9 Ellery Channing: The
Major Phase of a Minor Poet

To most students of American literature, William Ellery Channing II is known only as the protégé of Emerson, the friend and biographer of Thoreau, and the joke of criticism from Poe to the present.¹ He has been cited regularly, even by

¹ The critical history of Channing’s work is quickly told. Emerson reviewed his poetry in *The Dial* (Emerson, *Uncollected Writings* [New York, Lamb, 1912], pp. 137–152), and in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 13 (1843), 306–314. Years later, he also wrote a preface to Channing’s *The Wanderer* (Boston: Osgood, 1871). Margaret Fuller mentioned Channing in her essay “American Literature,” *Literature and Art*, ed. Horace Greeley (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1852), II, 132–133, as did Channing’s cousin William, in “Poems of William Ellery Channing,” *The Present*, 1 (1843), 30–32. All these notices are mixed but generally sympathetic. Poe, however, partly in reaction against critical backslapping among the Transcendentalists, devastated Channing in an 1843 review (*The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison [New York: Crowell, 1902], XI, 174–190), since which time no one has ever quite been able to take Channing seriously as a poet. It is almost as if Lowell’s strictures on Thoreau had remained unquestioned. F. B. Sanborn, in his preface to Channing’s *Poems of Sixty-Five Years* (Philadelphia: James Bentley, 1902), simply confirmed this impression by praising Channing’s “poetical temperament” (p. xliv) but noting, rightly, that he wrote far too much. Thoreau was of the same opinion, and recommended in his Journal that a good antidote to Channing’s “sublimo-slipshod style” would be “to write Latin, for then he would be compelled to say something always, and frequently have recourse to his grammar and dictionary” (*JT*, III, 118). The only significant modern critical study of Channing, Robert N. Huds-
fellow Transcendentalists, as a case history of the dangers of taking Transcendentalism too literally. "Whim, thy name is Channing," said Bronson Alcott (*JA*, p. 420), and he seems to have been right. Channing neglected his wife and children; he lived by sponging off his father, Emerson, and others; he was capricious with his friends. In his poetry, too, he distressed Emerson by seeming to take the doctrine of inspiration at face value, refusing even to correct grammatical mistakes in the poems he submitted to *The Dial*. As Walter Harding remarks in the introduction to Channing's *Collected Poems*, "It is significant that his best-known poem, 'A Poet's Hope,' was written on the spur of the moment," and that it became well-known not for its "unity, structure, or significance . . . as a whole, but for one brief line—'If my bark sinks, 'tis to another sea,'" which was quoted by Emerson and Thoreau in better known works. Channing's biographer, Frederick McGill, Jr., implicitly goes along with this view by making only passing reference to his poetry and taking toward the man a tone of good-humored indulgence. Channing himself seems to have welcomed his own oblivion in later life. One report, possibly apocryphal, has it that he would "haunt the Boston secondhand shops, buy up his own 'works,' and burn them." 

I believe that Channing's verse merits a fresh look. The best
of it still makes good reading; and his work as a whole is a
provocative complement to that of Emerson and Thoreau, in
that it too tends to be informed by the rhythms of nature, but in
a different way. The rhythms most likely to inspire Channing
poetry are not those of ascension, as in Emerson, or cycle and
renewal, as in Thoreau (with the partial exception of A Week),
but those of decline: sunset and the decay of the year into fall
and winter. These often supply the occasions for his short lyrics
and the structures of his longer poems. When surveyed as a
whole, this body of work furnishes the best example in Tran-
scendentalist literature of the frustrations inherent in a life and
aesthetics according to nature.

In approaching so obscure a figure as Channing, it is perhaps
first necessary to show that his work is worth the trouble to
read. To see that he was indeed capable of writing well, it is
best to begin with small things. Often Channing shows a talent
for finding the word which gives a deeper tone to a straightforward image or proposition, as when he speaks of the "impression" of shadows on the grass as a metaphor for the transience of fame (103); of philosophical maxims as "fungi / Of the Un-
derstanding" (442); of time as "the cenotaph of things" (341); or
of the relationship of nature to spirit:

The issues of the general Soul
Are mirrored in its round abode. [298]

"Issues" suggests both spiritual laws and natural progeny. Else-
where in Channing too, the issues of Transcendentalism are
stated as well as in the best of Emerson or Thoreau, as when he
describes the separation from nature one feels when walking in
a barren spot, under a bare sky:

Between, I stand, a creature taught
To stand between two silent floors. [314]

most of his prose is unpublished and (more important) because most of his
creative effort went into verse. He was the only significant Transcen-
dentalist except for Jones Very of whom this is true.
“Creature taught / To stand” captures the split image of man as a natural being educated into an artificial posture, which isolates him from his environment.

