Experiencing the Divine: Emotion and the Fallibility of Language in Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative"

MA Thesis Literary Studies, English Literature and Culture

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9 July 2019

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Introduction

Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" is a chronological, retrospective account of Edwards' spiritual life interposed with comments and reflections on his experiences with the Divine. He describes multiple powerful, highly emotional encounters as he recounts his religious development from his childhood to the present. It stands as a central text of eighteenth-century spirituality, a touchstone of religious thinking in this period. This thesis argues that concerns with the fallibility of language are central to Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" (c.1740), as he struggles adequately to describe spiritual experience in words even as that experience is said to go beyond language, including in its emotional and bodily effects.

Historical Context

Jonathan Edwards is one of the influential authors of early American literature. As a pastor he was a key figure in the period of revival that spread throughout the colonies in the 1740s, commonly referred to as "The Great Awakening". Arguably, this was "the most important social movement in the Colonies prior to the Revolution" (E. White xi). The controversial element in the Great Awakening came down to the exuberant display of emotions by its followers, derogatorily referred to as "enthusiasm" (Cayton and Elliot 64) by its opponents or even as "an orgy of the emotions" (Miller, *Errand* 154) and a "frenzy" (155). The latter "questioned the unrestrained emotionalism" (Cayton and Elliot 65) of the revivalists as well as accusing them of "preying on the emotions of the unthinking masses" thereby ignoring "sound tenets grounded in reason and Scripture" (Lambert 15). In his leading role within these events, Edwards took it upon himself to negotiate between the revival's most enthusiastic followers and its opponents. He did so through a series of sermons, later published as *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), henceforth referred to as the *Treatise* or *Religious Affections*. In these sermons he provided a detailed analysis of the proper role of emotion within religion, taking into account its relation to reason and related

concepts such as will, understanding, and the body. In this sense, Edwards sought to redeem the emotions and to grant them their proper place within religious life.

As a child of the Puritan tradition prevalent in New England, Protestant thought strongly influenced his thinking. It was partly due to his desire for the renewal of the initial religious fervour which the first Puritans brought with them when they arrived in the New World, that fuelled his embrace of revival. Yet, within the rise and fall of Puritanism as a dominant social force, which, it can be argued, ended in 1689 in England and a few decades later in New England, Jonathan Edwards finds himself at the end of a cultural era, at a time where Puritanism slowly metamorphosed into other denominations (Coffey 333). As John Coffey puts it "In New England … the story of Puritanism normally carries on to around 1730. By this date, we are told, 'Puritans' were turning into 'Yankees', and 'Puritanism' was being displaced by 'Evangelicalism'" (Coffey 333). These demarcations and distinctions should not be taken too rigidly, keeping in mind that such "historical categories" are not as "clear-cut" as presented but were in practice rather quite "blurred" (Coffey 333). However, Coffey nonetheless nominates Jonathan Edwards as one of the "candidates for the honorific title 'last of the Puritans'" (Coffey 333). As Edwards found himself on the brink of a new way of living the religious life he was thus only influenced by his Puritan heritage but guided as well by his fervour and "great longings for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world" (Edwards, "Narrative" 797). In this way, he was open to any knowledge that he felt would aid him in his endeavours. As a result of this scholarly curiosity and certain openness of mind, he drew upon the theories produced by Isaac Newton and, in particular, those of John Locke, as shall be explored further in the first chapter.

Genre and Publication

Edwards' "Personal Narrative" can be placed in the genre of Life Writing which, together with "the related category 'personal writing', covers a broad range of texts, including autobiography, biography, letters, memoirs, diaries and travel-writings" (Marcus 148). Whereas, some of these genres were previously categorized under "non-fictional prose" the focus within Life Writing has

shifted from an emphasis on the "fiction/non-fiction divide" towards "the ways in which such literatures represent the lives of individuals" (Marcus 148). Furthermore, in Life Writing "writing need not have made its mark in the public sphere" to be considered as "literature" which allows for the incorporation and recognition of "personal" or "private" (Marcus 148) writing as valuable objects of study. As the title indicates, the "Personal Narrative" was a personal work for Edwards. He wrote it around 1741 (the exact date is unknown) and it was published posthumously, as opposed to the many sermons and treatises which were published in his lifetime. The public part of his oeuvre deals with his views on religion, dogma, contemporary events – such as the Great Awakening – and how one was to live life as a Christian. These writings are mainly didactic and educational in nature and constitute the bulk of his work; the Yale series *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* comprises twenty-six volumes, which amply shows how prolific an author Edwards was. Of these twenty-six volumes, only one volume, titled *Letters and Personal Writings,* is dedicated to the private part of Edwards' writing. As the title indicates, this volume mainly contains letters to various people (236 letters to be exact) and his personal writings consists of four works namely "Resolutions", "Diary", "On Sarah Pierpont" – his future wife - and "Personal Narrative". None of these were published during his lifetime, neither do the original manuscripts still exist, rather the versions presented in the volume are based on "the work of later editors and copyists" (Claghorn 750). Of these four private works, the "Personal Narrative" has the clearest narrative structure as he turns his life into a story, while both "Resolutions" and the "Diary" are structured as lists the first with entries by number, the second by date. "On Sarah Pierpont" is a brief, half-page tribute to his future wife.

While the "Personal Narrative" is not an autobiography in the sense that it was intentionally (or explicitly) written with the purpose of offering an account of Edwards life, it does contain autobiographical elements. In particular, it mirrors aspects of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a text which is often considered as "the origin of modern Western autobiography" as it marked "a historical beginning" and it set up "a model for other, later texts" (Anderson 17). As George Claghorn notes in his 'Introduction' to the *Personal Writings* (in the Yale edition): "In the same manner as the

Confessions of Augustine . . . Edwards' "Personal Narrative" is a literary reconstruction. Edwards probably did not intend his account to be published, and without knowing what restrictions he put on the distribution of the manuscript, we cannot say whether anyone beyond Edwards' closest acquaintances read it before his death" (748). As for its publication, it was first published in 1765 – seven years after Edwards died – by Samuel Hopkins, a friend, under the title "An Account of His Conversion, Experiences, and Religious Exercises, Given by Himself". Despite the fact that the work remained personal and relatively private until its publication several years after Edwards' death it has since been regarded as a valuable work central to the study of our author. Since its first appearance, it was "frequently reissued during the nineteenth century" (Claghorn 752) and to this very day, it remains "an incomparably rich source for understanding Edwards" (Claghorn 750). Many critics see it as "perhaps the best example of Edwards' artistry, with the exception of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*" (Claghorn 749).

Edwards Studies

The study of Jonathan Edwards and his literary legacy comprises an enormous field and much has been said on his didactic works exploring the concepts and doctrines of the Christian religion as well as on his influential role in early American literature and society. From his own time on, there has been a great interest in Edwards' works and throughout the centuries that followed there have been resurgences of particular interest especially during new moments of revival and awakening, as Edwards is still perceived as a leading figure and authority on such events and on how to interpret them. Within the vast amount of secondary literature on Edwards' works, his "Personal Narrative" remains relatively understudied. It is either mentioned briefly in passing together with other works by Edwards, or as a source of information in biographies on Edwards. Given the abundance of material available on Jonathan Edwards, both in his own writings and the literary criticism on his life and literary legacy, I have opted to focus primarily on the "Personal Narrative"

while taking into account other works of Edwards (*Religious Affections*) as well as drawing in sources on historical and cultural context to enter into critical dialogue with the “Narrative”.

The “Narrative” is in itself a worthy object of further research as its due to its private nature. Though it may have been that Edwards attached the “Narrative” in a letter to his future son-in-law (Claghorn 747), the actual purpose of the text is not explicitly mentioned or stated anywhere. The text, thus, finds itself in a niche of Edwards’ writing consisting of his personal reflections. It is a treasure trove of insight, knowledge and stylistic beauty. Especially when studied through the current lens of Affect Theory and Emotion History, fields that have seen great development and a surge of interest in the past years. The aim of this thesis is to approach the “Narrative” in a new way, bringing to the surface a different way of looking at Edwards and his significance to the topic of emotion in religious literature.

Methodology

In order to explore Edwards’ text critically, I shall perform a close reading of the “Personal Narrative”, operating from the field of Emotion history while drawing on the insights of Affect Theory. Moreover, I shall place these close readings in the context of the culture of American Protestantism in the colonial period.

The field of Emotion History concerns itself with, one might expect, the “history of the emotions” (3) which “can be explored for its own sake—because emotions themselves are intriguing and important—or for what emotions reveal about broader facets of the human experience and social patterns” (Matt and Stearns 5). Within this field, various areas can be “examined from the standpoint of feelings” such as “business, politics, or science, and religion” (3). This thesis shall explore Edwards’ depiction of religious life from the standpoint of feeling, or emotion. In this way, it conforms with other research in the field as “religious historians of the last several decades have cultivated a way of working back and forth between the analysis of individual lives, closely examined, and the broader social worlds in which those lives were lived” (Corrigan 148). In a similar

vein, I shall analyse Edwards' "Personal Narrative" in relation to the cultural context in which it was written. A subfield of Emotion History which shall serve as the point of departure of this thesis, is Religion and Emotion. As John Corrigan notes in *Doing Emotions History* (2014), within this subfield it is important that "we should keep in view the two ends of a spectrum as they have come into focus in the study of religion and emotion: the role of ambiguity and mystery at one end and the importance of clarity and meaning at the other" (Corrigan 157). In concordance with Corrigan's argument that there should be room for mystery and ambiguity in the study of religion and emotions, this thesis shall illuminate how Edwards' in his language relates to these concepts of clarity and mystery.

In the first chapter, I shall refer to the thoughts of Jean-François Vernay as he reflects on the relation between emotion and Literary Criticism in his work *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (2017). First published in France in 2013 as *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en literature*, Palgrave MacMillan have incorporated the volume into their series on Affect Theory, named the *Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism*. In the manifesto, Vernay suggests that there should be an "assimiliation" (xiv) between science and the humanities instead of the dichotomy that has existed for so long. He argues in favour of a "fruitful interimplication of science and the arts" (x) in which there is room "to incorporate scientific findings into the humanities" (xiv). This interplay between science and the arts, when applied to the Literary Studies, is what Vernay has in mind when he talks about the "psycholiterary approach" (viii). This approach "seeks to learn from theories of the psyche and see to what extent the professional reader can incorporate psychological and psychoanalytic models and concepts in his literary analysis" (70). The value of this approach, according to Vernay, is that "theoretically informed readers have everything to gain if they can synthesize the philosophical approach and observations from cognitive science and the humanities" (68).

