Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" and C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*: Christian Spiritual Autobiographies Examined

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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May 1999

Expected graduation: May 1999
Jonathan Edwards was an 18th century American Puritan pastor, and he wrote a spiritual autobiography in essay form titled "Personal Narrative." C. S. Lewis was a 20th century British scholar and author, and his spiritual autobiography is a book, *Surprised by Joy*. Though these two men converted to Christianity in different ways and though they belonged to different denominations, their autobiographies and their lives still have remarkable similarities. In their works, both men emphasized that God drew them to Himself and that they did not find Him on their own. Also, both men were staunchly opposed to the prevailing world views of the societies they lived in. I also have written my own spiritual autobiography to examine the process of my relationship with God and to more fully understand the genre of the spiritual autobiography.
Elizabeth Fager

Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" and C.S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*: Christian Spiritual Autobiographies Examined

The Christian spiritual autobiography is a genre which combines biography and theology. These autobiographies may come in many forms, such as letters, essays, poems or books, and the first example of this genre is probably St. Paul's Biblical epistles. Jonathan Edwards was an 18th century Puritan preacher in America, and his spiritual autobiography, "Personal Narrative" is an essay, while C. S. Lewis, the 20th century Oxford and Cambridge scholar and author, made his Christian spiritual autobiography into a book, *Surprised by Joy*. Using different literary theories to closely examine these two texts can lead to a fuller understanding of the works and of the literary term "spiritual autobiography" than using only one theory would allow. Then by comparing the Christian conversions of these two men, who came from different denominations, occupations, countries and centuries, one can try to determine the theological significance of retelling one's own conversion.

Jonathan Edward's "Personal Narrative" was published in 1765, seven years after his death. Today it is read as the spiritual autobiography of this American Puritan preacher. Yet the work is different than many other pieces of Puritan literature because, unlike earlier Puritan writers such as Edward Taylor and William Bradford, Edwards was born in America. Also unlike many other Puritan preachers before him, Edwards was not considered an
unquestionable authority and leader of the community, but rather was actually dismissed by his own congregation. Therefore, his essay can be studied by reconstructing this historical context to try to understand why Edwards wrote each paragraph in the narrative. However, it can also be read in the manner of post structuralist theorists, who do not consider any historical context or authorial intent, but strive to deconstruct the actual words of the text. To gain the fullest understanding of "Personal Narrative," one could first deconstruct the work, then move on to an examination which considers the author and outside influences on the text.

The post-structuralist literary theorist Jacques Derrida taught that trying to imagine what the author actually meant, thought or did is impossible. In *Of Grammatology,* he wrote:

> Reading... cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it... or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place, outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general... There is nothing outside the text. ¹

Conforming to such a theory would necessarily eliminate the search for theological meaning in a spiritual autobiography, for deconstruction denies that language could be pointing to any transcendent being beyond words. According to Terry Eagleton, an Oxford literary theorist, those who believe in a God who transcends the text are implying that this entity "must itself be beyond that system, untainted by its play of linguistic differences. It cannot be implicated in the very languages which it attempts to order and anchor: it must be somehow anterior to these discourses, must have existed before they

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did."² Some would speak of spiritual autobiographies as pointing to God, who is a foundation and a first principle which exists before and beyond all else. Yet Eagleton says that a deconstructionist along the lines of Derrida’s Of Grammatology, post structuralism would be able to reveal that “... if you examine such first principles closely, you can see that they may always be deconstructed: they can be shown to be products of a particular system of meaning, rather than what props it up from the outside.”³ It is tempting to try to ascribe to "Personal Narrative" meanings which are not explicitly written, especially since the work is said to be autobiographical, and the text asks to be viewed in the context of Christianity. But in order to deconstruct “Personal Narrative,” such urges must be temporarily suspended.

One of the techniques of deconstruction is to show that words which initially would be considered opposites actually undermine each other and are not pure oppositions. In “Personal Narrative,” the binary opposites “seems to be” and “absolute” can be deconstructed in this manner. Many sentences in "Personal Narrative" are rendered weak by the word “seems.” Instead of saying, "I sought after a miserable manner," the text reads, "it seems to me I sought after a miserable manner."⁴ The qualifier "seems" makes one question if what follows "it seems to me" should be considered true or not, and the word "seems" is repeated many times in this manner in order to establish its function. Once the definitions of "seems" is established, the most deconstructable sentence of the essay is stated: "God's absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my

³ Ibid, 114.
mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of anything that I see with my eyes; at least it is so at times. 5 Here the word "absolute" means "certain," and throughout the work "absolute" is equated with God. "Seems" means "uncertain" and refers to a state of emotions. If it can seem that God has absolute sovereignty and justice, then either "absolute" is less than completely definite or "seems" can refer to something certain. Thus, these two terms which at first could to be opposites can be shown to be actually related, with each a part of the other. So while the narrative claims to be about a search for absolutes truth, this notion of the perfect and unassailable absolute is deconstructed within one sentence of the text.

Language is also shown to be elusive not only through certain specific words, but by the way that sentences, ideas, and the whole work are disunited. One way to see the disunity is by looking for confusing changes in verb tense. "Personal Narrative" is full of shifts in verb tense that distort the initial meaning. For example:

But yet it seems to me I sought after a miserable manner, which has made me sometimes since to question whether it ever issued from that which was saving, being ready to doubt, whether such miserable seeking was ever succeeded. 6

At first this sentence seems to say that the narrator now believes that the excessive piety of his youth was actually not even true Christianity. The statement of the problem with outward religiosity, "whether such miserable seeking ever succeeded," could be linked to any of the previous tenses. When exactly is the doubt? The doubt could be in the present tense, "it seems to me," or only in the past tense, when he "sought after a miserable manner."

