For now, wriggling back into Shady Hill was what Charley longed for. When the Asia docked in New York on 18 January 1851, his cousin Charles Mills stood on the wharf, a first glimpse of home. Norton had already asked his family to have William Bullard meet the train alone in Boston. “Do not let anyone else be at the cars, I would rather see you all at home where I left you nineteen months ago.”

The past would not submit to recapture. Shady Hill bustled with arrangements for William and Louisa’s wedding, only days off. A couple of weeks later, the newlyweds left for an eight-month wedding tour of Europe, taking Jane with them. Otherwise, on the surface, home life glided along as if Charley had dreamed the two years abroad. A new railroad on the northern side of Shady Hill, houses springing up along Kirkland Street to the south, scarcely yet encroached on “the pleasures of seclusion.” The Longfellows still came in the evenings for rhyming games and family theatricals; Charles Mills dropped in to dabble with Charley and Grace in the latest fad, spirit rapping; Mrs. Stewart, the new cook, was turning out a great relief: her predecessor had proved a disaster.

Yet, beneath apparently changeless cycles, Shady Hill had altered and not chiefly because Jane and Louisa had left: the larger reason was Andrews’s decline. Though only sixty-four years old in 1851, Andrews had for fifteen years thought of himself as “a feeble old man”; his nearly fatal illness in the fall of 1849 had left him one in fact. As the running of the household slowly slipped from his hands, his son took increasing charge.

Charles himself was older now, more widely traveled than his parents, with his own experiences, his own tastes, his own diversions, subtly diverging from Andrews and Catharine’s criteria. His new friend George Curtis visited from New York for a few days, to compare memories of the Sphinx and the Pyramids. “Il tuo Giorgio” was fop enough to nettle fastidious Norton sensibilities, but “Carlo caro” did not care. In April, Charles had
James Russell Lowell to dinner. Lowell hardly qualified as outré, his *Fable for Critics* and *Biglow Papers* only now and then tweaking Nortonian propriety; but he did write for the abolitionist *Anti-Slavery Standard* and thereby qualified at Shady Hill as a dangerous radical. Moreover, both Lowell and Curtis had once fluttered around the Transcendentalists, Andrews’s bêtes noires. Lowell was as yet only a friendly acquaintance, but Curtis was well on his way to becoming an intimate. The elder Nortons’ placid courtesy rarely wavered, but Charles was starting to redecorate Shady Hill intellectually to his own taste.4

For this, he had plenty of time. His premature return from Europe had stranded him with no business, and a depressed market did not immediately bring any his way. By April, however, he was lending Henry Lee a hand on India Wharf and “quite enjoying,” his youngest sister observed, “the little return to his old habits and business.” Soon he moved into his own counting room at No. 34 Central Wharf, sharing space with Franklin Story, an erstwhile fellow apprentice. There, for the next four years, Norton clambered about among linseed, dyes, gunny sacks and cloth, jute, hemp, twine, straw rugs. He chartered ships in partnership with Story or Charles Guild, Bullard or Richard Lewis. He bought and sold in London and Liverpool, Boston and Calcutta, sometimes for cash, sometimes for a six-month note. He dunned textile manufacturers in upstate New York, and he turned a profit.5

The profit was never large. In 1851 “extreme pressure in the money market” (the worst since the Panic of ’37, Norton believed) “diminished the value of all mdze.” In 1852 the *Seth Sprague* ran into foul weather, missed the height of the Calcutta market, and lost a bundle for Norton. Merchants had always played a chancy hand. But Boston now grappled with a deeper and persisting problem. The burgeoning port of New York was siphoning off her trade, turning the ups and downs of commerce into steady decline. In 1852, Bullard and Lee gave up. Norton hung on, but commerce occupied fewer hours than ever. Trade had always competed for Norton’s loyalty with other interests; its power to command him was slackening.6

A throng of new-made friendships partly filled the open hours: Rajinder Dutt and George Sim in India, Richard Milnes and John Kenyon in London, the Scheffers and the Circourts in Paris: letters flowed on and on. This stream of mail eroded the old boundaries of Norton’s world. He now heard directly of people, events, and opinions across the seas, especially in Britain; now he found himself receiving letters of introduction for traveling Englishmen.

Such individual acquaintanceships supplied the cement of cultural ac-
tivity in the days before professional organizations and specialized journals. Intellectually inclined travelers learned to know like-minded individuals across the country or across the sea; and they thereby linked together local cultural webs centered on cities as different as Boston and Charleston, Edinburgh and London. In this way, on the basis of common language and intertwined histories, a great North Atlantic matrix melded diverse regional cultures into a single cosmopolitan Anglo-American world of ideas, itself overlapping Continental European networks. Like Uncle Ticknor before him, Charles entered the thick array of personal familiarity binding together British and American intellectual elites. Within two decades his place in it would make Ticknor look provincial.

For the time being, his role was still largely defined by the broad limits of greater Boston; and with two years’ pent-up energy Norton returned to the local literary scene. In early April, Frank Parkman submitted to Norton’s editorial pencil rough proofs of his new book on Pontiac’s conspiracy; Charles had not finished working them over before Francis Bowen, who wanted Pontiac “favorably introduced to the public,” asked him to review it for the North American Review—which Charles did with the gravity of a newly elected corresponding member of the American Ethnological Society. While helping to launch Pontiac, Charles was also supervising American reprints for his new English friend Sir Arthur Helps.

He still found ample time to grind his own literary mill, his Indian experience providing good grist. For the July 1851 North American Norton wrote an account of Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, the wealthy Parsee merchant he had met in Bombay, whose stupendous charities earned him the first knighthood awarded an Indian. A swift sketch of Bombay introduced the piece. Norton made the city vivid by imagining exotic peoples jostling together in its streets, each character brought to life by a detail of dress or physiognomy (“the Chinese sailor, with his blue trowsers, his straw hat, and his long tail of braided hair”). This word painting concluded with the purple brimless hat and spotless white dress of a Parsee, the “most interesting figure” in the procession. A quick overview of Parsee culture followed, this in turn framing a detailed account of Jamsetjee’s benevolences, drawn from documents acquired in Bombay.

In this triple movement, Norton worked out a narrative technique suited to both his characteristic materials and his presumed audience. The putative reader came to Norton’s topic with no special curiosity; so Charles tried first to arrest the mind’s eye with a visual, kinetic dramatic scene. (Behind the pictures and actions in Norton’s prose worked Edward Channing’s teaching
of rhetoric and his own months in galleries, lessons sharpened by the hours poring over Parkman's writing.) A splash of local color served a second function: readying the reader for concise summation of whatever foreign culture, political theory, or religious system Norton had in view. This précis in turn made understandable a wealth of documentary detail that composed the meat of the piece. Norton would ring changes on this formula for decades, shifting the components around but never deserting the triune relation. And in the same happy experiment he found a subject with éclat; writing and lecturing on India became for a while a Norton speciality.

