

MAIN CURRENTS IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

AN INTERPRETATION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE  
FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO 1920

BY

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

THE COLONIAL MIND

1620-1800

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Foreword by David W. Levy



VOLUME I ♦ 1620-1800

THE COLONIAL MIND

VOLUME II ♦ 1800-1860

THE ROMANTIC REVOLUTION IN AMERICA

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THE BEGINNINGS OF CRITICAL REALISM IN AMERICA

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the pages of controversial literature, indicating the nature of the attack being directed against Calvinism. Dogma was face to face with rationalism.

A critical movement had long been developing in England, undermining there the foundations of Calvinism; and in this work members of the Anglican clergy had aided. Hooker had been a rationalist and the influence of the *Ecclesiastical Polity* was thrown in favor of an appeal to reason and to history. He rejected a literal Hebraism for a more philosophical interpretation of the Scripture. "The Light of naturall understanding, wit and reason, is from God," he argued; "he it is which thereby doth illuminate every man entering into the World. He is the Author of all that we think or do by vertue of that light which himselfe hath given."<sup>2</sup> Because of this rationalizing tendency the Anglican clergy, before the middle of the seventeenth century, had passed from the Calvinistic to the Arminian position. The fundamental dogma of Arminianism was the doctrine of the freedom of the will—that the elect of God are not pre-chosen, but a righteous life and good works will bring men into the way of salvation. Destructive of the whole Calvinistic system as such doctrine was—striking at the taproot of determinism—Arminianism carried a social significance greater than its theological import: it was an expression of the ideal of individual responsibility that emerged from the decay of the feudal system. The first reformers had asserted the right to individual interpretation of the Scriptures; the Arminians threw upon the individual the whole responsibility, bidding him assert his will and achieve his own salvation.

English rationalism was carried further by a notable group of thinkers, including Milton and Locke, who rapidly passed from Arminianism to Arianism, and thence to Deism. By the beginning of the eighteenth century English Presbyterianism, which had clung to Calvinism long after the defection of the Anglicans, was undermined by the growing rationalism and finally passed over into Unitarianism. Calvinism had lost the battle in the old world and ceased to play an important part in the intellectual life of England. In the face of this steady drift away from the conception of a divine Will that dwarfed the human will and held it fixed in the mesh of the divine purpose, towards the conception of the responsibility of the individual and the significance of the moral

<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesiastical Polity*, sixth edition, Book III, p. 10.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ANACHRONISM OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

#### I

BEFORE an adequate democratic philosophy could arise in this world of pragmatic individualism, the traditional system of New England theology must be put away, and a new conception of man and of his duty and destiny in the world must take its place. For the moment Calvinism was strengthened by the coming of the Scotch-Irish who spread the familiar dogmas along the frontier, remote from attack by old-world rationalism; nevertheless those dogmas carried within them the seeds of slow decay. The world that had created them lay in a forgotten past. The five points of Calvinism, postulated on a God of wrath, were no longer living principles answering to common experience; they were become no other than ghosts that walked on the Sabbath to terrify the timid. An intellectual *Aufklärung* was a necessary preliminary to the creation of a fruitful social philosophy. Theology must be made to square with actuality, or yield control of men's minds to more stimulating things.

But unfortunately there was no vigorous attack but only a tedious decay. The old was too deeply entrenched to be routed, and stricken with palsy it lingered out a morose old age. For years New England stewed in its petty provincialism, untouched by the brisk debates that stirred the old world. No vigorous disputant challenged its orthodoxy. In the year 1726 Cotton Mather wrote, "I cannot learn, That among all the Pastors of Two Hundred Churches, there is one Arminian; much less an Arian, or a Gentilist."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless rationalism was in the air, and although it might be excluded from the minister's study, it spread its subtle infection through the mass of the people. The backwash of English deism reached the shores of New England, and by the decade of the forties a movement of liberalism seems to have got under way. The word Arminian sprinkles more freely

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Walker, *History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, p. 216.



code in the work of salvation, the New England Calvinists found their work cut out for them. A critical spirit was stirring, an incipient rationalism was beginning to ask questions; orthodoxy for the first time was on the defensive, and ill equipped for the pending battle.