5 Ibid., 443.
6 Ibid., 442.
Perhaps the clause "whether such miserable seeking ever succeeded" is linked to the past participle "has doubted." If the narrator doubted in the past tense, as he was actively seeking after external expression of religion, then he was humble at the time and perhaps even at that time was saved. Yet since he "has . . . sometimes since to doubt," then it is not clear whether he doubts now or not. In such a way, one can decide that this sentence has no definite meaning. Doubt was present at some point, but it is impossible to know when, and without knowing the time of the doubt, no transcendent truths can be inferred from the text.

Another example of verb tense betraying any definite meaning is in a sentence about suddenly being convinced of the sovereignty of God:

But never could give an account how or by what I was thus convinced; not in the least imagining, in the time of it nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my mind apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it.\(^7\)

If the narrator never could give an account of how he decided, then he must not be giving one now. Yet he does mention an influence of God's spirit and of "now that I saw further," both which could be read as the very account that the sentence said could never be given. The "now" is also confusing in the sentence because it refers to past tense, not present tense: "now that I saw further." As with the verb "doubt," "saw" is floating somewhere in time. The language of "Personal Narrative" is also betrayed when statements contradict other statements. Some sentences are contradictory within themselves, such as, "But it never came into my thought that there was anything spiritual or of

\(^7\) Ibid., 443.
a saving nature in this." If it never came into thought, how is it written? Again, if deconstructing this text, the verb tense problems show that one cannot claim that the work teaches any universally applicable truths.

Though some sentences are contradictory within themselves, others can be compared to later parts of the text for deconstruction. In the latter part, "child" signifies a desirable state. "My heart, as it were, panted after this to be low before God... that I might be nothing, and God might be all, that I might become as a little child." Also, "I very often think with sweetness and longings and pantings of soul, of being a little child, taking hold of Christ... ." To be a child here is to have spiritual understanding. Yet when the narrator speaks of his own childhood, it is described as graceless, "And I am ready to think, many are deceived with such affections and such a kind of delight, as I had in religion, and mistake it for grace." and as superficial, "those former delights never reached the heart." Surely this type of child is not the one that the narrator dreams of becoming. so within this text, the meaning of the word "child" depends on the words around it.

Deconstructing "Personal Narrative" is fascinating because it reveals just how ambiguous and floating is the language of this text. In his textbook *Beginning Theory*, Professor of English at London University Peter Barry explains the work of deconstructionists: "They seek to show that the text is characterized by disunity rather than unity. They concentrate on a single passage and analyze it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a univocal reading and that language explodes into multiplicities of

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 448
10 Ibid., 449.
11 ibid, 442.
12 Ibid, 443.
meaning." Such a technique is profitable because it reveals that many times in "Personal Narrative" that which at first seems to have a single, easily understood meaning could actually have several meanings and that the reader does not have to ascribe to Calvinist Christian beliefs or even belief in God in order to closely examine the text.

Yet one can also learn about "Personal Narrative" by completely defying the post structuralist restrictions on applying outside sources and reading overall meanings into the text. Much historical information exists about the Puritans of this time, and by attempting to reconstruct Edwards's surroundings and frame of mind one can better understand the many outside influences on "Personal Narrative."

That Edward's spiritual autobiography would primarily be about how he became a Christian is perfectly logical. Edwards was a Puritan minister, and as a Puritan, Edwards necessarily would have been concerned and even obsessed with whether or not he was a true Christian. "For a Puritan, conversion -- the reception of saving grace and faith -- was the single most important event in one's life. Without it life was meaningless. Generally, however, conversion was understood...to be available only to those God had so predestined or elected." But Edwards was even more concerned with conversion than other Puritans because had inherited the pastoral position of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard and had to deal with changes Stoddard had made in the church. Stoddard was a very popular pastor, known as Pope of the Connecticut Valley, and he had permitted Puritans to obtain church membership and the sacrament of communion as long as one's parents were

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members of the church. Edwards, however, insisted on enforcing the older
Puritan doctrine that anyone taking communion first should have made a
convincing profession of faith. To take communion from Edwards, Puritans
had to convince him that they were converted and were trying to live as holy
a life as possible. Edwards was not just concerned about conversion, he was
preoccupied, much more so than his congregation, and they dismissed him
for it. As a Puritan minister who placed an extreme importance on the
conversion experience, what else would his autobiography be about, than the
experiences involved in his own conversion?

