

Michał Choiński

## Sermons That “Cut Like a Sword”: Samuel Blair’s Rhetoric During the Great Awakening

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**Abstract:** The article examines the style of Samuel Blair, a revival preacher of the Great Awakening who has often been omitted in the studies on the colonial pulpit tradition. Two texts by Blair, a sermon (*A Perswasive to Repentance*, 1743) and a revival account (*A Short and Faithful Narrative*, 1744) are studied rhetorically and presented as representative of the “rhetoric of the revival,” a particular mode of preaching in which the speaker employs a wide array of rhetorical patterns, biblical innuendos and communicative strategies aimed at eliciting emotional responses.

**Keywords:** Samuel Blair, Great Awakening, colonial preaching

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The Great Awakening constituted a critical event in the history of colonial America, arguably the most formative one alongside the French and Indian War. Crowds of thousands of people, the emotional reactions of the audiences which often bordered on mass hysteria, the fervent theological debates and a surplus of publications played a significant role in the shaping of the pre-Revolutionary ecclesiastical order. Similarly, the American rhetorical tradition was strongly informed by revival developments in pulpit oratory. New forms of preaching manifested the power of the spoken word to the colonists, and propelled the dynamics of public debate in a period which was to prove vital for the development of American identity. Alongside such figures as Jonathan Edwards, or George Whitefield, who were at the forefront of the Great Awakening and whose involvement in 18th-century revivalism has been extensively studied,<sup>1</sup>

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1 Since the publication of Perry Miller’s (*Jonathan Edwards*) and Ola Winslow’s (*Jonathan Edwards*) pioneering books on Edwards, a number of important studies have dedicated their attention to the significance of the Northampton divine for the Great Awakening. Edwards’s employment of figurative speech is discussed by Ralph Turnbull (*Jonathan Edwards*) as well as Wilson Kimnach (*General Introduction*), his sense of revival mission is stressed by Douglas Sweeney (*Jonathan Edwards*), and the importance of his theological thought for the “religion of the heart” is studied by McDermott (*Jonathan Edwards*). George Whitefield’s preaching, on the other hand, is claimed to have been impactful not

one could list a number of less well-known ministers who also had a significant impact on the colonial pulpit. This paper aims to discuss the preaching oratory of one such preacher, Samuel Blair (1712–1751), a Presbyterian revivalist from New Londonderry in Pennsylvania, who contributed greatly to the spread of the Awakening. For the purpose of the article, one revival sermon from the corpus of Blair’s texts that have survived till this day, *A Perswasive to Repentance* (1743) and one revival account, *A Short and Faithful Narrative, of the Late Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry, and Other Parts of Pennsylvania* (1744), have been selected to discuss his use of revival rhetoric—the skill of an emotional appeal in the case of the former text, and the ability to refute the anti-revival criticism through a positive portrayal of the Awakening in the context of the latter. There are relatively few remaining texts by Blair that date back to the times of the Great Awakening, and the two publications selected for analysis here, while moderately short (both of them approximately forty pages long), are most valuable for shedding some light on the preacher’s use of revival rhetoric.

### Rhetoric of the Revival

In America, revivalism has always played a significant role in the social functioning of religion. As argued by McClymond, “religious revivals are as American as baseball, blues music, and the stars and stripes” (*Encyclopedia of Religious Revivalism*). This strong presence of revivalism in the American religious landscape translates into the considerable significance of revival preaching for the American pulpit practice. One could argue that a certain continuity is discernible in the American revival tradition, and preachers of consecutive “Awakenings,” starting with the Great Awakening, have utilized similar communicative strategies, analogous sets of cultural references, as well as persuasive ploys to forward the “New Birth” to their hearers and to spread the revival zeal. Billy Graham, the most celebrated televangelist of the twentieth century, testified to the importance of this tradition when in 1949 in Los Angeles, during the “Canvas Cathedral” Crusade, he delivered to a contemporary audience the most notorious sermon of the Great Awakening<sup>2</sup> (and, perhaps,

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only on colonial public religion (Lambert, *Pedlar*), but also on the theatrical manner of delivery in the colonial pulpit (Stout, *The New England Soul*, Choiński *From Pulpit to Stage*). The key importance of Edwards and Whitefield is also pointed out by Mark Noll (*The Rise of Evangelicalism*) and Thomas Kidd (*The Great Awakening*) in their studies on the roots of American evangelicalism.

