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Visible Deliverances:
The Fact and Figure of Miracle in Eighteenth-Century America

By
Nicholas Mason Junkerman

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Mitchell Breitwieser, chair
Professor Elisa Tamarkin
Professor Mark Peterson

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Visible Deliverances:

The Fact and Figure of Miracle in Eighteenth-Century America

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by Nicholas Mason Junkerman

Abstract

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In my dissertation, “Visible Deliverances: The Fact and Figure of Miracle in Eighteenth-Century America,” I argue that the idea of the miraculous was a vital resource for the representation of physical and spiritual experience in eighteenth century America. If the peculiar power of a miracle is that it can disrupt apparently fundamental systems like time and causation, that same unique power constituted its great virtue for the Protestant thinkers in my study. The idea of the miraculous suspension of natural law dramatized the subordination of all perceived order to the will of God. Consequently this shock of divine power was a useful construct for the purposes of pious exhortation. In a deeper sense, however, it allowed the clerical writers I focus on to imagine the link between divine power and the contingent structures of human understanding. In “Visible Deliverances” I argue that this work of writing the human relation to the divine through miracle took place in the imaginative space of literary representation. Faced with the incommensurability of human perception and divine force, these writers turned to allusive figural strategies. It was only figural comparison – a practice of spiritualizing analogy – that could place human experience in a defensible relation to the immensity of God’s greatest works of power. In an initial chapter on miracles stories in Cotton Mather’s medical writing, I argue that he advocated for these stories as necessary evidence for understanding the full scope of physical experience. In my second chapter I read George Whitefield’s sermons on Christ’s miracles in the context of early-eighteenth-century English religious controversies. In a final chapter, I describe the complexity of Jonathan Edwards’ approach to the persistence of miraculous power in the world, an idea that he disavowed but could not fully relinquish. Ultimately I argue that the principle of contemporary miracle is what allows these writers to describe the full power of the essential evangelical experience of spiritual rebirth.

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Introduction

1. The Meanings of Miracle

In the tenth section of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume grounds a skeptical account of miracles in the unreliability of human testimony. Interestingly, that unreliability, and the threat that it poses to a correct estimation of the truth of miracle, is for Hume partly a question of pleasure:

The passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief in those events from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand, or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.¹

Here the delights and the dangers of miracle have a strikingly literary character. To the extent that those who credit such testimony give themselves over to the pleasure of miraculous narrative, they wrongly subdue their rational impulses. As a consequence, the pleasure of surprising narratives is destructive to the soundness of religion: “[I]f the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority.”² Hume’s point is intentionally limited. He does not attack the possibility of miracles themselves, but rather suggests that no story about a miracle could be sufficient proof of the reality of the phenomenon. Whether he meant thereby to discredit the concept of miracle entirely has been a matter of considerable debate.³

Yet Hume’s emphasis on the dubious pleasures of testimony, and his need to segregate the authority of religion from the “love of wonder” is an important point in its own right. It directs his readers toward a crucial observation on the nature of miracles—that they tend to be transmitted, understood, and debated through the material of narrative. Even when evaluating the general status of the miraculous, its claim to truth we inevitably recur to testimony, as Hume realized. Those testimonies describe an event located in a context, and embedded in a temporal sequence. They tell a story, and in so doing they capitalize on our love of stories. In Hume’s account this fact is asserted in order to diminish the miraculous, and beyond that to place the supposed evidentiary foundations of the Christian religion in the disreputable company of tale-telling, and our fallible desires. Yet even less corrosive accounts of Christian miracle must reckon with the consequences of Hume’s assertion. For the vast majority of people in all times and places, miracles appear at second-hand, and their supposedly ultimate significance must

¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Lorne Falkenstein (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011), 152–3.

² *Ibid.*, 153.

³ A careful and interesting discussion of this question can be found in: R. M Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 142–175; for another examination of the question in the context of more recent scholarship see: Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

be framed in narrative. This is a study of the way that those stories were told, the ways in which miracles were described and deployed in the English-speaking Protestant discourse of the eighteenth-century America. My particular focus is on the use of miracle narratives, both contemporary and historical, by ministers writing and preaching in the American colonies from the 1720s through the 1750s. In that period, in spite of (and sometimes in response to) a vibrant but fairly isolated skeptical tradition, miracle continued to function as a valued evidentiary resource, a crucial tool for exhortation and a means of investigating the relation between the divine and the natural. In criticizing the “pride and delight” of those who testified to miracles, and the “satisfaction” of those who listened to them or read their accounts, Hume was not poking at a dying tradition. He was chipping away at one of the major intellectual and spiritual resources of eighteenth-century Protestantism.

Before delving into the intellectual and spiritual significance of miracle in the eighteenth century, it's helpful to consider the parameters of the idea. What exactly did the word “miracle” signify in the Anglo-American Protestant tradition of the eighteenth century? For Hume, the violation of natural law was the determining factor, as he makes clear in a footnote to the tenth section of the *Enquiry*: “A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposal of some invisible agent. A miracle may either be discoverable by men or not. This alters not its nature and essence.”⁴ It is significant that Hume could confidently advance the “miracle” as a concrete category. As Peter Harrison has pointed out, this is not a reflection of any terminological consistency in scripture, where “those events typically identified as miracles are variously described as ‘signs’ (semeia), ‘wonders’ (terata), ‘mighty works’ (dunameis), and on occasion, simply ‘works’ (erga).” For Harrison, this variety suggests “that the authors of the Gospels were not working with a formal conception of ‘miracle’—at least not in that Humean sense of a ‘contravention of the laws of nature’ familiar to modern readers.”⁵ What would become the accepted association between miracle and natural law was a product of centuries of reflection on the topic. Yet the apparent simplicity and convenience of the definition obscures considerable complexities. Many of these definitional problems emerged from the practical questions that naturally proceed from the theoretical principle. How, exactly, was a miracle to be identified? Who could define the limits of the natural? How might one distinguish between a merely unusual natural event and a truly miraculous one? These were questions that engaged the great early virtuosi of the Royal Society, including Boyle, Newton and Clarke, who sought to reconcile the evolution of mechanical philosophy with the apologetic needs of Christianity.⁶

Some skeptical thinkers were much less concerned with saving appearances. Indeed, almost a century before Hume wrote the *Enquiry*, the notion of separate natural and supernatural orders of God's action in the world had provided Spinoza with the grounds for his audacious critique of the miraculous, one that goes much farther than Hume's. According to Spinoza, the idea that natural law could be violated reduces the

⁴ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 165.

⁵ Peter Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” *Church History* 75, no. 3 (2006): 493.

⁶ Peter Harrison, “Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 4 (October 1995), 531–53.

concept of law to meaninglessness. That conclusion is the foundation of the central dictum in his rejection of miracles: “whatever is contrary to Nature is contrary to reason, and whatever is contrary to reason is absurd, and therefore should be rejected.”⁷ Spinoza’s critique has the effect of yoking miracles to a strong and particular concept of natural law, even if only as a means of denying their existence. Much like Hume, he found one of the roots of this troublingly credulous faith in miracles in the pleasures of their reception. This is linked to Spinoza’s sense of the textual objectives of the Bible, and their formal consequences. Scripture, for Spinoza, is not natural philosophy. It aims at “narrating what appeals to the popular imagination.”⁸ Since the text is designed to increase devotion, it uses the metaphorical and poetic language of wonder to describe natural events. This approach is reminiscent of that of Thomas Hobbes, another important skeptical voice on miracles in the mid-seventeenth century. For Hobbes, the commonly accepted definition of a miracle begins with reception, with the admiration produced by the miraculous event. “By miracles are signified the admirable works of God; and therefore they are also called wonders.” To understand the idea of miracle is to understand what it is that produces wonder: “[T]here be but two things that make a man wonder at any event: the one is, if it be strange, that is to say such as the like of it hath never, or very rarely, been produced; the other is if, when it is produced, we cannot imagine it to have been done by natural means, but only by the immediate hand of God.”⁹ For Hobbes, it is the subjective nature of this admiration, and the hunger for it, that makes men vulnerable to the considerable threat of imposture, to those false miracles that are to be distinguished from the true miracles of scripture. The accounts of both Hobbes and Spinoza suggest how efforts to arrive at a precise definition of the miraculous were twined together with the pleasures of reception. A theoretically pure expression of miraculous power was difficult to disentangle from the intellectual and affective response of the one who experienced it or especially, as Hume emphasized, from the reader or hearer who receives it at second hand.

This dual understanding of miracle, as both a thing that might or might not exist in the world and also as an experience to be marveled at, is characteristic of seventeenth-century American thought as well: In his seminal book on popular faith in seventeenth century New England, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, David Hall describes an incredible variety of unusual events that went under the name of “wonders.” This category encompassed not merely those things that clearly violated all precedent set by the experience of nature (like ghost ships and armies in the sky), but also “any event people perceived as disrupting the normal order of things—a deformity of nature such as a ‘monster’ birth, a storm or devastating fire.”¹⁰ According to Hall, the wonder lore of the seventeenth century was grounded in meteorology, prophecy, apocalyptic prophecy and natural philosophy. As a consequence, a compilation of wonder stories entitled *Miracle of Miracles* could concern itself with earthquakes and comets, as well as the immediate execution of sinners by fire sent from the sky. The variety and notoriety of the events outweighed the desire for precise categorization. As Hall puts it, “Strictly speaking, a

⁷ Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 293.

¹⁰ David D Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 71–72.

‘wonder’ was distinct from a ‘miracle,’ though in everyday discourse, and even among the ministry, the two words became interchangeable.”¹¹ This was not, in other words, an instance of rampant folk superstition contrasting with elite discernment, but a more general indication of an early colonial culture that did not fix on “miracles” as a primary and particular mode of categorizing divine action in the world.

By the third decade of the eighteenth century, the picture is considerably changed. For the writers in my dissertation, the miraculous is a much more tightly controlled category. Rather than being synonymous with providential intervention of all kinds, it tends to denote only the most persuasively and disruptively supernatural events, with a special focus on the miraculous actions of Christ. Those events are further limited in the Protestant context by an increasing interest in temporal restrictions, in identifying the point in human history after which miracles had ceased. The outlines of this shift toward a more limited idea of the miraculous are consistent with now familiar models of cultural change in Western culture from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. For example, the world of wonders described by Hall bears a striking resemblance to the epistemological regime that Foucault identifies with the Renaissance. In one instance Hall describes a single English ballad that “spoke of blazing stars, monstrous births, a rainstorm of blood, lightning, rainbows, and the sound of great guns.”¹² The striking variety of these catalogues makes them appear like aleatory assemblages of remarkables. Yet for Foucault this is typical of the Renaissance episteme, the world of “*legenda*,” in which “nature, in itself, is an unbroken tissue of words and signs, of accounts and characters, of discourse and forms.”¹³ Thus, the organization of the collections of wonder stories is based not on their nature, but on their significance. In the Renaissance episteme, “[t]he function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating; it is interpreting.”¹⁴ In light of Foucault’s analysis, the lack of attention to the distinction between “wonder” and “miracle” looks less like a pre-modern failure of rationality. Instead it reflects an interest in how events are to be interpreted, rather than how they should be categorized. If a Renaissance chronicler understands a rainbow and a rain of blood as speaking indications of the will of God, the fact that the second looks much more like a violation of the ordinary course of nature might well seem less salient. For Foucault, it is only in the succeeding “Classical” episteme, the dominant regime of knowledge in the eighteenth century, that order, tabulation and taxonomy became primary characteristics of the epistemological field. Foucault is careful to distinguish his larger argument from a narrative of the emergence of rationalism. Indeed, the very concept of a shift from the Renaissance to the Classical episteme implies the disruption of the smooth progression from superstition to reason. What really matters is the not the “surface appearance” of the “uninterrupted development of the European *ratio*”¹⁵ but the underlying and fundamental changes in the structure of knowledge.

Foucault’s analysis, especially when examined in conjunction with the body of wonder literature chronicled by Hall, raises questions about whether there is such a thing

¹¹ Ibid., 72n2.

¹² Ibid., 73.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 40.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., xxii.

as a continuous concept of “miracle” between the writers I study and their predecessors in the English and American Protestant traditions. To be sure, there are elements of continuity. Increase Mather was one of the major American accumulators of wonder lore, and the form (and some of the content) of those tales is echoed in his son Cotton’s extraordinary medical cases, as well as in the healing narratives that crop up throughout the American eighteenth century.¹⁶ Nonetheless, as I suggest above, there is a difference—a general confinement of miracle to a narrower band of theological usages. Ultimately, this idea of a shifting sense of miracle matters to my dissertation because it helps to identify the parameters of the subject in the cultural moment I describe. Although the evidence I examine relates to issues like the reach of Enlightenment and possible itineraries of secularization in America, this study is not primarily focused on explaining the origins or the degree of a possible epistemic shift in American ideas about the supernatural, or on tracing a general history of colonial miracles. What fascinates me is the durability and the consistent appeal of this particular category of supernatural activity in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The animating question here is how and why, in the face of the generally declining prestige of wonder lore (and its subcategories like tales of witchcraft, anecdotes of remarkable providences and so forth) did the idea of miracles continue to matter?¹⁷ In other words, why miracle? Why in this moment, would these writers return to the idea of disruptive divine action in the world? How do they understand the importance of the idea of the event of immediate divine action? This is an account of the particular requirements that eighteenth century American culture brought to the spiritual and intellectual concept of miracle, and the writings that they produced as a result. I’ll summarize those particulars below, and detail them across the chapters that follow in an effort partly to describe a particular problem in the history of American Protestantism, but also to reveal the imaginative power of this discourse, and the literary effects it produced.

2. Miracle and Ministerial Speech

Most simply, Cotton Mather, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards turned to miracles as a resource because they were all ministers. The importance of this common professional and spiritual commitment would be hard to overstate. For each man miracle mattered most as a means of doing saving work in the world. Thus, although they all show an interest in the history and the limits of the miraculous, this remains a question of the spirit, of the ways in which the fact and figure of miracle could be used to facilitate the understanding, the strengthening and the expansion of the Christian religion. In other words, the nature of the miraculous thing mattered, but its greatest importance lay in its purpose. Miracles were necessarily worked for a reason equal to the excellency of the divine cause, as Edwards argues in his *Freedom of the Will*:

For the moral world is the end of the natural world; and the course of things in the latter, is undoubtedly subordinate to God's designs with respect to the former. Therefore he has seen cause, from regard to the state of things in the moral world, extraordinarily to interpose, to interrupt and lay an arrest on the course of things

¹⁶ Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 104–110.

¹⁷ A classic account of this shift can be found in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 570–83, 641–68.

in the natural world; and even in the greater wheels of its motion; even so as to stop the sun in its course.¹⁸

Edwards' emphasis on the supremacy of the moral world is indicative of both the formal and the functional status of the works under consideration in the following chapters. In this study I limit my focus almost exclusively to ministerial writing. More particularly, I trace the use and investigation of miracle among several major figures of an emergent American evangelical Calvinism. As a result, this dissertation does not seek to account for the totality of American miracle writing in the eighteenth century, but rather to describe a particular and important strain of thinking on the subject. In limiting the scope of my study, however, I do not mean to imply that the interests of these writers were exclusively parochial. Indeed, one of my contentions throughout this dissertation is that this particular eighteenth century American understanding of the meaning of miracle was profoundly shaped by its participation in a larger transatlantic Protestant imaginary. Nor do the writers in question, especially Mather and Edwards, seem especially limited by developing professional limits on intellectual exploration. They consider miracle in philosophical, medical and natural historical frames, as well as from a more explicitly theological and exegetical perspective. But their interest in the subject is always, at its root, centered in explaining and promoting the significance of Christ.

Recognizing the intensity and the consuming seriousness of that task is essential to understanding the writings that I analyze here. For each of these authors, all the possible natural and supernatural operations of the universe cohere around and subserve to the fact of Christ's existence. It is precisely this commitment that Alain Badiou emphasizes in his consideration of Pascal's writings on miracle. What fascinates Badiou about Pascal is the apparent perversity of his attachment to miracles: "[W]hy does this open-minded scientist, this entirely modern mind, absolutely insist upon justifying Christianity by what would appear to be its weakest point for post-Galilean rationality, that is, the doctrine of miracles?"¹⁹ This question might also be directed toward the apparent incongruity of the continuing prestige of miracles in the eighteenth century, and for that reason Badiou's response is illuminating. The answer at which he arrives has everything to do with the special status of miracle, which he sees as "the emblem of the pure event as resource of truth."²⁰ The link between the miracle and the "event" is grounded, most generally, in his sense that both are entirely divorced from their situations. They appear within a context, but are not in any way produced by it. Indeed, the event, like the miracle, is defined by the way in which it ruptures expected order: "A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths 'the event.'"²¹ It is the work of Christians, then, to maintain and promulgate a faith in the miracle of the incarnation of God. Pascal is, for Badiou, an exemplary case of a necessarily militant fidelity to that event. This work is carried out in a more general sense, however, by the institutional body of the Church: "Amongst the Christians, the Church, the first institution in human history to pretend to universality—organizes fidelity to the Christ-event, and explicitly designates those who

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 251.

¹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005), 215.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

support it in this task as ‘the faithful.’”²² The role of miracles then is not to enforce belief, to crush any possibility of doubt, but to provide the grounds for fidelity, and the role of the cleric is to maintain focus on (and faith in) the immutable, non-contingent, and specific fact that is Christ.

This, at its heart, is the task that preoccupies Mather, Whitefield and Edwards, who are ministerial speakers above all else. This commitment, this unvarying requirement to “organize fidelity to the Christ-event” begins to suggest how and why miracles continued to function for the eighteenth century American faithful as a contemplative and spiritual resource. Yet if the status of the miracle-as-event is similar in these two instances, the strategies for representing that event are dependent on the cultural contexts. Where the Catholic Pascal understands Christ’s sacrifice as the essential feature of the miracle of his incarnation, and venerates the Cross accordingly, the Protestants in this study turn invariably toward the resurrection, almost to the exclusion of Christ’s death. That second birth is for them the defining miracle of the gospels, the type both of the resurrections that precede it in the Gospels and of the New Birth that will succeed it in the spiritual lives of the faithful.

This focus on the New Birth marks the emergence of a major trend in American religious life. As Richard Lovelace puts it in *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather*: “One of the identifying marks of the evangelical tradition descending from the eighteenth-century awakenings had been the insistence on spiritual rebirth as the indispensable first experience of all genuine believers.”²³ In placing Cotton Mather toward the head of this long line, Lovelace allows that Mather does not always prioritize the distinction between the specific idea of rebirth and other categories of faithful experience like conversion. Nonetheless, he argues persuasively for Mather’s belief in a firmly Calvinist notion of spiritual transformation originating outside of the believer, a wonderful regeneration beyond all human power. This rigorous faith points toward an important set of commonalities between the authors I discuss, shared interests that bear directly on their writings about miracle. Each of my three central figures remained staunch Calvinists, even as some of their contemporaries strayed from the path. All were nostalgic admirers of seventeenth century American Puritanism, although even in Mather, a direct heir to its theological and cultural institutions, there is a sense that the movement’s moment has passed.²⁴ All three were also caught up in the broader transnational ferments of pietism and revivalism that occupied the Protestant world in the first half of the eighteenth century. In other words, I am partly concerned here with the emergence of what would come to be called evangelicalism in America. I approach that development by examining one particularly important representational strategy, one way that a strain of American religious thought understood itself and attempted to communicate its truths to the faithful. Protestants writing and preaching in America were able to make both rational and spiritual work of the idea of a miracle because it powerfully represented the

²² Ibid., 214.

²³ Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979), 73.

²⁴ Whether that “movement” had ever existed in a stable historiographical sense is another question: see Michael P. Winship, “Were There Any Puritans in New England?,” *The New England Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (March 2001): 118–38.

disruptive force of the central evangelical conviction—that the believer must be born again.

References to New Birth and regeneration make use of an analogical form, but they are not metaphors. To the Calvinist evangelical of the eighteenth century, the rebirth of Christ and the resurrection of the faithful have the same motive force—both depend upon the atemporal, non-conditional and entirely arbitrary will and power of Christ. In other words, the New Birth continually recreates the disruptive event of Christ’s resurrection. Here is how Jonathan Edwards frames that essential idea, in a commentary on the second chapter of Ephesians:

Therefore the apostle compares the work of God, in forming Christians to true virtue and holiness, not only to a new creation, but a resurrection, or raising from the dead (v. 1), ‘You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins’.... In speaking of Christians being quickened in Christ, the apostle hath reference to what he had said before...of God’s manifesting the exceeding greatness of his power toward Christian converts, in their conversion, agreeable to the operation of his mighty power, when he raised Christ from the dead.²⁵

He begins with the idea of similitude, as the apostle “compares” these two mighty works, but progresses to the notion that these two operations are “agreeable.” The resurrection of the soul and that of Christ’s body share an intellectual resemblance, but they are more powerfully united in their source and purpose. This is the representational dance of resemblance and cooperation—the elaboration and expansion of miracle in the space of language.

3. Miracle as Resource and Threat

The possible benefit of a reliance on miraculous evidence was compelling for the writers in my dissertation. The idea of God’s immediate intervention in the world offered a means of strengthening the commitment of the faithful by indicating, even at second hand, a proof beyond doubt of the existence, power and sovereignty of God. This is very much how Edwards understands resurrection: “I can think of no other miracle whatever that would be so full an evidence and manifestation of the finger of God; it must therefore be a certain evidence of the truth of that that it is done in confirmation of.”²⁶ Yet even in this brief and confident assertion, there is an indication of the double-edged nature of miracle. If resurrection is the most persuasive form of miraculous evidence imaginable, then it follows that there are other miracles that provide less persuasive proof. What about the limit cases, the more minor orders of healing? What about the possibility of imposture? Rather than being just a local issue in Edwards, I would argue that this is an example of miracle’s inherent resistance to rhetorical and doctrinal control. If disruptive miraculous power presented itself as a spiritual resource in this moment, it also constituted a continual threat. As a rhetorical object, it has something of a sorcerer’s apprentice quality—tempting to use, but difficult to wield. In the chapters that follow, I describe a range of pressures that came to bear on eighteenth-century deployments of

²⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1970), 302.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The “Miscellanies,” a-z, Aa-zz, 1-500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 394.

miracle, and how the representational efforts of my authors grappled with (and capitalized on) those pressures.

Despite the range of opinions expressed by eighteenth-century Protestants on the subject, one consistent, broadly agreed upon point was a rejection of all Catholic beliefs, rituals, anecdotes and evidence pertaining to the subject. Alexandra Walsham finds evidence of such anti-Catholic statements on miracle among early seventeenth century English polemicists “like Samuel Harsnet, John Gee, and Richard Sheldon” all of whom “devoted much space to describing the ‘lying wonders’, ‘mendacious prodigies’, and ‘egregious impostures’ by which the Jesuits and their secular brethren sought to seduce the credulous laity and prop up the reputation of the Antichristian papacy.”²⁷ The durability and the consistency of this Protestant preoccupation with priestly trickery and Catholic credulity is apparent in Edwards’ *Religious Affections*, which appeared more than a century later: “when the images of Christ, in popish churches, are on some extraordinary occasions, made by priestcraft to appear to the people as if they wept, and shed fresh blood, and moved and uttered such and such words, the people may be verily persuaded that it is a miracle wrought by Christ himself.”²⁸ While a full examination of the confrontation on miracles between eighteenth century Protestants and Catholics is outside the scope of this study, it’s essential to remember how deeply alien, repellent and strangely fascinating Catholicism could seem to these men.²⁹

Even if the Catholic faith in contemporary miracles seemed foolish and distasteful to the Protestant orthodoxy, they also recognized both its appeal and the ways in which it responded to urgent concerns among the faithful. Partly in response to this perceived threat, they established the principle of the cessation of miracles as a polemical commitment of orthodox Protestant faith. As I explain in my third chapter, the overarching idea of cessationism was that miracles, which by common agreement had occurred throughout the canon of Scripture, had ceased at some point in the post-Apostolic era. Recently Jane Shaw has suggested that assent to this doctrine was perhaps not as monolithic as has been supposed.³⁰ My own observations on the American context tend to align with Shaw’s. Cotton Mather seems not to have been attached to the doctrine, and openly preached about a return of miracles to the earth. Whitefield was more willing to follow the orthodox line, even as his friend John Wesley rejected it out of hand. In chapter three, in a detailed discussion of the question of cessation, I argue that even for an explicit cessationist like Edwards, the doctrine was difficult to define and hard to reconcile with the unlimited power of the Calvinist deity. Again, I understand this as a testament to the unique status of miracle, and its tendency to disrupt fixed orders. If rupture is the essence of miracle, efforts at bureaucratic limitation (such as the precise correlation of unlimited divine power and calendar time) tend to produce more or less

²⁷ Alexandra Walsham, “Miracles and the Counter-Reformation Mission to England,” *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (December 2003), 782.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 309–310.

²⁹ George Whitefield’s letters describing a 1754 visit to Lisbon offer an especially interesting look at an eighteenth-century evangelical Protestant’s impressions of Catholic ritual. George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London, 1771), 3:72–89.

³⁰ Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 21–50.

absurd results. Nonetheless, the broad strokes of the idea are a fundamental aspect of the Protestant approach to miracles in England and America in the early eighteenth century.

Another way that the disruptive power of miracle made itself felt in intra-Protestant debates was in the conflict over the nature and the threat of “enthusiasm.” The individual and independent spiritual bent of the rising evangelical movement in America constituted a persistent challenge to orthodox constraint. Claims to extraordinary spiritual experience drew the passionate interest of elements of the evangelical faithful, along with accusations of enthusiasm from the orthodox clergy. One useful way of thinking about this important tension is to ask how miracle served both to support and threaten the aims of established, hierarchical and bureaucratic Protestant religion. Sermons on Christ’s miracles, for example, were regularly used by preachers in England and America to encourage a piety that was warm and steadfast, but also stable and lawful. In this mode, the disruptive power of miracle is relegated to the realm of the exemplary. It is in this sense that Cotton Mather urged his hearers to emulate the man in Matthew 12:13, who responded to Christ’s command, and obtained a cure: “What will you now do? What? Ly and dy in the ditch? GOD forbid! No, Up, and be Doing; and Stir up your selves to take hold on GOD. Set apart a Time Immediately; and spend this Time in making a TRIAL, whether your SAVIOUR do not *Enable* you to *Stretch out a withered Hand*.”³¹ This is a mode of exhortation that relies on a safely distant instance of disruptive power, and that makes that example into a motive for quiet, diligent and progressive internal spiritual labor. It is, usefully, a figural approach that is acceptable to Mather’s Calvinism without seeming to encourage spiritual passivity in the face of divine will.³²

The accusation of enthusiasm in questions of miracle begins to arise when the immediate power of God moves closer to contemporary experience. The opportunity (a critic would say the fatal trap) of contemporary miraculous action is that it places the believer at the active center of God’s action in the world. No longer a closed book of pious examples, Christian miracle becomes, once again, a raw, disruptive and observable event. Even Mather, an eminently stable representative of the New England orthodoxy, felt the thrill of miraculous novelty. In 1696, he triumphantly presented new evidence of miraculous events in England:

For there seems as if there were an Age of Miracles now Dawning upon us. Proper Miracles were continued in the Church of God, for Two or Three Hundred years together, even until the Antichristian Apostasy was come to some Extremity. And when that Apostasy is over, tis possible, there may be a return of proper Miracles; those, Powers of the World to come. Such Miracles have been lately wrought, more than two or three of them, in the City of *London*.³³

Mather’s prophetic assertion significantly restructures the relation of the faithful to God’s power. In modifying the doctrine of the cessation of miracles to allow for a new spike in divine power, he brings Christ’s power into the contemporary Protestant world. At the same time, he plainly capitalizes on his congregation’s (and his own) desire to be in the most significant temporal and spiritual location in history, to be witnesses to the dawning

³¹ Cotton Mather, *The Quickened Soul. A Short and Plain Essay On, the Withered Hand Revived & Restored*. (Boston, 1720), 21.

³² Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather*, 83–4.

³³ Cotton Mather, *Things for a Distress’d People to Think Upon* (Boston, 1696), 36.

of the world to come. In so doing, he opens himself up to Hume's critique, that he derives pleasure from the wonder of the miracle story, that he places "a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others." If in Mather the impulse is safely contained within the structures of the New England church, many other Protestants in the ensuing decades would pursue this pleasure more freely, and rejoice in being immediate (or closely proximate) witnesses to the visible power of God.

For George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, the pressing work of encouraging and managing religious revival led to famous conflicts with the defenders of orthodoxy. Their approaches were by no means identical, and neither one could be classed among the most radical of revivalists. To say that they championed the evangelical revival is not to say that they were contemptuous of order in general. Nonetheless, both men clearly understood themselves as witnesses to the vital, immediate work of God. The origin and the progress of that work, the mighty spiritual rebirth of Christianity, was necessarily resistant to external, bureaucratic control. It was, in other words, a fundamentally disruptive spiritual event. For both men, the character of this rebirth could best be expressed in the language of miracle. It was not, however, a language of simple comparison. The powerful resurrection of the human soul in the New Birth was a supreme divine action. In the sermons of Whitefield and perhaps most movingly and completely in the thought of Edwards, the miracle of the reborn soul is no mere metaphor.

It is, however, an act of representation. The link between miracle and the resurrection of the soul brings me to a final note on the method of this dissertation. As I have suggested above, I understand the representations of miracle in these eighteenth century American Protestant writings as having a fundamentally literary character. This assertion is grounded in two particular aspects of miracle discussed above: 1) That the event of a miracle, when it is represented in text, appears almost exclusively in narrative terms, its claim to notoriety being founded on its location in a particular context and in a particular series of events. 2) That these same narratives are attractive to those who encounter them. The idea of miracle survives and thrives because it produces something like the "passion of surprise and wonder," that "agreeable emotion" described by Hume. In other words, miracles are predominantly encountered in the form of exceptional stories, and exceptional stories tend to produce pleasure, and so tend to be reproduced, circulated and celebrated. Yet this would seem to be true of essentially any miracle at any time. In linking eighteenth-century American miracles to the literary, and thereby making the argument that the miracle writings I discuss can (and should) be analyzed as literature, I want to make a more particular point. In this dissertation, I detail a wide range of theological, spiritual and cultural pressures that were brought to bear on the concept of miracle. Ultimately, I argue that the only way in which the tremendous exhortatory and evidentiary value of the miraculous could be sustained in this challenging context was by placing it in the imaginative space of literary representation. This is not, as I understand it, the same as arguing that miracle was vitiated, reduced to the status of a simple trope or cliché. Rather I suggest that the urgent spiritual applications of miracle in this moment were intimately tied to the imagistic, allusive, and narrative effects of a literary mode. The work of fostering early American evangelical piety was substantially about representing divine power to the faithful, and the intellectual and spiritual figure of miracle was at the center of that effort. Reading these miracle writings in this framework has the potential not only to enrich our understanding of early American Protestant piety,

but to expand our sense of how literary representation has helped to structure American religion.

4. Summary of Chapters

My first chapter is concerned with the presence and the importance of miraculous material in Cotton Mather's medical writing. I begin by describing a letter sent by Mather to the Royal Society, of which he was a proud and active member. The letter details a series of cures suggested to sick people in their dreams. The Society, while it welcomed other communications from Mather, dismissed these relations as irrelevant to the aims of natural philosophy. I argue that this judgment, and the accompanying desire to sort Mather's interests into the scientific and the superstitious, is largely replicated in more recent scholarship. As an alternative to this critical trend, I argue that miracle in Mather is a much more flexible and complex category than has been supposed. Building on Steven Justice's analysis of medieval writing on miracles, I suggest that rather than being direct evidence of credulity and superstition, miracle in Mather's writing is inherently linked to issues of empirical investigation, verification and the accuracy of testimony. To this end, I argue that Mather engages in a steady and self-conscious project of mixture, amounting to a refusal of a rigid distinction between the study of miracles and other epistemological projects. This effort is related to his lifelong interest in the evidence produced by the human body. I survey a range of important precursors to Mather's late-career writings on medical miracles, including his examinations of possessed children, his interest in angelic apparitions and his advice to young men on sexual purity. The final section of the chapter deals explicitly with medicine, and analyzes the form of Mather's miracle stories as well as his insistence in arguing for their significance. Ultimately I argue that this interest is not a simple question of atavistic attachment, but an internally consistent effort to merge the empirical and spiritual material of Protestant piety with the scientific material of medicine.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, I extend my examination of the uses and challenges of miracle for eighteenth century Protestants by examining the sermons of the celebrated evangelist George Whitefield. I approach his work by detailing the major conflicts over the miraculous that troubled the English church in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. I begin by describing the critical examination of the miraculous conducted by skeptical English writers of the period, reviewing the arguments of important voices like Matthew Tindal, John Toland and David Hume. My chief focus here, in establishing a context for my discussion of Whitefield, is on one of the most radical and controversial "deist" writers, Thomas Woolston, who wrote a series of inflammatory and deeply heterodox tracts about miracle in the 1720s. In opposition to an orthodox reliance on Christ's miracles as direct evidence of the truth of his doctrine, Woolston proposed a purely figural interpretive scheme. For Woolston, the significance of miracle lies in its visionary, mystical possibilities, the meaning that transcends the literal context. I argue that Woolston's writing, for all the caustic excess of its style, establishes two important baselines for my consideration of Whitefield. First, his provocation reveals the delicacy of the Church of England's orthodox position on miracles, wherein too active a literal faith in miracles indicated enthusiasm, but an entirely visionary and figural faith was also a sign of dangerous heterodoxy. It also suggests the importance of published controversy in setting the parameters for the Protestant understanding of miracles in eighteenth-century England and America. Whitefield was no stranger to this kind of

controversy. In the second portion of the chapter I detail the rhetorical combat that he and his friend John Wesley carried out with the orthodox leadership of the Church of England about the acceptable limits of the miraculous. Ultimately I argue that the pressures of deist skepticism and church controversy provide the context in which Whitefield elaborates his homiletic approach to miracles. I close the chapter by examining a series of his sermons on Christ's miracles, with a particular emphasis on his figural understanding of the implications of the resurrection of Lazarus.