But Calvinism had fallen into the clutch of forces greater and more revolutionary than either minister or congregation realized. To preach with convincing force one must appeal to the common experience; dogma must seem to square with the evident facts of life; it must appear to be the inevitable and sufficient explanation of the mysteries and perplexities that beset men in the world of reality. When it ceases to be a reasonable working hypothesis in the light of common experience, it is no longer a controlling influence in men's lives. And this was the unhappy predicament in which Calvinism now found itself. Take, for example, the doctrine of total depravity. In the corrupt worlds of Augustine and John Calvin such a doctrine must have seemed a reasonable explanation of the common brutality; an evil society must spring from the evil heart of man. But in the village world of New England the doctrine had lost its social sanction. When in moments of calm sense these provincial Calvinists asked themselves if the human heart were in truth utterly depraved, if they themselves and their neighbors were such vipers and worms as they professed to be, the conviction must have grown upon them that such professions were untrue. The everyday life of the New England village was animated by rugged virtues—by kindness toward neighbors and faithfulness to a strict ethical code, rather than by hatred to God and man, or brutal wallowing in sin. In short, these villagers knew that they were very far from a bad lot; and when they pondered on this fact they must have discovered increasing difficulty in reconciling Sunday dogma and week-day experience. Although they repeated the familiar creed, the sanction for that creed was gone; it was the voice of dogma that spoke, and not the voice of reason and experience.<sup>3</sup>

Such is the explanation, as well, of the decay of another of the cardinal points of Calvinism—the dogma of special election. In an aristocratic society it is natural to believe that God has set men apart in classes; but as the leveling process tended to strip away social distinctions, the new individualism undermined the

<sup>3</sup> See Wendell, *Literary History of America*, p. 89.

older class psychology. When the common man has freed himself from political absolutism, he will become dissatisfied with theological absolutism. The right to achieve salvation is a natural corollary to the right to win social distinction; that one's future status lay wholly beyond the reach of one's will, that it rested in the hands of an arbitrary God who gave or withheld salvation at pleasure, was a conception that ill accorded with the nascent ideal of democracy. When that ideal should be sufficiently clarified, the dogma of the elect of God, like the aristocratic conception of the king's favorite, would be quietly put away in the potter's field.

As the century advanced, the growing dissatisfaction with Calvinism received fresh impetus from the new social philosophy of France. The teaching of Rousseau that in a state of nature men were good, that they are still sound at heart, and that the evils of civilization have resulted from a perversion of the social contract, would appeal to men whose experience was daily teaching them the falseness of the traditional dogmas; and the ideal of equality would come home with special meaning to men bred up in villages and on the frontier. Such doctrines were fundamentally hostile to the spirit of Calvinism: not only did Rousseau set the doctrine of human perfectibility over against the dogma of total depravity, but he quickened the passion of revolt against every form of arbitrary authority, theological as well as political and social. Although the provincial colonial might not come in immediate contact with such speculative philosophy, in the long run he could not escape being influenced by it, and that influence would count against a decadent theology that held men's minds in its tenacious *rigor mortis*.

The crux of the question, it came finally to be seen by the apologists of the old order, lay in the fundamental problem of determinism. Was the will of man effectively free, or was it held in strict subjection to the stable will of God? According as the decision went touching this question, would stand or fall the entire metaphysical structure of Calvinism. To this problem, therefore, the best minds among the ministers directed their thought; and the historical position of Jonathan Edwards, greatest of the defenders of Calvinism, is revealed in its true perspective when his labors are studied in the light of this vital question.



Never had the traditional theology been so sorely in need of a champion as at the beginning of the second quarter of the eighteenth century; and such a champion God raised up—many devout Calvinists believed—in the person of Jonathan Edwards. Armed at all points—a theologian equipped with the keenest dialectics, a metaphysician endowed with a brilliantly speculative mind, a psychologist competent to deal with the subtlest phenomena of the sick soul—here was a man who might be counted on to justify the ancient dogmas to the troubled churches of New England.