2 More on Billy Graham’s appropriation of Jonathan Edwards’s Enfield sermon can be found in Andrew Finstuen’s article available on the website of JEC at Yale Divinity School: <http://edwards.yale.edu/files/finstuen-graham.pdf>.

America's pulpit oratory<sup>3</sup>), Jonathan Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Graham was by no means a pioneer in this respect, as nineteenth-century American revivalists, like Charles Finney, eagerly fell back on the rhetorical heritage of the first Great Awakening sermons.

The Great Awakening was the largest social (and religious) event in the colonial history of America. It followed a few minor religious revivals in Connecticut in the mid-1730s, instigated by Salomon Stoddard, a preacher of Northampton who managed to accumulate a spiritual "harvest" of three hundred people. The arrival of George Whitefield, a young Methodist minister who had become persona non grata in English pulpits and decided to start saving souls in America, galvanized the revival. The theatrical prowess of Whitefield allowed him to take the colonists' hearts by storm, amassing crowds of a few thousand people and eliciting from them powerful emotional responses. Whitefield inspired other preachers like Gilbert Tennent, Andrew Croswell or Samuel Blair, who, captivated by his spectacular success, engaged in itinerant preaching and brought revival enthusiasm further into different colonies, often accusing the ministers who did not support them of a lack of godliness. For that, the revivalist group, labeled as the "New Lights," met with criticism from the "Old Lights," advocates of the "rational" religion, among whom Charles Chauncy from Boston was the most ardent disparager of the awakening. The critics were also concerned by the physical symptoms of the "New Birth" manifested by the converts, like cries, panic attacks, fits, falling down, or spasmodic jerking. Some of these accusations were dismissed by Jonathan Edwards, who became both the advocate of the revival, as well as its active member, having preached in Enfield in 1741 the aforementioned *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*—a symbolic discourse of American "fire and brimstone" revivalism. The delivery of the sermon coincided with the peak of the Great Awakening. Whitefield's farewell address of the 1739–1740 tour, delivered just a few months before the Enfield sermon, gathered more people than the entire population of Boston at that time<sup>4</sup>—and even those who did not seek religious conversion, like Benjamin

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3 The investigation of *The Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* has in itself become an important part of the studies of the Great Awakening. A few generations of scholars have tried to explain the petrifying impact the sermon had over the Enfield audience. Some attribute it to the power of imagery (Cady, *The Artistry*), the logical structure of the discourse (Hearn, *Form as Argument*), the use of the Newtonian notion of gravity in the portrayal of sinfulness (Lukasik, *Feeling the Force*), the rhetorical "beat" of the sermon (Gallagher, *Sinners*) or the use of the deictic shift (Choiński, *A Cognitive Approach*).

4 It is estimated that in his lifetime, Whitefield preached at least 18,000 times and addressed up to 10,000,000 people. Benjamin Franklin calculated that Whitefield's voice was so powerful that he could be heard by more than 30,000 listeners. Interesting statistics concerning Whitefield's pulpit oratory are included in the introduction to *Christian History*, 1993/2.

Franklin, would attend Whitefield's preaching to witness the performance that was on everyone's lips. By 1743 most of the original revival zeal had been worn out and a series of post-awakening debates was initiated in an attempt to judge the outcome of the Great Awakening and overcome the divisions within the colonial ministry that it had caused. The overall impact of the Great Awakening was considerable. Some commentators, like Alan Heimert (*Religion*), believe the Great Awakening was vital for the shaping of the American spirit that later took the form of the American Revolution; others stress its formative influence upon the birth of contemporary evangelicalism (Kidd, *The Great Awakening*) or the evolution of American rhetorical practice (Stout, *The New England Soul*). It is apparent that by studying the roots of American preaching tradition we arrive at a more complete understanding of the present-day language of religion and the mechanisms of persuasion that govern modern revival rhetoric.

