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“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”: Some Unfinished Business

EDWARD J. GALLAGHER

Neither in the height of popularity enjoyed while living nor in the fall from grace experienced thereafter does Jonathan Edwards approach the literary trajectory of a Longfellow. Still, one cannot help but conclude that Edwards is a casualty of the decentering of Puritanism and the devaluing of religious writing signaled by Philip Gura over a decade ago. Though the editors of the Jonathan Edwards Reader, published since Gura issued his vade mecum, rightly label Edwards “colonial America’s greatest theologian and philosopher . . . the towering figure of an age in which religion predominated,” the study of our early literature now begins in pre-Columbian Native America and ranges from charms to corridos. Such a broadening of focus has necessarily had its effect on the attention we devote to the Great White Fathers of our past. Thus we watch Edwards’s presence in an oft frequented literary museum like the Heath Anthology of American Literature shrunk from nine selections over sixty-seven pages to four over thirty-four just across the three editions published in the 1990s. Whatever the vagaries of critical whittling, however, I think it is still safe to say that there will never be an American literature without “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It is simply

too compelling. And, in my opinion, it has not yet yielded all of its secrets.

Edwin H. Cady asked what he rightly called “the fundamental question” over fifty years ago in the pages of this journal: “Why, then, was ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ so successful in its mission of reducing previously blasé Enfield, Connecticut, to shuddering terror? Why has it become the classic of hell-fire and brimstone preaching...? [W]hat made the sermon so very effective? Where lie the springs of its success?”4 Accounting for the demonstrable efficacy of “Sinners” in the public sphere ultimately involves analyzing the tricky relationships among text, times, occasion, and the specific audience, but Cady limited his sights, as do I, to the sermon itself. What can we see in the work that seems to trigger its impact? What strategies mounted by Edwards, the conscious literary artist, can we detect? Admittedly, such concerns may seem a bit old-fashioned formally in our era of sophisticated literary theory and cultural studies, but I think they will remain the basic ones that readers, especially new readers, bring to the text. And thus though modern scholars from Edward H. Davidson to J. A. Leo Lemay, but especially William J. Scheick and Willis J. Buckingham, have followed Cady and studied “Sinners” in detail, I don’t believe their valuable insights yet exhaust meaningful answers to his fundamental questions. So I would like to encourage a fresh look at the anatomy of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by taking up the unfinished business of how it is constructed—by teasing some more information out of prior insights and by offering some new ones of my own.

“Sinners” is synonymous with the Great Awakening, that time in the early eighteenth century when the spiritual lid blew off New England. This so-called spider sermon was preached most famously to the hard-case congregation of Enfield on 8 July

1741, at what Ola Winslow has called “the height of revival excitement.”
Edwards’s text, “Their foot shall slide in due time,” yields the doctrine that “There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.” An overwhelming sense of God’s sovereignty, Edwards was calculating, would awaken the unconverted in the congregation. The means he unabashedly chose to inspire awe was, quite simply, horror: “Since there is a hell man must be frightened out of it.” “Some talk as if it is an unreasonable thing to fright persons to heaven,” Edwards wrote, “but I think it is a reasonable thing to endeavor to fright persons away from hell. They stand upon its brink, and are just ready to fall into it, and are senseless of their danger. Is it not a reasonable thing to frighten a person out of a house on fire?” And so the challenge to understanding the power of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” has always been in discerning the character of that horror and the ways in which it is evoked.

The Opening.—Central to the emotion it arouses is the sermon’s pace, its pulse, or what we might call more precisely its pulsation. Edwards strikes a variety of beats for strategic effect. On the surface, the traditional Opening (pp. 89–90) is a model of serene, logical order, and it proceeds at a measured, steady gait. Framing them between a concise lead-in sentence and the crisply stated doctrine, Edwards explicitly numbers the four implications of the passage from Deuteronomy to convey a sense of mathematical precision. All are delivered in easily digestible units of reasonably similar size, and they are ordered by subject (points one and two deal with the place and time of the fall, points three and four with reasons for and against the fall). The unpleasant ideas generated by the passage seem neatly and familiarly packaged, seem controlled and tamed by their rhetorical housing. Each point starts with and returns to a cold num-

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4 Smith, A Jonathan Edwards Reader, pp. 89, 90. Further citations to “Sinners” will be from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.
ber and a lean topic sentence. The presentation is clinical; the series seems designed to impede the cumulative development of an emotional response.

