Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address" (15 July 1838)

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Abstract: On July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered one of the most famous speeches of his storied career. At their invitation, Emerson addressed the graduates of the Harvard Divinity School, encouraging them to follow their intuitions and so slighting the influence of their venerable faculty mentors. Often acknowledged as the beginning of Emerson's career as a Transcendentalist lecturer, the Divinity School Address was necessarily also the end of his career as a Unitarian minister. This essay considers that early tenure, centering the twelve years that Emerson devoted to preaching, and locating his famous "Address" as the culmination of that homiletical body of work. In Emerson's moment of transition we can witness a fundamental tension between American individualism and Christian orthodoxy, as well as his selection of the more individualist path.

Keywords: Emerson, Harvard, Unitarianism, Preaching, Apostasy

Ralph Waldo Emerson's preaching career began on October 10, 1826, and ended on January 20, 1839, spanning just over twelve years in which he preached with striking regularity, frequently every Sunday and often several times a week, except when he was sick or, for much of 1833, in Europe. Because Emerson was so prolific in other venues, and because so much attention has been absorbed by his famous essays and orations, the ministerial foundation of his intellectual life has survived in relative obscurity, set quietly in unobtrusive stone. Though most every casual student of Transcendentalism understands that the Sage of Concord got his start as a Unitarian divine, few of the popular treatments seem to appreciate the duration of that stage, dependent as it was on supply preaching in an array of pulpits, from more than two years before his ordination at Boston's Second Church until just after his explosive address to the Harvard Divinity School.[1] Emerson's complete sermons include over 170 titles that fill four imposing volumes.[2] They make a vital contribution to any serious consideration of his life and work. And insofar as they account for almost the entirety of his public address prior to his lucrative career as a lecturer in the 1840s, their trajectory demands consideration by rhetorical scholars interested in American religious history. With these points in mind, this essay finds its subject in Emerson as *Man Preaching.*

My own interest in Emerson's pulpit production between his divinity school experience and his Divinity School Address has everything to do with the matter of his spiritual evolution during the intervening years. Like his cousin George Ripley, Emerson spent the 1830s in transition from the Unitarian ministry to something far less clearly defined, lending credence to Andover professor Moses Stuart's charge that Unitarianism was little more than "a half-way house to infidelity."[3] In Emerson's view, his development was less a matter of rebellion than of simple honesty, as he moved increasingly away from a submissive posture of deference to the text and toward one assertive of the shifts in his private mind. Because his life in these years was beset by tragedy, some have speculated that external events had prompted the inward turns. In his excellent biography, for example, Robert D. Richardson, Jr. traces Emerson's spiritual awakening back to his first wife's untimely death, instilling that catastrophic loss with liberatory

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power.[4] Lawrence Buell concurs, referring to Ellen Emerson's death as "the beginning of the end of his short existence as a good Boston professional."[5] I am somewhat less convinced, finding in the details of Emerson's life and times a record of incremental growth most notable for being slow and a rhetorical output most remarkable for being consistent, even when times were tough. If we consider Emerson's long 1830s with patience, we may come to appreciate his culminating ministerial work as a hard-earned reflection on a vocational path let finally go.

This essay seeks to center Emerson's "Divinity School Address" within his Unitarian career, marking the speech as a pointed farewell to a formative stage in his uncommonly refulgent life. Standing before the graduates as they prepared to make their way in ministry, Emerson spoke honestly from his own experience, celebrating the potential inherent to their callings while also cautioning them against the theological pitfalls that would await, and so showing them the potential for new growth outside of orthodoxy. I begin with a survey of Emerson's biography during the selected span, emphasizing the centrality of pulpit oratory to his development as a giant of American letters. I turn then to a close read of the "Address" itself, highlighting Emerson's two core themes and explaining why each constitutes a rejoinder to Unitarianism and, specifically, to the Unitarian Brahmins in attendance. Finally, I conclude with a few observations on what Emerson's transcendental turn meant for his life, religion, and politics, as well as the influence it has wielded over American doubters, skeptics, and freethinkers ever since.