The third and final chapter of my dissertation focuses on Jonathan Edwards' engagement with miracles, and particularly the complexities and the contradictions of his thinking about the doctrine of cessation. I begin with a general overview of the emergence of the English Protestant idea of the cessation of miracles. I survey an increasing body of scholarship that suggests that the principle of cessation was persistently challenged in England and America, not only by Catholics (against whom it had initially been directed) but also by the Protestant faithful. I argue that this sense of cessation as an unstable principle is essential to understanding the imaginative power of Edwards' writing on miracles. To establish the more immediate context for Edwards' thought, I review two major influences on the idea of miracle in America in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The first is the anti-revivalist writings of Charles Chauncy, and his criticisms of enthusiastic belief in what he called "extraordinaries." Chauncy's writings relied on an earlier generation of anti-enthusiastic writing, particularly Bishop George Hickes' response to a Huguenot group known as the French Prophets. The second is English deist skepticism, to which Edwards responded with an argument based in the coercive rational power of miraculous evidence. I argue that this defense, rooted as it was in the contemporary effectiveness of historical miracle, puts some strain on Edwards' commitment to the idea of cessation. This commitment (as Edwards argues at length in a series of sermons on 1 Corinthians 13) was based on a fundamentally ethical principle. God performed his extraordinary works in the world as preparation for an infinitely superior reign of divine love. His withdrawal of the miraculous gifts was, in Edwards' analysis, a sign of the coming maturity of his divine plan. At the same time, to assign such a motive to God's action in the world risked violating the core Calvinist commitment to God's complete sovereignty. To explain this conflict in full, I turn to an examination of the principle of arbitrary and unconditional divine power as it is expressed in Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*. In that text and a series of other statements on the subject, Edwards returns to the fundamentally disruptive and uncontainable power of miracle, a power that can interrupt the accepted operation of causation at any point. It is a power that, in spite of his ethical commitment to cessation, Edwards cannot restrict to the past, as indicated by his interest in apparent causal ruptures in the case of snakes charming their prey. Ultimately, I argue that Edwards approaches this conflict between an essential doctrine of his faith and the unlimited power of his God by way of a literary elaboration of the miraculous. This finds its most profound expression in his discussions of the operation of grace as an event comparable to god's mightiest miracles. By forging an allusive, but entirely non-trivial link between these two central Christian concepts of the divine, Edwards is able to construct an imaginative spiritual and intellectual realm that respects doctrine but also stands outside it. In that sense his vision is a product of the pressures of eighteenth century controversy, but also an expression of a linguistic and literary imaginary that can realize a world that transcends those conflicts.

Chapter One

“An Insensible Manuduction”: The Uses of Miraculous Narrative in Cotton Mather’s Medical Writing

1. Mather and Miracle: Readers Old and New

On December 1, 1712, Cotton Mather sent a batch of 13 letters to the Royal Society in London. In his cover letter he referred to them as “a small collection of *Curiosa Americana*,” intended to communicate unusual and edifying American phenomena to his metropolitan correspondents.¹ Under that general heading, the letters form a heterogeneous group, variously offering accounts of rattlesnakes, giant bones, celestial events, and supernatural phenomena. He opens the sixth letter in the series with a confident declaration of common understanding: “It has doubtless been somewhat of a surprise unto you to find what operations of the invisible world there have been in communicating the knowledge of medicine unto us.”² In support of this assertion, he offers a variety of historical examples of miraculous healing, as well as three local anecdotes describing effective remedies communicated in dreams. He opens this trio of stories with a brief account of a man cured of stomach pain by an “odd cataplasm” of boiled perch and parsnip, the preparation of which had been suggested to him in a dream. Mather then proceeds to relate the story of his own late wife Abigail [here an unnamed “gentlewoman”] whose suffering in her terrible final illness was relieved by a remedy described to her in her sleep.³

The third and final local example merits fuller summary, since it offers an overview of the key rhetorical and methodological features of Mather’s medical miracle stories. This tale concerns “a young woman of Boston, called Lydia Ingram” who, “after other languishing illness, fell ill of a fever.”⁴ Eventually the fever leads to swelling and “a total suppression of urine for ten days together.” Mather goes on to relate that after her physicians had given up hope, she “dreamt that there came into the room a gentleman with the circumstances of a venerable old age upon his head and face, but of a very comely countenance.” This mysterious dream visitor proposes a remedy of white wine mixed with alum and “*the powder of a burnt beef marrow bone*.” The presumably angelic nature of this dream visitation lends the story its narrative notoriety, but the description is also carefully medicalized. Ingram’s visitor repeatedly emphasizes the makeup of the remedy and the importance of its proper administration. The first time the remedy is prepared, Ingram’s forgetfulness leads to the omission of the powdered bone, and the medicine has no effect. After being corrected by the visitor in a subsequent dream, she finds relief in the properly prepared remedy. As the miracle story blends with the medical

¹ Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 405.

² Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 115.

³ The identification of this woman as Mather’s late wife appears in his diary: Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, ed. Worthington C. Ford (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co.: 1957), 1:444–5.

⁴ Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, 116.

case study, bodily evidence becomes part of the prodigious spectacle. When the angelic visitor's remedy begins to take effect, Ingram's suppression is relieved in spectacular fashion: "she had the relief that was promised her, and voided five pints of urine at one time; and from Wednesday at one o'clock to Friday at one o'clock, there came from her by measure six gallons."⁵ However, she fails to repeat the treatment, and the suppression returns. When the angel returns in a third and final dream, Ingram protests that she could not find white wine.⁶ This prompts a scolding from the angel: "*No white wine! There's enough in the town; but people that want a will seldom want an excuse!*" This exasperated outburst is followed by a gentler reassurance: "*However, take it again; all things are possible with God!*"⁷ Ingram dutifully complies, and her final, fully obedient preparation of the remedy produces a perfect and lasting recovery.

Mather emphasizes the participatory nature of this wonderful healing through his concern for procedure, measurement, and diligent self-care. Although Lydia Ingram is painfully incapacitated and constantly attended by physicians, the responsibility for the cure falls directly on her. She is the conduit for the expression of the private divine will in the public medical realm. Consequently, her helpless physicians are figured as extensions of either her recalcitrance or her obedience, able to do no more than what she tells them to. Ingram is responsible for directing the preparation of the remedy, which will then allow her to produce both the prodigious evidence of her urinary output and the ultimate proof of the cure. She is called not just to cure herself but also faithfully to bring forth the physical evidence of divine intervention. This makes her the crucial participant in the providential and medical drama being played out in her mind and through her body. More significantly, it merges the horizontal network of medical action and experiment with the vertical axis of private faith. For Mather, Ingram's story makes an explicit case for the consonance of divine cures with the aims and methods of contemporary medicine and natural philosophy. These are modified miracles—prompted by divine agency, but ultimately effected through the proper use of means.

The Royal Society was less sanguine about this possibility. In response to Mather's *Curiosa Americana*, the Society's Secretary Richard Waller published a summary of the letters in the *Transactions*.⁸ Faced with the extravagant variety of the letters, Waller's summary resorts to an evaluative sorting process. Those letters deemed more

⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶ The three-part structure of the Ingram tale is hard to ignore. It is the third and final story in the series, the angel visits three times, and the remedy contains three ingredients. This classic folkloric rhythm prompts useful consideration about the narrative construction of the story and Mather's letter. Mather himself recognized that such symmetrical structures could tempt and threaten both reader and writer. To impose a rule of three is to attempt to compel divine power, and, like miracle stories themselves, such narrative practice risks slipping into impious superstition. He warned of this danger in an earlier narrative: "[A]ltho I have thought of beseeching of the lord Thrice, when buffeted by Satan, yet I must earnestly Intreat all my Readers to beware of any superstitious conceits upon the Number Three." Cotton Mather, "Another Brand Pluckt out of the Burning," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), 317.

⁷ Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, 117.

⁸ Cotton Mather, "An Extract of Several Letters from Cotton Mather, D. D. to John Woodward, M. D. and Richard Waller, Esq; S. R. Secr.," *Philosophical Transactions (1683-1775)* 29 (1714): 62-71.

relevant receive careful treatment, and relatively complete summaries, while others are set aside as being outside the Society's purview. Mather's letter on miraculous cures falls in the later group. Of this account, Waller says simply: "The sixth Letter relates the Stories of some Persons that had Informations of Medicines for the Distempers they lay under, in their Dreams; these Accounts relate little to Natural Philosophy."⁹ The Society's refusal to take seriously the relation between phenomena like miraculous cures and natural philosophy has been noted by scholars like Raymond Stearns and Susan Scott Parrish.¹⁰ In general, the disjunction between Mather's enthusiastic contributions and the Society's response (which remained cordial, if discriminating) has been laid to the excesses of Mather's language and to his immutable intellectual habits. As Parrish puts it, "Mather, though he understood the empiricist imperative of the New Science, could not erase his ministerial and local trust in the spiritual immanence of the Word, nor could he abjure his greater talent for scholasticism than empiricism."¹¹ The terms of Parrish's analysis are well chosen. Mather's miracle writing does unite local, ministerial, scholastic and empiricist concerns. However, the texture and the significance of that union have not been adequately explained. Although appreciation for Mather's scientific curiosity is generally on the rise, contemporary scholarship has tended to share the Royal Society's desire to sort Mather's writing into meaningful and irrelevant contributions. This has deflected our focus away from apparently inauspicious discursive mixtures like those we find in miraculous medical narratives. A dominant critical interest in tracking the evolution of Mather's enlightenment has prevented a full examination of the evidentiary and rhetorical possibilities of his miracle stories.

Winton Solberg, in his comments on Cotton Mather's *Curiosa Americana*, suggests that the content of the letters reflects "the transitional character of [Mather's] mind."¹² In an echo of Secretary Waller's judgment centuries earlier, he notes that some of these letters "contain superstition, and some have little relation to 'natural philosophy' or science."¹³ Nonetheless, Solberg also sees evidence of evolution, and argues that by comparing the letters with their seventeenth-century sources, we can see "that Mather was moving from a supernatural explanation of various phenomena toward greater objectivity. Yet he had travelled but partway."¹⁴ In essence, Solberg sees the supernatural elements in Mather's scientific writing as evidence of an incomplete effort at transformation.¹⁵ He suggests, however, that the problem was not unique to Mather.

⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰ Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America*, 414; Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 122.

¹¹ Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 122.

¹² Winton U. Solberg, introduction to *The Christian Philosopher*, by Cotton Mather, ed. Winton U. Solberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), xli.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., xlii

¹⁵ See also: Otho Beall, "Cotton Mather's Early 'Curiosa Americana' and the Boston Philosophical Society of 1683," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 18, no. 3, (1961): 371–2. In this much earlier analysis, Beall makes a similar point: "By this time, the supernatural explanation of various phenomena was not always satisfactory to him, and he was moving toward a greater objectivity. At the same time, however, he traveled only part way: in other areas he was content to remain the uncritical gatherer and disseminator." I hope to show here that Mather's gathering and dissemination were always tied to the critical faculty, especially when dealing with the supernatural.

According to Solberg, “[s]cience had not yet completely emancipated itself from magic, the occult and folklore in this seminal period of Western intellectual history, and Mather’s views are in accord with the best scientific knowledge of his time.”¹⁶ There is truth to this developmental narrative. As we will see, Mather himself was enchanted with the possibility of progress and frustrated by its delay. Yet measuring the completeness of epistemic change is, after all, only one way of approaching the presence of the supernatural in these letters. As a dominant means of considering (or ignoring) Mather’s engagements with miraculous stories, this framework can distort the complexity of his moment and his work. This has particular consequences for our analyses of his much-discussed “credulity,” his willingness to accept apparently fantastical or supernatural anecdotes as legitimate evidence.¹⁷ A tendency to ignore the evidentiary and explanatory force of Mather’s miracles had also obscured their particular uses and their continuing relevance to other discourses.

Medical miracles are of interest for Mather precisely because they are extreme examples of divine intervention into the physical realm. As such, they make a useful site for examining the flattening, normalizing effects of critical readings of the interaction between Mather’s faith and his natural philosophy. Solberg sees the heterogeneous textual assemblage of the *Curiosa* letters as the product of the period as much as Mather’s critical faculties: “The early eighteenth century was still a world of wonders; most found it hard to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. Mather, like many learned contemporaries, continued to mix the factual with the fanciful.”¹⁸ It is precisely that unseemly mixing that will concern me here. I will consider how Mather himself uses the miracle story to construe and delimit categories like fact and fancy. The problem, after all, is not just that Mather believed in multiple causal systems, but that he insisted on comingling them. He repeatedly chooses to include miracle stories within or alongside other texts—in a series of letters, in the entries of a diary, in a medical manuscript. In order to grasp the full meaning of these stories, I will consider this apparently discordant assembly as a potentially meaningful act, rather than simply a product of Mather’s epistemic limitations. A close analysis of the structure and the context of these miracle stories will allow us to see them as carefully considered and internally coherent textual interventions. This will require, however, that we permit Mather’s understanding of miracle a certain dynamic critical value that it is usually not afforded.

My thinking on the meaning and uses of miracle has been influenced by a recent article that considers their status in quite a different context. Steven Justice, writing about medieval miracle stories, argues that miracle has always been a contested category, and that the idea of an undifferentiated “age of faith” is a critical fiction. Far from being a product of a failure to distinguish between the natural and the divine, the deployment of the term “miracle” is, he argues, an effort at just such a distinction: “[...] as Hume recognized, ‘There must . . . be a uniform experience against every miraculous event,

¹⁶ Solberg, introduction to *The Christian Philosopher*, cxiii.

¹⁷ Louise A. Breen, “Cotton Mather, the ‘Angelical Ministry,’ and Inoculation,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 46, no. 3 (July 1991), 348; Margaret Humphreys Warner, “Vindicating the Minister’s Medical Role: Cotton Mather’s Concept of the Nishmath-Chajim and the Spiritualization of Medicine,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 36, no. 3 (1981), 284.

¹⁸ Solberg, introduction to *The Christian Philosopher*, xli.

otherwise the event would not merit that appellation'; calling something a miracle implies its singularity. If all of creation really was one great miracle, miracles would by definition have been inconceivable."¹⁹ This observation invites us to consider miracle as a product of critical examination. As both an object and an instance of faith it is extreme, unusual and always subject to internal and external challenge. As Justice goes on to argue, the experience of believing in miracles is, at least for his medieval subjects, never a settled and comfortable one. He frames his discussion of this restless faith by considering a quotation from Aquinas: "*cogitare est simul coagitare*: roughly, 'to think is to bang things together.'" As Justice reads it, "The violent agitation imagined in that verb, and the cognitive restlessness it signals, are not the condition from which belief rescues the mind but a condition it inflicts."²⁰ In this account of belief, critical thought and assent are twinned—faithful assertion and doubt meet in a potentially endless dialogue. My intent here is not to map the Middle Ages onto the early eighteenth century, nor to draw a line between Aquinas' faith and Mather's. I do, however, want to proceed with this sense of co-agitation in mind. Mather's accounts of medical miracle tend to bang and jar against their discursive containers. They often fit awkwardly both with their textual neighbors and the expectations of their readers, as evidenced by the dismissive responses both of Secretary Waller and of Mather's more recent readers. Yet Mather's texts do not need rescuing or excusing from his miraculous attachments. Rather, his insistence on the relevance of miracles can usefully be read within the matrix of both his scientific work and his evolving but historically grounded faith. Our unwillingness to credit miraculous evidence would have been part of Mather's own experience of miracle, and his narratives are always responding to the possibility of doubt.

Indeed, as Reiner Smolinski has shown, the nature and extent of Biblical miracles was a subject of considerable debate in Mather's lifetime. In his introduction to the *Biblia Americana*, he examines Mather's response to a number of debates concerning Old Testament miracles. Here again, miracle is called into service more as a critical heuristic, a kind of touchstone, than as an internally dynamic discourse. Smolinski understands these theological and philosophical debates as test cases by which "we can gauge the extent to which Mather has crossed the threshold into the Enlightenment."²¹ In general, while he acknowledges that "Mather is supremely unwilling to sever the ties between natural philosophy and theology" he also notes that "his commentary in 'Biblia Americana' not infrequently moves in that direction."²² In these high-level international exegetical debates, the Mather of the *Biblia* appears flexible, curious, and open to the possibility of tempering conservative piety with innovative reasoning, a stance which Smolinski calls Mather's "ambidextrous approach."²³ This restless play back and forth over the threshold of Enlightenment recapitulates the age-old process of engagement with miraculous phenomena, that insistent interchange between skeptical inquiry and faithful assent. If the miracle is that which we cannot explain without God, its narrative power

¹⁹ Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103 (August 2008), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ Reiner Smolinski, introduction to *Biblia Americana: America's First Bible Commentary*, by Cotton Mather, ed. Reiner Smolinski, vol. 1, *Genesis* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 105.

²² *Ibid.*, 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108.

develops through comparison with what we do understand, what we can verify empirically.

This is borne out by Mather's review in the *Biblia* of the hypothesized causes of the flood in Genesis. He allows that "Some hold, That the *Flood* was altogether *Miraculous*; and that the Almighty created *Waters* on Purpose for this tremendous Occasion; which being dispatch'd, He again destroyed them."²⁴ Yet he goes on to suggest that this kind of pure miracle may be too simple a solution: "This is to *cutt the Knott*."²⁵ Instead, he offers a variety of possible explanations for the cause of the flood, heavily supported by contemporary natural philosophy. This refusal of an incurious absolutist belief, and the subsequent effort both to accommodate and distinguish between divine power and natural means, is one of the charms of Mather's thought. Smolinski's edition of the *Biblia* helps to show Mather's engagement with the early Enlightenment in new light. In so doing, it contributes to the effort of distinguishing his life and thought from what Smolinski calls "the popular caricature of Mather as an old witch doctor and diehard bigot."²⁶ Yet this important sense of Mather's flexibility and sophistication should not oblige us to set aside those aspects of his thought which might at first seem to be associated with that old, flat caricature.

Mather's interest in miraculous cures can help us to see how he developed and promoted a distinctly flexible and multivalent role for direct divine action. This intervention occurred in quite a different generic context from that of the scholarly, historical miracle debates of the *Biblia Americana*. In these medical cases, miracle is construed as an ongoing, emphatically local phenomenon. The great historical cataclysms of the biblical miracles have been muted into intimate, almost lonely phenomena. These miracles begin as explicitly private experiences that are available only to the supplicant. They hover always on the edge of perceptibility, and in their unverifiable privacy, they call up the possibilities of deception, misperception and hallucination. In this context, the stories find their public importance, and their verified divine reality, first through the bodily evidence of suffering individuals, and then through pious recording and repetition. Mather's stories serve to amplify and celebrate not just the consonance of divine providence and natural medical means, but also the individual experience of piety.

As indicated by the case of Lydia Ingram, this is a rhetorical project that takes advantage of the empirical evidence provided by the human body. Mather carries out his work, to a surprising extent, through the careful textual examination and display of the bodies of young people, especially young women. In these cases the invisible, liminal, dream-shrouded experience of miracle becomes legible through stories of prodigious physical recovery and the alleviation of symptoms. Mather's construction of these miracle stories is certainly informed by his medical and theological reading, and by his broad, scholarly sense of the history and evolution of miraculous Christian experience. Yet the crucial context of these local stories is Mather's meticulous lifelong study of the legibility and communicative possibility of the suffering human body. The sufferers testify to their faith and their private experience, but it is their symptomatic bodies, their

²⁴ Cotton Mather, *Biblia Americana: America's First Bible Commentary*, ed. Reiner Smolinski, vol. 1, *Genesis* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck; Baker Academic, 2010), 630.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Reiner Smolinski, introduction to *Biblia Americana*, 112.

measurable physical responses, which can offer proof of the operations of the invisible world. Over a span of decades, and in a wide variety of texts and genres, Mather contemplated direct experiences and reports of the effects of the invisible world on individual bodies. These investigations required the simultaneous deployment of both natural and supernatural interpretive strategies.

Other scholars have noted Mather's lingering attachments to the supernatural, and their fraught relationship with science and medicine. Linda Breen, in an analysis of Mather's advocacy of smallpox inoculation, shares my sense that "we must resist the temptation to divorce his medical thought from other pursuits now deemed unproductive or backward-looking."²⁷ Yet ultimately she decides that Mather "was a revivalist, not a transitional clergyman-scientist" and that his primary concern with conversion was the determining force in shaping his response to medical issues.²⁸ Jeffrey Jeske, in his useful reading of Mather as a "physico-theologian," does not require Mather to choose between the roles of clergyman and scientist. Instead, Jeske suggests he engages in a form of sly code-switching: "the protean Mather, attempting both to preserve the Calvinist core of Puritan belief and to accommodate the new science, adopts different personae with contradictory philosophical assumptions, depending on situation and audience."²⁹ In contrast to both of these readings, I would suggest that Mather's narration of the suffering human body is always insistently blending these two discourses, even in situations where such mixing could be avoided. It is my sense that this blending is a product as much of Mather's narrative commitments as his philosophical investments. Consequently I will focus here on details Mather provides about suffering bodies, but also on the form of the stories he tells about them. This approach offers a means of thinking not only about the strands of Mather's thought, but about how such a famously multiple perspective could be effectively integrated through the rhetoric of the miracle story.

In his early encounters with demonic possession, in his pastoral writings on sickness, in his private writing on personal miracles and especially in his late medical writing, Mather created a complex hermeneutics of the divinely influenced body. A selective review of these texts will help to trace Mather's construction of the miracle story. What all this experience and articulation produced was a discourse of miracle that adapted treasured narrative modes to new ways of seeing and knowing, and finally gave birth to truly multi-vocal texts. I will close with a careful examination of Mather's last significant writing on medical miracles, which can be found in his unpublished manuscript *The Angel of Bethesda*. In the eighth chapter of that volume, Mather reworks and expands his Royal Society letter on dream cures into a heterogeneous and fascinating statement on the meanings of personal miracle. Without assigning miracle stories a central position in Mather's later work, I argue that instances of their survival are indicative of miracle's enduring and important relation to Mather's more respectable eighteenth-century epistemological projects. Particularly in *The Angel of Bethesda*, the possible unity of miracle and modernity opens imaginative vistas for Mather that have not been sufficiently examined.

²⁷ Breen, "Cotton Mather, the 'Angelical Ministry,' and Inoculation," 339.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 357.

²⁹ Jeffrey Jeske, "Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 4 (October 1986), 584.

2. Reading Symptoms: The Body as Public Example

One factor in the shaping of Mather's medical miracle stories was his desire for a multivalent social and professional role. Much has been made of his interest in medicine, and the divine consonance he perceived between the work of soul-saving and the labor of caring for the sick.³⁰ Despite this abiding interest, he showed himself willing to accept the authority of physicians on material questions.³¹ By 1710, when he published *Bonifacius*, he clearly understood that his beloved old New England model of the minister-*cum*-physician was no longer tenable. Still, his reaction to a more rigid division of labor offers an illuminating view of his eighteenth-century medical and spiritual hermeneutics.

Addressing fellow ministers, with his own Boston experience plainly in mind, he suggests:

In a more *populous place* you will perhaps choose rather, Sir, to get some religious and accomplished *physician* into your neighborhood; and make *medical studies* your own diversion as much as may be; but with some eye to this, that you will communicate unto your *Luke*, what notable things you do in reading meet withal; and sometimes *unite counsels* with him, for the good of his patients. You may this way save the *lives* of many, who may themselves know nothing of it.³²

Faced with the pressures of social development and professional specialization, Mather recuperates his desired medical role in scholarly terms. Reading and counseling can be the means of saving both bodies and souls, and the minister is instructed to employ these tools to become a sort of shadow eminence in the new medical system. Fantasy or no, Mather's proposed solution illuminates his sense of the harmony between his medical interests and his spiritual vocation, as well as his faith in the efficacy of texts, reading and writing in both spheres. This theoretical approach was conditioned by a series of urgent and frightening experiences in which the human body appeared to produce evidence from the spiritual world.

The late seventeenth-century struggles over witchcraft and demonic possession are the most dramatic and well-known examples of Mather's physical investigations into the invisible world. While we will be primarily concerned with less familiar narratives of miraculous cures, these "case-studies" of possession hold important clues to his understanding of the significance of the suffering body. From the beginning of Mather's witchcraft experiences, the empirical, experimental evidence of having seen and touched the possessed is of primary importance. Yet he is aware, at the same time, of the ethical complexities of his dual role as minister and investigator. In referring to his earliest witchcraft experience, his 1688 examination of the apparently possessed Goodwin children, Mather frames the problem like this: "I was not unsensible, that it might be an easie thing to be too bold, and go too far, in making of Experiments: Nor was I so unphilosophical as not to discern many opportunities of Giving and Solving many

³⁰A good overview of Mather's dual interest, and of clerical medicine in colonial New England can be found in: Patricia A Watson, *The Angelical Conjunction: The Preacher-Physicians of Colonial New England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). See also the classic early study of Mather's medicine Otho T. Beall and Richard H. Shyrock, *Cotton Mather, First Significant Figure in American Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1954); and Maxine Van De Wetering, "A Reconsideration of the Inoculation Controversy," *The New England Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 1985), 57–8.

³¹ Warner, "Vindicating the Minister's Medical Role," 280.

³² Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good*, ed. David Levin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 82.

Problemes which the pneumatic Discipline is concerned in.”³³ Mather is aware that he can do real and important investigative work with these afflicted bodies, yet he is also wary of unseemly excess.

The value of this experience, and the temptation of experiment, comes from the immediate power of the evidence produced. These visible proofs become not only reinforcements for the personal commitments of faith, but also cudgels with which to beat doubters. As David Levin characterizes Mather’s association with one of the Goodwin children: “[W]hen he took Martha, the thirteen-year-old, into his own household, his explicit purpose was not only to cure her but also, without the slightest skepticism about the nature of her affliction, to observe her symptoms and the devils’ powers at length, and to accumulate ‘*evidence* and *argument* as a critical eye-witness to confute the Sadducism of this debauched age.’”³⁴ The importance of the final quote rests largely on Mather’s sense of being a “critical eye-witness.” The phrase places a meaningful dual emphasis on observation and judgment. While he may betray little skepticism about first causes, he does insist upon discernment as well as accurate and careful observation.³⁵ Mather is, in essence, developing an experimental hermeneutics of the invisible world. He filters his experience through his understanding of his duty, which is not only to comfort and heal, but also to watch carefully and to report his findings. In keeping with this systematic reporting drive, he goes on to de-emphasize any hermeneutical authority outside the experimental mode: “yet I will give a Touch upon one Problem commonly Discoursed of; that is, Whether the Devils know our Thoughts, or no? I will not give the Reader my Opinion of it, but only my Experiment.”³⁶ This ostentatiously cautious experimentalist stance is a response to the complexity of the task at hand. The empirical projects of medicine and supernatural investigation share the basic challenge of divining obscure causes from potentially deceptive effects. In both disciplines, the body acts as medium, displaying a sort of magic mirror correspondence between the visible symptom and the invisible cause. In reading the bodily signs of the possessed, Mather feels compelled to distinguish satanic possession from natural illness. In addition, he must sort feigned symptoms from the legitimate effects of witchcraft. The watchful, critical eye and the reporting voice are both marshaled in the examination and interpretation of the afflicted, deceptive body. He is a witness to newly revealed secrets, but he is also a filter.

This “critical eye-witness” role is rhetorically advantageous in that it insulates the speaker against criticism. Beyond these strategic considerations, however, the emphasis on experiment has another practical use. The strictures and forms of evidence and experiment help Mather to harmonize his various perceived responsibilities in the moment of crisis. As Levin points out, this task could be challenging: “He found himself in the awkward position of trying to do three incompatible things at once. He had to fight the devils who possessed Martha, he wanted to study their behavior and of course he wanted to cure the afflicted child.”³⁷ In a literal sense, these purposes are indeed

³³ Cotton Mather, “Memorable Providences,” in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), 122.

³⁴ David Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord’s Remembrancer, 1663-1703* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 152.

³⁵ Jeske, “Cotton Mather,” 585; Warner, “Vindicating the Minister’s Medical Role,” 15.

³⁶ Cotton Mather, “Memorable Providences,” 122.

³⁷ Levin, *Cotton Mather*, 153.

incompatible, since accomplishing one either delays or prevents the others. Nonetheless, Mather is at pains to articulate a system in which these desires are compatible. The human body provides a potential ground for that compatibility. Part of the intellectual work of these possession episodes (and part of the reason they relates to his later accounts of miraculous healing) is the careful unification of Levin's three strands into a single braid.

This process of textual solidification of the invisible world via the techniques of careful reporting was not Mather's invention. The responsibility of the clerical and intellectual elite of New England to report providential occurrences was heavily emphasized in Mather's youth. Indeed, it was explicitly codified in a number of documents from that era.³⁸ These included a Harvard College document (signed by both Increase and Cotton Mather) that enjoined ministers to "obtain and preserve the knowledge of such notable occurrences as are sought out by all that have pleasure in the great Works of the Lord."³⁹ Such providences, successfully recorded, attain their proper use-value, since they can then be banked and deployed as a kind of spiritual currency "the Accounts thus taken of these Remarkables, may be sent in unto the President, or the Fellows of the Colledge, by whome they shall be carefully reserved for such a use to be made of them, as may by some fit Assembly of Ministers be Judged most conducing to the Glory of God."⁴⁰ These providential anecdotes are related to emerging systems of scientific exchange, but their instrumental function has less to do with elucidating natural principles than with continually reaffirming the existence of the invisible world. This is perhaps an unsurprising ministerial endeavor, but what should seize our attention here is consonance of natural curiosity and providential history.

It was this imperative to investigate and report unusual events that helped determine the form and method of such volumes as Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providences* and his *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Michael Winship, in his *Seers of God*, offers a sensitive reading of providentialism in colonial New England and particularly in the work of Cotton Mather. Specifically, he examines "the progression of Mather's providentialism in the eighteenth century" as an index of "the cultural negotiations involved in the diffusion of the early Enlightenment."⁴¹ Winship emphasizes that the volume of Mather's writing on providential events declined considerably over the course of his life, in large part because of the reduced prestige of that discourse in intellectual circles.⁴² More particularly, he argues that Mather begins to understand phenomena like witchcraft, divination and astrology not just as theological problems, but as "signs of a social location a 'gentleman' would avoid."⁴³ Bearing that change in emphasis in mind, it's nonetheless possible to see how the techniques of encyclopedic collection and assembly characteristic of the providential catalogues carry over into Mather's medical writing. Changes in explicit content need not always result in methodological transformation. Furthermore,

³⁸ See for example Increase Mather's transcription of a list of "Proposals concerning the Recording of Illustrious Providences" originally drawn up by a group of Massachusetts ministers in 1681 in: *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Boston, 1684), 11.

³⁹ Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (London, 1700), 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴¹ Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 132–3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 135.

as our focus on the endurance of miracle implies, even as the prevalence of supernatural discourse diminished in Mather's writing, its claim on his imagination persisted. The point here is not to deny Mather's eighteenth-century urbanity, but to suggest that he continued to make strategic use of certain explicitly supernatural data in his later work. As Louise Breen has suggested, Mather's sense of the importance of medical examples was deeply rooted in the embodied empirical methods of his earlier supernatural investigations.⁴⁴ Providential and medical expertise were both, we should recall, an important part of Mather's portfolio, intellectually and socially. These disciplines were repeatedly intertwined in Mather's seventeenth century education and in his experiences with possession. This consonance finds a significant and developed expression in his eighteenth century accounts of medical miracles. However, Mather's sense of the malevolent effect of the invisible world on the human body had always been leavened by his interest in cases of angelic intervention.

