WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

1780–1842

His Religious and Social Thought

BY

ANNE HOLT, M.A., F.R.Hist.S.

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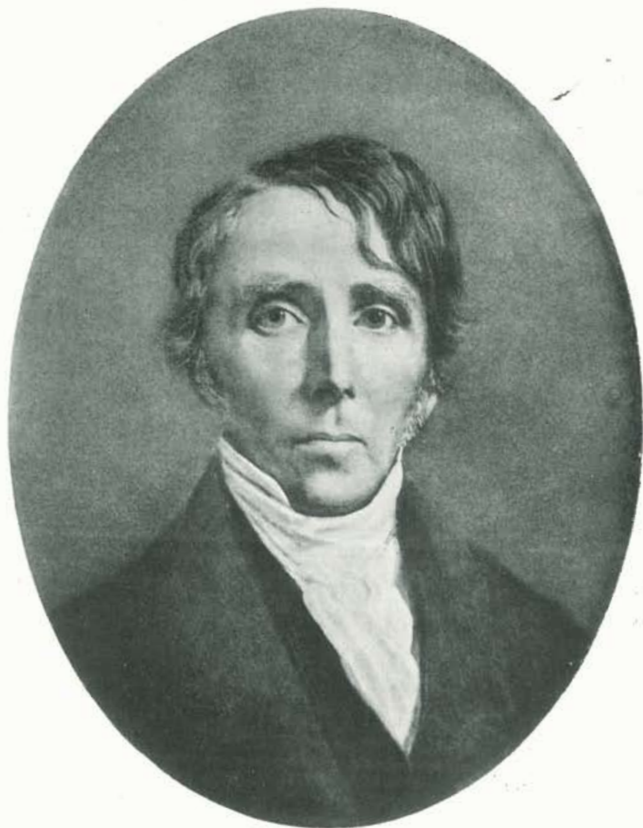

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING
Born 7 April, 1780. Died 2 Oct., 1842.

[*Frontispiece.*

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PREFACE

THIS little book is written on the occasion of the centenary of the death of William Ellery Channing to commemorate the great service he rendered a truly catholic religion by his emphasis on the moral nature and paternal character of God and by his belief in the spiritual nature of man, and his kinship with the divine.

I had hoped to be able to publish an adequate life of Channing, but this hope, like much else, has been frustrated by the present war. A new biography necessitates recourse to manuscripts and letters in the United States, and from this research I have been cut off. But I put this book forward as an earnest of fuller treatment when happier times come, and as a token of my own gratitude for the felicity of growing up in a home dominated by the teaching of Channing and of his great English disciple, John Hamilton Thom.

I wish to thank the Rev. Lawrence Redfern for his kindness in reading my manuscript, and for his ever-ready willingness to discuss theological points as they have arisen. I am also deeply grateful to the Council of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches for having asked me to undertake the work.

A. H.

Liverpool,
August, 1942.

CHAPTER I

HIS LIFE

When, on the 7th of April, 1780, William Ellery Channing was born in Newport, Rhode Island, the great struggle for American Independence was drawing to its close. For many years Newport itself had been occupied by a British force, and had only been evacuated in the October preceding Channing's birth.

The Channings, of good middle-class English stock, had come to Newport from Newton Abbot, in Devonshire, in the early years of the eighteenth century. Their coat-of-arms of the three moors' heads showed them to be allied to the family of Canning, which at the turn of the century was to give England a great Foreign Minister. It also showed their descent from the Canynges of Bristol, the great merchant princes of the fifteenth century who so nobly restored and beautified the church of St. Mary Redcliffe.

The child's father, another William, had come to the front in the recent struggle, and later, as Attorney-General for the state, held a recognized position in Newport. To his house came all distinguished visitors, including George Washington.

On the maternal side, too, the child could boast of good stock, and a tradition of public service. His mother, Lucy Ellery, was the daughter of that William Ellery who, in 1776, had signed the Declaration of Independence, and in 1795 he became Chief Justice of his state.

Though Rhode Island had led the way in the toleration of all religious faiths, yet the prevalent creed and practice was congregational of the more usual New England type. On Sundays the young Channings were taken to the Second Congregational Church, where the minister was Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803), a pupil and friend of Jonathan Edwards, though he had come to modify his master's system. He held that men had a natural power to choose the right, though it needed the transforming power of God to make them exercise their choice correctly. But his reverence for reason, and his belief in a virtue which consisted in the preference of the public good to any personal advantage, must have left an enduring mark on the mind of the boy who, Sunday after Sunday, listened to his eloquence, though, with his developing mind, the boy came to feel that the goodness of God was too great for the Calvinist scheme.

By Channing's boyhood, Calvinism had lost much of its gloomy hold on everyday life, though it is certain that the Puritans were never as joyless as the twentieth century likes to paint them. As early as 1684 Increase Mather had denounced 'gynecandrical' dancing, a sure proof that it existed—and by 1716 dancing was openly taught in Boston. Even such an other-worldly family as the Edwardses read novels of the type of *Pamela*.

William was educated, as were most of his contemporaries, at local schools, where the education cannot have reached a very high standard, for he was but twelve years old when he was sent to New London, Connecticut, to be prepared for college by his uncle, the Rev. Henry Channing. The following year his father died, and, at the age of thirteen, it may be said that his childhood ended. Henceforth on him and his

older brother Francis lay much of the responsibility of considering ways and means of helping their mother with the upbringing of the younger children.

In 1794 William was entered as a freshman at Harvard, still but a provincial college, and went to live at the house of his uncle, Francis Dana (1745–1811), the Chief Justice of Massachusetts, who, from 1781 to 1783, had resided in St. Petersburg as the representative of the newly emancipated colonies.

Channing was a diligent rather than a brilliant student, yet interested in the problems of the day, and taking a keen interest in politics, as did most of the young men who lived in the momentous seventeen-nineties. Apart from the more formal classical education of the time, Channing was reading such eighteenth-century philosophers as Price, Ferguson and Hutcheson. The influence of the first is of particular interest, as in many ways Price was the forerunner of Kant, but Hutcheson played an even more important part in the formation of young Channing's mind. We are told that it was in reading this author, who had asserted man's capacity for disinterested action and self-devotion to absolute good, that the fifteen-year-old Channing first had that vision of divine love and the possibility of man's spiritual nature that was to be the master light of all his seeing.

In 1798 Channing graduated from Harvard, and it was not until then that he determined to enter the ministry. It was now necessary for him to read divinity with a more serious intent and at the same time to cease to be a charge on his mother's small income. Because of this he accepted the invitation of David Meade Randolph, a relation of Thomas Jefferson, then holidaying at Newport, to return to Virginia with him

as tutor to his sons. For the first time he left his native New England for a country that in manners and customs was entirely different. He found life less conventional, and thought that the Virginians loved money less than the Yankees. 'Could I only take from the Virginians their *sensuality* and their *slaves*,' he wrote, 'I should think them the greatest people in the world.' Yet the sojourn was far from happy. Though the Randolphs kept open house, and welcomed Channing to it, he was too shy to come in. He worked incredibly hard, studying in every vacant moment, often until daybreak, and that in a southern country where dawn is never very early. As well as formal divinity he was reading the popular literature of the day, and quite lost his heart to Mary Wollstonecraft. 'I consider that woman,' he said, 'as the greatest of the age.' Like Southey and Coleridge but a few years before, he contemplated the idea of a communistic society, rather like that of Brook Farm a generation later.

In July 1801 he returned to Newport, and in December of the following year he was appointed regent at Harvard, a paid post with few duties beyond that entailed in maintaining discipline among the students who resided in the same building as himself.

