

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 5 (1990)

Artikel: Representing an re-forming the saint : the strange case of Jonathan Edwards
Autor: Aldrich, Elizabeth Kaspar
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99882>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 18.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Representing and Re-forming the Saint: The Strange Case of Jonathan Edwards

Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich

Favorably reviewing Perry Miller's new biography of Jonathan Edwards in 1949, Reinhold Niebuhr nevertheless found its subject's inclusion in the *American Men of Letters* series "a matter of dispute" — a demur that might astonish the teachers and anthologists of today who routinely include Edwards in their literature surveys, and who indeed think of the eighteenth-century Puritan minister and theologian primarily as what Miller announced him to be on the first page of his book: writer and artist. For Niebuhr the art is clearly all in the biography itself. He confesses "to a suspicion that Miller sometimes makes Edwards more modern and more relevant to modernity than he is," but succumbs all the same to Miller's formidable narrative powers: "one feels that one is reading a detective story" (648).

The *Strange Case of Jonathan Edwards* falls naturally into two parts. First, there is the mystery at the center of the life, of why the brilliant minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, who had led the transformation of a religious revival in his congregation into the most convulsive movement in American history before the Revolution — what some argue prepared the colonies *for* Revolution — should have been rejected by that congregation at the height of his reputation and powers, deprived of his ministry, and essentially exiled to the wilderness. But this is not the mystery, tragic though he acknowledges it to be, that Miller pursues or solves: the "external biography" of historical fact is dispatched in four interchapters (so titled), which occupy a scant five per cent of the total text. Rather, a second aspect of the case is nearer the heart of Miller's biographical project, though never directly addressed by him. It concerns

the ongoing "life" of the figure of Edwards in the two centuries following his death, one marked by extreme shifts of favor and disfavor which can themselves be read as a barometric measure of the culture's relation to its Puritan origins.

In the baldest terms: the historical Edwards shifts from saint to demon, is reduced to a joke, and later elevated to tragic hero. The saint is ascendant through the remainder of the eighteenth century and after, for example, in the definitive image created in Samuel Hopkins's first and classic memoir of 1765. It is in the course of the nineteenth century that this saint is demonized, as we see in the works of the Beechers, an Edwards-haunted family, and especially of Harriet Beecher-Stowe, who lived and suffered under Edwards's Calvinist theology until, rebelling, she blamed the one on the other and identified the two as inhumanly cruel and unchristian.¹ In the present century the figure has evolved through two forms of anachronism. The first, dominant through the twenties, grew naturally from the demon but is, in the writings of the generation of Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks, far-enough removed from the burden of inherited belief to be more lighthearted than Stowe, essentially comic.²

¹ For example in *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) Stowe depicts the doctrinally Edwards-inspired tortures (the medium is a fictionalized Hopkins) suffered by a mother who believes her son drowned unconverted. Incorporating experience from Stowe's adult life (a beloved son drowned), the episode is actually closest to a crisis in the early life of her sister Catherine, who suffered a nervous breakdown when her fiancé drowned in similar circumstances and who later wrote her own "refutation" of Edwards on the Will. Stowe's novel demonstrates how, in order to demonize seriously, one must have inhabited with one's object the same universe of belief. The theology and its effects are explicitly treated in a chapter entitled "Views of Divine Government," where the narrator remarks: "The standard of what constituted a true regeneration, as presented in such treatises as Edwards on the Affections . . . made this change to be something so high, disinterested, and superhuman, so removed from all natural and common habits and feelings, that the most earnest and devoted, whose whole life had been a constant travail of endeavor, a tissue of almost unearthly disinterestedness, often lived and died with only a glimmering hope of its attainment" (730).

² Serious in their tendency to "blame" on Edwards what was narrowminded and philistine in contemporary America, Mencken and Brooks nevertheless favor the lightly dismissive touch. Brooks's casual reference in *The Flowering of New England* to "the faith of Jonathan Edwards, who said that little boys were more hateful than vipers" (343) is characteristic. Mencken, rejoicing in the American

The second, arising in the thirties and dominant at mid-century, is tragic and heroic but no less anachronistic. This is the period during which Edwards seems to fade from popular memory or culture to be rehabilitated within the Academy: in this version the anachronism *is* the tragedy. Thus, the two most influential studies of this time, Joseph Haroutunian's *Piety Versus Moralism* of 1932 and Ola Winslow's highly-regarded biography of 1940, offer treatments of Edwards as sympathetic as could probably be imagined; but the former classifies his thought as "medieval" and the latter concludes, almost identically to V.L. Parrington's largely hostile work of a decade earlier, with the tragedy of a brilliant mind wasted in the service of a long and rightly-dead system of belief. Both comic and tragic aspects of the anachronistic Edwards are distilled in the ubiquitous schoolbook juxtapositions of Edwards and Franklin which we have all met. Franklin, Enlightenment man of science and public affairs, embodies the Republic he helped to create, the spirit both of its founding and its future. Edwards, always by contrast, either as hell-fire driven monster or gentle mystic, embodies a Puritan past from which the Republic has not simply grown but thankfully escaped. This Edwards is forever, as he was in his own lifetime, divorced from history.³ And this is the point to be stressed: the "historical" Edwards is a figure

