Norton’s return to Shady Hill passed in a blur. His mother and sisters came down there to greet Charley from William and Louisa’s summerhouse at Lenox in western Massachusetts, where all the Nortons were evading the August heat; back to the cool of the Berkshire hills they immediately carted their worn-out son and brother. Charles had come home tanned, Jane reported, “so bright and animated that every body congratulates us on his looking so well”; but beneath the deceptive bronze his health was “only tolerable.”

Jane soon lost her own brightness. On 21 August, James Lowell announced his engagement to his daughter’s governess, Frances Dunlap. “We were all disappointed,” sniffed Mrs. Longfellow, “and regret all the more that he did not marry Jane Norton.” Any awkwardness passed soon enough; and by autumn Charles was assuring friends that James had done “a very wise thing.” Still, Lenox proved a blessing for Jane, who did not have to walk the lanes of Cambridge while tongues wagged.

In the event, Cambridge saw the Nortons only briefly that fall. Charles tried to work at Shady Hill but found his health “so delicate”—or the invalidism of a healthy-looking man so embarrassing—that he decided to winter in the milder climate and quieter environs of Newport. “Agriculture, dullness, & tranquility,” sawing wood and taking short walks with a sister or two suited him. By late November he felt less feeble and through the winter slowly strengthened.

The family’s financial health, however, took a sudden turn for the worse. A decade of economic expansion and financial overextension in the United States had inflated a bubble that burst soon after Norton’s return from Europe. By mid-October 1857 banks everywhere had suspended specie payments. On Friday, 23 October, Charles was urgently called to Boston; the following Monday found him sitting in a countinghouse opposite the Merchant’s Exchange, a “suspended bank” under his feet, sorting through the
wreckage. He had always favored safe investments, and modest retrenchment cleared up the Nortons' troubles. The extended family fared worse; Uncle Samuel Eliot—once mayor of Boston and treasurer of Harvard—actually went bankrupt. The Nortons did what they could to soften his enforced retirement. Samuel's son Charles had become an assistant professor at Harvard, and Catharine transferred to this nephew a parcel of Shady Hill acreage to build a house for his destitute parents.4

Otherwise, the crisis did not greatly ruffle the tranquil household at Newport. William Stillman came to visit, having abandoned the evanescent Crayon but having become himself a permanent Norton project and occasional drain on the treasury. He tried to draw Charles but could not keep his friend's bulging eyes from looking "lobsterish" ("very kindly attributing it to the bad light"). Frank Child was one of the few other visitors that quiet winter and spring, once bringing Lowell with him. Frank had engaged himself to Elizabeth Sedgwick, daughter of the western Massachusetts clan that oscillated between Lenox and New York City; but this new relationship cramped not at all his intimacy with the Nortons. Grace, he teased; Charles, he loved with a "deep and tranquil" affection, "tried so long that I am sure it is all pure gold and will stand the fires of the last day." No man could be more loveable than Child himself. "How good he is!" Lowell shook his head; "I smell sulphur about myself when I am with him."5

Catharine presided placidly over the few servants; Jane and Grace carried on their timeless routine: neighbors to visit, notes and letters to write, household tasks to assist in. As Catharine aged (sixty-four now), Jane slipped into a quasi-maternal role: "The General Blessing," Grace called her. Gracie herself, "the Last & Least," still played family jester. In the evening they read aloud to each other—Modern Painters or the new Atlantic Monthly—or, on Sunday, sang hymns. When Charles's Tintorettos arrived in February, hanging them made a great event. A visit to Cambridge almost counted as a foreign journey. In December the Nortons bought a ten-gallon glass tank and filled it with seawater, soldier crabs, sticklebacks, sea anemones, little pink starfish, and a pair of oysters. Charles sat and watched for hours; in May he added a "young seaserpent." By then he was also gardening. At every season, more than anything, he sat and read. "Books are like virtues,—the more one has the more one wants."6

Yet merely idle reading came close to vice. In Europe, Charles could "pass an indolent existence" (or what passed for indolence in his mind) without distress of soul. But he had not been home two weeks before he began to impose on himself the pressure of "public responsibilities." These
duties, he knew, his health kept him from meeting—“& there comes the difficulty of content.” The generic Victorian compulsion of duty had evolved in the Boston species its sharpest claws. Semiconsciously, Norton may have fled to Newport partly to elude the hunting eyes of responsibility. But for him there was never any real escape. The psychological problem was to reconcile public obligation, personal enjoyment, and intermittent health; the answer, Norton soon concluded, was literary work. He could pursue it when strength permitted; he enjoyed reading and found satisfaction in writing; and he could regard writing—his own or that he aided—as doing good by entertaining and educating readers, even if this did not exactly equal the evening school or the model lodging houses. Norton fully articulated neither problem nor solution; perhaps he never clearly saw his dilemma nor consciously realized how he had resolved it. But he discovered a way of both doing what he wanted and satisfying his guilty conscience—or holding it at bay. If not quite a vocation, literary odd jobs postponed any pressing need for one.

Norton began to wield again the editorial pen that he had sharpened on Frank Parkman’s and George Curtis’s manuscripts. John Gorham Palfrey, next-neighbor to Shady Hill, started in October to send Charles for comment and revision proof sheets of his gargantuan History of New England, a stream of paper that for years flowed on like the Mississippi. Proofs of Richard Grant White’s multivolume scholarly edition of Shakespeare began arriving several weeks after Palfrey’s, interrupted briefly by a plea for a loan to enable White to finish the work. Norton spent his time (and money) wisely: both Palfrey’s and White’s projects counted as major American contributions to scholarship.