On the 24th of October, 1802, Channing preached his first sermon at Medford, and was at once recognized as 'a young preacher of extraordinary gifts, and of the highest promise in his profession'. Almost immediately he was asked to preach, with a view to settlement, at two churches in Boston, one in Brattle Street and the other in Federal Street. He chose the latter. He was ordained there, according to congregational usage, on the 1st of June, 1803, and here he remained until his death in 1842.

Apart from those years in the later eighteen thirties, in which he appeared as the champion of the anti-slavery cause, and for an unpleasant scare in 1812, when Boston hourly expected to be invaded by the English, Channing's life was singularly placid. During his early ministry his mother and his younger brother and sisters made their home with him, but in 1814 he married his cousin, Ruth Gibbs. The great changes in his life were rather intellectual. In 1815 the Unitarian controversy broke out, and in 1819 he preached the famous Baltimore sermon, where he expounded Unitarianism and gave to its rather amorphous shape a local habitation and a name. At home he was a conscientious minister, preaching regularly and, so far as his shy nature let him, fulfilling pastoral duties. Though as yet no regular Sunday school existed, he gathered the children of the congregation around him, and gave them some kind of religious instruction, and at least one little girl proudly affirmed that she understood every word he said.

From the days of his Virginian experience Channing had suffered from ill health, which contemporary remedies did little to help. In 1822 it was decided to try the effects of a European holiday. There is little of interest in his travel reminiscences beyond his meetings with Wordsworth and Coleridge. He had been one of the earliest transatlantic readers to enjoy Wordsworth, and his whole religion and philosophy were affected by the English poet. Unfortunately he has left little record of his meeting with the poet except that 'Mr. Wordsworth's conversation was free, various, animated. We talked so eagerly as often to interrupt one another. And as I descended into Grassmere near sunset, with the placid lake before me, and Wordsworth talking

and reciting poetry with a poet's spirit by my side, I felt that the combination of circumstances was such as my highest hopes could never have anticipated.'

At one time Coleridge had been a Unitarian lay-preacher, and had almost entered the ministry, but in later life had moved far away from the heterodoxy of his youth, though it was the materialism of Priestley and Belsham he disliked, and not the spiritual type of Christianity that Channing had begun to preach beyond the Atlantic. In meeting the American Coleridge recognized the points of affinity between them. 'Perhaps I have been more absorbed', he said, 'in the depth of the mystery of the spiritual life, he more engrossed by the loveliness of its manifestations.'

When Channing returned home in 1823, Ezra Stiles Gannett was appointed to assist him, and, until his death, he was fortunate in having Gannett as a loyal coadjutor.

Soon after his return, in 1824, the *Christian Disciple* was merged in the *Christian Examiner*, and for this paper Channing wrote his articles on Milton, Napoleon, and Fénelon. These were similar to the papers that were appearing in the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly Reviews*, but were the first of their kind to appear written by an American for Americans. The similarity can be seen clearly if it is remembered that Channing's essay on Milton was called forth by the publication of Milton's lost *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, as also had been that of the young Macaulay, who first achieved fame by reviewing it for the *Edinburgh* of August, 1825. These essays do not show Channing in any new light, for he wrote for edification rather than amusement, yet the paper on Milton was an inspiration to at least one English reader. Long years afterwards, John Hamilton

Thom recollected how Channing had freed him from textual and external Arianism. 'I remember', he said, 'how that light first came to me, and set me free for ever; nor have I a more vivid recollection than of turning for a moment from weary work to steal a glance at the tract on Milton's Treatise on "Christian Doctrine" which the college-porter had just laid on my school desk, and of being carried out of myself and my surroundings by its first lofty words.'

But if such writing was new to America, the dawn in New England at least was not far off. The eighteen thirties were the beginning of great days in the history of Boston. At near-by Harvard, Edward Channing, William's brother, George Ticknor and others were turning Harvard from a provincial college into a modern university. Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, had begun his work on behalf of children, as also, in a more orthodox fashion, had Horace Mann. In these years Emerson, who in 1823 had been Channing's pupil, was lecturing, and among others making a convert of Mary Channing. 'Oh, Miss Peabody,' she said in 1836, 'when one hears one of these lectures one feels one can never do wrong any more', and she borrowed the manuscripts so that she could read the lectures to her father. In 1840, Channing tried to found a society of serious-minded persons for serious discussion, and a first meeting was held at the house of Dr. Warren. Channing duly arrived 'with large thoughts which he wished to open'. Unfortunately, after introduction and greetings, just as the serious part of the evening was due to begin, a side door opened, and 'the whole company streamed in to an oyster supper, crowned by

excellent wines: and so ended the first attempt to establish aesthetic society in Boston '.[1]

But his friendships were by no means restricted to the élite of Boston, or to his own denomination. From 1829, one of the city's greatest reformers was ' Father ' Taylor, a Methodist who carried the Gospel to the seamen in the port. He was reported to have said of himself that though ' he sometimes lost his nominative case, he was always on the way to glory '.[2] No doubt his mission was on orthodox lines, but it received, as did the Roman Catholic Cathedral, financial help from Unitarians. He said he liked Unitarians ' because they meant religion. Their doctrinal errors only spoil the preaching of their ministers.' But the Unitarian minister, with his Harvard doctorate, and the non-academic Methodist fully respected each other. ' What a beautiful being Dr. Channing is,' said Taylor; ' if he had only had education '—a not altogether absurd criticism, as Channing was woefully ignorant of the rough and tumble of life. To one of Taylor's services went Channing accompanied by Miss Peabody. It was Communion Sunday, and Taylor asked them to remain for the second service. As each went up to the altar he addressed them in a word or two, calling Channing ' father '.

The last decade of Channing's life was largely filled with his part in the anti-slavery struggle. It cost him some friends and is said to have reduced his congregation, but by that time his faith was too serene to have allowed for embitterment. The last summer of all he spent at Stockbridge, in the Berkshire hills, to

[1] Emerson, *Lectures, Life and Letters in New England*, p. 321.
[2] Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England*, p. 269.

which a century before the exiled Jonathan Edwards had come to preach to the Indians,

> ' Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate,
> Fix'd fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute.'

On his way home, at Bennington in Vermont, he died at sunset on Sunday the 2nd of October, 1842.

CHAPTER II

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

CHANNING was not a great theologian, nor was he a varied religious thinker, but on a few truths he thought profoundly. In his own day he was revolutionary, and if to some extent he has been forgotten, it is partly because his teaching has been carried farther by others, and because much of what he taught has become the inheritance of all thoughtful men. Channing's theology has spread beyond his own religious body, and there are many persons in all denominations, and in none, who think as he did, without either being aware of it, or aware that it is contrary to those creeds to which they give formal adherence.

Channing left no systematic theological treatise, and his thought must be traced through many sermons, of which the most famous was that preached at Baltimore in 1819, and in his correspondence. He was brought up in a Calvinistic church, and in two respects was profoundly influenced by its teaching. There was much in Calvinism that was of the finest quality, and wherever it has been the predominant influence a noble type of manhood has developed. While it preached a doctrine of depravity and helplessness, it also made men so aware of the divine omnipotence, and of God's transforming power, that it bred up a race of men, perhaps a little arrogant because of God's especial favour to them, yet self-reliant, and brave, and trustworthy, who could win a new continent from the wilderness, and equally

well withstand the persecution of established authority. Channing had all the moral courage of the Calvinist, since God was so present to him that he realised that nothing else but being right with God mattered at all. He never separated the idea of the divine immanence from that of transcendence.

