

A Liberal Glass Ceiling? Channing, Hedge and the Gendered Status Quo
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In 1837, William Ellery Channing wrote to Lucy Aiken to express his relief at the restoration of her health. “Your previous letter had been written under disease and depression and gave me some concern for you,” he wrote, “I rejoice with you in your improved health and spirits.” However, with his congratulations, a caveat: “I cannot think of you as restored. Both of us I suppose are doomed to find the body more or less, a burden to the end of our journey.” Self-described as sickly for almost the whole of his life, William Ellery Channing sought solace in the cultivation of what he called “Mind,” defined as the internal connection with the Divine innate in human nature. In the same letter, Channing wrote, “To be a spiritual being, to have the power of thought, of virtue, disinterestedness, communion with God, progress without end, this does seem to me an infinite good. If the inward life can be strengthened, it seems to me of little importance what the outward life is.”¹ Transcendence of the body through the mind is a recurrent motif in Channing’s thought as well as his written works, from his sermons to his letters. Yet, it had a very particular meaning for Lucy Aiken. Like he, she was sickly in constitution and she was also a woman. For Channing, women were as burdened by their gender as he was by his illness.

Years earlier in 1823, Frederic Henry Hedge met Margaret Fuller in 1823. She was only thirteen, but even at that early age, Hedge noted, “she had already begun to distinguish herself, and made much the same impression in society that she did in after years.”² From their initial meeting until her tragic death in 1850, Hedge and Fuller maintained a close friendship defined by a constant exchange of ideas and a mutual respect for one another. The fact that she was a

¹ Letter from William Ellery Channing to Lucy Aiken, April 1, 1837, in *Correspondence of William Ellery Channing, D.D., and Lucy Aiken, From 1862 to 1842*, Anna Letitia le Breton, ed. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872), 288.

² Frederic Henry Hedge in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*. Vol 1. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1857), 92.

woman was not constitutive to their relationship. Fuller became the standard against which he measured all other women, a fact that was reflected later in his aversion to a broader women's reform movement.

Here are two liberal Christian men. Both had cultivated relationships with women based upon a genuine concern for their spiritual and intellectual advancement. Both were convinced that the betterment of humanity began first in the mind and soul (and only then the body). Yet, both were unable or unwilling to extend their liberal views into a social platform for gender equality. In many ways, Channing and Hedge were products of their time. It was not unusual for men to have relationships with women and not seek to advance their cause in any public way. For Channing and Hedge, the practical effect of their insistence on intellectual and spiritual improvement of certain women was not to alter the status of women in the 19th century, but to make them more effective spiritual beings.

The point of this paper is neither to condemn nor excuse these men for their views on women or gender equality. Rather, the aim is to examine why liberal thought, characterized by an increasingly high anthropology and a democratic belief in human potential, did not lead these two men to any kind of broad scale support for women's reform, like it had for some others of their ilk, like Theodore Parker.³ For the most part, as historian Peter King Carley notes, "The Unitarian movement generally had been a congenial one for women. Anything but emancipated in American society as a whole, in Unitarian circles they were given the opportunity to participate with a much higher level of equality, intellectually and socially, with men," resulting in the fact that "the movement attracted a number of intelligent and socially active women."⁴

³ Parker was known for his progressive views and his social radicalism, especially in the realm of anti-slavery and abolition. However, Parker also delivered a sermon in 1852 entitled "Woman: A Sermon," where he spoke specifically of the need for equality between men and women in all areas of human life.

⁴ Peter King Carley, *The Early Life and Thought of Frederick Henry Hedge, 1805-1850*. (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Syracuse University, Ph.D., 1973), 157.

What particular reasons stopped Channing and Hedge from taking that extra step, from simply advocating the intellectual and spiritual betterment of women to actively seeking their advancement in a political and social manner? Channing's reasons found root in his own troubled relationship to his body, whereas Hedge's grew out his commitment to preserving institutions and seeking change only in individual and gradual degrees. Both of these factors will be unpacked in relation to each man's relationship to one or more women of their acquaintance: for Channing his (primarily) epistolary relationships with Lucy Aikin, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Eloise Payne and for Hedge, his friendship with Margaret Fuller. Hedge and Channing, their relationships to these women and their subsequent thoughts and opinions about women's "place" in society highlights the question of why advancing freedom in thought did not necessarily lead to advancing freedom in body or status.