Related to this sort of tension are the mixed feelings Channing has in the following passage on New England religion. Gazing from Mt. Wachusett on the surrounding countryside, he sees

From every village point at least three spires,
To satiate the good villagers’ desires,
Baptist, and Methodist, and Orthodox,
And even Unitarian, creed that shocks
Established church-folk; they are one to me,
Who in the different creeds the same things see,
But I love dearly to look down at them,
In rocky landscapes like Jerusalem. [242–243]

This is a nice balance of disengagement and empathy. The hilltop vantage point is appropriately transcendental: the four spires are literally one to him who sees the panorama, and he is literally “looking down” on them as on a state of being from which he has evolved. But though he is skeptical, he is also fond. The “rocky landscapes” are barren, but he also reveres them as proof of the analogy his ancestors drew between New England and Canaan.

Emerson credited Channing with a painter’s eye, and perhaps he is most consistently successful at putting tonalities into images of color and shape. The sense of the four steeples composed into one is an example. Later on, looking from the same hill at sunset, the poet sees that “on some faint-drawn hillside fires are burning, / The far blue smoke their outlines soft in-turning” (257), prefiguring the “death” of the day which soon follows. Other provocative shape images are the “forked orchard’s writhing mood” (411); the “pine harp-shaped” (479); a picture of Niagara Falls “dwell[ing] alone in the pride of its form” (35); and most characteristically, his sense of the texture of light. The “Earth Spirit” says:
I have woven shrouds of air
In a loom of hurrying light. [26]

In several other instances the metaphor is reused to good purpose, as in the beautiful apostrophe to "Una":

We are centered deeper far
Than the eye of any star,
Nor can rays of long sunlight
Thread a pace of our delight. [110]

Here star and sunlight are complementary, as night and day; the star suggests the soul, sunlight the form of love. Elsewhere, Channing uses sunlight in woods as "spidery interlacings," as the setting sun "drew bright webs out of the twigs" (481).

Such touches as these show that Channing had at least the sensibility of a true poet. Sometimes, though rarely, his inspiration will sustain itself for the length of a poem, and the whole will be as memorable as the part. Such a case is "Boat Song," which can also serve us as an introduction to the themes which most distinguish his work.

The River calmly flows
Through shining banks, through lonely glen,
Where the owl shrieks, though ne'er the cheer of men
Has stirred its mute repose;
Still if you should walk there, you would go there again.

The stream is well alive;
Another passive world you see,
Where downward grows the form of every tree,
Like soft light clouds they thrive;
Like them let us in our pure loves reflected be.

A yellow gleam is thrown
Into the secrets of that maze
Of tangled tree, that late shut out our gaze,
Refusing to be known;
It must its privacy unclose,—its glories blaze.
Sweet falls the summer air
    Over her form who sails with me,
Her way like it is beautifully free,
    Her nature far more rare,
And is her constant heart of virgin purity.

A quivering star is seen
    Keeping its watch above the hill;
Though from the sun's retreat small light is still
    Poured on earth's saddening mien:
We are all tranquilly obeying Evening's will.

Thus ever love the Power;
To simplest thoughts dispose the mind;
In each obscure event a worship find
    Like that of this dim hour,—
In lights, and airs, and trees, and in all human kind.

We smoothly glide below
The faintly glimmering worlds of light:
Day has a charm, and this deceptive night
    Brings a mysterious show;
He shadows our dear earth, but his cool stars are white.

[51–53]

The stanzas, with their varying line lengths, seem designed to meander like the Concord River, which surely was the original for the poem. The initial effect is calmness, passiveness, at times even stagnation. First and last this is a lazy idyll, such as one would expect from an afternoon of boating, especially if the boatsman were that comic-strip Transcendentalist, shiftless Ellery Channing. But the poem is not idyllic without a struggle. First, the river is not entirely inviting: the glen is "lonely"; it lacks the "cheer of men"; it is tenanted by the conventionally ominous owl. "If you should walk there, you would go there again"—but not without misgivings, not with the same "mute repose" as the river. The mute repose is more an aspiration
than a fact, then, for the poet. The next stanzas suggest the source of the problem. Let “our pure loves” reflect ourselves as faithfully as the water reflects the trees, it asks—implying that at present this is not the case. The idea seems to be that the self—whether hers, his, or both at once—still harbors something secret within it.

