

'THE DIVINITY SCHOOL ADDRESS': EMERSONIAN POETRY AND PERSONALITY

J.J. LANERO

Universidad de León

ABSTRACT

In this paper we propose to consider the role played by the concepts of poetry and personality in the 'Divinity School Address.' From these concepts, a clearer picture will emerge of both Emerson and nineteenth-century Unitarianism. The 'Divinity School Address,' far from a declaration of war on Unitarianism, was an extension of the decades long Unitarian plea for fervor from the pulpit. Far from rebelling from the Unitarian sensibility and world-view, Emerson was expanding and fulfilling it. The 'Divinity School Address' presented to a very sensitive audience Emerson's building rejection of the idea of a 'personal' God. This departure into modernism was the most radical element of the address. Emerson gradually formulated a theory of the synonymous nature of God and the soul. His doctrine of the soul was a doctrine of criticism, and the soul must finally be understood as the insatiable passion for the Better, which enfolded a perpetual sense of the unachieved.

KEYWORDS

Being, Over-soul, Soul, Unitarianism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The April before he delivered his address at the Divinity School, Emerson had traveled into Cambridge (Massachusetts) to discuss 'theism' with some of the Divinity School students. Although he was not usually reluctant to let his views be known, he went to this meeting 'rather heavy-hearted,' fearing that what he had to say about theism would not be warmly received. 'I always find,' he confessed, 'that my views chill or shock people at the first opening.' But this conversation must have gone well. Emerson came away from it, 'cheered,' and remembered one point that seemed to impress the students favorably:

I told them that the preacher should be a poet smit with love of the harmonies of moral nature: and yet look at the Unitarian Association & see if its aspect is poetic. They all smiled No (JMN, 5, 471)¹.

¹ The following standard abbreviations to Emerson's works will be used throughout for parenthetical documentation: *CW: The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Robert E. Spiller *et al.*, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

With his orator's practiced sense of audience, Emerson seized on that revealing smile as a clue to the direction his later address should take. Jesus, he argued the following July, was a poet, 'drawn' by the 'severe harmony' of the soul (CW, 1, 81), a bard who had been misunderstood by his followers, because understood literally. What Emerson frankly labeled 'the famine of our churches' (CW, 1, 85) was in fact an overwhelming literalism, a surfeit of prose. What the soul craved was poetry.

Perhaps it is not strange that this religious reformer has become in our modern universities the property of Departments of English —no one ever stated the case for poetry more eloquently. But in 1838 Emerson spoke as a religious teacher, on a religious occasion, to a religious community. Controversial as his message was, it found a responsive chord in that community, as the earlier smiles of the Divinity students suggest. But the demand he made on that community was remarkable. One might reasonably expect from a religious body sound doctrine, moral justice, or spiritual nurture, but should one expect poetry of it? Emerson's demand must surely have seemed unfair to many of the ministers who heard or read it, who felt hard-pressed enough to make it through a weekly round of visits, parish business, sermon writing, and Sunday services. Daily life, whether for a minister or not, can itself be overwhelmingly prosaic; routine, even religious routine, is the death of poetry. Emerson, who himself had lived the minister's life, was not flattering in describing it in his journal account of his April meeting with the students:

A minister nowadays is plainest prose, the prose of prose. He is a Warming-pan, a Night-chair at sick beds & rheumatic souls; the fire of the minstrel's eye & the vivacity of his word is exchanged for intense grumbling enunciation of the Cambridge sort, & for scripture phraseology (JMN, 5, 471).

Emerson's boredom with routine parish duties, and with the 'grumbling enunciation' he had encountered in his Harvard lectures, is clear. But there was something in the fiber of the Unitarian community, particularly its younger members, that responded to this call to poetry as the highest of the soul's expressions. The historiography of Unitarianism, in fact, has been profoundly affected by literary scholars who have found the movement to be the generative force of American literature. To understand the impact of Emerson's address, the willingness of the Unitarians to accept the demand for the poetic must be examined.