But India still interested him less in itself than as a laboratory for testing permutations of Boston principles. Like Alexis de Tocqueville seeking France's future in the American present, Norton always pondered foreign cultures with an eye to elucidating his own. Parsees prowling the pages of the North American became a case study of the natural interweaving of religion, literature and the arts, and individual moral formation: a Nortonian experiment with general ideas about the relationship of art and national character, later to be applied to the United States. Because “no divinely gifted poet has sung to them, and no hero has arisen among them whose glories have been handed down by any pious narrator,” the Parsees had no “literature of their own.” Hence, they also lacked the “nobler qualities of character, those alone which can give a people an honorable place in the history of the world.” Their religion exemplified the historicist principles by which Unitarians explained religious development, in this case the corruption of belief into “superstition.” Parsees, Norton suggested, must once have venerated the sun as a symbol of deity; and as “so often” in “the history of religious beliefs, the symbol, from being regarded only as a sign of the Supreme and Holy Being, is now reverenced by the vulgar and uneducated as the visible God himself.”

With more urgency, Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy’s benevolences presented an object lesson for Americans. Although Americans “speak proudly” of their charities, Norton insisted that they had “little real reason” for complacency. “We have forgotten that we are the most prosperous community that the world ever saw, and that we should be more blameworthy than any other people were we less liberal.” Moving beyond ancestral High Federalism, Norton took the United States, rather than New England, as his native land. But he transferred to this vaster theater of political action the Boston notions of community and of a corresponding web of human obligation.

Such obligations ran deeper than the formal rules governing the polity. Norton's upbringing in Scottish Enlightenment historicism taught him to
relativize human institutions. Legal systems were no more than mutable outgrowths of historical evolution, and the progress of civilization had yet far to go. To bridge the gap between imperfect governments and inevitable human needs, voluntary effort had to come into play: to ease injustices, assuage oppressions, ameliorate the defects of underdeveloped laws. The horrors of poverty in Britain—and the insouciance of British aristocrats—had burned into him a lesson he never forgot: “benevolence is not simply a duty, it is a necessity,” so long as “the laws which regulate the acquisition and the possession of property are so ill understood as they at present are all the world over.”

Paradoxically, although America had fewer of such ills than Europe, it had yet more need of benevolence; for a republic’s survival depended on the moral health and political intelligence of its citizens. Not only altruistic “virtue” but also “the most refined selfishness” called Americans to work to improve conditions of life for the least fortunate among them: a vocation reinforced by sentiments implanted deep in human nature by a benevolent God. “We have learnt that expensive schools are the cheapest institution of the state; we have yet to learn that the prevention of pauperism, at any cost, is cheaper than the care of it when it exists; we have yet to learn that the truest pleasure which wealth can afford is in spending it so as to promote the happiness of others.” Benevolence obliged not only the rich. Most Americans could afford charity; and the “duty is the same to every man, to give to others according to his means.” An ancillary obligation evidently fell on some: exhorting others to do their duty, a mantle comfortable on the shoulders of Andrews Norton’s son.10

For, out of raw materials bequeathed him, Charles was forging an author, alter ego to the young merchant. In December, Longfellow reported to a London friend that Norton kept “one eye upon books and another upon the sails of Canton ships. Which will carry the day is doubtful.” Norton’s writings, however, bore no resemblance to the playful, precious Nile Notes that his friend Curtis had just published, a lateborn child of the Knickerbocker school of New York literature. New England seriousness simmered under even Norton’s lighter pages; he aimed at instruction more than entertainment and at moral formation more than either. The question now chiefly nagging at him was how communities ordered human relations. This quandary owed much to two concurrent though unrelated crises, the great Irish immigration and the expansion of slavery. But Norton was exploring basic principles as well as particular problems.11

He had in mind a book to bring under the searching light of Boston
principles the radical social theories that had animated Italian rebels and piqued Circourt’s salon. When this idea came into his head is impossible to say—maybe on the evening in Florence when he and the Brownings talked Italian politics and Robert handed him a copy of Mazzini’s *Poi et Avenir*. By April 1851 he was “reading and studying much” in preparation for “a short essay on Republicanism in Europe, which I mean to print as a pledge to that small portion of the world who care anything about it, that I do not spend my time idly, and that I still claim Literature as a love who is not to be supplanted in my affections by any other.” He enlisted George Curtis, with his New York publishing connections, and Frank Child, in Paris on his way home from Göttingen, to buy “republican pamphlets” for him, and alerted other friends to keep an eye open for tidbits of Continental politics. ¹²

The address for such deliveries shifted in June to Newport, Rhode Island, where the Nortons had decided to spend their summers. The physicians had prescribed Newport’s milder climate for Andrews, but the therapy hardly inconvenienced his family. Grace, always her own woman, did turn out an “unbeliever in Newport,” but her parents and siblings found the island resort nearly Edenic. A “gay crowd,” many from New York and the South, filled the town itself; but over the rest of the island, Charles felt, “broods a spirit of repose.” Literary work went on, with occasional attention to the countinghouse; but he also enjoyed long strolls along the shore and through the pastures, varied by bowling parties and visits from old friends. Newport recommended itself as a permanent annex to Shady Hill, and before they left in October the Nortons decided to build a house there. Charles managed this business; he had taken over from his ailing father supervision of all the family finances, which he oversaw along with his own investments in the India trade. At twenty-five, he had reached financial maturity. ¹³

Business mingled with a remarkable miscellany of other involvements in the early 1850s. Norton took to the lyceum circuit in a small way, lecturing on India. Always good with children, he taught a Sunday school class at the First Parish in Cambridge, soon becoming the school’s superintendent. (It was probably for the Sunday school that he printed the pamphlet *Five Christmas Hymns*: New England was learning to celebrate that suspect papist feast.) Harvard (appreciating his “bonne prononciation”) appointed him to its Committee of Examination in Modern Languages and, in October 1851, called him to cover the classes of a French instructor who had died suddenly. In January 1852 the Athenaeum elected Norton a trustee. ¹⁴

Adulthood crept up stealthily on Norton, as it does on most of us, but
with a Boston twist. This mélange of tasks carried local meaning: Charles was assuming his civic toga virilis, taking on, a little more conscientiously than most of his peers, the adult responsibilities that befell his station. There would come to Norton over many decades hundreds of the routine jobs that oiled Boston institutions.

He was at the same time taking on out-of-the-ordinary duties. Not every Boston patrician paid more than lip service to the local ethos of community obligation, but the Nortons’ wealth cohabited with sensitive consciences. As Catharine said, one must work “to aid the struggling and forlorn.” In that spirit, Andrews had helped to raise funds to relieve the great Irish famine in the later 1840s. Charles confronted its aftermath, his own sensibilities heightened by misery seen in India and Britain. The famine had driven millions from Ireland, thousands of them to Boston. In 1845, Cambridge counted scarcely a thousand Irish among its 12,000 souls; ten years later the city had swelled to over 20,000, nearly a quarter Irish. The conditions under which they had to live sickened a sensitive spirit. But what did duty enjoin?  