The offspring of four generations of religious enthusiasts, by every right of heredity and training the child of Puritanism, Jonathan Edwards was the last and greatest of the royal line of Puritan mystics. As a young man he felt himself to be living in the very presence of God; he was conscious of the divine life flowing through and around him, making him one with the Godhood; and he was filled with yearning for personal union with the divine love in Christ. His intellectual and spiritual life was molded by a God-consciousness as passionate as that of Spinoza; and it is this fact of a lifelong devotion to the God-idea that furnishes the clue to an understanding of his later development. Not content that God had marked him for His own, he must build a philosophical universe about the Godhood, justifying his mysticism by a metaphysical idealism. He must examine critically the foundations of his creed and establish his theology upon philosophy. No obscurity must remain unprobed, no link in the chain of reasoning escape challenge: he must base the five points of Calvinism upon a metaphysics that should relate them to a universal system of thought, giving them a cosmic as well as a Biblical sanction. It was a great ambition, likely to prove too difficult even for the remarkable powers of Edwards; and if in pursuit of new arguments for old doctrines, he found himself inclosed in a mesh of subtleties, if his theology and metaphysics were never quite reconciled, blame must be laid upon the difficulty of the undertaking rather than on the incapacity of the thinker. To one cardinal principle Edwards was faithful—the conception of the majesty and sufficiency of God; and this polar idea provides the clue to both his philosophical and theological systems.

Yet with this as a guide there is much that remains perplexing. There are inconsistencies in his thought as there were in his pastoral life; and we shall understand his position only when we recognize the contrary tendencies which confused him, as the inevitable consequences of a system of thought that was at once reactionary and progressive, the outcome of certain latent inconsistencies too antagonistic for any thinker to reconcile. As the defender of the traditional theology, setting his face against the developing experience of his generation, and as a rigid disciplinarian, reverting to the older Separatist conception of a church of the elect, and rejecting the "whole way covenant" of his grandfather Stoddard, he may perhaps appear in the light of a reactionary. But as the expounder of philosophic idealism he was looking forward to Emerson; and as the advocate of the new revivalistic methods, exalting the experience of conversion as the central fact of the Christian life, and assisting the forces that were drawing church and state apart, he was a pronounced revolutionist, the schismatic leader of the New Lights and the father of later Congregationalism. That Edwards was aware of certain inconsistencies is fairly evident; that he was puzzled, hesitated, and stopped halfway in his labors, is evident too, unless we believe, with Mrs. Stowe, that certain of his speculations were too daring to put into print. The chains that bound him were too strong to be broken; the contradictions that lay at the root of the Calvinistic system could be eradicated only by grubbing up the whole, and for that the time had not yet come.

In his early years, before his conversion turned him aside from his true path, setting the apologetics of the theologian above the speculations of the philosopher, Edwards gave promise of becoming a strikingly creative thinker. Following the native bent of his genius, he plunged into the study of metaphysics with such fruitful results that it seemed likely that New England Puritanism was at last to come to flower; that the mystical perception of the divine love, which had steeped the early Puritan thought in emotion and quickened it to poetry, was now to create a system of philosophy which, like transcendentalism in the next century, should adequately express the aspirations of the New England mind. There is no more interesting phase in the early history of Edwards than the transition from religious mysticism to philosophical idealism. The yearning for the knitting of the soul to Christ, as expressed



in the imagery of the Song of Songs, burgeoned into a larger idealism that translated the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley into an all-pervasive spirit of divine life. In certain moods it is the mystic who cries, "My soul breaketh for the longing it hath; my soul waiteth for the Lord, more than they who watch for the morning."

He was reading one day the words of Scripture [says Allen, paraphrasing Edwards' diary], "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever, Amen," when there came to him for the first time a sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things. A sense of the divine glory was, as it were, diffused through him. He thought how happy he should be if he might be rapt up to God in Heaven, swallowed up in him forever. He began to have an inward, sweet sense of Christ and the work of redemption. The Book of Canticles attracted him as a fit expression for his mood. It seemed to him as if he were in a kind of vision, alone in the mountains or some solitary wilderness, conversing sweetly with Christ and wrapt and swallowed up in God. . . . God's Excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything—in the sun, moon, and stars; in clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature, which used greatly to fix my mind.<sup>4</sup>

In other moods the intellect gains ascendancy over the emotions, and it is the idealistic metaphysician who speaks. With a searching curiosity that impelled him to ask what lies behind the outward semblance of things, binding them into a coherent whole and imparting to the world of experience a compelling unity, he came early to an interpretation distinctly Berkeleyan. From what source he derived it has been much debated and remains unanswered; nevertheless it is clear that it is closely related to his religious mysticism. When he inquired what lies back of the outward semblance, what is the thing in itself behind attributes and qualities, the existence of which is implicit in our perception of time and space, but which cannot be resolved into the things perceived, it was natural that he should have interpreted this *Ding an sich* in terms of God. "Men are wont to content themselves by saying merely that it is something; but that something is *He* in whom all things consist."<sup>5</sup> The world of sensation thus translates itself into a world of ideas; and this world of ideas, the expression of the divine mind, is the only reality. The more important of his early generalizations are given by Allen in some

