage its Transcendentalist patrons was the abolition of slavery. Though Emerson and Parker would come later to the cause, at the turn of the next decade, their commitment to their respective reforms lay elsewhere. West Street, however, had not been slumbering before Ms. Peabody brought “the Newness” through her doors. By 1835, on the other side of No. 13’s eastern brick wall, another atomic reform center had already established itself. No. 11 West Street was the home of abolitionist Henry Grafton Chapman and his dynamic wife, Maria Weston Chapman. Maria in particular became the indispensable manager of William Lloyd Garrison’s branch of the antislavery cause, serving as his lieutenant from 1834 through the formal life of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society after the Civil War. In league with her five unmarried antislavery sisters, who at turns resided with her, Chapman converted her home into the administrative and social center of Boston’s Anti-Slavery movement. Easy walking distance to Garrison’s Liberator and the homes of Ellis Gray Loring, Francis Jackson and Wendell Phillips, the home created a warm, informal supportive clubhouse for the “Boston Clique” of abolitionists – a place for them and their remote brethren to catch up on organizational news, activities, and planning sessions. It even served as a safe refuge from daily public harassment and, significantly, Boston’s anti-abolitionist mobs. Edmund Quincy fondly remembered the West Street “society of educated accomplished minds informed & elevated by devotion to great and sublime principles…” (BPL 11)
As the administrative genius behind Garrison’s movement, Maria Weston Chapman not only guest-edited his *Liberator* during his absences, but she also masterminded the development of the machinery for the association’s fundraising. Under her management, the Boston Female Antislavery Society (BFASS) conducted the enormously successful annual Anti-Slavery Fairs that supported the cause from 1835 to 1858. The BFASS annual gift book, *The Liberty Bell*, solicited literary contributions in the form of poems, short fiction, and essays from an increasingly diverse group of reformers from around the country and across the Atlantic. Chapman remotely orchestrated the management of the New York-based *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1840-1870) and along with Quincy edited *The Non-Resistant* (1838-1845). All these activities were largely planned and conducted in the parlor of the Chapman townhouse. No. 11 was a workshop, a home, a salon for antislavery agents and a publishing center, as much as Peabody’s Book Room was for Transcendentalists. Combined, the power of these two “atoms” gave rise to a nuclear era of social reform in antebellum Boston.

In *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*, scholar Henry Mayer states that abolitionists and transcendentalists ran in separate channels. But is that even geographically possible? Commonly, the players in one camp’s narrative show up in brief paragraphs or footnotes in the studies of the other camp. But with such a voraciously inquiring cast, how could indifference or dismissal define their actual attitudes to one another? Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the traditions of *scholarship* of these two movements run in separate channels, as ample evidence suggests the transcendentalists and abolitionists themselves intersected frequently.
The spiritual and intellectual currents of Transcendentalism and Abolitionism that flowed through West Street issued from a common Unitarian spring – in particular from a common progenitor, William Ellery Channing. Nearly all the members of the Boston Clique who eddied around No. 11 and all the radical seekers at No. 13 were intellectual “children” of Channing. The few who were not, such as William Lloyd Garrison (a lapsed Baptist), deeply wished for Channing’s favor. These streams did not run in separate channels. Rather, a network of individual rivulets flowed back and forth down the valley, converging and diverging until the gravity of liberal spirit finally drove them together in a powerful river of reform.
The Unitarian church machinery that ruled antebellum Boston was not a centuries-old institution with generations of tradition and accumulated power to wield over its congregants. It was a liberal offshoot of Puritan congregationalism that, thanks to its strong emphasis on education, had begun to divorce itself from Calvinism during the Enlightenment – even before the American Revolution. Influenced by John Locke and Isaac Newton, leaders like Charles Chauncy, minister of the First Church (or “Old Brick”) in Boston, took an axe to Puritan tradition during the time of the Great Awakening in the 1740s – publicly battling such “New Light” theological Titans as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. Chauncy and his “Old Lights,” as those evangelicals called the “reasoning unbelievers” out of Harvard, rejected a God of damnation in favor of a God of Love. Chauncy maintained that "a more shocking idea can scarce be given of the Deity, than that which represents him as arbitrarily dooming the greater part of the race of men to eternal misery. Was he wholly destitute of goodness, yea, positively malevolent in his nature, a worse representation could not be well made of him" (qtd. in Griffin 112-13). The first step towards more liberal Christianity had begun.

By the end of the American Revolution, the first avowedly Unitarian minister in Boston, James Freeman of King’s Chapel, had convinced his congregation to change their liturgy to eliminate all references to the Trinity, which he considered scripturally unsupported. Likely the first officially Unitarian church in the country, the King’s
Chapel congregation began moving away from other pillars of traditional Protestantism, such as original sin, predestination, and the divinity of Jesus.

The liberal seed germinated and grew slowly, aided by a host of other societal changes at the turn of the nineteenth century, especially in coastal Massachusetts: industrialization, immigration and religious diversification. The growing mercantile power of Boston altered the structure of regional class and power, creating an elite, conservative aristocracy, with deep implications for the nature of relationships between clergy and their parishioners. The Standing Order of Massachusetts still required that citizens support churches through taxation, but as non-Puritan-descended churches began to populate the landscape, the system began to feel the preliminary tremors of an impending seismic shift.

Historically, Puritans had rejected on principle any kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy. New England congregations were bound together by customized covenants in independent churches, and those independent congregations practiced collegiality and fellowship with their neighboring congregations. But in the burgeoning battle for dominion between the orthodox and liberal schools, orthodox clergy began to introduce mandatory creeds into their covenants, contrary to the Puritan way, in an effort to strain out what they saw as liberal infidelity. Unitarians, on the other hand, rebelled against the idea of creeds, which, in their eyes, inevitably institutionalized human errors in interpreting scripture and led to partisan corruption. They saw the liberalizing process as the natural evolution that comes with increased understanding of God.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century the “Unitarian Controversy” or the “Boston heresy” spread throughout New England. When Harvard College – the center of
ministerial power – appointed the liberal Rev. Henry Ware, Sr. to the Hollis Chair of Divinity in 1805, the orthodox felt their influence draining away. As retiring orthodox clergy were replaced by liberal pastors, the Calvinists withdrew to establish their own Andover Theological Seminary in 1808. The Congregational churches of New England were increasingly divided over these cataclysmic changes in faith, with congregations split in bitter and acrimonious divorces over creed, Scripture, members and church properties. By 1815, there was no denying that both orthodox and liberal wings could not co-exist within the same denomination.

Rev. William Ellery Channing of the Federal Street Church was 35 years old in 1815 and averse – as he always would be – to heated rhetoric, intolerance and sectarian contention. Yet, as the emerging moral leader of the liberal wing, he felt compelled to take the public stage to aggressively defend the liberal movement and to negotiate future co-existence for the two factions – separate but united in Christian principles.

In the culmination of a heated public battle of the pen, Channing laid out in the press his justification for relaxing the boundaries of formal belief.

Men differ in opinions as much as in features. No two minds are perfectly accordant. The shades of belief are infinitely diversified. Amidst this immense variety of sentiment, every man is right in his own eyes. Every man discovers errors in the creed of his brother. Every man is prone to magnify the importance of his own peculiarities, and to discover danger in the peculiarities of others. This is human nature. (qtd. in Mendelsohn 149)

To promote harmony in light of this inescapable truth, he called for free inquiry and charitable tolerance. But Calvinism was not that elastic, and the orthodox were not convinced.

The liberals, averse to schism but increasingly shunned and attacked for their novelty by their orthodox brethren, ultimately had to declare their independence. This
was done with definitive clarity in 1819 when Channing delivered the ordination sermon at the installation of Jared Sparks in Baltimore, Maryland. In this highly orchestrated declaration of Unitarian principles, Channing laid out the pillars of the new school, reflecting the ascendancy of Locke and Newton in the understanding of scripture: “[T]he Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and . . . its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. . . . We profess not to know a book, which demands a more frequent exercise of judgment than the Bible” (Channing, Writings 72-73). Spiritual growth, Channing maintained, required both Reason and Revelation for “God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. We may let it sleep, but we do so at our peril. Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings” (76). In the pursuit of spiritual advancement, men must apply reason to the Bible to glean the meaning from it. As reason drove increased understanding, so would the Bible reveal more truth to the enlightened seeker.

Channing also took on the matter of religious zeal and its sibling intolerance, errors that he claimed had driven Christians far from their religion, most jarringly in the Unitarian controversy.

Much of what passes for a zeal for truth, we look upon with little respect, for it often appears to thrive most luxuriantly where other virtues shoot up thinly and feebly; we have little gratitude for those reformers, who would force upon us a doctrine which has not sweetened their own tempers, or made them better men than their neighbours. . . . Charity, forbearance, a delight in the virtues of different sects, a backwardness to censure and condemn, these are virtues, which, however poorly practiced by us, we admire and recommend; . . . (98)

Such ideas regarding reformers and zeal foreshadowed the conflicts Channing would encounter nearly twenty years later when a new generation of social reformers would rise to battle social inequity, many of whom would be his own parishioners. His preference
for an oxymoronic “pure and calm zeal” (146) would confound, bewilder and even incense strident abolitionists in later years.

Of further significance for understanding the tenets Channing would bring to his Federal Street congregation is his parting admonition in the Baltimore address, an indestructible vestige of the Puritan emphasis on cultivating an *individual*, moral, working relationship with God.

Do not, brethren, shrink from the duty of searching God’s Word for yourselves, through fear of human censure and denunciation. Do not think, that you may innocently follow the *opinions which* prevail around you, without investigation, on the ground, that Christianity is now so purified from errors, as to need no laborious research. There is much reason to believe, that Christianity is at this moment dishonored by gross and cherished corruptions. (100)

Revealed for future reference in this is the long-standing New England antipathy for “association,” or more concisely, any congress of human beings where a common platform of values relieved individuals of the responsibility to cultivate their own informed judgments. Whether secular or religious, associations were corrupters of the individual’s spiritual journey. “Our danger is that we shall substitute the consciences of others for our own, that we shall paralyze our faculties through dependence on foreign guides” (Channing, *Works* 4:189). Channing would have more to say about the paramount importance of self-culture in later years.

The published sermon of the Baltimore address, “Unitarian Christianity,” sold tens of thousands of copies around the nation and in Europe, conferring upon Channing an instant international reputation. Liberals increasingly adopted the platform, and despite their distaste for institutionalizing religion, they formally established the
American Unitarian Association in 1825. (It is worth noting that although the presidency of the association was offered to Channing as their leading representative, he declined it.)

The toll of the split on the religious community continued beyond the division of the communion silver. A solid third of the congregations of Massachusetts became Unitarian. In eastern Massachusetts, the stronghold of liberalism, only three large towns retained a majority of orthodox parishes; of the 25 earliest churches in the former colony, 20 became Unitarian. In Boston itself, only the Old South Meetinghouse remained orthodox (Mendelsohn 166-67).

Urban Massachusetts was leaving the doctrines of election and the irredeemable depravity of man far behind, but the division reduced the social diversity of the congregations. Unitarian pews were now more densely occupied by “gentlemen of wealth and standing” – a group likely to be religiously liberal but socially conservative – while less affluent and less educated classes remained Trinitarian. The liberals were largely Federalist, and by-and-large, anti-democratic. (“There is no king so absolute as King Democracy,” wrote transcendentalist Convers Francis to fellow minister Frederick Henry Hedge.) (Woodall, Journals-1 20) They believed fully in a benevolent patriarchy, and what we might call today “trickle-down economics.”

Later in 1833, when Massachusetts relinquished its honor of being the last state in the Union with a Standing Order, the power of the clergy would be forever diminished, and the moral and social sway they had always enjoyed from their pulpits was eroded. No longer exercising institutional clerical coercion to enforce adherence to doctrine, their influence diluted. Ministers became more reliant on the good will of the men in their
pews for their agency, which softened their resolve to compel moral compliance from them. Reformers would thus come to consider them complicit in the evils of the day.

This revolutionary split in religious demography into liberal elites and orthodox middle and lower classes would have significant ramifications for the participation of Boston’s Unitarian brethren in the approaching era of social reform. The influential Reverend William Ellery Channing, “the reluctant radical,” would be thrust into the maelstrom of these reforms not by dispositional inclination or by the popular demand of his parishioners, but by his overpowering sense of personal duty.
William Ellery Channing is a compelling figure in American intellectual history. His role as the standard bearer of liberal Christianity put him in the leading ranks of most influential American thinkers of the nineteenth century. But his role within the clerical establishment of Boston was not that of an organizational leader. In many ways, he was a product of his generation, but in just as many ways he was a maverick among them. He was neither missionary nor crusader for a Unitarian establishment. Like an old-time Puritan and anti-associationist, his theater of religious communion was his independent church, not the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers. Yet he looked ever towards a progressive future in the church. Younger theologian Theodore Parker claimed, “It is not saying too much to say he has done more to liberalize Theology than any man now living, where the English tongue is spoken” (Parker, “Tribute” 8). It would be impossible to imagine the appearance of the transcendentalist movement without him, as he, more than any other religious thinker, carved the path out of Calvinism, through a few short years of Unitarianism, directly into transcendentalism. His colleagues were not so progressive.

Born in 1780, in the middle of the American Revolution, Channing was a full generation older than those of his clerical progeny who would become associated with reform movements. He, like the other liberal Christians of his own generation, grew up during the tumultuous time of war in his own country, the imprint of which would last their lifetimes. His colleague Rev. William Emerson watched the first shots of the Revolution fired in his back yard in Concord as a boy, but one need not have been an
eyewitness to musket-fire to experience the deprivations, fears and uncertainties of the 1770s and 1780s. Long-awaited peace was quickly followed by reports of the chaos and terror of the French Revolution, feeding deep suspicions about the vicious and untenable nature of democracy – a perspective that powered Boston’s Federalist culture. Channing was called as a young man to preach at the Federal Street Church in 1803, the year before Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor of France and threw Europe into turmoil. Less than a decade later the War of 1812 commenced. If Channing’s generation of church leadership was overly committed to stability, control, hierarchy and forced harmony in the new nineteenth century nation, it should come as no surprise.

But Channing also differed from the evolving Boston Brahmins of his milieu in his perspective on the meaning of the American Revolution for the church. In a country founded on liberty, the freedoms of religion, speech and inquiry were inseparable from faith. The Puritan ideal of the individual’s personal relationship with and responsibility to God remained paramount. It was his or her duty to pursue self-perfection, to continually cultivate him- or herself to emulate the example set by Christ – thus elevating the character of society one enlightened person at a time. Every person on life’s journey had this responsibility, and thus everyone on life’s journey must have ample liberty to pursue that higher purpose. This meant freedom of conscience and speech for all, regardless of gender, race or creed. It made Channing unusually democratic. Where his colleagues were religiously liberal and socially conservative, Channing was comparatively liberal in both ways. Most significantly, he was unselfconsciously receptive to higher revelation on any issue. Thus, as his “children” engaged him in their
issues, he became increasingly socially liberal (and more radical) until his death in 1842. He never stopped growing.

A proper (if not native) Bostonian, Channing was averse to open conflict and dissension, and he would eschew politics and partisanship his entire life, even when his radical declarations of faith or philosophy begat enough public outrage and hostility to unleash a mob. An agonizing period of introspection on any issue was required to enable Channing to study all sides of an issue in depth, from a myriad of perspectives, including those of all manner of opponents. Only when he could be certain he was exercising maximum judiciousness to all sides of an issue would he take a stand. Often accused of timidity by those who desired him to quickly wield a battle sword, the sickly and frail pastor bore slings and arrows from both those who rejected his unorthodox ideas, and those who demanded he proselytize more fervently. But once his stand was taken, he was impervious to censure. He was not, as some claimed, a slave to popularity.

Channing began with the inward man. But he was unable to compartmentalize that interior man from his relation to society. “The inward moulds the outward. The power of the people lies in its mind; and this mind, if fortified and enlarged, will bring external things into harmony with itself. It will create a new world around it, corresponding to itself” (Channing qtd. in Mendelsohn 197). Though he personally preferred to live within, his full career is characterized by a constitutional tension between the life of the inward man and the life of the outward. Christian duty compelled him to act outwardly.

During his early ministry, it was common for him to donate to a full spectrum of social charities, and in setting this example he was able to flush funds from his admiring
congregation that would otherwise have remained pursebound. Upper crust commercial Bostonians, as a part of their contribution to the general weal, displayed a cultural commitment to developing literary and scientific societies. They also embraced a modest, measured and quiet philanthropy, as a supposed hedge against becoming “mammon worshippers” – their responsibility as the elite, as Channing reminded them. But their pastor pushed (or tried to push) them beyond their customary boundaries in supporting the poor, sick, blind, orphaned, unemployed, and, of course, Harvard College.

In 1824 the Association of the Members of the Federal Street Society for Benevolent Purposes came into being in his church, but was never a powerful engine of philanthropy; Channing was never satisfied with the results of his efforts to engage his flock more enthusiastically. As the intractable nature of the social evils stymied him, he posed proto-sociological questions about identifying the roots rather than the symptoms of problems. However, as biographer Jack Mendelsohn so delightfully phrased it, “Boston’s men of enterprise were much too concerned with the manicuring of their souls to be tormented by secret questions about the origins of pauperism” (Mendelsohn 63).

Faced with an under-motivated congregation, Channing took advantage of the ordination of his young new assistant pastor, Ezra Stiles Gannett, to fire up his fellow clergymen.

The age is in many respects a corrupt one, and needs and demands, in the ministry, a spirit of reform. The age, I say, is corrupt; not because I consider it as falling below the purity of past times, but because I consider it is obviously and grossly defective, when measured by the Christian standard and by the lights and advantages which it enjoys. . . . I see much to make a good man mourn, and to stir up Christ’s servants to prayer and toil. That our increased comforts, improved arts, and overflowing prosperity are often abused to licentiousness; that Christianity is with multitudes a mere name and form; that a practical
atheism…and a practical infidelity…abound on every side of us. (Channing, 
*Works*, 3:14)

The advance of culture is favorable but “who is authorized to say . . . that whilst science and art, intellect and imagination, are extending their domains, the conscience and affections, the moral and religious principles of our nature, are incapable of increased power and elevation?” His congregation should no longer sit complacent and complicit in the face of stubbornly immitigable social problems. The church must be a platform for change, and the minister must lead it. Channing then charged his young colleague, Gannett: “[T]here is no romance in a minister’s proposing, and hoping to forward, a great moral revolution on the earth; for the religion, which he is appointed to preach, was intended and is adapted to work deeply and widely, and to change the face of society” (3: 16, 17).

Channing’s congregants may have retained their dull complacency during this address, but sitting in the audience was the young divinity student George Ripley; his life was transformed. He wrote to his sister Marianne, “It was a day of great joy for those who wish to see fervent piety connected with sound doctrine and liberal feelings. I would, but I cannot, enable you to form a conception of the infantine simplicity and apostolic meekness, united with the eloquence of an angel and spirituality of a sainted mind, which characterize Dr. Channing.” The Calvinist foundation of Ripley’s childhood began to disintegrate as he declared himself a “child of Channing” (qtd. in Frothingham 28).

Channing interwove the dual goals of perfection of the individual and the perfection of society, but the effort to do so required an enormous act of spiritual will. His natural temperament led only to the former goal – a fact that may account for future social reformers lambasting his absence of zeal in public crusades. But most of those
future reformers would prove unable to emulate his dual-action model, heeding only, at least in the early stages of their reforming careers, the dictates of their own temperaments – inward or outward. Those who looked to the elevation and the perfection of the individual soul were prone to explore transcendentalism. Those who looked to the elevation and perfection of society were more likely to become warriors in the anti-slavery cause, or one of a broad spectrum of other social causes. Thus, Channing’s children left home in separate directions, assessing each other with a wide variety of judgments until the greater gravity of the slavery issue ultimately brought most of them back to common cause again.

In these post-war years before the major reform era came upon the Massachusetts capital, a generation of young men and women were gestating. As Federal Street benevolents began carving genteel karma for themselves in 1825, future transcendentalists were incubating. Convers Francis, future Professor of Pulpit Divinity and Pulpit Care at Harvard Divinity School, was newly installed in the First Parish of Watertown. Young Ralph Waldo Emerson was making the fateful decision to study for the ministry. Frederic Henry Hedge was studying in Germany, becoming infused with the new German biblical criticism. George Ripley, future founder of the Brook Farm utopian community was a student at Harvard Divinity School, falling under Channing’s influence. Non-cleric Bronson Alcott was teaching school in Connecticut, finding, at least for a while, a cause that could fire his passions and search for meaning – childhood education.
Future innovative Unitarian clergymen James Freeman Clarke, Theodore Parker and William Henry Channing (the elder minister’s nephew) were fifteen years old; Clarke and Channing were just entering Harvard, while the farmer’s son, Parker, dreamed of the means to join them. At the same time the precocious teenage Margaret Fuller, was becoming acquainted with the newly famous author of *Hobomok*, Lydia Maria Child, in Cambridge. Despite an age difference of eight years, the two women joined in the study of John Locke and Germaine de Staël, assessing empiricism and romanticism and judging in favor of the latter. The only future transcendentalist who was already in play was Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who, at twenty-one, began her long apprenticeship and friendship with Channing, becoming his amanuensis – recording his sermons and conversations for posterity – into the 1830s. By the time the transcendentalist movement was emerging from its cocoon ten years later, Peabody was well poised as Boswell not only to Channing, but to the entire Romantic tribe.

Among the future abolitionists, Samuel J. May was a freshly ordained minister in “the solitary Unitarian church in the Orthodox Siberia” of Brooklyn, Connecticut (Stange 48), unaware of the fateful connection he would soon make with his Connecticut neighbor Alcott. In faraway England, nineteen year old Maria Weston was beginning a three year sojourn in England at the invitation of her uncle Joshua Bates to complete her liberal education, while her five younger sisters remained at home in Weymouth, Massachusetts, caring for their troubled family. Author Lydia Maria Child, already a literary celebrity at twenty-three, was now publishing her third novel, *The Rebels*. Ellis Gray Loring, boyhood friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was studying for the law at Harvard, while Edmund Quincy was a young undergraduate there, dreaming of writing
novels. Channing’s close younger friend Charles Follen, a German political exile who would become a stalwart abolitionist (along with his wife Eliza Cabot), had just begun teaching German at Harvard. Wendell Phillips was still a youngster at Boston Latin School, while in faraway Newburyport, twenty-year-old William Lloyd Garrison was finishing a seven-year printer-apprenticeship and considering the offer of his friend Isaac Knapp to start his own newspaper.

In 1820, the population of Boston stood at approximately 43,000. By 1830 it had swelled to 61,000. But it was still a small enough community that those who were affiliated with Harvard or the dominant Unitarian church would have at least known of other lights in the community, if they did know them personally. Of the persons outlined above, they would certainly all know of each other by the late 1830s. Emerson, May, and Peabody all knew Dr. Channing from early in their childhoods. Emerson’s father, minister of Boston’s First Parish or “Old Brick,” was a colleague of Channing’s, and Samuel J. May’s family were neighbors and close friends of the Channings. As a young divinity student May had served for a term as Channing’s assistant prior to his call to Brooklyn, Connecticut. Although the Peabodys lived in Salem during Elizabeth’s childhood, her mother began taking her to hear Channing preach when she was only seven – whenever he was exchanging with local Salem ministers or the family was visiting in Boston. By the age of thirteen, the prodigious Elizabeth and Channing were well acquainted.

Of all the remarkable male figures in this cast, only Bronson Alcott, Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison were not schooled or ordained in the Unitarian fellowship. But many of their religious ideas were compatible with liberal theology.
Alcott, who had been raised a Calvinist, would be called many things (transcendentalist, pantheist, ego-theist), but he never joined any church or associated himself with any denomination. He did, however, in his later years admit that “I attended [Channing’s] Church in Federal Street, and owe to him more than any other preacher, softened and rational impassions of the religious dogmas in which I had been educated. I think I may say that I became a Unitarian in the sense in which he then held that faith (though modified essentially since) by his teachings” (Herrnstadt 752-53).

Garrison and Phillips, though schooled in Calvinism, were so averse to any kind of ecclesiastical structure that they might have, at times, been considered “come-outers” – the term coined in the 1830s to denote those who abandoned all organized religion to seek their own, purer faith. It might not be out of place to say of them that, for Garrison in particular, Anti-Slavery was their religion. He most certainly saw himself called by God to exorcise the scourge of slavery from the nation. In an era when not affiliating oneself with a formal congregation was highly unorthodox, the rogue nature of this transcendentalist and these abolitionists demonstrates the underlying affinity the groups shared – the universal disappointment with all denominations of traditional churchdom.
As the third decade of the nineteenth century pressed on towards its conclusion, most of the would-be reformers born in the first decade were just entering, or had yet to enter, adulthood. Samuel J. May (b. 1797) remembered as an abolitionist, and Bronson Alcott (b. 1799), remembered as a transcendentalist, had a few years’ head start on the pack and make an interesting study. Elizabeth Peabody, though younger (b. 1804), no doubt would have still been laboring away at Harvard College and Divinity School if her gender allowed for it, but she took the fast track in launching her career as an educator in her teens. In fact, in the 1820s, educational reform was where these figures began to weave a web of alliances among the emerging reformers of the soul and of society.

A prodigious and ambitious autodidact, armed with the aforementioned “love for knowledge and helping others to it,” Peabody was in a prime position to be first out of the blocks. Eventually she would be the founder of the American Kindergarten movement, but in her early twenties she moved to Boston to build a reputation as an innovative, energetic and effective educator. Channing approved the venture and sent his daughter Mary to enroll in Peabody’s school, facilitating the long and productive relationship between the two as sage and acolyte. Her school was formed in 1826 when her close friend and fellow teacher in Channing’s Federal Street Sunday School, Eliza Lee Cabot, recruited students from the families of Cabot’s influential friends. Cabot and Peabody would later drift in separate directions as Cabot married the professor-turned-minister Charles Follen and the couple became stalwart antislavery activists within the Boston
Clique. Cabot may not have been the only future abolitionist Peabody was friends with in the 1820s; her memoirs contain multiple references to “my dear friend Mary Parker” – perhaps the future long-term president of the Boston Female Antislavery Society, Mary S. Parker. (MVWC 1)

Though today associated predominantly with Emerson and transcendentalism, Bronson Alcott was first and foremost a revolutionary thinker on childhood education, despite the fact (or owing to it) that he had not received a strong education himself. His school in Cheshire, Connecticut was his laboratory, and out of his progressive pedagogical experiments came some articles that made a name for him in education circles. Peabody first met Alcott when she was helping William A. Russell to edit the American Journal of Education in 1826. She recalled that “Mr. A. Bronson Alcott first came to Boston, in 1827, at the call of the ladies who established the first Charity Infant School, in consequence of their having seen some remarkable articles of his in the first Journal of Education, edited by Mr. William A. Russell” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 355). These journal articles, which proposed radical transformations in the moral as well as intellectual education of children, had created enough of a sensation that Rev. Samuel J. May and Dr. Channing – both deeply interested in educational reform – individually sought out his company for the first time on separate occasions.

Alcott’s Cheshire School was some sixty miles from May’s Brooklyn congregation, so, intrigued by what he had read, May invited Alcott to come stay with him for a week. May was so struck by his new friend, he later recalled that, “I have never, but in one other instance, been so immediately taken possession of by any man I

1 For references to Eliza Lee Cabot, see pages 39, 56, 66, 169n. For references to Mary Parker, see pp. 39, 65-66.
ever met. He seemed to me like a born sage and saint. He was radical in all matters of reform: went to the root of all things, especially the subjects of education, mental and moral culture” (qtd. in Mumford 122). But his visit had an even more permanent impact on the May family. The momentous day that Alcott arrived, it was May’s sister, Abigail (or Abba, Abby) who answered the door. It only took a moment for the gleam that would become Louisa May Alcott and her sisters to appear in Bronson Alcott’s eye. The two would be married in 1830, thus sealing a genealogical union between the future reform movements of soul and society.

Rev. Channing’s initial invitation to Alcott began a friendship that would be characterized by “many pleasant and profitable evenings in the discussion of questions then in the air – Education, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism[,] Socialism[,] Antislavery . . .” (Herrnstadt 752-53). Alcott, working to disentangle himself from the tethers of Calvinism, sampled congregations all around the city, first hearing Channing in April 1828. Channing proved just the exit ramp from fire and brimstone orthodoxy that Alcott sought. The friendship that sprang up between them was warmed in part by Channing’s support of Alcott’s Common Street School in Boston and, in the 1830s, his Temple Street School. But it went beyond the schoolhouse; it is thought that Channing was the conduit who brought Coleridge to Alcott at this formative time, which had an enormous impact on Alcott’s spiritual development and put him on the path to transcendentalism.

Alcott was exploring reforms of all kinds in the 1820s, including the issue of slavery. In a fateful excursion in October of 1830, Alcott and his new brother-in-law Samuel J. May, along with May’s cousin Samuel Sewall, ventured out to hear a young
radical abolitionist journalist named William Lloyd Garrison, fresh from a Baltimore jail on an anti-slavery libel charge. For May, the experience was electric, and likely was the other person alluded to in his above quote about Alcott’s impact on him. “Never before was I so affected by the speech of a man. When he had ceased speaking I said to those around me: ‘That is a providential man; he is a prophet; he will shake our nation to its centre, but he will shake slavery out of it. We ought to know him, we ought to help him. Come let us go and give him our hands.’” Sewall and Alcott did. They invited him home to Alcott’s home where the men stayed up until midnight tearing up the old world. May declared, “That night my soul was baptized in his spirit, and ever since I have been a disciple and fellow laborer of William Garrison” (May 19).

The next day May went to visit Garrison where the bond was even more steadfastly cemented. Garrison shared letters he had sent to Webster, Beecher, and Channing, “begging them, ere it should be too late, to interpose their great power in the Church and State to save our country from the terrible calamities which the sin of slavery was bringing upon us. Those letters were eloquent, solemn, impressive. I wonder they did not produce a greater effect” (May 20). It began one of the most persistent mysteries in the history of the era: Why did Dr. Channing, who was so open to people of all stripes, not respond to the young man’s strident plea?

May was not the first to fall to the siren song of Garrison’s personal magnetism. In 1829, 27-year-old authoress Lydia Maria Child was riding the crest of a wave of literary popularity, based on a series of successful books – primarily her domestic manual The Frugal Housewife, and her first novel, Hobomok – a daring tale that tackled interracial marriage between a white woman and a Native American man. Her eloquence
and courage in choice of subject matter caught young Garrison’s eye. Newly converted to abolitionism by Benjamin Lundy, the 24-year-old Garrison lauded this wife of his former employer at the *Massachusetts Journal*, David Lee Child, and reprinted her article in that journal, “Comparative Strength of Male and Female Intellect” in October 1829. He described the authoress as “a writer who is not surpassed, if equaled, by any other female in this country, and whose genius is as versatile as it is brilliant.” A few weeks later, he went even further in an editorial column to the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, declaring, “Let me say, then, that – taking her for all in all – she is the first woman in the republic” (qtd. in Karcher, *Woman*, 173). This was more than a literary fan rave. Garrison was considering whom best to recruit to his antislavery cause. Those who could wield the power of the pen were just the spokesmen he sought to enlist in his ranks. He set his sights on Maria Child (as she preferred to be called), as he would with the poet John Greenleaf Whittier. When he returned from the stint in a Baltimore jail in the summer of 1830, Child was among the first he sought to recruit.