Encumbered by his body, "Mind" became Channing's axis mundi. It was the foundation upon which his theology and worldview rested. Intellectually speaking, Channing was a Neo-Platonist. He adopted the Platonic principle that everything in the earthly realm- be it object or idea- was an emanation of some greater principle. The human mind, then, was an echo of the Great Mind or God. To reach the ultimate religious endpoint, in Channing's view, was to bring the mind as close as possible to the Great Mind, which in doing so achieved perfection. In his Sermon "The Labouring Class," Channing wrote, "Every man's elevation is to be measured first and chiefly by his conception of this Great Being; and to attain a just, a bright, and a quickening knowledge of Him, is the highest aim of thought. In truth, the great end of the universe, of revelation, of life, is to develop in us the idea of God."⁵ Channing believed that God intended such knowledge of Himself to be revealed progressively, both across time and to each individual

⁵ William Ellery Channing, "The Labouring Class" in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D., including The Perfect Life and Containing a Copious General Index and a Table of Scripture References*. (London; New York: Routledge and Sons, 1884), 90.

mind. The mind, depending upon its state of readiness, received truth in phases, never all at once. Preparing the mind to receive such knowledge, through the disciplining of the passions and affections through study of the Bible and honing of the reasoning faculties, was the greatest task of each spiritual being, man or woman. Channing charged his parishioners “to be just and generous to your own minds. Cherish every divine inspiration. Be no man’s slaves. Seek truth for yourselves. Speak it from yourselves.”⁶

When Channing spoke these words, they were as much for his own edification as for that of his listeners. On several occasions he wrote about his feelings of inadequacy and irrelevance. His greatest fear was for his active mind to succumb to of his diseased body. Writing to Lucy Aiken in 1830 in reference to his recent Article on the “National Literature,” he laments, “As to the article in question, I wrote it when sinking into disease... The body was indeed a reluctant instrument to the mind and if the articles have any merit, it is to be ascribed only to my deep conviction of what I wrote, so deep as to break forth under great physical infirmity.”⁷ He writes to Miss Aiken to ask for her critique of his article but moreso to appeal for sympathy from someone he views as a fellow-sufferer of bodily ills.

Historian Andrew Delbanco roots both Channing’s affinity *and* his ambivalence toward women in his childhood, noting that Channing’s primary companion and role model was his mother, Lucy Channing⁸ and household servant, Rachel De Gilder.⁹ Channing did not have particularly fond memories of his childhood, which he remarked to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody on

⁶ William Ellery Channing, “On Preaching the Gospel to the Poor” in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing, D.D., including The Perfect Life and Containing a Copious General Index and a Table of Scripture References*. (London; New York: Routledge and Sons, 1884),112.

⁷ Letter from William Ellery Channing to Lucy Aikin, Boston October 21, 1830 in *Correspondence between Channing and Aikin*, 53.

⁸ Andrew Delbanco, *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 13.

⁹ William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing. D.D, The Centenary Memorial Edition*. (Boston, 1890), 14.

a number of occasions.¹⁰ His many ailments began around this time, confining him to the house and forcing him to exist solely in the domestic sphere until he left for school in Cambridge.

From a very early age, Channing felt estranged from his own body, something he saw echoed in the experience of his mother. Like him, she had a keen and intuitive intellect, which her external, domestic circumstances muffled.

However, while Lucy's bodily circumstances made her kindred to her son, her body was also what made her seem equally enigmatic. On the one hand, as his granddaughter Grace later recalled, he remarked that what he admired most in his mother was "the rectitude and simplicity of her mind."¹¹ From Lucy, William learned how to quietly challenge his own state of embodiment through perpetual exercise of his mind. On the other hand, *because* of her gender, Channing put his mother on the pedestal upon which he put all women, unwittingly binding her potential. To Channing, women were categorically pure, delicate and virtuous. They stepped outside their womanhood by becoming assertive or demanding a different external lot for themselves and in doing so they were no longer simply transcending their bodies but leaving them entirely. After reading Mary Wolstonecraft's *Rights of Women*, he was mightily impressed by her thought, calling her the greatest woman "of her age" and noting that her book was "a masculine performance, and ought to be studied by the sex." His tack then immediately shifts, stating that although she "possessed a masculine mind... in her letters you may discover a heart as soft and feeling as was ever placed in the breast of a woman."¹² He allows her to trespass into masculine territory by crediting her with affectionate and benevolent sentiment and intent. Though in her writing she challenges the boundaries proscribed upon her sex, Wolstonecraft is still ultimately defined by her womanhood.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, *Reminiscences of Rev William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880), 83.

