

Emerson's Divinity School Address: Conditions and Reactions

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"The main question is how it has happened," Andrews Norton wrote in "The New School in Literature and Religion," which appeared on the 27th of August 1838 in the Boston *Daily Advertiser*, "that religion has been insulted by the delivery of these opinions in the Chapel of the Divinity College at Cambridge" (Norton 34-35). "The New School" that Norton referred to was American transcendentalism, the leaders of which he believed were influenced by German metaphysics, the French philosopher Victor Cousin and the Englishman Thomas Carlyle. The deliverer of those opinions was his former student at the Divinity School, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The particular incident to which Norton referred is the "Address, delivered before the Senior class in Divinity College, Cambridge," now commonly referred to as "The Divinity School Address," given by Emerson to the faculty, officers, guests and seven graduating seniors of Harvard's Divinity School on July 15, 1838.

In the address Emerson states that "Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion" (Emerson 866). He notes the two defects that have caused this corruption. The first defect is that Christianity is no longer a "doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus" (Emerson 866). Because of this "noxious exaggeration," Christ, who Emerson said was "the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of man," is portrayed as a "demigod" or figure from myth, rather than as the exemplary human that Emerson

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believed he was (Emerson 866). The second defect of Historical Christianity results from the first. Because Christ is regarded as he is, “Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead,” as if God only spoke and revealed himself to the people of a distant past (Emerson 867). Not only do these defects make the Christian preacher ineffectual, but Emerson blames the preachers, and considering the location of the address no doubt also blames those who taught the future preachers for preaching and teaching this defective faith, which makes perceiving truth an impossibility for the individual, unless that truth is handed to them and comes from a bygone age.

While Emerson blamed preachers and the Divinity School faculty for the current state of Historical Christianity, Norton accused the members of the “New School” of the “most extraordinary assumption, united with great ignorance, and incapacity for reasoning” who announced “themselves as the prophets and priests of a new future, in which all is to be changed...all present forms of society abolished” (Norton 33-34). Surprisingly, however, Norton, despite his condemnation, saw this “New School” as “a matter of no great concern” and the views expressed in Emerson’s address as a “matter of minor concern,” or rather this would have been the case “if those engaged in it were not gathering confidence from neglect” and continuing to “attack principles which are the foundation of human society and human happiness” (Norton 34). These were harsh words levied against a group of people that Norton saw as a clear and growing threat to order, and his remarks clearly indicate the degree to which insulting religion was seen as the same as attacking the possibility for a meaningful and organized existence. So how was it that these individuals, whom Norton saw as threatening the very foundation of society, could have proceeded unchecked? What was it about Emerson’s address that prompted Norton to speak out and spearhead the defensive effort against the transcendentalists? Specifically, with regard to Norton’s “main question,” what were the conditions around Boston at the time, as well as at Cambridge, and within Harvard itself that an address by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a widely well-respected person, could have caused him to be regarded as a religious dissenter, infidel, even a “slippery slope to atheism” (Buell 161)?

In Boston, during the first half of the nineteenth century “atheism seemed to lurk behind every pillar,” and accusations of atheism, religious dissidence, and infidelity, Robert Burkholder writes, “like that of witchcraft in the seventeenth century, were levelled often in press, and from the pulpit and podium” (Burkholder 1). Emerson’s remarks from behind the podium on July 15, 1838, garnered him such accusations. J.W. Alexander, Albert Dod and Charles Hodge, three leading theologians from the Princeton Theological Seminary, harshly denounced Emerson’s address at the Divinity School and transcendentalist ideas in general. They said the address was pervaded with “nonsense and impiety” and should Emerson’s instructions have been followed the only possible result would have been “hideous and godless” (Alexander et al. 13, 15). Transcendentalist ideas in general “approach the dialect of Bedlam” and “rob us of our religious faith, they despoil us of our reason” (Alexander et al. 14, 15).