Far more of his effort poured into “the Maga,” as Lowell and Norton called the Atlantic Monthly. Though grudging the time that editing it stole from Lowell’s writing, Norton never stinted his own hours: scouting out additional contributors among English writers whom he knew, suggesting others whom he did not for the publisher to solicit directly (notably “Mr. George Eliot,” whose Adam Bede greatly impressed Norton), scrounging puffs from transatlantic friends like Ruskin and de Vere. Miraculously, in April the prodigal steamer trunk showed up in a second-rate New York hotel, “unopened and uninjured,” with its cargo of copy for “the Maga,” including William Story’s Roba di Roma. Norton filled more pages with his own contributions, ranging from frequent book reviews to an old India hand’s report on the Sepoy Revolt. In January he asked James to raise his pay from five dollars a page. Charles was getting the hang of journalism.
Some of his articles suggested a role more weighty and concentrated than journalist. The first such was an account of the celebrated Manchester fine arts exhibition in the *Atlantic*'s inaugural issue of November 1857. In what was becoming his stock technique, he helped readers to visualize a visit like his own three months earlier, leading them from the bleak industrial city into the “vast space” of the exhibition hall, marching them through its different sections, pausing occasionally to draw their attention to particular paintings. But Norton was not merely guiding a tour; he was guiding his readers’ tastes and understandings, as they well knew.

Fanny Longfellow, for one, judged his article “a little à la Ruskin, not in style but in theory.” And why not? Ruskin’s idea of beauty as a kind of theophany, a bodying forth of God’s love for the world, appealed almost instinctively to the pious and Romantic son of Andrews Norton. Besides, Ruskin had become friend as well as teacher. His mark showed in Norton’s belief that Fra Angelico’s “pure, clear colors” reflected “his tranquil life and his reverential soul”; in his judgment that after 1500 painting sank in quality because “religion almost disappears from Art”; in his praise of Turner as the “great leader” of “the lovers of Nature as seen in the external world”; in his identification of Pre-Raphaelitism as the great promise in contemporary painting. Norton was more than “a little à la Ruskin.”

But far from Ruskin’s ape. Norton’s thumbnail sketches of individual artists relied on his own substantial firsthand acquaintance with drawing and color, acquired in galleries across Europe. Moreover, he paid far greater attention than Ruskin to portraits; and he read them differently, less as composition and color, more as expression of personal qualities and evidence of cultural history. Thirty years later, Henry James would flatly aver that “there is no greater work of art than a great portrait”—which for a novelist may be true. James could have got this attitude from Norton (quite possibly did); for Norton advised his readers that they would learn as much “of Venetian men and of their lives from the pencil of Titian and of Tintoret as from the pens of contemporary chroniclers.” Norton believed that every nation’s art opened a window onto its mental interior, especially on the moral and spiritual state of a culture. Ruskin, sharing the conviction, must have encouraged Norton’s thinking along these lines.

Yet in this matter Norton was more master than student—and possibly this is what Ruskin meant when he called Norton “my first real tutor.” Charles’s early and repeated immersion in the Scottish Enlightenment had fixed in his brain, long before he read Ruskin, the key idea that the customs and writings, paintings and architecture, of a “civilization” (later generations
would say “a culture”) reflected its stage of development. No surprise here: by 1857 this notion had settled comfortably into truism. But Norton’s awareness of historical criticism of the Bible infused the truism with philological specificity. He had gained this understanding over his father’s shoulder then solidified it in editing his father’s work. To comprehend any text, the interpreter read it in light of available information about its author’s culture. The text, thus illuminated, itself cast brighter light on that culture—leading then to still better grasp of the text, and so on, in a version of what later became famous as “the hermeneutic circle.”

Norton’s historical approach to art evolved out of philology; and, though barely breathed in “The Manchester Exhibition,” it was nonetheless pregnant with possibilities of new knowledge. In contrast, Ruskin’s notion of art as spiritual diagnostic was too vague and inchoate to be fertile for learning. Ruskin, the ripening prophet, increasingly treated art as a path to spiritual rebirth. Norton, the budding scholar, shared the spiritual concern; but he also had a methodology of erudition to incarnate spirit in historical flesh, one that was to provide the animating principle of his mature work.

Furthermore, the authorial habits inculcated by Edward Channing made for more efficient lessons than Ruskin’s. Norton wrote with greater concision and composed in clearer order than his friend, though with nothing like Ruskin’s genius. In four swift pages Norton trotted the Atlantic’s audience through a coherent history of Italian art. He warned them off the post-1500 painters (who until “very recently” had “been more loudly praised”) and told them to admire instead those from Giotto to Bellini. In equally brief compass and fluent sentences, he laid out the differing strengths of individual Pre-Raphaelite painters, their generic virtues, and the vices that crippled their collective promise. He spoke with the authority of one who had “made a thoughtful study of Art.”

In short—very short—“The Manchester Exhibition” presented Norton in a new persona. From his childish fascination with the pictures in the Athenæum to his recent roamings through the galleries of Rome, Munich, Paris, and London, he had amassed a trove of information about paintings, statues, drawings, and buildings. Out of this he had distilled, using Ruskin’s alembic more often than not, a degree of expertise about art. To Fanny Longfellow he might still be “Charley Norton.” But he had, more or less officially (America had no one to lay on hands), donned the mantle of art expert.

He wore it again in the report “The Catacombs of Rome,” which he had promised Lowell before leaving Europe. At New Year, Norton was reading
about nothing else, fretting for books only available in Italy. By then the
digest had burgeoned into a five-article series. Lowell figured the subject to
have enough éclat that he used the first instalment to lead off the March 1858
Atlantic. Much of Norton's knowledge of the catacombs came direct from
the mouths of Spencer Northcote and Giovanni Battista de Rossi; but he
also relied heavily on the seventeen parts of the uncompleted Monumenti
delle Arti Cristiane Primitive nella Metropoli dei Cristianesmo, published in
1844 by Padre Marchi, the catacombs' pioneering explorer; on the six vol­
umes of Catacombes de Rome printed between 1851 and 1855 by the French
commission established to excavate the catacombs; and on still unpublished
writings of the cavaliere de Rossi. This material he fleshed out with a
handful of medieval Latin sources.

Out of it all he shaped a study melding entertainment with erudition.
The general frame was a sturdy Protestant assurance that the catacombs
revealed the pure Christianity of the age of the martyrs, not yet corrupted by
popery. However, half realizing that this horse had been dead long enough
to putrefy, he beat it only lightly, showing far livelier interest in Catholic
legends surrounding the catacombs and in the paleo-Christian art within
them. Antique legend had obvious dramatic appeal, and Norton mined that
vein in an article devoted to the stories of Saint Cecilia. General readers
might have expected details of paleo-Christian art to offer a chance for an
after-dinner nap, but Norton worked even mortuary inscriptions into a
tolerably engaging story of the transformation of pagan into Christian cul­
ture. The inscriptions, he took occasion to note, provided no evidence for
any distinctively Roman Catholic doctrines or for Trinitarianism. He also
took occasion learnedly to criticize errors in the French commission's repro­
duction of certain murals.