Beneath the logical order of the surface, however, emotion seethes. In a phrase particularly appropriate to "Sinners," something within threatens to flame out, threatens to consume its casing. The listener is made to feel, in another phrase appropriate to the sermon, as if he or she were walking a plank blindfolded: each measured step promises to be the last and, even when safely made, only lengthens the distance from security and hastens the plunge into eternity. The four implications from Deuteronomy build one on another, step following step, marching toward an inexorable doom that is sensed but shielded until the last moment. First, the Israelites were always exposed to destruction. That's bad, but there's more: they were always exposed to sudden and unexpected destruction. That's worse, but there's still more: they were always exposed to sudden and unexpected destruction by their own weight. That's even worse, but then comes the clincher: the Israelites were always exposed to sudden and unexpected destruction by their own weight and they were certain to fall! There is no headlong rush to oblivion here (Edwards employs a similar technique in stretching the grim text of Psalm 73 over points two and three); Edwards has no intention of quickly putting the Israelites and Enfielders out of their misery. Quite the contrary. Edwards's strategy is to fix the gaze on misery. And that is horrifying.

In fact, the even rhetorical surface starts to buckle from the steady, incremental, pulsating pressure of horrifying content. Edwards's sentence structure in the Opening is clear and taut through to the end of the last sentence in point four, where the syntax literally starts to fall, to slide. The bumpy sounding "as he that stands in such slippery declining ground on the edge of a pit that he can't stand alone, when he is let go he immediately falls and is lost" (p. 90) could, of course, have been more smoothly written to read "as he that stands alone in such slippery declining ground on the edge of a pit immediately falls and is lost when let go." But Edwards is creating an appropriate rhetorical wobble for his listeners. Sound matches sense. In this
section of the sermon, balance is restored and order rescued with the appearance of the clearly crystalized Doctrine, which immediately follows the fourth point, but the pulsation is a clear menace to complacency, a taste of what’s to come. Edwards tries to approximate for his audience the trembling fright of what we might term a “close call” with destruction.

The Reasons.—Edwards adopts a similar strategy with meaningful variation in the Reasons section (pp. 90–95), which immediately follows the Opening and statement of doctrine. The ten-pack of reasons Edwards provides is so well knit that Rosemary Hearn can scoop off the topic sentence of each to illustrate her contention that form is argument in “Sinners.” Hearn’s extracted list of reasons enables us to see at a glance that one builds on another incrementally, just as in the Opening. There is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell. Not only is there no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell, they already deserve it. Not only is there no want of power in God to cast wicked, deserving men into hell, they are already under sentence. And so forth. Whereas movement in the Opening is linear, however, as in walking a plank, movement in the Reasons section is ultimately circular. The section ends where it begins.

In the breathless swirl of one long penultimate sentence, whose tumescence is worlds away from the tidy succinctness with which the section begins and which is threaded through the topic sentence of each point, the ten reasons are recapitulated:

So that thus it is, that natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; [2] they have deserved the fiery pit, [3] and are already sentenced to it; [4] and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold ’em up one moment; [5] the devil is

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waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; [6] the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out; [10] and they have no interest in any mediator, [7–9] there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. [P. 95]

Thus does the scholarly statement of doctrine, “There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God” (p. 90), morph into the savage “In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted unobliged forebearance of an incensed God” (p. 95). The neat stack of reasons has had its toes held to the fire and turned molten. And the gratuitously pounding alliteration of “uncovenanted unobliged forebearance of an incensed God,” as the phrase runs past comma stops, ensures that balance is not restored nor is order rescued.

And yet order is what might reasonably be anticipated in this segment of the sermon. If I can be playfully tautological for a moment to make a point, we expect the Reasons section to appeal to reason. The “textbook” Puritan minister would know that it is proper form to convince the understanding before appealing to the emotions.9 But, the concatenation of taut topic sentences notwithstanding, the artistry of the Reasons section extends beyond Hearn’s careful analysis of their logical development. While each reason builds on the one before and leads to the one following, each reason also tends to “take off,” to become rhetorically top heavy. It moves to a boundary, to an edge, far removed in intensity if not in space from where it began. Moreover, and perhaps most important, the reasons often end short of completion; they are left suspended, which negates the serene mode of presentation (the first reason ends with an unanswered question, the fourth on the brink of an open maw, the sixth anticipating spontaneous combustion, the

seventh with arrows of death flying, and so forth). To be still more specific, the reasons tend to end in *imaginary* confrontations, *imaginary* conditions, *imaginary* crises, *imaginary* consummations, *imaginary* correspondences, and *imaginary* conversations—all fraught with dire consequence. The unrelenting centrifugal force of the emotional content against the centripetal purpose of the logical structure exerts more pressure on the skeleton of the section than it can bear. And it crashes. The unimaginable becomes real. The forces of destruction triumph.