At first Child thought him too forthright and critical in his writings; like most of the people of eastern Massachusetts, she considered him too unrestrained to be effective. But she was utterly undone by his appeal to her sympathies for the slave. She recounted nearly thirty years later upon his death:

“I was then all absorbed in poetry and painting, – soaring aloft, on Psyche-wings, into the ethereal regions of mysticism. He got hold of the strings of my conscience, and pulled me into Reforms. It is of no use to imagine what might have been, if I had never met him. Old dreams vanished, old associates departed, and all things became new. . . . A new stimulus siezed [sic] my whole being, and carried me withersoever it would. ‘I could not otherwise, so help me God.’!”

(Meltzer 558)
Child was irrevocably drawn to the new movement, despite the catastrophic effect it would have on her promising career as a writer.

Like Alcott, Child represents another mixed transcendentalist-abolitionist family. Child’s remark about soaring aloft in the ethereal regions of mysticism reveals how she differed from most of the other abolitionists in the Clique. Her elder brother, Rev. Convers Francis of Watertown, ultimately became a transcendentalist himself, and during the time she lived with him before her 1828 marriage, she had access to her brother’s growing library as well as the Harvard divinity community. In this way she became acquainted with young pastors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and younger fellow scholar, Theodore Parker. (The mentoring Parker received from Convers Francis gave birth to a close lifelong friendship that endured many trials.)

Convers and Maria Francis had both been raised Calvinist, but neither remained so. Convers later became a Unitarian professor at Harvard Divinity School, and explored transcendentalism from within the Unitarian church, but Maria had no such strictures. The older brother could sympathize that Unitarianism was too prosaic for her spirit, but when she started to dabble in Swedenborgianism, Francis became uneasy. She assured him that, “I am apt to regard a system of religion as I do any other beautiful theory. It plays round the imagination but fails to reach the heart. I wish I could find some religion in which my heart and understanding could unite; that amidst the darkest clouds of this life I might ever be cheered with the mild halo of religious consolation . . . ” (Meltzer 2). Her interior quest was large, but not so large that she could not live in the exterior as well. When Garrison tapped into her restless dissatisfaction using his holy cause, he
struck a very deep chord. She found her heart and understanding could unite in the cause of abolition.

If Child were going to throw herself headlong into this cause, she needed to do her homework. At the time, she enjoyed access to the Boston Athenaeum – the private library that served Boston’s (mostly male) literati. Her literary success had gained her that honor, and she put it to good use over the next three years in researching her next project: the book that would become the groundbreaking *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* – a revolutionary text that would have far reaching effects after its publication in 1833.

William Ellery Channing had spent some time in his youth in Virginia, as a tutor to the slaveholding Randolph family from 1798-1800, where he wrestled with choosing a career path for himself. He came out of the experience prepared to enter the ministry, but he also came out with strong, but complicated, feelings about slavery. Slavery itself nauseated him. He wrote home, “Man, when forced to substitute the will of another for his own, ceases to be a moral agent; his title to the name of man is extinguished, he becomes a mere machine in the hands of his oppressor. No empire is so valuable as the empire of one’s own self” (qtd. in Mendelsohn 40). But he was also witness to the protestations of the Randolphs, with whom he had a very close and cordial relationship, that they deplored slavery, but felt powerless to change the system. They felt trapped in it against their will.

But thirty years had passed since then. A month after May’s and Alcott’s electric first acquaintance with Garrison, Channing was on his way to the island of St. Croix on
an extended health cure. But instead of resting he spent six months in what is best
described as a mission of investigative reporting on the state of slavery. He spent days in
the fields, interviewing slaves and filling notebooks full of observations and reflections –
the foundation of what would eventually be his first treatise on the subject, *Slavery* (not
published until 1835). “Here was a volume on slavery opened always before my eyes,
and how could I help learning some of its lessons?” (qtd. in Chadwick 261) The myths of
the happy slave were shattered when slaves begged to be purchased by someone who
would allow them to earn their freedom. The everyday cruelty and licentiousness was
inescapable, a difficult reality for a man always described as tender. Above all else, the
degradation of the slave’s soul and the hopelessness of the slave’s fate – unto countless
generations – pierced him anew. In his new understanding of the breadth of slavery’s
evil, he did not blame just the slaveholder, but all the prosperous yet hard-hearted men
everywhere who, indifferent to the criminality of the system, were complicit in its
perpetuation. This was not what he had understood from his time on the Randolph
plantation. He still worried about the treacherous road towards effecting emancipation,
and the unforeseen consequences of it to black and white alike. But Channing had
reached a higher level of consciousness about slavery.

When he returned to his Boston pulpit in June of 1831, he was ready to speak
about it. In his absence, Garrison had launched *The Liberator,* and his friends and
parishioners Samuel J. May, Ellis Gray Loring and Samuel Sewall were in Garrison’s
thrall. His welcome home sermon went right to the heart of the matter.

I think no power of conception can do justice to the evils of slavery. They are
chiefly moral; they act on the mind, and, through the mind, bring intense suffering
on the body. As far as the human soul can be destroyed, slavery is that destroyer.
It is a direct war with the high powers and principles of our nature, and sinks man
as far as possible into the brute. The slave is regarded as property, treated as property, considered as having no rights, subjected to another's arbitrary will, and thus loses all consciousness of what he is and what he should be. The feeling of degradation enters into the very constitution of his mind. (qtd. In W.H. Channing, *Memoir*, 3:149)

In this early stage of Channing’s antislavery evolution, his focus is primarily on the impact of slavery on the individual soul. Though his correspondence during the period shows he is aware of the harm slavery does to the masters as well, it is the soul of the slave him- or herself that has first claim to redress.

Channing knew that the previous six months had seen William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* landing like an incendiary missile in Boston, demanding immediate emancipation, and carpet-bombing the status quo. May testified that at the time of Channing’s return from St. Croix,

the public mind in New England had begun to be agitated upon the subject of slavery, as it never ha been before by the scathing denunciations that were every week poured from *The Liberator* upon slaveholders and their abettors and apologists. Dr. Channing’s sensitive nature shrank from the severity of Mr. Garrison’s blows, and yet he acknowledged that the gigantic system of domestic servitude in our country ought to be exposed, condemned, and subverted. (May 171)

Despite the fact that *The Liberator*’s unalloyed righteousness and radical call to shut down the national economy offended nearly everyone in Boston and beyond, Channing subscribed to Garrison’s newspaper immediately. His congregation of “gentlemen of property and standing” felt betrayed at the infiltration of the issue of slavery into their church by their own pastor. But not everyone did. Tradition holds that sitting in the pews that day was a young woman named Maria Weston Chapman, new wife of the highly successful and eminently placed Henry Grafton Chapman. Mr. Chapman and his

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father, a deacon in Channing’s church, were highly successful men of commerce, yet
despite their demographic profile, they stood out as rare abolitionist businessmen in the
congregation, along with lawyers Samuel Sewall and Ellis Gray Loring. Among the
merchants, only the Chapmans refused to trade in the slave-based economy, anomalies in
the Federal Street Society.

The former Maria Weston of Weymouth had married into the family in October
of the previous year, 1830. In her teens, she had had the privilege of being sent to live
with a wealthy uncle in England to be properly educated, and upon her return in 1828 at
age 22, she was made principle of the Boston Academy’s Young Ladies’ High School.
Yet her career in education would be cut short by this highly advantageous match. New
to Channing’s congregation, she appears to have caught the spark of his sermon and
immediately set about to try to rally support within the church society to work on behalf
of the slave. Thus, Channing may have played a role in inspiring Chapman’s initial
advocacy, along with her husband and father-in-law.

However, Chapman later long contended that Channing had tried to discourage
her from active advocacy, but that she defied him. This conflict likely took place a few
years later, after Chapman, her sisters Anne, Caroline and Debora Weston, along with
eight other women founded the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in October 1833.
Channing’s objection, no doubt, had much to do with Channing’s views at the time
regarding women’s sphere. In this regard, Channing was not particularly progressive,
especially in the 1830s. In an undated letter likely written later in life, Chapman refuted
Channing’s reputation for impartiality and averred to his prejudice. “He was not impartial
when he entreated me not to hold a ladies’ meeting; as if it were a crime dangerous to
humanity to protest against Slavery. ‘Remember, he said, the Southern Mothers with their infants in their arms!’ ‘I do remember them, I said, – but without distinction of Colour’ (BPL 5). This early disappointment with Chapman would permanently color her opinion of him.

In her role with BFASS Chapman developed a reputation as an extremely gifted campaign manager, and as a highly effective (and razor-sharp) journalistic writer and editor. Her talent for pitiless censure, coupled with the distasteful issue of her gender, would certainly have dismayed her minister.

As will be discussed later, Channing established a fairly strong track record of encouraging his friends Samuel J. May, Charles Follen and the more temperate Lydia Maria Child in their committed efforts on behalf of the slave. But as the supporting machinery of Garrisonian abolitionism, the BFASS would offend Channing on a different level. Female association posed even greater peril than male association, as women (as Margaret Fuller would be claiming at the end of the decade) had not been trained for critical thinking. Even if they were bold enough to fly in the face of deeply ingrained social norms and write, speak and proselytize in public, were they really equipped to parse the complexities of emancipation that bewildered scholars, lawyers and theologians? Morally pure, passionate and misguided, young women were vulnerable prey to evangelical abolitionists with their charisma and their zeal – the natal siblings of intolerance and dogma. To the foundational leader of Unitarianism, Garrisonian abolitionism was the heir apparent to fire and brimstone Calvinism – a bad influence on impressionable young women. It would be years before he would change his mind and call to remove the muzzles from women activists.
Chapter 4

Rekindling the Divine Spark

In September 1830, in a spiritual space far, far away from the nascent anti-slavery movement, the young pastor of the Purchase Street Church, George Ripley, wrote the first of ten articles that would appear in the Unitarian mouthpiece, *Christian Examiner* over the next seven years. It was a harbinger of trouble for the Unitarian establishment. Ripley, the self-proclaimed “child of Channing” had been a stalwart defender of Unitarianism since his ordination in 1826. The Unitarian controversy was far from over despite the establishment of a formal organization in 1825. The clergymen of the Boston Association of Ministers were ever aware that their orthodox Congregational brethren considered them illegitimate, and their liberal creed a veritable “half-way house to infidelity.” Despite the Unitarian ascendancy in Boston proper, they were still a minority denomination outside the city. Proving themselves not only legitimate, but progressively superior, was a consuming aspiration throughout the Unitarian clerical community.

George Ripley did not take this mission lightly. But after five years in the pulpit, he was dissatisfied with the difficulty he had in generating a pulse for spiritual improvement among his parishioners. Despite his own enthusiasm for religion, he could feel his congregation smothering that light in *him*. He feared soon he would be “performing the sacred function with little more emotion than he would tend the boiler of a steam engine” (qtd. in Golemba 77). The culprit, he divined, was the soporific rationalism of Unitarianism. In weeding out the enthusiasm of Calvinism and turning to the rational empiricism of John Locke, Unitarians had neutered Christianity. He
recognized that Calvinists could fire up their followers’ emotions, and even if it had no
effect on improving their moral character or the state of their souls, at least they were
engaged. Unitarians could not even fire up their followers’ emotions. It had only been
ten years since Channing’s Baltimore address establishing Unitarian independence, and
already the shortcomings of rational religion were evident. They had thrown the divine
baby out with the sectarian bathwater.

Ripley would not be alone in looking abroad for ideas on how to drive the church
through the awkward philosophical phase – looking to Locke to derive faith. In Germany
and England, intellectuals and theologians had already been working on it, both through
the rising school of new German Biblical criticism, and through the writings of Samuel
Taylor Coleridge in England and Thomas Carlyle in Scotland. One by one the young
Unitarian ministers of New England were turning to thinkers like Immanuel Kant,
Friederich Schleiermacher, Victor Cousins, and others to remedy what Emerson would
call “corpse-cold Unitarianism.” This wave was a profound reaction away from reliance
on sensory perception as the only way of knowing. Relying on empirical evidence of an
unseeable God created all manner of problems for the faithful. These thinkers rejected
Locke and his limited ways of knowing, and turned instead to inward ways of knowing –
intuition, conscience, spiritual inspiration – which formed the basis of the moral being.
They termed these non-material sources of knowledge “transcendent.”

Coleridge provided the terminology that allowed discussion of these distinctions.
“Understanding” in the transcendentalist lexicon is the faculty for perceiving the material
world or practical truths through one’s senses. “Reason” is the faculty of intuition or
divining spiritual truth beyond the senses. Though confusing to the uninitiated, these
restricted and customized definitions of those common words enabled intellectuals to craft their conversations about the future of faith.

Ripley would increasingly be a student of Coleridge and Carlyle and was among the earliest to plant seeds of the coming philosophical movement in print among the Harvard-trained community. In his 1830 article in the *Christian Examiner* Ripley declared,

> We would see a more profound analysis of the soul, with its boundless capacities of suffering and enjoyment, its thirst for infinite good, its deep passions, its inexpressible wants, its lofty aspirations after the unseen and eternal. Man has been regarded too much as the creature of accidental circumstances, while the primary and indestructible laws of his being have been kept out of sight. We wish to see his whole nature clearly exhibited before us, with all the mysterious powers it involves. . . . We want a philosophy which recognizes . . . those holy and spiritual relations, which alone can explain the secret of our existence. . . . We do not wish them to be treated as subjects of cold logical discussion . . . but to be held up in living colors, as everlasting realities . . . (qtd. in Golemba 35)

Ripley’s desire for an emotional faith – “heart religion” as the old evangelists called it – was palpable and insistent. What this first of ten articles would portend was yet another battle for theological dominion among the grandsons of the Puritans. The Unitarians had left Calvin behind; soon they would have to decide whether their future lie with Locke or with Plato and Kant.

Another young Unitarian minister was also working his way through the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle – Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson of the Second Church in Boston. Emerson was ordained the assistant pastor under the influential Henry Ware, Jr. in 1829. Emerson represented the seventh consecutive generation of ministers among his ancestors, which created a gravitational pull to the pulpit he had not been able to resist. But he did not last long in the profession. When his young bride Ellen Tucker
succumbed to tuberculosis in 1831 after only eighteen months of marriage, Emerson’s latent misgivings about his chosen profession were exacerbated and he resigned his position. To escape his grief and rebuild his life, he fled the city for an extended sojourn in Europe, touring Italy, France, England and Scotland. During his ten-month trip, he met and visited Coleridge and Carlyle, as well as William Wordsworth. Carlyle became Emerson’s lifelong friend (a much-studied friendship) and by the time Emerson returned to Boston in October 1833, he had journals full of observations and reflections that would inform his seminal transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature.*

Two months after his return, he came across an essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the March 1833 *Christian Examiner* written by an acquaintance of his, Frederic Henry Hedge. Hedge was a German scholar of high enough accomplishment to have read a broad bibliography of the German criticism in the original, and now, “Germanicus Hedge” was synthesizing it all – in English. Suddenly inaccessible German texts were accessible, and brilliantly translated and interpreted for Emerson’s consumption. As Emerson’s biographer, Robert Richardson noted, “If there is a single moment after which American transcendentalism can be said to exist, it is when Emerson read Hedge’s manifesto” (Richardson 166). Emerson’s year of inquiry made it impossible for him to return to the pulpit in the garment of a minister; he would have to break the bonds of convention altogether. He would continue to supply preach for several more years, but his career would now be carried out from the lectern and the writing desk. His first public lecture, “Uses of Natural History” was delivered at Boston’s Masonic Temple on November 15, 1833.
Elizabeth Peabody recalled the genesis of the movement for her, embodied in her personal relationship with William Ellery Channing. It was Channing who introduced her to Coleridge (as he had apparently done for Alcott), from whom I first learned the meaning of the word ‘transcendental.’ And when Carlyle’s writings and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lectures, in 1832 [sic], began to quicken our Boston thinking, it seemed to me that at last Dr. Channing’s spiritual philosophy had begun to pervade society, and was about to give it the depth and broad scope of the original Christian faith.

Years later, in reflection with her mentor, she recalled that a member of the transcendentalist circle cited a paragraph in Channing’s 1828 “Likeness to God” as the very core of transcendentalist philosophy: “The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 364). Channing of 1841 did not disagree with his 1828 self, though he would elaborate on these ideas famously, as will be recalled later on.

How did the arrival of German Romanticism affect the abolitionists of the Boston Clique? For the most part, its effects, if any, were subtle. Predictably, the intellectually insatiable Lydia Maria Child shared discussions of Carlyle with Ellis and Louisa Loring. Ellis Loring was an enthusiastic follower of Carlyle’s and worked with Emerson in the later 1830s to publish a collection of Carlyle’s essays. Less predictably Maria Weston Chapman would also rank Carlyle among the greatest thinkers of the time, which will also come up again later.

Eighteen thirty-three was an unsettling year for the Boston Unitarian clergy,
bringing the abolition of the Standing Order. Without government-mandated fiscal support of churches, ministers were far more vulnerable to the approval of their individual societies; their economic livelihood depended on it. Where the Unitarian creed had been uninspiring, the power of the purse strings multiplied. The democracy of abolishing the Standing Order was obvious, but for preachers of less starch, the temptation to acquiesce to the popular opinions of their congregations increased manifold. Few ministers were willing to continue making theological inroads against orthodoxy with parishioners tired of denominational conflict, inviting the ire of a new generation of Harvard clergy. Likewise, no minister who timidly eschewed the abolitionist cause would be safe from abolitionists’ bitter charges of exchanging virtue for popular approval.

Both transcendentalists and abolitionists were dissatisfied with the dry inadequacy of their churches in inspiring the kind of moral change they all hoped to see in their community and their country. A divine spark had been obliterated with the de-Calvinization of the Unitarian community, and these reformers sought to reconstitute it in differing ways. Ripley, like most of the emerging transcendentalists, was trained in the ministry; for them the necessary reform seemed to be a theological and institutional matter. The abolitionists, however, were ignited by the fire of William Lloyd Garrison’s Calvinistic antislavery orthodoxy. Garrison had abandoned the hellfire and damnation dogma of Protestant orthodoxy, but he had not lost that technique of the visceral emotional appeal to a holy cause. He was a natural born evangelist.

He must have been extraordinarily effective to appeal to predominantly reserved and understated Boston Unitarians. Few of them were instantly comfortable with his
condemnatory approach to slaveholders and the complacent northerners who enabled
them. It went against the grain of their denominational sensibilities. Child first found
Garrison “too ultra, too rash,” (qtd. in Karcher 174) but she was quickly won over by his
earnestness and passion. Eliza Cabot Follen recalled that her husband Charles found “his
taste and feelings were offended by the language [Garrison] occasionally used; he was
deeply pained by his harsh attacks upon individuals; but he never allowed his perception
of what he thought Mr. Garrison’s faults, to overshadow his conviction of his great
virtues” (Follen 251).

Samuel J. May relates the day he overcame his concerns about Garrison’s style:

I informed him how much troubled I had become for fear he was damaging the
cause he had so much at heart by the undue severity of his style. He listened to
me patiently, tenderly. . . . “O! my friend, do try to moderate your indignation,
and keep more cool; why, you are all on fire.” He stopped, laid his hand upon my
shoulder with a kind but emphatic pressure, that I have felt ever since, and said
slowly, with deep emotion, “Brother May, I have need to be all on fire, for I have
mountains of ice about me to melt.” From that hour to this I have never said a
word to Mr. Garrison, in complaint of his style. (May 36-7)

For May, his fate as a minister was sealed when he threw himself completely into
Garrison’s army. Throughout the region, pulpits were closed off to him; his views, and
his unwillingness to stifle them, created no end of occupational hazards for him
throughout his career. Even as early as 1831, the only pulpits that would remain open to
him were the Federal Street Church of William Ellery Channing, and the Second Parish
Church of fledgling pastor Ralph Waldo Emerson – a testimony to the young pastor’s
belief in free speech.

George Ripley’s 1830 article in the Christian Examiner revealed the growing
appetite for the sublime in the new generation’s ministry. Maria Child agreed, considering the Unitarian church "a mere half-way house, where spiritual travelers find themselves well accommodated for the night, but where they grow weary of spending the day" (Sewall 188-89). It was assumed that this insufficiency was strictly an issue for the church itself to resolve. But the abolitionists, not invested in the church as an institution, were receiving their thunderbolts from on high directly through the antislavery cause. This single crusade was for them a practical vehicle for satisfying that yearning for an ardent connection to God. The transcendentalists, on the other hand, with their Harvard Divinity School perspectives, were trying to build all new theological machinery. If the church were the platform from which to reform, that foundation must be sound before any individual cause could have a chance for success.

Ripley would eventually give up and leave the ministry in 1841, dejected at the apathy of his congregation. A greater light of inspiration came then to him in the form of the Brook Farm community. Non-cleric Margaret Fuller would find her passion in the cause of women’s advancement, and later, in New York, in a broad base of social causes. But in the 1830s, the budding transcendentalists were only interested in restoring what had been lost in abandoning orthodoxy – and bringing the spirit of German romanticism into their dry and sleepy churches.

The exceptions, ministers Charles Follen and Samuel J. May, along with Lydia Maria Child, experienced full-fledged conversions to Father Garrison’s “church.” May testified upon the “epoch” Garrison’s lectures formed in his life. “The impression they made upon my soul has never been effaced; indeed, they moulded it anew. They gave a new direction to my thoughts, a new purpose to my ministry. I had become a convert to
The doctrine of ‘immediate, unconditional emancipation, – liberation from slavery without expatriation’ (May 20).

The product of Maria Child’s 1830 Garrisonian conversion was the publication of *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833. The effect it had was electric. Aided to by *The Liberator’s* rapidly growing archives of literature on slavery from around the world, Child conducted a comprehensive analysis of slavery and race from historical, political, economic, moral and – most radically – racial perspectives. Her contention that northern racial prejudice was as reprehensible as southern slaveholding brought massive condemnation down upon her and destroyed her lucrative writing career. Published in 1833, and dedicated to Rev. S. J. May “as a mark of gratitude, for his earnest and disinterested effort in an unpopular but most righteous cause,” her expansive tour de force revolutionized the thinking of many, with testimonies of its profound influence surviving from Wendell Phillips, John Gorham Palfrey, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Charles Sumner and, most strikingly, William Ellery Channing. Rev. Charles Follen, upon reading the *Appeal* at his close friend Channing’s home, was inspired to join the New England Anti-Slavery Society and devote himself fully to Garrison’s cause.

Despite her brother Convers Francis’s position in the ministerial community, and her acquaintance with many of his colleagues, Maria Child had a very different relationship with Channing than they did. Her influence on him was stronger than his on her. She wrote after Channing’s death,

I shall always recollect the first time I ever saw Dr. Channing in private. It was immediately after I published my ‘Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans called Africans’ (in 1833). . . . I sent a copy to Dr. Channing, and a few days after he came to see me, at Cottage Place, at least a mile and a half from his residence
at Mount Vernon. It was a very bright sunny day, but he carried his cloak on his arm, and seemed fatigued with the long walk. He staid nearly three hours; during which time we held a most interesting conversation on the general interests of humanity, and on slavery in particular. He told me something of his experience in the West Indies, and said the impression produced by the sight of slavery had never left his mind. He expressed great joy that the ‘Appeal’ had been published, and urged me never to desert the cause, through evil or through good report….

We afterwards had many interviews. (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:154-55)

In those many other interviews, Child often became exasperated with Channing’s hesitant anti-slavery advocacy, but over the years they would both better understand each other’s positions, ultimately coming close to meeting in the center.
As a ubiquitous and highly observant participant in antebellum Bostonian society, Elizabeth Peabody is famous for recording the events that transpired during her long lifetime – events experienced not only by her, but by those around her as well. She is also somewhat infamous for relying largely on her memory, sometimes many decades after events occurred (she lived to be ninety years old), when longevity could give her the last word. It is not inappropriate to suggest that scholars be judicious with her accounts. However, her recollections provide us with an overflowing reservoir of anecdotal evidence that offers rich insights into transcendental Boston. Her role as Channing’s amanuensis alone gave her entre to some of the most fascinating conversations Boston ever heard. Of Charles Follen’s full conversion to abolition she writes,

I heard [Dr.Channing] say to Dr. Follen: ‘I am thankful that you can see your way clear to join the Antislavery Society; and I hope you will have such influence in its counsels that they may convince the North that it is our duty to offer compensation to the slave-holders, as they are doing in England. I have not bodily strength to attend their meetings, and strive with these stormy youths to act on Christian principles – one of which is to hold an even balance, and do justice to every shade of good, even in the bad; to judge and condemn the sin unsparringingly, but remember the sinner is our neighbor.’ (Peabody, Reminiscences, 359)

This last non-committal remark was the kind that exasperated Garrison most, especially the compartmentalization of the sinner and the sin. He referred to Channing’s “usual
blowing hot and cold,” and groused, “it shoots at nothing and hits it” (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:282).

It is unknown exactly how many times William Lloyd Garrison attempted to reach out to William Ellery Channing, but it is generally thought to be numerous. One such letter, written on January 20, 1834, may be the culmination of repeated failures to establish a dialogue with the extremely prominent and influential Channing. He encloses some antislavery materials for Channing to read, and begins by asking, “Why should a Christian, however distinguished, wait for the movements of a concurrent populace before he espouse the side of the outraged and guiltless slaves?” The implied charge, of course, was that Channing was afraid of his congregation’s disfavor. But Garrison next unloads all barrels.

I thought of beseeching you, in this letter, to exert your victorious influence for the deliverance of this country from impending ruin. But if the slaughter of two millions of victims who have gone down to their graves with their chains around them; if the cries of more than that number of tortured slaves now living; if a soil red with innocent blood; if a desecrated Sabbath; if a vast system of adultery, and pollution, and robbery; if perpetuated ignorance and legalized barbarity; if the invasion of the dearest rights of man, and a disruption of the holiest ties of life; and, above all, if the clear and imperious injunctions of the most high God, fail to stimulate you to plead for the suffering and the dumb, it is scarcely possible that any appeal can succeed. (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 1:464)

It may not be surprising that Channing did not answer this letter, though it clearly reveals the depth of Garrison’s fervor and frustration. But Channing’s distaste for zeal and bombast was so strong, that it must have created a kind of paralysis. Had Garrison read Channing’s Baltimore sermon “Unitarian Christianity” more closely, he might have paid attention to his words regarding Calvinist enthusiasm:

We cannot sacrifice our reason to the reputation of zeal. We owe it to truth and religion to maintain, that fanaticism, partial insanity, sudden impressions, and
Garrison’s approach immediately channeled Channing into a past he had fought hard to escape. Most of the new generation of Unitarians would agree with Channing. They did want to breathe new life into their churches, but they too hoped it would be carried out with more refinement and decorum. Even in later years, transcendentalists like Emerson and Fuller would have great difficulty with Garrison’s “stinging invective,” even when they agreed with the sentiment. Scholar Charles A. Madison contended it was Margaret Fuller’s “aesthetic recoil from the ‘rabid and exaggerated’ behavior of the Abolitionist leaders that kept her from joining the reform that was then most in the limelight” (431). Emerson lamented that he wanted nothing to do with “platform men,” an “altogether odious set of people, whom one would be sure to shun as the worst of bores and canters. I have the same objection to dogmatism in Reform as to dogmatism in Conservatism” (qtd. in Cabot 2:427). Thus, in 1834, while the anti-slavery movement was exploding throughout Massachusetts, Emerson was divining the infinitude of the inner man in the idyllic fields of his ancestors in Concord.

The man who would one day be Emerson’s closest friend, Bronson Alcott, was still a stranger to him in 1834, although Emerson had probably heard of Alcott’s ground-breaking ideas on education through the intellectual community. Shortly after Alcott and Samuel May met Garrison, Alcott had been given an opportunity to keep school in Pennsylvania, where he and his new wife Abba May began their family life, remaining from 1831 to 1834. His ideas about education were informed by both his introduction to Carlyle, Plato and Kant in 1833 and the young daughters who began to arrive to bless
them. He studied his daughters as a scientific and spiritual experiment, attempting to reconcile the mysterious connection between the human soul and the body. The result was his utter abandonment of Locke and the Lockean pursuit of education as a purely sensory endeavor. The soul was infinite and the body restrictive; matter must be subordinate to spirit. This revelation informed his new theories of education – which he now defined as “the science and art of educing the infinite from the surrounding encumbrances of the finite” (qtd. in Dahlstrand 100).

His reform efforts in the classroom to cultivate individual souls, as could be expected, were not universally embraced, and as his school faced dwindling enrollment, William Russell ventured to test the climate in Boston – to find if the Athens of America was ready for a revolutionary new pedagogical approach. The mentor who made Alcott’s return in 1834 possible was his friend William Ellery Channing, whose endorsement paved the way within his highly connected congregation. Yet one thing lacking in Alcott that might curb the willingness of educated Bostonians to enroll their children in his care, was his insufficiency in subjects that were a necessity for sons being groomed for Harvard. The solution was hiring Elizabeth Palmer Peabody – pedagogical enthusiast and polymath – to teach Latin, mathematics and geography, and insure the school’s success. Peabody closed her own school to assist Alcott in the new Temple School. Bronson’s passions were now completely monopolized by education, but Abba Alcott, who had just been a founding member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, arrived in Boston just in time to join that society’s sister organization in Boston. With her brother Sam, Abba kept the family in the front lines of anti-slavery, while Alcott focused on the soul of the individual child.
The 1831 anti-slavery sermon of Channing’s that inspired Maria Chapman turned out to be just the first of several false starts – efforts that filled abolitionists with high hopes of Channing’s assistance, and then tormented them with his return to silence. But several things occurred in 1834 that compelled Channing at last to return to his long-delayed treatise on slavery. In addition to Garrison’s letter, full of old-time zeal and enthusiasm, there had been a series of anti-abolitionist riots in the north – in New York City and in Charlestown in particular – which unleashed a level of public fury and violence that evoked memories of the French Revolution. This uncomfortable and unusual level of tension rendered complacency more difficult, and in fact, shameful in Channing’s eyes.

In this climate, Channing was visited by two abolitionists delivering unanswerable arguments against his own comfortable passivity. The first, in August, was Englishman Edward Strutt Abdy, who introduced an entirely new perspective to a man who might have considered himself quite liberal. He contended that Channing was unaware of his own quiet racism, that his interest in developing separate schools for black children belied his plan to promote a separate if not equal society for African-American citizens of Boston – to try “to destroy a distinction by continuing it.” As for lofty attempts to effect change through polite moral discourse, Abdy assured him that “no reform, religious or political, had ever been carried by the ‘meek and gentle’” (qtd. in Harwood 700).

Whatever seed Abdy planted may have already begun to crack its hull in Channing’s mind when Samuel J. May came to visit two months later. After a lengthy
discussion on the movement and its proponents, May suddenly became exasperated with the Doctor’s continued harping on the harshness of the abolitionists’ style and the treacherous unintended quagmire that could be created by immediate emancipation. Despite a life-long deference to the larger-than-life Channing, May suddenly came of age in an oft-cited eloquent tirade that bears repeating:

Dr. Channing…it is not our fault that those who might have conducted this great reform more prudently have left it to us to manage as we may. It is not our fault that those who might have pleaded for the enslaved so much more wisely and eloquently, both with the pen and the living voice than we can, have been silent. We are not to blame, sir, that you, who, more perhaps than any other man, might have so raised the voice of remonstrance that it should have been heard throughout the length and breadth of the land, – we are not to blame, sir, that you have not so spoken. And now that inferior men have been impelled to speak and act against what you acknowledge to be an awful system of iniquity, it is not becoming in you to complain of us because we do it in an inferior style. Why sir, have you not taken this matter in hand yourself? Why have you not spoken to the nation long ago, as you, better than any other one, could have spoken?’