For "The Catacombs of Rome" was a learned work, though hardly eru­
dite by the standards of Göttingen or Berlin. Norton's interest in the physi­
cal remains of ancient peoples had drifted from Squier's Mound Builders to
Mahabalipuram to desolate Greek temples in Sicily. Italy in 1856 and 1857
had focused this romance with archaeology more tightly on classical antiq­
uity, and Norton's dalliance had grown into a more serious relationship.
"Catacombs" rested on critically alert awareness of the best recent scholar­
ship and the original sources. Moreover, the articles had some importance as
the first work to acquaint Americans with the discoveries in the catacombs.
In all, the scholarly achievement was substantial enough that Norton con­
sidered publishing it as a small book.14

Yet in making himself into a scholar he did not suppress the fascination
with the larger human story that had enticed him into archaeology in the first place. Norton understood that some of his more arcane writings would interest only a limited class of readers. But he laced the *Atlantic* articles with dramatic touches calculated to intrigue a general reader; he deployed the minutiae of erudition to illuminate broadly the evolution of both Christian history and ancient art; he conveyed a sense of recovering from their long burial in the catacombs human meanings important to anyone. All came together as a scene in the great drama of human self-forming, of universal history: all, therefore, of a piece with Bellini’s painting or Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. Norton wrote from this vast perspective, not simply because he aimed to please general readers, but also because he remained one himself.

Yet he was decidedly a scholar, too, and of a type that needs explication. With his father’s example before him, Norton filled his solitude at Newport (as he had many days past in Rome and would many to come at Shady Hill) with reading, much of it arcane, much got from booksellers in New York, London, and Paris with whom he now regularly dealt. The boxes arrived, and Norton pored over their contents. The French medievalist Antoine Frédéric Ozanam’s *Documents inédits* contained “some curious things.” “As usual” with Italian commentaries on Dante, “nine tenths of Picchioni’s book is worthless”—but the other tenth stuck. In “the life of Virgil which used to be ascribed to Donatus,” Charles recognized the germ of one of Boccaccio’s tales.15

He sharpened his learning (and claws) in book reviews: of J. C. Peabody’s plagiarizing “translation” of the *Inferno*; of John S. Harford’s incompetent biography of Michelangelo; of the famous German art authority G. F. Waagen’s careless and fawning survey of recent additions to British art collections. By the time he came to review J. S. Brewer’s Latin edition of Roger Bacon’s works in 1860, Norton had a pretty sure grasp of the past half century’s scholarship on scholastic philosophy, the best of it French: Hareau’s *De la philosophie scolastique*, Jourdain’s *Recherches sur les traductions latines d’Aristote*, and more. He thought that George Bancroft “ought to be flayed alive” for omitting reference notes from his American history. A few decades later American students would undergo this sort of indoctrination in doctoral programs; ill health was Norton’s graduate school.16

Yet in one crucial respect he did not resemble at all an expert cut according to the standard pattern of the great German universities. A student of Florentine painting might dabble in Dante, but he was not supposed to write about paleo-Christian inscriptions nor to join the American Oriental Society. Norton’s comrade Frank Child makes an instructive contrast. “The
Professor”—one of Frank’s nicknames among the Nortons—did hold a Göttingen Ph.D.; and from the start of his career he concentrated his research exclusively on late medieval and early modern English philology. About the time his sick friend was leaving for Europe, he published a five-volume edition of Spenser. When Charles was wandering in print from Michelangelo to the catacombs, Frank was working on a seminal essay on Chaucer’s language (1862) and preparing an eight-volume collection of British popular ballads (1857–58). That last work proved prolegomenon to a more thorough edition that would absorb virtually all his scholarly energies for forty years. In thus contracting his range, Child was the very model of a modern professional scholar. Yet Norton never understood his own scholarship as different in kind from Child’s, nor vice versa (and indeed they shared key assumptions drawn from philology), even while Charles stubbornly refused to settle in one field or even to see his different subjects as essentially distinct.17

Still, like Child, Norton was acquiring the authority that attached to learning. Or, more precisely, he was assuming it in his writings; and his readers were granting it. The very possibility was recent. As late as 1825 or so, cultural authority of this sort—authority to pronounce what ought to be believed and felt—belonged in America not to expertise but to religion, not to scholars as such but to the settled clergy. (This is not to say that lay people paid more attention then to ministers than they did later to professors.) Norton’s father could claim that such authority belonged to him as a scholar, at least as far as pronouncing on the Bible. Andrews’s success in attaching clerical authority to his new scholarly persona had owed a lot to his own straddling of the line between minister and lay expert. Occasional preacher, professor of divinity, biblical scholar: people commonly mistook him as “Reverend.”

His son moved that authority more clearly into the lay domain. In Charles’s case, the right to pronounce derived transparently from expertise, not ordination. Norton had “made a thoughtful study of Art”; he never entered Holy Orders, except perhaps metaphorically. Yet the religious origins of the cultural authority he was acquiring showed in the tone of “The Manchester Exhibition” and his book reviews: he spoke as a preacher would, expounding truth and exposing falsehood to his invisible congregation. These roots showed, too, in the spiritual quality that Norton assigned to the experiences of art and literature about which he wrote. In this passing of the scepter from clergyman to secular expert, Norton helped to foster a mutation that altered irrevocably the cultural structure of the Anglo-American world.

