The farther Norton sailed into the public eye, the more Ashfield’s peaceful haven mattered. There, too, he found George’s comradeship, dearer each year as seasoned friends grew fewer. By early June of 1886, Charles had settled quietly at the Locusts, not budging till October whistled him back to his Harvard lecture room. Ashfield, if not idyllic to every resident, seemed so to Norton: hay to gather, wood to chop, berries to pick, books to relax with, and agreeable visitors such as Matthew Arnold and his wife, who stayed twice that summer.

Controversy could pick a path even through the dense birch and maple of Franklin County. Any August, for instance, some famous orator at Norton and Curtis’s Academy Dinner might gruffly speak his mind to the ever larger corps of reporters, avid for a dog-days story. This summer it was the American School at Athens that roiled Norton’s pond and his old friend William Stillman who first troubled the waters. In June the Nation published a letter from Stillman denouncing the school’s annual director for 1885–86, the Harvard classicist Frederic Allen. Allen had gone to Athens reluctantly and passed the winter there in poor health. Students complained that he neglected them, ignored important German archaeologists in town, and let his wife and her visitors use the school library as a private sitting room. Stillman’s charges contained enough truth to force Norton and his colleagues to try to limit the damage; and the 1886–87 director, Martin D’Ooge of the University of Michigan, sailed in July under instruction to pacify the students.

This blowup speeded plans to cure the root defect: that each year a raw director started from scratch. Norton, John White, William Goodwin, and William Ware (the de facto managers for Athens) did not need Allen’s ineptitude to realize the inadequacy of the system; but they also saw no easy solution. Their dilemma followed from the reason for founding the school in the first place—the United States had not a single experienced classical
archaeologist—and from “the impolicy of employing anybody but an Amer­
ican.” The amateur art lovers who largely populated the AIA and paid its
bills sharpened the predicament by failing even to see the need for exper­
tise. Norton thought the best way out to hire Charles Waldstein, head
of the Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge and at least
American-born. Waldstein had flaws: he did not know modern Greek, and
his expertise lay in ancient art rather than in archaeology. But, by October,
White, Goodwin, and Ware had come round to Norton’s view.1

By then Ashfieldian peace had ended anyway, and Norton faced the
annual invasion of British visitors, as regular as the turning leaves. By now
(as one Englishman observed) Shady Hill had become “a kind of literary
consulate,” its library a “literary museum” crammed with Norton’s “almost
unique collection of volumes, manuscripts, notes, and autographs,” and
Norton himself the celebrated “Proxenos, or Consul-General for British
literature and men of letters” visiting Massachusetts. This year, with Har­
vard celebrating its 250th anniversary, British guests “all but swamped”
Norton—“Five on Friday; two yesterday; two more today!” The delegate
from Emmanuel College, the historian Mandell Creighton, and his wife
stayed for a week at Shady Hill; and Norton returned Emmanuel’s 1884
hospitality with a huge reception for them one evening and a formal dinner
the next. The Harvard jubilee ended on 8 November, but the Creightons
were scarcely out the door before the Italian archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani
arrived for a month of lectures in Sanders Theatre and of entertainment at
Shady Hill.2

Fellow citizens also pestered Norton: for lectures, opinions, autographs.
When one editor, hankering for the eminent name, asked out of the blue for
an essay on (bizarrely) Tolstoy, Norton wearily replied that he had read too
little of Tolstoy’s work to judge it; and “even if I had read it all I have not the
leisure to write what would be a difficult piece of criticism”—adding in acid,
“The time of a man of letters is precious”: “I am tempted to write a homily,
but forbear.” Even Christmas now passed publicly. Concerned about Har­
vard students too poor to return home for the holiday, Norton had begun
inviting all the hangers-around to Shady Hill for Christmas Eve dinner.
(The custom endured, folded into the Norton legend.) The New Year began
with Charles Waldstein coming to stay for a week and be wooed for Athens.
He returned off and on until March.3

What spare time Norton salvaged from the AIA and teaching went
largely to literary work. In 1887 he published the Carlyle-Goethe corre­
spondence and the revised Reminiscences; in 1888, two volumes of Letters of
Thomas Carlyle, 1826–36. As Norton’s editing moved past the 1830s, with Carlyle advancing in fame and correspondents multiplying, the burden grew exponentially. Norton somehow got the job done by himself up to 1845. But in the fall of 1891 he hired his former student William Roscoe Thayer to choose, under Norton’s oversight, letters “desirable to print” from the final thirty-five years of Carlyle’s life; by February 1892 a selection stood ready for the editor’s hand. Then Norton put off the project. Carlyle’s family “had hoped and expected” him to finish the job; why he did not still puzzles. Perhaps the endless task simply interfered with work more urgent to Norton. Perhaps, having put Froude in his place, he had achieved his main end. Or perhaps Ruskin’s anger over his attacks on Froude hurt too badly, for these ongoing editions sorely strained one of the two or three deepest friendships of Norton’s life. Although little comfort to Norton, others esteemed his Carlyle editions; and such literary work (though far from the only warrant) probably played a part in Harvard’s decision to award her son an honorary LL.D. in June 1887.

In any case, gravitation toward more literary topics, away from art and archaeology, showed in Norton’s teaching as well. In 1886–87 he retrieved Dante from a dispirited Lowell and, the next year, handed over his own upper-level course in Greek art to a former student (and student of the American School), Harold Fowler. Norton continued to teach the broad survey of ancient art (the celebrated Fine Arts 3), along with, in alternate years, a companion Fine Arts 4 covering medieval art. But the old treatments of Florentine and Venetian art devolved into a single course called “Literature and the Fine Arts in Italy during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, with special study of Dante.” This pattern—two big-scale art history surveys, a more specialized course centered on Dante—would continue to the end of Norton’s classroom career.

To avert breakdowns Norton had finally learned to cut back other business during term time, although even the abbreviated menu of public duties ran on and on, extended by private ones. On 31 March 1887, for instance, he presided over an authors’ reading in behalf of the Longfellow Memorial Association, then two weeks later traveled to New York to represent Harvard at Columbia’s centenary and to attend a fund-raising dinner for the American School. He returned just in time to greet his in-laws Sara and William Darwin and, a few days later, to give Lowell a farewell lunch before James’s annual departure to summer in England, this year with Lily in tow. The three girls were growing into young women (even Margaret, who was seventeen), and they needed from their father a different sort of care as they
began to attract from the Harvard students new attention. Sally, at twenty-
dtwo, had turned out decidedly a beauty, Lily attractive, Margaret very plain,
and they had equally diverse tastes and talents. (Paradiso, Purgatorio, and
Inferno, the undergraduates said—typically sensitive young males.) Their
father seemed baffled about how to cope with any of them as they grew into
Victorian sexual maturity, potentially into marriage, and certainly into new-
felt urges to independence.