Stanza three contains a hopeful emblem: the sunbeam penetrates “the secrets of that maze/Of tangled trees, that late shut out our gaze,/Refusing to be known.” This new light is faint, only a “gleam,” but it promises a total revelation of the forest’s “privacy.” Sure enough, the next stanza (which comes at the exact center of the poem) seems to bring fulfillment—at least on the surface. For the first time, the poet turns from the river and its environs to look directly at the lady, who is “beautifully free,” as free as the air. But the consummation is only partial. They do not make contact; the lady is described in the third person, whereas elsewhere she is addressed directly; she is abstractly described—her “form,” “her way,” “her nature”; she is an object of reverence, not a companion. In a way, the poet’s idealization of the lady is consummation enough; certainly one expects nothing deeper than this face-value equation from sickening clichés like “her constant heart of virgin purity.” In the next stanza, furthermore, when he returns to speak of their surroundings, they seem to be in harmony with nature: “We all are tranquilly obeying Evening’s will.” The injunction in the next-to-last stanza (“Thus ever love the Power”), which parallels that of the second, suggests a desire for continuation, not fulfilment. Underlying this, though, is a sense of loss. The blaze of glories promised in the third stanza is annihilated by “sun’s retreat”; as it darkens, earth has a “saddening mien.” The transition between stanzas four and five suggests that the “virgin purity” of the lady has metamorphosed her into the “quivering star”; she lights the poet’s world but coldly, as a constellated goddess. Whether or not this specific implication was intended by Channing, it tallies with the gen-
eral atmosphere of the poem: love is suffused into spirituality, passion is diffused into languor. The last line expresses perfectly this mixture of loss and gain: in the light/dark imagery which Channing often uses: "He shadows our dear earth, but his cool stars are white."

"Boat Song," then, is both subtle in tone and sophisticated in structure, the last stanza echoing the first, the sixth the second, and the fifth the third, with the fourth highlighted as a result. As far as the quality of the imagery goes, this stanza is pure sentimental cliché—like most love scenes in American romanticism—but altogether the poem has so much going for it that it is hard to forgive Channing for not always writing as well as this. Certainly "Boat-Song" is better than almost any poem of Thoreau's and as good as most of Emerson's.

But perhaps this would have been perceived long ago, were it not for the fact that Channing was a (professed) follower of those two men. In the long run, his reputation, like Jones Very's, is going to depend not upon evidence that he could write respectfully, so much as proof that he was in some ways different from his mentors, more than a reflection of their genius. At first glance, he seems simply to be competing with Emerson and Thoreau on their own ground. "Boat-Song" is like a piece of *A Week*, only without Thoreau's concreteness; "Una" and "The Earth Spirit" seem to imitate Emerson's gnomics style but without his intellectual rapidity and invention. The charge of imitation is false; Channing developed his gnomics independently of Emerson, as he was quick to tell those who thought his "Spider" (1835) an imitation of "The Humble-Bee" (1837); and "Boat-Song," along with many other Channing idylls, was written before Thoreau had published anything. But the fact remains that Channing did less than his friends with the modes they shared in common, and that his independence was arrested—as he himself confessed—when he came within their orbit.

Yet Channing's poetry does have an originality of a sort, in
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the sense that it emphasizes certain notes which Emerson and Thoreau sound but do not stress. One is the idyllic. Emerson and Thoreau often speak of the need to "acquiesce" and live "deliberately as nature" but surprisingly seldom do their styles themselves create the feeling of unbroken tranquillity. Emerson's is generally restless; Thoreau's is tense and aggressive, or else compulsively informational, when he is marshalling his facts. Channing had different inclinations. He was still something of a Puritan, but a decadent one; his muse was moralistic, but with a large dose of hedonism. Whereas Thoreau and Emerson, in their theory of poetry, dwell more on bardic rage than Wordsworthian wise passiveness, Channing rarely pictures the poet as a Merlin or an Ossian, even though he was much more tempted than his friends to cast himself in the role of the New England bard, after the publicity Emerson gave his early verses. Herrick, significantly, was his favorite poet. He likes best to think of the poet as the "master of the calm" (96), sitting content come what may. He is Emerson's "Saadi" carried to an extreme degree. The Emersonian invitation to acquiescence becomes in Channing almost a narcissistic impulse to oblivion:

... I would my simple being warm  
In the calm pouring sun; and in that pure  
And motionless silence, ever would employ  
My best true powers, without a thought's annoy. [151]

As in this passage, and in "Boat-Song," Channing loves to entertain the sensation of drifting and dreaming. "Calm," "tranquility," "passiveness," "content," "willingness," and other such terms appear again and again in Channing's poetry. Sometimes, unfortunately, the dream-impulse takes the form of sentimental romantic medievalism—papier-mâché Keats and Spenser—a strain which links him with the soft side of Hawthorne and accounts, I think, for Channing's admiration of Hawthorne's tales. But usually the idyll takes place in nature, specifically in Concord. The favorite images of tranquillity, to which Channing
continually recurs, are the low hills and fields of Concord and especially the slow-moving river:

Thou lazy river flowing neither way
Me figurest . . . [86]

For Thoreau, the Concord’s sluggishness was a joke; for Hawthorne it ruined the swimming; for Channing it was a personal emblem. Thoreau was right in calling him the poet of Concord.

