

SPEAKING, SILENTLY SPEAKING: THOMAS SHEPARD'S "CONFessions"
AND THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF PURITAN CONVERSION
ON EARLY AND LATER AMERICA

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Speaking, Silently Speaking: Thomas Shepard's "Confessions" and the Cultural Impact of Puritan Conversion on Early and Later America

My dissertation reappraises the Puritan conversion narrative's influence on early and later American literature. It centers around the accounts recorded by the Reverend Thomas Shepard, minister to Cambridge's first church, and looks at how New England's earliest settlers represented their spiritual encounters. My study argues for Puritanism's continued cultural relevance by explaining how the inter-personal, social, and expressive energies that informed Puritan spiritual confession is both sustained and evolves in the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Chapter I accounts for the social, historical, and intellectual contexts in which the Puritan conversion narrative took place and outlines the scholarship it has received. Amid this scholarship I offer my analysis in Chapter II, pointing to the performance's formal, doctrinal, and expressive requirements to explain how believers delivered successful narratives and how they pushed the bounds of the religious doctrine that informed their accounts. Chapter III re-imagines the experience of Puritan conversion. It considers the performance from an affective framework and argues that the ambivalence endemic to spiritual assurance provoked in believers a psychogenic and narratological discord that promoted a form of self-understanding in which believers were unsure of themselves

even as their spiritual communities were certain that their conversions were complete. Chapter III concludes by assessing the literary consequences of this relationship with reference to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* as I look ahead to the conversion narrative's development in the 18th century, especially in writing. In Chapter IV, I reflect on the conversion narrative's role in the Great Awakening. I focus on two 18th century black Atlantic autobiographers, James Albert Grinniosaw and John Marrant, whose spiritual narratives give evidence of the Puritan conversion narrative's formal and ideological continuity. Chapter V considers how Puritan confession can be read against two canonical works of 19th century American fiction – Washington's Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Finally, Chapter VI theorizes how Puritan spirituality has come to shape contemporary American culture by reading the tenets, sentiment, and religious and expressive practices first initiated in Shepard's Cambridge against the ideology informing Alcoholics Anonymous' 12-Step program.

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For Maman Shirin and Daddy Alex

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Francis Moore came to the Massachusetts Bay colony with his wife and their two children some time in the mid-1630s. A coppersmith by trade, Moore was also the owner of a tannery business. He became a member of Thomas Shepard's church – Cambridge's first – on the 22nd of May, 1638 at about the age of fifty. Moore began participating in local government soon thereafter, rising to occupy the position of constable in 1659. Although little else is known about Moore's life, records show that at his death in 1671 Moore possessed barely fifty-seven pounds and owed what at the time would be considered a scant fifty acres, thus placing him below average in economic status.¹

Modest as Moore's social standing was, he was still rated highly by New England's congregational order, Moore having served as an elder at the head of Jonathan Mitchell's pastorate. Yet in the grand scheme of things, Moore's ascent to respectability, which included his becoming an exemplary member of his spiritual community, would not have been possible had he not complied that late Spring day in 1638 with the requirement of giving a personal account of the experiences leading to his conversion, a demand required of all who wished to join a church in the early Bay colony. A one-time public performance, yet one often rehearsed privately in the presence of an attending minister, this ritual was devised by New England's early leaders, Shepard among them, to consolidate congregational authority. Granting full communion only to those who could attest to having experienced saving grace, ministers used the rite to create religious consensus in their parishes. By conferring the title of "visible saint" on applicants who could deliver a convincing testament of faith, ministers could keep those whose speeches did not give evidence of sincere conviction out of their churches. In turn, those whose speeches met the demand were admitted to their folds and considered full members.

From both a practical and ideological perspective, to ask believers to deliver conversion narratives was a way Puritan ministers enforced a uniform conception of regeneration and established a definitive picture of how faith should emerge in a believer's life. As a test that determined which individuals truly had faith, and thus, most probably predestined to heaven, conversion narratives also helped ecclesiastical leaders

respond to doctrinal (and therefore social) challenges to the nascent colony, particularly in terms of the conflicting outlooks settlers held as to what orthodox religious practice could and should be in the Massachusetts Bay.

As Philip Gura has recently shown in his study of Puritan radicalism in early New England, between 1630 and 1660, among the approximately twenty thousand colonists who settled, “there were many individuals, ministers as well as laymen, whose Puritanism was not consonant with the official ideology of the Bay Colony” (4-5). Contrary to popular opinion, the Bay colony was not a theocratic hegemony. In fact, by the 1640’s, New England’s non-separating congregationalists were protesting bitterly against the steady influx of opposing denominations – Familists, Seekers, Ranters, Adamites, Quakers, Separatists, and Antinomians – all of whom sought New England as a place to live and practice their religion.

To be sure that no member of these groups would gain entrance to their settlements and churches, Bay ministers asked congregational applicants to describe their encounters with grace, whereby narrators told of their spiritual struggles, God’s involvement in their lives, and how they gradually – but surely – arrived at a conviction of saving faith. As narrators spoke, they demonstrated their conformity with their minister’s doctrine of salvation. Their accounts emphasized the importance of humility and persistence, explaining how they had slowly come to accept the view that spiritual endeavor, and struggle, was a crucial and life-long feature of sincere conviction, and that uncertainty, rather than assurance, was faith’s most certain term.

As John Demos has shown, and as Moore’s case exemplifies, to become a visible saint in the Massachusetts Bay colony brought with it the possibility of attaining certain social advantages. Church membership gave individuals the right to oversee a town’s civic concerns for example, and bestowed upon those who were lucky enough the honor of becoming an elder at the head of a church (148). But because all things social in the early Bay colony also came to involve religion, becoming a visible saint also meant, perhaps more than anything else, that a Christian had the right to think of himself (as John Winthrop explained in “A Model of Christian Charity”) as “hold[ing]” a “conformity with” God’s “works . . . for the preservation and good of the whole, and the glory of His greatness,” meaning that, as genuine convert, a saint could think of himself

as part of a broader community of believers who had come to the New World to enact God's providential design (27).

For students of early New England, Moore's conversion narrative, one of 51 Shepard transcribed between 1638-1645, exemplifies a short-lived tradition in America's cultural history.² The accounts he recorded attest to the spiritual involvement of many of Massachusetts' earliest settlers. They offer a picture of how early Puritan colonists grappled their faith, as well as the degree to which their understanding of conversion corresponded with their minister's theology – for example, that regeneration could only emerge from a lengthy (rather than instantaneous) process that brought with it heart-wrenching “humiliation and sorrow for sin past” (Shepard *Confessions* 36). While no Puritan ever had a surefire assurance of his salvation, applicants still offered their accounts as a way for congregations to hear the steps they had taken to salvage their souls and lead pious lives, an affair that left most converts “oft troubled” rather than undoubtedly optimistic (51). Shepard's transcriptions – or the *Confessions*, as they are now known – thus portray Christians who have engaged (and in many cases are still engaging) in emotionally exhaustive periods of introspection; who, like Elizabeth Olbon, whose statement is one of the first Shepard documented, persistently “hunger and thirst after Christ” even if they were convinced that Christ was theirs and that they belonged to His church (41).³

With no way to show their faith materially, confessors spoke of it instead, giving evidence of their understanding that, as one narrator put it, only “Christ [can] supply spiritual needs and necessities” (59). Narratives therefore served an instructive purpose, bringing Puritan doctrine to life as congregants learned from and identified with each other's accounts and experiences. Accounts reinforced the injunction that it was never “enough to know” that one is a sinner to be considered a saint. They taught that a believer must also feel grace flowing in his heart, including the assurances and doubts that encompassed the process of genuine regeneration; that there had to be “practice . . . joyn'd with [such] knowledge,” and that to be considered “a Christian of a very clear discerning,” converts had to take measures to justify their faith (Mather “What Must I Do To Be Saved” 59).⁴

In *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety*, Michael McGiffert has cited how

the Puritan conversion narrative was a distinctly “New England invention” (138).⁵ While the ritual was employed far more widely in New England than across the Atlantic, part of its uniqueness can be attributed to the fact that it brings to light how, as Perry Miller once observed, the doctrine of regeneration early Bay ministers held was unique from a more traditional Calvinist theology, different in that believers, while having no absolute assurance of their election, were taught that they still had the power to ready themselves for its arrival. So while most Calvinist ministers, including Shepard, agreed that God's will regarding the destiny of His elect could never be known, the Bay's religious leaders also promoted the idea that regeneration could still, to a certain degree, be a matter of empirical observation based on a believer's actions – and words. This discrepancy in doctrine is reflected in the distinctiveness of each conversion narrative as well as the ritual as a whole despite conventions of the form. And as we shall see, it is also an important factor that can help contemporary readers better gauge what it meant to have faith in early New England.⁶

Taken as a whole, the following dissertation argues that the Puritan conversion narrative can provide readers with important clues as to not only how the Puritans practiced their faith but also how their practice has come to influence early American religious culture by setting a benchmark for how later Protestants understand and convey their spiritual encounters. On the one hand, my study attempts to measure the ritual's impact on Protestantism by examining how the conversion narrative has informed – and in some ways continues to shape – the way believers regard their spirituality. On the other hand, it considers, within the space provided, some of the literary responses the Puritan conversion narrative has generated in an attempt to clarify the relationship between Puritan theology and its subsequent absorption and transformation within Protestant America. Looked at in terms of the evolution of the original Massachusetts Bay experiment, Puritan theology adjusted to a denominational pluralism within the developing community as well as to increasingly secular contexts. But despite this adaption, a process that, I argue, continues to this day, a decidedly Puritan form of the conversion narrative survives. My dissertation tries to explain how this has come to be the case.

As it does, it hopes to answer the obvious but inevitable question as to why, in a

time when cultural studies assimilates a wide range of alternative viewpoints, readers should once again care enough about the Puritans to examine their lives, their writing, and their contribution to American culture. As an early Americanist, my primary objective, germane to both religious studies and literary scholarship, is to make a clear case for the importance and continued relevance of early colonial culture: what I see as the powerful (though currently understated) impact Puritanism has on how later generations of Americans think about and express themselves within the context of their spirituality. So while I offer the conversion narrative as a way of assessing how Puritanism operated on the lives it touched directly, meaning those living in the 17th century, I also explain how the tradition of relating one's involvement with grace evolved (but also in many ways stayed the same) from the type speech Francis Moore gave in 1638 to become not just a “New England invention” but a decidedly American one as well.⁷

Like any work of merit, my project paves the way for future scholarship by making inroads for the fertile connections that deserve to be made between New England's first settlers and texts (and authors) as diverse as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. More often than not, readers fail to notice how these works – classics in their own right – may in fact owe their reality to the creative energies intrinsic to Puritan life: to the way believers were asked to consider, construct, and express their spiritual encounters in accord with a normative view of what these experiences meant. As the following chapters will show, the act of describing one's regeneration brought with it expressive energies at times inconsistent with the ritual's demands. The practice called on individuals to self-consciously capture experience, to extract its spiritual significance, and to convey an understanding of this significance with reference to their lives. It asked believers to lay bare the innermost contents of their minds and hearts, and to explain precisely why they felt the Lord had saved them. But at the same time, it also petitioned applicants to account for their experiences conventionally – in a way that could satisfy the demands of their audience.

This tension is reflected in the accounts Shepard recorded which, while theologically consistent and for the most part uniform in their content and structure,

nevertheless attest to 51 unique interpretations of faith told with enough art and dexterity to allow congregational audiences, and modern readers, to be able to differentiate one from another. As this dissertation moves chronologically to trace the ritual's progress from Shepard's time to the 20th century in oral testimonies and in writing (and in non-fiction and fiction), it presents these congruences and contrasts as a way to reappraise the Puritans as well as familiar (and less familiar) works of American literature. It frames Shepard's *Confessions* as a foundational moment – and foundational literary text – in which a distinctly American tradition of Protestant spiritual confession began, and tries to uncover how America's earliest settlers grappled with and described their spirituality. With any luck, this dissertation will, I hope, bring readers to more fully appreciate Puritans like Moore as real people rather than stereotypes or abstract figures, where the faith conveyed in Shepard's notebook can bring us to see the Puritans as individuals who honestly and bravely lived out their lives and their faith in terms not altogether different from those who came after them, including ourselves.

[2]

In “Individualism and the Puritan Imagination,” Ellwood Johnson proposes that we reconsider the way we think about Puritanism by focusing on its inherent individualism. He argues that despite whatever social (and specifically non-Puritan) realities are suggested by the term – an emphasis on social independence and self-reliance, the turning of man away from historical, cultural, and religious traditions – it can still be used to describe Puritan culture. Johnson claims that because believers were so often instructed to turn to themselves to discover the moral significance of their lives, their faith ultimately became a matter of individual thought, and their writing, a medium in which “all the possibilities of individual psychological power” are explored (230).

While Johnson is certainly right to point out the importance of independent thought to Puritan religious practice, he must also acknowledge how ministers consistently instructed their flock, as Thomas Hooker had, that God not only “calls for the daily attendance of our thoughts,” but will in fact “execute punishment upon us” if the duty “to divulge them openly” is ignored however much believers may have been encouraged to freely think or speak their minds (“Wandering Thoughts” 308). Rather than independent

thinking alone, then, it was a balance between self-governing thought and the imperative to make one's thoughts known – to God and to one's spiritual community – that becomes what Johnson identifies as Puritanism's "key to American cultural history" (232).

Johnson's point is still well-taken. Introspection and self-examination, cornerstones of Puritan faith, are themes that find deep root in America's fertile literary soil. It was this spirit of introspection, in fact, that led to the Antinomian Controversy of 1636-38, which threatened the Congregationalist system ministers like Shepard sought to establish.

Taking center stage in the Bay Colony when Anne Hutchinson, minister John Wheelwright, and to a lesser extent John Cotton were accused of disseminating the view that saving grace took precedence over moral law in a believer's regeneration, the dispute was precipitated by the possibility that individuals could hold autonomous power over evaluating grace's effect on their lives.⁸ As John McWilliams has observed, this ideological crisis "nearly wrecked Boston's church, if not New England's commonwealth, at the very outset," dividing "ministers, the churches, the deputies and the Freemen among themselves and against each other" (74). But while it may have exposed the fledgling colony's lack of social and ideological unity, the controversy was soon put down when the Bay's ministers and civic leaders, most notably John Winthrop, acted through legal channels to punish Hutchinson and her followers.

It was against this backdrop that Shepard first urged his congregants to make public their confessions of saving faith. The ritual defused the controversy by allowing individuals to assert their own evidence of grace within a controlled setting that adhered to a strict formula. Displaying independent thought, Hutchinson had failed to realize that her position on sanctification denied her spiritual community the basis for determining whether her relationship with grace was truly authentic. This, Hutchinson felt, was something which only grace could communicate to believers.

Perhaps the reason why readers so often discount Johnson's notion of Puritanism's inherent individuality, or even the idea that New England Calvinists could be artistically expressive (or that the Puritans are a decisive part of our cultural inheritance), is because of the tendency to privilege early Puritan culture as hegemonic and conformist rather than heterogeneous. If, by chance, Hutchinson and her supporters had convinced the Bay's ruling elite of their position, historians would have no doubt told a different story about

New England's first decades. Unfortunately, the propensity to see the Puritans as uncompromising in their fight to preserve civic and ecclesiastic cohesiveness discounts differences between individuals and their beliefs, a propensity which can also be attributed, at least in part, to our natural prejudices to all things "Puritanical," as well as to literary, scholarly, and popular portrayals that tend to misidentify the subjective nature of Puritan religious practice as mere anomaly.⁹

There is no doubt that Perry Miller's *The New England Mind*, published in 1939, has also contributed to the oversimplified way one tends to think about the Puritans. In it, Miller calls on readers to see Puritan society as uniform, particularly with regard to their thought and expression, arguing that "the entire expression of the period" should conveniently be considered "as a single body of writing" – "the product of a single intelligence" since "the first three generations in New England paid almost unbroken allegiance to a unified body of thought" (vii). Despite grouping the Puritans as if they all thought the same, a contention that later scholarship has largely disproved, Miller, like Johnson after him, also notes Puritanism's emphasis on voluntarism, a feature readers do not typically associate with Puritan culture and that Miller was correct to identify. In his study, Miller describes Puritanism's "cosmic optimism," the idea that despite the possibility of damnation, adherents could still find hope that they were saved. For example, a believer could look to his choices, both former and present, and infer clues as to his salvation, thereby extracting a certain degree of control over his spiritual destiny even when he knew he had none. This idea is, of course, in contrast to the traditionally accepted picture of Puritanism as a religion in which believers had to constantly conform and the view that they could not look beyond the despair that came with not knowing whether one was damned or saved. But because of Miller's unapologetically monolithic portrayal, readers – and later historians – have failed to recognize his call to see how Puritanism's stress on absolutism could lead to a theology that acknowledged the individual consciousnesses necessary in bringing its doctrines to life, just as readers fail to appreciate the fluid rather than static nature of Puritanism itself.

Studying the Puritan conversion narrative can correct this oversight. The *Confessions* reveal how ordinary individuals came to regard their faith in early Massachusetts, as well as the extent to which their ideas merged with each other and in a

fashion consistent with the Bay's ruling elite. A handful of more recent scholars – George Selement, David Hall, Lisa Gordis, Janice Knight, Patricia Caldwell, and McGiffert – have taken steps to correct some of the unchecked assumptions one has of the Puritans. They have done so by focusing on the social basis of New England's early cultural production in particular. Writing in 1984 about the place of popular religion in the early colonies, Hall defends this point of view, arguing that the field of Puritan studies should turn away from Miller's "special style of intellectual history" because it creates an "imbalance" in the region's history that, to Hall, "continues to demand correction" ("Toward a History" 49, 51).

Like Hall, the scholars mentioned above have similarly argued that in order to understand the Puritans one must understand not only the doctrine (meaning the ideas) informing their culture but also how the servants, plowmen, and housewives who filled Puritan meeting houses were as much the makers of their faith as their leaders. In *The Art of Prophesying*, for example, Teresa Toulouse has convincingly shown how ministers were persuaded by members of their church as much as they may have been influenced by orthodox doctrine, and that they often adapted their theology – and their sermons – to fit the varying needs of their respective settlements. Rather than view Puritan culture as largely in accord, social historians see it as a heterogeneous mix of ideas, people, practices, and customs, pointing to discrepancies between what scholars like Miller have postulated as "The New England Way" and the day-to-day experiences of people who (supposedly) lived under its might.

Owing a debt to both social and intellectual historian, my dissertation takes a middle approach. It appeals to a cross-disciplinary methodology that looks at literature in the context of social ideology, rhetoric, religion, and psychology, and suggests that though New Englanders followed their ministers closely they also, at times and often unknowingly, resisted and therefore altered the social and spiritual demands placed on them. In what follows, I try to test the social historian's underlying premise that New England's lay men and women were anything but passive; that, as Hall maintains, "they had interests of their own," and that "they brought distinctive needs to the making of [their] religion" ("Toward a History" 53). As we shall see, approaching early New England culture and the Puritan conversion narrative from a more eclectic

methodological framework can help answer several important questions about the period. For one, it allows us to see the extent to which ministers really spoke for their people instead of to them, or whether there was ever any real consensus of thought and practice in the Bay colony. Even more importantly, it treats theology in terms of the people it touched, giving readers a better sense of what the experience of being a Puritan was like.

Recorded privately and without the intention of ever being published, the *Confessions* can also add a new dimension to our understanding of Puritan life by shedding light on the boundary between public performance and private experience that shaped its religious practices and influenced the expressive tendencies of its individual believers. As the next chapter outlines in detail, early conversion narratives teach us that being a convert in early New England meant touching on a specific set of discursive touchstones informed by ministerial expectation, the testimony (and example) of other converts, and a believer's own understanding of Calvinist doctrine. The *Confessions* consequently uncover how converts joined their personal experiences, often rather inventively, with an idea of how they felt a legitimate believer should think, feel, act, and sound out loud. At the same time, Shepard's notebook shows that while narrators tried to convey a new sense of self-understanding resonant with Puritan doctrine, they often violated the ritual's terms in their effort to recapitulate the ineffable experience of their conversion. The result, I argue, is that applicants stretched the ritual's formal stipulations as they were agreeing to them in a process that helped them shape the content, and therefore the definition, of their faith.

Put another way, the dogma that pushed believers to “empty” themselves “of all self-confidence” and to declare “the weakness and insufficiency of all [their] carnal props and reasonings” also asked them to breach the terms of their self-rejection by obliging them to author the content (and in some cases, even the meaning) of their spiritual encounters (Hooker “Poor Doubting Christian” 1). Coming to terms with their worldly selves only to forsake what they found, converts were loath to realize that their personalities and lives could not so easily be subsumed under Puritanism's requirements that, among other things, paradoxically urged believers who feared hell to run evermore toward it. Not surprisingly, conversion narratives repeatedly voice anxiety, particularly over the possibility of misidentifying assurance. Indeed the visible saint's pervasive tone

was one of doubt rather than assurance which, while seemingly contradictory, was nevertheless consistent with a theology that believed that confidence in one's spiritual assurance implied an adherent who had not properly understood the essence of a faith contingent on epistemic and ontological uncertainty.

By pointing to their fears, narrators gained the ability insinuate their election. Demonstrating their capacity to view their lives according to how a saint was thought to behave, they gestured at their faith and their willingness to believe even though this ran counter to the doctrine of predestination. However unsure of their election they may have been, converts still played their parts, still gave their speeches, and were still identified as visible saints. It is in this sense that, as Caldwell has suggested, the ritual fulfilled certain needs. It allowed believers to play an active role in their spiritual fate even though they knew that only God could effect its outcome. It helped them lay vent to the difficult and often paradoxical demands of their religion, allowing them to speak openly of their concerns as well as express the hopes they held for themselves as God's chosen.

This dissertation asks how converts went about achieving these needs as it traces how the Puritans, and then later Protestants, substantiated their faith to themselves and others. In her groundbreaking study, Caldwell maintains that in Shepard's *Confessions* readers can hear "the first faint murmurings of a truly American voice emerging from little-known, ordinary people." To be sure, Caldwell's work has shown the importance of including ordinary people to the American literary canon, individuals who acted on the impulse "that their lives were worth writing – or talking – about" (*The Puritan Conversion Narrative* 41). Rather than lack imaginative or artistic power, applicants formulated statements aimed at convincing their audience of their place, if not in heaven, then at least in a church. My study inquires how they accomplished this feat. It considers the consequences of successfully delivered conversion narratives as it focuses on how the act of proving one's faith and talking about one's spiritual encounters has evolved in later periods, social settings, and in literature.

[3]

In the next five chapters, I trace the Puritan conversion narrative's impact on American culture by considering how the ritual evolved as an expressive mode and in

literature. My intention is to demonstrate that while the conversion narrative's significance may have transformed in response to increasingly pluralistic and secular contexts (whereby it would be technically wrong to call later Protestant conversion narratives necessarily "Puritan"), its formal, rhetorical, and thematic features nevertheless expand to accommodate changing values.

Chapter II begins by discussing the form and content of the *Confessions* as well as the spiritual and social ideology driving it. Though never intended for publication, I argue that the accounts Cambridge's flock delivered posses a clear coherence that suggests their minister's influence. But while narratives conform to Shepard's understanding of how sinners should come to conversion, they also offer unique instances of Providence's workings in believers' lives. So as each narrative reflects the individual subjectivity responsible for its construction, each also offers a slightly different picture of faith and of conversion.¹⁰ I suggest, then, that while successful conversion narratives meant a convert had referred to a set of rhetorical touchstones that enabled him to imply that he had been saved, his performance also allotted him the space to retain a private understanding of his experiences, and that the ritual consecrated this experience as well as this subjective space. The result is that conversion narratives challenged the ritual's ideological demands while simultaneously meeting its performative standards. Applicants were accepted to Shepard's congregation as saints. Yet each confirmation, each convert accepted to the fold, represented a new narrative – and hence a new understanding – of conversion. Early Puritan converts consequently pushed the frontier of their faith while absorbing it. For modern-day readers, their statements attest to conversion's dynamic nature amid its conventional form, thereby giving us a new way of understanding and appreciating the kind of spiritual practice upheld in the early Bay.

As Chapter II identifies the rhetorical parameters that led the Cambridge congregation to accept applicants to its church, it also interrogates Caldwell's conception of the Puritan conversion narrative as the beginning of "American expression," inquiring just how expressive converts could have been when the ritual required applicants to subsume their imaginative needs under the force of moral instruction. Looking at several accounts, I call on readers to reconsider Caldwell's position by showing how converts were creative only insofar as they were able to accommodate their private experiences to

their audience's expectations of what a sincere convert was supposed to say (and as I discuss in Chapter III, feel). I pose that it is in this act of accommodation that readers can measure just how inventive Shepard's converts could be, an act that becomes crucial to how subsequent Protestants construct their spiritual experiences in order to satisfy both their spiritual and expressive needs as well as the demands of an emerging reading audience.

Turning to the question of what the experience of preparing for and delivering a conversion narrative was like, my next chapter looks at the *Confessions* through a psychological framework as I trace the emotional and creative experience of becoming a visible saint. Chapter III studies the affective ferment the doctrine that ministers like Shepard asked believers to endure, and explores how the tension between a believer's assurances and doubts held sway over the creation – and hence the significance – of his narrative. I begin by looking at studies in the field – those by Charles L. Cohen, Murray G. Murphey, and Andrew Delbano in particular – that have probed Puritan culture from a psycho-social perspective. Relying on Cathy Caruth's recent work on trauma's relationship to its narrative re-telling to animate my discussion, I explain how the preparationist theology informing the conversion narrative triggered believers to develop a recognizable pathology inherent to the ritual's performance and to conversion in general. As we shall see, the conversion narrative's tendency to ask converts to understand and disclose their spiritual experiences in ambivalent terms pushed them to a state of “ontological insecurity” – what the modern social psychologist R. D. Laing has described as a reality in which individuals live with the stipulation that their own interests run counter to the demands of their society. Chapter III sees self-denial and even self-loathing as crucial terms of moral compliance in Puritan New England that, when performed, gave congregations a way to discern whether a believer really had faith. But as Laing would argue, a convert's inner psyche, while suppressed, was never destroyed. Chapter III asks whether we can see traces of this in the *Confessions*, as the practice of overcoming oneself also places significance on the self. One of the central paradoxes of Puritan faith, this conflict was resolved as each believer interpreted emotional turmoil itself as a crucial signifier of faith whereby ambivalence and emotional equivocation were themselves seen as hallmarks of visible sainthood.

Encouraged to accept uncertainty as an indication of election, converts learned to cultivate it. Yet this had psychological and explicitly dissociative consequences. I suggest, then, that essential to imagining what it was like to be a convert is understanding how believers simultaneously embraced a position of hesitancy and assurance, one that divided them along the lines of private and public self-understanding. Never knowing whether they were truly saints, converts were still labeled as such. I argue that this contrast, or split between what a convert felt he was versus how his community saw him, created a basic autobiographic conflict, one where the life represented in a conversion narrative became distinct from the narrator describing his life.

Implementing the conventions of an acceptable performance, converts told stories about themselves that encouraged approval, their speeches permitting them to move within a realm of acceptability even as they saw themselves as unacceptable sinners. Applying this idea to the *Confessions*, one sees how the so-called “authentic” identity literary critic Lionel Trilling first qualified in *Sincerity and Authenticity* emerges in each conversion narrative – a persona upon which applicants were identified as saints on the basis of their emotional performances but whose more personal, interior, or “sincere” self remained sheltered from the met demands of its publicly recognized counterpart. Chapter III offers this opposition – a conflict on the one hand psychic and on the other hand narratological – as a starting point for appraising early Puritan religious life as well as its impact on later works of self-representation, including those with a decidedly secular slant – Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* being the best example.

In contrast to the oral testimonies Shepard required of his congregational applicants, Chapter IV follows the conversion narrative's development in writing. I link the ritual to Joanna Brooks' work in the field, which argues for the importance of black Atlantic authorship to colonial New England and American letters more generally. In this chapter, I offer reasons as to how and why Puritan confession evolved in its spiritual and social dimensions to take on new political, rhetorical, and literary purposes in 18th century New England, centering my discussion on John Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings* and James Albert Gronniosaw's *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars*.

I begin by showing how these texts grew specifically out of the social, political,

and religious circumstances that historians attribute to the religious movement best known as the Great Awakening. As Michael Warner has shown, by the 1730's and 1740's, a Protestantism of consensus and unitary authority had suffered considerable erosion as a result of expanding public exposure to contending religious viewpoints circulated in print. What was once a professional matter among ministers – what comprised a true conversion, for example – increasingly became the subject of public debate. I maintain that these disputes, represented by the Awakening itself, forced a break with the conventions and practices of a more orthodox Calvinism (57-8). As new conceptions of faith were discussed and alternatively denounced and praised, New England began to see in writing spiritual narratives penned by common men and women and published for broad audiences. Taken collectively, these often harrowing accounts of sin and redemption offer an alternative view to the kind of spiritual experience 17th century converts reported, one marked especially by a shift in emphasis from collective to individual accountability.

Chapter IV argues that it was out of these circumstances that a tradition of black Atlantic spiritual autobiography grew. But as we shall see, the conception of Protestant faith authors like Gronniosaw and Marrant expressed was also driven by a confessional tradition established in the previous century. Like Shepard's congregation, black Atlantic autobiographers offered their readers the story of their regeneration. And just like a century before, their accounts were similarly concerned with proving their faith's sincerity through the credibility of their statements. But instead of petitioning to a small congregation led by a local minister, black converts communicated their faith to a much larger, faceless reading audience, making a broad case not only for their conversions but also for equal consideration as Christians. They accomplished this by appealing to the religious (and Puritan) custom of applying hagiography to experience – of seeing life as one long conversion story – as they portrayed themselves, and their experiences, as supreme examples of Christian humility. Expressing their faith along normative lines by grounding them within a definitive literary tradition, black converts achieved their rhetorical purpose, justifying the validity of their conversions while gaining social and, in some ways, literary approval from a primarily white readership who, in approving their lives, also endorsed the tale of Christian progress they read.

Gronniosaw and Marrant converted adversity into a sign of spiritual election, endowing their lives supernatural significance as their autobiographies served as models to other minority Christians in the same way members of Shepard's flock showed each other what it took to be a visible saint. Just as Brooks emphasizes the spiritual content and value of texts we often consider "secular" because we have given in to the idea that American history has progressed along a secular curve, Chapter IV describes how Puritan spirituality suffused into the spirit of a more Universalist modality, effecting it in ways not previously considered. I theorize that the reason we perhaps don't notice the type of faith the Puritans felt and expressed in later centuries is because we tend to overlook authors like Gronniosaw and Marrant, thinking of them (whether we'd like to admit it or not) as marginal rather than iconic, and hence, not culturally representative or relevant. Accordingly, Chapter IV again points to the importance of writing produced by ordinary (rather than elite) members of colonial society, making a claim for their place in the American literary canon.

Looking at how black Atlantic authors chose to represent their conversions – in a spirit of forbearance, self-control, and ambivalence – I suggest that their experience of articulating faith was on par with the performances delivered in Shepard's church, and that black Atlantic autobiography should therefore be seen as a place where we can observe Puritanism's influence on 18th century culture. By establishing how this genre owes its formal and ideological considerations to the 17th century conversion narrative, my examination critiques the kind of scholarship led by Henry Louis Gates, William Andrews, and Vincent Carretta, who read early black Atlantic autobiography as slave narratives, thereby minimizing Christianity's – and conversion's – influence on its authors and their lives. Chapter IV corrects this oversight, suggesting that conversion should be considered a hallmark of this literary tradition much in the way Gates considers the trope of the Talking Book its most distinctive literary feature.

Changing gears to consider the conversion narrative within the context of literary fiction, Chapter V reflects on the ways Protestant conversion has been figured in the 19th century as I point to how authors borrowed from its conventions to both structure and inform their work. To note how the conversion narrative is characterized in 19th century literature, or what F.O. Matthiessen and others have widely (and rightly) acknowledged

as a period of American literary renaissance, is to realize the conversion narrative's cultural relevance in a time of increasing literary and national self-consciousness. To make this argument, I narrow my focus to examine how conversion is represented in two canonical authors: Washington Irving and Herman Melville. Both Irving and Melville held an affinity for early New England history, literature, and the power of the Puritan imagination, and conversion weighed heavily on their minds. Starting with Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," a short story not typically considered in terms of conversion, I explain how Irving adapts the formal and, to a degree, the theological and social parameters commonly assigned to the conversion narrative to develop his tale. I also argue that "Rip Van Winkle" is Irving's deliberate attempt to not only lampoon an emerging American culture but to examine its connection to New England's Puritan past, particularly the ways in which members of society are identified, judged, and accepted.

The second half of Chapter V considers how Melville's *Moby-Dick* can be read as a spiritual narrative and as a text that owes its organization and many of its concerns to the form of spirituality in which Shepard's converts engaged at Cambridge. Concentrating on the novel's opening chapters ending with Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah (and conversion), I describe how Ishmael guides his narrative along the same path that early New Englanders used to steer theirs. As readers follow Ishmael from his solitary "loomings" in the first chapter to Mapple's self-conscious public performance in Chapter 9, they experience a narrative marked by advances and retreats – assurances and doubts, movements forward and back – that characterize the structure, style, and psychological activity Puritan conversion narratives typically offer. The result is a sequence of chapters that both read and feel like one of Shepard's *Confessions*. As such, the Puritan conversion narrative offers eagle-eyed readers not only an alternative way to appraise Melville's work but also a new means of better seeing Puritanism's impact on American letters while demonstrating how less overtly religious texts often cast a wide spiritual net, one readers often miss.

In Chapter VI, I turn to how the ritual instituted in Shepard's congregation still plays a contributing role in American society today. While this topic deserves a separate study of its own, I narrow my approach to consider one of America's most prominent contemporary fellowships – Alcoholics Anonymous – whose 12-step program shares a

clear (though as yet unexplored) affinity with Calvinist doctrine and the spiritual practices Massachusetts Bay ministers required of their communicants. Like the formal steps preachers encouraged congregants to undergo in their effort to prepare their souls for regeneration, AA lays for its members a framework for regeneration through which members adopt a new way of thinking about themselves in the context of their actions, relationships, and with regard to a “Higher Power” in whose will members place their fate.

Continuing to pursue the question of how Americans have come to understand, identify, and represent spiritual conviction, I shed light on the rhetorical and ritual practices alcoholics in recovery are asked to perform. I maintain that at its core, the plan both AA and those in the medical and social-work communities outline for patients centers on verbal communication: on addicts sharing their experiences and tales of alcoholism with others. By encouraging members to share their stories, or autobiographical vignettes of struggle and perseverance, AA helps members sustain their sobriety as it creates a support community of peers just as the ritual of delivering a conversion narrative brought Bay Puritans together under one faith. In both cases, members are repeatedly introduced to the possibility of relapse, whether in the form of committing another hapless sin or taking “just one drink.” Confronted with this possibility, both Puritan and addict learn to place their faith in a force greater than themselves – in a power that helps them overcome their temptations through an acknowledgment of their debilities. It is in this process that the connection and closeness between Puritan culture and contemporary America becomes most apparent.

To emphasize the close relationship between the *Confessions*, the theology that guided it, and Alcoholics Anonymous, I consider personal stories alcoholics have told both during and after their recovery – those contained in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA's seminal text, as well as those I obtained through interview. Accounts of spiritual change and redemption, these testimonies show how recovery is contingent on not only learning to think newly but also speaking and acting in a way that recapitulates an addict's commitment to sobriety. Guiding this process is the addict's admission, to himself and to others, that he is powerless over alcohol (AA's first “Step”), and that only a force greater than himself can help him prevail over his addiction. I argue that this crucial step is

driven, as is much of AA, by the same ideology Puritan converts applied to their lives and described in their narratives, where Puritan sainthood's most important requirement, to understand that “to walk with God” means knowing that God alone is “able to provide” (as one of Shepard's converts put it), is indistinguishable from the one alcoholics are asked to adopt if they are truly serious about their recovery (63).

Prompting my final chapter is the underlaying premise that while the means and approaches to spiritual experience have certainly multiplied from the time Puritan conversion narratives were delivered, where it is generally accepted that there are many paths to spiritual fulfillment, the fact that all are in some way reliant on a ritual performance that rehearses sanctioned behavior has nevertheless endured and can therefore be examined alongside the *Confessions*. Alcoholics Anonymous' close relationship to early New England's religious culture demonstrates how contemporary conceptions of transcendence are equally as “religious” as they were in previous centuries, and that we should not necessarily consider them secular since religion is not – and has never been – a stable notion, but rather, a “set of forms and changes,” as Charles Taylor has recently explained (19). The following dissertation asks readers think of the Puritan conversion narrative in the same way as Taylor: as a fluid and influential part of how Protestants have come to recognize their spiritual experiences and have learned to relate them to others.¹¹

Notes

¹ Biographical information pertaining to Thomas Shepard's Cambridge congregation, like that of Moore's, come from George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley's (Eds.) *The Confessions of Thomas Shepard* (Colonial Society of Massachusetts [Vol. 58]: Boston, 1981). The significance of Selement and Woolley's transcription cannot be overstated. For one, it gives readers an important look at how laymen and those of the middling and lower classes who did not have the same resources to publish their thoughts as many elites regarded their faith. Shepard's own conversion narrative was first published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts in 1930 (Vol. 27), which underscores the preference early American scholarship has tended to give to what New England's leaders – rather than laymen – wrote as somehow encompassing all of New England thought. In 1972, Michael McGiffert published *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety: Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard*. Yet it was Selement and Woolley who first took the task of transcribing Shepard's church “confessions,” as they are commonly called.

² Though there are many factors that made this the case, it should be noted that the ritual's importance profoundly diminished after the reluctant acceptance of the Halfway covenant among ecclesiastical leaders, which permitted colonists and their children to become congregational members without having to fulfill the requirement of corroborating their conversion. With respect to extant narratives known, there are less than one-hundred other "confessions" currently available: the 4 recorded in Michael Wigglesworth's *Diary* (edited by Edmund S. Morgan) and the 22 recorded in John Fiske's *Notebook* (edited by Robert G. Pope). John Eliot's conversion narratives comprise the remainder. Also, I would here like to suggest the possibility of thinking of the statements Shepard recored as spiritual autobiographies as much as church "confessions", which helps fit them within a broader tradition of confessional disclosure in early American writing that extends – though is not limited to – the genres of lyric poetry, captivity narrative, and autobiography proper. It will be the work of this dissertation to make this connection explicit.

³ As Norman Pettit has discusses in *The Heart Prepared*, however, not every minister preached from a theology of preparation. John Cotton, for example, rejected the idea as did the Antinomians, who considered preparationist theology as encouraging salvation through works rather than grace.

⁴ As Sarah Rivett explains in her study of death-bed confessions, the performance of proving faith is one a convert engaged in his entire life. This idea helps contextualize narrative's like those contained in the *Confessions*, which were delivered only once and were designed exclusively for the purpose of admitting members to a church. Rivett's examination is particularly interesting in how it questions the degree to which believers could ever believe in their sanctification, especially when the status of their election remained unsure even till their last breath. The *Confessions*, Shepard's *Journal*, his sermons, and his *Autobiography* show, however, that this uncertainty was precisely how congregations (and minsters) registered genuine conviction in applicants, whereby uncertainty became the basis of spiritual assurance.

⁵ While this may be the case, a particularly good study of the conversion narrative's history in early modern England is D. Bruce Hindmarsh's *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*. Hindmarsh discusses how thousands of ordinary women and men in the 17th and 18th centuries turned to spiritual autobiography to make sense of their lives. He outlines the emergence of the conversion narrative genre and the revival of the form in the journals of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival, arguing for the subtly different forms of narrative identity that appeared among Wesleyan Methodists, Moravians, Anglicans, Baptists, and others. Still, McGiffert is right no call the Puritan conversion narrative a distinctly American invention because it was in Massachusetts, rather than England, where the form was put into ritual practice as a means of creating religious consensus.

⁶ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 56. As Morgan notes, despite adopting the practice of admitting members to a church on the basis of a sound spiritual confession, church leaders also granted that the signs of election, discerned through the convert's

spiritual confession as well as his subsequent outward actions, were necessarily fallible, a belief consistent with the orthodox view that it was only God who knew with certainty whom He saved and whom He had not. It was the congregation's responsibility to nevertheless try and form an estimate, to try to assure itself of the probability (though never the certainty) of faith in every candidate it accepted. It was generally granted that men, being human, would make mistakes in judging confessions as sound. Consequently, the visible church would remain only an approximation of the invisible, a notion that led some leaders, Thomas Hooker and John Cotton among them, to question the expedience of the practice of ritual confession. By reexamining the practice of confession and the visible sainthood it was derived from the perspective of confessing individuals as opposed to merely the "New England Minds" that conceived of the practice, I hope to point to what the consequence of a faith based on appearance - on token, ritual gesture(s) - may have been on the *individual* minds living in early New England as well as the aftereffect of this tradition as expressed in the region's later literature.

⁷ Among the many studies of American Puritanism's evolution and legacy, I am especially indebted to Miller's *The New England Mind* and *From Colony to Province*, Edmund Morgan's *Visible Saints*, Richard L. Bushman's *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*, Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind*, Larzar Ziff's *Puritanism in America*, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad and Rites of Assent: The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*, Daniel Shea's *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, Andrew Delbanco's *The Puritan Ordeal*, and Michael Colacurcio's *Doctrine and Difference*.

⁸ The heterodox disturbances presented by Roger Williams and Thomas Morton may also have contributed to the institution of the conversion narrative as a formal requirement of church membership. Although the impact and historical significance of these figures is far too complex to outline in the space provided here, for now it will be sufficient to direct my readers to Janice Knight's superb *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts*. In her study, Knight points to the often gaping discrepancy in orthodox belief between New England's ruling party, one which suggests – or at least forces us to question – the possibility as to whether there ever was an orthodox view of religious practice in the early Massachusetts Bay colony. The under-explained remove of Thomas Hooker to the Connecticut valley suggests as much. As John Seelye points out in *Prophetic Waters: The River in Early American Literature and Life*, the continued influx of immigrants to the bay, more than simply destroying John Winthrop's ideal of a single centralized community, appears to have never allowed it to get off the ground in the first place. Still, the idea of ruling a "mixed multitude" rather than an ideologically coherent group was one easily appropriated within the terms of the "orthodox" ruling class, dissension always having had a Scriptural precedent. For this, one need only look to the Book of Exodus. This same typological link is emphatically stressed in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* as well as in the Puritan jeremiad more generally.

⁹ Part of the reason why many of us see the Puritans in this light is undoubtably because of the fact that Puritanism's leaders held a veritable vice-grip over the print trade, which was conveniently located in Boston. Publishing far more extensively than their other New

World settler counterparts, civic and ecclesiastic elites had a clear penchant for writing. It is from this literary corpus that scholarship has most commonly drawn (as well as taught from), although this practice has been now largely discredited thanks to the work of social historians interested in the totality of New England's culture as opposed to that which only its intellectual elites produced.

¹⁰ As Charles L. Cohen has argued in *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience*, all facts indicate that laymen rendered the impact of the specific sermons they heard uniformly and accurately. Yet this does not discount the fact that applicants still made statements unsupported by their minister's theology. The result, as Cohen justly concludes, is that “the laity introduced small changes reflective of individual preoccupations into their accounts . . . [where] every selection represents a talk plucked out of oblivion and accorded peculiar importance” (186-8).

¹¹ One look at contemporary American society shows just how much confession as a public discourse is a dominant part of our culture. One need only look to how Oprah Winfrey has made an industry of public confession, or how the private lives of celebrities exist in a public domain. It seems, in America at least, that individuals who are open and public about themselves are vastly preferred over the private and secretive.

CHAPTER II

PERFORMING THE PART OF PURITAN CONVERT: THE PURITAN CONVERSION NARRATIVE AND THE ELASTICITY OF ASSENT

To historian Sacvan Bercovitch, “the Puritan venture . . . was, above all, a matter of personal self-assertion.” Bercovitch goes on to explain, however, that this assertiveness was paradoxical – built on a complex symbolic, ideological, and rhetorical system in which individuals defined and expressed themselves by means of their assent to the idea that their personal progress was at all times connected to their colony's overall success, particularly as a religious commonwealth (*Rites* 33). For the Massachusetts Bay colony to fulfill its destiny as a spiritual beacon to the Christian world, settlers were told that they had to lend themselves to the task of seeing it under a spiritual light, which meant that they adopt the notion – Calvinist at its basis – that God had brought them to New England to perform His holy work.¹ According to Bercovitch, to live in the early Massachusetts Bay meant that believers had to perform individual acts of assent. It meant that colonists had to agree to their community's spiritual and social prerogatives, which in turn meant seeing theirs as a self-realizing culture in which evidence of God's presence and protection could be readily found for all who sincerely looked – and believed.

To borrow Benedict Anderson's terminology, the Bay colony was truly an “imagined community” (22). It was a settlement where the values of a specific culture and particular people were rationalized and spiritualized (and institutionalized) into a definitive Way, as believers self-consciously defined their community – and themselves – by consenting to a common understanding of what they believed their society should be. Considered in this fashion, we can confidently say that the Bay colony was a settlement established on interpretation, meaning the deliberate choice colonists made to see things according to the principles of their faith and its standards of behavior. This is precisely why Bercovitch contends that the Bay colony was “[b]uilt on a series of free and voluntary commitments” even if its leaders repeatedly asked adherents to acquiesce their personal interests for the greater good of the entire colony. Still, by identifying the Bay colony as a “community grounded . . . in private acts of will” rather than in an inflexible system of theocratic stipulations, Bercovitch's reading goes against a more traditional

conception of Puritan culture (*Rites* 12-3). After all, one does not typically associate terms like “free” and “voluntary” (and “individualism”) with the Puritans, let alone a phrase like “personal self-assertion.”

Speaking for a modern American generation who had vested themselves in an anti-Puritan tradition beginning, arguably, with Hawthorne’s probing if unflattering analysis of Puritan culture, William Carlos Williams once wrote in *The American Grain* that the Puritans’ greatest asset was their overwhelmingly petty stubbornness. Placing all Puritans into one class, Williams saw them as a people who, “without ground on which to rest their judgements,” chose New England as the sight of their “perversions,” “malice,” and “envy” (68). To Williams, the Puritans were the *last* people on earth a person could equate with principles like freedom or voluntary assent, ones that Bercovitch, in contrast, identifies as the cornerstone of their culture. Instead, Williams characterized them as a willful group of religious zealots who rejected whatever it was that immediately repulsed them, a characterization that has survived to this day.

More than anything else, Williams considered the Puritans a people fed by an insatiable appetite to “re-name . . . things seen” into their own likeness, regardless of anyone’s wishes (63).² Yet in the face of such criticism, there is still a remarkable degree of flexibility within Puritan culture that many don’t suppose. Reconstructing their experiences into terms resonant with their Calvinist understanding of life as an opportunity to serve and glorify the Lord, Puritan New Englanders incorporated what Williams described tongue-in-cheek as a “jargon of God” not only to realize their social vision as a chosen people but to also speak of their individual moods, hopes, and fears in a way that gave their existence significance (64). Working under their civic and spiritual leaders’ guidance in pursing a plan of religious reform, Massachusetts’ earliest settlers sought to make their lives – and through their lives, their communities – into shining spiritual examples. To accomplish this goal, they formed their settlements, as John Winthrop famously sermonized in “A Model of Christian Charity,” so that “every man might have need of the other, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection.” In this vein, Bay colonists were repeatedly enjoined to see themselves as united in spirit and in purpose so that each individual “might have the more occasion to manifest the work of the [Holy] Spirit” through “their faith, patience,

obedience” (25-6).

Doing so, however, would have been impossible had the majority of individuals not agreed to this agenda. And as numerous studies have shown, the ideal of being “knit” by faith, law, and custom was actually quite far from the colony’s early reality.³ Not everyone found the Massachusetts Bay’s direction and management appealing. Yet this reality helps clarify Bercovitch’s interpretation of Puritan culture as having been built on individual acts of will rather than simply on cohesion and control. To be a Puritan one had to choose to be. Individuals had to *want* to be a part of the Massachusetts Bay settlement in order to belong to it, just as they had to want salvation if it was ever to be had. As Bay leaders made very clear, these came down to the choice a person made to agree to see his or her life, actions, and words as never “merely private,” but instead, as “part of a communal venture” (*Rites* 33).

An important question to ask, then, and which this chapter pursues, is how the private became public in the early Bay colony, especially when overt forms of self-assertion were routinely censured. As Carolyn Eastman has asserted, Winthrop’s “Model,” a compact to which all colonists were expected to adhere, gained its authority through its invocation of a united people sharing a singleness of mind and purpose (4-5). Those who wished to participate in this vision – those who wanted to be a member of the colony – had to do more than merely think of themselves as part of it. They also had to learn to comport themselves, in speech and often in writing, to the stipulations of the Bay’s dominant ideology, becoming public players in its creation and maintenance by engaging in what Charles Taylor would call its “webs of interlocution” whereby members could feel themselves contributing to as well as compliant with its pervading norms by subscribing to the Bay leadership’s conception of an ideal public.⁴

To establish this ideal, the colony first had to identify those who truly wanted to be a part of it. It had to distinguish who was in and who was out. It was for this reason that first generation ministers like Thomas Shepard asked believers to account for their spiritual experiences before being included to a church. As a ritual, or rite of passage, the conversion narrative was devised as a test to see which believers were truly compliant with the theocratic and moral vision Bay leaders hoped to carry out. The requirement of delivering a personal account of faith granted individuals an opportunity to demonstrate

their assent to the Bay's religious and civic norms within a public forum, allowing them to show their community and its leaders that they genuinely believed in the colony's Christian (and colonial) imperatives.

On their own volition, applicants whose statements were recorded in the *Confessions* spoke of the personal transformation they had privately experienced, freely offering this information to their listeners to examine and accept. Placing his trust in the Lord, His ministers, and in His church, applicants like Henry Dunster explained, as if in a single voice, how the “Lord hath made me bid adieu [to] all worldly treasures” and “corruptions” in an effort to confirm – to themselves and to their congregation – the spiritual conviction they felt in their hearts (164).

On a federal level, conversion narratives gave evidence of Puritanism's spiritual and social triumph in New England. By having adherents relate the process of their increasing commitment to the model of regeneration they taught, ministers could point to the legitimacy and authority of Puritanism's congregational structure to observers abroad while controlling the way faith was understood and practiced in New England. As converts gave evidence of their faith, they also brought their minister's theology life, giving it an added force that verified the power of his preaching while simultaneously sustaining the culture from which it sprung.

The larger motivation behind the conversion narrative's institution was two-fold. First, accepted narratives taught listeners the correct path a convert must take to reach spiritual assurance. They also made visible, with a force modern observers can only imagine, that legitimate Christian conversions were indeed taking place in the New World. As such, conversion narratives helped fulfill both a psychic and sociocultural need for settlers who understandably felt isolated, both physically and spiritually, from the rest of the world. In aiming at establishing a Bible commonwealth whose historical model could be found in the Old Testament, congregations like Shepard's enforced spiritual confession in order to emphasize that here, in New England, was a special people set apart from others. Each testimony, both individually and collectively, represented how a group of committed individuals were successfully accomplishing the unfolding of God's cosmic drama of salvation in a land apportioned for just this work.

That conversion narratives were themselves apportioned for this purpose is

suggested on the first page of Shepard's manuscript. The *Confessions* begins with a deliberate reference to Isaiah 58:12, where Shepard asks, to an audience unknown, to “[l]ook upon the glory of God's work” that will “raise up a temple foundation of many generations” (1). As Patricia Caldwell has correctly surmised, the object of “God's work” is, of course, the *Confessions* itself. In *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*, Caldwell argues that readers should consequently interpret Shepard's inscription as imparting a hope; as expressing a desire that his catalogue of sound conversion experiences, ones made by common men and women rather than experts of religion, could serve as a foundation for the temple of Christian worship he believed New England to be, an ambition that ultimately arose from Shepard's desire to erect a congregational community united through idea and action (187).

To establish such a fellowship, however, an individual's private desires, thoughts, and feelings had to be rooted out so that, if misguided or misled, they could be corrected and that the stray Christian could be easily brought back to the fold. Conversion narratives helped make this process possible. This is why Caldwell is correct when she writes that the “special, even mysterious importance of the Puritan conversion narrative” was in the way “it merged, in one cardinal moment, an individual's need for assurance and his church's equally urgent need to meet it” (187).

As both needs came together, they endorsed the idea that the Puritans were indeed a blessed people set to live in their appointed land. In “God's Promise to His Plantation,” a farewell sermon delivered to Winthrop's *Arbella* fleet, John Cotton told his audience of “the grand Charter given to Adam and his posterity” whereby “[t]he placing of a people in this or that country is from the appointment of the Lord,” and more, that “God makes room for a people” wherever they should go. To Cotton, it was clear that the Bible's verses spoke about the party bound for the New World. Because of this, he emphasized that the company was also bound, by faith and so by duty, to not only recognize God's favor toward them in giving them a vacant land but also their responsibility to plant “trees of righteousness” in His New England garden (1). For while Cotton believed that God's living presence may very well be among His people, he knew that the fruits of God's benevolence would remain unrealized – and the Puritans' appointed promise would remain unfulfilled – without proper action, which meant the right kind of religious

devotion.

For Cotton, such piety could be had, and could only be had, if believers “discerned themselves to be in Christ” – meaning if they proved, to themselves and to their peers, that they truly belonged among New England’s faithful (1). Like Shepard, Cotton knew that a way to sustain religious consensus in Massachusetts was by having Christians give “an honest profession . . . which is sufficient.” By attesting to their conviction in Christ, believers would not only show their faith’s true colors and bring their most private sentiments out in the open, but would also signal their readiness to take on their social responsibility and adopt “that common charity” whereby “one man” would willingly bring himself “to yield to another” for the sake of God’s New World plantation (3).

In the early Bay colony, conversion accounts gave adherents an opportunity to distinguish themselves as heartfelt believers willing to respond to God’s promise while supporting the doctrine that to simply follow God’s “ordinances” was not “enough.” For ministers like Shepard and Cotton, without sincere and carefully monitored effort followers would rest in “dead prayers, dry sermons, sapless sacraments” rather than “the true gospel and Christ” (Shepard “Parable” 171-2). A soundly delivered conversion narrative which told of a believer’s spiritual struggles and triumphs proved the energy a convert exerted toward his redemption even if he knew that only God’s grace could save him. It showed all within earshot – and through correspondences, men and women in England – how spiritual reform was being achieved and how, despite differences between those who came to New England, all were willing to be knit to bonds of charitable affection just as Winthrop had idealized.

Like the scaffold of Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* where the good Reverend Dimmesdale finally succumbs to the burden of his secrets and his past, the conversion narrative gave Puritans a veritable platform from which to describe the effect – and considerable weight – their religion had on their lives as their speeches gave a living presence to the theology and spiritual errand to which they lent themselves. Not just a conversion story, their speeches told a tale that supported their faith’s compatibility with their spiritual community. Each confession animated the moral imperative that “true Christians” were those who “never rest before they have examined things by the testimony of Spirit,” as each account brought soteriology – or the process by which a

sinner gains salvation – to life. And as it did, each helped support the doctrine that compelled the ritual's enactment since each narrative served as a living example – much as the Bay colony was itself an example – of God's living presence.⁵

To Shepard, conversion narratives had a “special use onto the people of God” in “a land of peace, though a place of trial.”⁶ Giving spiritual sanction to early New England communities, what gave the ritual force was the fact that conversion narratives did not come from the pulpit, or at least not directly. Accounts were delivered by unassuming laymen who were typically uneducated and of lower social stations; common folks – men and women, old and young – who were tradesmen, mothers, yeomen, officers, servants, and farmers.⁷ Despite this diversity, however, each testified, in fairly similar terms, to how they had independently arrived at a conviction in Christ's redeeming power. Like any ritual, then, the conversion narrative worked to bring individuals together. It was a point in which independent members of a community joined themselves through a common performance that demonstrated the beliefs they mutually held. Making public a convert's personal experiences with grace, conversion narratives joined what Shepard referred to as a believer's “inward acquaintance with God” with those of his congregation who, because of their common yet “singular piety,” could “attest to” God's work among them as if in a single, unified voice (“Sincere Convert” 3).

As a performance that linked a believer's private experiences with those of his congregation, spiritual confession brought an applicant's inner thoughts and feelings to light so that they could be examined and so that his audience could determine whether his faith was consistent with the model his minister provided. Those who complied with the ritual showed that they understood and were willing to follow Shepard's injunction that there was “no reason to spend . . . time privately when [one] might possibly exercise” the practice of religion “publicly” (“Autobiography” 78). But while the ritual reinforced the evangelical efficacy of a church with each word a narrator used to articulate his faith, it was still, above all else, a test as to whether an applicant could subsume his personal conception of God, himself, and his regeneration with his congregation's and especially his minister's, thereby helping a preacher like Shepard winnow the Lord's choice grain from His withered chaff.

As George Selement and Bruce Woolley have discussed in their profile of Shepard's

life and the context surrounding the *Confessions*, Shepard was considered early New England's finest and most thoroughly soul-searching preacher. His sermons sparked numerous conversions, arousing many hearers to cry out in agony for salvation often while Shepard was preaching. The *Confessions* testify to Shepard's converting power, one which brought believers of all walks to a similar understanding of God's role in their lives as a force that can "provide for them and theirs" a solution for the "sink" residing in "their hearts."⁸ But while it was certainly a test of religious faith, the conversion narrative also gave lay members a unique opportunity to speak openly about their spiritual encounters and their hopes and fears for their future as they also showed their fellow Christians that their minds and hearts belonged to Christ. While each account accepted at Cambridge was considered an orthodox account of spiritual redemption that explained how a believer had reached a point where he "saw there was only righteousness in Christ," each was also as distinct as the individual making this claim, just as each could be taken individually or collectively as a testament to Shepard's theology of conversion (163). The term itself – conversion narrative – implies this dialectic, suggesting how the ritual worked to integrate private and public life by asking believers to relate the personal transformation they felt they had undergone (their conversion) into a shared language of evangelical Christianity epitomized by their narratives.

As accounts were approved, converts came to be regarded as genuine Christians – as visible saints who not only practiced but also felt the power of God's ordinances in their minds and hearts. This should suggest, then, that becoming a convert was far more than simply a matter of faith in Puritan New England. Judging by the testimonies in Shepard's notebook, conviction in Christ was also clearly a matter of words; it was a matter of performance that, when correctly carried out, not only justified an applicant's place among society's sainted but also distinguished him as God's visibly elect. In a world where a Christian's spiritual destiny was beyond man's capacity to know, the conversion narrative granted the Puritan the ability to articulate and even defend faith. To borrow Bercovitch's phrase, it gave him a means of personal self-assertion in which he could outline his unique story of spiritual redemption as he simultaneously confirmed his assent to his congregation's expectations of what this process should entail. Exactly how members of Shepard's church accomplished this feat, as well as how their

accomplishment may have influenced the parameters of their faith, is the subject to which the following sections will now turn.

[2]

For students of early colonial culture, the advantage of reading Shepard's *Confessions* is how it can help frame Puritan theology and early New England's civic ideology in relation to how lay members understood the two. First published in its entirety in 1981 from Shepard's leather-bound notebook held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the text sheds light on how early settlers grappled with and spoke of their faith as they strove to shape their experiences in a way that matched the expectations of their leaders as well as those they held over themselves and each other. Shepard's notebook gives readers a unique source from which to examine how lay believers or common members of Puritan society joined their experiences with what they perceived to be the correct path to spiritual assurance, thus uncovering what they considered a sound conversion to be.

At first glance, every narrative in the *Confessions* presents readers with an individual experience of how a Christian arrived at spiritual conviction, each bearing witness to what Shepard knew to be “the great difficulty of saving conversion.” The accounts that Shepard's applicants delivered reflect this difficulty, and this should come as no surprise. Shepard often told his flock how “[s]trait is the gate” to salvation, “and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life; and few there be that find it” (“Sincere Convert” 2). The *Confessions* bespeak to how believers took up this teaching. Thematically, each narrative is linked in the way speakers characterized their faith's arrival – as an irregular and difficult process – even though each gives a slightly different picture of a sinner's individual encounters with grace. Readers can account for this uniformity as a way Shepard, as well as members of his church, established the sincerity of an applicant's desire to join their congregation.⁹ Outlining their willingness to understand salvation within the prescribed framework of their minister's theology who knew conversion to be an unsteady process, Cambridge converts like Mary Angier “saw that strength was in Christ” and that “the fault was in [them],” leaving their “soul[s] with the Lord [to] let Him do what He will” even as they saw themselves “in as bad a condition as ever” (68).

Offering clues as to what piety looked like in the early Bay colony as it was interpreted and conveyed by ordinary individuals, the *Confessions* show its readers what Puritan converts had to do to be saved even if it was an accepted tenet of Puritan doctrine that no believer could do anything to effect his or her salvation. Those who read the *Confessions* soon notice that what believers did, beyond pursuing God's appointed means for salvation by searching for evidence that He had performed grace's work in their lives, was account for the steps they had taken that had led them to a sense of their justification in Christ. As already suggested, to be considered a potentially elect member of a church hinged on the dramatic power of a confessor's words, or rather, on the rhetorical performance he delivered. This perhaps more than having complete assurance.

To identify how converts gave grounds for their being held as spiritual beacons of their respective communities, we may begin by approaching this issue from its opposite side, that is, by grasping what types of thought, words, and behavior denied individuals this privilege.