This year even Ashfield felt unsettled, restless. By early July, Sally had
gone off to visit friends on the North Shore, leaving only the three younger
children with Papa. And one of summer’s most familiar faces had gone, John
Field having at last succumbed to Bright’s disease, just short of his seventy-
second birthday. Except for George’s company, Norton passed a “very soli-
tary” summer, troubled again by insomnia and frustrated by the resulting
inability to accomplish the work he had planned.6

More than physical ills or temporary irritation underlay his unease.
“From year to year,” he wrote James, “I seem to myself to grow more & more
silent, and to express less of what is in my soul.” Why quietude? The chill of
age, coming over a man about to turn sixty? Was he confronting more
honestly his own limitations, as sometimes happens when the great world
applauds one’s achievements? Charles Eliot Norton, prolific author, did tell
Lowell that he yearned for “the power of expression”! He longed, but felt
unable, “to give form and utterance to a few of the deepest conceptions of
Life and its significance and uses which come to one as one grows old and
draws the lessons from his own experience.” Having Dante as constant
companion did dish any illusions of one’s own about saying something
worthwhile. Returning to Shady Hill in late September, Charles “felt more
keenly” than ever the “the lack of old friends, the burial of old memories in
my heart.” A few months later Georgie Burne Jones, no fool when it came to
the human heart, commented on “a note of sadness” in a recent letter from
Charles. “I think of you always as bearing a burden so heavy that you can
only just carry it, but carrying it nevertheless in such a way that no one
would exclaim that you were overladen—I take it that this is much what you
would wish.”

The year passed. There were the students; the annual English herd to
feed and water; visits from Godkin and Woodberry and Jonathan Harrison
(now agitating for Indian rights); James Lowell to welcome home from
England, just in time to celebrate Charles’s sixtieth birthday on 16 Novem-
ber. And by following John Simon’s prescription for daily rest Norton kept
himself in tolerable health. In June 1888, Eliot graduated near the top of his
class at Harvard Law School, though illness kept Rupert from his college commencement. On 13 June their father got a degree himself, an honorary doctorate of letters from Columbia. Then the trek to Ashfield: to garden, to read Dante, to watch from afar “the closing scenes of the life of the Republican party” gathered in convention at Chicago, “killed by swallowing its principles.” To Norton’s disappointment the dose did not prove fatal.8

Republican survival only showed how large a measure of corruption the nation’s moral physiology had grown to tolerate—and made Ashfield correspondingly more precious in Norton’s eyes. The little, old-fashioned country town, where each citizen knew every other and even the affluent lived without display, supplied an object lesson for America. Life there implicitly condemned the crass ostentation and corrosive poverty that disfigured the nation’s large cities, the venality that infected its politics, the materialism and self-seeking that diseased its soul. America in the 1880s looked to Norton too much like the aristocratic England that had revulsed him in the 1850s.

He saw in Ashfield a republican simplicity, a muting of class division, a participatory democracy, a willingness of ordinary citizens to take up the burdens of self-government (and to follow the lead of wiser, more experienced heads, such as his) that bespoke an older, healthier America. A skeptic from a later era suspiciously wants to assume that Ashfield’s lesser folk looked on things differently than its richest citizen, but nothing other than suspicion supports the assumption. Norton reported to Lowell a meeting of the Sanderson Academy trustees that August—“good men of the village all of them, excellent products of democracy.”

We discussed the questions of town schools, the town debt, town accounts, all with good sense & right purpose. Tonight “by request” I am to give a talk on Longfellow to the townspeople. Tomorrow night George is to preside at a general meeting of the taxpayers, for the discussion of some of the questions we had in debate last night.

At a moment in history when America choked in “a malarial political atmosphere,” when its best leaders had to bend every effort barely to begin cleansing the Augean civil service, the nation needed to breathe the unpolluted air of a place like Ashfield.9

So Norton asked, “How can we save Ashfield and all that it stands for?”

It stands for much. It is the image and type of towns that have been the wholesomest communities the earth ever bore, which by their intelligence have
shaped the institutions of the nation, and largely directed its course, and by their virtues have set high the standard of democratic civilization. How may these communities be saved, strong, vigorous, permanent, not for their sake alone, but for the sake of the nation?

How? In part by gracing the town with amenities that would dim the lure of the big city. This was why Norton raised money for and donated books to the town library. In larger part by giving Ashfield’s children the intellectual advantages of the great world without their having to leave home. This was why Norton and Curtis year after year poured their efforts into sustaining Sanderson Academy—why in 1887 Norton sold some of his precious rare books to aid the academy; why he and Curtis each summer organized the Academy Dinner for its benefit.

But the dinner had a larger purpose than fund-raising (though the hundreds of dollars it brought in each year did keep the academy going). For at its tables nationally prominent orators warned Ashfield of the needs and perils facing the nation, while Ashfield stepped forward to exemplify to the nation America’s own best principles. Curtis and Norton always spoke themselves: in 1888 Curtis pleading “for independence from the tyranny of party”; Norton, for the cultivation of the imagination in schools and “the exercise of the imagination in daily life.” “Without imagination”—as Charles had learned from his teachers almost a half century before—“there can be no true sympathy.”

Such oracles sprang increasingly often from Norton’s tongue during these years, for without fully realizing it he was assuming the mantle of Anglo-America’s most visible cultural critic. Ruskin had fallen silent by the end of the 1880s, though his body would live for another decade; and in April 1888 a heart attack cut down Matthew Arnold. Arnold’s death hit Norton not only as a personal blow but as an “irreparable” loss to the anglophone world, “for he was doing work of which both America & England stood greatly in need, and there is no one left to continue it.” In a eulogy Norton quoted with approval Arnold’s idea of criticism as a “disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” Norton went on to stress that “subject, form, style” were “not the final object of criticism.” “It is the criticism of life that underlies all true criticism of books, of manners, of institutions.” He noted, too, that Arnold had “specially addressed the minds capable of receiving and propagating the highest influences.”

Norton’s idea of the critic’s role did not much differ from Arnold’s,
though he had absorbed its essentials from the culture of patrician Boston before either of them had taken his A.B. But Norton was no Boston Federalist, at ease in the land. Growing aversion to his country’s plutocratic values and boss-ridden politics distanced him from the centers of power and alienated him from the drift of American life. Dissatisfaction engendered isolation, and isolation fed dissatisfaction. By the 1880s Norton exemplified more fully than either Ruskin or Arnold what would be the characteristic stance of that new social type, the intellectual: independent of the powers in the land, critical of their pretensions, opposed to their visions. Being tolerably rich oneself made the stance easier to sustain.