<sup>4</sup> *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

extracts from his notes on the "Mind": "Bodies have no existence of their own." "All existence is mental; the existence of all things is ideal." "The brain exists only mentally, or in idea." "Instead of matter being the only proper substance, and more substantial than anything else because it is hard and solid, yet it is truly nothing at all, strictly and in itself considered." "The universe exists nowhere but in the divine mind." "Space is necessary, eternal, infinite, and omnipresent. But I had as good speak plain. I have already said as much as that space is God." "And indeed the secret lies here,—that which truly is the substance of all bodies is the infinitely exact and precise and perfectly stable Idea in God's mind, together with His stable will that the same shall gradually be communicated to us, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exact established methods and laws; or, in somewhat different language, the infinitely exact, precise, Divine Idea, together with the answerable, perfectly exact, precise, and stable will, with respect to correspondent communications to created minds and effects on their minds."<sup>6</sup>

Edwards had come to such conclusions before the normal unfolding of his mind was interrupted by his conversion. From the first a strong bias toward theology had tended to warp his interest in the purely metaphysical, and with the quickening of an active religious experience, he turned to examine the dogmas which expressed his faith. The call of the churches in distress came to him, and he made ready his logic to do battle with the enemy. Against the twin tendencies that were undermining the foundations of Calvinism—Arminianism with its humanistic emphasis and deism with its mechanistic—the deepest instincts of Edwards protested. The profound God-consciousness that filled him was stirred by what seemed an infidel attack upon the divine glory and sufficiency; the mystic and idealist was aroused to protest against a theology that conceived of religion as consisting of benevolence toward men rather than in union with God; and against a philosophy that in constructing a mechanical system was de-personalizing God into a vague First Cause, and bowing him politely out of the universe. In so great a crisis his duty seemed clear—to vindicate, not the ways of God, but God himself to men; to assert the glory

<sup>6</sup> For an examination of the philosophy of Edwards, see Adam Leroy Jones, "Early American Philosophers," in *Columbia University Contributions to Philosophy, Psychology and Education*, Vol. II, No. 4, Chapter 4.



and sufficiency of God even to the extent of minifying the capacities and potentialities of man.

The basis of his defense was already provided in his metaphysics, the conception of the divine idea existent in God's mind and expressed in His stable will. The needs of his polemics, however, thrust into relief the secondary rather than the primary element in his philosophy, exalting the doctrine of the divine will to the obscuring of the divine idea. How this came about is sufficiently clear in the light of the fact that in explaining the existence of evil, Calvinism fell back on determinism: the dogma of election could be fitted to the conception of a precise and stable will of God. The long feud between Arminianism and Calvinism resulted from emphasis laid upon different attributes of the Godhood. Shall God be interpreted in terms of will or love? If He is the sovereign ruler of the universe, He is also the common father; and that which broadly divides later theological systems from earlier is the shift from the former interpretation to the latter. The strategic weakness of Edwards's position lay in his assumption of the divine sovereignty as a cardinal postulate.

But in adhering to the doctrine of predetermined election by the sovereign will of God, Edwards did unconscious violence to the instincts of the mystic, that throughout his earlier speculations—and in much of his later, as well—impelled him to glorify the love of God the Father, and the sweetness of spiritual communion with Him. The practical necessities of the preacher, called upon to uphold the dogma of election in face of growing disbelief, seem to have forced him to such a position; but once having entered upon the train of speculation opened by the question of divine polity involved in "His having mercy on whom He will have mercy, while whom He will, He hardeneth," he came somewhat reluctantly to accept the doctrine of God's sovereignty as the cardinal principle of his theology, the creative source of his thinking. Thereafter he followed a path that led back to an absolutist past, rather than forward to a more liberal future. He had broken wholly with the social tendencies of his age and world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a statement of the doctrine, see Sermon XXXIV, "God's Sovereignty," in *Works*, New York, 1847, Vol. IV, p. 548.