The most recognized dissenter to early Bay orthodoxy was, of course, Anne Hutchinson, whose views and relatively high profile case may have even led to Shepard's adoption of the conversion narrative as a means of ensuring the cooperative status of his Cambridge church. Although there is no extant copy of a conversion narrative Hutchinson may have herself delivered, her trial's transcripts give clear evidence of her spiritual convictions, particularly in how they corresponded – or failed to correspond – to those of her questioners, Shepard the most notably unyielding among them.

As Caldwell has persuasively argued in her study of Hutchinson's examination, the source of Hutchinson's dissent sprung as much from her view of language and her belief in the inefficacy of words to communicate spiritual matters than from an unorthodox application of Calvinist doctrine. As John Winthrop explained to Hutchinson late in her trial, Hutchinson's "manifest evil" was a "matter of conversation" rather than of insufficient faith. As Hutchinson's most ardent and outspoken critic, Shepard also found fault with Hutchinson's manner of expression, especially "her fluent tongue and forwardness in expressions" that, he feared, would influence others to such untempered forwardness. But fluent as she may have been and however much she tried, Hutchinson could not persuade her accusers that her views were legitimate and that she was justified

in her conviction that “the Lord showed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants.”¹⁰

According to Caldwell, the primary impediment that stood before Hutchinson was her inability to accommodate herself – and her language – to her audience's expectation that genuine converts were, among other things, those who could explain the path they had taken to Christ. To Hutchinson, this was impossible since grace, as her minister John Cotton had taught her, was something altogether ineffable, and so, something that stood only between the Lord and His devoted servant and which only God could know for certain (“Antinomian Language Controversy” 346, 351).

In other words, Hutchinson could not give her accusers sufficient evidence of her sanctification because they had asked her to verbalize it. To Winthrop and other Bay leaders, this refusal ran not only counter to the fifth commandment but also made Hutchinson an “unprofitable member here among us,” transforming her into a dissenter unwilling to obey “the fathers of the commonwealth.” Hutchinson believed that converts could only sense their salvation rather than articulate it. And when they did feel it, it was only “[b]y the voice of His own spirit” communicating through “an immediate revelation” to a convert’s “soul.” In this, Hutchinson explained that her “judgement” was sound. For even if a saint *could* speak of her encounter with grace, the Holy Spirit would have “altered [her] . . . expression” to a point beyond human communication or comprehension (quoted in Hall *Antinomian Controversy* 313-4, 336-7). This is why Hutchinson’s reliance on Scripture, to which she often (and appropriately) made recourse in her trial, was still considered lacking, as her view of language’s function and capacity precluded assent to the form of linguistic and performative consensus Bay leaders supported. In contrast to ministers who opened the gospel while urging their flock to confess to their spiritual encounters as a means of substantiating them, Hutchinson was convinced that human speech was unreliable and that language was inadequate before grace and therefore incapable of fulfilling its basic denotative function in describing spiritual matters.

According to Caldwell, Hutchinson could not find a “point of contact” between the scriptural words of those men who were inspired by God to write the Bible and the extra-scriptural words of the Holy Spirit that, while bringing believers to conversion, could

only be expressed insufficiently (“Antinomian Language Controversy” 348).

Hutchinson's distrust of language, a literary analogue to her distrust of everything else human, accounts for her defiance and became the basis of what her accusers saw as her immorality. Committed to her convictions, she failed to adopt the standard of discourse Bay leaders asked their adherents to adapt. She was unable to let go of the notion that language was subordinate to its inner fact and that a convert's faith (and therefore, faith itself) could be detected and judged on the basis of a believer's words. For even though Puritan ministers accepted that a convert's language and subsequent conduct could never fully indicate his election, they still held believers to these standards no matter how imperfect or imprecise. In contrast, Hutchinson treated such effort as “works” rather than evidence – as external tokens that could not be regarded as evidence of one's private dealings with grace. Unwilling to describe her spiritual experiences in a way that would satisfy her judges, Hutchinson was promptly banished to Rhode Island, unable to assent to the communicative guideline Bay leaders endorsed, particularly the requirement that all applicants be prepared to describe their path to religious conviction before being granted full communion.

In contrast to Hutchinson, the 51 believers whose statements Shepard recorded gave sufficient evidence of their conversions, in part because they were willing to account for it. Testifying to their spiritual deliverance without pointing to it directly, applicants rendered their narratives adequate by following the course of how a sincere confession was thought to sound as they were guided by their minister's instruction and the example of previous narrators. To avoid the linguistic impediment that kept Hutchinson from speaking about how grace had touched her soul, converts deployed what Kenneth Burke has referred to in *Language as Symbolic Action* as a “cooperative symbolic network” whose adoption enabled candidates to both anchor and convey their spiritual experiences in a way that suggested their regeneration (45). By getting up to speak and by trying (and inevitably failing) to account for the Holy Spirit working through them, applicants signaled their belief in the legitimacy of their words and the sanction of their experiences to which their words referred. To drive this point home, however, they tailored their language – and the form in which they described their experiences – to conform to a determined, clearly identifiable expressive channel, one that usually included an appeal to

to Scripture, their minister's theology of salvation, and their mounting desire to "love . . . Christ and His church and people" amid persistent difficulty (*Confessions* 156). By doing so, confessors conveyed the credibility of their saving experiences, employing a recognizable gestural code attuned to the language and expectations of their cultural community.¹¹

This rhetorical choice, one as much of performance as faith, signaled their willingness to understand life within Puritanism's ideological and sociocultural framework, which in turn helped sustain it. As already mentioned, a narrator's performance preserved the ideals of his community. At the same time, it addressed his own level of commitment to its social, religious, and expressive standards as the ritual worked to unearth each applicant's personal degree of dedication to his faith, his congregation, and to the spiritual errand his leaders believed him and his fellow Christians to be undergoing in New England.

Urged to open up their private experiences to an attentive audience, converts mitigated the difficulty of imparting an account that would convince their listeners of their election by adhering it to a form they knew this speech was supposed to take. What made a narrative persuasive was its ability to tell a believer's conversion story within a discourse whose terms a congregation could identify, terms that members of the church themselves used to understand and describe their own religious experiences. So even if an applicant inadvertently betrayed the personal dimensions of his experiences, much as readers of any personal narrative would expect, the form, rhetoric, and symbolic register of his language relayed an overall picture of a sound conversion because his account was expressed through an identifiable communicative framework that directed his congregation's attention toward the substance – rather than the surface – of his faith.

Espousing a language that drew their listener's consideration towards certain affirmative channels, converts fit their narratives into a mold cast by their culture in order to suggest their conversion's legitimacy. Their choice to do so – one ultimately of expression – transformed them in the eyes of their congregation into visible saints, and their tales, into authenticated examples of a gradually unfolding faith. To be sure, not all confessors claimed to be sanctified. Yet they were asked to prove that they had felt the Holy Spirit move their hearts toward saving faith. To corroborate this meant that an

applicant had to show that the process by which grace had turned him to Christ was bona fide. This meant that he had to meet his audience's expectation of how faith should emerge in his life – what Shepard defined as the “work of the Spirit in the soul whereby the soul, beholding the glory of Christ and feeling his love, hereupon closeth with the whole will of Christ.” Standing in an applicant's way, however, was the fact that as a Calvinist, he knew that opportunities to misinterpret grace's marks were practically infinite. As Michael McGiffert explains, “[i]n the Puritans' deeply disordered world, things were seldom as they seemed.” Shepard often informed his congregation of this – of how even “the veriest reprobate in the world may have as good an assurance of Heaven as thou; [that] there may be better in Hell than thee.” What's more, Shepard told them how there are “many who are inwardly . . . the children of the devil [that] are outwardly . . . the children of God,” effectively telling his flock that there was no way they could know with absolute certainty whether the signs of their sanctification were sure.¹²

To overcome this problem, those wanting to join the Cambridge congregation shaped their narratives to adhere to Shepard's understanding of salvation, expressing an unsureness in themselves and their speeches even if they thought they had potentially closed with Christ. The *Confessions* are littered with statements expressing this type of sentiment, each narrative conveying an anxiety that McGiffert has identified as the essence of spiritual assurance for members of Shepard's church. So even though John Stedman “followed the Lord and found communion with God and His people so sweet,” he still confessed to having “many fears and doubts about my estate and condition,” doubts that, in turn, convinced members of Shepard's church that, if Stedman “followed on,” he was most probably saved (74).

The anxiety converts expressed toward their salvation is also suggested by the unfinished nature of many of the *Confessions* – Mrs. Greene's, for instance, which required the testimonies of others to “carry” her account – or by pronouncements like Nathaniel Sparrowhawk's, who admitted being unable to “remember many things which I cannot now express” (118, 64). But this was fine, because in dealing with ineffable questions of religious import or the inexpressible weight of things Eternal, converts were expected to struggle – with their faith as well as with the demand to speak about it in

clear terms.¹³ Unlike Hutchinson, Shepard's converts overcame this hurdle by rehearsing it all the more, their narratives repeating the refrain of “I could not tell,” which resonated with their minister’s view of spiritual assurance as an unknown quantity (109). What separated Shepard’s congregants from Hutchinson’s Antinomian views was that they regarded regeneration, because their minister did, as something forever unresolved. They thought of it as a lifelong process rather than one a believer could sense with her heart even if she couldn’t articulate the feeling. Rather than stand mute, Cambridge’s fold repeatedly declared how they couldn’t judge their salvation – nor their faith’s adequacy – by their own light. This ambivalence, however, typically led those who believed “to lay under the Lord” and “stand with God’s honor to show mercy” (51). In other words, uncertainty allowed them to establish their faith amid this uncertainty and become visible saints because the unsure convert – one who repeatedly “saw more of her sin” wherever she looked – was thought to be “a person who could be humbled” and who could gradually come to believe, with enough humility and conviction, that “with God all things are possible” (39).

While the majority of the *Confessions* do not overtly mention Cambridge’s minister, a handful cite how they were moved to assurance directly through his preaching. This, too, was a convention of the form, one that, a century later, had a profound effect on the course American Protestantism was to take both during and in the wake of the Great Awakening.¹⁴ Yet the most noticeable link between Shepard’s conception of regeneration and his congregation’s can be found in Shepard’s *Autobiography* which, not surprisingly, reads like a long conversion narrative in which Shepard represents his theory of salvation as anxiety-inducing and uncertain. Indeed the *Autobiography*’s most pervasive theme is that of a person “much affected” – by an awareness of God’s love, and of Shepard’s incapacity to stay the course of righteousness, Shepard who continually finds himself breaking “loose from the Lord again” (43). Shepard’s conversion is not an even ascent to sanctification. Rather, it is marked by plaguing assurances and doubts – afflictions and deliverances and afflictions again – that are reiterated right until the volume’s final reference to Shepard’s “iniquities” that only God can “pardon” and “subdue” (79).

Leading his congregation by example, Shepard was careful to explain how one’s only true hope for salvation rested in a believer’s full recognition of his iniquities. If a

man clearly saw his sins, he would also, in time, and if he was really destined to be saved, come to understand that only faith in Christ's sacrifice could redeem him. Acutely conscious of his "concupiscence and vileness," Shepard, rather than repudiate these sins, responded in his *Autobiography* by thanking the Lord for curing his "blindness" so "that I may mourn for that" (77). As a justified believer, converts like Shepard cultivated self-consciousness – or an awareness of themselves as innately deprave – as a crucial component of faith. According to Shepard, the pain and grief a believer suffered as a result of fully perceiving this truth would, with pious effort and patience, pave the way for his final deliverance. This view is expressed in the *Autobiography* as the hope – rather than the confirmation – that God "mayst restore comforts to me" thereby making "afflicting sweet," an affliction that gave the visible saint all the "more" reason "to do His will." To Shepard, the miracle and paradox of grace was that it "began to be best . . . [w]hen" a sinner "was worst"; where a night of immorality – of becoming "dead drunk, and that upon a Saturday night" – opened the sinner to the possibility of God's mercy if he was truly to be saved (78).¹⁵

As his congregation followed his lead, Shepard enjoined them to "resolve to set upon a course of daily meditation about the evil of sin and [their] own ways" ("Autobiography" 43). To Shepard, to be daily aware of one's iniquities was the beginning of hope and a new day. As his *Autobiography* reveals, as the series of afflictions and comforts Shepard endures at the hands of Holy Ghost mount, Shepard's faith blossoms. Grace's consoling power gives Shepard reason to believe God is with him, and so, that he very well may be one of His elect in heaven. Like every conversion narrative recorded in the *Confessions*, the pervasive theme of Shepard's *Autobiography* is that of a sinner's habitual fall to moral shortcoming – to "loose and lewd company" and "to lust and pride and gaming and bowling and drinking," for example – followed by a "resolve . . . to pray again" as a consequence of having been "much affected[ed]" and "awakened" to "God's free mercy and pity (43-4). This theme shows how Shepard believed that conversion was a cyclical pattern of spiritual gain and loss rather than an absolute moment that could be described. Only a sinner's spiritual struggles, and partial triumphs, could be told; only his degree of steadfast conviction could be measured. But when, for every fall, a Christian found succor in grace's capacity right his wayward path,

this gave evidence of a believer blessed.

Commenting on the way Shepard's theology surfaces in his writing, McGiffert explains how Cambridge's first minister embraced a "painful form of piety," one that, in particular, registered the unsettledness believers felt over their salvation as an indication of their election (3). The more a believer was unsure about the soundness of his conversion (and by extension, his salvation), the more he longed for its security – the more he would thirst for the Lord's mercy and acceptance. To Shepard, this proved that a believer was sincere in his conviction and thus that he was justified in being thought of as a visible saint.

As McGiffert has argued, this rationale "shifted the requirement of salvation from doing penance to being penitent," thereby transforming "assurance from outer appearance to inner reality, from public act" to a "private attitude" that challenged "each devotee to sound the bottomless depths of his own heart" (11). McGiffert is only half right, however. More than simply set a precedent for how genuine converts were expected feel, Shepard's model also furnished them with an experiential model through which believers could better understand and describe their spiritual encounters. As the *Autobiography* verifies, the road to sainthood began by recognizing the "vile wretch" that one was; by seeing the "main wounds in [one's] soul." Such wounds led the believer to anxiety, which in turn led to saving faith. For Shepard, they even led to sacrilege: to such agonizing despair that he found himself no longer able to "read the Scriptures or hear them read without secret and hellish blasphemy," Shepard "calling all into question." But rather than abandon all hope, Shepard saw his anxiety as an opportunity for reflection and renewed commitment, one that led him to realize how "sin was not my greatest evil," and God, his only solution (43-4).

Prompting a "terror of God," Shepard's fears pushes him toward the "strong temptations to run my head against walls and brain and kill myself." However, Shepard's urge to commit suicide, a trope often repeated in later conversion narratives as well as in a handful of the *Confessions* themselves, inspires, like before, a reenergized faith. Steadfast in his spiritual conviction, Shepard is willing to persist despite his terrors. He is willing to endure them – these "doubts and darkness . . . and the thought of eternal reprobation and torments" – because, to Shepard's "amazement," they immediately rouse

him to “fall down to prayer.” Brought to supplication through the charity of the Holy Spirit, Shepard arrives at a simple yet powerful insight: “that I should do as Christ.” This is an revelation that every Christian must experience, and for Shepard, it causes him to further see how he is “so unholy and God so holy,” his only recourse being to call on the Lord “for free mercy and pity.” “See[ing] my unworthiness,” Shepard finally arrives at saving faith. For as his “spirits began to sink . . . the Lord recovered” Shepard once again, pouring “out a spirit of prayer upon me” whose “conclusion” drives him to accept God’s charity toward those “worthy to be cast of his sight.” Feeling his own unworthiness and God’s worth, Shepard gains the capacity “to leave myself with Him to do with me what He would, and there and never until then I found rest.” He is strengthened by his conviction in grace’s redeeming power in the sight of his own weaknesses, his “heart” finally “humbled” as the self-scrutiny which led him to the sight of his sins and to disgust and doubt have steered him toward the Lord (44-5).

Shepard’s fears and self-doubt prompt spiritual fruits. And through his example and instruction, Cambridge’s flock deduced how self-scrutiny and disgust could lead to genuine faith. But even if they showed themselves to be contrite sinners ready to entrust their souls completely to the Lord, those wishing to join Shepard’s church found themselves in a bind: required to impart their personal experiences as they knew them but also in a way that fit within the conventions of saintly behavior their minister epitomized. To overcome this challenge, they aligned their experiences within a specific communicative and performative channel that, while curbing their degree of expressive latitude, signaled their readiness to join Shepard’s fold. As Michelle Burnham has shown, Puritans hoped to express themselves “plainly,” or simply, because of its “association with honest and direct forms of behavior or presentation” (51). This desire was rooted in the understanding that language that called attention to itself was self-aggrandizing and thus the mark of an unregenerate hypocrite. For the lay and working-class members of early colonial society, to speak in an ordinary or common language reflected a simplicity and honesty appropriate for members of their social station. It also demonstrated their humility and willingness to confront the “evil” in their hearts “and evil of sin and so a need of Christ and Him both to take away the filth and guilt of sin” and “make [them] more holy” (*Confessions* 71).

To speak plainly and conventionally meant that a Cambridge applicant direct his attention away from himself and toward “the image of God . . . in the course of [his] life” as well as his faith in the “power of mortification and sanctification” (71). This was a rhetorical choice, one consistent with the theology that a humble convert who deflected attention from himself was one who was honestly attempting – and to a certain extent failing – to express the miracle grace had apportioned in his life. This explains in part why converts confessed to closing only partially with Christ if they can really be said to have confessed to it at all. To be admitted to the Cambridge church, applicants were instructed not to give “extravagant, enlarged discourses of the set time of their conversion, and their revelations,” which in Shepard's view were “long doings, and are wearisome and uncomely.¹⁶ By limiting their voices and by pointing to their shortcomings rather than their achievements, Cambridge's converts conveyed the modesty they felt in their hearts and their inclination “to rely on Christ to continue it and to help [them] to walk with Him” (71). Ministers like Shepard looked for church applicants to deliver clear, no-nonsense narratives through which grace's inward principle could emerge to reveal – to make public – a believer's private, life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit.

By dramatizing their own sense of spiritual as well as verbal inadequacy, converts established their willingness to place their faith in God rather than presuming, as Hutchinson was accused, that it existed within themselves. As Caldwell has shown, the case was far different in Old England, where the literary guidance ministers provided was more closely attuned to the convert's unique expressive needs rather than the excesses of its prospective church members, and where elaborate sermons set a standard for how converts should internalize and convey their faith. Unlike their English counterparts, New England's ministers were fearful of exhibitionistic expression, which showed only “an outward, but no inward principle,” and which they believed served only to gain “external applause and praise.”¹⁷

To keep their speeches simple, applicants tailored their performance to a recognizable form, one in which both 17th century and later Protestant spiritual autobiographies closely observe. Although each narrative a Christian delivered understandably varied from one convert to the next, almost all the *Confessions* follow

what Owen C. Watkins describes as a “normal pattern of Puritan conversion.” As already touched on, this pattern is marked by an interminable process of unsettledness – of “peace, disturbance, and then peace again” – coupled with what Watkins identifies as “the two landmarks of contrition”: being convinced of one’s innate depravity and perceiving the necessity of closing with Christ in response (37). Adding to Watkins’ analysis, Virginia Brereton has read the Puritan conversion narrative as falling into a five-part formula in which converts describe 1) their life before conversion, 2) a gradual, and finally, an acute awareness of their sinfulness, 3) their surrender to God’s will as the only answer to their depravity, 4) a modest confidence in their surrender, which provokes a changed behavior, and 5) a period of low and high spiritual energy followed by renewed attempts at reaffirming their faith.¹⁸

Taking Francis Moore’s conversion narrative as an example in order to test Brereton’s formula, readers will observe how Moore begins his account by immediately admitting to “many sins committed,” particularly in his youth. Next, he explains how he first grew aware of his folly – how the “Lord revealed his estate to him that he was miserable” as “he found his flesh resisting and contradicting the Lord.” Moore responds to his discovery by yielding his will to God’s, aided by the knowledge that “Christ came to save those that were lost” and that “without repentance none could be saved.” Having accepted grace into his life, Moore grows increasingly hopeful that “the Lord had gone thus far with him,” especially since “the Lord wrought further humiliation” in his heart “for sin past,” which in turn causes him to “not only leave the evil but cleave to the contrary good . . . and to walk more humbly.” But because the work of conversion is never done, the remainder of Moore’s narrative describes intermittent periods of doubt as to “whether his repentance is right or no” followed by renewed assurances of God’s “infinite love.” Despite feelings of “security” however, Moore still considers himself “foresook” as he realizes that the only thing that can relieve the anguish he feels at the thought of being forsaken is the doctrine that “the Lord should pity . . . him that believes all things are possible.” This understanding, one that aligned Moore’s conviction with his minister’s theology, causes Moore to draw “his heart to the Lord again” with a degree of confidence never before felt though with a sense of deference and humility as Moore unassumingly recalls how grace calls “him . . . back again” (35-6).

While the *Confessions* bespeak to how this form was wide-ranging, where narratives offered often vary in the emphasis each narrator places on each stage, most conform to the blueprint Watkins and Brereton outline. They obey what Edmund S. Morgan has described as the typical “morphology of conversion” a convert was expected to undergo in real life, which involved the successive stages of “knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance” (72). As a result, Moore's narrative resembles those of his fellow converts even if it may have differed in its specific details or emphasis. When taken collectively, each step an applicant outlined reproduced in small God's greater plot of human salvation as framed in Scripture and reinforced by Shepard's theology. And just as his testimony strengthened Moore's own growing self-consciousness as a Christian, it also reaffirmed the spiritual values of his congregational community. By speaking honestly – or trying to speak – of his experiences and of his commitment “to endear his heart to the Lord” despite recurrent though understandable “relapses,” Moore recapitulated the stages of his conversion though his oral performance as his speech's formal parameters helped him demonstrate his assent to his culture's spiritual, moral, and expressive conventions just as the ritual itself helped ensure a homogenous account of spiritual experience among Moore's congregation (37).

Dedicated to keeping his “poor church spotless and clear,” exposing “the small number of true believers,” and proving, through confessions like Moore's, “the great difficulty of saving conversion,” Shepard's evangelical mastery coaxed would-be converts into showing their brethren that, as a spiritual community, they were living out the terms of their faith (“Sincere Convert” 3). The extempore confession applicants delivered, rather than mechanically parroting the Gospel, explained how “Scriptures brought [them] in to submit to the Lord,” each narrative animating the Holy Spirit's living presence within Shepard's church. Their speeches fused biblical text with actual life as narrators described how the Bible “did support” them in their daily soul-searchings, particularly when they “asked whether [they] had assurance” – whether, there was “some hope” for them in heaven since “nothing would satisfy . . . but the Lord” here on earth (*Confessions* 68-9). This merger empowered applicants to communicate the ineffable, which is precisely what the ritual asked them to do. As their accounts explained how they had applied the Bible and how grace had, time and again, brought them “to the fullness of

the riches of grace” and the knowledge of “its help in Christ,” it transmitted what no Puritan convert could: that the Lord had accomplished their spiritual regeneration; that the Holy Spirit had irresistibly moved them to see “none but Jesus Christ” (*Confessions* 45).

At the heart of what made a conversion narrative acceptable, then, was an applicant's ability to plainly (and so paradoxically) convey – in his own language, mannerisms, and color – the inexpressible and unknowable fact that he was born again as a Christian predestined for heaven; that his “new disposition” of seeing the world with “that new sense of things” and with “a kind of affection and delight . . . not formerly experienced” was an indication of his imminent election (Edwards “Personal Narrative” 669). Cambridge converts like Golden Moore assert this idea as implicitly as we are sure them to have expressed it timidly, which meant feeling increasingly miserable at the thought of “being without” Jesus. It meant “bemoaning” such a condition which, as they had learned, cleared the way for a believer to cry out in earnest “desire [for] help from the Lord,” a gesture in which he effectively placed his saving faith in God's promise to His elect: that “the Lord will restore comforts” for the “soul that should follow” (122-3).

By following this rationale, Shepard's congregants followed their minister who instructed them in “The Sincere Convert” how converts were those who “mourn truly for their true sin” (1). And so, rather than express inordinate joy, genuine believers grieved over their depravity and vileness. Like Moore, every day they saw “more of [their] wretchedness than ever before,” and were unable to endure the prospect of their damnation as a result (*Confessions* 123). But as unbearable as they may have found their condition or themselves, converts were still told to remain hopeful and to continue to strive toward Christ as any true believer would. “Be not discouraged . . . because thou art vile,” Shepard impressed, “but make double use of it” to “loathe thyself the more” in order to “feel a greater need and put a greater price upon Jesus Christ who only can redeem three from all sin” (“Sincere Convert” 4).

This formula was the essence of Puritan faith. And those who practiced it bore witness to their spiritual commitment, thereby justifying their calling as visible saints. Instead of claiming this openly, however, converts like Moore followed their minister's advice by remaining circumspect. Their narratives proved their spiritual commitment

through their cautious hopes, as converts claimed to have understood, after a great deal of anguish brought on by “fears and doubts,” “that a soul mourning under its evils” will soon find comfort in “the Lord” whose grace “will restore comforts to it.” Aspiring to enjoy “the Lord in His ordinances,” Moore’s spiritual faith was measured by the increasing uncertainty he placed in himself and in the contrasting hope he held in Christ whom, he knew, could deliver him. Yet at all times was this faith measured in small steps. For example, the more Moore felt “the Lord drawing and endearing [his] heart to Himself,” the more he also feared “he might become exceedingly sinful” as a result of a misplaced confidence in his salvation, a thought that forced him to the uneasy conclusion that he “should backslide in time.” Fearing that he would remain in this “condition,” Moore faced his anxiety as a cause “to seek Christ and to get more acquainted with Christ.” In other words, Moore effectively redirects his distress into a reason or “means to come hither . . . to enjoy more of the Lord.” His positive response to the unbearable weight of his sins, to “the enmity of [his] heart,” and to the possibility of “being without the Lord Jesus” is the correct one, one that showed his congregation that Moore was a believer that persisted in his faith amid doubts – a believer who gave evidence of “the Lord’s free grace and mercy to [his] soul” not because of a dawning confidence in his faith but because of Moore’s increasing concern with its authenticity (123-4).

Examining themselves only to repeatedly find their hearts exceedingly corrupt, applicants admitted to the Cambridge church and whose narratives were recorded in the *Confessions* were those who saw their corruption as a means “to come hither” to the Lord. They were believers who, more than anything, wished to be spiritually restored – to be “returned again,” “revive[d],” receive “new mercies,” and be forgiven for the transgressions that only God could forgive (95-7). Far more than simply being humbled by contrition however, converts were taught to think of themselves as “crippled and lame” (96), many going so far as concluding their narratives by remarking that they “shall never” (nor can they ever) “admire the Lord sufficiently” for the mercy shown them (98). This was because spiritual assurance came to Puritan New Englanders in the form of self-doubt, an idea consistent with Calvinist theology whose doctrines believers absorbed. As Thomas Werge has noted, the Augustinian conception of man’s two conflicting wills had clearly found its way to the heart of Shepard’s theology and to the

conversion narrative specifically as a moral viewpoint stating that only if man see himself as disconnected from God and utterly blind – full of corruption and darkened in understanding so that of himself he has no power – he gives himself the best chance at reaching conversion (24).

Trained to see themselves as chief of all sinners, Shepard's converts focused their conversion narratives on their iniquity in order to emphasize God's mercy toward them. Doing so complied with their minister's injunction that, as true Christians, they should never cease to “pull up the foundations” of their “convictions and [their] faith,” as every strike against oneself lay open the possibility for spiritual redemption at the hands of the Holy Spirit (“Parable” 173). This view demonstrates how conversion was a variable process in the early Massachusetts Bay despite the convert narrative's conventional form, one in which adherents were asked to unceasingly find a need *to* always be converting, which centered on their ability to see themselves as innately fallen – as the sole source of their own corruption, and God, as their only hope for salvation. Contrary to what readers may assume, the Puritan conversion narrative was not a bold declaration of spiritual change. Instead, it was a fluid and cyclical processes where applicants tacitly acknowledged their “need of Christ” and their yearning to be “carried through many fears and doubts” (*Confessions* 75). It was a confessional rite where applicants came together through their deficiencies – of being “meek and hungry and thirsty” – precipitated by an awareness of their true iniquitous nature that could only lead, if they truly believed, to an acknowledgment of their dependence on Christ's mercy (82).

As different as each applicant applying to the Cambridge church may have been, each joined bonds of brother affection by recognizing how they had “turned from” (or were trying to turn from) sin and by professing to an earnest “desire to walk under the feet of God and His people” even if they saw themselves as “being more vile than any” (80, 129). This is why an applicant like Mr. Sanders gave evidence of his faith by contrastingly admitting to “have seen” far “more of his corruption and deceits” than he could bear, or why Edward Collins confesses to have become “quickly lost by distractions and thoughts and cares which deadened” his “spirits” despite being assured that he had been “cure[d] by a heavy hand of God.” Negative pronouncements like these led applicants to subsequent and more affirmative assertions of faith – to the claim to

have realized how their “only strength against it,” meaning their sins and themselves, was “to rely on Christ to continue . . . to help [them] to walk with Him” (71, 84).

Pointing to their “many sins,” such as the constant “temptations of blasphemous thoughts of slighting the Lord,” as if in one voice, Cambridge converts drew attention to their acute awareness of their sins and the subsequent “fear” they felt in their “heart[s].” Seeing their sins “to be the[ir] greatest grief,” those who believed in Christ found “much comfort” in their desire to seek “the Lord in a way of humiliation” (100-1). But because faith was a continual process, and because the conversion narrative was a test of compliance with Puritan doctrine, contrition always attended with doubt. Enduring “a day of humiliation” after which they felt “God's promises,” converts still wondered “what would become” of them and “whether it was possible the Lord should have mercy” on their distressed souls. And even after the “Lord let in some beams of Himself” to show them mercy, converts still speculated how “ready [their] heart was to rest upon” his “heartbreakings” because their grief only left them feeling “proud” and “puffed up” rather than contrite (88).

Such remarks, however, paved the way for a convert's almost inevitable proclamation of faith – that “nothing but Christ” could give “satisfaction” to their souls (100). Such a remark is typical of the *Confessions*, affirming how self-scrutiny and the self-doubt that came with it were the lynchpins of Puritan faith. Recognizing how her “sin was very strong and [that she] could not get victory over it,” an applicant by the name of Katherine proved her piety through her willingness to place her trust in Christian doctrine – that “Christ will not cast away” sinners – which, in turn, caused “a great lifting up of my heart to the Lord,” and so, to a renewed commitment to faith (100-1). The principle catalyst for Katherine's reaction, of course, was Shepard, who asked his congregations to question themselves ceaselessly that they “may see the secret sins of wicked men in the world” and God's capacity to right wicked men (“Sincere Convert” 25). To see “secret sins” clearly was to clearly see oneself, which meant distrusting oneself even if signs of assurance were emerging in a believer's life. To cultivate anxiety led to a need for relief, and in believers, to faith. This is why Shepard told his flock that even if they believed themselves to have entered into a covenant with the Lord – “even [i]f you are wrapped up in God's covenant, [and] if any promise be actually yours” – they

should still not presume to have “take[n] possession of faith.”¹⁹ From their pulpits ministers like Shepard pressed converts that though they may possess “the language of [the] heart” they still did much to “huggest sin” despite their best efforts at rejecting it, “hissing” at grace even as they felt assured that they had experienced it. As a solution, they told believers to strive further to destroy their self-involved relationship with the world; that they question themselves continually, “look wisely and steadily upon [their] distempers, look sin in the face, and discern it to the full” as “the want thereof is the cause of our mistaking our estates” (Edward “Sinners” 480).

In accordance, applicants like Barbary Cutter delivered accounts that focused on a repeating pattern of discontent and grief followed by slight assurances. Converts claimed that despite seeing the necessity of Christ's sacrifice, they still felt their condition to be “more miserable than ever” (90-1). In doing so, they established that they had achieved what Charles L. Cohen has identified as Puritanism's “proper psychology” – a mindset whereby believers could attest to their willingness to relinquish their self-reliance in favor of a new ethic in which they learned to cleave to God's benevolent justice rather than themselves (11).²⁰ According to McGiffert, converts were to be “upright [and] self-denying.” They “closely examined their hearts, grieved over sins – their own and others' – begged mercy, and thought on holy things” (16). But to perform these actions one had to think newly, which entailed seeing one's “condition as more miserable than ever” and feeling “much affected” in response (*Confessions* 90). A convert's new mindset was that of a “lost creature” who had incurred “God's wrath” and, in seeking forgiveness, found himself repulsed by “the evil of sin” (107).

In this conversion narratives accepted at Cambridge not only accounted for a believer's encounter with grace but also spoke of how the Holy Spirit had pierced his heart to move him to the “desire to lay under the Lord” (51). As Norman Pettit has shown, to early Bay ministers, two of the most crucial stages of a Christian's conversion was the deep and prolonged sense of humiliation and contrition he was expected to suffer. These worked together to bring a believer to faith, or the willingness to place himself before God's “disposing” no matter what the outcome. This, it was thought, would usher forth a “contentedness of heart” that, however momentary, strengthened a believer's conviction that Christ had come to save poor sinners just like himself (96-7).

To show that their hearts had been sufficiently moved, applicants relied on an affective or extra-verbal vocabulary to convey not just their faith but also their feelings, meaning the emotions they experienced – and were still experiencing – knowing that “Christ saved them that were sinful . . . because that was His chief and principle work” (*Confessions* 21-2). As modern readers, this process is hard to imagine. Infer as one might, it is impossible to hear the precise notes of jubilation or hints of regret and sorrow concealed behind the words recorded in Shepard's notebook. Yet the emotional pendulum to which the *Confessions* testify should tell us how narratives were performed to display not only what a convert had gone through or how he thought but also how he felt, a subject which the following chapter will discuss at length. For now we can say that as applicants delivered their narratives, they expressed moods that often changed direction within the space of two or three sentences, to the point, even, where the lines between joy and lament, doubt and assurance, frequently merged. This is clear, for example, in the case of the farmer William Hamlet who, “giving up” his “soul to the Lord,” still found himself growing “frothy and unsavory,” especially since he considered the “ordinances of God” no less “unsuitable” to his tastes than before. And then, just as quickly as Hamlet thought he “should die” because of his “own vileness” which “he could not bear with,” his sorrow is “lifted up” in “the spirit of God,” which aids him in his “spiritual and temporal calling” to “love God more” (128-9).

As a congregation, Cambridge's communicating members shared Hamlet's restless experience, one realized – and ritualized – by both verbal and non-verbal notes each conversion narrative sounded. By pointing to their feelings, converts once again imparted that crucial something beyond their capacity to express, namely, the emotional content of their spiritual experiences and a sense of how their spiritual conviction felt, bringing to bare what rested in their hearts. Out loud, they disclosed the depths of their feelings and their frame of mind as they were graced with God's mercy, winning over their audience through the affective language their performances relied on, one that helped create an emotional connection and spiritual fraternity between themselves and their new congregation. As faithful Christians, believers were untied by a longing – by the concern that came with seeing one's “own insufficiency” and understanding that “nothing would satisfy . . . but the Lord” (69). To Shepard's communicants, spiritual change meant

relishing uncertainty as an ontology, where converts spoke of living out their “many doubts” regardless of any assurances they may have felt. In Francis Moore’s case, this came in the form of asking whether his conversion had gone “no farther than the repentance of Cain or Judas” (36). For Hannah Brewer, it was “hearing of sin . . . but” still being able “to apply nothing” (141). But as we now know, such doubts and the anxiety and despair to which they led, paved the way for a more significant spiritual ante, one in which Moore, for instance, could claim how the Lord had shown “him that Christ came to save those that were lost, and so him, not only in general sinners, but himself” (36). To be “lost” generated the potential to be found, just like becoming sick opens the possibility of recovery. Contradictory as it seemed, recognizing that one was a sinner gave the Christian convert hope in his salvation. To be unsure triggered the possibility of his becoming sure; the more inadequate a convert found himself, the more he had to rely on “the assurance of Lord’s love” (64).

Like Francis Moore, the more “humbled” a convert felt, the more he was justified in thinking himself “not only broken for, but from, sin,” a remark that evidently satisfied Shepard’s congregation enough to consider Moore “a new creature” ready to be “received to mercy” (36-7). The *Confessions* are well-stocked with this sort of dichotomy that can itself be accounted for through each narrative’s form – by the series of ups and downs, of movements toward and away from Christ, that aligned an applicant’s private ideology with the doctrine that the more “those that mourn and hunger” for grace, the more “shall [they] be comforted and satisfied” (36). One of the ways that applicants therefore demonstrated their faith was through an almost heroic show of persistence in the face of repeated difficulties, struggles typified by a convert’s plaguing self-doubts and sense of insufficiency. As they described these anxieties, their accounts breathed life into the doctrine that “[i]f you take shame to yourselves, God will honor you” because God only “doles” His mercy “to the bruised and abased” (Hooker “Application” 26). By doing so, applicants found a way to outwardly convey the inner conflict they felt between their insecurity and assurance, showing how they had properly registered that sainthood was a process rather than a settled condition, one that comprised a series of emotional tests that came with the thought of being “cut . . . off” from the Lord and the renewed possibility of becoming “considered of Christ” (*Confessions* 183).

In the conversion narrative, this was equivalent to limiting oneself to declarations of probability rather than certainty. It meant comporting one's account to a rhetoric of entailment, where the doubts a convert felt – and expressed – reinforced (and therefore evinced) the hope he ultimately placed in God's mercy for his deliverance. For Shepard's followers, regeneration was a sentiment of humility and hopefulness rather than affirmation, one that followed the logic that only *if* a convert's faith was sound, *if* he earnestly tried to be loving and useful and *if* he was genuinely moved by the desire for heaven, that only *then* could he and his congregation grant him the possibility of assurance. To become a Puritan convert consequently meant living a life of development and fluctuation, or true and false starts geared toward God's mercy in Christ's redeeming act. It meant perpetually dwelling on life's "ifs" and "maybes" as a means of gaining a heightened sense of one's spiritual assurance.

That every narrative in the *Confessions* is imbued with tones of hesitation and remarks like Christopher Cane's, who felt "undone" just as quickly as he became "revived" and who felt "forsaken" just as soon as he "grew secure," should tell us that it was perhaps the most critical feature of a Puritan convert's conversion account (59). Ambiguity and resolution, applied to a convert's spiritual life, showed that he had absorbed an orthodox understanding of conversion's proper morphology, which required believers to constantly interrogate whether they had gone far enough in their conviction rather than rest on what little they had thus far gained. Confessions were built on framework of equivocation whose avowal laid vent to a narrator's struggle to see that "there was not only righteousness in Christ even for those that were sinners and saw themselves [Christ's] enemies" (163). Having heard from their minster how pretenders "feel no misery" because they lay content "in their outward estates . . . never crying out of their sins while they lived," those applying for membership to Shepard's church submitted to their audience a case for their spiritual change by painting a picture of the miseries they endured which it entailed, as it did for John Furnell, them having "some conviction," but never complete confidence, that "I was such a one," meaning God's chosen (204).

Because no convert, and indeed no Puritan, could have complete knowledge of his election, faith was measured by the degree to which a Christian could exemplify the

values of his congregational community. For the lay men and women comprising Cambridge's church, this was commensurate with doctrines Shepard, as God's vicegerent on earth, had authorized. A question the next section pursues, then, will be the extent of the conversion narrative's creative capacity, as well as the implications this creativeness may have had on the faith (and so the values) Shepard's congregants held. As we may anticipate, while the function of requesting adherents to deliver conversion narratives was to promote a measure of devotional consensus that, members hoped, would keep their pews pure, narratives reflect idiosyncrasies that are as unique as each speaker. While these contrasts may appear negligible, upon closer inspection they show how narratives pushed the frontier of what Puritan faith could be. For as accounts were received they also surrendered to the reality, however implicitly, that an individual's unique conversion experience was as equally important to his spiritual community as a homogeneous understanding of this experience. With each narrative delivered, audiences bore witness to a slightly different picture of how assurance was ascertained, confirming, in turn, and to modern-day readers, how the assent to which the ritual asked applicants to give may have in fact been far more adaptable than the Bay's leadership had supposed.

[3]

As Daniel B. Shea has suggested, the issue of whether a Puritan's conversion had truly taken place may have never been in doubt even if his election was always in question. As an "autobiographical act," the very fact that an applicant stood to deliver his account itself testified to how his "experience has conformed, with allowable variations, to a certain pattern of feeling and behavior" expected of a visible saint (91). Although no Puritan could control the timing or shape of his conversion because grace was irresistible, his willingness – and in the conversion narrative, his ability – to bring all areas of his life into conformity with God's plan for salvation confirmed that if he wasn't a saint, he certainly appeared to be.

As the previous section has argued, to become a visible saint didn't just mean that a Puritan was convinced that the "blood [of Christ] . . . was shed for her" (*Confessions* 52). It also meant that converts learn to view their experiences in a certain way – as tokens of their spiritual destiny – and to interpret these signs correctly, with a sense of hesitation,

feeling, and piety worthy of a saint. Because believers in the early Bay colony could not be communicating members of a church without first delivering a conversion narrative, visible sainthood translated to how well an applicant could account for his encounters with grace, which in turn meant how well he could cast his story in light of the ritual's performative stipulations. As a result, the religion and faith to which converts were attempting to adhere became in many ways contingent on their presentation of its literal and symbolic facts, leaving Puritan religious culture to rest, in essence, on acts of self-representation.

It is in this respect that Ivy Schweitzer has suggested that the actions of New England's early setters were the most important factor in the construction of Puritan social reality (3). As a medium through which conversion, or the very essence of Christian faith, was presented and affirmed, the confessional rite enlivened the tenets of orthodox faith through decisive as well as creative action. Religious values like humility, spiritual endurance, self-scrutiny, and a persistent desire "to seek and . . . enjoy more of the Lord," were offered as crucial tokens of civic compliance, ecclesiastical membership and, of course, election, thereby animating the view that New England truly was a land dedicated to Christian worship (*Confessions* 123).

Every narrative in Shepard's notebook bears witness to a believer who was able to convincingly portray his experiences as those of a genuine saint. And as we know, to build their congregations and accomplish their evangelical mission on earth, Puritan ministers needed saints. As Jesper Rosenmeier first proposed, this meant that believers be able to reproduce in small the larger story of Christ's saving act for all mankind (445). It also meant that a convert be able to apply this story in terms of his own life. Those who successfully accomplished this feat were granted communion on the basis of their testimony's accordance with how faith was thought to manifest in a Christian's life. However, this does not change the fact that sainthood's essence, insofar as humans could know it to the point of accepting that certain believers had achieved it, settled, ultimately, on a performance: on a simulacra or approximation of how a believer understood saving grace and how grace had specifically unfolded in their lives. To borrow from Nelson Goodman's philosophical framework, the piety associated with being saintly was "as much made as found," constructed by the simultaneous act of reporting and interpreting

the conversion to which each narrative attested (22). While it must be acknowledged that Shepard's converts underwent what they knew to be saving spiritual experiences, a good portion of what "made" a saint in the Massachusetts Bay colony was not just what a convert felt in his heart but also what he said and how well he said it. For as Goodman justly explains, "without statements, truth is irrelevant" (18-9).

Just as much as what was literally said, early New England's social and spiritual reality was also fashioned by what was said metaphorically. In Anne Hutchinson's case, Hutchinson's defiance showed an individual, and a woman especially, who was unwilling to assent to the theology and social vision Bay leaders were advancing. But in the end, dissenters like Hutchinson, who stretched the limits of early New England orthodoxy, played a crucial role in the construction of its reality by helping Bay leaders establish clearer guidelines for what constituted appropriate Christian behavior. In contrast to Hutchinson, Shepard's communicants were not only willing to show their spiritual stripes but also outlined – and therefore also helped shape – a definitive picture of what a visible saint could and should be. They accomplished this by joining their experiences, and voices, with those who used a similar literal, symbolic, and interpretive framework to understand their regeneration, justifying their election by suffusing their society's creeds, tensions, and view of saintliness with their personal desire to be saved.

At its most basic level, we can say that conversion narratives served a referential function, where successful performances were ones that represented spiritual conviction with a force and relevance that pointed to and was consistent with a normative conception of Puritan faith. This idea is best exemplified by Nicolas Wyeth's confession. As he delivered his narrative to Shepard's congregation, Wyeth's language repeatedly fails him, where Wyeth was unable to satisfy the questions of Cambridge's church elders. Asked whether he remembered anything "about [his] misery and way of mercy," Wyeth answers that he had "since been much affected out of 25 Matthew and 14 John." Questioned as to whether he understood "how God hath tendered Christ to you," Wyeth replied by paraphrasing a passage from Ephesians as opposed to answering the question directly. Charged to answer how he knew God had given him "any assurance of His love in Christ," Wyeth responded by quoting a verse from John rather than explain how he knew (195).

Although Wyeth's references to Scripture are well-inclined, they still seemed to Wyeth's examiners to lack conviction. In fact, he is questioned twenty-one more times before his account is finally received, and this only after he admitted to still seeing "cause enough in my own heart why Lord should deny me." Yet it is this sense of verbal, epistemic, and emotional failure, one embodied by Wyeth's incapacity to answer his questioners directly (or what Caldwell has described as a "litany of woes"), that finally saves him in the eyes Shepard's congregation. His meekness suggests the type of self-doubt and repudiation required of a saint. That is to say, Wyeth points to his election by way of metaphor: through his incapacity to "remember" (and describe) how he came to feel "much supported" by "His will." "I cannot speak," he deferentially admits; I am "unable" (197). These statements, however, say more than enough. His sorrow, unsureness, insufficiency, and attempts to use the Bible as a way to understand his life speak volumes for Wyeth. So while Wyeth's narrative is, as Caldwell has rightly maintained, "convoluted" and "confused," its uneven and linguistically spotty timbre still betrays a convert who "obviously . . . suffers deeply" for his faith even if Wyeth is "unable to express his feelings to himself or to others in an active, direct way that might produce some sort of resolution" (*Puritan Conversion Narrative* 131-2).

It would be better to say, however, that it is precisely *because* Wyeth is "conflicted about the quality and meaning of his experience" that he is granted admission to Cambridge's church. The very fact that he is so disheartened, so unsure, and that his narrative reflects this equivocation, warrants Wyeth's acceptance to Shepard's fold. This suggests that Puritan congregations accepted the idea, however reluctantly or unconsciously, that election, while left for God to determine, was still something that could be established on the basis of a convincing oral performance – on the signs, but not necessarily the facts, of sanctification. As Perry Miller once suggested, for anyone interested in the Bay's intellectual and social history, one must realize how "[t]he final outcome in all New England preaching," particularly one vested so heavily in a covenant theology, "was a shamelessly pragmatic injunction" that "permitted ministers to inform their congregations that if any of them could fulfill the Covenant, they were elected." More than anything else, ministers encouraged their flock toward saintly action even while preaching a doctrine of grace that told them they could do nothing to effect their

election. It is in this contrast with European Calvinism that Miller has identified New England Puritanism's "revision of Calvinism," one that gave believers the capacity to control the terms of their salvation within the framework of their faith. As the well-admired minister and theologian John Preston summarized, "[t]he way to grow in any grace is the exercise of that grace," meaning that if a believer could conduct himself piously and on a consistent basis (and in Shepard's view, with added humility, grief, and a touch of despair), then the chances were that he was saved.²²

As Miller has shown, ministers persistently enjoined their parishioners "that faith without performance was impossible" (*New England Mind: Seventeenth Century* 396). It was the conversion narrative that made this performance possible because it made it known. It enabled believers to declare in the open and to each other that, as far as they knew, "my soul should come to the Lord," as one confessor put it (*Confessions* 92). The *Confessions* thus corroborate that even though church applicants knew that their salvation was not for them to know, they still made attempts toward knowing and describing it to the best of their [in]abilites. But as each applicant was admitted, his narrative also blurred the lines between the connotative and substantive essence of his account because it translated his raw experience into an indication of something other than itself, namely, the signs of his spiritual election. To somehow convey these signs was the conversion narrative's function – to do it to a point that reached a congregation's satisfaction.

By giving applicants the chance to rationalize and impart these signs in their own words and according to their own experiences, the ritual quite literally left the terms of a believer's conversion in his own hands in his ability to express himself in a way that made his faith real for himself as well as for his listeners. Growing to understand the stipulations of saintly behavior, confessors, in being asked to speak, controlled the metaphors and meaning that gave their lives' spiritual significance as their narratives rendered past events into a gripping moral story whose import transcended life and even, at times, its explicit connection to its narrator. In the words of Sister Geere, who made her relation in front of Reverend John Fiske's Wenham congregation in 1644, the conversion narrative was "a relation submitted to privately for example's sake, the safety of this church, and for the public honor of God" (quoted in Caldwell *Puritan Conversion Narrative* 132). But as a true story about a convert's vital and absolutely transforming

experience with grace, accounts also asked applicants to fashion their stories in their own language even if within the communicative and allegorical orientation of the ritual's formal parameters. Striving to meet both demands simultaneously, applicants fashioned stories that at once epitomized proper spiritual growth, ones with which members of a congregation would easily identify, while also accounting for themselves in a manner that suggested the singularity and authenticity of their spiritual experiences.

To generate convincing tales of spiritual development in the Bay colony meant that a convert had to choose from certain narrative elements that reflected his compliance with the conventions of ritual performance – that he show a willingness to expose his “secret sins,” for example, or his lack of “reflecting light” to “judge” such sins properly (Shepard “Sincere Convert” 23, 47). When added together, these choices conveyed his regeneration as a discrete instance of the Holy Spirit working in a believer's heart. As a result, the way applicants chose to speak about this experience, whether through their gestures, the images and biblical passages they referred to, or the way they synthesized constituent elements their culture provided, thereby making them into creative agents that expressed both a consensual as well as singular version (and vision) of how conversion could take place in a convert's life. Indeed the basic demand that produced conversion narratives – that an applicant deliver a speech reflective of a visible saint – imposed an artistic standard of performance on every narrator even if narrators never considered themselves the creators of any art. This helps explain each account's distinctiveness even if each cohered to a conventional formula and affective pattern. It also tells us how nearly every confession recorded in early New England was imaginative in its own right as opposed to unoriginal or inexpressive. The metaphors, a-rhythmic cadences, and the personally meaningful references to Scripture that comprised each narrative made it distinct, especially in the way it reflected a synthesis of experience as different as each convert even if every convert was recognized as a visible saint.

Rather than seeing what McGiffert has described as an undeniable I-ness of each narrative as counter to Puritan orthodoxy, one that betrays a consuming involvement with “me” and “mine” despite Puritanism's urge to suppress the subjectivism of personal assertion, readers of the *Confessions* should interpret the personal notes contained in each narrative as intrinsically part of, rather than resistant to, the religious practice held in the

early Bay colony (16). To signal that they had genuinely felt Providence's presence in their lives, converts delivered narratives that complied with a consensual understanding of sainthood's proper morphology in order to establish their faith. Having done so, it would appear that converts reduced the expressive latitude of their speeches, where even a cursory glance at Shepard's *Confessions* and others of the period bespeak a conventionality and aesthetic simplicity that, as discussed in the previous section, conveyed a plainness and humility – and a certain sincerity – that came with being called a visible saint. But as Shea has proposed, even though conversion narratives “indicate how limited the Puritan's freedom of movement could be as he prosecuted his inward exploration,” a limitation that reflected his awareness of his own limitations, they also evince an “appropriate measure of independence and originality in the genre,” one that sprung from as well as revealed the independent subjectivity authoring each account even if the ritual strove to confirm how a believer was working to reject himself and any moral viewpoint he may have held that differed from his congregation's (xiii).

As is the case for any autobiographical endeavor, Shepard's congregants faced the dual requirement of representing the personal nature of their experiences not only authentically but also in a way that conformed to their audience's expectations. To do so successfully was crucial, as it helped each to suggest the the lived nature his or her spiritual encounters within the parameters of the ritual's conventions. So while each conversion narrative in the *Confessions* fits the prescribed formula Watkins and Brereton cite, each nonetheless offer a different representation of Providence's workings unique to each confessor. For the yeoman William Hamlet, the Holy Spirit had given him assurances – Hamlet was “nearest to God” – when “in everything I saw I was decayed and gone” (127). For the glover John Fessenden, it arrived through Shepard's sermons: “hearing Matthew 25, many thought their penny” and “hearing His word Isaiah 38 of Hezekiah” (177). For Jane Palfry, in contrast, “hope in God” came when she learned to check her “rebellious spirit” – when she found her heart, unlike Hutchinson, finally “in obedience . . . to the Lord” (152). Yet at the same time, the ritual also asked that a convert's experiences, retold in his narrative, also cohere to the conventions intrinsic to the performance Shepard and his congregation expected. This conflict, inherent to the ritual and structural form, clarifies why readers might find the Puritan conversion

narrative simultaneously conventional and also subtly expressive. As Shea has argued, a convert's statements "do not reduce to the credal assertions of the writer" but are "instead a form of argument in which the narrator's attempt to assemble or fashion evidence out of his experience" in a way that, while hopefully satisfying his listeners, may still "easily falter or yield an unexpected conclusion" (xxii, xxv).

Shea's point is well taken, and helps explain the concurrent levels of compliance and "unexpected" distinctiveness of each narrative. More importantly, it allows readers to understand that a crucial feature of the Puritan conversion narrative was the way an applicant chose to address the ritual's demands in his own way and in his own language. By confining the expressive terminology of their confessions within a specific and clearly-defined expressive channel, confessors accommodated the expectations held over their narratives. Yet the communicative and theological framework they relied on also worked as a determinative boundary, one from which converts could point to the singularity of their experiences while holding to their culture's discursive and ideological norms.

Partaking in a performance built on the demand for believers to develop and deliver a personal narrative that articulated their faith's inner-workings, applicants were led to a creative space where they assembled and rehearsed the events surrounding their conversion in a language of Christian evangelism. Yet this language, like their experiences, were ultimately their own. So even though applicants asserted their faith by claiming to need more of it in a rationale and rhetoric consistent with their minister's theology, they still approached the ritual, and the rules regulating its practice, from a position of their individual experiences, using a shared lexicon to formulate accounts that were both similar to as well as unique from ones that had come before. As David D. Hall has recently explained in his study of popular religious belief in 17th century New England, conversion narratives were something of a middle-ground between an applicant's strict compliance with orthodoxy and a believer's private conception of what orthodox faith comprised. So while Shepard presented Puritan doctrine systematically and in a way he hoped his congregants to follow, converts routinely mentioned what they had learned randomly, often repeating the same doctrines in different ways, or leaving out crucial steps in the normal pattern of how conversion was believed to proceed, thereby

revealing what Hall has identified as “a gap” existing “between candidates and their mentor” (*Worlds of Wonder* 44).

To Hall, as for Caldwell, this gulf was one of vocabulary and logic rather than one of belief. Yet it seems more correct to say that the vocabulary and logic believers applied to their conversion *informed* their belief. The gulf to which Hall refers was also one of performance – one where applicants devised ever-inventive ways of describing their faith in ways that could still meet the demands of the ritual. Like any act of personal disclosure that asks a narrator to speak of his life, converts had specific interests and leanings which they inevitably brought to their confessions. To search for these interests or the distinctive needs that brought a believer to stand before a congregation is to look for the distinct individual behind each confession. As I have been arguing, this means locating the specific ways each applicant approached his performance, just as each narrative coalesced to comprise the religion and religious culture to which each convert voluntarily submitted.

To take up this charge requires readers to grant the authorial position of each narrator and thus the possibility of seeing the conversion narrative as an inherently creative – even artistic – endeavor even if applicants never considered themselves authors or artists. Like every individual, no two narratives were ever the same. Each described an entirely original experience of – and hence an approach to – salvation, yet in a language that at the same time imparted a narrator's assent to the caveats of the conversion narrative's performance, and by extension, to the culture out of which it grew and in which it was imposed. In the case of Brother Crackbone's wife or Mary Angier, to cite two examples, each delivered narratives that, for the most part, can be described as highly formulaic. But at the same time, each placed a decided emphasis on their intense concern for their respective family's spiritual welfare as opposed to their own which, in Mitchell Breitwieser's words, “severs” them “from the normativity the discourse is meant to provide” even while they were agreeing to its spiritual and social provisions (*American Puritanism* 97). As a mariner, William Manning's narrative, and so his converting experience to which his language attests, differs from others in his reliance on nautical imagery to both make sense of and recount his encounters with grace. Betokening himself as a “ship, meeting with new occasions and troubles,” Manning represents his

regeneration in his own idiom – in a way that was familiar to William Manning. Manning's staggering cadence, which revolves around the imperative refrains of “I should,” “I was,” “I thought,” and “I found,” also helped him express the spiritual restlessness that he, like his fellow confessors, felt in his heart. While this may be seen as a conventional move, it is one that also typifies the physical movement Manning personally endured on “several occasions” as a mariner. For Manning, the sea is a trope that best conveys his spiritual efforts which, while unique, also fluctuates between doubts and assurances in a sense typical to Shepard's converts (95-7).

As idiosyncratic as Manning's language may have been, it also portrayed the process of his conversion in a manner consistent with other narratives – for example, in Manning's numerous references to “the goodness of God” shown him, or that he was “a poor creature” yet one “provided for” because he indeed saw, as all converts saw, that he was “crippled and lame” (98). We can say, then, that each conversion narrative's distinctiveness was a constituent element of the ritual, whether in the form of Mary Griswold's deliberate and even decadent references to Scripture, Henry Dunster's exaggerated pontifications on infant baptism, or the aforementioned Wyeth's painstaking examination before Cambridge's elders. Shepard's own confession, meaning his *Autobiography*, is no different. It too breaks from custom to expose the distinct personality and expressive energies of its author. For example, although Shepard's address to his son “so he may learn to know and love the great and most high God, the God of his father” is a typical way Puritans opened their spiritual narratives, Shepard uses the opportunity to engage in a full-blown sermon in which the miraculous events of the younger Thomas' birth are described at length so that Shepard can in turn instruct readers “to lift up thy eyes to heave to God in everlasting praises of Him and dependence upon him . . . [who] hath been so careful of thee when thou couldst not care for thyself” (35, 39). Indeed much of the *Autobiography* reads like a sermon, replete with itemized points that explicate the events Shepard describes, and that reflect not only the vocation but also the temperament and spiritual dedication of its author. But despite discrepancies, the narrative features or the formal logic and language that distinguished conversion narratives also made them the same since they were all united by a common evangelical purpose. Speaking in their own voices, applicants gave evidence of their resolution to

close with Christ and the steps they had taken to make this possible. And as they spoke, their words animated their faith, exposing it to others as each narrative expressed a convert's spiritual awakening and religious conviction in slightly different (or in some cases, drastically different) terms.

To do this was unavoidable, and in some senses preferable since the ritual intended to bring believers of all walks and experiences together through their genuine penchant for piety. But by accounting for their faith in the only way they knew how – in a voice and in a personal context that was undoubtedly different for each individual – converts engaged, however unwittingly, in what Shea has identified as “a faintly subversive argument against formulaic descriptions” (149-50). As we know, accounts were expressed formulaically to reflect a believer's assent to his culture's religious and social ontology and to show his compliance with its moral framework. But however unconsciously or unwillingly, narrators still represented their narratives in their own tongues – in ways that not only betrayed their unique understanding of grace and even their creative capacity as narrators, but also in an incarnation that relativized their faith. As each confession conveyed a convert's spirituality, it also transmitted a fresh sense of conversion and of what this religious experience could entail. So as narratives were delivered and accepted, they ultimately defined the terms of Puritan religion with each narrator's interpretive definition of his ineffable encounters with grace.

By concluding his spiritual confession with an extensive eulogy for his wife, one in which he interprets her passing as both an affliction and a further instance how, as a Christian soul, “I am the Lord's and he may do with me what he will,” Shepard arrives at a new way of articulating (and so, comprehending) his faith, one that at the same time seems conventional because it fits within the framework of how Puritans were thought to regard their relationship with the Lord (“Autobiography” 72). The eulogy, in other words, adds Shepard's subjective thought-process to a shared conception of faith, teaching us that, whatever else it was, piety in the Massachusetts Bay colony was something as personal as it was public. More than simply a description of a Christian soul's private struggles, conversion narratives approximated saintly experience as best a believer could – in a way that both agreed with a common conception of what this was as well as what it specifically entailed for him. To achieve this balance, Cambridge's confessors reduced

their experiences into a constellation of absorbing metaphors that their audience could both recognize and identify but that were, out of necessity, of his own and in the way he imagined, ordered, and expressed. So as acceptable narratives offered an example of a authentic Christian conversion, they also offered a highly personal example, conveyed in a highly personal way, of saint-worthy experience that, when deemed sufficient, was re-inscribed within Puritanism's dominant discourse. The consequence is that while applicants may have conformed to the stipulations of the ritual, they also overstepped the performative boundaries under which it placed them. In following their minister's instruction and example, converts spoke of a "hungering desire for God's ordinances" (Cotton "Purchasing Christ" 329). Yet the manner in which they communicated this desire, or the choices they made in how they represented their religious convictions (for instance, by characterizing themselves as an unsure "wretch" and therefore "a hypocrite" all "the more" as Jane Holmes did), made their religion ultimately their own as much as it was a product of early colonial culture (*Confessions* 80).