If one reconstructs a typical Puritan's opinion of language, it could
cause one to suspect that the contradiction of words, the shifts in verb tense,
and the fragmented tone of "Personal Narrative" could be intentional. To
Puritans, life revolved around God, and the physical world was only
important for what it could reveal about God and the spiritual part of life.
The written word was no exception. Puritans commonly kept journals of
their spiritual lives to reveal their growth. "The true meaning of these words
does not necessarily correspond to the glitter of their surfaces but tends to lie
buried in their deeper strata, in levels beyond the writers' control and
comprehension." Edward's "Personal Narrative" is an example of this type
of spiritual diary. As a Puritan, Edwards would have believed that what he
wrote could give insight into his soul, but he did not want to look for too
much significance in his writing. "Ultimately language communicates only a
reflection of the spiritual influences upon the soul. In the 'Personal
Narrative,' consequently, he frequently speaks of the limit language . . . .
Language cannot finally cope with God's sovereign and mysterious

15 Ibid, 60.
providence . . . ."16 In his "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections," Edwards dealt specifically with religious language. He warned against preachers who believe that their words can bring others to understand God and to convert:

...language, though inseparable form the heart, is neither the means of regeneration nor the adequate testimony of it . . . . We see therefore, that even though language excited experience and transmits doctrine, there must be some words and all their rhetorical potential does not cause the reader to behold the truth.17

Edwards did not trust words, and he did not want others to place too much importance on them either, for they cannot replace a true communication with God, nor can they describe God. This attitude also explains Edwards's use of the word "seems" since he wanted it to be clear that his words could potentially be in error and should not be taken too seriously.

Edwards use of language also makes more sense if one considers the type of Christian Edwards was not. He was Calvinist, not Arminian or charismatic. These two other types of Christians were becoming more common all around Edwards, and he directly opposed them.

In the Protestant faith, Arminians can be considered the opposite of Calvinists. Calvinists believe that man is so depraved that he can do absolutely nothing to save himself and turn himself toward God; God graciously forgives a man and saves him and then the man converts to Christianity. However, Arminians believe that God has given man a free will to choose to follow God or not to follow God. Once a person chooses God, then God sends his grace upon that person, forgives him for his sins, and has

16 Ibid.
a relationship with him. To Edwards, this doctrine of free will was obviously wrong, for it implied that man was good enough and wise enough to choose God on his own. He wrote specific sermons against the Arminians, such as "Justification by Faith Alone." Since Edwards was so concerned with the Arminian doctrine of conversion, he would have had it in mind as he wrote his own conversion story, and he would have tried to show somehow that it was God converting him, and that he was not converting himself. "Personal Narrative" has to be the story of the Holy Spirit working in Edward's heart rather than of Edwards working. But how would Edwards convey these supernatural events through the language of mortal men?

Edwards did not know exactly how or when his conversion happened, so his verb tenses are shifty. Thus he says, "but I never could give an account how or by what means I as thus convinced, not in the least imagining, in the time of it nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it."\(^{18}\) He never could give an account of the process through which he was convinced, and what he writes here is not the explanation of a process, but only a statement that it happened. Therefore he uses a confusing tense. He did not imagine "in the time of it nor a long time after" that it was the Holy Spirit who satisfied him, "but only that now I saw further." Somewhere in the past, he was satisfied. If Edwards had used a straightforward past tense to tell of how he suddenly became convinced, that would imply that he understood how and precisely when God worked in him. Edwards must have thought that one day he might not be so definitely satisfied, so he does not say "now I see," for that would portray confidence. Edwards knew how Arminians thought of their conversion, and he wanted

\(^{18}\) Edwards, "442."
his conversion story to clearly be that of a Calvinist. So he made sure to convey that he believed that he could not know the mind of God and that without God’s grace he was depraved and incapable of even turning to God. Later in "Personal Narrative," he says, “My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way, and the innumerable and bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit that there was in my heart.”

Determined to portray this Calvinist theology, Edwards wrote to reveal his sinful nature and his inability to do anything good without God.

If, according to Edwards, Arminians took too much pride in their ability to choose to convert, then the charismatics (the radical wing of the New Lights, as Edwards knew them) took too much pride in their emotions. This charismatic branch of Christians emerged during the great Awakening in New England. In Religious Affections, Edwards called them hypocrites because they believed that strong emotions and flamboyant actions during a service proved they were converted. Edwards did not want his conversion story to rely on emotions for evidence. When writing of his childhood passion for religion and prayer, he said he was “deceived with such affections and such a kind of delight.”

This is another explanation of the frequent use of the word “seems” since Edwards wanted to draw a distinction between what one’s emotions say and what is truth. Near the end of his autobiography, Edwards again reminds himself and the reader that there is a difference between strong emotions about religion and the more appropriate Calvinist appreciation of God’s sovereignty:

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19 Ibid. 445.
20 Ibid. 442.
Though it seems to me that in some respects I was a far better Christian for two or three years after my first conversion than I am now, and lived in a more constant delight and pleasure, yet of late years I have had a more full and constant sense of the absolute sovereignty of God and a delight in that sovereignty, and have had more of a sense of the glory of Christ as a mediator as revealed in the Gospel. 21

Edwards obviously wanted to draw a line between Calvinist doctrine and the beliefs that led the charismatics to depend so much on their outward emotional displays of religious feeling.

Edwards was a conservative Puritan pastor who was known for wanting to stick to the old doctrines and old ways even when the entire congregation disagreed. He was a Calvinist and thought that everyone should accept this theology; he would not tolerate the Arminians or the charismatics who emphasized doctrines or practices which he found unbiblical. Therefore, he wrote his conversion story to prove that the Calvinist teachings which he preached were valid. According to critic Daniel B. Shea Jr., “By narrative example [Jonathan Edwards] will teach what is false and what is true in religious experience, giving another form to the argument he carried on elsewhere; and he hopes to affect his readers by both the context and the presentation of his exemplary experience.” 22 The conclusion of a reading which looks at historical context and supposed authorial intent is that Jonathan Edwards would have been trying to teach a specific Calvinist lesson through his spiritual autobiography.

