EDWARD CHANNING’S WRITING REVOLUTION: COMPOSITION PREHISTORY AT HARVARD, 1819-1851

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EDWARD CHANNING’S WRITING REVOLUTION: COMPOSITION PREHISTORY AT HARVARD, 1819-1851

BY

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COMPOSITION PREHISTORY AT HARVARD,
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4. GIVEN THE MULTIPLICITY OF BOOKS ........................................................................... 74
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Deciding to conduct archival research is a bit like volunteering to be haunted. The specters you begin to see everywhere are harmless – helpful even. But at their best they arebeguiling to the point of distraction, and at their worst they are overwhelming to the point of exhaustion. This dissertation could not have been completed successfully without the guidance and support of the people who helped me sort out these noisy shadows, and those who kept me oriented to the present.

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My dissertation, building on the work of John Brereton, Robert Connors, and others returns to the Harvard University Archives to reconstruct the Harvard rhetoric program under the leadership of Edward Tyrrel Channing from 1819 to 1851. During that time, coincident with the industrial revolution, U.S. publishers experienced a period of rapid growth as the cost of production for books, newspapers, and magazines dropped, and demand for print grew among a nascent middle class. Against that backdrop, and in spite of considerable resistance, Channing engineered a substantial shift at Harvard from an oratory-based curriculum to a writing-based one, just as the orientation of public discourse was beginning to shift to the page. From a wide range of documents which have not been closely examined in previous histories, I argue that Channing viewed writing as primarily a modern, technologically-driven, social and economic act. Eschewing the classical pedagogies of imitation espoused by his predecessors, he pushed his students to be original thinkers in a newly information saturated market, to beware of influence, and to view writing as the manufacture of valuable products. This dissertation brings Channing (and one of his students) out of the shadows of composition prehistory, and in doing so it makes two important contributions to our understanding of the field’s past. First, it illuminates how changes in the machinery and economics of print influenced early writing pedagogies. Second,
by revealing that formal writing instruction in American colleges began decades earlier than is typically acknowledged, it argues against the periodization that has often blinded scholars to early eras of composition’s history.
1. Introduction: The Origin Myth

In the beginning, there was English A.

That, at any rate, is where composition’s creation myth typically begins. Because it is one of the fires around which we all frequently gather, I will relate it again here, but I’ll be brief. In the wake of the Civil War, American colleges endured a crucible of external social and economic pressures that transformed them into recognizably modern universities. In 1862, the Morrill Act enticed states to erect colleges with agricultural and mechanical instruction as part of their curricula. Under the influence of German university graduates, colleges were gradually transforming into research institutions where students could elect their course of study. A rapidly expanding middle class had the resources and connections to send their children to schools that would have been entirely out of reach to them just a decade before. More people enrolled at more universities to study more new subjects than ever before. At Harvard, as elsewhere, the skyrocketing enrollment of new students precipitated the first great literacy crisis in American education. Johnny couldn’t write. In response, Harvard, then under the leadership of the German educated Charles William Eliot, instituted a written entrance exam in 1874 which more than half of their applicants subsequently failed. A few years later, Harvard introduced English A, the required freshmen writing class which was imitated by colleges and universities across the country. Over the following half century or so, the staff of those courses developed pedagogical expertise, theoretical models, and a professional apparatus that was finally formalized in the late twentieth century into Composition studies.¹

There is nothing wrong with that story, and I don’t really wish to challenge its importance. Every variation on it that I have seen has been true in almost every particular, and there is no denying the clearly traceable cause-effect relationship from that moment to this one. It
also happens to do many of the things that good origin myths have always done: it establishes an initial *raison d’être*, empowers us with a sense of tradition, and always seems to speak to the current moment.² For most histories of the field, English A and the conditions leading up to its creation are a moment of historical division, a clear and convenient starting point after which came composition studies and before which (so the story goes) you find mostly just rhetorical training in the classical and belletristic modes, composition’s prehistory.

I want to begin my work by suggesting that creation myths, no matter how true and powerful, can inadvertently act as blinders. There is no book before Genesis; cosmologists can’t measure the singularity. Composition, though, has a prehistory, decades of pedagogical and theoretical development that has gone largely unnoticed, occurring during a period of history, the first half of the nineteenth century, when the modern book and the modern writer were first coming into existence. There are valuable stories hiding in that prehistory, ones just as powerful and complicated and relevant to today as the history of English A. What’s more, we have the tools to study that prehistory, vast and untapped archives of student essays, administrative reports, lecture notes, curricula plans, reading lists, newspaper articles, and biographical sketches. Very little of this material has ever been examined closely or described in prior archival histories of the field.

In this dissertation, I tap into these archives to relate just one untold story from composition’s prehistory, that of the Harvard rhetoric program under the direction of Edward Tyrrel Channing, from 1819 to 1852. Channing is something of a cypher in current histories, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-him figure hovering just outside the margins of composition scholarship. He warrants a sentence, but no more, in the works of Connors, Crowley, Berlin, and a few others, where he is usually portrayed as an affable but obsolete figure representing,
unsurprisingly, some combination of eighteenth century Scottish belletrism and even older classical traditions. When he appears, it is often as a foil against which can be set the rise of composition in the modern university. As I will show in more detail in Chapter 3, however, his contemporaries and former students portray him as the man who set the stage for the writing program that followed, the mentor of many of the most lastingly original American voices of the nineteenth century, and the most dedicated and accomplished writing instructor of his era.

And that era was one of profound technological change, a kind of analog information revolution. Coincident with the Industrial Revolution, U.S. publishers experienced, in the first half of the century, a period of rapid growth as the cost of production for books, newspapers, and magazines dropped and demand for affordable reading material grew apace. In response to that significant technological and literary moment, and against considerable resistance, Channing reoriented Harvard oratory courses to place more emphasis on a writing curriculum which asked students to reflect on the challenges of composing in an information-rich world. He created a composition course which was, in a few important ways, recognizably modern – and he did so more than a half century before the first required composition course. Contemporaries appear to have recognized that pedagogical work as significant, though Channing is now all but ignored, as his era came to fall just outside the borders of our recognized history.

That, in brief, is the history I reclaim in this project, the conditions of one of the earliest coherent college writing curricula on American soil, and a few of the technological changes that drove its development. As I reconstructed that story, I was primarily guided by three research questions:

1. What, exactly, were Edward Channing’s contributions to composition as it came into existence in the early nineteenth century at Harvard?
2. What change, if any, did the growing market for ideas and for print have on writing instruction?

3. How did Channing understand and enact his obligation to cultivate unique and original American voices among his students?

To answer those questions, each of the upcoming chapters presents a different set of documents from the Harvard University Archives, spanning from 1804, when Channing was a student at Harvard, until his retirement in 1851. Chapter 2 presents newspaper clippings and official records related to the founding of the Boylston Chair, which Channing held for 32 years. They illustrate the subordinate place occupied by writing studies at turn-of-the-century Harvard, and some of the intense controversy surrounding the appointment of Channing, an ardent supporter of the current literary scene, to a prestigious rhetoric chair. In Chapter 3, I present some of Channing’s lectures alongside a small cache of yearly reports to the college president, which show the early challenges of introducing more writing practice into the Harvard curriculum. Student writing occupies center stage in Chapter 4, where I profile a single student, Henry Burroughs, using the themes he composed as a window on the writing culture at Harvard during this time.

First, though, some context, a sketch of what we know before I strike out into abandoned territory. In this introduction, I point to a few of the foundational histories of the field, to show that our understanding of the nineteenth century has really been all about the late nineteenth century. I suggest that, by drawing a rather artificial line at Harvard in 1874, historians have largely ignored or misrepresented the early half of that century. Some account of major events from that time will show that it was a complex and technologically-focused era, a rich moment for historians of composition to explore more fully. Finally, I describe the Harvard University
Archives, what I found there, and how I have made sense of them. In short, I begin with an attempt to see and then see past the blinders of the English A creation myth, which has too often rendered stories like Channing’s invisible.

**Literature Review: The Lost Half-Century**

I am far from the first historian to point to a curious gap in our understanding of the nineteenth century. Much of Robert J. Connors’ work was motivated by the same observation. In the introduction to *Composition-Rhetoric*, he describes correspondence between himself, Patricia Bizzell, and Bruce Herzberg as the latter two were compiling their now-ubiquitous anthology of rhetorical history. Connors took umbrage, it seems, at the short shrift *The Rhetorical Tradition* gave (and still gives) to the nineteenth century, as though nothing particularly worth noticing happened during that time. In a letter to them, he wrote, a touch sardonically:

[You claim that] For rhetoric, there was no nineteenth century. There were, of course, incredibly important nineteenth centuries for chemistry, history, biology, philosophy, psychology, literature, sociology, mathematics, philology – in fact, every other modern discipline was formed by the nineteenth century. But not rhetoric. (2)

Much of Connors’ subsequent work was dedicated to clearing away those cobwebs, arguing that too much of nineteenth century rhetorical theory had been overlooked because much of it had shifted to the page. He coins the term composition-rhetoric in an effort to reclaim nineteenth century rhetoric, and to more accurately describe a uniquely American rhetorical tradition that arose “to try to inform an ever increasing demand for literacy skills for the professional and managerial classes” (4). In short, he (accurately) identifies that nineteenth century education was characterized by a gradually increasing emphasis on the rhetoric of written discourse, which was beginning to displace the civic, political, and educational roles once exclusively occupied by oratorical modes.
From the standpoint of rhetorical history, then, there appears to be a broad, if somewhat vague, consensus that the bulk of the 19th century was a period of profound redefinition: as the orientation of public discourse transitioned to print, how people understood the value of their ideas changed as well. Words, written words at least, had literal value, which put new demands on the producers of them. This shift has been explored - in broad strokes - by historians like Connors and Rebecca Moore Howard. Howard, for instance, in *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*, depicts the entire history of Western authorship as a pendulum swinging between the two poles of imitation and originality. At some points in history, prevailing theories of invention depicted the author as primarily a compiler and steward of received knowledge; in some cultures, particularly medieval Christian ones, the idea that an author might contribute new knowledge to the world was seen not only as strange, but possibly scandalous. At other historical moments (the Roman Empire and the Enlightenment, for example), the originary author was in the ascendant.

The most recent swing, from imitation to originality, is the most important in her narrative, as it ushered in new attitudes toward writers who borrow the words of others. Previously, whether imitation or originality was ascendant, both had always been valued as legitimate modes of writing, imitators and originators were both always seen as authors. But the most recent shift introduced a new binary between the real author (the inspired, autonomous genius) and the transgressive author (the collaborator or the plagiarist). For Howard, this explains why patch-writing, a form of imitation promoted as a valuable pedagogical tool at least as far back as Quintilian, has been mislabeled as academic dishonesty, effectively cutting off modern students from a practice which would aid them as they attempt to learn and adopt the commonplaces of academic discourse. In the U.S., this shift happened gradually throughout the
19th century. However, that is that pendulum swing which Howard provides the least detail about. Though she highlights that the “transgressive author” who relies heavily on the influence of others is a product of this time, she stops short of speculating about what underlying social changes may have given rise to this new attitude.

Connors frequently alludes to similar shifts in the notional responsibilities of authorship in the nineteenth century. In “Invention and Assignments” he illustrates how writing assignments, specifically student themes, evolved over the course of the nineteenth century. What has been picked up from Connors history, when it’s picked up at all, is the narrative it presents of the rise of the personal narrative in composition classrooms. While that is certainly a part of the story, the more significant portion of his history describes how writing assignments evolved from being heavily reliant on students’ memories and notebooks to assignments in which students relied on their observations of the world. That the personal essay arose out of this moment is tangential effect – the larger narrative is, like Howard’s, that of a pendulum swing toward originality. Speaking of writing pedagogy in the early nineteenth century, he says that “English composition was devoted, as rhetoric had been to teaching the received ways of handling public topics by deploying gleamed knowledge mixed with commonly held beliefs” (303). In other words, composition was a matter of navigating and assembling prose from the public commons of knowledge, a movement he calls “The Decline of Invention.” So there is further history hidden between the lines of Connors’ work. Changing assignments were not solely because new populations of students entered the university. Both the new students and the new assignments are effects of a common root cause: a fundamental change in U.S. attitudes toward writing and authorship.
This seems, to me, like a strange oversight: while, from the standpoint of broad rhetorical movements, historians agree that there were major shifts in writing culture occurring throughout the nineteenth century, but when it comes to actual instruction in writing, the pedagogies adopted as this shift was occurring, we know very little prior to 1875. Take, for example, the rest of Connors’ *Composition-Rhetoric* which, while critiquing the lack of attention given to the nineteenth century, actually tends to skew heavily in favor of the latter half of the century. Or rather, it may be more accurate to say that he tends to tell narratives of development, in which the mores and philosophies of the early century gradually give way to those of the later. In “Gender Influences,” the increasing presence of women in higher education helped to encourage a shift from masculine and agonistic recitation to marginally more polite and feminine written assignments.  

In *Shaping Tools: Textbooks and the Development of Composition-Rhetoric*, question-answer style rhetorical treatises give way, in the latter century, to readers and handbooks for underprepared students. Predictably, those developments all tend to happen late-century, right around the time of English A, the convenient division point which separates a restrictive past from a comparatively more progressive era. In one typical characterization of this progress narrative, he writes that "the idea of writing interestingly or originally had always been subordinated before 1880 to the idea of writing correctly and elegantly" (317). The end result is that Connors' work does not so much recover the 19th century as it does the *late* 19th century.

That emphasis is not Connors' alone; it is endemic to field histories. The Bedford Bibliography’s *A Brief History of Rhetoric and Composition*, after its section on 18th century Scottish rhetoricians like George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whately, covers all of the next 50 years in just three sentences referring to a single theorist:
In 1806 Harvard college established the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory and became, thereafter, the dominant influence on the development of rhetoric at other American colleges. Edward T. Channing, who held the chair for thirty-two years (1819-1851), continued the Scottish emphasis on belletristic taste and the psychology of persuasion but shifted the emphasis in practice from speaking to writing and increased attention to literary exempla. From the literary models, Channing derived rules for correct grammar, style, and organization, which were taught more and more prescriptively as the century went on. (4)

In other words, the first half of the 19th century was little more than a continuation of the previous one, a period of dull belletrism which was only continued after Channing by Francis Child. But then English A appears, and Barrett Wendell's lectures, published in the 1890s, help spread the Harvard composition model across the country.

Further examples abound, and not all see the origin story as a propitious turning point. James Berlin, for instance, is less sanguine than Connors about where the 19th century ends up, but makes similar assumptions about the early century being a period of backward-gazing. In *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*, the noble if thoroughly outmoded classical traditions, represented by founding Boylston chair John Quincy Adams, are quickly superseded by the mechanistic eighteenth century Scottish tradition, which reigns absolute until the 1860s. It is only in the latter half of the century that the real drama unfolds as written composition begins to replace oratory in American colleges, and current-traditional rhetoric develops to guide the new pedagogy of composition. A few brave Romantics, like Emerson and Fred Newton Scott, try to stand up to this juggernaut but are either ignored or defeated, and the century ends with the current-traditionalists in charge, a pedagogical faction symbolized most
powerfully by the nascent Harvard composition program. Likewise, for Sharon Crowley, perhaps more than any other historian, English A is at the very heart of composition’s disciplinary identity, the foundation of a fraught relationship with the wider field of English, and a convenient starting point for her history in particular, as it aims to challenge the field’s reliance on that required first-year writing class. For her, as for so many others, the past is prelude. Almost every history of composition, while generally acknowledging large-scale cultural and rhetorical changes, generally ignores entirely or mischaracterizes through lack of attention almost every development in writing pedagogy before 1874.

No work, however, has been more influential in promoting the English A origin story and the late-century emphasis stemming from it than John Brereton’s documentary history, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925*. A ubiquitous resource for historians, and the largest collection of primary documents related to composition’s early history, Brereton’s collection has, to a great extent, set the terms of our understanding of our own history. The introduction is, in part, a justification for his starting point, arguing that the birth of composition is inseparable from the rise of the modern university system in the latter half of the century. There was, he suggests, no place for composition and very little writing guidance at all in the old American college system:

Though the old college stressed language study, English rarely had an official presence in the curriculum. A few institutions made provision for a professor of English or belles lettres. . . but most colleges in 1860 had no course in composition or in English literature. By 1900, on the other hand, every college had an array of composition and English courses. What happened? (4)
What happened, apparently, was more or less the narrative I opened this chapter with. American graduates from German universities came home and introduced electives, specialization, and a dominant research ethic at their institutions (Charles Eliot and Francis Child stand out as influential in Harvard’s transition). Simultaneously, student enrollments rose, bringing new, less traditionally prepared populations into the classroom. In this dynamic environment, some coherent pedagogy of composition was needed to meet the demands of preparing students to write for the rigorous demands of a new form of education. Composition, Brereton writes, “took on the special characteristics it did because of the way the new university was formed. . . . All of these factors were to shatter traditional rhetoric and to aid in the emergence of modern composition” (5). First there was traditional rhetoric, then came English A, and there was composition.

Brereton identifies one additional factor spurring that change, however, one that lurks on the margins of Connors’ and Berlin’s histories as well: technological innovation. In fact, he foregrounds technological and mechanical progress as a driver of nineteenth-century educational reform. The very first words of his introduction are these:

The composition course as we know it today, like the university that teaches it, is a product of late-nineteenth-century America. Both began life in the 1870s, in the age of invention that saw the birth of the hydraulic elevator, the electric light, the telephone, and the phonograph (3).

The assumption of this narrative, and many others about the origin of composition studies, is that rhetorical training was in danger of becoming obsolete to a rapidly evolving industrialized society. In the new university of the late century, it was swept away by a new, utilitarian writing course, more attuned to the times.
This, I think, is the crux of the story, and one that has not yet been fully explored. To paraphrase Connors, the nineteenth century was incredibly important for virtually every field imaginable, including rhetoric, as the country underwent a swift and dramatic intellectual and technological upheaval. New technologies without doubt would have had a direct impact both on how people wrote and on the value that society placed on writing versus traditional rhetoric. It would have been surpassing strange indeed if those changes had not managed to seep their way into classrooms before 1875. Pull just a little on that thread, on the relationship between technological innovation and composition instruction, and the English A creation myth begins to unravel. Follow that thread, and it leads you backwards, into composition’s unheeded prehistory, the lost half-century.

**Historical Context: Industrialized Writing in Composition’s Prehistory**

Typically, historians date the Industrial Revolution in the United States to between 1800 and 1840, followed by a secondary, steam-driven revolution that ended around 1870. If English A arose in part to meet the needs of a technologically advancing and industrialized society, then it arrived shockingly late to the scene, well after many of the most dramatic changes to American life had already been effected. According to U.S. census records, between 1800 and 1820, the population of the United States almost doubled, and it continued doubling every twenty years almost until the end of the century, from 5 million people to 76 million (United States, Department of Commerce). At the same time, the country was shifting from a largely agricultural economy to one that was split far more evenly between agriculture, industry, and services. In the United States, many of the greatest gains were made in textile manufacturing, steam transportation, and the invention and implementation of interchangeable parts. By 1875, the social and economic structure of the entire country would have been entirely unrecognizable to someone living just 50 years earlier. At the start of the century, the United States was a brand
new country – small, agriculturally driven, and not at all certain of its place in the world. By 1875, it was the world’s leading industrial nation.

The larger economic impacts of the Industrial Revolution, its impacts on agriculture, manufacturing, and quality of life, are very well covered by historians, and they are important here mainly as a kind of backdrop. What has been somewhat less well covered is the equally dramatic rise of the U.S. printing and publishing industry, which saw most of its greatest gains in the early half of the century. Several historians have referred to the beginning of the nineteenth century as the birth of the modern book. While American publishers were producing around 600 new titles per year in 1800, they were producing 6000 by the end of the century. The US publishing industry grew from the 8th biggest industry in the country to the third. The growth of newspapers and periodicals was even sharper, from around 100 in print at the turn of the century to around 1200 by 1835 (Gross). That expansion was driven both by increased demand for print and by the industry’s growing ability to meet those demands quickly and cheaply. In short, for the first time in history, writing and publishing became big business on a national scale. Texts became marketable commodities, which is one of the reasons Howard notes a shift toward originality, as that quality became a way of ensuring payment for one’s ideas. In short, writing became a valuable economic skill even outside of the educated elite classes, a vital part of one’s ability to participate in civic and cultural life.

At least at the outset, however, the nineteenth century did not appear to be lining up as a golden age for American writers. It was, in fact, one of the most difficult eras for writers to receive recognition or compensation for their work. Though copyright laws in our country date back to the first drafts of the Constitution itself, there were no international copyright agreements at all until the Berne convention in 1886. Which means that, throughout much of the nineteenth
century, U.S. publishers were under no obligation to pay foreign authors for the right to reproduce their work. Because of this, books by foreign authors were often much cheaper than those of American authors, whose works were protected by strict U.S. copyright laws. American authors therefore had a hard time getting established, competing as they were with cheaper books written by already more highly respected British authors. All of which means that the early U.S. publishing industry was founded on a sort of gleeful and legally sanctioned literary piracy.

Thomas Mallon, in a history of plagiarism and literary theft, relates stories about printers in Boston waiting at the docks because a ship was due to arrive with a proof of a popular author’s new work. Whichever printer got his hand on it first would have copies on the shelves within a few hours. However, Mallon also warns as that it would be tempting, though anachronistic, to read that situation through the modern lens of textual ownership. At the outset of the century, authors, printers, and readers still existed in the pre-industrialized culture where texts and ideas were largely seen as common property. Readerships were relatively small, as were most people’s pools of literary or other texts to draw inspiration from.