The standard republican prescription to make citizens safe for democracy was also patrician Boston’s favored therapy for uplifting the poor: education. In his article on Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, Norton had called “expensive schools” the “cheapest institution of the state.” They appeared a special bargain in present circumstances. The Irish had arrived in such numbers and in such disadvantaged conditions as to “form almost a nation by themselves.” Unlike earlier immigrants, they could neither “rapidly amalgamate with our native population” nor “speedily adapt themselves to our institutions”; yet Massachusetts law quickly gave them the “full rights of citizens.” Americans never should and never would “send them back to starve,” whatever “the consequence to us”; but, if anyone needed uplifting, these immigrants did.  

Norton persuaded the School Committee to let him use a schoolhouse near Harvard, then enlisted among his friends a corps of “excellent volunteer assistants.” In mid-November an evening school opened for men and boys “too occupied during the day or too poor to attend our day schools”: the first such institution in Cambridge, perhaps in the state. It operated only two evenings a week for a four-month term, and Norton had to fight a parsimonious School Committee to keep it going that long. He himself feared that the twenty-odd students got no “direct beneficial results.” But at least one ten-year-old orphan, after learning to read under Norton’s “gentle kindness,” frequently visited Shady Hill, where he got “choice books to
read, with instructions on how to read carefully”; eventually, he entered Harvard Law School and ended as mayor of Providence, Rhode Island.17

In any case, the evening school idea prospered around Boston. Norton’s cousin Charles Eliot taught in one across the river; his one-time playmate Thomas Wentworth Higginson organized another in Newburyport; and in 1854 the pastor of Saint John’s Catholic Church in East Cambridge opened one for Irish men. How much these owed to Norton’s experiment is no longer knowable, but the evening school did reaffirm and shape his own commitment to Boston’s indigent. A principle became a practicality. Measures to equip the poor to improve themselves, to fit them better to the community in which they dwelt, had become for Charles a lived reality, one in which he could play a part.18

It remained a reality in striking counterpoint to most of his activities. Germania Society concerts, Jenny Lind, Don Giovanni—how did Mozart mesh with the evening school? Chuckling with the Longfellows over one of Tom Appleton’s bons mots as they strolled out of a performance of The Crown Diamonds—did Mme Thillon’s singing echo on the highway verges where that Irish orphan boy eked out a “precarious livelihood” tending other people’s cows? Such questions the Nortons had cultured themselves to ask.19

And Shady Hill remained Charley’s lodestone. By early December, winter had crept into Boston. It was the best of times for Louisa, William, and Jane to return from their European travels and inspirit the household. The closeness of the Norton family is hard to exaggerate, its substantiality to Charles impossible to ignore. As Andrews weakened and Louisa moved to a new home on Beacon Hill, he perhaps grew even more conscious of the salience of his family. Jane, nearest to him in age, was closest emotionally. “Your precious note written on my birthday,” she told him, “has given me a great deal of happiness today and every word of love and affection that it contains I respond to from the very bottom of my heart.” As siblings do, they sometimes quarreled; and Jane was not above mocking the affection between “my precious brother,” “our dear sister Grace,” and herself. None of this loosened their attachment. “We are very important to each other and let us see that we are faithful to our trust. Let us see that we do justice to our real love.”20

The emotional center of Charles’s life being at Shady Hill, it was natural that his deeper friendships flourished there, notably—in the early 1850s—that with Frank Child. “I value as you would have me all your love,” Charles wrote Frank at New Year, with the open affection easy to Victorians, “and
will try always to be faithful to it,—faithful not only in loving you but in making myself more worthy of your affection.” It was equally natural that Frank become an intimate of the whole family. After studies in Göttingen and Berlin, he had succeeded Edward Channing as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric (thanks in small part to Charley’s lobbying); and, living nearby, he fell into the habit of spending Thursday and Sunday evenings at Shady Hill, talking and reading with Charley, submitting to Gracie’s ragging, playing music with Jane, before walking back to his digs at ten or eleven o’clock. 21

Some evenings Frank and Charley worked rather than played. Child, with intermittent help from his best friend, was overseeing for a Boston publisher a series of standard British poets. He undertook Spenser himself, a solid scholarly edition in five volumes; and he later added for the series an eight-volume collection of ballads, which Norton admired as “far superior to any preceding similar work.” Most Boston patricians with a taste for publishing were dilettantes; Child refused to edit Chaucer, on the ground that materials for a tolerably accurate version could not be had in America. Working with Frank kept alive for Charley an ideal of scholarship exceeding even his father’s in fidelity to the austere norms of German erudition. 22

In the winter of 1851–52, Frank and Charley surely talked also about an article of very different character that Norton was writing. “Schools and Dwellings for the Poor” appeared in the April 1852 North American. Norton began by noting in “the literature of the present age” a new concern for “that portion of society which is generally called ‘the lower classes’”; “the common ties of human sympathy binding together the highest and the lowest are now more readily acknowledged, the rights of the ignorant and the suffering are now more warmly asserted, and the duties of all classes towards each other are now more strongly urged.” He thought it “the visible sign of the influence of the spirit of Christianity, and the progress of Christian principles” that concern for the poor sprang from “a sense of the claims of man as man,” from “a true brotherhood.” This opinion marked his own progress beyond his ancestors’ High Federalism: Norton scorning the idea that charity should rest “on the belief that the poor are the dependents of the rich, & have the claims of dependance.” Norton conceded that eradication of pauperism was “utterly impossible,” since “society is at present organized” on the basis of “unjust inequalities.” But this unhappy state of affairs only made more urgent “doing the much that may be done to diminish it.” 23

First among things needful was “improvement of the dwellings of the poor.” On this hinged the success of “all other measures,” for bad housing was the “primary source” of vice and misery. In the “low, disgusting haunts
of poverty,” the “very ideas of neatness, of prudence, of sobriety, of chastity, of self-respect, are lost.” Where lay the remedy? Government ought not supply housing but should regulate and inspect it, ensuring proper ventilation, drainage, and so forth. Private hands should erect the needed buildings—but not “as a matter of gratuitous charity.” For “interference with the usual laws which govern men’s dealings with each other” would in the end frustrate reform: tenement owners would rise in opposition, and the poor would lose “self-reliance and self-respect.” Instead, “benevolent associations” should take the lead by building model tenements to provide decent housing for the poor along with a decent return for investors. Norton had bought these ideas wholesale from English reformers, and he detailed projects in London that had turned a profit on good, cheap housing.24

The second essential was to combat the ignorance that mired people in pauperism. An allusion on the first page to “the rights of the ignorant” suggests Norton’s attitude: ignorance was a deprivation, not a vice, demanding redress, not reprobation. Americans could find excellent models in the French salles d’asile for very young children and the English “ragged schools” for older ones. Norton wanted the former appended to American common-school systems; the latter corresponded to the “Evening Schools” recently established, devoting “chief attention” to “the poorest and most depraved.” He admitted that the job was complex, the teaching “by no means a simple process of cultivating the intellect.” “The affections are to be developed by sympathy and kindness; the moral truths taught by words are to be illustrated in conduct, and the progress of the intellect is to be based on the cultivation of the heart.”25