Press, 1971). EL: *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959-71). JMN: *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, William H. Gilman *et al.*, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960-82). L: *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, R.L. Rusk, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

But Emerson's April visit to the Divinity students raised one other question. He went with apprehension not because of his audience, but because of the proposed subject: 'theism.' Apparently he successfully maneuvered the conversation around to the stiffness of Unitarian preaching, but in the 'Divinity School Address,' the nature of divinity became a central point of contention; Emerson was fearful of shocking the students because he himself was in the process of abandoning the concept of a personal God. This was not, as he felt, the abandoning of theism. Emerson spoke with the highest reverence in these years of the Soul, a term which freed him of the father image of conventional Christianity, and grounded religious revelation, and religious value, in the self. Nothing touched a rawer nerve in the Unitarian community than this disavowal of the category of the personal in any definition of the divine.

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the 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. The soul knows no persons (CW, 1, 82).

Many Unitarians saw this rejection of the personal as a blow to religious faith. And Emerson was flirting with conflict when he spoke of the 'noxious exaggeration' given to the person of Jesus. But for Emerson, and some of his contemporaries, the divine Jesus was becoming an article of superstition, and the personal God an impediment to the cultivation of the soul. As Emerson told his audience, it is through the religious sentiment that 'the soul first knows *itself*' (CW, 1, 79, italics mine). We propose to consider the role played by the concepts of poetry and personality in the 'Divinity School Address.' From these concepts, a clearer picture will emerge of both Emerson and nineteenth-century Unitarianism.

II. BARDS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In reading the address today, one is probably struck first with Emerson's depiction of Jesus. It is clearly an attempt to make him accessible to a restless generation, who could not be satisfied with the usual pious elevation. He argued that Jesus 'belonged to the true race of prophets' because of his capacity to see 'the mystery of the soul' (CW, 1, 81). That in itself would have raised suspicion in his audience, not because of the depiction of Jesus as a visionary, but because he was one of a much larger company of them. As if to assuage the fears he raised, Emerson went on to argue for Jesus' uniqueness. 'Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of a man. One man was true to what is in you and me.' Of course this legacy was essentially anti-supernatural—it focused spiritual attention within, concentrating on an untapped divine potential within every individual. Its effect was to emphasize Jesus' humanity, and make any claims about the supernatural quality

of his being irrelevant to religious experience. How then do we understand his claim to Messiahship? To Emerson, it was a declaration of spiritual independence from any form of religious authority. Emerson thus presented this radically democratic claim in a close reading of the 'poetry' of Jesus:

He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think' (CW, 1, 81).

This poetic Jesus, whose essential message was that divinity can be found within the self, had been the victim of wrong-headed interpretation—a failure, if you will, of critical analysis. 'There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding,' Emerson wrote, relying on Coleridge's distinction between the higher, more holistic mental process, Reason, and the exercise of mere logic and empiricism, Understanding. 'The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips, and said, in the next age, "This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you, if you say he was a man"' (CW, 1, 81).

The ironic result was a religion built on a gross misreading of its founder, a misreading produced by top shallow, a sense of how religious discourse, as a form of poetry, achieves meaning. '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' (CW, 1, 81). Such shallow reading, restricting itself to the surface of words, starves the spirit. When such narrow concepts are invested with a presumed supernatural authority, violence is done to the real working of the religious sentiment. 'To aim to convert a man by miracles,' Emerson told his audience, 'is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments' (CW, 1, 83). Thus arose the simultaneously inspiring and daunting call to the graduating students, a call that identified them as the poets of the next generation: 'Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, —cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity' (CW, 1, 90).

Obviously Emerson was reading his own ambitions into this poetic conception of the ministry. 'I am born a poet,' he had written his wife Lidia during their courtship. 'My singing be sure is very "husky," & is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter, & specially of the correspondences between these & those' (L, 1, 435). But in his conception of the minister as bard, he spoke for more than his own aspirations. He was becoming the leader of a whole generation of religious thinkers who were desperate to reconceive their theology—and their task as ministers. But the ground had been carefully prepared for such a reconception in several decades of worried speculation over the state of New England liberal preaching, and the zeal of the liberal religious movement in general. What Emerson

actually did in the 'Divinity School Address' was to propose a new answer to a rather old concern among the Unitarians: how can preaching be made vital in the context of liberal theology?

