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Emerson's Reluctant Foe: Andrews Norton and the Transcendental Controversy

ROBERT D. HABICH

A CENTURY and a half after he pronounced New England transcendentalism "the latest form of infidelity," Andrews Norton (1786–1853) remains among the more shadowy figures in American literary history, consigned almost exclusively to his brief public role as the conservative Unitarian opponent of Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley—and imperfectly understood even in that capacity.¹ One of Norton's eulogizers predicted in 1853, "those who

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EMERSON’S RELUCTANT FOE

came into collision with him, and those who saw him at a
distance . . . would be likely to do him injustice.”2 Indeed,
even after the revisions of Unitarian historiography forged
in the past couple of decades, Norton’s most renowned “col-
lision” is still viewed pretty much as Perry Miller wryly char-
acterized it in 1961: with Emerson “the purest of white” and
Norton “as black as the pit.”3 Neither man profits from the
reduction, of course, though Norton’s suffering has been
greater. As the rich context of his opposition to transcenden-
talism will reveal, he was—like the transcendental contro-
versy itself—at once more consistently principled and more
richly human than has been supposed.

Norton’s personality may be partly to blame for the ease
with which he has been caricatured. His reputation as “Pope
Andrews” (Theodore Parker’s label) grew during the twenty
years before Emerson’s inflammatory Divinity School Ad-
dress in 1838. Appointed Dexter Professor of Sacred Litera-
ture at Harvard in 1819, Norton was a powerful influence
on those Emerson would call “young men . . . with knives
in their brains.” Although Norton earned the respect of some
students and colleagues, those who knew him best often
found him aloof and inflexible. James Walker, Alford Pro-
fessor and later president at Harvard, recalled that while
not unkind, “his nature was the opposite to genial, under-
standing that word to mean a readiness to take up and symp-
pathize with, and, in this way, to enter into and compre-
hend, a great variety of characters and convictions.” Imperi-
ous, self-assured, daunting in his command of biblical
scholarship, Norton passed quickly into college folklore.

lished study of Norton, an essay on his early years (through 1823) by Lilian Hand-
lin, “Babylon est delenda—the Young Andrews Norton,” in American Unitarian-
ism, 1805–1865, ed. Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical
Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989), pp. 53–85. Allen R. Clark’s “An-
(1942), relies mostly on the published documents by and about Norton.

3Perry Miller, “Theodore Parker: Apostasy within Liberalism” (1961), reprinted
When he entered heaven, so one student joke had it, he would surely sniff, "It is a very miscellaneous crowd."4

Norton resigned his professorship in 1830 to devote his energies to the book he embraced as his life's work, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (3 volumes, 1837–44). More important for his reputation, though, were Norton's polemics during the transcendental controversy of the late 1830s, which began with a localized debate over the need to validate Christianity with the evidence of miracles but escalated into a larger discussion of the "new views" of transcendentalism: intuition, the primacy of the self, and the insufficiency of social and religious institutions. In 1836 Norton took his former student Ripley to task in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (5 November 1836) for writing irresponsibly about biblical miracles in a recent number of the *Christian Examiner*. Two years later, following Emerson's Divinity School Address, Norton turned again to the *Advertiser* to castigate "the new school in literature and religion" for its "most extraordinary assumption, united with great ignorance, and incapacity for reasoning" (27 August 1838). Norton widened his attack with *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, delivered to the alumni of the divinity school at Cambridge in July 1839. Emerson, we know, remained apart from the "storm in our washbowl," as he called it in a letter to Thomas Carlyle.5 But Ripley, who had probably been spoiling for a fight for three years, answered with "The Latest Form of Infidelity" Examined (1839)—and the pamphlet war was on, a series of thrusts and parries that eventu-


ally drew in Parker, Orestes A. Brownson, and other assorted sympathizers with the transcendental "newness." And then, in 1840, Norton withdrew.

Even this brief sketch of the external moment on which Norton's reputation rests reveals some curious questions. How did Norton land at the forefront of public Unitarian opposition to transcendentalism? So thoroughly did he seem to represent the views of more conservative Unitarians that another of his students, James Freeman Clarke, called their position "Nortonism"; yet Norton seems an unlikely combatant, a cerebral academic "withdrawn from the stir and rush of the great world." It also seems odd that he would turn to the newspapers, when Unitarian periodicals like the Christian Register and the Christian Examiner were available for theological discussion. Finally, though, what most requires explanation is the vigor and emotionalism of Norton's reaction in the late 1830s to challenges to the historicity of miracles at least as old as the writings of Spinoza in the seventeenth century and Hume in the eighteenth. Perry Miller speculates that Norton must have been "inspired by nothing less than pure rage." If so (to paraphrase Emerson on Whitman) the rage must have had a long foreground somewhere, and it is there that we find the pattern of response to anarchy and authority that dissolves the black-and-white distinction between Norton and Emerson into historically more accurate shades of gray.

I

As Ronald Story makes clear in The Forging of an Aristocracy, the early decades of the nineteenth century brought traumatic changes to Harvard: secularization of the curriculum, a broadening of constituencies, and the growing influ-

7Miller, The Transcendentalists, p. 193.
ence of a culturally and financially elite class.\textsuperscript{8} In the face of these challenges, the proper exercise of authority over education became increasingly urgent. Norton found himself embroiled in a decade-long struggle for faculty control that would resurface in the 1830s to shape his response to the transcendentalists.