At this point I bethought me to whom I was administering this rebuke – . . . the man . . . who had ever treated me with the kindness of a father, and whom, from my childhood, I had been accustomed to revere more than any one living. I was almost overwhelmed with a sense of my temerity. His countenance showed that he was much moved. . . . Then in a very subdued manner and in the kindliest tones of his voice he said ‘Brother May, I acknowledge the justice of your reproof. I have been silent too long.’ Never shall I forget his words, look, whole appearance. I then and there saw the beauty, the magnanimity, the humility of a truly great Christian soul. He was exalted in my esteem more even than before. (May 174-75)

In this cinematic exchange the characters of both men are as clear as can be written. On October 21, 1834 Channing preached a sermon speaking out about the violence in New York and Charlestown, and soon after he left for his Newport family home to devote himself to the composition, at long last, of Slavery.

Among all the powerful personalities in Garrison’s camp, Samuel J. May stands
out as the most lovable warrior. Even though his anti-slavery sermons guaranteed he would have difficulty making a living, all who knew him testified to his kind and sympathetic nature. He seemed to have a mystical ability to open minds without offending them, charming them with his own open mind. Despite Emerson’s aversion to platform men and relative indifference to the cause, May was able to painlessly overcome his natural guard about the subject on a visit in July of 1835. Emerson recorded in his journal,

I wrote . . . that these orators of a principle owed everything to it, & our good friend S.J. May may instruct us in many things. He goes everywhere & sees the leaders of society everywhere, his cause being his ticket of admission, and talks on his topic with no intelligent person who does not furnish some new light, some unturned side, some happy expression or strike off some false view or expression of the philanthropist. In this way his views are enlarged & cleared & he is always attaining to the best expressions. As when he said the Question between the Colonization & the Abolition men was “whether you should remove them (the negroes) from the prejudice or the prejudice from them.” (JMN 5:73)

May might have written a manual on how to recruit a transcendentalist, but unfortunately he was a loyal soldier in the Garrisonian ranks, and followed that evangelical light into the realm of the greater public rather than the one he might have been better suited for.

Meanwhile, if there was anyone who was actually making a difference in challenging the hearts and minds of men and women regarding the slave, it was the brash, tireless, piston of a reformer, Garrison – aided by his growing new army: the Boston Clique.
When we refer to the Boston Clique we have in mind the largely Unitarian family of the church of Garrison. But through the 1830s these comprised only a portion of the greater anti-slavery movement. True enough, the launching of *The Liberator* marks a pivotal moment in the birth of the nationwide campaign, but its regional growth throughout the New England, New York, Philadelphia and beyond made it inevitable that regional cultural accents would occur among antislavery organizations. Just a year after the launch of *The Liberator*, on January 6, 1832, at the African Baptist Church on Beacon Hill, twelve white men signed the constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (NEASS), which called for immediate emancipation. Among the twelve were William Lloyd Garrison, his *Liberator* partner Isaac Knapp and Oliver Johnson. Initially, Samuel J. May, Ellis Gray Loring, and Maria Child’s husband, David Lee Child, withheld their endorsements because of reservations about the radical call for “immediate” emancipation, but within a few months they were won over to full membership.

As the organization branched out, the need for a nationwide organization became apparent, and reformers from New England, New York and Pennsylvania convened in Philadelphia to found the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in December 1833, with New York’s Arthur Tappan becoming the first president and William Lloyd Garrison drafting the “Declaration of Sentiments.” New Englanders Samuel J. May and John Greenleaf Whittier also attended the founding convention.
Back in Boston, the twelve activist women who had founded the BFASS – many family members of NEASS male members – were already organizing themselves. This revolutionary group of women primarily comprised three different demographic profiles: 1) upper class Unitarians and Quakers 2) white middle class Congregationalists and Baptists and 3) elite African American women from local Baptist and Methodist churches. (Hansen, BFASS, 46) This democratic cross-section was exactly the kind of diverse support Garrison hoped to recruit. He had witnessed the successes of women in English emancipation efforts, and presciently appealed to them to build his army. “The destiny of the slaves is in the hands of American women,” he wrote to a friend in England, “and complete emancipation can never take place without their co-operation” (Merrill 1:208). Though the women originally began as an auxiliary association to the NEASS, they quickly grew beyond this role, becoming indispensible to the support of both the organization and its mouthpiece, The Liberator.

The home of Henry Grafton Chapman and Maria Weston Chapman was open for business as the hub of BFASS and NEASS activity. Garrison had his Liberator office at 46 Washington Street, just yards away from the Old State House, but the real home of the Clique was at 11 West Street. One reason for this was the practicality of it. It was within easy walking distance of the offices of The Liberator and the office of NEASS (which became the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society or MASS in 1835). The homes of Loring, Phillips, Sewall and others were all just a short amble away, which made it a convenient place to drop in for the latest news, deliver materials, court recruits, or just seek some worthy like-minded company.
In addition, Maria Chapman was a young mother, but she was orchestrating an enormous operation. Her unmarried sisters, who were on perpetual rounds between Boston and their family home at Weymouth, shared burdens of maintaining the extended Weston family, while also periodically keeping school to make ends meet. Chapman had three young children during these years (a fourth died as an infant), so having a home office was most efficient for her and her turnstile sisters.

As Garrison’s lieutenant, Chapman undertook a broad array of administrative duties, not the least of which was serving as the omnipresent and nearly omnipotent corresponding secretary of BFASS. Her days were consumed, from managing the annual Anti-Slavery Fair (which was essential to supporting the men’s organization), to conducting organizational correspondence, drafting petitions, planning events, writing the BFASS annual reports *Right and Wrong*, editing the annual anti-slavery gift book *The Liberty Bell* – as well assisting later on the *Non-Resistant*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and, when Garrison was away, *The Liberator*. She wrote anti-slavery hymnbooks, essays, articles, and satiric poems. Her pen became her sword, crafting scathing and righteous articles to shake off the complacency of (and leave a mark on) all who read them.

The Chapman home became an organizational library – an archive for journals, documents, and correspondence with sibling organizations all over the country and in England. If a society agent needed to craft an appeal or a legal argument, the references available at West Street were indispensible. It was the group’s comfortable salon. Members from out of town, like Samuel J. May, Edmund Quincy, and the peripatetic Lydia Maria Child, commonly came and stayed for tea or for the night. During Fair time,
it became an over-capacity boarding house. Garrison might come to try out his speeches on a friendly audience, or someone who had been subject to abuse on the street could come for sympathy, tea and safe haven. At times the men’s organization had their executive committee meetings there, just to enjoy the feeling of being among extended family while doing the good work. Exiled out at his home in Dedham, Edmund Quincy pined to Maria,

I, too, miss the society & sympathy of my other home in West Street, I literally regret nothing else that I have left behind me in Boston but the true society which I have enjoyed at your house…. I never found what satisfied my heart till I became intimate with your family & the circle of friends which gather around it – for I never before found genius & talent without vanity & the thirst for display, literature without a slight tinge of pedantry or strong, pervading religious feeling without some admixture of cant. (BPL 11)

In fact Quincy may have been a bit smitten with Maria, who was well known as a stunning beauty. To English abolitionist R.D. Webb he described her “Mrs. Chapman I consider as standing at the head of the human race, men or women. She is the most perfect creature morally, intellectually and physically that I ever saw. . . . It takes time to thaw the ice of her exterior, then you are carried away by the torrent.” He continued, describing “a woman of genius surpassing Garrison and of invincible integrity” (qtd. in Taylor 12-13).

A less charitable and less enchanted New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan called her “a talented woman with the disposition of a fiend,” who could manage Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Quincy as deftly as she could “untie a garter” (qtd. in Pease 29). Once describing her as an “evil genius,” John Greenleaf Whittier also conceded she was “indeed a woman of superior intellect – and brilliant fancy and indomitable energy – but she wants the kind and humane heart of Lucretia [Mott]” (Pickard 1:338).
Maria Child, who would have many a scuffle with Chapman over the proper
correct character of abolitionist efforts said to Lucretia Mott in 1839, “I have long considered
Mrs. Chapman as one of the most remarkable women of the age. Her heart is as large
and magnanimous as her intellect is clear, vigorous, and brilliant” (Meltzer 107).
Chapman’s grandson, John Jay Chapman recalled thinking as a boy, that “there was
something about her that reminded me of a gladiator, and I sometimes wondered how she
had ever borne children at all and whether she had nursed them, or had just marched off
to the wars in Gaul and Iberia, while the urchins were being cared for by a freed-woman
in the Campania” (J. Chapman 212). James Russell Lowell called her their “Joan of arc”.
“Captain Chapman,” “Garrison’s chief lieutenant,” “Lady Macbeth,” “Her Lordship,”
“Amazon” and “Moral Napoleon” are just some of the nicknames that further attest to the
force of her personality.

Most students of the anti-slavery movement are familiar with the October 21,
1835 “Garrison mob” of Boston, when a large anti-abolitionist mob, frustrated at not
finding the detested English abolitionist George Thompson at a BFASS meeting, seized
Garrison instead. Famously, the mob of “gentlemen of property and standing” tied a rope
around his waist and began dragging him towards Boston Common for the traditional
Boston rituals involving tar-and/or-rope. Garrison later explained, "[t]he intention being,
as I understood, to carry me to the Common, and there give me a coat of tar-and-feathers,
a ducking in the pond, etc." (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:20). Mayor Lyman was himself a
confirmed anti-abolitionist, but he no doubt recalled the trials of Gov. Thomas
Hutchinson with an earlier Boston mob, and moved to rescue Garrison from the hands of
the “mobocrats in broadcloth” with the aid of some burley mechanics, whisking him to protection in the Leverett Street Jail.

But Garrison was not the only one to have a memorable day. Prior to the seizure of Garrison, the “wealthy and respectable” crowded outside the meeting room adjacent to the *Liberator* offices, where the ladies of BFASS were intent upon holding their meeting regardless of any and all intimidation – which was considerable. The growth of the mob to several thousand brought Mayor Lyman with hopes of persuading the ladies they were not safe and convincing them to disperse. In the resulting testy exchange, Chapman is claimed to have declared in true revolutionary Boston fashion, “If this is the last bulwark of freedom, we may as well die here, as any where.” But as partitions began to give way and projectiles were thrown into the chamber, BFASS president Mary Parker brought the women to vote for a more pragmatic conclusion. Resolving to adjourn, and with great solemnity, they “passed down the staircase, amid the manifestations of a revengeful brutality” (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:15). Years later she still recalled, “When we emerged into the open daylight there went up a roar of rage and contempt, which increased when they saw that we did not intend to separate, but walked in regular procession. They slowly gave way as we came out. As far as we could look either way . . . [w]e saw the faces of those we had, till now, thought friends” (M. Chapman, *Right*, 34). Garrison’s sons later revealed, “With ready forethought, Mrs. Chapman whispered to her associates filing out, while she stood between them and the Mayor: ‘Two and two, to Francis Jackson's, Hollis Street, each with a colored friend,’ thus giving what protection a white skin could ensure a dark one” (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:16).
The women eventually re-convened at the Chapman house on West Street, while shouts in the crowd were heard, “to West Street, Chapman’s, opposite Homer’s stable,” assuming George Thompson might be found there. Men milled outside the door until the wee hours, and harassed the inhabitants with “run-away rings,” all watching for signs of Thompson. The family spent an anxious day and night, but violence never breached the front door. According to her sister Debora, Maria “said that she had never had such a delightful time in her life” (BPL 6). Enthusiasm ruled on West Street. Unitarians never had so much fun.
Chapter 7
Channing Takes a Stand

There is little evidence among the gestating transcendentalists that they were even aware of the “Garrison mob” incident, except for an entry in the journal of Bronson Alcott dated October 21, 1835. “An abolition meeting is held in Washington street, a riot ensues, and William Lloyd Garrison is conveyed to prison by the city authorities to prevent his being injured. On returning from Concord I visit the gaol with my wife and see Garrison” (Shepard 69). Alcott had only just met Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was settling into housekeeping in Concord with his second wife of one month, Lidian. The Concord visit referred to was the very first time Emerson and Alcott had sat down to become acquainted. The quick transition from Concord to Boston may have been encouraged by Alcott’s wife Abba, sister of Samuel J. May, who was an early and active member of the BFASS, and probably a more committed abolitionist than her increasingly transcendental husband.

Although Elizabeth Peabody herself was unremittingly “shocked” at everything she was compelled to read to her mentor from *The Liberator*, she recalled that “Dr. Channing was much pained at the “mob of gentlemen of standing” in State Street, Boston, in 1836 [sic] as he had been at the attacks upon the Ladies’ Antislavery Society” (Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 358). He had seen it coming the previous August of 1835 when, working on his upcoming book from Rhode Island, he saw an advertisement in the *Boston Advertiser* for an upcoming anti-abolitionist meeting at Faneuil Hall. That
gathering served as a rally to coalesce anti-abolitionist sentiment, and emboldened the community to commit the October attack on the BFASS and Garrison. Ironically, if there was anything Channing hated more than uncivil public discourse, it was the abridgement of freedom of speech. As soon as he saw the advertisement, he composed an open letter to the paper dated August, 19, 1835, in which he testified, that

Any resolve passed at the proposed meeting…. intended to discourage the free expression of opinion on slavery, or to sanction the lawless violence which has been directed against the Anti-slavery societies . . . will afflict me beyond measure. . . . That Boston should in any way lend itself to the cause of oppression would be a dark omen indeed. (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:167-68)

Now, in the aftermath of the violence he had feared, he had little time to say “I told you so.” The publication of his long-awaited public treatise on the most pressing topic of the day was imminent. Slavery was published in December, and the abolitionists could not read it fast enough. Agitated by the suspense, Garrison had written to May just before its release:

Well, it is announced that the great Dr. Channing has published his thoughts upon the subject of slavery! Of course, we must now all fall back, and ‘hide our diminished heads.’ The book I will not condemn until I peruse it . . . . However, I am heartily glad that he is now committed upon this subject; for, however cautiously and tenderly he may have handled it, if he does not soon have a Southern hornets' nest about his ears, then it will be because hornets have respect unto the persons of men! (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:57)

At last the text arrived. Garrison’s first response was measured but positive.

The world is eager after Dr. Channing’s book on slavery, and we rejoice at it, because it contains luminous expositions of many of the principles, for which we have long been contending. They will thus be made acceptable to very many who have not condescended to receive them from us. . . . There are several things in the book, to which we may hereafter feel bound to object; at present we shall speak only of those parts we approve.
One can feel the hopefulness in Garrison’s review, point by point, of all the right things Channing has said, ignoring the criticisms of the abolitionists, separating the critical wheat from the chaff, hoping to find comfort in their common cause. Channing’s words would carry enormous weight in the public discourse, and Garrison had long coveted the endorsement.

Although Dr. Channing has expressed himself unequivocally in favor of some of the most unpopular doctrines of the Abolitionists, it is plain he does not choose to be considered one of us. His dread of association, if nothing else, would keep him aloof. We shall therefore not claim him. Nor indeed does he agree sufficiently to co-operate with us. Still, his book, we doubt not, will do great good, and we heartily welcome its appearance, and recommend it to the attentive perusal of all. (Garrison, “Channing,” 1835)

Likewise, Charles Follen had reservations, but on the whole was pleased the Doctor had come out. Ellis Gray Loring was upbeat as well, writing to Garrison from Brooklyn a week before the Liberator article.

I have just read with intense interest Dr. Channing’s tract on Slavery. It is the most elaborate work on the philosophy of Anti-Slavery I have ever seen, and appears most seasonably when iniquity is claiming to pass for an angle of light. I am grieved at some few censures of the abolitionists in it, put forth, I think, on insufficient grounds, but nineteen-twentieths of the book are sound in principle, and I will not grudgingly bestow my gratitude and praise for this splendid testimony to the truth. (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:55)

However, Lydia Maria Child did not agree, writing to Loring in January 1836 that she had received a copy of the book from S.J. May. “As for the book itself, I had read it before, and desire to blot it out of my memory” (Meltzer 46). (In place of the word “blot” she created an actual inkblot.) She began the process of crafting a scathing response in The Liberator, which would appear in the spring. The same issues burned. Yes, slavery was an unspeakable crime and colonization a scam. But he objected to “immediate”
emancipation; he thought the fiery rhetoric of the abolitionists generated militant resistance, not enlightenment; and, naively (she thought), he continued to place great stock in the humanity of southerners.

Indignation simmered in the heart of Garrison as well, and by the time the second edition of Channing’s book came out the following spring, he printed a 24-point critique designed to neuter its effect. Channing’s insistence on seeing all sides left him open to attack. Even Samuel May who loved him called the book “the most inconsistent book I have ever read” (May 177). Garrison agreed:

It is a work in active collision with itself. At the onset, its points are skillfully sharpened, so as to pierce through the joints and marrow of the monster Slavery; but they are soon purposely blunted and broken, or rather turned against the assailant himself. It is not enough to say, that the work has some defects— its errors are radical. (Garrison, “Channing” 1836)

Maria Child’s lengthy open letter to Channing in the April 2 edition of The Liberator must have left a mark on the poor pastor’s heart:

It is fashionable to complain of the enthusiasm and fiery zeal of some of the abolitionists. For my own part, I have never believed that icebergs could be melted by the graceful flickerings of Northern Lights or a polluted atmosphere purified with rockets. Had it not been for the honest enthusiasm of Wm. L. Garrison, I should have never felt, thought, or written on this subject.

She crafted a masterful refutation of all Channing’s complaints about the abolitionists, shuddered “to think how many successive generations might be doomed to slavery, in consequence of [Channing’s] smooth words,” and scolded him for never having attended an abolition meeting. (Child, “Letter”) The evidence that she hit her mark would appear the following month when Channing attended his first annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (formerly NEASS) in May. But her frustration with him was unabated. “For the sake of abolition, I have endured interviews with him, which
I could not have endured for any other cause. My soul has suffered many a shivering
ague-fit in attempting to melt or batter away, the glazing of his prejudice, false
refinement, and beautiful *theories.*” Exasperated, she cut him loose. “Let him pass on,
and fulfill his destiny charioteered by applause and pillowed with self-respect” (*LMC* 1).

Despite the pounding Channing took from the abolitionists, he was equally reviled
by conservatives – of his own class – for his radical insurrectionist views. John Quincy
Adams recognized it as “an inflammatory, if not an incendiary publication” (qtd. in W.P.
Garrison 2:91). Visiting British political economist Harriet Martineau wrote that “it was
declared by some liberal-minded gentlemen of South Carolina. . . . that if Dr. Channing
were to enter South Carolina, with a body-guard of 20,000 men, he could not come out
alive” (Martineau, *Society*, 92).

In high contrast, Margaret Fuller may have inadvertently added comic relief to the
mix, writing in her journal,

>This is a noble work. So refreshing its calm benign atmosphere, after the
pestilence-bringing gales of the day. It comes like a breath borne over some
solemn sea which separates us from an island of righteousness. . . . [I]t is probable
that, in addressing the public at large, it is *not* best to express a thought in as few
words as possible; there is much classic authority for diffuseness” (qtd. in Fuller,

With “diffuseness,” she distilled the very essence of Channning’s refusal to pick a side.

Channing had stepped out into the middle lane of a three-lane highway,
committed neither northbound nor southbound, but squarely in the lane reserved for
head-on collisions.  As Channing’s biographer John White Chadwick described it, he
had staked a claim for ten years before two fires, pleasing no one (except maybe
Margaret Fuller). But he was extraordinarily resilient and open-minded in the eye of the
hurricane. Child might have expected a chilling in her relationship with him, but was
surprised to find the opposite. “I found the Rev. Doctor walking down Mount Vernon,”
she wrote to Henrietta Sargent the following November,

but he insisted so strongly upon going back, that I at last consented. He was very
kind and complimentary, in manners and conversation. He soon began to talk of
Anti Slavery. I could see that he had progressed (as we Yankees say)
considerably since I last conversed with him; but he still betrayed his
characteristic timidity.

As a reward, she would not give up on him. “On the whole, I trust I helped him on a
little. When I again come into the city, the busy mouse will again go to work gnawing
away the net-work, which aristocratic family and friends are all the time weaving around
the lion” (Meltzer 56-7). His affection for her never wavered. In the large anti-slavery
scrapbook he kept, there are more clippings from the writings of Child than any other
writer.

Samuel J. May maintained always that Channing watched the anti-slavery
movement “with deep and increasing emotion, and often sent for me, and oftener for the
heroic Dr. Follen, to converse with us about it” (May 37). May recalled that “[a] few
days after [Slavery’s] publication, he invited Samuel E. Sewall and myself to dine with
him, that he might learn how we liked his book. . . . He requested and insisted on the
utmost freedom in our comments. He listened to our objections very patiently, and
seemed disposed to give them their due weight.” May admitted that the book had “found
its way into many parlors from which a copy of The Liberator would have been spurned.
Most of the statesmen of our country read it, and many slaveholders” (May 75).

Channing had an almost superhuman capacity for not taking criticism personally.
As abolitionist and conservative public opinion skewered him from both sides in the
press, he made his public debut in person in March of 1836 before the Massachusetts State Legislature, though, predictably, he did not speak there. In the midst of a deluge of anti-slavery petitions to Congress from the north (most prolifically from female anti-slavery societies), exacerbated by the wide distribution of Channing’s *Slavery*, Southern states had vociferously called for the legislatures of northern states to intervene – to outlaw anti-slavery activities and even to turn over abolitionists in their states to the south for trial. The Massachusetts legislature was taking the requests under advisement.

Members of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society requested, and ultimately were granted, legislative hearings where they might have their case heard, in light of what they perceived to be an assault on their freedom of speech. Over two contentious days, March 4th and 8th, Ellis Gray Loring and Charles Follen led a parade of speakers including Garrison, May, William Goodell and Samuel Sewall. The outcome is considered a decisive victory for the abolitionists (surely no anti-abolitionist legislation was passed), but the day is perhaps best remembered for its distinction as the only documented time that Channing and Garrison are known to have met.

The English writer Harriet Martineau was on an extended stay in Boston and her time spent with Channing, abolitionists and transcendentalists warrants further study, but unfortunately space prohibits an exhaustive account here. She wrote several books that offer insight into the social culture of the time, and her travels included attendance in the Massachusetts legislature during these hearings. She recorded the event from the gallery, where she sat with Maria Chapman, Eliza Follen and the Westons.

[T]he door opened, and Dr Channing entered – one of the last people that could on that wintry afternoon have been expected. He stood for a few moments, muffled in cloak and shawl-handkerchief, and then walked the whole length of the room, and was immediately seen shaking hands with Garrison. A murmur ran
through the gallery, and a smile went round the chamber. Mrs. Chapman whispered to her neighbor, ‘Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’ Garrison, the dauntless Garrison, turned pale as ashes, and sank down on a seat. (Martineau, *Age*, 44).

Later she elaborated, “Dr. Channing took his seat behind the pleaders; and I saw with pleasure that he was handing them notes, acting on their side as decisively, and almost as publicly as if he had spoken” (Martineau, *Retrospective*, 3:162).

Samuel J. May recalled that “Nothing . . . gratified us so much as seeing Dr. Channing approach Mr. Garrison, whom until then he had appeared to avoid, shake him cordially by the hand, and utter some words of sympathy.” He added truthfully that, “[f]rom that time until his death the larger portion of [Channing’s] publications were upon the subject of slavery, increasing in earnestness and power to the last” (May 202).

Yet the promise of partnership was not fulfilled. There may have been no disappointment greater to the abolitionists than the fact that that meeting did not lead to a dialogue between the two men. Garrison noted laconically to his wife, “I was introduced to Dr. C. on the spot, and shook hands with him, but had no opportunity to converse with him” (Ruchames 2:56). With so much of their common struggle still ahead of them when this occurred, and with such forgiveness for Child and May, it seems inexplicable on Channing’s part. Martineau probed deeper.

One day, when [Garrison] was expressing his pleasure at Dr. Channing having shaken hands with him the preceding day, he spoke with affectionate respect of Dr. Channing. I asked him who would have supposed he felt thus towards Dr. Channing, after the language which had been used about him and his book in the *Liberator* of the last week. His gentle reply was, “The most difficult duty of an office like mine is to find fault with those whom I love and honour most. . . . Dr. Channing, while aiding our cause, has thought fit to say that the abolitionists are fanatical; in other words, that we set up our wayward wills in opposition to the will we profess to obey. I cannot suffer the cause to be injured by letting this pass:
but I do not less value Dr. Channing for the things he has done” (Martineau, *Retrospective*, 3:257-58)

No doubt encouraged by Channing’s handshake, Garrison attended a sermon by Channing on March 7, in between the two days of legislative hearings on the 4\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th}.

He wrote his wife, Helen, “Sabbath forenoon, Mr. May, Henry and myself went to hear Dr. Channing preach, and were happily not disappointed. The sermon was full of beauty and power, worthy to be written in starry letters upon the sky” (*BPL* 1). A month later, he went again, and again reported to his wife, “the sermon was a very excellent one, in vindication of the equality of man, and the duty of attempting to elevate the lowest classes of society to the highest intellectual, social and improvement [sic]. He spoke in liberal terms of the working man. It was, I should think, too republican a dose for his aristocratical congregation” (Ruchames 2:83). Another undated reference exists to a Channing sermon Garrison attended with Maria Chapman at Federal Street, indicating it may have happened more regularly than we can know.

Channing, in his own inscrutable way, kept similar hidden feelings about Garrison to himself, and fortunately for us, he shared them with Elizabeth Peabody.

Dr. Channing . . . so entirely agreed with the principle that inspired Garrison . . . that he shared the feeling that seemed to have overwhelmed the understanding of the young agitator, and drove him on blindfold. Dr. Channing would say, “Garrison knows he is right in the great principle; he knows that it is of God; and so everything he thinks he regards as corollary to the unquestionable truth. The evil he has undertaken to fight is enough you must admit, to craze the greatest mind. I can forgive the excesses of a generous humanity; they are rare.” (Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 358)

During the same time period he also claimed, “I do not love to scold at the Abolitionists for with all their defects, they alone adhere to great principles” (qtd. in W.H. Channing, *Memoir*, 3:170). What an extraordinary – and maybe even mutually beneficial –
relationship might have ensued had both men revealed their true mutual esteem to one another. It is hard to deny the evidence that the roadblock was always Channing.

Still Channing persevered in his path towards enlightenment. His appearance two months later, in May 1836, at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society bore significant fruit for him. With the words of Edward Strutt Abdy about Channing’s unrecognized racism no doubt still in his mind, Channing recorded listening to the

short address of a colored man. . . . [H]is diction, his countenance, his gestures, his thoughts, his whole bearing, must have convinced every hearer that the African is a man is the highest sense of that word. I felt that he was a partaker with me of that humanity for which I unceasingly thank my Creator. I felt on this occasion, as I perhaps never felt before, what an amount of intellectual and moral energy is crushed, is lost to the human race, by slavery. (qtd. in W.H. Channing, *Memoir*, 3:178)

Channing squirreled his revelation away to be digested later. This experience reveals how difficult it was for northerners particularly to move beyond abstract understanding in judging the anti-slavery debate. With such a small African-American population to observe, and with so few who possessed the capacity to represent their case to their white neighbors, even those whites with the best intentions were at the mercy of their own imaginations to envision a world of equality for the black man. Channing’s experiences in Virginia and St. Croix had not exposed him to the unfettered black man who could act on his own agency. His openness to expand his understanding here afforded him an opportunity to grow.

In a long account of this meeting to an unnamed friend, he revealed his undeniable study of and interest in these leaders of anti-slavery. His conclusion was that, “This body was alive. I am sure, that, if the stirrers up of mobs could have looked into the
souls of these Abolitionists, they would have seen the infinite folly of attempting to put them down by such persecutions as they can bring to bear on them. Nothing but the Inquisition, the stake, the scaffold, nothing but extermination, can do the work.” Yet he saw their fate as uncertain – through no fault of their own – due to the society of the times. “The people at large are swallowed up in gain, are intoxicated with promises of boundless wealth, are worshipping what they call prosperity. It concerns them little who is slave and who is free” (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:180). The outcome of the battle was uncertain, but still, he must carve his own path. He could not enlist in Garrison’s ranks.
Chapter 8
Transcendentalist Club Takes on Its Church

In 1836 Maria Weston Chapman began publishing *Right and Wrong in Boston*, her BFASS annual reports on the state of the anti-slavery movement, publishing it through 1840 when it was titled, *Right and Wrong in Massachusetts*. The series provided Chapman with a powerful mouthpiece for chronicling the trials and tribulations of the movement, and it earned her a reputation for clear, strident, acerbic and witty commentary and analysis. Even Emerson had *Right and Wrong* in his library.

Lydia Maria Child also published a novel in 1836, *Philothea: A Romance*, which explored pointedly transcendentalist themes, set in ancient Greece. Dedicated to her transcendentalist brother, Convers Francis, it marked her return to the mystical and spiritual dialogues they had enjoyed before her commitment to the abolitionist cause had parted them. Coming out in print just weeks before Emerson’s *Nature*, the novel enjoyed popularity among those who subscribed to “the New Thought.”

For her it was a welcome break, after having just published a massive undertaking the year before, *History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations* – a work that would be an academic source and inspiration for future women’s advocates Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But she had been working so tirelessly on books with a mission, that she had suppressed and imprisoned her imagination. Writing *Philothea* was good for her soul. She consulted her fellow writer Mrs. Chapman for her advice on the manuscript; Anne Weston recorded that her sister “Maria passed most of
yesterday forenoon at Mrs. Lorings hearing Mrs. Child read the manuscript of her new novel ‘Philothea.’ it is a Greek story and Maria thinks it very fine” (BPL 7).

Scholar Perry Miller, however, was not thinking of the Marias when he proclaimed 1836 the “Annus Mirabilis” of Transcendentalism. The appearance of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s expansive manifesto Nature and the establishment of the four-year conversation circle that came to be called the Transcendental Club were the bellwether events that inspired that appellation. In hindsight we know that Emerson would later emerge as the leading spokesman for transcendentalism, but in 1836, Emerson had, to a certain extent, removed himself from relevancy in the Unitarian community by leaving the pulpit. Many of the Transcendental Club ministers, still in their churches, would have an unexpected battle moving the mountain of Unitarian conservatism. Their dissatisfaction with the theological and philosophical state of the church was not shared by most of their brethren.

What these men thought the church needed, the introduction of the ideas of German Romanticism into the Locke-based church, seemed not like a tearing down of the church, but of an expansion of it in pursuit of greater truth. As individual pastors were more and more influenced by the works and critical analyses of Coleridge and Carlyle in particular, they felt an increasing need to come together to explore a new and exciting direction for Christianity. The first rumblings of the Club were felt when, in June 1836, Frederic Henry Hedge, who had recently been called by a church in Bangor, Maine, suggested the establishment of a new symposium among their fellows. Emerson responded with enthusiasm; his distaste for the old guard evident.

The men of strong understanding [in Coleridge’s sense] are a menacing rapid trenchant race – they cut me short – they drive me into a corner – I must not
suggest, I must define – & they hold me responsible for a demonstration of every sentiment I endorse. Whilst therefore I cannot sufficiently give thanks for the existence of this class, without whom there could not be either porridge or politics I do, for my particular, thoroughly avoid & defy them. (Rusk 2:29)

At first only ministers were to be invited, and as Emerson was still periodically supply preaching, he was still eligible. But as Emerson felt Bronson Alcott must be included, and as highly qualified women seemed to have ideas worthy of sharing, the rules were loosened.

The participants varied over the years, but significant players for our purposes include Emerson, George Ripley, James Freeman Clarke, Frederic Henry Hedge, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Convers Francis, William Henry Channing (nephew of Dr. Channing), John Sullivan Dwight, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody. Their club was not called the “Transcendental Club” by the people who attended the meetings. It began as the “Symposium,” but names went in and out of favor. The group had no platform, no creed. There were no philosophical or theological requirements, but they were all of the liberal Christian tradition and wanted to talk shop. Thomas Wentworth Higginson would claim, “The only guest not tolerated was intolerance” (qtd. in Gura 5).