The split between the Calvinists, or Orthodox party, and the Liberals, or Unitarians, forced many of the Orthodox to leave their parish churches to form new congregations. They were said to have caustically accused the liberals of keeping the furniture, while they kept the faith. But the Orthodox also felt that they had kept the best of the preaching. And the liberals, to judge by some of their public statements, half believed them. Certainly this was the case with Emerson in the late 1830s. Conrad Wright's investigation of the background of the 'Divinity School Address' showed how much of Emerson's ire about the pallid state of preaching was kindled by the stultifying sermons of his Concord pastor, Barzillai Frost. Frost was, as Wright charitably put it, a 'mediocre preacher,' and the depth of that mediocrity is suggested by Frost's friend Henry Miles in his funeral sermon, which Wright quotes: 'Doubtless you all early felt that there was neither flexibility of voice, nor play of imagination, nor gush of emotion to give him, as a preacher, that power to which other endowments fairly entitled him'². But Emerson saw more than failures of talent or technique in Frost; he found his wooden preaching to be symptomatic of a serious failure of the religious sensibility. Frost became the symbol to Emerson of all that was dying, or dead, in the Unitarian imagination. 'He had lived in vain. 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 or acted, we were none the wiser for it' (CW, 1, 86). If there was no passion in Frost's preaching, there was deep emotion in Emerson's condemnation of it - passion tinged with his poetic ear, as the alliterative progression 'commended, cheated or chagrined' suggests.

But Frost was an extreme case of a more general worry in the Unitarian community. Does a religious outlook that sacrifices too much of its spiritual heritage on the altar of the rational risk losing its persuasive and motivational appeal? Is coldness and empty formality the price of rejecting the religious superstitions of past theology? William Ellery Channing, the most accomplished of the Unitarian preachers, had best articulated this fear in 1824, some fourteen years before Emerson's address³.

[People] want a religion which will take a strong hold upon them; and no system, I am sure, can now maintain its ground

² Conrad Wright, 'Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address,' in idem, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), p. 44.

³ Barbara Packer has discussed Emerson's feeling that he was extending the concerns of Channing and other Unitarians in his address: See *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 123-5.

which wants the power of awakening real and deep interest in the soul. It is objected to Unitarian Christianity that it does not possess this heart-stirring energy; and if so it will, and still more, it ought, to fall; for it does not suit the spirit of our times, nor the essential and abiding spirit of human nature. Men will prefer even, a fanaticism which is in earnest, to a pretended rationality which leaves untouched all the great springs of the soul, which never lays a quickening hand on our love and veneration, our awe and fear, our hope and joy⁴.

Channing and Emerson are obviously interested in nurturing the same thing: a preaching capable of what Channing called 'heart-stirring energy,' capable of answering arid rationalism by touching the 'great springs of the soul.' This is the poetry, the 'high chant,' that Jesus had achieved, and it was to this example that contemporary preaching had to aspire—and by which it had to be judged.

III. 'UNCONTAINED AND IMMORTAL BEAUTY'

This thirst for zeal can be found throughout the preaching of the liberals, quickened by their recognition that their theological differences with the Orthodox had made their identity as a separate religious body inevitable. Despite the deep strand of piety in the fabric of nineteenth-century Unitarianism, zeal seemed to threaten to become the province of the emerging evangelicals⁵. After all, Unitarianism had its origins in the Boston reaction against the emotional upheaval of the Great Awakening of the 1740s, and a hallmark of the domination had been its uncompromising rejection of the excesses of the revivals. Caught between their need for a rich piety, and their revulsion at evangelical ranting, the Unitarians hoped to maintain both a commitment to reason—and to decorum—and a spiritual depth. But John Brazer had stated the difficulty of that situation in an 1829 sermon on 'The Power of Unitarianism Over the Affections.' The objection often heard about Unitarians, he confessed, was that 'they exit chiefly but as a barren notion of the head.' Their lack of 'power over the affections' meant 'that they can breathe no new and fervid life into our spiritual natures.' The result, this reasoning ran, was 'that they tend, in consequence, to produce in those who profess them, lukewarmness and indifference to the whole subject of religion'⁶. Brazer had articulated the view of the opponents with such force

⁴William Ellery Channing, 'The Demands of the Age on the Ministry' (1824), in *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1875), p. 273.