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A justification for why those interested in New England's early literature should read Puritan conversion narratives shouldn't be necessary. By now it should be apparent that conversion narratives like the *Confessions* help demonstrate what James F. Maclear once described as "the emotional, the experiential, and ultimately the mystical element . . . of Puritan evangelical religion (662). Although lesser-known, early accounts like those Shepard recorded can help situate and, to an extent, re-familiarize readers with more canonical spiritual accounts – Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children", for example – or even texts outside the genre and period, like Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, or Jonathan Edwards' *Personal Narrative*. What a work like the *Confessions* does best, however, is show us how the practice of piety in the early Massachusetts Bay paradoxically embraced a multiplicity of alternative and at times contrasting models of spirituality rather than, as well as in the midst of, just one. Like the names on the title page of each confession Shepard transcribed, every conversion narrative represents an unrepeatable spiritual experience that took place in a discreet moment of time. They speak not only of a person's faith but of a *people's*, each helping readers better gauge just

what kinds of individuals the Puritans really were, and so, how these individuals may have influenced later settlers.

Autobiographic in scope and spiritual in theme, the conversion narrative's bent toward the formalization of subjective experience has led scholars, Caldwell most notably, to see the ritual as “the beginnings of American expression” – as a veritable staging-ground from which common men and women, rather than their leaders, rose to articulate their experiences and feelings in the name of their faith. While the accounts delivered at Cambridge “were common enough, admittedly, to Christian experience,” Caldwell points out that what makes them uniquely American is how, “now for the first time, they were linked to an actual place” (*Puritan Conversion Narrative* 120). Having “embraced the motion to New England,” Barbary Cutter acknowledged to Shepard's congregation how she had “went through with many miseries and stumbling blocks” for her faith, citing physical and psychological shackles that were “at last removed . . . after I came hither.” Cutter's narrative consequently lends credence to Caldwell's view, for it was only in New England where, with tears of joy verging on disbelief, Cutter saw her “condition more miserable than ever,” a sight that eventually led her to seek Christ as her Lord (89-90).

Opening their experiences up to examination, converts placed themselves (or were they placed?) in a position to bestow the events of their lives with symbolic importance even as they admitted the inadequacy of their words. Their ability to do so consequently calls for a closer look at Shepard's Puritans, particularly in terms of the extent of their expressiveness which, if explored, may give us a more nuanced view of Puritan culture, particularly in its impact on early American literature. Though they weren't necessarily eloquent or even artful, converts still managed to synthesize elements of their experience with elements of performance to describe the most important moments of their lives. They did this amid uncertainty and creative tension, one ubiquitous in Puritan literature, from Edward Taylor's verse to Increase Mather's *Brief History* of King Philip's War, in an effort that brought them to face-to-face with the moral obligation to reject their subjective self-identities.

Devised to create a consensus of experience, thought, and action, the conversion narrative pushed converts toward an on-the-spot creativity and inventiveness while giving

them with the proper lexical, affective, and symbolic vocabulary to account for their faith along affirmative lines, lines that both granted (and guaranteed) the uniqueness and spiritual worth of a narrator's private experiences while simultaneously confirming them as tokens of his congregation's spiritual sanction. It is in this merger – between personal and collective experience – as well as from a creativity borne paradoxically through acquiescence, that would in fact oblige later observers to exclaim how "New England" possessed "two advantages which should strongly excite the interest of mankind: namely, independence and authority," where the creative potential borne out of the conversion narrative demonstrated how New England was a "sphere . . . limited," yet one where "within that sphere . . . action is unrestrained" (Tocqueville 59).

Confirming an applicant's assent to his religion's value-system, the conversion narrative also brought his resourcefulness, uniquely expressive style, and his own experience and understanding of faith – combined with his minister's – to the Puritan meeting house where he painted both a conventional and idiosyncratic picture of how "the grace of God" had entered his "soul" to transform his "estate into" one in "fellowship with Christ" (*Confessions* 159). Despite the obligation for converts to lay open their thoughts and innermost feelings for a church to check and balance, the ritual also celebrated the special way a believer arrived at faith, just as it ostensibly asked him to repudiate himself and his voice to be closer to God.

As narratives were delivered and visible saints were brought into a fold, congregations like Shepard's therefore sustained an opposition – a distinct symbolic and rhetorical mode – vital to the delivery of an acceptable confession, and by extension, to the way Puritan piety was represented in early America. Asked to express their faith in their own terms yet in a way that conformed to the bounds of the ritual's carrying out, a congregation's efforts to lay open their soul sparked what I have been offering as a unique form of self-representation endemic to their performance and to Puritan culture more generally, one ultimately driven by a believer's voluntary consent to his society's demand that his soul's ascent to heaven was possible if he only tried to understand his proper place within God's cosmic drama of salvation.

While the custom of recording, sharing, and proving the authenticity of one's spiritual encounters has always held a firm place in America's literary tradition, there can

be no doubt of Puritanism's influence in shaping the cast. In the following chapters, I argue that the way early Bay setters rehearsed (and in some senses perfected) their speeches made a clear mark on later generations of Protestants willing to describe their conversion and faith. Without living to realize it, Shepard's confessors and others like them gave later Protestants a clear sense of what it meant to engage in appropriate (and consensual) Christian behavior that was also distinct, personally meaningful, and heartfelt. By relying on self-representation to affirm the positive spiritual status of its congregations, New England minsters, whether they knew it or not, placed the reality of their religious institutions – and their faith – on the interpretive and creative capacity of their adherents, giving believers not only the power to justify themselves as visible saints but also the chance to establish, in their own hearts and in their own language, the precise content of what being a genuine Christian convert was in the Massachusetts Bay colony.

Notes

¹ Perhaps the most comprehensive (and reader-friendly) text on Calvinism as is understood and practiced by its followers is, without question, Henry R. Van Til's *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*. In no uncertain terms, Van Til explains that it is the purpose of the redeemed to seek and bring all areas of human life into conformity with God's plan as revealed through the Bible. Since no Calvinist – and in our case, no Puritan – knew who the redeemed were, it was consequently the function of all adherents to follow this spiritual program.

² Williams' denial and repudiation of all things "Puritan" is ironic. By calling them renamers, Williams confers upon them a sense of poetic fluency and creative capacity, a subject this chapter will later explore, in order to attack them. The fact that Williams' history dedicates so much time to the Puritans betrays, beyond a form of anxiety, an influence they seem to have had on his mind.

³ This has indeed been the position of numerous and more recent social historians who, as Chapter I discussed, established their work in response to older intellectual historians like Perry Miller, Garrett Rutman, and Edmund Morgan. These latter scholars worked with the basic premise that New England's leadership spoke as the unified voice of their people, their writing therefore best representing the temper and mind of New England's early settlers. The best studies that have convincingly debunked this notion, particularly in terms of the Bay colony's religious practice, have been Philip Gura's *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England, 1620-1660*, David D. Hall's *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*, and Janice Knight's *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*.

⁴ Taylor quoted in Eastman, 7.

⁵ Cotton quoted in Delbanco, 37.

⁶ Shepard quoted in McGiffert, 70.

⁷ As Slement and Woolley explain in their introduction to the *Confessions*, those who gave their confessions “were mostly unassuming laymen. In England, where many of the families resided in Suffolk, Essex, or Northumberland, almost all the men were either yeomen, tradesman (carpenters, coopers, weavers, or glovers), or mariners.” Even more, only “one-third of the people could read and write” (3). The literacy level of Shepard's converts should strongly suggest how applicants relied primarily on oral means to understand and communicate their faith, for example through instruction from parents, by listening to sermons, and of course hearing the conversion narratives of their fellow Christians. On colonial literacy in colonial New England, see Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England*.

⁸ Shepard, “The Parable of the Ten Virgins,” 172. A good example of Shepard's evangelical and homiletic influence is cited in Slement and Woolley's introduction to the *Confessions*. According to the editors, Cotton Mather had once referred to Shepard as “Pastor Evangelicus,” and rightly so. Shepard's preaching was said to have awakened the pastor Jonathan Mitchell, who succeeded him at Cambridge. “[M]any a hundred soul,” wrote Edward Johnson, were “Saved” under Shepard's ministry (13). The *Confessions* themselves attest to Shepard's fervent and effectual preaching. In fact, a handful of applicants mention Shepard directly. Although no scholar has, to my knowledge, engaged in such a study, an evangelical genealogy between Shepard and Jonathan Edwards seems prudent, particularly as a way to make further connections between earlier and later religious culture in New England. This is partly the intention of Chapter IV, where echoes of Shepard's soul-awakening evangelism can not only be heard in Awakening-era sermons but also in 18th century spiritual narratives.

⁹ These sentiments were constantly stressed by early Puritan ministers. In “The Sincere Convert,” for example, Shepard presses his parishioners to realize that they “art full of rottenness, of sin, within” but also that, despite being “[g]uilty . . . God [nevertheless] looks to the heart,” where those that claim in earnest of having “despairing thoughts” (17) are, in all likelihood, God's elect, having realized and admitted to their iniquities as a road to their redemption. Shepard's logic can also be identified in the later jeremiad, though this sermonic form was applied to the community as a whole as opposed to individual souls.

¹⁰ Hutchinson quoted in Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 337-8.

¹¹ My analysis here rests on Burke's understanding of language as a symbolic act. According to Burke, as a “symbol-using animal,” humans must rely on a “dramatistic” or gestural relationship between language's symbolic and its non-symbolic or extra-symbolic content in order to produce meaning. Because congregations interpreted and

understood a confessor's speech as symbolic, as a gesture and a reifying performance that brought his conversion to life, applicants shared their experiences by using a shared transpersonal vocabulary – what Burke calls a “terministic screen” – to create a common understanding even if their encounters with grace were beyond the capacity of words to describe.

¹² McGiffert, 16-7. Shepard quoted here.

¹³ That being a Puritan saint meant having difficulty speaking about one's faith is reflected in almost all of New England's early religious literature, and should indeed be taken as an indication of what was considered genuine faith. In “Upon a Fit of Sickness” for example, Anne Bradstreet acknowledges how “great is the gain, though got with pain, / comes by profession pure.” To profess one's faith “purely” meant admitting to “pain.” More precisely, it meant conceding to the pain of being unable to speak adequately about how one felt toward God, how to properly acknowledge Him, and how praise His name. Edward Taylor's poetry is the supreme example of this, although Shepard's converts expressed it no less sufficiently. This fits with Raymond Williams' analysis in *Marxism and Literature* of how conversion experiences are always beyond expression and analysis; that religious experiences that are either recorded and read, or heard, lack a “living presence [that] is always, by definition, receding” (128).

¹⁴ Although the scope of this dissertation is to examine and clarify the Puritan conversion narrative's legacy on how Protestant regeneration is later represented, Chapter IV will specifically investigate its contribution to the Great Awakening, and later, to the black Atlantic world. There is certainly cause for this kind of exploration. According to David Bebbington in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, there can be little doubt that “Evangelical theology was the prevailing mode of Christian thinking in the English-speaking world during the nineteenth century,” a “doctrinal system professed by the Evangelical Revival that in the previous century had given birth to Methodism, transformed the Congregationalists and Baptists into eagerly expanding bodies, and begun to revitalize the Anglicans and Presbyterians.” Yet many have ignored the transformation of Calvinist thought under the impact of the Great Awakening, and dismiss the rise of a parallel doctrinal tradition created by Methodism. Indeed Shepard's Calvinism, while far from decaying, grew into a “modified version . . . as the nineteenth century proceeded, forming the backbone of Evangelical theology” (235). It is the purpose of this dissertation to explain how.

¹⁵ In Chapter VI, I will discuss Shepard's theology in the context of Alcoholics Anonymous where we will see how, despite the so-called secularity of this modern-day organization, AA imparts a suspiciously similar moral logic to addicts as Shepard did to sinners.

¹⁶ Shepard quoted in Selement's and Woolley's introduction to the *Confessions*, 23; In “The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645,” Selement observes that having coached and screened candidates privately, Shepard had already judged them as visible saints. This fact seems to emphasize, as this dissertation

maintains, the performative and ritual aspect of the Puritan conversion narrative over its spiritual currency. That is, that the notion that visible sainthood relied on a highly choreographed presentation. As this is the case, it will be left for this dissertation to explore the consequences of this fact, particularly whether converts simply "hit" on affective and rhetorical patterns of speech to secure a sainted social standing regardless of whether they had actually felt themselves closing with Christ.

¹⁷ Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion narrative*, 150. Shepard quoted in here.

¹⁸ Even the most cursory glance at Protestant conversion narratives written in the 17th and 18th centuries will reveal a formal and thematic closeness to the ones Shepard recorded although they are often longer, as well as written for very different audiences. However, while we must allow for certain stylistic variants, the rhetorical intention in earlier and later narratives of Protestant conversion is always (and always will be) the same, namely, that a believer is trying to convince his audience that he has undergone a genuine conversion. How one goes about proving this will reveal a closeness (or distinction) between earlier and later narratives. For example, to the Puritan, the road to salvation was always considered a difficult and uncertain one. This is also true of narratives written and recorded during the Great Awakening even though believers reportedly felt grace immediately and uncontrollably. While 18th century Protestants often represent their conversions as instantaneous, their narratives also show a believer who must repeatedly endure for his faith. Examples of faith endured as a means of confirming one's genuine piety can be readily found in the 19th century sentimental novel, which should lead to the conclusion that though the language of conversion may have changed from Protestant to Protestant and from century to century, the basic essence of how it has been characterized still remains closely akin to how it was represented in 17th century New England.

¹⁹ Shepard here quoted in McGiffert, 15.

²⁰ Cohen reads Puritan religious practice from a psychoanalytic perspective, sharing a critical viewpoint I take up in Chapter III. He argues that converts were asked to essentially reject the terms of their ego – understood as their unregenerate, “natural” selves – so as to give themselves over to an authoritative superego (represented most by God) for purposes of their own as well as their community’s greater good. In his study, Cohen explores the psychic tensions that Puritan religious theory and practice fostered in its adherents as a means of unearthing the specific affective language of ideological consensus crucial to Puritan society and essential (as I hope to show) to the conversion narrative.

²¹ As I have already mentioned, the sense of anguish and uncertainty that converts conveyed in their conversion narratives, a rhetorical analogue to the spiritual testing they endured, is just as complex as what readers find in the better known sentimental novel where Protestants, especially women and those occupying lower social stations, discover the depth and sincerity of their faith through moral hardships they endure in its name. As Michael J. Colacurcio has suggested in *Doctrine and Defense: Essays in the Literature of New England*, “the enduring power of many antebellum American texts comes in fact

from Puritanism: from the dis-ease of its embattled survival, in some instances; or from the violence of its repression; or even from the energy required to meet its 'moral' argument head-on" (230). Colacurcio explains that by the 19th century, the gradual erosion of biblical authority makes it possible for works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Hope Leslie* to insist on itself "as a 'sacred text' in its own right" in the same way conversion narratives, while personal and idiosyncratic, were nevertheless still considered spiritual examples of God's enduring favor toward New England's early Puritans.

²² Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, 395-7. Preston quoted here.

CHAPTER III

ANXIETY UNTO ASSURANCE: PURPOSE, PARADOX, AND THE PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPERIENCE OF PURITAN CONVERSION

In *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety*, Michael McGiffert has argued, quite rightly, that the most striking feature of the minister Thomas Shepard's life was its pervasive sense of "unsettledness," one in which Shepard's "ruling anxieties" often gave way to a feeling of security – or calmness – stimulated by Shepard's "thirst for acceptance" in Christ's redeeming power (3-4). Not surprisingly, these contradictory emotions shape Shepard's *Autobiography* and *Journal* in terms of their content and structure, both texts citing numerous instances in which Shepard's apprehensions over his faith's adequacy are paradoxically resolved through his commitment to serve God. In both works, as in Shepard's theology, the minister's misgivings are relieved, however temporarily, through his attempts toward an even greater faith, in a calculus that held that yes, "God was far from us and therefore our weakness," but that "He had [also] made himself near to us in Christ" for those who accepted their "troubling weaknesses" ("Journal" 110). Shepard maintained that true faith was established when a believer saw his moral shortcomings and, in response, grew first anxious, and then convinced, however hesitantly, that grace could save him despite his defects. As McGiffert has shown, Shepard's logic, one also shared by his contemporaries, can be characterized as one of the central "paradoxes of Puritan piety." As a minister, Shepard worked hard to push individuals toward spiritual assurance by showing them how a felt awareness of their spiritual deficiencies could lead them, if they truly believed, to a closer conviction in Christ's saving power.¹

To see one's shortages – that one is in "want of Christ" as Edward Hall, one of Shepard's confessors, had realized – led the Puritan saint to understand "that without Him he must perish," a realization that, for Hall and others, "opened . . . that promise" of "the son of man [who] came to seek that which was lost." For Hall as well as for the other members of Cambridge's church, piety was a process of "fits and starts." It was an emotional roller-coaster in which converts came to "loathe" themselves after having "found more enmity" in their "heart[s] against the Lord than ever before" – a

loathsomeness that found relief after they registered how “the Lord was willing to take away [their] enmity” (34).

For Shepard, as for his congregation, the sight of one's sin and the anxious response it would invariably produce in an elect soul was thought to lead the believer, in time and with persistent effort, toward an ever-increasing conviction in his salvation. Making despair serve the office of delight, Shepard grounded assurance on anxiety itself, like his contemporary Descartes, using doubt as the basis of spiritual affirmation. Assurance rested on a dialectic of contrary emotions, one in which a convert's hopes and fears kept his faith steadily aimed toward salvation's narrow gate. As McGiffert explains, that genuine faith was “patterned by a dynamic relation of hopeful and fearful emotions, interacting and interpenetrating” is precisely what made Puritan piety paradoxical, where to truly believe meant understanding the connection between doubt and assurance as it played out in a convert's life (25).

To have faith in the early Bay colony meant perpetually testing one's anxieties against one's convictions and constantly appraising one's sense of security against doubts that this security was truly warranted. For Shepard, assurances that one had been saved was something that every Christian had to seek throughout the course of his life. But as a process continually open to readjustment and revision, assurance – and so, one's conversion – was always in question. It was in this spirit that Shepard urged his followers to “[b]e always converting . . . always pulling up foundations.” He wanted them to persistently question their faith and to remain ever-vigilant (and hence, ever anxious) lest they be mistaken about the legitimacy of their religious convictions. “The godly,” Shepard reminded them, were those “daily afflicted and reviled,” while “the wicked . . . live and die in peace” (“Sincere Convert” 34).

This theology, as well as Shepard's legacy and effectiveness as a preacher, appears to have been as convincing as it was influential. Edward Johnson, Shepard's contemporary, regarded Shepard's evangelical efforts as those which “thousands of souls have cause to bless God for,” while Jonathan Mitchel, Shepard's successor at Cambridge, described his mentor as a “[s]oul-melting preacher” who could soften the heart of even the most obstinate sinner.² Committed to his calling, Shepard's ultimate priority was to stimulate his parishioners' faith and hasten their conversions, and to be sure, the

Confessions bespeak to his evangelical achievement.

As David D. Hall has recently shown, “no one who listened to the ‘painful’ sermons” of the Cambridge minister, and no one who converted under his instruction, “could take his salvation for granted” since Shepard taught that the heart of the sinner was too variable for assurance to ever be complete or known (*Antinomian Controversy* 12). This is why Shepard called on his flock to be restless rather than relaxed; why he strove to induce anxiety in those who lacked assurance and encouraged doubt in those who possessed it. Although salvation was an unknown quantity, Shepard was sure that the only objective measure of grace in a believer's heart were his fears. If a person cultivated these fears, his faith would be stimulated – if he really was saved – by the sight of his dependence on God's will as his only means of redemption. Shepard's formula was straight-forward: the more persistent the restlessness in a believer's heart, the more he would make efforts for his faith if his conviction was genuine, where the more he struggled, the more it showed that he was one of God's elect.

As David Leverenz has clarified, Shepard “wished to humble” and unnerve his congregants rather than pacify them, “knowing as he did that the least shred of comfort would keep them from dependence on the purified father” (189). “The Lord's choicest servants,” Shepard enjoined, were those who “have their complaints, their sighs and groans unutterable; they have their fears, temptations, and tears. Who more abundantly?”³ In his *Journal*, Shepard reiterated his view of conversion as a process that reversed the law of contraries. By focusing on “the deceit of a man's heart which . . . is very bad,” Shepard felt that a true believer would begin “to seek to be very good” though his heart's agitated response to his moral shortcomings (106). Indeed “God's greatest plot,” Shepard told his congregation, was not to lift men up, but rather, “to pull all men down, [so] that his Son may be set up.” He reminded them that sincere conviction in Christ's redeeming act would work to “empty a man” so that the Holy Spirit may fill him up even if this made the honest Christian seem as though he were “the poorest orphan in the world.”⁴ As Shepard would write on the title page of “The Sincere Convert,” his most probing sermon on conversion, visible saints were those who realized “the great difficulty of saving conversion” and knew that only “few are saved, and that with great difficulty.” Yet they were also those who saw the consternation that came with this “great difficulty” as

something especially “sweet” since it brought with it the possibility of gaining a clearer view of Christ's redeeming power (1).

As Chapter II has discussed, the conversion narratives Shepard recorded closely parallel the theology he espoused, particularly with regard to Shepard's view of regeneration. The *Confessions* show that despite individual differences, narrators – and narratives – registered and conveyed conversion in a highly conventional form, one that corresponded with Shepard's teachings and that, in turn, helped narrators signal the miracle of their conversion to a fellowship of believers who conceded that salvation was not something anyone could know. Accounts that attested to a believer's plaguing self-doubts and faith in God's sovereignty in response revealed a Christian who had undergone a genuine conversion even if he could never be sure that this was the case. Accepted to Shepard's fold along these terms, converts were consequently linked not only in terms of their speeches but also in terms of the feelings they shared – feelings characterized by conflicting emotions that, when expressed, suggested to other early New Englanders a divinely sanctioned faith.

To hear how difficult it was to be saved made believers understandably uneasy. In the face of this anxiety, Shepard ordered his flock to steer their apprehensions away from themselves and toward God and His church. Both, he explained, had the capacity to heal their sorrows and ease their unsettledness.⁵ Following their minister's instruction, Cambridge's faithful carried out their piety in a state of anguish, honing the latter as a means of securing spiritual assurance however difficult, agonizing, or perplexing the process. As Perry Miller has argued, by interpreting the conversions around them as indications of God's favor toward the collective enterprise of building a unified Protestant church, ministers like Shepard were quick to suggest that parishioners had to speak up or else be ruined forever (*Errand* 162). But more than simply speak up, regenerate souls also had to *feel* grace's saving power by showing that they had sufficiently questioned (and agonized over) their faith. They had to demonstrate, in alternating tones of grief and exaltation, that they felt in their hearts how Christ was the only solution to their fallen spiritual condition. So as converts rose to deliver an account of their saving experiences under the pretext of conversion's great difficulty, they spoke in a consonant temper, each not only describing but also feeling “a sense of . . . great guilt” at their “exceeding

wickedness” in “the sight of God,” as well as a sense of felt humility – and conviction – that despite their fallen “condition,” “Christ was offered” to “stay and comfort” those “stirred up . . . to seek Christ” (*Confessions* 33-4).

The cooperative sensibility early Puritan colonists embraced as part of the process of their conversion should demonstrate to contemporary observers how, despite individual differences among believers, converts still shared an emotional or extra-gestural language that allowed them to exhibit the “change of heart” taking place in their souls and their willingness to assent to a consensus of experience that, to Shepard, “gave a sign of a work of the True Spirit.”⁶ Like their ministers, those who belonged to a church structured their experiences through a similar pattern of unsettledness, one that formed the affective, thematic, and narrative epicenter of their accounts much as it did for Shepard in his *Journal* and *Autobiography*. This correspondence provides a compelling testament to the degree of unity – of both thought and feeling – between Shepard and his flock. In accordance, the *Confessions* reveal the depth to which believers registered their minister’s theology of a humbled heart as they refrained from making overt pronouncements as to the certainty of their conversions. In this vein, they typically end their narratives, as Nathaniel Sparrowhawk did, by “entreat[ing] the Lord to help” them in their “unbelief” even as they simultaneously found their “heart enlarged” by grace (64). Growing assured of his salvation after “hearing that the last shall be first,” confessors like the mariner John Trumbull highlighted how they were unable to “tell . . . whether [they have] seen sin or no,” as their doubts and their fear that they were damned rather than saved pushed them to recognize their need for further faith and so, to their listeners, that they *had* faith indeed (109).

In the sections that follow try to articulate the psychodynamic effect that the unsettling process of preparing for, and finally, of describing one’s encounters with grace had on Shepard’s converts. As Darrett Rutman has observed, students of 17th century New England must realize that the “evangelical thrust” of Puritanism’s preachers was always, in any final analysis, “related to society at large, [and] to the psychosocial setting in which laymen received their preaching” (114). By considering the personal, experiential, and affective demands under which converts were placed, I examine not just the psychological context Rutman describes but also the experience of what it was like –

meaning how it felt – to become a visible saint in the early Bay colony.

As we shall see, to convert in the Bay meant that a believer see himself as broken from himself. Yet this requirement had real consequences on actual people – in terms of how they were viewed by their peers, how it influenced them emotionally, and in the way they interpreted and represented their faith. But to address the question of how converts reacted to the Gospel's message of a new birth and how their social (and intellectual) context influenced this understanding, one must inevitably consider conversion from the psychosocial perspective Rutman suggests. For this purpose, I frame my analysis on modern psychoanalytic theory, particularly those advanced by psycho-social theorists R. D. Laing and Cathy Caruth who each examine, albeit in different ways, how human behavior (and in our case, the phenomena of conversion) is both precipitated and influenced by the often contradictory demands under which individuals are placed. My hypothesis is that the ministerial mindset in which preachers were taught that, whatever they did, they should “be sure to maintain shame” upon their flock, effected in converts what Laing categorizes as a condition of ontological insecurity, as the requirements of church membership encouraged an outlook in which believers had to simultaneously view themselves as both lost and found, both doubtful and sure (*Mather Magnalia* 522).

Having in some cases spent a lifetime cultivating anxiety as a means of probing their spiritual assurance, converts fostered uncertainty as a precondition of spiritual conviction. As they felt and later spoke about their transformation from reprobate to redeemed, they told a story in which their self-doubt grew in proportion to their assurance – one in which they had achieved the necessary stipulations of sainthood whose achievement, in essence, reversed the order of their success since it compelled them to doubt the fulfillment of their accomplishment. From a psychological perspective, to deliver an acceptable conversion narrative meant coming to terms with oneself under mutually exclusive terms. As visible saints, church members played two personas simultaneously – what McGiffert identifies as “anguished sufferer” and “assured believer” – in a dialectic that, when performed, helped them give evidence of their salvation in accordance with their minister's theology of an affected heart (98).

To both be *and* not to be was the paradoxical ontology of the Puritan saint. As such, a closer look at the conversion narrative he offered should show the degree to which

Calvinist doctrine promoted psychogenic discord in its believers, as well as ways in which confessors sustained this internal conflict as it influenced their accounts. Encouraged by their minister to see the “absolute necessity to be another man,” those preparing themselves for conversion aimed their sights and souls toward being something other than they were as they strove to radically transform their personalities. Yet the closer the convert came to sanctification, the more it seemed that he was falling short of this goal as his failure, rather than his success, induced him to keep striving toward Christ. Failure thus became the stage upon which the congregational applicant mounted a case for his conviction. As he enacted it by pointing to his personal and spiritual inadequacies on a public stage for others to view and verify, he imputed upon himself a condition of existential liminality in which his peers considered him saved – implied by his acceptance to their church – even as he was convinced of his “undone condition” (*Confessions* 33).

In this way, the Puritan convert was psychically (and socially) rent in two, divided between how he understood himself (as a sinner unworthy of spiritual redemption) and the way others saw him (as a genuine believer; as an adherent who lived in doubt of his salvation). Because this process of identification involved, at any single moment, both the external world and the internal being, focusing on it from a psycho-social methodology can clarify what the experience of Puritan conversion and confession may have been. We may say along with psychiatrist Erik H. Erikson, for example, that conversion, in terms of preparing for it, relating its experience, and living with it after having undergone it, asked believers to identify themselves in terms of the world around them. To borrow Erikson's terminology, the convert “judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in . . . while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them” (23). Such was the case for the Puritan convert, who concurrently viewed himself a sinner and a saint. Using Erikson's model, one notices how the process of conversion, for it truly was a fluid process rather than static moment, was one located as much in the eyes a believer's community as in a believer himself. This suggests that to be a Puritan saint in 17th century New England meant representing oneself in terms of a congregational community's values as much as it meant that a believer actually saw himself as saved.⁷

To convert and be redeemed, in other words, meant that an applicant had to advance a public identity and self-understanding in contradistinction with his own self-conception. This feature of Puritan identity (for as Alan Simpson rightful declares, the only thing all Puritans shared was their experience of new birth) did not end with Shepard's flock and their confessions, however (2). Rather, the paradoxical psychology that made Puritanism both problematic and potent has also influenced the way later authors – both religious and secular – have come to account for themselves within the social and psycho-social contexts in which they offered their experiences. Selves both saved and uncertain, Shepard's Puritans engaged in an autobiographical act in which they described their saving encounters with grace. As they delivered satisfactory accounts, they also assumed a sphere of representative personality, becoming single spokesmen for the spiritual ambitions of their congregation and even the Bay colony as a whole as their accounts revealed the inner life of each narrator.

As Mitchell Breitwieser has observed, the simultaneously representative and personal identity both expressed and inherent to autobiography dates “as far back, perhaps, as the American Puritans’ enthusiasm for applying hagiography to their experience” (*Cotton Mather* 1). Picking up on Breitwieser’s contention, I propose that the paradoxical and expressive energies endemic to works of self-representation later printed in America can be linked to the spiritual confessions offered at Cambridge. Embodying qualities of self-surveillance, self-discipline, and spiritual determination as they grounded their narratives in Scripture, their minister’s instruction, and the experiences of other converts, congregational applicants evoked what they knew to be positive aspects of human nature – qualities like self-denial, unsettledness, and contrition. These traits were absorbed within the dominant narrative of what it meant to convert even as they pushed converts to question their election. To engage in this tentative dialectic was to prove one’s election. Yet it also meant that narrators be, at least on the face of things, that which they could never admit to being; that they produce an account in which its protagonist’s assurance grew even as the convert who accounted for this process increasingly questioned both his assurance and himself. As the following chapter concludes, it suggests that this divide, or the tension between personal and public understanding so integral to imagining what the experience of becoming a Puritan saint was like, should be

seen as a key component of how later authors represented themselves in print. While this is a subject that Chapter IV will explore in greater depth, for now it suffices to say that part of the Puritan conversion narrative's legacy to later forms of self-representational literature is the way Shepard's adherents introduced to New England's shores the notion that reality and its narrative reenactment do not always need to cohere. This should tell us, then, that to be a convert in Bay colony was as much about performing the role of the visible saint as it was about actually being one in the first place.

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As historian and literary scholar Alan Simpson poignantly observes, history isn't just what happened but what people felt about it as it was happening (8). Yet history also comprises what people simply felt – what they experienced and how they communicated their experiences to others. History is also a search for not only the *how* but also the *why*: as in why individuals would *want* to describe their experiences and feelings in the first place, as it also considers what the consequences of this expression may have been on individuals and their communities. In this sense, history can be seen – as Darrett Rutman sees it – as a “process [of] sequential action and interaction of valid parts.” Thinking about it as such, however, requires one to regard history from multiple perspectives, ones that different disciplines and methodological perspectives can offer (128).

As the section above just discussed, we know that for Puritan laymen and their ministers conversion meant living in state of unsettledness that contrastingly encouraged the genuine believer, if he really was one of God's elect, to keep pursuing his faith. We also know that it was the job of New England's ministers to promote this unsettledness as a means of facilitating spiritual conviction in their adherents. As Andrew Delbanco has shown, ministers devoted their lives to fostering the psychological conditions that would enable their listeners to feel discomfort at the tremendous weight of their sins as well as the joy that came with the possibility that grace would lift this weight and direct their souls toward heaven. According to Delbanco, ministers kept their parishioners in a “state of anticipatory excitement” which “had to be maintained,” keeping them in “a mood in which one could scan experience for clues to the soul's condition while at the same time disallowing past experience as the ultimate measure of spiritual possibility” (125).

To paraphrase Delbanco, what ministers taught their listeners, then, was a frame of mind – a way to think about and interact with the world from a standpoint of what they considered to be orthodox Calvinism. To observers today, to understand this mental framework means examining the words believers used to impart it, a charge that falls equally on the literary scholar as much as those who study the mind since it is language that ultimately sheds light on how individuals register their culture's values and expectations. But to outline what the process of preparing for conversion and delivering an account of its experience may have felt like as converts went through this process, one must first consider the theology that encouraged the psychological conditions Delbanco mentions.

Preaching to the attentive assemblage gathered before him on the paired subjects of preparing one's heart for conversion and, for those already converted, of knowing how to test the authenticity of one's faith, Shepard reminded his audience that “[t]he knowledge of divinity is necessary for all sorts of men – both to settle and establish the good, and to convert and fetch in the bad” (“Sincere Convert” 4). As Charles L. Cohen explains, Shepard's intention was to “enlarge the understanding” of his audience regarding their spiritual weakness in the face of God's strength (5). To teach his flock this truth, Shepard directed his words “chiefly upon the[ir] affections . . . until the affections be herewith smitten and wrought upon” (“Sincere Convert” 4). Shepard not only wanted his listeners to understand his lesson but also feel it in their hearts so as to evoke in them what Cohen describes as a “protracted experience of desperation and relief” as they considered their faith (5).

By inciting this experience, Shepard hoped to muster in listeners a heartfelt relationship with God, striking “upon their affectations” – their emotions – in order to move them toward genuine spiritual growth. Shepard wanted those seeking membership to his church to both understand and feel the Gospel's truth. Becoming a convert meant more than simply leading a saintly life or to “[l]abor” intensely “to mortify and subdue his sins.” It also meant that a believer feel the desperation – and relief – intrinsic to this process, feelings that, when offered, helped the Puritan confessor give evidence of his sincere conviction in Christ (“Sincere Convert” 26).⁸

To facilitate these feelings, Shepard urged believers in “The Sincere Convert” to

strive ceaselessly to uncover the foulness residing deep within their hearts, reminding them that “without God's special grace,” the corruption in their “vile breast remains” (17). He told them to lament over their transgressions and at the possibility that grace would not heed their calls for mercy, and to feel great joy at the knowledge that God had the power to forgive transgressors. To prompt the type of anguish that would compel believers toward an ever-increasing commitment to Christ, Shepard repeatedly called attention to the “sea of sin” in which his listeners were mired, adding that they were “full of rottenness, of sin, within. [And] Guilty . . . before God, of all the sins that swarm and roar in the whole world.” Shepard explained that true contrition could only be attained when the Holy Spirit moves to “pull down man's proud conceits of themselves.” Only when this was accomplished would a believer feel “guilty” over his sins, and only then would he be able to entreat the Lord in earnest; only then would a believer put himself in a position to be saved, if he was ever going to be (43).

As Cohen has shown, Shepard's 17th century conception of faculty-humor psychology taught him that an intellectual apprehension of grace, a prerequisite for true spiritual understanding, can only come with a corresponding emotional response (81). This explains why Shepard directed his flock so relentlessly that even if they came to think of themselves as potentially saved, comforting “themselves in their smooth, honest, civil life,” that they must still “look within [their] own heart[s] and lament that, in regard of thy sins there, thou art as bad as many” (“Sincere Convert” 17-8). To Shepard, a restless heart – a heart that lamented at the sight of its sins – was a heart set on heaven. As Norman Pettit explains, the image of the heart itself served Puritans as a “biblical metonym for the inner man.” It occupied a “central position in their total conception of spiritual life,” so that if believers “could deceive others with their tongues, they could never deceive themselves in their hearts” (1).

Insisting that church-goers uproot the secret sins residing inside of them, Shepard encouraged constant and uncompromising self-examination, hoping to cultivate a restless state of mind in which the believer's thirst for saving grace increased in proportion to the moral transgressions for which he felt himself responsible. Writing to John Winthrop in 1636, or the same year in which complaints of Anne Hutchinson's prophesying first began, Shepard cited how “a man must have an honest and good heart before the Word

can have any saving effect. That is . . . before the Word work faith to believe to Justification, the heart must be made honest and good, in preparation.”⁹ Making the heart “honest and good,” however, meant being forthright with oneself, and to others, about the true nature of one’s spiritual condition. Before facing their God, adherents first had to face themselves. They had to see themselves for the sinners that they were so that they would feel humbled enough to petition the Lord for help. This process was the cornerstone upon which conversion – and so, Puritan society – stood.

By their own account, those who became communicating members of Shepard’s church described exactly such a process. Their conversion narratives are typified by a transformative psychological experience contingent on an applicant’s affective response to the reality of his sinfulness and the possibility of redemption. What this means is that, for Puritan New Englanders, conversion didn’t just signify that a believer had come to terms with his spiritual predicament. It also meant that he was disgusted with his iniquities as well as himself who had committed them, which is why a minister like John Cotton enjoined his parishioners to frequently “consider if there be not some vain pride, and hypocrisy, and covetousness, that cleaves fast to your hearts, which you allow yourselves in.” For Cotton, identifying – and identifying *with* – these failings were necessary if believers were going to reject them; if converts sincerely desired to ready their “hearts [to] be clean.” Only “then,” Cotton told his faithful followers, would their “heart[s] . . . lay hold upon God, and you will prize Christ” (“Purchasing Christ” 333).

For the Bay colony’s ministers, redemption was not without a convert’s awareness of his own depravity with which he had to first identify in order to repudiate. Although, as Calvinists, early New Englanders accepted the view that only God’s choice few were saved, the call to unearth and reject one’s trespasses was still placed on all who wished to join a church regardless of their soul’s final spiritual outcome. Commenting on the psychodynamics of Puritan conversion, Murray G. Murphey explains how those preparing for conversion, as well as those already converted, shared certain fundamental psychological characteristics that are evident in their personal accounts (139). This includes feelings of dejection, contrition, and self-recrimination, attributes believers shared as each became “convinced,” as Cambridge’s Mary Angier had, “that [their] estate was miserable” and as they “saw” their “own emptiness and Christ’s fullness,” a

realization that lead true believers to the conclusion – the *only* conclusion, their ministers taught – that “nothing would satisfy . . . but the Lord” (65, 69).

Compelled to recognize that they could not effect their own salvation – that, as Shepard clarified at the start of the “The Sincere Convert,” the primary object of pious life is to realize that only “few are saved, and that with difficulty” – converts and potential converts alike pushed themselves toward an unsettled condition that only grace could assuage (1). Moved to a highly affective state, or what Cotton describes as a “prostration of the heart,” believers like Angier perceived themselves so “utterly void” and “so downcast” that they could not “tell what to make of [themselves]” (66).¹⁰ This “prostration” intensified their anxieties, steering believers toward an existential indeterminacy that required them to wait “to see what the Lord will do with him, whether He will reach forth the hand of salvation into him” or not (69).

Converts had to endure this emotional turmoil if they were ever going to receive grace into their hearts, for it was an affected – a heart heart fully prostrated – that indicated a Christian who was willing to mend his ways. As Murphey has remarked, conversion in the Bay colony can be typified as “a change . . . in which something (grace) coming from without is internalized in the sinner, thereby transforming his personality” into one befitting a visible saint (142). This moral and ontological reorientation, it was thought, would translate directly to a convert's ability to see God's mercy as his only hope for deliverance. Assuming that it was only “in His power” to save him, Cambridge converts like Nathaniel Sparrowhawk, Angier's husband, “entreated the Lord to help my unbelief . . . whereby I found my heart enlarged” (64). Believing with an “enlarged” heart, however, first required that “a man be broken from himself,” a process slowed “[b]ecause men consider not of God's wrath daily, nor the horrible nature of sin; men chew not these pills: hence they never come to be affected, nor awokened” (Shepard “Sincere Convert” 62, 57). To truly convert meant swallowing the bitter pill of one's own self-image and lamenting both its taste and effect. As Sparrowhawk confessed, it meant being “broken off from sin by seeing it and feeling it, and groaning under the power of it (62).

Puritan converts who attempted such a break recounted their efforts in a way that matched the entire process: in ambivalent terms and in mixed tones of assurance and

doubt in line with Shepard's theology. William Andrews, for example, recalls the delight he experienced at building his faith "a new ship" from which the Lord would "deliver" him as well as the simultaneous misery he felt when "that ship was" soon "split." Coming to see how his ship was, in reality, constructed out of pride and "unpardonable sin" rather than any "heavenly gift," Andrews, in a demonstrative turn typical of the *Confessions*, recounted feeling "glad" how, with the Lord's "manifest . . . mercy," he "lost [his] ship and so" his "sin" (113). Told that only when one realizes he is "worst" does God "begin to be best" to him – that God's "unspeakable rich mercy" comes only to he who acknowledges the full "depths of seas and miseries" resting in his heart – applicants focused their narratives on their transgressions, the unhappiness such offenses engendered, and the rapture that arrived with the understanding that Christ could lift them out of their spiritual predicament (Shepard "Autobiography" 43, 62).

Cambridge's converts spoke in a highly charged emotional register consonant with these motifs, one that, to their audience, suggested a genuine hunger "for the Lord to help" them, and hence, "a new creature opened" to the Lord (108-9). Converts proved their faith by attesting to their conviction – and fear – that "without faith . . . the Lord might justly deprive" and "ever withdraw himself" from them (105). To be thought of as a visible saint meant being able to articulate this belief as well as articulate it in a heartfelt way – in a manner that gave evidence of the emotional distress a convert experienced when he realized that "most of them that live in the church shall perish" (Shepard "Sincere Convert" 36). For a true believer, however, this knowledge did not deter, for he preferred to perish rather than cease striving toward loving and depending on God, even if this meant an eternity of hellfire and agony. As Shepard often insisted, "[t]here are four straight gates which everyone must pass through before entering heaven." The first "gate" – one of four tests of faith – asked converts to be contrite since "God saveth none but first he humbleth them." The second gate required a convert to "desire Christ, and nothing but Christ." The third asked that he "confess himself to be a sinner" and "have a bitter sorrow, and so to turn from all sin." The last, perhaps the most crucial, asked the believer to pass through "[t]he straight gate of opposition" by rejecting "the world, and [his] own self, who knock[s] a man down when he begins to look toward Christ in heaven" ("Sincere Convert" 40).

In tune with this formula, converts like Sparrowhawk framed their narratives around the “bitter sorrow[s]” they felt. “Bewailing this condition and there entreating reconciliation,” they spoke of their desire to reject themselves as they recounted how grace had inspired them to strive toward Christ’s example even if the odds were stacked against them (64). But however adamant converts were in their efforts to pass through Shepard’s gates, they consistently admitted feeling “warnings of heart and convictions” along the way, warnings that left them unsettled, agonized, and “alone” to “bewail” their condition.

But bewail as they might, their affective response to faith as a perpetual struggle was consistent with Shepard’s vision of conversion’s true morphology. To grieve over one’s “estate,” which “was such and not to be trusted,” opened the door for spiritual recommitment – to the belief “that God [is] able to provide.” This rededication, a pivotal sign of a convert’s genuine desire to “walk with God,” at least to his congregation, transformed his heart-warnings into “other ways” that, with repeated struggle and recommitment, blossomed into a saving “assurance of Lord’s love” (63-4). As Edmund Morgan has shown, statements like these not only made converts into church members but also bestowed churches with a greater sense of their congregation’s spiritual involvement with grace (41). As John Cotton instructed his parishioners, it was a “profession of faith” that made “a true church” because it showed how “the persons so professing” were “united in the[ir] covenant [with God] and in fellowship [with] the gospel.”¹¹ To Bay colony preachers, speaking up about one’s spiritual experiences, and one’s struggles, achieved more than re-affirming a Christian’s personal conviction in Christ. It also established bonds of brotherly affection between members of the holy community, attesting to a uniformity of experience and understanding that, when added together, showed a people united in their frustrations, felicities, and faith.

With battered hearts refreshed by God’s everlasting love, a love that “hath let [them] see the insufficiency of [their] means,” confessors strengthened their determination to accept the psychological change commensurate with spiritual deliverance (*Confessions* 64). Commenting on the inner mechanism behind this process, Murphey proposes that “what happened” to sinners as their minds turned from “things of the world” to “the Lord Jesus in . . . all means,” was “an identification with God through

Christ and the introjection of the attributes and principles of God” into the convert's personality, which thereafter became “a permanent part of the his superego” (142). In Murphey's view, conversion comprised an “act of displacement” (143). Believers reconstituted their perceived debilities and a “love of the self to God and to other humans, particularly the saints” (*Confessions* 64). But just as this displacement and strengthening of the superego led converts to a stronger sense of faith, it also pushed them to see their true sinfulness with an ever-increasing clarity and intensity that, in accordance with Shepard's conception of faith as a pattern of unsettledness, left converts like Barbary Cutter in a “condition more miserable than ever” even after having converted (90).

Such misery was alternately consoled by faith, which provided converts with the assurance that “the Lord should pity” those who had truly recognized – and admitted to – their “vile” condition. Those who were “lost” would be “found in the Lord” who, in removing the sinner's “stumbling blocks,” guided him toward his heavenly home (*Confessions* 90-1). In response to Shepard's instruction, Cambridge's faithful explained that while their souls may very well have “come to the Lord,” they still thought it better to “stay and wait and lie under the Lord if He would show mercy” since God “did leave saints doubting.” For both minister and his flock, it was doubt that “remove[d] lightness and frothiness” from a believer's heart so that he could reach for the Lord “somewhat more.” “[D]oubtings” were reconstituted into “a cause for fresh evidence” in which visible saints like Cutter were gradually “made suitable to the Lord” who, on Judgement Day, “answered all doubts” (92).

Doubt's importance to a convert's assurance is typified by the way conversion narratives often end paradoxically and without resolution – with a pervasive sense of hesitation, but also with a measure of hopefulness that a convert's doubts will soon be “answered.” Although his account was accepted and Nicholas Wyeth was brought into Shepard's fold, his words still bore witness to a convert who found “cause enough in my own heart why [the] Lord should deny me” (196). Like Wyeth and many others, Goodwife Champney also told her congregation that she felt “lost and unsupported” and met with “vexing in all I did” even as she felt “justified” that the “Lord undertook for me” (191). As Cohen has shown, Bay ministers commonly taught their adherents that humiliation was the only true fulcrum to Christ, where the deeper a convert's

equivocating self-doubt, the greater the chance that he would see his utter dependence on Christ, and so, the deeper his faith would become (94). Faith's paradox rested in the idea that to receive God's grace one must first realize his failure to attain it on his own. Only by having understood one's limitations and internalizing it could one of Shepard's converts open himself to the possibility of being saved by a force that could "smother all doubts" and help him cast away his "corruption and so spiritual agonies and false fears" (92).

As an oral performance that attempted to represent the emotional restlessness a convert felt as he struggled through life for signs of his salvation, conversion narratives described in one breath how, despite being "oppressed," "[the] Lord still encouraged" believers to keep up their pursuit of piety; how God, with "glorious apprehensions of Himself," had nevertheless "filled" up a convert's "soul" with news of "mercy" that set him "free from depths" (*Confessions* 138, 135). Such contrasting sentiments gave authority to a convert's words, denoting the true change that had taken place in his mind – and heart – while showing his willingness to assimilate Shepard's paradoxical moral logic to his private conception of faith. Failure to demonstrate this logic was typically considered an indication that a sinner had not received saving grace; to register and declare its spiritual truth, gave evidence of his sanctification.

As the previous chapter has explained, Puritan confessors conformed their accounts to a conventional narrative framework that enabled congregations to more easily judge the spiritual sanction behind their words. The emotional content of their performance was equally important, enabling those listening to see (and through a process of identification, to a certain degree feel) the conviction in a narrator's heart. This still did not change the fact that whether a believer had actually passed through Shepard's "four straight gates" was always an unknown quantity since real conviction rested in a convert's persistence in the face of this unknown. For as every Puritan knew, even those destined for heaven could never know for sure whether they were saved, having "no reflecting light to judge of thyself" as Shepard reminded his readers in "The Sincere Convert" (47). Instead of characterizing conversion as a dawning self-confidence, Bay colony ministers issued equivocation as an indication of election, one the visible saint felt all the more. Yet it was Shepard, far more than his colleagues, who stressed this conception of regeneration. So as

they outlined how grace had entered into their hearts, carrying them, as it did for John Stedman, “through many fears and doubts,” applicants relied on emotional conflict to develop their narratives and define their spiritual self-understanding as their accounts centered around their affective responses to the spiritual challenges they faced and overcame only to face again (74).

Guided to forever be questioning whether their faith had gone far enough – whether, as Edward Taylor expressed so affectingly in verse, God's “church doors be shut, and shut out me?” – believers emphasized a mixed rather than a stable range of emotions in response to Christ's call (129). But as to the question of their salvation and the legitimacy of their conversions, they were left somewhere in the middle: neither assuredly saved nor unequivocally lost; at once “unfit for thee: not fit for holy soil” while at the same time washed in the spirit of “Thy church, whose floor is paved with graces bright” (130).

While the life-long development of a convert's faith, and conversion itself, are a difficult if not impossible to reduce, the constant emotional vacillation Shepard's church applicants spoke of tell us that they were objectives that, however uncertain, nevertheless pushed believers to occupy contrasting psychic categories that left them at one moment “distrusting God's providence” and the next moment “encouraged to go to the Lord” (151-2). On almost every occasion, converts admitted feeling restless, disturbed, and divided, “[s]ometimes having a heart to run and sometimes to sit still in the Lord's way” (41). Urged to repeatedly test their faith even as they knew they could not trust their own best judgement, converts outlined a process in which their minds moved from hope to despair to hope again – a movement that epitomizes Puritan conversion and the religious culture from which it sprung. Like Edward Hall, converts found “more enmity” in their hearts, more “than ever before,” the more they examined themselves with a humbled heart (34). The more they found their heart “dead and dull,” the more “comfort” and “support” God's mercy alternatively gave them as “the Lord's love” moved them, however provisionally, to a point where they could “feel His love” even as they “longed after Christ” (41).

To become a visible saint was for a believer to recognize how “full of rottenness” he truly was and for him to lament this fact while at the same time remaining hopeful that

the divine promise apportioned to God's elect pertained to him even if he really *was* chief of all sinners (Shepard "Sincere Convert" 17). Conversion meant that a believer recognize that "sin was it which did oppress" his heart, and that the only remedy for this "benumbed condition" – one that every genuine convert felt – was "His divine power" (*Confessions* 177). This realization was as powerful as it was heartbreaking. In Shepard's Cambridge, individuals who were "broken in heart" for previous "want of God's love" were those truly "willing to take the Lord Jesus" (178). Converts really were, from an emotional point of view, heartbroken. As he prepared applicants to make their professions of faith, Shepard called on them to acknowledge "what the apostle calls . . . 'sin that dwells in me', that is, that which always lies and remains in me" so that they too could experience this spiritual heartbreak. Faith, Shepard explained, was only real if a convert felt it in proportion to the pangs he correspondingly felt in his breast, for it was "the sins of thy heart" that must "rend in pieces and break" before a sinner could find his savior in Christ ("Sincere Convert" 18).

As Pettit has shown, Shepard's theology of the suffering heart differed then that of his ecclesiastical counterparts in that it more deliberately emphasized emotional anguish as a means to assurance. For what other early New England ministers called "contrition" or a sense of genuine compunction, Shepard qualified as an inescapable humiliation – a feeling of extreme mortification at the thought of one's insufficiencies through which a believer awakened, slowly and if he was lucky, to the justness of placing his fate in God's will rather than his own (108). Becoming aware of and vocalizing the contrition a convert felt deep down was critical to the conversion process and to the conversion narrative, revealing a Christian whose faith was sincere. Those who felt the power of the Holy Spirit were those willing to "[l]ie down under Him" that God may "tread upon" their souls in order to "exalt Himself." A genuine believer was he who was willing to cast himself down so that the Lord may "lift thee up and exalt thee" according to His own apportioned time (*Confessions* 18).

Shepard's doctrine reveals the prominence he placed on original debility as a fundamental aspect of human nature and, as such, as a key component in the redemption of the Christian's soul. To be saved meant that a believer realized and felt just how much he was innately corrupt. Because he was, his spiritual deliverance was never free of

unsureness and anxiety, just as faith meant enduring this uncertainty – not just feeling it, but living with it every day. As members of Shepard's congregation admitted their hopes and fears, they brought their drama of doubt and assurance to life, expressing ambivalence as an essential mode of what it meant to be (and to be considered) a visible saint. Sainthood wasn't just being able to pass through Shepard's straight gates of opposition. It was a convert's ability to embody and exemplify this opposition by taking it up as an inextricable aspect of how he saw himself and how members of his spiritual community saw him. Granted church fellowship, a legitimate convert was a believer who was invariably pulled in contradictory directions of not only feeling but also self-identification. He was a person both sure and unsure of his faith's strength and of his capacity as a believer; an individual whose identity as a visible saint was never certain because he never knew whether his conversion had ever gone the sufficient distance even if it seemed as if it had in the estimation of his congregation.

For members of Shepard's congregation, ambivalence – toward oneself and one's conversion – constituted real faith. This paradox of Puritan piety can be explained by remembering that early New England ministers like Shepard taught their adherents to interpret their doubts as an indication of how the Holy Spirit had entered into their lives. Framed in psychological terms, ministers asked converts to sublimate uncertainty and its residual anxiety into a positive sign of election. As Shepard's colleague Thomas Hooker knew, persistent spiritual doubts gave evidence of election – sainthood was “a fruit that proceeds from faith after much wrestling” (*Doubting Christian* 352).

It is difficult to gauge the internal or psychic impact that a lifetime of such “wrestling” had on believers. Judging by their words, however, it is feasible to say that the religious experiences adherents underwent entailed a powerful emotional confrontation not only with grace but also with a believer's own self. “Upon the Burning of Our House,” perhaps Anne Bradstreet's best known poem, does well to illustrate this point. Although Bradstreet was never associated with Cambridge's first church, her poem still describes her faith along the same line as Shepard's converts. In her poem, Bradstreet cites “distress” as a crucial component of her conviction in God's mercy, explaining how “[t]he flame consuming my dwelling place” and her inclination to “cry” over her material loss is (surely?) a sign of God's redeeming love toward her through this divinely

apportioned test of faith, meaning the burning of her house. This understanding transforms Bradstreet's unfortunate circumstance into an indication of providential favor. Her duress brings her closer to God and close to faith. Seeing the blaze as God's work and as a warning that her faith might be misplaced in the material rather than the spiritual realm, Bradstreet registers how her house and belongings are, in reality, "His own" and "not mine." As a result, she begins to welcome God's decision to consume her home as "just," converting her heartfelt tears into a positive marker of chosenness whereby God has taught her that she "should not repine" in the face of His will and to instead consider her calamity as "best." For even if "He might of all justly bereft," God, Bradstreet realizes, still "for us" "sufficient . . . left." In a show of faith, then, Bradstreet casts her "sorrowing eyes aside," choosing to "behold no more" the "pleasant things" that now "in ashes lie." As a genuine convert, she knows that it is her soul which should be considered her most prized possession rather than the material goods to which her "earthly frame" is drawn. Her decision to honor the unlucky event instead of lamenting it also reveals her willingness to not only break with the temporal world but also with the human impulses associated with it, for example, the urge to cry or grieve over one's possessions (292).

Bradstreet's mindset proved her a saint as an individual who, with tears in her eyes, humbly accepted her fate and placed her entire faith and frame in God's inscrutable logic. Recognizing the justice behind the Lord's choice to destroy her home, Bradstreet exhibited a sensibility felt only in those who were thought to have soundly converted. Turning to God at their highest and lowest points, Cambridge's converts confessed to experiencing a characteristic set of emotions – what Cohen calls an "affective cycle" – that gradually but steadily tore them from their former ways (76). At first complacent in their sin, believers progressively developed sorrow at its sight, then loathed it, and then grew anxious over their inability to achieve salvation in its wake. This despondency, however, eventually passed into joy through a contrite and heartfelt love for God, leaving the visible saint increasingly convinced in God's ability to save him. On the other hand, it also made him increasingly doubtful whether his soul truly deserved the deliverance promised to His elect.¹³

Centuries before psychologists defined what comprised neurotic behavior, Puritan converts embodied it in their persistent efforts to discern God's will toward them as they

stroved to accomplish what they knew they could never effect on their own. Those who believed faced their doubts by pushing themselves ever-more toward Christ's example even though they knew full-well the impossibility of succeeding. In a paradoxical turn, converts renounced their self-confidence, effecting a form of not only spiritual but psychological salvation that released them from the compulsion to achieve perfection. Like Bradstreet, Cambridge's flock channeled the despair that accompanies the unknown into a foundation of faith, redirecting their emotional energies into a love for God that, in time, gave them the capacity and assurance to continue on despite their not knowing whether their efforts were ultimately in vain.

Placing their human weaknesses in God's divine strength, Puritan saints admitted their iniquities and thus gained the fortitude to maintain their faith in a process that showed members of their congregation that they were (probably) saved. But what, we may ask, was the consequence of this process; what were the ramifications of individuals having to endure the emotional cycle Cohen posits as a necessary demand of fellowship and faith? What was the personal and social impact of understanding spiritual assurance as a dialectic of loss and gain, doubt and assurance, self-relinquishment and fulfillment, and how did converts live with these mutually exclusive stipulations, and how did doing so influence the way they perceived themselves both within and outside of their congregational communities?

[3]

In *The Real Christian* (1670), Giles Firmin, who was ordained deacon under John Cotton, criticized in retrospect the excessive emotional despondency Shepard's preaching brought listeners. In his tract, Firmin relates an incident in which a “[m]aid-servant who was very godly, and reading of that particular in Mr. Shepard's book . . . was so cast down and fell into such troubles that all the Christians that came to her could not quiet her spirit.” Hostile to excessive emotionalism, Firmin did not consider that, for Shepard, a conscious dedication to unsettledness and anxiety was the basis of spiritual conviction. As Shepard explained in the *Parable of Ten Virgins*, which he wrote and delivered as a sermon series at the same time he recorded the *Confessions*, God's “hewings and hammerings of you, nay, His knocking you to pieces, and new melting and new casting of

you" was necessary if believers were to become "vessels of his glorious grace." For Shepard, in order to be born again, a convert had to be knocked "to pieces" as well as aspire toward this knocking. He had to crave it just as he yearned to be forgiven for his iniquities. Even more, he had to venture to willingly do it to himself as he prepared to emerge from his "new casting" to take his rightful place among society's sainted.¹⁴

One suspects that Firmin's weariness of Shepard's preaching was seated in his skepticism over whether being emotionally overcome by fear and anxiety could truly manufacture sincere faith rather than simply terrorizing believers into making hasty and insincere professions of conviction. Firmin felt that converts should be steady in their emotional response to grace, and that the Holy Spirit's power to effect a believer's conversion was a gradual process of spiritual illumination rather than an abrupt and emotionally trying series of experiences.

In contrast, and in practically every instance, Cambridge's converts expressed the type of apprehension Shepard urged. As he accounted for conversion, George Willows, for example, described the "sense" of spiritual foulness and the ensuing "hell due" him, which left him "much terrified" at his own "corruption" as the "deadness" he found in his heart forced him to see just how "overcome by corruption" he truly was. Fearing their estates, converts like Willows gradually came to understand – and feel – self-repudiation as a crucial step toward conviction. To Shepard, this act of rejection was stimulated by apprehensiveness, one that inclined genuine believers to do their utmost to unearth and rid themselves of the spiritual rot residing in their hearts so that they could freely give themselves to God with a clean heart and a purity of mind. As Willows testified that "the more" he strove "against corruption" the more "overcome by corruption" he felt, he showed Cambridge's flock just how aware he had become of his iniquities and his inability to do anything about them. True to Shepard's understanding of regeneration, Willows' realization, and the incredible stress he must have felt as it dawned, pushed him, however paradoxically, to conviction: that "if I could but mourn under sin" and thereby trust in the Lord, that "then I should be happy." The uneasiness Willows' anxieties produced after the good, long, hard look he took at himself drove him to spiritual assurance, one in which he was convinced that "[t]he Lord revealed Christ unto me by revealing the fullness of the riches of grace" (43).

What Firmin did not understand was that Shepard's flock gained spiritual "strength" by sitting "still in His ordinances" – by realizing and grieving under their sins so that they might call on Christ to redeem them. Hearing "that Christ came to seek them that were lost," a "promise" that helped "stay the heart" of the repentant sinner, converts learned to identify themselves as lost souls whom Christ was appointed to call if God's will had ordained it. Overcome by their "grief," and having "no power" to cure their sorrow, those who truly believed felt compelled to walk "more closely with God" as their only course, an initiative that, in turn, prompted them (just as it had prompted Willows) to see grace's "fullness." As they recounted their spiritual encounters, applicants described an intense emotional experience that gave listeners, as well as modern-day readers, an indication of the complicated sense of anguish and elation they felt as they grew assured that Christ was their savior. To Cambridge's converts, to suffer emotional travail was a barometer of a convert's spiritual progress because it confirmed a Christian whose heart had been pierced by the Gospel's truth and who was willing to "lay under the anger of God" until he should find "peace and support" in "long[ing] after Jesus Christ (43).

