

Between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Dying Infidel

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Abstract : Beyond the heterodoxy expressed in his now-famous 1838 address to the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson's timing was particularly dangerous. Ideologically, New England faced a severe crisis of identity, as traditional categories of class and religion were growing increasingly unstable. Jones Very, influenced by Emerson, crossed the perceived border between acceptable religious zeal and insane enthusiasm. Abner Kneeland, on the other hand, crossed the uncomfortable border between post-Puritan Unitarian rationalism and blasphemous Enlightenment skepticism. More importantly, Kneeland oversaw a more overtly subversive brand of resistance (in the form of freethought periodicals) that not only threatened religious orthodoxy but also threatened to destabilize the class structure of New England. Very and Kneeland provide instructive case studies of how religious ideologies could run afoul of the social contract and the law itself. By looking closely at the social and religious forces that led to Kneeland's prosecution for blasphemy, Jones Very's forced committal to McLean Asylum, and Emerson's escape from these fates, we gain a greater understanding of the shifting cultural landscape of 1830s New England. This paper will examine Emerson's resistance to the traditional forces of class and ideology in Massachusetts by situating his early work in the context of the ideological battles of his time. More specifically, I will explore how Emerson was able to resist the conservative cultural forces of his time without experiencing the extremity of their wrath.

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