Although Charles here spoke from experience, he echoed his upbringing and education. Invocation of “sympathy” as key to pedagogy recalled Scottish psychology of the moral sentiments and the imagination as developed by Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, as appropriated by Andrews Norton, and as taught to Charles at Harvard. Dependence of “intellect” on “heart” reflected not only this Scottish heritage but also more recent American stress on building “character”—on developing an interior moral compass to guide the mind’s judgments—as a chief aim of education. Finally, the reference to “cultivation” recalls Unitarian Boston’s ideal of “self-culture”: the continuing formation of intellect, will, and affections by self-immersion in learning and the fine arts. From these materials, Charles was constructing understandings of education, its relations to personal morality, its salience for citizenship. His ideas were slightly bewildered infants; they would mature in the 1870s and 1880s into a new model of higher education.
Already, his practical proposals attracted readers. The article and the evening school gave Norton a small reputation as an urban reformer, of a “thoughtful” rather than “ardent nature.” With commerce occupying only a fraction of his hours, with no clear alternate vocation in view, Norton’s moral inheritance pushed him toward social activism: yet another career beckoned to a young man unsure of his direction in life. As the *North American*’s editor saw, “literary attempts” had become “subservient to other & higher aims.” “Schools and Dwellings for the Poor” put Norton in contact with reformers in New York and London, but a local contact had more consequence. On 15 April, Henry B. Rogers, a friend of Bullard’s, wrote to say that he, too, had been looking into English model dwellings. Norton had mused about turning exhortations into bricks and mortar; so, when Rogers asked if he knew “of any persons disposed to enter upon an enterprise of this sort,” Charles leapt at the bait, agreeing to take on the organizational work himself.26

This had to wait a month or two. Central Wharf and Harvard duties prevented him from settling into Newport until the end of June; and, there, work on the lodging houses sometimes took second place to interests of a less public-spirited nature. South Carolinians escaping torrid summers favored Newport; and with one of these families, Oliver Middleton’s, a particularly warm acquaintance grew. His daughters Matilda and Eleanor, a few years younger than Charles, became fast friends of Jane and Grace and, later, occasional guests at Shady Hill. One of them attracted Charles, though the Victorian practice of referring to ladies only by surname prevents us from knowing which one. *The Miss Middleton* sailed with him on idyllic afternoons, romanced with him on moonlit evenings.27

Even so, Newport was far from paradise that summer. As Andrews’s health fluctuated between bad and worse, the psychological burden on all the family grew. Business required Charles to shuttle to Boston; even when in Newport, the building of the new house and the planning of the model lodging house competed with Miss Middleton for his hours. And, with Father often abed, Charles was helping Andrews’s assistant, Ezra Abbot, to edit the elder Norton’s collected *Tracts on Christianity*.

Another literary project involved interests more characteristic. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in March, had set the Anglo-American world to talking—even Calcutta was abuzz. Norton, detesting slavery even more than abolitionism and considering *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “a work of uncommon power,” posted a copy to his English friend Arthur Helps; he also persuaded his college friend Edward Pringle, a member of
the Carolinian summer diaspora in Newport, to read it. Unsurprisingly, Edward and Charley argued; and at Norton's behest Pringle wrote out a refutation of the book and defense of slavery. A few weeks later a long letter arrived from Helps endorsing the book and attacking slavery. Norton believed that Northerners needed to hear Southern voices; Pringle's he thought a cogent and high-minded one. Helps meanwhile encouraged Norton to publish his letter in the United States. So, as summer ended, Charles found himself a small-time moderator of the great debate. He paid a Cambridge printer to run up copies of Pringle's *Slavery at the South* and Helps's *Letter on Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Tactfully, he sent Stowe only Helps's tract.) Fraser's, the magazine that had initially printed Helps's *Letter* in England, reprinted *Slavery at the South*; then Littell issued it as a pamphlet. Norton got out of all this the novel satisfaction of intellectual arbitrage, far from his last. 28

Another consequence was a new acquaintance. Helps asked Charles to transmit a copy of his *Letter* to Ralph Waldo Emerson, with whom Helps had become friendly in England. Communicating with the celebrated transcendentalist would not otherwise have occurred to Norton; for, in the 1830s, Andrews had violently assailed him as American avatar of German mystagogy, and inherited mistrust lingered on. Emerson, however, unexpectedly took the occasion of acknowledging Helps's pamphlet to wish for "new opportunities of establishing my acquaintance" with the younger Norton. These would soon come, as opportunities for other new friendships already had. William Porcher Miles, another Carolinian in Newport, shared Norton's interests in education; when the two met, they hit it off immediately. Captain Richard Baird Smith, the Ganges Canal engineer whom Charles had met in Britain, dined with the Nortons in early August 1852. An ugly little man, "very agreeable & intelligent," he and Charles became such warm friends that two decades later Norton, who never laid eyes on Baird Smith again, named a son after him. 29

Norton had indeed a remarkable gift for making friends—and, as matters turned out, for keeping them. William Miles regarded his "brief" acquaintance "as one of the warm and bright things of my life." Henry Arthur Bright, a young Englishman on an American tour after graduating from Cambridge, visited Norton hurriedly in 1852 yet returned home regarding him as a comrade for life. Norton's talent for friendship was often remarked upon. It was in everyday talk that he won much of the admiration that contemporaries expressed for him, resembling Coleridge in this if in little else. And this fact is key to understanding both Norton's influence and the
failure of later generations to comprehend it, for with ephemeral words vanished much of the reason for the respect accorded him.\textsuperscript{30}

The sources of Norton's capacity for friendship lie now partly hidden, but six elements at least played a part. First came a material precondition: Norton possessed the means to entertain and the residences in which to do it agreeably. But rich boors abound—Norton, secondly, had (as a younger contemporary who knew him well recalled) a “desire for constant self-improvement” that engendered “zeal for the best intellectual companionship.” This urge probably related to his omnivorous curiosity; though in the course of things he met persons whom he disliked, Norton (thirdly) rarely encountered anyone who failed to interest him. Curiosity went along with, fourth, a tolerance for personal disagreement, even for moral disagreeableness in individual persons, remarkable in a man so strongly principle and, indeed, censorious as Norton in the abstract. Fifth was the undemanding, offhanded generosity that his parents had formed in him—noblesse oblige without the condescension: “He is the kindest creature in the shape of a young man of 25 that ever befriended an emigrant stranger anywhere.”\textsuperscript{31}

Finally, sixth, Norton had a knack for talk: not for throwing off witticisms but for sustaining engaging conversation. One could chat for hours and go off to bed reluctantly. That same younger friend, looking back on a lifetime spent in literary and intellectual circles, recalled that Norton filled Shady Hill with “more pleasant conversation of an original sort” than he had known “in any other house.” The secret lay not only in Norton’s own discourse but in his talent as “a good listener,” his knack for turning talk toward fertile topics, his ability to draw out interlocutors. Yet the depth of Norton’s closer friendships, the intellectual caliber of those friends, and the permanence of his influence on them testified to something deeper, to a tougher fiber running through his conversation, giving Norton a highly personal authority. He never hesitated to criticize his friends’ work bluntly and face-to-face, and they heeded. They accepted his competence, “felt him to be one of them,” understood his candor as proof of love and admiration, Norton’s frankness flowing as it did from “a curious simplicity of character in him, careless of and blind to suspicion which it knew to be unwarranted.” Accepting another person with full and unself-regarding seriousness is a powerfully alluring compliment.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1852 this force attracted Miss Middleton, at least until October interrupted their moonlit romance. She returned to the plantation, the Nortons to Shady Hill, and Charles to his varied duties. The India trade was picking up; Sunday school started again; so also did Norton’s occasional lyceum
lectures on India—and so did the evening school, requiring from Charles not only hours in the classroom but a fight for its survival in the city council chamber. Now, too, with Boston’s patricians home from their varied summer shores, Norton organized with Bullard and Rogers a subscription to raise funds for the proposed model lodging house, then persuaded architects to volunteer to design the building. Fall also brought its forms of relaxation: pleasant family parties at Shady Hill, opera with family or friends, the annual dinner of Charles’s Harvard class, and just after Christmas an agreeable evening party where Charles met again the little girl he had played with at Theodore Sedgwick’s in New York ten years earlier. At sixteen Sue Sedgwick had begun to attract a different caliber of attention.33