The Preaching Years

Emerson's pulpit rhetoric can easily be read against the well-documented details of his biography during the ministerial years, captured in journal entries, correspondence, and written artifacts from others within his family and social circle.[6] Having matured in a particularly erudite home in an unusually literate community, Emerson was perhaps never at risk of losing his legacy amid the obfuscating sands of time. When he was seventeen years old he began work on a series of journals to which he would contribute thoughts, critiques, poems, and other miscellany for more than five decades to follow, and in the later years he would invest no small quantity of time and attention in crafting detailed indices to organize his entries in the most manageable fashion. These show that, at least as early as his enrollment at Harvard, Emerson was deeply introspective, passionately dedicated to books and ideas, and quickly enthralled with people—like the venerable William Ellery Channing and the upstart Sampson Reed, to say nothing of his Aunt Mary—who could capture and direct his avid curiosity. It was Channing, in particular, who inspired the young man to study divinity, if only "for the sake of saying" that he was, during the period of post-graduate years when he tarried in the schoolroom to support his family.[7] Channing gave his prospective protégé a sprawling list of books to read, and Emerson busied himself with this independent study until his admission to Harvard Divinity School in 1825. It was at this point that he began to experience eye problems attendant to a still nascent case of tuberculosis, and his studies were consigned to a sort of *ad hoc* limbo. At the insistence of his uncle, the Waltham minister Samuel Ripley, Emerson was licensed to preach in October of 1826, and on Ripley's dime he traveled south to St. Augustine and Charleston that winter, hoping to convalesce from the consumption that had refused to abate on its own. During this trip he found several occasions to preach the first two addresses in his new sermon book, and enough relaxation to restore his restive health. When he returned to Boston the following spring, he was strong enough to commit himself to further pulpit engagements.

From the autumn of 1826 to that spring of 1827, Emerson's preaching was necessarily limited to those first two sermons, each of which he delivered several times across several venues and would deliver again at various points later in his career. The first, on the biblical imperative to "pray without ceasing," advanced the novel suggestion that humans were incapable of doing otherwise, infusing all thought with reverential quality to the extent that "every secret wish is a prayer."[8] The second, a short theodical response to David Hume, sought to recast human happiness as a "series of reliefs" made possible by a world in which pain and suffering create incentives for the pursuit of improvement and virtue.[9] A third, drafted in June and seeming to link the Unitarian vision with an almost evangelical millennialism, touched off a productive season of writing in which Emerson churned out ten new sermons in relatively quick succession, allowing him to deliver his thirteenth composition by the end of the year. He would do so in Concord, New Hampshire on Christmas Day, to an audience that included his future wife.

In their style and content these early works presage the later essays and orations that would make Emerson a household name. In keeping with the conventions of the age, each of his sermons began with the identification of a biblical text, in every case a concise verse on which the speaker would then expound. From there, each quickly assumed a literary form, considering its themes in contemplative sentences and romantic language far more reminiscent of a Channing than a Finney or a Beecher. Emerson did not state a thesis and then argue points so much as observe and meditate on a spiritual reality, drawing always on his own thoughts and insights at the expense of detailed exegesis. Like Channing, and no doubt thanks to his guidance, Emerson knew the Bible very well, and could certainly have framed his oratory in deference to chapter and verse. That he did not is revealing, perhaps, but not quite to the extent of foreshadowing any later apostasy. Though admittedly somewhat marginal in their scant treatment of the holy texts, Emerson's sermons still fit within the rationalist parameters honored in Unitarian pulpits across New England, and by all accounts people enjoyed listening to him preach.

By the spring of 1828, Emerson was in love with Ellen Tucker and in search of the stability that underwrites marriage and family. This may explain his developing interest in Second Church, where he was made junior pastor in March of 1829, and senior pastor that July. His predecessor, Henry Ware the younger, had by then secured a professorship at Harvard Divinity School, a perch from which he would instruct auspicious ministerial candidates, nurse his ailing health, and on occasion write Emerson letters critical of his preaching.[10] Ware's complaints noted the paucity of scriptural citation in his successor's sermons, documenting it as a matter of some concern even then. In his journals, Emerson had for years been crafting aphorisms to individuality, and his homilies already displayed a tendency toward the intuitive in matters of faith. So it may be reasonable to infer, as many have, that this exceedingly precocious youth had not yet found a vocation so much as a job.[11] Though inscrutable, it remains at least interesting to suppose what forms Emerson's professional life may have assumed had his young bride lived. Because she did not, the surprisingly brief tenure of Second Church's promising new pastor seems perhaps not so surprising after all. A uniquely cataclysmic event in a literary life full of untimely death, Ellen's passing from tuberculosis at the tender age of nineteen may at least have delivered her husband from a safe, secure, narrowly institutional career.