⁵For a discussion of the pietistic element in nineteenth-century Unitarianism, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 151-73.

⁶John Brazer, *The Power of Unitarianism Over the Affections* [American Unitarian Association Tracts, First Series, no. 27] (Boston: Leonard C. Bowles, 1829), p. 3.

that we may suspect that liberal likewarmness troubled him as well. And this general apathy, many felt, extended into the liberal pulpit as well. Here is Emerson's ministerial predecessor Henry Ware, Jr.'s impassioned condemnation of pallid preaching, drawn, interestingly, from his 1833 ordination sermon for Chandler Robbins, Emerson's successor at the Second Church in Boston.

How seldom are the thunders which shake the senate-house and the forum, heard pealing through the temple of God! How rarely are the passions which weep and tremble at the fictions of the stage, called on for a tear at the foot of the altar, or made to glow and tremble at the realities of eternal truth! We are all correctness, decorum, and sobriety. We are careful to commit no faults, we shock nobody's taste, we roughly waken no one's slumbers⁷.

The liberal movement, too, had its Jeremiahs, and this sighing about a dwindling fervor is a replaying of the ancient New England pattern of mourning for a lost faith. 'In the 1640's,' Perry Miller wrote, 'there commenced in the sermons of New England a lament over the waning of primitive zeal and the consequent atrophy of public morals, which swelled to an incessant chant within forty years'⁸. Certainly Ware's—and Brazer's and Channing's—remarks should be seen as part of this fabric of faith, articulated now by the liberals as they faced the new theological landscape of the 1820s and 1830s. Ware's statement is particularly striking for its comparisons of the passions produced by the stage to the coldness of the pulpit. This is more than a casual comparison when we see it in the general context of the growth of the aesthetic sensibility in New England. As the culture matured, liberal congregations, and especially liberal clergy, became increasingly attracted to literary taste in Boston, noted the beginnings of this phenomenon in his 1811 funeral sermon for Emerson's father William, pastor of the First Church of Boston. 'Such is the constitution of society among us, that much of the care of our literary and charitable institutions devolves upon those clergymen, who have dispositions and qualifications for the task'⁹. In the generations immediately to follow Buckminster and William Emerson, that literary disposition increased

⁷ Henry Ware, Jr., *A Sermon Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Chandler Robbins, Over the Second Congregational Church in Boston* (Boston: James W. Burditt, 1833), p. 15.

⁸ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 471-2. See also Sacvan Bercovitch's interpretation of the cultural significance of the Jeremiad in *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

⁹ Joseph Stevens Buckminster, *A Sermon, Delivered at the Interment of the Reverend William Emerson* (Boston: Joseph T. Buckingham, 1811), p. 10.

dramatically¹⁰. By the 1820s, with Channing's eloquent example before him, Emerson could begin to conceive of the ministry as in great part a literary vocation—literature taken in its widest sense as inclusive of pulpit oratory and religious discourse, as well as poetry, essays, fiction, and other authorial activity¹¹.

The shift toward this aesthetic sensibility occurred simultaneously with the rising anxiety about the loss of passion in the Unitarian religious sensibility. If emotions of the kind displayed in the evangelical pulpit were unacceptable, were there other emotional responses to religion which might replace them? Some of the liberals found the answer to that question in the emotional aspect of experiences that could be classified as in part aesthetic¹². The ultimate fruition of this development of an aesthetic religion was Transcendentalism.

One of Emerson's best-known early gestures toward the aesthetic was his 1836 book *Nature*, one of the initiating texts of Transcendentalism. There Emerson asserted that 'the world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty,' and linked this hunger for beauty with religious fulfillment. 'God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All' (CW, 1, 17). Emerson went on to say that natural beauty was not 'ultimate,' but the pursuit of the ultimate spiritual beauty, through the symbolic language of nature, was indistinguishable from the pursuit of ultimate religious knowledge. The abstract statement of this equation may strike us as coldly analytical, so it is important to hear Emerson's more vivid depiction, of that 'All,' the well-known 'transparent eye ball' passage: 'Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.' And, in a crucial concluding phrase, he declared, 'I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty' (CW, 1, 10). This is one of the better known passages in American literature, and, we would argue, one of the most important in American religious discourse. The emotion is pitched to the highest intensity, as Emerson depicts himself lifted and swept away by his full perception of the world around him. He declares himself 'part or particle of God,' a

¹⁰ Lawrence Buell has written definitively on this development: See *Literary Transcendentalism: Form and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); and *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹¹ See Lawrence Buell's discussion of the development of *belles lettres* in New England from a range of quasi-literary forms in *New England Literary Culture*, ed. cit., pp. 23-55, 137-90.