To use yet another phrase literally appropriate to this sermon, Edwards suffers from no want of means in the Reasons section to set destructive energies in motion. A ferocious but unacknowledged biblical reference (Nahum 1:1–6) conjures crushing defeat in a confrontation with an Old Testament Lord almightily rebuking the earth [1], whereas a simple direct reference from Ecclesiastes yokes wise man and fool at the moment of unexpected death [8]. The sword of divine justice hangs over natural men [2], whereas hell’s mouth opens under them [5]. Edwards finds stark one-liners like “every unconverted man properly belongs to hell” [3] and “the arrows of death fly unseen at noonday” [7] as equally suited to his purpose as a frenzied series of choppy phrases that replicates raging flames of hell [4]. There’s the catchy poetry of “the heart is now a sink of sin” [6] and the utilitarian prose that all human activity is worthless without the presence of Christ [10]. But surely Edwards is at his most audacious when he summons voices from hell, alter-egos for the hard-case Enfielders, who testify that their confident expectations of “peace and safety” did nothing to charm away the machinery of destruction [9]. After such testimony from beyond the grave, what complacency can there be? None among the Enfielders, Edwards wants to be sure.

I said above that the movement of reasons is ultimately circular. To be at once more specific and metaphorical, I have always sensed this section as the hammering of nails around a coffin. Each of the ten reasons is in antiphonal dialogue with an invisible, rationalizing self, and one by one each excuse presented for postponing conversion drives the unconverted closer to his or her doom:
I have power to resist. | There is no want of power in God to defeat rebels.
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I deserve mercy not hell. | Divine justice never stands in the way.
I'm legally free. | You are already bound over to hell.
I'm physically free. | The glittering sword is whet, hell's mouth open.
I'm not in imminent danger. | The devils await like greedy, hungry lions.
Hell is far off. | Hell is within you already.
I'm alive. | The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday.
I'm wise. | The wise man dies like the fool.
I plan. | Listen to a planner in hell.
I have God. | No covenant, no obligation.

The effect of this pulsating, implied "antiphony" is for me claustrophobia, a form of suffocation, and I am convinced that it is an effect Edwards intends. He is attempting to approximate, I believe, what is arguably the greatest horror contemplated by the human mind, premature burial. Edwards's auditors find themselves in a narrow space, fully conscious and fully powerless, as he progressively entombs the excuse-making faculty. There is no exit. Contemplating one's doom is one's sole occupation. "This is death," Robert Lowell says in *his* spider poem, "To die and know it."¹⁰

*Application and Exhortation.*—To this point, the effect of "Sinners" has been to subvert order, to rattle the status quo, to break down complacency in order to clear a space in which conversion, or at least heightened consciousness, might occur. Much of the Application and Exhortation, on the other hand, is constructive, even though it tortures our modern understanding to consider visions of man's sorry state "constructive." Whereas heretofore Edwards, in a scholastic posture of detachment, has made only one reference to the "many that are now in this congregation" (p. 91), in the second half of the sermon,

he turns on his listeners. "O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in" (p. 98), he exclaims.

The Application is structured in two main parts (pp. 95–98 and 98–103), and each makes good use of incantation, that is, the repetition of words, phrases, and parallel constructions for rhetorical spell making. The alternation of "that"/"there" and "you" in the first paragraph of the Application, for instance, serves to specify the auditor's personal and immediate relation to indicated spaces or phenomena, all of which evoke fear and trembling. Four of those terrifying situations have already been raised in the numbered reasons, as referenced by the brackets below:

That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you [6]. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God [4]; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open [5]; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of [7]: there is nothing between you and hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up. [P. 95; my italics]

Extending the approach, the core of the first part of the Application (pp. 95–98) arrays six separate images: wickedness heavy as lead, earth ready to spew out the sinner, the black clouds of God's wrath, the dammed waters of God's wrath, the bent bow of God's wrath, and the infamous sinner-as-spider held by God over the fire (pp. 96–97). Each is appropriate to the whole of the sermon, and there is coherence among them. Still, the effect is quite different from that established in the first half of "Sinners."