Assistance from a presumably divine source is very much in evidence in Mather's famous accounts of two possessed young women, Mercy Short and Margaret Rule. Short, in Mather's account, suffered a multitude of torments at the hands of her demonic persecutors. Her body produces visible evidence of these tortures, as when demons stick her flesh full of pins: "some of the Pins They left in her, and those we took out, with Wonderment."⁴⁵ Toward the end of her suffering, however, Mather recounts quite a different kind of intervention. He tells us that Short "was attended with another Spirit, besides those which were her continual Tormentors; a Spirit which indeed was neither Visible, nor, I think, properly Audible, any further than a whisper unto her; but which managed his communion with her chiefly by an Impulse, most powerfully and sensibly making Impressions upon her Mind."⁴⁶ Short's vulnerability to demonic intervention also opens her mind to a benevolent intrusion from the invisible world. The spirit offers comfort, and correctly predicts the day of her deliverance from the demons. The shift from the demonic torture is noticeable. In place of the visible horror of pins and blisters and burns, the angel provides only the gentle evidence of Short's own timely recovery. Importantly, the telepathic internality of divine communication is described as a process of "a Spirit...sensibly making impressions" on Short's mind. Of course, in marked contrast to the pins extracted from her flesh, this "communion" is insensible to outside observers. By offering us access to Short's internal experience, the narrative transforms this insensible influence into sensible evidence of the divine. When Margaret Rule is subsequently visited by a similar spirit, Short's private angel experience is treated as an available public example: "what lately befel Mercy Short from the Communications of such a Spirit, hath been the just Wonder of us all, but by such a Spirit was Margaret Rule now also visited."⁴⁷ Mather clearly perceives a duty not just to record the dramatic public disruptions of demonic possession, but also to make public the private, countervailing force of divine aid.

Recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to these early modern beliefs about angels and their activities. This work has been cast, in part, as a corrective to a

⁴⁴ Breen, "Cotton Mather, the 'Angelical Ministry,' and Inoculation," 335–6.

⁴⁵ Cotton Mather, "A Brand Pluck'd out of the Burning," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), 264.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁴⁷ Cotton Mather, "Another Brand Pluckt out of the Burning," 316.

perceived imbalance in our readings of the post-medieval experience of the supernatural. Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, examining the English context, suggest that “while the demons (or evil angels) who haunted the imaginations of both elites and people between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries have become familiar, their more benign counterparts remain hidden in the shadows.”⁴⁸ Very much in keeping with this trend, scholarship in the American context has tended to focus more on the public crises occasioned by demonic agency than on the private comforts offered by angelic aid. One notable exception is Cotton Mather’s own private experience with an angelic apparition, which has occasioned consistent critical interest.⁴⁹ This awareness of the omnipresence of literal and metaphorical angels in Mather’s life, has not, however, produced a careful analysis of his treatment of medical miracle. His scattered descriptions of these angelic interventions in moments of crisis form a literature of privacy and uncertainty which has its roots in Mather’s demonology but takes on its full character as a persistent thread in his less explicitly providentialist medical writing.

Examples of miraculous intrusion into the ordinary suffering of illness were sometimes painfully close at hand. If terrible sickness proved a powerful rhetorical resource for Mather, this was as much a function of its omnipresence as its extremity. The final illness of Mather’s first wife provides just such an instance. Mather records the wrenching details of Abigail Mather’s suffering in his diary for October, 1702. Abigail’s torment, like that of Short and Rule, is mentioned in part because it gives rise to an unusual and potentially useful manifestation of the invisible world:

Behold a strange Thing! On the Night after the Fast, my Consort had appearing to her, (she supposes, in her sleep) a grave Person, who brought with him, a Woman in the most meager and wretched Circumstances imaginable. My Consort fell into the Praises of God, in that her Condition was not yett so miserably Circumstanced as that woman’s now before her.⁵⁰

This strange and heartbreaking pantomime, taking place on the indefinable border of sleep and dream, capitalizes on exactly the kind of cascading display that is central to Mather’s possession stories. The angel presents the wretched body to Abigail’s sight. She watches, and gives thanks, as Mather watches through her relation, and the reader watches through his. The display of the sick body radiates outward from the private core of the miraculous experience. In addition to this silent and ambiguous display, Abigail’s angelic visitor offers practical remedies for her symptoms. He proposes freshly cut wool for the pain in her breast and gum dissolved in water for her excessive salivation.⁵¹ The remedies are singularly effective: “unto our Astonishment, my Consort revived at a most

⁴⁸ Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, “Migrations of Angels in the Early Modern World,” in *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

⁴⁹ David Levin, “When Did Cotton Mather See the Angel?,” *Early American Literature* 15, no. 3 (December 1980): 271-275; Joad Raymond, *Milton’s Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46; Elizabeth Reis, “Otherworldly Visions,” in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alexandra Walsham and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 129–130.

⁵⁰ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, 1:444.

⁵¹ On the possible origins of the wool remedy as an ancient medicine for birth pain, see: Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, (New York: Knopf, 1982), 128.

unexpected Rate.”⁵² This observational corollary to the miraculous tale of the angel provides essential evidence of the consonance of divine suggestion and empirical verification. The success of the remedy was unfortunately not permanent—Abigail’s condition eventually worsened, and she died in early December.⁵³ Nonetheless, this temporary recovery would go on to have its own life as a public example of medical miracle.

Mather expresses no doubt in his diary about the authenticity of this angelic vision. In fact, as we saw in our initial examination of the *Curiosa* letter, he felt confident enough to report the story to the Royal Society, although he omitted his wife’s name and the wrenching particulars about the angel’s wretched companion.⁵⁴ Such acceptance of spiritual evidence was not assured. Elizabeth Reis, in a discussion of Mather’s views on angels, suggests that while Mather believed in his own angelic visions, “[h]e had less confidence in the visions of his parishioners, especially if they were women.”⁵⁵ This sense that women were less reliable receivers of true angelic influence is rooted in the persistent fear that any seeming angel could be a demonic deception. As Reis reminds us, Increase Mather was quite explicit about the links between gender and Satanic delusions: “if those White Angels appear to females only, who are the weaker sex, and more likely to be imposed on, that renders the case yet the more suspicious.”⁵⁶ The specific charge laid against the female observer is that she is susceptible to being imposed upon. This openness to demonic imposition is the dark mirror image of the angelic impressions that sustained, comforted and healed. As we saw in the case of Mercy Short, such invisible influences on the female mind could be synchronized, warring elements in one complex experience. More importantly, as the recorded experiences of Mercy Short, Margaret Rule and Abigail Mather suggest, Cotton Mather could make a virtue as well as curse out of female susceptibility. In the weakened states of possession and profound illness, Satan could threaten these women, but they were also given access to a direct and authorized form of pious interaction with the invisible world.

To fully understand the context of these individual medical miracles, a brief look at Mather’s pastoral medical writing is in order. I have suggested above that Mather’s interest in the combination of medical and spiritual investigation was a steady theme throughout his ministerial career. Important critical work has been done on the texture of that combination, on the way in which Mather “assigned a new significance to the spiritual aspects of disease, thereby exalting the specialist in affairs of the spirit, the minister, to a new importance.”⁵⁷ I am primarily interested here, however, in one aspect of this rhetoric—the way in which Mather turns the spiritual and symptomatic case of an exemplary individual to public account. This effort required him to establish a vocabulary and a method for reading between body and soul. In a major 1698 sermon on the subject of illness, *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*, (reprinted in the opening chapter of *The*

⁵² Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, 1:445.

⁵³ For a useful description of the circumstances of Abigail’s death and Mather’s reaction, see: Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 179–186.

⁵⁴ Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, 116.

⁵⁵ Reis, “Otherworldly Visions,” 291.

⁵⁶ Increase Mather, *Angelographia, or a Discourse Concerning the Nature and Power of the Holy Angels* (Boston, 1696), 17, quoted in Reis “Otherworldly Visions,” 291.

⁵⁷ Warner, “Vindicating the Minister’s Medical Role,” 280.

Angel of Bethesda), Mather frames sickness-induced suffering as a multiply directed act of divine providence. It is a scourge that punishes the world for its sinfulness (“*flagellum dei pro peccatis mundi*”).⁵⁸ Simultaneously, the curse of illness can serve as strengthening test for God’s chosen: “*Diseases*” as Mather says, “may be *Love Tokens!*”⁵⁹ When read thusly, as part of God’s saving work, the disease is not exactly to be loved, but it is certainly meant to be recognized as a meaningful sign of God’s interest in the sinner. At times, this reading takes the form of a kind of dogged analogical correspondence, as in this pious anecdote offered by Mather: “Our excellent Mitchel, being but Incommoded with an Hoarse Cold, wrote thus upon it, in his Diary. ‘My Sin is Legible in the Chastisement. Cold Duties, Cold Prayers... my Coldness in my whole conversation, Chastized with a Cold.’”⁶⁰ Even a cold, then, is a message from God. A sinner in this case could read in a straight line, by direct causation, from his sickness to his sin, through the visible evidence of his symptomatic body.

A more fully drawn case study in the physical legibility of sin can be found in Mather’s *The Pure Nazarite*. In this 1723 pamphlet, framed as a kind of open pastoral letter to a young man, Mather develops an anti-masturbation argument. Notably, he links physical and spiritual investigation through the imagery of demonic possession “Every time a Young Man commits this *Impiety*, he makes a new *Resignation* of himself unto the *Unclean Spirit*, and gives the *Unclean Spirit* a new *Invitation* to take *Possession* of him. The Glorious Lord now permits a *Devil*, not unlike those who entred into the *Gadaren Swine*, to enter into him.”⁶¹ Here the gospel account of the possession of the swine by the legion of devils, a key text for Protestant demonologists, is repurposed in service of a medical and moral argument. Physical sin translates into spiritual exposure; it constitutes an opening, an “invitation” for the disruptive influence of the invisible world. The secret act becomes a kind of self-possession, a recurrent compact with devils.

This is where the act of publication takes on medical and spiritual significance. As a publicly available work, *The Pure Nazarite* fights the secret scourge with display. It takes hidden, private shame and publicizes it, holding up the masturbator to scrutiny and so breaking the internalized cycle of self-possession. The work is painful, but necessary. Taking his cue from the fifth chapter of Ephesians, he pronounces: “*It is a shame even to speak of those things, which are done of them in Secret*. But I am to write of those things, which it is a *shame to speak* of; and I shall hope to do it so, that you will be *Ashamed*, and also *Afraid* of doing them.”⁶² In keeping with this practice of display, Mather offers an anecdote about an Italian doctor who sought to prevent new cases of venereal disease by showing pictures of sufferers with advanced symptoms to healthy young men.⁶³ Mather then emulates this medical and visual strategy by painting his own portrait of the impenitent masturbator: “If you should but see the *Picture* of a young man by this *Impiety*, reduced into a woful *Consumption*; his *Visage* Pale and Leane, and *Stomach* Depraved, and his depauperated *Blood*

⁵⁸ Cotton Mather, *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano* (Boston, 1698), 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Cotton Mather, *The Pure Nazarite* (Boston, 1723), 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2–3.

⁶³ Mather made repeated use of the story of the Italian doctor. See also: Cotton Mather, *A Perfect Recovery* (Boston, 1714), 17; Cotton Mather, *The Angel of Bethesda*, ed. Gordon W. Jones (Barre, MA: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972), 21(hereafter cited in text as *AB*).

fill'd with acid, and acrid Particles...[o]ne would think, it would be an *Infallible Preservative*.”⁶⁴ Mather's story, like the Italian doctor's picture, uses the means of publication and representation to do real work in preventing future sickness and sin.

What he shows the reader is how invisible physical and spiritual causes work in tandem, bad blood and bad actions both possess and waste the frame. This is another kind of display, the publication of the medical details to match the young man's demonic possession. The literal visibility of his lean visage is subtly blended with an imagined vision of his blood and stomach. The rhetorically exposed young man, the subject of Mather's ekphrasis, is both a medical subject and a moral example. He is an agent, a willing participant in the destruction of his health. At the same time, his agency has been evacuated. He is displayed, exemplified, and also possessed—a more or less literal demoniac. As before, in the case of the young energumens, Mather's account itself undeniably possesses and instrumentalizes the sufferer. Yet, as in the cases of Lydia Ingram, he also invites a kind of self-possession. In these suffering young bodies, Mather juxtaposes two classic requirements of his faith: the command to patiently acknowledge providential intervention and the obligation to intervene, to provide, whenever possible, for the well-being of your body and soul. This dual approach to the suffering body is symptomatic of the discursive blending that characterizes Mather's thought about sickness and sin. It's worth keeping the young Nazarite's simultaneously active and passive role in mind, as we turn to stories of miraculous healing in *The Angel of Bethesda*. There also, providential and medical discourses interact through the medium of afflicted young bodies. It is the definitive rhetorical strategy in Mather's treatment of miraculous medical experience. The physical emanations of the invisible world are blended with the practical (and increasingly non-spiritual) vocabulary and methodology of medicine, through the useful stories of individuals. As befits a volume that takes its name from an ancient instance of divine healing, *The Angel of Bethesda* makes important use of exceptional physical narrative in articulating its understanding of the medical and spiritual world.

3. *The Angel of Bethesda*: Miraculous Innovation and Encapsulation

Modern analyses of Mather's medical writing have tended to cluster around the particular issue of smallpox inoculation. The tone was set early by Beall and Shyrock, who admired his advocacy of the “animacular” theory of disease and his associated work in promoting inoculation. They saw in this aspect of Mather's thought an “indication of open-mindedness on his part—an attitude associated, also, with an ability to select out of contemporary science certain ideas which were to prove of lasting value.”⁶⁵ As I have already suggested, this characterization of Mather as a prescient selector inevitably involves some selection on the part of historians and critics as well. Nonetheless, Beall and Shyrock's advocacy of Mather's significance in medical history offered an important early look at Mather as a scientific thinker.⁶⁶ This sense of Mather as an able and

⁶⁴ Cotton Mather, *The Pure Nazarite*, 7.

⁶⁵ Beall and Shyrock, *Cotton Mather, First Significant Figure*, 92.

⁶⁶ Contrast this with their contemporary Perry Miller, who painted a much darker picture of Mather's natural philosophy. He famously dismissed Mather's inoculation advocacy as a “lucky shot,” and characterized Mather's contributions to the Royal Society as “among the most ludicrous.” Importantly, Miller reminds us that Mather's contemporaries expressed similar concerns about his credentials and his credulity. The *Transactions* of the Royal Society were by no

forward-thinking empiricist is central to my own reading of his work. Yet in focusing so steadily on one retrospectively appealing aspect of Mather's work, we risk losing sight of the central rhetorical objective expressed in of the *Angel of Bethesda*: "The Design of all this Essay is to Lead the Reader unto HIM" (AB, 10). On this point, Mather could not be clearer. The method of his writing is the persistent unification of the medicalized body and the sin-sick soul, and the ultimate purpose is salvation.

This is the dense and rather delightful puzzle of Mather's medical writing. What are we to make of texts that put so little space between soteriology and the innovative treatment of disease? The point is directly addressed in Linda Breen's sensitive reading of the supernatural underpinnings of Mather's smallpox advocacy, in which she places an entirely appropriate emphasis on his paramount commitment to issues of faith. She clarifies the ways in which Mather's efforts to observe and define the invisible world shaped his empiricism, rather than undermining it: "The struggle to separate vital religious supernaturalism from damnable superstition made Mather even more receptive to scientifically-based theories of disease than he would have been by virtue of his early training in medicine."⁶⁷ Breen's reading of Mather's career leads her to consider both demonic depossession and dream cures as means of thematizing conversion. She sees Mather working to convince his audience that divine healing could be "carried over into the Lord's dealing with the 'sin-sick' soul, inspiring them ultimately to make an attempt at salvation."⁶⁸ Yet she determines that "the analogies with depossession and dream cures were eventually deemed imperfect because it became increasingly difficult to show how dream cures comported with the 'rational' or scientific soul."⁶⁹ With that, she turns away from Mather's supernaturalism and toward his faithful engagement with smallpox inoculation. I find Breen's larger argument about the spiritual uses of bodily evidence quite persuasive. Yet I think that the turn away from the dream cures has more to do with our own discomforts than Mather's. These stories have long appeared as a critical problem in the analysis of Mather's development.⁷⁰ Thus, Breen echoes a long line of readers when she describes the Mather of the dream cures as "[f]ully credulous."⁷¹

Even as the extent and power of Mather's effort at combining medical and religious discourse becomes ever clearer, we continue to set some forms of evidence aside. Cristobal Silva, in the final chapter of his recent book *Miraculous Plagues*, reassesses the smallpox controversy by taking up aspects of Mather's synthesizing drive that are central to Breen's argument, and my own. Importantly, he sets the terms of the debate on

means synonymous with scientific authority for all American colonials. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 344–366.

⁶⁷ Breen, "Cotton Mather, the 'Angelical Ministry,' and Inoculation," 351.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Robert Middlekauff, for example, concludes an excellent analysis of the evolution of Mather's religious thought by dismissing his late career supernaturalism as a depressing retreat: "There is little of inherent importance, or interest in this theory [of the Nishmath-Chajim] or in the incredible stories Mather told in his last years about the world inhabited by spirits. The theory and the stories, however, in offering no criticism of superstitious folklore deprecated by careful theologians, suggest the depths of Mather's growing anti-rationalism." Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers; Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 318-19.

⁷¹ Breen, "Cotton Mather, the 'Angelical Ministry,' and Inoculation," 348.

linguistic and stylistic grounds: “The representation of style as secondary to scientific and theological matters is part of a vision that accepts the conventions of specialized discourses as foregone conclusions rather than the product of contested epistemologies.”⁷² He proposes to remedy this shortcoming by “reading Cotton Mather’s knotted rhetorical posturing as an attempt to reintegrate the growing schism between science and theology.”⁷³ The introduction of rhetoric as a central concern is heartening. It suggests that we can begin to see Mather’s work not just as the product of a moment of discursive multiplicity, but also as a sensitive critical contribution to those discourses. Perhaps even more importantly, Silva shows concern for the physical bodies that constitute the real tragic material of the smallpox debate. He suggests that we “pause...for a moment to ask what is at stake when we abstract from patients’ bodies to theories of illness and treatment, and how print is complicit in making those transactions.”⁷⁴ This pause is a deeply important moment of critical self-examination, and Silva’s reading of the racialized bodies of the smallpox controversy has implications for the ways in which bodies become a kind of evidentiary currency throughout Mather’s work.

Nonetheless, the centrality of the smallpox controversy as a site of inquiry continues to allow us to defer the examination of other bodies in Mather’s medical writing. In this framework, the healed bodies of the miracle cures can still be associated with Mather’s old epistemic attachments, with what Carla Mulford calls the “cultural lag” between England and New England in the eighteenth century.⁷⁵ This colonial backwardness is typified, for Mulford, by a lingering attachment to providentialism, and was “exacerbated when church leaders such as Mather, well read in the new science, turned to occult interpretation rather than rational explanation.”⁷⁶ Despite continued interest in the cultural negotiations of the smallpox controversy, the bodily evidence of the miraculous cures remains a part of Mather’s “older system, which created affiliation between the phenomena of the natural world and what he perceived to be the divine providence of his God.”⁷⁷ Yet if we are to take faith seriously as an intellectual and cultural force, how could such an affiliation constitute a lack? Certainly that link was being reframed, in Mather’s time, to account for cultural changes. In that respect, Mulford’s analysis of the smallpox debate as a “crossroads of early modern liberalism” seems apt.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, some faith in the connection between God’s power and the phenomena of the natural world would seem to be a constitutive factor of any Christian belief system, no matter how modern. If we allow faith some continuing critical force, Mather’s miracle stories can be read as more than an epistemic dead end. Miraculous cures offer Mather a chance to talk about abstract theological and medical questions in emphatically physical and specific terms. In fact, they are, by virtue of their content and method, very much in line with Silva’s concerns about attending to the importance of

⁷² Cristobal Silva, *Miraculous Plagues: An Epidemiology of Early New England Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152-3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁵ Carla Mulford, “Pox and ‘Hell-Fire,’” in *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America*, ed. Mark Kamrath and Sharon M Harris (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

specific bodies. They centralize private and particular miraculous experience as a site where faith can engage with a changing world. None of these concerns diminish as the eighteenth century progresses. These medical stories may allow us, ultimately, to see the forward-looking possibility in Mather's vision of miracle.

We can best start to understand that possibility by looking at exactly how Mather narrates his own experience of the important advances concerning smallpox: "It begins now to be Vehemently Suspected That the Small-Pox may be more of an *Animaculated Business*, than we have been generally aware of.... And so, we are insensibly drawn into *New Sentiments*, about the *Way* of its [i.e. smallpox] *Conveyance*, and the *Cause* why tis convey'd but once" (*AB*, 94). Mather is a sensitive analyst of the implications of this change, but also of the texture of that change, of what it feels like to be "insensibly drawn" into a new set of understandings. There is a lyrical quality to Mather's representation of the progress of medical knowledge. It's hard not to sense that he is aware of the importance of this shift, and the potential that it has fundamentally to improve scientific understanding of the causes of disease. He is pulled toward "New Sentiments" in part because they have real explanatory power. Yet there is also something ineffable for Mather about the way in which this change takes place. His feeling of being "insensibly drawn" into the new not only captures the numinous mystery of intellectual change; it also insinuates the gentle necessity of the providential guide, of the force that draws.

Understanding the animaculated nature of smallpox allows for the solution of the scientific puzzle of post-infectious immunity, and it also provides Mather with a wealth of theological metaphors.⁷⁹ Yet the animacular vocabulary does not explain the mystery of its own origins. For Mather, divine providence alone can provide the motive force for such a surprising and valuable intellectual shift. The insensible pull toward the rightness of the animacular theory points us toward the imaginative intertwining of Mather's empirical and pious discourses. The experience of discovery is miraculous, and remedy is, at its core, a species of miracle. This is a thread that runs through *The Angel of Bethesda*, and we find it again in Mather's chapter on miraculous cures: "The Good Angels may by Impressions on the Mind of [shall I say, *His Brother?*] the *Physician*, or, by an *Insensible Manuduction* to the *Friend* or *Book* [suppose an hint in our, *Angel of Bethesda*!] that may inform us, *How to be cured*" (*AB*, 53). The insensible orchestrating force that urged the smallpox investigations forward returns as the "insensible manuduction" that connects miraculous actors to earthly means. In Mather's writing on the dream cures, the gentle insinuation of the providential guide becomes a powerful and direct force. Yet they are all of one piece, and the extremity of miracle, rather than being a retrograde attachment, offers Mather the chance to articulate the textual and physical place of the divine in a changing world.

One of the principle stylistic vehicles of this articulation in *The Angel of Bethesda* is Mather's use of the chapter. He refers to each of the chapters in the *Angel* as a "Capsula." His medical pun subtly emphasizes his attention to the formal division of these texts, and their importance as unifying, enveloping containers of useful information. What is placed within the capsula must not only relate thematically to the other materials, it must strengthen them, and participate in the beneficial effect of the whole. The division of the manuscript's sixty-one surviving capsulae allows Mather to multiply his modes of inquiry

⁷⁹ Silva, *Miraculous Plagues*, 159–162.

under the heading of medicine, and consequently to include, but also to segregate, potentially objectionable material like miracle.⁸⁰ The ordering of these sections can produce surprising juxtapositions, as at the close of the seventh capsula, on animacular theory. True to the developmental theme he has been pursuing, Mather ends with a call for an increased use of mathematical methods in medicine: “How much would the *Art of Medicine* be improved, if our Physicians more generally had the *Mathematical Skill* of a Dr. Mead or a Dr. Morgan” (AB, 47). He follows this with an approving citation of an unnamed proponent of iatromechanical medicine: “Since the Animal Body is a *Machine*...a *Blind Man* might as well pretend to Regulate a Piece of *Clockwork*, or a *Deaf* man to tune an *Organ*, as a Person ignorant of *Mathematicks* and *Mechanism*, to cure Diseases, without understanding the Natural Organization, Structure and Operations of the *Machine*, which he undertakes to regulate” (AB, 48). This bold claim concludes the seventh capsula of the *Angel of Bethesda*.

The eighth opens with the following sentence: “It is not more *Notorious*, than it is *Astonishing*, that many *Methods* and *Medicines* for the Cure of *Diseases*, have been the Communications of *Daemons* to our World” (AB, 48). This inauspicious swerve back to pneumatology appears to be the antithesis of the mechanistic line of argument he has only just now so capably reproduced. Maxine Van de Wetering, in her analysis of Mather’s engagement with new medical ideas, reacts to this conflict in a useful way. In arguing that Mather’s thinking progressed gradually toward more “enlightened positions,” she notes that linear progress can nonetheless be difficult to track in his major works: “A chronological view... does not give sufficient guidance to Mather’s maturing position in medicine, for he never seemed to discard any early notion in favor of later ones. What he said in the early *Magnalia*, he repeated in *Bonifacius*, and much of his most reflective work in the *Angel* was a recapitulation of various earlier thoughts.”⁸¹ This frank analysis points directly to one of the central frustrations of reading Mather’s late work. How do we integrate our understanding of the curious theorist of smallpox with a mind that seems to recur endlessly to old fights, old beliefs and old texts?

It is partly in hopes of addressing this question that we turn directly to the presumably anti-scientific category of miracle. Recursion to old themes, the wholesale repetition of stories, the reassembly of previously available texts, all of these are constitutive stylistic features of the miraculous stories contained in *The Angel of Bethesda*. The problem, then, is not just the content, but the style, which led one critic to praise the book’s display of erudition, but to call the work itself “ill-digested, poorly assimilated, and uncritically presented.”⁸² The *Angel* is certainly not the only one of Mather’s works at which such charges could be leveled. It may in fact be that his practices of assemblage were partly the result of haste, or were a necessary coping mechanism for a prolific and tireless public speaker and writer. The purpose of this final section is not conclusively to explain the origins of Mather’s style, nor particularly to defend it. However, I will argue that the style of *The Angel of Bethesda*, if sometimes a source of frustration, must be understood as more than a mere impediment. Mather’s accretive style, defined by his

⁸⁰On the condition of the manuscript and its missing chapters, see: Gordon W. Jones, introduction to *The Angel of Bethesda*, by Cotton Mather, ed. Gordon W. Jones (Barre, MA: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972), xxxvii.

⁸¹ Wetering, “A Reconsideration of the Inoculation Controversy,” 59, n. 42.

⁸² Warner, “Vindicating the Minister’s Medical Role,” 293.

habitual recycling of material and his achronological assemblies, is a powerful expression of his intellectual and methodological investments. It has tended, however to obstruct our understanding of the importance of the miraculous aspects of the *Angel*. We have, perhaps, been searching for definitive patterns of development in Mather that do not match either his spiritual or his scientific goals. It may be that the apparent defects in the style of the *Angel*—its looseness, its refusal to make critical distinctions between apparently incompatible themes, its collocation of old and new data—are markers of a conscious, consistent objection to emerging restrictions on the interpretation of bodily evidence.

Mather assembles his reflections on miraculous healing in the eighth capsula of the *Angel*, under the heading “Raphael. Or, Notable Cures, from the INVISIBLE WORLD” (AB, 48). The details of Mather’s assembly of the Raphael capsula are clearest when we compare it to its predecessor, the unpublished letter to John Woodward on dream cures, which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In the Raphael capsula, Mather repeats the story of Lydia Ingram’s dream cure, continuing to use it as an anchor in his account of medical miracles. At the same time, the surrounding materials are adjusted, reinforced and updated in ways that may subtly alter the reader’s view of the implications and the uses of miracle. The stories vary considerably in their length, detail and (perhaps most significantly) in their depiction of angelic agency. They all, however, depict the body as a medium for reading the action of the invisible world, and emphasize the care required to observe, understand and respond to that agency. The presentation and the framing of these stories, as well as Mather’s subtle adjustments in their emphasis, help us to see his faith in the consonance of natural philosophy and miracle. They also permit us to examine the rhetorical work that Mather does to solidify and defend this necessary connection.

The first story Mather offers is the only one in which an angel appears in waking life to a sick person. In this case a man named Samuel Wallas, terribly ill with consumption, is visited by “a person of an aged, but comely and lively Aspect” (AB, 49). The visitor gives him a recipe for a medicine designed to cure his consumption, and Wallas prepares it and uses it to good effect. This tale was briefly mentioned in the letter Mather sent to the Royal Society as something of a commonplace, a tale that could “not escape” his learned reader. Now, more than a decade on, Mather expands his treatment of the tale, with this introduction: “Of the *Angelical Ministry* conspicuous, or at least probable, in Showing the Sick what to do for a Cure, I will not recite any *Outlandish Instances: Except One*, which my Father has transferred out of *Clark’s Collections* into his *Remarkable Providences*. And this I will mention, for a Reason anon to be intimated” (AB, 49). Here we see a simultaneous movement backwards and forwards, in keeping with the larger strategy of Mather’s capsula. He makes the story’s provenance a central point.⁸³ Rather than hiding the link back to the genre and the spirit of his father’s providential catalogue, he celebrates that association. Yet he also labels this tale of naked miracle as “Outlandish,” drawing a sharp distinction from the critical categories of Increase, who

⁸³ As Mather notes, the story appeared in his father’s book, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*. He also points out that Increase himself took the story from an earlier pious collection: Samuel Clarke, *A Mirrour or Looking-Glasse both for Saints, and Sinners*, 4th ed. (London, 1671) 2:18–20. The story had also previously been published in pamphlet form: *The Good Angel of Stamford* (London, 1659).

called Wallas' story "a strange providence."⁸⁴ This constitutes an admission on Mather's part that his new catalogue cannot simply *reproduce*, but must also *rejustify* inherited miraculous material. The providential content is still useful, but the evidentiary framework must be reformulated.

Mather concludes his story, as his father did, with a mention of a council of ministers that met after the event, and determined that the visitor was indeed "One of the Good Angels." Unlike his father, however, he elides the significance of that ministerial approval. Increase Mather closes his version of the Wallas story by admitting that angels may appear. However he warns "for any to desire such as this is unwarrantable, and exceeding dangerous. For thereby some have been imposed upon by wicked Daemons, who know how to transform themselves into Angels of Light."⁸⁵ In the discursive frame of the late seventeenth century, the ministerial stamp of approval would have been a valuable confirmation of the theological soundness of this widely distributed story. Cotton Mather, in his eighteenth-century medical book, is much more concerned with the efficacy of treatments, and, by extension, with the anecdotal evidence of the suffering body itself. Therefore, he allows the pleasing ministerial consensus to stand, but removes the context that gave rise to it. The more important justifying anecdote for his Wallas story comes from the brief addendum that follows it in *The Angel*: "I knew a person who at Fourteen Years of Age had great Symptoms of a *Hectic* upon him....In this Distress, he betook himself to this *Wallasian Remedy*; And now, *At more than Threescore Years of Age he writes the Story of it!*" (AB, 50). The "Outlandish" story of Wallas is included because Mather himself verified the remedy by using it. In the first detailed anecdote of the chapter, then, we find Mather reworking the time-honored raw materials of the providential accounts. His own investigation effectively balances the concerns of pneumatology and medicine by returning us to local, verifiable physical experience. The exemplary figure is Samuel Wallas, with the weight of Mather's forefathers behind him. But the local experimenter who defuses the outlandishness of the story is Cotton Mather himself. The young Mather is both a respectful and judicious inheritor of the miracle tradition and an active practitioner of an empiricism that can bolster and update that tradition. Like Wallas, he synthesizes providential acceptance and active, precise, health-promoting activity.

In keeping with this effort to add contemporary and local support, the chapter then shifts from this providential classic to a series of "domestic examples," three stories of Massachusetts women who were miraculously cured of their illnesses. This is a recapitulation, but also an expansion, of the strategy Mather used in his earlier letter to the Royal Society. The first example is a short account of woman's dream, in which she foresees the arrival of a remedy that will cure her gout. For his second example, Mather reproduces, almost verbatim, the story of Lydia Ingram from his *Curiosa Americana* letter. In spite of his well-attested reverence for the Royal Society, their disapproval does not seem to have carried much weight in this case. He is unapologetic about re-presenting Ingram's story as crucial medical and spiritual evidence. Indeed, he updates the biographical details that close her story, adding that "She is now above Twenty years after alive" (AB, 52). (The previous version had given the time elapsed time as "fourteen years.") In the face of skeptical dismissal, Mather reiterates his data, implicitly insisting

⁸⁴ Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, 205.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

on its relevance and its currency. He then extends and deepens this re-commitment with a new and carefully rendered story of miraculous healing.

To complete his trio of “Domestic Examples,” Mather describes the case of a young woman from Falmouth named Thankful Fish. His account of Fish’s miraculous healing opens in the mostly undated historical time that characterizes the preceding stories. Toward the end of the tale, however, he gives the first specific date of the capsula: “[O]n the Day following, [which was Nov. 14· 1724] she found herself yett more Able to *Stand and Step*” (AB, 52). The date is significant in part because it comes very late in the accepted timeframe for the composition of the *Angel*.⁸⁶ This historical immediacy of the anecdote indicates to a potential reader that the process of miraculous healing continues even to the very moment of the manuscript’s composition, and that the networks for transmitting edifying stories of miracle are intact. The context provided by the capsula is also essential. Mather has just sketched out a synoptic history of miraculous healing. He begins the capsula with classical precedents, progresses through the “outlandish” seventeenth century account of Wallas and the previously-anthologized story of Lydia Ingram, and then lands on the very current story of Thankful Fish. Mather was faced with frank discouragement from the Royal Society and his own anxieties about the possibility of “Encouraging Unwarrantable *Superstitions*, or *Affectations*; or Countenancing any Dispositions to go out of the *Ordinary Road for Cures*” (AB, 53). Nonetheless, his investigations of medical miracle continue. The internal and external doubt about miracle is met with faithful reassertion. He might have suppressed the material entirely, or let the authorized stories of past miracles stand in the middle distance of history. The safe course of pious moderation, after all, was to allow that miracles had happened before, but did not continue at the present moment. Instead, Mather gives us an example of miraculous intervention that is as current as any he could summon. His inclusion of the Fish story, in view of the discouragements he faced, must be read as an argument for the continuing medical, spiritual and narrative relevance of miracle.