Vernay acknowledges and applauds the "affective turn" (xi) currently taking place in many fields of academia which opens up "interdisciplinary potentialities of investigating affective and

cognitive sciences in the humanities" (ix). In this view, the cognitive sciences can shed new light on general concepts of cognition, emotion, imagination, and so on, and in that sense also on people's interaction with and response to literature. In another sense, "the study of emotions in fiction will emphasize the notion that writing is an embodied act whose corporeality is now the subject of many academic investigations through a range of buzz themes such as gesture, embodiment, body language, kinesia, just to name a few" (Vernay x). The first chapter shall review Vernay's critique regarding, what he considers as, the current lack of attention for emotion and affect in Literary Criticism.

Terminology

In my discussion of the "Personal Narrative", I shall highlight and explore several key terms that Edwards himself frequently employs. These are terms relating to the emotional sphere, such as *affect*, *affection* and *delight*. These words are still in use today, however, it is important to note that "many words describing or expressing emotions have in fact changed over time, and their superficial familiarity is misleading … such words are faux amis or 'false friends'" (White 33). In my discussion of such terms, I shall be careful to stay in touch with their eighteenth-century meaning and, if applicable, trace how their meaning has changed over time. In general, I shall use the terms 'emotion' and 'feeling' interchangeably.

As for the word "affect" in Edwards' time, R.S. White affirms that "one meaning of the word 'affect' in early modern English referred to the way the body registers feelings through, for example, having butterflies in the stomach for anxiety, feeling the hairs on our head prickling for fear and so on" (White 34). This ties in with the fact that the vocabulary people used to describe their feelings was "more closely tied with physical processes, since they saw body and mind as inextricably linked" (White 33). In this sense, the word affect covers how emotion touches the body, and therefore the self. Edwards uses the term in this sense, as shall be demonstrated more in the second chapter. Similarly, the "word 'affection' "was richly complex, not necessarily positive, covering feelings as

opposed to reason and in this sense probably the closest to our generalized word 'emotions' (whose current sense in English emerged mainly in the eighteenth century)" (White 34). Edwards himself defines his use of the word "affection" in his treatise *Religious Affections*, in ways which I will unravel in the second chapter.

Chapter plan

In order to elucidate the relation between emotion and rationality in Edwards' work, and how that relation appears to destabilise the authority of language, I shall explore in detail three key aspects of this subject. The first chapter focuses on key passages from the "Personal Narrative" that illuminate Edwards' struggle adequately to express his experiences with the Divine. In this discussion, I shall touch upon the critical role of Scripture in Edwards' life, as well as exploring the influence of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, with whose works Edwards was intimately familiar and which he drew upon for his own theology. Finally, I shall explore the affective response to Scripture and literature in general, drawing, for the latter, on the ideas of the critic, Jean-François Vernay who pleads for the incorporation of the affective response into Literary Criticism.

The second chapter deals with the relation between reason and emotion, one which became particularly strained during the events of the Great Awakening. As revivalists promulgated religious displays of emotion, its opponents renounced such displays fervently. Though often seen as a figure of the Awakening, Jonathan Edwards' actual stance mediated between the two extremes. In his treatise *Religious Affections,* he affirms that reason and emotion should harmoniously co-exist within the life of a believer as he argues in favour of the emotional in religion. This shift towards the affective can be seen as part of a wider cultural movement, in relation to which I shall refer to the acclaimed work of Lawrence Stone *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1977). I shall conclude by briefly comparing Edwards' thoughts to those of twentieth-century philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand as they both promote a balance between reason and emotion and make a strong appeal for the redemption of emotion in people's lives.

Finally, the third chapter shall explore the central role of literature within the Great Awakening based on the ideas of Larzer Ziff and Frank Lambert. Both stress the notion that literature, and especially personal writing, is constructed, in the sense that it is artificial. However, they come to different conclusions as to the implications of this constructedness. Ziff proposes that this element of construction and representation is what Edwards' objected to and tried to steer clear from. Lambert, on the other hand, argues that Edwards, together with other leading revivalists, purposely constructed texts to promote the image of the Great Awakening as a unified movement sweeping over the colonies. This is an image that Lambert dissents from as he argues it was in fact, invented. Both Ziff and Lambert reflect on the intricate relation between events (or experiences) and their interpretation in works of literature. In this way, their views tie in with the main theme of this thesis: the fallibility of language in describing experiences with the Divine.

Throughout this thesis I shall refer to and examine various interpretations of the Great Awakening, the most influential one being that of Perry Miller with whose views both Larzer Ziff and Eugene Edmond White, in general, concur. As mentioned, the final chapter shall discuss a dissenting view as proposed by Frank Lambert.

Chapter 1: Conviction, Conversion, and the Paradox in Language

The struggle with the insufficiency of language to adequately describe spiritual experience is present throughout the “Personal Narrative”, especially in the passages devoted to the description of Edwards’ encounters with God. From his early childhood to his maturity Edwards experiences several intense moments of connection with the Divine. These moments are highly charged with emotion and feeling, and those feelings are repeatedly expressed or linked to the body. I shall investigate several of these key emotional moments that most aptly convey Edwards’ paradoxical relation to language. The first such moment occurs in his childhood, the second and third encounters occur at a later stage in his life. All are essential moments in his conversion.

Childhood Experience

Edwards opens his “Personal Narrative” with an account of how he experienced religion in his childhood and early adult life. When he was about nine years old he experienced a season of “awakening” (790) about which he says he was “very much affected for many months” leading him to pray at least “five times a day” and to “abound in religious duties” (790). This happened during a “time of remarkable awakening in my father’s congregation” (790); later, in his own life, Edwards himself would become the leader of similar awakenings in his own congregation. I shall examine his strong interest in ‘awakening’ in more detail later. For now, it is important to note the first occurrence of the word “affected” (790) in the “Narrative” comes here. “Affected" acts as a key word in the “Narrative” as a whole and in Edwards’ doctrines on the nature of religion, as shall also be investigated later in this chapter. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the following definition for “affect” in its eighteenth-century context: “To have an effect on the mind or feelings of (a person); to impress or influence emotionally; to move, touch” (OED, affect). This state of being ‘affected’ expresses itself, apart from a dedication to prayer and an abundance in religious activities,

in feelings of "delight"; as he declares, "I experienced I know not what kind of delight in religion" (790). Immediately, from this first experience with the spiritual, Edwards is faced with the challenge of conveying states of mind or body or being to the reader that language and reason cannot necessarily describe. He uses the vague, if resonant, word "delight" to express what he is feeling, touching on "pleasure, joy, or gratification felt in a high degree" (*OED*). These joyful emotions move him to busy himself with religious activities. However, as he indicates by his acknowledgement that "I know not what kind of delight", he cannot quite define or explain what exactly it is that he is experiencing. His language here reveals a sense of the ungraspable, gesturing towards the fact that his feelings are beyond language, they are stronger and bigger than can be adequately put into words.

Despite the strong feelings during this period of awakening, he reflects that though the affections and that particular "kind of delight" (790) that he felt at the time were real, they were not of the sort that can act as proof of grace or as proof of true conversion. He reflects that "My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved" (791), suggesting a certain immaturity. That first enthusiasm (in our modern sense of the word) and zeal did not remain, after a while his "convictions and affections wore off" (791) and eventually he lost them altogether (791). Edwards shows a sceptical attitude towards his early emotions here. In this same vein, in his treatise *Religious Affections*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, he theorizes upon the nature of emotions and affections, aiming to separate which emotions are spiritually sound and which are not. The main conclusion is that the validity or spirituality of emotions can be judged by the fruit it produces and that "The right way, is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all; but to distinguish between affections, approving some, and rejecting others" (Edwards, "Affections" 121). During his time at college, he still has experiences with God but overall, his relation to God is characterized by "inward struggles and conflicts" (791). It is not until an unspecified later time that this struggle comes to an end by an experience that Edwards refers to as "that change" (790).

Conviction

A profound change occurs in Edwards' spiritual life which now revolves around "the doctrine of God's sovereignty" (791). This entails a belief in God as "choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased" (792), a central tenet to Puritan belief. Initially, for most of his childhood and young adult life, he says "It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me" (792) and he was "full of objections against the doctrine" (791-92). It appeared cruel to him that God would pick and choose the Elect according to his own pleasure, thereby leaving the others "eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell" (792). His objections against the doctrine were strong, to say the least, however, a remarkable thing happens as Edwards recounts: "But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure" (792). He refers to this as his "first conviction" (792) and it manifests a complete reversal of his previous stance regarding the doctrine. He shifts from vehemently objecting to such cruelty, to accepting it and being 'fully satisfied' as to its justness. He moves beyond his earlier anxiety and criticism towards God and is instead convinced of that which he initially opposed. At first glance, this seems self-contradictory. Especially since for such a dramatic change, Edwards remains quite vague on the specifics, happy to accept the self-contradiction. After stating that he is now convinced of the doctrine he continues: "But never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced" (792). In other words, Edwards himself is mystified as to the exact workings that brought about this remarkable change. Clearly, in his view, human reason fails fully to grasp what has happened here. It is not a change that he can explain logically. He does not know "how" or "by what means" he was convinced, which implies that it was not a change wrought by his own doing, at least not by a conscious, deliberate act on his part, as that would more likely mean he would know how the change happened. Despite mentioning that he "remembers the time very well" when the change occurred, he does not specify the actual time (as in month or year). Neither does he specify whether

it was a sudden alteration or a gradual process. Nor does he detail whether it was predominantly through a rational process or a feeling, or something else.

The following part of the sentence sheds some light on the event, as after he says how he "never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was thus convinced" he continues: "not in the least imagining, in the time of it, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it" (792). Though he did not realise at the time, as he looks back, he interprets the change as being influenced, if not instigated, by the Holy Spirit. The meaning follows the moment and lives as something to be understood later. At the time, he did not recognize it as God's doing though he was aware that he now "saw further" (792) than he had before. He concludes: "there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, with respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty" (792). It is important to note that he does use the word "mind" here, but as shall be discussed later Edwards does not equate the notion of the "mind" just to the faculty of reason. He interprets it as a spiritual change, an alteration that transcends earthly reality. This would explain why he cannot give a detailed account of it: human reason and logic simply does not suffice to give a detailed account of this spiritual awakening.

Despite the mystery concerning how the change took place, Edwards is very clear on its effects. He finds that his "mind rested in it", and all the "cavils and objections" (792) that he had up to that point are silenced. It is a dramatic change, affecting his life greatly. The struggle that had accompanied him through "all the preceding part" (792) of his life ceases to trouble him, it was silenced, shut down. Thus, the change has a profound impact on his general well-being and emotional life. Instead of the constant struggle and conflict he experienced as a student, he now feels more at peace. From this place of assurance and rest, he is able to experience joyful emotions regarding religion once again.