As religious and secular matters were still quite intertwined, “those who challenged accepted religious views and practices were thought to be attacking social and political stability as well” (Burkholder 2). Nonbeliever or dissenter, any enemy of religion was an enemy of the state, and as Norton felt, an enemy of order, happiness and well-being. As such, the state often acted as the protective “secular arm of established religion in Boston in the 1830s” (Burkholder 3). Perhaps this was nowhere more apparent than the fact that while Emerson delivered his address, Abner Kneeland, in the Suffolk County Jail, was a little less than halfway through his sixty-day sentence for the crime of blasphemy (Burkholder 3). Kneeland, who was the last person in Massachusetts convicted of this charge, was considered a threat to religion and thus a clear threat to order. He preached Free Enquiry, a belief system that denied God, Christ, miracles and the eternal soul, to crowds of 2,000 people and published his ideas in a weekly newspaper, the *Boston Investigator*, which he also edited (Burkholder 4).

There were other instances that were similar in spirit to Kneeland’s imprisonment. In 1837 Elijah Lovejoy, a minister, publisher and an abolitionist, was killed by a mob in Illinois. At a memorial service for Lovejoy in Massachusetts, Attorney General James Trecothick Austin, chief prosecutor of Kneeland’s blasphemy trial when it reached the state supreme court, who had been invited to speak at the memorial

as a Lovejoy sympathizer, quickly denounced Lovejoy and blamed him for his own death, saying that it was Lovejoy's own rash and dangerous ideas that incited the mob (Burkholder 8). For Austin, the Illinois mob's actions were no different than his own prosecution of Kneeland: they saw a threat to order and acted to eliminate that threat.

Harvard and the Divinity School, however, had no controlling factor, nothing acting as the "secular arm," to protect it from threatening unorthodox and anti-establishment views; at least that was the way Norton saw it. In fact, he saw the school as spinning out of control, and when Emerson addressed the senior class in 1838, Norton felt it mirrored what was happening on a larger societal scale and accused the transcendentalists of deliberately "keeping our community in a perpetual stir" (Norton 33). Norton began serving as the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature at Harvard nearly twenty years before Emerson's address in 1819. Although a very conservative Unitarian, he was nonetheless hindered in becoming the Dexter Professor by the liberal Christian views implicit in the denomination, such as denying the Holy Trinity and original sin. While he was able to obtain the professorship, it seems he was at odds with the administration and governance at Harvard and the Divinity School, struggling for more faculty control, from the beginning of and throughout his tenure (Habich 213). The administration and governance of Harvard and the Divinity School, simply put, was at best a system of multiple layers of complexity "almost guaranteed to cause friction among students, faculty and administration" (Habich 212).

Harvard had "two formal governing bodies," the Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers (Habich 212). Both bodies were comprised largely of non-educators, and prior association with the school was not necessary (Habich 212). Since the early 1800's faculty membership in each body had been on the decline. In fact, the Harvard Corporation had not included a resident instructor since 1806 (Habich 212). Despite this exclusion from governance and administration, faculty members were responsible and reported to the two bodies. Governance of the Divinity School was even more complex as it involved a third body, the "Theological Institution at Cambridge," which itself was responsible not only to the Harvard Corporation and the Board of Overseers, but also the "Society for the Promotion of

Theological Education” (Habich 213). The Society existed completely separate from Harvard and the Divinity School but because of its fund raising ability was able to exert considerable influence on the school (Habich 213). Robert D. Habich’s “Emerson’s Reluctant Foe: Andrews Norton and the Transcendental Controversy” provides a detailed and very illuminating account of the governing bodies of Harvard and the Divinity School as well as Norton’s long and unsuccessful struggle against them, and through it all Habich identifies the one constant as the “steady erosion of faculty control” (Habich 213).

Norton resigned from his Dexter Professorship in 1830. Ironically, in the same year control of the Divinity School curriculum was handed over to the faculty, and the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education disbanded (Habich 216). However, throughout the 1830s leading up to Emerson’s address, the Divinity School continued to have problems (“shrinking enrollments, a reduced faculty”) but what likely would have disturbed Norton was “growing complaints about the arid curriculum” (Habich 216). Perhaps even more troubling to Norton was the fact that even though the faculty had gained control of the curriculum, they had grown increasingly tolerant and even “encouraged the divinity students to broach ever more dangerous issues like slavery, religious radicalism, and social reform” (Habich 216-217). Again, this is the type of influence Norton felt the transcendentalists were having not just on the small student body of the Divinity School but on the outside community as well, identifying Emerson and the “New School” with “social upheaval” (Burkholder 2).

