

## COMMENTARY

“The Divinity School Address” (1838)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

Delivered before the senior class in Divinity College, Cambridge

“The sentiment of religion is at this time, perhaps, more potent and prevailing in New England than in any other portion of the Christian world. For many years since the establishment of the theological school at Andover, the Calvinists and Unitarians have been battling with each other upon the atonement, the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. This has now very much subsided; but other wandering of mind takes place of that, and equally lets the wolf into the fold. A young man, named Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a classmate of my lamented son George, after failing in the everyday avocations of a Unitarian preacher and schoolmaster, starts a new doctrine of transcendentalism, declares all the old revelations superannuated and worn out, and announces the approach of new revelations and prophecies.”

John Quincy Adams (1840)  
quoted by F. O. Matthiessen  
*American Renaissance* (Oxford 1941) 61

“Emerson wrote to Carlyle, October 17, 1838, concerning the reception of this address: ‘The publication of my Address to the Divinity College...has been the occasion of an outcry in all our leading newspapers against my “infidelity,” “pantheism,” and “atheism.” The writers warn all and sundry against me, and against whatever is supposed to be related to my connection of opinion, etc; against Transcendentalism, Goethe, and Carlyle. I am heartily sorry to see this last aspect of the storm in our washbowl.’ The opposition which Emerson refers to, it is important to notice, came from Unitarians as well as from the orthodox or ‘Calvinist’ party; Emerson was not invited again to lecture at Unitarian Harvard until 1867. The core of his heresy was his denial of the special authority of the Christian revelation and his assertion of the supreme authority of the spiritual intuition belonging to each individual.”

Randall Stewart  
*The Literature of the United States I*, 3rd edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1966) 1082

“In 1832, when Emerson decided he must give up his ministry, he especially emphasized his inability to find any special grace or sanction in the Lord’s Supper. Now he is associating this with all formalism--the giving the ‘bread’ without the ‘life’ of religion....”

It was at the request of the students themselves, not the faculty, that Emerson addressed the Harvard Senior Class in Divinity on Sunday evening, July 15, 1838. In his *Journal* during March he mentions his preoccupation with the desire to show these students how the ‘ugliness and unprofitableness’ of the prevailing theology failed to represent ‘the glory and sweetness of the moral nature.’ The address offended conservative belief, thus arousing a minor controversy in the lay and religious press. In this Emerson himself took no part, referring to it as ‘a storm in a washbowl.’ However, he replied (October 8, 1838) to a letter from his predecessor as pastor at the Second Church of Boston, the Rev. Henry Ware, Jr., in a memorable statement of the transcendental method of knowing, in part as follows:

I have always been, from my very incapacity of methodical writing, ‘a chartered libertine,’ free to worship and free to rail; lucky when I could make myself understood, but never esteemed near enough to the institutions and mind of society to deserve the notice of the masters of literature and religion....I could not give account of myself, if challenged. I could not possibly give you one of the ‘arguments’ you

cruelly hint at, on which any doctrine of mine stands. For I do not know what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought. I delight in telling what I think, but if you ask how I dare say so, or why it is so, I am the most helpless of mortal men....

In spite of statements often heard to the contrary, Emerson here plainly accepts the 'odious fact' of evil. But evil is not, in the sense of logic, a 'positive.' Positives are absolute expressions of being, and 'good' is one of them, a state of positive existence, to which 'evil' is only a 'privative,' depriving good of some measure of its being. Good could be complete, but evil could not; if the deprivation (or evil) became complete, there would result 'nonentity,' neither good nor evil, but nothingness....

A denial of the miraculous and special divinity of Jesus Christ was the extreme limit of Emerson's radicalism. Beginning with the Unitarian 'unity' of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (as contrasted with the trinitarian view), he builds the syllogism...: Jesus Christ was God incarnate; the divine Jesus was also man; therefore another man, by being true to the God incarnate in him, may also be 'divine' in the sense that Jesus was. The divinity of Christ was a miracle only as all things are—"the blowing clover and the falling rain." Later Transcendentalists in many cases accepted Emerson's position. A few advanced clergymen 'proclaimed the divinity of man'--the phrase appears on the tombstone of William Ellery Channing--but in 1838 it was a Unitarian 'heresy'."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long  
*The American Tradition in Literature*, 3rd edition  
(Norton 1956-1967) 1124, 1114, 1116, 1119

"The Divinity School Address argued that religion is practiced by America's ministers 'as if God were dead.' Emerson challenged the church's assumption that 'the age of inspiration is dead.' He identified Jesus and the prophets as 'holy bards,' discounted the importance of miracles, redefined good and evil, and urged these fledgling ministers to cast aside conformity, to free themselves from the authority of the church. They must help their parishioners 'to love God without mediator or veil.' Hoping to stir these ministers to recognize that their preaching had to be 'rammed with life,' Emerson instead was roundly condemned as a heretic by the Divinity School faculty and effectively banned from speaking at Harvard for the next 30 years. In a journal entry dated April 1840, Emerson recalled the lecture and the furor it had caused:

In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man. This the people accept readily enough, and even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture Art, or Politics, or Literature, or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion, they are shocked, though it only be the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts.

The Divinity School address made Emerson a public figure of considerable importance. Some said it made him infamous. But perhaps Bronson Alcott's observation best summarizes this phase of Emerson's life: 'Emerson's church consists of one member—himself'."

Justin Kaplan  
*The Harper American Literature I*  
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Michael Hollister (2015)