Going on twenty years, Norton had deplored the distinctive superficiality of “American talk about America,” on which battened an endemic “national self-complacency.” Even Cousin-President Eliot’s speeches, he told Jonathan Harrison in 1888, lacked “that deeper view which sees beneath the surface of things.” Norton took as his critical mission to speak frankly to his countrymen about precisely such foundational weaknesses and the corresponding overlooked potentials. He hardly expected converts in droves, and it is easy to see why.\textsuperscript{13}

He told American architects that they “pander[ed] to the popular taste” because they knew as little, and cared as little, about “the principles of art” as their clients did. But he then reminded them that their craft exerted an “entirely peculiar and enormous power” on “the taste, and hence upon the morals of the community”; and he urged them to recall the civic responsibility thus laid upon them to cultivate “creative imagination and a keen sense of beauty.” A former student, William A. Slater, Harvard 1881 (whom Norton liked because, “quite unspoiled by his enormous wealth,” he made “no obtrusive display”), had endowed an art museum in Connecticut. This model capitalist invited his old professor to inaugurate the gallery in November 1888; in the event, this became a great public occasion, aswarm with reporters. Norton delivered what the \textit{New York Times} described as “a very earnest but pessimistic lecture on the absence from Americans of the love and taste for art,” feeding the crowd “many unpalatable statements.”\textsuperscript{14}

In that same month Norton published in the \textit{Princeton Review} a widely read—or at least widely assailed—article, “The Intellectual Life of America,” arguing that the American elite had allowed material progress to elbow aside intellectual development. Shaking a monitory finger, he warned that “our civilization” teetered on the brink of “degenerating into a glittering barbarism of immeasurable vulgarity and essential feebleness.” The next year in \textit{Scribner’s} magazine he admonished Americans that their habit of
moving restlessly from place to place in pursuit of “wealth and material comfort,” their unconcern for family continuity and even for old houses, had stretched American individualism to a dangerous thinness, had weakened the feeling that each life forms “a link, however individual in its form, however different from every other, in a chain reaching back indefinitely into the past, reaching forward indefinitely into the future.” The loss of this sentiment, he bleakly warned, “saps the main source of moral being.” That in some quarters Norton began to acquire a reputation as a carping snob should come as no surprise.15

Neither should it be taken as gospel. Norton tried always to foster what he deemed the better elements in national life, not merely to rail at the worse. He took care to praise (with perceptible patriotic glow) American habits or institutions that he thought worthy of encouragement and emulation. In an 1890 Harper’s article on Harvard, he applauded the new American university ideal, accurately noting (as not all commentators did, even a century later) that it departed fundamentally from both German and British models. While criticizing Harvard’s defects—the “evil influence of wealth” on student attitudes, the excesses of college sports—he held up the university as “an institution in which an American may feel a legitimate pride.” And he continued to develop his own projects to amend educational or artistic deficiencies, carrying over into the cultural arena the reformist activism of his model lodging houses and evening school of the 1850s. Most recently he had devised a scheme for “a Library of School Reading” to give young readers easy access to literature of merit. At first Harper Brothers’ “educational man” had seemed intrigued, but for some reason he lost interest; by 1889 Norton was wheedling a resisting Century Company to take up the series.16

Yet, among Norton’s roles, scholar and promoter of scholarship remained the leading ones, with Dante, once again, closest to his heart. Although Longfellow’s death and Lowell’s retreat had disbanded the original Cambridge Dante circle, Norton’s own scholarship was entering its prime. As New England had regarded Andrews and Uncle Ticknor in their day as its most competent Dantists, so now the world recognized Charles—at infinitely higher level of expertise—as preeminent in America. One could press the analogy further, for Norton’s special strength as scholar called his father to mind: like Andrews as a biblical critic, and unlike Longfellow and Lowell as Dantists, Charles was a “minute and indefatigable searcher of texts.”17

He was also an indefatigable animator of other Dantists. In 1885 he had
donated to the Harvard Library the bulk of the works by and about Dante that he had amassed over the decades: a capital resource for future researchers. Present ones relied on him in person, as Edward Fay did in preparing his important concordance to the Divina Commedia (1888). More generally, Norton’s regular reviews of books in the field set for American scholars a critical standard equal to that prevailing in Europe. And under his leadership the Dante Society energized Dante studies in the United States. Beginning in 1887 the society’s Annual Report included a comprehensive bibliography of the year’s scholarship, American and European; within two or three more years the Annual Report had established itself as also a kind of Jahrbuch for American Dantists, a venue for even book-length monographs like Theodore Koch’s pioneering historical survey, “Dante in America” (1896).

Norton’s resurgent interest in Dante did not undermine his commitment to classical archaeology. Most urgently, the appointment of a permanent director for the American School still hung fire. In autumn 1887 Charles Waldstein stood on the verge of accepting; then he learned that funds to pay his salary might run short. There followed eighteen months of fiscal uncertainty and protracted negotiation before he agreed with the Managing Committee on a three-year appointment as “resident professor” for two months each winter. This arrangement at least gave the school some continuity of leadership.

And just in time, for the patriotic daydream that had flitted in and out of Norton’s head since the seventies seemed at last in his material grasp: the chance for Americans to excavate that most alluring of Greek remains, the temple complex at Delphi, and thereby to vindicate the claim of American archaeology to stand on equal footing with European. In fall 1886 the AIA had begun actively wooing the Greek government for the franchise. The Ecole Française in Athens owned a prior claim, but this deteriorated as a result of Franco-Greek quarrels over a commercial treaty and of uncertainty whether the French could afford to buy out the owners of the ground at Delphi. Finally, in January 1889, the Greek authorities all but promised the site to the American School. “Things come round to those who wait,” exulted Norton.

Having waited over a decade, he wasted no time in setting out to raise the needed funds, almost a hundred thousand dollars; as a first step he assembled more than a hundred well-endowed New Yorkers in late January to hear him plead. But the French had no mind to yield; they, too, brought pressure to bear on the Greek government, and the struggle see-sawed for
two years. Finally, on 19 November 1890, one of Norton's former students wrote to congratulate his old teacher on "the happy completion of your long cherished plan for the purchase of Delphi." The next day a letter arrived from Waldstein in Athens: the outcome was "by no means certain." On 10 March 1891, Waldstein cabled that the French had won; Norton's dream faded for once and all into the blue Greek skies. 19

By that date Norton had left the AIA presidency. He resigned in May 1890: weary of letter writing and meetings; wanting more time for Dante and other literary pursuits; most of all, perhaps, feeling that in this field he had done what he could to make actual his vision of American scholarship. His co-worker Thomas Ludlow lamented that no one could fill Norton's shoes; and, in fact, even after Seth Low of Columbia took over the presidency, Norton remained for several years the éminence grise. But Ludlow also observed that the institute had matured to the point where "no one man, however great, is indispensable to its welfare." The AIA and the American Journal of Archaeology had supplied a nucleus around which classicalists in American colleges coalesced into a profession that now stood on its own; and their coalescence, in turn, had given birth to an academic speciality new to America, classical archaeology. Scholars across the Atlantic "hailed with delight the entrance of America upon the old field of archaeological research," even the great Curtius calling the American dig at Icaria "epoch-making." In January 1890 the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut voted Norton himself honorary foreign member. European recognition, probably more than anything else, gratified the founder: a wounded patriotism always grimaced behind Norton's critiques of American culture. 20