¹² Howe has discussed the nineteenth-century Unitarian belief in the centrality of emotion to the impact of literature, and the relation of the role of the preacher and author in Unitarian aesthetics: See *The Unitarian Conscience*, ed. cit., pp. 194-97.

poetic pronouncement similar to Jesus' previously quoted claim to Messiahship—'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks' (CW, 1, 81). Jesus, like Emerson's persona in the transparent eyeball passage, is a 'lover of uncontained and immortal beauty,' and the moment of the full realization of that beauty is the moment of religious fulfillment.

Here, then, was a version of the self-abandonment that the liberals had envied in their unrestrained revivalist brethren. If in the heat of the revivals one was called upon to give oneself up to the Holy Spirit, something like this emotion could be achieved under very different circumstances—in ordinary walks in the woods around Concord, for instance, when it was possible to see those surroundings as the symbolic door to a perception of 'uncontained and immortal beauty.' Transcendentalism attempted to translate the spiritual abandonment that marked revivalist religion into a sense of the holiness of the ordinary. They hoped to charge daily experience with the shock of divinity.

The thirst for emotion, and corresponding sense that beauty could fulfill it, account for the redefinition of the preacher as bard in the 'Divinity School Address.' Emerson's plea is that the teaching of Jesus be received as it was intended—as a poetic effusion of the sort that marks all great religious teaching. To set it aside with false claims of unique or peculiar authority was to compromise its availability to life and thus to deaden it. 'The preachers do not see,' he warned, 'that they make his gospel not glad, and shear him of the locks of beauty and the attributes of heaven.' In a profound irony, the claims for the special authority of the teaching of Jesus actually robbed them of their efficacy. 'Now do not degrade the life and dialogues of Christ outside of the circle of charm, by insulation and peculiarity,' Emerson pleaded. 'Let them lie as they befall, alive and warm, part of human life, and of the landscape and of the cheerful day' (CW, 1, 83). In this sense, the 'Divinity School Address,' far from a declaration of war on Unitarianism, was an extension of the decades-long Unitarian plea for fervor from the pulpit. Far from rebelling from the Unitarian sensibility and world-view, Emerson was expanding and fulfilling it.

IV. 'THE SOUL KNOWS NO PERSONS'

We have thus recounted the story of the heat and passion behind the 'Divinity School Address.' We should also describe what seemed to some to be the cold wind that blew through it. Emerson's views did indeed 'chill' some people. The 'Divinity School Address' presented to a very sensitive audience Emerson's building rejection of the idea of a 'personal' God. This departure into modernism was the most radical element of the address.

In 1834, Emerson heard a sermon by the Baptist preacher Joseph Grafton that set him fuming in his journal. He called Grafton's 'hightoned orthodoxy' a 'sucked eggshell,' and bristled at his dismissal of liberalism as '*mere morality*.' 'Is it not time to present this matter of Christianity exactly

as it is,' he asked, and 'to take away all false reverence from Jesus, & not mistake the stream for the source?' 'God is in every man,' he went on to say. 'God is in Jesus but let us not magnify any of the vehicles as we magnify the Infinite Law itself' (JMN, 4, 309). Obviously, Mr Grafton deserves to share some of the credit for the 'Divinity School Address' with Mr Frost. We think one turn of phrase in this exceptional blast is particularly significant: 'let us not magnify the vehicles as we magnify the Infinite Law itself.' The capitalization of 'Infinite Law,' and the use of the neuter pronoun 'itself' alter the expected pattern of discourse profoundly. God the father, God the person, is no longer present, but replaced by an abstraction, a law. Emerson's devaluation of the relative importance of Jesus was directly related to his identification of God as 'Infinite Law,' a wellspring of divine power in every individual. The potentially universal availability of this power made religious experience part of the process of self-cultivation, a nurturing of the growth of the seeds of divinity within. As his thinking about theism developed in the 1830s, Emerson came to prefer the term 'soul' rather than 'God' as expressive of the highest religious value¹³.