Edwards unconsciously admits that the doctrine of sovereignty was reactionary. "From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's 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." Later he came to regard such repugnance as the sinful expression of the

The philosophical conception of divine sovereignty was too abstract to concern the New England laity; it was rather against the dependent dogmas of election and total depravity that the revolt was rising. And in defense of these threatened dogmas Edwards put forth his best strength. The crux of the matter, obviously, lay in the difficult question of the power of will. The entire structure of Calvinistic theology had been erected upon the assumption of determinism; and it must stand or fall according as the argument should justify or fail to justify that hypothesis. If the human will is effectively free to choose between good and evil, the dogma of the elect must go down with the dogma of predestination; and the teachings of the Arminians—tending, as they seemed to the Calvinist, to abase the creator in exalting the creature, and minifying the sovereignty of God in magnifying the excellence of man—would be in a way to prevail. Around this crucial point the battle had long raged, and it was with full realization of the critical nature of the problem that Edwards resolved to penetrate to the root of the matter, and by subjecting the question of determinism to exact analysis, rout the enemies of Calvinism from the inmost keep of their stronghold. His celebrated work *On the Freedom of the Will*, written in 1754, not only was his most important contribution to theology, but it was the last great defense of the conservatism that was stifling the intellectual life of New England.

The argument of this knotty book rests on a psychological rather than a metaphysical basis. Compressed into the briefest terms it runs thus: will is subject to desire, and desire follows what seems to us good; hence the determining impulse is to be sought in the impulse to seek the apparent good. The ethical import of such an argument will turn, of course, upon the character of the good which the natural man may be expected to desire. To Rousseau with his benevolent interpretation of human nature nothing is to be feared from the subjection of will to desire. Nor to the younger Edwards, feeling his way along the path of trans-  
natural man. As he saw further, his mind "apprehended the justice and reasonableness of . . . God's absolute sovereignty and justice with respect to salvation . . . as much as of anything that I see with my eyes; at least it is so at times. But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. . . . But my first conviction was not so." Quoted in Allen, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 37-38.



scendentalism, rediscovering the doctrine of the inner light, was such subjection to be feared. In a remarkable sermon published in 1734, he had expounded the thesis, "That there is such a thing as a Spiritual and Divine Light, immediately imparted to the Soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means."<sup>8</sup> The divine splendor which the idealist had seen diffused through the material world the theologian was now merging with the regenerative life of the Holy Spirit which "acts in the mind of a saint as an in-dwelling vital principle." It is "a kind of emanation of God's beauty, and is related to God as the light is to the sun"; it is a new vision by means of which one may "see the beauty and loveliness of spiritual things." In such a reinterpretation of the Quaker doctrine—so harshly condemned by the earlier Puritans—Edwards entered upon a train of thought that threatened to disrupt the entire Calvinistic system. He was at the dividing of the ways; he must abandon transcendentalism or the dogma of total depravity.

Instead he sought refuge in compromise, endeavoring to reconcile what was incompatible. Herein lay the tragedy of Edwards's intellectual life; the theologian triumphed over the philosopher, circumscribing his powers to ignoble ends. The field of efficiency allotted by the later theologian to this "in-dwelling vital principle," was no longer coextensive with the universe, but was narrowed to the little world of the elect. In the primal state of man, Edwards argued, before the sin of Adam had destroyed the harmony between creature and creator, the light which flowed from God as from a sun shone freely upon His universe, filling its remotest parts with the divine plenitude; but with the fall the harmony was destroyed, the sun was hidden, and only stray beams broke through the rifts to shine upon those whom God willed them to shine upon; all else in creation was given over to eternal darkness. And if the natural man, thus cast into sudden darkness "as light ceases in a room when the candle is withdrawn," is a being whose will is impotent to his salvation, it follows that he will now be impelled as inevitably towards evil as before he was impelled towards good. Every instinct of a nature corrupt and compact of sin, and with no wish to exchange darkness for light—having no eyes for the divine glory—drives him to a blind and consuming hatred of God. He is become as a loathsome "viper, hissing and spitting poison

<sup>8</sup> Sermon XXVII, in *Works*, Vol. IV, p. 438.