The group would meet nearly thirty times over the next four years, holding meetings at members’ homes in Boston, Concord, Cambridge, Medford, Watertown – wherever members homes were located. The meetings were held erratically, scheduled in particular when Hedge would be in town from Maine, prompting Emerson to call it “Hedge’s Club.” Recent divinity graduates James Freeman Clarke and William Henry Channing, who had taken positions in Kentucky and Ohio, were included when their schedules allowed their return.
Topics of discussion included “American Genius – the causes which hinder its growth, and give us no first rate productions,” “Mysticism,” “What is the essence of religion as distinct from morality,” “the doctrine of reform,” “the organization of a new church,” and “Does the species advance beyond the individual?” Such heady topics were not likely to attract abolitionists, yet the group saw a flurry of visits from Rev. Samuel J. May, Rev. Charles Follen and Emerson’s friend Ellis Gray Loring from 1838 to 1839. Follen attended when the topic was “Pantheism”; May attended when the topic was “Esoteric and Exoteric doctrine”; and Loring attended twice, once when the topic was “Wonder & Worship,” the other when the topic was unspecified. (Myerson, “Calendar”)

Women may have begun attending at Emerson’s request when a meeting was held at his home in Concord in September of 1837. Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Lidian Emerson, Elizabeth Hoar (who had been engaged to Emerson’s brother before his untimely death in 1836) and Emerson’s brilliant aunt Sarah Ripley are among those women who attended. It thus served, as did another Unitarian-based group – the abolitionist Clique – to afford women a place to share ideas and voice and agency alongside men. As with Chapman and Child who were literary engines on behalf of their cause, Fuller and Peabody in particular also sought and found the means of intellectual fulfillment and public rewards for their efforts. Even in the 1830s Fuller and Peabody frequently made their way into print, translating essays and articles from Europe and publishing their own critical or expository pieces in the journals of the day – both Unitarian and otherwise.

The two groups had another commonality: a desire to shake up the Unitarian establishment and breathe fresh life into a dead church. Both May and Chapman laid the
blame for moral complacency regarding slavery at the feet of the clergy. Chapman wrote to Elizur Wright that “My prayer has ever been, that the ecclesiastical despotism of this land be abolished at the same stroke that freed the slave & I see now, that without the abolition of the former, the latter cannot be” (Pease 41). Garrison summed it up best when he called the clergy “nothing better than hirelings, blind leaders of the blind, dumb dogs that cannot bark . . . [that] love the fleece better than the flock” (qtd. in Hansen, *Sisterhood*, 23). Likewise, transcendentalists held their conservative brethren accountable for a moribund church. Their separate and uncoordinated efforts to reform the clergy put tremendous pressure on those devoted to the status quo. As the transcendentalists brought their new ideas out into the public domain in pulpits and in print, those conservative brethren came out of their torpor, and prepared for battle.

Emerson’s entrance in print onto the stage as a former churchman, though revolutionary, did not create the kind of reaction that would hound his practicing colleagues. For one, *Nature* did not appear to have much to do with Christianity in particular; rather it offered a view of man’s relationship to all that was not his own soul – all that was external to his core self. Brownson called it “aesthetical rather than philosophical.” Elizabeth Peabody called it a prose poem. It made philosophical observations, not theological arguments, and thus was not perceived as a credible threat to the establishment. Even conservative minister Samuel Kirkland Lathrop opined that it provided “no substantial basis of faith.” It was poorly understood, and was seen by many as what Hawthorne would call “smoke, mist and moonshine” (Hawthorne 183). Brownson attributed the book’s success to “something in his [Emerson’s] personal
manners” – his stand as “the advocate of the rights of the mind” and “the defender of personal independence in the spiritual world” (qtd. in Gura 95).

Emerson’s charismatic language is clear in his oft-quoted opening paragraph:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? . . . The sun shines to-day also. (Emerson, Nature, 1)

For the young adolescent nation trying to build its own cultural, intellectual and spiritual identity, Emerson’s words were pure catnip.

In another dimension entirely, George Ripley attempted, from within the church, to expand the perspectives of his colleagues in a response to a book titled Rationale of Religious Inquiry, by England’s Rev. James Martineau, which he published in the Unitarian Christian Examiner. Martineau’s empirical rationalism made a good test case for debate. But the backlash from conservative Rev. Andrews Norton – “the Unitarian pope” – triggered a pamphlet war that would last for nearly a decade. The Norton-Ripley controversy played out not just between the two theologians, but pitted Norton, Harvard Divinity School and the Boston Association of Ministers against all transcendentalists in general. Ripley had the temerity to suggest that, without contesting the veracity of the miracles in the New Testament, the miracles were not necessary to authenticate the divine authority and moral teachings of Christ. From a transcendental perspective, faith was born in the intuitive, spiritual center of the individual, not in the deductive belief in the veracity of miracles in the material world. The virulence of the opening salvo was reported to Frederick Hedge in Maine by his friend Convers Francis of Watertown.
What do you think of Mr. Norton’s attack on Geo. Ripley? Leaving out of view the subject matter at issue, I must say, that Mr. N’s manifesto seems to me an extraordinary violation of all propriety, courtesy, & dignity. . . . Mr. N. comes out in a newspaper . . . & declares that the sentiments [Ripley’s article] contains to be dangerous or fatal to all faith in revelation, adding certain injurious & wounding intimations as to the thoughtlessness & incompetency of the writer. No reasons are given, no argument offered to meet argument – but merely general suspicions & intimations of something very bad. . . . Ripley of course will gird on his armor & the spectators may in time turn into combatants. (Goodall, Record, 21-22)

Francis was prescient. Ripley did gird up and so did many of the spectators. Ripley soon answered with a series of six essays titled *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* that represented two years’ worth of sermons that now served as his own transcendental manifesto. What was about to become a protracted battle for the soul of the Unitarian church put it into a crisis far more encompassing than the isolated question of preaching against slavery from the pulpit.

Abolitionism and transcendentalism occupied opposite ends on the Unitarian spectrum. All of them held freedom of individual thought to be sacrosanct, at least in theory. But those who believed in the power of associated action to effect reform also believed that for the good of the cause, it was sometimes necessary to subsume one’s personal inclination to the will of the group. For the Boston Clique, which would become the distilled core of Garrison’s support, each individual had to decide how much compromise was possible. This system led to internal strife in the group, but it also led to tremendous efficacy when the human enterprise was preforming in sync.

The transcendentalists had no such choices to make. There was no platform; thus there were no compromises. James Freeman Clarke quipped that they called themselves “the club of the like-minded, because no two, even, thought alike” (qtd. in Mott 408).
That left little chance for internal strife, but it also left every man for himself when the arrows of reaction were fired amongst him.

Dr. Channing, the patriarch, watched from afar, but with burning interest. Between his coterie of budding transcendentalist offspring, Peabody and his own daughter Mary, Channing kept abreast of the ongoing debates. Peabody recorded that Channing sided with Ripley in the pamphlet wars with Norton – understanding Ripley’s perspective far better than the frothing Norton could – and supporting it wholeheartedly. Channing’s health prevented him from attending Emerson’s lectures, but his daughter Mary brought him the manuscripts to read after the public addresses. Peabody was often there to discuss them, and recorded that she “never heard him express anything but pleasure and essential agreement with them” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 366). It did not bother Channing that Emerson did not speak of Christ; he was more concerned with whether Emerson was promoting the teachings of Christ. Emerson had remarked to Peabody that “the only way to preach Christ to this generation is to say nothing about him personally” (380). Channing understood this completely.

The year 1836 also marked a change in the special relationship between Peabody and Channing. She found herself gravitating towards Emerson and his circle more and more for intellectual camaraderie, especially as she could feel Channing focusing his thought and energy more and more on the anti-slavery issue. (After the publication of Slavery, he seldom wrote on anything else.) Interestingly, the absence of any disagreement with Channing may have marked a rite of passage for his transcendental children. Margaret Fuller had become close to Channing when she made regular visits to translate German articles for him, so when George Ripley made an unflattering remark
about him, she defended Channing in her journal in December of 1836. “I think the younger class of clergymen are disposed to undervalue Dr Channing, and forget what he has done, because he is not doing anything new” (qtd. in Capper 194-950). Nothing could better illustrate the absolute indifference of the transcendentalists to the antislavery movement in 1836 than this statement, coming just one year after the publication of *Slavery*, which was igniting a powder keg throughout the states.
Chapter 9

The Grimkés Unleash the Women

In January of 1837, Dr. Channing wrote to his friend, the abolitionist Charles Follen,

The most interesting point to me on the Abolition question at this moment is, the real state of feeling at the South, the real motive for perpetuating slavery. If this be love of gain, I am prepared to speak as I have not. . . . Let the truth be known. I have felt myself called to express a good hope of many slaveholders, not only to be just to them, but to counteract what has seemed to me the bad influence of the uncharitableness of the Abolitionists on the people here who have sided with the slave holder as an injured man. . . . If, however, we have been more than just, if we have been excessively, unreasonably lenient to the slaveholders, let the truth be told. If the basest of all motives is perpetuating the greatest of wrongs, then it is time to set the proofs of this enormity before the people. (qtd. in W.H. Channing, *Life*, 543)

These words mark another change in Channing’s attitude towards the anti-slavery movement, as well as towards his own activism. On August 1st he took another giant stride into the national political arena with an 80-page open letter to Henry Clay protesting the “Annexation of Texas.”

To me, it seems only right, but the duty of the Free States, in case of the annexation of Texas, to say to the Slaveholding States, ‘We regard this act as the dissolution of the Union. . . . We will not become partners in your wars with Mexico and Europe, in your schemes of spreading and perpetuating slavery, in your hopes of conquest, in your unrighteous spoils. (qtd. in Mendelsohn 261)

The tone of combativeness reflected a growing dissatisfaction not only with the slavery issue but the entire trajectory of the nation – an apparently relentless litany of national acts of robbery, rapine, encroachment, war and crime – in addition to the proliferation of
slavery. It was his most impassioned address to date.

For those who may have wondered if a new Channing was emerging, the murder of Elijah P. Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois in November of 1837 provided a speedy answer. Lovejoy was a Presbyterian minister and anti-slavery editor and printer who had suffered the destruction of his printing press three times. Upon the fourth attack he was ready to fight back. Armed with a gun to defend his property, he was shot dead before he could fire a shot. His death made him an instant martyr in the anti-slavery cause.

For Channing, as has been noted before, protection of the freedom of speech was beyond a civic duty; it was a sacred duty – to protect the legacy of the revolutionary republic. Consulting with his friend, the abolitionist Samuel Sewall, he initiated a petition to the city for the use of Faneuil Hall for a rally to protest the murder of Lovejoy, placing his own name at the top of one hundred petitioners. However, a counter petition intimidated the authorities, who then reconsidered and declined the petition. Undaunted, Channing then took to the press himself, penning an open letter “To the Citizens of Boston” in the Boston Daily Advertiser.

And has it come to this? Has Boston fallen so low? May not its citizens be trusted to come together to express the great principles of liberty, for which their fathers died? Are our fellow-citizens to be murdered in the act of defending their property, and of asserting the right of free discussion; and is it unsafe in this metropolis, once the refuge of liberty, to express abhorrence of the deed? (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:203)

Channing’s reputation was an enormously powerful tool in shaping popular opinion in Boston, and, with the resulting public response to his letter, Channing had his rally at Faneuil Hall.

But lest one think the public response reflected an interest in the slavery question,
Convers Francis revealed and clarified what truly underlay the support for the protest meeting. To Hedge in Maine he wrote, “The murder at Alton has in reality nothing to do with the Abolition question: it ought to be disentangled from all extraneous considerations, & be viewed simply as the sacrifice of an individual’s life in defence of his right to print & publish his opinions” (Woodall, Letters, 30-31). Thus the public support behind Channing was, in large part, not for the cause Lovejoy promoted (still too controversial), but for the principle of his right to speak freely about that cause.

On December 8th, some five thousand people came to the hallowed hall to hear speakers of multiple positions, including brief remarks by Channing, whose resolutions invoking the patriotic duty of all to support free speech and the rule of law were read by Benjamin Hallett.

The strident anti-abolitionist attorney general of the commonwealth of Massachusetts, James T. Austin, then delivered a rousing rebuttal to whip the crowd into indignation, which set the scene for the historic debut on the anti-slavery stage of Wendell Phillips. Phillips’ stunning performance set the tone for the success of the rally for the anti-slavery contingent, and Channing’s resolutions were passed. Channing’s biographer John White Chadwick maintained that “Garrison, in a letter the following day, pronounced them excellent; but they had not the ‘birr and smeddum’ which Garrison, a master in this kind would have put into them” (Chadwick 285).² Of Phillips’ impressive and persuasive oratory, Channing would always remember the performance as “morally sublime” (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:216).

The engagement of Channing in the arena in a new character allied him more

² I am unable to find the Garrison letter referred to.
closely with the abolitionists than he had ever been before. Of course, this unsettled him, and as he found himself praised in *The Liberator*, he returned to the safety of his habitual backpedaling and qualifying, making it clear in his own letter to the editor that he was still not one of them. Increasingly, Channing appeared to be a man committed to marching alongside a parade but not within it.

Channing was not the only person who was troubled enough by the murder of Lovejoy to come out of the shadows. In Watertown Convers Francis noted in his journal, “Preached at home . . . gave some interest by expressing my indignation at the outrage recently committed in Alton, in Illinois, in the murder of Mr. Lovejoy for his abolition principles. I could not in conscience omit the notice of such an atrocity, which is in fact but one of a long series” (Woodall, *Journals*, 2:249). He remarked further in a letter to Hedge, “The Alton affair is all the talk now, & Dr Channing’s petition for the Faneuil Hall meeting makes people mad or pleased. For my part, I think the Dr. has done right, & am glad he persevered so fearlessly & in despite of all obloquy” (Woodall, *Record*, 30-31).

In Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt both deeply troubled and deeply harassed. Concord itself was a hotbed of abolitionism, led by the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society (CFASS). In the van of the movement was Emerson’s new wife, Lidian, who enlisted in CFASS soon after its inception. She was aided and abetted in the Emerson household by his notoriously brilliant and opinionated aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Thus, in his daily domestic life he was surrounded by family and neighbors, cajoling and haranguing with increasing stridency. Aunt Mary pressured Lidian to urge Waldo “to
leave the higher muses to their Elysian repose and . . . enter those of living degraded
misery and the take the gauge of slavery,” (qtd. in Cole 175) but as he later famously
wrote, “I have quite other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits
imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man, – which, important to the republic of
Man, have no watchman, or lover, or defender, but I – ” (JMN 13:80) Emerson wanted to
liberate mankind, but not necessarily any particular men.

In the months before Lovejoy’s murder, he was still resisting the call upon him to
engage. His March 1837 lecture “The Individual” offered the usual Unitarian fare: “All
philosophy, all theory, all hope are defeated when applied to society . . . Progress is not
for society. Progress belongs to the individual” (qtd. in Gougeon, “Abolition,” 361). But
the dramatic martyring of Lovejoy fired his emotions and his imagination. He noted his
reaction in his journal. “The brave Lovejoy has given his breast to the bullet for his part
and has died when it was better not to live . . . . I sternly rejoice, that one was found to die
for humanity & the rights of free speech & opinion” (JMN 5:437).

The power of Lovejoy’s death to emotionally capture Americans did not bypass
Emerson, and he felt compelled, for the first time, to respond to a pressing invitation to
speak on the subject in Concord. Fittingly, there was difficulty finding a venue that
would allow free speech on such a subject as free speech. Such trouble augured poorly
for Emerson’s debut as an activist. His tepid remarks betrayed just how equivocating he
was on the subject. After lamenting the shortage of good venues, he suggested,

But, when we have distinctly settled for ourselves the right and wrong of this
question, and have covenanted with ourselves to keep the channels of opinion
open, each man for himself, I think that we have done all that is incumbent on
most of us to do. Sorely as we may feel the wrongs of the poor slave in Carolina
or in Cuba, we have each of us our hands full of much nearer duties. . . . Let our
own evils check the bitterness of our condemnation of our brother, and, whilst we
insist on calling things by their right names, let us not reproach the planter, but
own that his misfortune is at least as great as his sin. (qtd. in Cabot 2:426)

Compared to Channing’s query to Follen earlier that year about the motives of
slaveholders, Emerson’s thought lagged years behind his elder.

The loyal Elizabeth Peabody would insist years later, that “I can aver from
personal knowledge that, as far back as the publication of Lydia Maria Child’s awakening
book . . . Mr. Emerson was uncompromisingly an abolitionist,” but if true, it was
certainly in abstract spirit only. She further recalled his public words on Lovejoy with
pride, “when it was bad form in Boston society even to name Lovejoy or that for which
he was the first living sacrifice, I remember what a thrill went through the audience,
because Emerson named him as such, in a tone that seemed to preclude contradiction”
(Peabody, “Emerson”).

But in real time, few in Emerson’s audience were satisfied with his remarks,
including himself. His heart was not in it. The very idea of public advocacy discomfited
him. At the end of the day, his time had not come. He confided to his journal, “This
stirring in the philanthropic mud, gives me no peace. I will let the republic alone until the
republic comes to me” (JMN 5:479).

There were probably few in the liberal reform world of Boston who were not
deeply affected by the death of Lovejoy, but there is one more voice worth hearing – the
emerging and future Unitarian prophet, Theodore Parker. On December 24, 1837, the
twenty-seven year-old Parker, freshly ordained in West Roxbury, delivered a sermon that
put a tentative toe into the water of controversy. Rather than “be false to my conviction
& my trust,” he spoke “to the existence of Slavery amongst us.” The very fact that such
“an institution exists amongst a portion of our Nation, which is at war with the Spirit of
[Christianity,] with the Golden Rule,” demands “strenuous efforts to remove the blemish [from] the [Christian] of the age[,] to respect every man, even at the expense of conflicting with prejudice & passion” (TP 1). It is unclear whether Parker had the audacity to read this portion of the sermon out loud, as the manuscript has a pencil line through the passage. But the seed had germinated in being put to paper. In time, Parker would become not only one of the most outspoken and controversial advocates of abolition, but a “Son of Thunder” – one who was able to shock and awe with fire comparable to Garrison’s.

In general, in 1837, the theological sons of Channing showed a remarkable dearth of the interest and courage that was consuming their great patron. This was more than compensated for by his abolitionist children. On West Street, the year 1837 opened with drama for the Chapman family. They harbored Pinda, a runaway slave, in their home for several weeks while she waited to be joined by her husband. Chapman later turned the woman’s story into a thinly fictionalized account, *Pinda: A True Tale*, which was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York in 1840.

The BFASS had still more seismic events to contend with. In May they invited the Grimké sisters, Angelina and Sarah, of South Carolina to reprise the public speaking tour they had embarked on in New York the previous year. The sisters, raised in a slaveholding household, had scandalized both the south and the north by bursting out of their prescribed female fields of action in promoting abolition. As if speaking out against slavery itself were not inappropriate enough, the Grimkés had broken with all the rules of convention for women by speaking in public, most egregiously to racially- and gender-mixed, “promiscuous” audiences. They spoke all over New England, ultimately to
thousands of people, and created a dramatic spike in the number of anti-slavery societies created. It radicalized women in particular, who despite not having the vote, were both empowered and emboldened by the model of the Grimkés.

The ministers of Massachusetts were not pleased, and they directed their ire at the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, the impertinent women who had organized the Grimkés tour in their communities. The Unitarian women of the Clique were not themselves public speakers, but they were such extraordinarily effective organizers, lobbyists, fundraisers, journalists and cheerleaders, that public opinion about their level of participation became a painfully divisive issue. Husbands, fathers, brothers, and ministers exerted tremendous pressure on their female relatives to return to their traditional roles, and in June 1837, the Massachusetts Association of Congregational Ministers upped the ante by issuing a public “Pastoral Letter.” In it, they warned of “the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character with wide spread and permanent injury”:

There are social influences which females use in promoting piety and the great objects of christian benevolence, which we cannot too highly commend. But when she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary, we put ourselves in self defence against her, she yields the power which God has given her for protection, and her character becomes unnatural. We cannot, therefore, but regret the mistaken conduct of those who encourage females to bear an obtrusive and ostentatious part in measures of reform, and countenance any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers. *(GACM)*

Chapman responded in her year-end issue of *Right and Wrong in Boston* with a full rebuttal to the “black-hearted ministry,” and added fuel to the fire with a satirical poem on behalf of those Samuel J. May called the “female brethren.” It was titled, “The Times That Try Men’s Souls,” attributed to “The Lords of Creation.”
Confusion has seized us, and all things go wrong,
The women have leaped from ‘their spheres,’
And, instead of fixed stars, shoot as comets along,
And are setting the world by the ears! . . .
They’ve taken the notion to speak for themselves,
And are wielding the tongue and the pen;
They’ve mounted the rostrum; the termagant elves,
And – oh horrid! – are talking to men! (qtd. in Chambers 28)

For many of these women, the pressure to return to their sphere was too great to resist.
But for another group, the strength of their newfound empowerment was too cherished to relinquish. After an evening at the Chapmans’, Angelina Grimké wrote to a friend, “I had a long talk with the brethren on the rights of women, and found a very general sentiment prevailing that it is time our fetters were broken. L. M. Child and Maria Chapman strongly supported this view; indeed very many seem to think a new order of things is very desirable in this respect” (qtd. in Lutz 107-108). The seeds of women’s consciousness were being planted at No. 11 West Street.

The schism that this tension would initiate among the women of the BFASS would be increasingly exacerbated by other issues, especially as Garrison’s priorities changed. His Anti-Sabbath views, his growing focus on non-resistance, his anti-government disunion stance would create endless fissures within the MASS, the AASS, and the BFASS as well. The mostly Congregational and Baptist reformers had their own churches to call home and were not interested in joining the church of Garrison. Over the next three years, this schism would deepen irrevocably as the women turned on each other. By the time it would all come to a head in 1840, Garrison’s congregation would primarily be the Boston Unitarians who “wabbled” around the Chapman townhouse.
In the late 1830s it is not overly clear that Boston’s transcendentalists and abolitionists were particularly interested in each other, but a close look at letters and journals show some tantalizing connections. Maria Chapman’s sister Anne wrote on several occasions to her sister Debora mentioning visits with Margaret Fuller in the winter of 1836-37 and in early 1839. Her ambiguous characterizations of Fuller in the first two letters appear to be meant playfully, though the jury will probably always be out:

“...I] called upon Margaret Fuller. She was more sublime than ever; up in a higher latitude than ever before, but she was very glad to see me” (BPL 8). Two weeks later, she recounted, “Margaret Fuller called. She was more magnificent than usual & held forth at a great rate...” (BPL 9). Fuller’s reputation for arrogance was admitted even by those who remained fiercely devoted to her. (She famously told Emerson, “I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own.”) (qtd. in Myerson, Fuller, 149). So Weston may have taken her with the same grain of salt. But in 1839 she undertook to visit Fuller when she heard she was sick, reporting “a very agreeable call” in which Fuller was “very conversible & agreeable” (BPL 10). Fuller invited her to come visit again the following week, which she planned to do.

All the members of the Clique would have opportunities to socialize with some of the transcendentalists at lectures, sermons and events, but also at the home of Ellis Gray Loring. As noted before, Emerson was a close friend of Loring’s from boyhood, and Margaret Fuller was friends with Loring’s family as well. The Lorings were extremely
close to Lydia Maria Child, becoming so when the Lorings and Childs were neighbors on the Roxbury Neck. A surviving journal of Ellis Loring’s from a short window in 1838 shows a constant cavalcade of company that places Emerson, Child, Convers Francis and all three of the sisters Weston in the Loring parlor at various times, though not necessarily at the same time. Further Weston letters recount visits to the Lorings with guest lists that include the Chapmans, Follens, Phillipses and even George Ripley.

Loring and Emerson had such a frank and open friendship that Loring felt no compunction in critiquing Emerson’s public remarks. In March of 1838, having heard Emerson deliver a lecture on “Being and Seeming” in Cambridge, he took the speaker to task. Emerson had asserted that “eternal superiority belongs to the contemplative man over his more forcible and honored neighbor” (Emerson, Lectures, 97). Loring queried,

I fancy sometimes that you suggest or imply the impossibility of the same man’s performing adequately, both public & private duties. Is it a fact that the great & active philanthropists to whom you sometimes allude – such men as Clarkson… – do less than their quieter neighbors for the true & free development of their nature? . . . You are sometimes thought to teach, that in the great struggles between right and wrong going on in society, we may safely & innocently stand neuter, altogether; – gratifying mere tastes, so they be elegant, intellectual tastes – This is surely a misconstruction of your words. (qtd. in Gougeon, “Emerson,” 564)

Any response Emerson may have made does not seem to survive. Emerson was to hear this complaint for many years, but his nature, in this time of his life, was fairly immutable. Fortunately, the difference in the friends’ temperaments was not fatal to the friendship.

Emerson did, however, take a step out of his idyllic garden to take on the world just a few months later when he delivered his landmark Divinity School Address at the graduation exercises of the Harvard Divinity School on July 15. His target audience was
small; there were only six graduates and their families. But the audience was filled with most of his circle, and their journals and letters were filled with stunned and delighted accounts.

The primary intent of the address was an assault on formal, historical Christianity. He not only denied the perfection of Jesus, he listed his shortcomings. He suggested that raising Jesus above the common man denies the divinity in all men. He criticized adoration of the Bible for convincing men that miracles and revelation are in the past and they have missed its period of significance. The church and its dead traditions could only obstruct a man’s access to his God. What they called the church, he called consciousness, and he wanted all men to find it for themselves:

Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge, as St. Paul's, or George Fox's, or Swedenborg's, and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts, and if, as now, for centuries, — the chasm yawns to that breadth, that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine. Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. (Emerson, Nature, 141)

Whether or not it was Emerson’s intent to crush the aspirations of Harvard’s most recent crop of divines into the dust is open to debate. But Emerson would not be invited back to Cambridge for thirty years. The censure from the ministerial community was swift and angry. George Ripley may have been happy to have the fury of Andrews Norton redirected to someone new. Norton, enraged, loudly decried Emerson’s “incoherent rhapsody.”

Theodore Parker pronounced in his journal for July 15, “Proceeded to Cambridge, to hear the valedictory sermon by Mr. Emerson. . . . So beautiful, so just, so true, and
terribly sublime was his picture of the faults of the Church in its present position. My soul is roused . . .” (qtd. in Weiss 2:113).

Convers Francis, who had attended the address with Elizabeth Peabody reported to Hedge in Maine,

Have you heard that Waldo Emerson delivered the sermon this summer to the class at the Divinity School, on their leaving the seminary? I went to hear it, & found it crowded with stirring, honest, lofty thought. I don’t now that anything of his has excited me more. . . . The discourse gave dire offence to the rulers at Cambridge. The dean [John Gorham Palfrey] & Mr. Norton have pronounced sentences of fearful condemnation, & their whole clique in Boston & Cambridge are in commotion. The harshest words are not spared, & ‘infidel’ & ‘atheist’ are the best terms poor E. gets. (Woodall, Record, 34)

In a sequel letter, he justified Emerson’s iconoclasm. “E., you know, is not a man, who can very well justify his own processes of thought to another person, i.e. is not at all a man of logic: he is a seer, who looks into the infinite, & reports what he sees . . .” (37).

With a range of vision that would work equally deeply in both directions, Maria Child was also following the controversy surrounding her brother’s friend Emerson. Despite her independent denominational stance, she took interest in the affairs of the religion. She wrote to her brother Convers,

The Unitarian, busily at work pulling down old structures, suddenly sees [luminous rays] gild some ancient pillar, or shed [their] soft light on some moss-grown altar; and he stops with a troubled doubt whether all is to be destroyed; and if destroyed, wherewith shall he build anew? He looks upward for the coming dawn, and calls it transcendentalism. . . . Having accidentally fallen into this vein of thought brings Emerson to my remembrance. How absurdly the Unitarians are behaving, after all their talk about liberality, the sacredness of individual freedom, free utterance of thought, etc. If Emerson’s thoughts are not their thoughts, can they not reverence them, inasmuch as they are formed and spoken in freedom? I believe the whole difficulty is, they are looking outwardly to what the logical opponents will say, not inwardly with calm investigation. (Sewall 33-34)
Child’s point about the optics was well-taken as her brother wrote to Parker, “While the Unitarians are inflicting their censures and vituperations upon him, it is amusing to see the Orthodox defending him” (Collison 120). Unitarians were still not free of the need to justify separating from the Orthodox in their pursuit of liberal theology. Emerson’s address no doubt mortified them more than its content outraged them, as it made credible evidence to support orthodox claims of Unitarian infidelities.

Maria Weston Chapman was the most highly entertained of all, writing to William Lloyd Garrison, “I send you Emerson’s oration. It is rousing the wrath of the Cambridge ‘powers that be[’] in an astonishing manner. How cowardly are Unitarians generally! They take the alarm at sentiments which differ only in shading, from their own; (in matters of doctrine I mean.)” (WLG 2)

Having cultivated his elusiveness and planted his taproot in Concord, away from the bustle, Emerson was not fully prepared for the force of the reaction to his address. With accusations of infidelity, atheism, and pantheism flung at him from all corners, he was legitimately concerned that it might hurt his lecturing career – his primary means of income. But though he was rattled by all the fallout, he hid it well. Fuller was filled with admiration for his stoicism. She wrote to James Freeman Clarke in far away Kentucky, “You know how they have been baying at Mr. Emerson. ‘tis a pity you could not see how calmly he smiles down, on the sleuth hounds of – public opinion” (qtd. in Capper 324).

Peabody joyfully informed Dr. Channing, that “there had never been a discourse there that so justified the foundation principle of the Divinity School,” and after a long evening’s colloquy, Channing, having found nothing objectionable in Emerson’s address,
had to concede that perhaps Emerson’s denigration of the New Testament at an institution founded upon it might have been insensitive. (Peabody, Reminiscences, 372, 380). But he would pass no judgment.

The long-term ramifications of Emerson’s address were far reaching, not just for him personally, but for the future of the church. It brought the transcendentalists as a class of theologian-philosophers out of the woods and into the public discourse. They became a group with an identity (albeit a loose one), and a force to contend with. The bedrock of Unitarian culture was going to have to change.
Chapter 11
The Peabody Book Room

Washington Street in Boston in the 1830s and 1840s was known as Publishers Row, the center of the city’s burgeoning book trade. On the cusp of the decade, however, the short length of West Street, which links Washington Street to the Boston Common, became something of a center of women’s publishing. The beginning of this phenomenon occurred when the women of BFASS decided that their highly successful annual holiday fair should expand to include a literary component. Chapman, with her extraordinary executive gift for administration, had leveraged her many connections with the anti-slavery community in both New and Old England, as well as the continent, to solicit donations of high quality goods that could not be obtained elsewhere. The BFASS fair was far from a collection of trinkets for sale. Her target audience was the upper crust, and her talent for merchandising made sure that the fair was always successful. The funds raised were of no small impact to the anti-slavery societies they supported.