Emerson's genius as a religious teacher was his ability to speak words such as 'Infinite Law,' 'indwelling Supreme Spirit,' 'sentiment of virtue,' 'soul,' 'Over-soul,' or 'Being,' with a fervor and art that rendered them spiritually potent. With this ability, he could criticize the 'noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus' (CW, 1, 82), emphasizing that his message, and not his person, made him one of the 'divine bards.' He set himself the task of reforming the language of religion of attempting to carry an ancient piety into new linguistic vehicles. This linguistic reform bespoke a fundamental intellectual reconception as well, and the doctrine of God was at the centre of it.

The day after the gathering at the Divinity School, Henry Ware, Jr. wrote a worried letter to Emerson, which returned to a conversation after the speech the previous evening. Ware had apparently assented to a qualified version of Emerson's views then, but in the light of the next day had decided to retract his assent. And the retraction came with a note of concern: 'I look with anxiety and no little sorrow to the course which your mind has been taking'¹⁴. A modern reader will surely be curious about what is left unsaid in the letter—to what statements did Ware take exception? What qualifications was Emerson willing to make on the spot? But as the correspondence continued into the Fall, the issues became clearer. In October, Ware sent Emerson a copy of his new sermon, 'The Personality of the Deity,' telling him that it was written 'partly with a view' to Emerson's thinking. 'I do not know,'

¹³ For a detailed discussion of Emerson's use of the term 'soul,' see Jonathan Bishop, *Emerson on the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

¹⁴ James E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 vols. (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), vol. I, p. 689. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Cabot.

Ware said, 'by what arguments the doctrine that "the soul knows no persons" is justified to your mind' (Cabot, 2, 691). Emerson's rejection of the category of the personal had worried Ware the night after the address; on this issue, Ware was a good barometer of the sensibility of many Unitarians. Most of the attention that historians have given to the Divinity School controversy has centered on the attacks of Andrews Norton, with the result that Norton has come to be seen, erroneously we believe, as representative of the Unitarian reaction to the 'Divinity School Address.' It seems appropriate now that Ware be given his due as not only a more representative Unitarian, but a more able critic of Emerson's position¹⁵.

Ware's concern about Emerson's dismissal of the personal was intertwined with the Unitarian concern over the dying fervor of liberal religion. Ware told Emerson that he had been long concerned 'that men are suffering from want of sufficiently realizing the fact of the Divine Person.' The lack of the sense of a personal God, Ware felt, robbed religion of its fervor. 'I used to perceive it, as I thought, when I was a minister in Boston, in talking with my people [at the church, we should remember, that Emerson assumed], and to refer to this cause much of the lifelessness of the religious character' (Cabot, 2, 692). Emerson had understood and extended the Unitarian concern with dying fervor in his Address, but Ware accused him of taking away with one hand what he had given with the other. There could be no revival of the spirit among those whose God was an intellectual abstraction.

Ware's argument, as Emerson surely recognized, was a very shrewd one. Ware defined a 'person' as an 'intelligent, conscious agent,' and argued that 'consciousness, and the power of will and of action, constitute [God] a person.' 'Shape, form or place,' he added, 'makes no part of the idea'¹⁶. Ware contrasted this concept of person with abstract laws or forces that he called 'principles,' arguing that 'principles and laws operate for [the] support, guidance, and well-being [of persons], and therefore are secondary' (29). Ware's basis for the primacy of persons was in many ways a striking anticipation of theories of the social nature of reality. 'Some of these principles and laws have their origin in the relations which exist amongst intelligent, moral agents; most of them come into action in consequence of the previous existence of those relations' (29). Ware's argument that principles or abstractions were in fact laws of relations directly challenged Emerson's view of religious experience as the direct incarnation and

¹⁵ For an illuminating discussion of Ware's reaction to the Address, see William R. Hutchinson, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 76-9. Hutchinson stresses the difficulty with which Ware criticized Emerson, because of the cordial friendship that existed between them, and their shared work at the Second Church.