Yet scholarly nationalism never eclipsed scholarship pur sang. Even in striving to oust the French from Delphi, Norton worried less about "the credit for the Institute" than "the general interests of learning": a recent dig by French archaeologists at Delos, he thought, proved that they lacked the "thoroughness, accuracy, and respect for the ancient remains" that American excavators, emulating the Germans, did show. Norton treated the Archæological Institute as a means to this larger international end of advancing erudition. This required nurturing among researchers a sense of mutual identity and common effort, and from the outset Norton had meant the AIA to be a national institution forging just such concert. He later boasted that, in uniting classicists throughout America, it had given them both "a hitherto unknown sense of independence" and a feeling "of equal brotherhood with the scholars of other lands." 21

Linking scholars into such national and international networks therefore
became one goal of Norton and his diverse collaborators—exemplified, for instance, in the AIA’s links with the British Museum and in the Dante Society’s broadening out from a Cambridge clan to a national body with international ties. More generally, Norton insisted, “our higher institutions of learning are closely bound together, and the prosperity of any one of them is matter of common interest to all.” Yet the scholars in them, he warned, must not cluster together in order to isolate themselves from larger public concerns and the larger public; for “upon the character of our Universities the future civilization of America largely depends.”

Naturally, the institution that mattered most to him was Harvard. Norton’s father and uncle had captained the first effort to turn Harvard toward serious scholarship; and Charles followed their example, aiding Charles Eliot as he steered the university further along the course their family had set. By the early 1890s, with some thirty-five full professors and more than seventy in lower faculty ranks, the university could sustain specialized postgraduate work across a range of fields. Such a program seemed to Norton as to others sine qua non for laying the “deeper foundations of learning.” So he gladly taught the new courses “Primarily for Graduates,” entangled himself in the modern business of advising graduate students about financial aid and courses of study, became one of the biggest old boys in the developing old-boy network for filling college teaching jobs, and served on the administrative board of Harvard’s new Graduate School. For over a decade he had advocated a university museum to house collections for the advanced study of art. What he never did—curiously to later eyes—was to supervise a doctoral dissertation.

His own scholarship on medieval church building had gone into dormancy while Norton built up the AIA, but it began to leaf out again in 1889. The October Harper’s carried a long article on “The Building of the Church of St.-Denis,” followed in November by one on Chartres. These French sequelae to Norton’s Italian Studies of Church-Building in the Middle Ages seemed, however, comparatively stunted. His prose had grown cooler, his narrative more disjointed, his account of the buildings more superficial. In contrast to the Atlantic ten years earlier, Harper’s allowed no footnotes. It appears that precious little of Norton’s research found its way into these articles, that he “wrote down” to a “popular” audience newly redefined as lacking appetite for erudition. Norton always meant to rework these studies and add one of Cluny, making a book parallel to his earlier one on Venice, Siena, and Florence. Had he found the time to do so, one might venture a firmer judgment on his quality as historian.
What is transparent is that he did not fit into the mold of art history as the field defined itself in the two or three generations following him. He utterly ignored the formalist approach to criticism developing in Europe (and the analogous experiments of the Impressionists). Norton possessed a discriminating eye and an immense miscellany of detail about individual paintings and painterly techniques, about specific buildings and architectural methods: the basic tool kit of formalist connoisseurship. Yet he could not conceive art-historical scholarship as connoisseurship for its own sake, still less imagine teaching art history as the “appreciation” of individual objects abstracted from the gritty realities of bloodshed and avarice, of faith and ideals, that composed the milieu within which any painter took up a brush. But art history in the United States did just that in the decades after Norton, averting its gaze from history; not until the 1970s would the discipline wake up to the pastness of the past. So, paradoxically, the founder of the field of art history in America left almost no lasting impress on its practice. Rather, his scholarly influence worked in another way, by bending research in other domains of the humanities toward cultural history.

His student Woodberry credited Norton with two great contributions to historical scholarship in America. First, a book like *Church-Building* showed what research in the service of deeper understanding meant, providing a forceful “example of scholarly work such as I do not know of in our present publications,—an example which may have influence upon younger men, as it encouraged me like the flashing out of a new guiding light.” Second, Norton treated “art as a mode of history.” Woodberry (in this, his master’s disciple) regarded this approach to art as “of most importance, perhaps, for a people without art and accustomed to look on art as an appendix to life, so to speak.” Later scholars might be more inclined to appreciate Norton’s studies of medieval churches as pioneering the writing of integrated cultural history.24

However one specified Norton’s strengths as historian, his great failing was patent. Venice, Florence, Saint-Denis remained isolated tales, not parts of a developed analysis of medieval culture. Why this should have been so is something of a puzzle. True, materials for the study of the Middle Ages remained scattered and fragmentary; but such a quandary did not stop Norton’s younger contemporary, Henry Adams, from building a coherent study in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904) nor his older one, Jacob Burkhardt, from seeing his vastly influential vision of *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). Perhaps the positivist ex-Unitarian in Norton ultimately lacked enough respect for the culture he studied to see it as a com-
pelling whole; perhaps the restless reformer and polymathic scholar had not the temperament to settle down long enough to weave all the threads into one tapestry; perhaps the moralist preferred the exemplary case over a less sharply pointed longer account. For whatever reason, Norton could not—or did not care to—cast his researches into a coherent, continuous narrative; they never added up to more than a loosely connected series of episodes with repeating themes.

As the 1880s ended, Norton faced fragmentation in his personal life, too—literal and metaphoric. Despondently, he watched the breaking up of Shady Hill, staved off for decades despite shrinking capital. In 1887–88, Charles Eliot’s son (whom Norton had helped to guide into the new profession of landscape architecture) drew up a subdivision plan, running three new streets through the western, lower section of the estate. Norton had one comfort: the new neighbors he looked down on through the trees were mostly Harvard colleagues, among them William James, a friendly acquaintance for two decades.25

The passage of years also and inevitably sundered his family. In October 1888, Rupert sailed for Germany to begin medical studies, and Eliot moved to New York to set up a law practice. A year later he engaged himself to Margaret Meyer, a “pretty young lady” of that flashy city so alien to an old Bostonian. “So the young ones fly from the nest! They carry with them more than they know.” In April 1889, Arthur Clough’s son, also called Arthur, came to visit Shady Hill. Three weeks later, Arthur asked Sally to marry him. She wavered; he pressed his suit; she crossed the Atlantic to see him; and in September 1890, she returned, “taking,” as Georgie Burne-Jones wrote Charles, “her heart back to you untouched.” Sally had proved such “a thorough American,” Georgie said, that she could not wed across the sea. Maybe. But in the end not one of Charles’s three daughters (resembling in this two of Andrews’s three) could pull away from the powerful magnet of their father.26