But that is not all he was. As the undercurrents in “Boat-Song” suggest, Channing was, for all the delight he took in easeful lolling, a very melancholy poet at times. The melancholy is the other side of the idyll. His favorite context for his nature poetry is a context of loss: sunset is his favorite time of day, autumn his favorite time of year for poetry, and always these settings are redolent with death. Indian summer, for instance, is like “a new mood in a decaying man” (74), or

like the hectic cheek
Of a consumptive girl who ere her time,
In some gay anguish half renews her prime. [256]

Neither Emerson nor Thoreau is so apt to dwell on these associations, nor upon the parallel Channing likes to draw between the Indian’s near extinction and the time of year which is named for him.

Channing’s love of pastoral calm and simultaneous preoccupation with declines in nature are reminiscent of Robert Frost; and in each man’s work the intermixture has a lot to do with a fear of mutability. “There’s no stay to life” (434), Channing complains, in a Frostian echo. Both were insecure and unhappy men who turned to nature for relief but could not quite bring themselves to trust her. As Channing, in a typical instance, seeks to celebrate and identify with her, the remembrance of the passing of the seasons draws him back to this thought:

. . . where shall man, feigning his ignorance
To be in league with her, at last arrive,—
Or is he but a leaf tossed on the wave
Creative, one more joint to pass along
Tomorrow, to a meaner thing, a throw
Of her wise finger, then displaced. [432]

He stifles this heresy immediately, but it keeps coming up, and intensifies as he grows older. The series of notebooks which he kept during the 1850s and 1860s—in imitation of Thoreau, Emerson said—show a painfully self-divided effort to experience a meaning in nature. Emerson and Thoreau, in their worst moments, felt frustrated; Channing felt desperate.

At such times he would break out in mocking satires of his friends or complain that he had been hoodwinked into a lifestyle unsuited to him. “Nature & myself are utterly and entirely apart,” he writes in 1867. “I neither shall, I neither do know or imagine or suppose the faintest connection between myself & these objects, or between myself & these thoughts, than if I had never heard of them either. And so it will be to the end.” He goes on to bewail his unfitness for the writer’s vocation. Recalling the early encouragement given him by Emerson and others, he declares, “Had I known then, what I know now, I would never have written a line, or the smallest part of a line, at least to be printed.” “The process of writing with me,” he insists, “is something artificial and unnecessary,” a matter of habit. 6

In the long run, Channing did not blame the Transcendentalists or nature for his problems, but himself. He admired Emerson, even though he snipes at him cattily in “The Sage” (“The answer that I needed bad /Ne’er reached my ear, nor gay nor sad; /’That might be so,’ the sage would say, / Exactly flat as mere ‘Good day.’” [1010]). He described Thoreau condescendingly as a crank, but at bottom he worshipped Thoreau’s memory, Emma Lazarus declared. 7 This admiration, as well as

7 McGill, p. 169. The vicissitudes of Channing’s feelings toward Thoreau need systematic research. Channing was just as complicated a character as
Channing's own sense of inferiority comes out dramatically in the prefatory dedication to Thoreau in his long pastoral, *Near Home*. Here Channing pictures himself as an insignificant "reed," passing "a weak life consumed in trivial thought" (417), and he calls upon Thoreau to be his "muse," so that

Thy abiding faith in God's great justice  
Might arise, and so might I be just,  
And trust in him! [419]

Channing's image of himself as the weak reed sustained by Henry suggests still another reason why he was unable to find abiding consolation in nature. He was too dependent upon people. The problem of loneliness, felt by both Emerson and Thoreau, was especially acute for him; and it grew more so as he aged, outlived them, and developed a reticence even greater than theirs had been. It is typical of Channing to center his "Boat-Song" around a human figure, and then to make that figure tantalizingly remote. The sense of solitude always filled him with a longing for society. He was torn between a theoretical preference for nature as superior to man and the desolation of a world populated only by muskrats, pouts, and perch. As he climbs Mt. Wachusett, he professes to "love old solitude and hate new show" (241), but once he is at the summit he is glad to see "Plenty of farmers' clearings, and some woods, / But no remote Sierra solitudes" (242). The same thing happens in another hilltop meditation. After a bit of gazing around, the speaker wishes for "some chat with roguish lad"; indeed he feels so lonely that he would welcome "idle gossip fresh from parlors full / Of sewing"; or even "the dry call of herd-boy to his cows / His endless goal" (528). In writing elsewhere of New England traits, Channing seems quick to rebut the charges of Boswell, even if he was less of a literary talent. For an example of his satires of Thoreau, see Francis B. Dedmond, "William Ellery Channing on Thoreau: An Unpublished Satire," *Modern Language Notes*, 67 (1952), 50–52.
dreariness, inhospitality, and unfriendliness—partly because he senses them to be true.