The other way in which Calvinism affected Channing deeply was by reaction. 'You wish to know the history of my mind,' he wrote, in 1840, 'but it would fill a volume. My inquiries grew out of the shock given to my moral nature by the popular system of faith which I found prevailing round me in my early years.' Channing's denial of orthodox Christianity was because its belief in man's depravity, its doctrine of the atonement, and its Christology all seemed to deny the goodness of God. He sought his religion direct from the Bible, and then it dawned upon him that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was a deity very different from the God depicted in the teaching of the churches. Calvinism especially as typified by Jonathan Edwards had accentuated the sovereignty of God, it had pictured God as Judge, and had meditated on this aspect of the deity. But to Channing the divine appeal lay not in power and might, but in love; it was therefore the paternal character of deity which was the essential revelation of the Gospels. 'We venerate not the loftiness of God's throne,' he said at Baltimore, 'but the equity and goodness in which it is established.' His rejection of Calvinism on the grounds that it denied the moral nature of God was of course a question entirely different from that of harmonizing God's beneficence with sin and evil. This latter problem had little difficulty for Channing, though he was fully aware of its existence, and he did not try to lessen it by shutting

his eyes to the sorrow of the world. He was prepared to accept suffering as not accidental, but as part of the scheme of things, which in no ways undermined his faith in God. When, in 1841, his friend Charles Follen perished in the terrible disaster to the steamship *Lexington*, he wrote, 'It is so long since doubts of the Divine goodness have crossed my mind, that I hardly know how to meet them. This truth comes to me as an intuitive one. I meet it everywhere. I can no more question it than I can the supreme worth and beauty of virtue.'

Channing's religion may be described as evangelical, since its source was the Bible, but he differed from the so-called evangelical sects in his refusal to be bound by the letter, preferring to find the spirit beyond, and interpreting it with the help of that rational nature which was 'the greatest gift of God'. 'If I could not be a Christian', he said, 'without ceasing to be rational, I should not hesitate as to my choice. I feel myself bound to sacrifice to Christianity property, reputation, life; but I ought not to sacrifice to any religion, that reason which lifts me above the brute and constitutes me a man. I can conceive no sacrilege greater than to prostrate or renounce the highest faculty which we have derived from God. In so doing we should offer violence to the divinity within us.' There is, of course, a place for feeling and imagination in religion, and Channing was aware of this, only he, and his followers later, refused to allow feeling to usurp the functions of thought and reason.

But if it was to the Bible that Channing went, as had Milton and Locke and the earlier Unitarians, for a picture of Christ, he found there a character that, though imbued with divinity, was not the God-man of

the creeds. Channing never came to accept a fully humanitarian explanation of the person of Christ, and remained an Arian, in the eighteenth-century meaning of that term, believing in his pre-existence, and allowing him all honour that was compatible with the pre-eminence of God himself. Yet, in 1831, he wrote that for years he had felt a decreased interest in settling the precise rank of Jesus Christ. 'The power of his character', he then wrote, 'seems to me to lie in his spotless purity, his *moral perfection* and not in the time during which he existed.' Far from denying miracles, he welcomed them as among the most reasonable as well as important events in human history, and as a sign that there was some Real Being greater than Nature, 'a Mind which *can*, if it WILL, suspend or reverse the regular operations of the Material World.' Miracles alone, and especially that of the Resurrection, were capable of placing belief in a future existence beyond doubt. Immortality, he held, was confirmed by the physical resurrection of Christ, though elsewhere he placed his belief in a future life on a more philosophical basis, by arguing that since Perfection could not be attained in this life, man must be made for continued existence. 'I cannot believe', he said, 'that He has imparted conscience, only to be trampled upon by the appetites; that He has kindled reason and the desire for goodness, only to perish in dark despair.'

As with Unitarians in general, the use of the word 'God' was limited to the Father, and was not used in connection with Christ. He rejected the orthodox doctrine of the atonement, as it led men to believe that the value of Christ's sacrifice lay in the fact that he had turned away the wrath of God—had, so to speak, bought God off, instead of changing the hearts of men.

To him the strength of Christianity lay in the personality of its founder. 'Reduce Christianity', he wrote, 'to a set of abstract ideas; sever it from its teacher, and it ceases to be the "power of God unto salvation". . . . Christian truth coming to me from the living soul of Jesus, with his living faith and love, and brought out in his grand and beautiful life, is a very, very different thing from an abstract system. The more I know of Jesus, the less I can spare him; and this place which he fills in my heart, the quickening office which his character performs, is to me no mean proof of his reality and superhuman greatness.' 'To my mind,' he wrote to Elizabeth Peabody in 1840, 'he was meant to be an anticipation of the perfection to which we are guided, to reveal to us its existence, to guide and aid us towards it, to show us that which exists in a germ in all souls'. Experience, and the history of his fellow-men, had taught him the vast difference which separated them from their exemplar. 'He is to be approached', he wrote, 'by gradual self-crucifixion, by a war with the evil within us which will not end till the grave.'

But the greatest difference between Channing and his forerunners lay in his treatment of human nature, which in its turn affected both his faith in God and his Christology. In a sense he may be said to have taken the prevalent political theories of human nature and applied them to theology. While orthodox theology was inculcating a doctrine of original sin and of man's depravity, philosophy was talking of the rights of man, of the noble savage not debased by civilization, and of the perfectibility of mankind. The eighteenth-century thinkers were political rather than theological, and their names are connected with the American and

French revolutions rather than with church reform, yet as truly were they upsetting Calvinism as they were the Divine Right of Kings and of despotic government. Channing had imbibed this thought from Locke and Rousseau, from Paine and Godwin. He now transferred this belief in man's innate goodness to theology. Yet whatever inspiration he had received from the political thinkers, his basis of belief in the dignity of man was man's spiritual nature. The fatherhood of God to Channing meant that God was indeed father of spirits, in a literal sense, the Mind that was behind all others. From this he deduced that all minds were of the same family, whether of God himself, or of Christ, or of angels (because he believed in other spiritual beings), or of man. By so acclaiming the essential unity of all spiritual existence he abolished that dichotomy in theological thought which placed God at one side of a chasm and man on the other, and which demanded the existence of some being, part God, part man, to bridge. There was no such partition in the spiritual world, as in the material. 'All minds are essentially of one origin,' he declared, 'one nature, kindled from one divine flame, and all are tending to one centre, one happiness.' Since, as Channing held, the mind of Christ was of the same kind as ours, there was nothing in his of which the principle, capacity, or promise was not in man. The partition walls which imagination had reared between men and higher orders of beings vanished, and there was no longer aught to prevent our becoming whatever was good and great in Jesus on earth. The rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity naturally followed, or perhaps it might be said to have been discarded, for the problem it was invented to solve, the wholly otherness of God from man, now no longer existed. On a

different occasion Channing declared that he preached exactly as if the doctrine of the Trinity had never been invented. This was now the position taken up by the Unitarians. Apart from its interest in the history of religious thought, the Trinity had ceased to have any vital interest to inquiring minds. But if Unitarianism now found itself on new ground, it also moved away from the older argumentative type of faith, and was content to give positive affirmation of itself. Under Channing's guidance Unitarians refused to argue their theology from the pulpit, and preferred that their followers should show forth their faith in their works. They had come to see that faith was not a matter of intellectual belief, but resulted from deep religious experience. 'You must have discovered in me', Channing wrote to Lucy Aikin in 1841, 'a touch of that malady called mysticism, and will therefore wonder the less at my German leanings. I am, however, no reader of German. I have caught this from nobody. It was born and bred in me, and therefore more hopeless.'

Once it was allowed that the spiritual nature of the lowliest of God's creatures was allied to God Himself, that the glory of that nature had once shown itself in all fullness in 'humblest guise below', then the demand that men should be perfect even as their Heavenly Father was perfect ceased to be a hyperbole, and became the most urgent and incessant demand upon them. 'It is the office of religion, I repeat once more,' Channing said, 'to call forth the *whole* Spirit of Man, the Intellect, the Conscience, the Affections, the Will; to awaken Energy and holy purpose; to inspire a calm and rational, yet a profound love of Truth and Goodness, against which all powers of the universe will be impotent. Did I not hope for this quickening influence from religion, I could not speak of it as the Supreme Good. For our Supreme Good is the Perfection of our being and nothing which does not involve and promote this deserves the name.' It may therefore be seen that Channing's belief was in the potential nobility of man rather than a satisfaction with man as he was.