Despite this emphasis on the continuity of miracle, its phenomenal nature is not constant across the arc of Mather’s capsula. As the stories progress, the divine presence is progressively dephysicalized. Fish’s story begins much like that of Walls and Ingram, with debilitating chronic illness: “In her Thirteenth Year, she was visited with Sickness and Weakness, for Three Months together, and followed with Fitts that had on them an *Hysterical Aspect*, which so Enfeebled her that she could neither *Step* nor *Stand*, for Ten Years together” (AB, 52). For Thankful Fish, however, there is no angelic visitor. Instead, she has “a Strong Impression on her Mind, that if she were carried unto *Rhode-Island*, she should *there* find a cure” (AB, 52). Here again, the capsula divisions help to link and unify disparate data under a single theme. The inclusion of the Fish story in the Raphael capsula, under the heading of “Notable Cures, from the INVISIBLE WORLD” and alongside dramatic angelic interventions, offers a means of placing her impression and her eventual cure under the sign of miracle. By raising the possibility of an end to

⁸⁶ In fact, it comes some months after the widely accepted date of completion of the manuscript, creating something of a puzzle. Mather’s account in *The Angel of Bethesda* places the actual event of Fish’s cure in mid-November of 1724. Mather’s diary tells us that he completed the manuscript for the *Angel* in February of 1723-24: Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1724*, 2:698-9. He also claims to be done with the text in his letter to James Jurin of October 5th, 1724: Cotton Mather, *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather*, 400.

Fish's disability, the appearance of the impression advances the story's medical narrative. Yet it also initiates a parallel tale of exemplary Christian behavior that reframes the meaning of her suffering and her cure. When Mather talks about Fish's "Impression," he is describing a direct providential intervention. This is the force of heaven, pressing its truth on her mind. The weakness of Fish's illness turns out to be a kind of virtuous vulnerability. In an echo of Mercy Short and Margaret Rule's openness to angelic influence, Fish's body and mind are ideally prepared for the reception and transmission of divine suggestion.

The "Hysterical aspect" of Fish's "Fitts" is crucially related to this sense of useful impressionability. Mather believed women to be more vulnerable to disease in general, and denominated chronic, apparently neurotic female illness as "hysteria" (AB, 36). The natural infirmity of the female body made the mind susceptible to hysteria, and this in turn opened that mind to a range of influences. The role of hysteria was significant in his diagnostic work with possessed young women.⁸⁷ In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Carol Karlsen alludes to these earlier encounters with young female bodies in distress. She notes that Mather considered hysteria as a cause of Margaret Rule's fits in 1693, as in this quote from "Another Brand Pluckt out of the Burning": "I do believe that the Evil Angels do often take Advantage from Natural Distempers in the Children of Men to annoy them with such further mischief as we call preternatural...and perhaps for this reason one sex may suffer more Troubles of some kinds from the Invisible World than the other."⁸⁸ Devils, in Mather's analysis of Margaret Rule's case, are not instigators, but opportunists. The heart of Mather's point here is that hysterical symptoms, rather than being an alternative diagnosis, are a possible precursor for demonic possession. Hysteria provides the opening and possession is the "further mischief." The solution is neat, given Mather's requirements. It both coordinates the interaction of physical and supernatural causes and provides a hypothetical explanation for the overrepresentation of women among the possessed. Yet, as we saw in the cases of Short and Rule, he does not limit the interaction of invisible and natural causes to devilish mischief. Angels, too, could make use of this opening into the female consciousness. In Fish's case, the result of her hysterical disorder is not demonic possession, but a kind of self-possession that mirrors the divine will. In these miracle stories, potentially dangerous female weakness is reframed as a kind of gracious vulnerability. Here also, women's bodies provide the most vivid evidence of invisible influence. The hard stamp of divine will finds its ideal receptive medium in the delicate constitution of young, hysterical women like Thankful Fish.⁸⁹

Not coincidentally, Mather's story celebrates actions (like prayer, reading, and listening) which indicate Fish's willingness to be impressed upon. When Fish is

⁸⁷ Janice Knight, "Telling It Slant: The Testimony of Mercy Short," *Early American Literature* 37, no. 1 (January 2002): 45.

⁸⁸ Carol F Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987), 233.

⁸⁹ In an article on hysteria and Mercy Short, Deborah Kloepfer reads the link between the possession cases and *The Angel of Bethesda* differently than I do. Where I tend to see continuity and recurrence, she argues that the shift from the spiritual to the medical frame was part of an effort to account for his failings, to "get it right." Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, "Cotton Mather's 'Dora': The Case History of Mercy Short," *Early American Literature* 44, no. 1 (2009), 8.

discouraged by the helpless doctors she finds in Rhode Island, her hope is revived by miracle stories:

[S]he was told of Several *Miraculous Cures* that occur'd in the latter End of the last Century; and Some that were Cured of Distressing Maladies, While Reading and Thinking on the Miracles wrought by our SAVIOUR...and Beleeving that He could still do as great Things as Ever. She had good Advice given to her, to *Pray* much and ask the prayers of others for her; and hope in the Power and Mercy of her SAVIOUR. (*AB*, 52)

Here a collection of miraculous stories like the abbreviated anthology of the Raphael capsula appears as a curative force. Mather is dramatizing the usefulness of exactly the kind of historical context in which he has placed this very story. The miracle tale is another kind of numinous stamp that impresses upon the mind. Fish's models the proper pious response to the Raphael capsula. By attending to the miraculous stories of the seventeenth century, and by believing in the continuity and continuation of miracle as a curative force, she enacts the kind of faithful acquiescence that her own story is designed to elicit. Public example both produces and enlivens personal faith.

While this faith is the essential ingredient, it is not, by itself, sufficient. Thankful Fish's cure turns out to be the result of cooperating forces. To fulfill the narrative requirements of the tale, Fish must move from the passive acceptance of divine will to the active expression of that will in the world. Since she has not received her remedy by direct communication, she must also be receptive to ordinary exchanges. The actual mechanism of the cure appears in singularly undramatic form: "By and by, while she yett continued at *Rhode-Island* she heard mention of a *Malt-Bath*" (*AB*, 52). The idea at first meets with some resistance. Mather tells us "her friends were much against her trying of it, but thought her so feeble that it could not be used without unhappy consequences." Fish, however, refuses to yield, and we are told that she "was Impetuous and Obstinate for it, and would not be diverted from the perillous Experiment" (*AB*, 52). In specific response to concerns about bodily weakness, she asserts a kind of direct will we have not seen before. The force of miracle leads her not to the slow obedience of Lydia Ingram, but a fearless approach to the dangers of experiment.

Mather was not alone in his interest in the tale of Thankful Fish's experiment. In January of 1726, Paul Dudley, like Mather an American fellow of the Royal Society, sent a letter to James Jurin, then secretary of the Society, with his own description of the cure of Thankful Fish. The general sequence of the story tracks Mather's earlier relation, and there is considerable overlap in the specific wording, suggesting either that these two men communicated about the story or had access to a common source. Despite this similarity, they clearly understood the story's value in significantly different ways. One indication of this divergence is the generic context in which Dudley places the tale. In his letter, he presents it as the first in a series of cases under the heading "Physick" and titles it "A Remarkable Cure of a Person Sweating in Malt at Newport in New England October 1724."⁹⁰ He follows it with another tale of a sweating cure, in which a woman is relieved of her rheumatism by sweating in rum. This interest in sweating cures had previously

⁹⁰ Paul Dudley to James Jurin, January 21, 1726, *Early Letters*, EL/D1/90, Royal Society Archives, London.

been encouraged by the Royal Society, which had, the year before, published a Dudley letter entitled “An Account of an extraordinary Cure by Sweating in Hot Turff.”⁹¹

While the mechanism of the cure is the same in both versions of the tale, the impetus for its enactment differs in an important way. Mather’s Fish is driven by the force of her own miraculous impression and by the anecdotal support of other miraculous stories. Consequently, the discovery of the mechanism for her cure is a muted note in his version of the story. As suggested above, Fish’s active receptivity to social exchange has important narrative implications. In medical terms, however, Mather’s introduction of the “malt bath” is casual to the point of being nonsensical. No link at all is made between the bath and her particular illness. Compare this to the way in which Dudley introduces the cure: “after some time, either reading or hearing of Sweating Persons in her Condition with Malt, she was Resolved to make the Experiment.”⁹² The difference is small, but crucial. The introduction of previous instances of the experiment creates a meaningful link between Fish’s illness and her action. The relevant comparison set for Dudley’s Fish is “Persons in her Condition.” She learns about those other cases through social transmission, either oral or written. If she is not actually reading Dudley’s letters about sweating cures in the *Transactions*, she might as well be. As a reader/listener and an experimenter, she is a participant in the same diffuse network as Dudley and Mather. Her own experiment contributes to the general fund of knowledge, through the mediation of letter writers like Dudley. There is a process of cyclical generation at work, as the transmission of cure stories produces more (and more effective) instances of cures.

What is at work in these two stories is a similar textual strategy with radically different implications. In each case, Fish’s cure is helped along by a group of stories that recapitulate the narrative form and purpose of her own story. The necessary impulse for Mather’s Fish is divine grace. Yet her faith was bolstered and encouraged by a cluster of miracle stories just like the ones that surround her tale in the Raphael chapter. So also is Fish’s life saved in Dudley’s account thanks to stories like the sweating cures in his letters. In both instances, the collection of thematically linked stories not only frames, but also *produces* the cure of Thankful Fish. This takes us to the heart of what Mather is (and is not) doing with these miracle stories. His account positions the experimental urge as a product of historical and contemporary miracle.

Dudley’s account, by contrast, is situated firmly in the contemporary context of knowledge production and transmission. Susan Scott Parish uses Dudley’s letter as an example of the strategic aims of colonial reporters. She argues that such accounts were intended to suggest that consequential empirical and interpretive work was taking place in the colonies: “The colonials’ letters were not only implicit claims to legitimacy, but they also made explicit claims for the skills of local nonelite testifiers.”⁹³ Parrish focuses on Dudley’s mention of a “Skillful Woman in the neighborhood” who performs Fish’s cure, a figure completely absent from Mather’s account. This woman, with Fish as her implicit experimental partner, prepares the cure, of which Dudley gives a careful, presumably reproducible account. His interest in the details of the procedure and its enactors stands

⁹¹ Paul Dudley, “An Account of an Extraordinary Cure by Sweating in Hot Turff; With a Description of the Indian Hot-Houses; By the Honourable Paul Dudley, Esq; F. R. S.,” *Philosophical Transactions* (1683-1775) 33 (1724): 129-132.

⁹² Paul Dudley to Jurin, January 21, 1726.

⁹³ Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 119.

in contrast to Mather's much sketchier account of the particulars of the cure. Yet the generic and functional differences in these two approaches to the cure should not distract us from an essential similarity: these are both accounts of experimental activity in British America. Mather's Fish is stubbornly insistent on her "perillous Experiment" just as Dudley's Fish is "Resolved to make the Experiment." Mather's faithful Fish, nourished by miracle, is comfortable and active in the social real of experiment, but she arrives there on different terms.

The consonance of Dudley and Mather's language in this moment bears directly on our broader examination of Mather's complex use of miracle. What he has accomplished here is a careful imbrication of experiment and miracle. Thankful Fish's tale is a celebration of the rational and faithful use of means. Fish carries out the divine mission she inherits through the genealogical sequence of the Raphael stories. In essence, she adapts the central Matherian concerns of attention to divine communication and filiopietistic respect for spiritual precedent to the experimentalist idiom of the moment. In Mather's version of her story, Thankful Fish can participate in the tradition of miracle without the dramatic intervention of the angel who appeared to Samuel Wallas or who scolded Lydia Ingram in her dreams. Yet even without this dramatic demonstration, she is properly cognizant of the source from which her miraculous cure flowed. In the last line of Mather's tale she is carried to a church where "she signified her Desire to have *Thanks* rendered unto God her SAVIOUR for the Wonderful Work which He had wrought upon her: And she continues to Walk and *not faint*, or complain of Weariness" (AB, 52-3). This brings miracle almost literally up to the minute. The piety of faithful sufferers, the direct intervention of the divine and the resulting miraculous experiment are working in concert to sustain the bodily and spiritual health of God's people. It is a vision of a changing present and a faithful future that has more to say about the continuing uses of miracle than has been supposed.

Then, on the next line, Mather begins one more story. It is, unlike the other stories, enclosed in brackets in the manuscript. It reads like a narrative afterthought, a final tale on the way back to the quotations, meditations, and learned miscellanea that close the chapter: "What shall one think of a passage, in the Memoirs of, Mr. Robert Billi[o], One of the shining *Lamps of Heaven*, that were extinguished in 1662" (AB, 53).⁹⁴ Here Mather dips back into the annals of Puritan piety, and comes up with a somewhat dusty bookend to the story of Samuel Wallas.⁹⁵ With its brevity, its age, its English provenance and its apparent disinterest in empirical verification, Billio's story stands in striking contrast to the carefully drawn, local immediacy of the Thankful Fish story. The faithful core of the tale is the same, however, a direct echo of the central motivating structure in Fish's story. Deprived of the use of his legs by the gout, Billio is visited one day in his parlor by "a Strong IMPULSE upon his Mind, which caused him with much

⁹⁴ The name is transcribed in Jones' edition of *The Angel of Bethesda* as "Billig," which may have made him impossible to identify (AB, 53n17).

⁹⁵ Robert Billio was among the thousands of nonconformist ministers removed from their posts in the "Great Ejection" prompted by the passage of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. I have not found the "Memoir" to which Mather refers, but the anecdote was in published circulation around the time of Mather's writing. See for example: Edmund Calamy, *A Continuation of the Account of the Ministers, Lecturers, Masters and Fellows of Colleges, and Schoolmasters, Who Were ejected and Silenced After the Restoration in 1660, by or Before the Act for Uniformity*, vol. 1 (London, 1727), 478-9.

Difficulty to creep up into his Chamber, and there with fervent Prayer pour out his Soul before the Lord” (*AB*, 53). Billio’s gout is immediately cured, without the use of means that was required of Wallas, Ingram and Fish. The power of the divine is sufficient to effect the cure at any point, and Billio’s “IMPULSE” echoes and reemphasizes Fish’s “Strong Impression.”

As a narrative coda, the Billio story is a perfect example of Mather’s textual habit of circling back to old sources of pious instruction. Coming as it does after the story of Thankful Fish, it may contribute to the sense that audacious advancement on the common terms of miracle and empirical science is ultimately impossible for Mather. Yet what if, finally, we were to take the form of Mather’s chapter seriously as a product of his textual practice? What if we allow the idea of the capsula to do critical work? The term implies a container, an envelope in which various components can be combined. Thus the historical and empirical immediacy of Fish’s tale is encapsulated by just the kind of exemplary pious stories that helped to save her life. This capsule takes effect only if it is swallowed whole. Mather’s vision of miracle is set up to emphasize continuity as well as to indicate progress, and his refusal to prioritize a recent, methodologically advanced story like that of Thankful Fish has the potential to mislead us. If we consider miracles not as relics of old faith, but as a continuing negotiation with divine power, we see how they can continue to structure experience. The recursive, repetitive process of belief and the way in which it demands and articulates its own frameworks of evidence and affirmation, has not been adequately described in our readings of Mather’s medical writings. The persistence of miracle, with its startling immediacy and its eternal, looping return to the past, directs us simultaneously forward and backward. In that spirit, Mather’s medical stories should encourage us to think not only of what was being left behind in this moment, but what discourses of faith, miracle and narrative were being perpetuated, augmented and inaugurated.

Chapter Two

George Whitefield and the Evangelical Figure of Miracle

1. Deist Provocation and The Limits of Miracle

Shortly after Cotton Mather wrote the manuscript of *The Angel of Bethesda* and reaffirmed his longstanding interest in contemporary miracle stories, a controversy began to grow in the London press. Over the course of the late 1720s, a running argument about the proper interpretation of biblical miracle flared up into a war of words that one scholar has called “one of the dominating features of English intellectual life in the first half of the eighteenth century.”¹ It was a debate that Mather (who died in 1728), could only have encountered in its initial stages, yet it helped to shape the transatlantic Protestant understanding of miracle in ensuing decades in ways that would likely have been broadly intelligible to him. The provocation for the fight came from a diverse, heterodox group of free-thinkers and controversialists who were collectively (and somewhat problematically) referred to as deists. Their objections to the orthodox Anglican understanding of miracle were various, but largely focused on the case against its status as revelation, and as evidence for the divinity of Christ. Apologists for the orthodoxy of the Church of England made frequent, strident and lengthy replies to their arguments.² The fact that the debate endured until the middle of the eighteenth century gives a sense of the degree and the duration of investment in miracles on both sides.

As this initial focus on English religious controversy suggests, this chapter represents a shift, in generic, temporal and geographic terms, from my investigation of Mather’s writings on miracle healing. I begin by outlining the stakes of the debate over miracles, with a particular focus on the eccentric and mystical writings of Thomas Woolston, perhaps the most infamous of the deist writers on miracle. From there I proceed to a series of controversies over miracle in the early methodist movement, illustrated primarily through the polemical exchanges that John Wesley and George Whitefield carried on with the Anglican hierarchy. Finally, I propose a reading of Whitefield’s miracle sermons that takes into account both the pressure of controversy and the requirements of evangelical religion. In short, this chapter aims to treat the celebrated career of Whitefield, which so profoundly affected the American colonies, from the perspective of English religious controversy and theological conflict. Its larger objective, however, is to use that particular textual perspective on miracles as a means of thinking about the emergence and evolution of the evangelical Protestant imaginary in Europe and America in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

In particular, I argue that transatlantic revivalism and the tectonic effects of evangelical regeneration created the conditions for important new engagements with the idea of the miraculous. Confronted with extraordinary religious changes, evangelicals and their opponents grappled with miracle not just as a potentially problematic

¹ R. M Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 9.

² J.G.A. Pocock, “Within the Margins: The Definitions of Orthodoxy,” in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33-53.

contemporary phenomenon, but also as an evidentiary resource for spurring and strengthening Christian faith. The imagistic intensity and the empirical solidity of miracle make it an appealing rhetorical and theological object, conveniently deployable as a metaphorical referent. Yet the metaphysical significance of miracle, of the public manifestation of divine power, was so immense that it tended to resist containment in such metaphorical structures. As a consequence, powerful metaphorical uses of the miraculous bled over into lived experience, and the supposedly essential division between Biblical and contemporary miracle proved difficult to maintain. In the writing and preaching of George Whitefield, attempts to deploy and control the significant power of miracle ran up against questions about what could be felt, imagined and said about the action of the divine.

In Whitefield's sermons on the miracles of Christ, he turns to the great works of power as analogical, exhortatory and evidentiary resources. As Christ healed and resurrected in the gospels, the logic goes, so also the soul of the evangelical subject would experience repair and rebirth in London, Scotland, Georgia and Massachusetts. The challenge of this stance is as conspicuous as the opportunity. Whitefield's sermons called on believers to re-envision those distant, immensely consequential spectacles, to experience miracles vicariously, even while insisting that they were vanished from the earth, and no longer necessary in a mature church. This process of collective, guided re-envisioning, which I see as essential to Whitefield's homiletics, depends upon what I refer to as figural miracle. This is importantly distinct from a casualization or troping of miracle, its transformation into a commonplace for describing providential favors from God. In this context, the figure of miracle is a highly complex and central object of faithful contemplation, one that Whitefield goes to great lengths to represent in all of its monumental significance.

In placing this rhetorical work in the broader context of doctrinal controversy, I do not focus primarily on the tactical aspects of Whitefield's career, on polemical writing as a means of self-promotion. Nor do I attempt to reevaluate familiar arguments about Christian revival, like the struggles over the meaning of enthusiasm or the permissibility of itinerancy. Rather, I want to think about how the practice of controversy on a subject like miracle can shape its imaginative possibility and its rhetorical uses, and consequently how that concept helps to form the expressive world of the faithful. Nonetheless, the focus on figural language and the representation of the miraculous has made for odd bedfellows in confessional terms. In the opening pages of his weighty biography of George Whitefield, Arnold Dallimore describes an early-eighteenth-century England beset by moral turpitude and decline in piety. In addition to crime, sodomy and the "Gin Craze," Dallimore focuses on the challenge that the Church of England faced from deism. For Dallimore, this state of affairs was nothing less than a spiritual battle: "The Deists carried on a vigorous warfare against *supernatural religion* – Biblical Christianity – and in so doing made loud boast about the reason and logic of their views."³ Dallimore notes the forceful responses from the orthodoxy, but for the most part he sees a church too weakened by heretical teachings, temporal preoccupations and impiety to properly return fire. It was a spiritual crisis answerable only by revival—precisely the kind of revival that Dallimore, himself a Baptist minister, hoped for in the middle of the twentieth

³ Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield; the Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, vol. 1 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 20.

century. Given this sense of deism as an evil that only revival could cure, it would doubtless seem perverse to Dallimore (and perhaps to Whitefield himself) to enter into an analysis of Whitefield's career with anything more than a cursory look at the radical heresies of deism. I do so not in an effort to exclude the fundamental spiritual objectives of Whitefield's mission. Rather, I think that a consideration of deist perspectives indicates the scope and variety of English and American Protestant thinking about miracle in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, and so sheds light on the particular representational challenges that confronted Whitefield in his evangelical work. I don't assert some hidden doctrinal commonality between the figures in this chapter. At the same time, I don't see these various approaches to miraculous figuralism as antithetical to each other. Instead I think it's important to recognize that in this moment of considerable religious ferment, the forms and the meanings of divine power were under constant, close examination, and that the intensity of interest in miracles in particular shaped the imaginative possibilities that emerged.

From the end of the seventeenth century through the middle of the eighteenth century, English Reformed Christianity was caught up in a heated debate about the nature and significance of miracles.⁴ Across the seventeenth century, thinkers like Spinoza and Hobbes had traced important challenges to the orthodox Christian idea of miracle.⁵ In the English eighteenth century however, the debate took on its own particular theological character, with the most violent disagreements being prompted by a group of writers loosely classed as "deists," who were answered by orthodox apologists in the Anglican clergy. As is the case with other famously elusive collective terms (such as "Puritan"), defining the scope, tenets, and individual membership of the "deist" movement has always been something of an historical and critical puzzle. Certainly there was no fixed deist doctrine, no set of principles that would constitute a particular religious outlook. The major deist writers held a range of ideas about the nature and attributes of God, running the gamut from what we might recognize as a species of atheism to more mystical strains of Christianity. In view of this fact, as James Herrick has pointed out, the perennial shorthand view of deist faith "as theological rationalism centered on a God who set the universe in motion and then stepped away" is not of much use.⁶ In place of this, something of a scholarly consensus seems to have evolved around certain broadly defined deist preoccupations.⁷

The most important of these, for the purposes of this chapter, is the deist objection to the idea of revelation as a necessary precondition for salvation. The deists refused the notion of particular revelation as a patently unfair and unreasonable mystification, unworthy of divine perfection. Although there were a number of important attacks on miracle, and countless orthodox responses, the most enduringly famous contribution was David Hume's seminal essay "Of Miracles" which appeared in the *Enquiry Concerning*

⁴ Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, 9–18.

⁵ See my "Introduction," above, 2–3.

⁶ James A Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 23.

⁷ For useful discussions of the definition of deism see Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, 13–14; Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 24–39; Peter Gay, *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1968), 9–26; Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20–21.

Human Understanding in 1748. While Hume is not generally classed among the deists, his publication appeared at the end of the prolonged debate about miracle, and in the waning days of English deism. His argument touches on a number of essential points related to the miracle debate, and a brief summary of his famous intervention will help to set the parameters for my examination of earlier skeptical writings. Hume's treatment approaches miracle not as a question of direct experience, but of testimony. The question, as he frames it, is not whether you might believe a miracle if you saw it, but whether you can trust a report of a miracle. Hume does not reject the evidence of testimony, but he suggests that we are constantly weighing such testimony against our own experience. In the case of miracle, the conflict between testimony and experience is necessarily pushed to its limit: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."⁸ With that, he describes a range of miracle reports, and analyzes their probability. Repeatedly, his verdict is that the preponderance of testimony against miracles must outweigh the testimony for: "there is no testimony for any [miracle]...that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of the testimony, but even the testimony destroys itself."⁹ While he conspicuously avoids a direct examination of Christ's miracles, the reader can plainly see how they are implicated in his final conclusion: "we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion."¹⁰ The necessary result of this conclusion, for Hume, is the entire segregation of faith and reason: "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and 'tis a sure method of exposing it to put it on such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure."¹¹ Faith in Christianity is for Hume an ongoing miracle of its own, entirely divorced from the empire of reason.

From the vantage point of Hume's mid-century rejection of all testimony for miracle, both the diversity and the relative caution of most earlier deist writing on the subject is easier to see. In one early instance, John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysteriorious* (1696), the primary target is not miracle itself, but the mystification that Toland sees encumbering the teachings and practice of the Christian church. In his vision of Christian history, the natural simplicity and reasonableness of the Gospels and the early church were corrupted by the fatal poison of priestcraft and ceremony. These were heathen mysteries blasphemously dressed in new garb, observably different from the miracles of Christ, which are, for Toland, eminent models of reasonable action. Rather than accepting miracles as mysteries above human comprehension, he asserts their clarity and simplicity on the grounds of their evidentiary function. There is, in Toland's account, no "*Miracle* mention'd in the *New Testament*, but what serv'd to confirm the Authority of those that wrought it, to procure Attention to the Doctrines of the *Gospel*, or for like wise and reasonable Purposes."¹² This transparent functionality is the antithesis

⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Lorne Falkenstein (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011), 150–151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysteriorious* (London, 1696), 147.

of mystery, a “thing of its own Nature inconceivable, and not to be judg’d of by our ordinary Faculties and Ideas, tho it be never so clearly reveal’d.”¹³ Matthew Tindal, in his *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), the book that came to be known as the “deists’ bible,” takes the emphasis on the essential rationality of scripture to a new extreme. No miracle, he argues, could prove an evidently vicious doctrine to be holy. Thus the grounds of judging the goodness of a doctrine must lie somewhere outside of miracles—namely, in our natural, God-given reason: “[I]f the Doctrines themselves, from their internal Excellency, do not give us a certain Proof of the Will of God, no traditional Miracles can do it; because one Probability added to another will not amount to a Certainty.”¹⁴ Rather than objecting to the truth of miracles, Tindal makes them extraneous.

As this survey indicates, even on the specific issue of miracles, the range of opinions expressed by freethinking English skeptics makes it difficult to identify a single deist position on miracles that would cover all particulars. This is particularly true of the most controversial, productive, and iconoclastic figure of the miracle debate, Thomas Woolston. A Cambridge educated minister and academic, Woolston made his mark in the 1720s as a theological controversialist and caustic ironist, as well as a deeply heterodox and mystically inclined thinker.¹⁵ In a series of sensational publications, the most famous of which was a series of six *Discourse[s] on the Miracles of Our Savior*, Woolston advanced an extreme and inflammatory line of attack on the miracles of Jesus Christ. It was a rhetorical project that would bring him near-universal condemnation and give him the reputation of being a dangerous opponent of Christianity. This characterization of Woolston as anti-Christian is, as we will see, problematic at best, but subsequent readers have not managed much better. He was a vexing figure in his lifetime, and remains one now, easy to caricature yet difficult to accurately categorize. In part, this was a product of style, a particularly corrosive and erratic brand of ridicule, an “unrelenting burlesque of the Scriptural account of Jesus’ miracles.”¹⁶ The effort to sift his positive principles from his ironic ridicule began with his contemporaries and has continued even in recent decades. Critics have disagreed about whether he can be accurately called a deist, whether or not he was insane, and whether he was a sloppy and mediocre theologian or “the first major figure in modern biblical criticism.”¹⁷ In all this analysis of Woolston’s significance, both in the heat of the controversy and now, even relatively sympathetic readers seem unconcerned with the mystical representational strategy that subtends his caustic rhetoric.¹⁸ As his biographer William Trapnell observes, “Woolston clearly

¹³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁴ Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London, 1730), 374.

¹⁵ In my account of Woolston’s biography and early writing I follow William H. Trapnell, *Thomas Woolston: Madman and Deist?* (London: Thoemmes, 1994).

¹⁶ Roger D. Lund, “Irony as Subversion: Thomas Woolston and the Crime of Wit,” in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181.

¹⁷ Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 77–101; Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, 77–81; Lund, “Irony as Subversion,” 170–194.

¹⁸ In this I agree with Roger Lund, who suggests that deist writers remain under-accounted for “as a result of their heterodox ideas and their anomalous relationship to the literary canon.” Roger D. Lund, introduction to *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750*, ed. Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

wanted to accredit a figurative, parabolic and prophetic interpretation of the Bible,” a project his opponents obtusely (or maliciously) ignored.¹⁹ It’s not my intention to diminish Woolston’s reputation for extremity and idiosyncrasy, or to argue for a reevaluation of his theology. Nonetheless, Woolston’s radical figural scheme illuminates the special status of miracle, and the challenge of presenting the phenomenon in the world.

Across his publications on miracle, Woolston persistently challenged the orthodox conviction that Jesus’ divinity and the truth of his doctrine were proved by his literal and supernatural performance of earthly miracles. A version of the evidentiary model to which he was responding had been articulated earlier by Locke: “The Evidence of Our Saviour’s mission from heaven is so great, in the multitude of miracles he did, before all sorts of people, that what he delivered cannot but be received as the oracles of God, and unquestionable verity.”²⁰ Beneath this confident proclamation, however, the reader may detect a degree of hedging, some uncertainty about the reliability of isolated divine evidence. Locke’s emphasis on the number of the miracles and on their public nature is indicative of what R.M. Burns calls the “moderate empiricist” position, which he also identifies with the writings of latitudinarian Anglicans like Joseph Glanvill and Robert Boyle.²¹ The argument for the truth of Christ’s miracles, in this case, depends upon the context in which they occur in scripture. Specifically, we can be sure these acts are miraculous because they appear together (“the multitude of miracles”) and because of the excellency of the doctrine that accompanies them. The elements of the argument are mutually reinforcing (critics would say circular) since it founds the proof of Christ’s divinity on miracles, which are themselves verified by the manifest divinity of Christ, as observed in his doctrine.²² The “moderate” nature of this stance consists in its circumspection about the extent to which an isolated miracle can function as incontrovertible empirical evidence. Locke, for one, was unwilling to credit a decontextualized miracle as self-justifying evidence of the divine. Instead he depended on the “evident marks of a greater power,” the “seals set by to his truth for the attesting of it.”²³ Such marks are a kind of providential interpretive aid, given to humans by God to allow them to distinguish true miracle from “lying wonders.” In contrast to this moderate stance Burns also identifies a later, less cautious position advanced by William Fleetwood and Samuel Clarke, among others, which he calls “extreme evidentialism.” This formulation avoided the potential circularity of Locke’s argument by asserting that certain events, like resurrection, could be taken to be self-evidently miraculous, regardless of context.²⁴ Even for orthodox Anglican apologists for rational Christianity, who could agree that scriptural miracles constituted a kind of empirical evidence, there was evidently some disagreement and concern about how, exactly, they functioned as proof.

¹⁹ Trapnell, *Thomas Woolston*, 121.

²⁰ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 57.

²¹ Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, 47–69.

²² *Ibid.*, 57–69.

²³ John Locke, “A Discourse of Miracles,” in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 83.

²⁴ Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, 102–109.

Woolston, in sharp contrast to both versions of the evidentialist case, grounded his faith in Jesus' "messiahship"—i.e. in his spiritual and mystical fulfillment of prophecy. This, then, was Woolston's creed: "I believe upon good Authority, some of the Miracles of Jesus, as recorded by the Evangelists, were never wrought, but are only related as prophetic and parabolical Narratives of what will be Mysteriously and more wonderfully done by him."²⁵ The principle Woolston is attacking, that Jesus' divinity is confirmed by the literal record of his miracles, constituted a normative truth for most other English divines, and they were predictably enraged by his heresy. The complexity of Woolston's opposition to prevailing literalist doctrine was perhaps obscured by the intensity of his ridicule and the clamorous tone of the response. His is not, in fact, a totalizing attack on the principle of miracle, or on the sensory apprehensibility of the divine. We should note, for example, that in foregrounding the "parabolic" nature of the miracles, Woolston does not insist that all of Jesus' supposed miracles are false, merely that "some" were never wrought. In the wider context of his argument, it is an important concession.