And it was very much an Anglo-American world in which he played his
new part. The *Atlantic Monthly* had given itself its watery name precisely to insist that the ocean bridged, not divided. Britain and America, or at least New England and Old, were supposed to share a single “Anglo-Saxon” culture. When one remembers the great Irish immigration to New England and the class divisions that rent both nations (but especially England), this claim begins to appear as (hoist on its own metaphor) a fog of wishful thinking and willful blindness rising from an ocean of truism. Be that as it may, the Boston intellectual elite certainly did now cohabit, more intimately than ever before, with their counterparts in London: with the writers and scientists, mostly from middle-class dissenting or evangelical families, who had come to dominate the British quarterlies, run the scientific establishment, and write the popular novels. In this conjoint world Norton was emerging as a matchmaker.

For, in returning to America, Charles scarcely left Europe. His transatlantic friendships flourished in correspondence, as after his 1850 trip, but with a notable difference. Growing in number, they contracted in geography. Virtually all his European correspondents now were English: Mrs. Gaskell, Richard Baird Smith, Arthur Helps, Dante Rossetti, Lady Augusta Bruce. By 1860, Charles could no longer provide friends with letters of introduction for the Continent, so stale had his acquaintance grown there. Even for news of Italy he relied on Aubrey de Vere or the expatriate Storys. The thickness of English connections more than offset the atrophy of links to the Continent. Indeed, so well connected was Norton that, when the *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, he had the first copy in Boston.\(^\text{18}\) Clough’s monthly letters amounted to a newsmagazine of British intellectual life: which recent articles merited attention (and who had written them), which books were stirring controversy, which issues were agitating politics. Mrs. Gaskell’s were similar, though predictably more attentive to fiction. Charles reciprocated and also tried to secure American attention for British authors and artists whom he admired, like the Pre-Raphaelites.

He also performed more immediately practical services, becoming an unpaid literary agent (as he had for Arthur Helps in 1849 and again in the early 1850s): transactions made tricky—and often embarrassing for Norton and other cosmopolitan Americans—by the United States government’s refusal to recognize foreign copyright. Besides dealing in Mrs. Gaskell’s behalf with the Maga, he negotiated with the Boston firm of Ticknor and Fields for the right to publish authorized editions of her work in the United States. For Clough, he oversaw the publication of the Plutarch translation (completed at last in 1859); then reviewed it in the *Atlantic*; negotiated and
edited an American edition of the poems; even invested for Clough his American royalties. In comparison to these labors, arranging the American reprint of James Spedding's seven-volume edition of Francis Bacon's works was a breeze.\(^\text{19}\)

The dominant note in these transatlantic relations was friendship, not business. Norton's intimacy with Ruskin in particular steadily deepened. Ruskin encouraged Charles in his writing. ("Still I think your talk is better than your writing—at least it is more above other peoples talk than your writing is above their writing"); one more hint of the elusive qualities that made Norton such a force person-to-person.) As his own mind grew more turbulent, the older man increasingly relied on Charles emotionally; by August 1859, Ruskin was avowing that "you are almost the only friend I have left. I mean the only friend who understands or feels with me." The next spring he sent Charles a painting by Dante Rossetti, *Beatrice at a Marriage-Feast*. It was the most thoughtful of gifts. No other subject, no other living artist, could Norton have valued more deeply. He thought the picture "exquisite."\(^\text{20}\)

Norton's health remained far from exquisite, "strong some days, & not very strong on others"; yet he had regained enough of it to move back to Shady Hill in November 1858 and to resume tentatively a part in civic affairs. With Kansas still bleeding and the great question of slavery coming to a head, his conscience would scarcely let him rest. Norton thought James Buchanan's South-leaning administration "the worst we have had" and Buchanan himself weak and unprincipled. Norton expected the next president to be "a Northern man" not just in residence but also "in principle." But who? After William Seward delivered a fiery speech declaring the quarrel over slavery an "irrepressible conflict," Norton declared the senator from New York to be "not merely the best statesman in the country, but the most available man for the Republican party." He urged Lowell to have the *Atlantic* push him for president. And as the new year began, Norton was working his European contacts for all they were worth, promoting a scheme to settle German colonists in Missouri in hope of building a free-soil majority in that key border state.\(^\text{21}\)

The crusade against slavery did not dominate Norton's winter. His health permitted a little more sociability—Charles even organized a dinner at Parker's restaurant to celebrate Lowell's fortieth birthday on 22 February—and there was more of Mr. Palfrey's *History of New England* to revise. Mostly, though, Norton used his hours of well-being to read and write. In April the *North American* carried a deprecatory article by him on the native
rulers of India; this (and a brief review in the *Atlantic* several months later) turned out to be Norton’s farewell to his long literary affair with the subcontinent. Italy now preoccupied him; he had in mind expanding the *Crayon* sketches into a book.

First, however, came Dante. Norton continued to pore over volumes of commentary, ancient and modern, and to tinker with the translation of the *Vita Nuova* that he had begun in Rome “to amuse himself.” During the summer of 1858 he had read “with some care” Dante’s *Convito* and “all I could get” about Dante’s friend and fellow poet Guido Cavalcanti; more and more firmly Norton believed “the intellectual & spiritual development of Italy” to culminate in “Dante & Giotto.” Unknown—astonishingly—to Norton, Dante Rossetti had also translated the *Vita Nuova* and was preparations to publish it. Early in the fall Rossetti mailed proofs to his fellow enthusiast. Norton “at once” wrote back that he would withhold his own translation from full publication but that he wished “to print some parts of it” before Rossetti’s appeared, “so that the independent work I gave to it may be plain.”

By October, Charles was working on a pair of articles on the *Vita Nuova*, “to be interspersed with translations.” In the event, “The New Life’ of Dante” turned into three articles, published in the *Atlantic* in January, February, and March of 1859. The first offered a historical-biographical-critical introduction to the *Vita Nuova* for readers who knew little of Dante but the name. The second and third summarized the work, while providing a running commentary and pointing out connections to Dante’s later writings. All three were larded with large chunks of Norton’s translation, including snippets from other writings by Dante. Remarkably, these articles made the first effort to introduce the *Vita Nuova* to American readers. As serious scholarship by European standards, they counted little; as learned *haute vulgarisation*, they distinguished themselves by any measure. And they immediately established Norton in the forefront of American Dante scholars. After reading them, Longfellow volunteered to hand over to Norton his long-meditated project for an anthology of source materials and criticism introductory to the study of Dante.