Harvard's governance system in the early nineteenth century was, as one modern historian puts it, a "masterpiece of complexity" almost guaranteed to cause friction among students, faculty, and administration.\textsuperscript{9} As specified in the charters of 1642 and 1650, the college had two formal governing bodies: the seven fellows of the Harvard Corporation, usually alumni but not necessarily educators, who exercised jurisdiction over finances, hiring of faculty, and other specific areas of administration; and the Board of Overseers, a much larger body, which ratified the decisions of the corporation and established broad university policies. The fellows chose their own successors and included, by custom, at least one resident instructor; the overseers included the president of the college, the governor and lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, members of the state senate, and six ministers from the greater Cambridge area. Faculty members, charged with the "immediate governance" of curricula and students, were accountable to the professional men of the corporation—a situation that had caused discomfort since the seventeenth century.

This pattern of authority was already shifting during the decade or so prior to Norton's appointment as Dexter Professor in 1819. Since 1806, the corporation's membership had included no resident instructors, and in 1811, the corpora-


tion began giving the president of the college sweeping new authority over curricula, student conduct, and general government of the institution, "consulting as he shall find occasion with the instructors." Presidents John T. Kirkland, who served from 1810 to 1828, and Josiah Quincy, 1829 to 1845, took full advantage of those expanded powers. By 1815 the membership of the board of overseers had grown to include fifteen laymen and fifteen ministers, a broadening designed to increase public control over an institution still supported by public funds.

While the governing structure was complicated for the college generally, it was even more so for the divinity school. By 1819 a distinct administrative unit within the college, the "Theological Institution at Cambridge," was subject not only to the president, the corporation, and the overseers but also to the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education, a fund-raising group that exercised increasing sway over the conduct of the school.

If there is a constant in all these developments, it is the steady erosion of faculty control. And indeed this is the issue that caused Norton's first major breach with Harvard. His displeasure had been building for some time. In 1819 his Unitarian liberalism had been a liability in his efforts to secure the Dexter Professorship. Years later, he complained that his salary was less than two-thirds what other professors earned, "and it remained without any addition during the eleven years I held the place." In 1823 he was offered a Doctor of Divinity degree by the corporation—and pointedly refused it, protesting obliquely that "the association with it, and the sort of character which it is supposed to imply, are such, as I was rather desirous of avoiding."10 Then, in the months stretching across 1823 to 1825, three concurrent developments at Harvard seemed to crystallize Norton's dissa-

tisfaction and direct it toward the issue of faculty govern-
ance: the student riots of 1823, changes in the divinity
school's administration, and a challenge to the membership
of the corporation.

Student riots at Harvard had always been “savage little
affairs,” Bernard Bailyn notes, “explosions of pent-up ado-
lescent energies against the tightly paternalistic, and increas-
ingly paternalistic, system,” but the rioting in May 1823 was
unprecedented even by these standards. Prompted by a ri-
vality between two students to deliver the Commencement
Day speech, the conflict quickly escalated as the ceremonies
were disrupted and one student was tossed down the steps
of University Hall; eventually thirty-seven seniors, over half
the graduating class, were expelled. Coming as it did when
the state’s ten-year appropriation to Harvard was up for
renewal, the riot of 1823 raised again the embarrassing
question of who was in charge at the college.11 In July, a
seven-man committee headed by Judge Joseph Story was
appointed by the overseers to “inquire into the state of the
University.” Their report, presented in May 1824, rec-
ommended substantial changes in governance and in disciplin-
ing students, among them: (1) “complete visitational au-
thority”—in other words, supervisory powers—for the
president, along with the right unilaterally to veto any fac-
ulty decision; (2) the division of faculty into academic de-
partments; and (3) nightly inspection of each student’s
room, to be conducted by the tutors.

Worried that the Story committee’s recommendations
would only “aggravate the present evils” at Harvard, An-
drews Norton quickly produced a pamphlet of “Remarks”
opposing the report. When the overseers finally acted upon
the issues in June 1825, Norton must have viewed the results
with a mixture of satisfaction and dismay. As he had hoped,
the president’s powers were unchanged: no right to veto fac-
ulty decisions, no “visitational authority” over the instruc-

tors. But the "Immediate Government"—now to be called the "Faculty of the University"—remained as powerless as before.\textsuperscript{12}

Meanwhile, additional challenges to faculty authority were brewing in the divinity school. According to Conrad Wright, the corporation had begun to find the school something of a burden. In May 1824, in an attempt to clarify the lines of authority, the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education (with the corporation's blessing) adopted a new constitution that created a board of directors charged with "general oversight and Superintendence of the Institution." Under the revised system, the divinity school faculty would answer to the directors, who in turn answered to the society, the corporation, and the overseers. As Wright puts it, "the opportunities for friction and dispute were unlimited," particularly regarding the prerogatives of the faculty, who found themselves insulated from decisions by yet another layer of bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{13}

Also affecting issues of governance was the death in June 1823 of the Hon. John Phillips, which left a vacancy in the corporation and raised anew faculty demands that the position be filled with one of their own. In April 1824 Norton and Edward Everett, on behalf of eleven resident instructors, brought before the corporation a proposal to give control of the university to the faculty. In essence, they argued that the term "fellows" as used in the original charters derived its meaning from its application at English universities, where "fellows" referred to resident instructors. Therefore, the corporation ought rightly to be composed only of teaching faculty. Surprisingly, a number of Harvard professors (including Norton's brother-in-law, George Ticknor) opposed the change, on the grounds that instructors were unsuited to manage the increasingly complex financial and administrative affairs of the college. The result: in February 1825 the corporation nominated Judge Charles Jackson to

\textsuperscript{13}Wright, "Early Period," pp. 29--31.
replace Phillips, the overseers accepted the recommendation, and the case was closed.\textsuperscript{14} Twice in the same year, Norton's attempts to expand faculty control had failed.