I've been focusing on the beat of "Sinners," and so it is worth noting that as we enter the Application section, the metronomically numbered sections that try to grip the first half of the sermon give way to a kind of randomness. The first three, very different images, for example, are strung together in one paragraph, in one speaking and reading unit. Moreover, the images are "original," by which I mean they have a freshness because they are not explicitly tied to any acknowledged biblical source as are many in the first part of the sermon and virtually all in the second part of the Application.
At the very center of the sermon, then, we are momentarily set down in a sort of creative free-fire zone. Anything might happen, since momentum is not building toward a recognizable climax. Danger and uncertainty stimulate sleepy minds and imaginations, but there is a waywardness, a lack of precise direction. And then, out of the blue, the “anything” happens, for the riveting, climactic spider image is designed precisely—in yet one more phrase literally appropriate to this sermon—to overtake you completely unawares.

After capping the fifth image of the bent bow with the vivid representation of the arrow “drunk with your blood” (p. 97), Edwards launches into a long, prosy passage that seems to function like a coda. The passage is, though, just the pause that deceives. Edwards temporarily alters the beat to gather dramatic effect. Then, Pow! as if out of nowhere, comes the giant pulsation of the astoundingly brutal spider image. The angry god has been mediated in previous images by dark clouds, dammed waters, a bow. But this time Edwards’s auditors fully perceive him at the very height of his wrath:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet ’tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. [Pp. 97–98]

On the heels of this revealing glimpse of an angry God preparing to perpetrate perdition come two passages that sweep the first part of the Application to its conclusion in hypnotically pulsating rhythms.

The first incantatory passage replicates the experience of moving down into hell.

’tis to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep: and there is no other reason to be given why
You have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up: there is no other reason to be given why you han't gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship: yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you don't this very moment drop down into hell. [P. 98; my italics]

No reason . . . you . . . last night / no reason . . . you . . . this morning / no reason . . . you . . . at the beginning of the service / no reason . . . you . . . right now! For Edwards's congregation the climax of the movement of time might literally result in their own end. The second passage, an incantation hanging on a string of negatives, does nothing to alter that fear:

You have no interest in any mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. [P. 98; my italics]

You . . . nothing / you . . . nothing / you . . . nothing. Nothing.

After this significant rhetorical flourish, designed to leave the unconverted in complete disarray, the Application moves into its second part (pp. 98–103). The beat alters, and the structure once again assumes the form of a numbered sequence. Edwards appears to be restoring a semblance of logical order. But not so. The rhetorical solace is illusory, just as it had been in the Opening and Reasons sections, as a destructive content presses against form. To be brutally blunt, the content of this segment of the Application demonstrates that God is a killer. Once again, then, Edwards walks his listeners out onto a plank. Once again, within the pseudo-composure of an orderly, numbered list and understated topic sentences (as little as three words for point four: "'Tis everlasting wrath" [p. 102]), Edwards ignites a sequence of detonations. "Consider here more particularly" (p. 98), he coolly addresses his audience, the wrath directed against you. It is the wrath of the Infinite God. It is the fierceness of the wrath of the Infinite God. It is the fierceness and wrath of an Infinite God who is Almighty. It is the fierceness and wrath of an Infinite, Almighty God who has no pity. It is
the fierceness and wrath of an Infinite, Almighty, pitiless God who feeds on the pain of the pitiless. It is the fierceness and wrath of an Infinite, Almighty, pitiless, sadistic God who likes to display his trophies. It is the fierceness and wrath of an Infinite, Almighty, pitiless, sadistic, exhibitionist God that will last forever! This is, indeed, a lot to consider!