Maria Chapman had already been composing the BFASS annual report, Right and Wrong in Boston, in her home since 1835, as well as performing periodic editing duties for The Liberator and the new Non-Resistant. At the time, themed gift books were a popular form of raising money for philanthropic causes, and Maria Chapman envisioned a book compiled from literary contributions from far and wide that could be sold at the bazaar. Thus was born The Liberty Bell, the anti-slavery gift book that Chapman produced with the aid of her sisters and sometimes Edmund Quincy. The books, adorned with an engraved bell, bore the motto “Proclaim Liberty to ALL the Inhabitants” – a motto
contrived by Ellis Gray Loring. Inside were essays, stories, poems and letters, contributed by over 200 authors during the Bell’s lifespan, from 1839 to 1858. Many were among the most famous anti-slavery figures of their day; others were more literary. Despite the female composition of the editorial staff, fewer than one third of the contributors were women. Chapman’s hope was that the literary quality of the pieces would expand the audience. They were not political, but they most certainly had a propaganda element; thus they were designed not so much as an economic as a mission machine.

At the same time as the abolitionist women were expanding their agency with the written word, transcendentalist Margaret Fuller was endeavoring to expand the intellectual agency of her circle of women. Her gift for education had never been in the classroom with children. What she longed to do was to attempt a model of adult conversation groups for women that had been practiced by Elizabeth Peabody in earlier years. Enrollment fees for these would provide her with support as an independent unmarried woman, and she would be able to draw fellow women into dialogues designed to challenge them, broaden their perspectives, raise their consciousness, and help them move forward with new self-awareness and, hopefully, some ambition for self-fulfillment. Margaret’s father had subjected her to a grueling education as a child – a boy’s education and one that had made her nearly unfit to fulfill the female role her society ordained for her. If education was bad for a woman in society, then society must change – one woman at a time. The women in her conversations series would tackle the central questions for women: “What were we born to do? How shall we do it? which so
few ever propose to themselves ‘till their best years are gone by’ (qtd. in Marshall 387). This would be more controversial than it might at first seem.

Peabody volunteered to help organize such a series, and arranged for the classes to take place in the rented rooms of her sister Mary Peabody on Chauncy Place, just a two-block walk from their common future home on West Street, to be scheduled when Mary was out teaching school. (Elizabeth herself was then living in Salem with her family.) Sessions would be held Wednesday mornings, the days scheduled for Emerson’s current lecture series in Boston, so that those traveling from out of town could stay for that as well. Recruiting women was difficult at first; their natural fear of speaking before a group, inculcated with great efficacy from childhood, made them reluctant to join in. But ultimately, Fuller and Peabody were able to convene a dozen paying women from their own circles for the first session, commencing in November of 1839. These women were largely well educated, from culture-conscious families, and, of course likely to be of Unitarian background.

The sessions were to be highly participatory, but Fuller herself would act as a facilitator. She would make sure that all spoke, and she helped them to find alternative perspectives that might expand understanding of whatever topic was at hand. Those who left impressions of Fuller in this setting reported her gift was in her conversation. As was true of so many of the great minds of this time – Emerson, Channing, Parker, Fuller and even Alcott – their power was in their personal magnetism. It could not be recorded. But we can see much about the iconoclastic Fuller in the reminiscences that do exist of her. Emerson may give the best idea of the complexity of the first impression she often made.

She was then, as always, carefully and becomingly dressed, and of ladylike self-possession. For the rest, her appearance had nothing prepossessing. Her extreme
plainness, – a trick of incessantly opening and shutting her eyelids, – the nasal tone of her voice, – all repelled; and I said to myself, we shall never get far. It is to be said, that Margaret made a disagreeable first impression on most persons, including those who became afterwards her best friends. This was partly the effect of her manners, which expressed an overweening sense of power, and slight esteem of others, and partly the prejudice of her fame. She had a dangerous reputation for satire, in addition to her great scholarship. The men thought she carried too many guns, and the women did not like one who despised them. . . . I remember that she made me laugh more than I liked; for I was, at that time, an eager scholar of ethics, and had tasted the sweets of solitude and stoicism, and I found something profane in the hours of amusing gossip into which she drew me. . . . Of course, it was impossible long to hold out against such urgent assault. She had an incredible variety of anecdotes, and the readiest wit to give an absurd turn to whatever passed; and the eyes, which were so plain at first, soon swam with fun and drolleries, and the very tides of joy and superabundant life.

(qtd. in Myerson, Fuller, 139, 141-2)

Emerson mentioned, too, that someone remembered her as “A wonder of intellect, who had yet no religion,” and the very topics of the conversations confirm that. Rather than looking for wisdom in the New Testament, where all the other transcendentalists had been trained, she chose to explore the themes of human existence through relatively non-denominational Greek mythology. Using this familiar, non-controversial subject matter and avoiding political or religious controversy, Fuller hoped to compel them to develop the vocabulary to articulate their impressions, “turn those impressions into thoughts, & to systematise these thoughts” (qtd. in Marshall 387). Boys were brought up to do this, but their sisters were not. Educated to think like a boy, Margaret was the perfect interpreter to undertake this venture.

Though no cumulative list is known to exist of the purported 200 attendees of Fuller’s Conversations from 1839 through 1844, it is known that Fuller’s friends Lydia Maria Child and Louisa Loring participated in the first year’s Conversation series.
Emerson received the following account, which he shared in the 1852 publication of *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, attributing it only to “a very competent witness”:

Margaret used to come to the conversations very well dressed, and, altogether, looked sumptuously. . . . Of course, it was not easy for every one to venture her remark, after an eloquent discourse, and in the presence of twenty superior women, who were all inspired. But whatever was said, Margaret knew how to seize the good meaning of it with hospitality, and to make the speaker feel glad, and not sorry, that she had spoken. She showed herself thereby fit to preside at such meetings, and imparted to the susceptible a wonderful reliance on her genius. (Fuller, *Memoirs*, 146-47)

The Conversations would be a success, and would continue through 1844, but beginning in the second year of 1840, they would be held in a new location – No. 13 West Street.

For Dr. Channing, and all the abolitionists, the year 1840 would open with tragedy. Their favored son, and Channing’s close friend, Charles Follen had struggled over the years because of his fervent anti-slavery advocacy. It had cost him his teaching position at Harvard as a professor of German, and once he became a Unitarian minister under Channing’s cultivation, it was difficult for him to find a congregational home. Parker’s hometown of Lexington had called him in 1835, but they were unable to pay him enough to support his family. Emerson supplied their pulpit from 1836 to 1838, while Follen spent time in New York in search of a permanent place. In 1839, East Lexington was ready for him, and he planned to return to dedicate the new church they had built for him of his own design. Channing himself was scheduled to deliver the dedication sermon on January 15, 1840. But tragically, on his way home from New York for the event, Charles Follen was killed in the tragic explosion of the steamship *Lexington*
in Long Island Sound on January 13. The usually stoic Channing was deeply affected, purportedly burying his face in his hands at the news.

Channing coordinated with Samuel J. May, who it was determined should deliver Follen’s eulogy, and the plan was made to apply to Channing’s Federal Street Church to hold the service. At first, it appears they agreed, but within a couple of days the governing board of the church changed their mind – despite their full awareness of the close relationship between Follen and their pastor. A devastated Channing took it upon himself to deliver his own memorial sermon for Follen during his own pulpit time at Federal Street, and thereafter withdrew from all his public duties, refusing to take a salary. For the next 17 months, Channing preached in his own home church only once – and that shortly before his death. For the man who had attained nearly saintly status in his church in years past, his commitment to his own brand of abolitionism had turned him very nearly into a pariah in his own congregation.

Meanwhile, it took May three full months to find a church willing to host an abolitionist’s memorial service; incredibly, even Follen’s East Lexington refused. It finally took place on April 17th at the Marlborough Chapel. Estimating 2,000 people had come to pay their respects to Dr. Follen, May recalled that “[a]fter my discourse was delivered another touching hymn from the pen, or rather the heart, of Mrs. Maria W. Chapman was read by Rev. Dr. Channing and sung very impressively by the congregation” (May 259).

Elizabeth Peabody had tired of living in Salem with her family, where she had moved after leaving Bronson Alcott’s school in 1836. Her family needed the support of
Elizabeth and her sister Mary, their 70-year-old father, Dr. Peabody having long struggled to earn sufficient income as a dentist to support the family. But she yearned to be a part of the Boston life again, and her situation did not afford her the opportunities for frequent commutes to Boston and Concord. Elizabeth’s solution was to bring her family with her to Boston, to set up both home and business in the city. The two-story row houses on West Street offered the Peabody family both a place of business and a home in one central location. Mary could move her own school from Chauncy Place (where she lived doors down from Henry Chapman’s parents), and conduct it on the second floor, where the family would also live. Youngest sister Sophia, gifted artistically but often an invalid, would have her own studio space. The first floor would become Elizabeth’s adventure in intellectual entrepreneurship.

With all the transcendentalists hungering for the latest writings of the New Thought from Europe, and no reliable or regular source for obtaining them, Peabody decided to become the first person (and certainly the first woman) in Boston to open a foreign language bookstore and circulating subscription library. Here the intellectual lights of Boston could come to get the latest titles from Germany, France and England, and if purchase were out of the question, one could, for an annual subscription of $5, check them out.

Elizabeth was concerned that the idea of a lady bookseller might set tongues wagging, but after consulting with Dr. Channing, she was reassured. “I see nothing in the business inconsistent with your sex,” he told her. “I have a great desire to see a variety of employments thrown open to women, and if they may sell anything, why not books?” He added. “I should think a book-store kept by a lady would become a favored resort of
your sex. The ladies want a literary lounge, and good might come from the literary intercourse that would spring out of such a place of meeting” (Peabody, Reminiscences, 408, 409). But the bookstore quickly became a favored “Transcendental Exchange” that was fashionable to men as well as women. George Bradford described its appeal: Many persons of high culture, or of distinction in the sphere of religious philosophy, philanthropy, or literature, were often here, and likely to meet others, like themselves, interested in the questions then agitating the community, or to talk on the calmer topics of literature and philosophy.” Peabody was demonstrating an advanced marketing technique, as described by James Freeman Clarke, “always engaged in supplying some want that had first to be created” (qtd. in Ronda, Peabody, 186).

The list of eminent thinkers and writers who crossed Peabody’s threshold was impressive. They came for the books, they came for Fuller’s Conversations, they came to socialize before Emerson’s lectures, they came to drop mail and packages, they came for Dr. Peabody’s homeopathic medicines, and they came for art supplies, personally selected by their friend, the great painter, Washington Allston. Peabody reveled in it.

It was so desirable to have the matter so much in my own hands as for me to be able to have only that in my shop which I chose – & could in a measure recommend. – This was the original plan of my store – that I should keep one in which were to be found no worthless books – shadows of shadows – and nothing of any kind of a secondary quality. (qtd. in Ronda, Peabody, 186).

Peabody wrote a long letter to Channing while he was out of town about the first month of operations of her “atom of a shop.” A visit from the former editor of the Christian Examiner and future president of Harvard, James Walker, gave a clear insider view of the climate within the old Unitarian guard in the face of the sweeping reform movements seizing Boston.
I had a visit from Mr. Walker the other day. He came to subscribe to my library. . . He said it was pitiful to see in what a state of panic the community was. The conservative past men [were] in a condition of morbid fear that seemed to him to argue a complete want of faith. They were afraid to explore the grounds of anything in thought. It seemed as if they were sure that an attempt to do so would prove there was no ground at all [sic] for them to stand upon. He thought there was connected with this want of faith . . . a vague feeling of the insecurity of their property. . . . But he thought nothing was to be done but to soothe the thought – Ideas could not be awakened in people so armed at all points with the porcupine quills of fear – that figure of speech is mine by the way not his. (MVWC 405)

Transcendentalism was on the ascendant. The battles with the old guard over the Ripley-Norton controversy and Emerson’s Divinity School Address unified them. The arrival of the “Transcendental Exchange” acted as a hot house for the band, creating just the right conditions to promote each member’s growth. Peabody opened her book room in July 1840 and Margaret Fuller moved her next series of Conversations into Peabody’s parlor soon after, still planned to coincide with Emerson’s next Boston lecture series. So energizing was the new clubhouse to the group that even Dr. Channing became a regular morning visitor. Peabody reminisced:

When Dr. Channing was in the city, he was in the habit of coming to my store in the mornings to read the newspapers; and there he would sometimes meet and talk with Mr. [Orestes] Brownson, Theodore Parker, and others; and would like to hear me tell of the conversations at Mr. Ripley’s, or wherever else the reformers met. (Peabody, Reminiscences, 414)

The retirement of James Walker as editor of the Unitarian mouthpiece, The Christian Examiner, not long after Emerson’s Divinity School Address had serious implications for the transcendentalists. Walker’s relative tolerance for the New Thought had afforded them some begrudging access to print, but this was virtually shut off after his resignation. Plans were soon underway for a journal of their own, The Dial. Emerson had considered the potential of the magazine in his journal: “I think that our Dial ought
not to be a mere literary journal but that the times demand of us a more earnest aim. It ought to contain the best advice on topics of Government, Temperance, Abolition, Trade, & Domestic Life” (JMN 7:388). But if that more expansive model would require an active push from Emerson, it was not to be.

Margaret Fuller and George Ripley were appointed editors, where they would remain until the demands of the new Brook Farm pulled Ripley away for good in October 1841, and until the failure to draw a salary drove Fuller out in April 1842. Billed in the May 1840 prospectus as “The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy, and Religion,” the first issue of its four-year run came out in July 1840. With Fuller at the helm rather than one of the ministerial class, the tenor of the magazine steered a course closer toward the literary than the theological – a fact not appreciated by all members of the Transcendental Club. With Emerson’s defection from the church to explore the power of individualism, and Ripley’s defection to explore the power of communitarian living, the theological common denominator of the transcendentalists was dissolving. Still, in this journal, at long last, the club of the not-so-like-minded had a medium for the presentation of their ideas to the public. After two years, in May 1842, Emerson would assume the duties of the beleaguered and unpaid Margaret Fuller, and Peabody herself would publish the journal under her own imprint: E. P. Peabody, 13 West St., Boston. In her visionary outlook, Peabody spoke for all the like-minded in asking, “Why not begin to move the mountain of custom and convention?” (Peabody, “Glimpse” 222)

In later years Peabody would recall the glory days of the book room. “I came into contact with the world as never before. The Ripleys were starting Brook Farm, and they were friends of ours. Theodore Parker was beginning his career, and all these things
were discussed in my book-store by Boston lawyers and Cambridge professors. Those were very living years for me” (qtd. in Cooke, *Introduction*, 1:148).
Chapter 12

Convergence

As optimistic and expanding as the transcendentalists of No. 13 were in 1840, the abolitionists at No. 11 were beleaguered and battle-weary. The seeds of division in anti-slavery circles that were planted in the aftermath of the Grimké sisters’ tour had germinated and borne terrible fruit. In addition to the Pastoral Letter of 1837 urging the ladies to resume their proper sphere, an “Appeal of Clerical Abolitionists” was also issued in 1837 by a subset of abolitionist ministers led by Amos Phelps – one of the founders of the original New England Anti-Slavery Society and husband of the first BFASS president Charlotte Phelps. In it they targeted Garrison’s mission drift, attaching other reforms to the anti-slavery movement, in particular women’s rights and anti-government non-resistance. Rev. J. T. Woodbury expressed it succinctly, “We are not willing, in overthrowing slavery, to overthrow government, civil and domestic, the Sabbath, and the church and ministry” (qtd. in Hansen, Sisterhood, 23). Garrison, in response, redirected his searing journalistic ire from slaveholders to clerical abolitionists – his own MASS colleagues – in the pages of The Liberator.

It appeared to be a Boston battle, but the anti-slavery brethren of New York took note. In sympathy with their orthodox brothers of New England, they could not escape the feeling that Garrison was going rogue. Gamaliel Bailey confided to James G. Birney, “As to the Boston controversy, my heart is sick. I believe in my soul that we have all over valued Garrison. And as to himself, pride has driven him mad” (23). The kindred forces in New York and Massachusetts would begin to consolidate their influence.
But in Boston, the Unitarian women of the Clique were gathering in defense around their controversial editor, pitting them against the orthodox women in BFASS. In that year’s Right and Wrong Chapman lashed out against ministers of all denominations:

We find that at almost every step we have taken towards the slave, our progress has been impeded by the same obstacle. As church members, we have been hindered by the ministry – as women, we are hindered by the ministry – as abolitionists, still comes a ‘clerical abolitionist’ to prevent, as far as in him lies, the vigorous prosecution of our efforts. (24)

The BFASS board of officers, dominated by conservatives, refused to endorse the annual report, but Chapman published it anyway, proclaiming, “I shall never submit to any custom of any society that interferes with my righteous freedom” (25). She would not be silenced, but she would also not win the war.

The men allied with Amos Phelps had the power to break up the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, which they did in forming the new Massachusetts Abolition Society (MAS) in 1839, and they took the backing of the New York-based American Anti-Slavery Society with them. (A year later the anti-Garrisonian leaders of AASS would break away, re-launching as the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society). The “new organizations” withdrew their funding of The Liberator, and their allies in the BFASS voted in April 1839 to redirect their financial support of MASS to the still-conservative AASS instead. Conservative “new org” women in the BFASS attempted to take the annual Fair as well, but Chapman maintained her own fair independently, hosting it earlier in the fall to insure the failure of the “new org” fair. (It worked.) This hostility and warfare persisted until the inevitable demise of the BFASS.

Finally, in April 1840, with the orthodox new organization in control of BFASS, they formally voted to dissolve the organization. This two-year power struggle for control
of the BFASS was over, with the women of the Clique officially banished. The winners reorganized as the Massachusetts Female Emancipation Society, a supporting auxiliary of the men’s new Massachusetts Abolition Society. Chapman, undaunted, declared the dissolution illegal, and carried on the BFASS name with the surviving members of the Clique. Uncowed, undefeated, and self-righteous, the defenders of women’s rights in pursuit of the abolition of slavery maintained their diminished machinery at No. 11.

It was in this state of mind that Maria Weston Chapman eyed her new neighbors on the other side of her home’s western wall. Perhaps in her fury at clergy of all stripes, she finally, after years of harboring small hopes of her pastor’s reformation, tendered her formal resignation from Channing’s Federal Street Society – the same time as he had begun to be a regular morning visitor next door. Her reasons are unknown, but perhaps she was as disgusted as Channing had been at the scandal of the Follen memorial service.

Yet the arrival of Margaret Fuller’s Conversations in Peabody’s parlor must have presented itself as a fine opportunity to recruit more women to her now Clique-managed BFASS. Fuller’s Unitarian attendees were not of the Orthodox sort Chapman had just parted from. In December of 1840, about the time of the annual Fair, Chapman proposed to Fuller that one session of her current Conversation series might be devoted to the subject of slavery. The note and literature she left at Peabody’s book room for Fuller does not survive, but Fuller’s lengthy response does. It deserves full inclusion.

I received your note but a short time before I went to the conversation party. There was no time for me to think what I should do or even ascertain the objects of the Fair. Had I known them I could not by any slight suggestion have conveyed my view of such movements. And a conversation on the subject would interrupt the course adopted by my class. I therefore, merely requested Miss Peabody to show the papers and your note to me before I began on the subject.
before us.

The Abolition cause commands my respect as do all efforts to relieve and raise suffering human nature. The faults of the party are such as, it seems to me, must always be incident to the partisan spirit. All that was noble and pure in their zeal has helped us all. For the disinterestedness and constancy of many individuals among you I have a high respect. Yet my own path leads a different course and often leaves me quite ignorant what you are doing, as in the present instance of your Fair.

Very probably to one whose heart is so engaged as yours in particular measures this indifference will seem incredible or even culpable. But if indifferent I have not been intolerant; I have wronged none of you by a hasty judgment or careless words, and where I have not investigated a case so as to be sure of my own opinion, I have always wished that efforts originating in a generous sympathy, or a sense of right should have fair play, have had firm faith that they must, in some way, produce eventual good.

The late movements in your party have interested me more than those which had for their object the enfranchisement of the African only. Yet I presume I should still feel sympathy with your aims only not with your measures. Yet I should like to be more fully acquainted with both. The late convention I attended hoping to hear some clear account of your wishes as to religious institutions and the social position of woman. But not only I heard nothing that pleased me, but no clear statement from anyone. Have you in print what you consider an able exposition of the views of yourself and friends? – Or if not, should you like yourself to give me some account of how these subjects stand in your mind? As far as I know you seem to me quite wrong as to what is to be done for woman! She needs new helps I think, but not such as you propose. But I should like to know your view and your grounds more clearly than I do. (Hudspeth 2:197-98)

Clearly Fuller had not read Chapman’s 1837 Right and Wrong in Boston, in which the latter lobbied for reliance on the independent female mind – which she believed could not help but compel activism.

We entreat all women, for the sake of the perishing, to examine this subject attentively, for we see that women generally, cannot become other than abolitionists in the abstract, till their sentiments respecting the rights and consequent duties of woman are the growth of their own minds. The women of
the north will not be so cold, in a cause so ennobling and holy, when they shall
have life in themselves, and walk not slavishly by permission, but freely by
inward determination. And it will be so ere long. In all parts of the world are
arising teachers on this subject, or rather the called of God, to suggest the idea of
a truth which each mind must for itself discern – ordained of God, to present a
problem for every mind to work out. (M. Chapman, *Right*, 1837)

Fuller might not have been very sympathetic to Chapman’s religious underpinnings, but
she could have related favorably to Chapman’s insistence on cultivating the intellectual
and spiritual agency of the female mind. Both women were daughters of Anne
Hutchinson, raised in the Puritan-Unitarian tradition of the direct relationship between a
woman and her God.

Assessing Fuller’s letter, one can only imagine the feelings of an equally
imperious warrior like Chapman, whose philosophical control of BFASS had been
wrested away by orthodox women, who refused to stand up for women’s rights to agency
and activism. While Fuller was teaching women skills in critical reasoning and debating
the great question of what women were born to do, Chapman and her women were battle-
scarred and bloody, unequivocal about what they were born to do, and actively doing it.
A clearer illustration of the difference between Fuller’s interior reform and Chapman’s
activist reform would be hard to create.

Chapman did not respond to Fuller’s request for further literature as she was
preparing to move to Haiti for a rest cure for her husband Henry, who suffered from
tuberculosis. But she must have left directions to do so, as her sister Anne noted in a
February letter to Maria, “I answered M. Fullers letter or rather sent her a note & one of
our Reports to E. Peabody’s” (*BPL* 14). No further exchanges between the two
headstrong, refined and educated women appear to survive.
Four very eventful years later, after Horace Greeley enticed Fuller to move to New York to write for the *New York Tribune* in 1844, Fuller felt the quickening of her emerging inner activist. In 1845 she published seven articles in the paper related to slavery, and twice she reviewed Chapman’s Annual Reports of the BFASS. But her feelings about the abolitionists had barely abated. Reviewing Garrison’s preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* she displayed the bluntness of her critical style that would alienate many:

> [Garrison’s] motives and his course have been noble and generous. We look upon him with high respect, but he has indulged in violent invective and denunciation till he has spoiled the temper of his mind. Like a man who has been in the habit of screaming himself hoarse to make the deaf hear, he can no longer pitch his voice on a key agreeable to common ears. (Fuller, “Narrative”)

Fuller’s delicate sensibilities made her deaf to the cause itself, making it impossible for her to hear the Garrisonians, but time and distance would help change that.

After two years of writing about a broad spectrum of social causes in New York, Fuller was assigned as the first female foreign correspondent to Rome to cover the Italian Revolution for the *Tribune’s* readers. She published her eighteenth dispatch on January 1, 1848. Swept up in the meaning, passion and romance of that revolution, she finally understood the radicals back in Boston. She wrote for the paper:

> How it pleases me here to think of the Abolitionists! I could never endure to be with them at home, they were so tedious, often so narrow, always so rabid and exaggerated in their tone. But after all they had a high motive, something eternal in their desire and life; and if it was not the only thing worth thinking of, it was really something worth living and dying for to free a great nation from such a terrible blot, such a threatening plague. God strengthen them, and make them wise to achieve their purposes. (Fuller, *Days* 166)

Looking back on her Boston years frequenting West Street, Fuller may not have
been willing to engage in a new arena so clearly already dominated by other powerful female personalities. But even more importantly, like most of the transcendentalists in 1840, she had probably not yet laid sufficient emotional groundwork to become a public radical for any cause.

Whether or not Chapman was aware of this eventual reversal in Fuller’s attitude, she did later get her revenge as the editor of Harriet Martineau’s *Autobiography*. Chapman had met the Englishwoman Martineau in the mid-1830s when the traveling literary lioness was researching a book on the young American nation. Chapman was in part responsible for enlisting Martineau as a vocal proponent of American abolition, and the two became fast friends for life. It was to Chapman that Martineau turned in the 1870s to serve as the editor of her memoirs.

Harriet Martineau also became well acquainted with Margaret Fuller while sojourning in Boston, and in fact Fuller had harbored high hopes that Martineau, as a leading female public figure, might become a mentor to her. They, too, were “intimate friends” until Fuller delivered a sincere but overly-honest critique of Martineau’s *Society in America* in a private letter. Martineau had left the United States in 1836, so could never have attended one of Fuller’s Conversations personally. But her critique of them became legendary. It too deserves lengthy inclusion. She writes of Fuller:

The difference between us was that while she was living and moving in an ideal world, talking in private and discoursing in public about the most fanciful and shallow conceits which the transcendentalists of Boston took for philosophy, she looked down upon persons who acted instead of talking finely, and devoted their fortunes, their peace, their repose, and their very lives to the preservation of the principles of the republic. While Margaret Fuller and her adult pupils sat "gorgeously dressed," talking about Mars and Venus, Plato and Goethe, and fancying themselves the elect of the earth in intellect and refinement, the liberties of the republic were running out as fast as they could go, at a breach which
another sort of elect persons were devoting themselves to repair: and my complaint against the "gorgeous" pedants was that they regarded their preservers as hewers of wood and drawers of water, and their work as a less vital one than the pedantic orations which were spoiling a set of well-meaning women in a pitiable way. (Martineau, *Autobiography*, 381)

Such a description, of course, begs the question, how did Martineau know all this if she was not a witness? Did Chapman attend a conversation? A Weston sister? It is known that Wendell Phillips’ wife Anne, Louisa Loring and Lydia Maria Child attended at least some of the first season, but no record seems to survive of the Weston girls themselves attending. Despite the apparent voice of Martineau as the narrator, the very strident account is almost certainly influenced by editor Chapman. The publication of this characterization of Fuller and her Conversations twenty-seven years after Fuller’s death, is just one of several eternal grudges (such as that against Channing) that Chapman harbored all her days, unable to shake them off, long after Garrison had forgiven everyone.

The year 1840 was an extraordinary year overall for cataclysmic changes in the intellectual and social lives of our subjects. Dr. Channing had become a regular at Peabody’s book room, but he was not idle. He had written another treatise on slavery, which demonstrated marked evolution of his views on key matters. As seen earlier, he had experienced an epiphany at the MASS convention of 1836 regarding the human capability of African Americans. He had had another one regarding the need to engage politically in his letter to Henry Clay on the annexation of Texas. Now he was having another epiphany regarding the role of women in the anti-slavery movement. And to prove the point, he offered the manuscript of his new anti-slavery treatise, *Emancipation*,

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to Elizabeth Peabody as her very first commission as a publisher. His pronouncement on women as activists follows:

[T]here is one portion of the community to which I would especially commend the cause of the enslaved, and the duty of open testimony against this form of oppression; and that is, our women. To them, above all others, slavery should seem an intolerable evil, because its chief victims are women. . . . Woman should talk of the enslaved to her husband, and do what she can to awaken, amongst his ever-thronging worldly cares, some manly indignation, some interest in human freedom. . . . When she meets with woman, she should talk with her of the ten thousand homes which have no defence against licentiousness, against violation of the most sacred domestic ties. . . . I know it will be said, that, in thus doing, woman will wander beyond her sphere, and forsake her proper work. . . . What, let me ask, is woman's work? It is, to be a minister of Christian love. It is, to sympathize with human misery. It is, to breathe sympathy into man's heart. It is, to keep alive in society some feeling of human brother-hood. This is her mission on earth. (Channing, Emancipation, 65-66)

It is not known whether Chapman read Emancipation, though it is hard to imagine she did not. Channing’s endorsement of women’s advocacy in the anti-slavery movement was a far cry from his early entreaty to Chapman not to hold ladies’ anti-slavery meetings, or, as she recalled to Ann and Wendell Phillips, his “earnest entreaty that ‘we would confine the subject in our own hearts’” (WP 1). One might expect some alleviation of her disappointment in him, considering the liberalization of his views and their slow but steady convergence with her own. However, her bitterness towards him for not allying himself with Garrison from the start persisted unabated.

The fall of 1840 gave rise to an interesting juxtaposition of occurrences. On September 20th, the very last meeting of the Transcendental Club took place in the Peabody book room. The club finally had a clubhouse, and so it disbanded. In truth, the very existence of the book room made an organized peripatetic meeting unnecessary, but its ending signaled greater changes within the group. The topic of this last meeting was
“the organization of a new church.” Ripley’s formal resignation from his Purchase Street pulpit and the ministry would take effect in March of 1841, and he had visions of acting out a higher means of living through the establishment of an intentional community. The venture commonly called Brook Farm would be established the following month – April 1841. Peabody recorded at that last meeting in her parlor that “Mr Ripley said his say – very admirably too – & making no small impression of the reality of the evils he deplores – the key of which – is – that the ministers & church are upheld in order to uphold a society vicious in its foundations – but which the multitude desire should continue in its present conditions” (Ronda, Letters, 245-46). Ripley was clearly worn out from his battles with the establishment under Andrews Norton and with the dullness of his congregation. He was thoroughly disenchanted with the Unitarian ministry. It was time for him to move on.

Yet Peabody continued in the same letter to extol the same day sermon of Theodore Parker, the young minister who was just getting his feet under him as a preacher, and who was armed and ready to take on the world.

Today I heard Parker preach. . . . & again the deep music of his earnest voice moved me as I am seldom moved. He is really inspired. . . . He has got on fire with the velocity of his spirit’s speed – & the elements melt in the fervent heat of his word – He proves that the ‘organization’ yet admits a living spirit – & that God yet visits his church. (246)

Indeed, the letter marks the passing of the torch of Unitarian reformation from Ripley’s hand to Parker’s. Parker never would leave the church, as much as his fellow ministers wished he would. Convers Francis, who had been his mentor, wrote not long after to Hedge that “in our world of theology, Parker is just now the rising star, which some are hailing as the morning light of a better day, & others are looking at with amazed minds as
at a comet, that from its horrid hair shakes pestilence & war, – both perhaps equally mistaken. . . . His lectures are exciting much attention” (Collison 41). The coming few years would be his break-out.

Perhaps the most interesting event of 1840 was the convergence of the transcendentalists and the abolitionists at what became known as the Chardon Street Convention. As they had become tangential on West Street, so they were at Chardon Street. In November a call was issued in Boston’s newspapers for a Convention of Friends of Universal Reform in the Chardon Street Chapel. The plan was for three different conventions, where all comers could gather to consider the validity of: 1. the Sabbath, 2. the Church (and/or the Bible) and 3. the ministry. The seamless gathering of both camps can be seen in the fluid credit various attendees and scholars have assigned to the organizers of the event. Emerson scholar John McAleer credited the idea for the Chardon Street Convention to “four theological mavericks”: George Ripley, Theodore Parker, (transcendentalist) Christopher Pearse Cranch and Bronson Alcott. (McAleer 300) The Oxford Companion to American Literature puts it “under the leadership of Edmund Quincy and Bronson Alcott” (Hart 119). Attendee John Greenleaf Whittier considered it the organizational handiwork of Maria Weston Chapman and Abby Kelley. (Higginson, Whittier, 81) It is clear the worlds of Nos. 11 and 13 ran in common orbit in their hopes to shake up their natal church.