It is not surprising that Channing championed the freedom of the will in contradistinction to both Calvinism and to the earlier Unitarianism of Priestley and Belsham. To him it was the postulate of all moral life. Though he appreciated the philosophical difficulties involved, his approach was rather that of faith. 'To admit all the elements of truth into our system,' he wrote in 1841, 'at once to adore the infinity of God and to give due importance to our own free moral nature, is no very easy work. But it must be done. Man's free activity is as important to religion as God's infinity. In the kingdom of Heaven the moral power of the subject is as essential as the omnipotence of the Sovereign. The rights of both have the same sacredness. To rob man of his dignity is as truly to subvert religion, as to strip God of his perfection. We must believe in man's agency as truly as in the Divine, in his freedom as truly as in his dependence, in his individual being as truly as in the great doctrine of his living in God.' But Channing did not mean by freedom the liberty to do as you will whatever the objective, cost what it might. 'The essence of spiritual freedom is power,' he said. 'A man liberated from sensual lusts by a palsy would not therefore be inwardly free. He only is free who, through self-conflict and moral resolution, sustained by trust in God, subdues the passions which have debased him, and,

escaping the thraldom of low objects, binds himself to pure and lofty ones. That mind alone is free which, looking to God as the inspirer and rewarder of virtue, adopts his law, written on the heart and in his word, as its supreme rule, and which, in obedience to this governs itself, reveres itself, exerts faithfully its best powers, and unfolds itself by well-doing, in whatever sphere God's providence assigns.'

The older generation had revelled in theological polemics. The usual vituperation scarcely seems consonant with Divinity at all. From all this Channing made a marked breakaway. He disliked contention in any form because of the spirit it generated and the dividing lines it created or perpetuated between persons and bodies which should rather unite on agreed points and leave the differences alone. Only a feeling of the injustice done to his brethren could have enticed him into the Unitarian controversy of 1815, and then he wrote, 'Error of opinion is an evil too trifling to be named in comparison with this practical departure from the gospel, with this proud, censorious, overbearing temper, which says to a large body of Christians, "stand off, we are holier than you".'

Perhaps one of the noblest traditions in the Unitarian movement has been its spirit of comprehension and its refusal to found religious fellowship on doctrinal formulae. From the eighteenth century, in England and America, Unitarians have practised 'open communion', believing, as one of their number put it, that it was the Lord's Table to which they were bidden, and not the table of this or that church. They disliked the spirit of exclusion, whether it appeared in a world-wide movement like Roman Catholicism, or in any particular congregational church. Pride and arrogancy, not discipleship, seemed to be the qualities of those who tried to shut up Christ in their creeds and refused the name of Christians to others who sought to follow in his footsteps. The whole spirit of sectarianism, whether Catholic or Protestant, seemed equally wrong to Channing, and he did not regard it as a small sin at all, since it denied the supremacy of goodness and substituted for it an intellectual affirmation or denial as the bond of Christianity and as the qualification for the hereafter. But he did not waste his breath in arguing or pleading, but placed his claim for membership in the universal church of Christ, where it could not be assailed by prelate or by synod. Never perhaps has a grander plea been made for a church truly catholic than was made by Channing. 'There *is*', he said, 'one grand, all-comprehending church; and if I am a Christian, I belong to it, and no man can shut me out of it. You may exclude me from your Roman church, your Episcopal church, and your Calvinistic church, on account of supposed defects in my creed or my sect, and I am content to be excluded. But I will not be severed from the great body of Christ. Who shall sunder me from such men as Fénelon, and Pascal, and Borromeo, from Archbishop Leighton, Jeremy Taylor, and John Howard? . . . The soul breaks scornfully these barriers, these webs of spiders, and joins itself to the great and good; and if it possess their spirit, will the great and good, living or dead, cast it off because it has not enrolled itself in this or another sect? A pure mind is free of the universe, and belongs to the church, the family of the pure, in all worlds. Virtue is no local thing. It is not honourable, because born in this community or that, but for its own independent, everlasting beauty. This is the bond of

the universal church. No man can be excommunicated from it but by himself, by the death of goodness in his own breast. All sentences of exclusion are vain, if he do not dissolve the tie of purity which binds him to all holy souls.'

'I belong to the Universal Church; nothing shall separate me from it,' he said in the same address. He saw that human nature might grow good under various influences. 'The Romish Church', he went on, 'is illustrated by great names. Her gloomy convents have often been brightened by fervent love to God and man. Her St. Louis, and Fénelon, and Massillon, and Cheverus; her missionaries, who have carried Christianity to the ends of earth; her sisters of charity, who have carried relief and solace to the most hopeless want and pain; do not these teach us that in the Romish Church the Spirit of God has found a home? How much, too, have other churches to boast! In the English Church we meet the names of Latimer, Hooker, Barrow, Leighton, Berkeley, and Heber; in the dissenting Calvinistic church, Baxter, Howe, Watts, Doddridge, and Robert Hall; among the Quakers, George Fox, William Penn, Robert Barclay, and our own Anthony Benezet and John Woolman; in the Anti-trinitarian church, John Milton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, Price, and Priestley. To repeat these names does the heart good. They breathe a fragrance through the common air. They lift up the whole race to which they belonged.'

CHAPTER III

SOCIAL REFORM

IT has been pointed out by Emerson that Channing's printed writings formed almost a history of the times, 'as there was no great public interest, political, literary, or even economical (for he wrote on the Tariff) on which he did not leave some printed record of his brave and thoughtful opinion. A poor little invalid all his life, he is yet one of those men who vindicate the power of the American race to produce greatness.' But the diversity of his writing resulted from the unity of his thought. His belief in education, juvenile and adult, in social and temperance movements, in women's rights, in the abolition of slavery all resulted from his faith in the Fatherhood of God, and in the dignity of man. Nor did he preach a cloistered virtue. 'His sermons', wrote Elizabeth Peabody, 'made the impression on me of identifying everyday duties of social life, in the family and counting room, with the most profound spiritual exercises of self-surrender to God's will accepted by the heart.' So successful was Channing in this, as were followers of the type of James Martineau and John Hamilton Thom, that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century where Unitarianism flourished civic virtue flourished, and to be a Unitarian was synonymous with being a good citizen. 'It is not *trembling* that I want to see under my preaching,' he said, 'but cheerful, vigorous, beneficent action of each for all. I am jealous of eloquence. It is often, I fear but a siren song

that lulls the active powers to sleep. . . . If I had touched the depths of spiritual energy, my hearers would not express admiration of my words.' 'The New Testament meaning of salvation is nothing less than this sanctification of the will.'

Channing suffered from no easy optimism, and was fully aware that the contemporary world was far from being a good place, which would automatically grow even better, but 'for the fearful evils of modern civilization; a system which teaches its members to grasp at everything, and to rise above everybody, as the great aims of life,' he thought Christianity the only remedy. He refused to accept material comfort as a standard of civilization and disliked the grow-rich-quickly philosophy wherever he saw it. He thought that the existing social and economic philosophy was topsy-turvy of Christian ethics. 'Who', he wrote, 'that looks on Christian communities, would suspect that their Divine Teacher had pronounced a blessing on the poor, and solemnly and most emphatically declared opulence to be one of the chief obstructions of human virtue and salvation?' Material comfort was no standard by which to judge civilization. 'The saddest aspect of the age, to me,' he wrote, 'is that which undoubtedly contributes to social order. It is the absorption of the multitude of men in outward material interests; it is the selfish prudence, which is never tired of the labour of accumulation, and which keeps men steady, regular, respectable drudges from morning to night.'