Especially, perhaps, when that father’s loneliness grew painfully obvious. In October 1890, with Sally and Lily home from England and Rupert from Germany, Eliot and his new wife Margaret traveled up from New York for a reunion dinner. Not for three years had Papa got all six children together, nor would he again for a long time. And other vacancies threatened. In January 1890, James Lowell fell seriously ill, with internal bleeding of obscure origin; in February he hung near death. Though he rallied, he remained sickly and depressed all through the winter of 1890–91. Only a couple of months before Lowell’s affliction, Leslie Stephen had collapsed from “ner-
vous exhaustion.” In this case the patient’s need for prolonged rest paid a dividend to Charles: a three-week visit to America the following June and “a very good time” at Shady Hill. Even this was small change against the growing balance of lonely evenings in the big old house. Lowell disabled, Stephen back home, “whom have I to talk with in these wintry (spiritually wintry) days?” George Curtis still visited occasionally, as did one or two engaging ex-students; and Norton appreciated the virtues of the young “lawyers, doctors, artists” of Boston’s Tavern Club—including “that of not forgetting us old men.” In 1890 they remembered to elect Norton as their president. When all else failed, favorite authors filled the lonely dusk; in 1890 Charles rediscovered John Donne.27

The best antidote to loneliness was, as always, work. The spring of 1891 found Norton picking through selections for what were to be called the Heart of Oak books: a Boston schoolbook publisher, D. C. Heath, had finally committed his firm to the anthologies for young readers that Norton had long lobbied for. Helping in this job was Kate Stephens, an ex-professor of Greek at Kansas University who had fallen on hard times, adversity owed probably to her “extreme nervous” temperament, “ambitious disposition,” and suspicious nature. For the next several years she became for Norton both an aide-de-camp and an object of charity.28

The Heart of Oak books were merely a sideline to Norton’s great project; for five years now he had wrestled with canto after canto of the Divina Commedia. Perhaps the most precisely and limpidly written long poem in Western literature, Dante’s epic is correspondingly the most maddeningly elusive to fit into words other than the ones its author chose. Despite the straitjacket of terza rima, there is, as Norton observed, “rarely a needless or forced word in Dante’s lines.” Inevitably, then, the contortion needed to twist them into English verse sacrificed Dante’s “directness, simplicity, and naturalness,” which were exactly the qualities that gave his poem its “distinction and permanence of effect.” A prose translation sacrificed any hope of conveying the power and grace of Dante’s poetry—but not the possibility (if truly a literal rendering) of representing faithfully its character and substance, “for the Italian verse is as direct as the English prose.”29

During the winter of 1890–91, the Riverside Press in Cambridge began setting Norton’s English prose version of the Inferno in type. By summer he was sending copy for Purgatorio while simultaneously, with what aid the ailing Lowell could give, revising proofs almost damp from the press, moving at the rate of two cantos a week. In November, Houghton Mifflin and Company published Hell, closely followed by Purgatory and a year later by
Paradise. A thorough revision of Norton’s 1867 translation of the *Vita Nuova* appeared as a companion volume. As with all his books, Norton took care that these were elegantly designed and printed.  

The *Divine Comedy* made a literary event in America and won recognition on both sides of the ocean as among the most faithful translations of Dante’s epic yet to appear. The *Nation*’s friendly reviewer deemed it unequivocably the best in English, whether judged for accuracy, lucidity, concision, or style; Norton had reproduced better than any predecessor even the shifting modulations in voices from episode to episode. The eminent British Dantist Paget Toynbee, while unenthusiastic about *Purgatory*, placed *Hell* atop the heap of prose translations. Other English critics tended to get snippy about this American, though giving high marks for exactitude. As these disagreements suggest, the best parts of Norton’s translation—notably *Hell*—read very well indeed, the worst parts clumsily, and all taken together maintain an unusually high average for fidelity to the letter of the original.  

Houghton Mifflin kept the *Divine Comedy* in print in its original three-volume format through 1928, then as a one-volume school edition from 1941 to 1958, also reprinting Norton’s *Vita Nuova* as late as 1935. (Perhaps owing to the popularity of the translations, the old *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy* likewise remained in print into the twentieth century.) In the 1950s, Encyclopedia Britannica chose Norton’s version for its series, Great Books of the Western World; other reprints appeared into the second half of the twentieth century. This durability bespeaks both the exactness and the fluency of the translation, and these qualities in turn resulted from Norton’s careful scholarship and his minute attention to language. This compulsive care for language stretched back to the youth who modeled himself on his father.  

Yet the appeal of his Dante translations had deeper causes than their own comparative excellence, for Dante spoke with peculiar force to Victorians. The cult—and almost a cult it was—was recent. In 1812 George Ticknor could find only one copy of the *Divina Commedia* in Boston—which neither he nor the owner could read! Norton’s friend Samuel Ward, a decade older than Charles, believed that “Dante has been invented in my lifetime.” Yet by midcentury not only did “natural” *devotés* like Ruskin and the Rossettis adore Dante; so did people as unpredictable as the abolitionist senator Charles Sumner, the political economist Francis Lieber, and the South Carolina lawyer-diplomat Hugh Legaré.  

To understand the resonance of Dante among the Victorians, one must keep in mind two preliminary facts: first, that Dante, though famed for pioneering in the vernacular, remained part and parcel of a Latinate intellec-
tual culture extending from antiquity through the seventeenth century; sec-
ond, that classical schooling, a mere century or two removed from this true
Latinate culture, still molded educated Victorians. (Not long after his Div-
vine Comedy appeared, Norton wired birthday greetings to the elder Oliver
Wendell Holmes; the telegram comprised in its entirety a moderately ob-
scure Virgilian tag, in Latin.) Norton’s students in the 1880s and 1890s
represented the last American generation formed by this old-fashioned sec-
ondary education, the last to have some wraithlike familiarity with the
intellectual culture behind the Divina Commedia. This was prerequisite.34

Given an ability to connect with Dante, what drew readers to him?
Norton believed it was the spiritual cravings distinctive to his era. In the
Turnbull Lectures delivered at Johns Hopkins in 1894, he attributed the
vogue of Dante to a combination of “the materialism of our existing state of
civilization” and “the general dissolution of the old forms of religious faith.”
Dante, the archetype of a great religious poet, proved superbly able to slake
thirsts for larger meaning. “Antiquated, erroneous, or childish” theological
debris cluttered the Divina Commedia; yet, Norton thought, it still spoke
more powerfully to readers than any other work “of poetic art”—“alike
because of the general truth of its fundamental proposition, the subjection
of the whole world to the moral law, and because of the directness, vividness
& power of the poet’s application of this truth to the lives & destiny of
individual men.”35

Norton hit not far from the mark. To put the matter cynically, acquain-
tance with Dante was supposed to deepen his readers morally and emo-
tionally; hence a fondness for the Divina Commedia put gratifying psycho-
logical distance between oneself and the money-grubbing ignobile vulgus,
perhaps an especially nice feeling if one grubbed a bit oneself. (There is an
analogy to the mugwump sensibility in politics, its purer-than-thou air.) A
more charitable explanation probably explains better a larger number of
readers. The United States underwent a phenomenal industrial expansion
during the last third of the nineteenth century; this thrust into public view
an unprecedentedly porcine greed, genuinely distressing many Americans,
leaving them receptive to potent moral visions. Few could be more com-
manding than Dante’s.