Delightful Conviction

Since this first alteration, he has had another conviction, one that affects his life even more profoundly and, as he mentions in his first paragraph, “by which I was brought to those new dispositions, and that new sense of things, that I have since had” (790). He describes this second conviction as follows: “I have oftentimes since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty, than I had then”, namely not merely a “conviction, but a *delightful* conviction” (792 emphasis in original text). This ‘delightful conviction’ caused him to view the doctrine not only as true and just, but, moreover, as “exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet” (792). What was at first a calm assurance, the acceptance of a spiritual truth (Hebrews 11:1), expands into something greater, something beyond that – a state of delight. For the first time since the season of awakening (as Edwards himself refers to it) in his childhood, he experiences delight again. Though, this time, it is of a slightly different nature as when he was a child since the foundation for this delight is more evolved and mature. This “*delightful* conviction” and this accompanying new “sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things” (792) occurs for the first time while he is reading a particular verse in the Bible. Before turning to this passage from the “Personal Narrative” it is helpful to first consider the place of Scripture within Puritanism in general and in Edwards’ life specifically.

The Authority of Scripture

Essential for a proper interpretation of Jonathan Edwards’ writings is an understanding of how he perceived the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. Already during his own lifetime, Edwards had the reputation of being “an avid student of the Bible” (Stein 29). It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the Bible in Edwards’ life; it formed the cornerstone of his beliefs, the foundation of his faith. Consequently, as Conrad Cherry has shown, the Word played a “critical role … in much of Edwards’ writing as a primary form of proof and evidence” (Stein 32 or 33). For Edwards, “the biblical canon was a coherent and ordered source of beneficial knowledge and historical truth as well as a revelation of God’s plan of salvation” (Stein 5). For Edwards, Scripture acts as a fount of

knowledge, a document of historical truth as well as a treasured vessel containing the promise of salvation, the revelation of God's glorious work of redemption through Jesus Christ. As one of Edwards' many roles – amongst which are that of theologian, preacher, writer – he was also a biblical exegete whose task it is, "According to commentarial tradition … to interpret sacred texts and to identify and reconcile conflicting elements within the canon" (Stein 6). This is an early instance of the centrality of the critic in American culture, as Edwards creates these commentaries to illuminate the Bible for other readers. For Edwards there was no doubt as to the legitimacy of the biblical canon, he accepted it as a closed case with no room for alteration (Stein 5). As an exegete, "His core beliefs … included a supernaturalism that affirmed a God revealed through sacred texts and a three-story universe inhabited by humans and spirits, both good and evil" (Stein 5). As will be demonstrated later, the belief in the supernatural proves essential to Edwards' Christianity. In his exegesis of Scripture, Edwards "recognized that interpreters, himself included, could err" and therefore, he "refused to conflate or confuse his commentary with canon", a crucial stance "affirming the Protestant principle that Scripture alone is the authoritative source of Christian teaching" (Stein 6). This idea that Scripture is the "authoritative source" of Christian teaching is of key importance. It means that the Bible is the only absolute authority in Protestant, and Puritan belief: it is the true and absolute Word of God.

While for Edwards, Scripture in itself is 'the truth' and the authoritative word of God, the challenge lies in how then he (and we) should respond to it, since its univalent truth nonetheless calls up various, differing interpretations. According to Puritan belief, one needs help in order to obtain a proper understanding and interpretation of this divinely inspired Word. Help which they believed was made available to them in the form of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity. Larzer Ziff aptly describes the role of the partnership between the Word and the Spirit:

> At the root of the American Puritan tradition was the belief that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer took precedence over laws, that the divine influence was experienced

> as a flow rather than through forms. The presence of the Word was a necessary precondition for the efficacy of words; the Holy Spirit had written the Bible and only those who had that Spirit knew how to read the Bible. (Ziff, *Writing* 14)

It is through this 'divine influence' of the Holy Spirit, received by the grace of God, that the Bible is illuminated to the reader or listener, opening one's spiritual eyes to a new (supernatural) realm of vision: "When the consciousness is awakened by grace it sees that world in a new light, as if one previously blind to color now saw all its hues" (Ziff, *Writing* 16). The world stays the same, it is the perception of the world that changes. The same process applies to the interpretation of Scripture: one can read the Bible and yet not fully understand or grasp its meaning because one does not have the Spirit. However, when one receives the help and influence of the Spirit it opens up a whole new realm of meaning to Scripture and of its effects on the reader. This is the process that Edwards experienced and which lead to his "*delightful* conviction" (792). He recounts:

> The first that I remember that ever I found anything of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, 1 Timothy 1:17, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen." As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a *new sense*, quite different from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. (792 emphases added)

This passage reveals the centrality of the Word in Edwards' life, as previously discussed, and it exemplifies the necessity of the Spirit in illuminating the truth of the Word to the believer.

The language in this passage points once again to the difficulty of expressing spiritual revelation in language. Edwards affirms that while he reads these verses "there came into my soul,

and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a *new sense*, quite different from anything I ever experienced before" (792). He attempts here to frame the particular sensations he felt into words without being able to do so completely: he describes how "a sense of the glory" of God comes into his soul and "was as it were diffused through it". The casual vagueness of that "as it were" is crucial. We should also note especially his choice of the word 'diffused', evoking the idea of light being filtered and scattered softly in all directions. It elicits a feeling of softness, this is not a flash of lightning piercing his soul, rather it is like the first rays of sunshine in the early morning scattering over leaves of grass by the morning mist. Throughout the text he searches for the right words, style adapting itself to wonder, finding the most fitting phrases to intimate his experience to the reader. In this search, he often employs metaphorical language relating to light and to nature in general.

As for the experience itself, it acts as a dramatic turning-point in Edwards' life. Scripture was familiar to him and he would have very likely read the book of 1 Timothy before, perhaps several times. However, as he reads it on this occasion, something dramatically changes. This time as he is reading this Scripture he experiences 'a new sense', unlike anything he has ever felt before. Furthermore, he recognises that never before did a verse of Scripture seem to him 'as these words did', not in all his years of reading and studying the Bible. Never before has the Word had this particular effect on him; it is as though he encounters something completely new. This is a powerful, life-altering moment for Edwards which centres around the experience of this new dimension of the spiritual in his life – the 'new sense'.

According to Michael McClymond, the concept of the 'new sense' is a "crucial yet elusive feature in Edwards' thought" (408). With this concept Edwards "uses the language of the senses to capture something that transcends the senses" (408), as the 'new sense' he describes is not in its essence a physical one (though tightly linked to it, see ch.2). Language itself can suddenly open into a new understanding of its meanings. The elusiveness of the 'new sense' lies partly in the fact that Edwards acknowledged the difficulty of describing it to someone who has not experienced it for

themselves (McClymond 409). It is something that can only be properly understood once experienced. However, Edwards' descriptions of it do provide clues as to its nature. It is a "response to God's own incomparable beauty" which results in "spiritual delight" as "No one could see God's beauty without feeling delight" (409). McClymond, in his view of the 'new sense', navigates between different interpretations of the concept in scholarly debate. He sides with Perry Miller in the notion that "the experience of conversion is foundational to Edwards's religious epistemology" (409). It is conversion that enables "Believers … to perceive a holiness or beauty in God that is invisible to nonbelievers" (409). This perception of God's beauty is accompanied by a new appreciation of "the beauties of the natural world" (409) In addition, McClymond concurs with other scholars, such as Paul Helm, who pose that the conversion as "the mental breakthrough of grace, or 'divine light', operates *in and through* the natural sense faculties" (409). In this view, the 'new sense' is not just "an epistemological quirk, detached from the rest of human life" (409). Rather, it is very much a physical, bodily experience. In it, the spiritual meets the physical. Believers undergo "regeneration" through conversion and "this one experience unlocks the meaning of all human experience and sheds light on all of life" (409). The eyes of the believer open to new dimensions of being, new dimensions of understanding and living life. McClymond concludes that Edwards' concept of the 'new sense' is thus "a creative synthesis of Puritan and Enlightenment ideas, melding the discontinuities of grace with the continuities of human nature" (409-410).

The Influence of John Locke

To articulate this melding of the spirit and the body, and the multivalency of language, Edwards consciously drew on the philosophy of John Locke. As McClymond notes, Edwards' himself compared the 'new sense' to Locke's notion of "simple ideas" (409). This indebtedness to Locke need not surprise us as his philosophy exerted a profound influence on Edwards (as on many others at that time). He read Locke at an early age, probably when he was around fourteen, and he devoured the book; rejoicing in it more "than the most greedy miser finds, when gathering up

handfuls of silver and gold, from some newly discovered treasure" (Miller 175). Before exploring to what extent Edwards engaged with this 'newly discovered treasure', it is necessary first to briefly discuss Locke's philosophy itself.

In 1690, British philosopher John Locke published his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He devotes the third book of this treatise to an exploration of the nature of language. The work proved of great influence as "For two or three generations after 1690 practically all theorizing upon language attempted by English or colonial American writers, and much of that on the Continent, was a reworking or reinterpretation of Locke" (Miller, *Errand* 168). As Perry Miller explains in *Errand Into the Wilderness*: "The essence of Locke's theory is that language, like government, is artificial; it rests upon contract, and neither vocabulary nor syntax have any inherent or organic rationale" (169). Locke states that words are "the *signs* of their *ideas*" (132). Words in themselves "*in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*" (Locke 132 emphasis in original). This means that "words are *separable* from things" (Miller, *Errand* 169) and it is the things and their ideas that matter, not the words themselves.

Another central tenet in Locke's theory is his distinction between "simple" and "complex ideas" (Miller, *Errand* 172). Simple ideas are "the basic components of thought" (171), "the hard pellets of sensation … out of which complex ideas are built … [they] can be given a name only by those who have first had the sensation" (Miller, *Errand* 172). In other words, it is the experience of something that evokes the idea of it in us and then a word – language – is attached to the idea later. The focus is on experience, on the impression things make on the senses: "The primary alphabet of thought simply cannot be taken from words; words can only be attached subsequently, by public agreement, to indubitable shocks of sense" (Miller, *Errand* 172). An often-quoted illustration of this theory is Locke's own example that one cannot truly know what a pineapple is, what the idea of it is, how delicious it is, without having tasted it, without having experienced it (Miller, *Errand* 172). One

might object to this strict order of idea-evokes-word and question whether it is also possible for the word to come first and evoke an experience. Locke's answer to this objection is as follows:

> … *there comes by constant use* to be *such a connection between certain sounds*, *and the* ideas *they stand for*, that the names heard, almost as readily excite certain ideas, as if the objects themselves, which are apt to produce them, did actually affect the senses. (Locke 135)

In other words, because of "constant use" a certain familiarity is established between the words and their ideas. In this case, the utterance of a word can evoke the sensory experience. However, initially, it is the idea and the experience that need to be engrained in a person before this seemingly reversed order can be produced. This relates to the idea of the "new sense", how suddenly as in poetry) another meaning of the word flashes through – and that constant use breaks up – the language inspiredly defamiliarised.