Charles’s social life, however, now revolved around another guest at that evening’s party: a young Englishman named Arthur Hugh Clough, in Boston hunting a job. Clough had started a promising Oxford career but, coming to doubt the truth of Christianity, had resigned his fellowship. (Oxford still required adherence to the Church of England: a statement of belief not always taken seriously by those who subscribed to it. The delicacy of Clough’s conscience awoke fellow feeling in Norton.) He now needed some other way to support the woman he wished to marry. Soured on hidebound, class-ridden England, Clough looked to America with hope for humanity’s future as well as his own. Literate Boston already knew him for a poem widely noticed in 1848, “The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich”; and he had struck up a friendship with Emerson when the latter was in Britain that year; then, on the steamer to Boston, Clough fell in with James Russell Lowell. He also carried a letter of introduction from an English friend to Charles Eliot Norton.34

Clough arrived on 12 November 1852, a Friday evening; on Monday morning he met “young Norton” and, after three hours of walking and talking through Boston, swore “eternal friendship.” Clough took to Cambridge almost as quickly, finding “in its intellectual atmosphere a repose which recalls that of grand old Oxford.” Cambridge reciprocated by liking him, “with his gentleness, and his bewildered look, and his half-closed eyes.” Longfellow entertained him; Lowell became a good friend; but Norton and Clough were inseparable. Clough, though, was the first confidant to call him “Charles” rather than “Charley”: a sign of a subtle but self-conscious maturation in Norton.35

Clough became, like Frank Child, a shadow resident of Shady Hill, fond of Andrews and Catharine, “a fine venerable old fellow, rather infirm,” and “a most good, kind, maternal woman.” Charles helped Arthur look for
work, and it may have been Norton who arranged a commission from Ticknor and Fields to revise the so-called Dryden translation of Plutarch’s Lives. “Your kindness quite makes me ashamed,” Clough mumbled. But he in turn stretched Norton’s world. When they talked, as incessantly they did, religious faith formed a prime topic. Clough, though still clinging to a vague theism, had cast off every shred of credence in historic Christianity. His sincere and almost reverential unbelief immensely impressed his pious Unitarian friend, raising questions, fostering doubts, abetting trains of speculation that would ripen over the next decade. Friendship with Clough may well have been the turning point on the road that eventually led Norton away from Christianity into agnosticism, profoundly affecting his thinking on everything from the ends of politics to the means of education.36

For now, Clough provided a haven from the too-many projects Norton juggled: Calcutta and Madras, the house under way in Newport, two model lodging houses rising in Boston, the evening school, the book on social theories he was trying to write. Even for a young man, it became exhausting. In early March, Charles took a few days off to visit George Curtis and other friends in New York. Curtis, just made assistant editor of the new Putnam’s Magazine, took advantage of Charley’s stay to add to his friend’s workload—a little something for the magazine.37

Norton responded in ten days with a characteristic piece: an attack on the consciences of Putnam’s middle-class readers, cast in the form of a miniature memoir of his visit to New York. Its three pages contrasted the “tasteless display, and lavish, reckless wastefulness” of a posh dinner at the new Saint Nicholas Hotel with the selfless devotion of a clergyman who had set up a House of Industry amid the “confusion, dirt and misery” of the Five Points slum. The article also relived a moment in Pisa, evoking the shabby gentility of a palazzo there to puncture the Saint Nicholas’s brand-new pretensions. “Magnificence, to be complete, needs a glory which comes only with antiquity and the associations that belong to age,” for “beauty lies much in the imagination.” Charles did not lecture only in the lyceum.38

While dashing this off for Curtis, Norton put the last touches on the book that he had been preparing since returning from Europe. Finished in mid-April 1853, Considerations on Some Recent Social Theories appeared in the first days of May, anonymously. In Boston anonymity protected modesty rather than identity. Norton himself made no secret, sending a copy to every acquaintance suspected of a whiff of interest in political ideas on all three continents he had trod.

For, as he told Arthur Helps, recent ideas about liberty, republican gov-
ernment, and social reorganization “seemed to me to be ground for much confusion of thought,” and Norton wanted “not to lose the chance of doing even the least to turn the current in the right direction.” He was realist enough to cherish little hope of effect. Diffusion of education in the United States, wide but shallow, imbued Americans with “a certain pride of intellect,” which led them “to form strong opinions upon the most difficult questions.” It befell “those favored by education or circumstances to use their best efforts[,] however feeble, in helping the formation and the spread of right views.”

Right views were urgently wanted. The Fugitive Slave Law, appended to the so-called Compromise of 1850, had inflamed nerves on both sides of the Mason–Dixon Line. The law required Northerners to assist in recapturing escaped slaves; this produced an explosion of Yankee outrage that Southerners took as direct insult. Norton saw in the sectional shouting a “growing danger,” a “disposition towards ‘nullification’ in all parts of the country.” Even Andrews, long churlish toward abolitionists, urged fellow citizens to resist the Fugitive Slave Law by every legal means. Charles was not so sure. Experience of Europe had strengthened his conviction of “the absolute necessity” of “cultivating the spirit of obedience” to properly constituted laws. (“Properly constituted” was a key phrase: Italian resistance to Austrian tyranny seemed legitimate.) While no man of principle should want to help to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law, Charles deemed that a judge’s duty might require “unwilling assistance” and that even a private citizen ought to protect from mob violence a slaveholder trying to recover a slave.

The United States enjoyed the best and stablest government on Earth, but its endurance depended “on the spirit of obedience among the people to the laws.” Substituting a “right of private judgment” for the “duty of obeying the laws as they stand” would “unsettle the foundation” of the Republic—“or of any government whatsoever.” Americans must wait for “educated public opinion” to “correct bad laws without disobedience to them while they remain on the statute book.”

Norton’s views can appear the staunchest conservatism, if not downright authoritarian. But he echoed here the republicanism of the Founders: because voters can change laws, in a republican government the need for extralegal resistance disappears. Charles’s confidence in education also bespoke an enduring Enlightenment faith in the plasticity of human nature; he remained in this respect truer to Boston’s Unitarian principles than Andrews.