Equipped with the sensibilities just described, Channing handled the usual Transcendentalist topics in ways rather different from Emerson and Thoreau. Only Channing, for instance, could have concocted this mixture of abasement, gloom, and natural piety:

I love thee, Autumn, ruthless harvester!
Thou dost permit my stagnant veins to flow.  [299]

As a Concord poet, Channing could no more get away from nature as his primary poetic subject than he could evade the stereotype of young ladies as creatures of "virgin purity." His imagination fed on the very thing from which, at moments, it felt most alien. His sense of dualism was thus more severe than that of his friends, although disguised by his ways of coping with the problem—passiveness and self-effacement in his poetry, for the most part; humor and wit in his conservation and his prose. Channing really did doubt the efficacy of a life according to nature, for himself if not for his betters. The very "superficiality" and "caprice" for which his friends reproached him gave him a perspective on their existence which they lacked. He could see its ludicrous side. On the whole, one feels that Channing would have been far happier in literary New York than he was in Concord. He was a sparkling conversationalist; he had a gift for social satire; he entertained the ambition of writing a comic novel in the tradition of Cervantes and Rabelais; and the autobiographical tale he published in *The Dial*, "The Youth of the Poet and the Painter," shows a sprightly insouciance which might have been converted into successful popular fiction had Channing travelled in the right circles. But in Concord serious literature was de rigueur. As an Emersonian poet, Channing largely suppressed his comic sprightliness and sublimated it into a wistful melancholy. The result was something like what might have happened
to Nathaniel Parker Willis if he had remained in Boston.

Channing chose, then, to remain in Emerson’s orbit, take daily walks with Thoreau, and meditate on the mysteries of nature. Despite many misgivings, he was in the long run prepared to be damned, if it should come to that, for the glory of nature. As he told himself in one poem, he had no more right to complain than any other creature at the way she creates life and then destroys it. It would be going much too far to raise Channing to the level of a tragic figure, since it is often doubtful whether he is writing from his heart or from convention, and since a good deal of the time he evinces no deep self-knowledge but only a nameless disaffection (“I am possed / With strange Unrest” [203]). But his most ambitious work gives provocative and at times even memorable expression to the issues which plagued him. “October has hardly tinged our poetry,” Thoreau remarks in “Autumnal Tints” (W, V, 249). As we shall see in a moment, Channing came closest among the Transcendentalists to filling this gap, to poetizing the elements of autumn which are present in *A Week* only as a somber undertone.

During his lifetime, Channing published seven volumes of poetry, as well as miscellaneous verses: three collections of short poems (1843, 1847, 1849); then four long works in blank verse: *Near Home* (1858) and *The Wanderer* (1871), two local descriptive poems; *Eliot* (1885), a dramatic monologue; and *John Brown, and the Heroes of Harper’s Ferry* (1886), a closet drama. His poems which have been anthologized are all from the 1840s, but taken alone they present an incomplete picture of his work. Usually Channing is thought of as a lyricist, but if the later poetry is taken into account, he emerges as primarily a descriptive and dramatic poet. Many of the poems in the first three volumes also are in these veins. Like Thoreau, he is most consistently good in poems which establish an interplay between a natural setting, real or imaginary, and the thoughts of a first-person observer. Such works might be called romantic
excursions in verse. In the early poetry, "Boat-Song" is such a poem, as are "Inscription for a Garden," "The River," "Stillwater," "The Lonely Road," "Wachusett," and "Baker Farm," to name the most successful. Most of these poems, significantly, are in pentameter couplet or blank verse. Although Channing was capable of getting good effects with stricter forms, in general he did not have the talent, or the discipline, to master them, and in any case he needed a more open form for the free play of his thought.

Channing's achievement in the descriptive-reflective vein, such as it is, can be represented by "Wachusett," Near Home, The Wanderer, and Eliot. The first is a hilltop meditation in the topographical tradition dating back to Denham's "Cooper Hill" and including Emerson's "Monadnoc," as well as Thoreau's prose descriptions of climbing Wachusett, Saddleback (in A Week), and Katahdin (in The Maine Woods). The next two poems are also topographical, set for the most part in the vicinity of Concord. Eliot has a wilderness setting, somewhere on the midwestern frontier.