As for the complex ideas, then, they are "mechanical compositions of the simples" (Miller, *Errand* 173) which can always be broken down again and "resolved back into their components" (Miller, *Errand* 173). In a visual representation, one might think of Lego blocks, the individual blocks are the simple ideas and structures built out of them are the complex ideas. Thus, the names given to complex ideas are "only human constructions for social ends" (174) and they "do not need to correspond to real conjunctions of simple ideas in nature" (173). More could be said on this "sensational psychology" (174) (sensational here meaning 'through the senses') and its influence on ideas about language by contemporary and later scholars, however, for the purpose of this thesis it is essential to return to Jonathan Edwards and examine how he engaged with the material presented by Locke and how he responded to Locke's "doctrine of sensational rhetoric" (175). Locke's main point on the topic of language is thus, that language is artificial. Words are in this sense not intrinsic or determining, it is the experience, the sensation of things that matters.

There is a correlation between Edwards' inconclusiveness as to an exact definition of the 'new sense' and Locke's theory that language is "arbitrary" and a "social convention" (Miller, *Errand*

171). For both of them, experience is more relevant and of greater importance than the words attached to such an experience. Arguably, Edwards, with his adherence to Locke's ideas, did not strive for a fixed definition of the 'new sense' but rather attempted to convey the experience itself, the sense itself. He did so to the best of his ability, as he was fully aware of the limits of language impeding his endeavor. It is through the constant re-writing, revising and expanding of his phrases and sentences that the reader is invited to join Edwards in his quest to entrust his spiritual and highly emotional episodes to paper.

Edwards and Locke

According to Miller, "Edwards became a revolutionary artist in the midst of the eighteenth century because he took with painful seriousness Locke's theory that words are separable from all reality, natural or spiritual, and in themselves are only noises" (*Errand*, 177). Edwards, thus, took Locke's philosophy fully to heart and stressed the importance of experience over the arbitrariness of words. He concurred with Locke in the belief that words are mere "artificial signs" and "substitutes for reality" (*Errand*, 178). Though Edwards "remained a true Lockean, in that he persisted in taking abstract ideas for realities", instead of taking words for realities, he diverged from Locke in his redefinition of the term "idea" (Miller, *Errand* 180). As Miller explains:

> Edwards's great discovery, his dramatic refashioning of the theory of sensational rhetoric, was his assertion that an idea in the mind is not only a form of perception but is also a determination of love and hate … to apprehend them [things] by their ideas is to comprehend them not only intellectually but passionately. For Edwards, in short, an idea became not merely a concept but an emotion. (Miller, *Errand* 179)

With this refashioning, "Edwards went beyond Locke … He reached into a wholly other segment of psychology, the realm of the passions, and linked the word not only with the idea but also with that

from which Locke had striven to separate it, with the emotions" (Miller, Errand 179). Two main points arise here. The first is that Edwards redefines Locke's concept of 'idea' to involve the emotional, in addition to the rational, for him "an idea is a unit of experience, and experience is as much love and dread as it is logic" (181). Second, in doing so, Edwards draws Locke's theory into the realm of the emotional, from which Locke had extricated it. The preeminent position of experience through the senses was "Locke's major contribution to the Enlightenment, his weapon against enthusiasm" (172). In fact, many church leaders accepted "Locke with a sigh of relief, in the confidence, that life could now become genial, enthusiasm unfashionable, and Christianity reasonable" (175) because by Locke's theory language was "brought under control" (175). Locke, in fact, adds a chapter "On Faith and Reason" to his *Essay*. Here he proffers a "polemic against the religious enthusiasts of his day" (Jolley 437) and a "critique of religious enthusiasm" (Jolley 446). Locke opposed 'enthusiasm' as his theory is, in true empiricist fashion, inherently logical and focused on the rational. It is based on the presumption that as you experience the world, you receive information through the senses and then this impresses an idea (a concept) in your mind. Simple ideas are basically a shape, a colour, a texture, a smell, and combined these lead to a complex idea (a horse, a book, etc.). The information is gathered via the senses and from there it is logically processed to form an idea. The focus is on logic, empiricism, perception, and the rational. Indirectly, this means people will not get inflamed by emotions because we live by perception, by ideas, and we can always understand complex ideas by taking them apart. The process of experience is, in this sense, always logical.

For Edwards, on the other hand, "a word can act as an emotional stimulus … because, having consolidated the mind with the passions, … an emotional response is also an intellectual, or that an intellectual, in the highest sense, is also emotional" (181). In this sense "the purport of a symbol can be appreciated not only by the human head but more accurately by the human heart" (181). In fact, "by the word (used in the place of a thing) an idea can be engendered in the mind, and that when the word is apprehended emotionally as well as intellectually, then the idea can be more readily and

more accurately conceived" (181). Emotions, in this way, aid the understanding of words and their respective ideas, they can be understood more easily and fully when one employs both their rational and emotional faculties.

Locke's Influence on Edwards' Preaching

His adherence to Locke's philosophy influenced Edwards' manner of preaching. As Edwards became pastor of the congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, he was filled with ideas from Newton, who "had impressed upon him the inviolable connection of cause and effect" (Miller, *Errand* 175), and Locke. Regarding his preaching, Edwards maintains that "physicality was more vitally attached to a sense of evil of sin and the love of God than were the decorous explications of redemption that prevailed in the churches of the colonies' leaders" (Ziff 4). At the core of his teaching was the belief that: "Our people don't so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched; and they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching that has the greatest tendency to do this" (Edwards, "Some Thoughts" 388). Imbued with Locke's ideas, Edwards places emphasis on the importance of experiencing the Divine instead of merely passively listening to sermons on doctrine.

Apart from the emphasis on experience, Locke's influence also extended itself to Edwards' preferences in his use of language. Even before he became a pastor, he made a "commitment" to endeavour for the rest of his life "to extricate all questions from the least confusion or ambiguity of words, so that the ideas shall be left naked" (Dwight 702). This commitment proves crucial to his style of preaching, as the central driving force behind his sermons was his conviction that "the nakedness of the idea" (Miller, *Edwards* 161) would be the most powerful tool in language. He spoke in such a manner that would provide his words with the most force making them like sharp arrows that would pierce through to a person's very core. In this way, he endeavoured that his words, would, with God's divine touch, profoundly move, touch, and "rouse" people from their "lethal slumber" (Ryrie 288). His language is simple, as opposed to lofty and complex; it is consciously "bare" and contrives to be void of ambiguity and vague, intricate secrecy. In order to achieve this

sparseness, constructing his sermons was, for Edwards, “a consuming effort to make sounds become objects, to control and discipline his utterance so that words would immediately be registered on the senses not as noises but as ideas” (Miller, *Edwards* 158) and in this way Edwards was “forcing words so to function in the chain of natural causes that out of the shock upon the senses would come apprehension of the idea. Only then could the meaning of meanings be carried to the heart of listeners” (158). In Miller’s words, “the meaning of Edwards comes down to the mastery of the word, of the word transformed from a counter in scholastic demonstration to a bare and brutal engine against the brain” (*Errand* 167). His preaching was, thus, in a Lockean technical sense “truly ‘sensational’” (Miller, *Edwards* 158) and it “wrought an overwhelming effect by extraordinary simplicity” (Miller, *Edwards* 158). In short, influenced by Locke’s philosophy and building on its structures, Edwards “committed himself to administering the kind of shock that would transform the recipient by psychological processes, into the kind of person who would absorb the shock in only one way” (Miller, *Edwards* 158). His preaching makes an appeal to the senses to elicit a strong response that was both intellectual as it was emotional.

There is a striking paradox at work here, in which Edwards both adheres to Locke’s notion of the empty, arbitrary, and provisional nature of language, while it is through his particularly eloquent use of language that he strives to reach the hearts of his listeners. Language is a flawed medium, yet still operates as the element to move and impress people’s hearts.

Affective Response to Scripture and Literature in General

As Edwards in his sermons uses language as a key to the heart of his recipients, similarly, in his own life, it is the language of Scripture (as revealed by the Spirit) that is the key to his own heart. Returning to Edwards’ description of his ‘delightful’ conviction and the ‘new sense’ that now fills him, after stating that “never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did” he continues: “I thought with myself, how *excellent* a Being that was; and how *happy* I should be, if I might *enjoy* that God, and be *wrapt up* to God in heaven, and be as it were *swallowed up* in him”

(792 emphases added). He employs strong, affective language here, in which he expresses the desire and longings of his heart at this occasion. This affective response sheds light on the concept of the "new sense".

In the passage, the various components that make up a person's 'being' are presented as intertwined. Edwards "thought" grasps at the excellence of God, and in these thoughts, he longs for intimacy with God. He imagines what he will feel if his desires are fulfilled, pondering how "happy" he would be to "enjoy" God. At this point, it proves necessary to consider once again how words relating to emotion often change in meaning over time. The meaning of 'happiness', in this case, denoted in Edwards' time more a state of luck and chance than a goal to be pursued, as in its modern usage (White 33). However, even if read in its contemporary sense of 'fortunate', in the context of the passage it still refers to the emotional and to feelings of joy and delight. The word 'enjoy' is still quite similar in its use today as it denotes "pleasure", "joy" and is defined as "to possess, use, or experience with delight. Also with reference to the feeling only: To take delight in, relish" (*OED*).