With the crisis of American slavery lying behind Considerations on Some Recent Social Theories, it seems odd that Norton chose to school his half-
educated countrymen in *European* political thinking. Perhaps it was not. Norton was no American exceptionalist. He saw his country and Europe as wrestling with the same deeply rooted problems. And—like Tocqueville turned round—he believed that America must ultimately come to terms with the forces and ideas convulsing Europe. It therefore behooved Americans to develop right views of liberty, republicanism, and socialism.

Recent Social Theories began by identifying what Norton perceived as the toxic illusion of republicans like Mazzini, Kossuth, and Louis Blanc. Their “speculations” disregarded the real “differences in nations, both in character and in natural and material position.” Their “cry for Universal Liberty, for the establishment of Republics, and for the direct government of the people by itself,” while “dazzling” to the oppressed nations of Europe, ignored the fact that in most countries the people was far from ready to govern itself. The American Republic showed “the fairest prospect ever open to any people,” a great step forward in “the progress of mankind”; but the success of the United States reflected exceptionally favorable historic circumstances. Of all the large countries of Europe, only Britain gave the least hope of carrying through in the foreseeable future the “necessary reforms” to undergird popular government. 42

In an age of utopias Norton was an anti-utopian political thinker, subscribing to neither the liberal utopianism of the market nor the socialist utopianism of the state. He held the stunted doctrine of the state typical of Americans, mirroring the fear of government power engrained in American republicanism; and, for a theorist of his time and place, he paid slight attention to the laws of political economy. In fact, he saw both governments and economies as reflecting particularities of history rather than as embodying some world historical trend. Disregard of both state and market perhaps owed most to Norton’s appreciation of human community. He located the animating principle of social order neither in formal institutions nor in abstract universals but in human beings individually aware of ties binding them together.

He did share one dogma of the progressives’ faith: that “the rights of all men will at last be vindicated and acknowledged,” for he believed “those rights to be the care of divine as well as of human power.” But, although “in the long stretch of time, the progress of the world is assured,” progress comes slowly, “not visible from year to year, and only with difficulty to be seen from century to century.” “Rashness and inconsideration” would simply delay the “advance of freedom, and the elevation of the oppressed and suffering.” More specifically, only by ignoring the realities of history could revolution-
aries come to the fatal assumption “that wisdom and power are derived directly and immediately from the people,—that is, from the great mass of any nation; and, consequently, that political liberty is an inherent right of mankind, and that a republic is necessarily the best form of government.”

Norton’s view was profoundly historical and flatly pragmatic: a wise Solon diagnosed a people’s state of development before prescribing its rights, judged who could govern before declaring who should. The “final object of government” was “to secure the fullest enjoyment” of liberty to the governed; and the form of government “best fitted for this object”—monarchy, republic, whatever—depended on a nation’s quantum of “enlightenment and virtue.” No people had yet grown “so wise that it can know, or so calm that it can choose, what is best for itself.” Few were ready for self-government, and a pious absolute monarch would secure more liberty than an impious republic. The people—“misled, troubled, and exasperated”—needed guidance from “the few who have been blessed with the opportunities, and the rare genius, fitting them to lead.”

This was venerable Boston doctrine; but it was more than that, as became clear when Norton discussed liberty. The simplest definition of liberty, he wrote, is freedom “from restraint of whatever kind.” But this conception falls apart “the instant that we connect with the term Liberty any moral idea,” the “instant that it becomes to us . . . the aim of our highest and steadiest pursuit on earth.” So Norton offered a definition, “based on the primitive meaning of the word,” that shall “answer to that Liberty for which the best men of all time have lived, toiled, and died.” Liberty, in this “nobler signification,” is freedom “from all restraints which may prevent the doing of what is right. In other words, Liberty is the possession of the power to do the will of God.”

Norton’s linkage of liberty and virtue grew out of the intertwining of different traditions of thought. It echoed the Reformation notion of “Christian liberty,” which the Puritans instilled in New England’s political theory and which lived on feebly in the conservative Unitarianism of Andrews Norton’s generation and still twitched in the footnote where his son quoted Tyndale’s Obedience of a Christian Man. More immediately, liberty’s “nobler signification” evoked the ideology of the American Revolution, the belief that a republic’s safety depended on the virtue of its citizens; this conviction, reinforced in Norton’s classical education, still counted as conventional wisdom in the 1850s, though smacking more of bourgeois Protestantism than of Sparta.

Another of Norton’s arguments pointed in yet a third direction. Un-
checked freedom permitted man’s “savageness and wildness” to “tyrannize” over him, making “impossible the full development of his character.” This claim led to a final refinement in the definition of liberty in “its social or political” meaning: “that state in which a man is not deprived of the power of doing what is best for himself or others by the interference of another.” Norton readily conceded the evils flowing from economic inequality and political injustice, and he urged that socialist and other schemes to remedy them be judged on practical effect (about which he was pessimistic). But he also insisted that institutional reforms could never cut deeply enough; permanent improvement “could only come from a change in the characters” of individuals, such as lessening the selfishness of the rich and privileged. This way of thinking about liberty had affinities directly to the Boston idea of self-culture and more remotely to German post-Kantian conceptions of human self-development, notably Wilhelm von Humboldt’s Bildung ideal.47

All three lines of thinking had a more ancient ancestor in Stoicism. Norton’s education had exposed him to what was plausibly the fons et origo of Stoic political science in Cicero. Three teachings loomed large in that tradition: first, the axiom that human beings are naturally social, inclined to bind themselves by duties to others and to find their fulfillment in such relations; second, the understanding that this fulfillment came through an individual’s growth in virtue, conceived chiefly as control over oneself; third, the counsel that a virtuous person submit patiently to apparent vagaries of fortune beyond human control, knowing the universe to be divinely ordered and providential.

Very early in the Italian Renaissance, Ciceronian principles revived in a Christian Stoicism. Dante’s political writings took a Ciceronian view of an individual’s duty to the community’s welfare; this Dantean tradition grew into later Florentine civic republicanism, which ultimately influenced the thinking of the American Founders. Moreover, neo-Stoicism in the northern Renaissance independently infused Ciceronian ideas into the Calvinist political theory inherited by, among others, Boston Unitarians. Meanwhile, Petrarch had developed the Stoic idea of growth in virtue into something resembling self-culture (virtù being a more flexible notion for the Florentines than virtue became for the Victorians). This Renaissance conception of self-fashioning in turn evolved into both Boston’s ideal of self-culture and Berlin’s of Bildung.

Norton did not need to read Dante or Petrarch (though he had) to absorb their points of view, for Stoicism and neo-Stoicism so infused the worldview he inherited as to be, practically speaking, ineluctable even when
unrecognized. Norton's conviction of the inevitable progress of liberty ultimately grew from an essentially Stoic idea of the divine ordering of the cosmos, a belief to which the element of progress later adhered. His patient submission to the slow creeping of that progress had the same source. So did his emphasis on society as a voluntaristic community of mutual obligation and his corresponding inattention to constitutionalism and formal arrangements of power. And his idea of liberty as a school of virtue, a precondition for the gradual self-improvement of individuals and the race—to be limited and regulated for that purpose—also flowed from the Stoic tradition.