Norton had the satisfaction of seeing his concerns about faculty authority realized, at least at the divinity school, for the "grossly defective organizational structure" caused increased difficulties for the rest of the decade between the corporation and the society's board of directors. At last, in 1830 control of theological education was given over to the faculty of divinity (the president and three professors), and the Society for the Promotion of Theological Education dissolved itself. For Norton, though, the victory came too late. After taking a leave of absence for reasons of health in 1828, he resigned from the faculty, to be replaced in 1830 by John Gorham Palfrey, who was also appointed dean. In one of its last acts, the board of directors politely invited Norton to give "the benefit of his instructions" to the divinity students "as far as his other arrangements will allow."\textsuperscript{15} Norton declined. For the moment, his connection with the divinity school had come to an end.

II

With Norton sequestered at "Shady Hill," his Cambridge estate, and the issue of faculty governance resolved (temporarily, at least) at the theological school, life at Divinity Hall appeared to settle into a more comfortable routine. Although the school experienced difficulties in the 1830s—shrinking enrollments, a reduced faculty, and growing complaints about the arid curriculum—the life of the mind at Divinity Hall was hardly moribund. The "electric intellectual atmosphere of Boston" and the tolerance of the faculty, Gary L. Collison has shown in convincing detail, encouraged the divinity students to broach ever more dangerous


\textsuperscript{15}Wright, "Early Period," pp. 33–36; John Gorham Palfrey to Norton, 12 April 1830, Norton Collection, Houghton Library.
issues like slavery, religious radicalism, and social reform during the years leading up to Emerson’s Divinity School Address in 1838.16

Andrews Norton’s angry 1836 letter about George Ripley, which inaugurated his printed debate with the transcendentalists, reflects his—and others’—growing impatience with the products of Unitarian tolerance, not only with the ideas themselves but also with those who seemed to sanction them by allowing them to be aired publicly. As early as 1835, Norton’s hackles had been raised by Orestes A. Brownson’s essay on the incompatibility of Christianity and wealth, which appeared in the Christian Examiner for July. Brownson promised another installment on the same theme for a future number. Instead of protesting Brownson’s views directly, Norton complained privately to James Walker, the Examiner’s editor, about the propriety of printing Brownson’s projected second essay. Norton’s objections are telling:

As to Bronson’s [sic] article, I should much regret its being published at all. I say this of course without having read it. But his is one of those irregular, presuming, superficial minds, undisciplined by learning, whose speculations, of no value anywhere, are particularly adapted to do mischief in such a work as the Examiner. . . . It is worthwhile for us to devote our thoughts to it only on the ground that it is the sole work in the world in which intelligent Christians, having, as we think, correct views of religion[,] express opinions deliberately formed upon subjects of the highest interest, under a strong sense of responsibility. These are not to be mixed up with the crude thoughts of men, endeavoring to force themselves into notice by some extravagances of doctrine or some paradoxical mode of stating commonplaces.17

Norton voiced much the same complaint about Ripley the following year. Norton had offered his letter to the editor of the bi-weekly Christian Register, but when Chandler Rob-

bins refused it "from personal considerations," he turned instead to the Boston Daily Advertiser. While Norton found Ripley's speculations about miracles ill-founded, the "sole ground" of Norton's letter was his distress that such stuff could again find its way into the Examiner and thus masquerade as responsible Unitarian theology (5 November 1836). So serious were Norton's charges that Dr. William Ellery Channing called a meeting of the Examiner's proprietors soon after Norton's letter appeared. According to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Norton attacked Walker's even-handed editorial policy; Walker tartly responded that the real question was whether only Norton's views would appear in the magazine "or whether the questions that were in the minds of the contributors & the public should be discussed." Norton dug in his heels and insisted that the public good was at stake, whereupon Walker offered to resign as editor and start a new magazine. In the end, the assembly agreed to the principle of free discussion, with only Norton and John Gorham Palfrey dissenting.19

In late 1836, the year Perry Miller has called the "annus mirabilis" of New England transcendentalism, Norton would have had good reason to worry about free discussion. Emerson's Nature appeared on 9 September and within weeks of Norton's Advertiser letter about Ripley were issued three more books he would also view as subversive: William Henry Furness's Remarks on the Four Gospels (offered for sale on 14 November), Ripley's Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion (24 November), and Brownson's New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church (29 November). To

18 Miller, Transcendentalists, pp. 158-59.
19 Elizabeth Palmer Peabody to Mary Peabody, [23 November 1836], in Letters of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, ed. Bruce A. Ronda (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), pp. 185–87. Frank Luther Mott notes that in the mid 1830s the Examiner was conducted under the auspices of a "society of gentlemen" who apparently functioned as informal (and largely anonymous) directors (History of American Magazines, 1741–1850 [New York and London: D. Appleton, 1930], p. 287). Palfrey edited the magazine briefly, from 1824 to 1825; neither Norton nor Dr. Channing ever served the Examiner in an official capacity.
Rev. Conver Francis it seemed that "the spiritualists [were] taking the field in force."\textsuperscript{20}

Although Norton's argument was essentially a narrow one urging responsibility on the part of Unitarian editors, his was the first conservative voice raised in public during that momentous autumn, and he was soon perceived as the defender of conventional Unitarian values. On the day Norton's Advertiser letter appeared, Rev. Charles W. Upham of Salem wrote to commend him for "so justly and so fearlessly" upholding rational Unitarianism:

While I regret exceedingly that my friend Mr. Ripley has exposed himself to your remarks, I have long been satisfied that, sooner or later, and the sooner the better, open opposition would be made to the speculations into which many of our preachers and people, and among them some of my most beloved friends, have been led—I thank you for taking the lead in this necessary work.

Two days later another Salem minister echoed Upham's encouragement. Like Norton, John Brazer worried about the propriety of publishing speculations "which, to my mind, go the whole length of virtually undermining the basis of Christianity" in a journal intended "to speak the opinion of leading Theologians and Scholars of the liberal class of Christians."\textsuperscript{21}

During the next year, amid other reactions to the four transcendental manifestoes of 1836, Norton brought out the first volume of the \textit{Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels}, his defense of the historical importance of miracles. But Brazer's concern that "the religious commonwealth shall receive no harm" must have loomed larger in Norton's mind than academic disputes when Emerson delivered his Divin-

\textsuperscript{20}Quoted in Miller, \textit{Transcendentalists}, p. 107.