If he discarded contemporary economic standards because of his belief in the immortal nature of man, it was because of that belief that he championed man's individual rights as typified in revolutionary philosophy. These rights were founded on the fact of the fatherhood

of God, and remained good whether denied or ignored by the state. As his wisdom matured he became more and more aware that the nation was no abstraction, a vague mass, but was made up of a number of individuals, and therefore he could never reconcile himself to any form of national glory which meant misery and mourning to ordinary men and women.

But of all social reforms it was education that was nearest his heart. For a short time he had practised the art of teaching, when he had tried to break away from the prevalent discipline of the rod and use more reasonable methods in training the young both in morals and in knowledge. The secret of his dealings with children was the same as with their elders: his belief in them as ends in themselves. He did not believe that the child who in the long months before its birth had been the cherished hope of the parents, suddenly became 'a limb of satan', nor did he think the child was so endowed with original sin that it needed a baptismal rite to wash it clean.

Both in religious and secular education Channing looked upon the family as the unit. He thought that children should come to church with their parents, and though he talked to them separately and promoted Sunday schools, he never conceived it possible that children should be sent to one service, and their parents attend, or not attend, another. 'Children are best addressed indirectly, perhaps,' he told Elizabeth Peabody. 'They go to church with their parents, and get an idea of the universal obligation of social worship, and grow naturally into a sense of their own duty through their social instincts, without too much sense of compulsion. Their reverence for their parents, whom they see worshipping, quickens and gives reality

to their reverence for God. It gives them a sense of self-respect, also, to be left to their own spontaneity, which is important; uncompelled worship alone is in no danger of becoming perfunctory and hypocritical.'

Because all real education was to him fundamentally religious, based on the awareness of divinity within and around, he shared with his co-religionists in general a dislike of sectarian education which aimed at merely turning out good papists, or episcopalians, or methodists. 'To educate', he wrote in 1837, 'is something more than to teach those elements of knowledge which are needed to get a subsistence. It is to exercise and call out the higher faculties and affections of a human being. Education is not the authoritative, compulsory, mechanical training of passive pupils, but the influence of a gifted and quickening mind on the spirit of the young.' Before it was quite a commonplace, Channing saw the value of practical work in education. 'The eye to see beauty', he said, 'is developed by nothing less than *making* beauty', and so far as possible he would have had religion taught in this way. It was still very much the day of catechisms, and against this method of teaching Channing urged that Sunday schools should make the gospels the object of their study, so that pupils might see a vital Christianity portrayed in the person of Christ.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to education was through the influence he exerted on others, like Elizabeth Peabody, the founder in America of kindergartens, and Horace Mann, who, in 1837, renounced a promising political career for the humbler if more lasting calling of reforming the state educational system of Massachusetts. Half a century later it was not unusual for an educationalist inspired by Froebel to be met by

a Boston grandmother with the remark, 'But this is nothing new; more than fifty years ago Dr. Channing taught us to *live with* our children.'

Adult education and self-culture appealed to Channing as second only in importance to the up-bringing of children. Again his enthusiasm can be traced to his religious faith and to his philosophical doctrine of human nature. It was the practical side of his theory of Perfection, and sprang from an ardent belief in democracy, for wherever this is found, there is an urgent desire to make ordinary men both better educated and more thoughtful citizens. He saw that education and democratic institutions might well stand or fall together, and thought that if the education of the multitude was necessary to the support of a republic, that it was equally true that a republic was a powerful means of educating the multitude.

Channing looked upon self-culture, the development of all the faculties, as the duty of everyone, both rich and poor; at the same time his discourses were composed for the less educated—for the artisan and the mechanic and the manual labourer. Since it was the humanity in man that he loved, it is not surprising that in adult education he insisted on all-round development. Man was to be educated because he was a man, not because he was making shoes, nails, or pins. Channing showed no complacency with the existing social and industrial system, and saw no divine approval of the existing order, nor did he believe that God had destined the great majority of his children 'to wear out a life of drudgery and unimproving toil, for the benefit of a few'. He saw no reason why the world should be divided into two classes of brain-workers, and 'hands', and that the former should be considered more respect-

able than the latter. 'When I see a clerk', he said, 'spending his days in adding figures, perhaps merely copying, or a teller of a bank counting money, or a merchant selling shoes and hides, I cannot see in these occupations greater respectableness than in making leather, shoes, or furniture.'

In his lectures on Self-Culture, Channing aimed at improving the minds, widening the outlook, and in helping the working classes generally to achieve some kind of liberal education. Since culture meant growth, the practice of self-culture meant the unfolding by any individual of all his powers and capacities. He saw that education, whether moral, religious, intellectual, or practical, was essentially one, and therefore thought that it should be many-sided. It should not only fill the mind with knowledge, but should open the eye to see beauty, especially those beauties of nature which lay all around, but which went unnoticed by thousands.

His realization that men wanted, and would have in some way or other, diversion beyond their work, increased his advocacy of adult education, and he thought that wholesome amusements and excitements were the best defence against drunkenness. 'Man was made to enjoy, as well as to labour,' he wrote. He therefore wished to see the teaching of music made an integral part of every school curriculum, and wished to encourage dancing as an exercise healthful to both body and mind. He wanted it to become an ordinary amusement, a method of entertainment and exercise, for instance, on a wet day, and not confined to the ballroom.

Perhaps Channing was even more of an innovator in choosing Sunday as the day in which his ambitious

programme of self-culture might be carried out. He held that no scripture rules governed the use of this day, though custom had set it aside for public worship, but he realized that for many it had become a dull and fruitless season, and he therefore thought it might be developed in many ways, and the opportunity taken to show people the workings of God in nature or in history and so on. In fact it might be made for the adult what it was for the child in the Sunday school, a day of general instruction.

It is not surprising that Channing's humane and friendly feeling for the working classes made him revered all over the world. In England his books were read by the workers, including numbers of chartists. On receiving a letter of thanks for his lectures on 'Self-Culture' sent by the Mechanics' Institute at Slaithwaite, near Huddersfield, he declared, 'This is honour, this is honour'. After his death a representative of these same working men wrote, 'It will be some relief under your bereavement to know that the good man never dies; he lives and breathes in our cottages; his work on Self-Culture is the text-book of young men of our land; the soul-stirring sentiments of that book are working a moral regeneration in this country, and I feel that Boston has given us another *Franklin*, another guide to the regions of virtue'.

During Channing's life-time Boston was changing from a country town into an industrial city. The native New England population had been increased by immigration, very largely of the Irish, and with them had come all the poverty and degradation that that unhappy people bring with them. But if this poverty was far different from the austere and spartan living of pioneer days, an awakened social conscience felt bound

to resolve the problem with which it was now confronted. Channing had his thoughtful answer to give, and this answer took concrete shape in the work of Joseph Tuckerman, the originator of ministries to the poor, or domestic missions. This movement has not been, and cannot be a cure-all for the ills of modern society, yet it has made, and still makes, a vital contribution, and one which civilization will neglect at its own peril.

To Channing charity was no solution of the problem that lay before them, which could be satisfactorily met only by economic justice, founded on Christian values, which, as has been said, were different from those prevailing around. Neither Channing nor Tuckerman, like St. James before them, denied the uses of charity in giving immediate relief, but Channing was fully aware that charity might become the mother of pauperism. 'It is hard', he wrote, 'to ask alms and retain an erect mind. Dependence breeds servility, and he who has stooped to another cannot be just to himself. The want of self-respect is a preparation for every evil.'