The preaching style of the Great Awakening preachers, like Samuel Blair, represents "the rhetoric of the revival" defined elsewhere (Choiński, *Rhetoric*), as a particular mode of preaching in which the speaker employs a wide array of rhetorical patterns, biblical innuendos and communicative strategies aimed at eliciting emotional responses, and, ultimately, spreading the spiritual regeneration among the hearers. It constitutes the "language of American revivalism" (Choiński, *Rhetoric* 51). Expressive verbal ornamentation is perhaps one of its defining features, with the exclamations, rhetorical questions and sets of apostrophes commonly used by, for instance, George Whitefield, or intricate amplification formulas and extended metaphors employed by Jonathan Edwards. Such a mode of appeal firmly sided with the "religion of heart" rather than the "religion of the rational mind." The revival preachers used figurative imagery derived from the Bible or from the colonists' daily experiences, as well as a repertoire of metaphors and references to contextualize their battle for the morality of the colonies. For instance, unconverted preachers were most often portrayed as "wolves in sheep's clothing" and the role of the minister was to be a paragon of virtue, and shine like a "city upon the hill." Similarly, images of hell were commonly used and typical "fire and brimstone" motifs symbolized the orthodox doctrine of Calvinism to, almost literally, scare people into heaven.

The figurative richness of the rhetoric of the revival conditioned its expressive potential. The majority of the proponents of the Great Awakening professed themselves as converted and sought to articulate their experiences to the hearers, seeking to inspire and motivate them. This, in consequence, led to the increased persuasive force of the Great Awakening sermons which, when delivered to a larger group of people, joined and united them in the revival cause. The successful formation of the community of the converted in a number of cases allowed for the advance of the revival zeal. The rural inhabitants of the colonies were particularly easily swayed by the revival oratory—especially when the preachers attacked the rich and the educated.

The sermons of the Great Awakening were also innovatively dramatic. Their verbal opulence allowed some speakers, such as George Whitefield, to incorporate a number of elements associated with drama into their delivery. This had the effect of captivating the hearts and winning the goodwill of the colonists, many of whom—as argued by Stout—in seeing Whitefield preach “were for the first time in their lives seeing a form of theatre” (94). In terms of structure, the Great Awakening sermons moved away from the traditional scheme popularized at the beginning of the seventeenth century in particular by William Perkins's *The Art of Prophesying*. The design of the sermon described there, consisted of three elements: the explication of a Scriptural quotation, the statement of doctrinal points and the application of these points to the context of the audience. The basic framework of the text-doctrine-application form is oftentimes visible in the revival sermons, but the traditional principle of simplicity and of “plain style” advocated by the former generations of preachers, in the case of Great Awakening revivalists gives way to rich figurative ornamentation aimed at a strong emotional appeal.

The rhetoric of the revival was frequently divisive and antagonistic. The New Lights considered anyone critical of their general enthusiasm to be an enemy of the religious cause and opposed to the advancement of godliness. Even the less ardent Great Awakening proponents were often ostracized by their zealous colleagues. Thus, for instance, in Andrew Croswell's radical sermonic discourses there is little space for compromise or conciliation—whoever was not with the revivalists, was against them, and, as a consequence, against God's will. Such an approach antagonized clergymen and subsequently led to a number of divisions. Gilbert Tennent's *A Danger of Unconverted Ministry* delivered in Nottingham, Pennsylvania in 1739 is perhaps the best example of a revival divisive discourse. Its author, a young Presbyterian minister, warns all the colonists of the threat posed by preachers who only pretend to be fully converted and who, like the Pharisees, described in the New Testament, cultivate sinfulness underneath the pretense of orthodoxy. Gilbert's father, William Tennent, helped to secure the educational platform for the orthodox preachers by co-establishing the “Log College” a dozen years before the Great Awakening. That private teaching seminar did not have an official charter, yet it focused on the education of the orthodox ministers and thus helped in preparing the ground for the revival. Obviously, a number of representatives of the existing colleges were highly skeptical of such initiatives. When the New Light preachers exercised unsolicited itinerancy, crossing parish borders and encouraging the colonists to abandon preachers who were supposedly unconverted, they also antagonized the local authorities who saw in the crowds a potential hazard to social order—for instance, James Davenport, an agitator notorious for his erratic speeches, sectarian ambitions and book-burnings, was declared *non compos mentis* in the court in 1743.