And yet, Richardson's suggestion that the burden of domestic responsibility may explain both why Emerson chose to secure a permanent pulpit prior to his marriage and why he chose to surrender it afterward is perhaps not *exactly* right. Certainly, Emerson was overwhelmed with grief. His journals from the succeeding months are eloquent in despair, mourning the loss in

poetry and prose. On February 13, 1831, five days after Ellen's death, Emerson resigned himself to "this miserable apathy," recognizing that it "may wear off" in time but also dreading the resumption of anything approaching normal life alone. "I shall go again among my friends with a tranquil countenance," he wrote. "Again I shall be amused, I shall stoop again to little hopes & little fears & forget the graveyard. But will the dead be restored to me?"[12] The answer, of course, was *no,* but neither does Emerson's productivity in those months suggest a merely apathetic man. He preached on February 20th, and again on the 27th, and nearly every Sunday after that for the rest of the year, adding many Sunday and Thursday night addresses, as well as a series of nine "vestry lectures" that were widely praised for their thorough biblical scholarship. In total, Emerson wrote and delivered more than thirty speeches during the course of that year, bringing his sermon book up to 139 entries, all simply numbered and arranged by Roman numerals. He also attended speeches, including a revival meeting with Yale's Nathaniel Taylor and an antislavery lecture from the abolitionist Samuel J. May. He wrote about all of it in his journals, and to all appearances his life did go on. It is nonetheless worthwhile to note, as Richardson does, that all of this took place alongside a daily vigil by his late wife's graveside, at least until March of 1832, when he decided, for reasons unexplained, to open her coffin and look inside. Far from the gothic or the macabre, Richardson reads the event as a monumental turning point at which the despondent young lover simply "had to see for himself."[13] Emerson did not record what, exactly, he saw or how it made him feel, but his subsequent writing does suggest a subtle change in bearing. That summer, seeking repose in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, he wrestled with the clerical reservations that he had recently voiced to his congregants and that would eventuate his resignation in September. "I have sometimes thought," he wrote, "that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry."[14]

The point of contention, officially, was the observance of the Lord's Supper, a ritual that Christian churches of diverse backgrounds routinely practiced, then as now, in ceremonial remembrance of Christ. Emerson raised objections, but not before at least nominally considering the points and their counters. Admonishing himself that it is unwise to "bury my talent in the earth in my indignation at this windmill," he either could or would not let the matter go. "I know very well that it is a bad sign in a man to be too conscientious, & stick at gnats," he wrote. "The most desperate scoundrels have been the over refiners. Without accommodation society is impracticable. But this ordinance is esteemed the most sacred of religious institutions & I cannot go habitually to an institution which they esteem holiest with indifference & dislike."[15] Throughout that summer, as the congregation and their pastor deliberated separately over how best to resolve the impasse, a foregone conclusion drew quietly near. On September 9th, Emerson announced his resignation from the pulpit.

His address, Sermon CLXII on "The Lord's Supper," candidly relayed his focused thoughts and mixed feelings on the matter of the bread and the wine. Grounding his remarks in a long history of doctrinal controversy, he built a case on reasonable concerns and perhaps enough scriptural warrant to satisfy Ware. Because churches and sects had been arguing over the particulars since the ritual was ritualized, and because he believed that "Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance," Emerson suggested that "it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do."[16] His main points were two—first, that Jesus's final meal with his disciples should be understood as a unique event in history, rather than a precedent-setting example for subsequent generations, and therefore, second, that the sustained practice of a one-off gathering outside of its historical and geographic context could not help but confuse and mislead practitioners on important theological questions. For Emerson, if not quite for his

auditors, Christianity was not distinguished by its liturgical practices so much as its commitment to truth, morality, and the cultivation of the soul. Without condemning those who embraced the religious formalities, he declared his inability to celebrate them. "What I revere and obey in [Christianity] is its reality," he explained, "its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason through all its representation of God and His Providence; and the persuasion and courage that come out thence and lead me upward and onward. Freedom is the essence of this faith."[17] Because he had voiced his objections to the continued practice of the Supper, and because his congregation had replied with a unanimous vote to sustain it nonetheless, Emerson affirmed his ministerial commitment "to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart."[18] He proffered his resignation, and in time the church accepted with regret. By all accounts, there were no hard feelings on either side. But perhaps there were at least a few in attendance for whom the faith was not *essentially* devoted to freedom, and who recognized frankly that their now-former minister was bound for broader fields. In private correspondence, William Emerson expressed his belief that an accord might still be reached between his brother and the flock, but he was wrong. Having closed his accounts with the congregation, Emerson set sail for Malta on Christmas Day.