But in approaching the pressing problem of pauperism, neither Channing nor Tuckerman regarded it as one needing but one solution. They realized that it was many-sided, and that different aspects must be dealt with differently. There was destitution which came through misfortune; there was also destitution which came through vice—itself, maybe, the result of either heredity or environment. Scientific study of the different problems would lead to different remedies. But behind it all lay the need of consecrated and skilled service of men devoted to the work, and it was for these that Channing made his appeal. He knew that such men alone could lay fast the foundations of

individual character that could withstand temptation or overcome misfortune, and so produce men and women of mature mentality, able to stand on their own feet, the very salt of the earth, without which no democracy can survive. Spiritual salvation could be achieved only through character, and not automatically by church forms or rites. Needless to say, Channing was in frequent demand as preacher at ordination services, and we may imagine that never did he give the charge to the minister more delightedly than when the young men were ordained to this special service. He warned them that, though they might meet with deception, distrust and prudence were inadequate for the task. 'The only power to oppose to evil', he said, 'is love, strong enduring love, a benevolence which no crime or wretchedness can conquer, and which therefore can conquer all.' 'Nothing but Christ's spirit, that which carried him to his cross, can carry you through your work. Go then with his love; and it will be mightier than the sword of the magistrate, or the armies of monarchs, to conquer evil. It will touch the heart which has hardened itself against all other influences. It will pierce the conscience, which is impregnable against the most vehement rebuke. It will say to the reckless transgressor, in the only language he can understand, that he is not an outcast from his race; and it will reveal to the desponding sufferer a love higher than your own, and bring back his lost faith in God.'

The social problem to Channing was not one of the poor only. It was also one of the wealthy. He intensely disliked, and never failed to say so, a society which allowed wealth to become its distinguishing trait. If he disliked drunkenness among the poor, he still more

disliked gluttony among the rich, and if he pitied the poor labourer because of his incessant life of toil, he also saw the pitifulness of those rich whose vacuous lives made their days one long stretch of boredom.

Whether in tackling the problem of wealth or of poverty, Channing was inspired by his religious ideals. He held that to achieve a Christian society it was necessary for men to change their objectives, and that to make a civilization worthy of its name, virtue must be valued more highly than material wealth, which itself demanded as high an ethical standard in the making as in the spending. Isolated individuals could become a true community only when they realized the obligations entailed upon them by that Christian discipleship which they were so vociferous in claiming as their own.

CHAPTER IV

SLAVERY AND THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

WHEN, in 1834, Channing entered the field as the champion of the slave, abolition had not yet become the sectional question which it did in the middle of the century, but it was during the following years that the parties to the struggle were becoming defined. At the time of the Declaration of Independence slavery was regarded as a dying-out system, but the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1793 created a great new demand for slave labour at the same time as the supply of slaves was curtailed by the abolition of the trade, first by Great Britain in 1807, and then by other countries. But it must be remembered that, throughout Channing's lifetime, since the manufactures of the north were dependent on the cotton grown in slave-worked plantations, the rich citizens of New England, as well as the great plantation owners of the South, believed their prosperity to be dependent on a servile economy. The abolitionists in Boston and other northern cities were a minority often called upon to face danger and even death at the hands of the mob.

Though Channing had met slavery at first hand in Virginia, doubtless under its best character, it was not until after his visit to St. Croix, a Danish-owned island in the West Indies, in 1831, that he became fully alive to its evil. This was also the year in which William Lloyd Garrison opened his campaign. He said it was

his intention to make himself heard. He was heard, and the abolition question was discussed on every platform and around every fireside.

But the two men who did so much to make their contemporaries aware of the great evil of the day were very dissimilar, and had little effect on each other. Garrison, however much he might be convinced of the principles underlying the cause of emancipation, was fully aware of the propagandist effect of producing individual cases of hardship and cruelty. He also knew the use a reformer might make out of a nuisance value. Channing, on the other hand, was anxious to rest his whole argument on first principles, and regretted the doing or saying of anything which would stir up passion. The whole anti-slavery struggle shows Channing's optimistic view of human nature at its weakest. 'In striving to be catholic and magnanimous,' Garrison wrote at a later date, 'he wanted to apologize for those who deserved severe condemnation. He was ever reluctant to believe that men sin wilfully, and, therefore, preferred to attack sin in the abstract, than to deal with it personally. He was ready to condemn the fruit, but not the tree, for by a strange moral discrimination, he could separate the one from the other.' Yet Channing's attitude to the problem is a pleasant contrast to that of Henry Ward Beecher at a later date, who deliberately used his church and pulpit to increase the hatred that had grown up between the two parts of the Union. Channing also failed to distinguish between the penitent and unrepentant sinner. It was not a question of helping the South to get out of an acknowledged awkward situation, but of convincing them of the wrongfulness of slavery. But indeed the South was very far from admitting this wrongfulness,

and it was as late as 1837 that Calhoun enunciated the 'positive good' theory. 'But let me not be understood', he said in the Senate, on the 7th of February of that year, 'as admitting even by implication that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding states is an evil: far otherwise, I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved to be to both.' While this theory was becoming popular in the South, not only in the North, but all over the world there was a great outbreak of the spirit of reform and of philanthropy, of which not the least manifestation was that of the liberation by Great Britain of her West Indian slaves. Looking back, it seems impossible that anyone should have seriously believed that in the new world that was coming to birth, the United States, with its proud claim to be the cradle of liberty, could remain a servile state.

Channing's arguments on paper were impeccable, but in practice his position was untenable, for he utterly failed to realize the mental and spiritual isolation that was growing up in the South. The conditions there were not unlike those in Europe during the last decade. Legislation and intolerance made it absolutely impossible there, as in Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, for the people to be shown the other side of the picture. Preaching to deaf ears is a useless task. Reason no doubt is the best of weapons, but it does entail a receptive mind in the opposing party.

But if Channing's labour was lost, his thought is of interest not only because of its soundness but also because of its similarity with that of Abraham Lincoln a generation later. Neither of them was an abolitionist in the Garrisonian sense, and both wished to convince their opponents rather than to force on their own

solutions. Channing's thoughts on slavery were largely the result of his theological views on God and man. In adult education he had urged that men should be educated because of their humanity; now he pleaded that the slaves must be freed because they were human beings, and slavery was a system which denied them their humanity. He was not arguing from particular cases of awful cruelty, but had in mind the type of patriarchal slavery where the slaves were often treated as pet animals might be. He appreciated the fact that a certain minimum of material welfare was guaranteed, and anxiety for the future removed, but lack of responsibility did not make for adequate human standards. 'Great effort', he wrote, 'from great motives is the best definition of a happy life.'

Like Abraham Lincoln later, he did not consider valid the argument that compared the material condition of the slave with that of the free labourer. The difference between the two lay in the fact that the freeman had hope, and the slave had not. In 1854 Lincoln pointed out that there was no permanent class of hired labourers. 'Twenty-five years ago', he said, 'I was a hired labourer. The hired labourer of yesterday labours on his own account to-day, and will hire others to labour for him to-morrow.'

In 1858 Lincoln declared that it was his belief that the Union could not endure permanently half slave and half free. Twenty years earlier Channing saw the incompatibility of slavery with free institutions. 'How plain is it', Channing had written in 1834 'that no man can love liberty with a true love who has the heart to wrest it from others! Attachment to freedom does not consist in spurning indignantly a yoke prepared for our own necks; for this is done even by the savage and the beast of prey. It is a moral sentiment, an impartial desire and choice, that others as well as ourselves may be protected from every wrong, may be exempted from every unjust restraint.'

Channing's argument against slavery is really unanswerable, as it was based on ethics, and not on expediency. The material welfare of the owner meant nothing to him. 'Slavery upheld for gain is a crime.' 'I know it will be said,' he wrote, '"You would make us poor." Be poor, then, and thank God for your honest poverty. Better be poor than unjust. Better beg than steal. Better live in an alms-house—better die—than trample on a fellow creature and reduce him to a brute for self-gratification. What! Have we yet to learn that "it profits us nothing to gain the whole world, and lose our souls"?'