The depth of his emotions is evident from the wish he expresses to be "wrapt up to God" and to be "swallowed up in him". He is so overwhelmed by the excellence and beauty of this Divine Being that the ultimate joy and happiness for him would be to be completely enveloped into it, to have God consume him, to become one with him. He conveys a very intense desire resembling feelings of being in love; desiring to be with this other person above anything else, to have them be all and have complete unity as the ultimate goal. Edwards, however, takes it a step further, he does not just want to become one with God, he wants to completely disappear into him. That would bring him the greatest delight. He continues:

> I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to prayer, to pray to God that I might *enjoy* him; and prayed in a manner quite *different* from what I used to do; with *a new sort of affection*. (792 emphases added)

The impact, the effect, of these words from 1 Timothy is so profound that he keeps repeating them to himself, chanting them as it were, keeping them at the forefront of his mind. He even mentions in his speech he turns to "singing" the words "as it were" (792). Though he expresses himself somewhat uncertainly here, it is, in fact, the first instance of a practice he refers to repeatedly throughout the "Narrative". He remarks: "it was always my manner, at such times, to sing forth my contemplations" (page) and "it always seemed natural to me, to sing or chant forth my meditations; to speak my thoughts in soliloquies, and speak with a singing voice" (page). As he repeats and mulls over these words continually, he is also led to pray. His previously mentioned desire now expresses itself in prayer, as he prays that he "might enjoy" (792) God. He also reiterates the change that has happened in his religious life. He stresses how his manner of prayer is "quite different from what I used to do" (793). Thus, not only has his way of engaging with Scripture changed but also the manner in which he prays. This one decisive moment, in which he experiences a new "inward, sweet delight" (792) has far-reaching ramifications in how he relates to the Bible and to God Himself. Finally, he elaborates on this new way of praying by stating that he now prays with "a new sort of affection" (793). The fundamental element in his conversion is the introduction of true religious affection in his life. His experience with the Divine before the change was void of true religious emotion. Emotion that moves, changes, and opens one's eyes. In conclusion, the words of this biblical verse have become more than knowledge in his mind, they have become imbued with revelation and emotion. They have touched his heart.

Looking at this from a different angle, the process at work here potently resembles that of a reader (Edwards) having an affective response to a text (Scripture). He incorporates the text into the 'self' and it changes him profoundly. Similarly, readers today can be moved in turn by reading Edwards' "Personal Narrative". Despite the uncertainty concerning whether Edwards intended to publish his text, it undoubtedly still possesses an affective quality, inviting us to be moved. It would be in line with Edwards' other works – his sermons, treatises – to write in a manner that is designed to stir and affect his readers. Edwards talks about the emotional impact a text can have, which is

inherent to literature: it enlivens and touches readers, evoking emotion. It can even affect a reader to such an extent that they incorporate the text into the self, that they make it part of who they are, of what they believe. However, despite this prominent quality of literature, it is rarely taken into account within the field of Literary Criticism. Jean-François Vernay reflects on this reluctance in his manifesto, *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* (2017). As his main point, Vernay pleads for "the crucial role emotions play when reading fiction" (Vernay ix) and that emotion – both in the text itself and in writer and reader – should be taken into account in the study and interpretation of literature. He bases this on the belief that "emotions engendered in us by literature can give our real world more sense" (Vernay 39). In general, Vernay persuasively reflects on how readers can be impacted by a text and how there should be room for an emotional response in the act of reading as well as in Literary Criticism.

In the first few chapters, Vernay focuses on the role of the reader and especially on that of the "professional" (Vernay 2) reader amongst which are literary critics. He aims "to reconcile professional readers, attentive to the various narrative techniques, and non-professional readers, who abandon themselves more readily to the pleasure of the text" (Vernay 63). To achieve this reconciliation, Vernay argues that professional readers should be encouraged to express their love of literature and their feelings in response to a text by, for example, writing reviews in the first person (Vernay 11). According to Vernay, seduction is or should be, at the heart of reading fiction as "the relationship of individuals to literature implies an underlying seductive enterprise between writer and reader" (Vernay 23-24). It is due to the centrality of this "literary seduction" (Vernay 27) that makes it "fruitful to bring a psychoanalytic approach to bear on reading literature" (Vernay 23). It is necessary to add a note of caution here, as Vernay's language of pleasure and seduction is, in a world of 'MeToo', potentially a troubling one. However, the essential goal of his approach remains of interest as he seeks to reconcile "the professional reader with the non-professional, literature with the sciences, [and] reason with emotions" (Vernay 79) as well as "the impact of reception and its expression" (Vernay 66). In this sense, he pleads for an integration of emotion into Literary

Criticism. In his opinion: “We must with good reason put an end to this literary culture in which literary erudition obscures feelings and the pleasure of reading” (Vernay 79).

Chapter 2: The Relation Between Reason and Emotion and the Move Towards the Affective

This chapter shall examine the relation between reason and emotion in (the description of) spiritual experience in the wider historical context of American eighteenth-century culture. First, I shall discuss the polemical division created by the Great Awakening and Edwards' response to it. In his response Edwards' details the meaning of the word *affection* and how it relates to soul and body. Second, I shall argue that the embrace of the emotional, as propagated by Edwards, fits within a more general move occurring within contemporary culture. Finally, I shall bring in ideas and terminology used by twentieth-century philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand that elucidate the views of Jonathan Edwards on how emotion relates to reason.

The Great Awakening: Emotion vs. Reason

According to Eugene White, there was a "precarious balance … between reason and emotion" established by the "founding Puritans" which was "disrupted by the Great Awakening" (E. White xi). He speaks of a "confrontation between the rationalists and the revivalists [that] split the society" (E. White xi). The events "divided society into two camps" (E. White 6) with the revivalists embracing the upsurge of emotion while its opponents distrusted the "emotionalism of revivalist religion" (Ryrie and Schwanda 5) and remained "adherents of reason" (E. White 6). The opposition, or "antirevivalists", believed that "both revealed and natural religion are rational in character, the emotions have no substantive role in religion" (E. White xiii). The revivalists, on the other hand, "endorsed the emotional involvement of the entire man in religious matters" (E. White xiii). The clash between these two groups was acute and resulted in a battle that was in large part fought out via verbal attacks in pamphlets and other texts, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note that initially, as seen through the eyes of the revivalists, the Great Awakening brought "the triumph of emotion over reason" (6). Around April 1741 "the

revivalists were in dominion, the revolution against conservative rationalism in religion was approaching its peak in intensity, and the opposition was muted" (E. White xii). However, about a year later the "emotional excesses had brought the Great Awakening into disrepute among the conservatives" (E. White xii). In the context of conflict, Edwards decided to respond.

Edwards on Affection (*Religious Affections*)

Around the end of 1742 and at the beginning of 1743, Edwards presented "a series of sermons defending and explaining the role of emotion in religion" which were published several years later under the title *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Before turning to a closer inspection of the *Treatise*, it is essential first to unravel what Edwards meant in his use of the word *affection*. In *Religious Affections* he defines the term as follows: "the affections are no other, than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul" (Edwards, "Affections" 96). White adds a footnote to this, remarking that by "sensible" Edwards means "through the senses" (E. White 155). The affections are, in other words, the more dynamic effects felt in the soul as a response to sensory impressions. As Edwards states: "the affections of men are the springs of the motion" (Edwards, "Affections" 101). They imply movement as they both cover the response to sensory experience as well as that which "set men a going, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits" (Edwards, "Affections" 101). As examples of affections Edwards names the following: "love or hatred, desire, hope, fear … anger, zeal and affectionate desire" (101) and "joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion" ("Affections" 102) as well as "religious *sorrow*, *mourning*, and *brokenness of heart*" (Edwards, "Affections" 105). The affections, then, include both joyful and painful emotions while the "vigorous" and dynamic quality always remains at the centre.

After giving this definition Edwards attempts to explain in greater detail how the inclination, will, and soul are interconnected in these affections. However, in his attempt to neatly define the relations between these elements, he confesses that "language is here somewhat imperfect, and the

meaning of words in a considerable measure loose and unfixed, and not precisely limited by custom, which governs the use of language" (Edwards, "Affections" 97). In other words, Edwards indicates that it is challenging – even for him – properly to define or explain the precise nature of affections and how they work, where they are located, how they relate to other elements pertaining to what it means to be human. In his "Personal Narrative" he regularly refers to a similar phenomenon, that words or language in general fall short in explaining the affections he experiences, a recurrent phrase in the "Narrative" being "I know not how to express".

Returning to the *Treatise* and the context in which it was published, it was Edwards' response to the critique of the revival's opponents regarding the "new emphasis on emotion" (E. White xii) in religion. The first sermon in this series is called "Concerning the Nature of the Affections, and Their Importance in Religion" and centres around "explaining the role of emotion in religion and cautioning against excesses" (E. White 119). It is seemingly directed at an audience of Edwards' followers, so not directly addressed to his opponents, and while the overall tone is "expository", its style is "affectingly directed to the senses, and the implicit thrust is evocative" (E. White 119), (a characteristic style for many of Edwards' writings). The series as a whole reveals "Edwards's mature position concerning the relation of the emotions to religion" (E. White 119) which he argues, in short, are "the substance of religion" (E. White 119). In fact, Edwards makes the strong claim that "religion consists so much in affection, as that without holy affection there is no true religion" (Edwards, "Affections" 119). This is the doctrine he proposes at the beginning of the text, the doctrine that "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections" (Edwards, "Affections" 95). A bit further on in the text he reiterates this claim yet adds: "For although to true religion, there must indeed be something else besides affection; yet true religion consists so much in the affections, that there can be no true religion without them" (Edwards, "Affections" 120). For Edwards, religious emotion is central to "true religion". However, in this view, he does not dismiss reason as White explains that "By their nature, saving affections are reasonable and rational" (E. White 119). As his opponents accused him of forsaking reason for the glorification of emotion, it was of "central

significance to his confrontations with the antirevivalists, [that] Edwards called for the involvement, the engagement, of the reason as an integral part of the whole man's experiencing of religion" (E. White 119). As Michael McClymond notes: "In defending religious affections, and suggesting that even intense emotions and bodily manifestations could play a role in true religion, Edwards confronted and challenged a contemporary prejudice against enthusiasm" (413). In challenging this prejudice, Edwards argued for both reason and emotion as integral parts of religious experience. Edwards defended the role of emotion by arguing in *Religious Affections* that while reason should by no means be left by the wayside, "emotion is the substance of religion and that man cannot respond to God through the agency of a dispassionate objective intellect. The entire man must become involved – spontaneously and completely" (E. White xii).

Edwards on Affections and the Body

This concept of 'the entire man' for Edwards covered all aspects of what it means to be human – heart, mind, soul – and certainly drawing in the body. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards tries to define the place of the body regarding the affections. His argument, though clear at first, becomes slightly muddled as it progresses. In Edwards' description of the nature of religious affections, he starts with the claim that: "there never is in any case whatsoever, any lively and vigorous exercise of the will or inclination of the soul, without some effect upon the body" (Edwards, "Affections" 98). In other words, all religious affections have an effect on the body, and the body is involved in every affection. The foundation for this belief is: "the laws of the union which the creator has fixed between soul and body" (Edwards, "Affections" 96). This is quite a strong and clear claim. There is a unity – a connection – between body and soul and this connection is so intimate that movement in the soul will always create movement in the body as well. He continues by saying that because of this law of unity, not only do the affections influence the body, in a similar way the body can influence the affections: "from the same laws of the union of soul and body, the constitution of the

body, and the motion of its fluids, may promote the exercise of the affections" (Edwards, "Affections" 98). Thus, within the union between soul and body both affect and influence the other.