While we now have a better grasp over what believers felt as they moved from sin to sainthood, we have yet to explore the psychological outcome of their commitment to anxiety as a means of assurance. Expressing disquietude as a pivotal term of sincere conviction, Shepard's converts experienced a continuous cycle of emotional discomfort and relief that became a substantive feature of their congregational identity. This affective pattern worked to bind congregants beyond mere profession. But apart from their recorded statements, converts give historians little evidence as to the inter-psychic effect their faith had on them within the context of their spiritual communities. This is why the *Confessions* are so important in that they contribute to our understanding of how ordinary Puritans interpreted, internalized, and conveyed their devotion within the wider circle of what Shepard had taught them. As Elizabeth Reis has recently argued, regardless of what they wrote or said, it is still difficult to imagine the sensibility of a 17th century Puritan and understand how the knowledge that "the day of their calamity" was always "at hand" influenced the way believers regarded themselves as well as how they related to others (10). This is why an appropriate theoretical model that can describe this experience is so essential. If readers are to decode how Cambridge's converts privately came to grips with

their anxieties and assurances and assess the underlaying psychological and psycho-social impact of how doubting oneself and the sufficiency of one's convictions “night and day” became a means of spiritual and emotional “support,” they must first look for an explanatory mechanism that can qualify this experience (77).

Accepting the fact that not much can be known about Shepard's converts beyond the words they used to account for their experiences, it is to their language, then, that we must turn in order to discover how believers internalized their faith and the outcome this internalization produced. We know, for instance, that those who applied for congregational membership came to see themselves, much as Elizabeth Cutter did, as “Christless creature[s]” who were “persuaded [that] nothing . . . belong[ed] to” them, including salvation. Dejected and “cast off,” applicants grew convinced of their spiritual inefficacy. For those who believed, this only caused them to seek “the Lord more” because they knew – meaning they were taught – that with great “humiliation” came great rejoicing since “Christ came not to save righteous but sinners, and to find lost and broken hearted.” Pushed though this affective wringer, converts like the aforementioned Cutter regarded themselves as both empty and full – empty in that their temporal carriage put them in a position to lose “all,” and full through the realization that they could be found because to be lost implied a need (and in the genuine believer, a desire) for the “Lord to teach” them “to submit” (145). This desire, gained through much emotional wrestling, was the essence of Puritan faith. To be a visible saint thus meant that a Christian sustain a life of psychological highs and lows; to forever feel a need for heavenly grace while simultaneously gaining a sense of fulfillment in the fact that to feel this need was a legitimate sign that God would mercifully help the convert overcome it. Yet we are still left to wonder what the effect of this oscillating, emotionally trying, and paradoxical experience was, particularly in terms of a believer's private self-estimation as it related to the other members of his church.

As psychoanalyst and social theorist R. D. Laing has written in *The Divided Self*, “[o]nly existential thought has attempted to match the original experience of oneself in relationship to others in one's world” (19). For Laing, the task of existential phenomenology is to articulate what an individual's world is and his way of being in it. Using this framework to interpret the language and emotional register converts used to

account for their experiences, one sees how the unsettling procedure under which applicants became visible saints was one that asked them to adopt a disjunctive ontology where they could neither be part of the world or apart from it. In Laing's view, this left the Puritan self in a tragic paradox, what Laing designates as "engulfment," where an individual is flanked by two impossible sets of circumstances. We can say that a convert like Cutter lacked a basic congruity with respect to her identity. For as she attempted to free herself through faith from the degenerate world of which she was a part, Cutter knew, at the same time, that she could never achieve her goal – that she could never know whether she had transcended the world as a saint – if she genuinely believed in the doctrines of her faith. Rather than remain an unregenerate sinner, Cutter instead chose "to be content with His condemning will." Cutter's choice, to be both content and condemned was an impossible one, a fact underscored by her poignant assertion that, for a believer, to have "such need of Christ was not knowing whether else to go" (145-6).

With nowhere to go, Cambridge's faithful remained suspended, mired in a moral system that obliterated their personal identity as individuals both assured and unsure, saved and reprobate. To open themselves to the possibility of redemption, they welcomed the "evil nature in [them]" and thus their "need of all God's ordinances" (82, 84). More than simply acknowledge their sins so that the Lord may save them, believers embodied this sinfulness as a primary function of their being and as prerequisite for regeneration. In Shepard's Cambridge, to be considered a visible saint meant feeling apprehensive – and unsure – of one's spiritual destiny. Those who believed thus calibrated their experiences to fit this formal and emotional paradigm as they organized their accounts to adhere to the moral standard to which, as true believers, they thought to hold themselves. This is why converts like Edwards Collins, who served as deacon in Shepard's church, persistently cited their "base" and "sinister ends" that gave them "no peace" and that left them permanently looking "after further means and helps . . . [for] some more knowledge and gifts" (82). As he accommodated this emotionally demanding posture, Collins increasingly "took notice" that God's "promises [were] made" to those who considered themselves "lost . . . meek and hungry and thirsty" – to those, in other words, who "saw and [were] convinced of unthankfulness and discontent" (83-4).

It was this "discontent," this perpetual hunger for Christ, that brought applicants to

a fold. And for visible saints, it became an inextricable part of who they were, both privately and publicly, for it was this sense of restlessness, this utter emptiness but for the grace of God, that allowed believers to “answer the end for which He [had] sent” them (84).

From a psychological point of view, the convert's reality was what Laing would describe as unfounded. Placing his faith in the Lord, he knew not “whether else to go,” showing his “trust in the Lord” by “forever” remaining “stayed” rather than complete; always “[h]earing [how] many apprehended Christ,” but continuously wondering whether “Christ had not apprehended” him (*Confessions* 149). As he graduated through progressive stages of spiritual conviction, the professing saint cultivated an increasing sense of “ontological insecurity” – a frame of mind in which his temporal and spiritual identity came to rest upon an experience of himself as necessarily incomplete. The convert became, in Laing's words, a person “riddled by doubts” and “torn by conflicts” that stripped him “of all that is becoming to a man except his abstract humanity which, like his skeleton, never is quite becoming to a man” (*Divided Self* 40).

Having grown assured of Christ's power to save, a convert like Collins experienced himself as a sinner built on false foundations – as an insignificant and iniquitous nothing if not for the grace of God. He saw himself as a person who must perpetually work to cast off the slough of his original debility, perpetually because grace's assurances were only God's to know. As a visible saint holding fellowship within a church, the sincere convert endeared himself to his congregation by mourning over the profane liberties of his former carriage and stifling them through the sheer force of his faith in the Holy Spirit's regenerative capacity. But as a saint, he never saw himself as full or complete, for he was utterly deprave as his minister frequently told him. As a result, converts like Barbary Cutter were both “desirous to seek [the] Lord” and also “convinced of [his or her] sin” (90, 92). They knew their faith was not in vain, but they also feared that it was not enough, and so, forever they remained anxious over their spiritual destinies.

To make room for the unlikely chance that God had redeemed them, believers ceaselessly worked to dislodge themselves from the inclination of their natural hearts, hoping their “sins [would] die” so as to make room for “growing grace” (83). Yet they always remained unsure as to whether they had won the day. In this sense, they aspired

toward rather than ever felt secure in their spiritual conviction, unable to “tell whether [they] had” truly “seen [their] sin or no” or whether the “Lord had done” for them what He had promised those who truly had faith (109). On this plain of insecurity the convert’s life rested as he straddled the opposing forces of conviction and doubt that justified his calling. Engulfed by the undisclosed, his faith paradoxically increased in proportion to his uncertainty in himself. The “Lord hath let me see more of Himself,” Cutter confessed, when “in doubting” because the “Lord did leave saints doubting as to remove lightness and frothiness” from their spirit. “[D]oubtings” made a “cause for fresh evidence” through which converts were “kept . . . from falling” (92).

Morally upright as this doubting made them, it also forced converts to live with their misgivings. Having rejected themselves on the one hand, and on the other hand uncertain as to whether they were saved because they “saw nothing but vileness” in their hearts, visible saints submitted to ambivalence, personifying it through their commitment to a moral ontology in which nothing could be sure and nothing was taken for granted. As Reis notes with reference to how applicants registered the doctrines of preparation and assurance, the consequence of “the constant examination of one’s life and the continued search for the true repudiation of sin as evidence of grace left many in despair,” one based in a deep-seated anxiety that “hardly assuaged when churchgoers heard from their spiritual leaders that uncertainty of one’s election was one of the signs of salvation” (14). To be a visible saint was to be embroiled in this despair, which is precisely why Shepard’s congregants repeatedly emphasized their misgivings as a dominant feature of their lives. Joining Cambridge’s church some time before 1641, John Sansby acknowledged, like so many of his brethren, that the major obstacle to his faith was his stubborn and sinful heart which he found so “shut up that [he] could not pray at all.” Lamenting his impotence, Sansby resigned himself to it. As his conversion narrative advances, he recalls how he increasingly identifies with the “hellish frame” of his “heart,” which had been set up by a “full[ness] of self” that left him “dead and sluggish” in the Lord’s absence. Seeking Christ as a solution to his spiritual torpor, Sansby came to “rest upon heartbreakings,” much as Shepard would have wanted. Through them, he was able to “to judge . . . and loath” himself, an action that, in turn, enabled him to “wonder at the boundless mercy of the Lord” as would any saint (88).

Sansby knew that he was his own worst enemy – that he himself was the cause of his “shut up” heart, and that his “hellish, devilish nature [is] opposite to God and goodness.” As this reality grew in force, Sansby found himself more and more “at the brink of hell” which, like Edward Collins, caused him “to hunger and thirst after Christ” even more (86). Morally defunct and spiritually malnourished, Sansby recognized the need to empty the fullness of self that had corrupted him. Without grace, he saw himself as utterly incomplete, Sansby identifying his nature – God’s “opposite” – with the “awful nothingness” he felt himself to be (86). This void remained with Sansby to the end. As a member of God’s visible church, he remained unsure “whether Christ died for” him despite the inklings of grace’s assurances he felt stirring in his heart (87). Like other converts, Sansby therefore could not experience the world and his awareness of himself in the world (to borrow Laing’s phrasing) as a whole person. The corollary of his progress from total depravity to spiritual realization and finally, to conversion, culminated, then, in an ontological instability that typified his identity as a saint. To feel secure, “full,” or confident that he had sufficiently turned his life over to the Lord meant that Sansby not only felt overwhelmed but also overcome by the emptiness he experienced as a prerequisite of genuine conviction. Thirsting after Christ, Sansby came to understand himself as a visible saint through the emptiness he associated with himself. He *became* this emptiness just as he became a visible saint, an emptiness that, if his congregation understood him correctly, was taken as an indication that Sansby was truly “ready” for God to “let in some beams of Himself” (88).

As Sansby took the uncertain leap from sinner to saint, he transcended the world of which his corruption was a part. Although he was of this world, he was no longer a part of it as he endeavored to bring every aspect of his life, or as much of it as he could, into conformity with what both he and his spiritual community regarded as God’s design. Always striving toward this perfection, converts like Sansby quickly realized their inadequacy to fully understand it. As they made the attempt, they resigned themselves to occupy a realm of inefficacy and of ontological liminality in which they were neither this nor that – in which they labored “after Christ,” having a desperate “need of Christ,” while at the same time knowing “not whether Christ died” for them or whether their labors had been “provided for.” Anguished at the sight and thought of the remaining and seemingly

insurmountable vestiges of his natural being, Sansby was ultimately unable to know whether his “heart was carried” enough toward salvation despite a “straightened” heart “for God.” For even though God had “shot arrows in [his] heart” and Sansby grew convinced of “Christ's death destroying [his] sin,” he still remained uncertain of the “evidence” that his “nature [was] changed” and that the Lord was no longer “a stranger to [his] soul” (87).

The consequence of Sansby's plight and all who stood in Shepard's church to deliver an account of their conversion was a person unable to see himself (and who would never see himself) as a complete person. As Delbanco has rightly postulated, progress, rather than fulfillment, “was always at the heart of the Puritan dynamic,” thereby “producing in America a generation not of rationalist presumption but of morbid anxiety” (59, 62). Striving to repudiate their carnal selves and stand as moral exemplars of their congregations, converts like Sansby always doubted the fruits of their efforts since no man could ever effect his own salvation through meritorious works. But while conversion guaranteed Sansby's place within a church, it also left his fate conspicuously hanging in the balance where it would always remain. As Cohen has remarked, the psychological effect of Shepard's doctrine of preparation and conversion, which demanded that believers meet a standard they would always be unable to meet was, in every case, an acute anxiety endemic to those who sincerely believed. This anxiety was precipitated by a double-bind in which the believer strongly desired to respond to grace's call but was never satisfied as to whether he could (62).

To social psychologists, in a community of incessant doubt, such doubt has a tendency to undermine personal identity (Zuckerman 192). Making a sufficient confession of faith, a believer became a visible saint whose piety was predicated on his self-identification as a sinner; as a sinner who loathed his corruption, he was also a visible saint. While this paradoxical formula led to the anxiety Delbanco and Cohen have described, it also demonstrates how the convert was two things at once – how he occupied two mutually exclusive terms. To Delbanco, converts were “a people locked in fear, which on the one hand was deepened rather than relieved by the preparationists' relentless demand for hewing and hammering the corrupt self, and which, on the other, created conditions for spiritist hysteria” that reduced the Puritan converts to a “condition

of paralyzed dread” (60). But more than simply a substantive element of sainthood, this fear, produced through the uncertainty that came with being both a sinner (in one's heart) and saint (in public), was a state of being. This ontology allowed the convert to come to a positive recognition of himself as a genuine believer and visible saint. Yet the more of it he internalized, the more he was ontologically insecure as both a profound sinner *and* a sincere saint.

As a full communicant, the convert's place, then, was among a spiritual community who shared his existential burden – who had similarly come to an understanding of themselves through the sinful self they wished to reject but knew they never could. Taught by their ministers that he who was saved was a person who struggled with his sins and could persevere by giving himself over to God for judgement and deliverance, visible saints cultivated depersonalization – a dramatic act of self-repudiation – in order to attain the existential criterion to which their community held them. Refusing to see himself as saved, a convert's identity rested on the confirmation of his congregation as a person who rightfully belonged within their fold. As such, he became an object of not only his own experiences but also theirs, as he systematically worked to drain the lifeblood of his own subjectivity in favor of a greater (if impossible) spiritual standard to which genuine Christians were supposed to hold themselves. His life dedicated to the Lord's service, and so, living not for himself but for his moral prerogatives, the saint was neither of this world nor of the next. His congregation saw things differently, however. He was a visible saint: a communicating member of their church who had proved by virtue of his verbal profession and his appropriate sentiments that he had endured for his faith what most were unable to tolerate for a day. This is why, to adopt Laing's terminology once more, the accepted convert was “threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other” since it was his congregation who considered him justified in his conviction rather than the convert ever thinking so himself (*Divided Self* 47). It was in their eyes that every convert whose conversion narrative was recorded in the *Confessions* became a visible saint while the saint, by his own admission, continued to see himself as “being gross,” all while he “was loathe[d] and ashamed to make [his] condition known” (95).

This psycho-social dynamic of the convert's experience, one informed by insecurity,

or the precarious or liminal position in which a convert was obliged to reside, was the cornerstone of what it meant to be a Puritan saint in the early Massachusetts Bay colony. A convert was a believer split between his saved and sinful self. He was a person divided between how he saw himself and how his community viewed him. As the remaining sections of this chapter will argue, this double-division sets in motion a tradition of spiritual self-understanding inherent not only to Puritanism's legacy to the American self but also to how later American authors, and autobiographers in particular, have come to convey their personal experiences to others.

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Even though the converts whose conversion statements Shepard recorded all agreed that there would always be an inherent sinfulness residing in their hearts, they also seem to have accepted the idea that the regenerate soul who stood to deliver his narrative had already done a great deal to rid himself of his iniquities; that, in offering his conversion narrative, his heart had already been sufficiently melted by the gospel's truth and sweetly overcome by grace. Although a quantity beyond man's potential to know, that a convert had experienced genuine spiritual regeneration was confirmed by the unsettling, anxiety-inducing, and always uncertain experiences to which he admitted as part of his conversion process. Placing faith in the hope that "God had changed [their] estate" because the Lord had inclined their "heart[s] thereby to seek help in Him," Cambridge's converts spoke of gaining "some encouragement" with respect to their salvation – encouragement but never confirmation (65). Their progress signaled the strong potential of their election, particularly when they announced, as Mary Angier had, that their "disposition" had changed such that they could see "nothing . . . but the Lord." Realizing "her own emptiness and Christ's fullness," Angier increasingly saw her "odious" condition, calling out to the Lord for mercy in response. But even when she confessed that this odiousness only "grew worse and worse," Shepard's congregation interpreted Angier's admission as evidence of grace working in her heart rather than as a surefire sign of her damnation (65-9). This tells us that a convert's self-assessment often stood at odds with how she was received.

On a broader level, conversion narratives stood as confirmation that the Holy Spirit

was working among His people to establish spiritually justified communities embodied by churches like the one at Cambridge or Boston. As John Cotton reminded his flock at Boston's First Church, a profession of faith was the crucial link between believers and God's visible church, an idea that suggests that while the act of delivering a conversion narrative did not necessarily make a man a believer, it *did* make an early Puritan congregation by binding communicants through the performance of confession and the affective weight to which their testimonies referred. Taken in this light, Anne Hutchinson's offense was less that she recognized her regeneration though an immediate voice than the idea that she did not see the necessity of giving any further sign of her justification unlike those who sought to be admitted to a church as fully communicating members. Hutchinson failed to realize that while the experience of grace might be distinct and indescribable, the authenticity of this experience must still be weighed by a corporate tradition that viewed common faith as an crucial term of spiritual and social success.

For Shepard and his colleagues, having applicants deliver an account of their spiritual experiences not only uncovered the sincerity of a believer's faith but also helped create religious consensus among the faithful. This is why Patricia Caldwell has argued that the value and efficacy of an applicant's profession was not necessarily in his speech or even in the speaker, but rather, "in the joint action of speaker and audience – that is, in the words being spoken, heard, *and believed*" and upon which rested "the whole weighty issue of . . . conversion" (*Puritan Conversion Narrative* 107). Shepard as well as the majority of first generation ministers agreed that true believers "know not who they are, nor what they are born onto," nor would they ever know, since that "great glory for the present is within . . . a secret thing . . . [and] remote from public view" (Willard 369). It was the conversion narrative's role to bring this secret out so as to be shared with others, just as it brought an adherent's faith, and perhaps more importantly his feelings, into open view.

As a convert's concern over his salvation and the heartbreaking tears he shed over it stood as an indication of his justification in Christ, he still remained unsure whether his tears had been shed for the right reasons for he knew that hypocrisy lay at the wellspring of every human's heart, whether he be saved or damned. Working under this assumption, applicants still offered their accounts as evidence that grace had brought them to

conversion. Yet they could only feel this assurance to a certain degree, and so they invariably became anxious, as Angier did, over their “estate again,” as their conversion experience left them repeatedly “hearing nothing for or against” their spiritual condition (69).

Judging conversion narratives was no exact science. In “Hypocrites and Saints,” Cotton cited this difficulty directly – of perceiving “when men differ” – and whether a person could really tell a genuine saint from his hypocrite counterpart (316). While still in England, Cotton noted the ambiguity attending this designation in *God's Promise to His Plantation*, pointing to how the “aims and ends that men put to their actions” are invariably “hidden in their hearts” and privy to God's knowledge alone (1). An affectively charged performance that betrayed an applicant's unsettled emotional state – in his encounters with grace and as he offered his conversion narrative – unhid the hidden. In consonance with Shepard's formula that a sincere believer was a convert always converting, applicants publicly exhumed their deepest feelings as they remained open to the idea (and the likelihood) that the spiritual sanction of their experiences would never be confirmed.

As we have just seen, and as Caldwell has argued, the New England conversion narrative was far “more comfortable with [this] ambivalence and open-endedness” than its European counterpart (*Puritan Conversion Narrative* 34). In fact, a comfortable resolution to one's spiritual struggles was the last thing a Puritan convert sought since security, or a confidence that one had been saved, was a tell-tale sign of an unregenerate (and unrepentant) sinner. So while the freeman John Sill felt his heart “risen [to] seek things above” as Sill came, in time, to believe in Christ “more fully and by this means had some power against” his sins, he still confessed to Cambridge's church to finding “much deadness and security” in himself for which his “heart began to be troubled” all over again (48). Such a statement was the rule rather than the exception, which explains why conversion narratives refuse to portray converts at the height of righteousness or as supremely changed beings. A convert had to question himself till the end, whether he was a visible saint or not, because this was the essence of Puritan faith. As he did so, he demonstrated, to himself and to others, how he was willing to place his fate in God even if the extent of his deliverance would always remain beyond his grasp.

As the previous section has shown, to become a visible saint meant distrusting and rejecting oneself and alternatively placing faith in God's will and His church. Puritan of all Puritans, Michael Wigglesworth frequently stressed the danger of relying on one's spiritual convictions because the human self was never to be trusted, including one's motivations for proclaiming his faith publicly as a prerequisite for church membership. Lowering himself before God, Wigglesworth recorded in his *Diary* how he persistently found himself to "admire myself" even as he was "[a]dmiring God." "For this I loath myself," Wigglesworth recounted, a self-loathing essential to his humiliation (and hopefully his deliverance) at "Christ's hand." Expressing remorse and self-hatred for his sins, Wigglesworth distrusted himself even in his remorse, lamenting how pride "gets ahold" of him even in his most pious moments, which caused him to fail to see or "think one good thought" regarding the state of his soul (8).

"[P]rone to secret pleasure[s]," Wigglesworth worried that he found too much enjoyment in the contrition he experienced, an worry that left him as much confounded over his election as any of Shepard's converts (3). Wigglesworth's private admission, touching on the difficulty if not impossibility of telling whether one's faith was sufficient, is recalled in his widely-read poem "The Day of Doom." Sitting atop His heavenly throne on Judgement Day, God divides his chosen from mere pretenders "[w]ho for self-ends did seem Christ's friends, but fostered / Guileful sprites: / Who sheep resembled, but they dissembled (their hearts / were not sincere)" (592). As Wigglesworth's line suggests, while so-called converts can perhaps convince others of their spiritual sanctity with a contrite appearance and practiced language, at the day of reckoning "no hiding place can from His face sinners at all conceal, / Whose flaming eyes hid things doth spy, and darkest / things reveal" (589). In other words, what discerning congregations cannot do, God will: selecting His choice wheat from his withered chaff on Judgement Day even if the outcome of this choice is to remain a secret until this appointed time.

In both his *Diary* and in "The Day of Doom," Wigglesworth addresses at the impossibility of converts ever knowing in their lifetime whether they were saved or damned – whether their convictions were the real thing or only a faulty (if perhaps well-meaning) imitation. His concern, consistent with an orthodox reading of Calvinist doctrine, strikes at a paradox at the center of Puritan faith. For while "[t]he greatest

concern in the world” for a Christian may have been “[w]hat must [he or she] do to be saved,” where the only answer is to “[b]elieve on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved,” Puritan congregations were at the same time (and often in the same sermon) told that “[i]ndeed there is nothing to be done by us to merit our salvation” (Mather “What Must I Do” 54). For Wigglesworth, this even included the moments in which a convert hated himself most or, for that matter, when he found his heart drawing closer to Christ. Nothing human could be trusted, and in terms of salvation, which only God could effect, feelings of assurance and of spiritual conviction were no less unknown.

To lessen the pressure this ambivalence and the imperative to live with it and suffer under it presented believers, the authenticity of an applicant's speech was often judged by his willingness to speak at all, which served as an indication of grace's presence in his heart who had moved him to outline his spiritual progress even while knowing that he may very well be damned for all eternity. In the face of repeated equivocation, congregational applicants respected the command of their ministers who urged them, as Cotton Mather would a generation later, that “[t]his must be done: [that] you must confess yourselves” even if “unable to do anything effectually of yourselves, in coming to a glorious Christ.” In fact, the best a convert could hope for was “confessing and imploring the Lord, I am justly destroyed” with “a fearful trembling of soul.” In such a state converts were expected to “make this profession” and many of them did, a testament whose adequacy and perceived authenticity transformed them into a visible saints whether they felt they were saved or not (“What Must I Do” 69-70).

As the *Confessions* consistently show, believers repeatedly dismissed the idea of their election. Like Wigglesworth, Shepard's congregants refused to let themselves live up to what their conversion narratives entailed, meaning their salvation. They were unable to wholeheartedly embrace their publicly accepted identity as a bona fide saint, as this notion implied a convert who felt secure in his regeneration, and thus, an insincere convert. For the Bay colony's first settlers, Calvinism was a creed that asked its faithful to endure rather than accomplish. It was in the spirit of this doctrine that Shepard repeatedly enjoined his adherents that “true grace,” if it was the real thing, “never fills, but puts an edge on the [believer's] appetite,” pushing him to hunger after Christ rather than satisfy his hunger.¹⁵

In his community and in his church, an applicant who had converted was a convert justified in Christ and therefore justified in being considered a visible saint. What this means, however, is that the doubt at the heart of Puritan doctrine divided the convert not only against himself but also against his congregation's view of him. On the one hand, his conversion narrative publicly and unanimously proved him spiritually justified. On the other hand, both privately and ideologically, the visible saint could never go along with the terms of his acceptance and accommodate the positive designation his religious institution conferred upon him. While he may have felt saved to the point where he could stand in front of Cambridge's congregation and convince his audience that, in all likelihood, his soul was destined for heaven, the genuine convert still found only "a thirsting frame" and "a sluggish heart . . . opposite to His will" when examining himself, a discovery that made it impossible for him to see himself as ever completely assured of his call among God's elect (170).

Keeping converts from accepting the distinction of visible saint was their own self-estimation. Robert Daniel, for example, saw himself as unworthy of election because he constantly fell "short in that obedience that should be" (61). The same went for the farmer Christopher Cane who, being "show[n] God would work a new heart" in those who believed, "saw" that he "was unable" to find the "signs of them that love Christ" in himself. Rather than rest assured in his salvation, Cane felt "undone" and in need of "a new heart" (59). Instead of placing confidence in his conversion, Daniel remained in "fear of God's wrath" (60). These assertions suggests a divergence in how a convert's publicly accepted status as visible saint differed dramatically from how the convert actually viewed himself. In almost every case, the heart-broken sinner, confessing the full measure of his spiritual affliction and struggle, repeatedly judged himself below the standard to which his audience finally held him and most certainly below what his acceptance as a member of his church implied of his soul's destiny.

In his *Journal*, Shepard confessed that despite his choice to abstain "from all sin for a time to come," his "righteousness could not satisfy" him. If not him, Shepard wondered, then could it really then satisfy *God*? An outstanding example of all that was thought to be pious in the early Bay colony, Shepard consistently viewed himself as "impotent" – that he "could not do" the work required of a true convert – rather than see himself as a

visible saint who administered God's Word. In fact, Shepard found himself sinning "so much [and] with such dead, heartless, blind works" that he "feared" God "would never" redeem him as he noted "how little of Christ was present" in his heart because of "how much [he] had dishonored Christ" (97-8, 85).

If to be (a visible saint) was to *not* be (in one's own yes), then early Bay Puritans were a community of individuals living with negation as a necessary condition of their faith. Commenting on Shepard's theological penchant for regeneration as a restless process, Thomas Werge notes that even after moments of spiritual epiphany Shepard, much like his flock, "continued to be tormented," especially over "his own salvation in light of his unworthiness and the threat of eternal reprobation." Werge is correct to comment that "[t]he anguish of [Shepard's] conflicts and struggles as he attempted to sustain his faith testifies to the nature of conversion as a beginning rather than as an accomplished certainty" (6). However, he should also add how the spiritual pangs Shepard suffered failed to convince him of his election. To think that he was saved was probably the worst thing Shepard could do, as it would indicate a break from orthodoxy as well as the theology from which he preached. For Shepard, it was always best to be unsure about such matters. As a result, he, like all visible saints, lived as a Christian never wholly saved. Despite trying to "maintain hard thoughts of Him," Shepard still found that God "will not hear" him (85).

Living in doubt, Shepard was still thought of as a moral pillar of his community. He was a visible saint even if he could never convince himself that he was. Notwithstanding the rigorous course of introspection, sin-uprooting, and self-rejection he endured in his lifetime, Shepard regarded himself in his *Journal* as "nothing else but a mass of sin," deeming "all [he] did . . . very vile" regardless of his efforts or best intentions (86). In this, Shepard's adherents were like their minister. The *Confessions* show them to have felt an identical conflict with the assumption of their election, and by extension, with their status as visible saints where doubt, rather than assurance, was their preferred ontological standard. Greeted to a fold as an example of his Christian community – as a living embodiment of the faith his confession represented – Mr. Haynes, perhaps one of the most wealthy of Shepard's congregants, constantly "considered what need he had of Christ" rather than seeing himself as actually having closed with his savior. And even

when Haynes finally realized that he “did thirst” so that “the Lord did draw his heart to Himself,” he only saw more of his “dead frame” than before, and thus his “bondage,” rather than his “liberty,” “in carnal respects” (170).

By no means did sanctification offer the Puritan comfort, and as the examples above illustrate, feeling it – or thinking it, even for a moment – was a red flag that caused sincere converts to mourn over their sins and question their faith even further. Although Cambridge's faithful may have been persuaded that they had received saving grace to the point where they chose to make just such a profession to their congregation, their statements, in contrast, give evidence not of assurance but of extreme skepticism and self-distrust – of having only marginally succeeded in securing “some mercy and strength against sin” (177). The convert thus stood divided: between himself as a sinner whom his congregation considered a visible saint; from himself as a visible saint who, despite this label, still identified himself as a sinner. Accepted to his fold as a soul possessing genuine spiritual conviction, a convert also knew that as long as he remained in the flesh he would forever remain in doubt as to the merit of his assurance, including his inducement toward leading a saintly life. If these doubts ceased, Morgan explains, it “would be a sign that [the convert] had never had faith to begin with, but had merely deluded himself.” And so “the constant message of Puritan preachers: in order to be sure one must be unsure” (69-70).

Thus the visible saint stood split: on one side assured by his congregation's best but imperfect judgement that he had been saved, and on the other, in constant doubt of his salvation, divided between the terms of his public acceptance and his private inclinations. To the hesitant believer, to have sought and attained fellowship in a church made his justification seem more probable. Yet it never guaranteed it, and in certain cases, acceptance may even have had the unintended effect of enhancing rather than allaying a convert's anxiety over his spiritual fate. As we know, this uneasiness led the convert to renewed efforts to “become His,” as Shepard noted in his *Journal*. Uncertainty pushed the true believer to “pitch [his] thought and heart on Him” all the more. But with renewed attempts came renewed disappointments and, for visible saints like Shepard, an intensification of anxieties and doubts that, while driving the believer's faith, increasingly kept him from accommodating his identity as a saint. Encouraged to cultivate his doubts

and fears as a means of sustaining (as well as justifying) his faith, Shepard privately wrote how he had clung to his troubled heart as he endeavored toward assurance, internalizing his afflictions as a means of preserving his desire to “cleave to Him and be knit to Him” – as a way of throwing himself at “the mercy of the Lord” in an effort to remove the decay from his “base rotten heart” (86).

As Shepard's statement reveals, to become a visible saint in New England was to deny the likelihood of ever being one. This is why Cambridge applicants found “no foothold” upon which to “stand fast upon the word of God.” They dutifully rejected any sense of their election, including the one their church had bestowed on them, because their spirituality dictated that they forever question their faith's legitimacy. In Wigglesworth's case, this lack of solid grounding led to “fearful shakings” that “frequently assail[ed]” him, particularly as he noticed how expert he had become – consummate sinner that he was – at “cover[ing]” his degeneracy “from the eyes of men” (*Diary* 15, 109). Even “[w]hilest I am confessing and shaming myself before God for my pride and sensuality,” Wigglesworth admitted, “even then pride of God's gifts ariseth” (29, 54). Even at his worst, which was Wigglesworth at his best, did he see himself as a sinful hypocrite unworthy of recognition, just as Shepard's converts had declared a few decades before.

Adjusting to his community's understanding of saintly behavior – of how a visible saint felt, acted, and thought – converts occupied an impossible position; of ontological insecurity, as Laing has described, but also one in which they came to see themselves as split from their public calling. Doubting his salvation because of a “heart . . . exceedingly clogged with world” yet also confirmed by his congregation as one who has truly witnessed “the excellency of the truth of the Word,” the visible saint of Cambridge's church found himself estranged from congregation's perception. Instead of his own glorification he found himself repeatedly “kept . . . down,” unable to “find such signs” of election as “[t]he sin of unbelief always stuck” to him (96). God's spiritual legislature on earth, the Puritan church asked the sincere convert to preserve impossibility by requiring him to conform to mutually exclusive standards. To join them in fellowship, he had to be justified as a visible saint, which was something he could never do or admit. Yet join them he did, assenting to their view of him rather than accepting his own view of himself.

The Puritan convert thus lived a refracted existence, caught between the gaze of his congregation and his own. His self-denial fulfilled the terms of his saintliness. But as a saint, he denied these terms, and by extension, those that his spiritual community used to characterize him.

As Michael Kaufman has argued, the rhetorical performance applicants delivered produced an essential “difference between what he is” (a visible saint) and “what he says he is” (a sinner who can never accept his behavior as saint-worthy). “This ability to differ from oneself – to perform one ‘self’ in public and another in private – points” to what Kaufman sees as a “modern definition of individualism” that “assumes a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’” in particular (46). Since there would always be “secret, hidden sins in thine heart” that, Shepard told his flock, would forever “damn thee . . . as soon as ever thou art dead and gone,” converts could never bring themselves to look past their iniquities even if their congregations could (“Sincere Convert” 23). Placed in this existential stalemate as individuals both irreparably damned and potentially saved, converts simultaneously denied and justified their faith in the same breath. They met the demands of their religion and the expectations of their religious institution while at the same time, in meeting these demands, continued to question their convictions whose quality, counter to their own appraisals, had been verified by their church.

Conscious of his relation to the external forces that asked him to think and speak of himself in a certain way, a believer, in delivering a conversion narrative, demonstrated his conscious choice to side with his culture's dominant outlook even if he could not see himself according to how this culture defined him. As Lionel Trilling has suggested, this conscious choice “should imply a commitment to, rather than an identification with, the external power of society.” In Trilling's view, the convert, contrary to his decision to side himself with the imperatives of his religion, was “actually antagonistic to [this] external power,” which asked him to debase his overriding sense of being in favor of the conformist demands his congregation placed over him (36).

This predicament can best be explained through the analysis Sigmund Freud posits in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Applying Freud's psycho-social theory to the Puritan conversion narrative, one soon notices how a congregation's cultural values influenced adherents to become “double individuals” whom “are connected with one another though

the bonds of common work and common interests” at the cost of losing one's independent subjectivity (99). Injuring himself before his congregation's eyes because he saw “nothing but vileness” in his heart, Cambridge converts like Barbary Cutter tried to see the world like their sainted peers (91). Yet the essence of their spiritual and moral being came to rest on how their congregation saw them – as saints – despite their own self-understanding. In Freud's view, this is “the starting-point of important psychological disturbances,” ones that “emanate from the outer world” where individuals learn to “differentiate between what is internal – what belongs to the ego – and what is external” (40). To Freud, the consequence of this process of mixed identification is that the ego – the carnal, sinful self – learns to detach itself and accommodate an existence apart from the external or social world of which it belongs. The convert “cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals,” and so, he becomes neurotic – an individual disconnected from his culture even as he takes part in its development (69). To Freud, all civil society, in fact, “is built upon a renunciation of instinct,” leading to a “cultural frustration [that] dominates the large field of social relationships.” Accordingly, “[i]f [this] loss is not compensated, one can be certain that serious disorders will ensue” (84-5).

It is to this effect that Brooks E. Holifield has maintained that the Puritans “relied on ritual to express their sense of themselves as related to the divine power that governed their world,” but that “the irony was that ritual led not only to social cohesion but also to continuing conflict” among (as well as within) Puritanism's adherents (552). By requiring believers to relate narratives of their conversion before becoming church members, Puritanism's early religious leaders drove the problem of spiritual assurance from inner experience to outer appearance – from a private inclination of doubt to a positive and public sign of compliance whereby those who possessed sincere faith could be identified and separated from those who fell short. But because converts felt and, what's more, identified with their doubts as a crucial term of faith, they also came to recognize themselves paradoxically, both in terms of how they were received publicly and how they judged themselves privately.

As I have been suggesting, this ultimately made them unable to assent to the terms of their institutionally approved selves of which their ascent to sainthood stood as

evidence. Shepard's converts can therefore be seen as having adapted an "authentic" persona on their road to sainthood – what Trilling describes as a representation of oneself that consents to a socially inscribed view despite the representer's private sentiments and self-evaluation. The authentic convert was "a sociable man" who knew "how to live in the opinion of others," and it was "from their judgement alone that he [drew] the sentiment of his own being." Yet his private, sinful (or "sincere") self still lived beyond the veil of his congregation's discriminating verdict, a self that kept the convert from believing in his sanctification even if his congregation did (62).

As we already know, believers were bound to Puritanism's institutional and traditional social structure having successfully delivered a statement of conversion that implied their willing subjection to how their spiritual community understood religious experience. In this fashion, a convert's cultural and spiritual identity was established through his relationship to his congregation and community. The categorizing behavior of his rhetorical performance validated his place among his brethren through his adjustment and adaption to their expectations of proper speech, feeling, and behavior. The validity of his conversion was therefore retained, in essence, through the proper communicative exchange that evoked recognition and empathy in his peers. However, in assimilating ambivalence as the most important component of his experience, the convert found himself compelled to live out his existence in the eyes of his community, a subject perhaps best known for its treatment in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Insecure in his relation to himself and existing somewhere between the unsettled bounds of sin and salvation, Puritanism's faithful lacked what Laing calls a "basic sense of unity." They experienced themselves "as primarily split into a mind and a body" – divided between how they thought of themselves and how others recognized them (*Divided Self* 65). Driven toward this paradoxical ontology, converts adopted this split as an inextricable aspect of their spiritual being, one that arrived as a direct consequence of having delivered a conversion narrative successfully. While this division can certainly be construed as an unconscious attempt to deal with the underlaying insecurity of his religious existence, it does not change the fact that in every instance the Puritan self was a disembodied self – a self at once a visible saint who, as Laing explains, "experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body," and a body that is

“felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being” (106-7). The saint's public persona contradicted his private identity, as the former was created by his compliance with the intentions and expectations of his congregation. To borrow a phrase from Henry James, to be a visible saint was “a response to what other people say I am” rather than what a person said he was.¹⁶ The saint's public admission – that he was a sinner and a scoundrel hardly worthy of consideration, let alone God's – worked against his congregation's definition of him. From Laing's perspective, the sincere believer was consequently no more than “what the other person wants or expects one to become while only being one's 'self' in imagination,” which “implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation” (98-99).

Revealing the contents of his inner-most heart, the congregational applicant presented his case to a church which in turn estimated his faith's legitimacy, becoming not only an object of their interest, but also a representation of their collective spiritual and interpretive force. Driven by the desire “to make my condition known,” converts like William Manning admitted being “gross . . . and ashamed” (95). But despite these insecurities, he still became a visible saint, and thus, a paragon of piety, acquiring what could be paradoxically described as a “social self-identity” in which his acceptance to a church assured him of his place among similarly unsettled yet genuinely affected souls. Converts existed with contradiction. They were divided between their uncertainty in their relationship with grace while also assured of it as they sat among the sainted. In this condition, the Puritan convert both accepted and refused his social standing as saint. Or rather, he transcended this moral category as a sinner who always had more sin to upturn; who, like Nicholas Wyeth, continued to feel the need for God to “manifest Himself more” to his “soul,” and who could “see cause enough in my own heart why Lord should deny me” (197).

Considering themselves forever undeserving of redeeming grace and thereby coming to question the merits of their being seen as justified saints, converts came to feel doubly guilty having failed on two counts: at being the morally upright soul their congregation perceived them as and as Christians whose faith was never enough to promote the assurance their sainthood suggested. As Morgan has observed, in order for a

convert to be sure of his conversion he had to be unsure of it (70). But if unsure, then he stood counter to his congregation's best judgement, which received him on the basis of his exemplary (rather than inadequate) faith. As Thomas Hooker once explained, it was "secret sins," ones a believer "knows only by himself," that would keep him from achieving sanctification ("True Sign" 157). In this converts were united as individuals who acknowledged the presence of these secret sins in public. Their admissions brought them together, drawing converted and uncovered alike toward a more ardent level of faith. Yet they knew, as they were instructed, that many of their sins remained – and would always remain – unaccounted, a realization that kept them from conceding their sanctification. Their confessions therefore point to the perceptual split between how a convert like William Hamlet identified himself and how Cambridge's congregation viewed him, suggesting a discrepancy between the story his account described and what its language connoted. As he told his listeners about his experiences, Hamlet's faith had sustained him under pressure despite his continued doubts as to whether he walked "in assurance or affliction." But more than merely sustain him, his "desire to walk under the feet of God and His people and all men" demonstrated a humble, repentant, and saint-worthy believer – a Hamlet who, to his congregation, was assured rather than simply afflicted (129).

This picture, however, ran counter to Hamlet's claims – counter to his self-assessment as an unregenerate sinner "more vile than any" and as a person who least of all deserves absolution (129). In this sense, conversion narratives like Hamlet's can be understood through Cathy Caruth's reading of individual trauma as a repetition of an original experience that is neither fully assimilated when it occurs nor when is retold (5). As a visible saint, Hamlet's saving experience, and his comprehension of it, were absorbed by his congregation's dominant understanding of this experience, who approved saints who never approved themselves; converts who saw themselves as "seven times worse" the more they realized how "faith was sweet" and their own souls "frothy and unsavory" (128). While the believer's conversion narrative may have been good enough for his congregation, it was never good enough for the true believer. This left his original experiences, in Caruth's words, unclaimed, and thus beyond the veil of secrecy that ministers like Hooker so adamantly warned their parishioners.

From the narratological perspective Caruth uses to frame her interpretation of trauma as the re-telling – and thus, a reenactment – of a belated experience, congregational applicants entrusted their conversion (and consequently their faith's significance) to their audience's understanding, one that superseded the convert's own. Assenting to this understanding, a convert relinquished his own appraisal, doubting the merits of his piety as his congregation affirmed it. In the end, congregations retained only their own experience of a narrator's private experiences, unable to ultimately gain access to the actual facts of his conviction in Christ – unable to discern the secret “sin of the heart within the inward house” of the convert's soul, as Shepard preached (“Sincere Convert” 18).

The conversion story convert's described thus took on a textual rather than a lived force through his congregation's inadequate means of seeing “the facts” he presented. Calling on believers to convey the innermost details of their experiences – to communicate the inner-workings of their hearts in response to their insoluble spiritual encounters – congregations reorganized the convert's inner world to conform to their understanding of what this world entailed. To Caruth, this exchange would have left the convert in a state of trauma, one caused by the impossible (and Laing would say dissociative) narratological position in which the confessor's oral performance placed him. This began when a believer responded to and then described the overwhelming and unexpected set of providential events that he didn't grasp because he was told that he never could. Alienated from his own experience as well as his speech, the congregational applicant was also estranged from his church's experience of *him*, who viewed him as a visible saint and as one of their own. Living in their assessment, the convert thus surpassed – or relinquished – his private self-understanding in favor of his audience's reading, his confession representing the story of his arrival from sin to salvation though never from the convert's own personal view.

In existing for God and God's church rather than himself, visible saints came into being in their congregations' eyes and minds, whereby their religious (and social) identities were forged through the significance their brethren assigned to their narratives and to their lives. Thus the grammar or system of tropes that the convert used to describe his experiences broke from his phenomenal knowledge, his words expanding to the realm

of performance, which acted as an imperfect representation of his actual encounters that defined his belonging and spiritual fate. As the applicant relived his experiences through his account, one rendered for public approval, his faith, its meaning, and its legitimacy, were shaped by his congregation's best (but always imperfect) judgement. And as he gained their acceptance, the authority of his words transferred over to his adjudicators, who saw him as saved even as he vehemently denied this possibility.

Celebrated as a genuine believer, a convert invited to Shepard's fold made direct reference to his world, a reference that was rejected by his congregation who accepted only the implicit or latent reference that emerged from his narrative, one that ran counter to his language. His church evaluated the validity of his experiences through the impact of what they interpreted and believed as opposed to the external referents to which the convert's narrative drew attention: his "deluded spirit," which was *unable* to draw his "heart nearer to God," or the "deep distress" that *kept him* from believing "in that blood which was shed" for sinners like himself (52).

As Caruth explains, this loss of "referential peculiarity" constituted the very figure of the convert's social being. As he performed his narrative, his humanity as author and as a sinner assuredly condemned to hell receded to a subsidiary level of importance because the social circumstances of his narrative's significance took precedence over the overt content of his speech (82). As a result, those delivering conversion narratives proved their assent to orthodox doctrine while also maintaining possession over an independent subjectivity through which they arrived at an ulterior understanding of themselves unrecognized by their listeners. The narrative a convert delivered presented an acceptable, even exemplary believer whose faith knew no bounds. It offered the tale of a sinner whose spiritual afflictions earned him the right to be called a saint equaled only by the narrator's disapproval of himself. But in the end, the convert always viewed himself, at most, as an imperfect Christian. His congregational membership therefore entailed a necessary contradiction of terms that, as I have been suggesting, not only comprised his faith but also his being.

As a Cambridge applicant accounted for himself, he tried to demonstrate his genuine humility as he described the stages of preparation that had led him to conviction, proving the strength of his conviction, and thus his positive spiritual status as a saint,

through the heart-felt picture he drew of experiences. Through his persistent effort to “be reconciled unto God,” his reconciliation was established despite feeling his will “contrary to this” (40). Having failed to achieve his community's spiritual goals since fully achieving sanctification was always uncertain, and so, always out of reach, the visible saint still succeeded in social terms. He understood fellowship as an indication of his approaching salvation, but only so long as he distrusted everything about himself, which in this case also included his congregation's pronouncement that he was a Christian worthy of being called a saint. Instead of being satisfied, Elizabeth Olbon, for instance, only became more “wrought” by the “discontent in her own spirit” after having “witnessed the Lord's love to her.” “She saw she longed after Christ to save and sanctify her” rather than seeing herself as having been saved – rather than recognizing herself as an individual that “should enter into heaven.” As a thing “unclean,” Olbon could never wholly believe or wholeheartedly admit to being a saint even if her narrative showed the Cambridge congregation that she was in all likelihood (41).

The discrepancy between a congregation's public approval and a convert's refusal to believe in his or her election should be seen as a constative feature of the Puritan conversion narrative and Puritan culture more generally. As Kaufmann has already noted, it can also be tied to a longer development toward the type of individuality more familiar to modern readers in which individual personality is shaped through the conscious choice, and the struggle, to come to terms with one's experiences in the context of one's society and the public scrutiny it offers (34). This scrutiny divided the convert between what he wanted to be but could not admit to and what he cannot be but was told that he was, thus leaving him not only in state of ontological insecurity but also paradoxically detached from and also a part of his congregational community. As Leverenz has persuasively shown, this deviation between a believer's self-understanding and how his congregation perceived him produced from within a “profound ambivalence to authority,” one that stemmed from how the Puritan establishment accepted the convert as regenerate while concurrently rejecting the possibility that his faith could be known for certain (118).

Expressing doubts and, at times, slight assurances, the convert found himself aligned with his congregation's spiritual prerogatives. He became a justified saint through

the hesitations and vague certainties he felt that resonated with his peers who confessed to having undergone similar experiences. However, in laying his thoughts bare for other communicants to probe, the convert left his unassimilated characteristics – the sinner that he would always be – to the wayside as others were absorbed, even illuminated, by his congregation who seized upon his claims of unsureness and translated them into tokens of faith. We can only suspect that what remained, the vestigial portion of the convert's identity that could not assent to or become absorbed by his congregation's evaluation, did not disappear. In fact, it only seems to have deepened with time, as the narratological and ontological discontinuity the ritual engendered, however involuntarily, anticipated, and may even have inspired, how later Protestants have come to see, connect with, and express themselves in response to the culture of which they are both a part and divided.

[5]

In *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin contends that the traditions and convictions that shape American culture grew out of the social and psychological anxieties of early New England settlers trying to survive in what they largely perceived as a savage new world. At the center of Slotkin's analysis is the role of mythology, through which “the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected” (3). Mythology, however, is only as influential as the rituals that animate it. “Repetition is the essence of this process,” Slotkin acknowledges, where “the consummatory myth-maker must draw upon the vocabulary of myth-images and -structures that is his cultural heritage” (20, 13).

There can be no doubt that the Puritan conversion narrative served as one of the practical mechanisms behind the kind of cultural transmission Slotkin describes. As Shepard's sermons, church confessions, and more personal writing confirm, early New England's spiritual ethos revolved around a dialectic of assurance and anxiety, one that, as the following chapters will argue, are sustained in later centuries in life and in literature. Puritan believers measured their assurance and their rightful place among their Christian brethren through the proportional degree of unsureness they felt, an unsureness that

justified their convictions. As Slotkin suggests, this dialectic was driven by “a sort of definition by repudiation” (22). Converts defined themselves and were defined by the degree to which they could spurn their earthly impulses in favor of a communally received estimation of what constituted proper piety. As this dissertation looks ahead to the conversion narrative's impact in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, it argues that this process expanded to encompass a wide range of cultural perspectives, both religious and secular, as a means of understanding and articulating religious faith.

By delivering a brief account of their spiritual experiences, Puritan converts confirmed that they truly belonged among society's sainted. As converts applied the spiritual doctrines they were taught, their conversion narratives proved their spiritual, emotional, and ontological alignment with their ecclesiastical leaders as evinced by their heartfelt inclination to stand “before the Lord this day as the body of this people” (Sloughton 243). But more than simply a standard saints used to distinguish themselves from the sanctimonious, the ritual of offering a conversion narrative, and the relationship between assurance and anxiety it promoted, enabled converts and their congregational communities to arrive at a deeper understanding of faith by putting it on display for audiences to see – and respect. As a result, faith in the early Bay colony, and certainly in Shepard's Cambridge, was contingent on the anxiety a convert felt over her assurance; it was deep sense of emotional unsettledness that led believers like Jane Winship to “humble” herself “under God's hand” and so, to be “comforted” despite her fears (149).

The relationship between the concern a convert felt over his salvation only to grow assured of it is not a theme unique to Shepard's *Confessions*. It can also be found in a diverse body of Puritan literature, whether in Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor's meditative poems, Wigglesworth and Shepard's diaries, John Dane's personal narrative, or in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, thereby corroborating the importance of faith's affective content to the Puritans who practiced it. As the preceding chapters have discussed, Puritan converts made use of a traditional, formal, and rhetorical logic to direct their audience's attention toward the legitimacy of their accounts, signaling their religious convictions, and hence the communal value of their experiences, by amending the parameters of their language to fit what Jane Kamensky would refer to as the “dominant speech order” expected of a repentant sinner (3). But while converts registered and

expressed their willingness to lay low so that the Lord may be exulted, their statements only insinuated rather than absolutely confirmed the divine sanction of what they said, leaving congregations ultimately in the dark as to the sincerity and sanction of their words. This is why an applicant's affective response to his conversion was so closely monitored and such an important part of the conversion narrative ritual. If a believer couldn't explain how grace had touched his life, then he could certainly exhibit just how "troubled" and "weak" or "discontented [his] mind" was in the moments when he considered "if [he] was the Lord's," a display that, in turn, signaled to his congregation his readiness repent his sins and join their church (*Confessions* 97).

Congregations appraised an applicant's affective response to the Gospel, in part, because they had to. Authenticated confessions not only built churches but also drew church members together, signaling a mutual fellowship formed through a consensus of feeling and experience. Acceptable narratives justified both convert and the spiritual and political currency of his settlement. As the reverend Peter Bulkeley once wrote, "the Lord look[ed] for more" from New England's settlers: for "more zeal for God, more love to His truth." The conversion narrative brought this "more" out.¹⁷

Having felt God's grace and the moral responsibility of His covenant upon them, converts responded to Bulkeley's call for more by expressing their devotion as a conviction fraught with alternating bouts of jubilation and distress. In doing so, those accepted to a fold made "visible" the fact that God's work was being accomplished in the New World. Morgan is correct to remark, then, that faith "meant something more than mere belief" in the early New England (58). The ritual of delivering and recording conversion narratives worked to not only promote consensus but also collectively signal the religious exemplarity of these New World Christians who, to Bulkeley's contemporary John Cotton, were proving that they were indeed "a special people, an only people, none like thee in all the earth" (*God's Promise* 1).

Despite being typified as ideal Christians, Cambridge saints like Martha Collins continued to question their faith, at one moment "stirred up to seek" the Lord, "[b]ut then blockish and sottish again and so question[ing] the signs" of their election. As a visible saint, Collins complained of repeatedly being met "with sorrows and feelings [of] no life in [God's] ordinances," feelings that, however paradoxically, proved to Collins'

congregation that her faith was sincere because she was her willing to suffer for it despite repeated failures and “sorrows” (131).

Collins' ambivalences were key to her faith, allowing her to accommodate the impossible ontological position – of being both sure and unsure that grace had redeemed her – in which her religion thrust her. Told by her minister that she could never see herself as saved nor could she be completely reprobate as a communicating member of her church, Collins made uncertainty the source of her spiritual confirmation. In a world where to be humbled and heart-broken suggested a believer on the correct spiritual path, Cambridge converts repeatedly expressed worry upon “hearing on that text, gate is shut,” thinking “that surely now gate is shut for me,” in a logic that demonstrated their faith through the emotional appeal they made to the prospect (though never the certainty) that the Lord “will forgive iniquities” (132).

A century after Shepard's death, Jonathan Edwards also hoped to link unsettledness and a convert's felt inclination toward God as the visible presence of grace in his heart. It was to this effect that Edwards wrote his *Narrative of Surprising Conversations*, a text that tried to quell the skepticism of those “that scoffed and made ridicule of the religion that appeared in Northampton” (78). Like his predecessor Shepard, Edwards noted the change in his adherents' behavior and language as a way to detect their faith's authenticity. To Edwards, the appearance “more of a religious concern upon peoples minds” gave hint of their genuine desire to “more earnestly seek salvation” just as it had in Shepard's Cambridge. When believers felt an increasing “concern about the great things of religion,” Edwards explained, it was very hard to deny the spiritual authority of their convictions even if election was theoretically impossible to detect (74).

Interested in erecting a congregation as close to God's invisible church as possible, Edwards called attention to a believer's emotional and psychological transformation to argue for the sincerity of his convictions. For Edwards, true believers worked “more and more” on “reforming” and left off their “frolicking” “by degrees” to attend “public worship.” They were individuals that, while concerned over their spiritual fate, were still eager “and willing of themselves to comply with the counsel given them,” which included feeling agony over the uncertainty of their salvation in the face of their seemingly insurmountable sins (73).

In Edwards' view, the piety his flock displayed was neither zealous nor misconstrued but formal and appropriate. While their dispositions and testimony may have been emotionally fraught, and while they may have expressed uncomfortable fears regarding their salvation, his congregation produced "no new way of worship affected." Their groans and tears showed "no oddity of behavior . . . but on the contrary," how "the face of things is much changed" in their souls as reflected by "the appearance of a meek, humble, amiable behavior" (82). What convinced Edwards most of his Northampton saints' spiritual arrival was precisely what convinced Shepard of the sincerity of his congregation's faith: believers who could express "a sense of the glory of the divine perfections, and of the excellency and fullness of Jesus Christ, and of their own littleness and unworthiness" (78). To both ministers, the fact that even an "accidental sight of the Bible" could cause a believer to become "much moved" was not a cause for alarm and certainly no reason to discount a believer as a fanatic or a hypocrite. A convert's affective response to God's commandments evinced how grace had sincerely moved him, as it gave others a taste as well as a "sight" of the inner-workings of grace altering and welcoming his soul into "His sweet heart" (79). To Edwards, affected converts were "perfectly sober and in the exercise" of their "reason" because they realized, as all whom grace had touched knew, that prolonged spiritual anguish was a necessary activity "before they [could] have comfort" in heaven. Edwards therefore concluded that the recent conversions that had taken place were no less orthodox than previous displays. His adherents had followed "in the steps, and method" in which the proper "operation" of grace could be discerned; they were "convincing and converting sinners" who had endured doubts for a "length of time" before reaching "conviction" (80).

Like Shepard before him, Edwards approximated the spiritual sanction of a Christian's conversion through his capacity to appropriately demonstrate his faith. A genuine conversion was a process replete "with intermissions." It came "gradually" – "more and more" until a "sense of His glory and love" was evident in a believer "to a more than ordinary degree." In order for the Holy Spirit to fill them, converts had to empty themselves. They had to respond to their conviction of grace by "sink[ing] under it" – by perceiving their "nature seemingly overborne and sinking" – and by expressing, "in a manner that can't be described," their sense "of the glory of God" through an

appreciation of their own “unworthiness.” A sinking soul was a soul “longing to go to be with Christ.” A true believer was a person that doubted, rather than knew, whether he would ever be “at peace with that great God” (79-80).

For the early and later New England settlers who followed the Old Light Calvinism of Shepard's generation, election, at least to Edwards, was evident in a believer who was “full” with grace but who looked “on her self not as an eminent saint, but as the worst of all, and unworthy.” While a convert may have had “such a sense of God's exceeding greatness and majesty,” he only did so after feeling “swallowed up” by his own sense of insufficiency, which in turn proved “beyond any great doubt of her good estate” (80). In contrast to what most scholars assume, Great Awakening converts, or at least those whose statements Edwards chose to include in his *Narrative*, were linked to a previous generation of believers, and belief, in the way they similarly understood spiritual justification as demonstrable through a believer's growing anxieties. Like Shepard's Cambridge flock, converts living in Edwards' time met their doubts with renewed and persistent efforts toward saintliness, praying for God's mercy, though never sure as to whether their prayers would be answered or whether their redemption would ever come to be. Genuine – or acceptable – piety, whether in the 17th or early 18th century, was a piety that never ceased in the face of uncertainty. It was a faith characterized by alternating periods of hope and despair that amounted to an over-all ambivalence toward oneself.

While it is safe to assume that, by the time Awakening revivals had reached their highest point, the Calvinism Shepard, Winthrop, and Cotton espoused had evolved into a more inclusive faith, ambivalence still prevailed in terms of how believers typified their spiritual encounters. For even if one of the consequences of the Awakening was that believers could gain a more positive sense of having closed with Christ because assurance was increasingly considered something self-evident, converts still acknowledged how their doubts and self-recrimination had caused them to see that they had more spiritual cleansing to accomplish. As before, uncertainty and unsettledness, especially in themselves, led converts to faith; as before, the life of the convert was a life of progress and potential – one of constant challenges that, when met, reaffirmed a believer's conviction in the Lord's capacity to save him.

In the early Bay colony, it was the ritual that ministers like Shepard demanded of its church members that sustained this ideology. As this chapter has argued, it also nourished the idea, however implicit or unexpressed, that what made a believer into a saint was the degree to which his language and actions reflected this reality. The way a convert regarded his piety, the way he felt it and how he accounted for himself, told others that he had found Christ even if his salvation was unsure.

Though brimming with self-confidence and almost certainly a skeptic of the religious revivals taking place in New England, it is Benjamin Franklin who perhaps best speaks to how this tradition of self-representation (as a self-conscious performance) extends beyond a religious domain to encompass the secular. As Leverenz has rightly asserted, “instead of Puritan faith in the Word of the good book, Franklin had an equally salvational faith in the power of words.” He was a convert, in other words, to how language and the behavior to which it referred could support one's claim to social belonging when properly performed, just as one of Shepard's converts could prove his piety through the moving words he used to describe his spiritual conviction (225).

As Herbert W. Schneider has argued, Franklin's debt to Puritan thought is as unmistakable as it is significant. One need only look to Franklin's iconic *Autobiography* to see how he maintained Puritan virtues “in all their rigor” even if he “abandoned entirely their theological sanctions” (114). Rather than the next, Franklin looked to the temporal world for moral confirmation. He believed in a secular piety of self-improvement through sustained effort that came with repeated failure as well as success just as it had for Cambridge's congregation. In this sense, the *Autobiography* records its author's conversion, yet one to a strict code of industry and frugal conduct as not only Franklin's saving grace but also as a means to remove himself from his lower-class beginnings to become a leading member of colonial society. It is to this effect that Schneider has written how, “[i]n his austere moralism, Franklin was undoubtably a Puritan, however much he may have revolted against Calvinism.” While Franklin was surely an 18th century man-of-the-world, his moralism, Schneider explains, was still that of “a child of the New England frontier.” To Schneider, Edwards and Franklin “represented the two opposite poles of Puritan thought,” the difference being that while Edwards strove to induce New England to lead a godly life, Franklin hoped to teach

Americans the merits of leading a sober one (153).

However weary of organized religion Franklin was, his indebtedness to Puritanism's moral outlook makes him an important figure that bridges 17th and 18th century thought. Like his Calvinist forerunners, Franklin knew that to achieve something, a person had to work and, more often than not, suffer for it. But while the Puritans knew that the focus of all their efforts – salvation – couldn't be effected on their own, Franklin maintained that no goal was ever completely out of a man's reach if he simply remained committed to his ambition. Despite this discrepancy, however, Franklin still taught early Republicans that to accomplish something, old-fashioned Puritan virtues like self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and sincerity in dealing with other men were as valuable as they had always been. The main difference was that Franklin shifted the terms and signs of success. God was now as much on the side of the hard-working and fair-dealing person as on the Christian's, where a man's calling in life could be justified by his worldly achievements as opposed to the intensity of his spiritual call.