¹⁶ 'The Personality of the Deity,' in *The Works of Henry Ware, Jr., D.D.*, 4 vols. (Boston: James Munroe, 1846), vol. III, pp. 27-8. Further references to this text will be cited parenthetically by page number.

expression of abstract law. As Ware put it, 'If there were no such agents [that is, persons as he has defined them], there either would be no such principles, or they would have no operation.' 'Suppose the Deity to exist alone in the universe which he has made,' Ware proposed. God's very isolation, the lack of any social relationships with creatures, would mean that God 'cannot exercise justice, or truth, or love; they lie in the infinite bosom as if they were not; they have only a contingent existence' (29). Unless there are relations, Ware's reasoning ran, there are no principles; and unless there are persons, there are no relations. As Emerson himself was wont to do, Ware turned to a persuasive analogy from nature. 'If there were no material masses, there could be no gravitation; if there were no persons, there could be no truth, or justice, or love' (30-1).

The effect of Ware's argument was to leave Emerson with the uncomfortable choice of a personal God or none at all. 'What is chiefest in the universe,' Ware declared, 'is conscious, active mind; abstract principles are but the laws of its various relations' (30). As Ware saw it, Emerson had tried to put the relation before the persons who formed it. One could not preserve theism without a concept of personality.

No one thinks of denying the existence of principles and laws. Gravitation, order, cause and effect, truth, benevolence —no one denies that these exist; and if these constitute the Deity, he has not been, and cannot be, denied. The only denial possible is by this exclusion of a personal existence. There can be no atheism but this; and this is atheism.

As Ware trenchantly concluded, 'There is a personal God, or there is none' (32).

In correspondence with Ware, Emerson was conciliatory and diffident. But he was by no means prepared to yield ground. He saved his ammunition for a new lecture series two months later, which began with the topic, 'The Doctrine of the Soul.'

V. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SOUL

If Emerson had berated his contemporaries because the doctrine of the soul was not preached, he now took up his own challenge by preaching a theism free from the concept of a personal God. Such a theism, contrary to Ware's assertion, was possible, if the realm of the personal could be preserved in humanity. In journal entries of the middle 1830s, Emerson gradually formulated a theory of the synonymous nature of God and the soul. Insofar as God was humanly accessible, God was the soul; insofar as the soul transcended human mortality, the soul was God. God is 'the substratum of all souls,' he wrote in 1830, adding this significant corollary: 'Is not that the solution of the riddle of sympathy?' The very fact that God should not be conceived as a separate and independent will made the warmth of human sympathy and unity possible. As the 'substratum of all

souls.' God was a principle of unity. 'It is one of the oldest principles of philosophy that like must beget like, & that only like can know like,' he argued (JMN, 3, 213). For Emerson, the rejection of God's personality, far from a cold doctrine, laid the basis for that passion for wholeness and unity known as love. When he wrote in 1832 that 'the inmost soul is God' (JMN, 4, 56), he marked out the direction of his theism—a redefinition of God in terms of the soul, a concept at once intimate in his human associations and transcendent in its suggestion of the entirety of being in which the individual participated. 'Blessed is the day,' he wrote in 1834, 'when the youth discovers that Within and Above are synonyms' (JMN, 4, 365).

In 'The Doctrine of the Soul' Emerson recognized that to define the soul was to define living being itself, to answer the ultimate philosophical question. 'In approaching this subject,' he wrote, 'I have been led into the great question of primary philosophy. Who lives? What is the life?' (EL, 3, 15). But he was careful to warn that the explication of the doctrine would not take an exclusively religious form. Such categorization would deny its power and validity. In fact, he argued, it is the manifestation of the soul in the secular world which confirms its power. 'A religious history which is only religious does not satisfy the whole mind of man. It only meets one sentiment. True history will be religious, but it will not be a religious history' (EL, 3, 6).

Emerson sensed the workings of the soul in the revival of consciousness in his era that we have come to call Romanticism. This revival, as he explained it, was the result of the individual's fuller recognition of the soul, an expansion of the self, the seizing of an innate and as yet unrealized inner spiritual potential. This culture of the self stood as the hallmark of Unitarian theology and the Transcendentalism that grew out of it. But the culture of the self was also, and perhaps most decisively, an act of surrender, a recognition of the individual's participation in a larger energy. Emerson took it as a sign of a building revival of the spirit 'that the whole tendency of our time is in the submission it enjoins to the Unconscious and Infinite' (EL, 3, 10). The doctrine of the soul was in this sense a doctrine of surrender and acceptance. 'What has my will done to make me that I am?' he asked. 'Nothing' (EL, 3, 10).