Those conditions, however, as with everything else in this century, were changing rapidly. It’s natural that with a growing middle class, the nationwide demand for books and periodicals would skyrocket. Additionally, new types of texts were being demanded by a greater variety of readers who had leisure time to fill. Literary historian Michael Winship, for instance, has attributed part of the increased demand for books to the expansion of the railway: as people began to embark on longer journeys across country, they needed more affordable and more entertaining reading to pass the time. Meanwhile, the cost of producing books plummeted, leaving printers able and eager to meet the growing demand for print. Paper was made by hand until around 1800, when new mass production methods made it cheaper and easier to produce,
and in 1820 publishers began replacing expensive leather bindings with simple cloth ones. By the 1840s, paperbacks were common. These innovations meant that the cost of books plummeted before and during the 1840s, just when cheap series prints for the masses became popular. For a long while, most of that demand was met by pirated copies of British authors, which was both a legally and culturally sanctioned practice. Often those texts were altered and “Americanized” before reprinting, as happened with early editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* when it was reprinted by Ticknor and Fields printers of Boston.⁴

But as text production became profitable, so did much stronger ideas about the cultural value of authorship. Prominent cultural leaders and the reading public began to cry out for more original American voices, so American authors found they had a platform to start pushing for more copyright protections for both themselves and for foreign authors, leading to several decades of ever-expanding legal guarantees for authors. The most successful early American writers got their start writing for periodicals and newspapers, or by giving public lectures. Both the American short story tradition and the celebrity writer are products of this era. Twain and Emerson made more on the lecture circuit than from their books. Writers, and particularly American writers, became recognized public figures who made a living from writing and who were vigorous promoters of the idea that their works were original, American, and therefore valuable.⁵ Within a few short decades, the U.S. had undergone a cultural shift with regard to how people viewed, interacted with, and even created texts – from a culture who shared, reproduced, and largely held a small pool of important texts as common property, to a culture of text consumers and producers who saw value in their own ideas, and increasingly took for granted their expanding access to the technologies of textual reproduction and dissemination.
The effect of that shift in thinking on writing instruction, as it was occurring, has been very little studied, yet Harvard College sat in the very center, geographically and philosophically, of that publishing whirlwind. In 1780, the Massachusetts State Constitution charged Harvard with doing all in its power to promote “the interest of the republic of letters.” The college had always played an important role in providing civic and moral training to the wealthy and influential leaders of the colonies. In the fledgling nation, it was also tasked with being a site of cultural innovation, of training original voices for a uniquely American literary culture. That the print revolution directly impacted how Harvard went about fulfilling that charge can be neatly illustrated by two lists of books the faculty recommended to their students. In 1814, the college published a short catalogue of titles that freshmen were allowed to borrow from the library. Most of the titles were meant to supplement classroom study, organized into categories like: “Works Subsidiary to the reading of the ancient Classics and the learning of the Greek and Latin Languages,” “Mathematics,” and “Religious Writers.” But there is also a section titled “Belles Lettres and Miscellany” intended as suggestions for extracurricular reading. Included here are all of the leading Georgian writers of British belles lettres - Addison, Dryden, Johnson, Pope – the kinds of older works that were already in wide circulation in the reprint-centric American market. The only fiction recommended were the works of Maria Edgeworth, a popular British author noted for her extremely morally and socially didactic novels.

Eighteen years later, in 1832, professor Edward Everett prepared a new list of “Books Recommended to be Read by Students while at the University.” The first half of the list includes categories that closely mirror those used in 1814. And the books in the latter half, the extracurricular suggestions, include many of the same writers as well, but Everett innovated by adding two new categories. The first, United States History, expresses the burgeoning
nationalism of the age. The second, “Works of Fancy &c,” endorses a long list of modern novelists and poets, including Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and Robert Burns. Under Everett’s tutelage Harvard students could and would keep up with the times, they would participate in the burgeoning republic of letters. The list of titles checked out by the class of 1837 (which included Henry David Thoreau), shows that the students voluntarily sought out almost every writer on Everett’s list.

Moreover, under Channing’s tutelage, they would be encouraged to participate through writing of their own. When he took up a position as the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory, the same year that the first cloth book covers hit the market, by all accounts he took his responsibility to the republic of letters seriously, believing that skillful writing had become a powerful civic and intellectual tool his students required. He says, in one of his annual lectures to the seniors:

A man who writes much and with consideration is doing himself an incalculable good in respect to every other study. Thus what to one seems absolute drudgery and to another an amusement or refinement, may be made a means of forming good intellectual habits generally, and a generous preparation for the varied calls of life. (210)

What he describes is writing as a general intellectual process, writing to learn, a surprising orientation that I can find no place for in the histories that have so far been told of this era.

Channing held his position for 32 years, especially remarkable during a time when instructors and tutors routinely took on several different subjects during their careers. Those 32 years, from 1819-1852, coincide almost perfectly with the most chaotic decades of the American print revolution, and Harvard, while often resistant to those changes, was by no means immune. It is Channing’s story, his importance to composition studies and his pedagogy of student writing
during this exciting and frenzied time, that I wish to recover from composition prehistory. I argue that his previously scanty depictions as an outmoded and grammar-obsessed belletrist are wildly mistaken. During his time at Harvard, he transformed the primarily oratorical training that preceded him into a composition-heavy curriculum that regularly engaged students, through writing, with many of the important issues of their time. Most importantly, he challenged students to think about how to effectively navigate the information-rich world around them, and how to find an original voice with which they might contribute to it.

The Archives

In Archival Research In Composition Studies: Re-Imagining the Historian’s Role, Kelly Ritter makes a persuasive case for Composition historians to begin practicing archival ethnography, a term she borrows from library science. She promotes this research method as a means of combating composition’s tendency to accept singular texts, master narratives of events that become the authoritative source for our history – the English A creation myth, for instance. The problem, for Ritter, is our attachment to historical narrative. History is never as simple as the stories we tell about it: broad social histories contradict textbooks which contradict student writing which contradicts concurrent events in other fields. How, Ritter asks (as I have asked many times during this project), can we narrate ethically amidst the chaotic swirl of history? Ritter argues for resituating the positionality of the researcher in historical narrative, making one’s methods and participation in the research transparent, exercising as light an editorial hand as possible, and presenting the data as fully and richly as possible, in all its narrative contradictions: “The historian then presents, not re-presents, a community created by the external force of the archivist herself, rather than as a naturally appearing phenomenon” (283). Ritter holds up Brereton’s work as an exemplar of good archival ethnography, in which primary documents are laid down with very little interpretive lens, presented with all their inconsistencies
for the reader to make of what she will. The solution to the problem of historical narrative is to eliminate the narrative altogether.

I, too, am sometimes dissatisfied with the limitations of narrative as a historical mode: I can’t know the full story, and even if I did I couldn’t tell it. However, I see two problems with Ritter’s throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater approach to historical narrative. The first is that the Brereton style of history does not, as I have already suggested, actually present a full and uninterpreted record of events either. The selection of an archival set is always already determined by the story a researcher brings to the archive with him – in Brereton’s case, the story of the centrality of English A at Harvard and to composition. If the editorial hand is light, it is deceptively so. My second dissatisfaction with that approach is that I have never felt, throughout this project, that I was working primarily with inert documents. I always felt I was working with people. I agree with Neal Lerner that “archival research is not merely about the artifacts to be found but is ultimately about the people who have played a role in creating and using those artifacts. . . [including] a host of other players in the social world represented.” And because people tend to organize their lives, their relationship to others and the social world, narratively, I can only do the same. It adds a necessary (because always present) human element to the work that historians do.

Of course, viewing historiography as people-driven introduces a whole new set of ethical conundrums that are no doubt familiar to practitioners of actual ethnographic work (and may, in fact, be somewhat heightened in an archive). I can never be part of the community I seek to represent. I am always, of necessity, an interloper, a spy on the lives of people who did not agree to be represented by me, and who may not actually agree with or like very much the story I tell about them. This may seem like a small ethical concern, given that the subjects in question are so
far past their expiration date. Any historian will tell you, though, that after emerging from an archive, blinking in the sun and only half-oriented to the present, the dead are just as worthy of ethical representation as the living. So while I cannot – and don’t wish to – abandon the long tradition of history-as-narrative, I do want to meet my ethical obligations to the people whose stories I am only partially telling. Before embarking on a finished and authoritative-seeming narrative, I’d like to make my own position as a participant-observer of history clear, to pull back the curtain and describe why I came to the archives, what I found there, and how I have chosen to assemble those findings.

I didn’t come to the archives looking for Edward Channing. At the outset, my target was far less tangible: imitation and originality in the nineteenth century. I was driven, in part, by experiences in my own classes, where I sometimes fought against modern classroom constructions of originality, saw otherwise creative students crippled by the pressure to say something fresh and new. Where did this come from? I knew from sources like Howard that some part of that answer lay in the mid-nineteenth century, a time she identifies as a major shift from imitative models of invention to creative ones. I discovered fairly quickly, as well, that the nineteenth century was one of rapid expansion for American print and publishing, and I theorized that as writing became a widespread and profitable industry, the pressure for originality arose as an economic imperative. Because I wished to keep my focus, as much as possible, on how that moment affected the development of student writers, I followed the dictates of tradition and went to Harvard.

The Harvard University Archives, housed in Pusey Library at one corner of Harvard Yard, collects, houses, and provides access to documents related to Harvard itself over its approximately 375-year history. For about two months I floundered, arriving at least once a week
with a list of promising call numbers for student commonplace books (which, in the end, were filled mostly with blank pages) and records of student academic infractions (which, in the end, proved useful in unexpected ways). The archivists, ever patient, offered useful guidance and brought finds of their own to my table, but progress was slow, and Channing, as he had for so many others before, remained hovering at the margins, one ten-thousandth of an inch outside my field of vision.

In *Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology* Connors describes archival work as a mushroom hunt, almost as much luck as directed effort: “we may and must dart off the track to follow a likely scent, a fascinating claim, a mysterious author, a curious fact” (227). In my case, I finally spotted Channing in a set of papers offered to me by Tom Newkirk, copies of documents he made, I believe, during his own work in the Harvard Archives hunting for Barrett Wendell. Wendell was at work later in the century, so I was skeptical that the papers would be much help. One set, though, included Channing’s handwritten catalogue of themes, the topics he assigned to students as writing prompts (about which more in Chapter 4), and one of the themes asked this: “Suppose yourselves, as critics, required to pronounce upon what was stolen from another, what was justly adopted, & what was mere coincidence. In short - what is & what is not Plagiarism?” This, I felt, was my smoking gun, an assignment asking students to reflect on the nature of originality and plagiarism. Did a student write about this? Could I find *that* in the archives?

No. I never did find a student response to the plagiarism theme. What I found instead, were stacks of other student themes responding to just about every other topic on Channing’s extensive list: themes on phrenology, dueling, comets, Shakespeare, old age, Andrew Jackson, and electricity, all in thick stacks, each preserved by a single student. Above all there were
themes about writing, specifically about printing and publishing, several in every student’s stack, themes about what it meant to read and write in a world newly flooded with texts. Before I was done I had located nearly a thousand individual student essays, evidence of a thriving and directed writing culture from an era when Harvard was supposed to be full of agonistic debate and imitation of classical models. Channing himself, it transpires, has also left behind a wealth of his own documents. Of course, there were the original copies of his theme lists, but also yearly reports he wrote to the president of Harvard, a dictionary of Americanisms he took notes in, his published lectures, founding charters for the Boylston chair he occupied, and newspaper clippings editorializing on his selection to that chair – in short, everything a historian might need to invite Channing, and the Harvard he inhabited, back from the margins.

Far more, in fact, than is reasonable or responsible to cover in a project of this size; in Chapter 5 I will account for some of the possibilities in the material I excluded, the sometimes conflicting or tangential narratives left untold. As I tried to make sense of the Channing materials, I found that they were answering three broad questions, related to the ones that had brought me to the archives in the first place. What was Channing’s role in the development of composition at Harvard? What impact did developing print and publishing technologies have on how his students learned to write? How did he understand and enact his obligation to cultivate original American voices in his student writers? Answering those questions guided the work of abridgement. Themes about comets and dueling, for instance, while a fascinating window into the wider world of the early nineteenth century, are ultimately part of some other historical narrative. Generally, I found the documents organizing themselves into those that told the story of Channing’s appointment against the wider backdrop of American rhetoric and writing culture, those that told the story of how and why he instituted a curricular shift at Harvard, and those that
told stories of the student experience in Channing’s classes. Those categories became the three chapters that follow, each of which provides a partial answer to the questions driving my research. The rise of originality is still, and has always been, a piece of the lens through which I see these materials, an unavoidable influence on how I have selected pieces from the archive. But the larger story is that of a composition course before there should be a composition course, a writing program guided by Channing, fundamentally in tune with the technological changes that were redefining what it meant to be a reader and a writer in the United States.

Notes: Chapter 1

1 I follow Peter North’s lead in distinguishing composition, the loose and varied traditions of rhetorical training in written discourse that has existed for centuries, from Composition, the professionalized research-driven field which came into being in the 1960s. The difference is subtle but important. While English A belongs to the history of composition, it is part of an origin story that has long been central Composition’s disciplinary identity. I’m aware, also, that its centrality is not without critics.

2 How often have you read about the conditions around the first composition course at Harvard - the increasing enrollment, the complaints about class sizes, the challenges of convincing faculty to teach composition, the blame they diverted onto the preparatory schools - and thought: “some things never change”?

3 I oversimplify almost to the point of caricature, precisely the kind of critique that led to the back-and-forth between Connors and one of the reviewers of Composition-Rhetoric, Roxanne Mountford. Her review and Connors’ response to it are an excellent case study in the challenges of telling a coherent and targeted historical narrative that also adequately acknowledges the true, un-narratable tangle of influences at the heart of most history.

4 Composition historians usually rely heavily on textbook evidence, data which they often admit can be problematic. Textbook contents are not necessarily reflective of widespread classroom practices. Typically, researchers can refer to repeat printings to bolster claims that a text was enough in demand that we might take it as a reasonable representative of prevailing theories. However, even a quick glance at the publishing atmosphere of the nineteenth century will reveal such a chaotic scene that we might do well to take any claims about book prevalence with a hefty grain of salt before verifying them with evidence from other sources.
It’s no accident that this time period coincides with the heyday of the major Romantic writers, who were deeply invested in the uniqueness and inspired-ness of their work, though they were as much economically motivated as philosophically.

I have, on occasion, had quiet internal arguments with Channing over whether or not to include this or that document. He only speaks on paper and at a distance, but I assure you that he does have discernable preferences.
2. Edward Channing and the Boylston Chair

The trajectory of writing instruction in American universities was almost derailed by cabbage. On March 30, 1807, the entire student body of Harvard College rose from their seats in the dining commons and walked out, an act which, in the highly ritualized climate of 19th century higher education, was enough by itself to earn all of them disciplinary action. But the would-be activists didn’t stop there. Within an hour, much of the student body had gathered beneath an elm tree at the end of Hollis Hall and began shouting their grievances across the Yard and throwing old food at passing faculty. There are scattered reports of more violent outbursts as well – some property damage and attempted arson. Their primary complaints: the fish was old and the cabbage soup was full of maggots.

The Great Cabbage Rebellion, as it has since been called, was not an insignificant event in Harvard’s history, nor were the students’ complaints as trivial as they might sound to modern ears. At the time, students were required to dine together in the Commons; the protesters were essentially arguing that a repeated pattern of unpalatable food legitimately threatened the health and well-being of the entire institution. More importantly, though, the incident was a small manifestation of much broader, even global, tensions. Remember that, historically, college students often prove themselves much more attuned to social and political trends than the faculty expect them to be, and that awareness sometimes expresses itself in unpredictable ways. Look, for instance, at the student protests that spread across the country in opposition to the Vietnam War; or, more recently, the way the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and anti-Trump movements have tended to bubble over into smaller, student-organized protests against campus administrations.
Modern protests, however, might seem relatively tame compared to the hotbed of student discontent that was 18th and 19th century Harvard. Student unrest was a common feature of college life, a sort of rite-of-passage, and, like today, it often bubbled up out of existing tensions in the wider world, even if that energy was sometimes misdirected. Three decades before the Cabbage Rebellion, in the very midst of the economic and political tensions that eventually erupted into the War for Independence, the children of the Sons of Liberty brought their parents’ mounting frustrations with them to campus. Naming themselves the Sons of Harvard, they rose up in a successful protest against rancid butter. The word “successful” is almost always appended to accounts of that incident, though the word seems to indicate only that, in the end, the students successfully argued that they should not be expelled for inciting a riot; culinary conditions appear to have remained unchanged.1

By the time of the rotting cabbage, in 1807, the world at large was arguably even more primed for unrest than it had been in the Sons of Harvard’s day. A spirit of rebellion was spreading across much of the world: the French Revolution was a recent and still evolving memory, one of Ireland’s many rebellions against British rule had occurred a few years prior, there were ongoing uprisings in Serbia, and the Spanish-American Wars of Independence were just beginning to erupt. American newspapers were most preoccupied with daily accounts of Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Russia. What little page space was not devoted to that filled up with reports of the latest American ships to be boarded by the British Navy, news which portended the eventual outbreak of the War of 1812.

It’s easy to forget what tumultuous years those were for much of the world, and how much that spirit of revolution and rebellion must have suffused the daily life even of relatively sheltered Harvard students. William Ellery Channing, perhaps the most respected and well-
known preacher of the nineteenth century and a grandson of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, had been a student shortly before 1807, and he later wrote of those years:

College was never in a worse state than when I entered it. Society was passing through a most critical stage. The French Revolution had diseased the imagination and unsettled the understanding of men everywhere. The old foundations of social order, loyalty, tradition, habit, reverence for antiquity, were everywhere shaken if not subverted. The authority of the past was gone. (Broaddus 22)

In simple terms, Harvard students, caught up in the spirit of the age, were ready to rise up in protest of every perceived injustice, which they did frequently and with relish. Harvard’s early nineteenth century records of student “disorders,” as misbehaviors were then known, are filled with accounts of brawls, duels, effigies, and even one large explosion that destroyed part of the chapel. Meanwhile, the faculty and administrators, quite understandably fearful of chaos, eager to maintain social order and the authority of the past in the midst of an age of revolutions, were anything but sympathetic to student causes. One professor during that time, Eliphalet Pearson, carried with him pocket-sized notebooks so that he could, at any moment, record the names and infractions of students. One of these notebooks contains only a thirty-two page list of student names with no other information, presumably just a list of young men who had, in some small but now indefinable way, crossed Professor Pearson.

Thanks in part to nervously watchful faculty like Pearson, the Great Cabbage Rebellion of 1807 was far less “successful” than its predecessor: the administration summarily expelled permanently seventeen students, among them William Ellery Channing’s younger brother Walter, a sophomore at the time². Additionally, 107 students were forced to appear before the Board of Overseers and sign a confession that their behavior was, “contrary to the laws of the
college, made for the preservation of order and decorum” and that they would “offend no more in this manner” (Harvard, *Confession*). Among the lengthy appended list of names is the signature of a third Channing, the middle brother, who signed his name as “Ed” but who is usually remembered in histories of rhetoric as Edward Tyrrel Channing, the distinguished Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University.

**The Boylston Chair and the Classical Tradition**

The Boylston professorship is one of the oldest endowed chairs in the country, and Edward Channing its longest-serving and most influential appointee. Little is typically said of Channing’s life prior to becoming a distinguished Harvard professor. These days, not much is typically said of his life after that point either. By historians of writing and rhetoric, he is generally depicted, when he is depicted at all, as either a relic of the swiftly dwindling and outmoded (even then) discipline of classical oratory, or as the man who upended that tradition by moving literary criticism to the center of English studies. There is a kernel of truth in both perspectives, but very little nuance in either. Both of those discussions are missing vital background both on Channing himself and on the relationship between rhetoric and writing in

Fig. 1. A confession signed by the students who were expelled for walking out of the Commons. Channing’s signature is about half way down the first column. There are a number of other familiar 19th century surnames also evident. (Harvard, *Confession*)
the early nineteenth century academic tradition. To begin with, it’s impossible to understand the changes he wrought to rhetoric and writing instruction without some background on the chair he inhabited and its ties to classical traditions.

In 1771, Nicholas Boylston, one of Boston’s wealthiest gentleman merchants, bequeathed to Harvard College £1,500:

that the whole income & interest thereof be forever applied toward the support & maintenance of some well qualified Person . . . to be the Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, who shall receive the whole benefit of income from this Donation, if he discharges the Duties of his Profession & Office. . . . (Harvard, Records related to the founding)

Converting colonial currency into modern values is notoriously tricky, but my own very rough calculation puts Boylston’s donation at something approaching $50,000 in today’s money.³

Exactly why he chose to leave such a substantial sum to a school he did not attend in support of a subject in which he had no observable background or interest remains a (probably unanswerable) mystery. It’s an even more unusual bequest when you consider that endowed professorships were, at the time, quite unusual. Higher education in the United States was primarily an educational, not a research, endeavor; most faculty at the school were general purpose tutors to a relatively small population of students, the already well educated children of the wealthy social elite. At the time of Boylston’s donation, there were only two other discipline-specific faculty positions at Harvard: the Hollis Professor of Divinity, and the Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages⁴. As a gesture of thanks, Harvard commissioned a portrait of Boylston, painted by John Singleton Copley, and hung it next to the portraits of Hollis and Hancock in the Philosophy room.
At the very least, Boylston’s bequest illustrates the supreme importance that the early nation placed on oratorical ability. If the educational refrain of the late 20th-21st century is “Johnny Can’t Write,” then the 18th-19th century refrain was “Johnny Can’t Declaim.” The dominance of oratory over writing would be difficult to overstate. Generally, writing was seen as, at best, a memory aid to the more socially and politically useful skill of speaking well. At worst, writing was a uselessly indolent hobby. According to some print historians, when Thomas Jefferson ran for President in 1800, his critics accused him of being, among many other things, a “hopelessly impractical philosopher,” based mainly on the evidence that he had once written a book (Gross 432). Eloquence, on the other hand, was synonymous with intellect, taste, and public engagement all at once. Intellectual and political leaders saw the nation as inheritor of the noble democratic traditions of antiquity, so the important social and political issues of the day were debated not in the press, but in the pulpits, meeting houses, and lyceums. Boylston’s bequest, then, can likely be read as a statement from a very prominent and successful member of Boston’s wealthy merchant class both that the business of the world required talented public speakers in the classical tradition, and that the graduates currently being produced were not up to snuff.

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War and the general financial instability that attended the decades that followed, Harvard didn’t get around to actually filling the Boylston Professorship until 1806, when it appointed John Quincy Adams5 - just in time for a young Edward Channing to have attended his weekly lectures. Adams, however, was probably not much of a model for Channing. For one thing, Adams made it clear from the start that he didn’t have much regard for the Professorship’s official duties as they had been drawn up by the Harvard committee. He had good reason.
There were, bear in mind, very few models for what an endowed professorship should look like, and no models at all for a Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. At first glance, *The Directions and Statutes of the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric & Oratory in Harvard College*, the list of rules and duties which appointees were expected to adhere to, is an impressively official looking document: a massive sheet of handmade parchment covered front and back with painstakingly elaborate calligraphy. Look a little closer, though, and it becomes clear that the writers were thoroughly uncertain of their task. In several places, the formal text is crossed out, replaced with hastily penciled corrections (this was not the first draft either). A committee of the corporation prepared the statutes, which required the professor to meet with freshmen twice a week to discuss a classical text, portions of which the students were to recite in English; to meet the sophomores twice a week, devoting half the year to studying and reciting an English text, and half the year to delivering memorized declamations and writing compositions;
to meet the juniors fortnightly to continue instruction from the previous year’s text, and to correct written compositions; to assist students who were to speak at public exhibitions; to deliver weekly public lectures to the two upper classes; and to preside at weekly declamations of the two upper classes. The document elaborates on each of those responsibilities, particularly the lectures and declamations, and in detail the statute is both dauntingly thorough and alarmingly out of date even for 1806. Without any examples or prior experience to guide them, the committee that wrote the statutes could only turn to their own hazily remembered undergraduate oratorical training, laying out a curriculum heavily weighted in favor of memorizing classical divisions and figures of oratory. According to Ronald F. Reid’s history of the position, they took as their model John Ward’s *A System of Oratory*, an eighteenth century compendium of classical doctrine which had not been widely used in a quarter century.