clergy's loss of power and influence, would have us imagine the bad old days: "Think of what life must have been under such princes of damnation as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, with even bartenders and metaphysicians believing in them. . . . Or turn to the backwoods of the Republic, where the devil is still feared, and with him his professional exterminators. In the country towns the clergy are still almost as influential as they were in Mather's day, and there, as everyone knows, they remain public nuisances, and civilized life is almost impossible" (126-27).

³ The first published comparison may have appeared in the 1900 survey of American literature by Brooks's Harvard mentor, Barrett Wendell, although I suspect that Wendell simply elaborated there on what was commonplace. V. L. Parrington's strongly negative chapter on Edwards in his 1927 survey *Main Currents in American Thought* is entitled "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards"; it is immediately followed by the equally positive chapter on Franklin, "Our First Ambassador." Miller's concession in his Foreword to this automatic pairing is wonderfully predictive of the revolution of images he will achieve in the biography as well as of the rhetorical means through which he will do so (see Foreword xxxii).

which was developed consistently and increasingly away from history — no matter what degree of sympathy or hostility we find in purveyors of the image, no matter what version they may have embraced of America's usable past.

It is a tribute to Niebuhr's acuity that he detected in his early review, even as he resisted it, the total revolution of this image which the biography sought to perform. According to the cover of its most recent edition (1981), with it "Miller single-handedly restored the figure of Edwards from the image of a reactionary, 'fiery' Puritan to that of an artist whose vision summarized . . . 'the meaning of America.'" That a figure may be "restored" to something it previously never was is, I think, a matter of dispute. But hyperbole aside, and despite the revisionism to which Miller's own work and legacy have been subject, it is fair to say that his reversal of Edwards's image was successful and remains so, in essence, forty years later: the medieval throwback has become pioneering modern, in Miller's own version unsurpassed pioneer of Modernism and beyond. I know of no comparable case of such extreme reversal in American letters; it seems to me to stand in its own right as a mystery within the ongoing Strange Case.

Now assuming that this is a mystery worth pursuing, and that there is something that sets the biography apart from standard essays in revision and rehabilitation, I believe we can learn more about what it is if, instead of comparing Miller's work with that of his contemporaries, we set it alongside the writings of Edwards himself. I want to argue that Miller follows, or is like, Edwards in his representation of the ideal subject — intellectual hero or saint — and that this likeness goes beyond any mere coincidence we might find between the religious hagiography of the eighteenth-century Puritan and the secular discourse of canon-formation (or revision) so important to the twentieth-century academic critic. I am concerned not simply with what is peculiar to, or strange in Edwards and Miller, but with certain *uses of* strangeness in their writings which involve what I will call strategies of estrangement. I hope in the end to be able to suggest some connections between these strategies and current critical practice, although in the space remaining these must be sketchy at best.

The bulk of the eight or nine volumes of Edwards's writings can be divided among sermons, theological treatises, and narratives of various sorts: personal, biographical, historical. (The scientific juvenilia, dis-

proportionately represented in most one-volume selections of his works, reveal him as the prodigy he was and are of greatest importance to those who read Edwards as a tragedy of wasted genius.) In the sermons and treatises the subject of sainthood (grace, conversion, religious affectations and so forth) is prominent; in the narrative the representation of particular saints is predominant, and most often involves the polemical distinctions between the true and the false which categorize all controversies surrounding the Great Awakening. Edwards's polemic constitutes what I call his re-formation of the saint, or of the language of sainthood's representation. Like Miller's after him, Edwards's representation of his subject is invariably a rescuing of its true meaning or version from the misconceptions and false versions which already exist in the minds of others.⁴ In every narrative of sainthood we can find encoded a reader thus blinded and resistant; the polemic is directed at recognition of error: this, we might say, is the "con-version" the reader must undergo.