But it was when Channing came to deal with practical remedies that he appeared at his weakest. Slavery must be abolished, and it must be abolished by the South itself. This was the impossibility. Though, until the time of the Civil War, the statesmen of the North were fighting against the extension of slavery into the new territories, rather than for its abolition in the older states, yet because of the failure to convince the South of the necessity for abolition, the position was all along hopeless. Nevertheless it would have been a happier day for all concerned had the South, in the spirit of Channing, been able to tackle the problem for itself, and the owners have been the liberators.

In making a stand against slavery, Channing was running counter to popular opinion in Boston, including that of his own congregation. Many years after his death, William Lloyd Garrison, who had reason to criticize Channing so much in his lifetime, wrote of

him that 'he moved in a wealthy and an aristocratic circle, or rather was surrounded by those who are the last to sympathize with outcast humanity, or to believe that any good thing can come out of Nazareth. To write and speak on the subject of slavery as he did—unsatisfactory as it was to the abolitionists, who yearned to have him take still higher ground—was, in his position, an act of true heroism and of positive self-sacrifice; and, for a time—extending almost to the hour of his death—cost him the friendship of many whose good opinions, nothing but a sense of duty could induce him to forfeit.'

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

THE name of Channing has often been on Unitarian lips, and to him has been given a high place in the calendar of saints and prophets. Yet it is doubtful if many are at all aware of the work he did or the place he once held among his contemporaries. His name spread far beyond that small eastern sea-board where he spent most of his life, and for years it was a household word throughout the United States, in England, and on the continent of Europe. In 1838, Harriet Martineau wrote in her *Retrospect of Western Travel* that of all the public characters of the United States it was Channing that the English were most interested in. After his death a biography appeared in French, and as recently as 1929 a life of him was published on the Continent.

Channing was, of course, primarily the preacher. Though he was much admired and a devoted member of his family, he does not seem to have enjoyed great personal friendships, and Emerson went so far as to say that he was the most unprofitable private companion. Other witnesses testified that conversation with him tended to become a monologue, but allowed that he could talk for days on the same subject without ever becoming a bore. From Samuel May's reminiscences it is clear that there was no formality in his way of life, and, as a child, May was allowed the run of the Doctor's house, even including the study.

Most of the printed works that have been quoted

here were originally sermons. It is fair to assume that Channing took immense pains in their preparation and that most of them were largely written before being preached. At no period did he limit inspiration to the moment, and criticized those religious societies which did, as they tended to exalt God and to annihilate the creature by striving ' to reduce the soul to silence, to suspend its action, that in its stillness God alone may be heard '. He thought that the door of inspiration would be opened only to him who knocked. ' But inspiration ', he declared, ' does not visit the idle, passive mind. We receive it in the use and faithful use of our powers. You must study. You must work.' ' The fire which is to burn in the pulpit, must be kindled in the study.'

Yet if inspiration was to him, as conversion was also, a life-long process, evolutionary rather than catastrophic, his fame to a large extent rested on his power as a preacher. In 1826 one listener wrote, ' The man was full of fire and his body seemed under some of his tremendous sentences to expand into that of a giant . . . his face was, if anything, more meaning than his words '. ' He could never be reported,' wrote Emerson ' for his eye and voice could not be printed, and his discourses lose their best in losing them.' His style was clear without being particularly distinguished, but occasionally his writings are illumined by a telling phrase or even an epigram.

There is no doubt that he was both read and listened to in the Old World as well as in the New, yet it cannot be claimed for him that he was either a writer or thinker of the first rank. He is not to be compared, for instance, with James Martineau as a philosopher, or with John Hamilton Thom as moralist and preacher.

The answer to the problem of Channing's fame lies largely in the fact that he appeared at the right moment. Theological thought had lagged behind political, as in the next half-century it was to lag behind scientific. Channing harmonized the Gospels with the Declaration of Independence by the simple method of repudiating the articles of the Church and the Westminster Confession. He saw that it was not the Christian religion that was antagonistic to the new ideas, but what his predecessor Priestley would have uncompromisingly described as its corruptions. Orthodoxy of the day rejected Channing's thought, but nevertheless official Christianity has taken much from him. The world can never be grateful enough to men like Channing, who have transcended the limitations of their times, and so prevented contemporary religion from becoming the monopoly of the reactionaries.

But was, we may inquire, Channing's doctrine of human nature, with his claim that men really were the children of God, and his belief in the potential nobility of human nature, but an illusion with no basis in fact whatsoever? There are moments when we look round the world in the middle years of the twentieth century, when the doctrine of the fall of man and of the depravity of his nature seems more in accordance with things as they are than with Channing's optimistic belief. Yet we know that, in spite of the evil wrought upon the world by a few unregenerated men, in spite of the indifference and stupidity of the many that made possible the bringing of the evil, it has needed only the challenge of a great catastrophe to call forth the divine nature in men. Wherever young men have gone forth to face death that others may live, wherever in our towns and cities, and in the towns and cities of other

lands, old people and young, men and women, have met suffering with silent, brave endurance, there Channing's doctrine of human nature has found its vindication.

Where Channing's teaching was most open to criticism, as was pointed out by Garrison, was in his refusal to believe that sin was often intentional. In treating problems abstractly he failed to see that evil as an abstraction mattered little as compared with it when it became incarnate in man. But though there is room for a police force in any constitution, national or international, it does not mean that the standard of human behaviour will always remain as it is to-day. There is no *cliché* so false as that which declares human nature cannot change, or more at variance with the teaching of Christianity, whether orthodox, with its belief in conversion, or Unitarian, with its emphasis on the life-long struggle.

If it must be admitted that Channing's doctrine of human nature stands in need of some apologia, there are other aspects of his teaching which do not.

His break with biblical Christianity may be said to have been carried further almost immediately by Emerson and by Theodore Parker. Channing never came to accept the position of either, yet he was also critical of those who were content to stay where they were, and, what was worse, limit the progress of others. In 1841 he wrote, 'As I grow older, I grieve more and more at the impositions on the human mind, at the machinery by which the few keep down the many. I distrust sectarian influence more and more. I am more detached from a denomination, and strive to feel more my connection with the Universal Church, with all good and holy men. I am little of a Unitarian, have

little sympathy with the system of Priestley and Belsham, and stand aloof from all but those who strive and pray for clearer light, who look for a purer and more effectual manifestation of Christian truth.' His desire was that his own religious faith should not become stereotyped into another orthodoxy.

This attitude to faith, that it was not simply a coherent body of truths which once for all had been delivered to the saints, was not new. The belief that the Lord had yet more light to break forth from his Holy Word, at least in the restricted sense of the Scriptures, went back to the Reformation. It has always been an integral part of the Unitarian tradition. Recently Messrs. Miller and Johnson have said, 'If the line of development from Puritanism tends in one direction to frontier revivalism and evangelicalism, another line leads as directly to a more philosophical, critical, and even sceptical view. Unitarianism is as much the child of Puritanism as Methodism.' [1] From the petrifying hand of authoritarianism, whether unitarian or trinitarian, Channing wished to keep clear.