The first of these was the Sabbath convention, and Edmund Quincy was elected moderator of the three-day convention, with Maria Chapman as secretary. In addition to these, a gathering of men and women from all over New England and the middle states
included Dr. Channing, Alcott, Garrison, May, Parker, Emerson and even James Russell Lowell and Henry David Thoreau. But the illustrious names were joined by a fascinating diversity of attendees, from the very highest down to Abigail Folsom, “that flea of conventions . . . but too ready with her interminable scroll.” Emerson wrote a review of the affair for *The Dial* that remains seared in posterity for its charm:

If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day-Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers – all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest. The faces were a study. The most daring innovators, and the champions-until-death of the old cause, sat side-by-side. (Emerson, “Conventions,” 101)

There was no small anxiety by conservative observers in the build up to the somewhat circus-like convention. Theodore Parker noted in his journal before the event that “Dr. C. also doubts the propriety [of the convention], since it looks like seeking agitation, and fears the opinion of Garrison, Quincy, and Maria W. Chapman.” He steeled himself for participating: “I have my own doctrines, and shall support them, think the Convention as it may.” His feelings afterwards were mixed. He understood the value of church institutions, limited as they were, but he was also still novice enough to worry about the ramifications of his association with the event. After the convention, he noted, “I will only say that all my friends after the flesh, and some of my friends after the spirit, regretted that I had any agency in calling the Convention” (qtd. in Weiss, *Life*, 158). His self-assurance may seem shaky in this entry, but Parker would be cultivating the callouses of a cultural warrior soon enough, refining what Maria Child would later call “the powerful battering-ram of Theodore Parker’s eloquence” (qtd. in Karcher, *Reader*, 253).
Remarkably, both Emerson and Garrison considered Bronson Alcott the finest speaker of the convention. Emerson glowed, “By no means the least value of this Convention, in our eye, was the scope it gave to the genius of Mr. Alcott,” (Emerson, “Conventions,” 102) and Garrison concurred, “We were much struck with a speech made by A. Bronson Alcott last evening. He argued in a manner peculiar to himself, that holiness of heart constituted the real Christian Sabbath.” And for those who did not appreciate Alcott, Garrison reflected further, “There are some men who all their lifetime reason round and round in a peck measure, and never advance a step; and a new thought rises before their affrighted imaginations like the spectre of the French Revolution, disturbing their midnight slumbers, and haunting their noonday walks” (Garrison, Untitled). It was just the kind of comment Emerson might have made.
Chapter 13
Common Threads

George Ripley may have no longer been a minister, but he was still passionate about reform. The day after the last meeting of the Transcendental Club at No. 13, he was visiting the Chapmans at No. 11 to discuss the upcoming Non-Resistance Convention. Edmund Quincy declared to Caroline Weston that “Ripley is a thorough Non-Resistant” (BPL 13), which clearly endeared him to the Clique. It triggered their deep interest in his “come-out” Brook Farm community in West Roxbury, not far from Theodore Parker’s Spring Street Church or Edmund Quincy’s Dedham home. The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education was Ripley’s plan for a community that would enable its residents to develop their spiritual and intellectual capacity while engaging in honest and honorable manual labor. Ripley and his wife Sophia Dana Ripley were educators, and the Brook Farm School was a major economic engine for the community.

The planning for the community often took place in the Ripley home, and, like the Chardon Street Convention, attracted all manner of progressive and curious thinkers. Elizabeth Peabody reported:

Mr. Ripley . . . invited all these people to his house for conversation, on several meetings. One time, when too large a party met for his own small parlor, they adjourned to my larger one in West Street. It was a most picturesque assembly of all the bats and owls that hoot in the night-times of our civilization, together with the inspired prophets of the new Protestantism. (Peabody, Reminiscences, 413)

The Weston sisters may have been among the crowd that came to Peabody’s book
room, as they took a very keen interest in the planning of George Ripley’s Brook Farm experiment. Anne Weston reported in February 1841 that Abby Kelley, a long-time Clique ally, was considering enrolling at Brook Farm. In May, she wrote to Maria that she, Caroline, and Mary Chapman had spent the evening at the Ripleys’ at a meeting about the community. “I liked Mr. Ripley very well. He really talked con amore & disclosed he never went to bed in his life so little tired as now after working in the field all day. The milking seemed to occupy a very prominent place in their regards” (BPL 16). Maria and David Child, often on the verge of destitution once their roles as abolitionists had destroyed their careers, considered Brook Farm. Languishing in Northampton where they had just moved, Maria wished she had known about Brook Farm sooner. “I am curious to hear what are the prospects of Ripley’s Community,” she wrote to Francis Shaw, then querying a few months later, “What would you think of the safety of the pecuniary investment of $2000 in Geo. Ripley’s establishment? I mean the person’s labor put in likewise” (Meltzer 150, 162). But soon after she had made her decision she told Ellis Loring, “You need not trouble yourself about Ripley’s Community. I have not the slightest thought of joining it. I have had quite enough of hard work without any pay, in the course of my life” (Meltzer 167).

Edmund Quincy, who, living in Dedham, hoped to create better, more productive relations with the Brook Farm reformers, who were now his neighbors. He tried to entice Maria to relocate. “So I think if you come to Dedham to live & bring Garrison & Collins in your train we shall have quite a little Athens of our own” (BPL 11). When the anniversary of emancipation in the West Indies was celebrated in Dedham in 1842, Anne Weston reported to Maria that “All Ripley’s Community came. . . . They excited some
astonishment among the plain folk. The men being in blouses & both men & women with garlands of oak-leaves twined around their heads – looking like Zofin’s moons” (BPL 21). Echoing Peabody’s characterization of the eclectic crowd in her book room, this picture of the Brook Farm community paints a picture of flower children more than a century before their appearance in the 1960s. Eliza Follen thought their “mumming attire” inappropriate, but Quincy was more disappointed in their refusal to address the assembly in honor of the anniversary of West Indies Emancipation. “I do not think we have anything to hope from them” (BPL 23), he conceded sadly.

Markedly uninterested in associated communities in general was William Lloyd Garrison, despite the fact that his brother George was a co-founder of the Northampton Association and Industrial Community in an old Northampton silk manufacturing site. For an associationist, his views on associated communities are a bit unexpected. He explained to Henry C. Wright in Dublin, sharing the views of Emerson and Channing:

It cannot be denied that circumstances are often very unfavorable to the development of man’s faculties and moral nature; and if, by a reorganization of society, these can be rendered more favorable, – as doubtless they can, – let it take place. But it is an internal rather than an outward reorganization that is needed to put away the evil that is in the world. (qtd. in Friedman 65.)

Though George Ripley would never become an activist for abolition, as an editor of The Dial, he published a review in the October 1840 issue on George F. Simmons’ “Two Sermons on the Kind Treatment and on the Emancipation of Slaves.” Simmons, one of the young divinity school students who had made the fatal mistake of inviting Emerson to speak at his graduation in 1838, had not taken Emerson’s advice to forsake the church. He did, however, exercise equally bad judgment when addressing his brand
new Unitarian congregation in Mobile, Alabama, suggesting to them that their slaves
might deserve better treatment. After two sermons, he was run out of town upon pain of
death, from whence he returned to Boston. Ripley undertook to review those sermons,
and in his remarks, he addressed the transcendentalists’ relationship with abolitionists,
sounding very much like Dr. Channing.

[O]ur acquaintance with individual abolitionists is very limited; we have never
been in the habit of acting with them; we have no case to make out in their favor;
but our opinion is formed from their published writings, which we have read
diligently. . . . In the defence of their principles, no doubt, there may be the leaven
of human imperfection; for man still shares in the fall of Adam; there may be such
bad rhetoric; there may be a violation of the decorous courtesies. . . . But they
keep higher laws than they break. ‘We must pardon something to the spirit of
liberty,’ which fills their souls. It is in their ranks that we must look for the most
disinterested devotion to a great cause . . . and a willingness to brave persecution,
contumely and death, in their defence. Such qualities cannot long be
overlooked. Once seen, they cannot be despised. The heart is true as steel to their
attractions. . . . [T]o-morrow the voice of humanity will echo in their honor.
(Ripley 250-51)

Did Ripley’s acquaintances at No. 11 read The Dial? In one 1842 letter to her
sister Debora, Maria Chapman shared her reading list, which included an issue of The
Dial, and which she annotated, “Pretty good – goes with you against association” (BPL
22). Most interesting about Ripley’s review is its subject matter, which was not standard
fare for the literary Dial, and for the statement that even though those in the
transcendentalist circle did not associate with the abolitionists, they read their
publications. There is ample evidence that that went both ways.

Back in the 1830s it was not uncommon for Dr. Channing to submit letters to The
Liberator, and certainly The Liberator staff was not shy about reviewing Channing’s
publications. Both Garrison and Child were happy to review Channing’s Slavery, and
neither one held back their disappointment.

In May of 1841 Maria Child moved down to New York City to take over the editorial duties of the new *Anti-Slavery Standard* – mouthpiece of the surviving Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society. As such she had occasion to review or reprint her transcendental acquaintances back in Boston. For example, in June 1841, she reprinted Emerson’s essay “Man the Reformer” and then printed her own article on “Transcendentalism” in November of that year. Later in February of 1845, she reviewed her old friend Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Fuller likewise reviewed Child’s *Letter from New York* in the January 1844 issue of *The Dial*.

Child submitted her piece “What is Beauty?” to *The Dial* when Emerson was editor, in April 1843, which he printed. But he turned down a poem of hers on childhood in January 1844 issue because, as he said, “The verses too had merit, and I have recurred to them twice or thrice with a good will to print them, but they want that finish which my eye demands in these things, and I decided not to print them” (Holland 4).

On assuming editorial duties of *The Dial* in 1842, Emerson printed an article by an American businessman in Haiti titled “Saturday and Sunday Among the Creoles: A Letter from the West Indies.” Its author, B.P. Hunt, maintained that in West Indian Sunday Schools, black and white children showed equal capacity in intellect and manners – an report that much interested the editor. Emerson also wrote a review of Garrison’s *Sonnets and Other Poems* in the July 1843 issue of *The Dial*. Of Garrison’s talent as a speaker, Emerson had taken note in 1839, describing him in his journal as “a man of great ability in conversation, of a certain longsightedness in debate which is a great excellence . . . and an eloquence of illustration which contents the ear & the mind” (*JMN* 7:281). But
as a writer Garrison did not shine as bright. Emerson remarked courteously, “Mr Garrison has won his palms in quite other fields than those of the lyric muse, and he is far more likely to be the subject than the author of good poems.” Yet, all was not in vain. “That piece in the volume, which pleased us most, was the address to his first-born child” (Emerson, “Record,” 134). (As recalled by Samuel May, “Mr. Alcott wept as he read [that poem], with excess of feeling.”) (qtd. in W.P. Garrison 2:99)

Theodore Parker had his submission to *The Liberty Bell* turned down by Maria Chapman in November 1841. Chapman’s husband Henry wrote to Debora Weston,

Theo. Parker you know wrote a piece for the Bell, it was an Allegory & illustrated his peculiar religious views without a particle of A Slavery. _Anne & the Calvinists tho’ it hardly right to admit, considering that all denominations contribute to it – so Maria wrote a very polite [letter] to TP that for the above reason &c it would be best not to insert it and requesting him to send another – his reply was very friendly & proper. (BPL 17)

Parker must have taken the rejection in stride, as he submitted again in 1843. “Socrates in Boston: A Dialogue Between the Philosopher and a Yankee” appeared that year, the only piece by a transcendentalist in *The Liberty Bell* until anti-slavery become impossible to ignore, even by such stalwart mystics as Emerson, in the late 1840s and 1850s.

The rise of Theodore Parker as the radical theological knight, seizing the standard of church reform, is a great American story. Like the Weston sisters, who descended directly from Massachusetts Bay Pilgrims, and like Emerson, whose grandfather was the chaplain to the Concord militia that fought British redcoats at the Old North Bridge (on Emerson’s own land), Parker had a revolutionary pedigree that informed his view of himself in America. His grandfather, Captain John Parker, led the Lexington militia on
that fateful day of April 19, 1775, which heralded the start of the Revolutionary War. The
captain is still credited with steeling his men on Lexington Green before the approaching
British regulars with the inspiring declaration, “Don’t fire unless fired upon; but if they
mean to have a war, let it begin here.” (Rev. William Emerson was likewise reputed to
have declared on Concord Green that same morning, "Let us stand our ground. If we die,
let us die here!" – before cooler heads overruled him.) Capt. Parker’s musket from that
day hangs in the Massachusetts State House, but until Theodore Parker donated it in his
will, it hung in his own home. Like Emerson, Parker saw himself as entrusted with
responsibility for the nation his progenitor helped create. Growing up on the same family
farm and attending the meetinghouse that sat on that same Lexington Green, Parker
learned early on that “Rebellion to Tyrants is obedience to God.” There is no surprise
that he would become a warrior theologian.

Parker, like the other pedigreed figures mentioned above, may have had a
hallowed name, but he did not have means. His march to Harvard Divinity School was
longer and more arduous for a farmer’s son without resources. Thus, ministers such as
James Freeman Clarke and William Henry Channing, born like Parker in 1910, had
graduated and were out west missionizing while Parker was still slogging through his
studies in the mid-1830s. Yet Parker, a prodigious and voracious intellect, became a
theological scholar who ran intellectual circles around nearly everyone else of his day.
He reputedly read all of the approximately 13,000 volumes of his personal library, which
he left to the Boston Public Library in his will. In itself, his encyclopedic knowledge of
scripture and church history made him a powerful antagonist. But what made him such a
formidable adversary in the theology wars between the transcendentalists and the old
guard Unitarian leadership was his growing (and ultimately unshakeable) fearlessness in tearing down the walls of church convention.

Like Garrison, he was known to be sweet, kind and affectionate in private, but merciless, mighty and shocking in public discourse. As he stepped into the void left by George Ripley’s departure from controversy, Emerson wrote in his journal that Parker “has beautiful fangs, & the whole amphitheatre delights to see him worry & tear his victim” (qtd. in Grodzins 261). Added to these weapons, Parker had a wicked wit and a gift for slashing sarcasm. No other transcendentalist had his power to change the status quo.

Parker was certainly well aware of Garrison and the movement as the 1840s began, but his focus was on reform of the church first. With the exception of neighbor Edmund Quincy, he did not know members of the Clique personally yet; that would not happen for several more years. But when Theodore Parker made his first forthright step into the anti-slavery arena in January 1841, Quincy was there to document the hopeful responses of the abolitionists.

Parker’s “A Sermon on Slavery” was an unabashed step into the fray, moving significantly closer to the abolitionists than his transcendentalist brethren had in two ways. Unlike Channing and (the still-anemic) Emerson, Parker was temperamentally comfortable with antagonism and not only declined to scold the abolitionists for their tendentious rhetoric, he wrote them a pass:

These men, it is said, are sometimes extravagant in their speech; they do not treat the ‘patriarchal institution’ with becoming reverence; they call slaveholders hard names. . . . What wonder is it that these men sometimes grow warm in their arguments! What wonder that their heart burns when they think of so many women exposed to contamination and nameless abuse; of so many children reared like beasts, and sold as oxen; of so many men owning no property in their hands,
or their feet, their hearts, or their lives! The wonder is all the other side, that they do not go to further extremities, sinful as it might be . . .

If the abolitionists are “extravagant,” he queried, “what shall we call the deadness of so many more amongst us?” (Parker, *Sermon*, 10-11)

Parker then turned on the enablers of the north, those who thought that slavery was a sectional issue, of no relevance to the free states. “Slavery!” Parker expounded, “we have something to do with it. The sugar and rice we eat, the cotton we wear, are the work of the slave. His wrongs are imported to us in these things. We eat his flesh and drink his blood” (12). The root source of the evil of slavery knows no sectional lines; in both north and south it is allowed and protected for one non-denominational reason only:

It comes from the desire to get gain, comfort, or luxury; to have power over matter, without working or paying the honest price of that gain, comfort luxury, and power; it is the spirit which would knowingly and of set purpose injure another for the sake of gaining some benefit to yourself. . . . If you for your own sake, would unjustly put any man in a position which degrades him in your eyes, in his own eyes, in the eyes of his fellow-men, you have the spirit of the slaveholder. . . . This is the reason . . . that we deliver up the fugitives, and ‘betray him that wandereth,’ sheltering ourselves under the plea that we keep the law of the land, written by man on parchment half a century ago, while we violate the law of nature, written everlastingly by God on the walls of the world. . . . [In the north] it is not owing so much to our superior goodness, perhaps, as to a fortunate accident, that we have no slaves here at this day. They are not profitable. The shrewd men of our land discerned the fact long ago, and settled the question. (13-14)

Even in typescript, one can hear the “Son of Thunder,” as Elizabeth called her close friend Parker. And one can forgive the abolitionists for thinking Parker was about to join their ranks.

Edmund Quincy was the first to hear about the sermon, though he had not been in the audience, and he wrote to Caroline Weston to start the drumbeats through the Clique.
An abolitionist parishioner of Parker’s related that it was anti-slavery “thorough & no mistake.” Quincy dares not get his hopes up while he waits for Parker to bring the manuscript by to share with him:

He has before recognized the A[nti].S[lavery]. & N[on]. R[esistance]. movements as the chief, if not the only, manifestations of Christianity in the present age, without any Emersonian or Channingian qualifications. I think that we shall get some work out of him in some way. He is, I should judge from what he said about converted to Non Resistance also. You of course will not count much upon him yet – nor do I – only I hope. . . . He has already pretty nearly preached himself out of all respectable pulpits & will ere long I think preach himself out of his property. The signing the call for the Sab[bath]. Con[vention]. was of infinite service to him & I think may be the turning point in his life – as it helped him to get rid of a large proportion of that usefulness which is the first thing a man has to free himself from when he wants to be good for anything – & moreover it conferred upon him a very wholesome share of odium – the true baptism by fire – & I think he will stand it. (BPL 12)

Two weeks later, he followed up with Maria Chapman:

[Parker] spent an evening with me this week & brought his sermon & read it to us. It was very eloquent & very thorough – taking the ultra ground – condemning the North as the chief criminals – & defending the course & measures of the Abolitionists. He is a remarkable person & if he can only hold himself erect & go on he will make a figure before the world. . . . His eyes are not wholly opened yet to the real character of the Unitarian Clergy – but I am giving him a course of lectures on the subject when I see him – & they will tear his eyes open before long if he goes on as he has begun. (BPL 13)

Parker’s promising debut, however, would not be followed up again for years, much to the disappointment of the Garrisonians. The likely reason is suggested in Quincy’s letter to Caroline Weston: Parker was preaching himself out of all respectable pulpits. In preaching a fiery anti-slavery sermon, Parker had put his cart before his horse. Of primary importance to him was the reform of the church – the machinery (or horse) necessary for promulgating societal reforms. Abolition was in Parker’s cart; the result
was a game of abolition peek-a-boo – a very frustrating game for abolitionists in their quest for clerical support.

As a constant member of the Transcendentalist Club, Parker shared that group’s philosophical dismissal of historical Christianity; he had not been shy about expressing his views on the Bible, the church and the nature of Christ from his Spring Street pulpit – perhaps the only place his ideas were broadly accepted. Within months, Parker would administer the follow-up punch to Emerson’s Divinity School address and torch the Unitarian world with his transcendental take on Christ and the church. The occasion was the ordination of Charles Shackford in the Hawes Place Church of South Boston, and the name of his sermon was *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*.

Although Parker had already expressed most of the ideas in the discourse in other sermons, the choice to deliver it at an ordination, before a broad spectrum of Unitarian and Orthodox clergy, magnified its impact on the ministerial community and beyond. By presenting a radical new view of Christianity to a fledgling pastor starting his career, Parker echoed the bold act of Emerson at the Divinity School, but he did it from *within* the church – not as an exiled cleric. Still a member in somewhat-fair standing of the Unitarian Boston Association of Ministers, Parker posed a sticky problem for the brethren. Unlike Emerson, he was still one of them, and how they would respond to his performance would be closely judged by their rival Orthodox clergy.

Parker would go far beyond George Ripley’s controversial idea that it was immaterial whether one believed the veracity of the miracles of the New Testament. The title of his sermon formed the basis of his address, “Transient and Permanent”: What part
of modern Christianity formed what he called “absolute religion” – the immutable eternal core of Christianity – and what was inferior alloy? What he found to be transient was the forms of the church – man’s attempts at establishing Christianity’s permanence through its institutionalization. The spoken words, the oral teachings of Christ – the most ethereal part of Christianity – were in fact the permanent.

He began by asserting that Christians had “taken into their houses a great deal of Heathenism, a great deal of Judaism, & very little of [Christianity]. Thus the pure waters of Rel[igion], have been . . . corrupted – filled with the mud & slime, & abominable things of Heathen countries, the sweepings of idol temples, the offscourings of Jewish cities” (qtd. in Grodzins 241). All of this meant that the basic light of Christ had been obscured and diluted by generations of church traditions, which made the pure light of Christ harder to discern. Humanity was evolving and would continue to evolve; men would become more and more conscious and more and more capable of receiving God’s truth, as mankind advanced. Thus loyalty to forms created by past generations with lesser consciousness was retrograde.

“The miracles,” he grumbled, “that contradict common Law – such as the substantiation of Bread, water &c, the sending of the Devil into the swine, the resurrection of dead men – the resurrection of J[esus] C[hrist] itself – all these have [nothing] to do with [Christianity.]” He insisted, the present duties were to “rationalize Christianity” and “Christianize Reason.” Strangely, his fellow ministers did not follow. (241-2)

He continued, tearing down their house, claiming that the Bible, likewise, was written by men who did the best they could for their time and place, but for whom post-
Enlightenment men must make allowances. As an example, he pointed out that

On the authority of the written word, men have been taught impossible legends, conflicting assertions; to take fiction for fact; a dream for a miraculous revelation of God; an oriental poem for a grave history of miraculous events. . . . Matters have come to such a pass that even now, he is deemed an infidel, if not by implication an atheist, who will not believe that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his Son, a thought at which the flesh creeps with horror. (245)

Christ, he points out, did not commit his teachings to permanent form; “he found[ed] no institution as a monument of his words. He appoint[ed] no order of men to preserve his bright and glad revealings. He only [bid] his friends proclaim the truths they had received. He did not even write his words in a book. . . . He sowed his seed in the heart, and left it there” (244). Thus, the most permanent part of Christianity is to be sought and found within one’s own heart. All the mutable forms of the church are man-created, and so must be flawed, at the very least, over time.

The Unitarian ministers in Parker’s audience could not have received the news of their own irrelevance with much comfort, but the Orthodox were energized, busy scribbling down what they thought they heard and understood for what would become a fierce debate in Boston’s religious press.

But Parker was not done. He suggested that the Christian worship of Jesus was akin to idolatry, and that making a god of him rendered him useless as an attainable model of emulation. He even suggested his openness to the idea that as man evolved, an even more evolved Jesus might arrive in the future when men were capable of receiving greater light. Still, the essence of Christianity would remain the same. “So if it could be proved, in opposition to the greatest amount of historical evidence ever collected on a similar point, that the gospels were a sheer fabrication, that Jesus had never lived, still

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Christianity would stand firm, and fear no evil. None of the doctrines of this religion would fall to the ground.” The religion of Jesus was “absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion. . . . The only form it demands is a divine life. Love to God; Love to man; doing the best thing, in the purest way, from the highest motives” (245-6). Parker’s biographer Dean Grodzins clarifies his subject’s position on miracles. “He believed that nothing in the Bible was authorized in any miraculous sense and that what was true and valid was intuitively obvious to all people. He assumed that what was mistakenly called miraculous inspiration was in fact natural; and that natural inspiration could be ‘divine’ if it perceived Truth; . . .” (252). Poor Charles Shackford.

For Parker’s fellow transcendentalists, the address was spectacular. Elizabeth Peabody, who was in the audience, judged “[h]is sermon at South Boston was a consuming fire” (Ronda, Letters, 254), and when the first printing of his address in a 48-page pamphlet sold out, she took over as printer for subsequent editions and sold it in her book room. Writing to minister and future Brook Farmer John Sullivan Dwight, she effused that Parker

  goes on with the rapidity of an Angel – improving and unfolding and making a prodigious impression on people in spite of clerical opposition in the meanest tricks. . . . I go to hear him preach – & it is always good – better than others: & sometimes – frequently – very great. . . . He grows deeper and tenderer as he grows bolder & more radical. . . . But it is palpable to every body how many of the ministers dread his coming – while the common people ‘hear him gladly’” (254).

In fact, the ensuing scandal put Parker on the public map, and attracted an ever-growing army of followers, hungry for his ideas, and for the inspiring passion of his delivery. When he began a lecture series that following winter, he spoke to packed halls.

  Within a couple of weeks, the Orthodox journals lit up with reviews and
responses to Parkers visionary if not incendiary manifesto. Grodzins reports that
“Reading these crisscrossing polemics was like listening to a gun fight in an echo
chamber. The noise would not die down for months, and ears would still be ringing years
later” (Grodzins 248). His own Unitarian brethren were unexpectedly silent at first. The
Orthodox claimed that Parker’s dance with Deism was the ultimate extension of
Unitarianism, and because Unitarians by design did not have a creed, they could not
easily disprove the charge. The Unitarians would have to decide how to defend
themselves. If they began to require a creed to be a Unitarian minister, then they would
be as limiting to the religious freedom of the Transcendentalists as the Orthodox had been
to them. The optics of this hypocrisy was not lost on them.

Some Unitarians were willing to eat crow in that regard and called for Parker’s
“excommunication,” though the idea was heretical to them as a whole; there was no
mechanism for it within the American Unitarian Association. As long as Parker’s church
supported him, he was a minister. However, the brethren could stop exchanging with
him; they could stop including him in their fellowship. This most did. Heavy pressure
was applied to Parker to resign, but he refused to do so. He became completely
ostracized by his brethren. Parker had been in the running to take over Ripley’s Purchase
Street congregation, but this opportunity was now withdrawn. Even at James Freeman
Clarke’s liberal Church of the Disciples, Clarke’s congregation appealed to their pastor to
“uninvite” Parker from a planned exchange. Former mentor and close friend Convers
Francis, who was about to become a full professor at Harvard Divinity School, canceled
an exchange with Parker out of fear of losing this career appointment – a move that made
a strong impact on their friendship. Other transcendentalists remained as quiet as the
abolitionists did. Ripley was retired from theological matters, and Emerson and Fuller had no comment whatsoever, in *The Dial* or in private correspondence. Parker was on his own before the fury of the full Protestant establishment, causing him to lament that “I am so much an outcast from society as if I were a convicted pirate” (qtd. in Commager 104). But he was undeterred.

One more interesting voice needs to be heard regarding Parker’s break-out into the stage with the landmark address that still counts as Unitarian scripture today. Parker’s primary mentor and friend, William Ellery Channing, had much to say about the address, which reveals even more about the elasticity of the elder. Once again, Peabody shared the letters they exchanged over the event. Channing was moved by Parker’s “strong heartfelt utterance” of the fact that Christianity was “the universal, eternal truth, the expression of the Divine mind.” He had watched Emerson and Ripley leave the ranks and must have been reassured to see Parker stand his ground:

Still, there was a good deal in the discourse I did not respond to. I grieved that he did not give some clear, direct expression of his belief in the Christian miracles. His silence under such circumstances makes me fear that he does not believe them. I see not how the rejection of these can be separated from the rejection of Jesus Christ. Without them he becomes a mere fable. . . . Reduce Christianity to a set of abstract ideas, sever it from its teacher, and it ceases to be "the power of God unto salvation." . . . [W]hat I want is, not the naked idea, but the existence, the realization of perfection . . . . I want the existence of human perfection . . . . [T]he men to whom Christ was to unfold this truth were unspeakably distant from this perfection; that they were low, gross, spiritually dead; that the spiritual evidence which was enough for him hardly gleamed on their darkened understanding. How needed was some outward, visible symbol of the truth to such minds as Christ's resurrection! It shows great ignorance of human nature and of God's modes of operation to suppose that he would approach a darkened, sensual world by purely spiritual, abstract teaching. (Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 423–426)
Yet, this heartfelt resistance to Parker’s ideas did not diminish his affection, or his acceptance of Parker’s right to express them. Two weeks later he would write to Peabody again:

As to Mr. Parker, I wish him to preach what he thoroughly believes and feels. I trust the account you received of attempts to put him down was in the main a fiction. Let the full heart pour itself forth. . . . I do assure you that the weaknesses of the good are among the trials of my faith. . . . Give my love to Mr. Parker. I shall be glad to hear from him, and in perfect freedom. I think he is probably to be one of the many who are made wise by error and suffering. But I honor his virtues. I feel that he has seized on some great truths, and I earnestly desire for him that illumination which will make him an unmixed blessing to his fellow-creatures. (429)

When Channing referred to “the weaknesses of the good,” he was not lamenting the possibly erroneous hypotheses of Parker. Rather, he was lamenting, as he looked to the last year of his life, the limitations of the leaders of the faith he founded, his disappointment in their persecution of Parker, the attempts to prevent his free inquiry and free expression.
Chapter 14
The Ascension of Channing

Although the emergence of one who would become the new prophet of Unitarianism was marked with little notice by many transcendentalists and perhaps none by abolitionists, the ground was shifting under all of them. With Channing out of the Federal Street Church, replaced by the conservative and staunchly anti-abolitionist Ezra Stiles Gannett, members of the Clique abandoned that church as Maria Chapman had. Many of the abolitionists, including Chapman and Garrison, began to seek out Parker’s sermons and lectures. Some Weston sisters attended John Pierpont’s Hollis Street Church, until that minister’s strong stand on temperance and slavery created conflict in his congregation, and he was ultimately forced to resign in 1845.

The social unease and instability was not limited to the community of thinkers in Boston; it had reverberations throughout the region. At the end of 1841 the Westons’ friend Evelina Smith reported that their hometown of Weymouth was “in wonderful commotion . . . . For the last week or two, one could hardly go out, with encountering little knots of men at the corners of the streets, and at the shops & offices, eagerly gesticulating, & the ominous sounds of Abolition, Transcendentalism, church, Sabbath, &c. &c. . . . Women are running to and fro, with grave but earnest looks” (BPL 18). In a note to his wife, James Freeman Clarke shared Emerson’s quip that “[e]veryman carries a revolution in his waistcoat pocket.” (qtd. in Hale 133)

Meanwhile, the gentle Channing, still making personal house calls to his flock, visited the Chapmans in January of 1842, when their in-law Mary Chapman was ill.
Anne Weston related:

Dr. Channing called in his *pastoral* capacity to look up Mary [Gray Chapman]. He could not bear to have her stay away from meeting. He wanted her to go to *some* church, or if that would not do, let the friends hold a *parlour* meeting & Wendell [Phillips] preach. Maria uttered some thorough testimonies & excommunicated his church. Mary behaved well & very innocently mortified the poor Dr. by her praise of Parker & her indifference to meetings. (*BPL* 20)

Though Channing was probably less mortified by their endorsement of Parker than the Westons delighted to believe, in retrospect the episode is sad, as Channing’s intentions were only good and his days were numbered. It may have been the last time they saw him. Just as sad was the fact that Henry Grafton Chapman, Maria’s husband, was suffering increasingly from the tuberculosis that would soon take his life, too.

Through 1841 and 1842, Henry and Maria Chapman would be traveling back and forth from Haiti, where they hoped the tropical climate would provide Henry’s longed-for restoration to health. Meanwhile, her sisters held down BFASS operations in Boston in their absence.