at God," the outcast and pariah of the universe. There is no drawing back from the conclusion involved in the argument; the Edwardean logic moves forward by regular steps. The punishment meted out to sin is to be measured by the excellence of which the sin is a denial. God is of infinite excellence, and denial of His excellence is therefore infinitely sinful and merits infinite punishment. As a perfectly just judge God could not decree otherwise; because of the infinite heinousness of his sin, the natural man must receive the doom of eternal damnation.<sup>9</sup>

Under the rod of such logic—grotesque, abortive, unseasoned by any saving knowledge of human nature—Edwards preached that remarkable series of imprecatory sermons that sank deep into the memory of New England, and for which it has never forgiven him.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunate as those sermons were in darkening the fame of an acute thinker, disastrous as they were in providing a sanction for other men to terrify the imaginations of ill-balanced persons, we cannot regret that Edwards devoted his logic to an assiduous stoking of the fires of hell. The theology of Calvin lay like a heavy weight upon the soul of New England, and there could be no surer way to bring it into disrepute, than to thrust into naked relief the brutal grotesqueries of those dogmas that professed thus to explain the dark mysteries which lie upon the horizons of life. For a long while yet they were to harass the imagination of New England, but the end already could be foreseen. Once the horrors that lay in the background of Calvinism were disclosed to common view, the system was doomed. It might still wear the semblance of life; it might still remain as an evil genius to darken the conscience of men and women; but its authoritative appeal was gone. In this necessary work of freeing the spirit of New England, no

<sup>9</sup> See Sermon IX, in *Works*, Vol. IV, p. 226. The argument is unfolded in the following propositions: "Every crime or fault deserves a greater or less punishment, according as the crime is greater or less." "A crime is more or less heinous, according as we are under greater or less obligations to the contrary." "Our obligations to love, honor, and obey any being, is in proportion to its loveliness, honorableness, and authority." "But God is a being infinitely lovely, because he hath infinite excellence and beauty." "So that sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving of infinite punishment."

<sup>10</sup> See in particular Sermon XI, "The Eternity of Hell Torments"; Sermon XII, "When the Wicked shall have filled up the measure of their Sin, wrath will come upon them to the uttermost"; Sermon XIII, "The End of the Wicked contemplated by the Righteous; or, The Torments of the Wicked in Hell, no occasion of grief to the Saints in Heaven"; Sermon XV, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *Works*, Vol. IV.



other thinker played so large or so unconscious a part as Jonathan Edwards; and it was the notorious minatory sermons—the translation into vivid images of the generalized dogmas—that awakened the popular mind to an understanding of the conclusions involved in the premises.

While Edwards was thus hastening the decay of Calvinism with his lurid painting of “the landscape of hell,” in another phase of his work he was engaged in awakening an interest in religion among the slothful churches. He had long been interested in the phenomena of conversion, and as the great revival of the forties, led by Whitfield, spread from England to the colonies, he joined eagerly in the work. In consequence of an earlier revival in his parish of Northampton, his attention had been drawn to the little understood psychology of the awakening soul, and with the detachment of the scientist he set himself to study the problem. The terrors aroused by his minatory sermons provided his clinical laboratory with numerous cases of abnormal emotionalism. Day after day he probed and analyzed and compared, until as a result of his close studies in vivisection, he became a specialist in the theory of conversion, commanding the eager attention of a generation that had come to look upon this as the central fact of Christian experience. It is not easy today to be sympathetic with this phase of Edwards’s work; it belongs equally with his dogmas to a world of thought that is no longer ours. The repulsive records as they are set down in his *Narrative of the Surprising Works of God*, marked by evidence of pathological states of mind not far removed from insanity, no longer seem a testimony to God’s beneficent presence; the spiritual writhings which this gentle-natured student watched with such fascination, appear rather to be cases for the alienist to prescribe for. But to Edwards the terrors of a five-year-old girl were not pathological; they were the soul-labors of the spiritual rebirth, the visible signs of the supreme miracle of the universe, filling him with wonder and awe at God’s infinite mercy; and like a modern psychologist he was at enormous pains to chart the successive steps in the miraculous transformation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> According to Edwards there were four regular stages: (1) the first stirrings, when the sinner is brought under conviction that he is lost; (2) the realization of God’s justice, that he merits damnation; (3) the breaking in of the light, the first “gracious discoveries” of God’s mercies; (4) peace after the storm, the joy of assurance of salvation. For a fuller statement, see Allen, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 133–160.