All that is wrong in a single heart, or in society, or in the laws, is opposed to Liberty. But, on the other hand, every advance in intelligence; every evil overcome; every new spread of sound, upright thought; every gain, however slow or however small in the progress of right principle, is the gain and the fresh strength of Liberty. As long as human nature remains as God has created it, a struggle between good and evil must exist in the world. Restraint of what is wrong will be needed, and not until men become perfect will full and perfect Liberty be known. Such Liberty is the heritage of angels, and not of men. But as men become more and more enlightened and virtuous, Liberty will more and more gain possession of the world. Her progress will be slow, for the improvement of mankind is very gradual; but her progress is certain, because that improvement is assured.48

In these views Charles Norton would not, over the next half century, find cause to waver. Nor would there ever disappear from his thinking the intimate connection between the development of character through self-culture and the development of a people for republican self-government. “The first duty, the first necessity, is to help them to gain possession of their intellectual and moral natures.”49

Now, at least, most of his circle agreed with him. Felton praised Charles's “admirable” vivisection of “the doctrines of the reformers”: the book “will not only do good, but will bring you honor.” And Bowen went “along with you very heartily”—though at first thinking Charles “too hopeful”! Friends elsewhere generally approved Norton's views as well. Only that defender of slavery Edward Pringle thought Charles went too far in denying inherent superiority to the republican form of government: Southerners often stuck closer to the old republicanism of the American Revolution than did other Americans in the 1850s.50

The book finished, there remained projects enough to overfill Norton’s days and talks with Clough late into the night. From late April, Charles
ricocheted between the new house in Newport and Shady Hill (where Clough had transferred himself during the Nortons' absence), attending to business on Central Wharf, escorting Clough to a farewell dinner for Nathaniel Hawthorne (off to become United States consul in Liverpool), entertaining at the Somerset Club a touring nineteen-year-old Englishman called Sir John Dahlberg Acton. Norton took Acton to the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention then meeting, to show him "the way in which we manage a revolution." The future Lord Acton impressed Charles, and vice versa. Norton believed he had never seen "a more intelligent young man"; Acton thought *Recent Social Theories* "very good." A lifelong friendship began. 51

Norton's far more intimate friendship with Clough, however, suffered abrupt interruption. On 28 June, Arthur got letters from England urging immediate return: a job in the Education Office had opened, which might enable him at last to marry. The next day, he boarded the ship for home. He left behind an edition-in-progress of *Plutarch's Lives*, which he asked Norton and Child to help in completing. Charles's most tempting reason for shuttling to Shady Hill had vanished literally overnight. 52

A far graver loss loomed. Returning to Newport on 1 July, Norton found his father sinking. (No medical records survive, but symptoms during his later years suggest heart disease.) Charley remained to keep vigil, finding distraction in writing a series of newspaper essays on poverty in Cambridge and an article for the *North American* on the Ganges Canal. In early August, Andrews got a bit better, and Frank Child came down for three or four days. The improvement proved transitory. Toward the end of August, Louisa gave birth to Andrews and Catharine's first grandchild, a boy named William Norton Bullard. By September, Andrews could no longer leave his room, though his mind remained clear. On Sunday afternoon, 18 September, his breathing quickened, became difficult, and "about eight o'clock it ceased without a struggle." The family traveled to Cambridge for the funeral on Tuesday, 20 September, returning to Newport the next day. The funeral was held in the library at Shady Hill, "where my Father's presence seemed still to be with us." 53

His presence never left Charles. Andrews's intellect, conscience, and personality had shaped his son in so many ways that the impress could not fade: fastidiousness of taste; priggishness in morals; rigidity about truth; compunction about duty; the strong sense of community and its entailments; the deep commitment to family and its comforts; the high opinion of self, shading into self-righteousness; the generosity toward others, in dollars
and in hours—the list went on and on. A former student wrote that news of Andrews’s death came “as it might to a sailor who had heard that a great light on a dangerous coast had been extinguished”; Andrews’s physician, a man with a doctor’s experience of death and no disposition to gush, doubted that he had “ever known a family where the father’s loss would be greater.” How must Charles have felt? In November he printed privately a collection of his father’s verses to give family and friends. He set about editing, with Ezra Abbot, Andrews’s translation of the New Testament and other scholarly remains.54

Yet Andrews gave his son a beginning, not an end. Charles moved on, reworking his father’s moral and intellectual legacy, dropping elements, adding new ones. Already, the younger Norton’s attitudes had drifted some distance from his father’s: Charles had grown even more deeply impressed than Andrews by history’s shaping power on humanity; he was less insistent on the universal despotism of logical rationality, more tolerant of talk and behavior that raised the eyebrows of proper Bostonians, more curious about the arts. On the remarkably broad and solid foundation gently but firmly imposed by Andrews, his son would ultimately erect an edifice that would have surprised and not entirely pleased the father. In this sense, Charles’s great loss in the autumn of 1853 also freed him or, more precisely, made easier the self-manumission already quietly under way. At the same time, so deeply did Charles’s roots sink in the culture of Unitarian Boston that Andrews’s world seemed not merely normal but normative. Self-manumission was always partial, never more than adaptive.55

So there was no sharp break. In the months after his father’s death, Charles returned to teaching Sunday school (even printing a book of hymns for the children’s use); he supervised the opening of the model lodging houses; he struggled to keep the evening school running. In all this he was surpassing his father in his father’s own line. Yet Charles also became treasurer of a new School of Design for Women. Andrews would not have disapproved, just yawned. As yet, Charles’s artistic interests remained, for all the ardor aroused in Europe, unfocused and subordinate to his reforming commitments; but they marked out his own place beyond his father’s long shadow.

Friends also drew Charles away from the world that Andrews had inhabited. Charles was seeing more of Boston’s Wittiest bon vivant, Tom Appleton, of George Curtis, and of a Philadelphian called John Field—“the only good fellow from that tedious place I ever knew.” They were all good fellows—but not in the old Shady Hill vein. They were a little too frivolous,
a little too witty, a little too fond of extravagant prose, a little too involved with painters and sculptors. No whiff of scandal, just a faint scent of bohemia. Norton strolled with them through Newport; they came to stay at Shady Hill. Partly through them—and maybe through Frank Child’s Sedgwick friends in New York—Charles met more artists. He grew especially amicable with the landscape painter John Frederick Kensett; at Newport, Charles sat on the rocks and talked as Kensett sketched. For now, Norton’s passion for art mainly expressed itself through friendship.56

Of these newer friends, James Russell Lowell mattered most. Just when they met, who can now say? In Cambridge everyone knew everyone else. Charles had dined with him a few times since returning from Europe in 1851, evidently liked him, and owing to their mutual friendship with Clough, had seen him a good deal in the winter and spring of 1853. But Lowell’s brush with transcendentalism in the 1830s and 1840s and his continuing links to abolitionists surely raised Andrews’s hackles. Andrews was gone now; and in late October, Lowell’s wife Maria also died, rather suddenly. One evening shortly afterward, Charles walked to Lowell’s home, Elmwood, a mile or so on the other side of the college from Shady Hill. Loneliness had devastated Lowell; Norton’s own recent loss made him even more sympathetic than usual. They quickly became close. (It helped that Lowell was eight years older. Every man with whom Charles had really hit it off was his senior: Clough, Baird Smith, Kensett, even Child and Curtis by two or three years. Perhaps Norton sought in friends something of his father; perhaps he was simply mature beyond his years.) For the next year and a half, Norton and Lowell were much together. Lowell came “constantly” to Shady Hill, and the friendship soon grew to embrace “the whole family.”57