Despite his fragile health, Channing still had contributions to make to the anti-slavery movement. In a March 1842 address in Boston, “Duty of the Free States,” he offered up a most revolutionary passage – for him. Intensifying the stand he took in his earlier open letter to Henry Clay on Texas, he considered the necessity of preserving the Union, something his younger self would not have considered:

. . . I do not mean that union is to be held fast at whatever cost. Vast sacrifices should be made to it; but not the sacrifice of duty. For one, I do not wish it to continue, if after earnest, faithful effort, the truth should be made clear, that the free States are not to be absolved from giving support to slavery. Better that we should part, than be the police of the slaveholder, than fight his battles, than wage war to uphold an oppressive institution.
So I say, let the Union be dissolved, rather than admit Texas into the confederacy. This measure, besides entailing on us evils of all sorts, would have for its chief end to bring the whole country under the slave power; to make the general government the agent of slavery; and this we are bound to resist at all hazards. The free States should declare that the very act of admitting Texas will be construed as a dissolution of the Union. (Channing, “Duty,” 83-84)

Channing now saw that Texas represented not just the spread of slavery into new territory, but into every state in the Union – including New England; it was a full takeover of the government. That realization drove him towards Garrison’s banner of “no union with slaveholders.”

This was not the only evidence Channing left of his increasingly radical stand on politics. His very last public statement on the topic was his address in Lenox, Massachusetts, in observance of the August 1 anniversary of West Indian Emancipation. It was not a scheduled address; he had not been invited, and there were no local plans to observe the anniversary. He was simply an inspired tourist whose spirit had been moved on the occasion. Channing would never be a Garrisonian, but this last public address did document his continuing evolution on the issue of slavery. He began, characteristically, by assuring his audience that he spoke on behalf of no group. “Do not mix me up with other men good or bad; but listen to me as a separate witness, standing on my own ground” (Channing, “Lenox”, 7). Then he proceeded to dismiss the arguments against abolition, many of which he had been willing to entertain in the past.

He insisted now that it did not matter how brutal a slave’s condition might or might not be – answering comparisons between the conditions of slaves and poor white laborers. The crime was in robbing him of his humanity, and his potential to improve himself, as God intended. It was thus a spiritual crime. “What is the end and essence of
life? It is to expand all our faculties and affections. It is to grow, to gain by exercise new
energy, new intellect, new love. It is to hope, to strive, to bring out what is within us, to
press towards what is above us. In other words, it is to be Free. Slavery is thus at war
with the true life of human nature” (14).

He insisted that it was not just a southern problem but a northern one as well. The
root cause of northern tolerance of slavery was the profit motive pure and simple, but he
also implied that it was also tolerated in the north because of the region’s inherent racism.
He pointed out that in other countries, black men are not so reviled and dehumanized.
“We are apt to think this prejudice of color founded in nature. But in the most
enlightened countries in Europe, the man of African descent is received into the society
of the great and good, as an equal and friend. It is here only that this prejudice reigns”
(19-20).

Channing pointed out the unnatural nature of slavery. In the end, it is the loss of
Freedom that is the most egregious. “Nature knows no such thing as a perpetual yoke. . . .
Nature has implanted in all souls the thirst, the passion for liberty.” And he lamented the
unchristian and dehumanizing nature of the institution, revealing a deeper sympathy for
and acceptance of the African as a member of his human family:

Declare a man a chattel, something which you may own, and may turn to your
use, as a horse or a tool . . . and you cease to look on him as a Man. You may call
him such; but he is not to you a brother, a fellow being, a partaker of your nature,
and your equal in the sight of God. You view him, you speak to him, as infinitely
beneath you, as belonging to another race. You have a tone and a look towards
him which you never use towards a man. (8)

But, most striking was his very first public endorsement of any level of political
action. It was qualified, and a single recommendation, but it was to make a national
moral commitment to end slavery, and to make a singular but decisive community effort:

Freeman of the mountains! as far as you have power, remove from yourselves, from our dear and venerable mother, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and from all the Free States, the baseness and guilt of ministering to slavery, of acting as the Slaveholder's police, of lending him arms and strength to secure his victim. I deprecate all political action on slavery, except for one end, and this end is, to release the free states from all connection with this oppressive institution, to sever slavery wholly from the National Government, to make it exclusively the concern of the States in which it exists. For this end, memorials should be poured in upon Congress, to obtain from that body such modifications of the laws, and such propositions to amend the constitution, as well set us free from obligation to sanction slavery. This done, political action, on the subject ought to cease. (33)

Clearly, Channing had not calcified in his thinking; his evolution since the 1835 publication of *Slavery* was noteworthy. And though slow by Garrisonian standards to epiphanies about reform, the limber flexibility of his judgments stand in stark contrast to both the sluggish torpor of the transcendentalists and the unbending, uncompromising dogma of the Clique.

These two lectures reflect how deeply Channing was beginning to question his lifelong antipathy to associated action in the face of an intractable complacency in the populace about slavery. This comes in tandem with the disappointment he harbored towards the Unitarian ministry in general. He wrestled with a question that had been the bedrock of his worldview all his life, coming to grips with the reality that his philosophy of moral suasion – of improving society one improved individual at a time – was not going to be sufficient to end slavery. He wrote to fellow theologian James Blanco White:

I would that I could look to Unitarianism with more hope. But this system was, at its recent revival, a protest of the understanding against absurd dogmas, rather than the work of deep religious principle, and was early paralyzed by the mixture of a material philosophy, and fell too much into the hands of scholars and political reformers, and the consequence is a want of vitality and force which gives us little hope of its accomplishing much under its present auspices, or in its present
form. When I tell you that no sect in this country has taken less interest in the slavery question, or is more inclined to conservatism, than our body, you will judge what may be expected from it. Whence is salvation to come? . . . Is the world to receive new impulse from individual reformers or from new organizations? Or is the work to go on by a more silent, unorganized action of thought and great principles in the mass? Or are the great convulsions, breaking up the present order of things, as in the fall of the Roman empire, needed to the introduction of a reform worthy of the name? Sometimes I fear the last, so rooted seem the corruptions of the Church and society. But I live in hope of milder processes. (qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 2:394-95)

To consider that Channing wrote this at a time when most of his ministerial children were afraid to say the word “slavery” in their pulpits and were bored with him for doing “nothing new,” we might consider the Channing story worthy of Shakespeare.

Indeed, Channing’s youthful resiliency in the face of his lifelong legendary frailness presents a remarkable dichotomy. His mind enjoyed the elasticity of youth, even when his body had no resiliency. Emerson once said, when word of a bout of Channing’s illness was abroad, “In our wantonness we often flout Dr. Channing, and say he is getting old; but as soon as he is ill we remember he is our Bishop, and we have not done with him yet” (Peabody, Remiscences, 371)

George Ripley wrote in The Dial that Channing’s confession of faith embodied the “creed of the youth of this country, who are beginning, not so much to protest against the past, as to live in the present, and construct for the future” (Ripley 247).

Peabody recorded Channing’s attitude towards his transcendentalist children, including his humorous complaint that, “The danger that besets our Transcendentalists is that they sometimes mistake their individualities for the Transcendent.” Yet, he was nimble enough to let his offspring make their mistakes. Peabody recalled:

When the plan of the ‘Dial,’ to be edited by Mr. Ripley and Margaret Fuller was made, Dr. Channing cheered on the undertaking with his sympathy; and I
remember Mr. Ripley saying to me that he thought it the crowning glory of Dr. Channing that, himself the author of one great movement, he so generously looked upon another, – which as Mr. Ripley phrased it, ‘was a reform upon his reform,’ – and that he showed in his old age the same generous faith in freedom of inquiry and abandonment of tradition that he showed in his youth. In short, the ‘movement party’ found him, whenever they went to him for sympathy, ready to sympathize; and if he criticized measures, he always said God-speed to the spirit of the thing.’ ‘Nothing,’ he would say to me sometimes, ‘terrifies me in these wildest moments. What has for years terrified and discouraged me is apathy.’

(Peabody, Reminiscences, 370-1)

Theodore Parker, too, saw Channing as a man outside of his generation, yet a man for all time. He observed how estranged the elder had become from the ministry he founded:

If Dr. Channing could be ground over again, and come out a young man of five-and-twenty . . . [with] all the insight, power, eloquence, Christianity he now possesses, – but let him hold the same religious, philosophical, political, and social opinions as now[,] . . . be all unknown to fame, he could not find a place for the sole of his foot in Boston, though half-a-dozen pulpits were vacant – not he.

(qtd. in Weiss 108-108)

After Channing’s death, Parker summed up his greatness in a memorial sermon, especially with regards to his individual strength in the face of all manner of public opinion. “Nothing could pervert his moral judgment. . . . Timid though he was, and self-distrustful to a great degree, yet when Conscience spoke he heeded neither the roar of the little, nor the clamor of the great which excites that roar. . . . He was single-hearted in his efforts, aiming at no personal aggrandizement. He forgot himself in finding the truth”

(Parker, “Tribute,” 12).

Perhaps most touching would be the tribute of Lydia Maria Child, the editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard after Channing’s death. A subscriber to the Standard, he had written to her to thank her
for what you have done for the oppressed, & to express the pleasure & I hope profit which I have received from the various efforts of your mind. I have been delighted to see in your ‘letters’ [‘Letters from New York” editorials] in the Standard such sure marks of a pert, loving, hopeful spirit, to see that the flow of genial noble feeling has been in no degree checked by the outward discouragements of life. (Holland 1)

This unsolicited affectionate regard re-endeared Child to him deeply, and after his death she would return the favor in print:

He often sent for me, when I was in Boston, and always urged me to come and tell him of every new aspect in the Antislavery cause. At every interview, I could see that he grew bolder and stronger on the subject, while I felt that I grew wiser and more just. At first I thought him timid, and even slightly timeserving; but I soon discovered that I formed this estimate from ignorance of his character. I learned that it was justice to all, not popularity for himself, which made him so cautious. He constantly grew upon my respect, until I came to regard him as the wisest, as well as the gentlest, apostle of humanity. I owe him thanks for preserving me from the one-sidedness into which zealous reformers are so apt to run. He never sought to undervalue the importance of Antislavery, but he said many things to prevent my looking upon it as the only question interesting to humanity. My mind needed this check; and I never think of his ‘many-sided’ conversations without deep gratitude. . . . At one time he was very doubtful whether it were right to petition Congress. He afterwards headed a petition himself. In all such cases he was held back by the conscientious fear of violating some other duty, in endeavouring to do his duty to the slave. Some zealous reformers did not understand this; and thus construed into a love of popularity what was, in fact, but a fine sense of justice, a more universal love of his species."

(qtd. in W.H. Channing, Memoir, 3:154-155.)

The death of William Ellery Channing, apparently from typhoid fever, on October 2, 1842, unleashed waves of communal grief in Boston and beyond. Maria Child reported that abolitionist Eliza Follen, widow of Charles Follen, received the news “with furious grief” (Holland 2). Samuel J. May, with the characteristic kindness and affection for his friends that never failed him, memorialized his mentor:

And we look back with no little admiration upon one who, enjoying as he did, in
the utmost serenity, the highest reputation as a writer and a divine, put at hazard the repose of the rest of his life, and sacrificed hundreds of admirers of his genius, eloquence, and piety, by espousing the cause of the oppressed, which most of the eminent men in the land would not touch with one of their fingers. (May 185)

Even in The Liberator, submissions of memorial odes were published in November from William Cullen Bryant and Albert G. Greene. James Russell Lowell published a memorial ode to Channing in the 1843 Liberty Bell.

Garrison himself did not respond until 1848, as many did, when William Henry Channing published the first volume of his three-volume intimate biography of the uncle who raised him — Memoirs of William Ellery Channing. Garrison finally had a chance to gain some insight into the interior of the man who never was able to give him the support he so desperately needed. He generously reviewed the new Memoir:

My impressions of Dr. Channing were, that he was somewhat cold in temperament, timid in spirit, and oracular in feeling. But these have been greatly, if not entirely removed by a perusal of his Memoir. I see him now in a new phase — in a better light. He certainly had no ardor of soul, but a mild and steady warmth of character appears to have been natural to him. I do not think he was timid in a condemnatory sense; but his circumspection was almost excessive, his veneration large — and distrust of himself, rather than a few of others, led him to appear to shrink from an uncompromising application of the principles he cherished. In the theological arena, he exhibited more courage than elsewhere; yet even there, he was far from being boldly aggressive, for controversy was not to his taste. (Garrison, “Channing”)

By the time the Memoir was published, Theodore Parker was much more closely acquainted with Garrison, whom he admired. In his review of the biography of his mentor, Parker felt compelled to interrupt his laudatory words to express his disappointment that Channing had neglected Garrison — to him a dark blot on the revered Channing’s character.

[Garrison] was reviled, insulted, mobbed; a price set on his head; he lived in the
same city with Dr. Channing, struggling with poverty, obscurity, and honorable
disgrace for twelve years, and Dr. Channing afforded him no aid, nor counsel, nor
sympathy, not a single “God bless you, my brother,” and did not even answer his
letter! This we find it difficult to understand, as it is painful to relate. We gladly
hasten away from the subject, which we could not pass by in silence, but have
spoken of in sorrow. (Parker, “Channing,” 448)

We, likewise, gladly hasten away from the subject, as the mystery still remains, 170 years
later.

Garrison may have been able to make some peace with Channing, but Maria
Chapman never would reconcile with the man she repeatedly called “an elderly ambitious
milk-sop.” Even as late as 1876, her blood still boiled, and her grievances flew back in
time, past his later improvements, and roosted in the early days of the movement. Worse
than his condemnations of vulgar abolitionist tactics was the vulnerability they faced
without his support. In her private writings she charged, “[H]e made our lives unsafe, &
exposed us to the fury of street mobs & the invasion of & the setting fire to our houses
(BPL 27). In public, the most measured, civil remarks she could muster were:

Dr. Channing . . . was a good man, but not in any sense a great one. With
benevolent intentions, he could not greatly help the nineteenth century, for he
knew very little about it, or, indeed, of any other. He had neither insight, courage,
nor firmness. In his own church had sprung up a vigorous opposition to slavery,
which he innocently, in so far as ignorantly, used the little strength he had to stay.
. . . He had been selected by a set of money-making men as their representative
for piety. (Martineau, Autobiography, 2:272)

The persistence of her outrage thirty years after his death, in itself, gives clear and
incontrovertible evidence of the force of her will and conviction. This yields more in the
way of documentary evidence than Harriet Martineau’s characterization of Chapman as
possessing “the sweetest womanly tenderness that woman ever manifested” (qtd. in
Chambers 2). History can only understand what it can see, and, perhaps unfairly, less
primary evidence survives of her sweetness than her capacity for recrimination.

There is no doubt that the passing of Dr. Channing on October 2nd went unmarked in the Chapman household, as Henry Grafton Chapman died the very next day, October 3rd of tuberculosis, marking the end of the Chapmans’ life as they had known it, including their residence on West Street. (Maria Child wrote to Ellis Loring, “I wonder whether Dr. Channing and H.G. Chapman met on the road, and had any talk together.”) (Holland 2)

Yet, settling into new quarters a few blocks away on Summer Street, Maria Chapman and her sisters continued their labors with hardly a recess. The day after Henry passed, on October 4th, fugitive slave George Latimer and his wife Rebecca arrived in Boston after escaping slavery in Virginia. By October 20th, Latimer was in the Leverett Street jail, under arrest. The Weston sisters mounted their steeds.

The Latimer case became a landmark case for the anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts in that it generated an extraordinary petition drive to change state law regarding the role of state officials in the recovery of fugitive slaves. Signed by nearly 65,000 residents of the state and submitted to the Massachusetts Legislature, the petition led to the passing of the 1843 Massachusetts Personal Liberty Act, or the Latimer Law, which forbid state officials from aiding or abetting the arrest or detention of fugitive slaves in the state. It forbade the use of state facilities for detention of fugitive slaves, and it allowed for the state to propose a national constitutional amendment to forever separate the state of Massachusetts from all connections to the institution of slavery. A second petition with approximately 52,000 signatures, proposing that constitutional amendment, was sent to the state’s Congressional delegation, but had no success. The
state petition was called the Great Massachusetts Petition and, purportedly, the paper itself was more than a half a mile long.

The relevance of the case here is that members of the Clique were actively engaged in the collection of signatures for these petitions. Edmund Quincy and Maria Child were drivers of the petition in Boston, and they hoped to take advantage of Theodore Parker’s growing popularity as a lecturer to collect more signatures — a not unreasonable idea considering the anti-slavery sympathies expressed in his 1841 anti-slavery speech. Parker originally agreed to help out when his parishioner Frederick Cabot asked him to read the petition to the audience, but he later had second thoughts, considering that the topic of his lecture was not compatible with the process. “An abolitionist friend” — probably Quincy — was aware that he had changed his mind, but Parker was unable to get the word out to all involved — which included Maria Chapman. Many years later, Chapman bitterly recalled her version of the unfortunate incident:

Theodore Parker was delivering his lectures on religion in the Marlborough Chapel & I sat on the platform [illegible], to stand by him, as a free thinker, when he refused to stand by me, as an Abolitionist. It was thus. The abolitionists were petitioning on behalf of Latimer. A crowd was thronging to hear Parker — & knowing full well how many toilsome steps it takes to roll up a petition against public opinion, I thought to save some fatigue by taking advantage of hard minds, fused to melting-point by Parker’s eloquence in favour freedom [sic] in the church, to gain their names in behalf of freedom in the State. . . . I offered to ask Parker to cooperate by giving notice at the close of the lecture that forms of petition were placed at each entrance, with pens & ink & the audience were to be requested to sign as they went out. He said he would give notice. The time came: Parker was silent. I said _ ‘Mr Parker! they are beginning to disperse: Pray be quick! – ‘You must not think me faint hearted,’ was his reply, (– turning a nasty pall-green) but it has occurred to me that I have no right to use the building for this purpose.’ Just here comes William [Henry] Channing to me, rushing up the steps of the platform. ‘Mrs Chapman Why does not Mr. Parker give the notice!’ I said he doubts his right. ‘Then we have no business here!’ – said Wm – & ran & gathering up the tables and pens & ink & the coadjutors, & went off with the
My Conclusion about Theodore Parker was that he had just moral courage enough for his own use, but None to Share for the Cause at this period: and I have ever Since thought of him, that as far as the A.S. Cause was concerned, his moral courage like that of so many others, kept exact pace with the progress of the movement. (BPL 5)

We may never know why Parker changed his mind – or worse – lost his nerve; perhaps it was the fact that he was already in the cross-hairs of the entire Protestant machinery of New England, vilified as a deist, a heretic and an infidel in his chosen profession. And to be sure, Parker, like Channing and Emerson, was not a strong advocate of associated social action. Quincy was not likely surprised; Parker had attended the 1842 anniversary “picnic” for West Indies Emancipation in Dedham, but when Quincy asked him to speak he declined. “How long and difficult is the process by which a Unitarian Minister is transformed into a Man!” Quincy lamented at the time. (BPL 23)

But it is again noteworthy, that Chapman recalls this episode years later, well after Parker’s premature death from tuberculosis in 1860, after Parker, as an individual, grew into a formidable career as an anti-slavery warrior – most notably as one of the Secret Six supporters of the insurrectionist John Brown. But in late 1842, Parker was not prepared to join the ranks, and in the late 1870s, Chapman was not prepared to forgive him.

Parker, however, would be evolving. His interminable trials with the Boston Association of Ministers – his refusal to withdraw from the ministerial fellowship, even in the face of widespread shunning – slowly tempered him and thickened his skin. The popularity of his lectures rivaled the rising celebrity of Emerson, and he would soon outgrow his humble little Spring Street Church in West Roxbury. In 1843, he would leave for a year abroad, and when he returned to Boston, he would be in full armor. A
group of his supporters conspired to build a large new congregation for him in Boston – the 28th Congregational Society. Among the supporters were Francis Jackson, a stalwart supporter of the Garrisonians, and Deacon Samuel May – father of Samuel J. May and Abba May Alcott. This would be Parker’s home pulpit for the rest of his life, and it would afford him enormous social power. Many of Boston’s abolitionists would find their new home there in Parker’s house – including an irritable Maria Chapman.
Chapter 15
Emerson Eyes Channing’s Shoes

In light of the kindness shown between Maria Child and Dr. Channing in his final days, it is worth a moment to explore the slow weaning of Child from good standing in the Clique. Once, in 1840, when considering whether to try to submit her “Gospels of Beauty” to *The Dial*, she wrote to her brother Convers, “I do not think the editors of the Dial have the least wish for such an article; and . . . last, I have no particular sympathy with the clique here called transcendentalists. I want them to *have* their say, but I have never thought they had *much* to say, that would enlighten or bless the world. In no form of negation does my soul delight; it craves affirmation” (Meltzer 134). Since transcendentalists saw themselves as the ultimate purveyors of idealism, this judgment would have surprised them. However, she *did* submit “What is Beauty?” and *The Dial* did publish it.

If she did not see herself as a transcendentalist, her fellow abolitionists noticed the tendency in her. Anne Weston commented on her “character as a Transcendentalist. Pity that one who really lives so very much in the *outward*, should so perseveringly think she exists but in the inward.” Weston went on to say, as Child was heading to New York City to take on the editorship of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, that she doubted Child could “stand strait alone” in that post. “I should hardly dare to trust her with the Standard” (*BPL* 3). To be sure, like the transcendentalists, she did not have the same taste for controversy that the Weston girls had. But Garrison had faith that Child was up to the job, and both poverty and passion for the cause induced her to take it.
Child, however, was weary of the group’s perpetually rehashing of the ugly divorce between the old and new abolition organizations. The Standard itself was a new publication launched by the “old org” American Anti-Slavery Society when the “new org” American & Foreign Anti-Society took the old journal, Emancipator, with them, merging it with the Free American in 1841. Born of that strife, the Standard had a reputation for attacks on former allies and relitigation of the same old arguments. When Child took on the post, she “consented to take the Standard expressly on conditions that I would have nothing to do with fighting and controversy.” She would “aim more at reaching the people than at pleasing abolitionists.” (Meltzer, 193) “Anti-slavery might have made ten times the progress it has,” she wrote Ellis Loring, “if plain-speaking had been mixed with kindness, and zeal tempered with discretion” (Meltzer 171). Instead, she would throw herself wholly into building a family-friendly publication, one that would leave the schism in the past and call the public to the task at hand: immediate emancipation for the enslaved.

Like other papers, the Standard featured news for the cause: addresses, editorials, events, legal news, and articles on the movement, but Child also expanded the offerings to include more literary matter and miscellany, poetry, and even an occasional cartoon. She wanted to communicate with more people in more ways – attracting them to absorb the core mission of the paper without repelling them with divisive and virulent political rhetoric. In essence, without diluting the message of immediate emancipation, Child hoped, like Channing had, to slowly convert people to the cause with a soft touch, than to entrench reaction and anti-abolitionist militancy. Her editorial series, “Letters from New-York,” which profiled a broad spectrum of snapshots of the city, its people and
issues, were enormously popular, and in fact were collected and published as separate volumes. These alone played a large part in increasing readership.

The result was that Child doubled the paper’s circulation from 2,500 subscribers to 5,000 in two years. Samuel J. May expressed his gratitude to her as editor of the *Standard*, which, “without compromising its fidelity or efficiency, she made very attractive by its literary qualities and its entertaining and instructive miscellany” (May 231). But for some of her Boston compatriots, the success might have been a little too great.

The Boston crowd who had sent her there debated the softer style of the New York magazine, especially after Child refused to endorse Garrison’s summary declaration of disunion as an AASS principle. Garrison ultimately was big enough to appreciate her talents and her own style, despite her independence. He wrote in *The Liberator* that:

> Mrs. Child has very few superiors as a writer. Her style is clear as crystal, and elegantly simple; combining that rare quality, practical good sense, with great poetic beauty. . . . The field of controversy is not so much to her taste, as the grove of contemplation, or the arbor of poesy, but her clear perception of wrong, and her large benevolence of soul, impel her to go into the moral arena, not so much to achieve a triumph over others as to discharge a sacred duty. She addresses herself more to the understanding than to the conscience, and is therefore better adapted to be an auxiliary than a leader in the work of reform. (qtd. in Karcher, *Woman*, 287)

Child returned the genuine, albeit qualified support, assuring Chapman “I have the highest respect for [Garrison’s] ability, the most perfect confidence in his integrity of purpose, and a general unity with his principles. I am not willing to be mobbed for him, though I am for any principle that we hold in common” (May 175-6).

Wendell Phillips agreed with letting Child follow her own inspiration, acknowledging her success in building bridges between anti-slavery factions. He
queried, “shall there be no more letters from N.Y., no more articles ‘rightly dividing the word of truth,’ on the whole reasons of divisions in our ranks?” (qtd. in Karcher, Woman, 288)

Phillips clearly thought the answer was “no,” but a core of the Clique did not. Chapman, the Westons, Quincy and Abby Kelley demanded she conform her editorial approach to that of The Liberator, or as Chapman said, to stop serving “flapdoodle” where “roast Beef” was required. They felt she was burying the pill in the kibble, but that people needed to be converted, not duped. Abby Kelley complained that “L. Maria Child has disgraced and degraded the Standard to the level of new-organization” (Meltzer 193).

The Garrisonian “fire-eaters” called for commitments from their followers to more and more radical pledges, such as non-resistance, religious “come-outer” and tee-totaling pledges – all refusals to engage with government or churches as a protest against a corrupt nation. “I cannot express the degree of my dislike, of my utter abhorrence, of this come-out-ism,” Child complained in exasperation. “It seems to me irrational, unphilosophic, impracticable, mischievous in its effects, and excessively tyrannical in its operation” (Meltzer 207).

The Garrisonians were once again dividing amongst themselves. Child could not endure such tyrannical requirements, not just as abridgements of personal liberty, but because they muddied up the most important mission – simply emancipation. Her alienation from the anti-slavery organization, she said, came from “the bad spirit which I see everywhere manifested, and the increasing tendency to co-erce individual freedom. . . . I have no sectarian ties whatever; but I resist this innovation upon my freedom. If I see
fit to contribute toward the hire of a Catholic Cathedral, or a Mahometon mosque, I have
an undoubted right to do so. As if anti-slavery were the only idea in the universe!”
(Meltzer 194) She wondered where it would end. “Shall Sam J. May . . . and John
Parkman, &c be driven off the anti-slavery platform, because they believe they can do
good by continuing connected with the Unitarian association?” Would Lucretia Mott be
excluded because she believed it a duty to remain a Quaker?” (186)

Scholars Jane and William Pease have noted that “Garrisonianism was essentially
a millennial faith, argued in absolute terms. The character of the argument conditioned,
in turn, the character of the action.” (Pease 36) Chapman’s Separatist family legacy
made her particularly amenable to this religion. But to Child, who would someday write
a ground-breaking and far-seeing three-volume exploration of the world’s faith systems,
*The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages* (1854), such dogmatism was
utterly anathema. She insisted to Loring, “Anti-slavery does not, and cannot, supply the
religious wants of our nature” (Meltzer 196). Much as Child insisted her feelings of
friendship for Chapman were undiminished by their temperamental disagreements, this
conflict between the women could not be overcome at this time.

The relentless and aggressive pressure that Chapman and the others put on Child
to put down her quill and take up a sword finally exhausted her patience. Averse to
associations by nature and philosophy, Child popped off to her old friend with controlled
white heat in May 1842:

I care not the turning of a copper, whether the Channingites and the Quakers
approve my course, or not; and I care as little whether the Chapmanites and the
Garrisonites, and the Henry C. Wright-ites, give me a blowing up; I am glad that
they should do it, if it is any relief to their minds. Every day that I live, I thank
God more and more, that he gives me the power and the will to be an *individual.*
I am obliged to the Society for being willing to do my thinking for me, and
graciously decide whether I shall live in N. York, Philadelphia or Boston. The
*Standard* is theirs to move where they will; *I* am my own; and shall never consent
to edit, except where I now am; and under the circumstances of the same un-
impeded freedom. An agitator I am not, and never will be. (Meltzer 175)

Chapman annotated the original letter for further reference: “Mrs. Child. Evidence of the
influence of Dr. Channing . . . in alienating her mind from the line of duty” (Meltzer
deletion)

Child chronicled the rift to Ellis Loring, “What Mrs. Chapman considered a love
of popularity, and an over anxious desire to please *my* public, was in fact nothing but a
desire to gain the ear of intelligent and judicious people in behalf of anti-slavery”
(Meltzer 193). But expressing her true motive did little good. Chapman could not be
stopped. After more of Chapman’s piston-regular punches, Child declared, “I would hail
another editor to the Standard, as joyfully as a prisoner ever stepped off the treadmill”
(*BPL* 24). To Loring she confided, “I will work in my own way, according to the light
that is in me. . . . I never again will join *any* association, for any purpose” (Meltzer 194).
She was good to her word. One could make the claim at this point, that her
transformation from a Garrisonian to a late-stage Channingite was complete.

Child submitted her resignation in May of 1843 and chose to remain in New
York, returning to the writing she had abandoned so long ago. The new editor of the
*Standard* was her husband David, who was willing to give the Garrisonians what they
wanted. When he resigned a year later, all the gains the paper’s circulation had made
under his wife had been reversed. But she was in some measure free. When her old
friend Margaret Fuller moved to New York City at the end of 1844 to write for the *New
York Tribune*, their long-ago friendship would be renewed. What battle stories the two
radical women journalists must have shared as independent professional daughters of
Channing in New York City.

Meanwhile, like most Bostonians with a pulse in the 1840s, the members of the Clique frequently attended Emerson’s lectures, though not always with satisfactory results. In January of 1842, Anne Weston wrote to her sister Debora that she and their brother Hervey went to one:

He was on character & quite interesting. The house was full two thirds. He attacked the Abolitionists by name in a very vile manner that is supposing he meant us . . . . The idea was that the abolitionists were spiritual slaveholders ‘incarnations of the laws of Georgia & Alabama.’ He however bore something of a testimony as to Slavery for he spoke of it in company with ‘fraud’ & other acknowledged vices. (BPL 19)

Weston was not the only one to notice Emerson was sadly underdeveloped in regards to anti-slavery. When Maria Child went to hear him with a friend on his 1843 New York tour, she wrote back to Ellis Loring,

John and I go to [Emerson’s] lectures, and find them refreshing as a glass of soda-water; but, as usual, not satisfactory. He gave, in one of the lectures, such a glowing and graceful picture of Southern manners and character, that I might have supposed he considered arbitrary power one of the most beneficial influences on man. I should not have quarrelled with this, had he made the least allusion to any bad effects. Speaking of the deficiencies between our professions and our practice, as a people, he did not allude to slavery. I cannot think that this is manly and true; for the subject must occur to him. (Holland 3).

Despite her secret transcendental side, Child was not Emerson’s biggest fan. She maintained that “he is the best poet in the country, by all odds, and I am ready to do battle with anybody that maintains to the contrary” (Meltzer 218-9), but she was also “struck by his want of continuity.” His lectures were “full of profound things and brilliant things,” but he had “no thread to string his pearls upon.” (Holland 5). In the end, her response to
the man who would, more than any other, come to represent transcendentalism was fairly tepid.

The Weston sisters, including Chapman, were surprisingly well disposed to Emerson overall. In February 1844, the year he would make his break-out anti-slavery speech in Concord on the anniversary of West Indies Emancipation, members of the Clique had been having a small party at Maria’s, including James Birney, the Childs, Wendell Phillips, Edmund Quincy, Francis Jackson and others. After their soiree the entire cabal went to hear Emerson begin a new lecture series, and Caroline recorded it in her journal. “I am going to the whole course it was a most delightful lecture – he thinks all goes wrong in the world because so many are out of place – the ‘round pins are in square holes’” (BPL 25).