\textsuperscript{21}Charles W. Upham to Norton, 5 November 1836, and John Brazer to Norton, 7 November 1836, Norton Collection, Houghton Library. Upham and Brazer were men whose encouragement Norton could not have taken lightly. Upham was a former student of Norton's at the divinity school; Brazer had taught with Norton from 1817 to 1820, received a D.D. from Harvard in 1836, and currently served on the board of overseers.
ity School Address. On that occasion the threat represented by the radical transcendentalists became far more widespread than could be defused by biblical exposition alone.

The bare facts of the story of Emerson's address are well known. On 21 March 1838 the seniors at the divinity school—there were only seven of them—invited Emerson to deliver the "customary discourse" in Divinity Chapel, the yearly send-off for those on the threshold of graduation. Emerson accepted, but his address was hardly of the customary sort. On 15 July he stood before the students, the three faculty members, and their guests and challenged the young ministers to "go alone; to refuse the good models . . . and dare to love God without mediator or veil." The clergy, he charged—and by implication those who trained them—concerned themselves less with the soul than with self-serving bickering about the "person of Jesus." Their neglect had resulted in the "universal decay and now almost death of faith in society." When Emerson returned in his coach to Concord, he left in his wake a stunned faculty and a fired-up student body. Dean Palfrey recorded in his diary a single sentence, "Emerson preached odiously at the Hall in the evening," the first salvo in what Perry Miller has called the "whispering campaign" following the address.22

Emerson spoke on the middle day of the middle month of a fractious summer in which Boston's Unitarians felt battered by four events not immediately connected with the Divinity School Address. The first was the growing discontent of a Harvard student group known as the Philanthropic Society. Founded in 1831 to promote Christian education in prisons, the society was hardly a hotbed of radicalism. But in March 1838, at the same time Emerson was invited to speak at Divinity Hall, debate had turned to the volatile issue of slavery. By 21 May the students were discussing imme-

diate emancipation and agreed to invite an emancipationist to speak with them at their next meeting. The news traveled fast: on 25 May President Quincy, worried about a disruption on campus, told Palfrey to intervene and threatened to ask the corporation to prohibit any society at Harvard from inviting non-members to speak. The students eventually agreed to postpone the invitation, but only after they lodged a firm protest against the “encroachment on the mutual right of freedom of speech.” In June the Philanthropic Society passed thirteen resolutions calling for immediate abolition, cooperation with anti-slavery societies elsewhere, and full support for those working in Massachusetts.23

Students were not the only thinkers in a defiant mood that summer. In the June 1838 number of the Western Messenger, a monthly review edited in Louisville by a group of expatriate Harvard-trained ministers, James Freeman Clarke published what he called in his journal “a slap at the East.” A divinity school graduate, class of 1833, Clarke surveyed the prospects of liberal religion in New England and anticipated the conclusions Emerson would reach a month later: so-called “old school” Unitarians were “comparatively cold and indifferent” to matters of the soul, and the entire denomination suffered from “torpor and apparent death,” with the exception of a few vigorous thinkers like Furness, Channing, Emerson, Brownson, and Walker.24 If they emerged bruised from the scuffle with the Philanthropic Society, this “slap” from a former student must have stung the divinity school faculty even more.

Those who read the Western Messenger would also have been reading newspaper accounts in June 1838 of the cele-


brated case of Abner Kneeland, who would become the last person tried and convicted in the Massachusetts civil courts for blasphemy. On 18 June, Kneeland began serving a sixty-day sentence in the Suffolk County jail, but public attention to the case continued unabated throughout the summer, with a group of 167 influential citizens (including Emerson and many prominent Unitarians) petitioning for Kneeland's release. Robert E. Burkholder argues cogently for the specific connections between Kneeland's infidelity and a more generalized anti-establishment trend in New England. At the least, however, Kneeland's sensational case served to remind New Englanders how tenuous was authority's grip on radical ideas.

The fourth event of import that summer was less public: the developing insanity of a young protégé of Emerson's, Jones Very. A Harvard tutor and a budding poet, Very had caught Emerson's attention the previous April, visited the Emerson home, and attended some meetings of the Transcendental Club. By mid summer his outpourings of religious enthusiasm had made him something of a legend in the classroom, but by September 1838 his eccentricities could no longer be ignored. On the 13th he burst into Professor Henry Ware, Jr.'s office to announce that he had completed an identification with Christ; a day later he told members of the divinity school's debating club that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him; the next day Very's family took him home to Salem. The change was not therapeutic, however; on the 16th, after blessing frightened Salemites in the town square and criticizing the local clergy for their "dead formalism," he was committed to the McLean Hospital for the Insane, through the intervention of Charles W. Upham and John Brazer.26

To recap, then, the four events on everyone’s minds as they listened to Emerson’s address at Divinity Chapel were as follows: in early June the students of the Philanthropic Society openly defied the Harvard faculty; a week later the Western Messenger published Clarke’s attack on the coldness of Unitarian ministers; within another week Kneeland was jailed for blasphemy; and Jones Very, a known “disciple” of Emerson’s, had begun to show signs of madness. In short, when Emerson challenged members of the Unitarian clergy to their faces on 15 July, they had already been rubbed raw by tests of their authority, criticism of their commitment, and a sense of their own vulnerability. To be sure, Emerson’s immediate threat was theological. But as Burkholder and others have shown, in the Boston of the early nineteenth century threats to theological stability implied a challenge to political, legal, and social order as well.