It fell to each of the Boylston appointees, then, to either reinterpret the statutes to their benefit, or to adhere to them and risk obsolescence. Adams, ever the statesman, chose the third path of ignoring entirely portions of his responsibilities. Aware of the favor he was doing the Harvard Corporation, he struck a deal that allowed him to continue his duties as a U.S. senator, stripping his responsibilities in Cambridge down to semi-regular lectures and overseeing declamations when possible. Nevertheless, Adams was well respected as Boylston Chair, probably because his lectures are so clearly celebrations of the authority of the past. Though a self-confessed novice on the subject, he was a scholar situated firmly in the classical tradition of Cicero and Quintillian, though he also attempted to make a case for the continued relevance of that tradition:

The purpose of my lectures has been in the first instance to make you familiarly acquainted with the principles, transmitted in the writings of the ancient rhetorical
masters; and in the next to discriminate those parts. . .which were inseparably connected with the social institutions and manners of the ages and nations for which they wrote, from those, which, being founded upon the broad and permanent basis of human nature, are still applicable, and will ever retain their force. (Adams 6)

Basically, then, Adams’ lectures were a historical sketch of classical rhetoric, mixed with a few modern updates. For instance, he broke with the Statutes by restoring *memoria* to rhetorical instruction because he felt that students’ abilities to memorize and recite passages were severely lacking, and without that skill they could never be more than mediocre orators reading blandly from a script. (Improving memorization skills became something of a personal obsession.) He was respectful of tradition, then, not because he lacked originality, but because he believed earnestly in classicism’s usefulness and vitality in nineteenth century America. Prominent Bostonians agreed, and they often attended his lectures.

While Adams chose redefinition of the statutes, his successor, Joseph McKean, chose obsolescence. Less original than Adams, McKean organized his lectures in strict accordance with the outdated pattern the Corporation had set out for him. There is little to say about his tenure other than that he continued the tradition of imitating traditions. There is little evidence that either he or Adams approached writing as anything other than a memory aid. Nevertheless, the rhetoric department remained the sole academic site for any formal guidance on writing both at Harvard and most other institutions – it was simply placed firmly in service to the more practical tradition of oratory.

By the time McKean died in 1817, the Boylston position had become a centrally important institution both within Harvard itself and in the community’s perception of the education it was providing. It was a lucrative source of funding, thanks to the continued support
of Boylston’s grandson, who took an active interest in appointments. And those appointments, though so far uncontroversial, were still fraught with anxiety on the part of the faculty and alumni, as the position was still so ill-defined that it was subject to reinterpretation based on the preferences of the individual professor. The fear of change loomed large, because the course of Boylston lectures maintained a link to classical oratorical traditions that the older generation believed were a waning but vitally important skill, a central part of the communicative proficiency required of a citizen in a country powered by oratorical prowess. Good men, speaking well, were what the new American republic required. It is, however, a possible sign of brewing cultural shifts that it took Harvard eighteen months to find a replacement with adequate background in oratorical theory. If the newspapers are to be believed, they still failed to find someone qualified.

**Channing’s Background**

His brief flirtation with vegetable activism aside, Edward Channing’s young reputation was as a sober, competent, but unremarkable scholar. He was not immediately allowed to graduate with the rest of his class, but Harvard eventually awarded him a degree. After graduation, he took up the study of law under the guidance of yet another brother and was admitted to the Boston bar, where, it seems, he was seen as a thoughtful legal mind still in the process of maturing. The Boston newspapers at that time report that he handled a few property transfer cases, but not much else. It’s possible that his relative obscurity had more to do with the shadow cast by William Ellery than by any personal lack of talent. Later references to his early career suggest a shy, bookish homebody, more consumed by his literary criticism hobby than by his law vocation. One gets the impression that his occasional oratorical demonstrations were set up by well-meaning (and well-connected) friends and family who were worried about his lack of interests and prospects.
One notable moment in the spotlight occurred in 1817 when the Boston selectmen chose him to deliver a Fourth of July oration before the town, and President James Monroe turned up to the event unexpectedly. The oration was a patriotic celebration of the strength and restraint of American institutions, which had remained peacefully intact while the rest of the world was wracked by upheaval and revolution. A newspaper review of that oration, published the following day, briefly implies that the speaker was not suitable for the occasion (“The oration of Mr Channing was probably written before it was supposed that the President of the United States might be here at this Anniversary”) before admitting that, in fact, Channing did rather well: “The Oration was such as might have been expected from an elegant and classical scholar, who had diligently observed, with the true spirit of patriotism, the progress of his native country; and the delivery was in the purest form of cultivated eloquence” (Anonymous, July 4. Oration). Indeed, the speech reads as though designed to be blandly crowd-pleasing. Written in the elevated Ciceronian style characteristic of 19th century speeches (but which Channing did not typically favor), it celebrates the revolutionary spirit of 1776, while being careful to frame the ensuing events as more sober and reflective than other world uprisings. In one passage, Channing describes the founding fathers this way:

They were not a crowd of hot-headed boys, who longed to turn their masters from school, that they might sit for a day or two in the places of power, laugh at subordination, grow wild with sudden freedom till they were tired of it, and return to their duty after a little concession and wheedling promise. (An Oration 10)

The sentence is so clearly a reference to and dismissal of his own misguided student rebellion that one wonders if he knew already that he was being considered for a Harvard post, if there is something of the politician running for office here. Then again, there may be nothing more to it
than an apologetic sheepishness – if you had to choose a single word to describe Channing’s oratorical career, you might do very well with ‘inoffensive.’

We might imagine, then, that Channing was chagrined when, upon being named to the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory in October 1819, he became the center of a very public debate. In their introduction to his published lectures, Dorothy I. Anderson and Waldo W. Braden say that his appointment “caused the usual lively discussions and speculations among the interested students and citizens in Massachusetts” (ix). That’s an extremely mild characterization of a public outcry that veered occasionally into accusation and vitriol. An article in the Nov. 13 issue of the Franklin Monitor begins, in a rather more measured tone than many of its fellows:

We hoped long ere this to have heard that Mr. Channing had declined to accept the Professorship of Rhetorick and Oratory in Harvard University. We regret that he has not done it. And fear [. . .] that he may be prevailed upon to place himself in a situation from which neither honour can result to himself nor advantage to the community. (National Ægis)

The article goes on to praise the accomplishments of Channing’s two admirably successful predecessors, before rather contradictorily claiming that “the style of declamation at the University is miserable in the extreme, I had almost said the greater part of those who have graduated in late years could scarcely make themselves intelligible to an English Audience.” Channing, they feared, was fully incapable of remedying that state.

Channing did have his supporters, though they were naturally less vociferous than his detractors. They generally replied to claims that he was unprepared by rhetorically questioning whether anyone was ever prepared for such a position. Or they skirted the issue entirely by simply berating objectors for making the private decisions of the Harvard Corporation and
Overseers a matter for public debate. Milquetoast support, indeed. The precise nature of the public objections to Channing are important to examine in detail because they foreshadow the directions in which Channing would ultimately steer rhetoric over the course of his thirty-two year career: away from a slavish imitation of classical oratorical models, and toward the production of new and original written texts.

**A Question of Qualifications**

In fairness to the respectable gentlemen of nineteenth century Boston, Channing’s appointment was indeed decidedly odd. Imagine you are a modern poet, a member of the current literary establishment. Picture the confusion, then, if you learned that a relatively obscure and new-to-the-scene pop singer had been named poet laureate. Sure, that person might be theoretically minimally qualified for the position—writing lyrics and giving well-received public performances—but they’re so young and, more importantly, the genre they work in is so very (perhaps a tiny sneer of distaste here) *popular*. You might even fear that the appointment portended the decline of traditional poetry as we currently know it.

The reaction to Channing was just that. He was well known and inoffensively competent, but young (only 29), and an enthusiastic supporter of America’s growing popular print culture. And he had just been named to a position which had previously been steeped in imitation of the classical tradition. As a lawyer, he might have seemed a dependable choice, but it was no secret that he was a lawyer only by trade, not by preference or temperament. In fact, at the time, he had been pouring much of his professional energy into editing the *North American Review*, which he had helped found in 1812. That publication was the country’s very first literary journal, publishing fiction, poetry, essays, and ephemera. It was devoted, in that historically unique spirit of separation from all things British, to the creation and promotion of an originally American body of literature. Now, to modern ears, that surely sounds like a high-mindedly academic
aspiration, and it’s true that at editorial meetings Channing rubbed elbows with some of the great minds of his day and place: John Adams, George Bancroft, Nathan Hale, Edward Everett, Daniel Webster, and others. However, literary aspirations, while a reasonable hobby for a young gentleman, were hardly appropriate for a serious career scholar and rhetorician. Literature as a field of academic study was not taken seriously at Harvard until the 1850s, mainly under the fosterage of Channing’s successor, Francis James Child. In the meantime, it was felt that if the Boylston professor was going to be successful, he would be so on the strength of his voice and bearing, not on the breadth of his reading or the skill of his pen.

Those attitudes, however, were rapidly becoming obsolete in the world outside Harvard’s walls, thanks to a few demographic and technological shifts. For one thing, paper had to be made by hand until around 1800 when new production methods made cheap mass production possible. Immediately, both local and national newspapers and magazines sprang up everywhere. The very same year that Channing was appointed to Harvard, booksellers introduced the first cloth (rather than leather) bindings, and the cost of books plummeted. The first paperbacks were only a few years away. At the same time, demand for print was on the rise, as the country’s population had doubled in the past twenty years, and demand for cheap and exciting reading material more than doubled along with it. These signs heralded upcoming changes, not just for the world of literature, but for how people did business, received news, and participated in the political process. The entire orientation of public discourse was just beginning to shift to the page.

The North American Review was about as perfect a representative of the new world of print as you could hope to find. Its early issues are so enthusiastically disorganized that you get the sense the editors just got carried away by the myriad possibilities offered by affordable printing. The first volume runs more than 400 pages, which includes just ten short book reviews.
and five original poems. The remainder is a dizzying miscellany of reflections, profiles, announcements, maxims, anecdotes, and obituaries – most of these are reprinted letters sent in by readers. On one page is a purported cure for consumption; elsewhere is a letter reporting the number of Merino sheep in the United States; a letter from the King of Sweden announcing his plans for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; and an announcement that Edward Everett had been named to Harvard’s newly endowed professorship in Greek Literature. Reading the publication must have been something like the nineteenth century equivalent of online link surfing.

Though the Review never abandoned its role as an outlet for miscellaneous community writings, over the next few years it gradually came to focus more on the American literary scene, offering reviews of new works and lists of publications on American history and geography. By 1819, Channing had written and published two original essays and several book reviews. His review of Rob Roy, written the same year that novel was released, is an indicator of just how efficient and developed the American print industry’s infrastructure had become. By all accounts, Channing saw his work for the Review, first as a founder and regular contributor, then as its editor, as his primary occupation. Certainly, his reputation with the rest of the community was not as a lawyer or orator but as a writer, and an advocate for other writers.

It’s no wonder, then, that proponents of a strict interpretation of the Boylston Statutes were furious. Between October and November of 1819, the Boston area newspapers received and published dozens of anonymously written letters of protest. Most were probably sent by aggrieved alumni who remembered fondly their tutelage under Adams or McKean, but a few bear signs that they may have been written by Harvard faculty. Every one of them highlights prominently Channing’s lack of qualifications by asserting the inferiority of writing and writers
over the real intellectual work of academic life. One, published under the nom-de-plum *Harvard* in the *Columbia Centinel*, is typical of this kind of attack:

A person may be a good writer, and at the same time an indifferent speaker. Indeed, it is not a very difficult thing to write a tolerable essay; and to compose a decent oration, according to the rules of the art, does not require superior powers of mind, and is not perhaps beyond the reach of ordinary talents. But, to excel in public speaking, and to become an accomplished orator, has justly been considered among the highest efforts of human genius.

*Harvard* goes on to paint the United States as the perfector of the traditions of Greece and Rome, under which, “eloquence is power, and almost everything comes under its dominion.” Writers (and often readers), in the early nineteenth century imagination, were anti-social individualists wrapped up in the world of their own untested ideas, unprepared for the real practical work of speaking to the world. As one critic said of Channing: “The art of persuasion, the power of producing conviction by addressing the passions, the feelings, the prejudices, and the understandings of men, cannot be thoroughly acquired in the closet” (Philo Boylston). That this argument for the supremacy of oratory over writing was being carried out in print appears to be an irony lost on the participants. In their zeal to cast Channing as an underqualified scribbler, even his oration before the President, which had before been a model for eloquence, became something else altogether:

...a collection of political *trueisms* displaying neither invention, originality of idea, nor brilliancy of imagination. His style was stiff and inelegant; his gesture artificial and constrained; his manner was tame and uninteresting, and in fact his *discourse* was inferior to the generality of those productions. ... (Justice, “Communications”)
So Channing was not just mediocre and underqualified; to many, his qualifications actually gave him the exact wrong temperament for the position. To make matters worse, even if they had accepted a background in writing as a valid qualification, his personal views of writing, in particular its relationship to history and tradition, caused still more alarm. In 1816, he had published an essay in the *North American Review* titled “On Models in Literature” which is an extended critique of composers who believe that classical models are still relevant to the modern world. For him, imitation of any kind was a mark of an inferior composition. The country required great writers, he felt, to furnish it with a fresh new literary tradition, “and to tell such men that they must give their days and nights to any models, ancient or modern, is to destroy the whole worth and character of genius.”

Let us just look at one or two ways, in which freedom and originality of mind are assailed or endangered. The first is by inculcating an excessive fondness for the ancient classicks, and asserting their supremacy in literature. By some means or other, the ancients have exerted an enormous influence among literary men, and in nations too, that have had hardly any thing of real congeniality with them. (206)

The United States, in other words, is not ancient Greece or Rome, and veneration of those ancient models prevents American statesmen and academics from developing a more culturally specialized literary and rhetorical apparatus.

Lest anyone think his concerns are solely for the field of literature, Channing takes the time to detail the impact that reverence of classical models has on the education of the young as well. “The boy at school” he writes:

[...]is set to work upon the ancient classicks. He hears and reads of the god-like people, who began and finished the world’s literature. This is taken in with his rudiments, and
along with it, indifference toward his own language, which he acquired unconsciously as he grew, and thinks too familiar for study or respect. . . . (207)

He fears that the foundations of most men’s literary habits are in another language, another culture, another tradition, and a language, culture, and tradition that are already irrelevant. He makes an impassioned case that it is a matter of national identity and pride, not just that American writers be celebrated, but that schools make it a priority to create more American writers, and to empower them to write creatively and originally in their native voices.

In retrospect, that is a revolutionarily empowering stance.\textsuperscript{13} But at the time, while it may have been a tolerable point of view for a mere publisher of a literary magazine to hold, the Boylston was another story. What clearly infuriated alumni still further was that, thanks to the circulation of essays like \textit{On Models}, the Harvard Corporation must have known exactly what they were getting in Channing. In fact, rumor began to circulate that they had appointed him in direct contradiction to the wishes of Ward Boylston, who would be cancelling his next donation to the school in protest. (In the end, that rumor appears to have been false). It would be reasonable to ask, then, why Harvard chose to appoint him in the first place, when, as “Justice” points out rather grandiloquently in the \textit{Boston Daily Advertiser}, “there is a host of men, filled with suppressed ardor for eloquence and rhetoric, who would be exceedingly glad to serve the College in \textit{that} way.” I’d like to claim that the Harvard Corporation was more forward-thinking than the citizens of Cambridge, that they saw the print revolution in its infancy and leapt to provide students with the tools they needed to create and compose rather than repeat and declaim. The truth is almost certainly a bit more cynical, though. Walter Channing, the younger brother, was by that time a Harvard professor and an outspoken member of the Harvard Corporation. William Ellery Channing, the elder brother, was a highly regarded preacher and
orator, and he served as a member of the Boston Board of Overseers. Both, it seems, were trying to look out for their slightly bookish brother.

The public discussion over Channing’s appointment, then, is laden with an odd sort of contradiction at the heart of matters. On the one hand, he is portrayed as so bookishly retiring and inexperienced that he is bound to be ineffectual; on the other, he represents the possibility of a revolutionary shift in the way that Harvard conceives of the roles of rhetoric, oratory, and writing in college and public life. For the alumni and concerned letter-writers, fear of that change often came to be embodied in one particular incident, frequently alluded to but never directly named. Consider the following sentence from the *Franklin Monitor*, which, though long, I include in full in the interest of atmosphere-building, because it illustrates so beautifully the nineteenth century style of painful circumlocution passing for courtesy:

> It will unquestionably be a matter of some moment to avoid, as far as possible, the appearance of giving countenance, even in the most remote and indirect manner, to that spirit of hostility to the wholesome laws and regulations of the college, which the young men, who have heretofore been under its guidance, have so often discovered that they are prone to imbibe, for it would be highly impolitic unnecessarily to furnish an example not soon to be forgotten at college, which may tend in the smallest degree to encourage the disobedient and rebellious in future. (Alumnus)

Passages like this one abound, suggesting that someone so young would be a bad influence on the students. Perhaps that shouldn’t be surprising, given the low opinion people seem to have had of Channing’s professional qualifications. However, inexperience with public speaking has nothing to do with encouraging disobedience and rebelliousness. There is something different about these “bad influence” passages that suggest more is being implied,
something about Channing that rubs people the wrong way, beyond merely his youth and lack of qualifications. *The Columbia Centinel*, for instance, speaks favorably of the practice of hiring young professors in general, but,

we think the department of Rhetoric and Oratory furnishes an exception. . . . Besides, the professor in that branch should be able to instruct by lifetime example, to rouse the genius and excite the emulation of youth by exhibiting before them a constant model for imitation. (Justice)

It’s notable that the *Centinel* is implying that Channing is personally and morally suspect, not just academically so (which had already been stated outright several paragraphs earlier). The most direct formulation of this criticism comes from the *Boston Daily Advertiser*:

One among the many objections against him is that he has never received a regular collegiate education having left the University some time ago, together with several other students who were disaffected with the college government. (Anonymous, “Harvard College No.1.)

The *Advertiser*, you may notice, has massaged the facts a bit (Channing was awarded a late degree a few years later), but the reference to the Cabbage Rebellion is clear.

So forgive my slightly hyperbolic claim that rotten cabbage almost altered the history of writing instruction. It’s far more complicated than that. But there is no doubt that, in the minds of the people of Cambridge, the Cabbage Rebellion had become a metonym for everything about Channing that they didn’t like: his literary ambitions, his disregard for classical models, his youth. Mostly, referencing it became a way of expressing something vaguer and more troubling than any of those: an otherwise inexpressible sense that he represented upheaval, revolution, and
disrespect for the authority of the past. They feared the influence of his ideas on the already impressionable and disruptive youth of Harvard.¹⁴

Surely the incident was on people’s minds when, on December ⁴ᵗʰ 1819, Edward Channing donned his robes and walked across the Yard to deliver his inaugural lecture before the faculty and students. The newspapers called the lecture “ingenious and eloquent,” and certainly all of his lectures are remarkable in at least one respect. When addressing the students assembled before him, he generally didn’t refer to them as speakers or rhetors or orators, which were the terms favored by Adams and McKean before him. He called them writers.

Notes: Chapter 2

¹ Incidentally, the butter riot was led by a student named Asa Dunbar, the grandfather of Henry David Thoreau, a piece of trivia which is not completely tangential to the current narrative. Dunbar wrote a famous satirical account of the rebellion, *The Book of Harvard,* the wide circulation of which seems to have been the main cause of the attempted expulsions. Student writing was a powerful force.

² Don’t feel too bad for Walter Channing. By 1815 he had returned to Harvard as its first Professor of Obstetrics and Medical Jurisprudence. In his long career as a doctor he founded Brigham and Women’s Hospital, and became America’s foremost practitioner and advocate of anesthesia for childbirth – not a bad career for the least renowned of the Channing brothers.

³ You may notice that this isn’t actually a very hefty sum for the endowment of a professorship. That, indeed, is part of the reason Harvard took so long to make use of the money. The fund sat untouched for more than three decades, after which Boylston’s grandson periodically made additional contributions to the endowment.

⁴ The Hancock Professorship is the oddest of the three, mainly because there was not actually room in Harvard’s curriculum for any languages other than Greek and Latin, nor were the governing bodies willing to make room. It seems that they were happy to take the money, create the position, and then just told its new professor to teach Rhetoric and Oratory instead. At the turn of the 1⁹ᵗʰ century, that professorship was held by Eliphalet Pearson, he of the blacklisted student notebook. As the closest thing they had to a rhetoric expert, Pearson was most likely put in charge of the committee to create the Boylston statutes.

⁵ Adams seems an obvious choice. Who wouldn’t want the son of our second President on the faculty? However, though Adams was a Senator, much of his distinguished political and
oratorical career was still ahead of him. It appears that Harvard’s decision was motivated mainly by the fact that the Adams and the Boylston families were closely related. They hoped to flatter Nicholas Boylston’s grandson, Ward Boylston, who was then threatening to rescind the donation unless Harvard made use of it. They succeeded in their attempted flattery. In the following decades, Ward Boylston made tens of thousands of dollars in additional donations to increase the endowment’s funds.

6 Much is elsewhere made of the fact that he also convinced the Committee to waive the Declaration of Protestant Faith required by the Statutes.

7 Oddly, however, Quintillian’s “good man speaking well” was one classical precept that Adams felt was harmful. It might cause students to think that a man was good simply because he was eloquent.

8 Burn and melt a half pound each of rosin and yellow wax and breathe in deeply the resulting smoke.

9 1,584,652, providing about 122 million pounds of wool. Though, the estimate is low because only six states reported figures.

10 More particularly, King Gustavus Adolphus was looking to recruit travel companions, ideally one from each of ten European nations.

11 Everett, you may recall, worked with Channing on the Review, though there seems to have been no major objection to his appointment.