21 Ibid, 459.
Deconstruction of "Personal Narrative" is extreme in the way it refuses to consider any biographical or historical information, but only looks for meaning within the text. A reading which attempts to reconstruct Edward's frame of mind is also extreme for it presents things as fact which are only conjecture and places more emphasis on books about Edwards and Puritans than on the actual message of the text, without getting deep into the text itself. In looking for the theological significance of any text, the most beneficial reading of any text must then be between these two extremes. Deconstruction and historical context also can be used to examine Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*, in order to come to a balanced conclusion about Lewis's work and then to draw more general conclusions about both works.

Throughout his work, Taylor used long sentences with confusing changes in verb tenses and an abundance of adjectives, such as:

The soul of a true Christian, as I then wrote my meditations, appeared like such a little white flower as we see in the spring of the year, low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom, to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory, rejoicing, as it were, in a calm rapture, diffusing around a sweet fragrance, standing peacefully and lovingly in the midst of other flowers round about, all in like manner opening their bosoms, to drink in the light of the sun.23

A sentence like this makes it easy for a literary critic to say that language fails to express anything, and that perhaps there is nothing outside of language after all. Yet Lewis is precise, with tight, logical sentences, making *Surprised by Joy* much more difficult to deconstruct than "Personal Narrative." Lewis writes, "In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night the most dejected and reluctant

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23 Edwards, "Personal Narrative," 446.
convert in all England." The reader knows exactly what was prayed and when. By mentioning an approximate date, the reader feels as though the words on the page are describing a definite reality outside of the book. The descriptive phrase "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" is very extreme and perhaps exaggerated, yet somehow tangible and easy to get one's mind around, yet it is short and precise, and therefore does not have as much opportunity for the contradiction necessary to deconstruction.

Parts of *Surprised by Joy* can be deconstructed, though the process may not be as easy as deconstructing "Personal Narrative." *Surprised by Joy* does not perpetually say, "it seemed to be" before all descriptions, but it does acknowledge that words do not match up neatly with anything outside of the text. One example is the sentence, "It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's "enormous bliss" of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to "enormous") comes somewhere near it." Words are not strong enough for the sensation, yet the sensation can only be communicated through words, so how is the reader to know that there really is a sensation outside the realm of what can be described in words? The narrator tries to find a word to describe the nonverbal sense, and as he does he points out that what a word once meant, it may no longer mean. Bringing up ancient meanings and connotations of words then makes one wonder if all words have other, older meanings. If the narrator knows some ancient Miltonian meaning for "enormous," there are probably other unknown meanings. Perhaps there is no way to know what the narrator really means, if the reader is not familiar with all the possible meanings, ancient and new, of all the words used in *Surprised by Joy*.

25 Ibid., 19.
The narrator again uses words in a seemingly contradictory way as he says, "... I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote) ..."\(^{26}\) For something that can never be described, the narrator uses several very precise adjectives. What are those words doing, if not describing that which cannot be described? Also, the action in this sentence is confusing, and no precise meaning can be discerned. "Instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity... and then... found myself at the very same moment already falling out of the desire and wishing I were back in it." Does the narrator mean that first he was in the sky and then, at some later point was simultaneously falling out and wishing he were back in? At first read, the text indicates that all the events described in the sentence happened at the same time. Yet all these events-- the uplifting, desiring, falling, wishing he were back -- are certainly not understood simultaneously by the reader because they must be read one at a time, in an order.

Yet the elusiveness of the time flow of this passage, and the ironic use of words to say that words do not work, makes sense when one considers Lewis's idea of joy and spirituality. To him, joy was something that pointed to God. "Lewis reasoned that a desire for something that cannot be satisfied by any earthly object is an indication, indeed, almost a proof, that we are born with the desire for something over or beyond what this world can give" (Hyatt 306). Lewis describes joy as "enormous bliss" and the "desire that could not be described except as cold, spacious, etc." but makes sure that the readers knows these terms do not really encompass the feeling. Lewis wanted the reader to understand that joy was spiritual and from God. Sentences

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 20.
describing joy cannot be as precise, definite and straight-forward as all of Lewis's writing typically is, for Lewis wants the reader to understand that these experiences are beyond understanding, beyond worldliness, and therefore beyond words. These experiences led Lewis to his conversion. They led the intellectual Lewis to see that God is beyond human intellect, and is a contradiction to man's prideful sense of balance: "the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion our liberation. . . ." 27

This is purposefully contradictory, for Lewis is showing how he, a scholar who loved his own mind, ended up becoming a Christian, seemingly against his own will. Also, the last part of the book, the climax, where Lewis has finally become a Christian, indeed the point of the whole book, is the least detailed and definite, for words and chronological details are not so important once Lewis has submitted himself to God. "I speak of this last transition less certainly than of any which went before it, and it may be that in the preceding paragraph I have mixed thoughts that came later." 28 Lewis wants the reader to realize that the text is not the ultimate reality, but God is, and that his own writing is not so important as his relationship with God.

Although deconstruction perhaps unnecessarily throws out some helpful factual details as it tries to purify literary criticism, having the deconstructing frame of mind does remind one not to take the spiritual autobiography too seriously. Simply because Edwards or Lewis wrote something does not mean it absolutely happened that way because the physical fact may have been sacrificed for the spiritual point. The author has a motivation for writing a certain way. Edward's motivation was probably to be an example of a Calvinist conversion, whether he was truly converted that

27 Ibid, 183.
28 Ibid, 189.
way or not. Lewis too must have had reasons for portraying events in a certain light. To find what Lewis was trying to prove in Surprised by Joy, one must first examine his life and his other writings.