From late October of 1832 until late October of 1833, Emerson neither wrote nor delivered a sermon, by far the longest quiet stretch in his ministerial life. Over these twelve months he underwent a rebirth, of sorts, defined primarily by his solitary travels around Europe, where he visited famous churches, wandered famous streets, and called on famous literary figures including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. After landing in Malta in February, Emerson made his way around Sicily before heading on to Naples and Rome, spending a total of five months in Italy, which awed him despite his Protestant prejudices. From there he traveled over the Alps to Geneva, then on to a Paris that paled, by his estimate, in comparison to Rome. And yet, while there he did experience what Richardson has called a "vocational epiphany."[19] In the Jardin des Plantes Emerson was captivated by some ongoing research into plant classification, a vast and encompassing project that attuned his mind to the interconnectedness of all things in nature. He wrote in his journal that there is not "a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer." Noting his felt affinity with creatures from the centipede on up, he found himself "moved by strange sympathies" and saying, continually, "I will be a naturalist."[20] Though Emerson had expressed his curiosity about the physical universe long before this walk in the garden, it seems fair to mark the experience as a catalyst for the religious-philosophical work he was soon to undertake. He spent much of June and July in Paris before boarding the steamboat to London, where he began his search for the English luminaries noted above. That Coleridge, at least, fell somewhat short of his expectations does not seem to have diminished his own literary ambitions. If anything, Emerson's time in England made him feel ready—even impatient—for the next stage of his career.

When he returned home in October of 1833, Emerson arrived as a shepherd without a flock. And yet he delivered his Sermon CLXV from the Second Church pulpit on October 27, and rounded out the year with preaching in New Bedford and Boston. In 1834 he preached practically every Sunday in supply, filling pulpits around Massachusetts, Maine, and New York, though now delivering primarily old material. In May he received the first installment of an inheritance from his deceased wife, freeing him up to work on lectures. In August he toyed with the idea of succeeding Orville Dewey at New Bedford, and in December rumors had him

considering the pulpit at Waltham. But ultimately he passed on both, and would never seriously entertain such opportunities again. In hindsight, Emerson's reticence toward new pastorates and their attendant obligations is easily intelligible in the light of his glowing new options. He began his lecture series early in 1835, proposed marriage to a new wife, bought a new house, and began establishing the intellectual connections with which his ambitions would famously rise—Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, and Margaret Fuller, to name a few. Again in hindsight, the publication of his *Nature* in 1836 would mark the flowering of that new "transcendental" stage in Emerson's life, along with all of the intellectual trappings for which he would long be remembered and celebrated. But it seems worth noting, at the risk of redundancy, that he preached from Unitarian pulpits nearly every Sunday along the way—in 1836, 1837, and for about half of 1838, until the senior class of the Harvard Divinity School invited him to deliver an address. Though Emerson does not seem to have foreseen that his remarks to the students and faculty would serve as the coda to his pulpit ministry, he probably should have. A novel, polarizing, and self-immolating speech, the Divinity School Address marked Emerson's advance beyond the generous bounds of Unitarian orthodoxy and into an intolerable freedom.

An Address

Emerson delivered his famous *Phi Beta Kappa* oration at Harvard in 1837, and returned to address the Divinity School the following year. Both speeches were confrontational in an oblique way, both were controversial, but it was the second, in particular, that left the speaker *persona non grata* on campus for the next twenty-seven years. As it turned out, Unitarian patience was somewhat less than infinitely elastic, and Unitarian elites would suffer only so much wispy insult in their own hallowed home. In his account of Harvard during this time, Kenneth Sacks observes that an invitation to speak was essentially an invitation to praise, and both students and faculty had grown accustomed to hearing reverent paeans to their great institution.[21] If the content of Emerson's "American Scholar" had strained relations with his *alma mater*, the content of "An Address" set the bridge alight. The students had invited Emerson; the faculty would preclude any repetition of their mistake.