12 If there’s a second way, he doesn’t seem to get around to it.

13 Admittedly, there’s more than a shade of literary elitism in there too. We’ll get to that later.

14 Channing was probably not helped by the fact that just three months earlier a second, even larger Cabbage Rebellion had broken out. This time, students staged a massive food fight in the dining hall. When several students were subsequently expelled, their classmates once again gathered beneath the elm tree outside Hollis Hall (now officially named the Rebellion Elm), pelting faculty with the rotten vegetation they had just taken from their own plates. The entire sophomore class resigned, but recanted after about two weeks. Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the students expelled, then readmitted.
3. The Writer and His Times: Negotiating Change at Harvard

**Digression One: Peabody and Kirkland**

I begin this chapter with the first of two digressions, very brief character studies that will serve to concretize the state of the writing and speaking curriculum at Harvard. Generally speaking, if you want to know anything about daily life for students and faculty in the early 19th century, the best first-hand account I’ve seen is Andrew Peabody’s *Harvard Reminiscences.* Perhaps nobody has ever associated with Harvard for a longer period of time than Peabody, who was its second youngest graduate ever (at the age of 15 in 1826), then the Chaplain and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals, and finally a Professor Emeritus. By the time of his death in 1893, he had been working in and around Harvard for almost seventy years. (He was also, from 1853-1863, the chief editor of the *North American Review*, by then much changed from Channing’s day.) *Reminiscences*, which was published in 1888 and never reprinted, is Peabody’s attempt to capture what the school was like during his student days, and it is filled with fascinating minutiae about student life: how the dorms were furnished, the typical daily schedule, what the dining halls served, the ways students skirted curfews, where various classrooms were located. Mostly, though, it is a collection of seventy profiles, one for each of the faculty members that Peabody studied under or worked with during his long career. Most of these are not dry biographies, but deeply personal reflections on beloved (and sometimes not) friends and colleagues, and, as such, they should probably be read with some caution, through the nostalgic lens of a deeply loyal Harvard man remembering mentors, often from a distance of some sixty years. On the whole, however, Peabody seems to be remarkably forthright and honest, offering believably flawed and detailed anecdotes about some of Harvard’s most notorious figures.
One such anecdote, about President John Thornton Kirkland, is particularly valuable for the insight it offers into the separate but contended spheres occupied by writing and rhetoric in the 1820s. It was one of the President’s duties to deliver a sermon every Sunday afternoon, and Kirkland had become famous for his collection of proverbs, anecdotes, and fables, which he meandered between without any apparent organization. Peabody insists that he and his classmates listened attentively to each individual story, but admits that, as a whole, they were “if not unstrung, strung on so fine a thread that only [Kirkland] could see it. Indeed, we had a strong suspicion that his sermons were put together on the spot” (13). Their suspicions were probably strengthened by the fact that he carried to the pulpit each week the same sheaf of papers, which he shuffled and reordered during hymns. It seems that Kirkland had a finite number of elements which he constantly rearranged into an almost infinite number of sermons. One Sunday, however, after a series of student disturbances almost broke out into a college-wide rebellion (those really were quite frequent), Kirkland rose to the pulpit and delivered a fiery oration on familial loyalty and obedience that the students had never heard before. It cowed them into submission. The next morning, a deputation of students from all four classes visited Kirkland and asked him for a copy of the sermon so that they could have it printed and distributed. According to Peabody, the President replied: “You, students, last week gave me little time to write. But I found a sermon of Samuel Ogden’s that met your case; and, were I to print my sermon, there would be more quotation-marks than you or I would wish to see” (14).

Peabody’s story reveals the tension at the heart of rhetoric instruction during this time period. It’s a tension between the fading arts of oratory and the growing influence of print, yes. But to view it simply in terms of speaking and writing is to over-simplify. It’s also a tension between the aesthetics accompanying those two modes of rhetoric, between the imitative and
allusive values of oratory, still adhered to by many of the tradition-oriented tutors and administrators, and the impulse to cultivate new and original voices that suffused the world of print. For three decades, Edward Channing’s classes lived right in the heart of that tension, trying to strike a balance between the expectations of tradition, while also seeking to clear some space for his students to write and invent. The archival evidence presented in this chapter shows Channing trying, diplomatically and gradually, to clear that space, to enact a few small changes to a change-averse college curriculum.

**A Writer’s Preparation**

Channing himself would likely smile indulgently at the notion of researchers trying to piece together the innumerable elements and interactions that make up a teacher’s pedagogy. He was surprisingly diffident about his own contributions to his students’ educations, claiming in the very first sentence of his lecture *A Writer’s Preparation*, “No modest teacher would claim to have made his pupil a good writer.” Learning to write, he believed, was a massive and complex endeavor, in which the instructor played only one small, needlessly artificial part. He continues:

> So far as my own department of instruction is concerned, it would be easy to name the grammar and the rhetorical treatise that have been used, the dictionary that has been recommended, the authors that have been held up as masters of the language and examples of style so far as any writer can be studied as a direct example. It would be easy to describe the courses of lectures that have been read to classes, and the method of conducting the critical exercises in composition. But how insufficient do all these appear to account for what we see a man do when he passes from the rudiments at school to responsible writing in the real work of life... *(Lectures 187-186)*

I will not presume to know more than the man himself, will not claim to construct a fully accurate picture of how he tried to prepare his students for the responsible writing work of life. I
will, however, claim that an intriguing portrait can be constructed from a glimpse at the very sources he dismisses, as well as from countless other documents now housed in the Harvard University Archives: lectures, reports to the President, theme topic lists, student reflections. What they reveal is perhaps the first coherent university writing pedagogy in the United States, one that is concerned with preparing students for a world increasingly dominated by print, and caught in the tension between older traditions of imitation/rearrangement and newer values of original thinking expressed in writing. It is telling, I think, that his lectures contain no equivalent passage on pedagogical approaches to oratory.

To begin with, a few notes about the nature of the archival record. It’s best to approach these documents armed with a few key facts about the Harvard curriculum in the first half of the nineteenth century. For instance: the elective system was not introduced to Harvard until the 1880s, so all students prior to that time took the same rigidly prescribed sequence of courses, generally heavily weighted in favor of Greek and Latin languages and literatures. In addition, colleges were far more local and insulated institutions in those days, with the faculty largely culled from the alumni, and the student body mainly the upper class of the Boston region. They were a small club, with student enrollment less than 250 in 1820, and only a dozen or so faculty. As a result, Harvard’s curriculum was inflexible and slow to admit any changes, overseen as it was by a small group of officers intent on reproducing their own educations, and populated by students aspiring to the same education as their parents.

As the chair of the department of Rhetoric and Oratory, Channing theoretically had a great deal of influence over the sequence and make-up of the courses in his discipline. In actual practice, his power was probably restrained by the expectations of the rest of the faculty and the Board of Overseers. Indeed, though he continually tinkered with the content of his courses and
exercises, the basic overall sequence remained fairly stable during his three-decade career. If you were a student then, your course of rhetorical instruction probably looked something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freshmen</th>
<th>Declamations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>Declamations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recitations from a rhetorical text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Themes and Translations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>Declamations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>Declamations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lectures delivered by Channing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, there was minor variation. Early in his career, he delivered lectures to the juniors rather than the seniors. Shifting those later in the curriculum was probably an attempt to address the seniors’ poor performances at public exhibitions. For the sophomores, themes and translations often served as replacements for the other two exercises, and such substitutions became more and more frequent in the 1840s as class sizes began to grow. He was always trying new combinations of rhetorical texts, eventually settling firmly on Richard Whately.² At one point, as we shall see, Channing successfully removed declamations from his own list of responsibilities entirely (though not from his students’).

On the surface, the list of student exercises looked largely the way it had under previous Boylsts. The truth is that the conservative administrative structure of Harvard would never have allowed Channing to be the wholly revolutionary figure that Bostonians feared him to be. That’s the difficulty of reading Channing’s archival legacy: in a stubbornly stagnant system, change looks like a series of incremental compromises rather than a sudden transformation. Any single document, or partial document, can be used as seemingly solid evidence that Channing was unremarkably traditional in his beliefs and pedagogy. In truth, he often was, not only
because of administrative obstinacy, but because he was a man of his times, a true believer in the power of the rhetorical tradition to inform the American experience. However, he also believed in a definition of rhetoric that embraced and even emphasized writing. And he believed that the 19th century rhetor/writer fundamentally differed from his ancestors because his craft required him to navigate a modern textually rich environment. A more complete examination of the record reveals how, amid tensions and compromises, he introduced those ideas to the change-averse Harvard community, a gradual shift in emphasis that was no less revolutionary for all its subtlety.

When he retired in 1852, Channing was asked to prepare his lectures for publication. The resulting volume is, as Channing himself points out in the foreword, edited to introduce more consistency than the lectures initially had, to edit out opinions their author no longer held. That being the case, though they are the most complete source many scholars have for Channing’s pedagogy, the lectures may not be wholly accurate reflections of his practices, particularly earlier in his career. Nor is it a complete record of the full course of lectures he typically delivered. If the manuscript notes from which he originally worked still exist, they have not yet been found and archived. Nevertheless, I suspect that he kept his editorial hand light in the published volume, as he did not mean it to be comprehensive:

I have not attempted a systematic view of rhetoric, either in compliance with the statutes of the professorship, or according to any idea of my own. So obvious will this be, that the lectures may often be more justly regarded as essays upon subjects suggested by rhetoric than as orderly treatises upon its proper topics (Lectures vi).

That, indeed, seems to have been Channing’s instruction style, to offer what he felt to be useful practical discussions of the uses of rhetoric rather than to work systematically through all of the
history and principles, as John Quincy Adams and Joseph McKeen had done. That essaying style means that Channing’s lectures are more curated than his predecessors’, leaving us with a fairly tidy encapsulation of the general principles which, by the end of his career, had become central to his teaching. In particular, I’d like to highlight two lectures which are especially illustrative of the tensions within which Channing worked and of the subtle shifts he was able to accomplish within those constraints.

Channing’s inaugural address to Harvard, retitled in the published volume as *The Orator and His Times*, is the lecture he delivered on the day he became the Boylston Professor, and it appears that he began every year’s lecture sequence with some version of it. Though seemingly well received, it is not an obvious crowd pleaser. No doubt aware of his dubious reputation as a writer and editor, he walks a fine line between celebrating the powers of the oratorical tradition and offering a sometimes blistering critique of blind adherence to that tradition. It is, in some ways, a re-examination of the very impulses which prompted the endowment of the Boylston Chair in the first place. It would not, I think, be unfair to characterize the lecture as a carefully structured bait-and-switch trick. Having reassured his dubious audience of his admiration for classical traditions, he questions whether that tradition remains relevant to the American social and political system, ultimately deciding that it needs updating to account for a new legal system and for new technologies.

He begins in a vein which no doubt went a long way toward mollifying many of his critics, clearly linking his own newly occupied position to the ancient traditions, not just of rhetoric in general, but of rhetoric teachers in particular:

We look back to the best ages of those commonwealths, when society, letters, and all the liberal arts were advanced the farthest, and we find eloquence the favorite and necessary
accomplishment of all who were ambitious of rising in the world. It formed the earliest and most important part of education. The rhetorician opened his school, and professors of oratory and wisdom became part of the household, to bring up the young scholar to the art, and impress him with a sense of its preeminence among liberal pursuits and popular accomplishments. (Lectures 2)

To Channing and, no doubt, to the listeners assembled, the rhetoric teacher fulfilled a nearly sacred social function. Note that he casts the acquisition of eloquence first as a pragmatic concern: it is permits a degree of upward mobility for those who wish to rise in the world. Any man who found himself equal to “the vast preparation of a perfect orator” was capable of achieving prominence in the senate, the courts, or the battlefield. In the portrait painted here, the acquisition of eloquence was equivalent to the acquisition of citizenship, for those so skilled were not merely servants of the state; in a very real sense, they were the state, the talented elite who directed the course of judicial, political, and military matters. The crucial point, though, is that this is as much a statement about the function of the rhetoric teacher in society as it is about the rhetorician himself – it is Channing’s statement about how he views the responsibilities of his profession. Other professors might be charged with making men doctors and lawyers and priests: the professor of rhetoric and oratory is charged with making men rhetor-citizens.

More to the point, the Boylston professor is charged with equipping students to be American rhetor-citizens. That distinction is a crucial one because there is much that Channing finds obsolete and even dangerous in the classical model of the orator-citizen. As the lecture continues, his portrait of the ancient world becomes more and more alarming. For one thing, he begins to cast the old model of rhetoric as a battle between men of dubious intentions. The ancient orator was “always arming himself for the fight of eloquence, or, as it was called, to
approve himself a man-at-arms in the war of pleaders.” This made sense in the turbulent ancient world when small and warlike commonwealths fought each other ceaselessly. Orators were close to their audiences, adept at manipulating the passions to steer them in whatever directions they pleased. They could appeal to public sentiment directly, which usually meant that the most boundlessly ambitious rose to power. In a world where populations were small, literacy was rare, and the orator was a celebrity, the trajectory of a country was often in the hands of a single unusually fiery and eloquent speaker, a Pericles figure. “Here, then,” Channing writes “was room for the orator to pamper the pride of conquerors, or rouse the courage of the defeated by making their shame imbitter their hate” (Lectures 8). Under that model of oratory, it was far too easy to fall into “revolutions, tumults, vast military preparations, excited and directed by a few” (15). It is a shocking portrayal of the ancient tradition that he, as Boylston, has been tasked with preserving and promoting; it suggests that those who mourn the passing of this tradition are nostalgic for something capricious and dangerous. And he makes that case by tapping directly into conservative spirit of the age, by equating oratory with upheaval and revolution.

It is clear that the lecture was initially written with his appointment process still fresh in mind, and he does not shy away from confronting head-on the very Johnny-can’t-declaim impulses which nearly disqualified him:

But oratory, now, is said to be almost a lost art. We hear constantly how it has fallen from its old supremacy. You look at the few free states of modern times, and find no schools of rhetoric, crowded with the young and ambitious, who are preparing for active life and future grandeur by their accomplishments in eloquence. Is this so, because we have learned to despise our masters? (Lectures 10-11)
What, he asks, is the consequence of oratory’s fall from grace in a new and wholly different nation? Without it, what venues remain to the modern rhetor-citizen? The problem, he insists, is not that people have lost respect for the ancient arts, but rather that they venerate them too highly and unquestioningly. He does not entirely dismiss the value of studying sources such as Plato and Pericles and Cicero, but he clearly relegates that study to the fields of literature and history, useful for acquiring an understanding of the past and of the character of the ancients. As for practical modern use, any advice these sources give should be applied only “with a wise regard to the altered condition of society” (Lectures 15). If oratory has declined, it is only because American society has begun to realize that it is no longer needed. To mourn the passing of an obsolete skill is, to use Channing’s own word, ridiculous.

The modern rhetor-citizen is a wholly different character, someone almost aloof and cold, especially next to the violent manipulations of his ancestors. Two things, in Channing’s mind, account for this difference, two things that differentiate American society from Greek and Roman and account for the wholly justified decline of oratory. The first is a clearly delineated political and legal system, which enforces cooperation and restrains anyone with too much rhetorical talent from wielding a dangerous amount of influence. A great man, Channing tells us, “is perpetually taught now that the world can do without him; that in all his attempts to be useful, he is rather to cooperate with a thousand others than become the master of any one” (Lectures 15). The second difference is more telling, and far more clearly articulated:

The general diffusion of knowledge has had the same effect. . . . Opinions are constantly coming to us from other men and all parts of the world, through many channels, and we are thus enabled to think liberally and independently on all subjects, and especially on the opinions that are most current at home, and which the ancient orator might have appealed
to with unresisted and terrible power. In the ancient republics, the orator might control the audience, but now we see the audience controlling him. (*Lectures* 17)

Technology and the spread of ideas has changed the landscape of rhetorical practice. He doesn’t state explicitly (in this lecture at least) what exactly has caused this “general diffusion,” but there’s really only one obvious candidate. With newspapers thriving across the country and books being printed at an unprecedented rate, audiences have become readers. Which means that orators have become writers. Channing depicts modern rhetorical talent not as a contest but as a conversation, with the orator himself standing among an informed audience, something which becomes possible when ideas are distributed through printed media. No longer are audiences passive recipients of rhetoric; they are active consumers and producers of it. Channing believes that this is a great benefit to American culture, but also a new challenge for the rhetorician. The spread of knowledge, the richness of available information, the assumption of an informed audience, allowed people to have more reasoned conversations, with a full range of perspectives. However, it also meant that the modern rhetor-citizen (the writer) had to be cognizant of the conversation; he had to engage with and acknowledge what had been said before him, a restraint which did not exist for mere orators.

*The Orator and His Times* is a far more complex document than it appears on the surface, without the full context of Channing and *his* time. In the space of this first lecture, he expands the definition of rhetoric to include writing, redefines the orator to encompass the writer, and meditates on the challenge of learning to engage through writing in a world newly packed with other writers. Those moves are all made so adroitly (to modern sensibilities) that it is worth pointing out here that a significant portion of his audience was probably highly skeptical of this deft reframing of the mandate of his appointment. That Channing continued to deliver versions
of this lecture at the outset of every year possibly suggests that he continued to feel pressure to justify his pedagogy, to explain the need for a shift in emphasis. It was likely a hard sell, one which he had to make not just to the students who heard the lecture each year, but also to the administration of Harvard College.

**Reports to the President and Overseers: Declamation Debacles**

In a letter to the overseers of Harvard College, probably written in the Spring of 1824, Channing tells them: “I have never felt that any type of instruction can make men orators” - an odd admission from a man whose primary mandate was to train young orators (fig. 1). Nevertheless, he made this claim all the time, and it is perhaps less surprising when considered in light of the tone he set at the outset of his appointment. In various places throughout the lectures, he suggests that, because people learn automatically to speak their native language, oratory is simply a matter of letting natural inclination guide delivery. As he puts it in his lecture on elocution: “We have by our constitution an apparatus for sounds and bodily movements, universally significant of mental states and action, and sure to operate immediately and infallibly unless we clog it” (*Lectures* 46). If the clearest advice for good expression is, essentially, “don’t over-think it,” there isn’t much left for the instructor of oratory to do. Rare accounts of Channing’s in-class demeanor bear this out. Peabody describes in detail the careful attention Channing paid to student compositions, but portrays him as a far less engaged observer of declamations. Students regularly recited pieces from the same small pool of options, so that all students quickly knew every declamation by heart. At the end of a student’s recital, Channing would assign a single score on a twenty-four point scale, offering no comment unless he saw something particularly offensive³.

And yet, in his yearly reports, other than that one strange admission of the uselessness of oratorical instruction, Channing takes great pains to reassure that he is attending diligently to this
Fig. 1. Channing’s annual report to the President and Board of Overseers, written in April 1825. The document continues on the next page.
part of his job. In the 1820s, it appears that, at the end of each term, heads of departments were expected to write reports to either the President or the Board of Overseers. Channing’s are highly variable in terms of length, content, and level of detail. In general, he gives his take on how attentive his students have been and which exercises were attended to with the most enthusiasm; in the grand tradition of writing instructors throughout history he despairs of giving an accurate accounting of his hours of labor; he lists how many students still have outstanding assignments. These reports are a small but rich source of insight into how Channing perceived his own courses, or at least how he wanted the administration to perceive them. They are, for instance, the primary source from which I derived the above outline of Channing’s year-by-year curriculum. I have reproduced one of these in full (Fig. 1), to illustrate a typical example, and I cite selectively from several of the others. Sadly, this archive was abbreviated by the introduction of standardized reporting forms in 1829. Two of those official forms remain, offering little valuable information, and there the archive of Channing’s administrative reports ends.

However, for five years early in his tenure, the record is enough to get a sense of the tensions the new professor was learning to navigate. From one perspective, it’s possible to read these reports as a predictable defense of the value of oratorical instruction. In the 1824 report, for instance, he writes: “I have often spoken of the small number of Exercises in Declamation, as an evil” (fig. 2)

Fig. 2. A portion of Channing’s 1824 report. (Faculty reports and correspondence).
I think, however, it would not be accurate to read statements like this as regret at poor performance and lack of resources. Rather, I think they should be read as a statement of apology and reassurance. The second half of the above phrase, after all, is a significant qualifier: “however, I have never thought my own duties ought to be increased.” He goes on to insist that his responsibilities were plenty for any hard-working man. The suggestion is clear: if declamations are poor, look for someone else to solve the problem.

Declamations, you see, were not only the most neglected of Channing’s responsibilities, they also happened to be the most highly scrutinized and public of them. When the board of overseers made their annual tours of the campus, students demonstrated their speaking skills at public exhibitions, an exercise at which, common opinion held, each year’s batch of graduates showed less talent. It appears that these demonstrations were a continual headache for Channing, as virtually every report includes some kind of explanation for the quality of student speaking at exhibitions. This one, possibly from 1826, is fairly typical (fig. 3):

Fig. 3. “I think it would be but friendly to state to the Committee that the assignments at Exhibition are made without the slightest reference to the Oratorical powers of the Performer & that parts merely Literary are given without any more regard to proficiency in polite literature than in Metaphysics, Geometry, &c” (Faculty reports and correspondence).
In other words, the students chosen to recite happened to be poor representatives, and more care should be taken to choose students with more innate talent. That's a recurring sentiment whenever the subject of Exhibitions comes up. At that time, no formal examinations of student compositions were made outside of Channing’s own classroom. So, although the bulk of his time and energy was most likely expended on reading student themes, the students’ performances at public speaking were the external measure of his success. It left him in the uncomfortable position of having to demonstrate improvement in a skill in which he apparently saw only limited utility, had no personal talent, and believed wasn’t even teachable anyway.

He had a few strategies for making that case, some of which will echo familiarly in the ears of modern English department administrators. Occasionally, he blames the poor performances on the students’ prior schooling, such as in fig. 1 where he suggests that he would be able to show better progress “if the pupil came to me before he had been made a positively bad reader at school.” Sometimes he argues instead for a more specialized course of instruction. Fig. 4 is one example in which, in response to an apparent suggestion that students should have more choice in their studies, Channing expresses his hope that more Oratory classes could be offered. Not because the skill in general needs improvement, but because he hopes that it will allow students to self-select based on whether they need it:

Fig. 4. “In this case, those who think of devoting themselves to Law, Divinity, or Public Life, will have an opportunity to cultivate more thoroughly an art of the highest importance to them – those who have no taste or ambition for it will attend to the usual exercises only, which are any thing but burdensome; & what is done from choice, is such study to this, I am satisfied will be done with effect. & I believe the tone of the presented exercises will be greatly raised.” (Faculty reports and correspondence).
He goes on to suggest that choice will significantly improve the quality of exhibitions without, it must be said, any further effort on his own part.

And that is one of the most common themes as he constructs his apologies for the declamations: his own responsibilities are already more than one man can handle. Several years in a row he pushes the committee to hire another professor to handle speaking, someone “with more special and yet wider duties than mine.” Effectively, he was attempting to outsource his declamation duties to someone else. It must also be said that the institution was likely also exerting pressure, keen to bring in someone more conscious of delivery, in order to counter Channing’s lack of enthusiasm for it. President Quincey’s report to the trustees in 1828, for instance, makes some rather pointed suggestions concerning the teaching of speech:

“The President deems it his duty also in relation to the department of Oratory to suggest the importance, indeed the necessity, of additional aid in the instruction in declamation, or easy and graceful delivery” (Harvard, *Papers of Josiah Quincy*).

That year, Channing finally got his wish in the form of a new professor of elocution, and it is worth lingering for a moment on that incident, because it marks a significant moment of decline in the place of oratory at Harvard, a definitive moment when Channing’s departmental re-emphasis begins to take hold.