This conversion account contains a remarkable number of references to books and authors, which could seem to indicate that literature ought to play an important part in all Christian conversions. Yet such occurrences make sense in the context of Lewis's life. One of the benefits of Lewis's spiritual autobiography being in book form is that the 190 pages of Surprised by Joy give Lewis more of a chance to explain his childhood than Edwards had to explain his. The reader does not necessarily have to research other books to see that Lewis was raised to be an intellect. Edward's father directed Edward's education; Lewis's father directed his. Though Mr. Lewis did not always plan for Clive to be an Oxford don, he did try to ensure that his sons took all the steps to make them eligible for university. As soon as Lewis began preparatory school at the age of 13, his teachers started to see him as candidate for a college scholarship. Lewis's family's involvement in his education was not nearly so influential as Edward's prodding toward being a pastor, but still it guide him to the path of academia. Also, Lewis was not directed toward any specific religion; his father was a Christian but sent both his sons to live with and be educated by an atheist named Kirkpatrick, as described in chapter nine of Surprised by Joy.

Lewis was an atheist by the time he went to study with Kirkpatrick, and living with this man, hugely intelligent and rational, encouraged Lewis to think that the only appropriate position for a thinker and a scholar was that no God existed. Lewis writes, "what I got there was merely fresh ammunition

\[29\] Ibid, 51.
for the defence of a position already chosen."³⁰ Growing up, Lewis always read the "great books" and wrote complex stories for recreation, and at Kirkpatrick's he learned to read other languages. A humble description of his schoolwork shows that Lewis was a brilliant student: "Kirk did not, of course, make me read nothing but Homer. The Two Great Bores (Demosthenes and Cicero) could not be avoided. There were (Oh glory!) Lucretius, catullus, Tacitus, Herodotus. There was Virgil, for whom I still had no true taste. There were Greek and Latin compositions . . . . In the evenings there was French with Mrs. Kirkpatrick, treated much as her husband treated Homer. "³¹ By the time he was an adult, Lewis certainly was ready for his career as an expert in literature. Though deconstruction would not really consider the author, Lewis's conversion is obviously one of a scholarly atheist to a scholarly Christian, and his conversion story will be colored as such. Knowing that a child named Lewis actually had such experiences and later became a famous twentieth-century mind helps one to understand the contents of this book and to know why books played such an important part in Lewis's conversion. As he neared Christianity, Lewis realized that all the best authors dealt with either religion or Christianity: "All the books were beginning to turn against me. Indeed, I must have been as blind as a bat not to have seen, long before, the ludicrous contradiction between my theory of life and my actual experiences as a reader. George MacDonald had done more to me than any other writer; of course it was a pity he had that bee in his bonnet about Christianity ."³² Lewis was deeply affected by the Christian authors he read,

³⁰ Ibid, 114.
³¹ Ibid., 117.
³² Ibid, 171.
not because that is the best way to come to Christianity, but because books were always a big part of his life. Just as studying the New England around Jonathan Edwards sheds light on the account of his own conversion, studying England of Lewis's day will reveal some of Lewis's motivation for including certain details in his conversion. Edwards definitely saw himself as an anomaly in his society, as a bastion standing firm against the popular beliefs around him. Lewis probably felt a similar individualism, a fighting against popular culture. The radio broadcast talks began in 1941 and later complied into the book *Mere Christianity* are an example of Lewis's stance against the common attitudes of the age. George Sayer had studied under Lewis at Oxford and is described as "... Lewis's former pupil, friend for nearly thirty years, hiking companion, fellow teacher of literature, and the best biographer of Lewis to date..." Sayer's biography of Lewis, *Jack*, he explains that Lewis (Jack) realized that he had beliefs contrary to most of his society: "Jack detested the radio, as later on he would detest television, but because he realized that through radio he would be able to reach people who would never think of reading his books, he accepted. He told Welch that he wanted to talk about the law of nature, or objective right ad wrong, because in modern England the New Testament's assumption that people believed in natural law and knew that they had disobeyed it was no longer accurate. The first step therefore, was to help people recover a sense of guilt." Though not at ease with the most modern modes of communication, Lewis still would use what he could to prepare

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souls for salvation, especially since those souls neither knew they needed saving nor believed in absolute truth.

Proving that belief in absolute truth was still valid in the age of modernism was a common theme for Lewis. Sayer also writes of Lewis's influence at Oxford University in his role as president of the Oxford Socratic Club, which was created to discuss religion intellectually. At the beginning of each meeting either a Christian or a non-Christian would read a paper, and a speaker of the opposing view would reply. Lewis used the Socratic Club as an opportunity to defend Christianity logically and to attack any logical fallacies in the anti-Christianity papers and speakers. Sayer writes:

"[t]he policy of counterattack adopted by Lewis at these meetings and on many other occasions (but never in his tutorials) was something new in twentieth-century Oxford. For many years, Christians had been passively on the defensive. You might encounter a man frequently without ever knowing that he was a Christian. It was unlikely that in ordinary conversation he would uphold Christian principles and almost unheard of that he would make a vigorous, logical attack on nonbelievers from a Christian standpoint. Skepticism, tolerance, and even indifference were commonly thought to be the proper attitude toward Christianity. But for the time Lewis changed all that."35

In his position in the Socratic club, Lewis acted on his belief that Christianity had the ultimate, absolute truth and that one ought to encourage others to find this truth as well. Lewis employed the same strategy in his writing, including *Surprised by Joy*. In detailing his own search for happiness and his conclusion with Christianity, Lewis is showing others that searching is valid. In explaining how he came to see that atheism could not possibly be right, he

is showing that some worldviews are definitely wrong and ought to be revealed as wrong. According to Angus J. L. Menuge, who cites Lewis's "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," "For those familiar with Lewis's works, it should hardly need arguing that evangelism is a theme of central significance. Indeed, Lewis himself said that [m]ost of my books are evangelistic, addressed to *tous exo* [those outside]."\(^{36}\) Lewis knew that defending the idea of truth was important in evangelism because he knew the society around him.