However, Edwards then adds: "but yet, it is not the body, but the mind only, that is the proper seat of the affections" (98). It is the mind, or the soul, that is essential to affections, not the body. He clarifies this by saying;

> Nor are these motions of the animal spirits, and fluids of the body, anything properly belonging to the nature of the affections; though they always accompany them, in the present state; but are only effects or concomitants of the affections, that are entirely distinct from the affections themselves, and no way essential to them … (Edwards, "Affections" 98)

In other words, the physical sensations one feels when affected are "only effects" of the affections, they are not "the affections themselves". He reiterates this later in the treatise by saying that what is felt and experienced in the body is not the "essence" of the affections "but the effect of them" (Edwards, "Affections" 113). After first stressing the unity between body and soul he now emphasizes their state as separate entities. This seems somewhat contradictory, however, as he continues the logic in his argument becomes apparent. He stresses the prominence of the soul over the body because "an unbodied spirit may be as capable of love and hatred, joy or sorrow, hope or fear, or other affections, as one that is united to a body (Edwards, "Affections" 98). This is the central thought to Edwards' reasoning: if spiritual beings can feel affections then – and this follows logically, this means that affections are not tied to the body. In Edwards' words:

> Now it would be very foolish to pretend, that because the saints in heaven be not united to flesh and blood, and have no animal fluids to be moved (through the laws of union of soul and body), with those great emotions of their souls, that therefore their exceeding love and joy are no affections. We are not speaking of the affections of the body, but of the affections of the soul,

> the chief of which are love and joy. When these are in the soul, whether that be in the body or out of it, the soul is affected and moved. (Edwards, “Affections” 113)

It is because the ‘saints in heaven’ are unbodied spirits and because they are able to experience affections – even to a more perfect degree than humans can – that the affections must be separate from the body. The essence of affection is a “sensation of the mind” or as Edwards also describes it “that inward sensation, or kind of spiritual sense, or feeling, and motion of the soul”, that is “what is called affection” (Edwards, “Affections” 113-114). It is a movement in the mind and soul (which Edwards seems to use interchangeably). It is a feeling, that if one has a body, will have its repercussions on the body. To conclude in Edwards’ words, “the soul when it thus feels, (if I may so say) and is thus moved, is said to be affected, and especially when this inward Sensation and Motion, are to a very high Degree, as they are in the Saints in Heaven” (Edwards, “Affections” 114).

Despite the logic in his reasoning, perhaps inevitably he does not quite resolve the relation between body and mind in a conclusive way. This is not surprising given that he engages with an essential metaphysical question that has puzzled people for centuries. In Edwards’ attempt at deciphering the mystery, there is a discrepancy in that he argues that affections always have “some effect upon the body” (Edwards, “Affections” 98), yet the body is not ‘essential’ because, theoretically, affections can exist outside of it. He first seems to argue in favour of the embodiment of emotion, which he then undermines. There is a tension in his argument regarding theory and practice. In theory, affections can exist without a body. However, in practice affections always have an effect on the body. He adds: “though the affections have not their seat in the body, yet the constitution of the body, may very much contribute to the present emotion of the mind” (Edwards, “Affections” 118). In other words, a physical sensation can “contribute” to and influence a person’s emotional state.

Within Edwards’s discussion of the role of the body, it is important to note that he, in fact, honours the body and embraces physical displays of emotion. Earlier in the text he declares: “I am bold to assert, that there never was any considerable change wrought in the mind or conversation of any

one person, by anything of a religious nature, that ever he read, heard or saw, that had not his affections moved" (Edwards, "Affections" 102). And with the movement of affections comes movement of the body. In his "Personal Narrative" he regularly mentions how his affections lead him to intense physical expressions. For example, at one time when alone in the woods he has "a view" of "the glory of the Son of God" which lasted for about an hour and "which kept me, the bigger part of the time, in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud" (Edwards 801). This is quite an intense, emotional event.

Both *Religious Affections*, then, as well as the "Personal Narrative" bring up questions as to the exact workings of emotion and its physical reverberations in religion. They reveal the complexity of talking about spiritual, emotional events in relation to human reason, which is limited and cannot fully comprehend the distinct, transcendent processes at work in religious experience. Furthermore, though Edwards attempts to come up with an answer and attempts to grasp the intricacies at work to the best of his logical abilities, he then has to express it through the fallible medium of language. There are two barriers to battle with, as it were, in his quest to figure out the details and intricacies regarding a person's experiences with the Divine. Even from a non-religious perspective, these experiences are hard to grasp. It is the nature of emotion (and spiritual experience) to be fleeting, to flow, to be ever in flux. Despite the difficulty this creates in defining the nature of emotion, at the same time this touches on its beauty. Emotion – both in religious experience and in life in general – will always be surrounded by an element of mystery. Edwards' attempts to capture and convey his own emotions yield exquisite and exciting prose which is a fascinating object of study. In Edwards' language of movement and mystery, there are riches to be found.

A View of Christ: Fallibility of Language

The following passage serves as an example of how such affections presented themselves in Edwards' own life. He recounts one of the more intense experiences he has had:

> I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God; as mediator between God and man; and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace, that appeared to me so calm and sweet, appeared great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception. … I felt withal, an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, than to be emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him, and to be totally wrapt up in the fullness of Christ; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and that have had the same effects. (Edwards 801)

The passage exemplifies Edwards' quest for the right words to describe this experience. As Christ appears to him, Edwards stacks adjective upon adjective: Christ is "wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet … meek and gentle … calm and sweet". One adjective fails to do justice to the power of the event. The language reveals how, to Edwards, Christ is great beyond description. There is not one conclusive adjective adequately to address the glory of God, so the only way to describe it is by heaping description upon description. This is also evident from his productively infelicitous repetition of the word "excellent" and "excellency" in the same sentence. He simply cannot find another, a better word to describe what can only be referred to as the "excellency" of Christ.

Marriage: Shift Towards Affective Unions

Returning to Edwards' main argument in *Religious Affections*, namely his defence of the rightful place of the emotional in religious experience, he argues in favour of a religious life that welcomes affection. The move towards the affective that Edwards advocates can be seen as part of a wider cultural shift that was taking place from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, especially

in regard to marriage and family life. As Lawrence Stone argues in his influential work, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1977), "emotional relations within the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century family" were characterized by a "general psychological atmosphere of distance, manipulation, and deference" in which "marriages were arranged by parents and kin for economic and social reasons … [in which] evidence of close affection between husband and wife is both ambiguous and rare" (117). In other words, at a certain social level marriages were mainly forged for the advancement of socio-economic interests and as a necessary alliance for the begetting of children: "It was a structure held together not by affective bonds but by mutual economic interests" (118). However, a shift took place over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century towards more affective unions, to marriages based on choice and love wherein "the importance of affective bonds to tie the conjugal unit together began to increase" (123). Marriage, thus, became increasingly based on the affective, which Philippe Ariès in a review of Stone's work refers to as "the triumph of affectivity" (1222). He summarises Stone's point as follows: "All the new and expanded affectivity is from now on exclusively concentrated inside this closed family, expressed either between spouses or between parents and children. Romantic love (or the semblance of it) is now obligatory in marriage, where it had earlier been excluded" (1222).

This shift towards romantic love was readily promoted in Protestantism and "especially its Puritan wing" (123) which played an important role in "sanctifying holy matrimony" (Stone 123). Puritanism's "stress on the importance of holy matrimony - meaning marriage bound by mutual affection - helped to undermine its contrary emphasis on the need for strict filial obedience to parents" (Stone 266). As Stone elaborates:

> The intensification of married love brought about by the stress on holy matrimony played a part from a kin-oriented to a nuclear family … with the churches now ringing with sermons encouraging such bonding, the influence of the kin tended to decline, as the married couple

> presented a more unified front towards the external world. The rise of married love and the decline of kin influence were therefore mutually reinforced trends". (138)

Within Puritan circles, ministers stressed the importance of affective unions and "married love". To further illustrate this point, Stone refers to the works of John Milton (1608-1674) specifically his tract on *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643). In the *Doctrine* Milton poses that the main focus of marriage should not be on procreation but rather on companionship. It should revolve around "the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life" (Milton 114), with "conversation" here denoting "companionship" and "intimacy" (footnote 114). Leaving aside here Milton's views on the hierarchy within marriage (in which the man's needs are considered superior to those of the woman), Stone affirms: "Milton thus carried the Protestant concept of holy matrimony about as far as it could go without abandoning the sexual superiority of the male. The roots of affective individualism in seventeenth-century Puritan sectarianism are clearly demonstrated in these [Milton's] writings" (Stone 138).

The general move in early modern society, was thus, towards more affective unions. In a similar fashion, Edwards proposes a move within religion towards a more affective union with the Divine. As he says in the treatise: "The Scriptures place religion very much in the affection of love, in love to God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and love to the people of God, and to mankind. The texts in which this is manifest, both in the Old Testament, and New, are innumerable" (Edwards, "Affections" 103). He wanted people to experience similar affections and love. He felt compelled to wake people from a dry, cold type of purely rational religion towards an experiential religion in which the believer's relationship with God would involve and welcome feeling, the emotional, and its epitome of love.

Marriage in Scripture

One biblical book that centres around love and marriage is the book of "Canticles", also known as "Song of Songs". This book profoundly moved Edwards:

> … my mind was greatly engaged, to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ; and the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in him. I found no books so delightful to me, as those that treated of these subjects. Those words (Cant. 2:1) used to be abundantly with me: "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys." The words seemed to me, sweetly to represent, the loveliness and beauty of Jesus Christ. And the whole book of Canticles used to be pleasant to me; and I used to be much in reading it, about that time. (Edwards 793)

It is noteworthy that Edwards feels a strong pull towards Scripture that focuses on the beauty and excellence of Christ, in particular, the book of Canticles, which is a book of love poetry and erotic desire. At this time of his life, shortly after his conversion, it is this biblical book in particular which strikes a chord. It is an indication of how beauty, love and “sweetness” are at the forefront of his mind. The book of Canticles in its literal meaning concerns the romantic, physical relationship between a man and a woman who are to be husband and wife. Yet, within the Christian exegetic tradition, it was allegorised by commentators into the relationship between Christ (the husband) and His Church (the bride). For all its intense eroticism, it was read as a figurative image of Christ’s relationship with the Church. This marital union, whether literally or allegorically, and all that accompanies it is what Edwards meditates on. As he contemplates the saving work of Christ he contextualises that work in terms of love, beauty, and intimacy. This explains his abundant use of nouns and adjectives related to these terms such as “sweet” (and all its derivations), “pleasant”, “beauty”, “lovely”, “delightful”, and so on. This is how he experiences Christ, in the form of love and intimacy. The affective language of love Edwards employs echoes the language of Canticles. The biblical text resounds in his heart as it echoes his own emotions. This turns again on the idea of literature as a key to the heart.