But Unitarianism, under Channing's guidance, was never allowed to become merely a speculative religion. It is not claimed that anything new originated with him, for all through the eighteenth century the liberal in religion had pointed out that faith without works was dead. The development of revivalism, the belief that conversion was all-important, sometimes led to an emotional religion absolutely separated from the idea of the Good Life, while Roman Catholic piety tended (as it frequently still does) to show its ardour in the externality of religious rites, demanding virtue neither

[1] Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, p. 4.

in public nor private life. It is not contended here that either orthodox protestantism or catholicism is incapable of producing good men or women. There are saints in all denominations and in none. What is contended is that domestic, civic, and national virtues are not essential to the virtue of a good orthodox protestant or catholic, *qua* orthodox protestant or catholic. The position of the Unitarian is different. This was not new in Channing. It existed in England in the eighteenth century, and the late Dr. Powicke, himself a Congregationalist, has written that the orthodox had come to believe that good works 'were not necessary for their own salvation, and to preach them as an element of the Gospel was the work of an unbeliever. Many of the Presbyterians [1] (called Arians) had come to realize that if the Church preached a faith which had no vital relation to moral righteousness it was dead. They said this, preached it, wrote it; and had the distinction of being almost the only body of people in their day who witnessed, to the Pharisee no less than to the Publican, to the demand of Christ for repentance and "a godly, righteous, and sober life." But the Pharisee would not admit them to be Christian people. That they preached, and laid stress on, good works or clean living as something essential, was a sure sign that they were Arians.' In America also, liberal theology had laid emphasis on practical virtue, and, thanks to Channing, continued and spread to other denominations. When in 1815 old John Adams was given a copy of some of Channing's writings, he said he had been familiar with the teaching since, sixty-four years ago, he had listened to Lemuel Briant preaching the same at Braintree. Many years after

[1] Presbyterian in this sense is the equivalent of Unitarian.

Channing's death, at a dinner of Harvard graduates, President Eliot complained that though he had heard in the College chapel many preachers of many denominations, 'the preaching was, after all, rather monotonous, because they all preached Channing. Phillips Brooks', Eliot continued, 'spoke after me and said: "The President is right in thinking our present preaching monotonous, and the reason he gives for this monotony is correct; we all do preach Channing."'

Perhaps it is possible to see Channing's influence more clearly if it is followed in one direction particularly. His effect on American thought and practice was profound, but to an English reader an English example may be the more telling. We have already quoted from John Hamilton Thom's address at the celebrations at the centenary of Channing's birth. On the same occasion he also said:—

'In a word, what did Channing do for us? He lifted Religion out of the region of controversy; out of the region of criticism; out of a wrangle of texts and an arithmetical computation of on which side the balance lay; out of polemics into spiritual discernment; out of the disputable and limited letter to the self-manifesting and inexhaustible light of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ. He, more than any man, did for as many of us as were groping amid beggarly elements what the Divine Teacher desired to do for the Jews of his day; "Ye search the Scriptures, and in them ye think ye have eternal life—but they are they that testify of *Me*, and ye will not come to Me, to have the life direct." This is what Channing did for the Church to which he belonged, and for all who would hear his voice. He rose from the dead word to living

Persons. He emancipated us from external and traditional methods, from the cerements of the Creeds that embalmed bodies of divinity from which the life was gone, to be taught afresh by the Father of Spirits, and by his living Word.'

But if Thom was correct in claiming that Channing had set him and his generation free, it was also largely because of Channing that they used this freedom in a definite way. As Channing had taught that it was not trembling under his preaching that he wished to see, 'but cheerful, vigorous, beneficent action of each for all', so also did his English disciples teach. To the young people of his congregation Thom once said, 'You have knowledge, you have culture, you have position, you have wealth—and I know that you have many invitations and quickening impulses from God. To you ere long it will belong to uphold or to let fall, to illustrate or to tarnish, the cause of Christian truth and spiritual freedom in this community; on you will come the heritage of your fathers, in these happier times when you are asked only to adorn it by your lives, and by your spirit of religious enterprise and love to commend it to every man's conscience in the sight of God.' It may be claimed for these young people of the year 1854 that they took their teacher's words to heart and applied them. Consequently there arose a generation which gave itself to civic duty, to philanthropy, and last, but by no means least, applied these principles to business and to earning that money which was to be so needed when a William Rathbone invented District Nursing or a Charles Beard laid the foundations of a university. Similar work was done in the cities of two continents. If there is one great lesson that the twentieth century might learn from Channing,

it is that Christianity and Christian conduct must be carried into every sphere of life. It means that men and women imbued with its principles should play an active part in the public life of their country and of their cities. This is what happened in the nineteenth century among the devoted band of Channing's disciples.

Writing of these Unitarians, O. B. Frothingham once said, 'Integrity was their distinction from highest to lowest', and he reported how once a woman had said to him, 'A unitarian church to you merely means one more name on your calendar. To the people in this town it means better books, better music, better sewerage, better health, better life, less drunkenness, more purity and better government.' They had tried to make the dream of a richer and more abundant life an actuality.

But this externality was by no means all, and in fact was dependent on the inner vision. Though there are places in his writings where Channing shows fear that mysticism might become pantheism, yet from a quotation in an earlier chapter his acknowledgement of leanings in that direction has been shown. He saw that though no revelation could be contrary to reason, reason was at the last swallowed up in direct experience, and that the apprehension of God was direct, and not a process open to explanation. So he wrote in 1828, 'That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God is conceived by us only through consciousness, through the knowledge of ourselves.' Later, in 1841, he declared that 'We must start in religion from our own souls. In these is the fountain of all divine truth.' When first he had heard the call to the ministry, Channing had set before him as guide Fénelon's

description of the Christian minister, but when, in 1829, he reviewed a selection from the works of that writer for the *Christian Examiner*, he showed that he parted company from mysticism of that type by his refusal to accept ' self-crucifixion ' as a rightful means towards the end, especially if it meant the denial of the mind, which was ' akin to that intellectual energy which gave birth to nature '. He thought that the Roman Catholic church had developed this form of mysticism because in it human minds had been cut off from ' free, healthful inquiry ', and ' had sought liberty in this vague contemplation of the Infinite '. He would have had no sympathy with the mechanical exercises intended to induce a feeling of union with God apart from all ethical meaning, to which so much of mysticism seems to have been degraded in seventeenth-century France, as has recently been shown by Mr. Aldous Huxley in the life of François Leclerc du Tremblay.[1]

But there is an obvious affinity between Channing and the Cambridge platonists, with one of whom at least, Henry More, he was well acquainted, as there is also with Wordsworth. Never could Channing have looked upon the world of nature and believed it evil, but he saw in it a manifestation of divinity, though in less degree than in humanity. ' I would have you see God in the awful mountain, the tranquil valley '; he once said, ' but more, much more in the clear judgment, the moral energy, the pious gratitude, the immortal hope of a good man.'

There is something so gentle about Channing's personal religion, something so harmonious and natural, so free from anything exotic, that perhaps one

[1] *Grey Eminence.*

hesitates to use the word mysticism in connection with him at all. Perhaps it seems a word a little out of place in the Unitarian movement where religion has been characterized by an inward restraint. Yet we are told that when the German professor Tholuck met a young American who avowed himself a Unitarian, he said, ' Ah, the Unitarians, they are mystics '. If it be accepted that ' mysticism, according to its historical and psychological definitions, is the direct intuition or experience of God ',[1] then there is a place among the mystics for Channing and for numbers of his followers. Indeed, the practicality of their religion, that faithfulness in everyday life to the vision, might well be produced as the guarantee of the genuineness of their religious experience. Though this was not a new development in Channing, it is definitely not a strain associated with the earlier English Unitarians, like Priestley and Belsham, but, very largely owing to Channing, a deep personal religion grew up alongside a scholarly intellectual faith and the practice of service to the community.

Though Channing's own writings have fallen into oblivion from which they are not likely to be rescued, it is good that he should be remembered. He made a vital contribution to the welfare of his generation, and left behind a tradition without which the spiritual life of his own, as also of other denominations, would be the poorer. The two strains of inner devotion and external well-doing cannot be separated. We owe much to Channing that, though he never failed to tend the inner flame, he was never afraid that it would be blown out in the market-place, and so he left behind him a

[1] E. Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, p. 9.

tradition that has sought to harmonize intellectuality with spirituality, devotion and piety with practical good works.

> 'Peace is more strong than war, and gentleness,
> Where force were vain, makes conquest o'er the wave:
> And love lives on and hath a power to bless,
> When they who loved are hidden in the grave.'[1]

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[1] J. R. Lowell, *Elegy on the Death of Dr. Channing.*