In attacking the Divinity School Address Norton almost seemed to be at the point of believing that the Divinity School would be churning out Emerson clones and the effect would be horrific: “should such preachers abound, and grow confident in their folly, we can hardly overestimate the disastrous effects upon the religious and moral state of the community” (Norton 35). However, in that same response, Norton noted that it was the seven seniors who invited Emerson to speak at their commencement ceremonies who “have become accessories, perhaps innocent accessories, to the commission of a great offence” (Norton 35). As such, Emerson’s invitation and resulting speech may have been considerable evidence, as Norton saw it, of the

“disastrous effects” already emerging in and eroding the “religious and moral state of the community,” and thus he said the community needs to know what “exculpation or excuse” the divinity seniors could have provided for the “great offence” that resulted from their inviting Emerson to speak (Norton 35). “Exculpation” would have suggested that the graduating seniors were in fact “innocent accessories” and were blindsided by Emerson’s address. “Excuse,” on the other hand, would have meant that the seniors had foreknowledge of what Emerson intended to say, and thus Norton would likely have demanded that the Divinity School, which publicly denied responsibility for the address, as well as the community, deserved a justification for why Emerson was invited. Norton would no doubt have preferred that the seniors had been “innocent accessories,” as it would have implied that the transcendentalists were not “gathering confidence” and that people did not desire to hear their ideas. However, it seemed that in the case of the divinity seniors the opposite was true. Emerson noted in his journal that after being invited to speak at their commencement, he went to talk with the “Divinity School youths” and to his surprise all went well: “I went rather heavyhearted for I always find that my views chill or shock people at the first opening. But the conversation went well & I came away cheered” (Emerson 1965, 5: 471).

Others did not take Emerson’s ideas as well. Clearly, people like Norton and the three Princeton theologians felt there was a great deal at stake, a great deal to be protected, just as Emerson believed immediate action was needed to correct a great corruption: “And it is my duty to say to you that the need was never greater of new revelation than now” because of the “universal decay and now almost death of faith in society” (Emerson 868). However, they were not representative of the entire reaction to Emerson’s address. On August 30, 1838, three days after Norton’s “The New School in Literature and Religion” was printed in the *Daily Advertiser*, Theophilus Parsons, Jr., responded in the same newspaper with “The New School and Its Opponents.” Parsons identified himself as an opponent of “The New School” as he did not agree with Emerson’s ideas, but he immediately criticized Norton’s response as “so harsh, that in many passages it seems but the outbreak of indignant contempt” (Parsons 36). He warned Norton that by attacking “all inquiry — all progress” he was

creating a situation in which anyone with hope for the future would have no recourse but to move toward Emerson and "The New School" (Emerson 36). G.T. Davis's "Review of Divinity School Address" appeared the following day in the Boston *Morning Post*. It was not so much a review as it was Davis' attempt to correct Norton's grouping of the transcendentalists together with Victor Cousin and Thomas Carlyle. Like Parsons, Davis did not agree with Emerson. In fact, he admitted that Emerson was often difficult to understand because his ideas were "too dreamy, too misty, too vague" (Davis 40). As such, he gave very little concern to the ideas of the address: "Error has always a tendency to destroy itself" (Davis 39). He commended Emerson's mind and spirit, "willing to utter himself and be himself, and not another," just as Emerson urged others to "Obey thyself," and gave Emerson the right to "entertain" and "propagate" his views, something Abner Kneeland could have attested was not always granted (Davis 38; Emerson 867). Davis acknowledged that young men such as the Divinity School seniors "have grown weary of leading strings," and as Parsons cautioned Norton, Davis warned the Harvard faculty that should they choose to ignore this, "to Ralph Waldo Emerson they may rest assured their pupils will resort" (Davis 41).

The most thorough contemporary treatment that the address received came from Orestes Brownson on October 1, 1838, in the *Boston Quarterly Review*, which he also published. Brownson called the address "remarkable for its own character and for the place where and the occasion on which it was delivered" and admired the vitality of the language, the very qualities Norton saw as so insulting to religion and threatening to the community (Brownson 42). However, Brownson quickly pointed out numerous flaws with the address: "we cannot help regarding its tone as somewhat arrogant, its spirit is quite too censorious and desponding, its philosophy as indigested, and its reasoning as inconclusive" (Brownson 42). As a result, Brownson found the address vague, lacking in overall structure and direction. Overall, he was pleased with the motivation behind the address. He knew Emerson was no preacher of atheism or pantheism and that he meant no harm to Christianity or society, that he only wanted men to think and speak for themselves because Emerson could not stand the idea that so many people let their truth be handed to them without

question (Brownson 49).