**Digression Two: Barberous Practices**

In retrospect, the man hired for the job of teaching declamation, Jonathan Barber, has more than a whiff of the traveling snake-oil salesman about him. In the course of his long life, Barber was a self-professed expert on almost every trendy pseudo-science the early nineteenth century had to offer. He began his career as a doctor in London before emigrating to the United States and making a name for himself as one of the country’s foremost experts on elocution.
After his time at Harvard, he moved to Canada and took up a career as one of that country’s foremost experts on phrenology, the science of reading someone’s personality defects by examining the bumps in their skulls. Finally, after a brief trip back to England, he opened a homeopathy clinic in Quebec. All the while, he gave enthusiastically well attended lectures on all of his pet subjects. One Quebecois lecture attendee wrote to a friend:

Dr. Barber is lecturing on elocution and by attending them I have discovered that I am quite a novice in the service of speaking or writing correctly, although I daresay you will think it did not require any great stretch of intellect to make this discovery. (McGuire)

The man who wrote that, by the way, was a building contractor whose company had, rather remarkably, hired Barber to give lectures on elocution to its builders. If there is one positive thing that can be said with certainty about Barber, it is that he was a charismatic and persuasive speaker, and a wildly successful advocate for his own cause. Perhaps that’s why Harvard chose him to take up Channing’s slack.

A word on elocution: it is not the same thing as oratory. Whereas oratory traditionally encompasses the full range of the rhetorical canons (invention, arrangement, style, delivery, memory), elocutionists focus solely on delivery. Oratory is composition, more or less as we currently know it, but with the goal of producing speech. Elocution is merely the close study of the “correct” way to produce sounds and gestures. It was a highly artificial way of approaching speech training. Nevertheless, it was in vogue in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century because, as rhetorical training became more and more directed to the page, there was a great deal of appetite for scientific sounding solutions to the perceived decline in students’ speaking abilities. Before being hired by Harvard, Barber had published a textbook titled “A Grammar of Elocution” in which he insisted that speakers must start by learning the scientifically correct ways to
pronounce every sound in the English language before graduating to speaking whole words. A dramatic counterpoint to Channing’s suggestion that no school can make men orators, Barber believed not only that speaking could be taught, but that it was an exact and highly technical science. No doubt the Harvard administration hoped that, if Barber could just handle the technical aspects of getting students speaking correctly, Channing could simply carry on with the more theoretical aspects of rhetoric as a whole.

When he took up his position at Harvard, Barber instituted a strict and grueling regimen to improve the students’ speaking abilities. Students listened to him lecture about the proper way to hold one’s mouth and throat to pronounce the “a” sound. They imitated growling dogs to properly produce “r”. When they advanced to recitation, they spent hours memorizing speeches or poems, only to be subjected to one of the most bizarre training exercises in the history of rhetorical education. Barber invented and manufactured himself a six-foot wide spherical bamboo cage made of four vertical hoops and three horizontal ones. The student due to recite before class on a given day would, under the gaze of Barber’s extensive skull collection, climb into the bamboo cage and find himself confronted with thirty-two labeled gaps between the bamboo bars. The student would recite his memorized declamation, paying careful attention to the pronunciation, intonation, and pitch of every single sound, while thrusting his hands through designated gaps at predetermined moments, in order to produce gestures that corresponded to the appropriate emotional tones.

It’s unclear whether this had any discernable improvement on Exhibitions, but the students hated it, and Barber quickly found his persuasive charisma no match for the frustrated young Harvard undergraduates. Peabody, uncharacteristically, seems to have had a hard time being charitable toward Barber, saying:
He was probably an accomplished trainer of vocal chords. A man of respectable character, zealous in his work, and disposed to hold pleasant relations with his pupils. But he was pompous and fantastic in mien, speech and manners. (Peabody 90)

One morning, students walking to class noticed the ridiculous bamboo cage hanging from a barber pole (get it?) outside the Yard. It was never used again, and Barber retired shortly thereafter, apparently in some haste, without even waiting for the end of the term.

Barber left behind a serious distaste for artificial attention to delivery. For years afterward, he symbolized for Harvard students all the worst excesses of devotion to an outmoded art. Sadly, there is no record of what Channing thought of Barber – there are no administrative reports preserved from those particular years. However, I’d like to imagine that he felt, in some measure, vindicated: even the latest and most scientifically sound pedagogy had, indeed, failed to make the young men orators in a world that didn’t particularly need them. Perhaps some small part of him, remembering his own rebellious days, even cheered inwardly when he spotted the bamboo cage hung in effigy. But let me not steer too far into historical fiction. The facts are simply these: Barber moved on to a reasonably successful career in phrenology, and Channing carried on with what he had been doing all along.

**Composition at Harvard**

And what Channing had mostly been doing was teaching composition. This is, in fact, another one of the cases where a quick overview of Channing’s curriculum does not give a clear sense of how he expected students to divide their time and efforts, or how he divided his own. At a glance, declamations appear to dominate the curriculum, the only exercise required of all four classes. In fact, while a student might only expect to deliver a half dozen declamations each year,
a fortnightly theme ensured that students composed at least eighteen essays every year for three years. And unlike the declamations, Channing read every single theme. He marked each of them according to his own correction scheme, one of the first used in an American college context. Perhaps most remarkably, every student received verbal feedback from Channing on every theme.

Composition instruction occurred on alternate Fridays, with Channing’s rather desultory approach to declamations (or Barber’s more exacting approach) on the other weeks. Every other Friday, Channing set up shop in his recitation room for the entire afternoon. The students would filter in individually or in small groups to hand in a completed theme and to hear his remarks on their previous piece. Each student received individual feedback. Edward Hale, a member of the class of 1840, described this process:

The stuff which most of us wrote in those first themes was enough to make even optimistic angels weep. . . . But such as it was, we carried it in at three o’clock on alternate Friday afternoons. . . . You sat down in the recitation-room and were called man by man, or boy by boy, in the order in which you came into the room. . . . Everything was said with perfect kindness, and if you had said a decent thing, or thought anything that

Fig. 5. One page of a key to Channing’s correction notes, kept by William Allen, class of 1837. Channing used the marks to guide his verbal critiques. They generally appear only sparsely in student themes. (Allen)
was in the least above the mud, he was so sympathetic. Poor dear man! to read those acres of trash must have been dispiriting. (Hale 361)

Hale’s pity, it must be said, is coming 50 years later, from the perspective of a Harvard overseer who had recently seen class sizes balloon and faculty rebel against theme reading. “I thank God every day of my life,” he says later, “that Ned Channing was willing to read themes for thirty-two years” (361). Class sizes were more manageable during the early half of the century, with a class of 60 students considered exceptionally large. To read and respond to each, as well as to the two upper classes, was no doubt a daunting and impressive task, but a feasible one, and one which Channing seems, on the whole, to have much preferred to his other duties. Andrew Peabody’s perspective on the process is slightly different than Hale’s; what he admires from those fortnightly sessions is not Channing’s kindness and forbearance, but his sometimes brutal incisiveness:

On a specified day, Mr. Channing remained in session for several consecutive hours, receiving the members of the class one by one, and, guided by his own marks in the margin, made a minute criticism of the theme, not sparing censure for carelessness, or ridicule for whatever was pretentious, pompous, inflated, or otherwise than natural. . . . There were errors and deformities of style that were so dealt with that it was hardly possible that Mr. Channing’s pupil should be guilty of them more than once; for his invectives against them were so keenly pointed as to inhere lastingly in any mind capable of comprehending them. (87)

Fortnightly themes remained a key feature of university writing culture throughout the nineteenth century. Much has already been written about student themes, though most research centers on the latter half of the century when they reached their heyday under Barrett Wendell,
who transformed them into a daily exercise in an elective course. However, Channing was, if not the inventor of the fortnightly theme, certainly the popularizer of it. There is little evidence that his predecessors in the department of Rhetoric and Oratory paid much attention at all to student compositions. It is telling that, in the Harvard University Archives, there are indeed examples of student themes written during the tenures of Adams and McKean, but they are few and individual – in every case, only a single theme in isolation has been preserved. Starting in 1820, there are student themes to be found in abundance, and they are always in thick stacks, a student’s entire output for a whole year or even his whole college career. In many cases, these have been bequeathed to the university after being found kept in the writer’s possession many years later. There are two possible explanations for the differing rates of theme preservation pre- and post- 1820. The first is that Adams and McKean assigned compositions just as frequently as Channing did, but that students did not feel invested enough to preserve them. The second possibility, and I think more likely given what we know about Adams and McKean, is that they focused their energies elsewhere than written composition.

The fortnightly theme dominated Channing’s pedagogy, though, in a required course (because all courses were required) where students wrote eighteen compositions each year. And while he all but silently presided over declamations, Channing enthusiastically read and responded to hundreds of pages of compositions each week. It’s clear from the administrative reports of those early pre-Barber years that, even as he worked hard to justify students’ poor speaking skills, he also occasionally tried to make a case for the value of his work with student compositions. The writing classroom he describes accords well with the rhetor-citizen’s role he describes in *The Orator and His Times*: a speaker standing among a critical audience and answerable to the ongoing conversation. The few references he makes to this part of his job try to
convey an open and collegial classroom in which inquiry and critique run both ways.

Compositions, he says in his annual reports, are the exercises students attend to most diligently. “Criticisms are cheerfully received - & the students’ explanations of their objections to what I say are encouraged by me, and offered in quite a literary spirit” (fig. 1). Elsewhere (fig 5), he enthuses that he has always been pleased with his students’ attention to compositions, and notes the way that some otherwise struggling students manage to find their voices in writing. Such references to composition in this official record are rare, but they are striking for their stark contrast to the bored and apologetic ways with which he treats student declamations.

Fig. 6. “ The exercises in Themes were attended this last term, as usual, by the three upper classes, & I should say with great interest & to good purpose. I have always been satisfied with the attention paid to this Exercise by almost every student who is ambitious of doing well in any thing. Some good scholars, as might be expected, find that they cannot distinguish themselves in composition - & some scholars who are indolent as to other things, do well in this. (Channing, Faculty Reports and correspondence).

Those stacks of student papers, and Channing’s theme lists, are the unofficial record of what was really going on in his classes. I examine the student themes much more closely in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to point out the remarkable fact that Channing had gradually managed to redirect the course of the ponderous Harvard ship, slowly and not without occasional setbacks, such as the Barber incident, but no less deliberately. The following passage, from the lecture “A Writer’s Preparation” is, for now, best read entirely out of context. In it, Channing describes a student looking back over his education and trying to explain how he has become a
writer. Imagine, however, that it also describes the trajectory of the rhetoric department under Channing’s leadership:

A revolution has taken place in their minds, and, like others, not without a cause. It was not sudden, though it may seem so when it is first observed. It did not break out as a violent, separate event in their history. The preparation has been various, gradual and harmonious. The dull books and exercises of the rhetoric-class, we will believe, had their work to do among the other powers, and their effect has not perished, though they themselves, like other instruments, are now forgotten. (Channing, Lectures 186)

That the Harvard English department was, by the 1860s, almost totally devoted to literature and writing is a fact now taken for granted, a state of affairs that seems sudden and obvious. In truth, Channing worked gradually and deliberately, spending years taking a dual stance, even as he had in his inaugural lecture. While he maintained an official stance in favor of expanding the oratory curriculum, he had behind the scenes turned his department into primarily composition training, meeting the charge of his belief that the purpose of the modern orator was to reach the eyes and minds of readers rather than the ears and passions of listeners. It was an idea whose time had come. By the time he retired in 1852, the value of that shift in emphasis was no longer questioned. Peabody called his appointment “perhaps the most important ever made in the interest of American literature” (85). Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote admiringly that he had “turned out more good writers than any other half-dozen rhetoric teachers in America.” How he managed that, how he prepared young writers to navigate a world full texts, is a story that would no doubt resonate with modern writing teachers.

Notes: Chapter 3
It was a wealthy family who could afford to send their son across state lines to college. Indeed, the obliviously affluent Southern student is practically a stock character in most reminiscences of student life at the time.

Whately is widely acknowledged to be the first rhetorical theorist to treat composition as a separate and distinct subject. I can not verify with certainty which Whately textbook Channing assigned to his classes, but I suspect that his increasing preference for composition influenced his decision.

Peabody also highlights, as do others, that Channing was no adept at speaking himself, saying that as a speaker he had “no grace, nor any diversity of modulation; and his gestures were awkward, seeming to denote rather his discomfort at being obliged to speak than the mood of thought or feeling to which he gave expression.”

In truth, I suspect the issue was not one of class quantity but of class size. Each class held around 60 students. They attended declamations once a week, at each of which ten students would speak. At those rates, each student only declaimed perhaps five times per year. That’s not a lot of practice, even if Channing had been giving constructive feedback at the exercises.
4. Given the Multiplicity of Books...

“The multiplicity of books,” is possibly the most frequently recurring phrase in the entire archive of materials on Channing at Harvard. As I argued in the previous chapter, Channing made the fortnightly theme the centerpiece of his department’s refocused curriculum, occupying the center-stage spotlight vacated by declamations. In fact, the evidence suggests that he significantly cut back on the lecture schedule suggested by his job description so that he could devote more time to reading and commenting on themes. In this chapter, I take a closer look at those themes, which effectively shifts focus away from Channing and onto his students. What was it like to be a student in the early nineteenth century? More to the point, what was it like to be a student writer during the very earliest days of American writing pedagogies? The student themes offer a window on that experience. And that phrase, “the multiplicity of books,” is central to the story they tell, a defining quality of the world Channing believed his students inhabited. It makes regular appearances in the theme documents, a touchstone that called students’ attention to the most obvious concrete sign of the evolving literary and technological context in which they wrote.

First, though, before imposing order upon the theme materials, I think it’s important to take a moment to describe them in more detail and to acknowledge their breadth and variety.
Upon his retirement, Channing gave to his successor, Francis James Child, an imposing stack of records on the subjects he had assigned from 1823 onward, almost his entire career. In the Harvard University Archives, these are held in a single thick folder of 162 loose pages covered in Channing’s familiar handwriting. The bulk of this stack (125 pages) is made up of a single master list of themes, numbered 1-872, which grew week by week as Channing wrote new prompts. Fig. 1 shows a sample from page 5 of that document, which includes several topics on the rapid progress of American Literature. In addition to the master list, he kept a separate list for each graduating class, starting in that class’ sophomore year when their first theme was assigned. The class-specific lists are cross-referenced with the master list. So, for instance, on the page headed “Subjects of Class 1838-42,” the entry for May 19, 1842 reads simply “what is, what is not, Plagiarism 543.” Number 543 on the master list (Fig. 2) is the full version of the assigned prompt:

![Theme 543](image)

**Fig. 2.** Theme 543: “Suppose yourselves, as critics, required to pronounce upon what was stolen from another, what was justly adopted, & what was mere coincidence. In short - what is & what is not Plagiarism? (Channing, *List of Subjects*)

This elaborate system of cross-referenced lists was necessary, Channing writes in the notes and instructions he left for Child along with the lists, “to avoid giving the same or similar subjects to the same or to near-neighboring classes. . . .For several years, I have rarely used a subject twice.” In fact, if each student in the upper three classes wrote 18 essays per year, he could easily have assigned topics from the master list for more than 16 years without repeating
any. It seems that, for the most part, he preferred to add a new number to the end of his lists rather than rely on something he had tried before.

And he tried out just about everything on his students. There are political themes\textsuperscript{1}, moral and religious themes\textsuperscript{2}, historical themes\textsuperscript{3}, scientific themes\textsuperscript{4}, and themes which call for open-ended reflection.\textsuperscript{5} Making sense of such a dizzyingly eclectic assortment, finding any logic or motivating trend, is challenging; most historians haven’t bothered trying – if, indeed, they even knew these documents existed. While Channing himself occasionally appears as a background extra in histories of the field, the student themes, the actual content of the course, are almost never referenced. In the one exception I’m aware of, Sharon Crowley says only that Channing “was still assigning topics that we might call ‘political’: for example he asked his students to discuss their ‘ideal of a nation’s being independent – also of an individual’s’ and to consider ‘dependence of the cause of Freedom on the success of our institutions’” (50). In keeping with our field’s blind-spot for this era, her fleeting description of Channing’s assignments appears alongside – indeed, completely conflates Channing’s tenure with – the civic disputation traditions of the 1770s. It’s clear from the context that Crowley is relying on a secondary source for her characterization of Channing’s assignments: I.A. Anderson, in her introduction to the lectures, also describes the themes as primarily civic and political. In fairness, there are, indeed, many examples of those subjects, but to suggest that they predominate is a substantial mischaracterization which allows Crowley to paint over nearly an entire century of Harvard instruction with a single broad brushstroke. It maintains the artificial divide –central to her work and others’- between the later century, when composition history really begins in earnest, and everything that came before.
However, what I see when I look at the original documents are not primarily political themes – or, for that matter, primarily any one thing. What is immediately obvious is the sheer variety actually evident in the theme lists, the remarkable breadth of knowledge which a nineteenth century student was expected to draw upon when he took up his pen. That, I argue is the one clear unifying theme of the themes: the underlying assumption that the students responding to them are literate and opinionated about practically everything, or could be if given two weeks to marshal the appropriate resources. That assumption would have been untenable just a few years before Channing took up the Boylston position, but by the 1820s technology was changing rapidly, modern print resources - books, newspapers, magazines - were quickly becoming affordable and accessible. That fact alone marks Channing’s era as historically and rhetorically distinct from the previous decades with which it is too often conflated. And when you read the theme lists with that background in mind, a pattern starts to emerge. It begins to become clear that, for as much interest and range as Channing tried to introduce, he was above all focused on engaging students in questions of information technology and literacy. You start to see themes like these everywhere:

207 Is the diffusion of useful Knowledge likely to lessen the taste for merely elegant Literature, & a regard for exactness & finish of composition?

537 The state of a Voter or Thinker who reads only one Newspaper

And, of course, theme 18, seen in Fig. 1 above:

18 Effect on the Author of writing many Books. On the Public of the multiplication of Books.

“The multiplicity of books” was shorthand for the assumption of print access. It was practically a mantra, the subject Channing returned to most frequently in assignments and
lectures. It became the major premise, the taken-for-granted assumption that underlay much of his curriculum, an embodiment of everything he believed separated the upcoming generation of writers and readers from the generations before them. It stood for a series of still-escalating technological advances in U.S. publishing that had put books and newspapers and magazines in every home. And so, between their sophomore and senior years, nearly every student was asked to explore a sequence of surprisingly modern-seeming questions that followed from that premise.

Given the multiplicity of books...

1. How do you balance reading widely with reading closely?
2. What are the consequences of writing becoming a for-profit industry?
3. How do you overcome the anxiety of influence to say something original?

In the previous chapters, I described Edward Channing’s appointment and the early administrative challenges he faced as he gradually reoriented the curriculum. In this chapter, I refocus my lens on the experience of a single student, Henry Burroughs (1830-1834) as he writes his way through that curriculum. His themes, and some of the additional archival materials related to them, offer concrete evidence of a course of study that regularly confronted students with the above three questions and with other consequences of being a consumer of literature in a world suddenly saturated with literature, a writer with ready access to print.

**Introducing Henry Burroughs**

Under my office desk there is a large pile of assorted folders and binders filled with student papers. I occasionally kick them when I sit down, scattering the contents across the floor. For the past few years, I have had students in my writing classes compile all their work into portfolios at the end of every term, too late for me to return them conveniently. I promise to hold on to these for a year just in case one of these writers wants their work back, but no one has ever returned to collect. Every so often, instead of gathering up and neatly replacing the kicked pile,
I’ll glance at the submission date on the top paper, check the calendar on the wall, throw out the whole lot, and stretch out my legs. In this way I have become, like so many writing instructors, the de facto curator of a small but ever-rotating archive of student work. The current pile, topped by an essay titled “Is Social Media Worth It?” is well past its expiration date.

Either Channing’s students were more sentimental than mine, or he was a slightly more diligent and forward-looking curator than I am. The Harvard University Archives houses hundreds of themes written by his students. Some of them are hard to find, isolated single pieces hidden away in the personal papers of some Harvard-connected notable. For instance, among Henry David Thoreau’s manuscripts are two of his themes, written (according to Channing’s lists) in the Spring of 1837 in response to theme 360 and 362. More often, though, they are in thick stacks of 54 themes each, the entire output a single student would have produced during the course of his Harvard days.

The Harvard University Archives holdings include the themes from at least 19 students from this era, ranging from one student who started Harvard in 1819, the year of Channing’s appointment, to two students who finished their degree in 1854 under his successor. Ten of Channing’s 32 years in the position are unrepresented, but I am confident that the archives hold more themes that I have not yet uncovered. The students represented by the papers I have found are an eclectic (which is not to say diverse) bunch. Many of them, predictably, went on to the usual careers in law or the priesthood. But there are also two librarians, a farmer, a cotton manufacturer, and the country’s first classical music critic. One of them, Francis Bowen, was a political philosopher who, in the 1840s, took on Channing’s former role as editor of the North American Review. There’s a Confederate banking official and a Union field surgeon. A few of them are now otherwise quite lost to historical record and posterity, which is itself a kind of quiet...
accomplishment from anyone who inhabited the tiny and rarefied atmosphere of 19th century Harvard. Any one of them is a viable candidate for a case study of writing in the Harvard rhetoric program, but I have chosen, for reasons that I address in the coming pages, to restrict this chapter to the records of Henry Burroughs.

I have no anecdotes to introduce Mr. Burroughs. The sum total of his biography occupies three short pages in a 50-year memorial book compiled for the graduating class of 1834. The key points: he was born on Hollis Street in Boston, graduated from Harvard in 1834, wrote a dissertation on astronomical measurement, was ordained in the Episcopal Church, married, held priestships at congregations in New Jersey and Massachusetts, lost a son during the Civil War, and died in 1882. Like most of his classmates, Burroughs followed a conventional path after graduation, and left behind few records. Having read his themes, I can only flesh out that biography with a few minor details, the sorts of endearing quirks and preferences one can always glean from student writing: he was (possibly thanks to his professor’s influence) a great admirer...
of Sir Walter Scott, he often finished his signature with a spiral shaped flourish in the shape of a tornado (Fig. 3), and he enjoyed visiting Hampton Beach (Fig. 4).

I have selected Burroughs as the case study for this chapter for three reasons. The first is because of the sketchiness and ordinariness of his biography. I have selected Burroughs as a case study for this chapter precisely because his biography is so sketchy and so ordinary. Channing often enough receives credit for being the little-known mentor behind so many great nineteenth century writers that I felt it was important to capture the experience of the average student. If Thoreau (whose time at Harvard overlapped with Burroughs’) shows himself, in his themes, to be especially attuned to the challenges and opportunities a writer faced in his day – well, that’s to be expected from one of the great literary minds of the century. If students like Burroughs write about the same things – that could suggest a curricular emphasis. If that were the only criteria behind my selection, however, then almost any of the 19 students would do just as well.