Norton massaged these essays for the next several months, for he meant to have them privately printed as a book. Longfellow loaned him more commentaries; Lowell, just then publishing his own first article on Dante, advised on translation. This was—like Andrews’s rendering of the gospels—as literal as Charles could manage, consistent with fluency and his desire to capture Dante’s tone. James urged him “to archaize the language a little” to
suit “the matter & the date.” That made sense; but Norton dismissed as almost “vain” any effort by a modern “to seek the interior & intention” of Dante’s poetry, “owing to the completely different intellectual conditions under which we are.” In mid-May specimen proofs from the printer followed Charles to Newport. Norton fretted about the typeface, the number of lines on the page, the tint of the paper. His fastidiousness in bookmaking never weakened.

Otherwise, life in Newport was busy but scarcely anxiety laden. Artist friends, including Stillman, came to visit, as did Lowell and a couple of Eliot cousins. (Child had gone to Europe with his ailing fiancée.) In July the Harvard alumni approved his scheme to have William Story sculpt a statue of ex-President Quincy; that would entail a flurry of organizing and fundraising. He sent the manuscript of his Italian sketches off to Ticknor and Fields, revising further, with Lowell’s help, as the proofs came back. Norton’s once-phenomenal energy seemed to be flowing again—despite hair turning gray at thirty-one. It was James he worried about: between editing the Maga and professing belles lettres in the college, Lowell’s own writing was being squeezed thin.

Then Norton’s body turned on him. On the night of 29 August 1859, the rest of the household already asleep, Charles fainted on the entry floor. How long he lay there, no one knew; not long, Charles guessed. But for two days he was too weak even to try to write a letter. For days afterward in a blue funk, he muttered that his Italian book “will not be good enough to suit me.” James bucked him up, told him not to “feel at all bashful” about his book. “I find it very interesting & I am a much harder person to please than most folks”; the book would give Charles repute among “the truly judicious—which is all that is worth having.” The spell passed, but it reminded Norton that he could not rely on recovery.

His stamina returned quickly enough for Norton to take command in a new campaign early that fall. James Jackson Jarves, a wealthy native of Boston, had settled in Florence in 1852, assembling there a collection of paintings to illustrate the development of Italian art from Giotto to the cinquecento. Wanting the collection to rest in his natal city, Jarves approached—no surprise by now—Norton. Even less surprisingly, the idea appealed to Charles. After getting his Anglo-Florentine friend C. C. Black to vet the pictures, Norton set about raising the twenty thousand dollars Jarves asked. In late September he prepared a pamphlet testifying to the collection’s value and began quietly circulating it among wealthy Bostonians “interested to obtain such a gallery for Boston.” His principal target was the Athenaeum
trustees, who owned Boston’s existing art gallery; in October they voted to contribute a quarter of the money, appointing Norton and four others as a committee to raise the rest.  

Norton was simultaneously in charge of raising funds for the statue of Josiah Quincy at Harvard—and in both cases learning how little good “printed circulars” did. Prying cash out of people’s fingers required “personal effort & solicitation.” That became possible when Norton returned from Newport on 1 November, but he found most fists clenched. Rumors floated that the pictures were third-rate. The truth was that few Bostonians “value[d] the works of the old masters,” despite Norton’s efforts in the Atlantic to enlighten them; “the most cultivated part of the public” understood neither the importance of “‘old’ pictures” to “modern artists” nor “their essential value as representing the past thoughts and habits of men.” Jarves’s deadline arrived on 1 January 1860; the money did not. (Yale finally bought the collection in 1871.) Even the campaign for President Quincy’s statue—the least controversial act of Bostonian pietas imaginable—was proving frustrating. Norton was gaining painful experience in organizing and fund-raising that he would later put to remarkably effective use.

His Dante work ended more happily. At Christmas, Norton mailed to friends and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic a hundred privately printed copies of “The New Life” of Dante. “The book,” he wrote, “has at least the merit of rarity.” Running scarcely a hundred pages, it was a miniature triumph of the bookmaker’s art. Richard Grant White, who knew whereof he spoke, thought it “exquisite”—the title page “a jewel,” the “tint & surface of your paper & your press work” alluringly beautiful—touut à fait “the most beautiful” book “that has appeared in America.” And it included a genuine nugget of original scholarship: an appendix bringing to public attention for the first time the Vita Nuova’s structural symmetry, an ordering of the poems that gave its symbolism a dimension previously unobserved. This was hardly an extravagant feat of erudition, but Norton’s discussions as a whole did add up to the first serious American contribution to Dante studies.

Only two months later his “Italian book” came out. This one actually was published, by Ticknor and Fields as Notes of Travel and Study in Italy, an erratic and curious composition. Most of the first half comprised the sketches, largely unrevised, that Norton had written for the Crayon from December 1855 through early July 1856: a mishmash of scenic description, art commentary, quaint tales, accounts of Italian politics, and revulsion at things Catholic. Added to them were two substantial sections comprising
well over half the book's 320 pages. The first was a 60-page account of Orvieto's great duomo and its history, drawn partly from Norton's observations of the cathedral in March 1856, partly from secondary accounts, partly from published medieval documents. The second was an assortment of pieces written during his second stay in Rome, from December 1856 through April 1857. Several were swift sketches—a picturesque scene, a repellent ritual—no different from those he had tossed off for the Crayon.

But Norton filled most of these pages with longer or shorter bits of cultural and social history, culled from his reading in old books: a mode of narrative by no means absent from the earlier sketches but swelled very considerably in these later ones. An attack on papal indulgences did not stop with a few anecdotes calculated to horrify Unitarians, as it would have in 1856; rather, it segued into three pages carefully explaining the doctrine, then ten pages examining with a Protestant eye the history of the controversy surrounding it. What started as a depiction of a picturesque medieval tower on the Quirinal devolved into a twenty-page essay on Dante and Rome. The book concluded with a broad-gauged but compact essay on art and society in the cinquecento, analyzing what Norton took to be the fifteenth-century crisis and subsequent decline of Italy.  