Similarly, in the first of six discourses on Christ's miracles, Woolston specifically promises to demonstrate "that the Miracles of Healing all manner of Bodily Diseases, which *Jesus* was justly famed for, are none of the proper Miracles of the *Messiah*, neither are they so much as a good Proof of his Divine Authority to found a Religion."²⁶ Again, this does not constitute a total rejection of miracle, since he allows that Jesus was "justly famed" for his healings. While Woolston is a profound skeptic about the literal truth of miracles, he does not go so far as to reject the possibility of biblical miracle outright. Rather, he focuses our attention on what a given miracle might *signify*. If we read Woolston's tracts as a statement on the absence or presence of miracle at any given historical moment, we misunderstand his intentions. His ultimate interest is in severing the connection between the sensory apprehension of miracle and divinity, not in suggesting that a phenomenon like miraculous healing could never exist, or must exist only at a certain point in time. Quite to the contrary, he argues that miracles have persisted since the apostolic age, and have occurred even within the last generation: "History affords us Instances of Men, such as *Apollonius Tyanaeus*, *Vespasian*, and of the *Irish Stroker*, *Greatrex* who have miraculously cured Diseases to the Admiration of Mankind, as well as our *Jesus*."²⁷ Rather than attacking these instances of continuing miracle as imposture, Woolston allows for their literal truth.²⁸ He does so not to suggest that Greatrex or Vespasian might have equaled Jesus in spiritual terms, but rather, "to defeat us of all Distinction between true and false Miracles, which are the Object of our bodily Senses."²⁹ Woolston accepts miracle as a transhistorical fact, but denies that this fact has

²⁵ Thomas Woolston, *The Moderator Between an Infidel and an Apostate* (London, 1725), 42.

²⁶ Thomas Woolston, *A Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour* (London, 1727), 3-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ The case of Valentine Greatrakes (also rendered as "Greatrex") would have been relatively fresh in the memories of Woolston's readers. An Irish practitioner of miracle cures in the 1660s, Greatrakes caused a sensation in England, and his cures were closely observed by such illustrious figures as Robert Boyle, Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and Lady Ann Conway. See Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 74-96.

²⁹ Woolston, *A Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour*, 60.

any relevance to the mystical truth of religion. As evidence, miracle is allowed to stand, but the significance of that evidence has shifted.

The fact that the complexity of Woolston's temporal understanding of miracle was overlooked by his critics is perhaps unsurprising. Even if they had been inclined to take his figuralism seriously, his vituperation against the clergy and the rhetorical violence of his impiety would surely have put them off. By the time he arrives at his *Sixth Discourse on the Miracles of Our Savior*, he is mounting a frontal assault on the resurrection of Christ. He called this most consequential (and, for the orthodox, most indubitable) of Christian wonders a "Sham-Miracle, ...the most bare-faced, and the most self evident Imposture that ever was put upon the World."³⁰ Such an approach was obviously not conducive to calm hermeneutical debate. Acidic and sometimes erratic ridicule was Woolston's rhetorical mode of choice, and even careful consideration of the structure and limits of his figuralism does little to soften or naturalize the extremity of his positions.³¹ His attacks on supposedly sacred truth are ironic, varied, and sometimes almost frenzied. More importantly, his positions are shaped by the structures and contingencies of controversy, as much as by a desire to articulate a clear doctrine.

Nonetheless, it is in the very density and extremity of Woolston's figural understanding of miracle that we encounter his most significant provocation. He insists that his reader consider the possibility of an allegorical vision of miracle that does not merely correspond to the evidence of perception but utterly subsumes and supersedes it. This is a mystical, wild-eyed species of figural understanding that scorns and discards the sensory world, seeking to replace it with vision beyond image. Such is his treatment of the miraculous transfiguration of Christ. In his first *Discourse*, he calls this "the darkest and blindest Story of the whole Gospel,"³² thereby effectively yoking literalist interpretation to sensory failure. Pursuing this theme of perceptual fallibility, he argues that the shining transformation of Christ and the disembodied divine voice could easily be produced by a magician: "we know, in these our Days that some Jugglers are strange Artists at the imitation of a Voice...and can cast themselves too into different forms and shapes, without a Miracle, to the Surprise and Admiration of spectators."³³ In a classic instance of Woolstonian ridicule, everyday magic and scriptural miracle commingle and confound each other.³⁴

Yet Woolston had previously offered another vision of the transfiguration, a totalizing figural reading that he laid out in his 1725 tract *The Moderator Between an Infidel and an Apostate*. This text elaborated his allegorical doctrine, which he drew from his idiosyncratic reading of the church fathers. The *Moderator* appeared before the *First Discourse*, and so it preceded the infamy of those higher flights of ridicule, as well as the derisive take on the transfiguration we have just encountered. However, rather than

³⁰ Thomas Woolston, *A Sixth Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour*, (London, 1729), 27.

³¹ On the deist practice of ridicule, see Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists*, 51–75; for a broader look at the use of ridicule in Enlightenment religious controversies, see John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 174–196.

³² Woolston, *A Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour*, 39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁴ On perceptual phenomena like ventriloquism and their relation to American religion, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

looking for contradiction or evolution in his thought, I read these two versions of the transfiguration as indicative of the gulf between literal and figural modes of Woolston's hermeneutics. What is at stake is not merely a shift in understanding, but a total remaking of the sensory faculties, and so of the means of perceiving the evidence of miracle. Under the figural dispensation, the transfiguration is itself transformed from a ventriloquist's parlor trick into the constitutive marvel of all Christianity:

For the whole Mystery of Christianity and Antichristianism is only intelligible in and through Jesus's Transfiguration, which, as *Gregory Nazianzen* says, will be the grand Subject of the Contemplation of *Mystisists*, who, upon the Holy Mount of the Law, will intellectually behold how Jesus passes from one Type and Figure to another, and will apprehensively hear *Moses* and *Elias* reasoning with divine *Logos*, about the Harmony and Agreement between Law and Gospel.³⁵

This mystical vision throws an important sidelight on the epistemology of miracle I will trace across this chapter. Woolston's scornful reading of the literal transfiguration focused on deceptive sensory data. Here that sensory failure is replaced by the mystical fullness of intellectual beholding, and that shift radically reorganizes the experiential dimension of the miraculous. In what, precisely, does this beholding consist? What might it be like to see such a thing with the mind, and at the same time to "apprehensively hear" as the "Mystisists" do? Clearly, given the suggestive prolepsis of the phrasing, we cannot have this experience directly, at least not yet.

Here I think of Cotton Mather's retelling of the vision of his dying wife Abigail.³⁶ In much the same way as it was for the Mathers, the spectacle of this mystical transfiguration is a cascading mystery, radiating out through circles of beholding. We, the readers, watch the mystisists, who watch the shifting *logos*. As the circles widen, so does our distance from an already mysterious and intangible center. The reader stands transfixed by the intellectual vision of *logos*, but he is separated from it by the pressures that crowd in on the miraculous. For the Christian, there is no experience more essential than the contemplation of this mystic signifier, but it is hard not to sense that the experience of miracle is always happening at a temporal, narrative and imaginative remove. For Woolston, legitimate Christological experience is available only through the figural representation of miracle. This is an attempt at rerouting the massive empirical significance of miracle through the imaginative intellectual space of figural language, but it still depends upon the debased evidentiary frame of the miracle story.

More broadly still, I think Woolston's vision of the transfiguration challenges the empiricist separation between immediate sensory experience and intellectual vision. Why, Woolston asks, should we be so interested in the "experience" of miracle, in its physical presence? Even more significantly, on what grounds do we divide lived experience from the imaginative work of parable and figuralism? For Woolston, the actual experience of miracle would not constitute a colossal rupture, a transcendent piece of evidence, or even particularly a surprise. It would be the kind of experience you might equally expect to have on a London street at the hands of a showman, or in the presence of the living God. Neither experience would constitute an ultimate proof—rather it would be a distraction from the intellectual harmony of *logos*, the mystical truth of Christ. His version of deceptive sensation renders the idea of "authentic" miracle meaningless. What replaces it

³⁵ Woolston, *The Moderator Between an Infidel and an Apostate*, 44.

³⁶ See Chapter One, 25-6.

is an analogical sensorium—the practice of intellectual beholding. If we take this effort seriously, we can glimpse the stifled power in Woolston’s vision. Rather than weakening the power of miracle, he attempts to multiply and disperse it, to render it as an eternal future state of unlimited comprehension. Woolston’s mystical decontextualization of miraculous power is an extreme formulation, but one that offers us a key into the complexity of other treatments of miracle in the period. To summon miracle, even by analogy to higher truth, is always to deal in potentially deceptive imagery, to trouble the border between external and internal sight. The figural deployment of miracle, the ways in which it is named by association and comparison, gave it an important, underexamined life during the upheaval of the religious revivals that were to come.

2. Whitefield, Wesley and Methodist Controversy

Woolston, dogged by fierce condemnation and rumors of madness, was ultimately tried and convicted of blasphemy, and died under that sentence in 1733.³⁷ Yet the heat of the controversy he had ignited outlived him considerably. Years later, the famous itinerant preacher George Whitefield would remember Woolston as he defended himself in his own controversies with the Anglican clergy. Whitefield enters my account of miracle in this period in part as an instance of the essentially trans-oceanic character of these religious debates. His kinetic itinerancy embodied (and indeed helped to create) an evangelical Christianity that was beginning to understand itself in global terms.³⁸ This reading of Whitefield as a cultural force, as the transatlantic eighteenth-century Protestant par excellence, should be balanced, however, by careful attention to the exact nature of the spiritual product he promoted. Whitefield made miracle a focus of a number of his famously well-attended and repeatedly published sermons, and in so doing promoted his own figural view of the miraculous. Where Woolston was concerned to defend a spiritual reading of miracle against any literal interpretation whatsoever, Whitefield and his fellow evangelical revivalists were obliged to balance orthodox fidelity to the letter of Christ’s miracles with a more immediate and urgent commitment to the work of the spirit in the world. Whitefield’s writing, alongside that of contemporaries like John Wesley, offers another vantage point on the changing object of miracle, and its relation to categories of evidence, apprehension and spiritual experience.

At the same time, these early evangelicals operated in an intellectual climate that had partly been shaped (and continued to be influenced) by the deist miracle controversies. Like Woolston, Whitefield understood the value of controversy in promoting a polemic, and his barbs found some of the same targets. Indeed, Whitefield’s fervent and public evangelism brought him into conflict with some of the very men who had shouted down Woolston, including Richard Smalbroke, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry. Woolston had dedicated his *Third Discourse on the Miracles of Our Savior* to Smalbroke, then Bishop of St. Davids. By way of reply, the Bishop published *A Vindication of the Miracles of Our Blessed Saviour* (1729), a two-volume work that ran to over 1000 pages. In 1741, he turned his sights toward the methodists, and preached against their alleged

³⁷ Trapnell, *Thomas Woolston*, 76.

³⁸ Harry S Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), xx; Mark A Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, History of Evangelicalism, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

enthusiasm in a sermon that was published in 1744.³⁹ Later that year, while on board a ship to the colonies, Whitefield wrote a response to the Bishop's accusations under the title "Some Remarks upon a late Charge against Enthusiasm." In that text, Whitefield specifically takes up the issue of miracle and its limits. The core of the Bishop's charge, as Whitefield outlines it, is that evangelical belief in "the indwelling and inward witnessing of the Spirit" constituted an "enthusiastical" faith in "the *extraordinary gifts* and operations of the Holy Ghost."⁴⁰ In other words, Whitefield asserts that the Bishop is charging him with an impermissible belief in the external, miraculous, continuing operation of the Holy Spirit. Whitefield's response looks back to the Bishop's condemnation of Woolston almost fifteen years earlier. While joining in the rejection of Woolston's doctrine, Whitefield slyly accuses the bishop of his own extremism: "as he justly charged the infamous *Woolston* with sticking too close to the spirit, and not minding the letter, has he not in this performance so closely adhered to the letter, and so sadly neglected the spirit, as almost totally...to exclude the Holy Ghost in his operations, since the primitive times, our of the Christian world?" (*WGW*, 4:186). Thus Whitefield could tweak his opponent and claim a virtuous middle ground between the heresy of Woolston and the formalism he perceives in the bishop.

This was, by the middle of the 1740s, a familiar move for Whitefield. He had offered a similar argument five years earlier, in answering a pastoral letter from Edmund Gibson, then Bishop of London. The Bishop's letter was addressed "To the People of his Diocese...By way of Caution, Against Lukewarmness on One Hand, and Enthusiasm on the Other." The letter is in large measure an assault on the social and doctrinal threat of itinerancy and revivalism. The Bishop spends the bulk of the letter trying to hang the charge of enthusiasm around Whitefield's neck, largely by quoting suspect passages from his recently published *Journal*. The bishop anchors this charge of enthusiasm in the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary works of the Holy Spirit. The extraordinary works are those by which the apostles and others: "were enabled to work Miracles, and speak with Tongues, in Testimony that their Mission and Doctrine were from God. These have long since ceased."⁴¹ Whitefield's response, *Answer to the Bishop of London's Last Pastoral Letter*, rejects the charge, and takes up the challenge and the opportunity of public controversy. Like much of Whitefield's work, the *Answer* was rapidly and widely disseminated in print. It was penned in August of 1739, and was published in London, New York and Philadelphia before the year was out.⁴² In the letter, Whitefield is careful to emphasize his moderate credentials, and he grounds his self-defense in the disavowal of present-day miracle: "according to your Lordship's own definition, I am no enthusiast. For I never did pretend to these extraordinary operations of working miracles, or speaking with tongues, in testimony that my mission and doctrine

³⁹ Richard Smalbroke, *A Charge Deliver'd to the Reverend the Clergy in Several Parts of the Diocese of Lichfield and Coventry*. (London, 1744)

⁴⁰ George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London, 1771), 4:174 (hereafter cited in text as *WGW*).

⁴¹ Edmund Gibson, *The Bishop of London's Pastoral Letter to the People of His Diocese*, (London, 1739), 20.

⁴² Richard Owen Roberts, *Whitefield in Print: A Bibliographic Record of Works By, For, and against George Whitefield* (Wheaton, IL: R.O. Roberts, 1988), 43–44.

were from GOD” (*WGW*, 4:9).⁴³ Thus for both the Bishop and Whitefield, miracle is useful in this debate mostly as a safely alienable limit case, a way to define the terms of impermissible excess. Whitefield’s tactical pledge of assent to the Bishop’s cessationist doctrine does not, however, entail a complete retreat from the reality of direct divine experience. The Bishop asserts that enthusiasts are deluded “by a strong Persuasion on the Mind, that they are guided in an extraordinary Manner, by immediate *Impulses* and *Impressions* of the Spirit of God.”⁴⁴ Whitefield, however, asserts that such a belief must be groundless to be unlawful – God can and does work in such ways. While he is willing to allow that the external, evidentiary power of miracle does not testify to his mission, he will not sacrifice the resource of internal apprehension.

The terms of this debate provide an outline of the central structural and intellectual dynamics of the controversies over revival and enthusiasm.⁴⁵ Whitefield agrees with the bishop that “Lukewarmness and enthusiasm, are the two rocks against which even well-meaning people are in danger of splitting,” and thanks him for the reminder (*WGW*, 4:5). Given this consensus that there were perils on each side, a rhetorical combatant like Whitefield or the Bishop of London had only to slide the continuum in one direction or another, to place himself more nearly in the center, and his opponent nearer one of the perilous rocks. Whitefield works to distance himself from the enthusiast’s position, while simultaneously shifting the Bishop and the rest of the Anglican hierarchy closer to lukewarmness. There, is, of course, an inherent weakness to this apparently safe middle position. With enthusiasm and lukewarmness both at arm’s length, Whitefield is forced to defend himself on both flanks, creating a pincer effect that is both a spiritual peril and a rhetorical challenge. In his highly public writings he must defend evangelical faith in direct divine action, and at the same time he must police the discourse and reprove the actions of his more radical contacts within the revival movements. In the context of his debates with Anglican authority, this generally entails a refusal of miracle as an operative contemporary category.

This was not universally true of Whitefield’s evangelical contemporaries. To take one particularly important example, John Wesley staked out a significantly different position from Whitefield on contemporary miracle. The relationship between Wesley and Whitefield, which lasted for decades, was characterized both by loving friendship and strident theological disagreement. In his formative years at Oxford, Whitefield was befriended and greatly influenced by John and his brother Charles, members of the group of pious youths known as the Holy Club.⁴⁶ As their respective ministerial careers developed, however, John Wesley and Whitefield came to differ publicly on doctrinal matters, particularly on the crucial issue of predestination.⁴⁷ In 1739, Wesley published a sermon called *Free Grace*, which called into question a number of fundamental Calvinist

⁴³ See also Kidd, “The Healing of Mercy Wheeler,” 164.

⁴⁴ Gibson, *The Bishop of London’s Pastoral Letter*, 19.

⁴⁵ For an excellent discussion of enthusiasm see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 20–46.

⁴⁶ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 83–85.

⁴⁷ Frank Baker, “Whitefield’s Break with the Wesleys,” *Church Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (October 1, 1970): 103–13; Susan F. Harrington, “Friendship Under Fire: George Whitefield and John Wesley, 1739–1741,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 1975): 167–81.

theological assertions. Whitefield's published responses, *The Perfectionist Examined* (1740) and *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (1741) took Wesley to task for this apparent Arminian turn. This theological rift was never fully healed, although the personal relationship between the two men eventually improved. The rupture highlights the importance of internal, as well as external, controversy in shaping Whitefield's early career. It also indicates the degree to which the status of divine evidence was up for debate within the emergent evangelical movement. Famously, in deciding whether to follow the urgings of his heart to speak against predestination (and thus risk causing dissension), Wesley was encouraged by the dramatic emotional reactions of his auditors. In need of further proof, however, he turned to the Moravian practice of drawing lots to divine God's will. The lot that he drew read "Preach and print," and so he did. In a letter from September, 1740, Whitefield expressed his dismay over the ensuing controversy. In that letter he implicitly links his theological objections to concerns about Wesley's evidentiary approach: "O that you would be more cautious in casting lots! O that you would not be too rash and precipitant! If you go on thus, honoured sir, how can I concur with you?"⁴⁸ Even as he dueled in print with the Bishop of London about the divine evidence for his own commission to preach as he saw fit, Whitefield stood ready to debate not only the doctrine, but also the methods of his fellow evangelical preachers.⁴⁹ He was strenuously careful, however, to place his disagreements with Wesley in the frame of evangelical unity and love, evidence of a cordiality that survived between the two men long after this conflict.⁵⁰

Anglicans outside the evangelical movement, with none of Whitefield's much protested love for Wesley, would of course be even more direct in their criticisms of his standard of evidence.⁵¹ In 1745, the Anglican controversialist Thomas Church initiated a lengthy and sharp dispute with Wesley. The polemical exchange that ensued offers insight into the uncertain status of miracle in the early days of methodist evangelism. Church opened his attack with a letter published under the title *Remarks on the Reverend Mr. John Wesley's Last Journal*. The letter is focused on a critical reading of Wesley's fourth journal, which appeared in 1744.⁵² The broader argument of the *Remarks* recapitulates the basic terms of the attack on enthusiasm advanced by the Bishop of London against Whitefield, insisting particularly on the bad consequences of "resting so much on sensible Impressions, which cannot be Marks of the Spirit."⁵³ According to Church, this enthusiasm, so threatening to the good spiritual and temporal order that he would see maintained, is nothing more than "a false Conceit, or an ill grounded Persuasion, of an extraordinary divine Power and Assistance."⁵⁴ Church's focus on false conviction is essential. Wesley's error, according to Church, is not that he believes in something

⁴⁸ Qtd. in Baker, "Whitefield's Break with the Wesleys," 108.

⁴⁹ For an indication of the durability of these debates, and for a concurring opinion on the flimsiness of Wesley's evidence see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:309.

⁵⁰ James L. Schwenk, *Catholic Spirit: Wesley, Whitefield, and the Quest for Evangelical Unity in Eighteenth-Century British Methodism*, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies 26 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 209-10.

⁵² John Wesley, *An Extract of the Reverend Mr. John Wesley's Journal, from November 1, 1739. to September 3, 1741* (London, 1744).

⁵³ Thomas Church, *Remarks on the Reverend Mr. John Wesley's Last Journal* (London, 1745), 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

impossible (extraordinary assistance), but rather that he is falsely persuaded that he has received such dispensations. In effect, he is self-deluding, producing sham versions of the only evidence that would prove his doctrine beyond doubt. “An enthusiast is sincere, but mistaken.... Hence he talks in the Stile of Persons, who were really inspired, and who proved their inspiration by the plainest Miracles.”⁵⁵ The objection to enthusiasm here is twofold. On the one hand, Church’s critique is stylistic, proceeding from an attitude of High Church condescension that pervades his part of the controversy with Wesley. In this mode he figures methodist enthusiasm as a kind of clownish pretension, an unpersuasive (but nonetheless dangerous) mimicry of true inspiration. On the other hand, this posture requires Church to defend the miraculous precedent that he accuses Wesley of imitating; to support the existence of “plainest miracle,” and to separate it from the subordinate orders of divine intervention in the world.

As we will see, Church was in fact an avid and celebrated defender of historical miracle. He also stood ready, however, to pounce on the barest suggestion of contemporary miracle. One of his key points of contention has to do with a story that Wesley relates in his journal about travelling, tired and alone, on a dark, rainy night: “Being wet and weary, and not well knowing my way, I could not help saying in my heart, (though ashamed of my want of resignation to God’s will) O that thou wouldst ‘stay the bottles of heaven’! or at least give me light, or an honest guide...Presently the rain ceased; the moon broke out, and a friendly man overtook me.”⁵⁶ Church’s response to this anecdote is scathing: “This it is to be so great a Favourite of Heaven. The whole Course of Nature must be suspended to prevent your suffering some trifling Inconvenience. The Rain must immediately stop, the Lights of Heaven shine, and a Man be directed to travel your Way, for fear your important Person should be injured by the Wet and Cold.”⁵⁷ Immediately after this attack, anticipating his opponent’s response, Church offers this refinement on his point: “Don’t Sir, mistake and accuse me of being against a particular Providence. There is a great Difference between this and such miraculous Interpositions in your Favour. If you would not have us look upon what you here relate as being miraculous, there is nothing in it worthy of being related at all.”⁵⁸ Once again, the objection mingles a critique of style and a defense of doctrine. In Church’s framing, Wesley’s story must fail on one count or another. If it is claim to miracle, it is a remarkable story but an absurd pretention on doctrinal grounds. If it is an account of special Providence, it’s doctrinally admissible, but a bad story. This return to style continues an implicit argument that enthusiasm is always a violation of decorum in the most serious sense. This has a particularly important consequence for understanding how the pressures of controversy affect the eighteenth-century understanding of miracle. Church, as an apologist for good Anglican order, is working to subdue not just the actions of evangelical factions, but also the expressive and imaginative dimensions of their piety.

Pursuing this same line of attack, Church then turns to a series of wonderful cures reported by Wesley, both those he claims to have experienced himself and those he observed among the faithful. In particular, Church pounces upon the speed with which

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁶ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries II (1783-43)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 19 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 181.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 65–6.

relief comes to the sufferers: “Once you represent a Woman in the very Ravings of Blasphemy and Despair; and on you desiring two or three...to join in crying to [God] on her Behalf, you add, *immediately* ‘that horrible Dread was taken away.’”⁵⁹ The emphasis that Church places on the claim of immediacy is of special importance. In sifting the evidence of a natural process like healing, the rate at which that healing occurs is especially significant. Evidently Church is less impressed than Wesley by the rate of change over time: “there is no need of supposing these Recoveries miraculous. Some of them were not instantaneous. In some Cases the Disorder was only removed for the present, and returned again shortly.”⁶⁰ Finally, in the closing pages of the letter, Church’s prodding of methodist evocations of the miraculous comes to a head: “Please then to answer coolly and seriously, can you work real and undoubted Miracles? You know, you and Mr. Whitefield have been frequently called upon for these. I can hardly imagine you will in earnest pretend to them.”⁶¹ Here Church amplifies his charge in doctrinal and personal terms, directly accusing Wesley and Whitefield of being sham miracle workers.

Wesley responded to Church’s first attack via a letter, published in Bristol under the title *An Answer to the Reverend Mr. Church’s Remarks*. In countering Church’s ridicule of the rain story, he defends the anecdote as an instance of “particular Providence” and disavows any suggestion of miracle. On the topic of the sudden healings, however, he argues for a mixture of divine and natural causes. In so doing, he returns the debate to the grounds of essential definition. Wesley puts the question to Church thusly: “What do you mean by Miraculous? If you term everything so, which is *not strictly accountable for, but the Ordinary Course of Natural Causes*; then I deny the latter Part of the Minor Proposition” [i.e. that a belief in miracles makes one an enthusiast].⁶² Church, in his reply, (his second and last letter in the controversy), criticizes Wesley’s tolerance for the mixture of divine and natural causation in disease and healing: “It would have been kind to have let us know your Rule, by which you distinguish these, or at least to have pointed out the Cases which you think wholly natural ... However some of these you’ve here allow to be in Part supernatural. Miracles therefore are not wholly ceased and disclaimed by you.”⁶³ According to Church, Wesley’s healing accounts would then be considered heterodox on two counts—they violate a clear separation of natural and supernatural causation, and they transgress the historical limits set up by the church’s doctrine of cessation.

Wesley’s second and final response to Church, published under the title *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained* (1746), ends the controversy without either party seeming to have given significant ground. In this letter, Wesley makes some of his most extensive and plainspoken remarks on the topic of miracles. On the evidence for miraculous healings, he stands his ground: “I acknowledge, that I have seen with my Eyes, and heard with my Ears, several Things, which, to the best of my Judgment, cannot be accounted for, by the ordinary Course of Natural Causes, and which, I therefore believe, ought to ascribed to the *extraordinary Interposition of God*. If any man chuse to stile

⁵⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 73.

⁶² John Wesley, *An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Church’s Remarks on the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s Last Journal* (Bristol, [1745]), 45.

⁶³ Thomas Church, *Some Farther Remarks on the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s Last Journal* (London, [1746]), 134.

these Miracles, I reclaim not.”⁶⁴ The events were, he continues, observed by a multitude of witnesses, who are willing to swear oaths to what they saw. Finally, though, he offers a direct refusal of the doctrinal basis of Church’s objection:

I do not know, that God hath any way precluded himself from this exerting his sovereign Power, from working Miracles of any Kind or Degree, in any Age to the End of the World. I do not recollect any Scripture, wherein we are taught, that Miracles were to be confined within the Limits either of the Apostolick, or the Cyprianick Age: Or of any Period of Time, longer or shorter, even till the Restitution of all Things.⁶⁵

At the end of a long exchange, which swirls in large part around the nature and extent of God’s supernatural action in the world, John Wesley flatly denies the principle of the cessation of miracles. Although he is careful to avoid claiming a direct personal role in the operation of those miracles, he maintains the possibility of immediate, unfettered and contemporary divine action in the world. Significantly, Church himself did not abandon the issue at the close of this conflict. Several years later, he would enter into controversy with quite a different opponent, Conyers Middleton, whose *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers* (1749) had attacked the credibility of the church fathers.⁶⁶ Church’s defense of post-apostolic miracles, *A Vindication of the Miracles* (1750) suggests that more than 20 years after the scandal over Woolston, the argument over the legitimacy of historical miracle was still going strong.⁶⁷

I will address the historical origins and the theological complexities of the doctrine of cessation at greater length in the following chapter. In the more immediate context of this chapter, however, Wesley’s refusal to submit on the question of cessation brings up an interesting contrast with Whitefield, who was much more circumspect about reports of miraculous events, at least when speaking within the evangelical fold. On June 12th, 1739, only shortly before the beginning of his controversy with the Bishop of London, Whitefield sent a stern letter to the Fetter Lane Society. The Society was founded in 1738 by the Wesley brothers and a group of fellow Anglicans, and it was strongly influenced from the outset by Moravian principles, particularly through the guidance of the young Moravian minister Peter Bohler. Moravian piety had an important early effect on both of the Wesleys and on Whitefield, and Fetter Lane was a crucial locus of that influence, becoming, as Colin Podmore puts it: “the main seed-bed from which the English Evangelical Revival would spring.”⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the zeal of the participants, and the variety (in both intensity and form) of their oppositional positions toward the

⁶⁴ John Wesley, *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explain’d* (London, 1746), 55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁶ On Middleton’s place in the miracle controversy and his anti-dogmatic Christianity see: Ingram, Robert G., “The Weight of Historical Evidence,” in *Religion, Politics and Dissent, 1660-1832: Essays in Honour of James E. Bradley*, ed. James E. Bradley, Robert D. Cornwall, and William Gibson (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010).

⁶⁷ Hume’s famous chapter “Of Miracles” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, had appeared in the previous year. Middleton’s book apparently caused the greater sensation, as Hume complained in his journal: “I had the mortification to find all England in a ferment on account of Dr. Middleton’s Free Enquiry; while my performance was entirely overlooked and neglected.” (Quoted in Ingram, 86)

⁶⁸ Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

established church, led to frequent conflict. The particular trouble that prompted Whitefield's letter was occasioned by the influence of the radical movement referred to as the French Prophets, some of whose members intermingled with in the Society in 1739, claiming the gift of prophecy.⁶⁹ While Whitefield writes here in this case in support of the Wesleys' more moderate position in the conflict, his chastising of the Fetter Lane Society is reminiscent of his split with the brothers over predestination.⁷⁰ It offers another example of a steady love for fellow evangelists, marred occasionally by pointed disagreements about doctrine and behavior.

In the letter to the Fetter Lane Society, Whitefield cautions against the teachings of radicals, and takes a much harder line on miracles than Wesley would later do in his struggle with Church. In particular, he warned against those who preach that "there will be a power given to work miracles, and that now CHRIST is coming to reign a thousand years upon the earth" (*WGW*, 1:50). Whitefield reproves this tendency, arguing that the visible miracles of the Bible have conclusively ceased, and were no longer needed, in any case: "[I]f we have the thing already, which such miracles were only intended to introduce, why should we tempt GOD in requiring further signs?" In refusing to allow that miracles might resume as the millennium approached, Whitefield maintains the outward coherence of the cessationist position. Yet the particular terms with which he makes his argument are worthy of our close attention: "What need is there of miracles, such as healing sick bodies, and restoring sight to blind eyes, when we see greater miracles every day done by the power of GOD's word? Do not the spiritually blind now see? Are not the spiritually dead now raised, and the leprous souls now cleans'd?" (*WGW*, 1:50). Whitefield's version of cessationist doctrine describes a categorical shift in the experience of the divine, whereby the significance of miracle is transferred from the literal to the figural. In contrast to Woolston's approach, the move into the spiritual register does not obviate the importance of the literal content of miracle. Importantly, the representative miracles he highlights here are directly concerned with the visible repair of the human body. Contrary to the spirit of his rhetorical questions, there was a manifest and constant need of physical healing in the congregations he addressed, as Whitefield knew very well. Much as it did for Cotton Mather, the omnipresence of physical suffering creates an immediate bodily correlative for spiritual desire that is expressed through a faith in contemporary miraculous healing. These miracles of the flesh then cede their place not to something new entirely, but to a metaphysical transformation. In his exchanges with Wesley and the Fetter Lane Society, Whitefield was plainly unwilling to go as far as some of his associates in countenancing contemporary miracle. Nonetheless, he repeatedly frames the issue of divine action and power in the terms of miracle. In this spiritualizing approach, the hunger for healing, for divine intervention, had to be channeled toward its correlative in the spiritual imagination.

This transfer is one of the great tasks of Whitefield's evangelism, which excites the processes of public, visible divine interaction, but then spiritualizes and internalizes them. In that spiritualizing process, the naked power of the scriptural miracle remains a vital rhetorical tool for encouragement of the faithful. Whitefield, despite his many

⁶⁹ Ibid., 54–56; Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 205–208.

⁷⁰ Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield, B.A. of Pembroke College, Oxford*, vol. 1 (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1877), 240.

differences from Woolston, is caught in a similar analogical bind. He is trying to harness the spiritual power of miracle by means of its physical imagery, without at the same time insisting upon its literal reality. Paradoxically, this requires him to recur to the literalizing tropes of sensory apprehensibility. As Whitefield says, “we *see* greater miracles every day done by the power of God’s word.” In the context of this intra-evangelical dialogue, reassertion of the cessation of miracle conduces, strangely, to a daily experience of “visible” miracle. Deprived of literal miracle, supposedly the apotheosis of divine evidence, the faithful are comforted by the greater miracle of their vital experience of the new birth.

Nancy Ruttenburg, in her work on Whitefield and “spectacular conversion,” identifies a similarly paradoxical relation between limited human faculties and unlimited divinity. She approaches the issue primarily through the vocal *expression*, rather than the sensory *apprehension* of divine truth, but the relation to the category of miracle is compellingly similar. Speech, in Ruttenburg’s reading of Whitefield, is both tantalizingly liberatory and entirely bounded. Even as it provides experiential access to divine ecstasy, it reminds the speaker of the conclusive limitations of mortality. The solution to this problem is to die: “Death, and particularly death in the pulpit, becomes...the only way in which the paradox of speech—as a metaphor for the miracle of conversion, which brings life out of death, exaltation out of humiliation—could, as it were, be consummated.”⁷¹ Miracle reemerges here as the signal means of imagining the instantaneous transmutation of limited experience (like speech or sight) into unlimited divine truth. To this it seems necessary to add that the “miracle of conversion” is itself a metaphorical construct, and a fraught and powerful one at that. To claim any faith in contemporary miracle was to risk the charge of enthusiasm. As his exchanges with both the Anglican bishops and evangelical congregations has indicated, Whitefield was aware of the value of maintaining some strategic ambiguity with regard to the association between miracle and conversion, even as he urged the figurative link upon the regenerate: “A great work is begun in *America*, at *Georgia*, *South Carolina*, *New-York*, *Philadelphia* and *New-England*. GOD has confirmed the word by spiritual miracles and signs” (*WGW*, 1:242). Caught up in the heady expansion of the revival, Whitefield tiptoed to the edge of defensible analogy.