Edwards in Relation to Dietrich Von Hildebrand

The discussion of love and the emotions it evokes, as discussed by Edwards, can be understood more deeply through their relation with the ideas of German philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977). Von Hildebrand is known for his works in ethics, moral philosophy and philosophy of religion. As a convert to Catholicism, his writings are based on the same essential belief as that of Edwards, namely that God exists. His work *The Art of Living*, published originally in German in 1933, comprises a series of short essays devoted to ethics and seven moral values, or virtues. As this work discusses, in detail, what it means to be human from a Christian perspective – in or how to live life as God intended – it serves as a useful aid in the discussion of Edwards and in illuminating key concepts of this thesis.

Though almost two centuries apart, Edwards seems to operate from the same basic premise as Hildebrand: that every single person has value. In fact, this is – or should be according to the Scriptures – a basic premise of biblical Christianity, based on the well-known verse of John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" *(King James Version).*

Von Hildebrand and Edwards employ a similar kind of language; moreover, we may trace an overlap in the concepts they refer to and the tone and spirit in which they write also shows remarkable similarities. For example, at the core of Hildebrand's world of values and Edwards' ideas about the affections is love. This becomes apparent in Hildebrand's discussion of 'Goodness', where he touches upon the role of emotion as response to values: "the whole moral life consists in meaningful responses to values that have been grasped, such responses as enthusiasm, admiration, joy, obedience, love" with love being the ultimate, "the most complete and the deepest" (Von Hildebrand 36) response. In a similar fashion, Edwards refers to love as "the chief of the affections, and fountain of all other affections" (Edwards, "Affections" 106). I shall return to the central position of love later on but for now, note how Hildebrand speaks about "meaningful" responses to values that "have been grasped". In other words, experiencing such a response implies that one has

grasped certain values, these values are now understood and accepted, arguably on several levels, including of the reason and the mind but also on a spiritual level, as a spiritual sense. This 'grasping' and this spiritual understanding are accompanied by an emotional, affective response. Hildebrand's line of thought echoes Edwards' doctrine that the affections are essential to true religion; one cannot be a true Christian without experiencing such responses, such affections. The 'grasping' of concepts, whether they be values or Christian notions such as man's sinfulness or redemption, is essential and it is something that both involves the realm of the mind, the understanding and the realm of the emotions, which includes the physical. Both Hildebrand and Edwards state that when concepts are grasped it – naturally – evokes an affective response.

One could question whether the mind or the emotions come first in the act of 'grasping'. In one instance the mind will clearly grasp something before it is followed by any kind of feeling, in another instance something might be felt physically before it is understood on a rational level. In still other cases, the lines are blurred and a clear distinction about the order cannot be made. Finally, one can grasp something and be convinced of the justness of a certain concept without understanding it rationally. In such a case, the understanding then operates on a spiritual level that not necessarily involves the rational, logical mind. In short, it is a complex notion that defies a conclusive definition.

Balance Between Reason and Emotion

Von Hildebrand states that "the duality of intellect and will must be replaced by the trilogy of intellect, will, and heart" (Von Hildebrand 96). Edwards talks about a similar trilogy of "the will" or "inclination" and "understanding" and the "heart". In essence, they are referring to the same: they advocate unity within man between the different aspects that make up a person's 'being' – the rational, logical mind; the will to incline or decline; the heart and emotions. They argue in favour of a holistic approach to life and to what it means to be human; they plead for an acceptance and even embrace of both the rational and the emotional. Basing their ideas on the belief that man is a

spiritual being who needs both his mind and his heart to live life as God intended, to make morally sound choices and to lead a life of love. Throughout their works, they repeatedly warn against the dangers of an imbalance between reason and emotion. As neither an extreme leaning towards logic and reason nor an abandonment towards the emotional will lead to a fruitful, good life. It is this precarious balance and an embrace of the different elements that constitute a man's soul that leads to a full, satisfying life, a life of love.

Chapter 3: The Role of Print Culture During the Great Awakening

In *Writing in the New Nation*, Larzer Ziff emphasises Edwards' conscious and deliberate move towards print "in order to state his case" (4), in addition to his continued reliance on oral media such as his preaching. In his *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) – published a few years after he wrote his "Personal Narrative" – Edwards sets out "a defense of essentially oral, subjective, emotional phenomena conducted in print according to objective, rational principles" (Ziff, *Writing* 4). As argued in the previous chapter, it is in this paradox of writing about "subjective, emotional phenomena" in an "objective, rational" manner that Edwards faces the limits of human reason and language. This chapter shall explore the differing arguments of Larzer Ziff and Frank Lambert on the role of literature and print culture during the Great Awakening and how their works touch upon the constructedness (the artifice) and fallibility of language. Before turning to their interpretations of the role of print in New England, it is relevant first to consider print culture in England, especially within the Puritan movement.

Puritanism and Literature in England

As N.H. Keeble asserts in his essay on "Puritanism and Literature": "Puritanism was an intrinsically bookish movement" (Keeble 309). From the very start in England, the dissemination of Puritanism was intrinsically linked to literature as "the penetration by Puritanism of the nation's religious, political and cultural life was achieved primarily through the printed word" (Keeble 309). Keeble refers to a quote by Richard Baxter, a prominent Puritan figure in seventeenth-century England and a prolific theological writer, who aptly summarizes the prevalent Christian view on the importance of print saying: "Printing hath been a blessed means of increasing knowledge and religion" for "the Writings of Divines are nothing else but a preaching the Gospel to the eye, as the *voice* preacheth it to the ear" (Keeble 309). At a certain point in England, the printed word became

even more essential as, after 1660, many Puritan ministers were persecuted and took to print in order to keep reaching their congregations (Keeble 309-310). Examples of works originating from these turbulent times are John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and *Grace Abounding (*1666), which he wrote while in prison, aiming in this way to continue teaching and edifying his followers. For an extensive group of ministers, print was the only way to remain in contact with their congregation and keep practicing their professional duties. For them, print became indispensable and in this way, it increased in value.

At the same time, within the Puritan tradition, the "appeal to experiential (or, as the seventeenth-century term was, *experimental*) Christianity" (Keeble 315) led to the flourishing of personal writing. This leaning towards the "experiental" in religion focused on two practices: "the practice in gathered churches of requiring from prospective members accounts of their conversion experiences" and "the universally recognised duty of self-scrutiny to analyse spiritual progress" (Keeble 315). These practices led to a "habit of diary-keeping" (Keeble 322 footnote), which is a habit also devoutly practiced by Jonathan Edwards himself. The keeping of a diary, writing down thoughts, feelings, and experiences one would have regarding their spiritual life is a logical step to take in a religion that so strongly emphasises introspection and self-examination. Writing helps to order thoughts, to closely scrutinize one's inner workings, and monitor one's spiritual growth. An interesting paradox comes to light here as writing is considered a path to truth and self-knowledge and yet (as in the exegetical passages not possessing final truth) there is a sense that language is provisional, flawed, and ultimately insufficient to render or describe the divine. Though personal writing could serve the believer in gaining a better insight into their own spiritual state, the act of writing itself confronted them with the challenge of transferring these spiritual, transcendent experiences onto paper. As in the case of Edwards' "Personal Narrative", this brings up questions of truth. Truth, as presented in Scripture, was considered fixed, immutable and certain. However, in the case of a person's own conversion experience, one needs to figure out for oneself – and as proof to others – to what extent that experience is truly spiritual and inspired by God. The truth as

experienced by the believer is subject to the fleetingness of emotion and faced with the difficulty of pinning down what exactly transpired in the spiritual encounter. Humanly authored texts, as Edwards affirmed, can never reach the same level of truth as divinely inspired Scripture, which is the only steadfast truth.

Despite, or perhaps in spite, of this paradox in personal writing the underlying emphasis on conversion experiences and self-scrutiny were the driving forces "behind the development of spiritual autobiography as a distinct genre of Puritan writing" (Keeble 315) which eventually "contributed to the development not only of autobiography but also of the novel: it was as the confessional autobiographies familiar to his readers that early in the eighteenth century Daniel Defoe presented his fictions *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*" (Keeble 315). The aforementioned practices, thus, led to "a distinctively Puritan set of recurrent emphases and imaginative constructions" (Keeble 313) within Puritan literature of which the most vital is its "preoccupation with the personal" (Keeble 313). As shown, in order spiritually to grow, one needed to analyse closely their own faith and experiences with the Divine. Puritanism then can be characterized by its focus on experience, which requires a view inward, it requires introspection. "uncompromising individualism [which] champions conscience above worldly authorities and always prefers inwardness and experiential immediacy to formalism and convention" (Keeble 313). The challenge here is how to render this emphasis on spontaneity and mystery in the formalism and convention of texts. It brings in the question as to whether literature is up to the task of conveying a truth that transcends language. These questions draw attention, once again, to the paradoxical relation between spiritual truths (as mysteries) and words. The possible challenges in writing about the spiritual did not deter believers from the act. Partly due to the focus on introspection and self-examination, personal writing gained momentum, as Keeble notes: "as well as works written explicitly for a public readership, there was the extraordinary mass of private letters, commonplace books, conversion narratives and diaries, many of which were subsequently printed to become

classics of autobiographical writing" (Keeble 310). Thus, in England during the late seventeenth century, the practice of Life Writing flourished.

Larzer Ziff on Print Culture

Turning to the development of print in New England, in Ziff's reading of events, the Great Awakening was "the rebellion of an oral culture valuing immanence against a literary culture valuing representation" (*Writing* 15). In which "Edwards's outlook is shaped by the assumptions of oral culture" instead of print culture (Ziff, *Writing* 14). Edwards, in addition, uses a "medium traditionally controlled by the intellectual class" who distrusted the "emotionalism of popular religious meetings" (Ziff *Writing* 4) to give a detailed account of exactly that which they distrusted. Within the relation between oral and print culture, Edwards found himself on the brink of a "transition from a culture of immanence to a culture of representation" (Ziff, *Writing* 17) in which the latter "promoted one's ability to be what one represented oneself being. It replaced self-awareness with self-knowledge" (Ziff, *Writing* 17). This "new culture of print" (Ziff, *Writing* 17) opened up new possibilities and genres of writing amongst which were autobiographies and personal narratives (Ziff, *Writing* 17). However, this distinction is not as clear-cut as Ziff might present it. Edwards himself wrote a "Personal Narrative" and, as demonstrated, the focus within Puritanism was already very much on self-knowledge through introspection.