### Samuel Blair's Ministry

When set against this background, Samuel Blair emerges as a dedicated revivalist who was, however, removed from the most radical wing of the New Lights group. He may not be as well-known and researched as Jonathan Edwards, or George Whitefield, yet his contributions to the revival in the Middle Colonies are mentioned in almost all studies of the Great Awakening. Rev. Samuel Blair was born in Ireland in 1712 and arrived in America as a young boy. He began his ministerial education in the Presbyterian Log College and was among its first alumni. He received good ministerial training, including the classics, but Blair also grew impressively competent in matters of divinity. He was said to have manifested “extensive” learning, as “every branch of study taught in the college appeared familiar to him” (Schnittjer, *The Log College* 211). Samuel was not the only member of the Blair family to have graduated from the Log College—his brother John also finished the seminar, and subsequently became a professor of divinity and then a president of the future Princeton College.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia granted Samuel Blair the right to preach in November 1733 and a year later, on the 9th November 1734, he accepted a ministerial offer from Middletown and Shrewsbury in New Jersey. After a period of five years, during which he gained valuable preaching experience, Blair moved to New Londonderry (Pennsylvania), to a traditional Scots-Irish community. Smith points out that the “very naming of the village, after the city of the same name in Ulster, indicated its essentially conservative nature” (78). As Blair describes in detail in his account of the revival, he struggled greatly to bring the revival zeal to the Londonderry community. The account is the most important testimony to his life’s mission and his dedication as a Presbyterian revivalist in the Middle Colonies.

According to Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, Blair was the “most gifted intellectual among the Presbyterian partisans of the revival” (*The Great Awakening*, 128). He used some of his skill in language and debate to defend George Whitefield against the accusations of the Old Lights. When the excitement of the Great Awakening diminished, Blair set up his own school at Fagg’s Manor, a hamlet of Londonderry, for the education of ministers. The seminar resembled that of William Tennent’s. He continued to administer the school until his death in 1751, at the age of thirty-nine. Blair’s seminar produced a number of eminent alumni, among others John Rodgers, one of the important Presbyterian leaders of Revolutionary America or James Finley, a minister and a politician, the owner of the house where Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Upon Blair’s death, Samuel Davies, a graduate of his school and the fourth rector of the College of New Jersey, wrote an elegy dedicated to his former tutor. The sentimental apostrophe is highly exaggerated, yet it gives an insight into the esteem Blair enjoyed among his fellow clergymen and students: “Oh! Blair! whom all the tenderest names

commend, / My father, tutor, pastor, brother, friend! / While distance, the sad privilege denies, / O'er thy tomb, to vent my bursting eyes, / The Muse erects—the sole return allowed—/ This humble monument of gratitude” (qtd. after Alexander, *Biographical Sketches* 263).

### Samuel Blair's Revival Sermon

The sermon *A Perswasive to Repentance* was preached in 1739 as a regular lecture before the Synod of Pennsylvania. The discourse follows the traditional text-doctrine-application formula and in the consecutive fragments of the sermon, the preacher employs a wide array of creative rhetorical means to appeal to the emotions of the audience. The sermon is based upon Jeremiah 8.6: “I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: No Man repented him of his wickedness, saying, what have I done? Every one turned to his Course, as the Horse rusheth into the Battle.” Blair is very effective in using the implications of certain words and phrases from the passage, especially the question “What have I done?,” to construct the persuasive framework for the rest of the sermon.