Other and greater consequences were to flow from the new revivalism. The Great Awakening was the single movement that stirred the colonial heart deeply during three generations. It reveals, among other things, that America was still living in the world of the seventeenth century: that the upper class was not yet rationalized, nor the middle class commercialized. Theology was still of greater popular interest than politics. In its chief phenomena the Great Awakening was a return to an earlier age—to those unbalanced enthusiasms of the Puritan upheaval. It was essentially a mass movement. Its use of hypnotic suggestion, its lurid terrorism, its outcries and hysterical possessions, reveal like the Ranters of a hundred years before the phenomena of mob psychology, and it made appeal to the ill-educated, the isolated, the neurotic, to the many natural victims of hypnotic excitation bred by the monotony and austerity of village life. Its after effects were revolutionary, for the quickening of religious emotionalism marked the beginning of the end of Puritan formalism.

The bitter quarrel among the churches which followed as an aftermath was more than a theological dispute; it was a sign of the breaking up of the traditional parish system. The hierarchy had long before lost its authority, but in their several parishes the ministers still enjoyed patriarchal power. The tragic dismissal of Edwards from his parish was an unprecedented revolt against that authority. But greater changes were to follow. After the Great Awakening itinerant preachers made their appearance, who presumed to enter any parish without the consent of the minister, and preach such doctrines as they would. They were non-conforming free lances, hostile to the established church, whose stock-in-trade was the new emotionalism. Under their leadership, Separatist congregations were gathered that were not only an offense to the regular establishment but a challenge to its authority. Hundreds left the old congregations and flocked to the Baptists and Methodists, and naturally they would make trouble over paying taxes to support a church they had repudiated. In short, a little revolution was under way that was to end in the complete disintegration of the parish system.

By a curious irony of fate, Jonathan Edwards, reactionary Calvinist and philosophical recluse, became the intellectual leader of the revolutionaries. His insistence upon conversion as the sole ground of admission to communion was the final blow that de-



stroyed the old theocratic system which the Mathers had labored to uphold. Church and state were effectively cut asunder by such a test. There is no evidence that Edwards was concerned about the political or social consequences that must result from the abandonment of the traditional "Half-way Covenant." It was a question of doctrine with him, involving only matters of church discipline. Although he was accused of being a Separatist, and of seeking to disintegrate the parish system, he had no thought of attacking a parochial order that he held in high esteem. He was unconcerned that his teachings led straight to the old Separatist conclusion that it is the church mystical which Christ established, and not the church visible. Nevertheless he became the creator of the new Congregationalism, which in accepting the democratic principles elaborated by John Wise and establishing the local church as an autonomous unit, effectively nullified the Presbyterian tendencies of the old order.

As one follows the laborious career of this great thinker, a sense of the tragic failure of his life deepens. The burdens that he assumed were beyond the strength of any man. Beginning as a mystic, brooding on the all-pervasive spirit of sweetness and light diffused through the universe, with its promise of spiritual emancipation; then turning to an archaic theology and giving over his middle years to the work of minifying the excellence of man in order to exalt the sovereignty of God; and finally settling back upon the mystical doctrine of conversion—such a life leaves one with a feeling of futility, a sense of great powers baffled and wasted, a spiritual tragedy enacted within the narrow walls of a minister's study. There was both pathos and irony in the fate of Jonathan Edwards, removed from the familiar places where for twenty years he had labored, the tie with his congregation broken, and sent to the frontier mission at Stockbridge to preach to a band of Indians and to speculate on the unfreedom of the human will. The greatest mind of New England had become an anachronism in a world that bred Benjamin Franklin. If he had been an Anglican like Bishop Berkeley, if he had mingled with the leaders of thought in London instead of remaining isolated in Massachusetts, he must have made a name for himself not unworthy to be matched with that of the great bishop whom he so much resembled. The intellectual powers were his, but the inspiration was lacking; like Cotton Mather before him, he was the unconscious victim of a decadent ideal and

a petty environment. Cut off from fruitful intercourse with other thinkers, drawn away from the stimulating field of philosophy into the arid realm of theology, it was his fate to devote his noble gifts to the thankless task of re-imprisoning the mind of New England within a system from which his nature and his powers summoned him to unshackle it. He was called to be a transcendental emancipator, but he remained a Calvinist.