This equivocation touches upon one of the key elements of Ruttenburg’s analysis of Whitefieldian preaching and theology—the notion of “uncontainability.” For Whitefield, Christ (and by extension the minister of the Word), cannot be contained by linguistic or physical boundaries. The limits that Reformed orthodoxy placed on the operations of miracle are plainly just such a containment structure, an instrument of theological and discursive limitation. The principle of cessation obliged orthodox Protestants in the period to agree that God remained capable of working miracles (i.e., that he is uncontainable) but also to believe that they lived (by the accident of history) in a moment where the operation of that power was remitted. The mediated nature of figural miracle permits an escape. Figuring the new birth as a daily, constant, *spiritually visible* miracle permits Whitefield to disallow a faith in contemporary miracle while insisting upon a steady exercise of uncontained divine power. It is this doubleness, the push away and the pull towards, that charges Whitefield’s infrequent deployments of the actual term “miracle.” Ruttenburg quotes one such instance, in which Whitefield links his own

⁷¹ Nancy Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 104.

physical infirmity to the imaginative promise of divine intervention and miraculous healing: “Christ’s labourers must live by miracle; if not, I must not live at all; for God only knows what I daily endure.”⁷² Whitefield’s doctrinaire insistence that he neither works nor experiences miracles is balanced (and unavoidably subverted) by this somewhat offhand reference to miracle as a sustaining force in daily life. He expects no literal divine healing for the congregations, yet he lives by miracle.

This is what the fire of evangelism looks like when it circulates in a world of transatlantic controversy. If Whitefield’s willingness to engage in controversy helped to elevate his profile essential to his success, it also exerted pressure on his approach to miracle. As we have seen, opponents like Thomas Church were actively surveilling methodist publications for evidence of enthusiastic transgression, ready to pounce on apparent heterodoxy. These conditions were a source of opportunity in the work of awakening—baiting church authorities was unquestionably good press for Whitefield. Yet it also created an intensely charged atmosphere for his expression on the subject of miracle. By the time Whitefield began to preach in America, his enemies had already shown a willingness to scrutinize minutely any hint he dropped on the subject, and publish in response. Moreover, the fight over the figural and literal status of miracle first whipped up by men like Woolston was nearly twenty years old. Metaphorical references, like Whitefield’s reflection on living by miracle, emerge into a theological, polemical and figural crucible. In the most direct sense, this rhetorical context could lead to a kind of reflexive caution among supporters of the Whitefield’s itinerant preaching. In his *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield* John Gillies reprints a series of letters testifying to the effectiveness of his ministry in Scotland. One such letter, by a Mr. Willison, minister of Dundee, describes the operation of GW’s evangelism in the following terms: “I have myself been witness to the Holy Ghost falling upon him and his hearers oftener than once, I do not say in a miraculous, though an observable manner” (*WGW*, 7:94). It is a version of this very effort—to frame a public, observable, and deeply significant divine intervention while segregating it from miracle—that preoccupies Whitefield in his sermon literature. A representative instance appears in his sermon on “The Folly and Danger of Being Not Righteous Enough”:⁷³

If these are what they expect; I speak with humility, GOD, by us, hath done greater things than these: many, who were dead in sin, are raised to scripture-life: those, who were leprous by nature, are cleansed by the Spirit of GOD; those, who were lame in duty, now run in GOD’s commands; those, who were deaf, their ears are unstopped to hear his discipline, and hearken to his advice. (*WGW*, 5:126)

To fail to attend to such events, and to demand physical miracle is, for Whitefield, “only Deism refined” (*WGW* 5:126). It is the “letter-learned,” the “scribes” who call for physical evidence of miracle, when the spiritual evidence of God’s power surrounds them. Yet the analogical bind inherent in this position is immediately clear. The great work of the new birth, so evident to the faithful, can only be made manifest in text here through the figure of literal miracle. It is the effort to convey this continual, daily apprehensibility

⁷² Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*, 1:345–46, quoted in Ruttenburg, *Democratic Personality*, 105.

⁷³ This sermon, published in 1739, was a response to the anti-methodist polemicist Joseph Trapp’s *The Nature, Folly, Sin and Danger, of Being Righteous Over-much* (London, 1739).

of divine action in the mode of figural intangibility that structures, complicates and enriches Whitefield's approach to miracle in his sermons.

3. Whitefield's Sermons and the Imaginative Space of Miracle

In *The Marriage of Cana*, a sermon published in 1742, Whitefield recounts the miracle of Jesus' transformation of water into wine. In good evidentiary form, he argues that the primary purpose of Jesus' action was "'to shew forth his glory,' or to give a proof of his eternal power and godhead" (*WGW*, 6:71). Yet the dominating rhetorical drive of the sermon points us beyond simple visual verification: "Thus, my brethren, I have endeavoured to make some observations on the miracle itself. But alas! this is only the outer court thereof, the veil is yet before our eyes; turn that aside, and we shall see such mysteries under it, as will make our hearts to dance for joy, and fill our mouths with praise for evermore!" (*WGW*, 6:69-70). The literal content of the miracle offers the occasion for deeper, transporting mysteries of the incarnation of Christ. His sermon carries his readers and listeners up through an ascending chain of figural implications, drawing out the Christological essence of this miracle. This climb out of the world of flesh and letter carries us, like Paul, into an ineffable third heaven beyond mortal speech and thought: "Oh the invisible realities of the world of faith!" That final figure, "invisible realities" is as finely balanced and as evocative of his paradoxical faithful empiricism as Thomas Woolston's intellectual beholding on the mount of transfiguration. Thousands in the fields and squares of England and the colonies would have apprehended Whitefield's miraculous figuralism, and contemplated a living miracle that was at once uniquely comprehensible to their regenerate eyes and ears and utterly beyond them.

The operation of grace through and on the senses is a central theme in another of Whitefield's miracle sermons: "Blind Bartimeus." The sermon focuses on a passage in the tenth book of Mark where Jesus heals a blind beggar. In his opening, Whitefield draws particular attention to the dual purpose of Christ's miracles: "The miracles of *Moses*, agreeable to the Old Testament dispensation, were miracles of judgment; the miracles of *JESUS*, who came to bear our sickness and heal our infirmities, were miracles of mercy, and were wrought, not only for the cure of people's bodies, but also for the conversion of their precious and immortal souls" (*WGW*, 5:404). It is the simultaneity of this action, the cure of body and cure of soul, that captures Whitefield's imagination in the Bartimeus sermon. This sermon is constructed around an analogy between physical and spiritual disability, which is expressed through meditation on the miraculous healing power of Christ. Here Whitefield figures the hated and blameworthy incapacity of the soul that results from human sin through the natural, blameless blindness of Bartimeus. The two sides of this analogy are plainly not equal partners. Whitefield's spiritualizing discourse makes it clear that our internal disability, produced by original sin, is of far greater concern than our physical impairment: "if thou art in a natural state, thou art as blind in thy soul, as *Bartimeus* was in his body; a blind child of a blind father, even of thy father Adam, who lost his sight when he lost his innocence, and entailed his blindness, justly inflicted, upon thee, and me, and his whole posterity" (*WGW*, 5:414).

When Christ calls Bartimeus to him, the blind man's obedience to this command is an indication of his desire to return to spiritual sight. The immediate conferral of sight not only heals the physical organ but also awakens a particular kind of pious aesthetic sensibility. In the case of Bartimeus, Whitefield tells his audience: "I believe he received also a fresh addition of spiritual sight, and although others saw no form or comeliness in

the blessed JESUS, that they should desire him; yet he by an eye of faith discovered ... transcendent excellencies in the royal person" (*WGW*, 5:413). The sermon itself for Whitefield becomes a process of collective re-seeing, of correcting a carnal failing in our vision. He models the use of this sight with a visionary descant on the moment of restoration: "O! happy *Bartimeus*! ... Methinks I see thee transported with wonder and admiration, and all the disciples and the multitude, gazing around thee" (*WGW*, 5:413). This is the climactic instance of a literalizing vision, and it plays on the reciprocal, communal act of "gazing" upon which the printed sermon depends. Reading Whitefield's text is already an act of imaginative envisioning, inseparable from the persona and the imagined image of the most celebrated speaker in the Atlantic world. Here in a miraculous apotheosis, he redoubles that imaginative vision, inviting the reader to a plane of spiritual vision where, significantly, and a bit oddly, what the reader sees there is a static scene of looking: "the multitude gazing around thee." The sermon's readers are spectators watching spectators, and the layers of recursion are a reminder of the fundamental value of historical miracle. At the same time, this is a scene of adoration, a recreation of that moment in time when a believer could see, hear and touch the incarnate beauty of Christ. There is of course a danger in this fantasy, a lure toward enthusiasm. The imaginary contemplation of the miraculous event, in its appeal to our natural sight, threatens to trap the reader in a corrupt literalism: "A natural man, indeed, goes no further than the outward court of the Scripture, and reads this, and the other miracles of our blessed Saviour, just in the same manner as he reads Homer's battles, or the exploits of *Alexander*. But God forbid, that we should rest in only hearing this matter of fact" (*WGW*, 5:414). The mixing of reading and hearing seems anything but accidental here. It is the hearing of this sermon, this interpretive guidance, that will steer the faithful clear of the snares of "matter of fact." With that, Whitefield urges his hearing readers to restore their spiritual sight, and so to complete the far greater half of the double healing that Bartimeus received. Yet the narrative arc of the miracle makes itself felt—we are, post the miraculous event, in the space of denouement, and the call to turn toward Christ occupies only the last few pages of the sermon. The trap of literalism, of dallying in the outward court, threatens the form of the sermon too. It is precisely in the essential final stage, the turn toward a saving faith, that the risk of dependence on the miracle reveals itself. The narrative material is exhausted—the great work of rebirth is no certain corollary to the hearing of the miracle. The practice of analogy can take Whitefield's readers and auditors to the edge of revelation, but it may spend its rhetorical force in getting there.

Perhaps Whitefield's most sustained and searching effort to put miracle to saving use in the sermon form is his discourse on *The Resurrection of Lazarus*. Here his fierce engagement is keyed to his sense of this particular miracle's preeminent importance, which he sees as calling for "our particular and most serious meditation" (*WGW*, 6:104). The argument for its importance is founded upon the stark evidentiary force of resurrection, which is the greatest imaginable act of power over the human body. It is also, however, tied to a sense, which pervades Whitefield's sermons on the gospels, of the extraordinary divine care given to the orchestration and sequencing of events. In this case, the steadily ascending wonder of Christ's earthly miracles creates something like a dramatic arc: "the nearer he came to the end of his public ministrations, the greater and more noble did the miracles which he wrought appear" (*WGW*, 6:103). The observation is likely not Whitefield's own. Indeed, remarks on both the wonder of the miracle and its

careful timing appear in William Burkitt's *Expository Notes*, a biblical commentary Whitefield had recommended highly in his autobiography.⁷⁴ The comparison helps to remind us what the sermon offered for Whitefield. As both a literary genre, and an act of performance, it provided an opportunity not so much for interpretive novelty as for the methodical, public exploration of the visionary spiritual space of miracle.

This last point bears comparison to Harry Stout's important characterization of Whitefield as an "actor-preacher, as opposed to a scholar-preacher...a performer rather than a theoretician."⁷⁵ While acknowledging Whitefield's unswerving devotion to Calvinism, Stout positions him primarily as a great homiletic innovator who anchored his ministry in passion and "restored narrative to the center of preaching."⁷⁶ This link between heart religion, preaching and narrative is an essential component of Whitefield's lifelong evangelical project, and the presence of the theater (and theatricality) as both agon and model is fundamental to understanding how those essential elements were woven together. Indeed, in the Lazarus sermon, Whitefield figures Christ as something of a master stage-manager, an orchestrator of spectacle. In leaving Lazarus dead for days, in bringing his audience from a great distance, Christ magnifies the public impact of his work of power: "[H]ow wisely were all things ordered by the blessed JESUS, to manifest his glory in the most extraordinary manner, that not only his disciples might have their faith confirmed, but also many of the *Jews* might believe on him" (*WGW*, 6:112). If the implicit analogy between stagecraft and miracle seems a bit coarse, that is part of the wager that Whitefield makes in treating the topic. His homiletic strategy depends upon the idea that a re-narrating (or, put more forcefully, a guided public *re-envisioning*) of this ultimate miracle will reproduce the confirmatory and converting effect that it had in the original. If it succeeds, there could be no greater justification for a theatrical approach, and no better way to defeat the implicit, perilous association between a well-orchestrated miracle and the staged deceptions of a charlatan.

As in the Bartimeus sermon, Whitefield's most pointed uses of this strategy seek to create a total experiential analogy between three ordinarily distinct layers of reception—watching the miracle, attending to the sermon, and reading the text. Again, this effort is marked by a focus on the sensory conditions of the miracle: "How gradually does our LORD proceed, in order to engage the people's attention the more! Methinks I see them all eye, all ear, and eagerly waiting to see the issue of this affair" (*WGW*, 6:119). With the deployment of his visionary cue word, "methinks," Whitefield prompts (and himself enacts) a fantasy of pure receptivity, as Christ's audience (and presumably his own) become "all eye, all ear." As we proceed, the intimacy of the relation between the divinely orchestrated miracle and the dramatic structure of the sermon becomes ever clearer. Finally, in the instant of the expression of power, of the actual performance of the miracle, there is a kind of temporal and experiential fusion: "And now the hour of our Saviour's performing this long-expected miracle, is come" (*WGW*, 6:121). This climactic instance, representation as re-experiencing, prompts a now familiar rapture from Whitefield, which imaginatively collapses Christ's audience with his own: "What a fright was here! Methinks I see surprize sit upon each spectator's face: as the body rises,

⁷⁴ William Burkitt, "St. John XI," in *Expository Notes with Practical Observations on the Four Holy Evangelists* (London, 1700).

⁷⁵ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xix.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xx.

their wonder rises too. See how they gaze! See how their looks bespeak the language of astonished hearts; and all with a kind of silent, expressive oratory" (*WGW*, 6:121). Sermon and miracle, both public spectacles, merge as two audiences behold one fact. Appropriately, Whitefield closes the scene with an expression of hope that the sermon will spur belief in Christ just as the miracle did, that the effect, as well as the means, will be homologous.

What we would seem to have in the Lazarus sermon is an intense confirmation of Stout's sense that "theater won the contest for Whitefield's personality, even as methodism won the contest for his soul."⁷⁷ The finely balanced antagonism between these two forces is part of what produces the famously intense effects of his sermons, and *The Resurrection of Lazarus* is no exception. Yet there is also something more here, a difference dependent upon the special status of miracle as a theological and imaginative object—especially this particular miracle. For Whitefield and his contemporaries, resurrection is the most surpassingly excellent and indubitable of immediate divine actions. It depends, after all, on an absolute and normally inviolable binary—alive or dead. The starkness of the distinction separates it from healing miracles more generally, which accelerate a natural process past some loosely defined threshold into the realm of supernatural effects. More importantly, in its totality, its immediacy and its analogical content, it vividly resembles that fundamental evangelical Protestant construct, the New Birth.

It is this idea that Stout finds at the center of Whitefield's preaching, the very essence of a ministerial practice that declined theological speculation or doctrinal reinforcement. This is heart religion, an affair of the senses: "The new creation of which he spoke was not a 'mere metaphor'; it was as self-evident and palpable as a 'tasteless palate' suddenly brought alive at a sumptuous feast."⁷⁸ This is an elegant encapsulation of Whitefield's evangelical commitments. It also applies, in general terms, to his homiletic approach to miracle. His discomfort with speculative theology, for example, can be felt in his unwillingness to pursue the implications of miracle beyond the limits of the text: "And now perhaps, some may be ready to ask, What news hath Lazarus brought from the other world! But stop, O man, thy vain curiosity! It is forbidden, and therefore useless knowledge. The scriptures are silent concerning it. Why should we desire to be wise about what is written" (*WGW*, 6:121). There is in this an element of orthodox nervousness about occult investigation, the same spirit that led Whitefield to scold Wesley for casting lots. More generally, though, his comment indicates a studiously self-limiting interpretive practice, rooted in the literal, the useful, and the immediately apprehensible. His favorite Puritan sources tended to hew to this line too, emphasizing practical divinity. In surveying the account of Lazarus' resurrection, Matthew Henry's exposition shows a similar epistemological modesty—his concern is with the effect, and not the cause:

Power went along with the Word of Christ to reunite the Soul and Body of Lazarus, and then he came forth. The Miracle is describ'd not by its invisible Springs to satisfy our Curiosity, but its visible Effects to confirm our Faith... In a World of Sense we cannot frame to our selves, much less communicate to others,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

any adequate Ideas of the World of Spirits, and the Affairs of that World; let us not covet to be wise above what is written.⁷⁹

This is a divinity of surfaces, of sensory reception and empirical verification. Miracle, then, should be a tool for explication, and not for mystification. It should produce a feeling of wonder, certainly, but also of clarity.

Here perhaps we have the most direct contrast between Whitefield's imaginative regime and that of Woolston, the mystical deist. Miracle is not, for Whitefield, a tool for plumbing the depths of God's nature, for seeing the true and eternal face of *logos*. Importantly, it is also not simply a coin stamped with the value of Christ's divinity, as the most literalizing evidentialists might have it. Instead it offers a chance for collective contemplation of a literal, sensible, but also ineffable New Birth. Miracles are doing imaginative work in the sermons of George Whitefield, in a way that has not been properly accounted for. My purpose here is not to promote Whitefield as an underappreciated theologian or a doctrinal innovator. Rather, I want to show how direct focus on the miraculous reveals a local conflict that opens up to broader questions. When viewed from the perspective of Whitefield's discussion of Lazarus, the vanquishing of metaphor and the separation of the New Birth from "mere" figure, seems an ambitious and not uncomplicated goal. After all, in the case of Lazarus, the fact of resurrection and the feeling of the new birth are unavoidably linked through analogy, a comparison between physical and spiritual rebirth. Given Whitefield's evangelical motivations, miracle appears not for its own sake, but as a way to stimulate, to make more vivid, the sense of the New Birth as a literal, non-metaphorical event; the soul rises from the grave of perdition like Lazarus from his tomb. Yet the potential neatness of the analogy is disturbed by two factors that I have already discussed. The first is the charged, unstable nature of the miraculous referent, so often a chief locus of controversy. The second is Whitefield's preoccupation with the conditions of performance. In the final movement of the sermon, Whitefield summarizes his fondest hopes for its saving effects: "Would to God that my preaching upon the resurrection of *Lazarus* today, may have the same blessed effects upon you, as the sight of it had upon some of the standers-by" (*WGW*, 6:122). The contemporary compliment to the resurrected Lazarus is not then the resurrected soul of the convert, but the sermon itself. The sermon takes the place of the miraculous work, and Whitefield's hearers become the viewers of the risen corpse, their reception of the truth indicated by the "silent, but expressive oratory" of their faces - "as the body rises, their wonder rises too" (*WGW*, 6:121). Spiritual engagement with the scriptural fact of miracle must always also be a verbally mediated re-visioning of the sacred event that attempts to erase temporal distance. For Whitefield, that process is best represented in the terms of public spectatorship, but of a knotty, complex and multivalent sort, in which contemporary and ancient audiences comingle, and the preacher becomes the thaumaturge.

At this point, one might reasonably object that any sermon on scripture depends on some version of this imaginative spectatorship, this process of re-envisioning. What is particular about Christ's great works of power, however, and what makes them such attractive objects of spiritual and imaginative contemplation is the way in which they reorganize causal relations. The point is emphasized in Burkitt's commentary on

⁷⁹ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, 3rd ed., vol. 5 (London, 1725), 539.

Lazarus: “His Humane nature is the exemplary cause or pattern of the Resurrection. For which Reason Christ is called the *first born from the Dead*. For tho some were raised before him: Yet was his Resurrection the cause of their Resurrection.”⁸⁰ Lazarus rises because Christ will rise—the great work of salvation is always assured. As Matthew Henry puts it in his commentary on the same passage: “Tho’ the Miracle was not yet wrought, yet the Prayer was answered, and he triumphs before the Victory.”⁸¹ Thus the temporal sequence of past miracle and present sermon is inevitably and constitutively disrupted by miracle, and the faithful are always imaginatively watching an unmediated performance of divine wonder.

A recognition of the complex consonance of the event and the figure of resurrection takes us to the threshold of a larger question. Why, finally, is the status of miracle in Whitefield’s evangelism best understood through a literary analysis of his written texts? What status does the content of these printed and circulated sermons have in establishing the degree of his influence and the character of his public spiritual imagination? Along these lines, in the context of a broader argument about the importance of orality in early America, Sandra Gustafson argues that Whitefield’s message was not just crucially linked to his performance of it, but also to improvisation. In a trend that she connects to Solomon Stoddard’s earlier effort to discourage reading from the pulpit, Gustafson sees Whitefield’s habitual extemporaneous preaching as an essential contribution to American evangelical piety: “Whitefield made affective extemporaneous preaching of the kind that Stoddard advocated the sign of evangelical commitment.”⁸² That commitment, combined with Whitefield’s immense celebrity, sparked a kind of fashion among American preachers: “After Whitefield’s first American tour, ministers declared their dedication to the evangelical party by leaving their manuscripts in their studies and preaching extemporaneously.”⁸³ Taken together with Stout’s powerful argument about Whitefield’s fundamental theatricality, one might begin to wonder if specific textual formulations matter at all when thinking about the importance of these hugely influential sermons. Was Whitefield, in essence, a creature of public style, who made dramatic use of a limited range of borrowed figures? To respond in the affirmative would be no discredit to Whitefield, whose goal, it should always be remembered, was the salvation of souls—literary accomplishment, if it arrived, would be at best a means to that essential end. In reading the published remains of these magnetic, improvisatory performances, are we actually reading Whitefield, in a meaningful sense? Is *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, as a published text, a significant reflection of Whitefield’s spiritual power?

One potential answer to that question comes from Frank Lambert’s analysis of Whitefield as a creature of the transatlantic press. He was, Lambert reminds us, a central and active node in an evangelical print network: “The Grand Itinerant operated at the center of a voluntary network of evangelicals who disseminated revival news by reprinting reports in local newspapers, relating progress to ministers, and distributing Whitefield’s

⁸⁰ Burkitt, *Expository Notes*.

⁸¹ Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, 5:538.

⁸² Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory & Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 46.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 47.

latest writings.”⁸⁴ Lambert cites the volume of Whitefield’s publishing, including 90 editions in 1739, the year in which he began his American tour, and print runs in the thousands.⁸⁵ Perhaps more importantly, however, he notes the carefully planned symbiosis of performance and print that this frantic activity represented: “Adopting what he termed a ‘print and preach’ strategy, Whitefield bracketed his oral sermons with publications that first prepared men and women to hear the gospel and then reinforced the spoken word with a more enduring instrument.”⁸⁶ In addition, many who did not hear Whitefield in person were affected by his print evangelism. One of Lambert’s examples of this extended textual reach is particularly interesting in light of Gustafson’s point about the centrality of improvised orality in Whitefield’s mission. A community in Virginia, lacking an acceptable evangelical pastor, “worshiped by reading Whitefield’s sermon’s aloud.”⁸⁷ For this congregation at least, orality, textuality, performance and the aura of the Grand Itinerant were interwoven in a complex and deeply spiritually stimulating manner. Guided only by lay readers, their congregation grew and thrived.

It is partly with the experience of this congregation in mind that I advocate for a close examination of the textual record of Whitefield’s thinking about miracle. Major studies of Whitefield, like those I draw on above, have had a great deal to say about the mechanics of his mission and message, and rather less to say about its imaginative content. This focus on the technical aspects of evangelical itinerancy has taught us a great deal about how the social world of the Protestant church changed in England and America across the eighteenth century. It is less useful, however, for explaining the depth and the resonance of the mental landscape conjured by preachers like Whitefield. What he spread, in his transatlantic career, was a captivating imaginative regime, as well as an electrifying pastoral mode. At the same time, the emphasis on ideas in Whitefield should not be taken as an effort entirely to divorce his performative work from his message, to make him a philosopher. It’s hard to imagine one of his contemporaries attributing his appeal to refined intellectual force, as Samuel Hopkins did in his beautiful description of Jonathan Edwards’s preaching: “his words were so full of Ideas, set in such a plain and striking Light, that few Speakers have been so able to command the Attention of an Audience as he.”⁸⁸ Rather, in publicly celebrating Christ’s miraculous actions, he shaped the broader Protestant imaginary, reminding the readers, hearers and speakers of his sermons that Christian piety is a process of continually re-apprehending those performances. His vision is not empirical, like Mather’s or cosmological, like that of Edwards. Rather it is rooted in the fundamentally social dynamics of display and perception. It is the figural techniques of literary representation that enable his continuous, public recreations of the miraculous events that stand at the center of his evangelical piety.

⁸⁴ Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 109.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power*, 62.

Chapter Three

History, Law, Grace: Jonathan Edwards and the Problem of Miracle

1. Cessation

With regard to the history of the Christian religion, Jonathan Edwards makes his doctrinal position on miracles quite clear: “[T]he first hundred years of the Christian era, or the first century, was the age of miracles. But soon after that, the canon of the Scripture being completed, when the apostle John had written the book of Revelation...these miraculous gifts were no longer continued in the church.”¹ Edwards is articulating an orthodox view of miracles broadly referred to as the doctrine of cessation. Although this doctrine is primarily associated with Protestantism, the principle of the historical limitation of miracle appears in Christian theology long before the Reformation. A version of the idea can be found, for example, in Augustine, whose substantial and varied writings on miracle would later provide ammunition for both supporters and critics of the doctrine.²

Historians have traced the more particular formulation of cessationist doctrine from which Edwards’ position descends to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. D.P. Walker’s essay on the subject suggests that while Luther and Calvin offered occasional and cautious statements on the cessation of miracle, Protestant polemicists of the late sixteenth century turned repeatedly to the idea in an effort to “discredit contemporary Catholic miracles and to justify the lack of Protestant ones.”³ Catholic missionaries and apologists were equally strident in their opposition to cessationism, as Alexandra Walsham has shown in her analysis of miraculous discourse in the Counter-Reformation. Walsham argues that the promotion of contemporary miracles as a uniquely Catholic phenomenon offered comfort to an embattled minority population in England, as well as providing leverage in winning converts. Consequently, “[v]igorous rejection of the Protestant precept that miracles had ceased...became an increasingly prominent feature of English Catholic polemic in the course of Elizabeth’s reign.”⁴ Protestants returned fire: “In their determination to uphold the axiom that miracles had ceased, polemicists like Samuel Harsnet, John Gee, and Richard Sheldon devoted much space to describing the ‘lying wonders,’ ‘mendacious prodigies,’ and ‘egregious impostures’ by which the Jesuits and their secular brethren sought to seduce the credulous laity and prop up the reputation of the Antichristian papacy.”⁵ The ferocity of this debate is a good reminder that the doctrine of the cessation of miracles had its roots not

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 357.

² D.P. Walker, “The Cessation of Miracles,” in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 119.

³ *Ibid.*, 112. Robert Mullin, in his comments on the same subject, sees a much more firm cessationism in Calvin’s writing. See Robert Bruce Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 13.

⁴ Alexandra Walsham, “Miracles and the Counter-Reformation Mission to England,” *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (December 2003), 786.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 782.

in calm theological speculation, but in the heat of a struggle for the religious future of Europe.

Walsham's reconstruction of the debate shows us how miracle circulated in the polemical context as a linguistic sign:

Every sect could wrest the biblical text to its advantage, said the Irish Jesuit Richard Archdekin in 1667, but when the Lord 'speakes by works ... they cannot be controverted'. It was in this sense that Catholic writers spoke of miracles as the 'very woord' and 'divine sentence' of God. As Edward Worsley wrote in reply to the Restoration bishop Edward Stillingfleet, these were His 'legible Characters' and 'Seals and Signatures of truth.'⁶

The doctrine of cessation was a product of discourse, but miracle itself is a discursive object, and this was ultimately a fight over the legibility and the significance of the miraculous sign. That significance depended, to a great extent, on the context in which the question of miracle was being debated. In a separate discussion of early modern English beliefs about the cessation of miracle, Walsham argues that dogmatic Protestant doctrinal assertions were molded by the polemical context in which they were expressed. She suggests, in concurrence with Anthony Milton, that much of English Protestant doctrine was characterized more by variability and pluralism than by stability and unity: "The point certainly seems true in relation to the cessation of miracles. When the clergy addressed the question in other discursive contexts their answers were not so cut and dried."⁷ There turned out to be a number of basic articles of faith at stake in the concept of contemporary miracle, most notably the essential, sovereign independence of divine will. This made it difficult for Protestant thinkers, at least in their calmer moments, comfortably and permanently to reject the idea.

In *Miracles in Enlightenment England*, Jane Shaw extends the historical scope of this debate by deepening the experiential and narrative evidence against rigid cessation. Shaw's book focuses on English Protestantism in the second half of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth century, a context that I consider to be one of the essential intellectual and historical foregrounds for eighteenth-century American writings on miracle. One of Shaw's crucial interventions in the historiography of cessation is her rooting of broader assertions about theoretical multiplicity in the actual reported experiences of individual English Protestants. Acknowledging, with Walker and Walsham, that the doctrine of cessation emerged initially from a Protestant disdain for Catholic wonders, she goes on to note that "while official condemnation of miracles occurred...other Protestants nonetheless reincorporated a belief in the occurrence of miracles in their day into their theology and practice. In short, there existed a real diversity of belief and practice about miracles among Protestants."⁸ Shaw takes the doctrine of cessation and places it in conversation not just with Catholic thaumaturgy but also with the miraculous ideas and experiences of Baptists, Quakers, Huguenots and others. Ultimately, she argues that in this context there emerges a "new theology of the miraculous in a Protestant context, over and against the official Protestant doctrine of the

⁶ Ibid., 788.

⁷ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 229.

⁸ Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 33.

cessation of miracles.”⁹ I will return to this rich diversity of Protestant belief, and to its consequences for Jonathan Edwards’ thought, over the course of this chapter. For the moment though, let me say that while I use the word “cessation” (and its various derivations) throughout this chapter, I do so advisedly, in keeping with my general concurrence with the arguments outlined above. I mean for the idea of cessation to connote an important trend in Protestant theology, but I do not associate it with a stable, codified, or completely triumphant set of beliefs.

Indeed, Cotton Mather’s writing provides a useful American example of the complexity of the question of cessation. While one might see traces of the influence of the doctrine of cessation in Mather’s cautious faith in miracles, he clearly did not feel himself bound by a firm prohibition against asserting the continuing extraordinary operation of the divine. Indeed, I think Shaw’s insight about the turbulence and variety of Protestant thinking about miracle outside or against the frame of cessation has important echoes in the American context that are just beginning to be explored. Recent studies of writings about supernatural events in early America have shown that the limitation of miraculous phenomena to the scriptural past was by no means a universal principle. Important attention is now being paid to the range of extraordinary and potentially miraculous events (healings, visions, prophecies etc.) that were recorded by eighteenth-century American Protestants.¹⁰ This work builds on a previous generation of important studies that explored the diversity of supernatural practices and beliefs in early America, moving the conversation beyond a preoccupation with witchcraft.¹¹ We are beginning to see a clearer picture of eighteenth-century Anglo-American Protestantism, one that gives the continued life of miracle its due.

That growing scholarly interest in these lived experiences of divine power is forcing us to confront the ways in which the experiences of the faithful challenged prevailing cessationist doctrine. Thomas Kidd’s article “The Healing of Mercy Wheeler” is perhaps the most significant recent examination of the power and the vulnerability of cessationist doctrine in eighteenth-century America. In his summary of both the context and the intellectual stakes of the cure narrative of a woman named Mercy Wheeler, Kidd suggests that the principle of cessation led to a kind of self-censoring caution in chroniclers of extraordinary events. His central example is the author of the Wheeler account, one Benjamin Lord. As Kidd puts it: “Reformed Christians, including Lord’s Puritan forebears, believed that special providences sometimes led to surprising recoveries

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ See especially Thomas S. Kidd, “The Healing of Mercy Wheeler: Illness and Miracles Among Early American Evangelicals,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1, Third Series (January 1, 2006): 149–170; Douglas L. Winiarski, “Souls Filled with Ravishing Transport: Heavenly Visions and the Radical Awakening in New England,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 1, Third Series (January 1, 2004): 3–46; Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); David D Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, Studies in Cultural History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

from grievous maladies, but not to instant healings. Lord was not prepared to take on the centuries-old assumption that miracles, including immediate healings, no longer occurred.”¹² This sense that extraordinary cases required rhetorical and theological circumspection seems entirely accurate. Yet Kidd’s broader argument, that a resurgent interest in miracles was a phenomenon of the revivals of the 1740s, seems too temporally limited to me, in light of the growing body of work on miracles. Indeed, the evidence Kidd himself presents throughout his article serves as a reminder that the agreement among Reformed Christians about the possibility of miraculous healing was nowhere near total, either before, during or after the events we refer to as the Great Awakening. In fact, as I argue in this chapter (and throughout this project) the principle of cessation is always necessarily constituted by the pressures of challenge and doubt.