¹¹ Grace Channing, *Biography of William Ellery Channing*, (Andover-Harvard Archives, bMS 100/2 (47)).

¹² William Henry Channing, *Life of Channing*, 56.

What becomes clear on further examination of Channing's assessment of himself and his opinions about women, is that in his view his own state of embodiment was unnatural whereas for women, their bodily confinement was *natural*. When women used their minds to change their gendered sphere, their gender changed. Their circumstance transformed the natural to the unnatural. Channing could not countenance this and, as he did with Mary Wolstonecraft, resolved his cognitive dissonance by giving any perceived "masculine" action a "feminine" point of origin. However, when *he* confronts the state of his body through exercise of his mind, the result is ultimately to restore equilibrium, to remedy what was unnatural. On his bodily state he wrote, "I am hemmed in,- I am fettered. Like Enceladus, I groan under the mountain. I labor to remove it; but still, still it weighs on my breast, and seems to press heavier after every struggle. In fact, my late complaint has had more to do with the mind than the body, or rather the body has been affected in such a manner as peculiarly to affect the mind."¹³ To change his mind *was* to change his body or its perception by others.

In many palpable ways, Channing's external circumstances were changed through the improvement of his mind. He rose in prominence as a preacher, thinker and leader of the nascent liberal movement within Congregationalism, known as Unitarianism. As his star rose, so did his desire to spread his theory of Mind beyond his congregation. He began to reach more broadly through the publication of some of his major sermons like *Self-Culture, Likeness to God,* and *Unitarian Christianity*. On a more personal level, he focused his attention on several women of his close acquaintance with the desire to guide those minds more susceptible to the dangers of bodily passions and affections.

¹³ *Ibid*, 90.

Among his choices of female correspondents, there is no decided pattern.¹⁴ What they all had in common was that they were inquisitive women for whom Channing claimed an affinity and whose internal betterment he had taken upon his shoulders. Another thing these women shared, at least at first, was a sense of awe at the man himself. “Dr Channing was a man of genius in the broadest sense,”¹⁵ wrote Peabody in her work of 1877, *Reminiscences of Rev Dr. William Ellery Channing*. She wrote how in spite of his ill health and feeble appearance, “He did seem to be nearer to God than other men, and his voice to come out of a very intimate heavenly world.”¹⁶ Channing’s relationship with each of these women was lopsided in the beginning: Channing was the dispenser of advice and opinion and Aikin, Peabody and Payne were the eager recipients of his patronage. Channing’s message to Payne, Peabody and Aikin was essentially similar in tone. He wrote to Eloise Payne telling her to “let her [capacities] be improved by attention and exertion and especially... satisfied by piety.”¹⁷ Such a remark is repeated in letters and encounters with both Aikin and Peabody. He did not modify his theory of Mind because they were women, but rather emphasized its worth all the more. Peabody noted that Channing would often come back to certain points in their conversations, the most frequent being that “self-education is the only education,”¹⁸ that she must find inside herself the means of her own betterment. Channing, true to his principles, would not deign to tell any of these women how or where to look for improvement, for fear that this would actually stymie her personal development. Channing was adamant that none of them become complacent in their well of knowledge, but constantly seek new truth and new ways to enact their ever-broadening minds.

¹⁴ Lucy Aikin was British and a contemporary in age; Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Eloise Payne were both New Englanders, teachers and younger than he. Aikin was aristocratic and superior in personality; Peabody was opinionated, brash, but open; and Payne was sensitive and innocent.

¹⁵ Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁷ Letter William Ellery Channing to Eloise Payne, November 1809 bMS 100/1 (43).

¹⁸ Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 135.