"Wachusett" is the most ambitious and in many ways the best of the early poems. Neatly organized, it begins with the climb and a brief look from the summit, ends with a correspondingly panoramic view of the sunset, and centers around an inner debate between a hypothetical "student" and the speaker. The student sees three evils in the surrounding countryside: a devotion to utility rather than beauty, a crass materialism, and a tradition-bound religion. The speaker answers each of these charges in turn, with Emersonian arguments: (1) to make a good engine is not a mechanical act but "one of the purest ministries of Art" (244); (2) the law of competition will ensure that everybody seeks his own level, in contrast to the feudalism in the so-called age of romance; and (3) if the forms of religion have a validity to the worshipper we should not censure them. Neither these arguments, nor the objections they are designed to counter, make the poem interesting so
much as the happy expression which is sometimes given to them and the unusual (for Channing) thoroughness with which they are made to dovetail. Each leads nicely into the next, and upon finishing the poem and going back to the beginning, one has the pleasure of finding that the introductory descriptions have been fashioned, unobtrusively, so as to lay the groundwork for each of them.

The really provocative part of the poem, though, is its final section. The poet has hinted that it might be summer, but now we see that it is fall, from the oak tops "Which light October frosts color like wine." It is still warm, but the rising wind brings a sense of urgency: "the Indian summer's voice, / Bids me in the this last tropic day rejoice" (254). But he cannot; instead the immediately sees "How brown the country is, what want of rain" (254), associating this with the Puritans' devastation of the Indian tribes. "Where are they?" he asks.

Ah, like this summer, they did fade away
Into the white snows of that winter race,
Who came with iron hands and pallid face. [255]

In just a few lines the speaker has, in effect, conceded all the student's objections to the civilization he has previously defended. Once he has put dialectics aside and opened himself to the influences of nature, his sense of its relentless cycle refutes his dogged optimism.

Now he notices the approach of night. Sunset comes like the end of the world, "As if at last old earth had caught on fire, / And slowly mouldering, sank into the pyre" (256). He himself feels like the "last man" alive. But curiously enough, his sadness disappears, though the imagery of death continues for fifty lines more, until the end of the poem. "Who can be sad and live upon this earth?" he cries (257). In an access of the same mutability which has just led him into gloom, his painter's eye is overcome by the beauty of the sunset. "Each instant changes everywhere the scene, / Rapid and perfect turns the Indian
screen”—the local Indian becomes the Asian Indian, the sad transience of Indian summer now seems like an exotic piece of Oriental art (258). “New England drear” seems positively Mediterranean to him now; and his enthusiasm bursts out in patriotic fervor: “He is not right, who our New England says / Is a dread, cold inhospitable realm” (259).

In short, his sunset meditation has come full cycle, re-enacting the rhythm of the debate: melancholy, rescued by affirmation. His personal fear of nature’s mutability gives way to his delight in her mastery of the art of change. In the nine remaining lines, the serenity is maintained (or is it?) as the sinking sun turns the sky to “purest roseate,” which modulates to “gentle red,”

Then dies within that stormy mountain cloud,
That masks him proudly in a leaden shroud. [260]

Why “proudly”? Does it add the last touch of dignity to the sunset, or does it mark the cloud’s final triumph over the sun? The speaker’s heart is content, no doubt about that, but only because he has made himself the passive receiver of contradictory impressions.

Near Home is a much more diffuse and uneven work than “Wachusett,” partly because it is twice as long—almost a thousand lines. In its scope it is a more ambitious treatment of the theme of the going-down of the seasons. The poem opens with a sunrise in spring and ends with the coming of autumn. The movement is guided by two structural principles: shifting scenes according to the season and the topic the poet wants to broach; and the conflict between hope and gloom, à la “Wachusett.”

The conflict here, however, is less regulated and more oblique: the device of the second persona is dropped, and the speaker’s way of coping with doubt is usually to evade it, by changing the subject.

The spring sunrise, for instance, calls to mind the origin of
the world, which leads to thoughts about the diminution of man since his Arcadian beginnings, raising the possibility of the future extinction of the race, from which, however, the speaker abruptly draws back: "Of this / We phrase not here" (422). His subject is local, not epic. He is then visited by an ominous image of the regional past, the Indians, but this is quickly superseded by his pleasure in nature and the awareness that "I do not walk alone; / For still I feel thy arm is round me, / . . . Thou, who art all in all" (422-423). But at once, in another metamorphosis of sensibility, this presence is transformed into a sense of human companionship:

I do not walk alone, for still the Spring
Calls up my old companions. [423]

This in turn leads into a eulogy of Home, the pleasures of friendship and family, thoughts which give him inexpressible comfort and security. "Safe in my heart is home with all its joys"—the idea, and the language too, suggest to him the way

the dimpling river laves,
Safe in its pure seclusion, the green base
Of yonder hill, bleached to its core with shells,
Things of the Indian. [424]

But, alas, the poet finds himself betrayed again by reminiscence, betrayed even by nature, for the mention of Indians now calls to mind the whole tragedy of their race, gone like leaves, like grass.