While Emerson’s was surely the most direct and articulate of the challenges posed in the summer of 1838, the response to him owes much to the disorganizing trend already in motion a month before he spoke. Some were relieved that Emerson had at last revealed his true colors—“It strikes me he must either be insanely self-complacent or else a very miserable & restless man,” wrote Edmund T. Dana to his father—but others identified him with the larger threat posed by Kneeland, whose Boston Investigator applauded Emerson as a free-thinker. Still others, apparently instigated by Upham and Brazer in Salem, blamed Emerson for Jones Very’s madness. George B. Loring, a Harvard senior in 1838, sneered, “Perhaps between them they have put the standard of perfection found in Christ so low that one if not both think they have reached it.” So quickly did word of the address travel that even those not present, like the Harvard

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student Nathan Hale, Jr., felt comfortable offering an opinion:

I didn’t hear Emerson’s lecture & was very glad that I didn’t, when I was told what it was—Dr. Palfrey appeared very much hurt about it. . . . The Elect were enraptured—Miss Eliz. Peabody &c.—but the more moderate I think are a little frightened.

Samuel Osgood, a young minister who wrote for the Messenger, captured the hyperbole of the first reactions:

The whole world are in commotion on account of Ralph Waldo’s last manifestation. . . . [The address] is an open declaration of war against Revealed or Historical Religion—& is so written that to common minds, it seems entirely destructive of all faith.

Yet educated Unitarians in New England possessed no “common minds,” and as liberal Christians, most paid more than lip service to the ideals of tolerance and the free exchange of ideas, a point easily lost if the shrillest and most immediate responses to Emerson are mistaken for the majority view. While even a fairly conservative minister like William A. Stearns, an 1827 Harvard graduate and later president of Amherst, could fume about the “hyper-spiritual, neo-super-visionary R. W. Emerson [who would] destroy the good name of Unitarianism,” he could also conclude lightly, “I think that the Literati of your region had better enclose brother Emerson in a balloon and send him on a voyage of discovery to Capt. Symmes entrance of the North Pole.” Conventional Unitarians split over the jailing of Abner Kneeland, and the proprietors of the Examiner recognized their responsibility to air dangerous ideas like Ripley’s. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find no unified denominational condemnation of Emerson personally, or of his address. As Lawrence Buell asserts in Literary Transcendentalism, “the Unitarian community was much readier for

28George B. Loring to James Russell Lowell, 19 September 1838 and Nathan Hale, Jr., to Lowell, 24 July 1838, Lowell Papers, Houghton Library; Samuel Osgood to J. F. Clarke, 4 September 1838, Perry-Clarke Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society. Quotations by permission.
Emersonian notions of art and religion than the acerbity of the miracles controversy would lead us to expect.”

In the context of the larger response to the Divinity School Address, ambiguous and complicated as it was, we may most properly appreciate Norton’s own “New School in Literature and Religion,” surely the most unbridled attack on the constellation of events of 1838. Published in the Advertiser for 27 August, Norton’s piece epitomizes the fear of disorder that was sweeping New England by summer’s end—what he called “that restless craving for notoriety and excitement, which, in one way or another, is keeping our community in a perpetual stir.” As a recitation of the intellectual ills of the day, his essay is unsurpassed: ignorance, lack of reason, “contempt for good taste,” arrogance, and obscure language, laid at the feet of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Victor Cousin, and the “hyper-Germanized Englishman” Thomas Carlyle. This “insurrection of folly” would matter little, Norton contends, except for its “disastrous and alarming” seduction of the young, Emerson’s address to the divinity school students being the most “extraordinary and ill boding evidence” of that danger.

Though Norton’s essay pauses short of a tirade, his anger is evident. Yet it is not directed at Emerson or his address, which gets only one sentence of summary in an essay of some eighteen column inches. Indeed, Norton finds Emerson’s opinions “a matter of minor concern”; for him, “the main question is how it happened, that religion has been insulted by the delivery of those opinions in the Chapel of the Divinity College.” Certainly the students could not really have

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29 William A. Stearns to Charles Stearns Wheeler, 11 November 1838, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, N.Y., ms. no. MA 4021; Lawrence Buell, Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 33. Theodore Parker reports the “queer predicament” of the Boston Ministerial Association, which met in late 1838 to consider whether Emerson was a Christian: “either they must acknowledge a man may be virtuous & yet no Xn. (which most of them thought it a great heresy to suppose) & religious yet an atheist, (which is a contradiction—to be without God— & yet united with God.) or else to affirm that E. was neither virtuous or religious, ‘which they could not prove’” (Parker to George E. Ellis, 3 January 1839, Parker Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society; quotation by permission).
thought Emerson’s “incoherent rhapsody” well spoken, or profound, or consistent. Therefore, “the public must be desirous of learning what exculpation or excuse they can offer” for jeopardizing the “religious and moral state of the community.”

Norton thus shifts the terms of dispute from theological error to social disruption, from private insult to communal affront—from Emerson to the students who invited him. His quick dismissal of Emerson’s “opinions” may be explained by Norton’s own scholarly orientation: he was absolutely impatient with transcendental intuition, or any other form of speculation unconfirmed (or unconfirmable) by what Emerson viewed as mere second-hand evidence. Surely he found Emerson’s indictment of the clergy offensive, as he had found Ripley’s view of miracles two years before. Just as surely, though, he saw Emerson’s address as symptomatic of a much larger, and ultimately more important, ailment; and the cure was not to censure Emerson but to hold accountable the students who invited him, the faculty who permitted the invitation, and the Unitarian leaders who refused to lead. Put simply, Norton’s “New School” essay privileges responsibility rather than ideas, which are more or less dangerous depending on who says them, who hears them, and where.