The world around Lewis, specifically in the prestigious universities of Oxford and Cambridge, was anti-spiritual, anti-religion, and obsessed with science. The most influential movement in art, literature and scholarly thought during Lewis's life was modernism. Modernism took into account the rapid rise of industry and advances in medicine and science at the beginning of the century, added in the mass destruction of World War I and later World War II, and asserted that reality was up to the individual's perception and that if there were truth, only science could find it. "Lewis believed his neighbors were infected with materialism, this disease that denies the reality of all metaphysical, supernatural concepts."\(^{37}\) Therefore, he would certainly try to demonstrate through his conversion that this is not the case. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says that he once believed that only science could possibly be true, even though at the time he loved the idea of spirituality: "Such then, was my position: to care for almost nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot and the Grail, and to

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believe in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service."  Finally, in the last two chapters, Lewis converts first to theism, then to Christianity. He mentions a desire for something unearthly (he calls the desire "Joy"), a study of philosophy and a book by Christian author G. K. Chesterton all as helping him to finally decide to believe in God.

Yet Lewis must put a disclaimer on the idea of only using the mind to arrive at Christianity, for this is not the point at all. He says he doesn't remember so much about the state of his own emotions and the exact sequence of events. Though careful to prove that a thinking, intelligent, widely-read person in the modern age still could believe in Christianity, he did not want to over-emphasize the role of the mind in a conversion. He wanted those reading his autobiography to find Truth, so he writes about how such a search should not be directed inward toward one's own emotions, but out of one's self, toward an outer truth. Modernism increasingly taught Lewis's age that reality is what one's mind will make of it. Thus he writes, "One of the first results of my Theistic conversion was a marked decrease (and high time, as all readers of this book will agree) in the fussy attentiveness which I had so long paid to the progress of my own opinions and the states of my own mind . . . . To begin and to pray were the beginning of extroversion. I had been, as they say, 'taken out of myself.'"

Lewis would want the reader to see that, though the modern mind could be used to lead one to God, God is not within one's own mind, and in fact would direct Christians away from obsessing about the states of their intellects. God must be beyond that, for minds may change, but God does not.

38 Lewis, C. S. Surprised by Joy, 140.
39 Ibid, 186.
Also, Lewis would not have wanted to imply that he figured out about Christianity by himself and then decided to be a Christian. Lewis was an Anglican, and as such would have ascribed to the doctrine described in the Articles of Religion in The Book of Common Prayer. Article X, titled "Of Free Will" clearly states that one does not cause oneself to be a Christian: "The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God: Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will. . . ."40 Lewis's description of his conversion certainly fits this Anglican definition of coming to God. He says he did not turn himself to God but was drawn by God: "And so the great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue."41 He also indicates that his own strength and his own will had nothing to do with his conversion, but that God conquered Lewis's will: "Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves."42 In these ways, Lewis's theology and his conversion story are very similar to Edwards's. Edwards and Lewis came from and held to beliefs of different Christian denominations, and their two spiritual autobiographies recount very different conversions. Yet both explicitly state that God did the converting, and they simply submitted to Him without completely understanding how or why. At this crucial point in each autobiography, the authors are in agreement about the sovereignty of God and the necessity of submitting to Him.

41 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 169.
42 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 173.
The other important element present in both of these autobiographies is the idea that the author was writing as a true Christian opposed to worldly aims. To understand Lewis's and Edwards's autobiographies, one must consider the author's role as an anomaly. Lewis would forever be pitting himself against the materialistic world, showing that it was valid to be spiritual and Christian and to believe in absolute truth. As he wrote about his conversion, he would want readers to see that he too lived in a materialistic, hedonistic world, but was able to maintain his reason and intellect while also embracing faith and spirituality. He wanted to show that not all intelligent people have to depend only on science and the senses, and his writing in *Surprised by Joy* shows all this in its last few chapters. Similarly, Edwards wrote slyly, to show readers that only strict Calvinism was the right doctrine, even though new Arminians and New Lights were becoming more influential in the community and the Puritans were wanting more flexible church laws. Lewis wrote to show that Christianity was superior to both mere intellectualism and to materialism.

The literary term "spiritual autobiography" must refer to an introspective piece of literature, which takes outside influences and closely examines how they helped lead one to submit his own will to God. That's what I am going to attempt to do in the following section of this paper.

My parents have always gone to church, and so have I, without any choice in the matter while I lived under their roof. My parents did not encourage me to any occupational end, but they always encouraged me to be a Christian in every sense of the word: to go to church, to pray, read the Bible, do God's will, even be a missionary to Africa, if that is what God wanted.