The second reason for his selection is that Burroughs’ papers happen to be more complete than most, and slightly better preserved. The other students left their portfolios of themes in messy stacks of individual essays, often out of order or missing a few entries. Burroughs’ collection, though, was neatly bound at some point, which has preserved them well enough that some of the fainter features are still visible. Channing’s corrections and comments, for instance, which he always made in pencil, are often all but worn away on many other students’ papers, but remain highly legible in Burroughs’. Bound together with the themes are a mathematical proof and several forensics, the more explicitly argumentative essays assigned to seniors. Officially, the forensics belonged to no single department – they were a sort of non-departmental exam due every few weeks – but they do offer an additional window into composition at Harvard, and the subjects provided for these have Channing’s fingerprints all over them. Filed separately from this
volume is one more artifact belonging to Burroughs, the notebook he kept during his third year, much of which is devoted to detailed notes on Channing’s senior year lecture sequence. Having these additional documents available has allowed me to, in a few key instances, compare and triangulate sources. In particular, it’s possible to see how the lectures Channing actually delivered that year differed from the published versions he compiled twenty years later, and how the theme topics sometimes built on those lectures.

Collectively, the Burroughs papers constitute a nearly complete record of the composition instruction received by one student in the early 1830s, just as Channing was reaching the middle of his career, after the conflict of his appointment and curricular refocusing had settled down. In what follows, I am, of course, offering up only a small portion of the fifty-four themes, five forensics, and twenty-one lectures kept by Burroughs, which themselves constitute just a small portion of the available record of this period. All histories are partial. But in offering up this modest sampling, I seek to open a window on a period which has often been overlooked, or at best mischaracterized as composition prehistory, a time when classical rhetoric (channeled through Scotland) reigned. In fact, what Henry Burroughs’ papers prove is that, while many aspects of the student experience may still have been heavily influenced by the classical tradition, writing instruction was decidedly not. There was, in fact, a dynamic writing program in place during this period, one which often engaged students in very current questions about how to write effectively during a period of technological growth.

I have organized this profile into three sections, one for each year Burroughs wrote themes, and in each section I focus primarily on a single theme from that year. Each addresses, in some form, one of the three questions that, at the start of this chapter, I argued were central issues in Channings courses: how to read and write critically, the consequences of writing for
profit, and the limitations of originality. In other words, I point to places where Burroughs explores some logical extension of the premise: "given the multiplicity of books..." That motif does not appear in every fortnightly theme, or even every other – the themes are eclectic at best, and I will try to offer some sense of the variety along the way – but they recur with enough frequency to be significant, and with greater force as Burroughs moved into his final year and prepared to enter a world flooded with texts.

**Sophomore Year: Fall 1831-Spring 1832**

**Critical Consumption**

Henry Burroughs arrived at Harvard in the Fall of 1830 at the then-typical age of 15, the same year that Emily Dickinson was born and a locomotive was first raced against a horse (the horse won). In Chapter 3 I noted that, even under Channing’s new regime, Freshmen did very little writing at Harvard, their rhetorical exercises for that first year restricted mainly to recitations: in 1830 that meant reading, memorizing, and reciting from Whateley’s *Elements of Rhetoric*. Ordinarily, these were the kind of strict, classical exercises that have become a stereotype of 19th century education, and were no doubt valuable when an extensive mental storehouse and easy verbal facility were the main objectives of rhetorical training. For Channing’s part, he apparently believed his approach to recitations was friendlier and more progressive than most, encouraging his charges to summarize in their own words rather than simply memorize, and to question any precepts that did not correspond with their experiences.

Burroughs would not have begun writing themes until his sophomore year, the same year that William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator* in Boston and Charles Darwin set sail on the *H.M.S. Beagle*. Fig. 5 is a copy of the list of themes for the class of 1834:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>College year 1831-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 10</td>
<td>The Turk's Algebra.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Account of the Greek fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 4</td>
<td>Account of the Greek fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Account of the Greek fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 8</td>
<td>Account of the Greek fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 17</td>
<td>Account of the Greek fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>Jan. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 28</td>
<td>History of If.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 17</td>
<td>History of If.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 27</td>
<td>Of studying antiquities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18</td>
<td>Greek Lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2</td>
<td>expectation of a prize.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Subject of Class 1830-34**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>College year 1833-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 10</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 12</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 12</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 8</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 10</td>
<td>The elements of geometry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5. Channing’s list of themes for the class of 1834.
I have also included in the appendix to this chapter a transcription of that list, made for ease of reference. In the transcript, I have altered the formatting slightly, but I have maintained Channing’s short-hand descriptions exactly as written. The Examination Theme, though originally inserted afterward in a margin, belongs chronologically at the end of spring term 1832, so I have added it there. The bolded entries are my addition, the themes that seem to be nudging students to explore their relationship to the expanding world of print and authorship. When Burroughs and his classmates began writing these themes, they followed a regular two-week pattern of assignment, planning, composing, feedback, and correction. Composition instruction occurred on alternate Fridays, with Channing’s rather desultory approach to declamations on the other weeks. (It’s also likely that Burroughs and his classmates received the bulk of their declamation training from Barber – it’s unclear to me what the exact division of labor was between him and Channing at this time.)

Their introduction to this feedback process was gradual, however. The sophomore class was often not expected to compose original material at first, but were assigned translations of Greek or Latin passages in order to focus on style and correctness. Channing later discontinued Translations in 1844 (“& wish I had done so earlier”), but Burroughs’ class still began by translating from Horace and Ovid, and summarizing a lecture from Blair they were reading at that time. For each composition, they came before Channing and received his corrections and a score on a 48 point scale.8

It was not until the end of the fall term, a few weeks before Christmas, that the sophomores were given space to compose something of their own, and the very first real theme they were given was on a popular but short-lived printing trend:

172: Some account of the Annuals for 1832, and your opinion of that kind of writing.
The Annuals referred to in the topic are literary annuals, often otherwise called gift-books or keepsake books. They first appeared in England in the 1820s, and it would be difficult to find a more perfect embodiment of the new commercial age of print. They were lavishly decorated and illustrated collections of essays, short fiction, and poetry, typically published each Fall and intended to be given as gifts for Christmas. The stories and essays, usually sentimental and religious in nature, were nevertheless often provided by some of the leading popular writers of the day: Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, and Robert Browning in England. The annual fad reached American shores in 1827 and lasted until the early 1850s, during which time they served a vital function in the cause of promoting American literary voices, providing a forum for native authors who, thanks to the ease of pirating foreign work, struggled to find a market. Nathaniel Hawthorne,
Edgar Alan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow all contributed regularly. Annuals also almost always contained steel engravings, a new technology which, in the 1820s, allowed for mass production of illustrations. In this theme, then, Channing was expecting Burroughs to be familiar (or quickly become familiar) with a literary tradition that was only a few years old, and to comment on the cultural relevance of a popular fad brought on by expanding technologies.

Fig. 5a is a portion of Burroughs’ response, which begins, in the timeless tradition of student compositions everywhere, with a generic account of the history of gift-giving, a kind of “since the beginning of time” journey through the gifting traditions of history:

The custom of giving presents is very ancient. Among the Romans it was usual for clients to give presents to their patrons, citizens to the Emperor, and friends to one another, on the days of public feasts or birth-days, and on the first of January. This custom has been continued until the present time. . . .

Channing’s parallel marks in the margin indicate that he intended to discuss this introduction with Burroughs. (In marginal notes, students hoped for a mark that indicated the writing was unparalleled.) When, a few paragraphs in, he finally digs into his subject, his response is tellingly ambiguous: defensiveness punctuated by moments of rote concern for the dilution of high culture. He notes, for instance, that “there has been a great improvement in the arts of binding and engraving” so that every year’s Annuals are better than the last. As the tradition had become more established, trivial writings had been replaced by those of well-respected authors. The result, he believes, is that the Annuals are, though frivolous, a good introduction to respectable culture, an opportunity for more casual readers to be exposed to the works of great writers and be inspired to read them more extensively. They are, in short, a good gateway to real
literature. This waffling cautiousness is short-lived, however, and likely a concession to Channing, because in the next paragraph Burroughs writes admiringly of the sheer variety and entertainment value of these collections:

Burroughs would not yet have sat through Channing’s lecture series, so it’s unclear whether he knew while writing that his professor was liable to push back against this sentiment. For Channing, this fickleness of the mind, the inability to apply oneself to a single topic and task, was a by-product of the proliferation of popular literature. It needed to be resisted by the students in his charge, because careful reading and good writing happened when one was disciplined, focused on the task at hand. He was not, it must be said, against popular literature – far from it. In *Habits of Reading*, a lecture on how writers should read, he warns not against reading superficial books but against reading books superficially. And several students speak of pleasant evenings at Professor Channing’s lodgings, discussing the most recent publications⁹. However, he cautions students against what he calls literary foppery, the desire to know a great deal about books in order to be seen as fashionable. That kind of reading might be fine for a man of leisure, an already established professional, but reading:
is to be the student’s business. It is, for the present, his profession. It is his work, not his play; the stuff and not the ornament. . . . Besides, the sole object is not to make one a man of learning and exact taste, but also to form in him that most difficult to form of all habits, the habit of attention. (Channing, Lectures 204-205)

Channing was thus keenly aware of the tradeoff presented by cheap and proliferous reading material: that as more material became available to more readers, people tended to read more widely but less deeply and less selectively, and he believed that lightly flitting from topic to topic bred laziness and impatience. And so, at least in his lecture materials, he always firmly emphasized the importance of reading deeply on one subject - not for the purpose of becoming an expert, but simply to keep one’s powers of concentration and attention keenly honed.

The annuals represented that tradeoff perfectly, between the democratizing spread of information and literature and the dangers of embracing that spread uncritically. It must be said that this concern often manifested itself as a generational tension as well, between the younger print-natives who were comfortable with voracious consumption and their mentors who advocated more caution and discernment. There are moments in this theme when Burroughs appears to be offering at least lip-service to that sense of caution, half-hearted concessions to the more literarily cautious, as when he says notes in his conclusion that “Annuals, if read to excess and to the exclusion of more important works, would, doubtless, produce a bad effect.” What bad effects he had in mind are not specified, but one might read in that phrase something akin to the avid Facebook user opining in a school assignment on the nebulous dangers of social media.

What telegraphs much more strongly in the theme are the moments, as in Fig. 5b, when Burroughs praises and celebrates the very qualities that Channing probably hoped he would be
skeptical of, as when he singles out one of that year’s annuals as particularly varied and therefore praiseworthy:

Fig. 5c. “The annuals of 1832 are more pleasing and acceptable, from the variety of pieces which they contain. The Token possesses this variety to a great degree, containing pieces on various subjects from the gravest to the gayest, so that it may be taken as a companion of our gloomy and thoughtful, or of our sprightly hours. If, on the contrary, it contained pieces on one class of subjects alone, many of its charms would be lost.

There are two features of this brief passage that I think are worth noticing. The first is that Burroughs refers as evidence not to annuals as a generic phenomenon, but to a specific annual: The Token, published between 1829 and 1842. The specific edition he cites, 1832 included, among many other selections, four early Hawthorne stories and three poems each by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Burroughs is clearly familiar with the annual genre, either because he took the time to track one down in order to write this theme, or, as I think more likely, he was already a consumer of gift books. We might quibble that he doesn’t exactly reference specific selections from the 1832 Token, but I think that would be critiquing the essay with a too-modern lens; the theme genre often left very little space for detailed development, and in any case Burroughs is trying to make a broader point about variety being a key draw of the gift books. That is the second feature I see as significant here. This is the demonstration of the premise he lays out earlier in Fig. 5b (premise: the mind delights in variety;
demonstration: *The Token* provides stories for any mood and situation). The conclusion he reaches: though readers should be somewhat cautious, “among the periodicals of the present age, they stand foremost in beauty, and form a highly appropriate present for a friend.”

I read Burroughs’ response to this theme as a celebration of a trendy literary fad, a defense of reading as light entertainment rather than just serious vocation, and an optimistic take on the net good resulting from the multiplicity of books. Even more interestingly, those views were likely at odds with Channing’s, or at least failed to properly explore complicating points of view. Because while I expect that Channing approved of any publication that provided an outlet for American writers, I’m also confident that he would have had strong words of caution about the mindless variety that is so central to what his pupil seems to admire. Of course, I don’t know what feedback Burroughs received when he stood before Channing the following week for his response, but I think I am on firmly supported ground to suggest that he was probably challenged to complicate his ideas. Channing probably asked him to expand on those implied but glossed over moments of tension. Yes, variety is fun, and access to literature is surely a good thing. But does that variety lead one to read less reflectively? Does it encourage laziness and literary foppery? That is certainly the approach I would have taken with Burroughs, very similar to the approach I often do take with students who write glowing and uncomplicated paeans to technological progress.

Similar themes appear on every class’ list, usually in the very first year. Often these “critical reading themes” take a form that we might mistake as simply literary: students are asked to assess the quality of a kind of literature. Many of the themes back in Fig. 1 are good examples. But note that these are not analytical questions, as themes often became in the latter half of the century under Child. The students aren’t being asked to explain and critique literary techniques
or prove their familiarity with the Great Works. Rather, they are being asked to reflect on their personal relationship to new forms of literature, how their modern experience with the printed word shapes them as consumers and producers of it. Make no mistake, that is a concern about technology and progress; it’s about class too, and protecting good-old-days intellectual standards from erosion, but technology lurks ever in the background, the root cause that needs to be investigated (given the multiplicity of books). And Burroughs’ response suggests that students, as ever, may have been more willing to embrace the new, even as their instructors urged caution.

After that first real theme, around Christmas of 1831, Burroughs and his classmates were from then on in the thick of Channing’s wide-ranging lists, and for the remainder of the year Channing largely avoided literary topics. They wrote about how young and old nations value their histories differently, why people study antiquities, the use of exile as a punishment. In February, Channing asked them to select passages from their personal reading that they felt were particularly “sublime” and to comment on what made them so; Burroughs chose all of his from *Paradise Lost*. In May, Burroughs wrote a highly critical theme about phrenology, possibly a tense subject given that Jonathan Barber, the elocutionist introduced in Chapter 3, was still a member of the department, subjecting students to both his bamboo cage and his conjectures on the meaning of skulls. The class ended the year on an open reflection, the one excerpted above in Fig. 4: “105 Describe any scene or occurrence that has interested you” and Burroughs, in one of his longest and most vividly written themes of the year, describes a visit to Hampton Beach in New Hampshire, hoping to find the opportunity to return there during the upcoming break.

**Junior Year: Fall 1832-Spring 1833**

**Writing for Personal Gain**

If Burroughs made it back to the beach that summer, he never had a chance to write about it. He returned to Harvard for his junior year in August of 1832, at precisely the time that, on
another continent, Pavel Schilling was demonstrating the first electric telegraph. Closer to home, Andrew Jackson, a nationalist demagogue who frequently invoked Harvard intellectuals as examples of the out-of-touch ruling class, was in the midst of a campaign for reelection. Channing began the year with a literary theme - “214 Of the objections to admitting supernatural agents into modern plays or novels” – once again suggesting that he expected his students to be remarkably up to date on the current literary scene.

Early in September, he assigned theme number 216: “What distinction would you draw between the style proper for conversation, for writing, and for debate. See what they all have in common.” Burroughs’ response is, unfortunately, messy and meandering, easily the most heavily corrected and over-written in his entire collection, done in a scrawling hand that veers so often toward illegibility that it appears the response was written in some haste (Fig 6). Channing almost certainly believed so, as his editorial marks are uncharacteristically numerous. He spent a lot of time on this one, and Burroughs, perhaps chastened, took the time to make corrections, to emend phrasing and cross out extraneous clauses. Fig. 6 shows one of these pages, a section in which Burroughs, ironically, comments that writing allows one time to concentrate, to think slowly and formulate a more finished style than one might be capable of in an extemporaneous conversation or even formal debate. On the final page, the theme offers a rare glimpse of Channing’s mildly caustic response style (Fig. 7).
This piece is worth closer study, especially by those with further interest in how rhetorical instruction made the transition from oral to written modes – that a student is able to take for granted the academic prominence of composition over verbal disputation is, as we’ve seen, something fairly new to Harvard. I include it here for other reasons, though. It serves as an example of one of the most challenging aspects of studying student writing from this era: with no tradition of revision, and with most feedback delivered orally, it’s hard to make many claims about what aspects of writing were actually discussed, what Harvard’s in-the-classroom emphasis was, or whether it had much direct impact on the development of a student as a writer. This theme shows the very ordinary and seemingly unhelpful correction process students like Burroughs went through. Channing had a list of correction marks which students kept handy (several copies are still extant), and which guided his verbal feedback. Fig. 4 shows at least one of these: brackets indicating that the included words should be eliminated. Elsewhere, a W in the margin which indicates a passage that “abound[s] in needless words, truisms, or trite remarks,” one of the more common marks. Burroughs corrected what he could without beginning from scratch, Channing likely never saw the changes, and they moved on immediately to the next topic.

This year’s themes, though, offer an unusual opportunity to observe a break in that routine, a rare example of a student, subsequent to hearing Channing’s remarks, getting a chance to undertake a complete revision from square one. It came about out of administrative desperation. At the end of each year, students were given an Examination Theme, which served
as a kind of loose program assessment tool read by the Examining Committee of the college.

Channing felt it was improper to comment on these themes, “since they at least professed to be specimens of what the students could do of themselves under my teaching.” But they were apparently never satisfactory, and were a source of frustration to both Channing and the committee. That he was now being held accountable for the poor quality of student writing rather than the poor quality of student declamations must have felt like a very small victory indeed. In the end, Burroughs’ class was the last one to write an examination theme.

In a last ditch attempt to raise the quality of the samples he sent to the committee, he appears to have decided to stack the deck in his and his students’ favor: he chose a topic that he had already assigned earlier in the year. We might infer that Channing hoped his students would have the opportunity not just to make surface corrections, but to attend as well to the *substance* of their theme, to produce more carefully thought-out pieces for the Committee. He
could offer this opportunity while remaining technically true to his belief that it was not proper for him to correct the Examination Theme. The topic he chose to revisit:

222: Of pecuniary rewards for literary productions as prizes for Dissertations, and stipulated sums for books or periodical contributions.

This theme was first assigned in November of 1832, and Burroughs’ first response to it (Fig. 8) shows that, as in the previous year, he is still exploring, in sometimes superficial ways, how the publishing business was changing his world. He begins by celebrating the multiplicity of books, boasting that, in modern America (Fig. 8b):

It’s notable that books are an item of conspicuous consumption for Burroughs. For the wealthy, they are sometimes simply ornaments, indicators of the informed good taste of the possessor – mere literary foppery. For the working classes they are aspirational items, affordable enough to provide a means of information and economic advancement previously unavailable. But whereas the previous year he wrote about the consumption of books, this theme is really more about the production of them. The logic of his theme runs something like this: books are
everywhere and everyone has them, but writing is really difficult and time consuming, so money must be inducing authors to produce. He dismisses fame and charity as sufficient motives for most writers, insisting that, “few are willing or able to devote their time and attention to the gratification of others, without any prospect of advantage to themselves.” Perhaps the most striking feature of this theme is how modern it seems. Strip away the nineteenth century handwriting and this might be a first draft from one of my own students; it repeats key words from the prompt as frequently as possible, it mimics in passing several key concepts and phrases from Channing’s lectures, it shifts quickly between subjects in a way that suggests the student is exploring ideas that aren’t fully formed yet. Burroughs says nothing specific about payment for books or periodicals, a subject about which he probably knew very little, but the final paragraph, where he shifts to the subject of prizes for dissertations, is a delightfully selfish expression of student attitudes toward writing (Fig. 8c):

![Handwritten page](image)

Fig. 8c. “To young men money is especially acceptable. In this country where large fortunes are soon divided among children and heirs, every one must prepare to make his own fortune. Education constantly draws from the purse without ever returning any thing. The strongest inducement that can be held out, is to offer them both money and opportunities of improvement, at the same time.”

The following year, Burroughs wrote a dissertation (which, at the time, was something akin to a modern poster presentation) titled simply Aberration, but, sadly, there is no evidence that he
received any pecuniary reward for it. To Burroughs, writing was a form of labor, difficult and mentally taxing labor for which one deserved to be remunerated. Books themselves, the possession of them, had long been a signal of social standing, but now producing them, adding to the store of published knowledge in the world, was a tangible means of improving one’s real economic condition.¹²

That motif became even more pronounced when he returned to the topic in June. The examination theme is a dramatically improved piece of writing, both longer and more focused. It’s clear that Burroughs was working from the first version, because the opening paragraphs are nearly the same, and there are similarities of phrasing throughout that suggest a writer copying over from a rough draft. In general, though, he has fleshed out his ideas, admitting more complexity and detail, particularly in his treatment of writing as a form of labor, of hard but attainable work that anyone could pursue. But instead of letting that assertion stand alone, he now explores the implications of it in two ways. First, he defends against objections that money is a cheap and inappropriate

Fig. 9a. A later page in Burroughs’ Examination Theme. Although the first pages of the two drafts are very similar, he fleshes out his later arguments in the rewrite. Here, he discusses writing as a form of profitable labor.
incentive to produce literature. More notably, he considers the consequences to literature when writing becomes an economic act, noting that successful authors must consider the broad popularity of their works first:

The aim of an author who writes for money is to please the people. Unless his works are popular, they will not meet with a good sale, and his object will be defeated. He is obliged to amuse, in order to please. . . . Novels and magazines will bring in a fortune, while scientific and philosophical writers barely obtain a living.

Burroughs is invoking an image of an author as not just an informer but an entertainer, and a popular entertainer at that. Interestingly, he sets it in contrast to writing for intellectual or academic purposes, which he dismisses as unprofitable. That definition of author, as laborer, informer, and entertainer, was brand new, a product of the print revolution which put affordable books, newspapers, and magazines in every household, of the multiplicity of books. It also put the means of producing and distributing those same printed materials in more peoples’ hands. It made men, even some uneducated men, authors. That Burroughs feels the need to defend this new, more democratic vision of authorship suggests that it was still a source of some anxiety, at least among the Harvard academic establishment. The diffusion of knowledge is, he insists, a net good, even at the expense of a supposed dwindling of literary rigor. In one passage, which echoes his defense of gift books, he writes:

Works of light reading are not so injurious as they may at first appear. No book can be read without learning something. Useful and solid information is often concealed in a mass of light reading. And in this disguise it finds its way into houses whose doors would be closed to a work of serious and instructive character coming with a serious title.
This is not simply a matter of quantity outweighing quality. Rather, he is arguing that quantity and quality are not mutually exclusive, or perhaps that quality should be redefined along economic rather than academic lines: is it “useful” to as many people as possible, and can the writer thereby gain from it? Is the labor that the author undertakes compensated appropriately? In short, is the writing marketable?