Norton’s “New School in Literature and Religion” is significant not merely because of its vigor or its immediacy but because it recalls Norton’s old complaints about the Unitarian hierarchy’s lack of responsibility. In the circumstances surrounding publication of his comments, Norton’s quarrel with the denominational press was rejuvenated. While the Christian Examiner offered no response to Emerson until November (it was, after all, a bi-monthly publication), the Christian Register (which had refused to print Norton’s 1836 objections to Ripley) reacted with its usual caution. On 29 September an anonymous writer inquired whether Emerson represented the general thinking of Unitarians; Chandler Robbins, the editor and Emerson’s successor at the Second
Church of Boston, replied in the negative but asserted that Emerson was still “at heart and in life a Christian.” Apparently Robbins suffered for his evenhandedness; in the Regis-
ter for 20 October he responded heatedly to “readers who found cause to complain of us for not always fully chiming with the prevailing tone of censure”:

The truth is, we are constitutionally prone to sympathize, perhaps too strongly, with good men who are subjected to the hard discipline of popular reproof. . . . We have sad, sad memories of inquisitors, and bigots, and clamorous crowds, and stakes and crosses, that have haunted us even from our childhood.

Incensed at being associated with witch-hunters, Norton immediately wrote a rebuttal and fired it off for review to his father-in-law, who wisely suggested showing it to Robbins privately, “with a view to your maintaining an elevated position.” Norton took the advice but cautioned the young editor to “do me the justice to believe, that I have not been influenced by any personal feeling or improper motive.” He made his point: “greatly relieved at the suppression of your article,” Robbins apologized.30

Norton’s “New School” essay also calls to mind an issue of longstanding importance to him. At least since the student riot of 1823 and his aborted attempts to change the Harvard governance system in the 1820s, he had been concerned about the proper supervision of students. To be sure, he was not alone in condemning the impropriety of inviting “heretical” speakers to Divinity Hall. Nathan Hale, Jr., fumed in a letter to James Russell Lowell, “As for the Divinities I want to kick every one I see,” and Richard Henry Dana, Sr., worried for the fate of the school itself:

When you consider that the class of young divines just graduated, were principally Emersonians, you can form some judgement of what Cam. Theol. is. It is important that these things should be

50Samuel A. Eliot to Norton, 21 October 1838, Norton to Chandler Robbins, 22 October 1838, and Robbins to Norton, [late October 1838], Norton Collection, Houghton Library.
spread abroad. The character of that School must be made known to the public.31

The title of Norton’s essay alludes to both the “German” school of thought and the splintering of Unitarians into old and new schools; but we should not ignore the fact that the “Theological Institution at Cambridge” had indeed become a new school since Norton left it, and in ways he did not like. In 1838, then, he could be forgiven a touch of smugness over the “disgust and strong disapprobation with which [Emerson’s address] must have been heard by the highly respectable officers of that Institution,” for he had all but predicted that something disastrous would happen unless faculty exercised greater control. Although Norton was as ineffective in mobilizing his denomination then as he had been in the 1820s, he at least had the satisfaction of seeing in the rebellion of the Philanthropic Society, the madness of Jones Very, and the invitation to Ralph Waldo Emerson confirmation that he had been right all along.

III

The controversy over Emerson’s “heresy” proceeded without Emerson. Privately hurt, he was publicly silent, at least about his address.32 For Andrews Norton, though, the two years following Emerson’s Divinity School Address marked the apex of his involvement in the transcendental controversy, both through his published writings and through a

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31Hale to Lowell, 24 July 1838; Dana to Caleb Sprague Henry, 5 October 1838, Dana Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Published responses often made the same point; see, e.g., the review of Henry Ware, Jr.’s Personality of the Deity in the Christian Watchman, 19 October 1838, p. 167.

32Emerson kept up a busy lecture schedule in 1838 and 1839, but he vented his disappointment in his journals. See, e.g., his entry for 19 October 1838: “It is a poor[-]spirited age. . . . The feminine vehemence with which the A. N. of the Daily Advertiser beseeches the dear people to whip that naughty heretic is the natural feeling in the mind whose religion is external” (Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–82], 7:110–11).
series of behind-the-scenes maneuvers that he thought would remove the transcendentalist threat once and for all.

On 18 July, nearly a year to the day after Emerson's address, Norton delivered *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* in the First Church of Cambridge. He had been officially invited by an "association of the alumni" recently formed, one assumes, to help redeem the school’s battered reputation. The first speaker, Norton gave them what they wanted, a thoroughgoing attack on the "depraving literature and noxious speculations which flow in among us from Europe" and a firm exposition of the conventional Unitarian view of biblical miracles: "Nothing is left that can be called Christianity, if its miraculous character be denied."33 To the published version of the address, which appeared on 24 August, Norton appended two long "notes" on modern infidelity and the historical basis for Christianity. Erudite, detailed, and passionate, Norton's discourse covered much the same ground as his "New School" essay of a year earlier—the fallacy of intuition, the disorganizing tendencies of Germanism, the need for empirical verification of faith. Emerson is nowhere mentioned, but New England transcendentalism is everywhere implied.

In his journal Theodore Parker called Norton's address "a complete failure"; most published reviews were lukewarm. Rufus A. Johnson, the new editor of the *Christian Register* since Robbins relinquished the job in the spring of 1839, acknowledged the miracles controversy but vowed to stay neutral, preferring "brotherly love" to doctrine (26 October 1839)—an editorial policy Norton could hardly have found surprising. In its November 1839 notice, the *Christian Examiner* spoke highly of Norton's "lucid, cogent, and impressive reiteration" of the old arguments, though the reviewer concluded ambiguously that intuition may be valid when it

33 Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1839), pp. 8, 22. Though the title page dates the address 19 July, the manuscript "Records of the Theological School" (Harvard Archives) places it a day earlier, in "Reverend Mr. Newell's church."
grows from the testimony of miracles. If (as Parker wrote) Norton thought he had "'done transcendentalism up,"' he was mistaken. Ripley responded on 12 October with "The Latest Form of Infidelity" Examined; Norton answered it with his own Remarks later in the month; and Ripley countered with A Defense of "The Latest Form of Infidelity" Examined: A Second Letter at year's end and another published "letter" in March 1840. Parker joined in, thinly disguised as "Mr. Levi Blodgett," to return the discussion from German scholarship back to intuition and miracles. If anything, Norton's Discourse inflamed the transcendental controversy it was designed to smother.