Yet these crude hypotheses scarcely begin to explain the specific charac-
ter of the Dante cult. The Divina Commedia enriched the religious imagina-
tion in an era when for many in the educated classes the fund of Christian
truth ran low, even approached bankruptcy. These were the decades when
agnosticism first became a viable option for large numbers of people in
Britain and the United States. The number of out-and-out unbelievers, such as Norton, remained comparatively small; the number of those who worried whether God had really revealed the Bible, whether miracles could trump scientific laws, whether Christ (or oneself) could live after death, was large and growing. Yet the scientific vision of reality—by now more or less materialist in principle, more or less taken as an alternative to religion as a mode of explaining the world—did not entirely satisfy, for all its undeniable power and popularity. Hence the yearning that led readers confusedly to Dante. Compared even to lyric poetry or painting, Dante’s highly symbolic, allegorical, even mystical art had the specific appeal of a counterweight to the hard-headed ethic of science. Most well-educated Victorians, like Norton himself, leaned toward utilitarianism in politics and social ethics, scientism in epistemology. But they rarely believed that pure rationality ought to reign in the domain of emotion, sympathy, and human purpose.

For human truths existed insusceptible to proof or disproof. Perhaps subjective in some absolute cosmic sense—for only the human species recognized such truths—they were objectively real for its members. The felt goodness of love, the allure of the beautiful, might no longer testify to universal divine law, might elude the experiments of science, but did nonetheless bind together all human beings. Thus an ethic of feeling countered the ethic of belief; an ethic of character, that of conscience; an ethic of art, that of science. Science penetrated to the truths behind forms; art, by veiling truth in form, revealed the outlines of truths in essence impenetrable.

Art drew boundaries around the cultural authority of science. It provided an alternative to the clear-sighted truthfulness that people like Norton associated with scientific reason. And no artist suggested this deeper, human reality more evocatively than the great allegorical poet of truths seen through a glass darkly, Dante Alighieri.

Publication of the Divine Comedy sealed Norton’s scholarly reputation. By now his learning had become a Boston legend. William and Henry James’s acidic sister Alice asked her diary in 1891, “Who, I should like to know, ever saw an over-educated Yankee!—save, always the egregious Norton.” Much of his erudition converged on Dante, a field in which for two decades leading European scholars had treated Norton as a peer. In 1891 William Warren Vernon, a competent if flattering judge, declared him one of the three greatest Dantists alive. Few would have gone so far even at the time, and later generations of experts have not set Norton on a pinnacle. That being said, he did bring American scholarship up to an unprecedented level, a rough equality with the best European Dante literature.
And, despite his suspicion of formal doctoral study, Norton raised up an entire generation of scholars to follow him. Even more than in the cases of classical archaeology and art history, the academic field of Dante studies in the United States owes its existence to him. (In all these cases, to be sure, another scholar would eventually have taken the lead had Norton not done so, though it is hard to imagine anyone else commanding the three different fields.) This act of institutional creation involved far more than his leadership of the Dante Society. He suggested lines of work, lent books, encouraged young scholars, helped them find their way to obscure sources. The first substantial works of American Dante scholarship—such as E. A. Fay’s concordance to the *Divina Commedia* and Charles S. Latham’s annotated *Translation of Dante’s Eleven Letters*—would almost certainly never have seen the light without his aid. T. W. Koch, founder of the great Cornell Dante collection and author of the first survey of American Dante scholarship, was his student. Charles Grandgent, the preeminent Dantist of the early twentieth century, was first his student, then his colleague, finally his successor. This “new generation of American Dantists,” the first rooted in universities, were right to look on Norton as their “spiritual father.”

Yet Norton’s patriarchal role in Dante studies—as well as that in the teaching of art and the organizing of classical archaeology—raises a profound question about the history of learning. In 1844 Andrews Norton had encouraged the Boston dentist Thomas Parsons to continue his study and translations of Dante: a pursuit, he said, that might pleasantly and honorably occupy his leisure for years to come. Such was pretty nearly the place that Dante occupied in Charles Norton’s life; though he always enjoyed teaching Dante to Boston ladies or Harvard seniors, his Dante work, like his leadership in archaeology, bore scant relation to any professional commitment or academic position. Nonetheless, Norton did win eminence among university-based scholars in Europe, and he did largely found three professional academic specialties in the United States. How does this apparent paradox fit into the history of learning? Was he a genteel amateur? a new professional? some awkward transitional form in the evolution of the modern academic species?

Or are these even useful distinctions? Is the supposed “transition” from “amateur” to “professional” an artifact of a later era, a schema imposed anachronistically on a late-Victorian academic environment still plastic and undetermined, in order to make it fit into a neat story of the development of the twentieth-century idea of a university? Doubts about this simple tale of origins are in order. As late as the 1890s, long after the old generalist pro-
fessor had in the leading colleges lumbered the way of *Stegosaurus*, the new ideals of “scholarship” and “research” pointed toward more than one academic future.

As Norton’s own research deepened in the 1880s, as he concentrated more of his energy on translating Dante and on teaching art history, he might well have narrowed his scholarly purview. He might have addressed himself to a specialized audience, contracted the scope of his writings, spoken only to issues of immediate concern to other Dante scholars and art historians. He did not, in part because of temperamental intellectual restlessness, in part because of polymathic background and family heritage, in part because of hope that erudition might ultimately influence the mores of American democracy. Nor—and herein lies the larger point—did academic pressures push Norton to behave otherwise. Nothing seemed odd in his delivering a paper in May 1889 to the Harvard Philosophical Club, meeting at Shady Hill, no more than that the Harvard Classical Club should meet there in March 1891. University norms in 1890 did not yet mandate separating knowledge into distinct disciplines: that kind of specialization supplied one model of serious scholarship, but only one. And one about which Norton felt increasingly ambivalent—maybe *because of* his leadership in promoting research. Recall that, for all his advocacy of graduate education, Norton never directed a dissertation.39

Part of his ambivalence about the professional ideal of specialization arose from fear of cutting the tie between knowledge and character. Mere expertise—the pedantry of the Ph.D. mill—could not generate the morally deepening effect, the enlargement of sensibility and human sympathies, which growth in knowledge ought to bring, which indeed seemed to Norton the largest purpose of knowledge.