In the opening of *A Perswasive to Repentance*, Blair declares that the “Reformation” of sinners’ ways can only take place thorough the message delivered to them by ministers, who act as God’s “Ambassadors” (4). They are to use all the “Instructions, Motives, Arguments, and Expostulations” (6) available in the Bible to help the conversion of the ungodly. These words may be interpreted as Blair’s apology for his own pulpit oratory. All the appeals he employs, even those aimed at fear or distress, turn out to be justified, as the success of preaching brings about the salvation of souls and the purification of sin. The preacher uses the journey metaphor to represent the confusion of a sinful life and, through a rhetorical figure *subiectio*, a question and an answer, stresses that the sinners are led astray by their sinfulness: “Can any such demented Person be found, who will not return to his right Road, after he has wandered out of it and gone wrong? Surely no!” (2). The failure to comply with the instructions of morality and warnings they receive leads to the “most terrible dangers and miseries” (6); the sinners are doomed unless they return to the path of righteousness, guided by the words of godly preachers.

Right from the beginning, Blair uses rhetorically balanced sentences. In a number of statements, the even arrangement of figures reinforces the message: “The brutish Unreasonableness, bold Presumption, and Fool-Hardiness of Sinners, who go on in their sinful Courses against all the awful warnings of Heaven, and all the restraints of Reason and Conscience” (8). The use of a tricolon of pejorative nouns highlighted by epithets, as well as a pair of positive nouns, allows the discourse to “flow” consistently. The preacher also incorporates exclamations and rhetorical questions into the text

(“Oh! What have I done?”)—in effect, the impersonation of a desperate sinner through a series of emotional cries renders the text dynamic and theatrical.

The preacher highlights the imminent and unstoppable peril that awaits the sinner in a powerful apostrophe: “He tells you, O ye rebellious Sinners, that if ye do not Reform and Repent, seek his Mercy with humbled pained Hearts, and turn to his Ways, the Damnation of Hell, will infallibly be your Portion to all Eternity” (10). The address is confrontational, pointing out uncompromisingly in consecutive sentences how erroneous the decisions of the sinful are and just how severe a punishment awaits them. The constant invocation of the inevitable perdition of the wicked implies that the time to reform the hearers’ hearts is now or never. Such a message of urgency was one of the important traits of the rhetoric of the revival. The New Light preachers believed in the “New Birth,” an instant and powerful conversion instigated with the help of a preacher, thus the imminence of eternal punishment was to mobilize them to embrace the message from the pulpit more willingly.

Having expounded on the doctrine, the preacher discusses the nature of repentance, declaring that it must not be accompanied by “Confession, Shame and Sorrow” (15). The three nouns iconically encapsulate the whole process, and function like an advertising slogan of today. Blair also uses them as rhetorical themes, to structure his discourse and, in his discussion of confession, to provide a daunting image: “And yet, alas, thus it is with Multitudes of perishing Souls who are rotting in the Graves, in the Stench and Pollution of Sin; they are willingly blinded by the Devil to look upon their Sins as very Trifles” (16). Sinfulness and moral decay are presented as physical decay and affliction. At this point, the rhetorical pathos, an appeal to the emotions of the hearers, is aimed at eliciting from them a reaction of disgust and abhorrence.

In the Application of the sermon, the preacher encourages the members of the audience to ask themselves the question: “Have you ever repented?” As the sermon progresses, his words gradually become more audience-focused and accusatory. Through repetitive apostrophes, as well as the argumentative ploys used earlier by the preacher, the addressees are forced to refer all the emotional appeals to themselves. The initial, acrid question is followed by a listing of longer enquires about their state of mind and conscience to accuse the recipients of hypocrisy and laxness: “But you have been always excusing yourselves and lessening your Sins, to still the Clamors and Accusations of your guilty Consciences” (21). The constant redoubling of nouns (“Clamors and Accusations” and “Light and Warning”) as well as the reinforcement of epithets (“irreligious, ungodly and vile”) help the preacher to emphasize his main points and balance the sermon in terms of style.