Other contemporary reviews, such as that of James Freeman Clarke, an 1833 graduate of the Divinity School, which appeared on November 6, 1838, in the *Western Messenger*, a liberal monthly magazine based in Louisville, found nothing “objectionable at all” in the address, only that Emerson sometimes spoke too strongly without enough care, which may have made his tone and wording more susceptible to misunderstanding (Clarke 51). Similarly, although somewhat later, Englishman Richard Monckton Milnes praised Emerson for giving a fresh and attractive language to the ideas of Carlyle and found nothing of “a controversial character” in the address (Milnes 16). However, the confidence and immediacy with which Emerson urged his ideas to be acted upon led Milnes to believe that he had not sufficiently considered some of their most basic implications.

It seemed that the overall reaction to the Divinity School Address was a relative split, perhaps even leaning towards the positive. Although those who opposed the address spoke out with vehemence, it seems opposition was largely reserved for the very conservative, while the address — if not the specific ideas contained in it, then at least the motivation and character of its giver — was largely admired. Despite Emerson’s own concerns following the address, he soon found that his popularity as a lecturer increased (Burkholder 14). So what was it then that made some, like the three Princeton theologians, “cleave with more tenacity than ever” to the current state of Christianity, or cause Norton to “unlimber his logic” to guard against transcendentalism (Alexander et al. 15; Gohdes 27)?

For Norton, there was obviously his history with the Divinity School. While the address clearly offended him, considering the fact that his efforts to gain the faculty more control were rebuked while he held his professorship, it must have also hurt and yet been oddly prophetic as well. Prophetic or not, the ideas of the address — the defects of Historical Christianity and intuitive perception of divine laws — were at direct odds with Norton’s own ideas and his life work, the three volume *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*. Although both Norton and Emerson believed there was a great deal at stake, Emerson felt that religion and faith were tired and ineffectual, nearly dead, while Norton believed it was people like Emerson and the

transcendentalists who were trying to killing them. It also seems that in addition to the ideas of the address, its confident and assured tone, which even supporters criticized Emerson for, would have greatly bothered Norton and been most abrasive to his own personality, which Habich describes as “[i]mperious, self-assured, daunting in his command of biblical scholarship” (Habich 209). This personality was shaken in the few years following the address, as Norton became aware that he was clearly losing the debate he had essentially initiated (Habich 234). But the degree to which the address offended him was clearly indicated by the extremely harsh tone of his response, for which he was criticized in turn.

As for the specifics of the address, there are far too many ideas, wordings, phrases and passages that would have troubled Norton to list them all. They begin with the opening line of the address, “In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life,” and the beautiful natural imagery of the subsequent passage (Emerson 862). Norton would have found the summer as a coming to head of problems, which is exactly how he viewed Emerson's address and its subsequent publication, rather than anything resembling “refulgent.” He wrote that Emerson's address was “ill boding evidence” that the “evil” — this is the same “evil” Norton felt was rocking the foundation of “human society and human happiness” — “is becoming, for the time, disastrous and alarming” (Norton 34). Two years earlier, in 1836, Norton had already begun battling in print with the transcendentalists when he criticized his former student George Ripley “for writing irresponsibly about biblical miracles” (Habich 210). 1836 was no doubt a very difficult year for Norton. In the last third of the year, four works appeared, beginning with Emerson's *Nature* on September 9th, that Norton would have found threatening (Habich 218). Following *Nature* were William Henry Furness's *Remarks on the Four Gospels*, Ripley's *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion* and Brownson's *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*. In 1837, Norton countered with the publication of the first volume of *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*. In these volumes Norton sought to prove the validity of miracles as observable proof of God, which is quite contrary to Emerson's idea of intuitive perception, which he spoke of the following summer.

It is not difficult to imagine the anger Norton must have felt when Emerson said that the defects of Historical Christianity were the fault of preachers and, given the location of the address, of the teachers of preachers as well. Despite opinions that the “address itself was calculated to give no offense, on a grounds of vocabulary,” it seemed Emerson did not pull any verbal punches (Whicher 74). He said the “vulgar tone of preaching” profanes the soul, that this “injury to faith throttles the preacher” leaving him ineffectual to do good, and that the pulpit has been “usurped” by formalists. “[L]et him hush” who continues to preach the corrupted faith; the preacher who preaches only as rituals and the past allow him to have “lived in vain” (Emerson 867, 868, 869).