The changes Burroughs made between his two responses are significant, in that they show how his thinking about these issues has evolved significantly, or at least deepened, over the course of a single year. Some of that evolution may be a direct result of individual feedback from Channing, but I think it just as likely that this was a recurring topic of discussion for the entire class. That this topic was repeated as an examination theme, the only such example in the entire archival record, suggests that it was a matter of some importance. Or, at least, that Channing felt all his students had enough to say, were well enough prepared, that they might turn out a better-than-average essay for the committee. He could have chosen any of the 17 other themes the junior class had written that year: the feelings of the American colonists toward Great Britain, examples of “deluge” and “darkness” in literature, the purpose of May Day fairs and other charities. Instead, he had students revisit a question about the economic rewards of good writing, a new and not entirely accepted model for authorship that was in the Harvard consciousness in large part because Channing himself had placed it there. Similar (often, nearly identical) themes appear on almost every class list, often in the Junior year: What dangers to literature are apprehended from the present low prices of books in this country? Which class of literary publication – poetry, history, novels - offers to writers the best pecuniary return? Themes like this, and the students’ responses to them clearly place the writer at the center of an economic transaction, a configuration which required them to attend to aspects of writing that
previous generations never needed to consider, one of the more prominent of which merited a few comments in the final paragraphs of Burroughs’ theme, something added to the later examination draft, where he offers encouragement (and more than a little chastisement) to the writer who can't find anything to say:

Fig. 9b. “Laziness is industriousness in finding excuses. But there are so many books, that information may be readily acquired on any subject. . . . Minds are so unlike that we can seldom read an essay on any subject without having a different view from that presented by the author. Thus originality is within the reach of all, and he who has not sufficient industry to think, may compile.”

There is an odd tension in that comment, one that expresses a key concern of writers in Burroughs' time. On the one hand, he encourages compilation as a perfectly legitimate mode of writing, one that is simple and productive where sources are abundant. On the other, his comments acknowledge that a reluctance to write often stems from a fear of being derivative, that in an environment where writing is marketable, the pressure to produce something that stands out, something original, can be stifling. The anxiety inherent in being expected to compose meaningful new material in the face of the copious and eclectic sources already sitting on people's shelves would become a significant point of emphasis in the final year.
Senior Year: Fall 1833-Spring 1834

Cultivating Originality

In the Fall of 1833, Edgar Allan Poe, widely believed to be the first well known American to make a living on writing alone, began experimenting with prose stories (many of his earliest attempts would be published in annual gift books). In September, the first daily newspaper, *The New York Sun*, began publication. And Henry Burroughs began his senior year just in time to rub elbows with Henry David Thoreau. It was an unusual year for Burroughs and his classmates, interrupted by the largest student protest in Harvard’s history, which led to a week-long complete campus shutdown in late February – note the atypical three-week gap in the class theme list between Feb. 21 and Mar. 14.\(^\text{13}\) In spite of the interruption, the seniors took on more academic work, more writing, than any of the underclassmen. The fortnightly themes continued at the usual pace, but they were also expected to write five forensics, which were similar to themes but argumentative rather than expository: the writer took a position and defended it.

Seniors also attended Channing’s lecture sequence, and Burroughs took notes on each of the lectures. Note-taking at Harvard was a thorough business, a reflection of the highly memorization-based pedagogies then in place in most other classes. One of the first things you’ll notice about Burroughs’ notebook is that it doesn’t look like notes at all, but like a fully formed and organized transcript of what he heard. In class, students would typically take sketchier notes first, often dividing the labor among each other. After class, they would gather in groups to reconstruct the lecture word-for-word, as nearly as they could, and copy it down in their official notebooks. The resulting notes are sometimes tonally erratic, less polished than the later published lectures, with more conversational diversions and half-elaborated thoughts - closer, in short, to a spoken cadence. These later, more finished notes are the ones that Burroughs left to the archives, and they differ from the published volume Channing later prepared in several other
significant ways, revealing a much heavier bias in favor of literary criticism and practical advice for writers. Of the twenty-one lectures transcribed in the notebook, probably the total for the year, the first six treat the four types of oratory, corresponding to roughly the first eight published lectures. The next five were on literary criticism (two on forms of criticism, one on poetry, one on criticism of poems and novels, one an analysis of Scott’s novels – he really loved Scott). The remaining ten, nearly half of the total for that year, are about writing. Many of these are on subjects related to the surface mechanics of writing – the proper composition of a sentence, a lecture on choosing words precisely – but just as many reveal an awareness of the actual practice of writing, a concern for the students’ experiences when they sat down to put pen to paper, attempts to speak to their hesitations and to get the ink flowing. It appears that one of the most prominent of the issues addressed is precisely the one which Burroughs had begun to explore at the end of the pecuniary rewards theme: the anxiety that grew from the mandate for originality.

Harvard’s students certainly struggled regularly with that anxiety, if the frequency with which Channing broached the subject is any gauge. For them, it was a natural extension of the multiplicity of books: the enormous literary access their generation enjoyed had fundamentally altered the nature of invention, the traditional processes by which subjects and material for composition are generated. In ancient schemas, invention was a wholly interior process of discovery, a series of heuristics designed to help a speaker or writer think through all of the possible approaches to a subject – Adams treated invention in precisely this way in his Boylston lecture sequence. Channing, however, dismissed those schemas out of hand as “of no practical use” to the current age. Invention had become largely exterior, a process of gathering, reading, and processing in the attempt to find something that could be added: “the meaning of invention
has now become less wide,” he wrote in one lecture. “[Now] It is used to signify the production of new scenes or incidents, or of new combinations” (Burroughs, Notes on the Lectures). That relatively recent mandate, the mandate for originality, was a natural consequence of the exteriorizing of invention, the need to interact with other texts coupled with the economic pressure to produce something that was marketably unique. Invention had become about striking an appropriate balance between influence (which had grown far easier) and originality (which had grown correspondingly more challenging).

You see this tension throughout the lecture notes and relevant themes, classic manifestations of what Harold Bloom called, in 1973, the anxiety of influence. Bloom writes mainly about poets, who, he argues, are often hindered in their creative processes by their ambiguous relationships to their precursors - but his theory has often been extended to other creative genres. Because poets are often inspired to write after reading others’ poetry they are in danger of producing highly derivative work. Before writing The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom spent a decade studying the Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, including Channing protégés like Thoreau and Emerson, emphasizing their struggle to cast off the influence of precursors like Milton, Browning, and Spenser (all three of which appear with some frequency in the theme subjects or in students' responses to them). For Bloom, the greatest poets and writers are those who manage to create original work in spite of the pressure of influence.

But casual and novice writers are subject to the anxiety of influence just as keenly as the literarily ambitious, and perhaps especially so in eras when the field of writing seems to be expanding too fast to keep up with, as it was during the 1830s. The subject is addressed most directly in lectures 12 and 13, a little more than half-way through senior year. According to Burroughs’ notes, Channing expressed this balancing act by positing two flawed, intentionally
extreme current philosophies of invention: the writer who looks to books for inspiration, and the writer who spurns them in fear of influence. He describes those two philosophies this way (Fig. 10):

Fig. 10. From Burroughs’ notes: “Some students of books. . . think that all subjects have been treated in the best manner by standard authors, & that it is foolish and presumptuous, to require any more information than they have given or to attempt any thing new. - Of an opposite kind are the pretenders to genius who despise all books & look for knowledge in their own minds, for its materials, in the world.” (Burroughs, Notes on the Lectures)

It’s clear that he sees both of these writers as unproductive. The first is so paralyzed by the breadth of his influences that he gives up in despair, failing to pause to reflect deeply and wonder whether what he reads corresponds to his own experience of the world. The other is so intent on avoiding influence that he isolates himself from current conversation, writing ungrounded reflections for an audience of one. Both are to be avoided. Channing expresses this more starkly and succinctly in a published lecture, “A Writer’s Habits”: “There are madmen and sluggards in cells as well as in libraries.”

The false choice between hermit and librarian was a subject of a theme in October of that year, once again disguised and wrapped up in a question about current publishing trends:

254 The use or mischief of Anas, Scrap Books, Collections of anecdotes, as the Percy Anecdotes, D'Israeli's curiosities of literature &c.
“Anas” appears to have referred, at the time, to collections of miscellany associated with a single person, like the famous volume of Thomas Jefferson’s memoranda which had recently been published. However, the other two kinds of volumes, scrapbooks and anecdote collections, are far more interesting. Both of the specific volumes mentioned were wildly popular volumes in 1833. Near cousins of the Annuals, anecdote collections were big business in the publishing world, a way for readers with limited money or shelving to gain small bites of knowledge about a wide variety of historical and literary figures. D'Israeli's was the more lastingly famous, a hodge-podge of short essays, each a few pages long, on topics as wide-ranging as the history of gloves, the use of puns by Cicero, saints carrying their heads in their hands, and the drinking customs in England (which asserts that drunkenness is a swiftly waning historical fad).  

14 The Percy Anecdotes, published pseudonymously by a pair of London
periodical editors, were similar in structure and style, though the entries tended to be far shorter and significantly less eccentric. The collected anecdotes are not dissimilar to student themes, in which the author reflects on the significance of a topic, and perhaps provides a brief tale of an historic or public figure. Both *Curiosities* and *Anecdotes* are further notable for the ways they took advantage of commercial publishing trends of the day: *Curiosities* by releasing expanded editions and supplements every few years, and *Anecdotes* by publishing in 20 monthly volumes to which readers purchased a subscription. Both were cutting-edge practices.

More to the point, volumes like these trafficked in a sort of gleeful derivativeness, collecting and rehashing hearsay, commonplaces, well-known aphorisms, historical profiles, and morality tales - conveniently packaging a wide variety of learning for the masses, but adding very little in the way of original material to the republic of letters. Copies of both were undoubtedly common on Cambridge bookshelves, and by asking students to write about them, Channing is forcing them to reflect on how their own creative processes are aided or hindered by the ready availability of pre-existing material, how they balance influence with originality. Would they be hermits, spurning a convenient reference for material, or would they be librarians, mere collectors of others’ work?

Burroughs’ response is especially intriguing when read next to the Annuals theme from two years before. In many ways, this is simply a repetition of that earlier theme, drawing attention to a very similar literary phenomenon. However, I read in this later theme evidence that Burroughs’ thinking has evolved in two very telling ways. First, he has adopted a more cautiously thoughtful approach to literary consumption. In stark contrast to his celebration of the eclectic variety of the Annuals, he now expresses an apparently sincere concern that reading these collections will bestow merely the surface appearance of great learning. The problem, it
seems, is in the disconnectedness of the anecdotes, the fact that they are detached and decontextual bytes of information (Fig. 11b):

Having by now apparently adopted (or at least learned to mirror) his instructor’s distaste for “mere literary foppery,” Burroughs telegraphs his skepticism of these collections quite strongly in terms that echo Channing’s instruction. No surprise: as before, deep and reflective reading is part of the antidote, avoiding the impulse, embodied by texts like both the anecdotes and annuals, to flit lightly from subject to subject like a Wikipedia link surfer. While they may provide useful and interesting material for one’s mental storehouse, interesting trivia the writer might call on to add spice to his compositions, they do not open any conversation. By virtue of their breadth and variety, they falsely suggest that there is no topic under the sun that remains uncovered by modern writers – it’s enough to stifle the pen. But what Burroughs seems to have picked up from his instruction is that the anxiety of influence is a false construct, based on an overestimation of the benefits of the multiplicity of books. Those who are overwhelmed by the breadth of material available might fail to appreciate that the depths of a topic can never truly be
plumbed. And it is depth, close study, synthesis, and reflection on a given topic where original writing might still be produced (Fig. 11c):

For a student writing in an educational system that has often been portrayed as top-down, agonistic, and inattentive to students’ own voices and opinions, I find this passage surprisingly empowering. That is, perhaps unexpectedly, the second way Burroughs has evolved over the course of his time in Channing’s classes. In a nearly identical assignment two years earlier, he spent the bulk of his theme writing admiringly of how much there was to read and enjoy. By his senior year, he is confidently asserting the power of his own voice to add meaningfully to the conversations he finds there. Most other depictions of higher education in the early nineteenth century – Brereton’s “old university” model, for instance - leave very little space for the confidence this student shows in his own intellectual and communicative powers – his belief that through reading, reflection, and writing, he can add his own ideas to the republic of letters.

Fig. 11c. “But if a writer aiming at originality wishes to obtain materials for thought, and to lead his mind to originality, let him shun such light reading. . . . Nothing is of more efficacy in causing the mind to produce something of its own than long, hard, study. . . . And, besides this, the more information the mind has in any branch of learning, the greater is the hope that it will bring out something original; for no subject can be exhausted. Something may be added to the arguments of the soundest reasoners. Invention will never be satisfied.” (Burroughs, Themes)
Channing, however, constantly pushed exactly this confidence on Burroughs’ class. In a lecture that was almost certainly delivered after this theme was written, he argues to his students that finding, reading, and paying attention to other writers is not a simple hunt for what’s missing or a quest to find something new. Rather, he insists that by digesting fully what they read, his students, his writers, are adding to their mental stores and making what they read their own.

Burroughs’ notes record that Channing finished the 12th lecture of the year with the following thoughts (Fig. 12):

It might be tempting to read this passage (perhaps a touch anachronistically) as a description of plagiarism, of granting students permission to copy the more learned ideas of more talented writers. But I think that reading misses the ways in which students’ own innate powers are being encouraged here, the way Channing appears to insist that students’ own thoughts are worthy of being tested against the best that they read, and that originality can be achieved through personal expression. He elaborates on that idea in the very next lecture, which offers advice on how writers can develop their own style, and which begins with the passage Fig. 13.

This passage is striking for the way it attempts to alleviate the anxiety of influence by firmly placing the source of originality not outside in the enormous and intimidating world of
texts, but back on the students’ own innate resources - on the writer’s voice. The close and careful reading Channing had been pushing for years was not simply for the sake of learning facts and studying great works; it was also about pushing a student like Burroughs to assimilate what he read, to make use of whatever he wished, in his own writing, as long as he always did so thoughtfully and expressed it in the unique voice and style that best suited him. This lecture wanders over many topics, some of which I’ll return to in the concluding chapter, but throughout it Channing pushes his students to find their own voices amidst the sea of competing texts they were consuming every day. Finding that voice was hard – it required careful self-reflection and diligent practice (which they certainly got from his classes). He appears to include himself along with his students when he instructs them that:

“We should note on what subjects we think with the greatest ease and pleasure & express ourselves most easily. We should write as we feel & believe. We must examine the opinions which we have taken upon trust that what we abide by may be our own choice. In this respect the earlier writers had an advantage. They found their materials in the world & in themselves.” (Burroughs Notes on the Lectures)
So when Burroughs asserts in a theme that “invention will never be satisfied,” he is channeling an optimism that seems to have suffused Channing’s instruction. I won’t claim that these lecture notes convey a fully coherent theory of originality in writing – Channing was no composition theorist. But what these documents show is an instructor who was responsive to his students, aware of the anxieties unique to writers preparing to enter a daunting, textually rich world. Again and again he emphasizes to Burroughs’ class that they can be productive and original writers if only they take care to read critically and then trust in their own power to transmute what they read into something their own. That Burroughs by his senior year expresses confidence in his ability to do just that is due, in no small part, to the value Channing clearly places in student voice as a site of creativity and transformation.

That emphasis is wildly out of step with prior descriptions of this era, and of descriptions of Channing’s role in particular. But then, prior characterizations of this era have never been very consistent. The Bedford bibliography’s brief history of rhetoric and composition acknowledges that Channing shifted the curricular emphasis toward writing, but portrays him as a traditional belletrist in the Scottish model, claiming that he “increased attention to literary exampla. From the literary models, Channing derived rules for correct grammar, style, and organization, which were taught more and more prescriptively as the century went on” (4). It appears to suggest that Channing set the regressive model for much of the rest of the century, claiming for instance that A.S. Hill “continued the rule-bound focus on written composition begun by Channing.” Connors describes writing assignments from this era as “completely, utterly, relentlessly impersonal” and rhetorical instruction in general as “the last hurrah of formalized invention systems meant for use in the old way of rhetoric” (144). From references like these, I imagine a student writer from this time suffering under a highly restrictive and
impersonal regime of formulaic composition. I envision classes, disconnected from the industrially advancing world outside, reciting from Cicero. I picture essays filled with generic moralizing and classical references, returned to students silently and overwritten with grammatical corrections.

But I can’t find strong evidence for that picture in the archives. Certainly, there was still a great deal of recitation happening, and declamations were a regular part of the rhetoric course, even into the 1850s – something my analysis above does not fully capture. And it’s true that interactions between students and faculty were, as a rule, perpetually agonistic and often overtly hostile. But Channing’s course appears to have been an exception to that trend, a place where students were encouraged to reflect on and write their own ideas, and were regularly given individual (if sometimes biting) critique. The class was anything but impersonal; though they often fell short, students were at least encouraged to write on the subjects and in the styles that came most naturally to them. If Channing held up literary models as exempla, he did so only rarely, and preferred to emphasize modern writers. And I can’t square the claim that he focused mainly on correct grammar and style with the obvious sparseness with which he made use of his correction marks (Burroughs’ “speaking vs. writing” theme being a notable exception).

Above all, writing instruction was not, at this time and in this place, in thrall to the classical tradition. In fact, Channing was self-consciously dismissive of classical formulae, insisting repeatedly that he believed them no longer relevant. Instead, Burroughs’ themes illustrate a writing program thoroughly invested in exploring the very modern experience of reading and writing even while the industrial revolution was regularly redefining those very practices in unpredictable ways. The usual narratives of composition history leave no room for this story. Studies like the ones cited from Connors and Crowley above, but also landmark
studies like Brereton and Berlin, are based on an artificial division of history into the days of the old college and the days of the new university, the pre-Civil-War era of outmoded classicism, and the post-industrial era that birthed composition courses. They perpetuate that divide, in part, by telling the origin story that is so familiar to us all: in the beginning was English A, and all that followed after was recognizably modern, recognizably Composition Studies.

But more than a half century before English A, Henry Burroughs attended Channing’s senior lecture sequence, and was told that his voice was original. For three years, he wrote constantly, 54 themes in total, wildly various but threaded with a sequence that was clearly intended to foster a kind of basic information literacy and an awareness of the growing social and economic power of the printed word. That, too, is recognizably modern, recognizably Composition Studies.

Conclusion: A Multiplicity of Sources

The archival record of student themes is wide and deep and largely unexplored. These offer a substantial and multifaceted collection of student writing from a period of history when industrialization was changing the nature of writing and authorship more quickly and thoroughly than at any other time in history. In the Harvard University Archives, I found almost a thousand individual themes written by around two dozen students during the first half of the nineteenth century. There are probably more. Any number of stories might still be told about them, and our understanding of the field’s deep history would be immeasurably enriched. In the next chapter, I will point to a few of the other trends I see in this material, and suggest which ones might offer the most promise for future work. For the moment, I want to acknowledge that the materials are so rich that even the small story presented by this chapter, about one student learning how to be a critical and original writer at the height of the print revolution, left a few items on the cutting room floor.
Channing’s emphasis on critical literacy was more thorough than just one theme subject a year. During his junior year, Burroughs wrote in response to theme 240, a reflection on popular reading habits:

240 Of our unwillingness to be told how a novel will turn out, yet we confidently anticipate the results and are displeased if our conjecture was wrong. The degree and kind of interest we feel on a second reading of a good story.

In the second half of his senior year, he wrote theme 115:

115: The effect of contemporary criticism upon the permanent reputation of an author or artist.

Two weeks later, he was assigned theme 265, which uses the density of Goethe as an opportunity to explore the interdependence of readers and writers:

265: “If we do not like Goethe, it is because we do not understand him; if he appears to us obscure and enigmatical, it is because we have not the true feeling of sympathy, which would safely conduct us to the solution of all his mysteries.” A circular argument. Speak of the mutual claims of an Author and the public: the one to have an intelligible book, the other to have an intelligible reader.

These kinds of themes came with particular density at the end of senior year, perhaps as Channing saw his students’ entry into the republic of letters looming near. In addition to themes, each senior wrote six argumentative forensics, an exercise which was woven through the entire Harvard curriculum, so Channing was not responsible for keeping a record of the subjects. But Burroughs included his forensics with his themes, and at least two of the subjects assigned to his class bear obvious signs of Channing’s influence:

Ought periodical literature to be encouraged?
How is the progress of Philosophy affected by the very popular form of modern literature?

Any of these themes could have stood in perfectly well for the ones I presented in more depth above. The subject of reading and writing in the modern world was pervasive. I should also emphasize that each of the eighteen other sets of student themes show a similar pattern. John William Bacon (class of 1843) wrote themes about the limits of a free press, whether a writer adopts a persona on the page, and one very familiar subject: “581 What class of Literary Publications appears to you to promise a writer the most money?” H.S. McKean (class of 1828) wrote a generic theme about the “the practice of writing, its many uses” as well as several more specific topics about anonymous authors, satire, the power of a good review, and literature as preparation for the world. The examination theme subject for that class was “I am glad to be a writer in 1826.”

I have no idea whether Henry Burroughs was glad to be a writer in 1834, when he graduated from Harvard. His themes show that he was a passable writer, but not a singular talent like the more well-known graduates of Channing’s course. But Channing didn’t set out to train Thoreaus and Emersons. They were the exceptions. The vast majority of his students were like Burroughs, who embarked on a long but unremarkable career as a minister, following one of the vocational paths that had always been traditional for Harvard graduates. He did so, however, with a slightly elevated sense of how the literary landscape of his world was changing and expanding, and some sense of what it took to participate in it. At some point, his collection of themes and forensics, still neatly ordered, somehow found their way to the Harvard University Archives. That they, along with so many similar collections from other students, remain preserved and available to researchers, is – I think - remarkable. It suggests that the students took
some pride in the writing they had produced, that even amidst the multiplicity of books, their words too had value.
Appendix: Transcript of Fig. 5.