The speaker accuses the audience of constant relapses into sinfulness, framing his argument in an antithesis: “You have gone on several Years in the Way of Sin and rebellious Neglect of the Ways of Godliness, and yet have never so much as had your



obstinate Hearts bow'd in true Humiliation before God on that Account; but are still boldly persisting on in the same Course." The antithetical contrasts between the "Way of Sin" and the "Ways of Godliness," as well as between "obstinate Hearts" and "true Humiliation" help Blair to stress that there is no mid-way between salvation and damnation. To him, the members of the audience cannot opt for a compromise, and they have to choose between full orthodoxy and compliance, between continuous disobedience and condemnation. At the same time, the unwillingness to respond to the calling of the "New Birth" is presented as tantamount to exposing oneself to torture and endless misery: "you will be cast into the Prison of Hell, and lash'd to the Wheel of Justice to suffer for all your Sin and Obstinacy against God," where "[T]here shall be weeping, wailing, and gnashing of Teeth to all Eternity" (24). Blair uses the images of earthly anguish to depict the suffering of the soul, and to make the complex theological notion of eternal damnation immediately accessible to the members of the audience, effectively blackmailing them into orthodoxy.

Another contrast used by Blair in the sermon involves the juxtaposition of human reason and base impulses. The distinction is first visible in the very way the preacher defines sin: "Sin is to act without any regard to the just Reason of Things, and so to act like a Beast" (25). To him, all the workings of the rational mind point to embracing the orthodoxy, while animalistic and lustful instincts undercut the natural yearning of the mind towards godliness. Thus moving away from the orthodoxy implies siding with the base, unworthy elements, and acting "like the most senseless and improvident Brutes in the whole Creation" (26). The sinners are called upon to ponder on their fall and hopelessness: "O, sinner, consider what a terrible aggravated Damnation thou deservest and are like to meet with in a little Time, for thy brutishness, and heaven daring Insolence, in paying no Regard to all the Councils, Arguments, and Threatening of the eternal God" (30). Blair again uses a direct address and a tricolon to point out the unconditional and complete moral bankruptcy of those who reject the "New Birth" and, to strengthen his point, provides a long list of misdoings the sinners are most commonly guilty of: "Drunkenness, Quarrelling, Whoredom, profane Sabbath-breaking, Stealing, Defrauding, Revengeing, mocking and scoffing at Piety and Religion, and all such enormous Wickedness" (31). The extended *enumeratio* illustrates the range of their faults and the negativity of every action they undertake. The preacher's message is ultimately pessimistic, as nothing the sinners do or think can remedy them—their only potential chance for salvation lies in embracing the message that is being delivered to them in the sermon.

Towards the end of the text, Blair intensifies the imagery, and pushes it in the direction of "fire and brimstone" pulpit oratory by employing more images of inferno than at the beginning of the sermon. The implications behind the sinner's metaphorical whereabouts play a significant role in this rhetorical strategy, when the preacher explains that "you stand as it were upon the very Brink of the burning Furnace and

how soon you may be cast in and sealed up to Eternity in the dismal Vault of Hell you know not” (37). The sinners’ location in the figurative landscape connotes a threat of falling down (“Brink”), as well as confinement (“Vault”), as if the preacher wanted his hearers to associate their present, fallen state with extreme danger. In time, the sinners are bound to “fall into the Gulf of irreparable Ruin” (37), their physical fall symbolically signaling their ultimate moral decline and helplessness.

The final words of the sermon constitute a powerful call to sinners to repent and return to God: “fly to him alone for your Relief, lay the whole Weight of your Salvation upon his Merit and Mediation, and so take him with all your Heart for your only Savior” (39). This strongly motivational apostrophe abounds in active verbs in the imperative form. It seems that the preacher is taking full control over the discourse and uses his rhetorical skill to command the hearers. Contrary to the earlier images of hell, now the imperatives connote liberation, spiritual elevation and freedom. The final apostrophe completes the appeal of the text and concludes it with a metaphorical transition from evil to goodness.