Up to this point, Channing had been able to keep his encouragement at their endeavors separate from his thoughts on women's bodies. Eventually however, the effect of his advice produced results he knew not how to address. Channing's tone changed in his message to Aikin, Payne and Peabody, respectively, when he sensed that each had appropriated his methods for actions uncharacteristic of their gender. With Lucy Aikin, Channing had always worried about her superciliousness. She was a woman of rank in England and he began to fear that the improvement of her mind was actually deepening her scorn for the lower classes. She seemed to confirm his fears for a time, writing in a letter of 1832 that she felt she had little to say to the lower classes. She reveals not a little resentment at Channing's tacit presumption that the only role available to her as an educated woman was in benevolence societies, for she wrote in 1832, "If I am capable of benefiting any class, it must be one considerably removed from the lowest, of whom, whatever you may think of the confession, I have never seen enough to know at all how to address them. One *comfort* is, that there is still plenty of ignorance and noxious error to be pointed out in all classes."¹⁹ She used the tools that Channing had given her to encourage her fellow aristocratic women to seek a voice in politics. She had little interest in conforming to what he viewed as the proper use of her mind. This was the first of many increasingly adamant challenges to Channing's authority as a mentor. For a period after this particular exchange, Channing seemed chastened by her remarks and avoided the subject, but eventually revisited the topic of philanthropy. He urged her that it would "benefit [her] mind by giving it a *new action*" in the form of the betterment of her fellow-beings.²⁰ Ultimately, he was at a loss of how to proceed with her. Their correspondence ended rather bitterly: Channing's last letter included a comparison between American women and English women, serving as a non-too subtle jab at his

¹⁹ Letter from Lucy Aikin to William Ellery Channing, October, 15, 1832, *Correspondence between Channing and Aikin*, 147

²⁰ *Ibid*, 223.

correspondent.²¹ Aikin, in turn, chose not to dignify this letter with a response- at least not one that survived.

In his native New England, Channing took a keen interest in the advancement of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Eloise Payne. The degree of interest increased however as each became involved in education, either as a teacher or reformer or both. In Peabody, Channing found a woman of formidable mental capacity and opinion. She held ideas about education he felt were odious and unhelpful (a problem of certain pertinence for himself as his daughter Mary was under her tutelage). What he sought to break in Miss Peabody's mind was her commitment to the idea that imagination was a thing to be feared, both in herself and her children. Peabody often spoke of her admiration for Dr. Channing's spontaneous use of his imagination, but she mistrusted it in herself and would not dream of instilling it in her pupils. As a woman, he saw her as perfectly suited to such a task, so he registered shock when she refused to incorporate his methods and adopted instead the traditional Harvard system of recitation. The fact that she stated her inability and unwillingness to enact what he viewed as an intrinsic characteristic of her sex caused a certain tension between the two for a time. This is reflected in a letter written to Peabody, where Channing expresses his discontent at the homework assigned to his daughter, ultimately asking her to provide Mary with a different lesson.²² She demurely refused in a subsequent letter,²³ with little of the deference she had earlier showed him. Some of Channing's concern at the lesson can be ascribed to a parent's concern for his child's education. Yet, as much of his surprise at her refusal to comply with his request, was that the methods she was choosing were so decidedly unfeminine.

²¹ Letter from William Ellery Channing to Lucy Aikin, June 12, 1842, in *Correspondence between Channing and Aikin*. It is important to note that their correspondence was also cut short due to Channing's death in fall of 1842.

²² Peabody, *Reminiscences*, 262.

²³ *Ibid*, 263

Channing's concern for Eloise Payne arose from his fear that she had opened her mind too willingly to the scholarship that he had recommended. Nearly everything she read, from treatises on Biblical Criticism to philosophical tracts by Hume and Gibbon appeared to send her thought in a new direction. This he believed to be an unfortunate trait of common to women and one he had hoped to train out of her through instruction in how to think and how to discern what was true and what was false. He admonished her to fortify her mind against false philosophies.

In one letter he wrote,

I wish you to be so cold and spiritless as to believe only what is true, as to judge only according to evidence, as to love and admire, mourn and fear only in proportion to the good and evil which are presented to your mind. I know the mortifying change I should produce in your character. You would not receive half so many impressions, or forms half such rapid decisions, but as trifling compensation, your impressions would be more durable, your decisions more just. Do not suppose from this, that I bar against you the gate of the world of fancy. You may enter occasionally, if you will put yourself, under the care of those experience [guides]... Your serious studies may perhaps be employed on the faculties and development of the human mind on education, especially [female]. Remember you are not to read only but to think and observe on these subjects."²⁴

In Payne, Channing saw celebrated the most dangerous qualities of women, namely indecision and impetuosity. In spite of his remonstrance, Payne persisted in her heresy. She, like the other two learned too well the lessons Channing had taught. She incorporated new information as it came in, sought new forms of truth, even in places and people that Channing disavowed, and cultivated her own ever-shifting worldview. These were all elements of Channing's theory of mind and things that Channing had said, at one time or another, to these women and to the general public.