This was Norton practicing the mode of writing that he had learned to manage best. Themes becoming familiar to his readers ran through it: that buildings and paintings must be seen in light of their times; that they in turn illumine those times, since art expresses the ruling ideas of its era; that great art must be true both to nature and to some spiritual conception; and that only an age of faith can produce the highest art, just as the most spiritual artist in any age will create the most spiritual art. The method of approach was also becoming familiar. Norton anchored his essays in broad (though not yet deep) command of musty sources and of centuries of learned commentary on them. Yet he conjured from cracked parchment living human beings for his readers. He achieved this not just because he had picked up tricks of vivid scene painting and arresting anecdote but also because he saw in the past lessons for the present: the dangers of superstition, the importance of free government, the evils of corruption, the struggle of spiritual values against a material age.

For Norton's ideal as historian was to paint with broad brush strokes yet precise pigments, to expand moral horizons yet stick scrupulously to the historical record. The analogy to the Ruskinian ideal of art is revealing, but revealing of why Ruskin attracted Norton rather than of where Charles got his ideas. Norton's model was one of humane learning derived from Boston
principles, his own father, and fellow Cantabrigian writers like Longfellow and Lowell. Lowell expressed the archetype in reviewing *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy*: “When, as in the present instance, scholarship is united with a deep and active interest in whatever concerns the practical well-being of man, we have one of the best results of our modern civilization.”

In 1859, Norton still groped to name this mode of scholarship. It was, he understood, the alternative to the model of knowledge represented in the natural sciences. But, writing of university education, he could find no better antonym for “the pursuits of science” than “what are called classical studies”—the tentativeness of the phrase showing his dissatisfaction with it. “Learning, so called” and “learned studies” hardly worked better.

Whatever the name, America stinted it.

The temper of our people, the wide field for their energies, the development of the so-called practical traits of character under the stimulus of our political and social institutions, the solitary dissociation of America from the history and the achievements of the Old World, the melancholy absence of monuments of past greatness and worth,—these and many other circumstances peculiar to our position all serve to weaken the general interest in what are called classical studies, and to direct the attention of the most ambitious and active minds far too exclusively to the pursuits of science.

Norton held no brief against science, but he called for “balance.” Americans more than the peoples of Europe, he said, needed to read literature other than “newspapers and magazines,” “to entertain as familiars” great writers of old. For “our birthrights in the past are imperfect; we are born into the present alone” and live “but half a life”: “by living also in the past we learn to value the present at its worth.”

Among “learned studies” Americans underrated in particular textual philology. Even love for great writers “of other times and other tongues” did not “stimulate the ardor of students to the thorough examination of their thoughts and words.” Norton admitted that philology bore some blame, too often nit-picking at boring questions; such “useless inquiries” betrayed “its true end.” Here, his father’s son spoke, explicitly citing the relation between scholarship on the text of the *Divina Commedia* and on “the text of more ancient works, as, for instance, that of the Gospels.” Charles ranked “verbal criticism” high among studies because it treated “the instruments of human power” best fitted to express spirit: “words as the symbols of thought.” Philological scholarship “makes thought accurate, and perception fine.” For writers it “adds truth to the creations of imagination by teaching the modes
by which they may be best expressed”; and for readers it “leads to fuller and more appreciative understanding and enjoyment” of past masterpieces. “There can, indeed, be no thorough culture without it.”

His own erudition elevated Norton, still a middling scholar by European gauge, to the highest levels of learning in New England. Thomas Parsons greeted “New Life” with a sonnet putting Norton’s name “on the scroll of sacred scholars”; Thomas Appleton, whom Boston credited with a sharp critical eye, thought Notes of Travel and Study “distinguished and superior,” the Orvieto chapter “famous.” Indeed, the book stayed in print for half a century; and, as late as 1897, Houghton Mifflin planned to include a selection in its Library of the World’s Best Literature, Ancient and Modern. In understanding the enthusiasm for his writings, the twenty-first-century reader needs not only to remember how few Americans worked the ground that Norton did but also to appreciate the frequent acuity and prescience of his judgments on the artists and critics of his era.

As his city metaphorically ordained him, Norton’s actual religious beliefs were drifting toward the outer reaches of Boston Harbor. Over the past few years, religion had often preoccupied him. He had caught from Andrews the germ of an uneasiness with institutional religion. Encounters with papal Rome had raised it to fever, for there he saw the church’s stultifying effect (so he judged) on English Catholics whom he otherwise liked and admired. True, no Boston Unitarian expected better from—well, no longer the Whore, but still the Lady of Uncertain Virtue, of Babylon. But his friend Clough, after wrestling long and hard to harmonize his conscience with the capacious Church of England, had in the end saved his self-respect only by abandoning the church and, ultimately, giving up Christianity tout court. The long evenings together at Shady Hill in 1852–53 and their more recent talks in London can hardly have omitted Clough’s intellectual struggle with organized religion.

Charles increasingly suspected repression and conformism to be inevitable in any church. This was no great leap for a Unitarian suckled on the rhetoric of liberty of conscience, and Norton’s belief in the spiritual role of the artist encouraged him to take it. To achieve spiritual insight one must throw off the shackles of tradition. How else to reconcile admiration for Giotto and Fra Angelico with contempt for their church? Moreover, his deepening historicism led Norton to see all religious institutions as secondary to whatever endured in Christianity: every church was the fleeting product of a particular age, destined to evolve into something new. Norton still taught Sunday school but stressed “the spirit of the Gospels” over the letter
of doctrine; and the best thing that he could wish for his students was “the formation of an independent religious character.”

He observed with close attention the “struggle for faith,” which Clough had foreshadowed and which now shook the British intellectual class and spilled over into the United States. Unitarian leaders attributed it to “the absence of faith & the prevalence of skepticism.” Norton disagreed, blaming loss of faith in Christianity rather on “absence of independence of judgment,” the result of “long training of men’s minds within the limits of formulas & creeds.” Real Christianity, he thought, “has never yet been fairly tried.” “Enlightened and liberal men,” independent thinkers like Clough and the British authors of the controversial Essays and Reviews (which Norton reviewed approvingly), were in actual fact struggling to draw Christianity “from its chrysalis.” In the “new age, soon to come,” the church would cease being “the guardian of faith” and become merely “the external, social expression of the presence & rule of the Holy Spirit in the hearts & lives of each individual.”