Once again the numbered points expand dramatically. The first buds into a twin whose magnitude is then intensified: the wrath of an earthly king is to be feared, but (and the sentence literally pivots on the beat of a “but”) the wrath of the king of kings makes the worldly ruler’s “nothing, and less than nothing” (p. 99). The second point triangulates: a vision of the inconceivable misery of the damned is followed by another of Edwards’s own incantatory strings of negatives signifying God’s disregard, which is then followed by a performance of the divine dance on man’s soul—the sacred stomp on sinners—told in “the words of the great God” himself through Isaiah (p. 100). The third point gives a synopsis of the four acts of the play Damnation, on its everlasting run at the Celestial Theater. The sinner not only suffers, isolated, the agony of God’s wrath, indicates Edwards, but he suffers in the presence of successive audiences composed of holy angels, the Lamb, and then the “glorious inhabitants of heaven” (p. 101). The pain, Edwards stresses, is exquisitely psychological as well as excruciatingly physical. Capping the series, the fourth point in the list arrays several sentences that appropriately stretch out the sinews of syntax, as in “you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all” (p. 102).

Not only do the four points gather dramatic momentum, but three of the four contain at least one element so startling that it literally packs a punch. The conclusion of point one (p. 99), for instance, counsels sinners to fear him who still has power over you after he has killed you, an image that raises the specter of an insatiable, postmortem God, a serial killer of a different stripe.

The second point teases sinners with the possibility of pastoral sympathy. After graphically delineating what it’s like to confront omnipotence enraged, Edwards’s tone verges on pity:
Oh! then what will be the consequence! What will become of the poor worm that shall suffer it! Whose hands can be strong? And whose heart endure? To what a dreadful, inexpressible, inconceivable depth of misery must the poor creature be sunk, who shall be the subject of this! [P. 99]

But even this attempt at human commiseration, if it is even meant to be such, is undercut by another incantation-negation set to music for utmost effect:

he will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy, nor will God then at all stay his rough wind; he will have no regard to your welfare, nor be at all careful lest you should suffer too much, in any other sense than only that you shall not suffer beyond what strict justice requires: nothing shall be withheld, because it's so hard for you to bear. [Pp. 99–100; my italics]

The only comfort is outlined in the penultimate phrase: you will not suffer beyond what you deserve (p. 100). Oh, sweet reservation. Was justice ever so succinctly described? But even here Edwards does not console; he mocks. He dangles the possibility that justice might offer a small out, but with the final phrase he quickly snatches it away, for justice, he makes it absolutely clear, is in no way equated with mercy. Justice, indeed, may require inflicting pain that is beyond all bearing.

The third point bundles two alarming ideas. First, Edwards compares the Lord favorably to the “mighty and haughty” monarch Nebuchadnezzar (p. 101). Regardless of the end of the story in Daniel 3, the king of Babylon—captor of Jerusalem, builder of the golden image, and stoker of the fiery furnace—is hardly a traditional, or actually even proper, model for divine action. In this metaphor, Edwards reverses the virtual cliché that man is made in the image of God. Instead, God assumes the likeness of man, a notion Edwards had suggested in the first reason and in the spider image when he extrapolated God’s attitude toward sinners from man’s attitude toward lowly and loathsome insects (pp. 90, 97). Think about it. We are to understand God through man! Through the evil, violent, selfish side of man! Clearly the rules vary according to one’s position. Cer-
tainly a new vision is necessary if earth-bound sinners are truly to understand their situation, a notion encompassed in the second arresting facet of the third point.

The glorious inhabitants of heaven, late of human communities like Enfield, possess that new vision and act upon it. Contrary to our usual imaginings of celestial affairs, these saints occupy themselves by roasting human carcasses. For them this is not a blood-curdling spectacle conducted at the expense of their less fortunate fellows. Their allegiance is elsewhere now. They immediately “fall down and adore that great power and majesty” (p. 101). God’s sovereignty reigns supreme. At the final curtain, human pity is as absent as the Divine’s.

After the fourth point, the second part of the Application ends with an incantatory flourish, as had the first part, but to different effect. I quote the long paragraph in its entirety:

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath, and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation, that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious they may otherwise be. Oh that you would consider it, whether you be young or old. There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. We know not who they are, or in what seats they sit, or what thoughts they now have: it may be they are now at ease, and hear all these things without much disturbance, and are now flattering themselves that they are not the persons, promising themselves that they shall escape. If we knew that there was one person, and but one, in the whole congregation that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person! How might all the rest of the congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter cry over him! But alas! instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this discourse in hell? And it would be a wonder if some that are now present, should not be in hell in a very short time, before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some person, that now sits here in some seat of this meetinghouse in health, and quiet and secure, should be there before to-morrow morning. Those of you that finally continue in a natural condition, that shall keep out of hell longest, will be there in a little time! your damnation don’t slumber; it will come swiftly, and in
all probability very suddenly upon many of you. You have reason to wonder, that you are not already in hell. 'Tis doubtless the case of some that heretofore you have seen and known, that never deserved hell more than you, and that heretofore appeared as likely to have been now alive as you: their case is past all hope; they are crying in extreme misery and perfect despair; but here you are in the land of the living, and in the house of God, and have an opportunity to obtain salvation. What would not those poor damned, hopeless souls give for one day's such opportunity as you now enjoy! [Pp. 102–3]

The four separate interlocking sequences of the paragraph can be represented visually as follows:

1 2 3 4
every many many already there
who all some there this year some there now < > you here now
some this morning
one one who
you already there

The first incantatory sequence atomizes the congregation by encouraging people to search each other's faces for signs of damnation: every unconverted soul here is in danger; many here will spend eternity in hell; we do not know who all of them are; but only one would be awful; especially if we knew the one who it was! The second sequence then pulsates back, overlapping terms with the first, starts over, and atomizes the congregation again, this time, however, honing down not on a speculative one "who" but on a definitive "you." As it does so, the sequence incorporates a third, an onward march of time like that observed in the conclusion to the first part of the Application. Many will remember this discourse in hell; and some should be there before the year is out; and some should even be there before tomorrow morning; and—and here's the pulsating twist—you have reason to wonder why you are not already there.

In the concluding flourish to the first part of the Application (p. 98), there is no reason to wonder why you do not drop right
away into hell. That is frightening. But here there is reason to wonder why you are not already in hell (p. 103). That is hopeful. Once more, Edwards brings the unconverted to the brink, but this time he does not quite tear away their foundation. In the fourth sequence, Edwards pulsates back, overlapping terms with the second again, isolating a "you" who is still in this world and envied by the damned in hell. The incantatory movement of the fourth sequence, therefore, is not downwardly linear, like the rest, but laterally contrasting: some whom you knew are now past hope, but you retain the opportunity for salvation.

The last six paragraphs of "Sinners" (pp. 103–5), an exhortation to action, extend the rising mood of optimism. With a rousing, incantatory splash, the closing opens:

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are in now an happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. [P. 103; my italics]

With mood reversal comes rhetorical reversal. Terms such as "you," "now," and "many," previously tied to negative notions to produce a steady drum roll toward doom, throughout the Exhortation are linked with "day" and "daily" to open wide an optimistic vision: to help listeners literally "see" the awakened from other congregations feasting, rejoicing, and singing (p. 103). The dissolution of human pity and the atomizing of the congregation recounted in the second part of the Application are no longer the only options available to the unregenerate; instead, he or she is proffered an invitation to join a vibrant religious community. So, even though "Sinners" ends with the divine ax poised over worthless roots and the divine breath hot upon fleeing backs (p. 105), the ending is really less horrifying than it may appear. Robert Lee Stuart, for instance, sees the final exhortation that the New England Sodomites flee up a
mountain as assurance that they will find footing there to keep them from sliding down into hell.  

There is more to say about Edwards’s strategy in the Exhortation, though. Not until this late stage in the sermon does he tick off a series of questions designed to motivate his listeners. How can you rest one minute howling while others sing? Are not your souls as precious as those now flocking to Christ? Are not there many old people who have done nothing but treasure up wrath? Do not you old people see how you are passed over? Will not you young people join your peers in renouncing vanity? Don’t you unconverted children know you are going to hell? Don’t you want to be holy and happy children of the king of kings? The questions appeal to the rational decision-making faculty in mankind, which, in the final analysis, is not yet entombed. Mankind’s fate, it seems, is not completely determined by outside forces. To maximize this appearance of choice, Edwards abandons the familiar linear sequences to build the Exhortation on pairs. Each pair poses dichotomous alternatives. Each rocks back and forth on clear options. Each mimics over and over the weighing that precedes rational decision. There is a day of mercy or an eternity of justice. This is a day to come in or to be left behind forever. You can either pine and perish or rejoice and sing. Do you want to be children of the devil or children of the king of kings? This will either be a day of great favors or remarkable vengeance. You can choose this day or curse this day. You can either be cut down or fly up.  