"How greatly Mr. Brainerd's religion differed from that of some pretenders to the experience of a *clear work* of saving conversion wrought on their hearts," Edwards begins the "Reflections and Observations" which form the close of his *Life of David Brainerd* (1749; the *Life* itself was a compilation of Brainerd's diaries). The first misconception to be overturned — it is conventional, virtually formulaic for such narratives — concerns the teleological placement and interpretation of conversion in the life narrated, the idea of conversion as end or end-in-itself. Edwards goes right on:

Although his convictions and conversion were in all respects clear and very remarkable, yet how far was he from acting as though he thought he had got through his work, when once he had obtained comfort, and satisfaction of his

⁴ In fact Edwards was compelled to "rescue" the very idea of such narrative representation. His grandfather and predecessor in Northampton, "Pope" Solomon Stoddard, had abolished the public account of conversion hitherto required of each individual for church membership and replaced it with a collective and formulaic "profession of the covenant." The change evidently conformed to the will of the people, if it did not form that will. At least it is worth remembering that, whatever the political and family intrigues behind Edwards's expulsion in 1750, its official cause was his demand that the individual account be restored and the congregation's violent rejection of that demand. For an attractively lucid account of the public confession of faith and its development see Morgan.

interest in Christ, and title to heaven! On the contrary, that work on his heart, by which he was brought to this, was with him evidently but the beginning of his work, his first entering on the great business of religion and the service of God, his first setting out in his race. (500)

"On the contrary": this, the overwhelmingly dominant phrase here and throughout Edwards's polemics, is a kind of directional sign of the tendency of his language. It is difficult to illustrate the force of Edwards's linguistic re-formation with brief quotation, so much is it the effect of sheer repetitive weight. Only in the experience of this weight do we realize that the apparently simple, everyday terms he uses are often quite literally contradictions of his reader's expectations, as in this section of the "Memoirs of Mr. Brainerd," dominated by the language of beginning and struggle. In addition to this sort of contradiction Edwards relies on strategies of denial, of an almost incantatory negation. His list of what Brainerd's conversion does not consist in amounts to an anthology of the claims of many enthusiasts or, for that matter, of the accusations made against them by such liberal critics of the Awakening as Chauncy. A very brief sample:

His convictions, preceding his conversion, did not arise from any frightful impressions on his imagination, or any external images and ideas of fire and brimstone, a sword of vengeance drawn, a dark pit open, devils in terrible shapes, &c. strongly fixed in his mind. His sight of his own sinfulness did not consist in any imagination of a heap of loathsome material filthiness within him; nor did his sense of the hardness of his heart consist in any bodily feeling in his breast, something hard and heavy like a stone, nor in any imaginations whatever of such a nature.

His first discovery of God or Christ, at his conversion, was not any strong idea of any external glory or brightness, or majesty or beauty of countenance, or pleasant voice. . . . (502)

and so forth at length. Although it might be argued that the vividly detailed evocations of what is not subvert the denial itself, I would read them differently. These strong, sensual images represent the presence within the text of the error of the reader: they are points of recognition, present for denial or repudiation. And such points mark the near-limit of what *can* be transmitted to the fallen or unconverted about the nature of true grace.

What Edwards demands of the saint, and what he performs in his representation, is a severance from human connections or connectedness that is both institutional (he not only scorned the half-way covenant rejected by Stoddard but the whole idea of the covenant itself) and perceptual. The sixth sense which comes to the converted and which Edwards describes most fully in the "Treatise on the Religious Affections" is qualitatively different from the other five and indescribable in terms of them. The virtue of the converted Brainerd, as he writes in the *Life*,

not only differs from the virtue of others in degree, but even in nature and kind. . . . And he himself (who was surely best able to judge) declares, that the dispositions and affections, which were then given him, and thenceforward maintained in him, were most sensibly and certainly, perfectly different in their nature, from all that ever he was the subject of before, or that he ever had any conception of. (524)

And Edwards continues in emphasis of Brainerd's certainty and of the absolute newness of his experience and "conception." The new or sixth sense thus creates an unbridgeable gulf not only between the saint and other, fallen men but within the saint's own history and consciousness: a double estrangement, if you will, of the saint from others and from his other self. Such a gulf — epistemological and hence expressive — must pose a problem in the (Edwardsean) saint's self-representation, where the encoded error inheres in the consciousness of the narrator, that is in the consciousness which lives in time, so that its recognition and denial — our "con-version" — entail a denial of time itself.

This, I think, is what happens in and what accounts for the uniqueness of that most problematic and stunning work, Edwards's "Personal Narrative," which is most sensibly and certainly, perfectly different in its rhetorical nature, to paraphrase Brainerd, from all that ever he wrote of others. And such a gulf would also complicate the very rationale of the written saint's *Life*, that is of its exemplary usefulness. In fact, it is just this difficulty which is addressed by Hopkins at the beginning of his *Memoirs of Edwards*. That text, a much more traditional hagiography than any written by its subject, can be read as a framework of intelligibility

constructed around the "Personal Narrative," which is reproduced within it.⁵

The double estrangement of Edwards's saint achieves its poetical equivalent in the quite haunting images of solitude — of a notably exclusionary kind — with which the figure is always surrounded. Although Brainerd "was of a very sociable temper, and loved the company of saints . . . yet his warmest affections . . . were in his closet devotions and solitary transactions between God and his own soul . . ." (509). The Great Being who visits Sarah Pierrepont and "fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight" leaves no room for "all the world":

She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her. ("Sarah Pierrepont" 56)

Even the four-year old Phebe Bartlett retires to her closet ("Narrative" 86). And the "Personal Narrative," dominated throughout by the subject's solitude in closet, field, or grove, ends with the archetypal image of his being forced, on account of the "kind of loud weeping" in which his new sense of God is expressed, "to shut myself up, and fasten the doors" ("Personal Narrative" 72).