Frederic Henry Hedge did not suffer as Channing did from any ambivalence toward his relationships with women. Their femaleness or their bodies did not appear to concern or stymie him in the way they had for Channing nor did assertiveness, even aggressive expression of

²⁴ Letter from Payne to Channing, bMS 100/1 (43).

opinion deter him. There is little evidence that he reacted with anything other than deference, when Margaret Fuller spoke critically of his work, thought or intentions. In her letter of April 6 1837, Fuller admonished Hedge after hearing rumors that he planned to “cut up [Bronson] Alcott” in a review of the latter’s work. She wrote, “I should be charmed if I thought you were writing a long, beautiful and wise like article showing the elevated aim and at the same time the practical defects of his system... But the phrase ‘cutting up’ alarms me, if you were him I am sure that you would feel as I do that your wit would never lend its patronage to the ugly blinking owls who are now hooting from their tenements.”²⁵ In response, Hedge wrote, “[you] are right about Alcott and my reputed design upon him. I feel grateful for the confidence you press in the purity of my intentions in this matter. It is a gratifying to feel that one is understood and trusted, in spite of rumours, by those one loves. No, I am not going to ‘cut up Mr. Alcott.’”²⁶ Whether Hedge had never planned such a critical review of Alcott or whether he was in fact admonished by Fuller’s words and changed his tack is unknown. What is evident however is the level of comfort Fuller felt in instructing Hedge on how to act in matters of opinion and written exchange. Much of this had to do with Fuller’s own reputation as a woman of letters, but in truth, their respectful and easy rapport can be traced to earlier years.

Though the two met initially in 1823, their friendship developed over one of Hedge’s favorite subjects: German philosophy, poetry and biblical interpretation. At the tender age of thirteen, Hedge moved to Germany with his tutor George Bancroft to attend one of the famed German gymnasiums.²⁷ Upon his return in 1823 and his matriculation at Harvard, Hedge

²⁵ Letter from Margaret Fuller to Frederic Henry Hedge, April 6, 1837 (Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University).

²⁶ Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Margaret Fuller, May 23, 1837 (Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University).

²⁷ He first attended Ilfield, but eventually left for the much more prestigious Schulpforte, where he spent the bulk of his time.

immediately acquired the reputation as an expert on Germany- and rightfully so. According to Hedge's biographer, Orié Long, Hedge had opened up to Fuller the world of German thought and language.²⁸ She wrote to him at first to inquire about German biblical scholarship and gather recommendations for authors and books of that genre.

However, the subject most traversed by the two of them was much more literary. From his time in Germany, Hedge developed a deep love of poetry, especially that of Goethe. He inspired and encouraged the same passion for the German poet in Fuller, who would eventually translate and write a critique of Goethe's "Tasso."²⁹ Fuller wrote to Hedge to inquire about various details of Goethe's life for her book. Hedge wrote back encouraging her in this undertaking, writing, "I feel a deep interest in our life of Goethe- more than I thought it possible for me to feel in any literary undertaking of my own. I hope you are going to make a serious affair of it and not a mere sketch. If you make such a book, as I think you can make, it will be a work of which I shall be doubly proud- proud as an American (by birth) and proud as a German (by education)."³⁰ However, in his brief sketch of Fuller included in her Memoirs (published posthumously), he noted that while her critique of Goethe is one of the "best things she has written" and "one of the best criticisms extant of Goethe," she lacked "imagination and she wanted productiveness. She wrote with difficulty. Without external pressure, perhaps, she would never have written at all."³¹ Hedge felt obligated to provide such pressure, given the talents he was sure she possessed.

²⁸ Long, Orié W. *Frederic Henry Hedge: A Cosmopolitan Scholar*. (Portland: The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1940).

²⁹ She was unable to find a publisher before her death. Her brother Arthur Fuller eventually included it in a compilation of her works, published in 1860, entitled *Art, Literature and the Drama*.

³⁰ Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Margaret Fuller, August 2, 1837 (Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University).

³¹ *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 96.