Maria Weston Chapman, for all her narrowness of passion, had an interest in transcendental writers, in particular Thomas Carlyle. (On this Child would have agreed, writing once to Loring to thank him for sending “Sartor Resartus”, which I kept under my pillow for weeks, and shouted over with joy.”) (Meltzer 196) Chapman had a personal pantheon of great thinkers, whom she shared in a letter to Louisa Loring.

Some day I shall of a certainty know Carlyle. All manner of walls melt down, that people of the same heart may meet__ Differences of country, station, sect, sex, talent, training, – all are in vain to keep them asunder. The rebuilding of the ruined world were not distant & slow, not an age requisite to make ‘an idea common property, could a congress of such as H. Martineau, Carlyle, Emerson, Garrison & their likes meet face to face. Quite infinite is the help they might each afford the other. . . .’”Like will to like” & “Associations for ever!” Not associations as machinery only or as churches only, but as both. Not as Church & state either. Not a tying together, but a fusion. __Self-Government, to wit. (EGL 1)

Chapman’s often difficult wordsmithing reveals that same millennial theocratic tendency
that Child could not get past, but it is interesting to note that at least two of her four heroes were transcendentalists. As disappointing as transcendentalists were to her cause, she recognized the underlying anti-establishment sympathies of the two groups in the theoretical world.

Her affinity for Emerson in particular is curious because he had no affinity for associations whatsoever. Over the years he trudged a long, arduous path away from jarring racism, and even as he was pressured into anti-slavery activism by the female members of his immediate family, he did so holding his nose. Still, Pease & Pease assert that Chapman considered Emerson her spiritual mentor. Considering the high standard of philosophical purity Chapman held everyone else to, especially ministers such as Channing and Parker, it is remarkable how forgiving she was of Emerson. Perhaps Emerson endeared himself to her in the very act of resigning, in the very earliest days of the anti-slavery movement, from the same ministry that would ever disappoint her – even though that cause had nothing to do with his resignation. Perhaps that abandonment of the pulpit released him, in Chapman’s eyes, from the obligation to active reform work.

No matter how pastors Channing and Parker might have outperformed Emerson with regards to anti-slavery in the early 1840s, the philosopher Emerson could not disappoint her to the same level.

In the 1844 Annual Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, two years after Channing’s death, Chapman still hammered home the evils of the transcendentalists and their elder for thwarting the Garrisonian cause.

There has been, from old time, a school of philosophy which ascribes to loneliness and quiet, and individualism, not only their great and characteristic powers, but which would also endow them with those of society, activity, and cooperation. The ideas of this school have been brought to bear upon our
association by those who wished to disband it, from the commencement of our enterprise. . . . Dr. Channing and the transcendental school borrowed the idea from old philosophers, and applied it unsuccessfully to prevent men from associating as Abolitionists. (qtd. in Gougeon, Hero, 48)

She recognized that Emerson belonged to this class of thwaiters, but her characteristic derision does not rise to the surface with him.

In the summer of 1844, word spread quickly that the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society had finally convinced Emerson to make an address in honor of West Indies Emancipation on August 1, 1844 there in his hometown. His address is considered his first serious anti-slavery address, and was much anticipated. Although Anne Weston and Maria Chapman both wrote letters to Wendell Phillips encouraging him to represent the Clique at Emerson’s Concord debut, he did not attend, and it is unlikely they did either. (A competing event in Hingham was much closer to the Weston home in Weymouth.) But a myriad of observers were there to record the event.

Despite his deep reluctance to enter the battlefield, Emerson took the commission extremely seriously. First, it was the result of deep scholarly research into the history of slavery itself and particularly in the British West Indies. He was aided in his research for the oral address, as well as the later pamphlet publication, by his dear friend, abolitionist and attorney Ellis Gray Loring, whose deep knowledge of both the cause, and of the legal literature on important slavery cases, were of inestimable aid and enlightenment to Emerson. Their collaboration certainly provided the abolitionist with an extraordinary opportunity to influence Emerson’s perception of the issues and his responsibility in relation to them. (Loring’s influence may be underestimated in Emerson scholarship.) In addition, this research was taking place in the political uproar over President John Tyler’s drafting of a treaty to provide for the annexation of Texas. With the threat of the addition
of another slave state into the Union, even the non-political likes of Emerson were alarmed. The ongoing public discourse on the topic made Emerson’s soil friable, receptive to new seeds of thought.

A study of Emerson’s address shows how cannily he understood all the different factions within his Concord audience, and what they would want and not want to hear. He utilized several narrative techniques that might have helped him avoid the triggers that usually set off the Garrisonians, as well as the general public. He opens with a classic Channingite statement of non-association with any movement, and follows with reference to the abolitionists’ reputation for condemnatory rhetoric. But he does it with disarming good humor:

The institution of slavery seems to its opponent to have but one side, and he feels that none but a stupid or a malignant person can hesitate on a view of the facts. . . . I was about to say, let him go hence . . . But I have thought better: let him not go. . . . Let us withhold every indignant remark. In this cause, we must renounce our temper, and the risings of pride. If there be any man . . . who would not so much as part with his ice-cream, to save [a race of men] from rapine and manacles, I think I must not hesitate to satisfy that man, that also his cream and vanilla are safer and cheaper, by placing the negro nation on a fair footing, than by robbing them. (Emerson, “Address,” 4)

Though America’s mercantile nature disgusted Emerson, he knew his audience. He was willing to appeal to their commercial nature if nothing else. He proceeded to make the case that West Indian Emancipation had shown that free negroes were good for business. This may not be the highest example of his commitment to “moral suasion,” but it reveals a latent pragmatism in Emerson not often seen.

Then he returned to the morality of the issue, subtly implicating his northern listeners for closing their eyes.
We sympathize very tenderly here with the poor aggrieved planter, of whom so many unpleasant things are said; but if we saw the whip applied to old men, to tender women . . . if we saw men’s backs flayed with cowhides . . . if we saw runaways hunted with bloodhounds . . . if we saw these things with eyes, we too would wince. . . . The blood is moral: the blood is anti-slavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery. (6)

The failure of northern imaginations to adequately conjure these scenes makes the north complicit. Emerson insists they conjure these images until they can bear full witness to the evil in the crimes.

Yet this is as close as he comes to addressing American slavery. The pragmatism returns. By confining his remarks primarily to the issue of slavery as it had been (and continued to be) resolved by England, he was able to impart ideas about slavery with a proxy tale, without overtly proselytizing about American slavery. Anyone in his audience could infer the lessons to domestic American slavery, if they so chose.

Emerson also appealed to patriotic pride, again suggesting, without brow-beating, that America was supposed to be the land of the free and England the seat of tyranny. In one telling anecdote, he reminded his listeners of a point of pride in England: “As soon as any man puts his foot on English ground, he becomes free.” This was followed by the quote of a grateful black man in English courts speaking through his attorney, “I was a slave for I was in America: I am now in a country, where the common rights of mankind are known and regarded” (26). Emerson did not need to interpret the irony for his Concord audience, nurtured on the patriotic mythology of April 19, 1775. New England revolutionary pride was in their genes, and shame for betraying the tradition would by nature rise up.

He further appealed to white and Yankee pride, assuring his listeners that “[t]he
genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery” (34). Furthermore, “[s]trong and healthy yeomen and husbands of the land, the self-sustaining class of inventive and industrious men, fear no competition or superiority” (29). Even though we may love the luxuries that the national slave economy affords every New Englander, the northern “man is born with intellect, as well as with a love of sugar, and with a sense of justice, as well as a taste for strong drink” (19).

Emerson’s reliance on the regional pride and sense of manhood continued, as he turned his attention on the pressing problem of the day – not of the enslavement of millions of Africans in slave states, but the southern practice of imprisoning the free black maritime citizens of Massachusetts when their ships enter southern ports. This dastardly practice, designed to keep New England’s free black population from infecting southern slaves with a taste for freedom, saw the common incarceration of black mariners in jail while their ships were in port. If the captains of those ships would not pay for the room and board of their crew in those jails, the men were subject to being sold into slavery.

Emerson was outraged at the practice, but even more outraged that the Massachusetts Congressional delegation was utterly mute on the topic. To address this, he demanded his listeners let their congressmen know exactly how they felt about this institutionalized kidnapping of their fellow citizens in southern ports. If those leaders failed to act “in the sleep of the laws,” it was incumbent on every son of New England to vote the unworthies out. The very supine position of these men made them the tools of southern bullies; “there is a disastrous want of men from New England,” he charged. (25)
If the State has no power to defend its own people in its own shipping, because it has delegated that power to the Federal Government, has it no representation in the Federal Government? Are those men dumb? . . . Let the senators and representatives of the State, containing a population of a million freemen, go in a body before the Congress, and say, that they have a demand to make on them so imperative that all functions of government must stop, until it is satisfied. . . . The Congress should instruct the President to send to those ports of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, such orders and such force, as should release, forthwith, all such citizens of Massachusetts as were holden in a prison without the allegation of any crime, and should set foot on the strictest inquisition to discover where such persons, brought into slavery by these local laws . . . may now be. That first; – and then, let order be taken to indemnify all such as have been incarcerated. As for dangers to the Union, from such demands! – the Union is already at an end, when the first citizen of Massachusetts is thus outraged. (24)

The sheer radicalness of Emerson’s call for federal intervention marks an extraordinary change from his earlier expectation that slavery would be only ended when slaves and their owners were able to self-improve themselves out of the peculiar institution.

Granted, affording justice to the free black men of Massachusetts did nothing to end slavery. But again, Emerson knew his audience.

He knew that the moral suasion of the abolitionists was having very little effect, especially in the shadow of Texas. He knew that first he must anger New Englanders on their own behalf; he must inflame their indignation about the federally-sanctioned violations of the rights of Massachusetts citizens, regardless of their color. Next, having battled (and continuing to battle) his own personal racism, he had to convince his audience of the capacity of the black man to participate in society as a self-reliant man. He evoked Thomas Clarkson’s exhibition of the cultural artifacts of Africa, which displayed their capacity, when free, for civilization. Having just publishing “Saturday and Sunday Among the Creoles: A Letter from the West Indies” in the April 1844 issue of The Dial, he was conversant and convinced in the findings that black children were as
educable as white. Similarly, his other research convinced him that the post-abolition economy of the British West Indies had revealed the black man’s initiative and capacity to take care of himself. For the author of “Self-Reliance,” this was the magic tipping point. He declared that “The First of August marks the entrance of a new element into modern politics, namely, the civilization of the negro. A man is added to the human family” (29). He offers a markedly transcendentalist assessment:

I esteem the occasion of this jubilee to be the proud discovery, that the black race can contend with the white; that, in the great anthem that we call history, a piece of many parts and vast compass, after playing a long time a very low and subdued accompaniment, they perceive the time arrived when they can strike in with effect, and take a master’s part in the music. . . . [N]ow let them emerge, clothed and in their own form. (34)

For many listeners and subsequent readers, the lecture hit its mark, even though Emerson failed to touch upon the primary goal of abolitionists: immediate emancipation for American slaves. He also failed to endorse Garrison’s non-resistance, which would preclude government intervention in the fight. He offered no advice about how the emancipation of American slaves might be effected or what individuals could do to pursue it. But Emerson was astute enough to know that as a simple repeater of Garrisonian tenets, he would have no more success than the abolitionists were having. He knew his Concord audience better, and knew he had to approach their hearts from a different point on the compass. He had to provoke them to resist the institutional impact of slavery on themselves (for their sympathy for the slave was weak), and he had to begin to chip away at their widespread and deeply ingrained belief that a black man was not exactly a man. Emerson knew, because he was just like them. No art of address required.
Still, he wanted to give the abolitionists their due. As he had avoided American slavery in his discussion of English slavery, so he avoided naming individual American abolitionists or their societies. He began instead by praising the English abolitionists who had effected British emancipation, and then slowly elided into their unnamed American counterparts. He noted that the English heroes had extraordinary moral qualities.

This moral force perpetually reinforces and dignifies the friends of this cause. It gave that tenacity to their point which has insured ultimate triumph; and it gave that superiority in reason, in imagery, in eloquence, which makes in all countries anti-slavery meetings so attractive to the people, and has made it a proverb in Massachusetts, that ‘eloquence is dog-cheap at the anti-slavery chapel? [sic]’ . . . . [W]e are indebted mainly to this movement, and to the continuers of it. (27-28)

Some abolitionists understood all this, and understood that the very fact of Emerson’s willingness to speak was a major victory. Little mention remains of the fact that a young, relatively unknown Frederick Douglass also spoke at the event, as did Samuel J. May. But in 1844, Emerson was at the very zenith of his fame and influence, and so the power of his endorsement could not be duplicated by anyone else. The president of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Mary Merrick Brooks, who had organized the event, and who, along with Emerson’s mother, wife and aunt had convinced him to speak, glowed in her victory. So grateful was she, and so desirous that Emerson should feel welcomed into the anti-slavery fold, that in October she awarded him a medal on behalf of the national organization. Claiming him as one of their own, even if he did not claim to be one, was as much for the benefit of the society’s morale as it was positive reinforcement for Emerson.
Maria Chapman revealed her quirky views of Emerson in an unpublished draft review of his address, noting that “[t]he abolitionists have been greatly cheered & strengthened by the words of Mr Emerson’s.”

Emerson is a ripe & thorough scholar & well known in the world as an eloquent writer. Language is to him what the blade is to an accomplished swordsman. He is one of whom the United States of North America have too few – an educated man of Genius: a sort of which they can boast fewer still; – a man who has acted upon his convictions, as fast as he was convinced. His character being rather contemplative than active, at least according to the popular acceptation of those words, he has been a philosophical Speculator rather than a reformer. His wisdom has therefore made fools of some, & his naturalness been the occasion of affectation in others. Hundreds of young persons have made him their excuse for avoiding the Anti Slavery battle, & talking about the clear light; just as thousands have refused their help to the cause because Dr Channing wrote essays against associations. (BPL 26)

Emerson the Channingite and Emerson the man of genius are able to exist simultaneously in Chapman’s world, yet the fact that the draft does not appear to have been published may reflect her awareness that the contradiction would not be easy to explain to the public.

Not all reviewers were satisfied. One witness to the Concord event was compelled to express in The Liberator that the central point had been neglected, characterizing Emerson, a bit sarcastically, as the medium of the female “Spirit of Liberty”:

We hoped she would have spoken in equally strong tones of rebuke, of injuries done daily to thousands of free-born Americans in other States, whose rights are as dear to the heart in which justice dwells, as the rights of the citizens of Massachusetts; but perhaps she found no words — perhaps a feeling of sickening despair seized her, and she feared longer to stay. (“The First of August in Concord” 23 August 1844)
John Greenleaf Whittier, the poet Samuel May considered abolition’s “laureate,” (“…his harp of liberty was never hung up”) (May 263), expressed the mixed feelings of many when he wrote an encouraging review of the final pamphlet for the Middlesex Standard:

We had previously, we confess, felt half indignant that, while we were struggling against the popular current, mobbed, hunted, denounced, from the legislative forum, cursed from the pulpit, sneered at by wealth and fashion and shallow aristocracy, such a man as Ralph Waldo Emerson should be brooding over his pleasant philosophies, writing his quaint and beautiful essays, in the retirement on the banks of the Concord, unconcerned and ‘calm as a summer’s morning.’ (qtd. in Gougeon, Hero, 91)

Emerson’s own kind were more uniformly gentle. Transcendentalist George Curtis wrote, “It was not of that cold, clear, intellectual character that chills so many people, but full of ardent life. His recent study of Anti Slavery history has infused a fine enthusiasm into his spirit & the address was very eloquent” (qtd. in Gougeon, Emerson, 574). His friend Margaret Fuller effused in her journal, “But Waldo’s oration, O that was great heroic, calm, sweet, fair. . . . So beautifully spoken too! Better than he ever spoke before. . . . The old story of how the blacks received their emancipation: it seemed as if I had never heard before: he gave it such expression. . . . I felt excited to new life and a nobler emulation by Waldo this day.” (qtd. in Berg, et al, “Impulses,” 107)

Regardless of what interior forces finally motivated Emerson, the Emancipation address does mark a new phase in Emerson’s public anti-slavery life. It did not make him fonder of participating, and it left him feeling compromised rather than proud. He complained to Carlyle in England, “though I sometimes accept a popular call, & preach on Temperance or the Abolition of slavery, as lately on the First of August, I am sure to
feel before I have done with it, what an intrusion it is in to another sphere & so much loss of virtue in my own” (qtd. in Gougeon, Hero, 92). Wallowing in the “philanthropic mud” continued to unsettle him, as he wrote earlier in the year: “Now when at any time I take part in a public debate, I wish on my return home to be shampooed & in all other ways aired & purified” (JMN 9:71). Emerson could not be more clear in his continued distaste for activism in early 1844: “Does not he do more to abolish Slavery who works all day steadily in his own garden than he who goes to the abolition-meeting & makes a speech? . . . He who does his own work frees a slave. He who does not his own work is a slave-holder” (9:126). Channing would have understood, but he might have answered the question, “No. But nice try.”

The illuminating impact Emerson’s address made on Margaret Fuller marked a new phase in Fuller’s life, but it was not the only catalyst in her transition from interior thinker to the exterior agent she would soon become in New York. The loud and heated question of the annexation of Texas was inescapable that same year of 1844, and though Maria Chapman appeared to have given up on her long ago, Fuller’s friend Eliza Loring had not. Fuller reflected in her 1844 journal, “Mrs. Loring here. They want something of me about Texas. Went to walk, but could not think about it. I don’t like to do anything else just yet, don’t feel ready. I never can do well more than one thing at a time, and the least thing costs me so much thought and feeling; others have no idea of it” (Higginson, Ossoli, 122-23). Her world had been consumed with arts, culture and women’s issues, especially as it played out in her own budding writing career. She had recently published Summer on the Lakes in 1843, and she was working on converting her Dial essay “The
Great Lawsuit. Man Versus Men. Woman versus Women.” into her great feminist manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

But resist the expansion of her world as she did, the question of broader activism haunted her. What *else* were women born to do? Her diary soon read: “Might not we women do something in regard to this Texas annexation project? I have never felt that I had any call to take part in public affairs before; but this is a great moral question, and we have an obvious right to express our convictions. I should like to convene meetings everywhere and take our stand”(123). Such a metamorphosis was probably not possible for Fuller in Boston where existing reformers governed a well-established dominion. Fate came to her rescue when the publisher of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, delivered her ticket to the greater world beyond – a position as staff writer on his influential paper – a remarkable achievement for a single woman in 1844.
Chapter 16

Fraternal Acceptance

The transcendentalists’ awkward relationship with their abolitionist siblings was fraught with two major differences in philosophy: one in principle regarding associations and the other regarding the acceptable tenor of public discourse. But there was more to it than that. They truly did admire the conviction and the eloquence of the reformers. Emerson himself wrote in his journal that Wendell Phillips was “one of the best speakers of the age,” (JMN 9:136-37) and that Garrison “is a virile speaker,” and, though he lacked “the feminine element which we find in men of genius[,] [h]e has great body to his discourse, so that he can well afford occasional flourishes & eloquence. He is a man in his place. He brings his whole history with him, wherever he goes, & there is no falsehood or patchwork, but sincerity and unity” (9:267). Elsewhere he reflects that Garrison is a masterly “agent of good. I cannot speak of that gentleman without respect” (9:134).

But Emerson, like his fellow philosophical seekers, could never refrain from qualifying their admiration. Just six pages after the preceding praise of Garrison, the same journal reads, “Every time Garrison repeats his phrase, ‘a covenant with death, & with hell they are at agreement,’ I think of Dr Bell’s patients [at the McLean asylum in Charlestown]. The superlative in manners too. People with manners of desperation who go shrieking, tearing, convulsed through life[,] wailing, praying, swearing” (9:273). He is both impressed with the man but repelled by the excesses of demeanor.
Phillips fails to satisfy, too, though not for the same reason. “The first discovery I made of Phillips was, that while I admired his eloquence, I had not the faintest wish to meet the man. He had only a platform-existence, and no personality.” Phillips and Garrison comprised a sociological and psychological test case for Emerson.

Of Phillips, Garrison, and others I have always the feeling that they may wake up some morning and find that they have made a capital mistake, and are not the persons they took themselves for. Very dangerous is this thoroughly social and related life, whether antagonistic or cooperative. . . . Mere mouthpieces of a party; take away the party and they shrivel and vanish. They are inestimable for workers on audiences; but for a private conversation, one to one, I much prefer to take my chance with that boy in the corner. (JMN 13:281-82)

But this unsatisfying assessment of either man did not prevent Emerson from increasing acceptance and increasing collegiality with them. He probably first came to know Garrison in 1839 when the militant Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, allied with the “old org” Clique in Boston, began inviting Garrison and Phillips to their meetings. It was not uncommon for them to proselytize the cause in Concord. When invited to the 1841 Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Convention there (bringing Frederick Douglass for the first time), Garrison and Samuel May took lodgings with May’s sister and brother-in-law in Concord – Bronson and Abby Alcott.

Another attendee, Phillips, became a regular – albeit provocative – speaker in Emerson’s hometown. In 1843, a year after Phillips had made an incendiary speech in town that set all of Concord ablaze, the CFASS approached Emerson to invite him back to the Lyceum (as women they had no vote on the Lyceum committee). In the interest of free speech, as well as some small sympathy with the cause, Emerson navigated the politically hot issue with an enflamed community and brought Phillips back to continue evangelizing his community.
Perhaps it was because the abolitionists were such a perplexing irritant to Emerson that he was compelled to parse his conflicting feelings towards them. This very process helped drive his evolution towards his own, individual (of course) brand of abolitionism. Over the next few years he would be making slow steps to activism. He delivered more West Indies Emancipation anniversary addresses again in 1845, 1846 and 1849. He would boycott speaking at the New Bedford Lyceum in 1845 due to their new policy of excluding blacks from membership. Much as he loathed the philanthropic mud, Emerson would begin now to play his part – rarely to the extent the abolitionists would have liked – but he would slowly begin to fill the vacant shoes of the last reluctant radical of Boston – William Ellery Channing.

Before concluding this very important chapter, it may be fitting to allow one of our first profiled figures to have the last word. Bronson Alcott, whose own transcendentalism had dominated his abolitionist muse early on, observed and studied the members of the Clique with great interest. With a wife and brother-in-law firmly in Garrison’s camp, he could hardly avoid it. But his temperament was much more inclined to the spiritual than the material world. In 1850 he recorded in his journal a deeply revelatory entry after discussing the pervasive mixed feelings he harbored about the Garrisonians with his friend Emerson. By that time, the transcendentalists and abolitionists knew each other fairly well, and a number of them (Emerson, Parker, Alcott, Garrison and Phillips in particular) had even been members of the short-lived Town & Country Club – a gentlemen’s conversation club that brought them together in 1849-1850. Because of Alcott’s insightful study of “class,” and because it so effectively
describes the candlepower of Garrison’s oratory and Alcott’s constitutional
incompatibility with it, it is worth presenting at length.

This afternoon read at the Athenaeum again. Emerson came in while I was
reading at the table, and we had some talk in the alcove on Garrison’s part in last
Monday evening’s parliament at my rooms. E. said that he could never speak
handsomely in the presence of persons of G’s class. And I, too, plead to the like
infirmity, if infirmity it be; and while entertaining profoundest respect for the
formidable talent and executiveness which works out principles to their issues,
and can scarce over-rate these admirable qualities as practical equipments, I
scarce never meet a person of this temperament with unmixed pleasure. The spirit
and grain of this class is essentially discourteous, and there is fight and
desperation in the blood, manners, and speech of the creature. He persists, and
must, on precipitating every man he meets headforemost into the pit of his
indignation, and sets his conscience forthwith to fork the poor victim into the
flames raging in his own veins, impaling his prey there most unmercifully, as he
were doing Satan’s behest in the Lord’s name. A poor creature may be so
overloaded with the sense of responsibleness, so frightfully executive and instant
and despotic in enforcing what he calls his ‘sense of duty,’ as to sacrifice the rest
of himself in his endeavours to be faithful to himself and to others. For an
overplus of conscience is quite as disastrous and fatal as a like excess of passion
or of intellect in our mixture, and converts the talents and propensities instantly
and inevitably into demons to victimize the possessor – or possessed, rather – and
everyone who falls in his way. Only the good man and true and circumspect
safely mounts the law and rides onward to victory. But neither of our prophets –
Carlyle nor Garrison – seem to have now the complete mastery, and demonize in
a style most Satanic, lurid, explosive, and damnable. (Shepard 225-26)

Given the great dispositional chasm that lie between the abstract, spiritual
transcendentalists like Alcott, and the earthy material warriors like Garrison, it is a credit
to both groups that they would be able to achieve a level of mutual co-existence, and
even cooperation, as the slavery issue gained more and more nuclear fuel en route to the
Civil War. Their ability to appreciate the gifts of the other, while accepting their
shortcomings, did credit to their aspiring souls.
Conclusions

The brick wall between No. 11 and No. 13 West Street was a sturdy one, but it was not impermeable. Metaphorical vents occasionally opened to allow sunshine or oxygen from one group of inhabitants to the other. The symbolic rowhouses lodged the heart of abolitionism and transcendentalism tangentially only for a short time – only about one year. The movements, of course, continued in their own orbits, but more and more a small group of their most influential members came gravitated together. By 1845 the culture of both groups were undergoing major changes.

The long run of the Chapman household on West Street as the center of the early abolitionist movement had ended by the time of Henry Chapman’s death in 1842, but it merely relocated to a new nearby residence and did not signal the dissolution of the Garrisonian Clique. The female, state and national anti-slavery societies had split in 1840, and the Clique would split again as the leaders’ insistence on non-resistance and come-outism drove Maria Child and the Lorings out of the fold in 1843. But a core held firm. Samuel J. May, who had always suffered in the pulpit for his active anti-slavery advocacy, finally found peace with a receptive new church in Syracuse, New York in 1845. Chapman, in 1848 moved with her children to Europe for their education, but with the help of her sisters in Boston, she continued to manage the annual fair and publish *The Liberty Bell* all the same. She returned to her post in 1855 and the Garrisonian machine motored on.

The opening of the Peabody book room had brought the transcendentalists together around Margaret Fuller’s Conversations, Emerson’s lecture series and the
publication of *The Dial* — all while the dissolution of the Transcendentalist Club signaled the slow scattering of the “like-minded” in far-ranging directions. By 1845, the “atom of a shop” had spent its energy, as its members had moved on. The establishment of Brook Farm drew George Ripley away as another short-lived communal experiment, Fruitlands, drew Bronson Alcott away. By 1844 it was clear that *The Dial* was not fiscally viable, its small circulation could not maintain production. When Horace Greeley offered Margaret Fuller a position with the *New-York Tribune*, her Conversations likewise came to a halt. Peabody herself was more and more interested in pursuing educational theory, as well as her own writing. She and her family retained the book room and circulating library for several years after 1845, but its heyday as the Transcendental Exchange was at an end.

Emerson and Parker continued to develop their spiritual visions — one within the Unitarian church and the other without. They lectured to enormous crowds of devoted followers, terrified conservative Unitarians, shocked the Orthodox, and made their way towards more active roles in the anti-slavery movement — *slowly* — frustrating their abolitionist neighbors with their maddening brand of transcendental tease. Despite evolving relationships of friendship and respect with William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, neither Emerson nor Parker would commit themselves fully to the cause of emancipation until the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 — when the slave powers infiltrated Massachusetts with the backing of the federal government. The scions of Lexington and Concord then emerged armed and determined to defend Massachusetts from yet another tyrannical government.
What the abolitionists and transcendentalists had in common was a liberal Protestant heritage that valued self-reliance, self-determination, the cultivation of lifelong moral improvement, and freedom of thought and expression. They distrusted fashion, creeds, ecclesiastical hierarchy and the infringement by any power on a man’s relationship with his God. In this culture, they were kin. For most of them, the shadow of Unitarian bishop William Ellery Channing loomed large in their spiritual development.

But they also had significant differences that kept them from being natural allies. The abolitionists were focused on a single goal – the abolition of slavery – and all other reforms were, for the most part, secondary to it. It was a holy mission, and required enormous self-sacrifice which would purify the individual while purifying society. To accomplish this required associative action – the collaboration of a committed team – and each member had to make often-painful compromises to the group in the name of unity. For some, like Lydia Maria Child, the compromise became too great. But others agreed when Maria Chapman insisted, “I consider ‘platformism’ essential to the abolition of slavery” (Pease 38). And indeed that willingness to subsume one’s needs or desires to the cause made them a cohesive and formidable force for change.

For the transcendentalists, that platformism was an anathema. They clung tenaciously to Channing’s dictum about creeds and ritual: the fear “that we shall paralyze our faculties through dependence on foreign guides.” For them, society could not be changed through collective action, but only through the improvement of individuals, which would ultimately, somehow automatically improve society. They dwelled in the interior man. The abolitionists had no patience for this glacial, gradual transformation of men in the face of a monstrous evil like slavery.
Significantly, the first figure to bridge the chasm between the two groups was their progenitor, Channing. Channing’s irreconcilable desires for both an interior and an exterior life were clearly represented by his transcendental and abolitionist offspring. A stalwart anti-association man all his life, he nevertheless had great capacity to learn. By keeping his channels of communication open with abolitionists such as Child and May, he came to accept a new truth: that an evil as vast – and growing in power – as slavery, could not be accomplished by the moral suasion of individuals alone. He would understand this much earlier than his transcendentalist children would, and it would fuel his evolution as a spokesman for public action.

As it turned out, Channing was a much more ready student of his children than they were of him. Abolitionists watched and studied the transcendentalists, but less from an interest in their ideas than in a hope to recruit them. With the possible exception of Child, and to a much lesser extent Chapman, most were not interested in transcendentalist ideas. In turn, the transcendentalists watched the abolitionists, but with a kind of nervous arrogance, disdaining their evangelical zeal as a throwback to a less civilized time. Like typical siblings, they expected to learn little from each other, and for years, they got what they expected. But slowly, as historic events unfolded, transcendentalists came to realize, as Channing had, that it was immoral for them to sit the struggle out as slavery expanded before their eyes.

Natal temperament did not easily allow for either constituency to jump tracks, but as the 1840s turned into the 1850s, the leaders of these movements better accepted the advantages of multiple and diverse kinds of genius for a common goal. The associationism of the abolitionists proved a glue that cemented their reformist agency
long after the transcendentalist diaspora. Henry Mayer’s implication in the epigraph that the transcendentalists did not appear to influence abolitionists is certainly well-founded. In fact, the reverse is true. The abolitionists had a far greater impact on the transcendentalists, eventually drawing many of them to the plight of the slave.

In closing, it seems worthwhile to note that in addition to preparing the nation for the great cataclysm that lie ahead, the common rebellion of the abolitionists and transcendentalists against the moribund and corpse-cold Unitarian church also led to its transformation. Channing’s “Unitarian Christianity,” Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” and Parker’s “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” ultimately emerged as the founding creedal documents of modern American Unitarianism.

Channing, Emerson and Parker have become the denomination’s revered prophets – the Unitarian Trinity. It is not insignificant that the church that reviled them came to canonize those three free thinkers who ultimately embraced both transcendentalism and abolitionism – unifying in spirit Channing’s estranged family.
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ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<td>BFASS</td>
<td>Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society</td>
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<td>BPL</td>
<td>Boston Public Library, digitalcommonwealth.org</td>
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<td>CE</td>
<td>Channing-Ellery Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society</td>
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<td>EGL</td>
<td>Ellis Gray Loring Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University</td>
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<tr>
<td>GACM</td>
<td>General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts</td>
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<td>JMN</td>
<td>The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson</td>
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<td>LMC</td>
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