In part, this challenge came from a continual stream of novel claims to miracle, like those that persisted in England and America throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I will touch upon those miracle stories in this chapter, and I consider a full acknowledgment of their continuity and importance to be essential to my aims in this project. Yet miracle stories and their relation to cessation are not at the center of my analysis in this chapter. Rather, I show how the doctrine of cessation was susceptible to internal conflict, not just on experiential, but on theological, linguistic and narrative grounds. I understand this conflict to be rooted in the unique potential of miracle as a signifier, its power and desirability as a form of divine communication. It is on this point that Jonathan Edwards assumes his primary significance for my project. I propose that in reading Edwards’ writing on miracles we need to extend ourselves beyond the binary of the cessation and continuation of miracles, and attend to the knotty multivalence of his approach to extraordinary divine intervention. Ultimately I will argue that Edwards is unwilling, despite his impressively reasoned cessationist convictions, to surrender the possibility of contemporary miracle, or the rhetorical power that accompanies it. While Edwards was, by the standards of his time, nothing like an enthusiastic proponent of present-day miracle, his approach to the subject bespeaks a desire to exploit its potential, accompanied by an equally important need to contain its problematic force. To understand the delicate nature of this project, it is essential to review the rhetorical, doctrinal and controversial status of contemporary miracle in mid-eighteenth century New England.

While Edwards could spar with Old Light thinkers like Charles Chauncy over the significance and permissibility of certain modes of religious expression, he tended to agree with the critics of the revival that claims to contemporary miracle were illicit. Yet the grounds of this assumption were, I would argue, under pressure, and always had been. This was not only because they occasionally conflicted with lived experience, but also because miracle itself is so vital to the larger evidentiary claims of Christian belief. My intention is to show that miracle itself is (as I put it in my discussion of Edwards) “polysemous.” The root of the quandary of miraculous evidence is theological, as Jonathan Edwards well understood. He explicitly recognizes the impossibility of limiting or predicting arbitrary divine power, while at the same time arguing that some effort must be made to separate spiritual truth from delusion. The response he cultivates to this problem is a literary one, an allusive communicative mode that allows him to balance the empirical requirements of his moment with the sovereignty and the ineffability of his

¹² Kidd, “The Healing of Mercy Wheeler,” 157.

God. To explain that response, I want first to consider two discourses of Edwards' day in which miracle played a central role, namely the debates over "enthusiasm" and "deism." I will turn first to criticisms of "enthusiastic" belief in miracles, as presented in the writings of Edwards' Boston opponents and their theological predecessors.

2. The Specter of the French Prophets: Miracle and Enthusiasm

The threat of intemperate zeal, for Charles Chauncy, lay in its power to disrupt stable structures of all kinds. Across his writings on the New England revivals, he pounds steadily on the threat to hierarchy posed by the orthodoxy's old enemy, immediate revelation. If believers felt that religious understanding could be derived directly, rather than through the stable medium of Scripture and the mediations of the clergy, then they laid themselves open to the horizontal, social contagion of enthusiasm and the vertical, internal deepening of mistaken belief. This process of cascading error was instigated, in Chauncy's view, by the bad doctrine of irresponsible preachers like George Whitefield, and accelerated by the rampant misuse of their prominence and mobility.

In his massive 1743 critique of the excesses of the revival, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, Chauncy details his fears of a potential spiritual contagion, with the promiscuous Whitefield as its principal vector: "I was always afraid, lest People, from him, should learn to give Heed to Impulses and Impressions, and by Degrees come to Revelations, and other Extraordinaries of this kind."¹³ The final term, "Extraordinaries," is a persistent feature of Chauncy's anti-revival writing, and the range of its significance is worth examining. In the case above, it appears as a general term for an aggravated state of spiritual error, exemplified in this case by a mistaken belief in "Revelations." Here and elsewhere for Chauncy, the "extraordinary" is a term of opprobrium, a way of denigrating unusual external evidence: "han't the great Talk of a *Revival of Religion* arisen more from the *general Appearance of some Extraordinaries* (which there may be where there is not the *Power of Godliness*) than from such Things as are *sure Evidences of a real Work of God* in Men's Hearts?"¹⁴ The force of Chauncy's critique has everything to do with the way in which he defines the extraordinary in this context. As he explains subsequently, "there is a two-fold Work of the SPIRIT of GOD spoken of in Scripture: The one respects his extraordinary and miraculous Gifts and Powers; the other, his common and ordinary Influence, that by which a *Work of Grace* is begun and carried on in the souls of men."¹⁵ In this binary construction, the extraordinary and the miraculous stand in opposition to the more proper, usual and important work of grace.

So is Chauncy's "extraordinary" synonymous with miracle? Certainly in the quote above he seems to allow that they are closely associated. On the other hand, the fact that he does not collapse the two terms gives Chauncy some flexibility, permitting him to associate and critique a whole range of aberrant and disorderly behavior under the heading of the extraordinary. What seems essential however, in the context of a discussion of miracle, is the relation between the extraordinary and the category of evidence. The problem with these "Extraordinaries" is that their evidentiary power (and ultimately their status as signs) is unreliable. Even if they were provably divine, they would be no sure evidence of salvation. To further this point, Chauncy reaches back in

¹³ Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (Boston, 1743), 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Christian history, and argues that even in the indubitably miraculous days of the Apostolic Age, there was no necessary link between miraculous ability and salvation. This baseline principle is laid out in the introduction to *Seasonable Thoughts*, and bolstered by an extract from the English theologian John Owen's 1676 tract, *Pneumatologia*. As Owen puts it in Chauncy's quotation: "Neither were those miraculous Operations of the *Holy Spirit*, which were visible unto others, any part of the Work of Regeneration; nor did they belong necessarily to it: For many were the subjects of them, and received miraculous Gifts by them, who were never regenerate, and many were regenerate, who were never Partakers of them."¹⁶ To put it more directly, in the tradition of orthodox Anglo-American Calvinism the miraculous action of the Spirit and the work of internal regeneration have no *necessary* relationship to each other.

Yet to say that such works are not sure evidence of grace is not to say that they are evidence of nothing at all. The introduction of a historical frame, in the move back to the Apostolic Age, creates an immediate argumentative problem. This problem has everything to do with the uncertain status of miracle as sign, and the unavoidable dual character of miraculous works in this strain of Protestant theology. In the context of contemporary events, Chauncy and Owen understand claims of extraordinary works to be deceptive and dubious. At the same time, they allow that the evidentiary, signifying power of such "Extraordinaries" was an essential aid in the preparation and establishment of Christ's church. This duality is evident in a later quote from Owen's *Pneumatologia*. In a discussion of the purpose of miracles in the Old Testament ("Preparatory to the New Creation"), Owen emphasizes the communicative function of extraordinary events: "Now the end of all these miraculous operations was to give reputation to the Persons, and to confirm the ministry of them by whom they were wrought."¹⁷ Owen frames this with a reminder that those miracles were not performed by the power of men like Joshua, but *through* them, by God. In other words, we are cautioned, as in Chauncy's *Seasonable Thoughts*, not to ascribe the excellence of the work to its human vehicle, but to its divine origin.

At the same time, the effect that the miracle has on the reputation of the individual is an essential aspect of its function. Owen's prime example is God ordering Moses "to work several miracles or Signs before them that they [the people of Israel] might believe that he was sent of God, Exod. 4.8. And such Works were called Signs, because they were Tokens and Pledges of the Presence of the Spirit of God with them by whom they were wrought."¹⁸ This is one of the essential intellectual challenges of the principle of cessation, from the seventeenth-century Calvinism of Owen down through Chauncy's critique. Cessation makes the idea of miracles do double work. Those miracles that occur during the preparation and building of the church are signs to be celebrated and magnified. Then, past a given historical point, the communicative significance of a putative miracle becomes a threat, and it must be rigorously limited, controlled and even denigrated.

This second iteration of miracle, as a potentially uncontrollable contemporary signifier, was also a central concern for the English bishop George Hicke, another of

¹⁶ John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, a Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London, 1676), 178; quoted in Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England*, 18.

¹⁷ Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, a Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chauncy's sources in *Seasonable Thoughts*. Hickes first delivered his sermon "The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised" in 1680, making the core text roughly contemporaneous with Owen's *Pneumatologia*. The text from which Chauncy quotes, however, was a revised edition published in 1709, in direct response to recent claims of contemporary miracle. In his sermon, Hickes is emphatic about the undesirability of extraordinary gifts, and Chauncy quotes him at length on this point: "how much more excellent and desireable the saving Graces of the SPIRIT are than all these *pompous miraculous* Gifts: In which there is really no intrinsical excellence. All which I would have those especially to consider whose enthusiastical Tempers, or Education, incline them first to admire, and then to conceit these miraculous Gifts."¹⁹ Like Owen and Chauncy, Hickes is conscious that the arc of the history of redemption offers a resource for fixing the signification of miracles, and thus dispelling a potential source of confusion. Consequently, he sponsors a kind of soft and gradual cessation, in which the special gifts taper off individually, terminating in "the latter end of the Fourth, and beginning of the Fifth century" with a few healings "which were the last Miracles in the Church."²⁰ Importantly, fixing the line at this point focuses the reader's attention not on the nature of the testimony (i.e. scriptural or not) but on the historical limits of that testimony.²¹ Stories up through the fifth century could be credited, those beyond were taken to be inadmissible evidence. However inexact this line seems in doctrinal terms, what is essential is that Hickes marks a point in history past which the "Miraculous Unctions of the Holy Ghost" would no longer appear.

This particular formulation of Hickes' stance on miracle, like that of his predecessors, is shaped as much by early-eighteenth-century religious debate as by a desire for theological precision. It is, as I have suggested, only necessary to reiterate the principle of cessation if it is being challenged by contemporary claims to miraculous power. In Hickes' case, the provocation came in the form of the French Prophets, whose claims to miraculous power caused a sensation in London in the first decade of the eighteenth century.²² The Prophets were an English offshoot of the Camisards, a French Protestant faction that launched a rebellion in the Cevennes in 1702.²³ The Camisard rebels emerged from the entrenched, persecuted Huguenot communities of rural southern France, and from the beginning, their prominence was tied to their claims to miraculous gifts, especially prophecy. After the rebellion in France was put down in 1705, three Camisard prophets, Durand Fage, Elie Marion and Jean Cavalier made their way to London, arriving in the summer of 1706. Their notoriety spread quickly, and by the following year there were dozens of English converts among the "French" Prophets. As their influence expanded, the miraculous claims of the Prophets also grew bolder, encompassing not just prophecy but also miraculous healing.²⁴ This trend culminated in a promise by John Lacy, the most prominent English prophet, that he would resurrect his

¹⁹ George Hickes, *The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised* (London, 1709), 59; quoted in Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England*, 21.

²⁰ Hickes, *The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised*, 51.

²¹ The difference from Edwards' dating (see page 67, above) is worth noting, and serves as another indication of the variability of opinion on the subject.

²² The notoriety of the Prophets famously inspired Shaftesbury's *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708).

²³ Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108–110; Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England*, 149–158.

dead comrade Thomas Emes on May 25th, 1708. This represented a transformation of the group's rhetoric and practice of just the kind that most troubled those who criticized enthusiasm. It took the social and spiritual metaphors of restoration and rebirth and remade them in the literal image of the most consequential of all Christian miracles, the resurrection.²⁵ The prophecy was not without risk, however, and Emes' failure to rise at the appointed time was a critical blow both to the credibility and the millennial hopes of the Prophets.

These events motivated Bishop Hickee to revise and expand his 1680 sermon on enthusiasm, and to reframe it in a fourth edition of 1709 as part of a collection of three works designed to "shew the Vanity of the Pretensions of our new Prophets to Miracles and inspiration."²⁶ His dedicatory epistle to the new volume emphasizes the core presumptions of cessationist doctrine, and argues that when it comes to miraculous work, history and context are all-important: "the Times of the Church, when Miracles were wrought, are not to be admired, and preferred before those, in which Miracles are ceased, because our Lord commended their Faith and pronounced them blessed who believed but had not seen."²⁷ This denigration of miraculous evidence and promotion of belief without sensory proof is an entirely rational gesture in the context of cessationist doctrine. At the same time, it runs counter to the epistemological procedures that had just been applied to the prophets and their claims of revelation. It was not the principle of cessation itself that proved to skeptics that the Prophets were deluded, but the actual, observable failure of their predicted miracles.

This reliance on visual evidence is not just a question of responding to vulgar curiosity. It has its analogue in the necessary epistemological modesty of cessation. The absurdity of prophetic claims or miraculous evidence cannot be assumed *a priori*, since this would infringe on the liberty of God's action in the world.²⁸ Hickee is fully aware of this point, as is evident in the body of his sermon, which takes us back to signifying miracle as the true test of prophecy: "I deny not, but God is free to send Prophets when he pleases...but then whensoever he sends them, he will, as he hath always done, send them with the Power of working Signs and Wonders, and whensoever they shall come, we shall have a right to try them by the Scriptures."²⁹ The cessation of miracles is provisionally assumed, but not guaranteed, and evidence must still be tried. Even if the miraculous sign is not to be coveted, the principle of its communicative power remains as essential a resource as ever for Hickee's church, beset as she is with the claims of false prophets who could always, of course, turn out to be true ones.

In quoting Hickee and Owen, Charles Chauncy is acknowledging his debt to generations of Protestant experience with miraculous claims. In fact, in *Seasonable Thoughts* he makes this historical continuity into one of the significant virtues of his critique. He is drawing, as his text points out, not just on the accumulated wisdom of Protestant theology, but on a long record of historical analogues to the current revivals. His repeated reply to the assertion of novelty in the New England revivals is essentially that both America and the larger Christian community have seen such things before. The

²⁵ Schwartz, *The French Prophets*, 117.

²⁶ Hickee, *The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised*, "The Epistle Dedicatory."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For earlier examples of this line of thought see Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, 229.

²⁹ Hickee, *The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised*, 63.

errant dependence on immediate revelation (instead of the Word) is, for Chauncy, part of a recurrent Satanic assault on true Christian order and practice, linked to previous events, especially the furor over “Antinomianism” in early New England.³⁰ He shared this interest in creating a polemical genealogy of the deceptions of immediate revelation with other anti-enthusiastic writers in England and America.³¹ Given this rhetorical proclivity, it may not be surprising that critics of the revivals in New England raised the decades-old specter of the French Prophets. In 1742, a lengthy anonymous text entitled *The Wonderful Narrative: Or, A Faithful Account of the French Prophets, their Agitations, Extasies and Inspirations* appeared in Boston.³² By way of demonstrating the perils of enthusiasm, the text chronicles the most resonant and consequential miraculous prediction of the Prophets, the resurrection of Emes.³³ Befitting the anti-revivalists’ preoccupation with the social consequences of enthusiasm, the *Narrative* presents the pretension to miraculous power as a source of dangerous social mobilization: “such was the Alarm of this predicted Miracle, on the appointed Day of its being wrought...that the *Queen’s Guard*, to prevent Disorders, was posted in *Bunhillfields*.”³⁴ On the other hand, if this witnessing crowd is liable to the contagion of error, they are also a means to magnify and perpetuate the record of the miracle’s failure: “There are some Persons now living in *New-England*, who appeared with the Multitude at *Bunhillfields*, on that noted 25th of May, who can testify, that nothing remarkable happened.”³⁵ From the perspective of the anti-revival divines of Boston, this final note surely has a dual message: The supposed miracles of the French Prophets (both reported and failed) constitute both a monitory specter of enthusiasm and a testament to its absurdity. The great cataclysm of pretended miracle at Bunhillfields appears not just in the historical record, but also in living New English memory.

So much for latter-day miracles. Yet the *Wonderful Narrative* is careful not to let the reader’s newly fortified disdain for the miraculous extend too far. Miracle, as always, must be mocked in its pretended form and protected in its true one. Accordingly, the appendix of the *Wonderful Narrative* reminds us that we must not neglect true religion. If the notion of contemporary miracle, like the predicted resurrection of Emes, is objectionable in the extreme, the evidence of Christ’s miracles is desirable and self-evident in the other extreme: “The Gospel...is a *System every Way worth of GOD*, and approving it self to the Reason of Man; and JESUS, the Author of it, evidently proved his Mission...by the WORKS WHICH HE DID; which were great and marvellous, and such as could not be the Effect of *Art and Contrivance*, but at once appear to be above the Powers of Nature.”³⁶ The authorship of the gospel is undergirded by the deployment of the transparent miraculous sign, the antithesis of the dubious claim to contemporary miracle.

³⁰ Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England*, iii–xxx.

³¹ See for example Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise Concerning Enthusiasme* (London, 1655); Hickes, *The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised*.

³² Edwin Gaustad has addressed the authorship of this work, declining (on stylistic grounds) to attribute it to Chauncy. He does suggest that Chauncy may have helped edit it, and certainly concurred with its sentiments. Edwin S. Gaustad, “Charles Chauncy and the Great Awakening: a Survey and Bibliography,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*. 45 (1951).

³³ For another discussion of this text see Kidd, “The Healing of Mercy Wheeler,” 163.

³⁴ *The Wonderful Narrative: Or, A Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Extasies, and Inspirations*: (Boston, 1742), 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

This corrective, moderating return to the subject of miracle serves as a reminder of the complexity of reading the miraculous sign in the eighteenth-century Protestant world. As we saw in the previous chapter, skepticism, like enthusiasm, carried a risk of contagion, and if misapplied, could convey the believer to the equally dangerous impiety of deism. It was a threat that Jonathan Edwards took very seriously, and it exercised as great an influence on his miracle writing as did the anti-enthusiastic writings of Chauncy and the Old Lights.

3. Edwards and The Deist Threat: The Defense of Miracle

I should begin by saying that Jonathan Edwards absolutely reviled the intellectual trend he labeled deism, and thought it presented nothing less than an existential threat to Christianity. In an oft-quoted passage from the *History of Redemption*, he charges these deists with atheism and Satanic plotting against the Reformation: “The deists wholly cast off the Christian religion, and are professed infidels. They ben't like the heretics, Arians and Socinians, and others, that own the Scriptures to be the word of God, and hold the Christian religion to be the true religion, but only deny these and these fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion; they deny the whole Christian religion.”³⁷ As we have seen, many “deists” like Thomas Woolston were not fundamentally anti-Christian thinkers, and much of their work fits poorly into almost any collective definition of deism, however sensitive and provisional.³⁸ It's hard then to see that Edwards' broad invective has much critical purchase, beyond the hack and slash of polemical exchange. But, if it matters in a historical sense that this anti-deist charge doesn't describe Woolston's thought accurately (and indeed caricatures all the thinkers labeled as deists), it's hard to imagine that it would have mattered much to Edwards. Even if he had been better acquainted with the quirks of Woolston's miracle writing and his quixotic interest in saving Reformed Christianity from itself, it's unlikely that he would have been any less outraged by his impiety and his ridicule of the literal Christ.

As reflexively unsympathetic as Edwards may have been to any notion that smacked of deism, we should not miss the importance of his engagement with this broad strain of unconventional thought. Gerald McDermott's book *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* took the first comprehensive look at the philosophical and theological components of Edwards' response to deism. McDermott positions the struggle with deism as one of the grand preoccupations of Edwards' thought: “Edwards considered deism to be Christianity's most formidable opponent, and...the better part of his theological project was a direct or indirect response to it.”³⁹ In fact, McDermott argues that Edwards saw a greater threat in deism than he did in Arminianism, the doctrinal trend more traditionally identified as his theological nemesis. The immediate threat may have been overstated, at least in the colonies, since any American writing that could be plausibly associated with deism would not appear until just before the Revolution.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John Frederick Wilson, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 432.

³⁸ See Chapter Two.

³⁹ Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37; A. Owen Aldridge, “Natural Religion and Deism in America Before Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (October 1997): 835–848; E. Brooks

Nonetheless, the struggle with English deism offered Edwards a broader intellectual stage than did quarrels within the mainstream of Reformed Christianity. He uses the opportunity, in effect, to locate and confront those aspects of Enlightenment rationality that might threaten faith.

As McDermott notes, the refutation of deistical reasoning is a distributed project, scattered throughout the Edwards corpus, and leaving its traces in his great works like *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*. The bulk of the explicitly anti-deist material appears in his “Miscellanies,” an immense group of carefully composed notes that Edwards began in 1722, and added to regularly for the next thirty-five years. The “Miscellanies” cover a wide range of subjects, but a significant minority of the entries are dedicated to explicitly arguing for the rationality of Christianity, against the skeptical critiques raised by the deists. Ava Chamberlain has argued that these entries, most of them appearing under the title “Christian Religion,” are notes toward an unfinished larger project, which Edwards intended to call “A Rational Account of the Principles and Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion.” This systematic treatise was meant to be a “transatlantic assault upon deism” which would reconcile the truth and necessity of revelation with the dictates of reason.⁴¹ Thus, while Edwards was engaged in the promotion, management and defense of the revivals in Northampton, he was also steadily at work on another kind of evidentiary project.

Among the writers commonly identified with early-eighteenth-century English deism, the attack on miracles as an irrational and intolerable mystification was a commonplace. Edwards’ was clearly aware of Woolston’s provocations, although his direct familiarity with him may have been limited. Still, he would have found plenty of skepticism and derision about miracles in the work of his two primary deist targets, Thomas Chubb and Matthew Tindal.⁴² Unsurprisingly, he gives over a good number of his entries in the “Miscellanies” to defending the orthodox evidentiary view of miracle. In the literature discussing Edwards’ relation to deism and Enlightenment religion, the attention to his ideas about miracle has been relatively cursory.⁴³ A fuller examination of this aspect of the debate will shed important light on more familiar critical questions about Edwards’ empirical and spiritual approach to conversion.

The thrust of Edwards’ defense of Christ’s miracles, as it appears in the controversial context, does not differ greatly from the evidentiary line of the latitudinarian Anglicans that we encountered in the previous chapter. In his thinking about miracle as a proof of Christian doctrine, he follows the same general principles advanced by Locke, who compared the miracles worked by Jesus to ambassadorial credentials. Assent to miracle and belief in divine truth were indivisible for Locke: “where the miracle is admitted, the doctrine cannot be rejected; it comes with the assurance of a divine

Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 159–172.

⁴¹ Ava Chamberlain, introduction to *The “Miscellanies,” 501–832*, by Jonathan Edwards, ed. Ava Chamberlain, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 27.

⁴² McDermott suggests that Edwards was familiar with much of the deist literature at second hand, but may have known the work of Tindal and Chubb directly. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods*, 35 n. 2.

⁴³ See for example Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of Nature* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 211–216.

attestation to him that allows the miracle, and he cannot question its truth.”⁴⁴ Edwards, assuming the same coercive logical power of miracle, uses it to take aim at the supposed rationality of deism. He frames the self-evidently excellent work of miracle as the height of rational demonstration: “What can be more reasonable than to believe a man, when he comes and tells us that he is sent from God, and will heal the diseases of our souls; and tells us, that we may believe him, [that] he’ll heal the diseases of our bodies; and accordingly heals all sorts at all times, of all manner of diseases, by a touch or word’s speaking.”⁴⁵ Part of the supposedly self-evident rationality of this construction of miracle lies in the symbolic resonance between spiritual and physical healing, a standard analogical baseline that undergirds the orthodox reading of New Testament miracle.

I will return to the broader consequences of that physical/spiritual analogy, but I think it is also important to note the way in which Edwards skirts the problem of history in this example. Self-consciously or not, his use of a generalized present tense, with its implication that Christ is always presenting this evidence directly to us, allows him to evade one of the most famous objections to the reliability of scriptural miracles – that we can know about them only through the testimony of others.⁴⁶ In order to capitalize in a lasting way upon the *sensible* nature of miracle (which is the essence of its crucial evidentiary power) Edwards must imagine a sort of constant faithful re-creation of sensory immediacy. Here also there is an important parallel with Locke, who recognized that accepting miracles as evidence required an act of imaginative transference: “He that is present at the fact, is a spectator. He that believes the history of the facts, puts himself in the place of a spectator.”⁴⁷ Edwards was a revivalist as well as an apologist for an orthodox view of Scriptural miracle, and it suits his purposes to assure us that Christ’s rational presentation of confirmatory sensory evidence is both indubitable and ongoing: “He tells us that he will deliver us from spiritual and eternal death, and also from temporal death.... And to prove this, he gives us sensible evidence that he has power over men’s lives, not only by prolonging men’s lives, but even by restoring of them after they are dead; and besides, rises from the dead himself.”⁴⁸ Divine power pointedly extends beyond the ordinary providential action of prolonging life to that most nakedly miraculous act, resurrection. The deist argument, as Edwards well knew, was precisely that the testimony of revelation did not constitute “sensible evidence.” Edwards’ relieves this pressure on miracle through his faithful reading, which envisions a kind of atemporal, continual re-apprehension of the most powerful and direct proof of the rational truth of the Christian religion.

⁴⁴ John Locke, “A Discourse of Miracles,” in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 82.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The “Miscellanies,” 501-832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.18 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 119–120.

⁴⁶ This is the problem around which Hume would base his famous critique of miraculous evidence. Ultimately, Hume concludes that no degree of second-hand assurance would suffice to make a miracle story convincing. Consequently, the assent to the Christian religion is a consequence of faith, not reason, and so makes the believer aware of “a continued miracle in his own person,” a characterization that, interestingly, might describe aspects of Edwardsian internality. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Lorne Falkenstein (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011), 164.

⁴⁷ Locke, “A Discourse of Miracles,” 80.

⁴⁸ Edwards, *The “Miscellanies,” 501-832*, 120.

4. The Ethical Weight of Cessation

This tactical rhetorical victory is of course in some tension with the important historical principle of cessation. In fact, the apparent incompatibility between God's unconditional ability to intervene in the world and the harmony of his redemptive historical plan may be the dominant problem in Edwards' thinking about miracle. In the fight with deist heterodoxy, he must balance his exploitation of the evidentiary power of miracle with his adherence to the doctrine of cessation. Like Whitefield, Edwards had both political and theological incentives to control the kind of millenarian enthusiasm that was encouraging new faith in contemporary miracles among revivalists. As we saw at the outset of the chapter, he was adamant in his historical conviction that miracles had ceased. They would, he argued, not return to the created world, even with the approach of the millennium, which he himself eagerly anticipated. He observed a willingness among certain zealous friends of the revival to countenance immediate and extraordinary divine experience, a tendency that he linked to theological error. This was, it is important to emphasize, a carefully considered position, grounded as much in his sense of Christian ethics as in any doctrinal allegiance. Whatever the political advantages of cessation, the depth of Edwards' commitment to it as an ethical principle, as well as the care with which he investigated and articulated it, is worth our sustained attention. This is all the more true because the principle of absolute cessation was, as we will see, difficult to sustain on other grounds.

Edwards' most complete statement on the subject is found in a series of fifteen sermons he preached on 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's famous hymn to love. The sermons were preached in 1738, but were not published until 1852, when his great-great grandson Tryon Edwards collected them under the title *The Fruits of Charity*. Across these texts, and in particular in the second and fourteenth sermons, Edwards develops a philosophical and ethical argument for the disappearance of what he refers to as the "extraordinary gifts of the spirit." He does so by figuring both the individual and the collective life of the church in terms of a moral and historical teleology, a sweeping arc that tends toward the ultimate fulfillment of divine love in heaven. In this scheme, the extraordinary gifts, such as miracle, prophecy, speaking in tongues (i.e. the collection of supernatural phenomena identified in 1 Corinthians 12) are subordinated to the principle of divine love. As Edwards makes clear in his second sermon, the argument for cessation rests upon the essentially limited nature of the gifts. Miraculous gifts were an instrument designed to win men to God's doctrine. They were not the object of the doctrine itself. So to suggest that such miraculous means would return when the promised end arrives is, in Edwards' eyes, an absurdity: "the end is more excellent than the means, by an universally allowed maxim. For the means has no goodness in it otherwise than as subservient to the end. The end, therefore, must be considered as superior in excellency."⁴⁹ That end is the unbounded and eternal operation of the Holy Spirit, producing the fullest possible happiness and sanctification in believers. This is Edwards' vision of Paul's "charity." His fourteenth sermon, "Divine Love Alone Lasts Eternally" makes the point succinctly: "Divine love is the end of which all the inspiration and all the miracles which ever were in

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 162.

the world were but the means.”⁵⁰ Miracle and grace are causally related, but, as Edwards’ title makes clear, the former is everlasting, while the latter, which Edwards identifies with the famous “childish things” of 1 Corinthians 13:11, will fade away.

In fact, while Edwards allows for the necessary (if unequal) causal association of miracle and grace, he understands their inherent qualities as being diametrically opposed. The grounds of this distinction are important in contextualizing the moderate revivalist understanding of miracle that Edwards is detailing here. At the outset of the second sermon in *Charity*, he lays out “a twofold distinction of the gifts and operations of the Spirit, viz. into common and saving, and ordinary and extraordinary.”⁵¹ *Ordinary* works are available at all times, whereas *extraordinary* works are only available for a particular time (e.g. during the Apostolic age). *Common* works are available to both regenerate and natural men, whereas *uncommon* works are available only to the saints. Thus, miracles are understood to be extraordinary, common gifts, while grace is an ordinary, uncommon gift.⁵² This distinction is made along historical and spiritual lines; in the moral frame of *The Fruits of Charity*, miracle is bounded in time and carries no necessary association with salvation. The category of sensation, and indeed any mention of the physical status of miracle, is conspicuously absent.

This definition bears comparison with one offered by an earlier New England divine. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Boston minister Samuel Willard wrote a vast theological compendium entitled *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, which was posthumously published in 1726. In a discourse on the “publick life of Christ,” Willard gives a different definition of the nature of Jesus’ miraculous works:

[Christ’s miracles] were *supernatural* effects, above the ordinary course of second causes, and so they were great Works, such as none but God could perform.... They were also *sensible* effects; for though the work of Grace be a super natural work, yet it is not called a *miracle*, because it is spiritual and affects not the senses, as these do, and for that reason are called signs, which represent one thing to the sense, and another to the mind.⁵³

For Willard, the sensory availability of miracle is what distinguishes it from grace. In introducing “signs” as a synonym for miracles, he emphasizes the doubled and divided representational power of those events. Grace, by contrast, because of its unavailability to the sensory apparatus, is a non-representational work. Its action and its meaning are unified in internal space, and the invisibility of the sign reduces its interpretive complexity. The miracle, on the other hand, has both mental and physical existences that are by definition separate and not intended to be reconciled. In a sense, Willard’s solution is the simpler one – miracles happen outside, grace on the inside. Edwards, as a consequence both of his historical situation and his intellectual and spiritual preoccupations, can segregate miracle and grace in temporal and spiritual terms. He cannot, however, permit grace to escape sensation. By the extension of this same principle, he cannot allow any part of the moral or natural world to escape its susceptibility to divine power. This inevitably creates a tension between his vision of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 360.

⁵¹ Ibid., 152.

⁵² For another instance of a New England minister’s deployment of this distinction as a check on enthusiasm, see Winiarski, “Souls Filled with Ravishing Transport,” 32–33.

⁵³ Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity* (Boston, 1726), 371.

miracle's place in Christian history and its place in the natural world. The balance of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring the context and the consequences of this dual commitment, and the problems it raises for Edwards in establishing a unified theory of the divine action of miracle and its relation to history.

5. Causation, Miracle and the Universe of Law

In his great late career work, *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards makes a complex and extended case for Calvinist necessity. In the text he refers constantly to the logic and the figure of the chain, those iron links of cause and effect that cannot be broken, that forbid all contingency, and that inevitably lead us back to God. One of his central proofs of this concept rests upon the necessary conclusions to be drawn from God's "foreknowledge," of all events and moral actions. In part the case rests, as it often does for Edwards, on the logical extension of the fundamental Calvinist faith in God's absolute sovereignty. If even the smallest contingent event were unavailable to God's knowledge, it would bring the absolute reason and order of his system to ruin. Here Edwards deploys some of the sarcasm typical of his controversial mode: "The supreme Lord of all things must needs be under great and miserable disadvantages, in governing the world which he has made, and has the care of, through his being utterly unable to find out things of chief importance, which hereafter shall befall his system."⁵⁴ This emphasis on harmony and systematicity typifies Edwards' vision of the divine, but also makes possible the key rhetorical strategy we see throughout *Freedom of the Will*, wherein the slightest imaginable deviation from perfect order can be shown to reduce God to absurdity, and thus to be itself absurd.

Yet this insistence on the dictates of natural reason must be subordinated, ultimately, to "the affairs of the moral kingdom."⁵⁵ Edwards' great proofs of God's foreknowledge are derived from scripture. He reminds us, at the outset of his discussion of God's timeless knowledge, that he supposes himself "herein to have to do with such as own the truth of the Bible."⁵⁶ This essential limitation on his argumentative structure serves to re-establish the centrality of the moral kingdom in the scheme of creation, and to emphasize the supremacy of scripture as the only meaningful authority in that preeminent sphere.