⁵ Hopkins's first paragraph is most interesting for its definition of rightly useful Christian biography and should be compared with Stowe's reflections on the ill effects of an impossible ideal, quoted above, note 1. "President Edwards," Hopkins begins, "was one of those men of whom it is not easy to speak with justice, without seeming, at least, to border on the marvellous, and to incur the guilt of adulation. The Christian biographer labours under a difficulty, in describing the characters of extraordinary men, which the writers of other lives are but too generally allowed to forget; for he is bound so to represent actions and motives, as to remind his readers, that the uncommon excellencies of a character flow entirely from the bounty of heaven, for the wisest and best purposes, and are not the result of natural vigour and acumen. Otherwise, instead of placing these excellencies in a view advantageous for imitation, or describing a character attainable as to its most valuable traits only by gracious aids, there would be danger of setting up an idol; more precious indeed than gold, but still an idol, whereby the mind would be led astray from the one great object of Christian life, Jesus Christ, whose fulness *filleth all in all*" (1–2).

The image is sweetly touching, yet it contains, as do all Edwards's images of the saint's isolation, an expressive rupture or refusal of which the implications for traditional Puritan practice could be disturbing. In rescuing the account of grace from the errors of a formulaic convention, or from the misguided and no less formulaic clichés of the enthusiasts, we could say that Edwards restores strangeness to it. But as I've tried to suggest, his re-formed account incorporates an estrangement from human converse, community, history. At the heart of his own severe orthodoxy we can detect a kind of antinomianism.

In characterizing Miller's biography of Edwards as hagiographic I don't in any way wish to suggest the meretricious wartlessness which is the almost exclusive sense of the term as it is used today, both in book reviews and more scholarly writing. It is hagiographic in that it presents its subject as the embodiment of an ideal (elusively merging the "pure artist" of Miller's time with the Visible Saint of Edwards's own); more important, it is so in structure, since the narration turns out to be the identification and elaboration of a single moment of conversion, a moment when Edwards's "whole insight was given him at once, preternaturally early, [after which] he did not change, he only deepened" (44). The moment is the fourteen-year old Edwards's reading of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: Miller calls it "the central and decisive event of his intellectual life" (52) and organizes the account of the life according to it. As this procedure suggests, the biography also follows Edwards in breaking the teleological convention, marking conversion as the motivating beginning of the history of struggle which follows, with some suggestions of an annihilating effect on the pre-conversion past. Here again we encounter an estrangement in the narrative in the relation of time, let us say, to a representation that treats its own accessibility as problematic, at least for an encoded reader who may find himself stranded or lost in time, on the wrong side of a gulf within the narrative itself.

One example of how Miller's organization of the biography reflects its temporal dislocations can be found in the presentation of the principal chapters. In contrast to the brief interludes of external biography, these have titles identifying the subjects of Edwards's interior life in its unfolding of Locke: "The Inherent Good," "The Objective Good," "Naturalism," "The Will," and so forth. Each has a substantial epigraph,

the first having two, from Thorstein Veblen and (note the order) Edwards himself. Thereafter they are taken from the following (in order): Henri Bergson, John Maynard Keynes on Newton, Franz Kafka, Samuel Richardson (the sole eighteenth-century figure besides Edwards), then Fritz Wittels on Freud, T.S. Eliot, William James, Charles Saunders Pierce, Otto Jahn on Mozart, and, for the final chapter entitled "History," Augustine. At one level these represent a straightforward manipulation of the reader's context for reading. The sight of all those Modernists framed and interrupted by Edwards, a forebear, and a contemporary reminds me of the device used by E.M. Forster at the beginning of *Aspects of the Novel*, where he imagines all the novelists of all ages sitting in a room and writing together, and himself looking over their shoulders and juxtaposing certain pairs which demonstrate that Richardson is closer to Henry James than he is to Sterne, who is more like Virginia Woolf, and so on. All this to help Forster and his readers to free themselves of traditional periods, "to exorcise," as he writes, "that demon of chronology which is at present our enemy" (29). "Edwards was not the sort," Miller asserts, "whose work can be divided into 'periods'" (44), and it seems to me that what is rejected in the term extends beyond the stages of his own life. Again and again in the text, casually helpful concessions to the reader's frame of reference perform their own covert pairings, as they work to exorcise the chronological demon:

When Edwards stood up among the New England clergy, it was as though a master of relativity spoke to a convention of Newtonians who had not yet heard of Einstein, or as though among nineteenth-century professors of philosophy, all assuming that man is rational and responsible, a strange youth began to refer, without more ado, to the id, ego and super-ego. (63-64)

What is strange in Edwards is initially so according to the historically limited or period-bound understanding of his contemporaries. Miller introduces the term during an account of Edwards's first appearance in Boston as Stoddard's successor, when the Eastern Establishment turned out to scrutinize his delivery of the Thursday Lecture. The account serves both as a dramatic opening to the narrative and as an occasion for the sort of intellectual-ecclesiastical-political-and-marvellously-personal portrait of New England at a particular historical moment that no one has ever been able to do as Miller could. Edwards's lecture might have disturbed his listeners, Miller notes, had not

their enthusiasm for the doctrine made them blind to other implications. Yet even they might have wondered about certain peculiarities of diction. Did they forgive these as the crudities of strength, as signs of a lack of Harvard training? Certainly there was something a little strange in the vocabulary, at least as compared with the use of words in other sermons of that year. . . . If Edwards was insinuating [that man is "disposed . . . only through the sensible"], he was suggesting something that to Harvard men of 1731 . . . was utterly strange. (32–34)

The perspective is theirs, presumably; the "utterly" is Miller's own and important. I have had to elide in the above passage two pages of very close reading of the lecture in the form of free indirect discourse — that is, filtered through the perspective of listeners who should find various of its parts "queer," "still more puzzling," "enigmatic," "disturbing," like "a foreign language," "gnomic." Edwards's very language is estranged from contemporary usage and understanding, and the impression left by the chapter, a *tour de force*, is that of a figure addressing an audience of his peers from across some barrier or gulf which leaves him strangely, perhaps utterly alone.

In the following chapter Miller repeats the process of close reading indirectly filtered, with the crucial shift of perspective from Edwards's contemporaries to his own, along with those predecessors who have helped form their understanding or "conception." And in doing so he gives the game, so to speak, away. Developing his exegesis of Edwards's "Divine and Supernatural Light" against the misreadings of its students and critics, Miller is led to muse on "the cryptic element" in the writing which, along with their other teachers and period-bound thinking itself, has led them astray. "One hardly knows, therefore" — the confession seems disarming —

whether the cryptic element in Edwards' writing is deliberate artistry . . . or a psychic inhibition (to use his own phrase, a moral inability). . . . We are not sure whether we have to deal with a pathological secretiveness or an inherent inexpressibility in the thought itself. . . . [H]is second publication, like his first — and his last — contains an exasperating intimation of something hidden. There is a gift held back, some esoteric intimation that the listener must make for himself.

And then the now notorious pronouncement that

Edwards' writing is an immense cryptogram, the passionate oratory of the revival no less than the hard reasoning of the treatise on the will. . . . His writings are almost a hoax, not to be read but to be seen through. (50, 51)⁶

This is a prescription for reading, but one that can be filled only by Miller, who has the key enabling him to "see through" what to others is not only strange but utterly strange: inaccessible. The key itself — Edwards's reading of Locke — is here introduced in the text; but what is to convert the reader to it I believe lies elsewhere.

Of course no self-respecting reader can ignore the invitation to read Miller's text as a cryptogram (the alternative seems to be placement in the company of benighted Harvard men from 1731 down to the present); and of course Miller's detractors have "seen through" it as almost a hoax. My own strategy is to apply to Miller his prescription for reading Edwards: as he reminds us in another context, "one must seize upon occasional passages, definitions by the way, the peculiar use of key words, and above all the use of words as incantation" (48). One notices almost immediately in the biography, for example, a kind of comic analogy to the incantatory negations of Edwards's prose, a quasi-incantatory repetition of key words or phrases which, carried through shifting and often inappropriate-seeming contexts, are redefined, defined out of ordinary usage and into something else, rather like self-negation. It is as difficult to illustrate the force of Miller's linguistic re-formation with brief quotation as it is in the case of Edwards, so prolonged and complex are his weavings of such verbal threads, but I will attempt an analysis of one, concentrating on its appearances in Chapter I.