Thus drop the races,
Annihilated and spoiled, not to return.
Yet at their base the dimpling river laves,
Base of those low, lone hills. [425]

Luckily the poet is able to return to the river and seize on it as an image of constancy. This cheers him up again; he makes ready to cast himself on the bosom of nature, and "Leagued with the universal law pursue / Like it, a sympathetic journey"
Ellery Channing

(426). Never complain about loneliness in nature, he tells himself; look at all the natural life around you, and the testimony it affords to “the revelation of abiding grace / Continuous” (428).

But try as he will the poet cannot sustain this mood. He cannot help thinking of the fate of the Indians, the mutability of the seasons, his loneliness in nature, and the possibility that nature may be planning to annihilate him without a trace. He changes the subject, he changes the scene from river to meadow, from inland to seashore, but somber intimations still pursue him. It is not necessary to trace all the twistings and turnings of his thought; its subjects vary but the range of tones is about the same as in the sample I have just discussed, which comprises the first 170 lines or so. That sample should suffice to illustrate the main virtue of the poem, its subtle emotional texture. In its better portions, there is a continual modulation of tone, reminiscent of the changes in the autumn sunset in “Wachusett.” Since the language and imagery of Near Home are less interesting, this quality of modulation may not strike the reader at first, and even if it does he might argue that it testifies rather to Channing’s dreamy capriciousness than to conscious art. That may be true in part, though I hope I have made a case for Channing as a conscious artist in the other poems I have discussed. Certainly, despite anything Emerson said, one must have some respect for the conscientiousness of a writer whose surviving manuscript poetry shows fairly extensive revision; who withheld a great number of poems from publication, feeling they were not good enough to print; who after the age of thirty had serious doubts about his artistic abilities. 8 Even if one assumes that Channing did meander a good deal in Near Home, the effect is often happy: a procession of tonal shifts within an emerging design.

At the end of Near Home, as in “Wachusett,” Channing “re-

8 Sanborn’s preface and Channing’s manuscripts substantiate these claims.
solves" the cosmic question raised by the coming of autumn through a triumphant lapse into resignation:

Learn from the joy of Nature, so to be
Not only quite resigned to thy worst fears,
But like herself superior to them all.  

Though we may be destined for a wintry fate, we may warm ourselves with the fires of our own serenity, thus "annihilating change" (466). This solipsistic affirmation is clinched by appeal to the example of "Vernon" (elsewhere identified as Thoreau), the same muse invoked in the preface.

But this consolation was soon lost. Thoreau died four years later, leaving Channing without his closest friend. That may partly explain why his next poem, *The Wanderer*, begins on a more somber note than we have ever heard him strike before. Standing on a hill, the speaker surveys first his village, then the sky, and then he turns once more to the perennial subject, the meaning of nature. The season is winter; the silence and loneliness are intense; the frost is "like a nettle robe" (482). How can a person withstand, much less fathom, such relentless force? "Well, I could pray," he thinks, for an intermission of winter; but what good would that do?

And then fancy the dull man wandering round
As I, vexing the sly world with questions,
Heard his queries solved and plainly answered:
Came, by some taste of learning, to the sense
Of all the senseless facts.  

What then? Even with such theoretical knowledge, "might I so front the wood? / Should it not flout and leer?" Why should man have the effrontery to probe "the end of Nature's bashfulness" (483)? Compared to nature, the oldest man's life is scarcely less ephemeral than the youngest's.

At this point, about a hundred lines into the poem, the speaker begins to move about. He shifts the scene from hill to field to riverside, and he turns away from personal meditation
to portray first a struggling farmer, then—at length—an ideal student of nature. The inquest into nature is not dropped entirely, but it is pursued in a much different manner for the rest of The Wanderer's considerable length (about 2500 lines). The poem falls into seven sections, grouped according to setting into three main units, "Wood," "Mountain," and "Sea"; and the progression from one to the next is, broadly speaking, a progression from solitude to society, from private to public. "Wood" counterpoints the impressions of the speaker with the portraits of the ideal student of nature and a crotchety hermit, the two of whom, taken together, make up the split image of Thoreau in Channing's mind. "Mountain" describes two social scenes. First, the poet takes an excursion with the hermit to the side of a hillside summerhouse, frequented also by a group of their friends, whose good times are recalled. Next, he camps out with the hermit near the wigwam of an interesting old Indian, and recalls how several acquaintances visited them there. In "Sea," finally, Channing moves beyond personal reminiscence to take in the whole course of history. The prospect of ships at sea calls to mind the spread of western civilization from its beginnings in America, and the colonization of America in particular. A beautiful mansion overlooking the bay, and its well-bred inhabitants, stands as an image in his mind of the attainments of American culture, though the poet cannot quite forget the great social problems which exist outside the charmed circle of the estate. Such intimations call to mind the social responsibility of the artist: he caps his panorama and ends his poem with a vision of the kind of poetry the new age requires: not bardic tales, not classical myth, but "the myth to-day," "the scholar's song" (134,133), based on close observation of nature and contemporary life.