Emerson’s intended his criticisms to inspire and open others to a way of seeing the world that he believed the current state of Historical Christianity did not allow. Emerson said that Jesus Christ was the one man who “saw with open eye the mystery of the soul,” the one person “in all history” who “estimated the greatness of man,” and that “God incarnates himself in man” (Emerson 865). It was these facts that Emerson believed had been greatly perverted by Christian preaching ever since the time of Christ, and, as a result, man had essentially been told that the level of truth perceived by Christ was no longer possible. It was because Christ was the exemplary man, the very truest from the “true race of prophets,” that the exaggeration of his person and misconstruction of his teachings had occurred: “The idioms of his language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes” (Emerson 866). Because of this usurpation and misconstruction Emerson felt Christianity had become like a cult or mythology structure. He believed Christ “spoke of miracles; for he felt that man’s life was a miracle,” which seems very much akin to the optimistic tone with which he began the address (Emerson 866). However, Christ’s example had become so distorted that the word “miracle” as Christianity used it became a “Monster.” “To aim to convert a man by miracles is a profanation of the soul” (Emerson 866, 867). After Emerson referred to the word “miracle” as a “monster,” he added, “It is not one with the blowing clover and falling rain,” which seems to recall the optimism and natural imagery of the opening passage, suggesting that the current

state of Christianity was not only at odds with the progress of man, his ability to discern the laws of his soul, but was even a hindering and regressive force (Emerson 866). But even the opening passage, despite its optimism, was still an "imperfect apprehension" (Emerson 862). Emerson believed man was capable of better, but how did he suggest man get there?

Emerson found the process, at least the first step of it, quite simple and self-evident: "A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue" (Emerson 863). One of Norton's central complaints against Emerson and the transcendentalists, a complaint shared by some of Emerson's supporters, was their confidence and their assured tone. Norton saw this tone as a "rejection of reasoning" coupled with "contempt of good taste," and was angered that anyone who felt entitled could assume such "a tone as if he were one of the chosen enlighteners of a dark age" (Norton 34). One can imagine Norton bristling when Emerson, after speaking of how "Character is always known," that good attracts good, and the "vile, by affinity, the vile," immediately referred back to these ideas as "These facts" (Emerson 863, 864). Emerson was no doubt seen by those who shared Norton's opinions, such as the three Princeton theologians, as exemplifying this trait of self-selected enlightener when he proclaimed that the "sentiment of virtue" will raise man, "low as he now lies in evil and weakness," to the knowledge of divine laws that cannot be properly written or spoken (Emerson 863). And yet, there Emerson was on July 15, 1838, saying of the sentiment of virtue, which allows man to perceive these unutterable laws, "let me guide your eyes to the precise objects of the sentiment" (Emerson 863).

Norton went on to point out — and this seems a wholly justifiable complaint — "by what process this joyful revolution is to be affected [we] are not told" (Norton 34). This criticism is echoed in modern work on Emerson. Charles Howell Foster phrases the point more specifically, and without Norton's acidity, when he mentions the importance Emerson placed, throughout all his work, on his conviction that "reliance on the soul will work a spiritual revolution in," not just the current defective state of Christianity but, "every part of society" (Foster 100). This idea was what opponents of Emerson and

transcendentalism found threatening, as they felt it entailed not a beneficial “spiritual revolution” but rather an unguided if not reckless teardown of “every part of society.” The applicability of Foster’s statement to the Divinity School Address is clear: Emerson said the “religious sentiment” makes man “illimitable,” that it “corrects the capital mistake of infant man,” which is any form of imitation, “by showing the fountain of all good to be in himself,” and that it is this sentiment that “lies at the foundation of society” (Emerson 864). Compare what Emerson wrote a few years later in “Self-Reliance”: “It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.” It seems that Emerson was implying that if individuals opened themselves to and perceived this sentiment, everything would simply fall into place, even though he provided no actual instruction for how this was to be done (Emerson 886).