Norton's participation in this "pamphlet war" cemented his public reputation as a Unitarian apologist and opponent of the transcendentalists. Behind the published controversy, however, were operating a series of complicated private dealings that provide a different interpretation of his motives, beginning with Palfrey's announcement in April 1839 of his retirement as Dexter Professor. He and the two Wares, Henry Sr. and Henry Jr., had served as the divinity school faculty throughout the declining enrollments of the 1830s; now, with Palfrey's resignation (he would devote himself full-time to the editorship of the North American Review), the question was not so much who would replace him but whether he would be replaced at all. The Harvard Corporation turned to Andrews Norton and asked James Walker, one of the fellows, to feel him out. In May Norton responded: teaching would be time-consuming and a burden to his health, and in addition, he worried about the school's financial stability and the lack of faculty control.35


In his refusal Norton was being coy, for he had already developed a plan for returning to the divinity school on his own terms. Perhaps he thought that events of the tumultuous summer of 1838 would give his arguments greater weight. But whatever the reasons for his confidence, in June Norton made the corporation a counter-offer: he would return to part-time teaching if: (1) the divinity school faculty were given “the whole power of making regulations [about instruction and discipline] . . . subject to the approval of no other body”; and (2) a new professorship of Hebrew and Old Testament studies could be created, to be filled by his friend George Rapall Noyes.36

It was an audacious proposal, given the school’s precarious finances and shaky enrollment, though a characteristic one, given Norton’s history. An embarrassed Noyes asked Norton to drop his demands; they were impractical, and, Noyes confessed, he would feel he had been appointed only so that the school could get Norton back. Throughout the summer of 1839 Norton’s proposal went unanswered, but it casts new light on his July performance at First Church, Cambridge. The Infidelity address was not only an attack on heresy but also a position paper drawn up in anticipation of his return to the faculty, a dramatization of the theological commitment he believed had been lost in his absence.

Norton’s gamble failed. His offer languished through the fall, until a note to President Quincy pried loose an answer. On 26 October the corporation decided not to fill the Dexter Professorship with Norton or anyone else but confirmed James Walker as Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity, a position not formally connected with the divinity school.37

For Norton the rejection must have been a double blow. Not only would the divinity faculty be reduced to two, but


37Noyes to Norton, 29 July 1839, and Quincy to Norton, 29 October 1839, Norton Collection, Houghton Library.
Walker—his adversary in the dispute over editorial policy in the *Christian Examiner*—had a reputation for transcendentalist leanings. Charles W. Upham wrote Norton a frantic letter from Salem:

We look to you alone in this exigency. Dr. Channing favors the new views, as they are called. Dr. Walker has never lifted a finger against them. In point of fact he has favored them, and his appointment to Cambridge was hailed as the first step towards bringing the College and Unitarianism to transcendentalism. My only hope is you. May your life be spared to deliver us from a state of things which I fully believe could only issue in the destruction of the faith of our churches and clergy!

And to make matters worse, the next year Noyes was appointed Hancock Professor of Hebrew after Henry Ware, Sr., retired. Norton must have reflected on the cruel irony that the corporation wanted the friend he had sought to sweep into the divinity school on his coattails more than they wanted him. When in early May 1840 Norton was again approached about returning in some capacity to the divinity school, he washed his hands of the place:

If this or any other institution for learning is to be made what it might be and should be, it must be put into the hands of those whose studies, feelings and habits of mind qualify them to judge of the proper manner of conducting it, and who from principle, feeling and personal interest are deeply concerned in its prosperity. They must have the unembarrassed control of it. . . . In these now disastrous times, disastrous as regards the avowed opinions of one portion of the Unitarian clergy (so called) and the inertness of a large majority of the other portion, the school, I fear, will be useless, or worse than useless, if there be not an essential change in its conduct.

With these views, and after the offers I have already made[,] I do not feel called upon to do anything toward attempting to further the progress of the school in a course in which I have no hope of success.38

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Stripped of his association with the divinity school and despondent over the "inertness" of his denomination, Norton turned for support to recent critiques of the state of New England theology by three orthodox Congregationalists at Princeton. *Two Articles from the Princeton Review*, published by Norton in spring 1840, was his final public declaration in the transcendental controversy.39 As Perry Miller notes, Norton's alliance with his old Calvinist enemies is a measure of how acute his frustration with the Unitarian clergy had become. In addition, though, Norton was heartsick over his increasing isolation; the campaign against infidelity had become personal, exhausting, and vicious. Brownson's notice of *Two Articles* in the *Boston Quarterly Review* for July 1840 reveals how thoroughly Norton himself had become the issue: "It is said that he usually sits in a room with the shutters closed, which has the double effect of keeping the light out and the darkness in." A despondent Norton wrote William Ware in late February,

I had nearly made up my mind that *almost* unsupported as I have been . . . and in danger in consequence of being regarded as a bigot, a holder of obsolete doctrines, a man of obsolete learning, and narrow minded and over zealous about trifles, that it would do very little good for me in any way to take any further interest in the existing state of things.40

To some—and clearly Norton knew this—he had become a laughingstock. By 1840 he was sick of it.