But more than simply teach his fellow man how to live, Franklin's *Autobiography* emphasizes what Leverenz terms as a “deliberate change from habits of pride, lust, and argumentation to . . . benevolent humility” as not only a means of self-improvement but as a way to also show others how one has improved (225-6). Knowing “what is right and wrong,” Franklin didn't see why a person could not “always do the one and avoid the other.” Franklin's goal for mankind was tangible: to be “good citizens” rather than “good Presbyterians.” He saw religion as a force that served “principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another” rather than “inspire, promote, or confirm morality.” Rejecting it, Franklin found inspiration in his own “little liturgy, or form of prayer” – a list of thirteen worldly virtues “necessary or desirable” (*Autobiography* 65-7).

Franklin's program offers a rational alternative to religious moralizing while suggesting a more palpable means of achieving (and giving evidence of) one's upstanding character. For Franklin, to be decent meant playing the part of a decent person. It meant following what one intuitively knows is right and maintaining that course. But as always, Franklin's advice, particularly its focus on performing self-conscious self-regulation to achieve rarified personal heights, leaves open the question as to whether Franklin was actually taking himself – and especially his readers – seriously. Outside the fact that his

Autobiography distinguishes him as the same sort of “convincing preacher,” albeit a secular one, assisting his fellow man to “aspire to better himself,” Franklin finds his list of virtues and regime “of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day” impossible to meet. In fact, Franklin is “surprised” to find himself “so much fuller of faults” than he “had imagined.” His tablet of virtues, a testament to the hard work he had put into becoming a better person, becomes “full of holes” as a result of his persistent failure to meet each category's standard (71-2). Success through hard work, it would seem, is not as easy Franklin first advertised.

As was the case a century before, there are limits to perfection, and Franklin soon gives up his plan to attain it as his attention is turned to “a multiplicity of [other] affairs.” Franklin's failure thus ends with a congenial reminder that “a speckled ax was best” and that there is a “kind of foppery in morals” – that the pursuit of perfection is more “ridiculous” than useful. As a result, the *Autobiography* sidesteps the issue of Franklin's personal shortcomings as he humorously points to how “a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated,” and that a truly “benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself.” This view, however, makes Franklin's moral position (and thus Franklin the person to whom this morality is associated with) ambiguous. Even more dubious is the fact that his secular substitute for a Calvinist doctrine of work and moral preparation leads him to its same uncertain conclusion: that the pursuit of perfection clearly has limits, and that in reality, it is an impossible ambition for naturally faltering human beings (72-3).

Admitting to have “never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining,” and instead, falling “far short of it,” Franklin still finds himself satisfied “by the endeavor,” becoming “a better and a happier man than [he] otherwise should have been” had he “not attempted it” (72-3). Consequently, Franklin's book of moral prescriptions, and the *Autobiography* itself, fail to show “the means and manner of obtaining virtue.” If anything, Franklin's experiences have taught him that virtue is indistinguishable “from the mere exhortation to be good,” and that the appearance of virtue and industry are as equally important as their attainment. Having failed at perfection, Franklin now stresses not the “success in acquiring the reality of . . . virtue” but “the appearance of it,” an emphasis that, while leading to “less mortification” when

Franklin finds himself “to be wrong,” leaves open the question as to what Franklin, who has thus far designated himself as a model of rational rectitude, really believes (74-5).

As Morton Ross has duly noted, Franklin's *Autobiography* is “rich” in “evidence of Franklin's skill with appearances” (216). A good example of this arrives when Franklin admits in the *Autobiography* that “to show that I was not above my business, I sometimes brought home the paper I purchased at the stores, through the streets on a wheelbarrow. Thus being esteemed an industrious thriving young man” (75). Franklin's actions, in other words, are done with an eye to the public response they will generate, thereby leaving readers to question the authenticity (and authority) of his instruction just as they are kept them from distinguishing between Franklin's autobiographic persona and Franklin the actual person. As Leverenz explains, Franklin's idiosyncratic style “was able to express self-division and ambivalence through irony,” setting up what D. H. Lawrence once described as the first dummy American (239). This is to say that the “Franklin” Franklin performs is indistinguishable from the authoritative Franklin. Like the Puritan convert who also put himself to the task of narrating his progress from complacency to spirited action, Franklin convinced audiences of what he was regardless of whether he was or not.

As Mitchel Breitwieser has argued, although Franklin presented himself as an open book, he actually diverted “attention from questions that should have been confronted more directly,” devoting his energy to the weighty issue of his own character in the way it conformed to his impulse toward “determined self-design” rather than presenting this character for what it really was (*Cotton Mather* 2-3). Franklin's emphasis, then, is not on self-improvement itself but on the calculated performance of making life into a conscious project so that a fully finished self can emerge. Like the Puritans before him, Franklin offered himself up for inspection and emulation regardless of whether he achieved his personal goals. Accordingly, Breitwieser contends that Franklin's concept of the self should be seen as “the combination of rational calculation, ingenuity, and resolute industriousness” that, for Franklin, “are self, and all of self.” Such qualities make a man what he is because it is in their pursuit, rather than in their accomplishment, that he shapes his personality. For Breitwieser, this shows how, to Franklin, “the appearance” of one's self was the most anyone else would ever see, and so, the one thing to which every man must attend (8).

While Franklin's commitment to life as an unwavering project sustained by resolve suggests his desire to forge himself as a representative personality, it clarifies how Franklin believed that the only personality an individual can claim is the one he presents to the world. This outlook purposefully blurs the line between reality and representation whereby Franklin's "true" or authoritative self becomes indistinguishable from his autobiographic persona. This leaves the *Autobiography*'s readers to question just who the "real" Franklin is – a question they pursue until they finally realize that Franklin's public figure was built to withstand attempts at uncovering its more personal dimensions.

From here a clear correspondence can be drawn between Franklin's self-conscious performance and that of the Puritan convert whose pious sincerity and heart-felt commitment to serving God convinced his congregation of his spiritual worth even if he could never know it for certain. As was the case for Shepard's converts, the significance of Franklin's experiences and the man to which they are connected are unclear except when defined by his audience. Franklin's personality is as constructed and open for interpretation as it is instructive, just as Franklin's shiftiness keeps observers from knowing whether his emphasis on performance is an indication of his hostility towards duplicity or his genuine regard for it as a means of transcending worldly authority. Like the Puritan convert whose self-estimation clashed with how others interpreted his language, Franklin cultivates the notion of a double self – a self simultaneously public and private – as endemic to social existence. Linked through the self-conscious performance each performed, both Franklin and the 17th century convert gave force to the idea that to be an American or a convert was as much about performing these roles as about actually being one or the other. In this we are left to reflect on the degree to which the Puritan conversion narrative may have contributed to the American autobiography – a literary tradition in which a self is produced, and performed, for a higher, public end.

Notes

¹ Another, and perhaps more noted paradox, was the widespread adoption of the Covenant of Grace. As Perry Miller has argued best in *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, the covenant was the "ultimate creation of the Puritan genius," securing for Shepard's New England Calvinists rational order in a universe governed by universal absolutism (239). As converts, believers knew first-hand the capriciousness of God's seemingly arbitrary will. This of course included the question of their salvation,

which no one could predict. But to make this predicament easier, and to be able to fill churches with visible saints, ministers like Shepard taught that although a Christian could never know the outcome of his soul's spiritual destiny, the life he led – the family he was blessed with, his successes in business, even his good fortune in arriving to New England – would be able to suggest whether he was damned or saved. What Miller terms a “psychological doctrine” was nothing less than a way a people who thought they were living in a predetermined world could assert control over their spiritual fate. This view clearly contradicted the Puritan assumption that a person could correctly read God's will or that his “works” – meaning the pious deeds he committed – could somehow be equated with divine logic.

² Johnson quoted in McGiffert, 7-8. Mitchel quoted in Werge, 9. For the most recent and most thorough study of early New England's sacerdotal genealogy, see Janice Knight's *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*.

³ Shepard quoted in McGiffert, 20.

⁴ Shepard quoted in Leverenz, 190-1.

⁵ Perhaps more than most, it was Shepard who assessed assurance along these lines. As Darrett B. Rutman has shown in *American Puritanism: Faith and Practice*, theological differences among first generation ministers seems to have been the rule rather than the exception. The best counter-example of Shepard's doctrine of preparation was John Cotton's who, in the wake to the Hutchinson controversy, came decidedly close to accusing Shepard of preaching a doctrine of works rather than grace, an accusation from which he soon backtracked. For Cotton – and ultimately for Shepard – justification in Christ always preceded sanctification. By asking converts to relate an account of their conversion, Shepard, Cotton felt, seemed to have reversed this order whereby a congregation would deem an applicant sanctified before granting his justification. As Rutman explains, “to Cotton . . . [a] man finding assurance in terms of outward appearance and being accepted within a church of saints on that basis was likely to rest easy.” Cotton's hope was for Christians not “to build the signs of their Adoption by Christ upon any sanctification, but such as floweth from faith in Christ Jesus; for all other holiness, and righteousness . . . may be . . . mortal seed, and fall short of perseverance” (104). The problem with Cotton's argument, however, was that if sanctification flowed to the believer directly from Christ, there would be no need (or way) for ministers to check whether a convert was justified, since the Holy Spirit would have superseded the ministry's authority. These theological disputes – and others, such as Thomas Hooker's removal to the Connecticut valley – causes Rutman to conclude that in New England there was only a “semblance of unity” among ecclesiastic leaders (112).

⁶ These quotations actually come from Jonathan Edwards' “Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit,” 207-8, 209. My point in using Edwards instead of Shepard is to suggest the theological closeness between the two ministers which, to date, has never been explored. Doing so would indeed prove a fruitful study whereby early New England's religious and intellectual legacy to the 18th century can be more firmly established.

⁷ It should be noted that most ministers granted that, because it truly was impossible to know for certain whether a convert had been saved, congregations would have their share of saints and hypocrites. The prevailing thought, however, was that it was better to take the chance and admit some hypocrites so that those who were saved could enjoy fellowship within God's holy community. This is precisely why ministers like Shepard emphasized a theology of a broken heart – that while a hypocrite could feign his conversion through a deft rhetorical performance, he would have a far more difficult time pretending to feel grace's converting spirit in his heart, especially as he described its effect on him to other Christians.

⁸ Augustine's *Confessions* is well worth noting here in its relation to Shepard's preaching. In it, Augustine repeatedly stresses, in a constant tone of lament, the affecting power of spiritual inspiration which, while (hopefully) leading the believer to Christ, also forces him to see his own lack of worth, and more, that to be a sincere believer one must engage in a war of “myself against myself” (152).

⁹ Shepard quoted in Pettit, 144.

¹⁰ Cotton quoted in Murphey, 136.

¹¹ Cotton quoted in Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 108.

¹² In a tradition first initiated by Augustine, to feel the weight of one's sins helped the convert see the perfection of Christ's example. John Bunyan is perhaps the best example of a Puritan who took this formula to the extreme. By being the most sinful sinner the world has ever known, Bunyan could emphasize God's goodness toward him and the miraculousness of His having appointed Bunyan to the cloth.

¹³ Shepard's journal entry of February 15, 1641, illustrates this contradiction best. Seeing “there was nothing else good and because He was always good,” Shepard saw that “I had cause to seek Him always.” Through lack, Shepard gains faith. Yet his conviction is only temporary. Soon after his realization, Shepard begins to doubt himself again, wondering why and for what cause “did [he] desire to live with Him alone in heaven?” These doubts led Shepard to conclude how his “heart [was] very apt to comfort itself” inordinately, thus leaving him back where he started: seeing that there is “nothing else good” but Him (87). This never-ending cycle of assurance and doubt characterizes the *Confessions* perfectly.

¹⁴ Gilman quoted in Leverenz, 17. As Chapter IV of this dissertation will discuss in further depth, Gilman's commentary anticipated the type of criticism many New Light preachers faced during the Great Awakening. The connection between orthodox, first generation ministers like Shepard, particularly in terms of their affective homiletic style, and those of the early and middle 18th century, has not been explicitly made however. This would appear to be an especially fruitful study for scholars interested in continuing to trace the influence of Puritan religious practice on later generations.

¹⁵ Shepard quoted in Delbanco, 56.

¹⁶ James quoted in Laing, *Divided Self*, 106.

¹⁷ Bulkeley quoted in Pettit, 115.

CHAPTER IV

“I WILL MAKE DARKNESS, LIGHT”: CONVERSION, CONVENTION, AND SELF-AUTHORIZATION IN 18th CENTURY BLACK ATLANTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As the religious temper of first and second generation Puritan settlers dispersed into the 18th century, what changed most in conversion narratives delivered orally and in writing are less the formal features of the accounts themselves than the question of what a legitimate conversion comprised. As a steady inflow of new settlers reached America's shores, a more pluralistic, more liberal social order was coming to its own. New England was changing, evolving from a settlement made up of four colonies to a grouping of provinces in which individuals were newly recognized as Yankees rather than Puritans.¹ This shift represents how, to many, old religious prescriptions, like the belief in man's total depravity, the doctrine of unconditional election, or the limited possibility of atonement, were losing their appeal. New economic ambitions and fresh viewpoints on the role of individuals within society were altering previous assumptions about the relationship between believers and their religious institutions. A previous culture of cohesion and conformity that gave individuals a limited social role no longer seemed as persuasive, as competing denominations, new cultures, new ideas, and foreign races threatened – and, some have argued, overcame – the kind of spiritual practice held by New England's first settlers.²

As he witnessed these changes taking place in his native land, Jonathan Edwards noted with regret how “[t]here is not now that spirit of orthodoxy which there was then” – the “mysterious and spiritual doctrines of Christianity . . . never so ridiculed, and held in contempt, as they are in the present age” (“History” 21). Edwards' observation, offered to his Northampton congregation in 1739, seems strange however. For as he was expressing his thoughts, an upswell of conversions were taking place not only in his own parish but all over New England in a flood of religious sentiment scholars now commonly recognize as the Great Awakening. Edwards' statement can be explained, however, by thinking of his sermon as a jeremiad, what Sacvan Bercovitch describes as a “political sermon” in which a minister “cries of declension and doom” as “part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand” Puritanism's leaders had set for their congregations a generation ago

(*American Jeremiad* xiv). Edwards' address thus gives evidence of how Northampton's minister felt the religious ethos of his community to be waning even as the Awakening was taking place, giving way to present realities previously absent from New England life.³

Convinced that Christian doctrine was now, more than ever, held “in contempt” and believers’ faith less heartfelt than before, Edwards was weary of the welter of religious sentiment cropping up across New England. Although his evangelical mission as a minister was to attune individuals to the Gospel and to the possibility of a soul’s regeneration, Edwards regarded the overabundance of recent conversions as a challenge to a “spirit of orthodoxy.” Like other Old Light theologians, Edwards was especially concerned about overt emotional displays associated with the revivals – what can be characterized as Pentecostal-like moments in which revival-goers both writhed in agony and shouted in jubilation believing they had been touched by the spirit of the Lord. As a corrective, Edwards explained in *Some Thoughts on the Revival of Religion* how a “distinction must be made [between] affections or passions” – that while “religious affections” are “the very life and soul of all true religion,” potential converts should be careful to avoid “affections that are very flashy” since they often lead to unsound conversions” worthy of little regard (265-6). To Edwards, the large number of recent conversions did not necessarily suggest their quality nor their adherence to “orthodoxy.” In fact, the examples of faith he encountered seemed only a “zeal for the mysterious and spiritual doctrines of Christianity” rather than “a glorious outpouring of the Spirit of God,” an enthusiasm that confused the true work of religion by mixing hypocrites with genuine saints (“History” 21-2).⁴

To most scholars, Edwards stands as a central figure of the Awakening, and is best known for his soul-stirring (and widely anthologized) “Sinner’s in the Hands of an Angry God,” whose awesome homiletic power no doubt converted many. Yet however responsible Edwards may have been for bringing about the conversion of pious Christian souls, he was still cautious of emotionally-induced conversions, seeing many as “little to be depended on” and made “in the name of passion” rather than true faith (265). A vanguard of Enlightenment thought, Edwards hoped to merge – rather than rely on – Lockean empiricism with orthodox Calvinist doctrine. This is reflected in his view that it

was only possible for those who had undergone a rigorous course of moral preparation to gain an understanding, albeit a human one, of God's judgement through their sensory experiences.⁵

During the Awakening, Edwards commented considerably on the topic of regeneration, a subject that was coming under increasing contention as droves were leaving their towns and parishes to hear the passionate preaching of new itinerant ministers who taught that a convert's own understanding of regeneration was as valid as anyone else's. Edwards' later attempt to reestablish an older order of communion, permitting the sacrament to be taken only by those whose faith had been publicly declared and examined, was his greatest (and last) effort to salvage a more conservative form of spiritual practice. This attempt would result in Edwards' dismissal on June 22, 1750 by his congregation's unanimous vote, a vote that itself stands as a testament to New England's changing religious culture.

In contrast to the previous century, the middle and second half of the 18th saw the birth of not only new approaches to conversion but also new kinds of converts as a result. As Cedrick May has recently shown, the “emotionalism and egalitarianism” espoused during the Awakening, especially by developing Methodist traditions, “increasingly appealed” to members of the poorer classes “who benefited from the catharsis of the emotional and spiritual outpourings” that accompanied most Methodist services (556). This attraction, which came with the Universalist doctrine that salvation was available to all rather than a chosen few, was encouraged by a rising transatlantic book trade that delivered the Gospel's message to the masses like never before. In an almost consumer-like fashion, individuals could listen to or read the doctrine a minister delivered and choose which preacher (and often which doctrine) suited them best. As such, conversion was increasingly billed as subjective experience in which believers – rather than ministers – held ultimate authority. As more and more converted under these circumstances, their claims to having undergone regeneration became harder to check because, unlike a century before, ministers weren't as easily available to examine them. Consequently, claims to faith – and regeneration – became more difficult to dispute, leaving men like Edwards to lament the decline of orthodoxy's vital spirit.

As a growing number of individuals were exposed to the notion of an unhampered

form of spirituality and increasingly wrote of their own spiritual encounters, techniques of representing these experiences also broadened. This further complicated the question of what a genuine conversion experience could and should be, intensifying the debate over how one could distinguish between the claims of a misguided convert with those of a Christian elect. New preachers from a wide range of religious movements did much to muddle this picture by openly fanning the flames of religious rapture and rejecting Old Light Calvinism, and its standards of propriety, in favor of a felt rather than an intellectualized spirituality. The result, as Nathan Hatch has shown, was that by the dawn of the new Republic, Christianity was effectively reshaped “by common people who molded it in their own image and who threw themselves into expanding its influence,” as the popularity of New Light and itinerant preaching transformed colonial religious culture by addressing a believer's “own priorities” (9).

This state of affairs made conservatives preachers weary, who saw these changes and the revivals from which they had sprung as a threat to ecclesiastical tradition as well as to their own religious authority. They were right to worry. As Hatch points out, a more popular theology was sending many religious leaders “into a headlong retreat,” as the Awakening elicited from below “powerful visions of faith that seemed more authentic and self-evident” (and hence, more persuasive) than the ambiguous signs of God's dispensations for which Old Lights, including Edwards, urged believers to seek (34). Presenting the Gospel without complication or logical subtlety, new roving ministers, whether Methodist, Baptist, Universalist, or Millerite, were altering the relationship between preacher and audience, shifting spiritual authority “to those claimants whose person, language, and deportment best resonated with the interests of common people.” Yet the unregulated expressions of faith fed by the passions of ordinary men and women “did not merely diverge from received authority.” Increasingly, “they failed even to take into account the standard theological categories that served as guides for religious experience” as they molded Christianity into their own image. While individuals were still converting (and now, more than ever), they relied on their own standards of measurement in order to qualify their experience as both legitimate and divinely sanctioned (134).

As Christian spirituality shifted to reflect the values of individual believers,

ministers increasingly adapted their speeches to fit the needs and expectations of their listeners, effectively changing the ways in which Protestant piety was understood, communicated, and practiced.⁶ As T. H. Breen and Timothy Hall have shown, however, no single factor was more instrumental in igniting the 18th century debate over what comprised genuine faith as the conversions associated with the Awakening, which compelled “ordinary people to rethink traditional social” and spiritual “categories” (1411). As Nancy Ruttenburg has argued, Awakening-era polemic, “on its own,” achieved nothing less than “democratizing” American religion. The deference traditionally assigned a minister gave way to popular criticism, thereby “shifting the balance of power between minister and congregation,” where “the respectful silence customarily observed in Puritan churches” were now “broken by the cries and groans of a congregation whose religious experience was, according to their conservative detractors, considered increasingly ‘enthusiastic’” (429).

By promoting the dismissal of scholastic pietism and stressing the importance of a believer's individual understanding of the Bible and his faith, the Awakening also represented a period in which those of African descent embraced Christianity for the first time in large numbers. As colonial literacy rates rose, these individuals not only spoke about their experiences but in many cases chose to write about them as well, often to readers who, like Edwards, were interested in the accuracy (and orthodoxy) of their words but who ultimately preferred the testimony of converts that could be examined and whose conversions were inspired by a rigorous course of self-scrutiny. Freeing new converts in their attempts to express their faith was the dissipation of an influential congregational structure that carefully instructed parishioners and that tested (and often re-appraised) the validity of a believer's religious convictions. On their own, revival converts often interpreted religious doctrine as they saw fit, making a case for their spiritual rebirth in terms that often diverged from a more traditional understanding.

But while the practice of confessing one's faith in front of a preacher and small congregation as was gradually abating, the conversion narratives (and thus the spirituality) registered in most 18th century black Atlantic autobiographies still follow a more conventional pattern that resembles those offered in 17th century New England. For these new converts and writers, regeneration was not necessarily an instantaneous

process. Instead, it was seen as a grueling, life-long, and anxiety-prone activity whereby faith was tested at every turn and in dramatic fashion. One may ask, then, as the following chapter does, why these authors chose to portray their spiritual progress in this way? The answer, in part, is because their conversions took place at a time when contending religious viewpoints were speaking out against one another like never before. So while 18th century conversions weren't being evaluated as frequently, on an individual basis, or as a starting point of congregational membership, they were still under no less scrutiny. To be considered genuine Christians, black writers adhered to a form and conception of regeneration that had previously been proven. Advancing their story of spiritual regeneration along more conventional lines may have also tapered the effect of having to offer their testimony to an audience of readers rather than face-to-face listeners as was the case a century before.

For those who would have dismissed the legitimacy of a conversion narrative that was not inspected personally, where a believer's physical gestures, vocal cadences, and affective outpouring could not be determined, to imitate a more conventional style of conversion narrative that emphasized these rhetorical features would have shown an author as in sync with a previously established religious tradition, thereby helping him bridge the gap between himself and readers who weren't there to examine his conversion's strength. A black Atlantic autobiographer's editor or amanuensis also assisted in this process, connecting readers to an author by serving as a proxy that could testify to the sanction of his converting experiences. The result, is that while the religious upheaval known as the Great Awakening may have brought black colonists to convert in droves, the way they often conceptualized and represented their conversions still, for the most part, conformed to an older practical standard – to an older standard of performance – that not only harkened back to a more traditional form of Protestant conversion narrative but that also held to a more orthodox (rather than a New Light) religious paradigm so as to give clear proof of an author's faith.

By repeatedly pointing in his autobiography to the many afflictions he endured for his faith and the subsequent and mounting concerns he experienced as a result, John Marrant, a free-black-turned-Anglican preacher whose *Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings* (1785) was reprinted well into the 19th century, represented his experiences

using an orthodox Calvinist interpretation of saintly behavior, one that echoes the type of faith Thomas Shepard's converts relate in the *Confessions* or even that of Bunyan's Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Fearing that the Lord has shunned him, Marrant places his confidence and commitment wholly in the Gospel instead of himself in a gesture that gave Marrant, and hopefully his readers, evidence of his sanctification. Marrant represents himself as a genuine Christian convert by offering himself as a person who feels grievously afflicted rather than undeniably assured; a person who persists in his faith despite all obstacles, and considers himself "nearest to God" only after having resigned himself "to come and content to be a servant." Like the Puritan convert who, in his "decayed" and "dejected" situation saw "the sweet order and life" which the Gospel could offer the "people of God," black autobiographers like Marrant underscored the dramatic element of faith (*Confessions* 43). They stressed the allegorical capacity of their suffering to make a case for their sincere conviction in Christ and thus their quality as Christian saints. As a result, the story of 18th century black Atlantic autobiography is one as much about conversion and faith as about individual empowerment, social critique, and self-authorization, as most scholars have supposed.

To study how black Atlantic authors accounted for their conversions exposes an important link between 17th and 18th century Protestant religious culture. In his study of black Atlantic writing, William L. Andrews offers a reason, albeit indirectly, as to why black authors may have adopted traditional representational forms to convey their faith and their lives, though with a view to their texts as slave (rather than conversion) narratives. According to Andrews, a writer like Marrant took from "models imported from the predominant culture" to relate his experiences in a fashion consistent with the values and objectives of his predominantly white audience (12). Looking for "a rhetorical mode that would conduct the battle against racism and slavery on grounds other than those already occupied by pro- and antislavery polemics," authors soon found that by relating their experiences with grace according to normative discursive channels that white culture could approve, they could overcome their plight as disenfranchised colonists and prove themselves as genuine Christian (5). This was made possible by making a case for a hard-earned spirituality rather than one gained on-the-spot. Doing so enabled authors to argue not only for the reality and quality of their religious convictions,

but also for their equality through the suggestion that if they were saved in heaven, then surely they should be considered on par with any white colonist on earth. As converts calling out to Christ, they could speak out against the injustices they faced while at the same time signaling their assimilation and acceptance of white cultural norms as their narratives joined their voices to an established tradition of Protestant spiritual confession.

Henry Louis Gates, perhaps the foremost scholar of 18th century black Atlantic writing, once argued that by writing about their experiences early black autobiographers suggested their place on the Great Chain of Being by showing their mastery over the printed word. Having learned to emancipate the voice and meaning of words contained in a book, authors offered a justification for their emancipation (“Writing” 3). But as Jesse M. Molesworth has more recently shown, in order to be heard black authors were first required to “compose a text whose words cannot be discredited by an unsympathetic white audience.” To Molesworth, a black writer had to “drown out the white voices claiming that his words are only those of a 'sulky' African.” He had to “empower his words with the precise type of audibility” that would allow his voice and the life it represented to be seen as both acceptable and genuine (132).

By representing their experiences in conformity with an older, orally-delivered standard of spiritual self-representation, authors bestowed their texts with the type of audibility Molesworth describes. Imagining hearing a black convert's voice rather than inferring it through printed words on a page brought readers closer to the experiences an author shared, whether of his conversion or the injustices he endured. This proximity made his audience feel as though they were actually there to inspect what a convert “said” as opposed to what he wrote, which may have seemed calculated, made in hindsight, or otherwise disingenuous.

Pointing to a scene in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) as an example, Molesworth cites the difficulty Equaino had in reclaiming the money he had lent his master since, in Equiano's words, “no black man's testimony is admitted against a white man.” Molesworth explains that to speak authoritatively, a writer like Equiano first had to express himself convincingly – like “a white man” – meaning in a manner that his primarily white audience could more easily accept (132). Like the black author's claim over the printed word to which Gates refers, the performance of spiritual confession

generated the possibility of acceptance, one from which early black authors could claim certain inalienable rights. As Vincent Carretta explains, conversion gave Afro-Britons an “influence and power rarely experienced by blacks in the period,” where the equality of Christian souls could be “taken to imply belief in the equality of bodies and civil rights” (9). To Carretta, who sees black Atlantic autobiography as falling under the mutual categories of the slave and captivity narrative, that a “shared theme of liberation” is common to these texts shouldn’t surprise readers (1). Yet the fact that so many early black writers chose to include an account of their conversion in their writing in order to gain the type of liberation Carretta describes, may. While literacy or the imperative to speak out against injustice may have brought black Atlantic authors into cultural being as Gates, Andrews, and Carretta have all surmised, it is only part of how they suggested their importance as writers and as people. To offer an account of his conversion in which he could demonstrate his assent to white culture and its Protestant tradition gave the black writer’s life an added – and at times, an undeniable – spiritual coinage. By gaining recognition as Christian converts, authors like Marrant and Equiano could make the claim that, if nothing else, they believed in Christ. But as simple as this assertion may have been, it potentially led to the broader (and more subversive) claim that if they weren’t equal with whites on earth, then surely the same could not be said about their faith, which had persevered through barriers of race, education, and enslavement.

With faith also came the possibility of adopting a hermeneutic orientation to sacred text, and this is precisely what black Atlantic authors did. As Christians, authors found an answer for their encounters in the Bible, rendering their experiences exceptional and most certainly sacred. Authors identified with biblical figures like Joseph, Daniel, and Jonah, reading their lives into Scripture which in turn became a way to understand, present, and justify their covenant with Christ as well as their legitimate place among white society and its cultural traditions. In this Paul Gilroy is correct to suggest how the “orientation to the specific dynamics of performance has a wider significance in the analysis of black cultural forms than has so far been supposed” (75). By including an account of their conversions in their texts, black autobiographers played on the fact that they were genuine Christian converts whose experiences had been preordained, and could be justified, in the Bible. Conversion consequently gave them the means to both

understand and transcend the physical bounds (and bonds) under which they were placed as they proved themselves not only functional but also spiritually justified members of society.

To consider the religious epicenter of early black Atlantic autobiography as the following chapter does is useful for several reasons. Just like for other marginalized members of 18th century society, for black authors, conversion meant more than simply closing with Christ. It meant the opportunity to identify oneself as a Christian and to speak publicly as a believer among other Christians. As May has argued, conversion also provided authors “entrance into the major theological discussions of the time” as their regeneration permitted them to carve out a position of special authority from which they could speak with confidence as they enumerated their personal experiences (554). By writing about the spiritual nature of their experiences, black autobiographers contributed to a tradition of religious self-representation upon which their literary performances stood, adding their own ideas of Christian devotion and salvation to previous conceptions. Accordingly, their voices helped shape the religion that informed their lives. Early black Atlantic authorship therefore speaks not only of endurance, faith, protest, and self-liberation, but also of creation and cultural achievement, one that deserves wider recognition among readers interested in conversion narratives written and recorded in early America.

[2]

With the publication of Briton Hammon's *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance* (1760), readers were introduced to the first work in prose published by a black author whose writing was directly influenced by the Great Awakening. Phillis Wheatley, perhaps the most widely anthologized black Atlantic author to date, is another good example of a writer influenced by the Awakening, Wheatley having won literary recognition for her “Elegiac Poem on the Death of That Celebrated Divine . . . the late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield” (1770).

As a number of more recent literary scholars have shown, black autobiographers who wrote in the 18th century were frequently involved with the kind of New Light evangelism typically associated with the Great Awakening.⁷ It should come as no

surprise, then, that when focusing on conversion narratives featured in black Atlantic autobiographies like Hammon's, one immediately notices not only the Awakening's impact on an author's life but also the influence the performance of spiritual confession had on his text and his faith as a whole, a practice no longer required, but that he nonetheless chose to engage. The desire to account for their spiritual experiences – to submit them for evaluation and approval – itself demonstrates the value black Atlantics placed on their faith as well as its presentation. It also reveals how a description of a convert's spiritual encounters, particularly the road he took to conversion, remained as important to 18th century Protestants as it was a century before, though perhaps for different reasons. As Carolyn Eastman has shown, for example, 18th century culture saw the emergence of a new public sphere in which the concept of a model public that shaped it marked “the conditions of power and the social hierarchy of politics” (9). For black Atlantic authors to prove themselves as part of the public ideal, of which an idealized Christian faith was most certainly a portion, gave them the capacity to demarcate and transcend their place in society. They could counter the negative assumptions associated with their narratives and their race by representing their faith in a way that aligned with what the public sphere imagined an ideal Christian convert to be.

Such portrayals made a case that, as genuine converts, black authors deserved inclusion as public actors among colonial society. To the Methodist George Whitefield who visited America seven times to preach to audiences rich and poor, black and white, souls were not segregated in heaven. “Blacks are just as much, and no more, conceived and born in sin, as white men are,” Whitefield sermonized, where “both . . . are naturally capable of the same improvement,” and should be considered just as equally capable of achieving salvation.⁸ Of the many Afro-British settlers in New England who heard Whitefield preach, those who wrote about their lives often mounted a case for their faith, their portrayals of conversion and their subsequent spiritual encounters defending not only the authenticity of their religious convictions but also their impetus to write, and to write about their lives.

To be seen as an ideal Christian signaled an author's absorption into white culture, as did his ability to take up his pen to write. As Christians potentially saved, autobiographers could invert the prejudices held against them by repositioning

themselves as not only public players but players in God's divinely intended history. To emphasize the religious sanction of their lives was a rhetorical maneuver with a decidedly spiritual edge, one specifically set against the politics of republicanism under which they suffered. This strategy worked as authors, pious and penitent Christian souls, advanced the idea that as New World Israelites held in bondage, they laid claim to a more authentic relationship to sacred history than their white counterparts. Embracing an exceptionalist rhetoric of prophetic destiny informed by a typological reading of Scripture, black Atlantic converts who wrote about their experiences earned themselves a status at first relative to, but one that eventually overcame, the limitations of 18th century culture.

However, as Africans strangers living in strange land, autobiographers were faced with their race as a barrier impeding their readers' acceptance of both their accounts and their conversions. This is why many chose to dictate their tale to an amanuensis – usually a confirmed Christian – who was white and who could serve as eyewitness to the authenticity of what he had heard. In many ways, an amanuensis served the role of a traditional minister who oversaw a convert's spiritual confession. As a go-between, an amanuensis could guarantee to readers that what he heard was true, thereby countering those skeptical of a black autobiographer's writing by confirming what readers could not see or hear for themselves with his own testimony. An amanuensis worked like a mediator, one able to circumvent the negative distinctions that ethnicity as well as the medium of print presented a black convert's text by vouching for the power, rather than the eloquence, of a narrator's faith as he delivered the details of his experiences.

This relationship is powerfully demonstrated in the opening of Marrant's *Narrative*. As the autobiography begins, Marrant's amanuensis, the Methodist minister William Aldridge, immediately makes reference to Marrant's visible look and feeling. Serving as a proxy for readers not there to examine Marrant's verbal gestures, the swells and drops in his voice, and the tears he may have shed when recounting his experiences, Aldridge reassures them that Marrant "appeared to me to feel most sensibly," particularly "when he related those parts of his Narrative, which describe his happiest moments with God," a point that gives Aldridge – and Marrant's potential detractors – "no reason to believe [Marrant's account] was counterfeited" (110). According to Sandra M. Gustafson, an amanuensis like Aldridge, while helping the black autobiographer win readers over,

still significantly altered his story into a text “tritely hybridized.” Narratives were “an act of textualized speech, an African American tale recorded and edited by a white Englishman, and a narrative of intercultural evangelism” all in one (107). Yet this does not discount the fact that Christianity was the starting point of self-representation for black Atlantics authors. As Marrant immediately reports at the opening of his *Narrative*, it was his desire to reveal to readers the “power, grace, and providence of God” through his “conversion, success, and deliverances” that pushed him to relate his experiences, plain and simple (110). In other words, Marrant’s call to write was triggered by his Christian call.

This does not lessen the fact that black converts like Marrant had something extra to prove as they delivered their accounts, having to overcome the suspicion their race conferred upon them. To prove the sanctity of their spiritual calling, whether through an amanuensis or not, was one way they met this challenge. Authors merged the idea of their religious commitment with an established intellectual and rhetorical tradition whereby a sinner told the tale of his path to religious conviction for readers to examine. By demonstrating the quality of their conversions, authors could in turn suggest the authenticity of their texts and, by extension, the quality of their lives. So even if black Christians living in the 18th century began to take the matter of their salvation into their own hands and increasingly offered their experiences to audiences in a mediated form (whether to an amanuensis, or in print, or both), their recourse to a more orthodox tradition of Protestant spiritual confession helped them mitigate the skepticism and “enthusiastic” epithet their emotionally charged accounts typically generated.⁹

By the time the Awakening’s fervent pitch drew to a close, conversion, especially in New England, had gained a new sociopolitical register. To be a convert didn’t simply mean that a person was now a Christian. It now meant that he had converted to a particular religious institution that possessed a particular moral outlook which drew distinctions between itself and other denominations. Offering salvation to those willing to pursue it, revival preaching created choices (and thus drew bounds) between believers that, when taken collectively, diminished the possibility of calling one sect – or one conversion statement – necessarily more “correct” than another. As Hatch has commented, this outcome offered individuals, and “especially the poor,” not only access

to Christianity but also “compelling versions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence” (4). Individuals, including black colonists both free and enslaved, were starting to see themselves – almost effortlessly, Old Lights thought – as “new men . . . with new attitudes towards themselves, their religion, their neighbors, and their rulers in church and state” (186).

This was not lost on black Atlantic autobiographers who, in presenting their personal encounters with grace as the single most important feature in their narratives, added their voices to those who believed. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson considered the “new men” to which Hatch refers in the context of natural rights. For as the pre-Revolutionary period following the Awakening ushered a large number of ethnic minorities and those of New England's lower social spectrum toward religion, it also carried with it the idea that there was nothing “natural” or inevitable – and certainly nothing Christian – about the expropriation of millions of Africans to the Americas. Though himself a slave owner, Jefferson saw the unnatural presence of slavery as a threat to the stability of the early Republic, admitting in his *Notes* to “tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever.”¹⁰

Although a secular deist, Jefferson was acutely aware of Christianity's influence on the American colonies and its settlers, especially those enslaved. Having considered the “numbers, nature, and natural means” of Africans living in the colonies who had taken up Christ as their own, Jefferson was confident that an “exchange of situation,” or a shift in the Republic's social dynamics, was inevitable, especially at the hands of a “supernatural interference.” Trusting in the reasonableness of the gentry's ability, perhaps even their right, to lead the new nation, Jefferson saw how African colonists were converting in swarms, to which he lamented how “[t]he spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying . . . under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation . . . with the consent of the masters.” Like Edwards before him, Jefferson didn't see minds more engaged in religion as an incontrovertibly positive fact. Instead, his *Notes* express how he worried that, “under the auspices of heaven,” slaves of African decent were profaning what Jefferson saw as a sacred relationship between ruler and ruled, where their adoption of Christianity's moral logic – one of the meek inheriting the earth – would invariably oblige rational-minded “masters”

to give their “consent” to slaves “rising from the dust.”¹¹

Jefferson was right to be fearful. Embracing the chance to hear the Gospel, many black Atlantics were welcoming Christianity to not only give sacred meaning to their lives but to also mitigate and even change their present social condition. To view his situation under the guise of a fortunate fall, whereby the discomfort of his present life was compensated by the chance given him of achieving eternal salvation in heaven, gave the black colonist the capacity to justify his plight as that of a genuinely devoted Christian while supporting the more subversive argument that he should be treated as an equal on the basis that he was an ideal Christian. As Carretta explains, in cases where “physical liberation from enslavement in the present seemed impossible, spiritual freedom and equality in the afterlife offered some solace” (8).¹² For black colonists who found God, conversion was the nexus of this solace. As beneficiaries of Christ's redemptive act who had been moved by the Holy Spirit to seek the Lord, converts could posit physical hardship as a marker of Providential favor. By portraying themselves as unrelenting Christians, autobiographers subsumed their racial identity under the more generic one of a Christian pilgrim who piously accepts his fate. By doing so, he could then argue for the spiritual warrant of his life, which helped bring about the “exchange of situation” Jefferson sensed, one where the black autobiographer was revered as society's sainted rather than its reviled.

This is illustrated right from the start of Marrant's *Narrative*, where Marrant explains that what makes his text serviceable, if only “interesting,” is that it is a story about a black sinner who has successfully come out of the most “uneasy [of] circumstances” to prefer “the practice of religion” over his race's “savage despotism” (110). As an autobiographer vouching for his account's veracity as well as the quality of his own character, Marrant points to his race and the “uneasy” condition associated with it not as a detriment but as a testament to his genuine involvement with grace. This relationship is one that the remainder of Marrant's *Narrative* pursues. As Gustafson has argued, from a rhetorical standpoint, Revolutionary-era ethnic minorities like Marrant often adopted the persona of a Christian “savage” to “create intercultural identifications that would counter the representational force of an independent American nation that restricted citizenship to whites” (101). By offering themselves under a hierarchy of a

cleansed racial figure – as souls brought out of their “savage” degeneracy through the grace of God – autobiographers established a self-authenticating authority held together by an image of themselves as noble savages converted to Christianity. They refigured blackness and the physical and spiritual bondage associated with it as circumstances that, given the miraculousness that they have been overcome, overwhelmingly corroborated the black Altantic's personal and spiritual integrity, and so, the justness of what he wrote.

This moral interpretation took on the difficult social position imputed on 18th century colonists like Marrant, as days “much chequered with wants and supplies, [and] with dangers” are reinterpreted as tokens spiritual assurance that simultaneously justify his religious call as well as his call to write (116). By stressing how its author's road to salvation was less immediate – more miserable, more “chequered with wants,” and far more precarious than it would have been for someone who was white – Marrant's *Narrative* emphasized both the profoundness and spiritual sanction of its author's faith, a profoundness, Marrant hoped, that would answer those doubting his piety's substance as well as his own value as a person.

As George M. Fredrickson has explained, the epithets of “depraved,” “savage”, and “duplicitous” were ones that black colonists often heard (5). But rather than avoid them, autobiographers employed them strategically to undermine them. Acknowledging his depravity, ignorance, and iniquities as he expressed the “uneasiness” of his conversion, Marrant weakened the negative prejudices his text invariably faced by pointing out how, despite all odds, he had moved from a condition of misery to one of spiritual understanding. By stressing racial disadvantage as not only depraved souls but depraved *black* souls, converts could insinuate the almost supra-legitimate force responsible for their regeneration. Admitting, like James Albert Gronniosaw did in his *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars* (1772), to be “very unhappy in myself” (34) or, like Marrant, to having been “a slave to every vice” (112), authors made room for what, by their account's end, seemed like their almost inevitable spiritual deliverance. This was accomplished by integrating the classically Puritan view that “the goodness of one who is a good man begins with a deep apprehension and acknowledgement of his badness,” where the more often a believer's faith was tried “in deserts full of dismal circumstances,” the better a convert could prove its divine sanction, as success amid

spiritual struggle was interpreted as evidence of grace working in a believer's heart (Mather "What Must I Do" 57).

For authors like Marrant and Gronniosaw, to refer to moral failings and the desire to change – and suffer – as an indication of moral ascendancy was a clear way to gain positive recognition in a culture that failed to recognize them as moral equals. To do this, however, meant that they had to appropriately assimilate the semiotic, verbal, and textual standards white culture imposed on them, an achievement made possible, as Gilroy rightly contends, in their adoption of "a hermeneutic focus pushed toward the mimetic, dramatic, and performative" (38). In other words, it meant that black authors engage in a performative act that would simultaneously make their accounts both convincing and extraordinary, both familiar and fantastic since, in the end, they were not just converts but black converts. To call attention to their pitiable condition with reference to the Bible helped authors ensure this outcome. As detested, poorly-treated, and unfortunate creatures, writers could defend the surprising strength of their character against the injustices they faced in a language of Christian evangelism, their portrayals of religious fortitude bespeaking a humility and piety deserving of recognition and acceptance.

In much the same way Thomas Shepard wrote in his *Autobiography* that the spiritual adversity he daily encountered was a blessing – a test of his faith and so, a moment in which the Lord was "best" to him, "refreshing" him in his chance to secure and strengthen his conviction in Christ – black authors recounted the "greatest trials" they "had ever met with" to illustrate how God had carried them "through many difficulties" to an ever-deepening faith (55). Having faced and overcome a "great deal of ill treatment" because of his race, Gronniosaw converted his physical hardship into a symbol of saintliness that, when told, gave evidence of how "the Lord was with [him]" even as Gronniosaw awaited "patiently for His gracious call" (53, 55). Along with Frank Lambert, we may say, then, that Christianity gave early black authors a way to reshape "the message of the new birth for their own ends, including that of breaking the chains that confined them" (25). This reinforces Gilroy's basic contention that the black Atlantic's desire to demonstrate proper compliance with white culture "expanded" at times "beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by their masters" (40). What Gilroy fails to point out, however, is that Christianity was itself an instance of such a

“gift,” one that black Atlantics absorbed and called upon to validate their conversions, their lives, and the fact that they were writing at all.

In *American Lazarus*, Joanna Brooks has argued that the impact of Christianity on black Atlantic writing was nothing less than the emergence of a self-representative literature that connected black Atlantics through their common experiences of faith and suffering, a faith that helped order the writer's experiences into a manageable, illustrative, and authoritative form through which he could make a case for himself as a productive member of 18th century society. In Brooks' view, that authors so frequently turned to Scripture to seek an explanatory mechanism “that honored their haunted and paradoxical circumstances and offered some key into the mystery of personal and communal redemption,” suggests how their work's “collective character” more properly fits within the tradition or literary genre of spiritual narrative (8). As accounts of sin and redemption, calamities and deliverances, the narratives black Atlantics wrote are best typified, according to Brooks, by the biblical life of Lazarus, who emerges as a universal “symbol of early African-American culture” representing “the drive to claim life from death and meaning from chaos, to honor through stories shared experiences of loss, and to witness to the possibility of redemption” (101). Like Lazarus rising from the dead, the black Atlantic autobiographer's narrative moves along a thematic and formal trajectory of sin and rebirth. This shows not only religion's importance to an author's life but also conversion's creative impact on his expressive and self-representational efforts. Brooks is right when she claims that religion afforded “American communities of color . . . the resources of evangelical religion to create for themselves new identities and a new future” (53). It is important to remember, however, that one of these “new identities” was that of a Christian saint, which emerged, Lazarus-like, from an author's ability to represent his life within a sacred context.

Using their Bibles to interpret the cosmic significance of their lives, black autobiographers performed what Brooks calls a “a dialectical process of creative elaboration” that encouraged them “to develop their own distinctive form of Christianity,” one in which they typified themselves as Christians possessing an unshakable – and undeniable – faith (119). As Brooks points out, Marrant's Autobiography “posits blackness as a marker of chosenses” to suggest “that black people

have a specific covenant relationship with God” (94-5). When Marrant asserts in the *Narrative* how his desire to relate his personal experiences was driven by the impetus to illustrate God's “wonders among all the people,” he is specifically referring, then, to “people” like himself whose piety can surmount any obstacle; who, despite numerous setbacks “sharp and severe,” still prefer “the practice of religion” to “ease and pleasure” (110-1).

Like Marrant, Gronniosaw similarly focuses on his “severe” misfortunes to highlight his faith's potency. As “very poor Pilgrims,” yet those who still wait “patiently for His gracious call,” Gronniosaw paints a picture of himself and his people as believers who do more with less. Tested at every turn, their piety is unrivaled, where the “hard labor” they face is interpreted as a blessing: as an opportunity for spiritual recommitment and another chance to gain God's “charitable assistance.”¹³ As one of God's chosen held in captivity, it made sense to a convert like Gronniosaw that his faith would be constantly tested. This is precisely why his autobiography reads like a never-ending catalog of divinely apportioned trials. In a time when Gronniosaw couldn't evince his religious feelings to his audience face-to-face, to portray moments of repeated hardships followed by heavenly relief provided readers with an argument for the reality of Gronniosaw's convictions. Referencing Galatians 1:4, which describes how Christ “gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil,” Gronniosaw draws a parallel between his experiences (as one in the midst of present evils) and sacred history. The “great deal of ill treatment” he suffers paves the way for deliverance, and so, to another instance in which God is with him – another example that “the LORD shall deliver [him] out of the evils of this present world” (53).

Having found the unjust circumstances of his life explained in the Bible, Gronniosaw claimed Christ's promise to His redeemed as his own. True believers were men like Gronniosaw: those who wait “patiently” for God's “gracious call” and who would soon be delivered from the present world's troubles and brought “to the EVERLASTING GLORIES of the world to come” through the humility and patience they exhibited. Gronniosaw's references to his “situation” and “difficulties” thus became a way to alternatively express the reality of his salvation and his spiritual progress “towards [his] HEAVENLY HOME” (53). His use of Scripture also creates a position of

authority through his reading of his situation, a gesture not only counter to his orientation as a disenfranchised black but one that is in fact predicated on its very circumstance. As a Christian convert, the difficulties Gronniosaw endures are redirected through the interpretive practice he engages. Understanding and describing his experiences through the Bible allows him to present himself as spiritually-committed Christian.

It is to this effect that Brooks has argued in *American Lazarus* that early black authors forged “new communities, new identities, and new futures” for themselves and other Christians of color (54). By recasting “the conventions of [Protestant] religion, literature, and performance” in their narratives with themselves as grace's recipient, authors developed “a measure of aesthetic and theological independence from Anglo-American traditions,” one where their captivity and slavery was reconstructed into positive terms (56). Yet it is still important to realize that this independence was ultimately secured through faith and the access to the religious culture Christian spirituality granted. Introduced at first to the concept of an unmediated access to Christ through the New Light understanding that salvation could be attained by those who earnestly sought Him, black Atlantic converts who wrote about their lives relied on their faith, and the tradition of relating its experience, to corroborate their spiritual sanctity and redeem themselves in the eyes of their readership. Conversion offered black Atlantic converts a chance to be heard; a chance to express themselves and to communicate to other Christians that they had not only been saved but that theirs was a genuine – and perhaps even a definitive – embodiment of Christian piety. Insomuch as faith brought with it the opportunity to talk about how an author's came to be, spirituality bestowed him with a degree of creative independence, one from which he could represent his experiences with grace (and his experiences in general) in a commanding fashion.¹⁴

It is in this sense then, meaning through their choice to write about their faith, that readers should consider Andrews' contention that authorship was a “self-liberating” enterprise for the black Atlantic writers. For as their narratives represented “climactic acts in the drama of their lifelong quests for freedom,” they also expressed an author's desire for spiritual fulfillment, both themes co-existing to express an overall picture of a Christian justified in Christ, and so, one that deserves to be justified in the eyes of any who also believed (ix). As Gates first proposed, it was the acquisition of literacy, rather

than religion, that gave Afro-British colonists the capacity to “demonstrate her or his own membership in the human community,” where authors could trace their identity and deliverance from white society’s fetters back to their first involvement with the printed word (“James Gronniosaw” 253-4). To Gates, to be able to read and write allotted 18th century autobiographers like Gronniosaw and Marrant a way of giving readers tangible proof of their reasonable level of integration within white culture. In fact, literacy, characterized by the moment in which a black slave or freeman is first able to hear what appears to be a “taking book” “speak” is, according to Gates, “of such fundamental import to the Afro-American literary tradition” that it should be considered “a central informing metaphor of [this] tradition.” Gates maintains that it was an autobiographer’s choice to include this moment in his narrative that enabled him to establish a formative trope upon which a self-representative black Atlantic literary tradition could be formed. Grounding their work around this metaphor as they “revised [it] in their own texts,” autobiographers created what Gates sees as a “continuity between texts that, when together, comprise the shared text of blackness” in a language that black Atlantics could call their own (256).

While Gates is certainly correct to point to the direct textual relationship between works that build upon a trope uniquely expressive of a black Atlantic autobiographer’s coming into cultural and literary being, he does not account for the traditions to which literacy, figured as the trope of the Talking Book, gave black authors access. Gates also fails to explain how these traditions informed the explicit and implicit arguments in an autobiographer’s writing. Literacy didn’t just give marginalized groups access to pen and paper; it gave them access to culture itself from which writers could borrow from available discourses – spiritual confession of sin and redemption being one of them – to gain the rhetorical and expressive tools needed to forge their identities freely and in a voice all their own. In Gates’ view, literacy’s attainment was essential to the black Atlantic’s personal and literary development because it bestowed him the capacity to demonstrate his willingness to extricate himself from his illiterate African heritage that separated him from white culture. While Gates is correct to point to the Talking Book as a trope many black authors seized upon to signal their cultural absorption, he regards this moment only as “a secular or cultural cleansing that obliterates (or is *meant* to obliterate)

the traces of an African past" that Gronniosaw and Marrant are "eager to relinquish" (263-4).

Regrettably, Gates fails to consider the importance of this moment within a religious context, where literacy is valued as a spiritual turning-point that gave black Atlantics their first glance at Christianity, their faith paving the way for not only their cultural assimilation but also for the chance to account for themselves as spiritually regenerate souls. Building on Gates' study, Brooks' *America Lazarus* has introduced the centrality of religion to black Atlantic writing, arguing that the recurrent appeal to literacy cannot be separated from the black Atlantic autobiographer's Christian call as both confirm his commitment to white culture. Although Gates may be correct that the Talking Book is a crucial framing devise for black Atlantic writing, a point from which authors could express themselves by giving their distinctive twist to a developing literary tradition, he would be just as right to say that the black Atlantic's desire to convert, and his conversion, was as equally a part of how he showed his readiness to conform to white culture as his desire to master the printed word. As he points to literacy as a means "through which [Gronniosaw] could remake the features, and color, of his face," Gates ignores how Gronniosaw's struggle to read and write foregrounds his conversion, where his command over language, while crucial to his cultural absorption, is only a prelude to his closer involvement with a Protestant religious culture that empowered him to transcend the moral and materials bounds of his disenfranchisement (266).

Conversion, in other words, is as important to "remaking" Gronniosaw's features as his discovery of language, which is only the preliminary stage of Gronniosaw's personal evolution. In fact, readers will recall how Gronniosaw's first encounter with the Talking Book in the *Narrative* occurs in conjunction with devotional practice – with his master's custom of reading "prayers in public . . . every Sabbath day." Seeing his master read, Gronniosaw hopes that the prayer-book will speak to him as well, and is "very sorry and greatly disappointed" when it will not "say something to me," a sorrow which leads Gronniosaw to feel "despis'd . . . because I was black." Gronniosaw's inability to read doesn't just challenge his self-worth, however. It also precipitates his desire to change – to no longer be "despis'd." By associating his illiteracy – a condition he detests – with his race and his heathen upbringing, Gronniosaw suggests how exposure to and an eventual

mastery of the printed word may alter how “every body and every thing” despises him, a disdain that, like his illiteracy, Gronniosaw interprets as a direct consequence of his color (38).

Being black doesn't just exclude Gronniosaw from literacy, as Gates has suggested. It also prohibits Gronniosaw's access to prayer. And it is prayer that will eventually restore him. More than simply providing him an entrance point into white culture, literacy grants Gronniosaw access to religion, religious models, and performative traditions that can in turn be used as an instrument of self-improvement and expression. Seen in this light, Gronniosaw's first encounter with print serves as the foundation to larger social (and spiritual) claims. As he learns to read and write, his readers witnesses Gronniosaw also developing along a moral plane as a legitimate Christian convert. Soon after his *Narrative* describes his encounter with his master's prayer-book, Gronniosaw explains how he became a servant in the house of “Vanhorn, a young gentleman,” where Gronniosaw is immediately “affronted” by the language of other servants who “used to curse and swear surprisingly.” Yet his displeasure isn't rooted in their misuse of language but in their moral weakness. Having gained access to print, Gronniosaw, turning to his Bible, realizes God's power “to damn them immediately.” The vulgarity of Vanhorn's servants serves as a sharp contrast between them and Gronniosaw, who has gained a sense of right and wrong through his exposure to the very basics of Christian doctrine – “that there was a wicked man call'd the Devil, that live'd in hell, and would take all who said these words,” which has taught Gronniosaw to be “terrified . . . greatly,” not only by the possibility of hell, but also by those who take the Lord's name in vain (38-9). The printed word, and Gronniosaw's acquisition of literacy, therefore acts as a conduit for Gronnisaw's emerging morality whereby he can distinguish himself from others more profane.

For black Atlantic authors, conversion became a means toward not only spiritual regeneration but also social reprieve. By pointing their gradual adoption of Christian values, writers gained a stage from which to argue that they were both constructive and virtuous members of colonial society much in the way Gates claims how their reference to the Talking Book was a way of their establishing their assent to white culture while simultaneously initiating their personal as well as cultural identity. But by the time the

black Atlantic autobiographical tradition culminates in John Jea's *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings* (1811), its use of the Talking Book trope, as well as many of the experiences Jea describes, seem to Gates to have become far too “decadent in its repetition” (*Signifying Monkey* 32). What Jea recounts as “fervent prayer, for five or six weeks . . . in the Dutch and English languages” – prayer finally granted when “an angel, in a vision, in shining raiment” teaches Jea to read – Gates considers an over-exaggeration of precedents already established by Jea's earlier models (115).

It may be prudent to ask why Gates dismisses Jea's experience as hyperbolic and “decadent” rather than as a testament to his outstanding faith, especially since the miracle of Jea's literacy is so powerfully conflated with his Christian call. As Jea explains, he cannot “read in any book, nor any reading whatever, but such as contain the word of God,” a fact that leads Jea's examiners (though apparently not Gates) to see his literacy as truly “the work of the Lord,” and Jea, a genuine Christian convert (115). Because Gates' reading of the black Atlantic literary tradition follows a more secular rather than religious trajectory, Jea's story appears to exceed the bounds of common sense. To be sure, it is far easier for more secular-minded critics to account for Jea's experience as a recourse to previous convention rather than as an isolated and inexplicable supernatural event. But supernatural events are precisely what faith is all about, and Jea's descriptions serve only to corroborate his faith's unflinching power. To identify the religious force of Jea's text as reflecting a constative thread of early black Atlantic autobiography would undermine Gates' analysis, which is precisely why he ignores it, since the call to convert as well as the moments of divine inspiration preceding and following it are those that all Christians share regardless of their race.

As a whole, and as Brooks' study has shown, it seems unwise to ignore the strong religious emphasis of early black Atlantic texts like Gronniosaw's or Jea's, particularly since literacy gave them not only access to the Bible but also a way to make claims for their equality and freedom, or in Jea's words, that “it was right and just that I should have my liberty” (115). As one scholar has already noted, the use and metaphor of spiritual rebirth may in fact surpass literacy as a way black authors demonstrated their cultural evolution away from the negative associations affixed to their race (Montgomery 110). According to Nancy Ruttenberg, “[t]he empowerment of black speech” actually “depends

on the moment of religious conversion,” where an eagerness to change – to lift one's faculties toward literacy as well as moral perfection – enabled authors to substantiate their cultural metamorphosis by explaining their experiences through a paramount text of white culture: the Bible (434). The daunting challenge literacy presents, then, is bridged not simply when an author is first able to read or write but when he did so specifically in accordance with his Christian call.

Just as literacy gives Gronniosaw access to the Scripture through which he better understands his bitter circumstances and place among God's redeemed, the Bible itself increasingly becomes a guiding force that allows him to see – and shape – his life's meaning. With his Bible, Gronniosaw can both explain and represent his experiences as sanctified, doing so through a constellation of metaphors that, as a Christian, he reduces to those of an individual whose worldly suffering can be equated with steadfast conviction. As his experiences mount and his *Narrative* moves forward, Gronniosaw increasingly comprehends how he has “no friend but God.” He intensifies rather than abates his position as a social (though certainly not a spiritual) outcast. As the *Narrative* progresses along an increasingly embattled curve, it characterizes Gronniosaw as a Christian who not only prays “to Him earnestly” but who does so the more “defrauded” he feels – the more he has been treated poorly, particularly as a result of his race (46). Gronniosaw thus establishes a consonance between the harsh realities of his experiences as a black colonist and the vitality of his faith. For no matter what he endures, Gronniosaw is “willing,” even thankful, “for every trial and trouble” he is “met with.” Such a rationale, and such piety, paves the way for ensuing pronouncements of faith – for example, that he is “not without hope that [his difficult experiences] have all been sanctified to me,” which in turn allows for the more significant suggestion, however implicit, that they can also be taken as evidence of Gronniosaw's election (48).

The difficulties Gronniosaw depicts, especially late in his *Narrative*, both underscore the zeal as well as highlight the evenness of his faith as he converts earthly misfortune into a type of spiritual suffering befitting a saint. By describing how he is “overtaken by fresh misfortunes” almost the instant he seems to be doing “very well,” Gronniosaw paints a picture of himself as a Christian concurrently humbled and devoted. He is a believer who is content to remain “patient 'till it pleased God to alter my

situation.” And as his autobiography tells of an increasingly committed Christian who meets adversity with steady acceptance and humility, it also develops an important connection between Gronniosaw’s life and Scripture, particularly through the association Gronniosaw makes between himself and Old Testament Israelites who, as God’s chosen, similarly endured “hard labor” for their faith. This link is crucial, in that it again helps Gronniosaw transform the turmoil of his life into a marker of election as he interprets his plights as those preordained in the Bible – as ones typically suffered by God’s “[p]eople” who, like Gronniosaw, are also “very poor [p]ilgrims . . . traveling through many difficulties” (52-3).

This move is not limited to Gronniosaw’s *Narrative*. As readers may recall, Marrant’s first encounter with George Whitefield also connects his faith with that of the Israelites, where Whitefield, “pointing with his finger” at a startled Marrant, identifies Marrant’s fate to that of “O Israel” whom Marrant must “prepare to meet” (113). Singled out in this fashion, Marrant becomes the subject of Whitefield’s text, and from this point on, his fate is wrapped up in sacred history and, more specifically, to the Exodus story of captivity and redemption. Equiano, whose contact with Whitefield similarly sets him on a steady path toward conversion, also locates the meaning of his experiences in the Old Testament and “the words of the Psalmist” who speaks to Equiano of his capacity to endure hardship so as to glorify “God in my heart, in whom I trusted” (241). Consistently finding his experiences “agreeable to what I read in the Scriptures,” Equiano sees his troubles as possessing a greater symbolic resonance. Overcoming them, they deepen his conviction, to the point where Equiano finally distinguishes himself as one of “those who the Scripture calls the excellent of the earth” – as one of the Lord’s persevering saints whom Equiano feels himself “most heartily able [to] join” (261-2).