In the end, to make sure that his message is understood by each and every member of his congregation, Edwards tailors his comments to three distinct groups within it. First he addresses those who have “lived long in the world,” next the “young men and young women,” then “children,” and finally the congregation as a whole—“everyone” that is yet out of Christ (pp. 103–4). Unlike previous 1-2-3 sequences, there is no mystery, no suspense, no uncertainty about the movement of this

passage. Edwards makes the path to salvation for each group not only easy but easy in earthly terms. First, simply go with the flow—simply join with the many from the surrounding towns who are flocking to Christ. For each group the implicit message is, in effect, Be Yourself. To the old: just act your age, simply exercise the wisdom that ripens with years. To the young: conform, join the crowd of peers, define yourself against the older generation. And to the children: follow your innate instinct to please parents and authority figures. Despite lingering intimations that God's wrath endures forever, the conclusion gives hope that natural man can at last trust a natural act. Fleeing the state of sin makes sense. The salutary effect of horror is to make you hurry.

Evidence for the rhetorical power of this "ne plus ultra of evangelical terror" has always been readily available. A contemporary witness testified that the "Shrieks and cries" of the Enfield congregation "were piercing and Amazing." A century later Harriet Beecher Stowe's stepmother ran for cover when husband Lyman began his Edwardsean ventriloquy of "Sinners." And in our own century Walt Disney borrowed liberally and literally from "Sinners" in creating dialogue for the preacher in the deliciously titled 1960 movie Pollyanna. Critic J. A. Leo Lemay finds that Edwards's spider sermon "outdoes" the hell-fire sermon in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist. Poet Robert Lowell's New England imagination hovers around

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the nature and consequences of Edwards’s New Light impreca-

tion.16

But the question for literary critics has always been the how
and the why of “Sinners’” power. Was it just the sensational
subject matter that moved contemporary audiences? Or was
there something about those audiences that made them ripe for
grand emotional release almost regardless of the stimulation?
Or was it Edwards’s art? The answer is complicated, of course,
but Cady’s article drew attention to the artistry, even if many
of its particulars still remain elusive. In fact, because the solemn
Edwards was known for what Edward H. Davidson has
termed “impassive delivery,”17 there has long been a sense of mystery
about Edwards’s writing, what Perry Miller has called “an exas-
perating sense of something hidden” in a corpus like an “im-
mense cryptogram.”18 In the search of the tap root, Cady fo-
cused on imagery, Hearn on the syllogistic form, Miller on the
rhetoric of sensation, Scheick and Buckingham on a host of
contributing elements, and so forth.

I have focused on the rhythm, the beat, the sound of the ser-
mon and tried to identify what I have termed a recurrent pulsa-
tion that comes naturally from within rather than being im-
posed artificially from without, from the minister’s delivery. In
doing so, and in incorporating the insights of others, I have
treated “Sinners” as a sermon, as primarily an auditory expe-
rience. The pulsation—quite interestingly, Donald Weber iso-
lates a historical pulsation in Edwards’s History of the Work of
Redemption, a sermon sequence constructed just two years be-
fore Enfield19—works broadly to destroy old ways of thought in
the first part of the sermon and to construct new visions in the
second. I make no claim whatsoever to having finished the busi-
ess Cady inaugurated of analyzing Edwards’s art in “Sinners.”

16Lowell, “Master Edwards and the Spider,” and “After the Surprising Conversions,”
Lord Weary’s Castle, pp. 58–61.
17Edward H. Davidson, Jonathan Edwards: The Narrative of a Puritan Mind (Cam-
19Donald Weber, “The Figure of Jonathan Edwards,” American Quarterly 35 (Win-
In fact, I would invoke Davidson’s still valid declaration that this “extraordinary sermon deserves all the rhetorical and metaphorical analysis one can bring to it, for it is in its way a true work of art.”20 I think it unfortunate that recent critical trends have discouraged intense analysis of individual works, especially those, like “Sinners,” carefully crafted for specific occasions and audiences. And I would like to see literary critics take up the yet unfinished business of understanding the internal dynamics not only of Edwards’s “refined poetry of torture”21 but of his many other writings as well, as we approach 2003, the three hundredth anniversary of his birth.

20Davidson, Jonathan Edwards, p. 79.

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