And yet, readers of the Divinity School Address outside of its immediate context will not be struck by an overtly incendiary tone. When Emerson resolved to highlight the weaknesses and shortfalls of the Unitarian establishment, he did so in distinctly Emersonian fashion. Situating his remarks within the preternatural beauty of "this refulgent summer," Emerson built his case upon two primary themes: the universal integrity of intuition as it exists in "the moral sentiment," and the troubling narrowness of an outmoded "historical Christianity." Of the two, this second theme was the more detailed and pointed. Through it, Emerson made his foray into the Unitarian "miracles controversy," stating baldly that miracle is "Monster."[22] After analyzing these themes as they appear in text and context, I will conclude with some reflection on honest dissent in the heyday of Unitarian Boston.

Theme I: The Moral Sentiment

For Emerson, the "moral" or "virtuous" sentiment serves as an emotional link to the nature of Being itself, disclosing in meditative moments the connection between human spirit and the rest of creation. Recognized and understood, this sentiment prepares the individual to appreciate the unseen matrix of "laws which traverse the universe and make things what they are," such that the world itself is immediately diminished, existing only as "a mere illustration

and fable of this mind" (2). For all of Emerson's airy rumination on the beauty and mystery of nature, his attention is ever focused on mind and morals, placing these atop the natural panorama and offering them as the key to unlock its beguiling secrets. Experienced as *sentiment*, the moral impulse in humanity is at once pedagogical and ontological—it teaches people how to identify and understand their reason for being. By its very existence, universally felt and undeniable, the moral sentiment serves as another mode of revelation. It is God's Word implanted in the fabric of his work. To understand the meaning of life, one need only look inward and submit to these feelings. There, in the pursuit of virtuous conduct, is "the end of the creation answered, and God is well pleased" (3).

Indeed, for Emerson, the emotional cues that guide us on questions of right and wrong are simply extensions of the natural laws that order the universe. The laws of the soul are divine and incontrovertible, like gravity. The decision either to abide or to challenge them is consequential. "He who does a good deed," Emerson writes, "is instantly ennobled. He who does a mean deed is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice" (5). Buell has observed that Emerson's style in passages like this, dwelling "somewhere between metaphor and metaphysics," is typical of Transcendentalist writing more broadly in that it "prefers to make a striking general impression rather than to be exact."[23] There is a circuitous nature to the phrasing, such that Emerson's most startling claim is immediately qualified by less inflammatory language—it is not that the just man *is* God, he clarifies, it is that the just man is god*ly,* and to that degree god*like.* Still, the effect rendered by this wording is consistent with the larger argument in which it features, emphasizing the porous relationship between nature and supernature. Emerson's God is not in any sense a deist clockmaker, or even an aloof, Calvinist sovereign. He is an artist, infusing himself into his creation and permitting his creation to partake of himself. Virtue provides the means to the union.

Though Emerson's laudatory emphasis on morality and virtue would have been familiar to his Unitarian audience, his reverence for feeling as the arbiter of truth soon acquires a more antinomian resonance. Unitarians endorsed a broad range of theological views, treating the end of moral conduct as a binding tie between, but they stopped short of crowning each inner voice with prophetic authority. Emerson ventures onto this dangerous ground with small but steady steps. "The perception of this law of laws awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment," he writes, "and which makes our highest happiness. Wonderful is its power to charm and to command" (8). This religious sentiment is "divine and deifying," he declares. "It is the beatitude of man. It makes him illimitable" (9). It "lies at the foundation of society, and successively creates all forms of worship" (10). It is, finally, "an intuition." Perceived intuitively, it must be experienced individually. Its insights are personal and private, customized for and delivered directly to each inquiring mind. Though they are preached by the wise, the learned, the experienced, or from Jesus himself, they "cannot be received at second hand" (11). For Emerson, the essence of Christ's ministry was in his leadership by example, in his personal embodiment of the divine potential in humanity. "I am divine," he has Jesus say, "Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou thinkest as I now think" (13). Though the Unitarians had demoted Jesus from deity to something somewhat less, Emerson deifies him once again, but only as a shining exemplar of the spirit at work in everyone. This portion of the address is transitional, guiding the audience out of Emerson's first main theme and

into his second—from an endorsement of the intuitive moral sentiment to a critique of historical Christianity.