If we can say that the black Atlantic’s liberation can be traced to his acquisition of literacy as Gates has argued, then we must also say that it was granted through the type of spiritual assessment above that literacy generated. The printed word, and the door of religious culture it opened, not only conferred black authors with an expressive channel through which to lay the necessary rhetorical groundwork for restoring their economic and political freedoms as Brooks, Andrews, Carretta and Gates have all suggested. It also gave them the capacity to interpolate their experiences in a way that justified their claims,

that proved their ardent faith, and that their readers could recognize and not necessarily deny. As Christians, black autobiographers held their faith as a critical and inextricable part of their lives. So much so that most took the time to describe how they arrived at their Christian call, how they had suffered for their convictions, and how they had overcome all adversity to “stay still faithful to [God's] promise” of redemption, as the conclusion of Gronniosaw's narrative claims (52). What they imparted was a faith truly sanctified – an exemplary faith that, through implication, appeared more genuine, more miraculous, and more heavenly than that of most. It is to this effect that Brooks has suggested how authors like Marrant “redrew a veil of blackness around themselves and counted all who stood within it as participants in the unfolding of a mystery, a common consciousness, and a culture” (*American Lazarus* 150). Still, in any final analysis, readers should recognize that only through conversion could this redrawing become possible. And as black converts saw their fate as spiritually warranted, it was the black Atlantic author who gave voice to the sacred importance of their lives.

[3]

Like the 17th century conversion narratives Thomas Shepard recorded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, those contained in the personal accounts black Atlantic authors composed, even though written rather than orally delivered, still reveal how individual and communal perceptions of piety were as equally dependent in the 18th century on a plausible performance of what one had to do to be saved as they had been a century before. What had changed, however, was the problem of distinguishing a real Christian from a hypocrite. While spiritual conviction was still judged by the tenability of a convert's words and the piety of his subsequent actions, print, as a mediated form, kept readers from actually seeing the look on a convert's face has he delivered his account in order to judge the sincerity of his words. In the 18th century, faith was no longer tested as a requirement of church membership. This consequently changed the terms of what it meant to belong to a church, what it meant to be a Christian convert, and subsequently, the definition of what faith could and should be. It also altered the extent to which converts like Gronniosaw and Marrant had to justify their convictions. No longer could they appeal to their charisma as speakers or to their emotions as they described how grace

had entered into their hearts. No longer could they whisper in awe-inspired voices how Jesus had come to save them. Instead, they were obliged to confine their thoughts – and arguments – to pen and paper, forced to overcome the restrictive boundaries of print as a medium and a white culture as a force necessarily set against their claims.

With some belonging to an established church and others not, Protestants in the 18th century were left not only with the pressing question of what genuine faith was but also the question of how to present theirs in writing. Marrant, who was ordained the same year his *Narrative* was published and sent to Nova Scotia to minister to the several thousand Africans who had fled north during the American Revolution, addressed these questions by defending what he saw as the emotional and highly personal nature of a believer's Christian call. This view bespeaks his faith's indebtedness to the Great Awakening revivals under which Marrant converted. Speaking for himself and unchurched believers just like him, Marrant made a case for his religious convictions by pointing to faith's indwelling and pervasive nature, one that was beyond any man's ability to discern, whether in person *or* in print. Instead, faith was something that was held in a believer's heart. It was ineffable – something beyond a Christian's capacity to rationalize, something Marrant's "tongue could not express," yet something which every believer could still miraculously feel, often with assurance (110).

But despite Marrant's admitted inability to "express" how grace had overcome him or the faith he felt, his *Narrative* reports how he had frequently "cried . . . earnestly to the Lord," and that "He who heard Jonah's prayer, did not shut out mine." In other words, Marrant not only expressed his convictions, he was also sure that his prayers were answered; that his was a faith God had recognized and would reward. Having thrown himself willing and "constantly in the arms of prayer and faith to the throne of grace," Marrant explains how he had systematically gained a "fuller and clearer . . . feeling" about his "salvation" with every act he committed (126). Looking to his future, Marrant even went so far as anticipating his call on Judgement Day and the hour when he would finally be able to speak freely and intelligibly to other Christians who, like himself, "understand the language" and the mysteries "of Canaan" (95).¹⁵

However, like all other black Atlantic autobiographers living in colonial America, Marrant hadn't reached heaven just yet. Confident in his faith, and willing to offer it as an

example to those to whom he ministered as well as to more distrustful readers who would have questioned his faith's authenticity, Marrant quickly found himself in a bind of wanting to describe and defend his faith but knowing that such a thing was beyond his capacity to express. For contemporary readers, Marrant's difficulty invites us to ask how, then, *did* 18th century converts like Marrant convey their religious convictions, particularly at a time when the legitimacy of their conversions were so frequently held in question? How was it that they lifted the communicative restraints facing them – the medium of print, skeptical audiences, and faith's ineffability – to express their Christianity coherently and convincingly?

It is here, in answering these related questions, that readers will notice the Puritan conversion narrative's impact on spiritual self-representation in the 18th century and on black Atlantic authorship in particular. For although many black converts may have owed their conversions to the evangelic New Light tenets of the Awakening and post-Awakening era, pronouncements like those of the Puritan Edward Hall, who admitted in 1636 to Shepard's congregation to having had a "Christless" faith "built upon false foundations" and "fits and starts," are ones often repeated in black Atlantic texts (34).

In an essay on the literary consequences of New England Puritanism, Larzer Ziff once wrote how one can easily detect the Puritans' "affect on literature" – and hence the culture from which it springs – by observing how they furnished later Protestant authors with a "set of customs" that both inform and help shape their texts ("Literary Consequences" 304). Faced with the challenge of overcoming the negative associations not only joined to their race but also with the revivals to which their conversions were linked, black autobiographers described their arrival at conviction according to said customs – in ways that, for the most part, closely conform to the kind of spiritual (and rhetorical) standards of performance established in 17th century New England. Doing so was a way to impart, at least as much as possible, the authority and spiritual sanction of their religious experiences. As a symbol of intellectual as well as moral change, conversion as a trope and as a vehicle for expression afforded black authors with the opportunity to signal the profitable read they felt their narratives to be. Like the Puritan convert Hall whose confession taught others "how freely Christ was offered . . . unto [those] that believe He is precious," (34) Marrant's sought to give his *Narrative's* readers

evidence of not only “the power, grace and providence of God,” but also of the “conversion, success, and deliverances of John Marrant” (110).

But unlike Hall, black Atlantic autobiographers understood that if the story of their spiritual transformation was to be believed they would need to do more to convince their large and largely faceless audience. To make a case for the sincerity of their convictions, black converts first had to make a case for their trustworthiness as writers. Gone were the days when they could account for their faith in person. Now it was to their writing that observers cautiously looked. As both Marrant and Gronniosaw's autobiographies show, black authors who chose to portray their faith responded to this obstacle by conventionalizing their conversion accounts, modeling their narratives after those typical of the genre. This strategy permitted them to effectively side-step the suspicion their race presented their texts. Following Gronniosaw's lead, Equiano and Marrant framed their writing as an instance of Gospel glory – as a life-story from which any Christian could learn – in an argument that was, in most cases, endorsed by a white amanuensis or by testimonials appended to their texts. To be seen as an genuine Christian convert “brought out of darkness in His marvelous light” gave autobiographers like Gronniosaw the capacity to demonstrate that they were morally credible members of early colonial society. Under the auspices of heaven, they explained how God had fundamentally altered their lives in a “union with the triune of God in Christ,” where their recourse to an already established tradition of Protestant confession highlighted their sufficient level of cultural integration (Gronniosaw 33).

Appealing to this practice – to the self-conscious performance of describing one's spiritual transformation to evince God's glory in a way others had done before – created a discursive channel through which black writers could write in defense of their faith and describe their experiences in meaningful ways. In a time of fervent religious contention, one further escalated by an advancing and increasingly accessible print culture, black Atlantic authors found an immediate and attentive audience. Marrant's *Narrative*, for example, became one of the the most popular captivity narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries, while Gronniosaw's autobiography was published at least 12 times before the end of the 18th century. This popularity was crucial to both authors, providing the promise not only of their narratives being read but also the more rewarding prospect of being

recognized as devoted Christians and, more importantly, as individuals worthy of favorable recognition. To be read (and as Gates has argued, to be able to read and write) also meant that black Atlantics could establish a literary tradition of their own. Yet this tradition was precipitated at all times (and in Gronniosaw's words) by their desire to commit "to paper" how God "most amazingly acts upon and influences their minds, and in the course of wisely and most wonderfully appointed Providences" (32-3).

It is in this sense especially that Brooks remarks how the evangelical revivals of the 1730's and 1740's gave Afro-British colonists their "first self-consciously mass cultural movement," one in which print acted as its "major instrument" in establishing their identities as Christians and as people. As Brooks explains, the impact of the Awakening was profound, particularly in literature, in the narrative formulas it popularized and in the way converts chose to represent their religious encounters. So when the repentant English slave-trader John Newton wrote in 1772 how "I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind but now, I see," he was, according to Brooks, expressing his faith in terms previous converts had verbalized, conventionalized, and that, by the 18th century, were well-documented as signs of God's amazing grace among His people just as the conversion narratives Shepard recorded a century earlier stood as a testament to his congregation's ardent, authentic faith ("Edwards to Baldwin" 442).

But however formulaic or dedicated to the past Newton's declaration may have been, it was also spoken in a language of 18th century evangelism. His statement took place in cultural milieu where moral acts themselves and miraculous events, rather than the hard-earned efforts a convert had made to discern his spiritual balance with Christ, were seen as evidence of a believer's sanctification. Indeed with the decline of a more stern and strictly enforced form of Calvinist Protestantism with predestination at its center, answers to spiritual questions were increasingly perceived as something held within a believer's heart. And as the notion of a single, pervasive religious authority or institution grew outmoded, an unprecedented obligation was suddenly placed on believers like Newton to not only speak out about their faith but who, in speaking about it, defined it as well. This may explain why most historians and literary scholars fail to trace the spiritual testimony contained in black Atlantic writing to the 17th century and to Puritan confession specifically. In Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, just as in

Gronniosaw's or Marrant's, Equiano interprets his faith through his own guiding light. Yet he also sees it, just as the Puritans had understood their faith a century before, in relation to prophetic destiny and, more specifically, to the Israelite history of exodus, which he understands as an analogy for – and more importantly, as a reference to – his own experience of sin and redemption. Also like the Puritans, Equiano characterizes his faith as a conviction that isn't sure-and-steady but that vacillates between personal despair and a dawning confidence in Providential design. Like his literary predecessors in Gronniosaw and Marrant, Equiano offers his faith's resolve not by thinking of himself as saved, but instead, by judging himself a “blind, blasphemous sinner” beholden to the “goodness of God.” In fact, it is only because God repeatedly shows Equiano forgiveness and “mercy” despite the “many evils” and “carnal acquaintances” he commits that Equiano begins to gain a sense of his election, which prompts him to strive even further in discerning God's will toward him (262).¹⁶

As a man who lived in the 18th century and as a New Light convert who owed his conversion to itinerant preaching, Equiano describes his conversion as a dramatic moment, one in which “the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light” in an “instant, as it were,” to remove the rot of his faithlessness thereby “letting light into a dark place” (265). However, this type of portrayal in which faith is suddenly realized did not hold weight with conservative thinkers who felt them to be “chiefly a matter of nice speculation . . . which many that make use of them do not understand themselves” (Edwards “Justification” 8-9). For a black author to make this kind of assertion was to risk readers thinking his faith a mere matter of “speculation.” Consequently, his account make an effort to convey his Christian call in a more moderate temper typified by the suffering, humility, and endurance he experienced in their lives.

While present-day readers familiar with Marrant's *Narrative* could argue how many of the events Marrant relates often exceed customary bounds, on a whole, Marrant's faith is consistent with the kind of tempered forbearance one would expect from a believer engaged in a more traditional eschatology. In the moments that follow Marrant's dramatic conversion at George Whitefield's hands, readers will immediately note how Marrant's spiritual convictions gradually heighten in proportion to the experiences – and trials – he endures. As was also the case for Gronniosaw, Marrant is transformed, by

autobiography's end, into a marker of piety characterized by the adversity he faces and successfully, and humbly, endures. So even though the post-conversion sojourn through the woods Marrant depicts in his *Narrative* might be highlighted by how he drank "both mud and water mixed together" as he fed "upon grass" (a meal that also left him quite "satisfied"), he interprets these events not an indication of God's favor toward him but as a cause for him to pray further, a realization for which Marrant penitently gave "God hearty thanks." Rather than view this miraculous and Exodus-like event as an indication of God's approval, Marrant sees it as gift "from Heaven" that inspires supplication – a prayer "that the Lord forgive me . . . poor unbelieving creatures [that] we are." Devoted to God's will as he may be, Marrant only feels "supported by the Lord" because, as one of these poor creatures, he understands how "we are assured the Lord will supply all our needs." His faith is "supported" through the humility, rather than the confidence, it inspires. It is only in a deferential tone that Marrant construes the events he faces as divinely apportioned. And so he welcomes them because he knows, like the Calvinist of old, that the Christian pilgrim's road to salvation is never sure, but rather, "checkered with wants and supplies, with dangers and deliverances (116).

While Marrant's wilderness experience may seem idiosyncratic or hyperbolic, that his mind always turns to Christ for solace as he "willingly" resigns himself "into [God's] hands" to be "strengthened" categorizes his behavior as normative or more traditional in its orientation (115). Although his *Narrative* is more detailed and certainly more stylized – or artful – than many conversion narratives recorded in the previous century (a fact which attests to the cultural circumstance within which it was penned), it still makes use of an implicit rather than overt justification of Marrant's spiritual assurance. In this readers can once more see how Marrant's autobiography was indebted to the Puritan conversion narrative. As was the case for the Puritan convert who stood to deliver an account of the Lord's dealings with him, never does Marrant actually claim to be saved. Instead, he allows readers to observe – and in a sense also test – the purity of his convictions through the way he handles different situations and correctly interprets them as part of God's design. Indeed the way Marrant adopts Scripture to not only understand his spiritual station but also characterize his circumstances confirms his creative obligation to earlier cultural benchmarks of Protestant self-representation. Through the

hermeneutic appropriateness of his scriptural application – for example, when he identifies himself with Joseph who similarly returned from the forest only to be unrecognized by his family – Marrant signaled to readers his aptitude for evangelism while demonstrating his life's interconnectedness with sacred history.

As Brooks has convincingly shown in *American Lazarus*, Marrant incorporates a “language of prophesy” – what I have been calling a hermeneutical orientation – to suggest an interdependence between biblical and personal history (120). Pointing to Scripture and to the figure of Saul who awaits the Lord's commandment for three days without sight, food, or water, Marrant contemplates the full effect of his regeneration through Saul's example. Like his antitype, Marrant's conversion has also overcome him to such a degree that he, too, goes for “three days without any food” and “only a little water now and then” as he remains in a state of anxious “distress of soul” (113). It is through this distress that Marrant begins to feel his heart's inclination toward Christ. Yet his interpolation, like the many others in the *Narrative* deploys, is not just a way Marrant edges himself closer toward conviction. It is also a convention that frames all Protestant spiritual autobiography. It is a way Marrant can attest to his life's redemptive force – a way for him to give his private experiences what Benilde Montgomery has described as a political and ultimately a cosmic significance (103). The propensity to read his experiences through the Bible gives Marrant the discursive capacity to articulate his historical consciousness as well as his faith. But even more importantly, it also allowed Marrant to demonstrate the evolution of his spirituality in concrete and symbolic terms through the correct interpretations he makes in a language that, as John Sallient has aptly shown, resonates with earlier literary models and are, at the same time, a crucial feature of black Atlantic authorship (20-1).

As Marrant's *Narrative* progresses, it expands to take on an allegorical and transhistorical register, as Marrant interlaces the subsequent experiences he recalls, devoted Christian that he is, with apt references to the Bible. In one instance, Marrant identifies himself with “the three children in the fiery furnace, and of Daniel in the lion's den” as a way to justify his burgeoning faith and express the “close communion with God” he feels in his locked up in his heart (118). When taken captive, called “a witch,” and “thrust into prison . . . to be executed the next morning,” Marrant again considers his

situation within a biblical orbit: as “enough to make me think, as old Jacob once did,” how “[a]ll these things are against me!” Considering his captivity in light of Jacob's, Marrant gives further evidence of his mind's inclination toward faith that, when added up, make a larger case for his aptitude for piety. The hermeneutic appropriateness of his interpretation enables him to suggest how “God, who never forsakes his people, was with me,” a remark that alludes to Corinthians in terms clear to any Christian reader (114).

A soul truly converted, Marrant reads the Bible with a pair of regenerate eyes, or so his reading suggests, where he understands his encounters as a type of those described in the Bible. Like the Puritan saint whose earthly road to salvation was one of progress rather than finality, Marrant's faith is also expressed, like Gonniosaw's through the rigorous course of spiritual as well as physical testing he endures, which once again pushes his *Narrative* toward the moral and allegorical. It is in this sense especially that Marrant's account corresponds with 17th century spiritual narratives like John Dane's *Declaration of Remarkable Providences* or Anne Bradstreet's more canonical *To My Dear Children*, where Marrant's piety is expressed not through an outright statement of conviction, but rather, through a depiction of an enduring faith perpetually tested and persistently proven. In one instance, when Marrant encounters two bears in the wilderness, he recalls feeling “very little fear” knowing, as a genuine Christian, that his fate resides in God's will. Because his faith is sincere, Marrant is quickly pardoned as the bears pass “without growling, or the least apparent uneasiness.” As a spiritual test, the bears, predators of the American wilderness, have afforded Marrant an opportunity to examine and substantiate his faith. They have tested Marrant's conviction and faith in the Lord, who in turn tames “the wild beasts of the forest” so that Marrant may pass without fear. They also prompt Marrant to prayer – to sing “hymns of praise to God . . . about fifty-five miles from home, right through the wilderness” – as Marrant wanders the woods alone, a prophet protected from wild beasts (116-7).

The heroic trials and “troublesome times” Marrant's *Narrative* describe frame his encounters “as a preparation” and confirmation of faith as if in answer to skeptical readers who would have considered his miraculous conversion at Whitefield's hand perfunctory (117). As Philip Gould has noted, the theme of labor, especially slave-labor, and a life of hardship endemic to 18th century black Atlantic literature is often figured in

Protestant spiritual autobiographies (667). That both Gronniosaw and Marrant conflate the two by merging their physical hardships with the promise spiritual preparation can deliver consequently challenges the notion that their texts were geared solely toward arguing against the physical captivity and injustices they faced. In Marrant's *Narrative*, for example, an opening reference to Proverbs 10:16 – that “[t]he labour of the righteous tendeth to life; the fruit of the wicked to sin” – reinforces how Christianity, and for a black convert like Marrant, Christian suffering, can be a means “to life,” as Marrant joins his autobiography's overarching motif of physical travail with the possibility of spiritual transcendence. As Carretta has remarked, virtually all 18th century black Atlantic publications in prose “took the form of spiritual autobiographies that trace the transition from pagan beliefs to the Christianity,” where readers frequently face the imputation of hardship as a reasonable means to accept an author's claim to faith in addition to the instructive value of his text (9). Although black Atlantic autobiographies were certainly indebted to the historical moment in which they were written, the way they formulate an author's faith appeals to an earlier mode of devotional representation even with the advance of new conceptions concerning religious conviction. While newer religious groups, like the Quaker Society of Friends or Methodists understood conversion as a moment in which God overrules nature to endow a believer with an overpowering sense of his salvation, black Atlantic converts still chose to describe their religious awakening in terms as equally rooted in a traditional conception how this process was thought to occur as those anchored in New Light rhetoric.

To have done so makes a case that black Atlantic autobiographers were aware of the kinds of criticism leveled toward them. As has been well-documented, heading this attack was Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston's first church who published numerous essays questioning and condemning the validity of the conversions attested to and recorded by those unaffiliated with an established congregation. To a stalwart Old Light thinker like Chauncy, revival converts represented an unenlightened and hence a less conscientious category of believer, especially those “of the meanest capacity, i.e. women and even common negroes” who, while perhaps wholehearted in their zeal, were nonetheless misconstruing their religious experiences because they lacked the proper guidance of a legitimate minister. Like other conservative theologians who where

committed to preserving a more mature (and what they considered a more “orthodox”) conception of religious devotion, Chauncy believed that real Christians were those who yes, felt grace's presence in their hearts, but who also penitently and persistently applied Christian doctrine to their lives and who, in the process of continuously renewing faith through spiritual self-examination, joined others in Christian fellowship.¹⁷ In fact, Chauncy once remarked how “of the many and great mistakes of the present day,” the most “notorious error” that “illiterate and young people” like Marrant committed was their quickness to confuse their powerful emotional experiences felt at revival meetings with an authentic encounter with grace. As a minister who taught his flock that conversion was a gradual process of spiritual awakening rather than an instantaneous moment of fulfillment, Chauncy, like his Puritan predecessors, felt that converts like Marrant weren't carefully scrutinizing “the influences they are under” to see whether they “are from the Spirit” or gained “merely from . . . perception” (“Seasonable Thoughts” 293). Chauncy's remarks betray his prejudice against lower class converts, many of whom were illiterate and did not have the same access to moral instruction as whites. As a minister who saw conversion as a lifetime of spiritual instruction and struggle, Chauncy viewed the eagerness revival converts like Marrant demonstrated toward the Gospel as injudicious at best.

Caught in these crosshairs, black autobiographers responded by explicitly enumerating their cautious path to conviction, a conviction that, in Marrant's case and others, came though close and “conscientious regard to His word” rather than misplaced enthusiasm (111). In fact, Marrant addresses the legitimacy of his conversion experience by specifically pointing to the careful direction he received after first being exposed to Whitefield's preaching. For example, his *Narrative* cites how Whitefield, although an itinerant minister scheduled “to leave town the next morning,” nevertheless remained to minister to his spiritual patient, taking Marrant's hand and instructing him how to “spen[d] some time in prayer.” Praying “over again,” Marrant explains how “we kneeled down a second time,” where this time “the Lord was pleased to set [Marrant's] soul at perfect liberty” as his confusion, fears, and aguish – concepts often negatively imputed upon revival converts – are sweetly transformed into feelings of “peace, and joy, and love.” To reinforce how his faith has been adequately probed, Marrant also cites how

Whitefield, now for a third time, which itself is a traditional biblical motif, checks on his patient once more. In fact, Whitefield calls on Marrant “every day for several days afterward” just to be sure of Marrant’s recovery as well as the authenticity of his regeneration’s saving work (114).

Marrant’s is no hasty conversion, but rather, one that has been carefully considered and painstakingly earned under close supervision. To make such a case was in answer to minsters like Chauncy and even Edwards who, while considered Chauncy’s rival, still firmly held that there was “no good reason why the people of Christ should not openly profess a proper respect to Him,” as well as others, on the basis of the conviction they felt “in their hearts.” To a more traditional Calvinist like Edwards, there was “nothing reasonably to be supposed . . . why” believers “should not be as much expected and required to confess” their faith since true believers were “those who” could both “exhibit a credible profession” in addition to demonstrating signs of “gospel holiness” through their actions (“Qualification” 429). But while Edwards may have wanted New Light evangelicals to publicly profess their religious convictions, he also worried how many were “themselves publishing their own experiences from time to time and from place to place, on all occasions and before all companies . . . [in] common conversation.”¹⁸ As Michael Warner explains, too much public profession wasn’t a good thing, especially for Edwards, who feared that by disseminating their conversion narratives at home and abroad through an expanding transatlantic print trade, revival converts and their exhorters would dismantle any remaining sense of collective accountability or religious consensus that Edwards and his colleagues had spent their lives trying to establish (57). That is to say, open profession, if unchecked or unauthorized, and then circulated throughout the land, threatened a unified conception of regeneration as well as any notion of a coherent congregational ministry, and finally, what seemed to Edwards to be the very core of Protestantism itself.

Although Edwards did his best to subdue the “common conversation” New Light converts both represented and offered (one strategy being to record and publish with commentary the conversion narratives of his own congregation), he could do nothing to stop the publication and spread of conversion narratives extended by Christians who were convinced – and were told – that their miraculous transformation under the Holy Spirit

was truly the work of God. By mid-century, the idea that grace was something unmistakably and subjectively felt could not be suppressed, even by Edwards. Christ had come to save His own, and He did so in His own way. To examine all New Light conversions would have been impossible anyway, and without proper examination, what was felt couldn't so easily be denied.

Still, seeing how black Atlantic autobiographers made a conscientious effort to account for their faith in more conventional terms should tell us that they recognized critics who advocated a steady and studied approach to a believer's legitimate Christian call. To scholars of 17th century New England, the formal and devotional considerations black autobiographers adopted can be easily traced. As Kenneth P. Minkema has shown in his study of Samuel Belcher, a saddler by trade whose spiritual narrative was recorded during the Awakening, Belcher's profession, while lacking the order and pacing of its predecessors, still observes the kinds of customary phrases and narrative protocol presented in earlier spiritual narratives like those contained in Shepard's *Confessions*. While Belcher's account, like those of black Atlantic authors, appears "far richer in emotive language than . . . earlier relations," it also demonstrates the same absolute dichotomies and paradoxes fundamental to 17th century Puritan spirituality and the rhetoric – and orthodox doctrine – guiding its presentation (123). Like his Puritan predecessors, Belcher's narrative expresses a deep sense of spiritual anguish through contrasting imagery that represent the long-suffered and hard-earned process of Belcher's self-examination, moral preparation, and eventual conviction in Christ. As in the 17th century conversion narrative, Belcher justifies his faith by pointing to his alternating feelings: of anxiety with regard to his possible damnation, and calm hope in his salvation; in one instance finding his soul "cold and dull," and in the next finding himself committing "sins with greater reluctance than I used to do," all of which Belcher takes as a sign of "the glorious workings of the spirit of God" working in his heart to "waken me up."¹⁹

Unhappy with his lack of faith even as it grows, Equiano recounts for his autobiography's readers a desire "to be annihilated" under the weight of his sins. In fear of God's retribution for past (and present) transgressions, he contemplates "drowning himself" for lack of God's assurance (264). Like first generation Puritan converts, or even

Belcher, Equiano censures himself at every turn, passionately proclaiming how he “should certainly go to hell” despite his best efforts to be pious. However, through this mixed energy and anxiety Equiano finds his assurance. His persistent efforts toward piety show him that salvation can be earned “at Christ's feet” even if he is a sinner (265). His portrayal of conviction is one where faith is characterized by doubt and self-relinquishment as opposed to an ever-growing confidence in salvation, a characterization reflective of a more traditional representation of Protestant faith. The experiences he describes are increasingly characterized as a test (and therefore a demonstration) of his faith, and in this his *Narrative*'s formal trajectory moves decidedly toward hagiography. Genuine conviction cannot be without its proportionate suffering. Yet those who suffer for the Lord and for their convictions are poor pilgrims undoubtably assured their portion and place in heaven.

It is likely that Equiano may have learned to frame his spiritual progress from reading Marrant, who portrays his faith through the mounting challenges – the perpetual steam of ups and downs, captivities and deliverances – he endures. With every “deep conviction of sin” Marrant uncovers in himself, the more he is brought to “think, like old Jacob once did,” that “God, who never forsakes His people, was with me” (120). What distinguishes the black Atlantic author's spiritual narrative from Belcher's (delivered in 1740) and those recorded in 17th century New England, however, is the level of concern the former at all times openly express as to whether their accounts would, in Gronniosaw's words, “gain credit with many” (42). Like Gronniosaw, Equiano also feared that his text would be “rarely, if ever, believed” (187) as did Marrant who, from the outset of his *Narrative*, asserts how “facts, and facts like these” should move readers to see their “truth” (111).

As Gordon Sayre has explained, black Atlantic autobiographers faced “the difficult rhetorical challenge of establishing an ethical common ground upon which a slave might establish his or her humanity in the eyes of readers” (180-1). Pointing to the “structural paradigm of sentimentality” upon which the 18th captivity narrative was predicated, Sayre posits how an adaption of its conventions permitted “the African-American author to write himself into being” by encouraging a powerful emotional response in readers through the hardships, forbearance, and faith he generated (188).

By appealing to their feelings, or to the unspoken elements of their written performance that print, as a restrictive medium, barred, black autobiographers could stress the genuine nature of what they recounted. Doing so also emphasized the authenticity of their accounts, and especially their spiritual encounters, by helping authors frame their narratives along more conventional affective guidelines – according to a formula that could satisfy men like Chauncy who preached a more traditional form of piety and profession. This is why black Atlantic autobiographers represented their spiritual progress as if to an Old Light audience even if they were delivering their narratives in writing. And such a move is apparent from the start of both Gronniosaw and Marrant's accounts where both outline each author's moral development by immediately adopting the conventional trope of youthful rebelliousness to signify the unregenerate state each will inevitably overcome. This is characterized in the way Gronniosaw at first acts "uneasy" in reaction to his master's "fond[ness] of" him, protesting against his master's resolution to take him to church or "put" him "to school" by deliberately refusing "to go." Such a reaction, however, and however obstinant, cannot come in the way of Gronniosaw's vocation. "[I]n this state" of ignorance and depravity, Gronniosaw slowly grows aware of his precarious spiritual condition. This in turn makes him more receptive to his master's spiritual guidance, an indication of Gronniosaw's dawning faith (40).

As he pursues a path of piety, Gronniosaw's conviction in Christ increases exponentially. At one point, he finds himself considerably moved by a passage from the Bible – from Revelation no less – that, to Gronniosaw, appears to correspond to his own increasing desire to abandon a life of sin. This too is rather conventional, where converts traditionally portrayed their positive response to Scripture to signify their movement toward spiritual conviction. Gradually coming to realize how, despite "clouds" of ignorance, "every eye shall see Him," Gronniosaw feels "affected . . . excessively" by "[t]hese words" and endures "great agonies" knowing himself to be a sinner. That Gronniosaw's heart is affected demonstrates his justification in Christ, as he by degrees finds himself convinced of God's power to remit his sins. Like the Puritan saint, Gronniosaw's pain promotes an even greater level of conviction, one that paradoxically – and Puritan-like leaves Gronniosaw exceedingly "convinced of my own corrupt nature,

and the misery of my own heart.” But with agony comes even greater spiritual insight and development, which Gronniosaw represents by referencing his attraction to two canonical texts – John Bunyan's *The Holy War* and Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*. Whereas Gronniosaw once was lost, now he is found, having pushed through to the moral significance of these texts which no longer seem lost on him. As an evolving Christian, Gronniosaw can now identify with the message of redemption held therein: with Baxter's instruction that despite “much distress” all are “invited . . . to come to Christ,” and with Bunyan himself who, to Gronniosaw, seems to be a struggling believer “much like myself” (40-1).

But because Gronniosaw represents his faith as a developing rather than finalized conviction, there is no resolution to the question of his eternal salvation just as there wasn't for the Puritan convert. For even though Gronniosaw may identify with Bunyan – a weary Christian pilgrim indeed – as well as the message of hope Baxter announces, Gronniosaw still “could not come” to an absolute assurance of his place in heaven, which in turn triggers further “agonies that cannot be described,” agonies that, to any Old Light minister, would have indicated his earnest desire for Christ. Emotionally, spiritually, and physiologically pained, Gronniosaw's only remedy is God's own Word. His cure is derived not by medicine but by a passage from John (1:29) in which Gronniosaw sees himself as “the Lamb of God” to whom the excerpt speaks and to whom Christ has been appointed to save. Like an applicant admitted to a church in 17th century New England, Gronniosaw slowly fulfills the promise of his election by understanding how his “wicked heart and undone state” could, in fact, be redeemed through Christ's “comfort and consolation,” a realization that, while garnering the “ridicule or contempt” of reprobate peers, nevertheless allows Gronniosaw to take “great delight” as his heart is finally – and decisively – “lifted up to God” as evidenced by his ability “to pray continually” to the Lord without fear of hypocrisy (41-2).

To gain the “charitable regard” that his “little history contains matter well worthy the notice and attention of every Christian reader,” Gronniosaw also takes great pains to show how his religious awakening was a process as equally and carefully considered as felt as something that has been tested to a point of “satisfaction” by others as well as himself (32). Lacking the benefit of an established minister or an attentive congregational

audience to verify the authenticity of his convictions, Gronniosaw makes up for this absence by reporting in his *Narrative* how a “Mr. Freelandhouse, a very gracious, good Minister . . . took a great deal notice of me” during moments of spiritual and emotional distress. Citing how Freelandhouse, a reformed Dutch clergyman, not only “took me home with him” but “made me kneel down, and put my two hands together, and pray’d for me, and every night and morning he did the same,” Gronniosaw delineates the careful assistance he received while preparing for his call, thereby silencing those who may have doubted his degree of circumspection or the spiritual authority behind his feelings.²⁰ That Freelandhouse (a misspelling of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghusyen, in a pun that associates Gronniosaw's spiritual deliverance with his actual freedom) is himself “so affected” by Gronniosaw's “great trouble” that “the tears ran down his face” only adds to Gronniosaw's rendering. Gronniosaw's faith has not only been examined – and he has not only been shown the proper way to pray – but it is in fact so powerful that it can move a legitimate preacher to tears (43).

Gronniosaw's rhetorical gesture is also replicated in Marrant's *Narrative*. As if in answer to readers who may have looked at the encounters portrayed in a narrative written by “A Black” with skepticism, William Aldridge, Marrant's amanuensis, is forthcoming about defending his interlocutor's faith by mentioning the inordinate and “uneasy circumstances” under which Marrant fell in “the practice of religion.” As Andrews has remarked, Aldridge's presence in Marrant's text acts not only to “allow the black author's story to become operative,” but also serves as an “authenticating device” or “character reference” for the black convert's genuine spiritual involvement (26).²¹ As such, Aldridge explains to Marrant's audience how his friend's faith had not only been conscientiously gained but also regularly tested; that Marrant had eschewed “the pursuit of ease and pleasure,” been “shaken over the mouth of hell,” and “washed in the atoning blood” before being “made happy in his God.” Like Gronniosaw and Marrant, Aldridge was well aware that readers might cast the events a black autobiographer represented in his narrative as mere “novelty,” which in turn “may dispose some readers to question the truth of them” and thus ignore the “magnitude of the facts contained in the following pages.” But as a cleric able to discern the validity of a convert's recalled encounters with grace, Aldridge supports the legitimacy of Marrant's convictions in a time when few

revival converts like Marrant were afforded this endorsement. Like the Methodist clergyman Walter Shirley who acted as Gronniosaw's amanuensis, Aldridge serves as a proxy for Marrant's readers who cannot be there to hear the clarity and compunction in Marrant's voice. In their stead, Aldridge reassures them that he is not only sure of Marrant's trustworthiness as an author, which will be "clear to great numbers, and to some competent judges," but is also confident that the *Narrative* will ultimately and indisputably show "that God is with the subject" (110-1).

Aldridge's authority, and support, works to alleviate the mistrust Marrant's writing, his race, and his conversion faced, allowing readers to more easily believe – when they couldn't be present to see – that Marrant had truly cast out "the corruptions of his nature" to become a "ready servant, for Christ's sake" (111). To show that their faith conformed to an orthodox conception of piety and profession in the face of a skeptical reading audience was necessary if a black Atlantic's narrative was going to be believed. For critics were aiming their ire not only at new evangelical converts but also at itinerant ministers who had converted them – at charismatic and skilled rhetoricians like Josiah Smith, Gilbert Tennent, and of course Whitefield. Old Lights repeatedly pointed to the "spirit of pride" prevailing over both itinerant minister and convert. They blamed unsettled preachers for fooling believers into thinking themselves saved by the Holy Spirit rather than to fostering "real inspiration" in their hearts. At a time when most never travelled great distances, itinerant ministers like Whitefield and John Westly often roamed an upwards of three continents to cultivate what conservatives saw as a mobile and volatile spiritual community set on spreading grave misconceptions concerning the true path to Christ. Traditionalists like Chauncy accused New Light evangelicals of rhetorical theatrics and "self-conceit" – of being men who used their "gift of tongues," "extraordinary fervor," and "enthusiastic impressions" to take advantage "of those who are modest, suspicious of themselves, and not too assuming in matters of conscience and salvation" simply to add their number to their conversion totals. Old Lights were suspicious of the power of eloquent speech in general. And their suspicions gradually grew to an fear that extended to anything that a person associated with the revivals either said or wrote as they insisted that a minister's face-to-face assessment of a convert's conversion account was essential in judging its value. To Old Light theologians, itinerant

preachers like Whitefield were no more than peddlers of “excessive confidence and assurance.” They were confidence men who were simply trying to acquire a “great reputation among the populace who speak of them as men of God” by stirring up, through “those pungent and terrifying addresses,” a contagious yet superficial brand of “religious frenzy” that should be vehemently “condemned” rather than “treated with tenderness and leniency” (Chauncy “Enthusiasm” 688-9, 692-3).

Conservative ministers were right to be worried that itinerants were potentially stealing converts from their fold. This was because New Light preachers were refashioning Christianity itself. They were mingling diverse and even contradictory impulses with notions of genuine faith, and therefore erasing the kinds of social and theological distinctions that, they felt, should be kept separate. They were weary, in other words, of what George Rawlyk has helpfully referred to as the early 18th century's “fragmenting evangelical ethos” (145). Opposing denominations were bringing into being new churches and forms of worship in which spiritual authority no longer relied on standing, education, or ordination, but on the ability to affectively move people in order to retain their confidence, thereby confusing the distinction between pulpit and pew. As Breen and Hall have outlined, itinerants “were seen as impostaers who undermined the spiritual authority of settled pastors” (1429). They placed “emphasis on personal choice in religion,” while drawing “attention to the wildly emotional, disorderly, even anti-intellectual” aspects of evangelism that gave prominence to individual experience rather than an intellectual apprehension of the soul's path to regeneration (1424). To conservatives like Isaac Stiles, true Christians were “men that can't be sway'd or turn'd about by fear, or hopes, or gifts.” They were men and women who rejected the “love [and] praise of men” in favor of “the praise of God” – men and women who followed “fix'd and steady principles,” and who were “uniform in their practice.” Real converts were those who demonstrated what Stiles qualified as a “stability and constancy of mind,” and who believed that if assurance of one's salvation could be secured, then it was only through a lifetime of spiritual struggle rather than an instantaneous moment in which a Christian suddenly felt himself saved (321).

That so many were professing their faith without the supervision of an ordained minister while others still were, to some extent, created a divide between churched and

unchurched adherents as well as between popular and elite understandings of Christianity, thereby confusing the boundary between established priestly domains and unrecognized, popular behavior. Widening this gulf was also the fact that itinerants were frequently enjoining those gathering to hear them testify to their saving experiences – to not only offer their stories and themselves as supreme examples of souls embraced by the Holy Spirit, but to also take it “upon them to do the business of preachers” (Brooks *American Lazarus* 23). Moved to prophetic speech, many converts, Marrant among them, were also moved to evangelize. But this only further confused the distinction between settled and lay – “orthodox” and unorthodox – preaching, while promoting the idea that the testimony of new evangelicals were as equally viable as the teaching of any seated minister.

Black Atlantic autobiographers were attentive to these considerations, knowing full-well the misgivings their accounts of conversion would generate. Gronniosaw is a case-in-point. Outside of his reference to Frelinghusyen, Gronniosaw also drew attention to the careful direction his master and “good mistress insisted on” amid his uncontrolled fits of “grief and distress,” suggesting that his conversion was guided closely, and not merely an isolated instance of religious affectation (40). Close to the end of his *Narrative*, in a remarkable passage in which Gronniosaw simultaneously affirms his intellectual apprehension, the overwhelming power of his faith, and the divine sanction behind his convictions, he explains how a group of:

Calvinist Ministers desired to hear my experience from myself, which proposal I was very well pleased with: So I stood before 38-39 Ministers every Thursday for seven weeks together, and they were all very well satisfied, and persuaded I was what I pretended to be. They wrote down my experience as I spoke it; and the LORD ALMIGHTY was with me at that time in a remarkable manner, and gave me words and enabled me to answer them; so great was his mercy to take me in hand a poor blind heathen. (48)

As we can see, this passage serves the same function as Aldridge in Marrant's *Narrative*, standing as a go-between – a communicative link – between Gronniosaw's readers and those who were present “to hear [Gronniosaw's] experience” from his own mouth. What readers “witness” by proxy is a faith that cannot be denied, one that convinces “all” even in light of the passage's Pentecostal moment in which God gives Gronniosaw the “words”

that “enables” him “to answer.” Upon reading this passage, audiences realize how Gronniosaw’s speech “stood” the test of not just one but “38-39 . . . Calvinist Ministers.” For “seven weeks,” Gronniosaw explains how he passed a rigorous course of spiritual examination, each time leaving his ordained examiners “all very well satisfied.” And Gronniosaw’s weekly avowal is not just consistent but noteworthy. Rather than Gronniosaw himself, it is his questioners who write “down” Gronniosaw’s “experience as I spoke it,” his testimony giving evidence that God “was with me.”

In making this point, Gronniosaw sought to paint a more traditional picture of how he, as a genuine Christian convert, could dependably vouch for his faith, a faith that was tested, approved, and written down for later use as an example for others. To redirect potential criticism further, Gronniosaw also substantiates the legitimacy of his hard-earned and thoroughly-tested conversion by calling attention to his relationship with respected Christians as well as those in established religious circles. Along with Gronniosaw, Equiano, Marrant, and Phillis Wheatley all point to their association with the Countess of Huntingdon Selina Hastings and her Protestant Connexion, an influential religious network that patronized their literary as well as evangelical efforts in the New World. Although Hastings was forced to register as a dissenting Christian, her prominent network made extensive efforts, both in print and through evangelical action, to bolster the spiritual sanction of believers like those mentioned above who had converted under Methodist preaching.

Exposed to Methodism by her sister-in-law Margaret Hastings, the Countess began to attend religious meetings held at the Fetter Lane Society while in London in 1740. As John R. Tyson’s biographical study of Lady Huntingdon explains, the Connexion’s rules for membership have been preserved in founder John Wesley’s journal which, even though Wesley was a Methodist, specify that members would meet once a week to “confess our faults to one another, and pray for one another that we might be healed.” Thus in a gesture almost identical to the early 17th century New England practice of relating an account of one’s conversion to others for approval, society members were urged to “speak as freely, plainly, and concisely as they could the real state of their hearts, with their several temptations and deliverances” (582-3). They were asked, in other words, to deliver a conversion narrative in the presence of other Christians, ones who

often recorded what they had heard. Engaging in religious instruction after periods of confession, members fastened bonds of Christian fellowship through the acknowledgements of faith their group required. Using her financial resources, Hastings established numerous churches supporting the Methodist cause and the conversions of black converts like Equiano and Gronniosaw in particular, whom Hastings referred to as her special “class” of Christian souls. As Tyson explains, membership in this sub-group were designated by a “class ticket” – a sort of membership card – given to adherents who could sufficiently give evidence of their religious convictions. This ritual of public confession and official approval was later replicated in meetings Hastings operated in her various homes and chapels, which were not only recorded but also printed and disseminated so as to confirm the sanctity (and scrupulous examination) of her benefactors' beliefs (591).

Consorting with and pointing to their association with the Huntingdon group, which stressed the importance of circumspect moral consideration followed by a confession of how a believer had come to feel that he had been called, helped legitimize a black convert's portrayal of spiritual faith. As Brooks clarifies in *American Lazarus*, black Atlantic authors frequently appealed to such “transatlantic networks of influence” to substantiate their faith's authenticity, as the political, moral, and financial support groups like the Huntingdon Connexion offered also “proved critical to their [evangelical] careers” (26). By signaling to their alliance with these networks, black Atlantic autobiographers not only corroborated their faith but additionally bestowed their accounts with what Paul Gilroy calls a “unified and socialized” appeal, one that could help them avoid the difficulties their race presented their narratives by fostering a sense of fellowship in readers to which Christians of every race and class – whether Old Light or New – could respond (30).

To place an emphasis on the allied nature of their individual experiences promoted what black Atlantic converts hoped to be a degree of sympathy and identification in their reading audience. Fearing that his readers would not believe what he “pretended to be,” Gronniosaw took care to point to how other Christians would be able to share in his experiences; how those whom have also converted would undoubtably recognize “the joy and comfort conveyed to me” regardless of his social standing. Like countless Christians

before him, Gronniosaw saw “the beauty and glory of God the more I was humbled.” As if to downplay the idiosyncratic irregularities – the unbelievable instances – his *Narrative* may have been accused of, Gronniosaw explains himself by asserting that his faith “cannot be expressed . . . and [can] only be conceived by those who have experienced the like,” thereby evoking a virtual community of converts among his readership (43). This community included black Atlantics like himself – Marrant, for example, who, we may recall, opens his *Narrative* in a similar gesture toward ineffability and the unspeakable. Like Marrant after him, Gronniosaw widens his personal involvement with grace, reshaping it into something that connects him to other Christians, meaning those who could also attest to have “experienced” what Gronniosaw had. At the same time, Gronniosaw’s remark endows him with a sense of spiritual authority, as he suggests that only those who have also converted in a similar fashion – who have also undergone “the like” – would be able to see how he had truly been saved. Gronniosaw consequently positions his experiences as those which not only bear witness to his own faith but also to that of the broader spiritual progress of the community to which he feels he belongs, thereby defending the potency of his regenerative experiences to more skeptical readers.

As Kenneth Burke observes in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Gronniosaw’s gesture, or his simultaneous appeal to both a wider Christian audience and himself as a spiritual authority, should be read as a move designed “to break down generic divisiveness.” If Gronniosaw had distinguished himself in a manner alien from the interests and assumptions of his readers, he would have risked jeopardizing his chances of the latter welcoming his words. To Burke, successful speakers are those who know how “to display the appropriate ‘signs’ of character needed to earn the audience’s good will” (43). And this is precisely what black Atlantic autobiographers did. Through his appeal to a depersonalized version of his own experiences, Gronniosaw’s framed his conversion as one that others have also gone through, a move that not only reifies Gronniosaw’s persona but also the community to which he sought inclusion. By seeing a version of their own experiences in Gronniosaw’s, audiences came to believe in the authenticity of the latter’s spiritual account even if it was incredible and inexpressible. As Andrews has explained, the almost compulsory address black authors made to white readers that their narratives were based in fact reveals how they felt the need for readers to complete their texts – “to

supply a presence where there was only 'Negro,' only a dark absence." Needless to say, this idea applies to an author's account of his own conversion. To authoritatively convey the sincerity of his religious convictions, black Atlantics were ultimately dependent on readers to "complete" – or accept – their texts. Building on what Andrews describes as "a hierarchy of abstract significance on the mere matter of facts," Gronniosaw and Marrant made a case for the veracity and greater moral significance of their conversions as that which their race could be read as a positive focal point as opposed to an obstacle – as a sign of God's Providence and goodness working in the hearts of even the most deprave of sinners (33).

Assuming it remarkable, even miraculous, that an uneducated person of color could arrive at a serious form of spiritual conviction without proper ministerial guidance, black Atlantic authors like Gronniosaw situated their accounts in terms that could be approved more easily. Promoting their texts as moral if not allegorical tales from which any Christian could learn, they oriented themselves as Christians who, like their readers, were similarly engaged in discerning God's will. As such, they forged what Philip Gould sees as an act of literary collaboration, where the common spiritual circumstance of a Christian trying to understand his spiritual destiny and the extent of his faith took precedence over the skepticism readers may have felt toward his writing (633). Stressing what Warner refers to as an "anti-fictional" or instructive rather than an exclusively subjective account of Christian progress, black autobiographers made a special case for the didactic weight of their autobiographies, and by extension, the life of the Christian convert represented in them (175).

As Warner has argued, the print ideology of the public sphere in the 18th century was one that "valorized the general over the personal," where "virtue was predicated on an author's absorption into generality" (176). Attentive to these considerations, black Atlantics published their accounts under auspices of a representative rather than an exclusive personality, asking readers to measure the sincerity of their faith against their own. By seeing writers like Gronniosaw and Marrant behave like sincere and heartfelt Christians, their readers could only assume they were. As Wolfgang Iser clarifies, this form of interaction between text and reader helped create the impression that a narrator's audience was involved in something real; that they are bearing witness to the actions of a

Christian as he not only came to terms with his own faith but whose story could also help readers come to terms with their own (67). By offering their experiences up to inspection twice over – to their readers and, in their texts, to an audience who had surveyed the legitimacy of their feelings and words – black Atlantics looked back to an older tradition of Protestant spiritual confession where observers listened to a convert's narrative and determined its moral value on the basis of their own experiences. That Marrant's *Narrative* in particular includes a conversion narrative outside his own – another “remarkable conversion,” but this time of “a child seven and a half years old” – serves as an excellent example of how autobiographers turned their texts toward the morally instructive, and consequently, their own authority over, and the legitimacy of, its subject matter (124).

Readers will recall how this strategy is duplicated when Marrant becomes a spectator (and even inspires) the conversion of his Indian captors, where he is not only an eye-witness of “wonderfully affected . . . people” but also, apparently, an adequate adjudicator of who should rightfully be considered “savingly converted to God” (118). Such passages are crucial, as they promote the idea that Marrant was more than simply a convert. As a spectator to other conversions, Marrant locates himself as a knowledgeable onlooker – as one who can tell whether a convert is “going to that fine place where God would wipe away all tears” (125). While foreshadowing Marrant's call to the cloth and his assignment to Nova Scotia, this gesture can also be interpreted as a final petition for the authenticity of Marrant's conversion and the power of his faith in its capacity to move others.

In this respect, and as May has suggested, readers might want to think about Marrant's *Narrative* not only as a spiritual autobiography but also “as an ordination sermon,” one that justifies “Marrant's participation in evangelical ministries” and that therefore becomes a “crucial step in his acceptance into the Methodist Huntingdon Connexion from which he would receive financial support” (555, 562). As if himself a minister, an amanuensis, or a witness to the conversion of others, Marrant describes Mary Scott's conversion for the private edification of his reading audience. He explains how he “here mention[s]” Scott's account “in hopes the Lord may make it useful and profitable” to readers, particularly “to my young readers,” underscoring his *Narrative's* function as a

moral guidebook for conversion (124). Marrant therefore highlights the importance of his text as not just an autobiography written by “A Black” but also a work that can be “generally useful” to all Christians as a text that bears witness to how “the Almighty gave his sanction” to all who truly believe, including Marrant (111). By appending Scott's conversion narrative in his text, Marrant gives his *Narrative* an added moral significance that instructs attentive readers to “GIVE thanks to God” (127).

But despite its high-minded efforts, Marrant's *Narrative* can only be “useful” insofar as it is both read and believed. In this light, the divine “sanction” Marrant refers to tries to answer for his autobiography's usefulness as it supports the notion of Marrant as a paragon of Christian virtue, a Protestant saint, and a minister to others. Gronniosaw also engages in the same practice, downplaying his account (as a “little history”) yet citing it as one that can not only serve the “private satisfaction” of the “young lady” it was written for but also that “of every Christian reader” (32). As Marrant's autobiography claims from its outset, it too was written with his readers – rather than himself – in mind as a text that attempts to “[d]eclare [God's] wonders among his people” (110). By taking these measures, Gronniosaw and Marrant point to the universality as well as instructiveness of their accounts which, they claimed, had been written for a wider Christian audience rather than for self-promotion. Gronniosaw's *Narrative* declares this outright, explaining how it was composed for the purposes of spiritual education rather than self-aggrandizement – written to “praise the glory of God” and to teach “in what manner will God deal with those benighted parts of the world where the gospel of Jesus Christ hath never reached” (32-3). By taking themselves out of the equation, Gronniosaw and Marrant more easily drew attention to the divine sanction behind the experiences they described, dispelling criticism from those who may have considered their faith – and their accounts – self-serving, imprudent, or overly enthusiastic.

As modern readers, we are left, then, with the conclusion that while the definition of what comprised an authentic Christian conversion may have shifted in the 18th century to become something examined in print rather than by a live audience and faith itself as something that was available to all, subjectively felt in a believer's heart, and unique, the literary tradition of black Atlantic autobiography tells a slightly different story of how Protestants came to and articulated their faith. It speaks of how authors relied on earlier

priorities and models of representation to confirm their conviction in Christ. It tells of how black converts painstakingly examined and offered their religious convictions for approval as Puritans had a century before. Exposed to new ideas of what faith could and should be, and having converted under the robust preaching of an itinerant ministry, black converts still offered their conversion stories in ways that reflect a more traditional understanding of this experience, and this on their own accord. Yet their faith wasn't just traditional. It was also exceptional – as unique as each supernatural experience each author reported. As this faith endured under the most severe hardships, both physical and spiritual, each account portrayed a Christian soul – a *black* Christian soul – whose piety could set the tone for others, even whites. In a changing transatlantic world where access to print allowed more and more opinions to float unimpeded into the public sphere, converts like Gronniosaw and Marrant became the visible saints of the 18th century Atlantic world, whose convictions, and indeed their life stories, keep in motion a tradition of Protestant spiritual confession for readers to explore, reflect upon, and embrace.

[4]

Of the 18th century black Atlantic autobiographies most frequently read, all include a description of the author's gradual but seemingly inevitable – and almost conventional – awakening from sinner to saint.²² Having chosen to relate an account of their spiritual transformation, authors both adopted and thrust themselves within a determined orientation, one that, in a certain way, made their cultural emergence in the early colonies possible.

With Christ as their keeper and with biblical history as an analogical counterpart for their shared experience of captivity, suffering, and deliverance, black converts did more than make their claim upon an established tradition of Protestant spiritual confession. Their writing, as some have argued, generated a culture and even a language all their own.²³ As Brooks has suggested, readers should take the black Atlantic author's instinct and capacity to interpolate God's living Word with his life as *the* “founding moment” of his English-Speaking literary career. In fact, the same black Atlantic writing that tells of “a story of redemption and regeneration” and that redirected “the democratizing, charismatic, and separatist energies of American evangelism and its

powerful doctrine of rebirth,” triggered what Brooks sees as “the formation of new religious communities, new theologies, and new literatures for people of color” (*American Lazarus* 3).

As autobiographers recounted their conversions and imparted the covenant they felt existed between the Holy Spirit and their souls, they argued for their spiritual convictions as well as for greater social and cultural recognition. They embraced the Pauline tradition of personal weakness and earthly misfortune as a means of gaining rhetorical power, converting debility into strength as well as proof of the seriousness of their spiritual convictions. In having reorganized an eschatological, typological, and confessional discourse into a performative space whereby they could make these claims, black writers not only erected a platform for their critical interventions into early national formulations of race but also crafted a view of themselves as visible saints: as Protestants willing to endure more than most for their faith and who, as a result, were most probably going to heaven. As we now know, they posited this idea in both overt and subtle ways, but almost always in a way that was concurrent with their need for literary expression – with their need to tell their life stories in their own words.

But while the act of situating their narratives and their lives on a spiritual course was an essential part of the black Atlantic's first venture toward literary creation and self-representation, we must remember that in most cases he was defining and defending himself against the Bible, this most preeminent text of white culture. The authority Scripture gave enabled him to articulate a vision of himself and his people under a rubric of Providential design, just as John Winthrop's company had a century before, where the reality of captivity or the injustices a black convert faced became a clear sign – and for the Christian saint a type – of his spiritual appointment. As the Psalm Marrant included as the epigraph of his *Narrative* declares, “the redeemed of the Lord” were those whose “[w]onders of his [g]race record.” And as we now know, black Atlantic writers wrote copiously of grace's wonders.

In this vein, black autobiographers wrote not only about their lives and their circumstances but also about the way their lives increasingly and inextricably became involved with grace. They wrote about how their iniquities and ignorance were respectively transformed into a resolve toward Christ. And they wrote about the many

suffering circumstances they had overcome through sheer faith – a faith in the Lord's adeptness to provide for those whom He, in Marrant's words, “had chose.” Having been chosen, authors like Marrant transformed disenfranchisement into a marker of spiritual election that was scripturally verifiable, an election assured to those who could display an appropriate degree of faith, humility, and circumspection or who could, in the language of Thomas Shepard's Puritan New England, give sufficient evidence of their election.

Believing with his heart in the Lord's capacity to clothe and guide both himself and his people's “footsteps lest we stray,” Marrant reminded readers how those who suffer for their faith were guarded “with a pow'rful [h]and,” the same hand that would also lead the pitiable and suffering “to the heav'nly Land” of Canaan on Judgement Day (127-8).

To see how black Atlantic authors joined their lived experiences with their faith is to see how they breathed new life into the Bible, shaping it into practical as well as expressive terms that does well to substantiate Brooks' contention of black Atlantic writing as a story of regeneration and redemption in every sense. As a wide range of scholars, from Mitchel Breitwieser and Ivy Schwietzer to Christopher Castiglia and Michelle Burnham, who have studied how those disenfranchised found their literary voices amid captivity and contention have shown, individuals otherwise lacking the potential to speak publicly often found the means to do so within culturally inscribed bounds. Considered in this light, recourse to religious discourse, and conversion especially, was indispensable in giving black authors a way to speak to white culture in a language of its own moral idiom. Yet this process also led to paradox. For to do so, black authors also had to rely on the presiding rituals and conventions of this culture – on the Bible, on typological interpretation, and on the symbolic, formal, and rhetorical conventions that contributed it. To become speaking subjects, black authors had to not only speak but to also speak *properly*, meaning that they had to rely on the conventions of this discourse in order to be heard, or heard in the right way. So even though Protestant spirituality invited black authors to become authoritative speaking subjects for the very first time, converts also restricted – even confined – by the same culture of Western letters that ascribed to them a lower rung on the Great Chain of Being.

In other words, the same expressive potential Christian culture bestowed on the black Atlantic autobiographer determined his pronouncements, thereby threatening what

Brooks and others see in black Atlantic authorship as a wholly new contribution to this tradition. While typological interpretation or the act of seeing and representing oneself as a Christian convert offered black Atlantics a way to order their lives, promote a collective history of transcendence and fulfillment, and create new spiritual communities of color, their ability to create these alternatives, just like their access to literacy itself, was still predicated on voluntary submission to the governing rules of the culture from which they were attempting to escape. Foregrounding their experiences, identities, and voices within white Europeanism, the authors just discussed also limited themselves to the culture-specific parameters they adopted. So while Gronniosaw and Marrant could demonstrate their ardent, even exceptional faith by assuming normative discursive avenues, their performances were made on an essentially white stage that both dictated the terms and judged the legitimacy of their achievement.

As Bercovitch has shown with regard to Puritanism's legacy on later American civil society, to assert oneself freely in this country, at least according to Bercovitch, means doing so according to guidelines of admissibility. According to Bercovitch, every sign of an individual's success, be it secular or spiritual, is ultimately reinscribed within dominant culture as an indication of cooperative rather than personal triumph since an individual's actions, whether reactionary or traditional, have become inseparable from the abstract notion of national progress first established by a powerful Puritan rhetoric of federal election (*Rites* 50). Like the classic American authors Bercovitch studies, black Atlantic autobiographers were also confronted with their society's inadequacies, many turning for solace and inspiration to Christianity (and Christian rhetoric) as a source of social and spiritual deliverance (56).

But while they did not lack in radical energies, these authors still, almost inevitably, invested in the vision which they opposed. Through their utterances, they adopted their oppressor's cultural benchmarks, ultimately reinforcing a vision of consensus they hoped to resist. It would be careless to ignore how this conflict is also an important feature of black Atlantic autobiography, one upon which its tradition of spiritual self-disclosure stands. Assenting to established cultural models as a means of self-representation, black authors and converts entered white discourse to both resist as well as become a part of it. Having done so, they join the vital and often amorphous

fabric of what it meant, and still means, to be an author writing about his spiritual experiences in America.

Notes

¹ As argued for and suggested by the titles of Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* and Richard L. Bushman's *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*, this shift in New England religious culture was, by the turn of the 18th century, firmly established, where scholars typically refer to the development of a more "enlightened" or liberal American culture as one of the principle reasons for Puritanism's decline. But while these pioneering texts have convincingly argued for Puritan orthodoxy's seemingly inevitable deterioration, both also maintain that aspects of Puritan culture – or what Miller loosely refers to as "The New England Way" – still managed to retain a hold over the fundamental ways individuals have come to understand and describe their experiences, spiritual or otherwise. In fact, scholars like Ursula Braumm, Christopher Castiglia, Michael J. Colacurcio, Andrew Delbanco, David D. Hall, Richard Slotkin, Michael Zuckerman, and most notably Sacvan Bercovitch have all, in various ways, similarly argued for the Puritanism's continued relevance to American culture. Like this chapter, their studies stress the value of seeing Puritanism's legacy from a perspective of cultural shift rather than one of declension – as a force that evolved with the times, and that continues to set an example just as a city upon a hill. As Joanna Brooks has written in "From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History," a scholarly genealogy beginning with Perry Miller's famous essay "Jonathan Edwards to Emerson" will show a continuity of thought from the Calvinist Edwards to the Unitarian spiritualist and one-time minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and this despite Miller's disclaimer in *Errand into the Wilderness* that "[t]here is no organic evolution of ideas from Edwards to Emerson" (184). To be sure, and as Brooks rightly points out, the Edwards-to-Emerson narrative, misconstrued as it may have been, still "served as a centralizing architecture of early American literary history for almost seventy years" (439). But Brooks wonders: what happened to the concept of Original Sin if it's not found in Emerson's thought. In other words, how exactly did a sinner in the hands of an angry god go into the woods and a century later emerge as a Man Thinking? Brooks' timely question points to the broader and perhaps more important question of whether it's really possible to think about a history of American religion and literature outside of a secularization narrative represented by the Edwards-to-Emerson thesis. Most recently, Robert Milder has breathed new life into this genealogy, reversing its terms in "From Emerson to Edwards," where Milder, consistent with evolving theories of Puritanism's American legacy, argues for the unmistakably (and understated) Calvinist influence in Emerson's thought. Brooks and Milder both believe, then, that the critical consensus which argues for a forward-sweeping thesis of American culture's secularization to be unconvincing. If anything, religion, particularly of an amorphous Protestant sort, is still a potent aspect of contemporary American discourse, where the idea of what it means to be a "real" American or "more" American than someone else, at least publicly, is still inextricably linked to the strength of one's association with Christianity. Phrases like "In God We

Trust” and “God Bless America” beg the question of *which* God, exactly, is being “trusted” as well as to who the term “We” is referring. No doubt a Christian one.