Milnes said of Emerson and the address that the “confidence with which he invests his conclusions, and the solemnity with which he urges his hearers to act them out fully and immediately” was proof “that he has not probed the depth of the ground on which he is standing” (Milnes 16-17). However, it is possible to discern a certain logic and organization to the address, similar to the numbered and titled platforms of ascending importance in *Nature*. It seems to be a three-step process, beginning with the sentiment of virtue, followed by moral sentiment, with the religious sentiment coming last. Emerson defined the sentiment of virtue as “a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws” (Emerson 863). These laws “refuse to be adequately stated...on paper, or spoken by the tongue” but permeate the actions and thoughts of daily life, and as such “this sentiment is the essence of all religion” (Emerson 863). Next is the “intuition of the moral sentiment,” which is “an insight of the perfection of the laws of the souls” (Emerson 863). So, if the “sentiment of virtue” simply entails perceiving and enjoying these “laws of the souls,” that “more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty,” then the “moral sentiment” is a fuller understanding of these laws, the knowledge that “They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance”

(Emerson 863). From an awareness of the “laws of the souls” followed by an understanding of their timeless immutability comes the recognition of a third sentiment: “The perception of this law of laws awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment, and which makes our happiness highest” (Emerson 864). It is this sentiment that is “divine and deifying” and “lies at the foundation of society” and “all forms of worship” (Emerson 864).

Despite what seems to be a fairly ordered and logical progression in the address, there are many flaws, the first and most obvious of which is vagueness. Emerson was often praised for his language. Parsons commended his “extraordinary brilliancy of language, his frequent beauty of imagery, and the originality of his style” even though these attributes sometimes appeared to “indicate a mind from which all order are absent” (Parsons 36, 37). Emerson identified himself as a meticulous wordsmith, believing that “There is a right word, and every other word is wrong,” while Norton, on the other hand, accused Emerson of abusing “common language” for the sake of trickery “which we mistake for eloquence” (Emerson 1963, 3: 271; Norton 34). Emerson was attacked for sounding very appealing but lacking any real substance or direction. Emerson did say certain things that may have sounded like instruction for what Norton dismissed as the “joyful revolution,” but he never actually provided a method. For example, to start the second passage of the address Emerson said, “when the mind opens and reveals the laws which transverse the universe...then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of this mind” (Emerson 862). But how does one get the mind to open? Emerson offered that this is achieved simply when the individual proclaims, “I love the Right; Truth is beautiful within and without for evermore. Virtue, I am thine; save me; use me; thee will I serve, day and night, in great and small, that I may be not virtuous, but virtue” (Emerson 863).

In addition to the complaints regarding Emerson's language, which ranged from brilliant but vague to deliberately misleading and subversive, there seems to be an unavoidable inherent contradiction in the logic of the address. As already noted, the “certain divine laws” to which Emerson urged people to open themselves “refuse to be adequately stated.” And again, there Emerson was, first speaking in

Divinity Hall, and later that summer in print with the publication of the Divinity School Address, speaking of the “divine laws,” referring to them as “these facts,” noting how they work and the effects they render, and urging the seven seniors to open their hearts and minds to them. Although Emerson said the laws “will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue,” he seemed to claim a rather thorough knowledge of them as well as the ability to enlighten others on how to perceive them. It seemed that Emerson was telling the divinity seniors to “Obey thyself,” but first to listen to him so they would know how.

There is another seemingly unavoidable contradiction running throughout the address. Emerson urged the divinity seniors to look at everything firsthand: “Let me admonish you, first of all 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” (Emerson 872). However, earlier he had told them of the “sublime creed that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind, and that one mind is everywhere active” (Emerson 864). Furthermore, Emerson said that the religious sentiment “corrects the capital mistake of the infant man, who seeks to be great by following the great, and hopes to derive advantages *from another*” (Emerson 864). However, if everyone has his heart and mind open to these sentiments and knows that the world is created and connected by the one mind and will that “is everywhere active,” why cannot others be looked to and advantages be derived from each other? This seems especially contradictory given that Emerson said the laws can be “read hourly in each other’s faces, in each other’s actions, in our own remorse” (Emerson 863).