Theme II: The Problem with Historical Christianity

To elucidate this theme, Emerson subdivides his analysis into a pair of enumerated points. The first is that, over the millennia, Christianity has been corrupted. It has fallen into "error," such that it is no longer practiced as "the doctrine of the soul," but rather "an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual," taken up in "noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus" (15). This marks one of several moments in the address when the speaker allows the veil of august propriety to slip, and its application to the Christ-emphasis in Christianity may be read back onto his culminating dispute with Second Church. Certainly, Emerson's irritation at this brand of practice had been building ever since. Peter S. Field writes that, by 1838, he was "bursting with the pent-up frustration accumulated over half a decade of miserable Sundays," in which preachers and congregants alike had submitted themselves to a tired, dusty, merely historical faith.[24] If Christianity had been reduced to an ancient personality cult, then it had nothing to say to men and women of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, Emerson argues that a singular focus on the life, ministry, and miracles of Christ leaves the essential truths of the faith "foreclosed and monopolized." The historical emphasis relegates the power of Christian faith to other people, places, and times. Instead of inspiring and invigorating its practitioners, it demands their submission and prostration. "You shall not be a man even," Emerson quips. "You shall not own the world; you shall not dare and live after the infinite Law that is in you, and in company with the infinite Beauty which heaven and earth reflect to you in all lovely forms; but you must subordinate your nature to Christ's nature; you must accept our interpretations, and take his portrait as the vulgar draw it" (15). Dispensing with this approach, Emerson substitutes one more conducive to Christian belief has he understands it, an approach that validates the self and honors its internal revelations. Experienced through God-given virtue, intellect, and strength, the divine intuition stands ready to accommodate a worthy Christianity, allowing each individual to realize that "the gleams which flash across my mind are not mine, but God's," representing a faith tradition that is here and now, not there and then. In this context, any attempt "to covert a man by miracles is a profanation of the soul," to be replaced by a "true conversion" based in "the reception of beautiful sentiments" (17). And with this shift, preachers and congregants alike will recognize the true power and meaning of the Christian message, rather than fixating on Christ as messenger.

These issues merge smoothly into the expression of Emerson's second point, marking a consequence of the first. He argues that the corrupting influence of historical Christianity has profoundly restricted any potential for Christian inspiration in the present.[25] "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done," he writes, "as if God were dead" (19). Without the active and influential movement of the divine spirit through preacher and parishioners, faith has been stripped of its powers. The church is now more akin to a civic club, and devotion to a hobby. There is nothing celestial in it. This is the crux of Emerson's critique, and here the address reaches its point of application for the divinity students in the audience. If they would commit their lives to the pulpit and pastorate, they must first search themselves and decide whether they are worthy of the call, capable of transcending the low and narrow limits of the institution in their time. "The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach," Emerson writes. "Courage, piety, love, wisdom, can teach; and every man can open his door to these angels, and they shall bring him the gift of tongues. But the man

who aims to speak as books enable, as synods use, as the fashion guides, and as the interest commands, babbles. Let him hush" (21). If their motivation was derived merely from books, from influence, or from a desire for vocation—the sources that had moved so many into the clerisy, including Emerson himself when he sat in their seats—then it may be time for a change of plans.

Indeed, and unfortunately for the graduates, true Christian service would require a higher order of practice than their professors and mentors had modeled. Emerson's complaints about corruption and impotence were not merely abstract—they were traceable to real people, some of whom were sitting somberly in the audience at the time. Under their stewardship, the faith had fallen into "universal decay," owing directly to the sad fact that "the soul is not preached." The situation had entered a state of emergency, just as the torch was about to be passed. "On this occasion," Emerson writes, "any complaisance would be criminal which told you, whose hope and commission it is to preach the faith of Christ, that the faith of Christ is preached" (22). Though the pastorate was a variegated position with an array of duties, Emerson attributes the sorry state of Unitarianism in New England to the sorry state of the pulpit precisely. If preaching is understood as "the expression of the moral sentiment in application to the duties of life," then the preachers in attendance were a class of abject disappointments. They had failed "to charm and command the soul," or to inspire "pleasure and honor in obeying." Their faith did not "blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers." Instead, under their leadership, "the priest's Sabbath has lost the splendor of nature; it is unlovely; we are glad when it is done; we can make, we do make, even sitting in our pews, a far better, holier, sweeter for ourselves" (23).