The predominance of the moral world, and the idea that scriptural revelation is an unquestionable baseline of agreed-upon truth, has important consequences for Edwards' conception of miracle:

For the moral world is the end of the natural world; and the course of things in the latter, is undoubtedly subordinate to God's designs with respect to the former. Therefore he has seen cause, from regard to the state of things in the moral world, extraordinarily to interpose, to interrupt and lay an arrest on the course of things in the natural world; and even in the greater wheels of its motion; even so as to stop the sun in its course. And unless he can foresee the volitions of men, and so know something of the future state of the moral world, he can't know but that he

⁵⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 254.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

may still have as great occasion to interpose in this manner, as ever he had: nor can he foresee how, or when, he shall have occasion thus to interpose.⁵⁷ Here we begin to see the challenge that absolute divine authority over the natural and moral world poses to the cessationist limitation of miracle. Edwards here defends the right and the ability of God to intervene in the natural order not just in the scriptural past, but also in the future. The benefit of such a defense is that it places that which is apparently vicious and disorderly in miracle—the violation of the natural “course of things”—in the proper context of a superior order, the absolutely foreknown and non-contingent “moral world.” Plainly, however, this continuity of extraordinary interposition is in conflict with the cessationist telos that Edwards lays out in *The Fruits of Charity*, that ethical arc of the church from the tutelage of miracle to the mature empire of orderly love.

What is at stake in all of Edwards’ thinking about the natural implications of miracle is the status of causation, and the extent to which a miracle, properly defined, represents a threat to the exquisitely important causal order. In *Freedom of the Will* he is at pains to defend Calvinism from the familiar charge that it creates a kind of endless prison of necessity, which would tend to vitiate all incentives to moral action. He argues that, rather than being destructive to morality, this “doctrine of necessity” protects us from the nightmare of Arminian contingency. The threat that he perceives in Arminianism is the collapse of cause and effect, the dissolving of an ordered universe into meaningless contingency, in which no act of the will could be reliably connected to its consequence. In keeping with his prioritization of the moral sphere, the most troubling result of such unchecked contingency would be the undoing of moral necessity, and a consequent evacuation of the meaning of praise and blame: “It will follow from Arminian principles, that there is no degree of connection between virtue and vice, and any foregoing event or thing...And if so, then all foregoing means must be totally in vain.”⁵⁸ Given the stakes of this threat, we see the danger of the apparent causal disturbance of miracle all the more clearly. A change in the settled natural order (like halting the movement of the sun) would, if it were the product of contingency, threaten the order of the moral world, too. Again, the force of miracle, once mobilized, must be contained. That such events happened in the past must be admitted by all who “own the Bible” and read it as Edwards does. That such events may happen again must also logically be allowed by any who allow for divine omnipotence. For the historical and Scriptural reasons identified above, Edwards has cause to consign miracles to the past. Yet given the suppositions of his Calvinism, miracle remains a necessary, powerfully affecting (and thus potentially destabilizing) presence in the world. The need to subordinate it to a meaningful and absolute divine moral order is thus especially pressing.

It is here that my discussion of the specific object of miracle intersects with a broad, long-running debate about Edwards’ engagement with natural philosophy in general, and particularly with Newtonian physics. Rather than attempting to account for all of the implications of the new science in Edwards’ thought, I want to think about how Edwards makes use of a Newtonian atomic view of the universe to deal directly with miracle. Within the scope of his discussion of the will, the atomic scheme offers Edwards a means of emphasizing the scope and the totality of universal causation: “If the laws of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 368.

motion and gravitation, laid down by Sir Isaac Newton, hold universally, there is not one atom, but what has influence, every moment, throughout the whole material universe, to cause every other part to be otherwise than it would be, if it were not for that particular corporeal existence.”⁵⁹ For Perry Miller, famously, it was this intuitive and active grasp of both Newton and the atom that permitted Edwards to anticipate, if not fully articulate “the great line of the future” and the development of modern physics.⁶⁰ Miller sees profound theological ramifications following from this Newtonian rationalism, and the principle of invariable causation that follows from it. Most importantly for my investigation, he sees a necessary epistemic shift in the understanding of miracles:

By either book [*Freedom of the Will* or *Original Sin*], by both logic and induction, we come to Edwards’ basic prerequisite to all experience: the course of nature, as infallibly shown “by late improvements in philosophy,” is an inviolable sequence of events. All Christians profess an “immediate agency” of God, but they may no longer vulgarly invoke it as a miracle, as a break in the coherence. Even when bringing the soul of a child to birth, ‘God works as much according to an established order, as his immediate agency in any of the works of nature whatsoever.’⁶¹

Miller’s insight—that Edwards’ understanding of experience was significantly (even primarily) structured by the order of causation—remains essential. Certainly the entire logical structure of his *Freedom of the Will* depends upon a rigorous and pervasive model of causation. Edwards is also manifestly less willing than was Cotton Mather to credit miracle as an operative aspect of contemporary experience. Yet, as we have seen throughout this chapter, and will continue to see, this more circumspect approach did not mean that miracles could be abolished, either by the doctrinal means of cessation or by the kind of rationalist progression Miller suggests. The controversial status of miracles in the mid-eighteenth century, both in transatlantic exchanges and in the context of revival, had little to do with providential actions like conception and birth. When the various players disputed over God’s willingness to intervene, they discussed, as Edwards does, the great things of the “moral universe” and the relation of God’s work to the plan of salvation. The question then, is whether the kind of causal chains that define human experience can be said to extend to God.

Recently, Avihu Zakai has examined this issue in depth, and he offers a stark contradiction of the notion of Edwards as a proto-modern sympathizer with the new science. Indeed, he argues that not only did Edwards “not embrace the new scientific modes of thought,” he was in fact “one of their sharpest critics as evident in his rejection of mechanical, experimental philosophy.”⁶² It is, as Zakai suggests, ultimately a question of sovereignty, and he argues persuasively that the full extension of Newton’s thought leads inevitably to conflict with the absolute Calvinist insistence on divine autonomy: “Reacting to the mechanical philosophers’ assertion that ‘divine operation’ is ‘limited by what we call laws of nature,’ Edwards declared that the use of such a concept to describe God’s relation with the order of creation was unwarranted.”⁶³ Significantly for my

⁵⁹ Ibid., 392–3.

⁶⁰ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 96.

⁶¹ Ibid., 267.

⁶² Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of Nature*, 13.

⁶³ Ibid., 35.

purposes, Zakai turns to Edwards' discussion of historical miracle as the most significant and stark expression of that sovereignty: "God in some things in providence, has set aside the ordinary course of things in the material world to subserve to the purposes of the moral and spiritual, as in miracles."⁶⁴ The specific context of this comment on miracles is particularly important, and I will examine it shortly, but Zakai's general point about the need to reassert the importance of miracle in Edwards' view of the universe is very much in line with my thinking.

Zakai's argument is a useful corrective to the over-modernization of Edwards' thought. Nonetheless, it is perhaps only in combination with Miller's reading that we can see the particular power that the new philosophy has given to Edwards' vision of miracle, even as he disputes it. He cannot allow God to be barred from disrupting the causal chain whenever he sees fit, but he also emphasizes the limitations that God holds himself to in service of the preeminent moral structure of his plan of salvation. He will not use his power in a way that vitiates that plan, by confusing (as humans might), the excellence of means and ends. Yet humans also cannot pretend to understand the harmony of his creation so well as to fix limits on the expression of his power within it. Correlating the dual harmonies of the moral and natural worlds is not a simple task. Miracle, as a quintessential expression of sovereignty, is uniquely resistant to being anchored in any of the particular orders of human science, the moral, the natural, or the historical. Taken as a whole, Edwards' analysis of miracle presents a polysemous, occasionally contradictory and protean account of the place of divine power in the world. It is an account that is always aware of the inevitable fracturing created by human thought, the misrepresentation that creeps in when subordinate human orders are used to convey the absolute unity of the divine.

Perhaps understandably then, Edwards makes at least a temporary concession to that multiplicity. His major statements on miracle tend to focus on its individual aspects, without attempting to synthesize all the implications of the phenomenon (or even to standardize its definition). Another important framing of the question is found in no. 1263 of the "Miscellanies." This long entry contains what is perhaps Edwards' most sustained and probing analysis of the relation between divine action and natural law. He opens the several page discourse by reasserting God's independence from constraint. God's consent to the laws he has established is by no means permanent or conditional upon events in human history: "if he acted once, why must he needs and forever act no more?"⁶⁵ According to this account, God's actions can be separated into two kinds, the "arbitrary" and "that which is limited by fixed laws." Of these two, it is the arbitrary order that remains preeminent. According to Edwards, the universe and its laws originated at the moment of creation in God's entirely arbitrary pleasure, unconstrained by any preexisting laws: "Tis arbitrary operation that fixes, determines and limits the laws of natural operation."⁶⁶ This regression to the first cause is reminiscent of the logical

⁶⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Images of Divine Things," in *Typological Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 11 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 61. Quoted in Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of Nature*, 35-6.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," 1153-1360*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 23 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 201.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

structure of *Freedom of the Will*, and reminds us that for Edwards, this divine arbitrariness is precisely opposed to anything like contingency in the created world.

Indeed, perfect arbitrariness is essentially divine: “An operation is absolutely arbitrary when no use [is] made of any law of nature [and] no respect had to any one [su]ch fixed rule or method.”⁶⁷ Edwards allows, however, for certain mixed modes of partial arbitrariness, whereby the natural and the divine could mix. In essence, he is arguing for the existence of gradations of miracle, the idea that certain actions could be “nearer to arbitrary and miraculous than other divine operations.”⁶⁸ Even God himself was only perfectly arbitrary in that first moment, in the creation *ex nihilo*. All creation that followed, the shaping of the things of the world, was mixed with the operations of the laws he had established.⁶⁹ The arc of the universe will, he is careful to note, swing back to perfect arbitrariness at the end of time, when God will abolish his own laws in the final cataclysm. What stands in between these two points of unalloyed miracle, then, is a period of natural operation that is always intermixed with arbitrary power.

Norman Fiering, in his perceptive analysis of no. 1263 of the “Miscellanies,” remarks upon the essential symmetry in this particular Edwardsian vision of history: “One might conceive of Edwards’ history of the universe as a great parabola. From the middle of the curve one may ascend in either direction to the unique and singular actions of God.”⁷⁰ The essential consequence of this structure is that at no point does the presence of miracle in the world diminish to zero. We are always somewhere on a sliding scale. As Fiering puts it, this discourse is “ostensibly a defense of miracles, but the total effect of it is to diffuse the idea of miracle along a graded scale, as in Malebranche, so that one can speak in the end only of the more or less miraculous in a natural world that is one great miracle in all of its parts.”⁷¹ This stands in stark contrast to Perry Miller’s characterization of Edwards as essentially beyond the vulgar incoherence of miracle, espousing an immediate providence that need never conflict directly with natural law. Yet the overall effect may be somewhat similar, in that a faith in the diffuse omnipresence of miracle permits Edwards to create a new regularity out of the diversity of creation. According to Fiering: “Given the continuum from the arbitrary to the fixed, or from grace to nature, a wonderful harmony and symmetry is observable.”⁷² The smooth arc of divine history compensates for the potential disruption of miracle.

What we have here is not, however, a unified and final expression of Edwards’ understanding of the history of the universe. In his discussion of the intergrading of nature and arbitrary divine will, Edwards strategically allows one divine arc to take precedence, and Fiering, following him, sees the harmony that such a narrowing of the frame makes possible. There are, however, other historical arcs in Edwards, which must complicate the picture of miracle. The parabolic model of history excludes the most

⁶⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Importantly, an exception is made here for the creation of the souls of Adam and Eve, an action that Edwards feels compelled to allow to be entirely arbitrary. The divine refusal to be limited by history is total.

⁷⁰ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 101.

⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷² Ibid., 100.

consequential moral intervention in the universe: the incarnation of Christ. Edwards proceeds in the same text to explore how such monumental historical instances trouble the smoothness of the curve of divine arbitrariness that bends from alpha to omega. The natural creation finally makes possible another, greater work of arbitrary power, the foundation of the church. This “new creation” occurs, in Edwards’ account, in a punctuated series of miraculous seasons, in “which God appears in an extraordinary manner and operates by an arbitrary influence.”⁷³ The greatest of all of these were the miracles of Christ’s life and death, which were “infinitely greater effects than the creation of the world.”⁷⁴ This spike in arbitrary power, and the centrality of Christ in Edwards’ history of the universe, cannot be seen to conflict with divine harmony, but it must disturb the smoothness of the curve that Fiering isolates. If we allow Edwards’ physical model, the variable but harmonious mixture of arbitrary and naturally regulated divine action in the world, it’s hard to ignore the conflict with the restraint he places upon miracle in the framework of post-apostolic cessation. Fiering rightly describes the symmetry and heroic integrative scope in one facet of Edwards’ analysis of miracle, but this harmony cannot describe the whole range of Edwards’ positions. In Edwards’ merging of history, nature and divine will, there is a multiplying complexity that refuses to submit to any individual order. Edwards is, after all, trying to describe those actions that are the most entirely divine, and which are therefore the most free from the explanatory systems of human order.

It is precisely this effort to speak the order of pure divine action that makes miracle an attractive literary object for Edwards. Once we begin to realize how potent and complex the idea is, we can sense both the rhetorical force of miracle and how it fragments into multivalence and ineffability. Edwards’ distributed, decades-long project of accounting for miracle is a literary and psychological effort to activate the immense and overwhelming evidentiary force of the impression produced by miraculous events. At the same time, he tempers that force by emphasizing that God’s miraculous power does condescend to human understanding. The arbitrariness that defines God’s action is made predictable, in a sense, by its participation in the communicative project that advances the supremely important telos of salvation. God’s miraculous work consents to a kind of legibility because it has a pedagogical and rhetorical purpose, both in its application and its remission. This is a reflection, in part, of an old providential model, that of the pervasively signifying universe that is legible to faithful readers.

One of the essential ways in which Edwards explored the representational connections between sensation and spirit was via the typological tradition. In a manuscript series spanning decades and comprising hundreds of entries, Edwards collected observations on these “Images of Divine Things.” This allegorical mode of reading the world, Wallace Anderson argues, was a theological and literary inheritance that Edwards modified for his own purposes: “From these features of substance and language it is evident that Edwards devoted this series, not to the exercise of literary imagination alone, but to certain investigations of fact.”⁷⁵ This duality of purpose, with

⁷³ Edwards, *The “Miscellanies,” 1153-1360*, 209.

⁷⁴ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context*, 210–11.

⁷⁵ Wallace E. Anderson, introduction to *Typological Writings*, by Jonathan Edwards, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 11 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

its intertwining of method and objective, seems particularly relevant to the question of miracle, where both the status of the fact—the event itself, and its spiritual implications are so pressingly important.

At several points in the manuscript of “Images,” Edwards turns to the example of snakes that have the ability to charm their prey, luring them to their doom. The phenomenon of rattlesnake fascination was, as Herbert Leventhal has explained at length, a favorite natural curiosity in eighteenth-century America. Leventhal usefully situates the discourse relating to the phenomenon at the junction of natural history, emergent scientific paradigms, occultism, and the synthesis of Native American and settler traditions.⁷⁶ Edwards’ interest in this apparent deviation from the normal sequence of events has to do (as in all of the “Images”) with understanding the meaning of divine communication in the medium of the created world. More particularly, however, it gives him a concrete opportunity to explore the theory of partial arbitrariness, the graded mixture of natural causation and miracle:

God in some instances seems to have gone quite beside the ordinary laws of nature in order to it, particularly that in serpents' charming birds and squirrels and such animals. The material world, and all things pertaining to it, is by the Creator wholly subordinated to the spiritual and moral world. To show this, God, in some things in providence, has set aside the ordinary course of things in the material world to subserve to the purposes of the moral and spiritual, as in miracles. And to show that all things in heaven and earth, the whole universe, is wholly subservient, the greater parts of it as well as the smaller, God has once or twice interrupted the course of the greater wheels of the machine, as when the sun stood still in Joshua's time.⁷⁷

The drumbeat of Edwards’ logic here and elsewhere is hierarchy—the absolute subordination of the created world to the spiritual world. Thus one of the communicative functions of miracle is to demonstrate that subordination through unusual natural events. In the case of the snake it is also a means of enfolding the natural curiosity of the eighteenth-century colonial elite within the plan of salvation, exposing all knowledge to divine hermeneutics. The oddity of the snake is truly significant not as an American natural outlier. Rather its remarkableness is divinely arranged in proportion to the importance of the moral truth it has to teach. Edwards phrases the analogy more baldly in a subsequent entry: “the manner in which birds and squirrels that are charmed by serpents go into their mouths and are destroyed by them is a lively representation of the manner in which sinners under the gospel are very often charmed and destroyed by the devil.”⁷⁸

The long passage above is remarkable not so much for its objective, which is very much in line with the re-enthroning of theology as the queen of the sciences, as Avihu Zakai puts it.⁷⁹ What is more striking is Edwards’ effort to manage vast shifts in scale without collapsing the subtle degrees of divine action. The move to the example of Joshua and the sun standing still represents a huge change in register, launching the reader at once from the recurrent contemporary curiosity of snakes into the realm of

⁷⁶ Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*, 137–67.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Images of Divine Things,” 61.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁹ Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of Nature*, 13.

Scriptural history and the very greatest celestial works of power. In part, this serves to mortify human attachment to minor hierarchies like time and size, in favor of the grand hierarchy of spiritual preeminence. In that now familiar but always tense negotiation with the avowed principles of cessation, Edwards refuses to separate categorically Joshua's time from ours, or to make a radical distinction in the operations of God's power over the snake and the sun.

At the same time, it is vitally important to note that he does not directly label the charming snake a miracle. The snake's power, and the striking natural oddity it produces (i.e. the apparent reversal of expected order) are only associatively tied to miracle. God will occasionally "set aside the ordinary course of things in the material world... *as in miracle*" (italics mine). This final clause makes miracle an instance of divine abrogation of natural law, but it does not imply that all such setting aside is miraculous. At the same time, given the divine power invoked by the allusion to miracle, Edwards cannot simply subsume this event in a smooth and disinterested providentialism. The mixed style of his expression mirrors the blending of the natural and the arbitrary. This is more than just rhetorical sleight of hand. It is a delicate and allusive expressive strategy that draws on the most inexpressibly powerful works of the divine. Edwards' figuralism, which joins absolute arbitrary power to sensible detail, is the definitive literary feature of his writing on miracle. It is his response to the doubled need to exploit and contain the miraculous. Understanding this feature will allow us to see how he navigates the complexities of miracle in the fraught environment of religious revival.

6. On the Miraculous Apprehensibility of Grace

The nature of grace and its relation to sensible experience was a primary concern during the Great Awakening. It was in the context of this debate about grace that Edwards' convictions and questions about miracle took on their most consequential and urgent public form, in dialogue with the anti-enthusiastic writings discussed above (see section 1). It is in his seminal volume on religious psychology, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* that Edwards addresses the sensible nature of grace most directly. In the treatise's second section Edwards notes a tendency among his contemporaries to devalue the observable actions of divine power: "How greatly has the doctrine of the inward experience or sensible perceiving of the immediate power and operation of the Spirit of God, been reproached and ridiculed by many of late."⁸⁰ Edwards understands inward divine experience and sensibility as entirely consonant. In fact, he argues that it would be offensive to reason to profess the existence of a power beyond the natural which is required to produce Grace, and then to argue that the recipient can't feel it as such: "it is in no wise unreasonable to suppose that this effect should very frequently be produced after such a manner, as to make it very *manifest, apparent and sensible* that it is so" (*RA*, 138—italics mine). With his triple insistence on the sensory availability of grace, Edwards argues that the work of the Spirit cannot be segregated, at least terminologically, from the language of external sensation.

He does not pursue this rhetoric of sensation to the point of arguing that miracle and grace are identical. Yet if we take public sensory availability of the divine to be one of the markers of miracle, he is clearly moving in that direction, at least for the moment.

⁸⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 138 (hereafter cited in the text as *RA*).

As was the case with Cotton Mather's contemporary miracle stories, what Edwards defends here is the possibility that vertical, immediate communication with the divine is still possible, and continues to operate in the horizontal, networked space of the public sphere, as an object of rational understanding. Yet there is a point beyond which he cannot go. Pushed by his convictions away from the skepticism of cooler moderates, he is careful to stop short of radicalism. He allows that "to expect that the Spirit of God will savingly operate upon their minds, without the Spirit's making use of means, as subservient to the effect, is enthusiastical," but he refuses to disallow the preeminent power and the sensory availability of immediate divine causation (*RA*, 138). What he needs, I would argue, is an appropriate textual mode for encouraging faith in the sensory availability of the divine without appearing to countenance spiritual delusion.

This is where the figural deployment of miracle again presents itself as a useful (if somewhat treacherous) strategy. The ultimate foundation of this belief in observable grace, and the clearest expression of the principle behind it, lies in scriptural examples of God's greatest works of power. The link between miracle and grace in Edwards' system is analogical. He posits first that "grace in the soul, is so the effect of God's power, that it is fitly compared to those subjects, which are farthest from being owing to any strength in the subject, such as a generation, or a being begotten, and resurrection, or a being raised from the dead or a being brought out of nothing into being" (*RA* 139). The train of divine action slips again from providence into miracle. Generation is a plausibly natural, providential work of God, but resurrection is emphatically miraculous. As Edwards' note indicates, the biblical text that undergirds the passage is Ephesians 20: "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." Thus the central healing miracle of the Christian revelation, Christ's resurrection, becomes simultaneously the source, the warrant for and the type of the miraculous work of grace. It was a point that Edwards underscored in his "Miscellanies":

[A] resurrection must be God's own work and his only.... [W]hatever may be supposed of other miracles, of the possibility of their being performed by creatures, we know of this that it cannot. I can think of no other miracle whatever that would be so full an evidence and manifestation of the finger of God; it must therefore be a certain evidence of the truth of that that it is done in confirmation of.⁸¹

Here we see one of the major connections between the extreme evidentialist stance prevalent in the struggle against deism and the analogical effort to describe the operations of grace. Resurrection stands above the perceptual and epistemological problems that trouble apparent instances of miracle as divine evidence. Reasonable people could argue about the origin or the context of a remarkable healing, but a resurrection (so this argument goes) can only be a miracle—its divinity is self-evident. The only reasonable inference by a witness would be that the worker of the miracle was sent from God. This absolute certainty is linked to those periodic spikes in divine arbitrariness that Edwards identified as characteristic of Christian history in no. 1263 of the *Miscellanies*. Resurrection makes no concession to the processes of natural law—indeed it confounds them utterly. The same can be said of "being brought out of nothing into being"—the

⁸¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies," A-z, Aa-zz, 1-500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 394.

creation *ex nihilo* that is Edwards' archetypal act of arbitrariness. By linking grace, in its periodic and unconditional arbitrariness, with resurrection and original creation, he effectively yokes it to the most unalloyed forms of miracle.

While the direct equation of miracle with grace would seem "enthusiastical," the practice of analogy allows Edwards to retain its evidentiary force. Grace is "fitly compared" to the indubitable and fully visible finger of God. Analogy bleeds over into the physical. Edwards' list of the exemplary great works of power is dominated by the forms of miraculous incarnation. In the persistently human and social theological vision of the *Religious Affections*, (as in the New Testament) the substance of miracle primarily coheres around transformative corporeal experience. Inevitably, however, this brings us back to the central Edwardsian problem of the indeterminacy of physical signs. The human body and mind, the interconnected medium for producing the "manifest evidences" of grace, is a leaky and unreliable vessel.⁸² And so again the anxious revivalist's question: What if that which we name miraculous is merely a product of our deceptive imaginations?

In his direct treatments of the category of imagination, Edwards seems to make of it a threatening and vulgar force, made up of intense and delusive sensory data.

Here, for the sake of the common people, I will explain what is intended by impressions on the imagination, and imaginary ideas. The imagination is that power of the mind, whereby it can have a conception, or idea of things of an external or outward nature...when those things are not present, and be not perceived by the senses. (*RA*, 210-11)

The impression on the imagination is an exacerbation of this phenomenon: "when such kind of ideas are strongly impressed upon the mind, and the image of them is very lively, almost as if one saw them or heard them, etc. that is called an impression on the imagination" (*RA*, 211). Edwards disapproves of such experiences being used as spiritual warrants, and warns against thinking of imaginative sensory experience as a variety of authentic "spiritual discovery."

Most importantly for my purposes, it is not misperception itself that troubles Edwards most, but the failure of the interpretive faculty that should regulate such faulty perceptions. Those who misinterpret extraordinary sensation as divine power are collectively identified only by their tendency to be "of the common sort and weak of reason and body."⁸³ They wrongly take sensory confusion to be a sign of spiritual elevation, looking "upon it as sufficient evidence that these things are spiritual discoveries, and that they see them spiritually, because they say they don't see these things with their eyes, but in their hearts; for they can see them when their eyes are shut" (*RA*, 212). Edwards acknowledges that the stumbling block here is partly linguistic: "because

⁸² Shortly before this point Edwards offers the following summation of the mind-body link: "...such is our nature, and such are the laws of union of soul and body, that the mind can have no lively or vigorous exercise, without some effect upon the body. So subject is the body to the mind, and so much do its fluids, especially the animal spirits, attend the motions and exercises of the mind, that there can't be so much as an intense thought, without an effect upon them" (*RA*, 132).

⁸³ Furthermore, he tells us: "'tis known by abundant experience, that 'tis not the advancing or perfecting humane nature, which makes persons more capable of having such lively and strong imaginary ideas, but that on the contrary, the weakness of body and mind, and distempers of the body, makes persons abundantly more susceptible of such impressions" (*RA*, 213).

spiritual things being invisible, and not things that can be pointed forth with the finger, we are forced to use figurative expressions in speaking of them, and to borrow names from external and sensible objects to signify them by" (*RA*, 212). He blames an inability in some "common, and less considerate" believers to understand this practice. When such people hear analogical comparisons between spiritual and sensory phenomena, "they ignorantly look and wait for some such external discoveries" (*RA*, 213). Miracles, however, seem like a special case—they are nothing if not an external discovery. To mix Edwards' metaphors, not only can a miracle like resurrection be pointed out with a finger, it *is* the finger of God, both the indicator and the extension of divinity. As I have detailed above, Edwards had complex and carefully considered reasons for differentiating between scriptural and contemporary miracle, but the problem with comparing grace to miracle still applies. Miracle is too charged with physical, sensory potential to function as an innocuous metaphorical vehicle.

All this is to say that the physical sensibility of miracle operates in some tension with much of Edwards' project in the *Religious Affections*. The debased, even pathological nature of corporeally produced impressions is a recurrent theme: "Abundant experience does certainly show, that alterations in the body will excite imaginary or external ideas in the mind; as often, in case of high fever, melancholy, etc. These external ideas are as much below the more intellectual exercises of the soul, as the body is a less noble part of man than the soul" (*RA*, 216). What is needed is not these "animal senses" but "a new spiritual and divine sense." This persistent attachment to literal perception is such a problem that it drives Edwards to iconoclasm, comparing vivid imaginations of Christ to "the idea that the papists conceive of Christ, by the beautiful and affecting images of him which they see in their churches" (*RA*, 214). Such carnal imagery, and the emotional world it conjures, is ultimately and fatally linked to lying miracles, to those images which "through the craft of the priests, are made to move, and speak, and weep" (*RA*, 215).⁸⁴ Thus gaudy supposed miracle and over-literal interpretation are linked as two species of the same problem—Edwards rejects experiential literalism as blind stupidity.

At the same time, he has not quite managed to escape the earlier bind, the insistence that the experience of justification can be sensible—he won't argue for spiritual invisibility any more than he will for carnal vision. His evolution of a spiritual sensorium is a solution to this problem to a certain extent but, I would argue, not one that can satisfy completely. Miracle remains a vexed definitional problem, given the inevitable blending of the physical and the imaginative in his figural approach. Edwards imputes the negative consequences of the practice of analogy to the interpretive failure of others, but he will not discard it entirely.

Indeed, he persists in insinuating the existence of some miraculous essence in the work of grace, proceeding as before by means of an imbricated metaphorical vocabulary. In a later passage in *The Religious Affections*, he argues against immediate revelation via impression on the mind—God does not whisper in the believer's ear. The testimony of grace is "not only a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from whence a thing may be argued and proven to be true" (*RA*, 231). The only

⁸⁴ He recurs to this example later; his central references to contemporary miracle are used in service of an anti-Catholic polemic: "the lying miracles of the Papists, may for the present, beget in the minds of the ignorant deluded people, a strong persuasion of the truth of many things declared in the New Testament" (*RA*, 309).

fit comparison he can summon is to the evidence of miracle. In the New Testament, “God is said to bear witness with signs and wonders, and diverse miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost.” These miracles are not “of the nature of assertions, but evidences and proofs” (RA, 232). The influence of grace is finally more directly observable and persuasive than any mere impression on the mind. It is to be compared to nothing less than the miracles of Christ. Here Edwards, as befits his moderate evangelical stance, can argue for the miraculous evidentiary power of grace while holding firm against the Woolstonian excesses of all-consuming figuralism. Yet still such figures proliferate. Pressing on to describe the exact nature of God’s “evidences and proofs of grace,” his primary resource is metaphor: “When God sets his seal on a man’s heart by his Spirit, there is some holy stamp, some image impressed and left upon his heart by the Spirit, as a seal upon the wax” (RA, 232). The distinction is not between the false process of internal impression and some truer action, but in subtle Edwardsian fashion, between two versions of the process of printing, two forms of sensible, potentially divine internal action—a physical impression on the heart rather than on the mind. Instead of conducting us, as we might expect, from deceptive spectacle to abstraction, he loops back to a literalizing analogy, to the imaginary physicality of the royal seal. Edwards allows the spiritual implications of the Lockean impression to expand in metaphorical space, supplanting the forbidden impression with a sanctified alternative, another kind of certain evidence.

Miracle, then, sets up a particular tension between sign and sense is that is, for Edwards, a constitutional problem, a condition of mortality. In an earlier work on similar themes, he focused on the necessity, inevitability and even the pleasure of imaginative work in spiritual matters: “Such is our nature that we can’t think of things invisible, without a degree of imagination.”⁸⁵ Even those endowed with “the greatest powers of mind” are incapable of a non-imaginary contemplation of the divine. Thus we all recur to those minor human hierarchies, like history, nature and time, sorting indivisible divine action into imaginary categories. These categories, as the wise know, are heuristics, divine condescension to our limited faculties. The trouble with “those of less understanding” is narrative incontinence—an inability to parse and interpret their God-given imaginings and to give a seemly report of them: “they are apt to lay too much weight on the imaginary part, and are most ready to speak of that in the account they give” (RA, 236). Indeed, Edwards is willing, in this context, to defend as possibly licit even transporting visions of heaven. He will not, however, allow that they are “of the same nature with the visions of the prophets, or St. Paul’s rapture into paradise” (RA, 237). Again we find Edwards policing the boundary of miracle, prohibiting a slippage from imaginative work into a belief in the spiritual gift of prophecy and physical transport into paradise.⁸⁶ Yet he sympathizes, if only momentarily, with the pleasures of the unfettered spiritual imagination. It is no surprise if “believers should for a season be diverted, and so taken off from impressions made on the organs of external sense, and wholly employed in a train of pleasing delightful imaginations, such as the frame the mind is then in disposes

⁸⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks,” in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 236.

⁸⁶ Even Paul, we should note, gave a cautious but suggestive report of his own “rapture”: “I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth) such an one was caught up to the third heaven.” (2 Corinthians 12:4)

it to" (*RA*, 237). This is a glimpse not just of the raptures of the spirit, but of the associated and far-ranging pleasures of figuralism, where the ineffability of the *logos* strikes and sparks against the imagined objects of our physical world.

It is the very kind of moment that Sharon Cameron illuminates in her essay on Edwards' *True Virtue*. Moments like these, as Cameron indicates, are marked by intellectual and affective complexity, but also by a particular literary power. As she puts it: "What makes Edwards a great stylist with respect to moments that ventriloquize a mistaken position...is the way in which his representations underscore the overlapping of enticement and delusion."⁸⁷ I would argue that miracle, for Edwards, is always just such a source of enticement and delusion. It is a wellspring of much-desired physical evidence for supporting Christian doctrine and articulating individual faith, but also a delicate rhetorical puzzle, for the reasons I have outlined above. It is also, always, for Edwards, connected to that which he knows must be true about the divine, that the universe sprang from an unimaginable quintessence of arbitrary, miraculous power. Spirit once made matter, *ex nihilo*, and that power cannot be diminished, though it may be remitted. To reach toward that power with the mind is natural, even necessary, but to believe that we can define and delimit it with our categories is delusive. Cameron particularly emphasizes Edwards' dissatisfaction with our efforts to think of the spiritual in physical terms. We cannot manipulate or describe the appearance of spirit because "[s]piritual things have features, but not *physical* features, have textures, but not the texture of objects, have pervasiveness without substance."⁸⁸ And yet faith in miracle promises that spirit is always offering us its physical manifestations. It is the literary, the practice of figural representation, that offers Edwards his only resource for exploring this tempting and confounding problem, even if the work leads, inevitably, back to limitation and error.

⁸⁷ Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Abbreviations

I use the following abbreviations in the text for frequently cited works:

- AB*: Mather, Cotton. *The Angel of Bethesda*. Edited by Gordon W. Jones. Barre, MA: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972.
- RA*: Edwards, Jonathan. *Religious Affections*. Edited by John E. Smith. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959.
- WGW*: Whitefield, George. *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*. 7 vols. London: 1771.

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