It was Hedge who proposed Fuller become editor of *The Dial*, a journal and literary magazine devoted to Transcendental philosophy.³² Fuller was ideally suited for the task, because in Hedge's view she had "intellectual sincerity. Her judgments took no bribe from her sex or her sphere, nor from custom nor tradition, nor caprice. She valued truth supremely, both for herself and others."³³ Here is one of the few explicit mentions by Hedge of Fuller's gender. What is clear, however, is that Hedge felt Fuller had *transcended* her sex, because she no longer sought quarter from her "sphere" as to any decisions or opinions upon truth. For Hedge, Fuller's eligibility for the high-minded required of an editor was evidence of her "masculine mind," meaning that her "[actions] were determined by ideas rather than by sentiments."³⁴ This did not challenge his relationship with Fuller in the way such "masculine" behavior had for Channing. His concern for her advancement never wavered. What ultimately challenged their friendship was Hedge's own reticence to promote such advancement in any comprehensive way or on an institutional level- and this applied to all such change, across the board, from women's movements to church reform.

It began with *The Dial*. Frederic Henry Hedge had promised Margaret Fuller several pieces for *The Dial*. As editor of the radical periodical, she was determined to get them. Perturbed by his silence, she wrote to him time and again, pleading for the pieces he had sworn to write. In the end, Hedge would only submit two pieces³⁵ to a magazine for which he had had the original idea.³⁶ At that time, Hedge had begun to put some distance between himself and his

³² Joel Myerson, "Frederic Henry Hedge and the Failure of Transcendentalism," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 23 (October 1975), 396.

³³ *Memoirs*, 96.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 95.

³⁵ His contributions were a poem called "Questionings" in the January 1841 issue and an essay entitled "The Art of Life- The Scholar's Calling" in the October 1841 issue.

³⁶ He proposed the idea of a journal for Transcendental philosophy as early as 1835. Myerson, "Hedge and Failure of Transcendentalism," 396.

more radical friends, especially when it became clear that Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, Theodore Parker and Fuller, herself, were contemplating the formation of a Transcendentalist church. Schism was anathema to Hedge. He, who had the distinction of proposing the existence of the Transcendental club in the first place,³⁷ had intended the group to serve as a refuge for “like-minded” people to express their ideas. Never was it his intention to have this become the breeding ground for an alternative church. He slowly began to extract himself from the group, beginning with his refusal to publish in *The Dial*.

What does this have to do with Hedge’s views on a woman’s movement or women’s reform? A great deal, actually. Hedge was a gradualist, not a revolutionary. In the world of reform- social, political or ecclesiastical- Hedge favored organic growth out of established institutions rather than destruction of such institutions to make room for something new. Hedge held the view that progress came as a result of individual efforts, not from top-down institutional restructuring.³⁸ He was perhaps best known for his insistence on a “Broad Church,”³⁹ which was his ideal of a universal Christian Church built on the foundations of traditional Christianity and the Bible. In every age, Hedge argued, there existed those who were taken with a reformatory spirit and sought to break free from established institutions. “[This reformer] may find others who will accompany him in his flight; but let him not fancy that the course of reform will follow him there, that any permanent organization can be based on dissent, that society will relinquish the hard conquests of so many years, and return again to original nature, wipe out the old civilization, and with *rasa tabula* begin the world anew. Man’s progress is natural, not a

³⁷ Hedge first mentioned it in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson (June 14, 1836, Poor-Hedge Papers).

³⁸ Hedge, “The Progress of Society,” *Christian Examiner*, XVI (March, 1834), 1-21.

³⁹ He wrote a treatise called “The Broad Church,” published in the *Christian Examiner* in 1860. It is unclear whether he was the first to coin this term, but it has become widely associated with him and his friend and colleague Henry Whitney Bellows.

voluntary growth. A divine education is evolving in eternal procession of the soul.”⁴⁰ This sort of revolutionary change was reckless and in the end, accomplished little that was constructive. Hedge firmly believed that all real change began in the individual “procession of the soul.”