I grew up going to a little Baptist church in the country near my house. I love thinking about that little church, how typical it was for a rural Baptist
church, with its old ladies, guilt-trip sermons, visiting gospel singers, and all-church pot luck dinners. I hate to feel that I am too good for this church now, and I remind myself that I am not. Such an attitude of superiority is sinful, for the Bible clearly states that humility ought to be the goal of all Christians. Romans 12:3 reads: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..." and Philippians 2:3 commands: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." Therefore, in any account of my conversion to Christianity, I must be careful not to sound prideful in regards to any institutions or people I have known but grown away from. The Christianity I believed in while attending this little church is far different from the Christianity I believe today, but this is because as a child I had a childish understanding of the Christian faith, and also because I'm not sure that I had even really submitted to God until recently.

I question my submission to God because in my younger days, I saw "being saved" as important primarily because it meant I didn't have to go to hell. I knew it was important to obey God, mainly because I didn't want to make Him mad and therefore invoke judgment on myself. Church was not a worshipful time then, but rather one that made me feel guilty for not doing enough for God -- not being good enough and not evangelizing enough. This was a self-centered Christianity, because my prime motivation for being this type of a Christian was to be a good person, just for my own conscious and my awards in the afterlife. I always believed that Christ was the only way to heaven, but mainly I just wanted to keep myself safe. I did want to do good; I wanted to earn a good spot with God.

In high school, I continued to go to church. I often had a nagging inside to read the Bible and pray more, but I easily convinced myself that I
had not the time. I was busy pursuing straight As or and being a perfect person in as many ways as possible within my own strength. Many times I was worn out, irritable and didn't act kindly to my friends or family when I didn't live up to my own goals. It now seems that this frustration ought to have made me seek God for fulfillment, but no such answer to my problems ever really entered my mind at that point.

This strive to earn and achieve and perfect lead me, at certain times, to become very "religious." I made different vows of purity, such as to never allow hateful thoughts or to eliminate all profanity from my lips and mind. I would set goals for learning scripture or reading through the Bible. I would pray alone in my room at night with candles lit and a small statue of the crucifix in front of me to keep my mind from wandering. Yet these were always only my ideas, because I always stopped short of asking God what He wanted me to do and waiting for an answer. I believe I had essentially the same experience as Edwards had in his childhood, as described in "Personal Narrative": "My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved, and I seemed to be in my element when engaged in religious duties. And I am ready to think, many are deceived with such affections, and such a kind of delight as I then had in religion, and mistake it for grace" (Edwards 27). I did enjoy my religious pursuits in those spurts, but they always were focused on myself and my own growth than focused outward, toward God. I may have been one of those people who Edwards speak of as mistaking affections for true grace.

Toward the end of high school, our church was shrinking and I was far more interested in graduation and choosing a college than in learning about God. Soon I moved in to the dorms at Ball State and my family began going to a new church at the same time. This new church is actually very Puritan in
many ways, for it is Reformed, which essentially means Calvinist. In other words, the doctrine states that nothing we do earns our salvation, but God is just so gracious and merciful to us that He wants to have a relationship with us. His grace saves us, not our words or even actions. We're supposed to do all that the Bible says, but because it pleases our God, not because we are trying to earn something. Basically our goal one earth is to please God by doing what He wants.

When I first heard how much grace and not human decision or works was emphasized by the Calvinist preacher, I thought that surely it must be wrong. If only God converts us and nothing we decide or do ourselves converts us, then why should we even talk about Christianity to others? It seemed to go against Christ's teachings about telling all the nations about God, because God would just teach others what He wanted them to know. And if nothing humans do brings us our salvation, this seemed to be just an excuse to be able a sinful life but still say, "God is doing all the work. He'll forgive me. I don't earn anything, anyway." The teachings at the new church definitely had a different focus than the teachings at the new church. Somehow this confusion resulted in my considering leaving Christianity altogether. At that time it seemed to me that if God was what the Bible said He was, He ought to be able to reveal Himself to his people. There shouldn't be such a seemingly vast difference between two churches, both even conservative as far as churches go. Secondly, in my pride, I could not come to terms with the way so many Christians seemed, in my own eyes and as portrayed in the media, to be so much more foolish and misinformed than everyone else. I was just generally annoyed at my religion. Thirdly, I began to figure that I probably only believed in Christianity in the first place because my parents did. Suddenly was just not convinced that the Bible was true or
that God was necessarily real. It seemed so much more likely that God was something a scared, lonely and ignorant people made up in order to make themselves feel as though life had meaning. I didn't want to try to figure out if there really was proof for the resurrection of Christ, the historicity of the Bible or the existence of God. Instead, I wanted to change a semi-blind belief in God for a completely blind belief that God did not exist.

Yet I sometimes still went to church and listened to what went on, mostly because it was fun for me to sit through a service and be cynical and to feel happy that I was not chained to such a belief. Through this church I began to see that, if I were to have a Christian faith, it needed to be God-centered. I should be living life to help God in His work and to please Him most, rather than just to ease my mind or to earn a place in heaven.