The millennial flavor of Emerson's doctrine is part of the explanation of his impact in the late 1830s. 'The American Scholar,' the 'Divinity School Address,' the series of lectures, 'The Philosophy of History,' 'Human Culture,' and 'Human Life,' all conveyed a sense of newness, a conviction that the era was one of profound and positive change. 'The Times, as we say—or the present aspects of our social state,... have their root in an invisible spiritual reality' (CW, 1, 167). The times were the manifestations of the workings of the soul, and thus Emerson's doctrine of the soul was presented as a doctrine of the modern. The difficulty, of course, was that this opened the question of history as the work of the soul. As for the sorry record of history, Mark Twain's remark comes to mind. 'There has been only one

Christian. They caught Him and crucified Him early'¹⁷. Could a doctrine of the soul bear the weight of the past?

Emerson answered by distinguishing between human achievement and human potential. Although humanity was 'graceful and gifted,' human history was indeed unpleasing, and human institutions were proof of the failure. As Emerson put it, 'Man has uncumbered himself with aged errors, with usages and ceremonies, with law, property, church, customs, and books until he is almost smothered under his own institutions' (EL, 3, 11). The work of the soul, then, was inevitably against those institutions—or if not directly against them, then in spite of them. He did not advise the Divinity School graduates to leave the church and form a new one—that would simply have duplicated the same problem that they now confronted. 'I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me in vain' (CW, 1, 92). His advice, surprising, perhaps, given the 'revolutionary' reputation of the 'Divinity School Address,' was 'to let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing.' The energy required for institutional reform was better concentrated on the potential of present institutions to serve as a means of expression for revitalized individual energies. His programme for reform thus fell into three parts: 'first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul' (CW, 1, 92).

But Emerson's deeper response to the problem of history did not revolve around this critique of institutions. He argued that the very perception of the inadequacies of human history was the evidence of the working of the soul. 'Frankly we give up the Past to the objector,' he admitted. 'He may find what matter for sneers and for tears in it he will.' But the objection itself was Emerson's clue that the soul continued to work. 'What is the reason of this uneasiness of ours? of this great Discontent?' (EL, 3, 14). The doctrine of the soul would have been threatened had history taught us complacency. The critical spirit proved its vitality. The sense of unfulfilled potential, the realization that acts that do not live up to their promise—surely the first lesson of history—was for Emerson the mode through which the soul could be discerned. The soul was the means by which any judgment of the past, or of the times, could be passed. 'Always there is in man somewhat incalculable,' he wrote, 'a presiding, overseeing, imparting, unexhausted soul' (EL, 3, 14). The continuing capacity for criticism was the soul's best evidence. The most persuasive development of this idea came in Emerson's 1841 essay, 'Circles,' now a central text in Emerson studies. There Emerson conceived the soul through the metaphor of expanding circles. The essential spiritual act of the boundary of the known into the infinite unknown. Insofar as the unknown perpetually remained, such expansion was eternal. But

¹⁷ *Mark Twain's Notebook*, Albert Bigelow Paine, ed. (New York/London: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 344. See also William M. Gibson, *The Art of Mark Twain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 165.

insofar as the effort required was never-ending, there could be no achieved and final spiritual posture. Thus the basis of his optimistic expansionism yielded the seeds of a tragedy that haunted his work. The soul was insatiable. That was its power. But no achievement or insight could assuage it. If we understand this thrust of Emerson's thinking, his legacy becomes clearer. The root of spiritual energy was the critical capacity, the ability to recognize what could be. This also yielded for him a sense of perpetual, and aching, failure. Emerson's doctrine of the soul was a doctrine of criticism, and the soul must finally be understood as the insatiable passion for the Better, which enfolded a perpetual sense of the unachieved. As he said in 'The American Scholar,' 'The one thing in the world of value is the active soul' (CW, 1, 56).