In its design, The Wanderer is Channing's most ambitious work. In its execution, though, it is inferior to "Wachusett" and Near Home, except for the first section, which seems to me to contain the best poetry Channing ever wrote. Once he moves
away from his initial posture of soul- and nature-searching, the poem rapidly loses force; the emotional pressure of the inner dialectic is diffused into set-pieces of description, which get more and more insipid as they get more public and range farther away from Concord.

_Eliot_ is the last major poem in which Channing shows a persona in confrontation with himself and nature. Here the speaker's isolation and withdrawal are extreme: he has been a hermit for almost twenty years, and still he does not feel at home in nature:

> And yet the everlasting voice I hear,  
> And never find the silence. [613]

But there is a special secret to his sorrow. He has killed his rival in love, and banished himself to the wilderness; and as a result of both acts his wife has died of grief. Now he is continually tortured by guilt about the two deaths and by fantasies of the lover and especially the wife, whom he loved dearly despite his neglect of her. The fact that he must kill animals to stay alive is a reminder of his crimes; the stream speaks in the voice of his abandoned children. Even crucifixion, he thinks, would be "Far happier than this slowly dropping rust/Curdling about my unprotected thoughts" (640).²

At the end of the poem, he feels himself to be dying. Still as far away as ever from peace of mind, he manages nonetheless to gain a certain satisfaction from looking over the mementos he has with him, including some of the poetry he used to write, and pronouncing a "testament" or epitaph on his life. The following lines are of special interest as an indicator of their author's poetic development.

> In those my early days, amid the trees,  
> I thought to raise an altar to the Muse,  

²This poetic situation can of course be autobiographically interpreted, as both expressing and legitimatizing (as tragic rather than tawdry) Channing's personal loneliness and guilt at mistreating his children and his wife, whose death was hastened by his neglect of her.
And with these lines to consecrate its front,—
The Muse that haunts these bowers and bends their lives.
Time rubs away the outward, leaves within,
Merely the cerements that once owned life.
And, when my numbers failed me, I essayed
To dwell as might some anchorite austere;
O'er the cold stones to drag the nights with prayer,
And mortifying arts the convent knew. [700–701]

This is the confession of a failed nature poet. Like a good deal of the material in Eliot having autobiographical reference, this passage is not particularly relevant to the career of the fictive persona, but it says a lot about the career of his author, and explains some of the differences between Eliot and the long pastoral poems discussed before. Eliot is not much concerned with guessing at the riddle of nature, with the interplay between the mind of the observer and the thing seen. The restless mind is turned inward; the question of nature's meaning now seems ephemeral compared to the speaker's own spiritual crisis. The thought of nature's calm, constant persistence amid all temporary mutations and suffering occurs to him, but is not enough to draw him away from himself to her, as it was for the speaker of the earlier poems. The tone here is thus much more intense: nervous, self-pitying, distracted, even hysterical at times. This makes for greater force, but not, unhappily, for better poetry. Just as a too heavy dose of descriptiveness in The Wanderer leads Channing away from sharp imagery and into trite abstractions, so an excess of psychodrama lures him into another sort of conventionalism, the histrionics of Byronism. Eliot is Manfred redivivus. To perform at his best, Channing needed to strike a balance between the inner and the outer lives.

The syndrome described in Eliot's speech infected Emerson and Thoreau as well as Channing. All three believed that the success of poetry was dependent upon the poet's insight into nature, and that if this failed his only recourse was a life of austere self-discipline. Indeed, this should be his regular prac-
tice, since, as Emerson said, “the sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body” (W, III, 28). But it was terribly frustrating if the visions would not come, as Emerson and Thoreau realized as they aged. Here is the point at which Channing’s work supplements theirs most importantly: his frustrations was the keenest; and he owned up to it most candidly, and portrayed it best in his work. Since his writing, like his personality, is less self-restrained than theirs, it is in some ways a more faithful record of their spiritual lives. In particular, its vacillations of mood read more like their journals than their own essays do. Their rambling, aphoristic style gives their essays the appearance of spontaneity, but their tone is almost maddeningly self-assured. The reader knows that this contrast between turbid syntax and confident tone hides something; and it takes Channing—or their journals—to show what it is.

Emerson was right, therefore, when in his review of Channing’s early poems he categorized them as “verses of the portfolio,” more revealing though less polished than good poetry is. If we may go one step further than this and say that a number of passages in Channing’s poetry are also well-written, perhaps some may even be persuaded to follow Emerson’s advice and read it.

10 Uncollected Writings, p. 139.