The key word of the phrase "free and catholic" is introduced, appropriately enough, in an account of an inside joke made in the early

⁶ Oedipa Maas, heroine of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, begins her own prolonged, attempted unraveling of the immense cryptogram (possibly all a hoax) of Pierce Inverarity's Will by journeying into a Southern California landscape whose outward pattern conveys "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. . . . [where] a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (13). The search — which leads at one point, not incidentally I think, to a Berkeley professor of English who expounds on "a sect of most pure Puritans" and other "Calvinist fanatics" (116,

days of Harvard/Yale rivalry. Yale had suffered a scandal in 1722 when a generous donation of books had led, seemingly directly, to the defection of its Rector and two tutors, along with four Congregational ministers, to the Church of England.

So in 1732 when the news arrived of a second great donation . . . the dean of the Boston clergy, Benjamin Colman . . . wrote in haste to Rector Williams [of Yale] to ask if this donation meant new apostasies. Williams replied that . . . since it was made "in a true Catholick Spirit, as much (if I mistake not) as Mr. Hollis's to Harvard College," Yale was adding it to the already fine library. This was a palpable hit. Colman's favorite and insistent shibboleth was "catholick," and he had been chiefly instrumental in persuading Thomas Hollis to endow Harvard with two professorships, which at the moment were occupied, one by a man whom the . . . orthodox regarded with suspicion, and the other by a well-known toper. (8-9)

Miller is here able not only to demonstrate his uncanny intimacy with his historical characters — he can sense the subtlest nuances of the insults they exchange — but to make his own contribution to the joke, extending the associations of "catholick" from too-liberal books and apostasy to earthier vices.

The full phrase, appearing in the same context, forms part of the explanatory background.

Colman is worth dwelling upon because, while he was a friend to everybody, he proved a good friend to Jonathan Edwards. His sermons breathed the spirit which he and Leverett had made synonymous with that of Harvard, "free and catholick." It was his practice, after delivering a series on some topic, to publish it as a sort of provincial *Spectator*. (18)

The quotation marks and eighteenth-century spelling indicate, or at least acknowledge, the meaning intended by Colman and Leverett; the literary

119) — comes near to an end at the edge of the desert and at her own revelation of meaning: "She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America" (134). My intimation of Miller's (or Miller's Edwards's) presence here and elsewhere in Pynchon may be an esoteric one but is nonetheless strong.

allusion works as a bridge between Colman, who presumably admired and perhaps (like the young Ben Franklin, who later admitted as much in his *Autobiography*) consciously imitated the *Spectator*, and the reader who knows what its "spirit" is. A page later quotation marks are dropped and modern usage enters in:

His generation had grown up in the shadow of the Mathers and their rebellion had taken the form, in sheer self-defense, of the genial and irenical. Now they were grave and reverend seniors, who vaguely sensed that among the newer generation lines were again being sharply drawn, that the clash of fundamental differences could no longer be muted by the free and catholic approach. (20)

The phrase works as a label to characterize a policy. Quotation is resumed — the label is now a motto — as Miller enters the mind of Edwards:

"Free and catholick" was their motto, but to Jonathan Edwards, conditioned by the tumult of primitive Yale and trained by Stoddard to the standards of frontier autocracy, they incarnated everything most corrupt and complacent in the metropolis. (23)

Edwards judges what *he* takes to be a contradiction (I follow the evidence of the adversative conjunction) between what they say they are and what they really embody; but already we sense a displacement in the prose, the truer antithesis to "free and catholic" seeming to reside in "primitive" and "autocratic." A stitch to be picked up later, as it may be in Miller's remark on the fate of a Harvard-trained minister who settled in Stoddard country, "where he soon made so clear his free and catholic sentiments that in 1739 half his congregation seceded from him" (25).

When Miller interprets the printing of a certain sermon as an "opening maneuver of the free and catholic faction" (27) we hardly notice — the characterizing label is so well-established — that the phrase is used to modify something which contradicts it. But, the chapter educates us for the rest of the book, no use of the words or their variants can be wholly neutral or innocent. The statement that in the Lecture Edwards demonstrated "a kind of fierce moderation . . . but it was the restraint of an inward discipline, not of catholicity" (29) demands virtual translation: "Edwards showed moderation," it might run, "in his presentation of

Calvinist doctrine [the 'fierce' is surely displaced] but from purer motives than the conciliatory or even hypocritical ones we might expect from the free and catholic faction" or, as it is characterized in a later reference, "wing" of the clergy, "whose sermons," Miller notes on this occasion, "were rapidly becoming literary orations to which a text was mechanically prefixed" (48). Once associated with Addison, they are rapidly becoming belletristic show-offs whose always implicit class affiliations are confirmed in a still later shift of reference from the "clergy" to the "free and catholic gentlemen" (179).