Ziff poses that Edwards' writings were more connected to oral culture than to print culture, which arose in his lifetime and would flourish after the publication of the first novel (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*) in 1740 (Ziff *Writing* 16). He states: "The coincidence of Edwards's popular influence reaching its highest point in the decade when the novel commenced its entry into American life suggests that the oral culture that had empowered Edwards's writings had reached flood point and was soon to ebb" (Ziff *Writing* 16-17). According to Ziff, it was not print culture but oral culture that "empowered" Edwards' writings. As a note on the side, he subtly links the decline of Edwards' popularity to the introduction of the novel, bringing paradox to Keeble's earlier

argument that the novel's birth is in part indebted to Puritan personal writing. Ziff bases the connection of Edwards to oral culture on the idea that Edwards considered the imagination to be the "faculty Satan employs to delude persons" (Ziff *Writing* 16) and that so-called spiritual experiences that sprung from the imagination were not to be regarded as "inspired by grace" (Ziff *Writing* 16). Only experiences that flow forth from grace were considered valid and truly spiritual. It is this opposition of Edwards to "imaginative re-creations" (Ziff *Writing* 16) and his belief that the "created world is determined, not subject to re-creation" (Ziff *Writing* 16) that are in opposition to "the values promoted in print culture" (Ziff *Writing* 16). Among these values in print culture, are the celebration of the imagination and the exploration of "the construction of self in writing" (Ziff *Writing* 17). Ziff argues that Edwards opposed the new culture of print due to the prominent place it offered to the imagination and because it presented the possibility to construct the self through a text. Edwards' writings did not fit this new culture, as his works focus on the portrayal of spiritual truths and anything merely imagined or reconstructed would not be in line with the truth.

Lambert on the Construction of the Great Awakening

Frank Lambert proffers a different interpretation of Edwards relation to print culture. In his work *Inventing the "Great Awakening"* (1999), Frank Lambert aims "to address how revivalists themselves wove their own web of meaning which convinced them and thousands of others that they were participating in a glorious 'Work of God'" (13). Opposing this (religious) view of the Great Awakening as being a 'Work of God', Lambert, as the title suggests, interprets the Great Awakening as an "invention" (13). As this word is central to Lambert's argument, he clarifies the various definitions and connotations of the term as follows: "'Invention' had two meanings … First, it meant 'the discovery of a hidden thing'", second, it meant "fabricating or designing something new" (Lambert 8). The revival's opponents also referred to the idea of "invention" but "according to the term's negative connotation, that of fabrication of a falsehood" (Lambert 9). Though Lambert interprets the Awakening as an invention, he uses the term in its wider sense, not in its negative

connotation of viewing the revivalists as "cunning promoters [who] somehow foisted an unwelcome religious 'product' on passive audiences" (Lambert 13). Rather, he looks at the events of the Revival from a position outside of religion, that is, not from a religious perspective, rather – one might call it – a scientific perspective. He critically approaches the accessible data from the period and questions the claims made both by revivalists and antirevivalists, as he comes to the conclusion that invention and human agency were essential to the formation of what is considered by many to be the Great Awakening.

Lambert contends that the idea of the Great Awakening as "a coherent, intercolonial revival" (6) was simply not true, it was an idea placed upon the events that were taking place, and it was the revivalists (among them Jonathan Edwards) who were framing the events into a larger narrative of a unified, grand work of God. This is in stark opposition to the revivalists' own interpretation, who believed the events that transpired to be an "*extraordinary* 'Work of God'" (Lambert 4). The word "extraordinary" here is used in the sense that "Though God was always at work redeeming fallen humankind, they [revivalists] contended that on rare occasions he dispensed his mercy in unusual outpourings" (Lambert 4). They "insisted that the revival was of divine origin and existed apart from human agency" (Lambert 8). The ministers documenting the events "insisted that they were discoverers, not architects, of the events they reported" (Lambert 4). At this point, Lambert disagrees as he claims that the "revivalists fashioned the awakening" (Lambert 7) and, in that sense, were most definitely acting as architects. In his view, they played a crucial role in interpreting the events that took place and how they communicated them to the world.

Lambert asserts that within the invention of the Great Awakening a key role was reserved for literature. He claims that the religious leaders of the time "invented the revival by constructing and publishing series of narratives to interpret the events they witnessed and encouraged" (Lambert 9). A key player in this literary game was Jonathan Edwards whose publication of *A Faithful Narrative* in 1737 "instituted a new genre" (9) that was soon copied. The *Narrative* tells the story of how in the town of Northampton where Edwards was pastor, great numbers of people came to salvation and

how, according to Edwards, this was proof of God being at work in the town and that the events signalled a revival (Lambert 9). It became a "model script for similar accounts that followed" (Lambert 9) in other parts of New England and "inspired ministers and laypersons in communities throughout the colonies to stage and report similar revivals" (Lambert 11). Lambert's use of the words "stage" and "report" here are significant, as they reiterate his stance that the ministers are "architects" of the Great Awakening. In his view, they used Edwards' work as a "model script" to produce more revival narratives and, in this way, feed the overarching narrative of a great intercolonial revival. In reality, the awakening that Edwards speaks about was not the first of its kind, as Edwards' congregation had "experienced 'revivals' of a similar intensity" (Lambert 11) before. However, through the publication of *A Faithful Narrative,* the events were provided with a voice, a platform and so it became "the opening occasion of a series of events that revivalists would come to interpret as a single work" (Lambert 11). According to Lambert, then, the Great Awakening was not in itself as grand and extraordinary and unified as was claimed. Local religious events were occurring across the separate colonies as they had done in the years before. This time, however, it was the crucial role of literature and the "extensive publicity" (11) it provided in the interpretation and publication of these events that enabled "a rather ordinary occurrence in an obscure corner of colonial America … [to grow] into the Great Awakening" (11). Through the vast publicity around the events staged by the revivalists, the separate events were presented as a unified, intercolonial movement.

In general, Lambert's argument reflects on "the challenge of exploring the boundaries between event and interpretation" (Lambert 8). In this sense, it ties in with earlier posed questions regarding the place of truth in the interpretation and writing about spiritual events. Lambert stresses the element of construction and invention within the act of interpretation and writing. He is sceptical about the revival narratives and the extent to which they portray actual, true events. Opposing Ziff, he argues that print culture was essential to the formation of the idea of the Great Awakening. He is clear that Edwards and other ministers made deliberate use of the ability of

literature to reconstruct and represent events as best suited their goals. However, despite their opposing views, both Ziff and Lambert bring up the complexity involved in writing about spiritual events and in how to interpret the literature that comes out of it.

Conclusion

One of Edwards' preferred ways to spend his time was to go out into nature for "secret converse with God" (Edwards 797). He loved to retreat to a solitary place and connect with his God, to leave behind his duties and the demands of this world, even if only for a moment. It is in these "secret" and solitary moments that Edwards experiences love and joy beyond description. Often, he is moved so deeply that he cannot but respond to this "ardency of spirit" then by "breathings and groanings that cannot be uttered" (801) as he glimpses the glory of his Saviour. He is often overcome by "a very affecting sense" that completely overwhelms him. He concludes his "Narrative" with a final description of such an "affecting" moment of connection which causes him "to break forth into a kind of a loud weeping" (804) in which he "could not but as it were cry out, "How happy are they which do that which is right in the sight of God!" (804). His many treatises and sermons provide detailed analyses of Scriptural truths and how these should be incorporated into the lives of believers. In these works, he writes as the teacher, the pastor who, from his position of authority and his extensive knowledge of Scripture and Christian dogma aims to edify his congregation and point them towards Christ. Yet, in his "Personal Narrative" we receive a glimpse of Edwards' own, personal and intimate relationship with his Creator. Whether or not Edwards wrote the text with a didactic aim in mind, or with the intention to publish it at some point is, in this sense, irrelevant. In comparison with his public works, it offers the reader an intimate picture of how Edwards either experienced or, in a more sceptical reading, chose to represent his experiences with the Divine. In either case, it reveals in its tone, style, and its language the difficulty of adequately describing spiritual events. For Edwards, connecting with the supernatural, that which exists and is located outside of space and time was essential in his conversion and should be an integral part of anyone's religious life. To use again Von Hildebrand's terminology, the essence of the true religious life is to have *communion* with God. This communion, established in moments of transcendence, always resounds in emotional and bodily effects. Surrender to the experience of the emotional and physical

response is required to undergo such experiences. Edwards argues this on a logical level in *Religious Affections* and shows how he welcomed such affections in his own life in the "Narrative". As demonstrated, these two texts complement each other in enabling us to gain a better understanding of Edwards' interpretation of our experience of the Divine. Both works, in addition, consequently reveal Edwards' paradoxical relation to language, as both a flawed, insufficient medium to convey spiritual truths and yet as a key to the heart.

As shown in the second chapter, Edwards' move towards the affective in religion can be seen as part of a wider cultural shift towards the affective, specifically evidenced in the area of marriage. Marital unions became increasingly based on love, on an emotional connection. Similarly, religious life began to be more concerned with feeling, the affective, especially during the Great Awakening. This surge of interest in the emotional and the affections that reached a peak in the revival led to friction between emotion and reason. This tension motivated Edwards to respond and argue in favour of the emotional. In his defence of emotion, he nevertheless honours the place of reason and advocates a harmonious balance between the two faculties.

The third chapter touched upon the role of language and literature in the description and interpretation of spiritual events, yet from a broader perspective. As argued, Ziff's reading of events which places Edwards as opposing print culture does not hold up in light of the overwhelming evidence regarding the centrality of print within Protestant tradition. Lambert, on the other hand, agrees that literature and print were crucial in the American Puritan movement, especially as a medium for dispersing the idea of revival.

Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" celebrates the emotional and welcomes the incorporation of the bodily in religious experience. Fuelled by a "holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings and thirstings after God and holiness" (Edwards, "Affections" 104), Edwards' life revolves around seeking connection with the Divine. In his description of these divine encounters, he strives to express in words that which transcends words. In his quest to describe these highly emotional and intense experiences he faces the limits of human reason and language. If one were, to sum up the

theme of the “Narrative” in Edwards’ own words it would be: “I know not how to express”. In his endeavours to express the inexpressible, language proves weak, insufficient, and fallible. This essential *aporia* embodied in the text produces the beauty and intriguing quality of the “Narrative”. It is the presence of the enigmatic that draws readers in and it is the mystery intrinsic to Edwards’ descriptions of communion with the Divine that makes his “Personal Narrative” such a fascinating object of study.

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