

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

### *Personal Narrative*

Although probably the most famous American Puritan autobiography, by one of the most famous American Puritans, Edwards's "Personal Narrative" does not follow the conventions of a Puritan confession. The established sequence of events, as summarized by Edmund S. Morgan, is "knowledge (of sin), conviction, faith combat, and true, imperfect assurance (of salvation)."<sup>1</sup> Edwards's path, extending from his childhood to the point where this narrative stops in January, 1739, is from piety to doubt and then to alternations between lyric adoration and a fear of corruption, ending in "a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness," though the latter is tempered by faith "that God reigned, and that his will was done." Yet this very difference from the norms is part of what makes Edwards's story so intriguing and, for some people, so lifelike. He is introspective to the point of gloom. He is also like a psalmist when describing the "delight" and "sweetness" and "glory" of God's world.

Further, more definite interpretation of the "Narrative" would be aided by our knowing more about the circumstances of its writing. For whom was it written, and when? It was not published until 1765 in his friend Samuel Hopkins's *The Life and Character of the Late Rev. Mr. Jonathan Edwards*, where it appeared in a chapter called "An account of his conversion, experiences, and religious exercises, given by himself."

The inwardness of the writing suggests that it was not meant for publication in Edwards's lifetime. Yet the comparisons of his experiences and "affections" with other people's suggests that he was definitely mindful of his neighbors and parishioners, including those swept up in the emotions of the Great Awakening of 1740-+50, which began with the revival at his church in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1735-35. Was he testing their religious sincerity against his own? Was he, even somewhat pride fully, asserting his greater "wickedness"? Or was he trying to review his history and humble himself? Whatever the answers, such intensity was hard to bear (and have bared). By 1750 the residents of Northampton had had enough religious fervor, and they dismissed Edwards from his church. He went across the mountains to Stockbridge, where he was a missionary to the Indians until 1757, when he was invited to become President of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) and where he died of smallpox in March 1758.

Edwards's "narrative" has long been contrasted with Franklin's *Autobiography* and John Woolman's *Journal*. The writings of Calvinist, Deist, and Quaker; of revivalist, of merchant-philanthropist-scientist, and of pacifist-reformer: the three allow for an illuminating range of comparisons. It is also instructive to compare Edwards and Charles Woodmason, noting, for example, how both are on "errands in the wilderness," but how Woodmason, despite his hardships, seems so much more psychologically settled and sure of himself. Woodmason, we might say, wrote his *Journal* in order to preserve his sense of himself and sense of propriety and control amid the misbehavior of others. He never questioned himself. Edwards constantly questioned himself, seeking salvation, not just social order. But these autobiographies also have some features in common. Each, we might say, espouses a particular virtue, and so aims, to use Franklin's term, at "the art of virtue." Piety, pragmatism, pacifisms, and Episcopalianism were different virtues, but eh autobiographies of these four individuals were used to explain and promote each.

The text is from *The Works of President Edwards*, ed. S. Austin, 8 vols. published in 1808, in which spelling and punctuation were much modernized, and from which the bracketed information of the present selection is derived. The classic biography of Edwards is Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, published in 1949. David Levin's *Jonathan Edwards: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969) reprints Hopkins's *Life and Character*.

1. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963), p. 72.

Reading

Selected Sermons of Jonathan Edwards

<http://archive.org/stream/selectedsermons01edwagoog#page/n6/mode/2up>