### Samuel Blair’s Revival Account

Alongside the sermon, *A Short and Faithful Narrative* by Blair, his history of the revival, can be classified as another form of the rhetoric of the revival: the account. Like in the classical speeches of Roman judicial oratory, the preacher presented a narrative of events that was to defend a certain idea and was, necessarily, not objective, but subjective and persuasive. Narratives such as Jonathan Edwards’s *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, as well as *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival in New England* played a key role in the debate over the Great Awakening, and were used by the New Lights to stress its positive impact. Similarly, Blair’s goal in the case of the text analyzed below was to portray the events in a constructive way, and to turn his account into an effective encouragement. Thus, the persuasive agenda of the narrative was not that different from the goal of a sermon. As the preacher declares, he seeks to “tend to the Glory of our Redeemer, and the Increase of his Triumphs, carrying on of the Design of said History, containing Accounts of the Revival and Propagation of Religion in this remarkable Day of Grace” (7). Blair’s perspective is that of the sacred history—in which the revival is an event that propels the advancement of religion in the period before the second coming of Christ and messianic deliverance. At the same time, the document is a vital historical source of knowledge about the course of the Awakening and about the perception of the event by the pro-revival party.

Blair begins his account of the revival by describing the situation of the Church in his neighborhood. He stresses that prior to 1740, people manifested “lamentable Ignorance” of their religion and, in consequence, the “Nature and Necessity of the New-

Birth was but little known or thought of." The colonists' reluctance to ponder matters of religion caused a general laxness and apathy—"people were very generally thro' the Land careless at Heart, and stupidly indifferent about the great Concerns of Eternity" (10). So, all over the land "religion lay as it were a dying, and ready to expire its last Breath of Life in this Part of the visible Church." Interestingly, most of the phrases Blair employs to describe the state of the church connote idleness, motionlessness and stupor, the opposite of what is implied by the words "revival" and "awakening," which he uses to describe the change in the society he later witnessed. Blair portrays the history of the revival as the history of a positive dynamic reform that allowed for the restoration of lost piety and the saving of a number of souls from damnation.

The account shows that Blair's preaching agenda was primarily to address those who were not converted. He wanted to raise them from their "unregenerate" state and to help "their Conviction" (12), yet, his initial efforts resulted in only five successful conversions. A change to this disappointing result came with the help of a guest minister. For the duration of his journey to New Jersey, Blair invited another preacher to step in his place. The replacement minister was a sympathizer of the revival and delivered a sermon on the "dangerous and awful Case of such as continue unregenerate and unfaithful under the Means of Grace" (13). This discourse had a particularly strong impact on the hearers and "under that Sermon there was a visible Appearance of much Soul-Concern among the Hearers, so that some burst out with an audible Noise into bitter crying" (13). Having seen the influence of the rhetoric of the revival among the members of his flock, Blair decided to make use of its effectiveness and himself began eliciting strong emotional reactions from his listeners, as his words "seem'd to come and cut like a Sword upon several in the Congregation" (14). Those who had earlier manifested religious apathy, now reacted to Blair's words in a strongly emotional manner: "several would be overcome and fainting; others deeply sobbing, hardly able to contain, others crying in a most dolorous Manner, many others more silently Weeping" (15). Some even demonstrated "strange, unusual Bodily Motions" (16). Such physical, emotional reactions caused a sensation among the colonists and, as a result of the general public interest in the revival, the "number of the Awakened increased very fast, frequently under Sermons there were some newly convicted, and brought into deep Distress of Soul about their perishing Estate" (16). It is evident that the physical reactions to the sermons were considered by the preacher as a testimony to the effectiveness of his method and a proof that he had managed to affect them deeply enough to trigger the change of heart necessary for their salvation. Thus, the simile he uses to describe his own preaching, comparing his pulpit oratory to a blade ("cut like a Sword"), a sharp, precise and piercing weapon, is particularly telling of his own perception of his revival mission.