All added up. Looking back, Norton realized that his travels in India and Europe, then the “summers at Newport” and the “new friendships” had “gradually” worked “a great change in my character.” These influences “finally took me out” of a life of “domestic seclusion in Cambridge” and “enlarged my vision of the world.”58

“Gradually.” There was no sharp break in Norton’s outlook or routine: sharpness was not in his repertoire. New friends did not displace old; through 1854 and into 1855, Charles dined regularly with a little group calling itself the Beefsteak Club, which included Frank Child, their classmate George Martin Lane (now, like Frank, a Harvard professor), and a Ticknor daughter. He kept pecking away at the literary craft. Putnam’s turned down a couple of submissions; then, in June 1854, it published a sketch of his palanquin travels (a recycled lyceum lecture). And he still balanced the merchant’s
trade with civic duties, serving in the winter of 1854–55 on the Athenaeum’s Library Committee and the Cambridge School Committee while simultaneously struggling to keep the evening school afloat.59

Externally, indeed, Norton’s life continued much as it had since 1851. Good citizen; amateur author in the Boston mold; tolerably successful merchant: he even contemplated a second voyage to Calcutta. Yet sometimes he felt himself adrift, wondering where his compass pointed. Cryptic lines appeared in his most private notebook:

Sancta Maria, ora pro me!
17th April 1854.
De profundis clamavi.

“Holy Mary, pray for me! From the depths I cried aloud.” From what depths he might have been crying, no clue survives.60

Perhaps exhausted by too busy a life, Charles was certainly feeling poorly physically. The Middletons had invited their Newport friends to visit; relaxation in coastal Carolina’s balmy climate must have seemed a fine idea. In early March, Charles and Jane set out, arriving in Charleston on the fifteenth. The city reminded him of Italy: “a fine air of age, & dusty decay which invests whole streets with the venerableness of the past.” He visited his Newport friend William Miles at the College of Charleston, searching there for signs of intellectual life, finding none. After several days, Charles and Jane removed to Oliver Middleton’s plantation on Edisto Island, a short ride from Charleston, to loll in “perfect summer.”61

Lolling did not drain Norton of curiosity: above all, he observed slavery, talking frankly “with all sorts of persons” about it. What distressed him most was not physical suffering (of which he saw little, and that no worse than the poor endured in Northern cities) but mental and moral neglect. Slaveholders abandoned their slaves to what Charles saw as a degraded and brutish condition, with no effort to educate, to elevate. Oliver Middleton was a considerate master; but, for just that reason, on his plantation Norton felt “most bitterly the inherent evils of the system.” One of its “worst effects” was “to deaden the moral feelings and to obscure the intellects of the masters.” (Focus on the slaveholder was common among white Northerners, who found it easier to identify with masters of their own race than slaves of another.) Norton heard “men of character & cultivation” utter “with utmost honesty of feeling” patent “fallacies and monstrous principles.” The women proved better, “clear-sighted in regard to the wrong,” but helpless; their “eyes fill with tears when you talk with them about it.” He found particularly
alarming the drift in public opinion. The great majority of the men, at least, had over the last few years come to think slavery a positive good for both black and white.62

Where lay a remedy? Norton saw none “but the gradual & slow progress of the true spirit of Christianity, bringing together black & white, quickening common sympathies, and by degrees elevating both classes”—the one from “ignorance & brutality,” the other from “indifference” and “blindness of mind.” But this must be “a work of ages,” sighed the author of Recent Social Theories. No “immediate, compulsory measures” seemed likely to help either blacks or whites. All the more important, then, to stop bolstering the system. Seeing slavery at firsthand deepened Norton’s long-standing hostility to any national measure that propped up slavery or encouraged its spread.63

By 1 May the Nortons were reunited at Shady Hill, and Charles was back at work. His new best friend, however, was gone: James Lowell had taken off to Europe for a year, to prepare himself to succeed Mr. Longfellow as Smith Professor of Modern Languages and Belles Lettres. Norton found solace for Lowell’s absence in William James Stillman, only a year younger than Norton and recently arrived in Cambridge from New York to solicit contributions for his new art weekly, the Crayon. Stillman was also preoccupied with other business: extricating himself from orthodox Christianity, quarreling with his family about religion, mooning over a suspicious female protégée, and doing all with Weltschmerz of Alpine proportions. The Crayon appealed to Charles; so did Stillman’s earnestness. Something in Norton responded to the emotionally hungry. Perhaps whatever impulse drove him to succor the poor in body—to take seriously that command of his religion often treated by others as nominal—drew him to needy and questing spirits. He had developed, from nurture or nature, from upbringing or genes, and probably from both, the personality of a caregiver. It was not coincidence when, years later, he took up the vocation of teacher. And Stillman was only one of a long series of informal protégés—most, like Stillman, from poor backgrounds—whose broader education Norton enabled.64

Stillman noticed that Charles was suffering his own worries: “You have walked with Pilgrims and become weary and bewildered, I know.” The only pilgrim Charles had strolled with recently was Stillman, but he did seem tired and uncertain. The India trade continued its desultory course, Norton taking “gloomy views” of its future. He planned to edit more of his father’s work, probably to write a memoir; but that was not a career. He dabbled in other literary business—an American edition of a recent English novel of life
in India; a quick piece for the *North American* on the opening of the Ganges Canal; a brief and surprisingly favorable notice for *Putnam's* of “a curious and lawless collection of poems” by “a kosmos” named Walt Whitman. But dabbling was all this was. There was no big new project; no sense of how literature would fit with commerce, or commerce with reform, in his days to come; no direction. His father’s death had made him head of the household, but whose house did he head? The birth of Louisa and William’s second child in August underlined Charley’s failure to find his own moorings.65

By that time his health had worsened again. In early July he suffered some sort of physical collapse in Cambridge. He returned to Newport to take it easy, reading a little Greek, riding horseback, “trying to win back a quicker pulse.” He did not recover; “a too long walk” or “too much writing” would exhaust him for a couple of days. The ailment was mysterious; the doctors, convinced that Norton had overworked himself, prescribed a vacation: he could stay home if he wished or try the panacea of Victorian medicine, a change of climate. Charles thought he would find it embarrassing to remain at home, looking tolerably healthy but living like a drone. By mid-September he had decided that a “few months” in Europe were the answer; a week later, Mother, Jane, and Grace resolved to go with him. After autumn in England, they would spend winter in Rome, then rescue Lowell from his studies in Germany. Norton handed over the model lodging houses to Martin Brimmer, his business affairs to William Bullard.66

On 10 October 1855 the family sailed for Liverpool. Charles was a few weeks short of twenty-eight, but illness made him look older; his acquaintances believed his life to be ebbing away. They “had nearly given up hope” that he would return.67