1831
9/17: Ovid V. 835
10/1: Horace I. Ode 3.
10/15: Adventures of Aristous - 193
10/29: Account of Blair’s 6 Lect.
11/12: Exord. Marcel: to [???
11/26: Some account of 1832 Annals - 172
12/17: Blair’s 13th Lect. Harmony

1832
1/14: Young & old nation’s History - 189
1/28: Story of Julius C. & Merchant of V.
2/11: Select sublime passages &c.
2/25: Of studying antiquities &c. - 60
3/10: Abdication of Rulers - 186
3/24: Translate De Senect. Cyrus to his sons
4/21: Exile as a punishment - 205
5/5: Phrenology – Physiognomy - 108
5/19: “Pacus decorum,” A Modern & Ancient [??] - 209
6/2: Describe any scene &c. - 105

8/16: Supernatural agents in Mod. Play - 214
8/30: The Hunter. Angler, Botanist - 215
9/7: Distinction of Style - 216
10/5: “Deluge” & “Darkness” - 219
10/19: College Catalogues - 25
11/2: The suffering of the poor [??] of the Rich - 65
11/16: Pecuniary Rewards of Literature - 222
12/7: A conqueror’s Toleration

1833
1/4: Melancholy &c. – 225
1/18: Caesar & Alexander in obscurity - 231
2/15: The most agreeable of the Mechanic Arts - 233
3/1: Old man’s remembrance of youth - 236
3/15: Ext. debate & prepared speeches - 238
4/?: Interest in the result of a Novel – 240
5/10: The calm observer of events &c.
5/24: May Day Fairs & Modes of charity - 246
6/7: Difference of National & Individual crime - 250
6/28: Royal Progress – Presidential Journey - 250
7/12: Golden Age. Paradise. & ideas now of perfection - 13
Exam Theme: Pecuniary rewards of Literature – 222

9/13: “They think mair o’ wha says a thing – “ 252
9/27: Disputes about Machiavel, Mary &c. - 253
10/25: College Antiquities. Pecries History &c. - 256
11/8: Animal Magnetism &c. - 259
11/22: Want of Amusements in America - 260
12/13: Adam’s intellectual state - 155

1834
1/10: Of man’s putting a nation forward - 264
1/24: Bad characters well drawn - 261
2/7: Effect of contemporary Criticism on One’s fame - 115
2/21: Claims of the Writer & Reader. Goethe - 265
3/14: Metaphors from Agriculture &c. - 272
3/28: Hector & A. Hotspur & Lady Percy on - 269
5/9: Mutual regards of a Catholic & Reformer - 268
5/23: “The insignificant purity [??]” - 21
6/6: Choice of a Profession - 279

Notes: Chapter 4

1 608: “When & from what cause, did you find yourself a Political Partisan? Or, have you escaped, thus far, from attaching yourself to a Party?” and 217: “Why is it that so much excitement prevails upon the election of so limited an office as the President of the U.S.?”

2 646: A discussion between Socrates & a Jew on the Nature of the Deity & on the doctrine of a Providence. And 761: Compare Scott’s Rebecca with some Heroine of the Old Testament or the Apocrypha.

3 632: “Charles II and James II were both in favor of toleration in religion. Their motives.” And 224: “Your opinion of Bonaparte’s carrying away works of Art from conquered Cities.”

4 797: 173: Conjecture as to which field of inquiry promises the most & greatest Discoveries in future times – The Mind, the Earth, the Skies, the Appreciation of Mechanical Power. And 204: Science – its increased discoveries as affecting the Imagination & the resources of Poetry favorably or not

5 587: “What seems to be the most engrossing subject of the day?” and 380: “memorable friendships.”

6 “Titles of Books – illustrative, attractive &c.”
“Death gives to other attributes their power of terrifying; the thunder’s roar, the lightning’s flash, the billows’ roar, the earthquake’s shock, all derive their dread sublimity from death. All are but instruments of his resistless sway.” The Inheritance. Chapt. 56. Is the doctrine true?”

Orations, you may recall, were graded on a mysterious 24-point scale. Until the 1830s, every instructor had his own idiosyncratic grading system. Grades were not standardized until just a few years before Burroughs matriculated, when President Quincy, as part of a sweeping effort to curb behavioral problems, instituted a standardized four-year-cumulative point system. The students complained that this put them all in perpetual competition with each other. Indeed, that was precisely Quincey’s goal.

Such references to friendly mingling are, I feel obliged to mention, highly unusual. At the time, the student body notoriously saw itself as the natural and irreconcilable enemy of the faculty, and many faculty refused to even acknowledge a student’s presence outside of the classroom. Students who spoke with faculty outside of class times (who broke from rank) were often spurned by their entire class. Faculty-student relations were so bad that one former student likened it to the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. That so many former students also mention congenial evenings in literary discussion with Channing suggests a shocking level of trust and goodwill.

In his first election, Jackson had beaten the incumbent president, ex-Boylston John Quincy Adams. If you’re a fan of cautionary axioms about the circular nature of history, both the 1824 and 1828 elections are worth reading about today.

I find it extremely unlikely that this was merely an oversight. His lists are meticulously kept specifically in order to prevent this kind of repetition. And I can find no other example anywhere of a class being given the same topic twice.

I am, of course, channeling Henry Burroughs here. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that his belief in the socially levelling power of authorship is the perspective of a relatively privileged young Harvard graduate. The access he celebrates was certainly facilitated by the very education and connections Harvard provided. The women’s rights movement was still in its infancy at this time. And, according to the 1830 census, more than 2 million people (roughly 15% of the population) were slaves. To be sure, the progress Burroughs describes was real, but it was incremental and not at all universal.

President Quincy’s controversial disciplinary measures backfired. When the freshman class (Thoreau included) felt they were treated unfairly by their Greek tutor, someone set fire to his classroom. Unable to determine who exactly was behind the arson, Quincy expelled a student more or less at random, a Southerner he hoped the other boys wouldn’t care too much about. He miscalculated. The entire Freshman class protested in support, and Quincy’s attempts to quell the insurrection alienated each of the other classes one by one. The entire campus ground to a halt, and it seems that much of Cambridge openly supported the students. There are reports that many of the faculty secretly did too. There’s no evidence that Channing was among them, and I find it remarkable that he didn’t choose to address the event with a theme.
D'Iseri, it should also be said, wrote over a quarter of his anecdotes on literary topics, as he was well known to be one of the world's first great bibliophiles. A reader of *Curiosities of Literature* might come away knowing a great deal *about* literature without having read a single page of the original works he references.

An unusual parallel: like Channing, Henry Burroughs never officially received his diploma. At the graduation ceremony in June of 1834, he joined most of his classmates in declining to step forward to be recognized. Resentment lingered toward President Quincy’s botched handling of the student rebellion a few months previously.
5. Conclusion: Channing’s Retirement and Possible Legacy

Future History

Before following Channing through to retirement – and a little bit beyond – allow me a brief digression to speculate on future work and to point out a few complicating threads that ultimately fell outside the borders of this project’s lens. In doing so, I illustrate that this history is not closed, that there are still promising directions for future research and future researchers, and that there are almost certainly other enticing stories lurking out there in Composition’s prehistory. This dissertation has barely scratched the surface of the archival material that I have uncovered. In shaping the narrative of Channing’s proto-composition course, my lens has been trained on the things that seemed to be influencing his and his students’ beliefs about writing and print. Any time a document mentioned writing, or the technology of print and writing, or some new kind of literary fad or trend, I marked it for closer examination. That left me with a collection of potential documents that was only a small fraction of the archive available to researchers, and only a small fraction of that subset was finally included here. The process of selection left nearly all of the archive, sadly, on the cutting room floor. Very few of these documents have ever been directly referenced by historians of composition and rhetoric. It seems generally known, for instance, that Channing’s list of theme subjects exists, though they have never been quoted from directly, let alone reproduced for researchers.¹

Clearly the theme list, alongside the student themes themselves, are the most expansive and promising avenue for future research. In Chapter 4, I examined four of the 54 themes written by one student. To date, I have located full or partial collections of themes from 22 students, totaling nearly a thousand individual themes written during almost every year of Channing’s three-decade-plus career. A few of these students left other ephemera in the archives as well,
which might be triangulated in productive ways with the themes, just as I have already done with Burroughs’ lecture notes. Jacob Rhett Motte, for instance, kept a diary while he was a student, and though he does not reference Channing specifically, he does often complain about his studies and comment on student activities on campus. Taken together, a much more detailed and comprehensive description of Channing’s department of rhetoric and oratory might be assembled, aspects which I have only speculated about or hinted at might be more fully fleshed out. How much, for instance, did the larger college curriculum influence Channing’s choice of subjects? How often did he select themes that supplemented students’ work in other courses? (At the risk of being anachronistic: how interdisciplinary was the writing instruction?) A fuller narrative might also delve into students’ lives as readers and writers outside of Channing’s direct sphere of influence. Harvard has a long history of student publications, both sanctioned and decidedly not. In this project alone I have already alluded to Asa Dunbar’s influential and controversial satire of the butter rebellion, *The Book of Harvard*, and to the students who wished to publish President Kirkland’s plagiarized sermon. Students were writing more than themes, and often using their ability to publish and disseminate that writing in very strategic ways. Many of the literary clubs were also founded in this era. The relationships or tensions between student underlife and official instruction are, I think, one of the most promising ways this history might be made richer. Historians of composition have often ignored the people and documents at the peripheries of classrooms, the journals and newspapers and trivia that add depth, context, and reality to an era. That very blind spot, I would argue, left Channing out in the cold for more than a century. It would be a shame to ignore this extra-classroom context in future work.

All of those suggestions, however, essentially just apply the same lens I am already using, but with a more detailed focal depth. One of the most exciting qualities of these
documents – the themes especially – is that they are so varied in subject that they might be subjected to any number of alternative lenses, used to illuminate wholly different aspects of student life than what they confronted in rhetoric and writing classrooms. They are, in fact, a fascinatingly miscellaneous window into nineteenth-century life and culture generally. In Chapter 4 I alluded briefly to the ways in which issues of educational access, social class, and economic condition are sometimes uncomfortably embedded in the underlying premises of many of the theme subjects and the students’ responses. Burroughs, in his celebration of the democratizing spread of print technology and American literary culture, is predictably blind to the ways in which he innately occupies a privileged position that allows him ready access to those resources. We should not expect anything different from a 16-year-old in 1833. It is true, however, that the early nineteenth century was an era of profound social and economic upheaval, as the country rapidly transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial economy and the middle class gradually acquired greater social mobility. The themes often anxiously acknowledge those changing social tides in ways that perhaps foreshadow the literacy crisis that hit Harvard several decades later. I’ll point, for instance, to the following:

85 Of the Prejudices against the liberal Professions.

192 The feelings with which the Labouring man & the Scholar regard each others’ occupation; & which feels the most contempt for the other’s ignorance of what he himself excels in.

Students’ responses to these offer historians a fascinating, on-the-ground perspective not just on composition traditions, but on one of the most important cultural tensions of the time. Similar studies might focus on race, gender, the progress of science, or American politics in the
nineteenth century. The theme subjects offer entry-points to learn more about each of these subjects, and much else besides.

None of those studies will be possible, however, without access to archival material currently available only in the Harvard University Archives. In my introduction, I was critical of the ways prior histories, especially John Brereton’s, often simply reified an origin story and unintentionally discouraged exploration of alternate histories. Brereton’s pioneering work, however, remains a defining, field-shaping piece of historiography that made accessible hundreds of primary documents which would have otherwise been unavailable to most researchers. My primary ambition moving forward is to use Brereton’s work as inspiration and template, to shape these archives into a new supplementary documentary history. More immediately, it became clear to me not long after beginning this project that these documents remained hidden, in part, because they have not yet been digitized. The Harvard University Archives have, little by little, begun to make some of the most important and in-demand manuscripts publically available through their online databases, but very little from this period has made the cut. I have already begun conversations with the archivists about which of Channing’s documents should be added to the digital archive – the theme list being my first priority. Before more stories can be crafted, the archives themselves need to be made available, to be presented on their own terms for future composition and rhetoric historians to read and interpret and reshape, revealing a deeper, older, and more nuanced picture of the earliest days of our field.

**Conclusion: On Ethical Mythmaking**

I began this dissertation with a defense of narrative as a vital historiographic mode. I’d like to conclude by admitting to a few of the risks. There is a great deal in the Channing archival record that invites comparison with modern conditions, both to writing classrooms and to the
general state of literacy technology. Both the lectures and the reflections of former students, for instance, often describe practices that seem jarringly out of place with prior assertions about this era’s regressive approach to correctness and style. To take one particularly striking example, I offer below two passages. One is from Channing, and the other is Donald Murray. I invite readers to identify which is which:

The first heat of writing is the most intense. When... the energies of the mind are in full operation, the writer should not leave his task until it is finished. He should not say that he has the train of thought and can finish on some other day, for he can never be sure that his mind will again be in the same shape. . . . It is a very bad habit to turn back during the act of composing to rectify style. Correction begins when all other works are done. And then this:

This is not a question of correct or incorrect, of etiquette or custom. This is a matter of far higher importance. The writer, as he writes, is making ethical decisions. . . . He uses language to reveal the truth to himself so that he can tell it to others.

In the preceding chapters, I cast Channing as the protagonist of this story, the man who, against formidable resistance from the entrenched Harvard establishment, presciently introduced a writing program at a historically significant moment. The selective lens that has been necessary to tell that story tends to throw moments like the above into sharp relief; it perhaps invites comparisons like this, which are undoubtedly alluring but usually anachronistic. It would be far too easy and misleading, for instance, to argue that Channing was some kind of prophetic fore-runner of the process movement, or a tragically forgotten pioneer, or a brother-at-arms in the effort to keep pace with writing in a changing world. Narratives, particularly historical narratives, can too easily become terministic screens that obscure as much as they illuminate.
When I recently presented some of Channing’s documents at a major conference, a colleague sought me out afterward to ask more about what she called “this new founding father.” I was (and remain) troubled by that term. It is not my intent to simply replace on old origin myth with a new one. It would be more accurate (though perhaps less satisfying) to say that Channing, like everyone else, was reacting in the best way he knew how to the moment in which he found himself, reacting in sometimes familiar ways to a very different set of historical pressures than the ones which drove Murray, and different still from the ones we face today.

Still, comparisons are perhaps inevitable, especially so when the narrative is compelling and familiar. So, in the interest of treating Channing ethically and honestly, I’d like to attempt to articulate briefly and simply what writing and student writers meant to him, and where the modern comparisons begin to break down – where, in short, he remained firmly a man of his own time. In pointing to the inconsistencies in the narrative, the moments where the man disappoints the myth, I am keenly aware of the risks I am taking as a scholar and narrator. I risk pushing Channing back to the margins. More personally, I risk undercutting my own work. I expect there are readers who will begin to question the entire premise of this project. If he wasn’t an unqualified revolutionary figure, a new father of the field, then what was the point of resurrecting him? To take that view, however, is to misunderstand the complex mechanisms of history, and to sell the field of composition and writing studies far too short. Channing is a compelling figure in his own right, true. More importantly he is the strongest argument I can assemble against the periodization of composition history. His story, even its inconsistencies, forces us to see our work as part of a continuity, an endless procession of teachers doing the best they can from one moment to the next, and only most of the time getting it right.
My favorite passage, if not the most significant one, in the whole of the Channing archive, appears in yet another lecture copied down by Henry Burroughs, probably in the spring of 1834. In it, Channing communicates to the class the concurrent labor and reward of writing, both as a physical practice and an intellectual process:

![Image of handwritten lecture notes]

Fig. 1. A Passage from Burroughs’ notes on Channing’s lectures: “We are apt to feel an invincible disinclination to write. We are terrified by the preparation, our bodies must be lulled to repose, a tiresome position must be maintained, and this task is compared with the delights of reading, conversation, & reveries. But a few efforts make duty a pleasure, and the mind, confined to one subject, perhaps with the subject of its choice, grasps the whole of it & rejoices in its strength.”

This passage captures almost everything that can be said for certain about Channing as a writing educator. For him, composition was an empowering scholarly exercise that was essential to his students’ academic success in a world full of intellectual distractions and short-cuts. To write well required them to resist the breakneck pace of technological advancement, to slow down and consider subjects in their full context, and to reflect on their personal strengths and interests as student writers. To be a disciplined and engaged writer was to establish the habits of mind that were at the heart of all good intellectual inquiry. What is particularly remarkable is how often Channing’s approach to theme writing is described as unbound by strict rule and etiquette. What he valued, above all, was a kind of honesty and personal curiosity that appears to be the defining trait of what he called the original voice. Francis Dana, in the brief profile of
Channing as an educator that precedes the published lectures, characterized his style in this way: “Yet, though severe in his tastes, he was, on the whole, a wide liker. He was not fond of fault finding, He was no martinet. Wherever he saw sincerity, earnestness and power, no man made larger allowances for faults” (xii).

The effort to capture one’s current state of mind, to set it down in that earnestly personal and original voice, took precedence over mere matters of style and correctness, and it absorbed the bulk of Channing’s time as a Harvard instructor. I noted previously that, though copies of Channing’s correction key are fairly common, the marks appear only sparingly in the actual themes – a few students received no written corrections in the whole three years they composed. Correction happened, rather, in the classroom, as Channing engaged with students (sometimes sharply) one-on-one each Friday. Though, obviously, the content of those proto-conferences went unrecorded, one imagines that the arrangement did not lend itself to a minute dissection of grammatical errors. I suspect, rather, that students were forced to account for the substance of their efforts, that Channing ruthlessly targeted whatever he suspected was the lazy unoriginality of mere literary foppery. It is also fairly clear that he genuinely enjoyed the time he spent working with student themes. In his reports to the administration, he speaks more positively of that exercise than any other. By all accounts, he grew increasingly frustrated during the later years of his tenure, as the increasing class sizes forced him to cut back on the frequency with which he assigned themes. Still, for most of his career, they were his primary focus, and that effort appears to have paid off. Right around the time that A.S. Hill was organizing English A, Edward Everett Hale wrote that “there are those who claim to be able to recognize from a nineteenth-century Harvard man’s writing whether he graduated before or after Channing retired” (Hale 87).
Channing is worthy of a closer look, to be brought back out of the shadows, for all of those ways in which he defies our understanding of the state of composition and rhetoric in the early nineteenth century. He remained, though, a man of his time, as well. Though he gave students plenty of space in their themes to explore influential literary fads, he was himself a notorious literary snob, highly skeptical of the kinds of popular literature and periodicals that were proliferating around him. In his private life, he was not above a bit of fun reading – along with most of America at the time he eagerly awaited new installments of Dickens novels – but in the classroom he pushed exactly the kind of discerning literary palate that has become the defining feature of the belles lettres era of education. He was not against the modern, but his tastes were exacting and discerning, and he pushed them on his students as well:

the moment [a student] loses sight of his duties and advantages, and begins to trifle miscellaneously with books, and crave variety, and talk of keeping pace with the age, there is reason to fear that he is losing all control of himself, and all perception of the useful in reading.

There is, of course, more than a touch of self-protective classism in statements like these, an insistence that Harvard men should have the proper backgrounds to discern between the literally valuable and the trashy ephemera that could be found in every corner bookshop. It must be admitted that his insistence that students grapple, in their themes, with questions about reading and writing in that era was motivated in part by a desire to police what they read, to instill an appreciation of “proper” literary style. To expect anything else of Channing is to look for an anachronism. Nor is this only a small caveat to the Channing historical legacy. That elitist attitude toward modern literature probably helped pave the way for the rise of Literary Studies under Francis Child, and it almost certainly contributed to Channing’s own relegation to the
footnotes of history. Until you find him in the archives, he does indeed look like just another
teneteenth century belletrist.

It should also be noted that at no point did Channing’s contemporaries ever view his
department as primarily dedicated to writing instruction. It’s absolutely true that theme writing
became a far more frequent and highly valued exercise during Channing’s decades at Harvard,
but they remained only one part of the training students received in the department of rhetoric
and oratory. Right up through Channing’s retirement, students continued to memorize and
deliver declamations. Admittedly, neither Barber’s exacting pseudo-scientific approach nor
Channing’s unenthusiastic one probably did much to advance students’ oratorical skills.
Nevertheless, the department remained officially dedicated to the preservation of the oratorical
tradition. I think it is telling that, although more than half the lectures delivered to Burroughs’
class deal with writing, language, and literary criticism, the published volume is weighted far
more heavily in favor of oratorical skills. Even in the years after his retirement, Channing was
carefully reshaping the official record to downplay just how much theme writing had displaced
the traditional curriculum. Even given three decades of work, Harvard was too stubborn for
Channing to change it entirely, even if he’d wanted to.

So the changes may have been small, and they may have been tempered by all the
restraints we expect of a nineteenth-century academic institution, but they were nevertheless
significant and unexpected. Even given every anachronism-evading caveat I can muster, we are
still left with a vast archival record that prior histories of the field have never even hinted at.
They show a vital and enduring writing culture, imperfect and elitist perhaps, but carefully
attuned to students’ needs at that moment in history.
Channing had apparently resolved, early in his career, to retire at the age of 60 and, though still healthy, he kept to that resolution at the end of 1851. That same year, Adams Sherman Hill began his first year as a student. Before leaving, Channing prepared for Francis Child some notes on how to use his now ponderous stack of themes and, as far as I can tell, Child largely ignored them. Plump, short, and bespectacled, practically a caricature of a nineteenth-century professor, the students called him “Stubby” Child. He had studied literature and philology at the University of Gottingen in Berlin, and was eager to apply the German model of literary studies to Harvard. Jay Heinrichs, in Harvard Magazine, has called Child “a fox in charge of henhouse studies.” Heinrichs refers mainly to Child’s swift excising of classical rhetorical studies from the curriculum, but the same can be said of his approach to the writing culture Channing had cultivated. He was no fan of teaching. “I feel only little interest in what is called declamation, & would much rather be a teacher of dancing,” he wrote to acting president Andrew Peabody when he accepted the position. Similarly, he felt that reading and correcting themes was agonizing drudgery and he passed it off to subordinates whenever possible. He was a literary scholar stuck in a position dedicated to teaching rhetoric and (now) writing. So, as Channing had done before him, he simply redefined the position, but much more radically, into literary studies. Child immediately changed the name of the lecture sequence from “Rhetoric and Criticism” to “English Literature and Language,” which is precisely what he taught for the next 24 years. In 1876, Harvard finally relented and, to keep him from being poached by the newly founded Johns Hopkins University, granted him his own chair of English literature.

Much has been written about Child’s introduction of literary studies to the American University, the creation of the modern English department, essentially. In composition history, Child and the department he founded have become the backdrop against which English A
supposedly arose as a new and subservient phenomenon. And so we finally arrive back where we always seem to, the story we’ve always told about where we come from, which has always been true, but has also always been incomplete. Child’s department of literary studies was the recent deviation from the norm, not a long-standing and inevitable tradition. English A did not arise spontaneously in 1874, with nothing to precede it. A.S. Hill and Barrett Wendell were not working from scratch. Many of Channing’s former students were, in fact, Harvard professors by that time and, as you have seen, they spoke highly of him as a teacher of composition. The course they had taken with him remained a deeply ingrained part of the Harvard English department’s culture, a well of prior experience from which they could draw when developing a writing class anew. They remembered how, as students, they wrote, frequently and prolifically, about every topic imaginable. They wrote about the technology of writing, about how it was changing, and how they saw themselves as consumers and producers of it. Even if that was only a small part of a much larger and more complicated Harvard history, it still fundamentally changes the story we have always told about composition in the nineteenth century.

Notes: Chapter 5

1 “Generally known” might be putting it a bit strongly. Crowley vaguely references a few of Channing’s theme subjects. However, rather than directly from the primary source, she appears to be replicating a description from another researcher, I. A. Anderson, who wrote a paper about Channing in 1948. Likewise, Connors’ sole mention of Channing’s themes seems to be repeating either Anderson or Crowley.

2 Channing, Lectures Delivered to the Seniors in Harvard College.

3 Murray.

4 In fairness to him, it probably was. By that time, class sizes were ballooning. Even Channing, who seems to have enjoyed theme correction on the whole, was struggling to keep up in the years before his retirement.
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