If henceforth Norton would be unwilling to participate personally in the controversy, his concern continued nonetheless, for now, as he saw it, Germanism had thoroughly
worked its evil in New England. The "new party" within Unitarianism, he believed, had Dr. William Ellery Channing at its head and freedom as its watchword:

They cover over and countenance and encourage the expression of opinions the most disastrous to the community by those least qualified to be its guides, everything extravagant in language or licentious in speculation, the violences of the abolitionists, the atheism of Kneeland and Emerson, the infidelity of Ripley and Brownson, and the furious jacobinism of the latter.

And so in March 1840, his anger unabated, Norton offered to send William Ware, the new editor of the Christian Examiner, a draft list of Ripley's errors if Ware would commission someone to review Ripley's last two pamphlets. A month later, he sent the same lengthy notes to Palfrey at the North American Review, with the request that he use them to rebut Ripley's pamphlets there: "I might reply to them, but this his partisans would represent as the pleading of an advocate in his own cause." Palfrey was unsure that the North American was the place for theological debate with Ripley, whom Norton now saw as the "champion" of transcendentalism in New England. Norton argued for the urgency of the situation, in terms that reveal how thoroughly integrated personality and theology had become:

If he be not checked, as he may be thoroughly, his Transcendental Review will of course go on; it will be said by those of his school, as it has been in the New York Review, that he has obtained a decided advantage over me; he will become a great man; and he and Brownson and Miss Fuller and Miss Peabody, with occasional aid from Dr. Channing and others, will become the mystagogues of one-knows not how large a portion of the community.  

It was as close to frantic as Norton would become, but his warning did no good; neither the Examiner nor the North American took up the cudgel against Ripley, and his "Tran-

41Norton to Ware, [late February 1840] and 18 March 1840; Norton to Palfrey, 13 and 22 April 1840, Norton Collection, Houghton Library.
scendental Review,” the Dial, gave the “mystagogues” a forum for the next four years.

IV

In March 1842, Andrews Norton reminisced about his early days on the Harvard faculty. Due to his “want of orthodoxy” and anti-Trinitarian views, the corporation had balked at giving him the Dexter Professorship in 1819. Only after Palfrey interceded did the fellows change their minds, over the objections of Dr. Channing, who feared Norton’s presence would give the school a reputation for “favoring heresy.” As Norton observed dryly, “Times have since altered.”

Norton’s recollection serves as an object lesson on the dangers of reducing the transcendental controversy, and his part in it, to the strict polarities of old and new schools or conservatism versus radicalism. Certainly, as Michael J. Colacurcio has recently argued, the transcendentalists viewed the need to validate truth empirically as “the representative error of the American Mind,” just as Norton (and many others) feared that only gibberish would result from replacing external evidence with transcendental intuition. The miracles controversy focused and gave vocabulary to these philosophical disagreements, to be sure; but it did not exhaust them nor, as Norton’s history illustrates, was epistemology at the root of the problem for the man known as the “archenemy of Transcendentalism.”

In Norton’s view, the central issue of the transcendental controversy was authority: the epistemological authority of empirical evidence but also the practical authority to govern in a world where ideas had dire social consequences. Thus Norton’s arguments for faculty governance, for censoring denominational media, and finally for the proper supervi-
sory role of the clergy are consistent with his local arguments with the transcendentalists, each centering on the abdication of responsibility. For nearly twenty years he had urged responsibility upon those whose authority required it of them, and he had failed in every attempt, either because responsibility was not given (as in the disputes over Harvard governance) or because it was not accepted (by the divinity students, the editors, and the Unitarian clergy generally). The miracles controversy, and the transcendental controversy that subsumed it, merely gave Norton an additional occasion—albeit an important one for American cultural history—to assert his opinions about the proper exercise of authority.45

To say, therefore, that Norton's was a response to Emerson is to mistake symptom for illness. Even the “New School” essay of 1838 specifically discounts the Divinity School Address to indict instead the students who called for it. Dismissing an opponent with a sniff may be viewed simply as a rhetorical ploy, but Norton demonstrates Emerson’s relative unimportance to him elsewhere: Emerson goes unmentioned in the Infidelity address of 1839, the pamphlet war with Ripley, and the list of transcendental “mystagogues” Norton drew up in 1840. Emerson’s refusal to argue publicly with Norton may, of course, help to account for Norton’s failure to see the “Sage of Concord” as his enemy. But Norton’s despondent letter to William Ware offers another reason for his reluctance to engage Emerson. By early 1840, Norton conceded that

the question is not whether a man in this country may not think or write or discuss anything he pleases. That has been settled. But it is, whether Christian clergymen (so called) shall be Christians or not; and whether professedly Christian publications shall earnestly and ably maintain the cause of Christianity; or administer poison and food at the same time.

Muster ing his dwindling energies and painfully aware of his lack of allies, Norton once more narrowed the issue, this time to a proposition so tautological that its truth (he hoped) would be self-evident—that “Christian clergymen . . . shall be Christians.” By the end of his participation in the transcendental controversy, Norton had identified two “parties” threatening the religious and social stability of New England: the transcendental “mystagogues” like Ripley, Brownson, and Elizabeth Peabody and the “new party” of Unitarian ministers like Dr. Channing and Walker, who countenanced the transcendental views. His “pure rage” vented itself primarily on the second group; but Emerson, a former minister by his own choice and an infidel by Norton’s, was no longer part of the problem that an increasingly reluctant Norton chose to address. However central Emerson and the Divinity School Address may now be in our after-the-fact appraisals of the transcendental controversy, to Andrews Norton they represented little more than a particularly vexing skirmish in a war he had waged, and lost, for two decades. As his complicated struggle reminds us, one of the central episodes in American intellectual history owed as much to institutional politics, personal animosities, and the very human reluctance to confront change as it did to the “new views” of transcendentalism.

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