² The increase in population the colonies saw in the 18th century helps account for the greater diversity of opinion in religious and political life. In 1670, for example, the population of the colonies roughly numbered 111,000. Thirty years later it was more than 250,000, and by 1760, if one includes Georgia, it reached 1,600,000. Boston almost doubled its size from 1700 to 1720, where the great migration seen in the first half of the 18th century was not primarily English as many Dutch, German, and Protestant French settlers, as well as Jewish merchants and craftsmen, established themselves in New York and Philadelphia.

³ Warning converts and potential converts of the judgements God held in store for his backsliding people, Edwards' homily follows a form set by Michael Wigglesworth's popular poem “God's Controversy with New England” (1662) as well as Samuel Danforth's 1670 election-day sermon, “A Brief Recognition of New-England's Errand into the Wilderness.” As Perry Miller explains in an early essay that borrows its title from Danforth's sermon, most “major expressions of second generation [settlers],” which “were in the fullest sense community expression,” were imbued in a pervasive language of “troubled utterances” that “[s]omething has gone wrong” (2). Just as Wigglesworth was claiming in verse how God had a cause to be angry with his people for displaying “[i]nstead of heavenly frames an earthly mind” (231), Danforth, like Edwards above, observed how New Englanders had become diverted by the ungodly “noise and tumult of their secular occasions,” thereby obstructing “their ready and cheerful attendance unto His doctrine” (1). To Danforth, individuals were increasingly proceeding “from faith to faith” and slowly becoming blind to the proper means of true spiritual conviction (13).

⁴ Best known for his involvement in the Great Awakening and his departure from an outdated mode of Puritanism by adopting a psychology of sensation to orthodox Calvinist doctrine, Edwards was, first and foremost, a Calvinist in the strictest sense. Like Thomas Shepard, Edwards firmly believed in Calvinist dogma – in predestination, man's total depravity, the limited power of atonement, and the concept of irresistible grace. As a Millennialist, Edwards also believed in a thousand-year age of blessedness culminating in the Second Coming of Christ, of which the Awakening and the profusion of religious conversions associated with it appeared to Edwards an indication. Yet most scholars consider Edwards' theology a step removed from that of his ministerial predecessors. His decision, like Shepard's before him, to limit church membership and participation in the sacraments only to visible saints shows how this is not the case. Edwards' choice stemmed from his belief that man's felt experiences with grace and his subsequent actions – and words – were the surest sign of his inner dispositions. This understanding helps explain Edwards' attraction to a sensation of grace to which he is commonly associated where grace. As Edwards explained in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” the Holy Spirit operates directly on a believer's faculties like a “natural force” which “conveys to the mind the subject matter of . . . saving instruction” (266-7).

⁵ The two texts that best exemplify this view are also Edwards' most personal: his spiritual autobiography, or “Personal Narrative,” as well as the now widely anthologized

(though posthumously published) “Divine and Supernatural Light.” Both works show, with Edwards' own faith as an example, how a believer can gradually come to discern the Holy Spirit working not only in him but also in the natural word.

⁶ As Teresa Toulouse has convincingly discussed in *The Art of Prophesying*, this change is reflected in the homiletic structure and content of Awakening and post-Awakening sermons. Toulouse's study wonderfully synthesizes a question that has plagued early colonial historians for some time now, namely, whether religion in New England was shaped by its people or its preachers, where Toulouse's work answers the question with a resounding: “both.”

⁷ The most notable studies on the subject, other than Andrews', are Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame's *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*, Joanna Brooks' *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, and John Wood Sweet's *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North*. Despite the crucial importance of these studies however (and as only a cursory glace at their indexes will show), none of these scholars sufficiently treat the subject of Afro-British conversion in the context of Puritan New England out of which the revival movement known as the Great Awakening was, as all the scholars above suggest, at least partially a reaction. It is interesting to note that while most black Atlantic authors commonly anthologized published their narratives in England, their spiritual statements show that the formal and rhetorical maneuvers they applied to convince their audience mirrors those patterned by 17th century congregationalists. This, I think, gives credence to the theory that Puritanism may have influenced how 18th century Protestants both understood and presented their faith, as this chapter hopes to show.

⁸ Whitefield quoted in Brooks, *American Lazarus*, 31, 95.

⁹ It is important to note that while black Atlantics cannot necessarily be considered New England – or even American – authors where their writing is, technically speaking, more rooted in English rather than colonial American intellectual tradition, their testimonies can still give readers a better picture of the precise cultural and pietistic practices they assumed from early New England's religious culture if examined directly against this culture.

¹⁰ Jefferson quoted in Brooks, *American Lazarus*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹² So considered, a form of faith that relied on predestination rather than on spiritual rewards for good works was especially attractive to those whose ability to perform good deeds were severely limited. This explains why black Atlantic autobiography is imbued in a religious discourse that finds its roots in 17th century New England. A Protestantism

whose central doctrine taught that God had preordained certain souls to heaven regardless of their color, creed, or economic situation became a means of counterbalancing the corporeal adversity black converts endured.

¹³ As Wilson J. Moses maintains in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, the revisionist element here Brooks recognizes gives evidence of a jeremiad-like undercurrent in the black autobiographical tradition, particularly (though not exclusively limited to) those written by evangelical preachers like Marrant. Using Scripture as a self-authorizing instrument, black authors criticized white culture while adopting its central moral guidebook as a rhetorical devise as well as a source of empowerment.

¹⁴ Of the more recent studies on early Black Atlantic writing in the context of religion, those of Benilde Montgomery, Adam Potkay, and John Saillant are all especially good at dealing with the ramifications of Christianity on black authorship. None, however, specifically consider the consequences of conversion on how black autobiographers crafted their narratives or presented their faith. Needless to say, it is here that this chapter offers an important critical intervention to the field.

¹⁵ Marrant's assertion is nothing new. As early colonial scholars may perhaps already know, claims of being tongue-tied when attempting to express one's spiritual encounters and inclinations is a convention often repeated in the spiritual utterances of 17th century Puritans as far ranging as Anne Hutchinson and Mary Rowlandson. As Shepard's *Confessions* tell us, this verbal ineptness was often interpreted, particularly in female applicants, as a sign of election since, in displaying it, converts showed themselves to understand how the ways of God could never be explained or known, a concept central to Calvinist theology.

¹⁶ To be sure, 17th century New Englanders were not the first to convey their conversion experiences as formulaically as Thomas Shepard's congregation since a similar practice was also taking place in England. The novelty of the practice Shepard institutes is really a question of how one considers the American literary canon, however. Insofar as scholars deem texts like John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* or even William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* crucial texts of early America, as they commonly do, then I think it's fair to think of Shepard's *Confessions* similarly: as one of the first of its kind recorded in the Massachusetts Bay colony whose importance can be seen in later conversion narratives.

¹⁷ Chauncy quoted in Brooks, *American Lazarus*, 23. Other conservatives included Samuel Wigglesworth, David McGregor, and Isaac Stiles. But that fact that there were so many differing interpretations regarding the revivals' significance, that there were so many different kinds of speculation concerning their sanctity, should suggest how any stable notion of an "orthodox" religious view no longer exists at this time.

¹⁸ Edwards quoted in Warner, 57.

¹⁹ Belcher quoted in Minkema, 125.

²⁰ Growing up in New Jersey with four brothers who also became reformed ministers, Freelandhouse was ordained in October, 1745, becoming a pillar of his congregational community in Albany, New York. As Vincent Carretta notes in *Unchained Voices*, Freelandhouse was a successful preacher and an influential – though little known – figure to the Great Awakening, winning him the praises of both Edwards and Whitefield. Gronniosaw's association with Freelandhouse establishes Gronniosaw, and more importantly his *Narrative*, within a context of the Great Awakening. That Gronniosaw reveals how Freelandhouse effectively helped him pray, a lesson that leads to his conversion, also shows one of the ways the *Narrative* is indebted to early 17th century religious practice, particularly the practice where a minister carefully checked a convert's conversion statement before granting him admission to his church or even allowing him to speak in front of the congregation.

²¹ For another good study on authentication of four major antebellum slave narratives, see the first chapter of Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*.

²² These would be those of Briton Hammon, George Liele, David George, Boston King, Equiano, Marrant, and Gronniosaw.

²³ Paul Gilroy has done the most to suggest this idea. He not only coined the phrase “Black Atlantic” but also traced its cultural legacy to the modern day. This legacy, or a language all the black Atlantic's own, can be seen in certain subcultures, such as hip hop, ebonics, jazz, or even, as I would like to suggest, the moral logic that underlays the 18th century sentimental novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* being the most widely known.

CHAPTER V

CONVERTING THE CANONICAL: REGENERATION, “RIP VAN WINKLE,” AND

As this dissertation moves chronologically to consider the conversion narrative's impact on American culture, it argues that the way 17th century Puritans described their conversions has influenced the way later Protestants have come to represent their spiritual experiences, especially in writing.¹ The following chapter addresses ways this confessional literary tradition has influenced 19th century American fiction. While the impact of the conversion narrative may be clear in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, or Phillis Wheatley's “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” it also resounds in less obvious works: Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*; Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, and Thoreau's *Walden*, to name three examples. Yet as readers, we frequently ignore this possibility, failing to see the ways in which canonical authors often borrow from America's religious culture, which of course includes its Puritan past, as a way of shaping their texts, coming to terms with history, and commenting on their own culture.

According to religious historian David W. Bebbington, evangelical theology was the prevailing mode of Christian thought in the 19th century English-speaking world. This theology was derived from the same doctrinal system established in the previous century, in part because of the Great Awakening, which gave birth to Methodism, transformed the Congregationalists and Baptists into expanding bodies, and revitalized the spiritual energies of both Anglicans and Presbyterians. But while the Awakening transformed Calvinist thought by creating parallel doctrinal traditions, it also brought with it, particularly in the 19th century, what Bebbington calls a special “attachment to the Bible” that brought traditional biblicism “to a fresh pitch” (235-6). Guides to Bible reading, such as the widely used *A Scripture Help* (1816) and Thomas Hartwell Horne's more erudite *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (1818) were now acknowledging the Bible's scriptural and interpretative openness. So while the legacy of Enlightenment had a profound impact on the evolution of Christian evangelical thought, it also brought with it the notion that theology and science originated from the light of the

same truth, whereby religious thought expanded, at times, to encompass the scientific.

These changes both influenced and were marked by a significant ideological shift in the doctrine of assurance. Puritanism's understanding of prolonged self-scrutiny and doubt as ideals to be sought after in ascertaining one's salvation had seemingly caved under popular priorities, as 18th century preachers like Jonathan Edwards and the well-travelled John Wesley taught that it was more-or-less possible to be sure of one's spiritual redemption. This idea found fertile ground in the 19th century. And as fresh ideas about man's relationship with the divine permeated into new philosophical quarters, the way assurance was conceptualized was often re-imagined, as theologians and literary artists alike both challenged and embraced pervading assumptions about God, conversion, salvation, and man's role – if any – in such matters.

In the two sections that follow, I try to offer readers an example of how one can assess American fiction with a special sensitivity to the religious climate in which it was produced, focusing on what we know of the Puritan conversion narrative in order to show how this tradition has shaped the way authors in the 19th century presented their concerns and composed their work. By considering American literature within this framework, I am making a case for the conversion narrative's extended impact on American culture by showing how the expressive energies informing Protestant spiritual confession can offer new ways of exploring familiar texts. Well-known 19th century authors like Washington Irving and Herman Melville are not typically associated with concepts like spiritual regeneration and its representation. As a corrective, I argue that their work demonstrates a formal and intellectual debt to the kind of religious self-representation Puritan converts have offered and that were being reappraised at the time Irving and Melville wrote.

While my hypothesis is that we can look really to any text to see whether it has been influenced by how others have considered and conveyed their faith, my analysis here will specifically look at Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and the opening chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Texts that are often read in college classrooms and considered staples of the American literary canon, both illustrate how literature traditionally considered peripheral to the kinds of ideas associated with conversion, and Puritan conversion in particular, are in fact involved with it. My assumption is that making this connection can give readers not only a more nuanced understanding of these texts (or any text, for that matter), but

also a greater appreciation of the conversion narrative's importance to American culture as a whole.

[2]

While an argument for the direct lineage between “Rip Van Winkle” and Puritan conversion narratives like those contained in Thomas Shepard’s *Confessions* or spiritual autobiographies like Jonathan Edward’s *Personal Narrative* and John Marrant’s *Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings* may seem farfetched, conversion’s religious and cultural imprint still prevails in Irving’s text. Like his contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, who revered Irving as America’s finest writer, Irving generated a good portion of his work from the content of America’s past in which he found a set of concepts indispensable as the framework for his satirical presentations of colonial life. In “The Legend of Sleepy Hallow,” for example, Irving sets his story “in a remote period of American history” where Ichabod Crane, “a perfect master of Cotton Mather’s history of New England,” instructs his students with the same kind of stern “tone of menace” as Mather himself. In the story, readers learn that Crane’s preoccupation with Mather is actually rather extensive. Crane spends much of his time, and gains much pleasure, by reading Mather’s history – one as tedious as it is long – “until the gathering dusk of the evening made the printed page a mere mist before his eyes” (952).

Irving’s reference to Mather associates Crane (and especially Mather) with the past and with anachronism as it suggests, however implicitly, that a person who would actually read the *Magnalia* for pleasure would also probably fall pray to the kind of ghost story that the impressionable Crane falls for in “The Legend.” Irving’s reference to Puritan history therefore offers readers a glance at how he may have regarded Puritan culture itself, which apparently had the evocative power of “mere mist” to his 19th century eyes (952).

Notwithstanding his jibe, Irving’s remark still betrays how Puritan culture weighed on his mind if only as the basis of a joke. At the very least, Irving’s conscientious reference to early New England and its history charts the differences between Puritan culture and his own. Irving uses the past as a means of critiquing on his own culture, especially those like Crane who still “most firmly and potently” believe in stories of

“New England Witchcraft” despite their supposedly “great erudition” (952).

If Irving's reference to the Puritans in “The Legend” is marginal, then it is almost completely absent in “Rip Van Winkle.” Nowhere in the text does Cotton Mather and his *Magnalia* appear. Rather than point to the Puritans directly, Irving instead draws from their cultural practices – and the conversion narrative specifically – to characterize Rip's transformational experience, to flush out the story's broader considerations, and mark the differences (and similarities) between early New England culture and his own. This is to say that Irving does not overlook Puritan religious practice even if he may have dismissed the Puritans themselves. In fact, his portrayal of Rip's supernatural encounter, a transformative experience in which Rip, like a visible saint, comes to terms with his destiny “as one of the patriarchs of the village,” justifies thinking of Irving's story along these lines – as a coded [re-]figuration of the type of transcendental experience expressed in the Thomas Shepard's *Confessions* as well as later accounts of Protestant conversion (947).

By focusing on “Rip Van Winkle” from a standpoint of conversion, one notices how the concept of spiritual election develops in the 19th century to take on a broader, more secular shape. In the world of democratic Republicanism under which Irving lived, election had a new meaning, one in which a gospel of wealth and political power, rather than spiritual conviction, gave evidence of God's approval. As such, readers can interpret “Rip Van Winkle” as a literary opportunity in which Irving tested the limits and possibilities of conversion in an early national period where regionalism and regional identities (and values) still prevailed yet were increasingly feeling the force of an encroaching rhetoric of national progress and election. To be sure, “Rip Van Winkle” is a text firmly entrenched in the cultural landscape in which it was produced, evident especially in Irving's heavy-handed satire, which is often inaccessible to modern readers. Still, Irving's coded humor should not dissuade readers both casual and serious from noticing its connection and indebtedness to early New England, particularly as a text that comments on how social context and collective judgement over a person's private experiences often determines their legitimacy and value.

Reading Protestant spirituality into “Rip Van Winkle” brings readers to notice how one of Irving's many uses for parody was to question religious conversion and explore the

boundaries of its significance in 19th century America. As Carolyn Eastman has argued, the “we” in the phrase “We, the People of the United States” that preambles the Constitution invokes the idea of a unified “people” who theoretically share a singleness of mind and purpose. Yet this notion “obfuscated more than it described, for it cloaked vast disagreements over politics, culture, and the Constitution itself,” leaving “many questions” – such as who counted within it – “unresolved during the fifty years after the Revolution” (1-2). Exactly who was included within this “we” was still uncertain when Irving published “Rip Van Winkle” in 1819 just as patriotic symbols were notoriously in flux, a fluidity that amounted to what Eastman characterizes as a “messiness” surrounding early national identity and culture, one that Irving was clearly responsive to.

The question of who and what constitutes an “American” are concerns that Irving's tale addresses almost immediately. As “Rip Van Winkle” opens, readers are given a brief account of Rip's disposition, one that offers Rip for critical assessment and comparison. We learn, for example, that although “a simple good natured man” and “a kind neighbor,” Rip has nevertheless “inherited . . . but little martial character of his ancestors.” The precepts of pious labor which from the beginning had been central to New England Puritanism do not apply to Rip, whose moral nature is “pliant and malleable” even if he also possesses “virtues of patience and long suffering.” Living a relatively carefree life, Rip's major failing is his laziness, “[t]he great error in Rip's composition” being “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labor” (938-9). As such, Rip stands in contrast to emerging national virtues of industriousness and profit-making, qualities that emerged from the Calvinist tenet, one that finds its finest exposition in John Cotton's *The Way of Wealth* (1641), that every man should have a calling and work hard at it.

Rip's home reflects Rip's lackadaisical mentality. Rip has allowed “his patrimonial estate” to have “dwindled away under his management,” where his land is not only “the worst conditioned farm in the neighborhood” but his children are “as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody.” Rip's most glaring weakness, however, is his unwillingness to improve upon his defects and to strive toward moral perfection, a reluctance that sets him apart from an ethic of economic progress. Even more, he is unconscious that he has any faults at all. Idling all day, Rip is “ready to attend to anybody's business but his own,” and “would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound.” Rather than repent for his

shortcomings, Rip refuses to change his negligent behavior for which he feels there is “no use,” whether for his own good or for his family (938-9). To be sure, Rip is no paragon of virtue, nor is he interested in converting his bad habits into merits. Neither religion nor the doctrine of a secular calling in which worldly success is measured as an indication of Providential favor are on Rip’s mind, whose characterization portrays him as the last person who would have complied with Thomas Jefferson’s injunction to “determine never to be idle” or that “nothing can contribute more” to “human happiness” than “contacting a habit of industry and activity.”²

In a time when the notion of being an “American” was still developing, Irving offers Rip: a man whose qualities, if anything, are certainly not those to which his Puritan forefathers nor those who would have followed Franklinean principles of industry and frugality would have adhered. If it is a sin to lack industry and live to “whistle life away,” then Rip is most certainly a sinner (938). Still, it is hard to see him as such, especially when Irving humorously pairs the negligent but true-to-himself Rip with Dame Van Winkle, his comic foil, who ceaselessly sermonizes “in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing everything he said or did.” This pairing of opposites causes readers to see Rip as a victim of his domestic circumstances rather than as a poor provider – as a man who dutifully takes the “torrent” of his wife’s “household eloquence” with an unassuming shrug of the shoulders that, however unfortunate for Rip, only provokes “a fresh volley from his wife” (939). Yet Irving’s strategy – and humor – still turns toward the moral by asking readers to evaluate not only their private conception of appropriate behavior but also sin, or in this case, the sin of Rip’s good-natured but altogether unforgivable sloth. While Rip’s vices are something that deserve to be laughed at, they ultimately yield an ambivalence toward Rip as a character whose disposition simultaneously merits sympathy and reprimand.

Instead of meeting his problems head-on or make an effort to better himself, Rip chooses to escape his weaknesses and his wife’s tirades by running “away into the woods,” a setting traditionally reserved for spiritual testing even if Rip is not spiritual person (940). It is here that Irving’s exploration of Protestant conversion begins, for without realizing it, Rip’s departure commits him to the supernatural encounter that will change his life forever. This transformation is not precipitated through grace, however, or

by Rip's desire to repent for his sins, but by his inability to withstand "the ever-during and all-besetting terrors of a woman's tongue" (939). Rip is no persevering saint, and the change that will alter his life forever is brought on by absolutely no effort on his part. Instead, it is sparked by an unusual circumstance and a night of drinking. Encountering Henry Hudson's specter dressed in "the antique Dutch fashion, Rip, "[n]aturally a thirsty soul," secretly steals sips of Hudson's "excellent Hollands" when "no eye was fixed upon him," sips that promote the drunkenness from which he will rise two decades later (941-2). Lazy, and now a thief as well as a drunk, Rip awakens in a state of remorse and "with a heart full of trouble and anxiety" (943). But rather than self-consciously see himself as the cause of his "trouble," the soft-hearted Rip instead ponders the lie he will tell his wife upon his return, more scared of what she will do to him than he is for the state of his soul.

However anxious he may be, Rip no longer needs to justify his behavior. His wife has long been dead and his children are now grown, having apparently never needed their father's presence or moral guidance. In what for most would be a personality-altering experience, Rip returns fundamentally unchanged. Instead, it is "[t]he world around him" that seems "bewitched," transformed beyond the point of Rip's recognition (943). In Rip's world, and Irving's, conversion works a little differently, operating on a much larger national scale rather than only on individuals like Rip. It is Rip's society that has converted, from providence to an emerging new nation, where Irving reframes conversion's importance as something that applies to communities as opposed to only people. And instead of moral reprisal, Rip is rewarded for his transgressions with impunity, his inexplicable experience not only ridding him of his responsibilities but also allowing him to return to "his old walks and habits" and the company of "many of his former cronies" as if nothing has happened (947). Miraculously offered a new chance at life, Rip instead chooses a life much like the one before. His, then, is a conversion in reverse. Given an opportunity to feel remorse and lead a newly productive life, to make amends for his laziness and "meekness of spirit," and to finally see the consequence of his wife's warnings (which were "worth all the sermons in the world"), Rip instead resumes his former haunts and habits, picking up the same lifestyle he has always led and most certainly prefers (938).

Written in a period of growing cultural and national consciousness, Irving's tale,

short and amusing as it is, still tests, through Rip's character and [non-]actions, the degree to which the moral values Rip should have lived by have grown outmoded. In fact, Irving's portrayal of Rip's misadventures seem to advocate the notion that while one's life can fundamentally change, the result does not necessarily entail spiritual and personal insight and growth, but rather, often a continuation of one's private status quo. What *does* change during Rip's slumber is the country itself, which was at the forefront of Irving's imagination as opposed to questions about the final state of Rip's soul. The Dutch colony of Rip's home has "singularly metamorphosed" in a series of transformations that bewilder Rip much as one would expect it did for those living in post-Revolutionary America. The "great tree that used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore" has been replaced by a liberty pole; the "ruby face of King George" in its doorway exchanged for an image of George Washington. While Rip blacked out, the entire country has undergone a collective transformation in which "the very character of people seemed changed." Without realizing it, the American Revolution has come and gone, making Rip's appearance – his "uncouth dress" and "rusty fowling piece" – seem strange, attracting the attention and amazement of "an army of women and children that had gathered at his heels" (944).

The degree to which Rip's community has changed can be measured by how much Rip hasn't. Like Cotton Mather before him, Rip seems outdated, and is considered a relic of the past. But while Rip's personality never develops as a consequence of his supernatural experience, he is still changed in the way others, meaning his new townsmen, define him, which is equally beyond his control. Instead of in the woods, Rip's conversion takes place on the ground and in the eyes of others who impose their collective transformation on Rip through the political and moral standards to which they now hold themselves, rules (like not being a Tory) to which Rip is unfamiliar. Conversion – from British colonist to American citizen – is now a secular and political proposition. Although Rip is the same Rip twenty years later, he is different now because of how a new generation of Americans recognize him. Their assumptions – who he is, where he came from, and why he seems so strange and out of touch – define him, and alter him, more than any spiritual experience. Rip's transformation, in others words, is seated in his community's, which is imposed on the unassuming Rip. In Rip's America, one's identity

and moral constitution may not necessarily matter, especially if one lives in a world where others ultimately determine what is right or wrong as well as who belongs. Rather than the grace of God, it is other people's opinions that determine a subject's fate, his social standing, and his value to his community, an idea that Hawthorne often explored, particularly in *The Scarlet Letter* and in short stories like "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil" – tales in which identity is defined through collective consensus rather than personal effort. Like Hawthorne, Irving similarly suggests that one does not necessarily have to *do* anything to change, whether spiritually or otherwise, because one ultimately lives in a reality of others; in a world of social and historical circumstance that, like a Calvinist's view of his spiritual destiny, are considered beyond the bounds of human control.³

Like the younger Hawthorne, Irving did not have to accept Puritanism's creed or its polity to question and express the same concern for an individual's relationship to his community. But that he explores this issue with an eye to his own time reveals a continuity that, for Irving as an author, translated into a literary framework from which he could present Rip's symbolic (and moral) drama. Upon returning to the village he once knew, Rip is no longer well-liked and easy natured. He is no longer he same "Rip". Instead, Rip is identified as a breeder of "riot in the village," a "spy," and a "refugee" to be done "away with," a characterization that, to Rip, seems "a perfect Babylonian jargon to the bewildered Van Winkle" (940). Rip is a stranger in a familiar land, and is welcome just so long as his story – meaning his account of his who he is – can be verified and so long as he is validated in the eyes of his new community. Like a Christian convert, Rip has experienced something ineffable which has strangely altered him beyond recognition and which he must somehow explain. And this explanation must also be accepted. Rip must *prove* himself to be who he says he is. But because Rip does not have the "jargon" his townsmen require, he is ultimately held in suspicion and forced to explain himself.

From a rhetorical standpoint, Irving's tale reads like a conversion narrative, particularly as a story in which one's ineffable private experiences – whether with grace or as a result of having drank too much "Hollands" – are called on to be described and which, in their telling, must to a large extent conform to an audience's expectation of what is and isn't true. Like the Puritan convert who conveyed his spiritual experiences to

a discerning congregation, or like the evangelical Christian who is summoned by the Holy Spirit to express his religious convictions, Rip is similarly pressed to account for himself and his uncertain supernatural encounter. Unable to describe that which he himself can never know for sure, Rip's subdued reaction in answer to the town's questioning evokes only further distrust and even a little ridicule. “[W]ink[ing] at each other, and put[ting] their tongues in their cheeks” with “a general shaking of the head,” the crowd refuses to accept Rip's experience or his identity, their reaction due, of course, to his story's seeming far-fetchedness (945).

Unable to appease them, Rip finds himself in a communicative and an even deeper existential bind: unable to account for himself and at the mercy of his community to verify what he has gone through in order to be welcomed among them. Irving critiques the ways in which one's society and the collective judgement of one's community can not only control the significance of an individual's experiences but also the identity of the person who has undergone them. Having awakened in what can only be called a living-afterlife, Rip, his personality, and his words, no longer make sense. He no longer commands the meaning to which his language refers. His claim to be “a loyal subject of the King,” delivered with an emphatic “God bless him,” for example, is gravely misunderstood by the “crowd of folk” who question him. Not only is Rip's language considered foreign, but every “answer” the town gives puzzles “him, too,” and lead to “matters which [Rip] could not understand.” Unable to answer as to “whether he was a Federal or Democrat” or “what brought him to the election with a gun on his shoulder” because such questions don't make any sense, Rip finds himself outside his town's communicative framework. Stuck mute, it is now *their* language – and their interpretive gaze – that matters. So even though Rip's supernatural experience hasn't changed him and he is still the same Rip he always used to be, it has nonetheless left Rip “alone in the world” because it has displaced him from the political and symbolic discourses of a post-Revolutionary America whose dimensions – and development – Irving tracks (944-5).

Unable to impart his experience intelligibly, Rip's communicative inadequacy binds him to his community as much as it betrays his dissonance from their cultural norms. It is through this paradox – and through his townsmen especially – that Rip Van Winkle is reborn. Inhabiting a realm outside the bounds of intelligible discourse, Rip's transition

from Dutch colonist to newly-minted American is contingent on those who hear, judge, and believe his story. He can only be Rip Van Winkle if they say so. Without the town's confirmation, Rip would continue to be a stranger and outcast. Who he is, and who Rip becomes, then, are concepts inextricably connected to his experience which, while having no direct effect on Rip's personality, nevertheless alters him beyond recognition. As such, Irving shows the degree to which effective communication (and other people) plays a role in the creation and dissemination of self-identity, a notion that, to Irving, fluctuates because it is ultimately determined by the symbolic: by language and its presentation. This concern resides at the center of "Rip Van Winkle" and is reflected in the story's opening epigraph, which remind readers how "[e]very change of season, every change of weather, [and] indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change," or in other words, that meaning (and so experience) is a forever-fluctuating proposition (937).

From the story's beginning, Irving suggests that transition and transformation, and history, are a natural and irrepressible part of life. Someone like Rip does not necessarily have to be conscious of the transformation he has experienced – nor does he have to experience a bona fide conversion – in order for true change to take hold. This idea suggests, and lampoons, the significance of what has happened while Rip was asleep. From a political standpoint, Rip's country has changed. But if this has no bearing on who Rip is as a person, then how notable *is* this transformation? The answer, Irving suggests, rests in how individuals accommodate to change, how they regard it, which becomes its substance. Because Rip represents continuity, he is impervious to this change, proving his irrelevance to the evolving context of his society who identify Rip through the change they (rather than Rip) have experienced. Sensing how his very being, and perhaps even his safety, rests on the perceptions of how others regard both him and his tale, a speechless Rip can only "cry out in despair" as a man now forced to question not only what he has undergone but also "his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man" (945).

But while his experience has put Rip at a distance from his community and himself, it also connects Rip to his townsmen through the determination they are forced to make upon his arrival. Having finally gained their favor, Rip's new identity is established, new in that the town's reluctant acceptance of his account endows Rip with a symbolic

resonance that transforms him from shiftless husband to a token of both the past and the supernatural. Although he is still the same old Rip, Rip still undergoes a secular form of regeneration. He becomes a living representation of “old Dutch inhabitants,” “the old times before the war,” and “Hendrik Hudson and his crew” – concepts that help establish the town's identity in its relation to its past even if Rip is regarded as mere novelty (947).

As “Rip Van Winkle” concludes, we learn that, in time, Rip becomes a man indistinguishable from his experience and its story. His life takes the shape of a narrative, and his identity becomes an epitome of the experience his tale connotes, a tale whose evidence is, of course, unaccountable. While Rip is certainly no Christian convert, and while the Protestant or even the spiritual dimensions of Irving's story are latent, he too stands out as exceptional as a member of his community whose supernatural experience and its re-telling defines him absolutely. Having considered this process, Irving redraws the semantic and symbolic link encompassing the rhetorical parameters of any personal account, thereby suggesting that language is never static, its meaning often changing in course of a single night. Now, instead of declaring allegiance to “Old England” and “his Majesty George the Third,” Rip must adapt to unavoidable change by regarding these phrases a “species of despotism” as he is obligated to the evolving political and social circumstances of his time of which he understands very little (947).

Through a care-free humor that reflects Rip's lighthearted personality, “Rip Van Winkle” examines identity in relation to time, language, and society, and offers it as an entity contingent on these abstractions within the context of early 19th century America. Although moral laxity doesn't seem to come in the way of citizenship in Rip's new world, something Irving may have in fact been criticizing, being “a free citizen of the United States” ironically means living in country where words (and how they are interpreted) govern not only an individual's relationship to his community but also who a person is. Asking in earnest whether anyone “know[s] poor Rip Van Winkle?,” Rip is finally granted a place within society only after his story is “corroborated . . . in the most satisfactory manner” – after “Peter Vanderdonk” verifies the plausibility of his account. Listening to Rip's tale, it is Vanderdonk who reminds the town of Hudson's legend who, in the region's lore, was purported “to keep a guardian eye” on the town's inhabitants. Vanderdonk suggests that it may have been Hudson's specter who is responsible for Rip's

otherwise unaccountable experience. Beginning to see Rip's experience as plausible, particularly in its association with the Hudson legend, the town disperses, returning to more pressing matters. Rip's story finally makes a little sense, his words matching their idea (and ideal) of the vigil Hudson's ghost keeps "every twenty years, with his crew of the Half-moon," and it is through this association that Rip's encounter becomes the stuff of legend – and literature (945).

One can justify reading "*Rip Van Winkle*" as a conversion narrative – or a short story that deals explicitly with conversion – because, in the end, Rip undergoes a striking personal transformation that, at the same time, leaves him no different than before. What changes, however, is that Rip's experience has endowed his life with a symbolic resonance it never had before, one in which Rip is reborn, through the estimation of others, into a town patriarch and emblem of the past. While his is not a religious conversion per se, Rip's life still alters significantly. It takes on an almost literary quality, where his identity is refigured to inhabit a metaphorical existence indistinguishable from the words he uses to describe his encounter. Readers can therefore argue for "*Rip Van Winkle*" as a conversion narrative in how Irving works to erase the boundaries between Rip and his supernatural experience, which is suggested by the story's title. Ultimately, "*Rip Van Winkle*" is a tale of an inexplicable experience retold and its impact on an individual and his community. Whereas it did not before, Rip's life now straddles the realms of actual experience, history, myth, and interpretation – concepts equally germane to the emerging nation and the context in which Irving wrote. Through an unassuming Rip, Irving's critique offers readers the quasi-ambivalent assessment, one that Melville took up extensively, that individuals can only be what they seem to be or what people say they are, real only in so far as their self-characterization is regarded as true. Having been thoroughly questioned, Rip is finally accepted within his new community on a provisional basis. Many still "doubt the reality of" his story (947). And so, his tale becomes emblematic of, just as it questions, the stability of truth itself, especially in terms of how one distinguishes the facts of experience from their retelling.

That this is "*Rip Van Winkle's*" moral outcome, or that Irving's tale even has a moral, shouldn't surprise readers. Indeed it is hinted at in the story's preface, where readers are reassured how the tale to follow is authentic in its "literary character." Not

only that, but its narrator implores that “Rip Van Winkle” be regarded for its “scrupulous accuracy,” particularly as “a book of unquestionable authority.” Right away readers are confronted with questions of truth and its accuracy. We can only assume that Irving's satire here was certainly not lost on his readers who knew that “the late Diedrich Knickerbocker,” in whose papers “Rip Van Winkle” was said to be found, was the same narrator for Irving's *History of New York* (1809), a series satirical sketches in which Irving merged (and most would agree rather irreverently) history, myth, and local color to form the substance of his fiction (936).⁴

Irving's readers thus knew that, as a fictional history, “Rip Van Winkle” wasn't scrupulously accurate at all, which was the butt of Irving's joke. But even if it is, at heart, an amusing tale that, for good reason, has become a mainstay of the American literary canon, “Rip Van Winkle” takes itself seriously enough to ask readers to contemplate the limitations of historical representation as part of the *History*. It repeatedly interrogates words like “unquestionable authority” and “accuracy,” as well as concepts like identity and nation, in terms of what they may mean in a world, Irving's world, where accounts of the past and the fabric of present seemed unstable at best. Like the moment of Rip's self-accounting, Irving explores the foundation of human belief. He examines the basis of how something becomes real, and more, how newly-minted Americans like Rip *become*, both privately and in the estimation of others.

In this one can again trace “Rip Van Winkle's” considerations to those intrinsic to accounts of religious conversion, especially in terms of what comprises a spiritual conversion and how a convert comes to be seen as authentic. Just as the burden of proving faith is the task of any conversion narrative or author of any personal narrative, Rip's story must also seem credible if it is to be believed. Recording in his *Diary* the spiritual experiences of his Malden, Massachusetts congregation, Micheal Wigglesworth embodies perfectly the ambivalence in which Puritan congregations were placed when accounting for the legitimacy of a convert's religious conviction. Terrorized by the idea that in the push to draw oneself “near to God” one becomes induced to “pretending of [his] own heart,” Wigglesworth points to the near-impossibility of relying on words to account for spiritual experiences, particularly when used to establish the depth of a believer's piety (29). For Wigglesworth, to describe one's conversion and conviction in

Christ as a requirement of church membership was a double-edged sword, for “while confessing and shaming myself before God for my pride and sensuality, and security, even then,” Wigglesworth notes, “the pride of God’s gifts ariseth” (100). Wigglesworth felt that words, which men easily distort, can never be trusted even if they are the only way of accounting for oneself and one’s faith since human pride, and man’s capacity to deceive himself, can never be escaped. How, then, Wigglesworth asks, are converts to establish their faith; how are observers to believe a story ultimately rooted in private experience?

While we know Irving was hardly the religious figure Wigglesworth was, his framing of Rip’s story around its telling purposefully attempts to call attention to the credibility of language in order to test the limits of what can be known. By reading the tale, readers submit to Irving’s design, which asks them to push aside – or at least momentarily suspend – how they think about concepts like “absolute,” “well-authenticated,” and “unquestionable,” as Irving confuses the lines between fact and fiction. Like Rip’s new townsmen, readers must also “put their tongues in their cheeks” and screw “down the corners of their mouths” as the mythical and historical background informing Rip’s experience – and “Rip Van Winkle” itself – keep them from entirely rejecting the story’s fictionality, particularly since “the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings” (946). As readers, are we all that different from Ichabod Crane? For we, too, play a part in bringing Rip’s character to life if only for as long as we read his story, just as Crane brought Mather to life as he turned the pages of Mather’s history.

As a short story, “Rip Van Winkle” challenges our ideas of how identity is constructed, the reach and limitations of conversion in a 19th century world, and the frontier of what can and cannot be known. As such, it would be careless to see it as a text written only for amusement and ignore the ways Irving evokes these questions, ones stemming from a tradition of Protestant conversion, to influence and complicate his work even if it is, at times, at the expense of making a joke. While Irving never openly admitted that he was thinking about America’s Puritan past and its religious culture as factors essential to “Rip Van Winkle’s” thematic and theoretical energies, his reliance on it to present his story’s underlaying issues, such as what it means to be a member of

American society when the nation has been founded on easily exchangeable terms, should still be carefully regarded, particularly if it provides us a fresh way of assessing this classic text. Although Irving never delves directly into religious matters, he still addresses conversion on a much larger, national scale as a concept that can not only be useful from a political, secular, and ontological standpoint, but also how regeneration in 19th century America is a process equally contingent on others as it is on one's own experiences.

[3]

In contrast to Washington Irving, Herman Melville never hid, particularly in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” just how much he believed “a touch of Puritan gloom” and its appeal “to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin” could enhance the subtlety of a literary work (520-1). A metaphysician of the soul, Melville felt that early New England could teach 19th century Americans something about themselves – something resonant, and deep, and undeniable. In “Mosses,” Melville urges readers to see Puritanism's moral, spiritual, and ontological calculus as something of which “no deeply thinking mind is wholly free,” thus making a case for Puritan theology's relevance to American thought. For Melville, it was Calvinism's “mystical blackness” that fascinated him most. So much so, that he felt if one were to seriously want to “weigh this world” honestly, “no man” could do so “without throwing in something somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance” (521).

To Melville, Puritanism's “black conceit” proved how the world was often “uneven” and oxymoronic (521). And as we know, *Moby-Dick* possess a great deal of Puritanism's blackness. Yet there have been few studies that focus exclusively on how Puritan culture absorbed Melville's imagination and influenced his art. Although a handful of scholars, Ilana Pardes most recently, have commented on Melville's biblicalism and religious background, they have not shown how Melville's best-known work both interrogates as well as embraces Puritan doctrine as a specter that informs and haunts *Moby-Dick*, more, perhaps, than any other consideration.⁵ According to Pardes, part of Melville's ambition in authoring *Moby-Dick* was to “reinvent the Bible,” and biblical exegesis, by “open[ing] up the question of what counts as Bible and what counts as

interpretation” (1). In an antebellum period in which Emerson wrote that it was high time Americans should have a Bible that should be no provincial record, but should open the history of the planet, Melville questioned the stability of concepts like faith and salvation by repeatedly placing them in a series of revolving discourses that unsettled any sense of their absolute meaning. As a man whose family “was steeped in Calvinist traditions on both sides,” Melville explored the meaning of Christianity as well as conversion's true path, often to the ire and dismay of his reading audience (11-2).

A novel as all-encompassing as the symbolism behind the white whale himself, *Moby-Dick*'s reach was not limited to Melville's culture even though this may have been what absorbed him the most. To eagle-eyed readers, Puritan spirituality, its attitude toward conversion, and the theology that informed this attitude were as much on Melville's mind when he wrote *Moby-Dick* as anything else. To approach this classic text along such a line is a useful way of grounding it. But because it is such an encyclopedic text, I have limited my focus here to the novel's first nine chapters, which ends with Father Mapple's stirring sermon on, of all things, conversion, with the hope that my analysis will induce others to continue to explore the impact of Puritan thought and spiritual practice on Melville's work.

When *Moby-Dick* closes, audiences often find themselves wondering toward what end Ishmael's venture has led. As the novel's “Epilogue” tells us, “[t]he drama's done” and Ishmael, the only one to “survive the wreck,” has returned to dry land (427). “Done”? It seems at this point the drama has just *started*. Ishmael has escaped disaster, and now sits to begin – rather than end – the story that has just been told. For Melville, nothing is sacred, and so, beginnings and endings are also terms that deserve a closer look as the “Epilogue” confuses the distinction between the two, effectively leaving readers back to where they began. According to T. Walter Herbert, this can be read as simply another way Melville “establishes and disestablishes the reader's relation to his narrative,” where “at every point we find ourselves struggling to find a framework in which to place what is being said.” To Herbert, *Moby-Dick* “challenges us to join a revitalized conversation” so as to force readers into a new way of thinking about old concepts by evoking “ultimate reality itself as a zone of tumult” which, to Melville, was seen as a fundamentally religious insight as well as endeavor” (“Calvinist Earthquake” 114-5).

Melville draws us, then, toward religious struggle from the novel's outset, fusing art with the spiritual and the secular with the sacred. This is clear as Ishmael opens his account and explains how his experiences aboard the *Pequod* have "swung open" for him "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world." In other words, what was once closed-off to Ishmael is now "open" as a result of his voyage, though what has precisely been gained is left unexplained. Despite this ambiguity, Ishmael's statement still suggests that he has experienced an epiphany – that what he has gone through has opened his eyes and granted him a new sense of seeing the world. And the more he tells us, the more it seems that he has arrived at a metaphysical insight in particular. As Ishmael sits to "recall all the circumstances" of his expedition, he explains that he has learned a valuable lesson about life's "springs and motives." He has realized that he is not in control of his fate, understanding that his decision to take "part of a whaling voyage" was never "a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgement," but rather, a consequence of some inconceivable force. Ishmael's voyage has apparently turned him into a fatalist – into a person who is perfectly happy to relinquish himself to whatever "those stage managers, the Fates" assign him. *Moby-Dick* begins, and ends, in other words, with Ishamel finding his religion (22).

Ishmael's account, meaning the novel itself, bears witness to this process. And now, having survived the *Pequod's* destruction, Ishmael offers his story as lone survivor, trying to better comprehend the extent of what he has experienced. Whatever this may be, Ishmael is convinced that his voyage was "doubtless" formed as "part of the grand program of Providence," one "drawn up a long time ago." Carried to shore, he now finds himself "swayed," just as he was prompted to leave land in the first place, to the purpose of accounting for Providence's program whose power "secretly dogs and influences" him in "unaccountable ways" (21-2).

It makes sense, then, to think about *Moby-Dick* as Ishmael's attempt to narrate the "unaccountable." Ishmael seeks to qualify his experience – to share it with others so that they, too, may perhaps be able to explain what Providence "can better answer than anyone else" (22). Ishmael's narrative objective consequently fits within a 19th century evangelical scheme that placed particular emphasis on the place of atonement in the overall pattern of theology where redemption is marked by a starting point of ruin

(Bebbington 236). Beginning with the sense of destruction and survival, *Moby-Dick* is precipitated by the same soteriological impulse that inspired not only Melville's Christian contemporaries but also Puritan converts who offered to others the most important moments of their spiritual lives. Involving readers in his adventure, Ishmael wants them to understand the rationale (or share in the metaphysical ambiguity) behind his journey and return. He wants them to listen to his experiences and to validate it, if possible, so as to escape the notion of the universe's impartiality toward him – that despite “the great shroud of the sea” rolling “on as it rolled five thousand years ago,” his journey marks something real (426).

But like a Puritan convert who narrated his personal tale of sin and redemption without knowing with complete certainty whether he had been stationed to serve as God's elect, Ishmael (and readers) can only guess at the significance of his adventure. Perhaps his attempt is all that matters. Discussing 19th century American fiction, Edward H. Davidson has written how Melville was a writer “whose imagination might be regarded as religious but whose temper has long removed him from any doctrinal or dogmatic religious content.” At the time when Melville was writing, the religious residue of an older Calvinism, according to Davidson, was being exhibited in a clash between the intellect and the soul where, throughout this tension, New England churches and many leading thinkers began to place the doctrine of salvation not on God but in the human will (65). Ishmael's openings statement, as well as *Moby-Dick* as a whole, suggests that Melville was skeptical of such an outlook. In fact, his professional career took on the contention and credo that men “are endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights,” of which the capacity to have answers for spiritual questions was increasingly one, by appealing to an orthodox Calvinist logic that held that realities of human experience, particularly as pertaining to one's fate, couldn't be explained. Melville believed that a world that placed final power in the percipient self was a world without moral bounds. For if ethical responsibility rested solely on men, the measure of this responsibility would no longer be capable of assessment since such a measure, in any final analysis, would become contingent on an individual's moral calculus.

Melville was weary of man's epistemic capacity. At the same time, he conceded that the world was man's to judge, even if this meant that spiritual realities were beyond the

jurisdiction of his judgements. If Melville sided with Calvinism as Herbert has suggested, then he did so by conveying a reality that is innately turbulent, in notable contrast with the secularization of rational and moral order (“Calvinist Earthquake” 113). While he may have felt that humans were not wholly lost in their depravity, Melville knew that they were still incapable of choosing between good and evil, just as Ishmael's choice to go to sea was never a result of his own freewill. Ishmael's accounting tests this theory as an attempt to better understand the consequences of his adventure and the degree of his agency vis-a-vis Providence's program. Accordingly, his narrative not only gives testimony to his own struggle to discern the meaning of his experiences but also to Melville's struggle against newer liberal religious formulations set on depositing the old. Although a tale about an ill-fated whaling voyage, *Moby-Dick* is also a story about personal discovery and human choice. It is an exploration about the level to which humans can grasp the unfathomable universe and the world's will toward them.

As the first chapter begins, readers find Ishmael fighting to discover how Providence not-so-secretly “influences” him. Prepared to describe his experiences aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael's narrative serves as a simulacrum of religious action and fulfillment: of the search to understand how Providence works in man's life. In this Melville's novel demonstrates its alignment with the Puritan view that men had to wrestle with the higher significance of their experiences, and more, that assurance was always a concept to be sought after rather than the Christian's right. This view is in contrast with those who read Melville's work as blasphemous or, at the very least, outside the bounds of religious orthodoxy. John Parke, for example, has observed how “Melville, in dealing with the problem of fate,” did so “completely outside a Christian frame of reference,” where Melville's “depiction of a universe both godless and purposeless was, and he knew it, a blasphemy from the point of view of orthodoxy” (93).

Parke's assertion is inconsistent with *Moby-Dick*'s opening chapters however, which are steeped in an ideology that can only, and appropriately, be called Calvinist. For even though Ishmael felt an urge “to go on a whaling voyage,” he admits being mostly compelled by an unseen force – an “invisible police” – that prodded him. In fact, like a devout Calvinist convert, Ishmael relinquishes his volition to fate and to the idea that his destiny as part of the *Pequod*'s crew had been preordained. After all, “[w]ho ain't a

slave?" to one's fate, Ishmael pointedly asks, where his acceptance of the inevitable, which includes his penchant to author his account, serves as a moral and metaphysical compass within which "everybody else is one way or another served." In contrast to Parke's viewpoint, Melville's universe is anything but purposeless. For even though Ishmael finds it difficult to discern the universe's motives, he still places his faith in God's program and in fate as a means of ontological balance. As the "one" that "did survive the wreck" and who, like Job, must confront and accept disaster as a test and testament to faith, Ishmael attributes his final deliverance, and his destiny, to a force beyond his explanation. This force itself becomes an explanation: not only for Ishmael's voyage and his decision to go, but also for "the universal thump" that, to Ishmael, seems "passed round" to "all hands" (20-1).

In dealing with fate, Ishmael does so within an unmistakably Calvinist outlook, one that posits indeterminacy as a central doctrine. While Melville's reference to Calvinism isn't direct, it is still quite clear. Like the Puritan devout who was "left to wonder at the boundless mercy of the Lord," and in wondering, found "some beams of Himself," Ishmael offers the "ungraspable" as a "key to it all," positing uncertainty as the basis of assurance (*Confessions* 88; *Moby-Dick* 20). The chapters that follow "Loomings" can therefore be interpreted as an account that unveils Ishmael's arrival at this conviction. As such, *Moby-Dick* is (as much as anything else) an account of Ishmael's arrival at insight – a conversion narrative he sets himself down to write. As if a convert prompted by faith to relate his arrival at spiritual conviction, Ishmael is "tormented with an everlasting itch" to share the harvest of his trials and exploits. As readers, we therefore know that there is far more to Ishmael's narrative than it being a sea-yarn about "paying and being paid," "wholesome exercise," and "pure air" (21-2). Instead, we are confronted at the story's outset by the idea that Ishmael's spirituality – and from the novel's first line, his "calling" – is on the line. How Ishmael got to this point thus becomes the creative impetus behind his account's design.

Having survived his perilous journey, Ishmael begins his narrative at his journey's end and with the notion of what he has become. "Call me Ishmael" (18), he famously declares, his demand requiring readers to merge his identity with his biblical namesake, a figuration readers must continue to assess as he develops his tale. But the association is

apt. Just as Ishmael and his mother Hager were protected by God's angel, Ishmael has also been chosen (by the "Fates") to be saved as his narrative paints a picture, and perhaps more subtly presents an argument, as to why this may have been the case. Having been rescued by the *Rachel* certainly helps show Providence's affection for him where Ishmael, having been miraculously "[b]uoyed up by that coffin for almost one whole day and night," is finally redeemed as one of "her missing children" (427). But at the same time, Ishmael's calling also implies irresolution and uncertainty. Through implication our Ishmael is a wanderer without a home, however buoyed up or lost – and found – he may be. His redemption is informed by fluidity rather than steadiness, and is as uncertain as Ishmael's true identity or even the reason why he has set out to tell his story in the first place.

Having "escaped alone" like Job "to tell" readers of the moments leading to his deliverance at the *Rachel's* hands and to his subsequent arrival at spiritual conviction, Ishmael brings them along his narrative with the sense they are seeking answers to the questions he sets out in the novel's first lines, beginning with the idea of how he (now) sees himself – with how Ishmael wishes to be identified (427). As a wanderer, Ishmael's experiences aboard the *Pequod* have led him to his name. Yet this calling must be accounted for, and it must be done so in connection with Ishmael's new metaphysical outlook, one where assurance and uncertainty can be spoken in the same breath. Of the many things it is, *Moby-Dick* is therefore also an exhibition of rhetorical persuasion that seeks to convince its readers of Ismael's literal and figurative calling. Ishmael wants to establish his identity and his faith. Whether he accomplishes this or not is, of course, left for readers to decide, where his narrative is poised, like any conversion narrative, at convincing an audience of the new self its narrator believes he has become.

In *Moby-Dick*, our narrator has become Ishmael, and his text bears witness to this ontological arrival as it offers a symphony of voices that attest to its narrator's personal evolution. As a story of personal transformation, *Moby-Dick* is driven by the same impulse propelling all personal disclosure, namely, to set down the facts of experience so that audiences may test an author's character against his encounters. Part of what makes his story convincing is the way Ishmael has given himself a head-start over his readers. Although his narrative sets out to clarify the terms of his calling, Ishmael has also

resigned himself to the fact that much of it is beyond his capacity to explain; that it is Providence's show from the start. Once again resembling the Puritan convert who described how he came to possess, though never with absolute certainty, grace's assurance, Ishmael places himself in the equally impossible position of trying to impart what he has already conceded as ungraspable.

As we can see, Melville's art invites interpretations rather than answering them. In this sense, it resembles Hawthorne's writing. In *Mosses*, Melville admitted to his mentor that readers seeking a comprehensive understanding of his work would be left ultimately unsatisfied in their search. Like Hawthorne, Melville rested on symbolic subtlety to generate multiple meanings. The significance of things, including Ishmael's name or the function of his narrative, are "not obtruded upon everyone alike." Instead, they are "insinuated to those who may best understand it, and account for it." Melville felt that the answer to life's questions, if they came at all, arrived through epiphanic (and we may say spiritual) moments – "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive [t]ruth" – rather than through "quick probings" ("Mosses" 523). For Melville, human understanding was a sacred and personal matter that could always be qualified as an uncertain struggle, at best.

As he pushed against the view that, as rational creatures and moral beings, men were endowed with the capacity to meet their Maker as well as choose between right and wrong, Melville offered human instinct and experience, rather than the intellect, as moral barometers. As he explained in "Mosses," readers "cannot come to know" someone like Ishmael or the greater import of his experiences simply "by inspecting it" because "there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition" (522). As such, Ishmael invites his readers to administer the same rules of engagement they would apply to any conversion narrative, where those who can "account for" it – those who have undergone a similar set of experiences – are those who can "best understand" the meaning of Ishmael's words. This position should give readers additional reason to ground the novel, and its overarching themes, within a discourse not only of narrative disclosure but also of spiritual confession. If the white whale is the text of Melville's sermon, Ishmael's experiences are its application, where readers are guided through Ishmael's passage from his soul's drizzly November to its final redemption at the hands of the *Rachel*.

Playing the role of both narrator and subject of his own story, Ishmael delivers his

account through a dialectical motif of journey and return, wreckage and rescue, that merges *Moby-Dick's* beginning and end into a never-ending continuum. In doing so, he frames his account as a Puritan would his conversion narrative – as a text that both edifies and explains the process of spiritual testing and accomplishment. This dialectic forms a common trope from which *Moby-Dick's* narrative set-pieces revolve, which makes it no coincidence that the images of death and mortality represented in “Loomings” by the “coffin warehouses” Ishmael finds himself “involuntarily pausing before” should reemerge as the coffin life-buoy that finally saves him (18).

As readers may know, this type of opposition is endemic to Thomas Shepard's *Confessions* and well as most other Protestant-Calvinist conversion narratives, where contrasting notions of anxiety and assurance or uncertainty and conviction (and of course sin and redemption) preside as vital narrative formulations. *Moby-Dick* makes ready use of these oppositions: in Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah, for instance, in a dialectic that replicates in small Ishmael's departure and return. These energies generate ambiguity, however, one that pervades Ishamel's account, and by extension, the question of his ontological arrival as a whole, one whose balance Melville leaves for readers to weigh. For while one can argue that Ishmael has indeed undergone a form of personal transformation as a result of his experiences at sea, one still wonders: toward what end? As a perpetual wanderer and outcast son, Ishmael both occupies and represents an “anomalous position on the boundary line separating God's chosen people from the rest of mankind,” one that therefore “undermines the religious claim making that boundary absolute,” as Herbert has remarked ('*Moby-Dick*' and Calvinism 54).

But more than simply undermine, Ishmael's identity reformulates traditional religious boundaries as fluid, and thus, as uncertain, just as *Moby-Dick's* opening presents Ishmael's deliverance and ultimate redemption as a process still set in motion. Ishmael's rescue inspires him to impart his narrative. But as we know, this only leads back to his eventual rescue, which in turn anticipates his story's beginning and which leaves Ishmael's final deliverance, and so *Moby-Dick* as a whole, in an indeterminate dialectical loop.

One cannot help but wonder if this is Melville's idea of rescue and redemption? If so, then we see how Melville's art truly is imbued with Puritanism's power of blackness,

which similarly saw regeneration as a fluid and undetermined process. While speaking of a “desire to dwell [in heaven] all days of my life,” 17th century Puritan converts like Mary Angier typically confessed that they were unsure as to their regeneration’s completion, an uncertainty that kept them working continuously toward Christ’s example (*Confessions* 171).⁶ Like Ishmael’s never-ending narrative that takes him (and his readers) out to sea and back to land, conversion, for Bay colony Puritans, was a work forever in progress, and Ishmael’s account, its significance, and the consequence of its telling, is no less enigmatic. *Moby-Dick*’s narrative structure consequently illuminates Melville’s sympathy for a traditional religious outlook, one that in fact facilitates the telling of Ishmael’s story – an outlook that poses reality as indefinite, and where ultimate truth is always beyond all formulation.

In terms of its composition, *Moby-Dick* can consequently be read as an analog for the type confessional experience to which Puritan and later Calvinist-minded Protestants testified. Discussing *Moby-Dick*’s construction, Walter E. Bezanson asks readers to imagine Ishmael “at his desk trying to explain himself to himself and to whoever will listen” as he sifts “through memory and imagination in search of the many meanings of the dark adventure he has experienced.” Bezanson argues that because Ishmael admits early on to being unable to understand the full import, motives, and springs of his experience, he relies on his *audience* to gather the significance of his words just as he places his own understanding in the Fates (645). If Ishmael really is a fatalist, then it makes sense that *all* individuals – his readers included – are part of the voyage he is about to both take and relate. It is this reliance on and inclusion of his readers that reaffirms *Moby-Dick* as “antiprogressive” in form as an account that, like the Puritan’s persistent call to search his soul, repeatedly shows its hero meeting “himself, over and over again” just as readers are invited to see something of themselves in the ocean in which Ishmael sets sail (Fish 229-30).

Following Ishmael on his journey, readers are beholden to the interpretive process just as Ishmael is over and over again. His narrative’s authority is therefore contingent on the many meanings it engenders. As is the case for the doubloon Ahab nails to the *Pequod*’s mast or the meaning of Pip’s incomprehensible speech, readers find ever-deeper meanings within the omens and portents of Ishmael’s account, which in turn forces it to

inhabit a subjective – and often obscure – existence. This leaves Ishmael's account – and its resolution – in limbo, just as Puritan conversion narratives denoted faith's unfolding as a recurrent pattern of gain, failure, anxiety over this failure, and a sense of uneasy fulfillment in the knowledge that perhaps something has been gained in the venture after all. Just what, of course, remains uncertain, and this haziness casts the orbit around which *Moby-Dick* revolves, as Melville offers open-endedness and interpretive struggle as one's only basis of assurance.

Life, which includes concepts like identity, faith, and personal redemption, are ambiguous – both unknowable and ever-open to interpretation. Like the sea, readers are drawn into *Moby-Dick's* expansiveness and potential, seeing something of themselves in it just as Ishmael has set himself to trying to rehash the metaphysical significance of his trip. In this, Ishmael's account merges private experience with a greater public understanding through the interpretative process it invites. And so it reminds us again of the conversion narrative as a story of one man's personal (and spiritual) experiences which, at the same time, as particular as they may be, can still be applied to anyone. Ishmael makes no qualms about this reading. From the first, he asks readers to delve deeply into his story – not for its significance, but rather, for the universal and cosmic value it may bring, and in “Loomings,” he makes an effort to make readers feel a personal connection between his experiences and their own. He reminds them, for example, how they too “cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the ocean” as he; that they too hear the call of “pistol and ball” in response to life when it no longer holds particular interest; they too “pace straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive,” just as “you yourself” also “feel such a mystical vibration” when contemplating the sea. Like Ishmael, “[t]housands upon thousands of mortal men” are also undoubtably “fixed in ocean reveries” – they too are susceptible to the universe's impartial thumping (20-1).

Whether they realize it or not, readers take part in Ishmael's adventure and his moral outlook, helping him to realize the identity his account seeks to establish. As such, “the preparatory activity that had been an individual . . . concern” to the Puritan convert and that mirrored, in small, his spiritual community's “broader social concerns” through his narrative re-telling, is itself mirrored through Ishmael's appeal for readers to see their own story in his (Pettit 87). Readers are similarly asked to consider their lives (and even

their morality) in the context of the narrator's. It is in this sense that Bezanson has argued that “[t]o ask what [*Moby-Dick*] means is really to ask what it is about, and to ask what it is about is in turn to ask how art works” as well as how Ishmael's narrative is constructed. Instead of asking what Ishmael's experiences amount to, Bezanson suggests that readers should alternatively look to the novel's structure since “the way a thing is said” is often the very thing that *is* being said, for “[t]o the maker the form is completion; to the receiver it is possibility” (641).