Also behind his ambivalence lay a measure of sensitivity to a profound change in the social structure of knowledge. The old intellectual culture of patrician Boston (like the cultures gravitating around other cities) had of necessity been relatively unspecialized; for the writers and savants who made up that culture had their reference points in the local community and therefore spoke in terms comprehensible to all educated Bostonians. Such a culture was not just locally oriented in space: it went deeper in time. Men of letters and men of science grew up together, went to school together, worked and argued together for a lifetime. They developed profound, growing, ripening intellectual-personal relationships that conditioned their intellectual work at every turn. These ties militated against fragmentation of knowledge, promoted fertilization across very different fields. At Harvard, George
Lane, Frank Child, to some extent even William James still sustained this kind of relation to Norton; so in the AIA did Frank Parkman, Martin Brimmer, and William Goodwin. But relationships like theirs grew rare in the nationalizing academic disciplines of Norton’s later career, as a leading nationalizer like Norton knew well. The last of the men still at Harvard who had taught Charles as a college boy died or retired between 1886 and 1888.40

Such changes profoundly shaped the character of knowledge, but another epistemological question took scholars even closer to the groundwork. Largely unrelated to these previous ones, it posed a choice that would determine the next century of learning. At issue was not whether new, more scholarly modes of learning, based largely in universities, would displace older, more generalist forms, rooted in local communities (which is how historians often depict the situation). This transition, as such, raised scarcely a ripple, at least in the better colleges. As a matter of course, Norton applied a criterion of “original work” foreign even to so accomplished a historian as his old friend Parkman, routinely taking writers to task for failing to keep up with the latest research. Among serious scholars, such standards now went without saying (except on ritual occasions of public self-congratulation). What Norton and other professors in the new universities grappled with was how to structure this new knowledge.

No one slighted the depth of knowledge represented proverbially by German erudition; but many wondered how to absorb it, how to fit it with other ways of knowing. Norton’s sporadic griping about mindless German fact grubbing or superficial French elegance arose from this concern. He worried especially about “the temptation, which attends the study of every science, to exalt the discovery of trifling particulars into an end in itself,” to overlook “the distinction between pedantry and learning.” Facts, “till ordered in their relation to some general truth, are nothing better than fragments in a heap of rubbish.” Norton held up an ideal of a scholarship striving “for breadth of view, for intelligent marshaling of the facts and vivid presentation of them, for abundance of learning easily held in hand.”41

Yet “breadth of view and abundance of learning” only begin to distinguish Norton’s archetype of research; his own work, and his scholarly ideal, grew specifically from philology. In his father’s day “philology” had referred to the study of language and literature in the broadest terms, comprehending everything from the comparative study of the evolution of languages, as essayed by Bopp, Rask, and Grimm, to literary criticism like Samuel Johnson’s or Coleridge’s, to emendation of classical texts, to Andrews’s own biblical studies. By the later years of Charles’s career, “philology” was
migrating toward its more restricted twentieth-century meaning, principally referring to linguistic science (such as investigation of Indo-European) and to the study of old texts from a purely linguistic point of view.\textsuperscript{42}

Behind these shifting usages, however, lurked a common methodology or mode of explanation. In its ancient origins and its Renaissance elaboration, philology had centered on improving understanding of an old text by contextualization: by comparing the words, or indeed stories, in the text to usages of the same words, or telling of similar tales, in other texts contemporary with the one under study. And philologists of whatever bent still strove to elucidate a “text” (which, in the case of comparative philology, might be an entire language) by such a process of comparison or contextualization. As Andrews Norton said in his first Dexter Lectures in 1813, the “circumstances in which a word is used” supply “a necessary commentary for defining its signification”; thus, the biblical interpreter must learn not only the characteristic style of the biblical writer and his period but also the conditions and outlook of the people to whom he directed his message, the historical circumstances under which he wrote, the social and economic character of his society, and so forth. This effort to elucidate and deepen meaning—of a text, an event, an idea, a painting—by appeal to historical and cultural context was the key to philology and its influence.\textsuperscript{43}

That influence can hardly be overestimated. Charles Norton imbibed it direct from the paternal spring, but he need not have, for its different currents included the recovery of Indo-European by comparative philologists (the single most stunning triumph of scholarship in the nineteenth century); the so-called higher criticism of the Bible (which revolutionized Christianity); and history itself as a scholarly pursuit. From the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth, philology reigned as queen of the sciences in the great German universities that exemplified learning for Europe and America. Darwinism bore its impress; anthropology acknowledged it as a parent.\textsuperscript{44}

Yet the historicocultural method of philology produced stultifyingly narrow as well as breathtakingly broad scholarship. The German tradition in Norton’s day pushed in both directions, notorious for fact grinders, celebrated for great humanists. In American college classrooms a philological approach could either anesthetize students by parsing Milton or fascinate them, as Lowell did, by telling tales of medieval Florence meant to help them understand Dante. Philology was, after all, in the first instance a work of recovery, the elucidation of lost meanings. As a recuperative discipline, philology could take an anti-interpretive stance; but recovering ancient texts
also required interpretation. Setting a text—or a primitive custom or a medi­eval church—in historicocultural context could imply minute specificity or illuminating breadth. In teaching Dante, Norton aspired to both, explaining passages “fully from every side,—verbal, textual, literary, spiritual.” In teaching art, his broad historicocultural contextualizing contrasted with both Ruskin’s earlier formalism and Berenson’s later aestheticism of technique. Always, the animating impulse was to reach out from the object of study and connect to a larger universe of knowledge.  

Philology provided the most important, but not the only, force pushing Norton in this direction. He had also absorbed in his youth the broad­gauged historicism that Unitarian Boston inherited from the Scottish En­lightenment (an outlook itself, by the way, ultimately rooted in philology). The Scots told a story of human progress as a single evolutionary history, implying that at least the historical and cultural sciences formed in the end a single field of knowledge, all being pieces of the one story of humanity. In so expansive a conception of learning, every piece must eventually link up with every other through longer or shorter chains of connection. Norton’s own experiences in India, his early interest in the Mound Builders and Nineveh, his later work on the ancient world all conspired to reinforce this breadth of outlook, to dilate his scholarly perspective. And an impressive range of languages enabled him to put these epistemological principles to practical account. Before entering Harvard, Charles had studied Latin, Greek, Ger­man, French, and Italian; in 1849 he even added Hindi. Hindi soon dropped from the repertoire, but improving the others occupied him from college days until at least the early 1870s.

The aspired-to scope of erudition showed in Norton’s amplitude of literary reference. His leisure reading ranged from Plutarch to Donne to Boswell to Théophile Gautier to Mr. Dooley; and this multiplicity of perspective, combined with a relational habit of mind, early gave him quick and accurate insight, often tossed off in almost epigrammatic classifications. Sir Walter Scott, he remarked in a letter of 1871, observed superbly “what is external & strongly marked in nature, character, & life” but lacked “penetra­tive” imagination “to reproduce intricate & obscurely defined characters.” Norton measured writers of his own era against the whole canvas of Euro­pean literature. William Morris, contrasted with the “Greeks and Shake­speare & Dante,” lacked “sense of proportion of form”; Emerson was “not one of the Universal men in a large sense; but a man of some universal sympathies and relations curiously and instructively hampered by local, provincial, bonds.” Such breadth of comparison led Norton not to denigrate
but to appreciate contemporary writers: “Put the literature of this century
into one scale and that of all preceding time into the other, and the balance
would not hang very uneven.”