Thus, his reasoning behind his unwillingness to back a full-fledged women’s reform movement had more to do with his conservatism, than his feelings about women. Hedge wrote only once on the issue of men and women, and only after the Civil War (when the chaos of Reconstruction had actually dampened most efforts at women’s reform). In his article “Male and Female,” Hedge weighed the truth of two biblical passages: Galatians 3:28, “There is neither male nor female” and 1 Corinthians 11:8-9, “The man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man; neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man.” Hedge recognizes the value of the first passage, noting that Paul, “with the impetus of his great thought of the new creation in Christ, had [seen] for the moment, the old distinctions, race, nation, rank, and even sex, disappearing.”⁴¹ Moving to the second passage, he wrote that “the latter judgment, formed on a lower level, is prudential and conservative: it respects the existing order and need. The existing order and need are to be respected; the apostle’s example shows how impossible it is to jump the conditions of the present, to transport society bodily from a given position in time to the distant eye-mark of prophetic vision without touching the intervening ground.”⁴²

Hedge goes on to acknowledge the existence of a “culture of exclusion”- men are excluded from the kitchen and nursery, women from the army, pulpit or the law. However, he writes,

[To] speak of wrongful exclusion is simply to assail the law of nature. Civil law there is none which prohibits women from engaging in any pursuit they may choose to adopt.

⁴⁰ Hedge, “Conservatism and Reform,” (1841) in *Martin Luther and Other Essays*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), 143-44

⁴¹ Hedge, “Male and Female,” *The Monthly Religious Magazine (1861-1869)*, 38, 4 (October 1867), 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

And no prejudice is there which is not the inevitable accompaniment of ancient use- the atmosphere of custom- and which would not quickly yield to any resolute and successful attempt on the part of women to occupy paths of industry hitherto occupied by men alone. But to hear some women argue the matter one would think they expected that society, by an act of legislation, should turn out the male occupant and install the female in his place... Nature and the verdict of mankind, both male and female, the eternal instincts and proprieties, discriminate between employments masculine and feminine. It is not blind prejudice, as the advocates of sexual indifference plead, but enlightened perception and refined feeling that rules.⁴³

Hedge did not see the purpose in a broad scale revolution of gender roles. For those women who wished to transcend their sex, they should seek to do so on their own. Others had done so, he argued, noting employment trends in the medical and education fields as well as retail, where women were being employed alongside men.⁴⁴ His most sterling example, as always, was Fuller, who had for Hedge, raised the yardstick for female potential exceptionally high.

The success of Fuller's ambition came not through a general change of conditions for women, but through her *individual* efforts, through the strenuous exercise of her mind. Why should women seek broadscale change, when there were those like Fuller who had sought to change the course of her life through her own hard work? Institutional change was not the answer. "Society will never permit such an interchange of functions between the sexes as is likely to confound that ancient traditional distinction."⁴⁵ He insisted that this did not mean he did not support, on principle, the extension of civic rights to women. For example, he argued, that he would not speak out against women's suffrage, but in fact he did not need to. It was women themselves who saw the danger in such action. "Let the women of Massachusetts... present a petition to the General Court for an act of legislation empowering them to vote... But the matrons of Massachusetts will do no such thing. They know too well that such a revolution would be attended with great risk of domestic happiness, and with small advantage, if any, to the

⁴³ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

public good. It would carry more directly and more fiercely than ever before into the bosom of families the bitterness and broils of political life, and make a man's foes to be those of his own household."⁴⁶ In such institutional change, Hedge saw the dissolution of the family. If this was the form women's ambition was going to take, he could not support it.

Liberal in principle, conservative in practice, both Channing and Hedge fell short in the way of women's reform. Much is expected of these two men given their role in the Unitarian movement and their individual relationships with women who were not their wives, daughters or other relatives. Perhaps that is why their hesitance toward women's reform seems startling. They spoke of human progress and change as an intrinsic piece of human existence. However, it is neither so startling nor so unexpected if one realizes that they were always clear to separate individual change from institutional or societal revolution. Their aim as liberal Christian ministers was to bring human beings closer to God, closer to their full potential by teaching them to improve their minds. There it was up to each individual to progress. Spiritual change was the expected result of such progress, but societal, political and professional change could result as well. Channing ultimately could not countenance the latter sort of change in women, feeling it contradicted the fact of their femininity, their embodiment. Hedge did not oppose women's advancement in society; he simply did not think it was the duty of political or societal systems to expedite this change. In fact it was in the best interest of such systems to discourage holistic change. If institutions were going to change, if women were going to exist in society in a way they had theretofore, then it would happen gradually and it would happen with or without the approval of William Ellery Channing and Frederic Henry Hedge.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 6-7.

