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Early American Protestantism* (review)

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*The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography
in Early American Protestantism.*

By RODGER M. PAYNE.

Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998.

Conversion narratives, or public professions of faith, flourished in the Puritan churches of New England for a short time in the seventeenth century, but by 1700, the delivery of such narratives as a prerequisite for church membership had passed away, and they were dismissed by at least one minister as little more than “a quaint speech in the church.” Yet the eighteenth-century evangelical movement with its emphasis on personal “heart” religion saw an upsurge in conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies. Professor Rodger M. Payne takes a new look at this material and finds that, despite their adherence to certain conventions of form and language, eighteenth-century evangelical spiritual narratives played an active part in altering and expanding the concept of selfhood and thus participated in the passage of American culture into modernism.

For all the scholarly attention it has received, the spiritual narrative as a form of literature still presents both aesthetic and historical problems. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty is that the alleged formulaic constraints of conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies can seem to obscure the underlying, living experience they are supposed to convey. More subtle is what Payne calls “the paradox of the self” (33), in that conversion involves a humbling, even self-annihilating experience of divine grace at the same time that the very act of speaking about it requires considerable self-assertion. Moreover, there is the historical problem of how people fitted this apparently circumscribed form of expression into their lives at a time of social, political, and intellectual ferment.

Payne confronts such problems by proposing that the eighteenth-century evangelical conversion narrative/autobiography served as a ritualized method of dealing with cultural tensions by creating and extending new conceptions of an autonomous and independent selfhood. Such a process would seem inconsistent with, and even to undermine, the foundation of the conversion story as a witness to the power of divine grace. But Payne maintains that, although the concept of conversion was certainly not new to the eighteenth century, evangelicals “reconceptualized” it (9), shifting the focus from God and ministers to the individual, sanctifying the speaker’s personal choice and responsibility in the work of conversion, and in the process creating a new, more complex sense of self.

Based on concepts propounded by Michel Foucault and other theorists about “discourse” (5–6) as a complex reciprocal and creative (or “constitutive”) activity, Payne discovers a shift of power from the “discursive site” (9) of the pulpit to the people, a democratization of religious authority as ordinary believers used the

traditional language of conversion to create something new, to give a local habitation and a name to “that which has possessed no prior cultural reality” (8), and in particular to emerging concepts of selfhood and subjectivity.

As for the supposedly limited language of this genre, Payne argues that it is not to be construed as a confining frame or Procrustean bed, that it functioned as a communal, evolving narrative space. In offering testimony of their experience, converts applied the socially sanctioned discourse to themselves, thus joining “a shared community of meaning” (12). The language of the larger interpretive community (Stanley Fish’s term) validated the individual’s experience (11)—an experience otherwise ineffable and inexpressible—and thus in a real sense created it. This process reinforced the selfhood of the speaker, both as subject and object, the I who speaks and the I spoken about. We are to see the whole body of these works as in a process of constant creation, as a sort of meta-text of evangelical conversion, moving towards a modernist “discourse of selfhood” (12).

Exploring the significance of this process, Payne makes some remarkable—and, if viewed from a Calvinist standpoint, one might say shocking—claims. Conversion in this period became “a matter of personal decision” (46). The authors of these evangelical narratives were “justifying themselves” (29, 47), that is, “justifying the transformation of their lives into narrative” (48). Discursive power meant that redemption of the self came through linguistic presentation rather than through religious experience. In sum, “in narratively creating themselves, evangelicals converted themselves, and from auditors of the word they were transformed into authors of the word” (49).

At the same time, Payne acknowledges the existence of an “ineffable experience” even as he describes its descent into the narrative realm. He gives an illuminating history of the Christian belief in the transforming power of the Word, of preaching as the means of grace and hence as the site of the preacher’s power (a power that, he suggests, is diluted as eighteenth-century evangelicals began to deny conversion through sermons and to look at other means, such as devotional reading, to experience it). In any case, he claims that it was the inherited conversion language of the community that made the experience real “because it placed it within the discursive domain of the author” (59). This conversion language didn’t just describe; it *performed* the conversion through an autobiographical process—not unlike other forms of literature that enact what they mean.

In a particularly interesting final chapter, Payne supports these ideas in part by positing a ritual structure for the narrative, within which conversion takes place as both a literal and a figurative journey involving time and space. In an earlier chapter, Payne pointed out that spiritual seekers often did move from place to place, church to church, revival meeting to revival meeting, in their spiritual quests (46). Here he offers valuable information about the actual seating arrangements in revival meetings and the positioning of such spaces as the altar area and the mourner’s bench, all of which provided a physical geography for the spiritual movement of conversion. And he demonstrates that speakers had a variety of ways of physically locating their conversion experiences—alone in a room, in a field, on the road, as well as in the time-honored “wilderness” of New England and the soul. Finally, although these experiences took place in a condition of separateness from the community, the speaker presumably completed his or her conversion by journeying back to the

society of others. In the end, conversion did not extinguish the self; it made the self into a “literary subject . . . redeemed ‘literally’ by its ritual movement through the text” (83).

This is a challenging argument. It suggests a new angle of vision on what we thought we knew about the trajectory of spiritual autobiography. It takes us as far as possible from the Puritan conception of the church as a “speaking Aristocracy in the face of a silent Democracy,” inviting comparisons of the evangelicals’ narrative strategies at almost every point with those of their (apparently very different) seventeenth-century forebears—although students of seventeenth-century America may discern a germ of these developments in the “preparation for salvation” doctrine that eventually triumphed in New England and silenced the purer Calvinism of John Cotton. Above all, it finds in spiritual narratives a vital literary power, and may be said to anticipate in intriguing ways American romanticism. Links to Emerson can surely be made, but for this reader, Walt Whitman springs even more forcefully to mind. In light of Payne’s argument, it seems clearer than ever that Whitman reinvented the conversion narrative, conceiving of himself as his own “discursive community,” and offering himself to his fellows as the “site” within which the individual realizes his/her own conversion: Whitman himself as the nexus of myth and history, self and community, soul and body, poetry and prose, creating and speaking himself, and through himself, spiritual experience to all hearers.

Still, in this inexorable unfolding of the self and the “democratization” of the narrative, something is lost. All this American self-reliance and self-absorption can be wearying and claustrophobic. Everywhere there are (to borrow Jonathan Swift’s terms regarding the battle of the Moderns and the Ancients) swarms of spiders but no bees. The discursive site that once was divinity is now the community. In this configuration, there is little or no room outside the room of the (individual or collective) self. There is no room for pietists and Quakers like John Woolman, no room for Harriet Beecher Stowe to say of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “I didn’t write it; God wrote it.” But whether or not the attribution of so much power to the realm of discourse alone is something Payne’s readers will welcome, his study makes a thought-provoking case that eighteenth-century evangelicals responded to cultural change by developing a new, linguistic arena for conversion and a richer concept of selfhood, and in doing so he gives new life to the literary importance of spiritual narrative.

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