And it gave him a scale of similitudes, a set of criteria, to judge more
securely, and to appreciate more deeply, the qualities of any artist or poet.
Emerson reminded him not only, say, of Johnson or Hawthorne but also of
an “Italian master in the 13th century.” This long view explains Norton’s easy
inclination to cast aside the chaff in editing writers of his generation, rather
than (as later editors would wish) to preserve every scrap of a poet’s verse.
Lowell’s “ephemeral production” should “perish with the day to which it
added a momentary charm”—as he told that poet more than once. Breadth
of learning also accounts for his most remarkable strength as scholar, teacher,
and academic innovator: the capacity to integrate erudition into a single
great whole, even if that capacity was not exercised in any grand narrative. As
the Italian historian William Thayer remarked, Norton held an “immense
advantage” over every other British or American Dante scholar: “a special­
ist’s knowledge of medieval art.”

Yet Norton was no freak of academic nature. He only exercised more im­
pressively than most a common style of scholarship in the late nineteenth­
century university. Rooted in the philological urge to link together pieces
of knowledge, this mode of erudition resisted a competing impulse, rooted in
physical science, to divide knowledge into discrete specialized “disciplines.”
Philological historicism—to give Norton’s approach a label—displayed itself
perhaps most clearly in the new field of comparative literature, itself a
natural outgrowth from his kind of learning. Not coincidentally, a student
and disciple of Norton’s, Arthur Richmond Marsh, returned to Harvard in
1891 as the first professor of comparative literature in the United States. In a
letter to his mentor, Marsh defined his new field as concerned with “the
organic and consecutive growth of the conceptions which constitute civili­
zation as contrasted with barbarism.” His study of classical, medieval, and
early modern literatures, he said, “made it possible for me to follow ideas
from their genesis, through the Middle Ages, to the present.” The program
of the twentieth-century giants of comparative literature and the history of
ideas—Erich Auerbach, Ernst Curtius, Arthur Lovejoy, J. B. Bury—rests
here in embryo.

Scholarship of this Nortonian scope resolved the dilemma haunting
“scientific” erudition. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche taunted academic spe­
cialism, the German-model pedantry that Norton similarly mocked.
Almost always the books of scholars are somehow oppressive, oppressed; the “specialist” emerges somewhere—his zeal, his seriousness, his fury, his overestimation of the nook in which he sits and spins, his hunched back; every specialist has his hunched back. Every scholarly book also mirrors a soul that has become crooked.

But Nietzsche contrasted the scholar with the “man of letters who really is nothing but ‘represents’ almost everything”: something akin to the polished superfluities that Norton identified with a certain style of French littérature. Nietzsche (a philologist) knew that scholars at least had what “men of letters” did not, commitment to “unconditional probity in discipline and prior training.” “No, my scholarly friends, I bless you even for your hunched backs”—though hardly for their crooked souls. Norton had the hunched back—his “scholar’s stoop” was a mobile Cambridge landmark—but philosophical historicism drew the specialist out of “the nook in which he sits and spins,” opened to him spacious fields wherein to stretch his crooked soul.49

Yet such broadly integrated learning drew disdain in its turn: from some because it was broad, from others because it was learning.

Many professors oriented to research understood the “German model” to mandate just the sort of specialism that Nietzsche decried and they rejoiced in. Several of his Harvard colleagues shared Norton’s broad-gauge, integrative idea of scholarship: William James, George M. Lane, Josiah Royce, George Herbert Palmer, among the better remembered. But others took a narrower view, believing that the true researcher could only dig deep by staying in one trench: most of the physical scientists but also eminent scholars in other fields, such as the economist J. Laurence Laughlin.

Their argument had force. George Lane might be admired for combining in his studies of Latin the “fine literary appreciation which characterizes the English school” with “the minute and exact knowledge of the Germans”; but even his admirers had to concede that he published little real scholarship. Norton at times spread himself too thin, lapsing from breadth of vision into sententiousness. Turned away one evening from a crowded public lecture by Norton, William James fumed, “Why can’t one speak truth sometimes, and call C. E. N. publicly and without apology the infernal old sinner and sham that he is.” “There isn’t a genuine word in him,” James exploded to his wife.50

In calmer moments James knew that his elder friend had quite a few genuine words in him, especially when talk turned to Dante or painting or
Greek architecture; and it is essential to realize that Norton’s conception of scholarship not only made room for specialized knowledge but also depended utterly upon it. It was to Norton that his Latinist colleague Lane turned to get the correct form of Latin ordinal numbers for an inscription.51

Such conspicuous erudition explains why the media of middle-class culture grew as uneasy with Norton’s scholarly writing as did the professors of “Germanic” disciplinary specialization. For, in what almost amounted to a parallel movement, when many academic experts began to retreat into their nooks, magazines catering to educated readers began to expel scholarship from their pages. Tolerably well-schooled readers in the 1850s were still thought capable of digesting erudite discourse; by the 1880s magazine editors had decided that scholarship went over the heads of their audiences. As recently as 1878 the Atlantic Monthly had printed the articles based on Norton’s Church-Building prominently, with footnotes. It was a sign of the times that in 1889 Harper’s pushed their sequels to the back of the book and stripped them of notes.

Norton did not steer a middle course between popular culture and disciplinary specialism; he practiced a mode of learning different from either. His form of erudition demanded intimacy with original sources and modern research but denied that a scholar could acquire competence in only one area. Growing out of philological historicism, it saw knowledge as interrelated, expecting that the fruits of research in one domain would connect with other reaches of that whole. For only by setting scholarship in the context of larger human strivings and achievements, Norton and others like him believed, could the scholar illuminate broad human concerns. Even so technical a piece of research as Norton’s article on the proportions of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia he mailed to his regular correspondents; the idea that Greek architectural principles might derive from religious belief, after all, did suggest implications broad enough to interest nonspecialists. Anyone who believes Norton unduly alarmist about the plague of fact grubbing ought to read the dissertations produced in his day—and not a few produced a century later. Norton thought pedantry toxic to the mind. A broadly humanistic scholarship he saw as integral to “the interests of high culture in America.”52

Norton cherished high ambitions for the university. Within the matrix of a modern research ideal, he strove to foster a truly liberal scholarship. Liberal learning, in turn, he hoped might pump its regenerating serum through the arteries, veins, and capillaries of a general culture that badly needed to improve its health.
The true scholar is he who, avoiding useless specialism on the one hand, and loose inexactness on the other, never mistaking the roots of knowledge for its fruits, or straying from the highway of learning into its by-paths, however attractively they may open before him, holds steadily to the main objects of all study, the acquisition of a fuller acquaintanceship with life in all its higher ranges, of a juster appreciation of the ways and works of man and of man’s relation to that inconceivable universe, in the vast and mysterious order of which he finds himself an infinitesimally small object.

Small wonder that the humanists of the early twentieth century—Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More—looked to Norton as model and mentor. They were not alone. Neither did they sway the future.53