Blair stresses that the revival experience became perhaps the most popular theme of conversation within a congregation and describes how members of the congregation

reported their own religious experiences to him: “It was very agreeable to hear their Accounts, how that when they were in the deepest Perplexity and Darkness, Distress and Difficulty, seeking God as poor condemned Hell-deserving Sinners the Scene of the recovering Grace, thro’ a Redeemer” (20). The preacher’s observations reveal the importance of the community for the spreading of the revival. Those that have not yet experienced the “New Birth” were inspired by the converted and encouraged by them to get carried away by the “enthusiasm” of others—“they saw others weeping and fainting, and heard People mourning and lamenting, and they thought if they could be like those it would be very hopeful with them.” The effects of the conversion differed between the members of the congregation and, in the case of some, turned out to be only temporary: “They seem to have fallen back again into their former Carelessness and Stupidity: And some that were under pretty great Awakenings, and considerable deep Convictions of their miserable Estate, seem also to have got Peace again to their Consciences without getting it by a true Faith in the Lord Jesus” (26).

The general account of the revival is supplemented by three detailed stories of people who had undergone regeneration. The first convert, a woman, under the influence of a powerful awakening sermon, “saw that she was hereby exposed to the Sin-punishing Justice of God, and so was fill’d with very great Fear and Terror” (30). Blair’s story describes the consecutive emotional reactions of the woman over a few years. Her initial fear, caused by the realization of her sinfulness, was replaced by joy at the thought that she was improving her morality. Yet, with time, doubts about the completeness of her conversion caused her to question her own godliness. These dejections over her regeneration lasted a long time, until later, when she was meditating on the sacrament, “her Heart was much taken up with the Beauty and Excellency of Sanctification” (36). Blair stresses that the revival experience ultimately gave her spiritual tranquility and joy, as she “manifestly appear’d to lie under it [the Hand of God] with a peaceful Serenity and divine Sweetness in her whole Soul” (37). Interestingly, he also stresses that the impact of her religious experience was so powerful that “it made her for a while both deaf and blind” (31). The second convert Blair describes was Hans Kirk Patrick, an educated member of the community, who experienced conversion when he was bed-ridden and aware of his pending death. To him the experience of conversion also brought much needed comfort, and “with a great deal of serenity and sweetness of Soul he fell asleep in Jesus” (40). The third account concerns two children, sisters of seven and nine, who experience great “Delight” (41) in prayer and whom religious dedication brought a pleasurable consolation. These three case studies of converts close Blair’s account of the revival in New Londonderry. The preacher uses them as the final element of his agenda to create a positive and attractive image of the processes of awakening. By stressing the emotional and religious gains of the revival participants, he seeks to encourage others to join the ranks of the converted and counter the arguments of the Old Lights.

The above discussions of two revival texts by Blair cannot be seen as a complete overview of the preacher's pulpit oratory. Rather than investigate the preacher's corpus in detail, the goal of the article was to illustrate the mechanisms of Samuel Blair's rhetoric of the revival using two examples: an awakening sermon and an account of revival. The pulpit discourse, *A Perswasive to Repentance*, demonstrates Blair's communicative skill of persuasive rhetoric—dense expressive figures, balanced argumentation and dialogic interludes are combined with the appeal of rhetorical pathos. Blair does not rely strongly on logical persuasion or the creation of an authoritative image—his rhetorical ploys are almost exclusively aimed at evoking negative emotions and affecting the audience in this manner. The metaphorical representations of damnation, sinfulness and God's retribution abound in strongly evocative phrases and figurative reinforcements. All these elements prove Blair's talent for persuasive rhetorical appeal. His *Account*, on the other hand, shows how consistent and uncompromising the preacher was in portraying the revival in a positive way, both in terms of the structure and discourse of his narrative, thus effectively dismissing the claims of the Old Lights. In his depiction of the revival, Blair presents it as a critical moment of reformation for the colonies, engineered by God and designed to provide a remedy for the ubiquitous sinfulness and laxness. The revival is portrayed as a breakthrough for the colonies—and, at the same time, for particular converted individuals. By stressing both the communal and particular ramifications of the revival, Blair manages to present the Great Awakening as a historic event, a “New Birth” to the colonies.

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