The free and catholic spirit, confessing by its scorn of cramming principles down another man's throat that it had no principles to cram, was setting up an ideal of candor attached to no particular scheme. . . . (56)

What is masterly about this editorializing is that it is almost redundant: the words "free and catholic" have already been effectively "emptied" of their common meaning; like the ideal of candor they profess to represent, they are not attached to what they should be and indeed come close to signifying emptiness itself. But mere emptiness cannot carry the full weight of historical explanation demanded in the passage opening the chapter on "Revivalism":

The mysterious phenomenon known in Germany as Pietism, in England as evangelicalism and Methodism, in America as the Great Awakening, presents everywhere a curious uniformity, as though each people had been searching for the same thing, and suddenly, in the heyday of the Enlightenment, found it. Whatever it was, it was always a rejection, a violent rejection, of the free and catholic spirit. (133)

By contrast, a local and personal (and almost final) application of the phrase suggests the "fullness" of an aggressive ideology:

In the summer of 1742, as James Davenport was wrecking the Awakening, there appeared in Boston one of the most effective pieces of propaganda the counterreaction hit upon. . . . Bibliographers doubt that Chauncy wrote it, but Edwards thought he did; it was clearly the work of the free and catholic cabal . . . to counter this, the cheapest of all attacks, Edwards employed a means as astonishing and as revelatory as any in modern literature. (203)

A connection can be drawn, I think, between the linguistic re-formation

exemplified in "free and catholic" and the breathtaking hyperboles which Miller permits himself throughout his text, as in the last phrase quoted above. Indeed the not-so-displaced antithesis to "free and catholic" in this instance *is* the equally re-formed "modern," although we would have to have traced that thread as well to appreciate fully how the opposition works.

In part it works on quite simple manipulations which gain in cumulative effect. If the literal or commonsense antithesis to "free and catholic" is "unfree [here in the sense of intolerant more than imprisoned] and narrow or sectarian," then just as "free and catholic" has been "emptied" or relegated to a sterile past, so its implicit, unspecified opposite has been "filled" and projected into a vital present which is or should be ours. Much as this process may overturn our ordinary sense or usage, I hesitate to apply it to my term "estrangement," since it seems inappropriate to the apparently confiding relationship which prevails between narrator or writer and reader in this as in all Miller's prose. But estranged or not, converted we are. When Miller writes that under Edwards "a once harsh doctrine which for over a century had been progressively rendered harmless and comfortable, was once more harsh," we assent to the positive tone of the statement. We even assent, on the basis of our re-formed sense of the autocratic, to its immediate corollary — "It was imperiously brought back to life" (80). Now if this seems today recognizably datable — according to the "neo-orthodox revival" of the thirties and the post-war fifties expounded by Donald Weber in his Introduction to the 1981 edition (xi–xxi); or more remotely, to the anti-humanist orthodoxy of Eliotic High Modernism — it is probably because such elements are present in the text, forming part of its own cultural history or "moment." What I wish to stress is that such elements are peripheral to the strategies we are concerned with as to the achievement which is their sum, the re-formation of Edwards himself.

Chapter I has established not only a tone for the biography but a paradigm: in the opening narrative Edwards is placed before a fully particularized and representative group of his contemporaries, and yet from it he emerges isolated and alone; in the biography as a whole Edwards is placed in a densely realized historical context from which he is nevertheless comparably isolated. This is not simply a question of a character's being out of step with his time (although a case could be made for Miller's having inverted the line of the "tragic waste" school, showing

Edwards not as behind his times but as so far ahead that even we haven't caught up). True, Edwards is estranged from his contemporaries (in our eyes) by the wall of their incomprehension by which we see him surrounded. But is this all? The text asserts categorically, "He was a man of his century" (95), yet there is an exasperating intimation of something hidden, some esoteric intimation to be drawn from the language itself. From the same passage in the text:

He would, I am sure, agree that Whitehead put thus simply the heart of his meaning, and he would agree further with Whitehead that men of thought, by virtue of this perception, are ultimately rulers of the world, but he knew more than Whitehead ever did of what is actually required for ruling a New England town. (95)

The historical world inhabited by Edwards's contemporaries most often seems to be crowded out of his interior life by another, a world of invisible presences always conversing with him: Whitehead as well as Locke, Einstein as well as Newton, an Emerson from whose transcendentalism he was "prepared to dissent in advance" (240) and who comes to seem less a follower than a superseded predecessor, an effect I can only call apophrades-run-backwards. Terminology, as Miller so often remarks, is a problem. Beneath the surface of his dazzling erudition and sheer narrative drive, we detect a strange and deeply paradoxical ahistoricism.