As exemplary of this problem, Emerson identifies one particular preacher who "sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more." Now widely recognized—and perhaps then suspected—as Concord minister Barzillai Frost, this unfortunate soul had failed to animate his rhetoric with the light and texture of lived experience. "He had lived in vain," Emerson writes. "He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it" (24). The example illustrates that fatal separation between intuition and oratory, embodying the subdued and stultifying form of address that invariably results when the preacher denies or ignores the divinity at work in himself, and so discounts that at work in each and all of his listeners. His discourse becomes flat and boring; his message uninspired and uninspiring. In contrast to this formalist relic, conversant in historical anecdotes and doctrinal strictures, Emerson conjures a "true preacher," alive to experience and attentive to feeling, recognizable when "he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of his thought" (24). Though exceptions were to be found—not in the brilliance of "a few eminent preachers" but in the "better hours" and "truer inspirations" of all—there was sadly no complete man at work in the Unitarian field of the day, present company included (27).

Thus Emerson concludes that these two errors—the emphasis on a merely historical Christianity and its resultant fatigue—can explain the state of the Church in 1838, a condition that he found positively dismaying. Appealing to the youth by condemning their elders, Emerson sought to recalibrate the course of an institution that had occupied and oriented the entirety of his life to that point. Having presented both an ideal and a complaint, Emerson would conclude his address by advocating the former as corrective to the latter.

Application

Appropriately, Emerson suggests, the problems created by privileging Church over Soul may be resolved by privileging Soul over Church once again. His summation of this case comprises one of the most memorable passages in the text. "The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man; indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology," Emerson writes. "It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that he speaketh, not spake" (30). Though evangelical clergy and writers had long attacked Unitarian theology for being insufficiently orthodox, Emerson indicts the faith for being far too evangelical. If that problem were to be corrected rather than propagated, that new generation of ministers would need to change course on their own—and each in his own way. "Let me admonish you, first of all," Emerson famously writes, "to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil." In language presaging his essay on "Self-Reliance," he continues: "Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's" (31). Each a "newborn bard of the Holy ghost," the graduates of the Harvard Divinity School had within them the power to create the faith anew, building a foundation atop their own God-given insights and intuitions (32). Thus Emerson's new ideas and interests were brought to bear on his old tradition and vocation, to powerful and unnerving effect.

Conclusion

For all of the many reasons that Emerson continues to fascinate, the Divinity School Address marks his appeal to the disillusioned, the doubting, and the skeptical within American religiosity. At once an iconoclast and a legacy—the last in a line of five generations of New England minsters—Emerson chafed within a Unitarian body famous for its openness to diverse ideas and interpretations. Far more flexible than its Calvinist rivals, the Unitarian Church of the 1830s was the shining culmination of America's liberal Christian tradition, endowed by the likes of Jonathan Mayhew and Charles Chauncy, influenced by Joseph Priestley and Theophilus Lindsay, christened by William Ellery Channing, and dedicated to the preservation of values like intellectual liberty and freedom of conscience. If Emerson felt entitled to challenge the establishment in its home and to its face, he may well have justified the move in reference to the establishment's own professed commitments. Far from violating Unitarian standards, Emerson's address embodied them. In doing so, it tested their limits. Ultimately, the speaker learned that he had gone too far.

This much was clear from the most famous reply to the Divinity School Address, delivered in the Divinity School itself exactly one year after Emerson spoke. Andrews Norton, the old Harvard don famously dubbed the "Unitarian Pope," delivered "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity" on July 19, 1839.[26] Though Norton never mentioned Emerson by name, his audience would have had no trouble identifying the infidel in question. An extended defense of Christ's miracles and of historical proofs, Norton's address attacked and dismissed the malign influence of the German theological and philosophical ideas that were then leading so many young Bostonians astray. Decidedly unwelcome at Harvard and toxic to true worship, this

rising *transcendental* influence could be nothing but destructive to the sons of Unitarianism. It had certainly destroyed the son of William Emerson.

