

ANALYSIS

“Personal Narrative” (1739)

Jonathan Edwards

(1703-1758)

Edwards wrote this narrative to define true conversion as distinct from transitory emotional experiences common during the revival movement called “The Great Awakening.” He started the movement in his own village of Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734 and it spread “over the whole eastern seacoast.” Waves of religious enthusiasm rolled through New England until 1750, partially inspired by his own calm appeal to emotion in his sermons—especially to the fear of Hell.

As a boy, Edwards prayed five times a day in secret and spent much time praying and discussing religion with other boys: “My mind was much engaged in it, and had much self-righteous pleasure; and it was my delight to abound in religious duties.” He and other boys constructed a “booth in a swamp, in a very retired spot, for a place of prayer.” He also prayed alone in “secret places of my own in the woods.” The Puritans of the previous century saw wilderness as the domain of Satan, populated by demonic Indians. To the contrary, from an early age, Edwards felt so much at home in the wild, that is where he felt closest to the divine, repeatedly transcending the biases of Puritan ideology through his experiences of mystical emotion. He is the first American writer to express the archetypal individuation process described in “Model of Metaphors,” manifesting characteristics of holistic consciousness in common with later American writers as diverse as Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Black Elk, Willa Cather, Hemingway and Toni Morrison, in the transcendental mode.

Throughout his “Narrative,” Edwards exhibits both *puritan* and *pastoral* characteristics, contrary to the typical verticality of the Calvinist: “My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved.” His “convictions and affections” are balanced, as are duties with delights and head with heart. Like Hawthorne later, he counters psychological imbalance, which leads to false ideas: “And I am ready to *think*, many are deceived with such *affections*, and such a kind of delight as I then had in religion, and mistake it for grace” [italics added]. His own first “awakening” wore off and he “went on in the ways of sin.” Then he fell gravely ill, a characteristic phase of the individuation process. God “shook me over the pit of hell....My concern now wrought more by inward struggles and conflicts, and self-reflections. I made seeking my salvation the main business of my life.”

He had always resisted the doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty “in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me.” Only when he is able to subordinate himself totally to this Calvinist doctrine, to the absolute *sovereignty* of God, does he have a true conversion experience and receive the *grace* of God. In Jungian terms, he subordinates his ego to the sovereignty of his soul or deeper Self. Yet, paradoxically, he does not realize the meaning of this at the time. Words of the *Holy Bible* are the medium of his mystical transformation. He seems to experience synesthesia when reading, “*I am the Rose of Sharon, and the Lilly of the valleys*. The words seemed to me, sweetly to represent the beauty of Jesus Christ.” Both flowers are mandalas, symbols of wholeness.

The severity of Calvinist doctrine, requiring annihilation of the ego, is a pressure that intensifies a compensating pastoralism. According to Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, “The psyche is a self-regulating system that maintains itself in equilibrium as the body does. Every process that goes too far inevitably calls forth a compensatory activity.” The cold oppressive doctrine calls forth “a sweet burning in my heart, an ardor of soul.” As he struggles to describe the ineffable, the word *sweet* becomes a motif: “This I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, *sweet* abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world; and sometimes a kind of vision...of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, *sweetly* conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God.... I

walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father's pasture [Christian pastoralism; *Psalm 23*], for contemplation." Spiritual rebirth is evident in his "becoming a child of God."

His sense of paradox increases: "I seemed to see them both in a *sweet* conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together; it was a *sweet*, and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful *sweetness*; a high, and great, and holy gentleness." When he sees divinity in "all nature" he approaches the heresy of pantheism and resembles Emerson feeling like a "transparent eyeball." His atonement with Nature dispels all fear: "And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so *sweet* to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me." His inclination to art—"to sing or chant"—is another characteristic of the transcendental mode. [italics added]

To his main point, he contrasts his feelings of true grace with the superficial religious experiences of his youth: "They were of a more inward, pure, soul animating and refreshing nature. Those former delights never reached the heart; and did not arise from any sight of the divine excellency of the things of God." Also, "My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way; and the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my heart." Integrating head with heart, he returns to Calvinist doctrine as a structure for his amorphous emotions, "the inward ardor of my soul"—a flame and inner light. His unconscious or soul is the medium of his mystical experience, and yet, ironically, the doctrine of depravity condemns it.

What a paradox, that the work of American literature with the most abundant effusions of intense pastoral feelings and sweetness is by a Calvinist. Specifically, he is expressing Christian pastoralism, full of natural imagery in common with the *Bible*: "Holiness...made the soul like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers; all pleasant, delightful, and undisturbed; enjoying a sweet calm, and the gently vivifying beams of the sun. The soul of a true Christian...appeared like such a little white flower as we see in the spring of the year; low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory." Paradoxically, the lower he subordinates his ego, the more exalted he feels: "My heart panted after this, to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be nothing, and that God might be ALL, that I might become as a little child." Paradoxically, in becoming a child, he is reborn ALLmighty, since God is inside him.

As his personal narrative proceeds, Edwards continues to retreat into the wilderness for prayer and his individuation goes on in a cyclical pattern. At times "I sunk in religion." Again he falls ill and again is reborn. As he integrates Calvinist doctrine, his psychological puritanism, he returns to a vertical mode of consciousness and fights the devil in his inner wilderness, which nevertheless, paradoxically, continues to be the place he goes to be closest to God. "When I look into my heart; and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell."

"Personal Narrative" exhibits all the characteristics of the holistic mode of consciousness in literature: the quest into the Wilderness; a sense of responsibility for attaining salvation; Christ-evoking figure as exemplar (Christ in scripture, his spiritual guide); a confrontation with ultimate Truth, often in the form of a wild animal (thunder is the equivalent of a wild animal); spiritual death and rebirth; atonement with Nature; synthesis of puritan-and pastoral values; an harmonious vision of life, unique in its totality, universal in its archetypal components; ultimate solitude and self-reliance; transcendence of time and space; mystery, intensity, ecstasy; a sense of paradox; ineffability; numinous evocation; inner light.

Michael Hollister (2015)