The universalizing tendency of an ahistorical or decontextualizing representation seems to me self-evident, as is its connection to the discourse of universal values (aesthetic, spiritual, and so forth) from which the traditional canon has been constructed. What I find surprising and paradoxical in the author of *The New England Mind* may turn out, given the canonization to which *Jonathan Edwards* is committed, to be inevitable. Certainly the passage on Edwards and Whitehead quoted above assumes a timeless company of the Great to which each figure belongs in a sense different from his belonging to his century; certainly — this is for us axiomatic — Miller's own values and time are inseparable from his imagination of this timeless realm. But it does not necessarily follow that his discourse of canon-formation or, in keeping with the comparison I have been pursuing, of hagiographic estrangement from temporal and other contexts, is as vulnerable to deconstructive or new

historicist exposure as some recent critical challenges to it assume. Consider two 1985 studies (Michaels and Pease; Tompkins) which, while largely crediting Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) with fixing "the small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion" of American literature since its appearance (Tompkins 199), acknowledge a wider school of which it is a part and in which Miller's work plays a major if not founding role. Tompkins seems to me the most vulnerable in her revisionist project, since the "new kind of historical criticism" she proposes, in which the "value" of a work depends on its "cultural reflection" of the commonly held values of its time (xi—xv *et passim*), can reduce itself to quite crude tautology.⁷ But the essays in the more sophisticated collection of Michaels and Pease are often similarly flawed. Subjecting a certain universalizing discourse to corrective historicism can involve pitfalls which Miller, at least, seems almost to have prepared in advance. As the comparison with Edwards should have indicated, a kind of proleptic resistance to such correction is built into a rhetoric which encodes as error, and deconstructs, its own temporality — in its linguistic norms and in other conventions performing the work of cultural reflection. In this context it seems to me as beside the point to unmask, say, the cold-war rhetoric of Matthiessen (Pease 113—55) as it is to try to uncover those influences which Harold Bloom might be Anxious to conceal.

But how, if not through the unlikely route of apophrades-run-backwards, have we arrived at Harold Bloom? Perhaps, as is so often the case in American letters, we simply find ourselves under an Emersonian umbrella. Perhaps the route is more devious. Having begun this essay with Niebuhr's evocation of detective fiction, I am inclined to end by breaking one of its cardinal rules against the introduction of new elements on the last page. I have considered Miller as self-appointed Son in his work of post-Puritan hagiography; let me now propose him as Strong Father to a quite different critical offspring.

⁷ Although the New Historicism is commonly held to be incompatible with if not hostile to Deconstruction, I find a blurring of the two in the works cited, symptomized perhaps by Tompkins's self-alignment with Derrida (xv). In a critique of recent books which challenge or dissent from the American literary canon, including *Sensational Designs*, Peter Carofiol arrives at a conclusion near to the paradox I have been exploring here: that is, that such works "use historicist arguments to escape the constraints of history" (615). Not a bad description of our modern, academic hagiography.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Flowering of New England, 1815–1868*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1957.
- Carofiol, Peter. "The Constraints of History: Revision and Revolution in American Literary Studies." *College English* 50 (1988): 626–38.
- Edwards, Jonathan. "An Appendix containing some Reflections and Observations on the preceding Memoirs of Mr. Brainerd." *The Life of David Brainerd*. The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 7. Ed. Norman Pettit. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985: 500–42.
- . "Narrative of the Surprising Conversions" (original and revised accounts). Faust and Johnson 73–91.
- . "Personal Narrative." Faust and Johnson 57–72.
- . "Religious Affections." Faust and Johnson 206–54.
- . "Sarah Pierrepont." Faust and Johnson 56.
- Faust, Clarence H. and Thomas H. Johnson, eds. *Representative Selections*. By Jonathan Edwards. Rev. ed. American Century Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962.
- Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Eds. Leonard Labaree et al. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.
- Haroutunian, Joseph. *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology*. New York: Henry Holt, 1932.
- Hopkins, Samuel. *Memoirs of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, A.M., President of the College in New Jersey*. Rev. and enlarged by the editors of Edwards' works. London: B. John Hawksley, 1815.
- Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.
- Mencken, H.L. *Prejudices: Fourth Series*. New York: A. Knopf, 1924.
- Michaels, Walter Benn and Donald E. Pease. *The American Renaissance Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982–83*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards*. Intro. by Donald Weber. New England Writers Series. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.
- . *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1953.
- . *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. New York: Macmillan, 1939.
- Morgan, Edmund S. *Visible Saints: the History of a Puritan Idea*. New York: New York University Press, 1963.

- Niebuhr, Reinhold. Rev. of *Jonathan Edwards*, by Perry Miller. *The Nation* 31 December 1949: 648.
- Parrington, Vernon Louis. "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards." *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginning to 1920*. 3 vols. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927–30. I.148–63.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Bantam, 1967.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *The Minister's Wooing*. New York: The Library of America, 1982.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Wendell, Barrett. *A Literary History of America*. New York: Scribners, 1900.
- Winslow, Ola. *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography*. New York: Macmillan, 1940.