Norton still called himself Christian, but he had shaken off commitment to any particular beliefs, concluding that “the Christian religion is no fixed and formalized set of doctrines, but an expansive and fluent faith, adapting itself to the new needs of every generation and of each individual.” It is impossible to guess who, besides Clough, may have encouraged him to think along these particular lines. Norton knew of Ruskin’s “unconversion” from evangelicalism; had they talked of his deeper skepticism about Christianity? Had Charles read Thomas Carlyle’s unsettling Sartor Resartus (first published as a book, after all, not in Britain but in Boston in 1836)? or pondered the contention of Andrews’s old adversary Theodore Parker that historic Christianity was “transient”? or discussed such questions with his new friend Emerson? The only thing obvious is the congruence of Norton’s new view of religion, as evolving through changing forms in changing cultures, with his old philologically rooted historicism. It is equally hard to pin down specific articles of his own “fluent faith” at this stage. But closest to its heart seemed to be the “gradual improvement in human nature” and “gradual increase of human happiness upon the earth.”

To this religion he did commit himself. He cast his scholarship in a mold meant to foster just such “gradual improvements”; and, though still at times an invalid, he took no mean part in civic life. In 1860 he felt able both to rejoin the board of the Model Lodging House Association and to publish a long article in the Atlantic encouraging its imitation.

Increasingly, though, the impending crisis over slavery turned Norton
away from Boston’s problems and focused his attention on the nation’s. He was beginning to shift his primary sense of citizenship from Massachusetts and New England to the United States. In this, Norton enacted a broader American transition induced by the clash between North and South; for Charles, as for many others, the pivotal moment can be specified almost to the date. On the night of 16 October 1859 a radical abolitionist named John Brown, at the head of eighteen men, captured an undefended federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, hoping against hope to raise a slave rebellion that would bring the hated institution to a fiery end. The notion was bizarre, the attack suicidal. Thirty-six hours later Brown was in irons, most of his raiders dead. In the South crowds screamed for his blood. In the North some acclaimed him as a hero, more denounced him as a scoundrel, most tried to sort out the laudable from the damnable in this strange crisis and stranger man.

Norton belonged to the majority, struggling to form a “dispassionate judgment.” No doubt Brown was legally a traitor, and Virginia had a constitutional right to hang him (which it did on 2 December). But Norton, deploiring Brown’s course of action, admired his “strong love of liberty”; and the fanaticism with which the South responded to Brown’s raid appalled him, raising to a higher pitch his hostility to slavery. Brown himself seemed to Norton a magnificent “anachronism,” an “enthusiast” reminiscent of “the Scottish Covenanters and the English regicides”; yet he deeply admired his courage in the face of the gallows—and knew that his posture as a martyr “increased daily the sympathy which was already strong.” He also knew that, North and South, Brown had stretched nerves already taut. Talk grew, he informed English friends, of a Republican victory in the upcoming presidential election and, in that event, of Southern secession. Charles also told them that the South was too weak to make secession stick. In ten years the slavery debate would be over, Republican policies in place: no extension of slavery into the territories, no slaves in the District of Columbia, no Fugitive Slave Law. In these views, Norton sounded like many moderate Republicans.39

He differed from most, however, in seeing the crisis of slavery as an episode in an epic transcending America and the nineteenth century. Garibaldi’s Red Shirts, Boston’s model lodging houses, even Lord Vernon’s recent republication of the first four editions of the Divina Commedia belonged to the same saga: the story of the “gradual improvement in human nature” and “gradual increase in human happiness.” At times, surveying “the state of Europe and of our own country,” Norton found “more need for
faith than ground of hope.” But usually not. His confidence in progress grew “firmer” as his knowledge of events widened. Yet he could hardly be called a Pollyanna, for—“heavy as the sadness of the world is and disappointing as men are”—he expected improvement to creep with glacial slowness, amid confusions and setbacks. The recent “admirable patience & steadiness” of the Italians “in their struggle for national existence” almost startled him.40

His own country’s role in the drama enacted a grand motif: popular government. Like Tocqueville, Norton saw America as a laboratory of democracy for the entire Western world; going beyond Tocqueville, he regarded the experiment more broadly as an episode in the evolution of human nature. For instance, because democracy tended “to destroy privacy & seclusion,” Americans had a hard time sustaining “independence of character” and had to solve in a new way the age-old problem of leading “a double but not divided life,” “in the world but apart from it.” The most severe immediate stress came from slavery; but immigration, schools, literature, slums, mores all had tested and would test the system. In art and literature America humbly followed its European parent; in politics and government the United States painfully carved out a new and higher path. “The real course which affairs are taking,” Norton wrote to Aubrey de Vere in February 1860, “can only be seen by watching the undercurrents” in the “untracked seas” on which America was setting out. He deemed “the prospect before us” encouraging: “looking forward for some centuries I seem to see a social condition different from any which the world has known, & better & happier than any that has gone before.” The Scottish Enlightenment had never imagined “the progress of civilization” in terms at once so fluid and so encompassing.41

The vastness of these “untracked seas” never distracted Norton’s gaze from his tiny duties in their navigation. With George Curtis he thrashed out what national politics demanded, on one of Curtis’s rare visits to Shady Hill in January 1860; but the Maga framed a lot of Norton’s social existence now. At the center stood Lowell. The Atlantic also brought Norton into regular contact with Oliver Wendell Holmes, the physician-poet who figured in its pages as the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. Holmes came to spend a few days with Norton at Newport, departed calling him Cousin Charles. In the spring of 1860, Cousin Charles was elected to the Saturday Club, brought together around the Atlantic’s writers a few years earlier. Emerson was one of the regulars. By now, Charles had buried deep his father’s animosity to the mystagogue of Concord, even commissioning a picture of Emerson that hung at Shady Hill; Emerson for his part was saying “the pleasantest things” of Charles. The Saturday Club took its name from its monthly eating habit;
and there Norton dined convivially with very old friends like Longfellow, Felton, and Benjamin Peirce, merely old ones like Lowell and Tom Appleton, newer ones like Holmes and Emerson, but only two really new ones, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier and the railroad entrepreneur John Murray Forbes. Boston, after all, was Boston. 42