Suppose everyone did fully obey themselves and took nothing at all at secondhand. What would be the result? Milnes called on “Mr. Emerson just to bring before his fancy what, in all probability, would be the result, if this indiscriminate self-reliance was generally adopted as the sole regulating principle of life” (Milnes 17). Lack of order would be the obvious answer, and Milnes said as much when he answered his own question with what seemed to be a slight comic ring: “What a battle field for enthusiasms the world would become...What a range for every fancy-fuddled and passion-puzzled man to wander through, proclaiming his own Messiah-ship” (Milnes

17-18). It is true that Milnes' criticism seemed to overlook the possibility of the one mind and will Emerson believed all who obeyed themselves would perceive. However, in that same idea of the one mind and will, Emerson did not acknowledge the possibility for any human variation in those people who followed the "great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself" (Emerson 867). Brownson questioned this logic: "why is not the sensualist as moral as the spiritualist, providing he acts out himself" (Brownson 43)? Simply put, humans vary from person to person and not everyone who obeys himself will come to the same conclusions.

Consider the parable of the Canadian woodchopper in Thoreau's *Walden*. The woodchopper exemplifies Emerson's "great stoical doctrine." Thoreau wrote of the woodchopper, "He came along early, crossing my bean-field, although without anxiety or haste to get to his work...He wasn't a-going to hurt himself. He didn't care if he only earned his board" (Thoreau 1439). Emerson had said the divine laws cannot be recorded or spoken, "yet we read them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's actions" (Emerson 863). Thoreau wrote that the woodchopper would never "take the spiritual view of things," but he still admitted, "He interested me because he was so quiet and solitary and so happy withal; a well of good humor and contentment which overflowed at his eyes" (Thoreau 1439). Thoreau said the woodchopper held preachers and writers in very high regard, a quality Emerson likely would have frowned upon, since it implies being influenced heavily by someone else. However, Thoreau went on to say, "I loved to sound him on the various reforms of the day and he never failed to look at them in the most simple and practical light," and "he could defend many institutions better than any philosopher, because, in describing them as they concerned him, he gave the true reason for their prevalence" (Thoreau 1440, 1441). This suggests not only that the lowly woodchopper had not only an uncorrupted view of the world, but also that he was not influenced by the opinions of others. He takes nothing at secondhand. Perhaps his only fault was that when suggested that he improve his "mode of life," he said it was "too late" (Thoreau 1441). However, there was no need for the woodchopper to change his life style, nor did he want to, "By George! I can enjoy myself well enough here chopping; I want no better sport"

(Thoreau 1439). The woodchopper was content. Everyone should be so lucky. But despite his various observations of the woodchopper, Thoreau could not get a definitive handle on him: "I sometimes saw in him a man whom I had not seen before, and I did not know whether he was as wise as Shakespeare or simply ignorant as a child" (Thoreau 1440). For Thoreau, it seems that the woodchopper, by obeying himself to the utmost, and perhaps even fooling those who in theory have a greater understanding of the world, proves that every heart does not indeed vibrate to that same iron string. However, on Emerson's view, even though the woodchopper was content and true to himself, if he did not perceive the same "divine laws" in the "homely game of life," his contentment and willingness to be himself is somehow inferior (Emerson 863).

However, nearly every point of criticism seems rather ineffectual against the idea that Brownson noticed back in 1838, the idea that makes the address relevant even today. Brownson wrote of Emerson's address, "his real object is not the inculcation of any new theory on man, nature, or God; but to induce men to think for themselves on all subjects, and to speak from their own full hearts and earnest convictions," because he could not "bear the idea that a man comes into the world to-day with the field of truth monopolized and foreclosed" (Brownson 48, 49). It is this spirit behind the address that continues and will continue to have appeal. Were Norton and the other critics who heard or read the address back in 1838 justified in their complaints and fears? Given the conditions of the time, when an attack on religion was seen as attack on all society, order and authority, yes, particularly considering that when Emerson delivered the Divinity School Address on July 15, 1838, he was describing the defects of Historical Christianity in the very halls where future ministers were taught the faith they would later preach. Emerson was not just describing the defects he saw: he was essentially telling the divinity seniors to ignore what they had been taught, urging them to go out and preach their own firsthand religion of the soul. But was Emerson speaking within Divinity Hall just to attack and tear down the bedrock principles of society, as Norton accused him of doing? Absolutely not: "Rather," Emerson told the graduating divinity seniors, "let the breath of new life be breathed by you through forms already

existing" (Emerson 873).

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