If the charge of infidelity is severe in any religious setting, it was especially so in this. Perry Miller has noted that Unitarians as a class had "smarted under the accusation for decades" and "had been described as being themselves such abandoned heretics that they were bereft of even the conception of heresy." As a Harvard gentleman, Norton had been "schooled in the discipline of dignity and in the avoidance of name-calling," and there was "every reason that he be considerate and tactful" in this case. Emerson—like George Ripley, James Freeman Clarke, Theodore Parker, and the other "infidels" soon to rise among them—had been one of Norton's students. Norton "had known their fathers." And so, if he saw fit now to make this damning charge, against these young scholars and in this hallowed space, it must have meant that "the culprit was a threat both to the church and to the state."[27] Emerson's meditation on the blowing clover and the falling rain appears far more sinister from this vantage.

But, of course, the charge of infidelity did not ring true to Emerson himself, and so he chose not to dignify it with response. From childhood on, through the death of his father and the striving poverty of his family; through Harvard, the school room, and Harvard again; through his marriage, his ministry, and his bereavement; through his travels, his writings, his supply preaching and the lyceum, Emerson followed the religious sentiment as it guided him toward a calling for his life. For him, every individual was morally obligated to express the truth as he saw it, or as it was revealed to him in quiet moments. If that truth violated certain norms and expectations, or if it made one powerful enemies, or if it resulted in banishment, none of this was to be regretted. George Kateb has written that "Emerson's mission is to preach courage, inspire hope."[28] It is thanks to this courageous quality that Emerson's address has remained potent for so long, and why it continues to speak to so many who are uncomfortable simply repeating doctrines and dogmas. The key to understanding Emerson's early career, the Divinity School Address has been unlocking potential for nearly two centuries since.

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Notes

[1] This is also true of the rhetorical studies literature specifically. Nathan Crick, for example, focuses on the essays. See *The Keys of Power: The Rhetoric and Politics of Transcendentalism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 104-146. Exceptions include Wesley T. Mott, *"The Strains of Eloquence": Emerson and His Sermons* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990) and David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

[2] These are published as *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vols 1-4,* Albert J. von Frank, Teresa Toulouse, Andrew Delbanco, Ronald A. Bosco, and Wesley T. Mott, eds. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989).

[3] This charge was common enough to warrant a rebuttal from William Ellery Channing in his 1819 sermon, "Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered." See *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing* (New York: Routledge and Sons, 1884), 302.

[4] Robert D. Richardson, Jr. *Emerson: The Mind of Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3.
[5] Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Boston: Belknap/Harvard, 2003), 14.
[6] It is standard practice in books and essays on Emerson to cite these primary sources in-text using a short list of shared abbreviations. Since I will be citing these texts somewhat sparingly, I have dodged that convention here.
[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 1.* Ralph L. Rusk, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 146.
[8] Emerson, "Sermon I," *The Complete Sermons, Vol. 1*, 56.
[9] Emerson, "Sermon II," *The Complete Sermons, Vol. 1,* 66.
[10] Richardson, *Emerson,* 90.
[11] See, for example, Kenneth Sacks, *Understanding Emerson: "The American Scholar" and his Struggle for Self-Reliance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32-47; and Peter S. Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 59-96.
[12] Emerson, *Journals,* 170.
[13] Richardson, *Emerson,* 3.
[14] Emerson, *Journals,* 193.
[15] Emerson, *Journals,* 195.
[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Lord's Supper," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* Brooks Atkinson, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 100.
[17] Emerson, "The Lord's Supper," 108.
[18] Emerson, "The Lord's Supper," 109.
[19] Richardson, *Emerson,* 139.
[20] Emerson, *Journals,* 276.
[21] Sacks, *Understanding Emerson,* 32-47.
[22] Readers interested in an overview of the miracles debate will find one in Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 157-246.
[23] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 14-15.
[24] Field, *Ralph Waldo Emerson,* 120.
[25] The claim that Christianity has been corrupted over time and theological manipulation is a central theme in Unitarian writings. See, for example, Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, in Two Volumes* (Piercy and Jones, 1782); William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," in *Unitarian Christianity and Other Essays* (Liberal Arts Press, 1957); and Theodore Parker, *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (American Unitarian Association, 1908).
[26] Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (Dallas: Kennikat Press, 1971).
[27] Miller, *The Transcendentalists,* 6-7.
[28] George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 20.