Newport was still, in that era, pretty much Boston, too. The Nortons went down in May as usual, soon joined by the summer medley of visitors—James Lowell, then Ezra Abbot; Uncle and Aunt Ticknor; a stray artist or two; and, when the American Association for the Advancement of Science met in Newport at the end of July, Mr. Felton and Louis and Elizabeth Agassiz. Charles, the woodsman, cut his leg with a hatchet while opening a case of wine, immobilizing himself for two weeks. He was agile by early August, when he and Jane left with the Lowells, Stillman, and some other artist friends to spend a fortnight in the Adirondack mountain wilderness. Norton never got past Lake Saranac. “Knocked up by the heat of the weather & some overfatigue,” he collapsed in the apt village of North Elba. There “the General Blessing” nursed her brother while their friends forged ahead. From his chair Charles fell in love with the Adirondacks, “constantly & deeply” feeling “the presence of God.” But Lowell was the one who got to fish. On the twenty-first, they limped back into Newport, reminded anew that Norton could still not count on his body. 43

A day or two later, a letter arrived from Frank Child. He and Lizzie, back from Europe and holed up at Sedgwick headquarters in Lenox, had married there on 20 August. All of Norton’s intimate male friends—Lowell, Curtis, Clough, Ruskin, now Child—had embarked on marriage. Charles alone remained in the pupal stage, an ailing man well into his thirties with no real career. Whatever emotions his inability to mature evoked he kept to himself. He simply rejoiced with Frank, probably, and rightly, expecting to see nearly as much of him as ever. 44

Autumn grew grimmer. As October faded into November, the fate of the Republic and perhaps of slavery hung in the balance. Though preferring William Seward for president, Norton had grown tolerably comfortable with the more moderate Abraham Lincoln. The important thing was to get a Republican president, and Charles felt reasonably confident of that. He was far less sure of a Republican majority in Congress. Both opinions give strong evidence merely that he read the newspapers. 45

If Lincoln’s election on 6 November did not surprise Norton, the speed with which the Gulf states moved to secede did. He had calculated that Republican victory would provoke secession, slaveholders realizing that the
steadily growing majority of Yankee voters had “forever” deprived the slave states of the political power to protect their institution. But he had not guessed so quick a move and blamed the “rash bravado” of Southern leaders on the corruption of “their characters” by their own system: slavery “has produced a generation of men of hasty temper, of arrogant & tyrannical disposition, of narrow minds.”

That was superficial; the true origin of secession lay “deep in principles, & remote in time.” The American Republic had always formed “a Union of incompatibilities.” Still deploying the Aristotelian categories of classical republican theory—terms familiar to the Founders—Norton described the slave states as “more or less completely oligarchical,” the free states “almost pure democracies.” The Constitution had manufactured “an alliance” between “these two conflicting systems”; but the “divergence of moral sentiment” between them inevitably widened, especially after the South persuaded itself that slavery benefited both masters and slaves. Rather than “indulging in dreams” of perpetual Union, “we ought to have been preparing for its inevitable rupture.”

This came on 20 December when South Carolina voted to secede. Two days later, Norton wrote to a Charleston friend who had taken a leading part in the movement. “Shall we laugh or cry? Let us do both.” South Carolina did right, Norton said, to wait for “no compromises or concessions, for we have none to offer or to make.” He did not lament “the destruction of a nominal Union”; yet he remained “utterly sceptical as to the success of your experiment”: “higher laws than the Constitution and higher ordinances than those of Conventions” would operate so as to “save the country from destruction and preserve all that is worth preserving in our Republic.” “Spite of all your decrees you & I will not be foreigners to each other”: through rising sectional tensions, through the secession winter, Charles kept on cordial terms with Southern friends. He even felt “sorrow & compassion” for the South as a whole, given “the retribution that they are preparing for themselves.” “The harvest they must reap is one of inevitable desolation.”

He felt less charity toward Northerners. His “chief fear” as Christmas approached was that “we of the North should fail to see that the time has come when the dispute between the North & the South can be settled finally.” The North must cast away “timid counsels” and “compromises & concessions.” Like many, maybe most, antislavery Northerners, he was at first willing to let the South go in peace, believing that the slave system, unprotected by the Union, would crumble before the moral revulsion of the
world. If conflict did come to rifle and sword, Northern might would bring slavery to a bloody end. “New England is stronger than New Africa.”

Meanwhile, the “whole country,” Norton wrote to Aubrey de Vere, itched for 4 March when “we shall be relieved from the imbecility of Mr. Buchanan.” Lincoln he believed “an honest, straightforward, courageous man.” Still better, the new president would presumably heed the advice of Secretary of State William Seward, more than honest and brave, “a statesman of a high order.” Lincoln’s inaugural address impressed Norton as “manly & straightforward”; he rejoiced to see “the dignity & force of the government once more asserted.”

He also rejoiced to hear that Lincoln had appointed George Perkins Marsh of Vermont, with whom Norton had chanced to dine in early December, as United States minister to the new Kingdom of Italy. The erudite Marsh shared Norton’s philological interests; he could provide a congenial superior, even a scholarly collaborator, while residence in Italy could offer a wonderful opportunity for Norton’s studies. Norton wrote to Senator Charles Sumner, suddenly a man of influence, asking “to be considered a candidate for the post of Secretary of Legation.” He took no other steps, “for I do not wish to place myself in the position of a beggar for office.” In political patronage, beggars are usually choosers; and the job went to a more assiduous scrounger.

This was a disappointment; but far darker clouds closed in, both personal and national. Arthur Clough had fallen ill that winter; in mid-March the Nortons learned that the disease was consumption. South Carolina’s noose around the federal fort in Charleston Harbor strengthened; so did Lincoln’s determination to break the stranglehold. In early April, Charles and Jane journeyed to Hartford to witness another inauguration, their cousin Samuel Eliot’s as president of Trinity College. On 12 April, as the predawn darkness softened over Charleston Harbor, the battery of the Palmetto Guard opened fire on Fort Sumter.