At the same time as my head was learning these things, something in my heart was telling me that I had never really submitted to God in the same way that other true Christians had. This became the crucial point, the point of submission read about in "Personal Narrative" and Surprised by Joy. I never truly had opened myself up to Him; I had never completely agreed that He was in charge of my life no matter what. Since I had not done this, I had not really experienced Christianity, so I had no reason yet to really disregard it. I had always been holding back in case I figured out something better or easier, or in case God wanted me to do something beneath my over-achieving standards, or beyond what my shy personality felt comfortable with. But finally I decided that, whatever the cost, I was going to try to live for God every day, that I was going to talk to Him and read His word, so that I might learn better how to please and obey Him. I have no testimony of when I knelt and prayed a meaningful prayer. I just know that my freshman year at college, I became a real Christian. I submitted to the fact that God needed to be the
biggest part of my life, because I was created for that purpose. Though some
days my mind does wander and focus on things other than God, I always
come back to Him because He persistently draws me back to Him, as a
shepherd leading his sheep who have gone astray.

Like Lewis, I can see that literature has helped to show me that God is
real and is the God portrayed in the Bible, and that He is the only one
qualified to be in control of my life. I believe that God had me read certain
books that helped me to understand the true state of my heart and the
absolute Truth about God. Also, many of the things I read today help me to
understand more and more about God.

Around the time I started to read C.S. Lewis, and I was deeply and
greatly affected by his writing. Here was a man who I slightly resembled
because he loved the imagination and fantasy and literature and he wanted to
believe in things because they were absolutely true, not because they seemed
right. Yet this was a mind so much greater than I could even comprehend.
This mind believed not only in God, but also in the one Christian God. Lewis
said things I hadn't quite thought of yet, and better than I ever would have
thought of them. *Mere Christianity* was monumental in the regaining of my
faith in God and Christ. Lewis showed that Christianity is far more than a
religion that I believe in; it is truth, it is the greatest reality, it is the one
answer to many very different puzzles, and it is the place to fulfill my inner
longings. It showed me that ultimate reality could be found and that if I used
logic and reason I could arrive at God as that reality. Even when I was
doubting the validity of Christianity, I still knew that I had misery and
longing and was in need of something. In a Chapter in *Mere Christianity*
titled “The Shocking Alternative,” Lewis answered for me why there were so
many problems in the world and why God must be the answer to those problems:

What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could "be like gods" -- could set up on their own as if they had created themselves -- be their own masters -- invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history -- money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery -- the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.\footnote{Lewis, C.S. \textit{Mere Christianity}. New York: Simon \& Schuster, 1996, 54.}

Such passages showed me clearly that there will be pain and misery in most lives at some point, and that things will go wrong in this world, but that Christianity has an explanation for this problem of pain and evil. Such a realization, through Lewis's writings, began my path to once again embracing Christianity.

In \textit{Mere Christianity}, Lewis also deals with logical and moral arguments for the existence of God, but he uses simple language to explain these proofs, so that I was able to see that one does not need to have blind faith in Christianity, and that reason does point in the direction of theism. Lewis begins \textit{Mere Christianity} with the proof of moral absolute:

These, then are the two points I wanted to make. First that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about
ourselves and the universe we live in. 44

In Screwtape Letters, Lewis imaginatively ingrained into my mind forever the importance of prayer. Once I began to pray, everything began to fall into place. The space trilogy was also amazing because here Lewis used science fiction used to portray Christianity, and this showed me that every part of life and everything enjoyable could be submitted to God. With each work by Lewis that I read, a new part of my mind or my life was challenged to be given back to God and used for him. And always my thirst and hunger for God were increased by reading the way Lewis wrote of his Lord.

These days, I am also influenced by Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century Frenchman. This man was a mathematical and scientific genius, and his name still comes up today when one studies probability, barometric pressure, the vacuum and geometry. This intellectual was also a Christian theologian, and his Pensees is an apologetic for the Christian religion which focuses mainly on the contrast between man in sin and man living through God's grace. To do so, he first explains the state of man's wretchedness in sin, then proves of the existence of a sovereign good, and then deals with the falseness of other religions and the historicity of the Bible. Always, Pascal is asking the reader to use his reason to see that he Bible must be true, that mankind needs a savior and that only Jesus Christ could possibly be that savior. Pascal's writing, translated from French, is more complex than Lewis's writing on the same subjects, and also goes into much more detail on how we know the Scriptures are reliable and how a person can use his reason to see that he needs Christ. Even while logically explaining why the Apostles could not have been lying about Christ's resurrection, Pascal encourages the

44 Ibid., 21.
reader to think it through on his own and not to simply take Pascal's word for it:

The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus's death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more ecause of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out.\textsuperscript{45}

Pascal's balance between telling the reader the truth and encouraging the reader to think for himself reconciles for me Christianity's insistance that it possesses the absolute truth but that the individual must still find that truth for himself.

In writing my spiritual autobiography, I suppose I too had motives besides the unbiased recording of facts. I wanted to write something that followed the model that I decided was common to the two examined spiritual autobiographies. I looked for a point of submission, and I looked for proof that I am different than the stereotype of the American college student of the late 1990s. I wanted to show that my life and beliefs are opposed to the relativism which is widely accepted among my peers, but that still my faith is based on more than family tradition. In the process of choosing and writing about the experiences that led me to my true conversion to Christianity, I discovered a new appreciation for the artistry involved in making an autobiography into something which can be considered literature. I see that Edwards and Lewis must have been brilliant writers in order to have

constructed works which are not only autobiographical but also enjoyable and quality literature. More importantly, I noticed that both writers were also thinkers who employed their intellects in their pursuit of Christianity. In this way, my research and writing for this paper taught me that, while I go through the lifelong process of living as a Christian, I ought to use both my emotions and my mind, and that I can employ both faith and reason to learn more about God.
Works Cited