There is no doubt that considering *Moby-Dick's* construction can provide a key to what Melville may be saying. As a close reading of the novel's opening chapters reveals, at least one thing he was saying was that art could and should mimic life. Both must somehow be cogent and ungraspable; both must be clear and equivocal, positive and uncertain. It is the novel's narrative structure, then, that most powerfully captures Melville's debt to the conversion narrative. Through it, Melville approximates the experience of the typical Calvinist convert. Beginning his narrative by describing the emotional turmoil and general sense of melancholy he feels, Ishmael conveys his inclination “to get to sea as soon as I can,” a desire that ends, of course, with him right back where he started. “Growing grim about the mouth,” Ishmael “account[s] it high time” to “quietly take to ship” with a “philosophical flourish” that, readers assume, will help quell his appetite for “pistol and ball.” Ishmael's account therefore commences (without anything having yet happened) with a pervasive feeling of unsettledness and “hypos” its narrator – and so, his narrative's objective – is seeking to resolve. The exploits that follow are pregnant with possibility as opportunities from which Ishmael may find a cure for the intolerable “November” of his soul. Using restlessness as a motivation to seek its solution, he sets out to “see the watery part of the world” as a way “of driving off the spleen,” all while Ishmael reminds readers that they share “nearly the same feelings” (18).

In this, *Moby-Dick's* opening chapters chart the uneasy affective turns Puritan narrators used to describe their conversions, where regeneration is similarly characterized as a series of advances and retreats, and assurances and doubts, driven by the same impulse Ishmael has of wanting to cure his existential uneasiness with its attendant ambiguities. The way Ishmael processes his experiences mirrors the Puritan's,

particularly in his need for metaphysical clarity. Ordered into chapters, the events Ishmael outlines represent an opportunity for remedy – for a chance for his soul to return to normalcy. But as we also see in the Puritan conversion narrative, while Ishmael's encounters offer a chance for understanding and fulfillment, they also make room for disappointment. This tension and dialectic moves Ishmael's account forward, pushing him toward the ocean (and hopefully the cure) he seeks. It also forms the structure of the chapters themselves, where the tension between experience and the possibility of restoration presented by Ishmael's encounters is carried out through the novel's narrative trajectory: the way Ishmael takes his audience from his thoughts in “Loomings” out into the street and into the public sphere in “The Carpet Bag” (Chapter 2), for example.

This articulation of experience as a pendulum-like pattern always set in motion, always moving forward and back, is repeated in *Moby-Dick*'s early chapters and marked by Ishmael's physical and psychological movement, which Melville represents as a series of “ins” and “outs.” These replicate and reinforce *Moby-Dick*'s sustained ambiguity and dialectical course. Yet they also point directly to Melville's reliance on Puritan doctrine in order to tell Ishmael's story. This story – which has been established as being both Ishmael's and our own – is qualified by the same emotional valences Puritans used to vocalize their faith and their hope for salvation. That is to say, Melville incorporates Puritanism's understanding of religious conviction and conversion, one characterized by a mixed series of assurances and doubts that left believers in a perpetually-hesitant state, as an expressive conveyor with which he uses to propel Ishmael's narrative forward, and back. In doing so, he not only engages but wholly absorbs readers into a motif of spiritual movement first described by New England's Puritan settlers, assimilating their religious practice and cultural norms into the fabric of his text.

As we have seen, this motif – of inward contemplation and outward action, of incident, involvement, and its retelling – opens Ishmael's story, which begins with a deeply-meditative (and highly personal) inward-glancing turn that, alternatively, applies not only to “thousands of mortal men” but is also powerful enough to drive Ishmael “out” to sea (18). From its outset, *Moby-Dick* begins from a starting point that utilizes the Puritanism's doctrinal emphasis on conversion's affective pattern whereby believers expressed an inward apprehension that revolved around their outward and openly-

declared hopes for assurance. This model forms the basic structure and informs the content of Ishmael's narrative as readers follow Ishmael story in a way that approximates the spiritual experience Puritan converts underwent. Having admitted his reasons for wanting to depart, Ishmael, like the sincere convert who confessed his early misdeeds in an effort to repudiate them, puts his private thoughts on display. Stuffing “a shirt or two into my old carpet-bag,” a symbol that reinforces Ishmael's dynamism and his narrative's penchant for movement, Ishmael finds himself (in Chapter 2) immediately “disappointed” upon arriving in New Bedford, having learned “that the little packet for Nantucket had already sailed.” His adventure has abruptly come to halt before it has even started. And with “no way of reaching that place . . . till the following Monday,” Ishmael's progress and venture toward metaphysical clarity has been impeded for the moment (23).

Ishmael's inner “concernment” is mirrored by the empty and “dreary” New Bedford “street,” which seems ironic since, as an important whaling center, New Bedford boasts the “most young candidates for the pains and penalties of whaling.” In a town usually full of men, Ishmael is alone – forced, “with halting steps,” to loom New Bedford looking for warmth and companionship. This isolation and the contrast it represents from the normally populated streets is further intensified by Ishmael's unfamiliarity with the town. He knows “no one in the place,” and this makes him feel even more “anxious” and alone, as the “dubious-looking . . . dark and dismal night” that is “biting cold, and cheerless” deepen his concerns. Ishmael's dejection sharply diverges from the “expensive and jolly” mood and “the bright red windows” of the two inns he passes, whose “broad glare” drives Ishmael back into the “all but deserted” streets (23).

Although “The Carpet-bag” is a short and seemingly insignificant chapter, readers can still notice how it presents Ishmael's account as a narrative rife with opposition, as the narrative point Ishmael adopts repeatedly oscillates between his internal musings and New Bedford's public streets. Inside Ishmael's mind, readers are also with him out in the “dubious-looking” street, where his once-anticipated encounters offer only letdown, and thus, a reason for Ishmael – and readers – to continue his search. Yet his experiences offer Ishmael no solace; they provide no solution to his metaphysical blues, as the streets seem lined with “blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand,” a darkness amplified by

what Ishmael characterizes as a “most miserable plight.” Whether it be at the Crossed Harpoon or the Swordfish Inn, Ishmael finds only a “[t]rap” – signs of “that destroyed city, Gomorrah” – which discourage his ingress from the cold streets. And his encounter with these places only increase his feelings of isolation. Entering the Swordfish Inn, Ishmael is shocked to find portents of destruction: “[a] hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit” (24). To his surprise, Ishmael has entered a church and yet finds no answer for either his soul’s November plight or his body’s need for nourishment and rest. His salvation isn’t to be found here. Standing in the doorway, he is again mired in his progress – held in place by the vacant stares that seem to push him out the door.

Like a weary pilgrim who, looking for the right church, seeks the right way “Inn,” Ishmael is left only with doubts. He must therefore continue his search, and so, his narrative must also continue, his New Bedford encounters only prolonging his final restitution. Out in the street, Ishmael’s mind takes a decidedly spiritual turn. Half-dead from the cold, he identifies himself as “Lazarus” who, Ishmael speculates, would also find himself “stranded there on the curbstone before the door of the Dives.” The association with Lazarus is poignant, whose death and resurrection echo and amplify Ishmael’s journey and return as well as the oscillating in-and-out movement of his thoughts and subsequent footsteps. Like the fated Lazarus, Ishmael too is destined to join the company of men. Accordingly, his account gravitates inside from the streets in “The Spouter Inn” (Chapter 3) as he ventures to cast off his blues. It is here that Ishmael’s socialization begins, particularly in his effort to communicate with others. However, stepping into the boarding house, he is immediately confronted with ambiguity; with feelings of isolation, hesitation, and doubt, which are reflected by the tavern’s “dusky entry” and “public room,” a “still duskier place” that seem as if “the bulwarks of some condemned old craft.” The Spouter Inn does not appear to be the answer for which Ishmael has been searching. For even though he is finally among others and in from the cold, Ishmael nevertheless finds his surroundings oppressive as his narrative quickly returns to focus on his “contemplations” and “repeated ponderings” rather than on his external environment (25-6).

Ishmael’s befuddlement is reinforced by “a very large oil painting” that seems to

“delineate chaos bewitched” and that causes Ishmael to feel “puzzled and confounded,” particularly in the multiplicity of interpretations he draws from the “long, limber, portentous, black mass” depicted in its center. A “boggy, soggy, squishy picture,” the painting, like *Moby-Dick* itself, is “enough to drive a nervous man” like Ishmael “distracted.” Yet it also possess “a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it,” one that divergently draws Ishmael's attention toward its significance even though he admits the painting to be beyond his capacity to understand (26). Reiterating in small the equivocation Ishmael's encounters and narrative generate as a whole, the “squishy picture” colors Ishmael's public arrival with a vague sense of apprehension, its cloudiness amplifying his uneasy social experience. Ishmael's anxiety is soon compounded. Unable to interpret the painting's rightful meaning, his mind soon turns to the mysterious “dark-complexioned harpooner” with whom Ishmael learns he must share a bed. The notion of sleeping with anyone at all, even with “your own brother,” bothers him profoundly. “People like to be private when they are sleeping” he explains, where the potential of a strange bed-fellow infringes on his need for privacy (28-9). This comment, like the painting itself, helps signal the disparity and uneasiness Ishmael feels between public and private realms, further advancing the dialectic between the known and what can only be guessed. Although the potential for Ishmael to interact with his fellow-boarders provides an opportunity to be social, such an opportunity, at least to Ishmael, is accompanied with a sense of isolation brought on by equivocation. The possibility of reaching out to others only compounds Ishmael's worry because, like the “squishy picture,” he is transfixed by the unknown: by an “unknown stranger, in a strange inn, in a strange town” (30).

Not knowing with whom he is to sleep, Ishmael begins to “feel suspicious” toward others which, despite his best efforts, he “could not help” (28). Only eventually does he see his folly, as readers themselves only later find out that it is Queequeg's friendship – and coffin – that saves Ishmael's life. The scene at the Spouter Inn comes at the beginning of Ishmael's venture, however, where Ishmael describes to his readers the magnitude to which he finds himself repeatedly subject to his thoughts. These thoughts, however misconceived as they may be, still lead to outward action and to the conviction that everyone, including his new roommate, is “a human being just as I am” (36). And as

Ishmael literally and figuratively invites Queequeg “in” to bed by the end of the chapter, his narrative once again repeats its oscillation back-and-forth in a movement that mirrors the hesitations and progress that characterize his experiences as a whole. But because we, too, share “nearly the same feelings” as Ishmael, we are bound to see Ishmael's encounters – his retreats and advances – as akin to our own. The lessons Ishmael learns at the Spouter Inn are ones that his readers also inherit. So while Ishmael may be the lead player in his account, his narrative expands to give readers their own opportunity for insights and ambivalences whose conclusion they share with Ishmael.

In following a narrative pattern of ins and outs, Ishmael's account predictably turns from the more social Chapter 3 to the intimate “Counterpane” of Chapter 4 as a way to frame Ishmael's musings. Here, as before, ambivalences attend, and with them, the possibility – though never the reality – of answer. Half-asleep, and with Queequeg by his side, Ishmael experiences nothing less than a spiritual encounter – what he describes as an odd “sense of weight and pressure” descending upon him. Appropriately, this sensation drives Ishmael to transcendental meditation. “My sensations were strange” he explains, not knowing what this “pressure” is because he is in a dark bedroom. What the weight is, of course, is Queequeg's arm “thrown over” Ishmael as Queequeg sleeps. However humorous this may be, it reminds Ishmael of a prior experience, one in which “a supernatural hand” descended upon him. This hand “seemed” as if “placed in mine” Ishmael recalls, an encounter that, rather than provide any solace, instead kept him “for days and weeks and months afterwards” lost “in confounding attempts to explain the mystery” of what this “hand” might have been and what its presence may have meant. Ishmael's supernatural experience was ambiguous. Its result: unclear (36-7).

But whereas Ishmael remembers feeling an “awful fear” and uneasiness at the presence of the former “hand,” now he feels only a loving “matrimonial” grasp that comforts him and that keeps him warm at his counterpane. The contrast between the two experiences – one doubtful and the other affirmative – is marked through the surprising humanness Queequeg's “pagan arm” presents (37-8). Queequeg's touch curbs Ishmael's restlessness as well as the awful anxiety his memory of the supernatural hand evokes while at the same time curing any apprehension he may have held toward his cannibal bedmate. For a moment Ishmael has found his consolation. His ruminations have borne

moral fruit. And although he is no closer to understanding the meaning of the supernatural hand, Ishmael's acceptance of Queequeg's humanity has led to a form of spiritual fulfillment and sense of peace in the unknown. For whereas he was once in fear of the cannibal Queequeg, Ishmael now embraces the sereness of the "indecorous figure" of Queequeg who lovingly throws his arm around Ishmael (39).

It is telling, and certainly ironic, that Ishmael's interaction with Queequeg – a pagan who worships an idol – largely brings him to a sense of Christian charity even if he now realizes it is "[b]etter to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (36). But as we might expect, this powerful conflation leads to further ambiguity, just as "The Counterpane" does well to reproduce the uncertain and yet still assuring process that conversion was for the Puritan saint. At the same time, Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg's manner, particularly as he compares Queequeg's morning absolutions to the way "any Christian would have washed his face," offers an alternative to traditional Christianity. So while the two men's relationship helps Ishmael grow on a moral plane, this advance is stymied by the cannibal's very presence, who is an idol worshiper and who hums "to himself in his heathenish way." But because no man is wholly free from Puritanism's pervasive blackness, even this ambiguity is consistent with a Puritan understanding of conversion. For while Queequeg liberates Ishmael from his prejudices and spiritual restlessness, a freedom that causes a "melting" in Ishmael's heart, it is at the hand of "this soothing savage," leaving readers to question, just as Ishmael questions, the sacred authority behind his recently developed morality (39). In this Queequeg represents a choice in the way any believer must choose which church is right for him or her. That the consequence of this choice returns to save Ishmael from drowning in the form of Queequeg's look-alike coffin proves that Ishmael's choice to befriend Queequeg was a good one even if it was never Ishmael's decision to room with the gentle cannibal in the first place. Once again Melville maintains *Moby-Dick's* ambiguous balance.

In what seems a self-conscious effort to downplay or parody the religious import of this episode, Ishmael, rather than focus on the broader significance of what he has just experienced, chooses to instead focus on the humor of his "comical predicament" (38). This once again causes readers to question the value of what Ishmael's encounter may actually mean. Rather than provide a clear answer, Ishmael "quickly" departs from the

events of the preceding night as he readies himself to venture back out into society once again. In Chapter 5 (“Breakfast”), Ishmael's narrative again reaches out to the world of men, as echoes of potential camaraderie and eucharistic communion permeate the breakfast table but go ultimately unrealized. As if rising momentarily to the rarified heights represented by his night's spiritual and emotional encounter, Ishmael descends “into the bar-room” for his morning meal. Yet his moral clarity has not been lost. In fact, it helps him reach a new degree of moral achievement. Rather than the pervasive sense of isolation of the previous chapters, Chapter 5 opens “very pleasantly” as Ishmael reaches out to his fellow boarders and especially Peter Coffin, the frustrating inn-keeper who vexed Ishmael so exceedingly the evening before. The fruits of the lessons Ishmael has learned in “The Counterpane” he now applies to Coffin, a name that foreshadows the novel's ending, and by extension, Ishmael's rescue from death and his return to land and to life, which is itself an allusion to conversion. As he greets “the grinning landlord,” Ishmael cherishes “no malice” toward him any longer. An evening with Queequeg has apparently led Ishmael to a better understanding of the world – that “a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing.” Once angry to be the butt of Coffin's jokes, Ishmael now sings a different tune, sermonizing that “if any one man, in his own proper person, afford stuff for a good joke to anybody, let him not be backward, but let him cheerfully allow himself to spend and be spent in that way” (39). Thanks to a night with Queequeg, Ishmael has apparently learned to turn the other cheek.

This lesson is soon negated in “Breakfast.” In a move that corresponds with the oscillating pattern of Ishmael's narrative, personal advance can only coexist with symbolic and even physical retreat. Turning from the intimate bedroom to the public setting of the Spouter Inn's mess hall, Ishmael is led once more to introspection and equivocation – to a decided turn “in,” as it were. Seated in a room “now full of boarders who had been dropping in the night previous” and “preparing to hear some good stories about whaling,” Ishmael, to his “no small surprise,” finds “nearly every man maintain[ing] a profound silence” as if each man's voice were stifled by the constrictive monkey-jacket he wears (40). Expecting lively social banter, Ishmael finds only an off-putting silence. This is not the community of men Ishmael seeks, in sharp contrast to the loving pair of which he found himself a part the night before. The profound silence that

endures consequently pushes Ishmael, before it pushes him out the door, toward “reflections” rather than conversation and therefore away from this communion of whalers whom he wishes so earnestly to join. Once again Ishmael is left to feel isolated and confounded. Once again is he left to wander and wonder.

Sitting dumbly, the “sea-dogs” at the breakfast table “looked embarrassed.” Though they are “all of the same calling, all of kindred tastes,” they look “round as sheepishly at each other” as if in the company of strangers. Were whaling a church, these men would be a timid and uninspired flock, as they appear to Ishmael “as though they had never been out of sight of some sheepfold among the Green Mountains.” The religious implication of this statement is too obvious to ignore. United by the same “calling,” these “sheep” sit passively, unfit or unwilling to speak at the breakfast table and share the breakfast communion and fellowship Ishmael expects. Having “boarded great whales on high seas,” the men are for some uncertain reason unable to relate to each other. Their ineptitude, or lack of socialization, is in contradistinction with Queequeg who, almost ironically, eschews the more civilized “coffee and hot rolls” for his “beefsteaks, done rare.” On a quest to drive away the blues and reconnect with society, Ishmael finds better community (and common sense) in the pagan Queequeg who sits “at the head of the table” eating his steaks. “His greatest admirer,” Ishmael again finds comfort from an unexpected if somewhat dubious source, forcing readers to ponder the stability of their convictions and expectations just as Ishmael questions his own (40-1).

With breakfast finished and with the taste of a disappointing turn toward others left in his mouth, Ishmael once again moves his narrative outward – “out for a stroll” – in “The Street” (Chapter 6). Hosting a multitude of people, New Bedford is not without its peculiarities and accompanying ambivalences, ones that, by this point in the narrative, follow Ishmael wherever he goes. “Perhaps the dearest place to live in all of New England,” the town is “a land of oil, true enough: but not like Canaan.” Like the breakfast table, it is not a promised land but only a stopping point on Ishmael’s journey out to sea. Like everything else, New Bedford is a place of contrast, one which offers Ishmael ambiguity rather than answer (41).

As morning breaks, the “polite society of a civilized town” seem to transform before Ishmael’s eyes, presenting a view of New Bedford’s unseemly underside, whether

“the queerest looking nondescripts from foreign parts,” or “actual cannibals” standing “at street corners” that make even the most circumspect “stranger stare” in bewilderment at scenes of “bones” and “unholy flesh.” Even “parts of her back country are enough to frighten one,” Ishmael explains. These realities are not without their contrasts. New Bedford is also a place where “bright terraces of flowers” grow, even if “upon the barren refuse of rocks thrown aside at creation's final day.” It is a town where “patrician-like houses; parks and gardens . . . opulent” can be found alongside “iron emblematical harpoons” and “scraggy scoria” (41-2). Both infertile and opulent, queer looking and yet bustling with commercial life, New Bedford's streets yield only oppositions, ones on par with those Ishmael has already felt and described. Readers note that the chapter also returns to the theme of wandering – of searching movement – first introduced in “The Carpetbag,” where they are again presented with Ishmael's tranquil musings which diverge from the physical scenes and “wild specimens” he catalogs. That Ishmael's narrative moves out from the Spouter Inn and into public only to return back to his private thoughts is itself an important dialectic that allows his narrative's structure to remain consistent with the recurrent inward and outward-moving pattern it has followed thus far. Outdoors, we are still inside Ishmael's head, forced, like Ishmael, to consider with uncertainty “the Freegeeans, Tongatabooans, Erromangoans, Pannangians, and Brighggians . . . which unheeded reel about the streets” (41).

Just like the unsettling meal of the previous chapter, Ishmael does not obtain the communion or the positive social experience he seeks in “The Street,” as his narrative once again revisits the vague sense of detachment and ambivalence he experiences as a result of his encounters. This unsettledness pushes Ishmael's narrative forward, where he moves away or “out” from the bustling street into “The Chapel” (Chapter 7) where he is again confronted with oppositions of life and death. Here Ishmael's narrative returns to its initial subject matter as the specter of his mortality and the unknown not only “loom” large but also push Ishmael out to sea. Drawn into the silent church, he finds a “small scattered congregation” sitting in a “muffled silence.” Yet strangely enough, “[e]ach silent worshiper” seems to “purposefully be sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable” (43). As in the previous two chapters, there is no sense of fellowship in the chapel despite the common experience shared by everyone in

it. Among “islands of men,” Ishmael feels cut off, particularly by the insular experience of each mourner’s grief, which remains unaccessible (and unexplained) to him.

Confronted by memorial placards which, with their “frigid inscriptions,” compel him to acknowledge “the fate of the whalemen who had gone before,” Ishmael is instantly repelled as they are the “trappings of unceasing grief.” Ishmael wonders at their purpose and significance. Yet this, too, is beyond Ishmael’s grasp. To Ishmael, the inscriptions are simply tokens of death and the unknown – of “bitter blanks” and “deadly voids” that no mortal can know, and that act only to “gnaw upon all Faith” rather than restore or uplift it (44-5).

The hypocrisy and religious ambivalences of this scene, as in “The Counterpane,” irritates Ishmael. He wonders “how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss?” But even in the face of this criticism, Ishmael is still drawn into the magnetism of the unknown. In fact, it facilitates, quite unexpectedly, genuine spiritual insight. The placards offer him a moral lesson, one that convinces him how “[w]e have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death,” and that “what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance” – that “my body is but the lees of my better being.” Rather than see the darker side of the ambiguity death presents, Ishmael sees hope. While the placards draw him “in” only to repulse him, their significance does not possess him completely. Their temptation offers a chance at spiritual recommitment. Repelled by the chapel congregation’s oppressive deification of death and the dismal, Ishmael still finds his own doctrine to live by, one that, with a Whitmanian flourish, celebrates the body as much as the soul, and that accepts life on its own terms and death for what it is: “a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity” (45).

Ishmael’s viewpoint reflects 19th century culture. As Lawrence Buell reminds us, at the time Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, “religious ferment and anxiety resulting from the breakdown of consensual dogmatic structures and particularly the breakdown of biblical authority in Protestant America” was a serious force to be reckoned with (54). But rather than adopt a liberal sectarian conception of faith, and rather than attacking those more traditional, Melville sides with the latter by constituting indeterminacy as his moral doctrine. Ishmael’s position above is a good example of this. Although his realization

coincides with a more progressive understanding of religious ontology, the moral insight he espouses casts revelation on the possibility of doubt. It is in the act of doubting that he gains metaphysical clarity. Buell is therefore correct when he argues that Melville's work "stands not firmly opposed to sacred literary tradition but remains in some measure faithful to the biblical sense of God's elusiveness of human conception (55). What Buell neglects to mention, however, is that this faithfulness approximates the Puritan experience of spiritual regeneration where conviction and faith, like the ocean, is unrelentingly subject to nature's ebbs and flows. To use Buell's terms, Ishmael's insight first demythologizes traditional pietism before reconstituting it in a form New England's first settlers knew only too well. Instead of force-feeding religious orthodoxy to his readers, Melville evokes the religious crisis of his day to mark its continued relevance (57).

It is for this reason that Rowland Sherrill has called *Moby-Dick* a "sacramental" text "brimming over with signals of the transcendent" (100). Yet this sacramentalism is ultimately vested in a far-reaching Calvinism, as Ishmael's narrative engages readers with questions of truth, the divine, and the absolute, and makes these concepts a matter of personal introspection in which doubt and assurance continuously collide. Rather than see *Moby-Dick* – and Ishmael's moral conclusion above – as a dismissal of the theological and biblical traditions it deploys, readers should see it as a work that revisits these elements in order to propose how reality is a life-long struggle that can be reconstituted in spiritual terms that are, by definition, beyond the scope of human interpretation. For just as Ishmael reaches his conclusion regarding the "true substance" of existence, he returns, almost immediately, to the world of the finite in "The Pulpit" (Chapter 8). As he recounts Father Mapple's preparations, his narrative once again reverses course, moving from Ishmael's ruminations on the eternal and the unknown back into the chapel that repulsed him at first.

In accordance with the sermon on conversion he is about to deliver, Mapple, Ishmael notes, seems himself a man experiencing a manner of rebirth. While "in the hardy winter of a healthy old age," the preacher "seems merging into a second flowering youth . . . a newly developing bloom – the Spring verdure peeping forth beneath [his] February's snow." Once again ambiguity attends Ishmael's meandering, one that is here

associated with Mapple's unaccountable regeneration. With “a truly sailor-like but still reverential dexterity, hand over hand” Mapple ascends “the main-top of his [pulpit]-vessel.” Gaining his place, Mapple stoops over the pulpit to “deliberately drag up the ladder step by step . . . leaving him impregnable in his little Quebec.” To Ishmael, these gestures seem odd. Considering them for “some time without fully comprehending the[ir] reason,” Ishmael remembers Mapple’s “wide reputation for sincerity and sanctity,” which would never allow him to use “mere tricks of the stage.” Ishmael concludes, much as he did with regard to the painting in the Spouter Inn, that “there must be some sober reason for this thing . . . it must symbolize something unseen” (46).

What this “thing” can only “be, then,” is “by that act of physical isolation, [Mapple] signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time.” This interpretation, which can be characterized, at best, as a stab in the dark, nevertheless fits a traditional Protestant reading. As a “faithful man of God,” Mapple would certainly want to cut “all outward worldly ties” as he preaches, his isolation replenishing him “with the meat and wine of the word.” Understood in these terms, the meaning of Mapple’s ambiguous gesture becomes lucid (for the moment). Like the sermon he is about to preach, it imparts a kernel of spiritual truth and signals, at least to Ishmael, the necessity of placing one’s soul in a “self-containing stronghold” before it can take communion with the “meat and wine of the word.” Once again Ishmael gains metaphysical clarity through ambiguity and the act of interpretation that comes with it as his narrative registers interpretive unsettledness as the substance of understanding. Once more are readers presented with Ishmael’s account as a spiritual exploration that employs motifs of Calvinist theology to frame its narrative and subject matter. As another encounter before Ishmael’s journey out to sea, “The Pulpit” temporarily moves Ishmael toward greater spiritual understanding. He quickly realizes that the pulpit’s “side ladder was not the only strange feature of the place.” Looking at it more closely, Ishmael notices that behind the pulpit is “a large painting representing a gallant ship beating against a terrible storm,” an image that foreshadows the *Pequod*’s destruction and, consequently, Ishmael’s impetus to author his account (46-7).

As a dialectical set-piece, Mather’s gestures point ahead to what’s to come just as it points back to Ishmael’s first sentence in “Loomings.” But more than his gestures,

Mapple's pulpit, with its “paneled front [which] was in the likeness of a ship's buff bows” and with “the Holy Bible” resting on its “fiddle-headed beak,” captures Ishmael's attention, which vaguely looks like a whaling ship. Through its uncertain terms does Ishmael once again grasp “full . . . meaning.” To Ishmael, the pulpit “is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear.” “[T]he pulpit leads the world,” and “the bow must bear the earliest brunt” of “the storm of God's quick wrath.” As was the case for the chapel's memorial placards, the amorphous pulpit has led Ishmael to interpretation, and finally, to moral insight – that “the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow” (47). The conflicting images of the secular whale-ship and the sacred pulpit coming together create a tension that, while resolved by Ishmael's explanation, still point to a deeply rooted preoccupation with the problems posed by incompatible explanations of experience. And as before, Ishmael's analysis stems from contradiction rather than clarity; his path to certainty is made possible through the uncertainty that preoccupies him.

The religious ambiguity of the ship-like pulpit is recapitulated in “The Sermon” (Chapter 9), where Father Mapple delivers a dramatic homily on conversion. The sermon is Mapple's rendition of the Book of Jonah, which he places before his audience “as a model for repentance” and redemption (52). Mapple's model, however, is one of a decidedly Calvinist charity. Like Jonah inside the whale, a genuine convert is an unregenerate believer who hands himself over to God's saving grace. Jonah's “lesson to us all as sinful men,” according to Mapple, is that to “obey God, we must disobey ourselves” and lay up assurances in Christ (49). For “[s]inful as he is,” Jonah “does not weep and wail for direct deliverance.” He accepts his fate, seeing “that his punishment is just,” and “leaves all his deliverance to God, contenting himself with this” and thereby demonstrating his “true and faithful repentance” (52).

Just as Ishmael reminds his audience in “Loomings” that life's uncompromising elusiveness is a circumstance that applies to everyone, Mapple teaches listeners how Jonah's path to deliverance is a course that applies to “us all.” This course, as readers by now may come to expect, is set by a pattern of dialectical exchange that projects uncertainty and assurance as the gauntlet through which metaphysical clarity is partially gained. As the hymn that opens Mapple's sermon enjoins, the motion toward redemption

is one fraught with “solemn tones” that grace rewards by transforming into “a pealing exultation and joy.” Like Jonah, we too are mired in the same “ribs and terrors” and “dismal gloom” of our fallenness. Powerless to remedy this condition, our only hope is to call on God, just as Jonah did, even when we can “scarce believe Him [ours].” In other words, both faith and salvation is vested in the balance between an unswerving hope and the uncertainty of its fulfillment. Deliverance is wrapped in contradiction; our redemption, a “song” that is gained in that “terrible, that joyful hour” in which we give “the glory to . . . God” (48).

But more than serving as a model for piety, both the hymn and the story of Jonah's conversion typify redemption – a curbing away of the unknown – as a forever-alternating process of woe and delight. “[O]n the starboard hand of every woe,” Mapple assures his audience, “there is a sure delight; and higher the top of that delight, then the bottom of the woe is deep” (54). Conviction, like Jonah's deliverance, is a process rife with agony and joy – like Ishmael's narrative, it is a motion both forward and back.

Just as the Calvinist perceives existence, Mapple's sermon frames reality as perseverance amid the unknown. Ishmael's account gives life to this framework, confirming it through the equivocations its hero encounters and transcends as if this were his calling. Like Jonah, Ishmael will also be placed in Leviathan's path, a symbol of the unfathomable that is at the same time the “key to it all.” The connection between the two men should be enough to suggest how Ishmael's journey may also culminate in a converting experience – one that is retold and relived once the spiritual “drama's done.” Perhaps this is why Ishmael's narrative so forcefully re-imagines the advances and retreats – the assurances and doubts – the Calvinist convert underwent, whether in its movement or in the encounters its author is met with. How “The Sermon” closes is no exception. For whatever the moral of Mapple's homily, Ishmael is, as before, left only with ambivalence: with the idea of Mapple's hypocrisy who, “while preaching to others is himself a castaway” and a sinner. Calling on others to repent while fallen himself, Mapple admits to being an even “greater sinner than ye” (53). How seriously, then, can one apply his sermon's lesson?

Predictably, this question is left for readers to muse as Ishmael's account moves away from metaphysical matters to the more intimate relationship he shares with

Queequeg in “A Bosom Friend,” a chapter in which Calvinist theology is entirely profaned in the new-found affection Ishmael finds for Queequeg's idol Yojo. But just as before, this contrast sustains the ambivalence endemic to Ishmael's account as well as the New England Puritan's conception of conversion – a process whereby sinners gain a small degree of moral clarity followed by renewed doubts followed by renewed spiritual gains. As I have been suggesting, these repeated ambivalences – or “turns” inward and out – form the trajectory and much of the content of Ishmael's tale, which should tell us that whatever Melville's intention may have been when writing *Moby-Dick*, to recast Puritan theology in a 19th century light was certainly part of his design.

Notes

¹ Perhaps the most comprehensive if somewhat dated study on the American spiritual narrative/autobiography is Daniel B. Shea's *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988). In it, Shea discusses the cultural function of the conversion narrative as a written form, particularly as texts written to instruct and guide a convert's posterity toward their own conversions. This dissertation argues, however, that readers must look further to conversion narratives that were orally-delivered (like those Thomas Shepard recorded) if they are to gain a fuller sense of how this ritual developed.

² Jefferson quoted in Morgan, “The Puritan Ethic,” 187.

³ Irving's view anticipates those of R. D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience* in which Laing, a social psychologist, argues that all experience can be qualified as “inter-experience” whereby reality is established by another's view of one's motives and actions that are then reconstituted in the first person's consciousness. “Behavior,” Laing argues, “is a function of experience,” which is “a function of the other” (25). As a result, Laing concludes that “[w]e live equally out of our bodies and out of our minds,” which also determines the actions and thoughts of others, a determination that, in “Rip Van Winkle,” shapes Rip's new post-Revolutionary identity even when his personality remains consistent with before (59).

⁴ It is certainly not a stretch to say that Irving's aesthetic formula would later blossom into the genre of the American Romance, one that Hawthorne most fully delved in order to animate his exploration of the relationship between history, people, and their interpretations of history in how it defines social norms.

⁵ Studies of Melville's biblicalism include the groundbreaking studies of Nathalia Wright (1949) and Lawrence Thompson (1952). Americanists and postcolonial critics (Sacvan Bercovitch, Michael Rogin, Lawrence Buell, Elisa New, and Hilton Obenzinger) have also commented on Melville's biblical commentary and meta-commentary. Their inquiries have added a much-needed contextualization of Melville's use of the Bible. Yet

none of these scholars, with perhaps the exception of Bercovitch, have concretely applied Puritan doctrine, and its conception of conversion, to *Moby-Dick*. The following section seeks to correct this oversight.

⁶ Converts like Mary Angier (who joined Shepard's church in 1639) typically – and paradoxically – describe their conversions as both a dynamic and static process. Citing a “powerful . . . stirring” that “convince[s] her that her estate was miserable” but that God could nevertheless save her, Angier, slowly gaining spiritual conviction in the events she describes, is still by her narrative’s end uncertain as to whether “the Lord called her to himself.” Though she was accepted to Shepard’s church, Angier nevertheless remains unsure as to whether God has saved her soul (65-7). Like Ismael, Angier identifies herself with a pariah. She sees herself as a sinner and outcast who, without God’s “help,” would “rise to greater condemnation” (66). Such a statement lead congregations to infer a convert like Angier’s genuine faith, however, where the path to spiritual conviction ironically arrived through increasing levels of a convert’s doubt in her salvation.

CHAPTER VI

“THEN, NURTURED BY THE PROGRAM, THAT INNER SPIRIT GREW”:

SPIRITUAL REGENERATION, STORY-TELLING, AND THE RELIGIOUS IMPACT OF PURITAN CONFESSION ON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

The purpose of this dissertation has been to introduce my readers to Puritan conversion narratives delivered in the 17th century – spoken accounts of spiritual transformation offered by members of early colonial society as a prerequisite for congregational membership. To this date, there are only three sources that document the tradition of Puritan spiritual confession: Thomas Shepard's *Confessions*, containing 51 testimonies given between 1637-1645 at the First Church of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the 6 recorded in Michael Wigglesworth's *Diary* some time between 1653-1657, and the 23 transcribed between 1644-1666 in *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*.¹

However, the fact that these are the only extant copies does not exclude the likelihood that the practice may have been far more extensive. We know, for example, that conversion narratives were delivered in England. And much of early New England's literature – whether poetry, captivity narrative, biography or autobiography, private journal, or history – can be characterized by the same type of devotional sentiment expressed in the texts mentioned above. In accordance, this dissertation has made attempts to make room for future scholarship to explore ways in which the Puritan conversion narrative may have influenced these genres, and by extension, the way Protestant New Englanders have come to understand and represent their spiritual experiences.

As more recent scholarship has shown, what made Puritan conversion narratives unique from those delivered elsewhere is the way each can be formally and thematically linked, whereby each account expresses the same basic essence of Puritan faith despite differences among narrators.² As Chapter II has shown, narratives delivered at Cambridge stuck to a basic formula, one that can be described as choppy, unsteady, and stylistically plain, and which expressed spiritual assurance in terms of anxiety and doubt as opposed to certainty. By adhering their narratives to the performative conventions of the form, applicants demonstrated their conformity to the way assurance was thought to emerge in

a believer's life, effectively signaling their sainthood through their act of formal, ideological, and performative assent. For instance, by relating how “[s]ometimes the Lord, especially during a fast day morning, refreshed” his “heart” to be “inclined . . . to close with the Lord most,” Nathaniel Sparrowhawk touched on a set of performative conventions that resonated with an orthodox conception of how spiritual regeneration was to take place in a believer's soul. This in turn gave his Cambridge congregation reason to accept Sparrowhawk as a visible saint (63).

Like the other conversion narratives Thomas Shepard recorded as the *Confessions*, Sparrowhawk's testimony shows how becoming a visible saint in early New England was potentially as much about compliance – to a certain way of thinking, act/reacting, and speaking – as it was about faith. Narratives also reveal the extent to which believers literally controlled the terms of their faith, and perhaps even their spiritual destiny while they, at the same time, agreed to their culture's dominant mode of understanding genuine spiritual conviction.

For early New England ministers like Shepard, asking believers to deliver an account of their experiences with grace served several purposes. First, it tested an individual's faith, where those who could prove theirs as sufficient were granted full communion. It also enabled spiritual communities to build congregations comprised exclusively of visible saints whose conversions attested to how God's presence was working within a fold. Approved narratives also taught those both converted and unconverted to better discern the signs of God's providential design with respect to their own lives. Finally, and most importantly, conversion narratives served an evangelical purpose. They helped induce conversions, where narratives – and narrators – gave listeners a better sense of how a genuine convert felt, what kinds of experiences he was supposed to have, how he was to think about himself and his spiritual condition, and how he should sound when addressing his fellow Christians.

These objectives are reflected in the accounts themselves, in which a convert's relationship with Providence overshadows his own personal history. So while conversion narratives are stories about a person's unique and intimate encounters with grace, they are just as much a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit and God's dealings with His people – how the “Lord stood behind” his Cambridge followers “with His voice,” as

Sparrowhawk recounted – as an isolated example of faith (63). Who a convert was, where he came from, how much he made or how many children he may have had weren't germane to his narrative because, as Calvinists, Puritans believed that these facts had nothing to do with how God chose His elect. As a result, readers today discover very little about confessors outside of how they represented their spiritual experiences and what they claimed to have learned from them, where differences between narratives (and narrators) are obscured by the weight of the correspondences that exists between each account, often with the unfortunate effect of readers losing sight of the actual person who valiantly struggled to describe his ineffable religious experiences.³

As Patricia Caldwell has shown in *The Puritan Conversion Narrative*, one of the reasons why narratives seem so similar (if not redundant or tedious) is because they were designed to deflect attention away from individual believers and toward grace. Consequently, each account betrays a “collective personality . . . trying to work itself out in the conversion narrative,” one especially “comfortable with ambivalence and open-endedness” as opposed to a “drive toward completion and resolution” (34). According to Caldwell, these qualities distinguish the Puritan conversion narrative from those delivered elsewhere, as narrators generated not only a unique form of religious expression associated solely with 17th century New England, but also what Caldwell identifies as a “larger, more persuasive dynamic in the[ir] narratives as a whole” (32). This dynamic was achieved rhetorically – through the performance of delivering and hearing about a believer's experience with the Holy Spirit that, as an encounter that could also be applied to every convert, unified congregants. As an applicant stood to describe how grace had opened his heart, members of his church heard a tale of iniquity and gradual spiritual awakening much like their own as his narrative brought Calvinist doctrine to life. Verbal expression thus gave profound meaning to the early Puritan church, giving parishioners a real-life sense that the Holy Spirit was among them despite their differences, the physical hardships each endured, or their distance from their former homes. Accounts invigorated a congregation's spiritual commitment by establishing a sense of community built on fraternity, common experience, and language. Even more importantly, conversion narratives allotted individuals with a way of understanding their lives in a manner that made sense. As a ritual, the conversion narrative gave converts – all

converts – a platform from which they could express what they knew to be the most important moments of their lives as they simultaneously justified their faith and their place among society's sainted.

As accounts were offered and accepted, each sustained what Joanna Brooks has elsewhere described as “a functional model of a community” – a framework from which individuals could bestow significance to their lives and to their communities by adopting a shared language of evangelical Christianity (*American Lazarus* 123). The conversion narrative vested individuals with a common discourse that gave their lives a moral emphasis, one that the ritual reaffirmed on both public and private levels.

But by the turn of the 18th century, the Puritan conversion narrative was no longer considered the life-blood of the Protestant church. Its function was no longer seen as imperative or even practicable, where most ministers regarded it as no more than “a quaint speech in the church.”⁴ While the crucial point that regeneration was a process by which a person passed from spiritual darkness into light as a direct consequence of grace entering into a believer's heart remained, the theology of popular evangelism in the 18th and 19th centuries, while inheriting the main outlines of the Puritan scheme, differed from its earlier equivalent because by then it had been shaped by Enlightenment thought, which saw conversion as an ultimately subjective process. Yet this development has not stopped Caldwell from arguing that despite the ritual's systematic decline, 17th century conversion narratives “mark not an end but a beginning” of “American expression,” where “the effort to capture, experience, and express life through vital language . . . has ever since been the cause not only of New England but of the best of American literature” (198).

While Caldwell's hypothesis is one that this dissertation has tested, one is still left to wonder the extent to which Puritanism, as a religious practice, has influenced how later Protestants have come to regard their faith. Caldwell's analysis also does not change the fact that there have been very few detailed studies of the conversion narrative that have specifically shown its contribution and legacy to American culture. This is because most studies of early New England are helmed by either the intellectual or social historian, both of whom have preferred to focus on Puritan spirituality within the context in which it occurred rather than as it applies to later cultural moments. To a literary scholar like

Caldwell however, this connection is more obvious. As this dissertation has tried to show, one need only look at black Atlantic autobiography, or even literary works like “Rip Van Winkle” and *Moby-Dick*, to see the Puritan conversion narrative's impact on the way Protestants think about and represent faith, or that America has never truly secularized in any sense. Yet as obvious or as powerful as these correspondences and ideas may be, they have not been adequately explored. And when they have, scholars have been satisfied to center their analysis predominantly around Max Weber's now outdated analysis of Puritanism's function in contributing to America's so-called “spirit” of a capitalistic work-ethic – a secularized gospel of wealth in which diligence in business, thrift, and a penchant for self-improvement, more 18th century Yankee values than those shared exclusively by Puritans, are set apart as Puritanism's most significant cultural contribution.⁵

We can attribute this absence, in part, to the fact that for many, 17th century conversion narratives are considered outside the limits of what can be considered literature. A text like the *Confessions* is not considered canonical, and perhaps for good reason. Church applicants weren't authors, and their language can hardly be qualified as polished or poetic, which is perhaps why we tend to think of Puritan conversion narratives, in so far as we think of them at all, as serving a documentary function or as texts that were designed to be morally instructive rather than imaginative or creative. Indeed it is hard to think of the believers who stood to nervously account for their conversions as writers, even if they were laying vent to certain expressive energies. Confessions were delivered orally rather than written, which also makes it difficult to think of them in terms of literary art. What's more, conversion narratives like the ones Shepard recorded were never intended for publication, so far as we know. Puritan converts were not worried about the aesthetic merits of their language so much as its effectiveness in advocating their faith, especially in a fashion congruent with the orthodox doctrine their minister taught. Converts were more concerned about being granted full communion; more interested to show, as the only anonymous entry in Shepard's notebook put it, how “the Lord had done very much for me” in having given him or her “hopes of His electing favor” (208).

In other words the ritual, while serving a primarily ecclesiastical function, also

asked narrators to engage in a rhetorical performance where narratives were judged on the ability of an applicant's speech to competently illustrate his conviction in "how weak" he felt he was "if God should withdraw" – his capacity to demonstrate his desire to "humble" himself "before God in regard of [his] present state" of sinfulness (208).

Yet only a handful of academics have focused on the Puritan conversion narrative's impact on later forms of expression, including its literature, which also includes its religious literature. How, then, might we argue for the cultural legacy of early Puritan confession, and on what basis can we say that these accounts are important, not only to American literature but also to Americans living today?

As social psychologist Peter G. Stromberg has proposed, one option would be to focus on "the ways in which believers integrate a shared religious language into the idiosyncratic details of their own life histories and situations," where readers can look specifically at how language works within a community to give practical and spiritual meaning to individual and collective experience (5-6). In other words, by looking at how individuals reframe their personal experiences in terms of the canonical language Puritans used to impart their conversion experiences, readers should be able to uncover the extent to which a text like the *Confessions* informs how later generations think about and describe their faith. Such a possibility asks that readers consider the Puritan conversion narrative from a cross-disciplinary perspective by examining how a discourse of Christian evangelism – and conversion more specifically – influences the way individuals and their communities understand, internalize, and speak about their religion. For whether a student of literature, history, psychology, or early New England society, one must still consider the performative function of the language converts used to communicate their faith in order to make connections between how this language was used in the 17th century and subsequent examples across different cultures and communities.

To accomplish this goal, or to understand how a specifically Puritan language of ontological change works and changes within different cultural communities, requires a form of analysis in which the early New England specialist's expertise is needed. This especially holds true when trying to appreciate the full range of meanings a convert evoked when he explained, as Cambridge's Mr. Haynes had, how "being almost

discouraged” he was nevertheless led to “fresh hopes of mercy” that “the Lord might be a surety for me” (169).

But before staging this sort of rhetorical analysis, it may be useful to recall J. L. Austin's view of performative discourse. According to Austin, language can be thought of as a speech-act – as a form of action that creates rather than describes a given reality. As a practice, language can therefore be used to invent or alter facts of life that, when shared, generate a distinct speech-community wherein individuals are better able to interpret and share their experiences (5). As a Puritan convert offered an account of his encounters with grace, he did more than merely describe the transcendent moments of his life. His speech enacted the idea that he belonged to a congregation, just as it signaled the probability of his election (or in Haynes' words, that God was a “surety”). His performance showed his assent to the normative expectations of his culture as his account simultaneously reinforced the type of profession required of a visible saint, thereby justifying the religious sanction behind his conversion.

If we consider Austin's understanding of language as performative or serving a specific social function, then we can apply the way language worked within the Puritan community to the way it operates in other cultures and contexts independent from questions of canonicity or whether or not Shepard's flock considered themselves writers. For in the end, every confession Shepard transcribed, whether unique in certain ways or tediously conventional, worked to achieve the same rhetorical and practical purpose. Every conversion narrative used a very specific language found within a very specific community to make a very explicit argument: that a genuine conversion had in fact taken place in the life of the convert describing his experiences. In every case, believers deployed a culturally-coded language of evangelical Christianity that tried to express the ineffable aspects of their faith as they attempted to come to terms with the mysterious nature of religious experience in ways that made sense, that could be described, and in a form that others could recognize.

Although this may be obvious, what made this process possible was precisely what the ritual required: that a believer speak up; that he relate to his audience the precise moments in his life when his faith was tested, sustained, and increased, and that he explain, as Sparrowhawk had, “what the Lord had done” to save him from his “follies”

and “natural disposition” as a sinner (63). By talking about it converts made it so as they relived the terms of their spiritual awakening for others to examine and approve. In sharing their stories, they not only deepened their own commitment to faith but also helped shape their community’s definition of regeneration, just as their community gave them the terms to express their spiritual conviction. This is why Stromberg has argued that the conversion narrative “works in much the same way any ritual works” by generating “a particular social reality” that “unifies those involved through common language, experience, and the experience of relating this language” (16).

To find links between the Puritan conversion narrative and other areas of American culture, including its literature, one consequently need only turn to places where language similarly functions in an operative sense to reaffirm faith, generate community, and sustain communal values both shared and reinforced through ritual practice. It is with this principle in mind that the following sections will explore whether vestiges of the Puritan conversion narrative, as well as the theology that energized it, can be found in America today. To make this challenge easier, however, I have looked to places where one can find a culture in which accounts of spiritual transformation are not only essential but also serve as the cornerstone of the community in which they occur – places where language is employed to both evoke and maintain the personal change described, and where the act of sharing one’s private experiences moves others, and oneself, to heightened levels of self-understanding.

Fortunately, one doesn’t have to search long to see how Alcoholic’s Anonymous, which can certainly be qualified as modern-day fellowship, fits these criterion. According to George H. Jensen, whose work focuses on the way rhetoric moves within the AA community to shape personality, while the culture of Alcoholics Anonymous varies widely from group to group, it is nevertheless held together by a series of “Steps,” traditions, and ritual practices of which members are asked to engage regardless of personal history (58).⁶ In this sense, AA resembles the form of congregational structure that held 17th century New England congregations together. Concentrating on the way confessional discourse operates in both cultures – by helping people to attend meetings and persist in the spiritual program each outline, by creating the necessary conditions to recognize, understand, and modify the weakness individuals feel as part of their identity –

can therefore help us see the tangible connection between the two despite their historical distance. Like the sinner who told his congregation his story of personal transformation from darkness into light, AA's members are similarly encouraged to speak about their experiences of hardship, endurance, and deliverance. In fact, self-disclosure is essential to the recovery program AA outlines, as addicts are taught that they must learn to acknowledge their weakness (to themselves and out loud to others) in order to begin the process of their recovery, if recovery is ever to be had. As members talk about their experiences and admit their insufficiencies, other alcoholics identify with their tales, relating what they hear to their own, often similar experiences with alcohol. Through this act of open disclosure and listening, an exchange held together by a vocabulary that, I am claiming, is largely akin to Puritanism's evangelical pietism, members come to realize the precise nature of their physiological and metaphysical predicament and learn to rely on a source of strength outside themselves – on a “Higher Power” – in order to assume the new values and identities their speeches promote.

As was the case for the Puritan conversion narrative, personal disclosure not only embodies the values and norms of AA culture but also enacts the culture itself. Just as the convert assumed a new persona as a visible saint by interpreting his life through a moral ethic of Protestant Calvinism, the alcoholic similarly relies on AA's rituals – going to meetings, talking with others, active service in the alcoholic community – to maintain his sobriety and steer clear from the gates of his addiction's hell. As Jensen has noted, the recovering alcoholic is taught to always remember “his or her former self repeatedly” rather than “kill off the former self and complete the transformation into a new identity.” He is told, rather than forget his former transgressions, to “come to know that former [alcoholic] self and then keep that self alive” so as to remember how that former self can always “become the future self” with relapse (115). This imperative betrays the AA's ideological closeness to the theology that informed Puritan conversion, where adherents were persistently enjoined that their spiritual assurance could always be misidentified and so, that God “calls for the daily attendance of our thoughts” – that a believer must search “the compass of his whole course . . . the frame of his own heart” in order to maintain vigilance against the strong potential of repeated moral failing.⁷

As Chapter II has already explained, Bay colonists perceived regeneration as a

life-long process of spiritual maintenance rather than as an epiphanic moment. The *Confessions* bear witness this, where converts called as much attention to their iniquities and shortcomings as they did their spiritual gains and assurances. So too is the road to AA recovery as described by those who have gone through it. Personal redemption is a path fraught with difficulty and constant self-scrutiny, as well as one of success and hope for a better future ahead. In the sections that follow, I suggest that the way AA's members are asked to identify themselves, understand their predicament as alcoholics, and engage in the process of their recovery are supported by the same tenets established in 17th century New England. I do this by looking at how AA's language helps alcoholics come to terms with their addiction so as to reject their dependence on alcohol, as the community-binding evangelical rhetoric essential to the performance of Puritan confession, as well as the doctrines precipitating this performance, propel AA's members, whether religious or not, to seek spiritual answers for their biological disease. The vocabulary alcoholics use to describe their addiction – terms that also animate their recovery – is rooted in the same religious discourse in which Shepard's congregation participated, revealing one of the ways Puritan culture continues to influence contemporary Americans.

Although, as an institution, Alcoholics Anonymous has been very careful to describe itself as a program more spiritual than religious in order to avoid polarizing members who may be agnostic, atheist, or of a different religious persuasion, it still offers a form of spiritual and physical salvation from the essential limitations of the self that Shepard's adherents held. As AA historian Ernest Kurtz explains, “whether this state of limitation – ‘sin’ – be understood as depravity or deprivation,” the “human situation of need – of needing specifically *other*, whether that ‘other’ be an-Other, an-other, or others – or something else, it [is a need that] has inspired all religion just as it inspires AA” (182). This has lead Kurtz to conclude how “the fundamental impulse revealed by and lived out in Alcoholics Anonymous will be found to be that of a uniquely American expression of Evangelical Pietism,” where the notion of surrender, whether it be to the admission that “I am an alcoholic,” or to irresistible grace, is expanded into a way of life “equivalent of classic religious salvation . . . or justification *by faith*” (183-4).

If Caldwell is correct to assert that, with the Puritan conversion narrative, readers

will find the beginnings of a uniquely American voice, then to see the connection between a modern-day fellowship like AA and 17th century Puritanism can tell us how this voice has developed while at the same time revealing how the former still continues to impact the way individuals live their lives today. To flush out how this is the case, at least with respect to a cultural institution like AA, also justifies the need to reexamine early colonial literature and less canonical texts like the *Confessions*. To be sure, the motivation behind this chapter is my underlying belief that Puritanism, as a cultural practice and as a mode of apprehending the world, has never become obsolete. This position naturally challenges the idea that American culture has advanced along a secular curve, as I have thus far tried to revisit (and revise) the type of scholarship best represented by Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch who, while conceding the gradual decline of Puritanism's cosmology, nevertheless see the legacy of 17th century New England as a prevalent part of the ideals, rituals, and rhetoric that inform us today. To notice the discursive, practical, and pietistic continuities of Puritan religious culture in a program like AA adds force to Bercovitch's contention that the way Puritans understood and described the world "survived, finally, not by chance but by merit, because it was compelling enough in content and flexible enough in form to invite adaption" (*Puritan Origins* 186). It also supports how American culture never truly "secularized" in any definitive sense – that while we may like to think that our society has divorced itself from the notion of Christianity as its official religion, the Calvinist doctrine that informed New England Puritanism still permeates the way individuals and institutions interact.

What separates my reading from either Miller or Bercovitch's, however, is that I point to a concrete place where early colonial culture continues to make an impact on our society and how, in many senses, it continues to exist. Yet it is important to be clear: I am not suggesting that Puritanism or even that Puritan theology and writing expresses the essence of what it means to live in present-day America. Rather, I am suggesting that groups like AA, which are a vital part of contemporary American culture, cultivate (by reenacting) a set of codes and enforce certain forms of ritual language, action, and understanding that owes its existence to the type of social reality early Puritan congregations sustained in their confessions. To be sure, Americans today, whether Protestants or not, are not like 17th century Puritans. Yet the way we organize and convey

our experiences, particularly our spiritual ones, and the way we come to terms with our lives and our society at times bears close resemblance with the way the Puritans lived nearly four centuries ago. While the terms, the people, and the cultural contexts have certainly changed, the stipulations ministers like Thomas Shepard demanded of their congregants still continues to play an important role in how contemporary Americans come together, share their experiences, and overcome personal difficulties.

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Of the “diverse” believers “propounded to be received and were entertained as members” at Cambridge’s first church, Hannah Brewer delivered what turns out to be one of the shortest of the 51 conversion narratives the *Confessions* contain.⁸ Because of its brevity, it is worth quoting in entirety:

I heard what a misery it was to be without God in the world and that I was in [that] condition. And so was saddened and sick and thought if I should die, I should die eternally. So I would not speak of my condition to any. And hearing of sin of Sabbath breaking and taking God’s name in vain, the Lord set that sad on my heart. And I heard that promise proclaimed – Lord, Lord merciful and gracious etc – but could apply nothing. (141)

Only five sentences long, Brewer’s account was evidently enough to convince Shepard’s congregation of her spiritual conviction. After considering her statement, however, one wonders what satisfied them, especially since her testimony lacks any reference to Brewer’s regeneration or even her faith in Christ. If anything, Brewer’s narrative and the conversion it is supposed to describe strikes one as open-ended rather than certain. Rather than saved, Brewer claims to be in a “condition” of “misery” – she feels “saddened and sick” to “be without God,” and even though she hears the gospel’s “promise proclaimed,” Brewer admits that she can “apply nothing.”

As Daniel B. Shea has remarked, Brewer’s deference and the indeterminate quality of her narrative – one that Shea qualifies as a cry of “I know not how to express it” – is a typical feature of the Puritan conversion narrative (98). Instead of confessing her faith with confidence, Brewer describes it as overwhelming and ineffable; as something beyond her comprehension and powers of application. Her account’s brevity certainly adds to this effect. But even though her faith is something Brewer is unable to express,

she still feels it, particularly in her “heart,” which grows “sad” at the thought of being “without God in the world.” Brewer’s problem, then, is not that she doesn’t feel saved. It’s that she can’t express what is in her heart, which she interprets as a sign of her separation from the Lord. Yet this debility is one that other converts similarly shared, and is a gesture typical of Puritan conversion narratives delivered in early New England. By acknowledging her rhetorical incapacity as well as her inability to apply God’s promises, Brewer struck a common cord with how the rest of Shepard’s congregation also felt as Calvinists likewise unsure of their spiritual destiny. As a result, her account, brief and simple as it was, still managed to join her own personal experience of grace with that of Shepard’s congregation on both emotional and expressive levels, which is precisely why Caldwell has asserted that for the Puritan convert to point to one’s limitations was, in essence, to “encourage communication – with oneself first, then with others” (*Puritan Conversion Narrative* 91).

Brewer’s account worked, then, to strengthen her community’s bonds just as served to sustain Brewer’s own faith. For as every Puritan faithful knew, all humans, as Adam’s posterity, were inherently fallen and therefore separated from God who had sent Christ to redeem them. Brewer’s inability to express herself – “to speak of her condition to any” – therefore showed Shepard’s flock that Brewer had attained the fundamental understanding that she, like all men, wasn’t perfect. By identifying herself as a sinner who Sabbath breaks and takes “God’s name in vain” and more, that she is “aware” of being “in [that] condition,” Brewer signaled to her congregation her awareness in her need for divine intervention in the form of the Lord’s “merciful” grace. Like Saint Augustine, perhaps the most prominent of all Christian converts, Brewer’s heart is also restless, “saddened, and sick,” until it can find support in the Lord.⁹ As compressed as it was, Brewer’s narrative consequently still expressed her understanding, one that Shepard’s congregation shared, that only through faith could she hope to close with Christ – that only through God’s will could she ever hope to attain salvation, or in Brewer’s case, the ability to apply God’s proclaimed “promise” to her life.

Speaking very little, Brewer said a great deal, speaking not only for herself but also for her spiritual community at large who identified with her experiences and even her lack of rhetorical prowess. Drawing attention to her limitations and to the depravity

that she as well as the rest of her congregation knew as their collectively fallen “condition,” Brewer tacitly stressed a desire for fulfillment in a way that applied to her specifically but also in terms that her spiritual community was instructed in and that they shared. In having spoken – or in trying to speak – of her failings, Brewer showed her assent to the tenets of her religious culture. As John Cotton habitually reminded sinners, true converts were those who “complain they see little grace in themselves.” Genuine saints were those who repeatedly questioned the possibility of their salvation and who knew that only Christ could save them. For as Cotton explained, despite a convert's doubts, “it may be none at all as [you] think,” for “if your eyes be set on Christ, and upon your failings in grace and yet in Christ you see there is salvation . . . it is an evident sign that God hath given you grace.”¹⁰

Judging from her narrative, it is clear that Brewer's eyes were set squarely on her failings. Rather than a saint, she thought of herself as a sinner who, if she “should die,” would in all likelihood “die eternally . . . without God.” As a believer who sees very little grace in herself, Brewer's narrative fulfills Cotton's stipulations. By describing how her faults and the potential of damnation affect her emotionally, Brewer gave evidence of grace's favor toward her since it was commonly thought that only a genuine convert would be affected by such a harrowing possibility. At the same time, Brewer's awareness of her moral ineffectiveness translated to her rhetorical ineptitude, one that in turn emphasized her belief that only God's “promise” could save her, and more, that only God could give her the power to “speak of my condition to any.”

Such a remark highlights the anxiety and embarrassment Brewer understandably felt knowing that she was in a godless condition. Still, to say that she could not speak of her sinful condition to any seems a little strange. After all, Brewer *did* speak of her condition as a necessary requirement for her acceptance within the Cambridge fold. Although at a loss for words, Brewer nonetheless acknowledged the value of speaking out, where the pervading sense of powerlessness and sin that distinguishes her narrative is offset by her attempt (and certainly her courage) to speak out despite her inclination and fears not to. By speaking, Brewer exhibited her humility, remorse, and longing for spiritual remedy through her willingness to overcome herself and her inadequacies for her faith. So while she may have been unable to apply the promise of salvation for sinners

like herself, Brewer still managed to distinguish herself as an individual who had experienced a pronounced form of personal change. Before, Brewer couldn't speak what was in her heart. But now, before Shepard's congregation and God, she could, which gave the Cambridge church sufficient evidence of her election.

As readers can see, there is no divine and supernatural light that transforms Brewer into a model Christian, only a timid acknowledgement that her condition was lowly, that she was in need of God's mercy, and that she was afraid to die "eternally" without God. Her admission, however, was one that other converts, as Protestant Calvinists, understood and felt; one that linked Brewer's conversion narrative with the others Shepard recorded. But what ultimately convinced Shepard's church of Brewer's faith, and what joined her to them in bonds of Christian fellowship, was the act of self-surrender Brewer's account displayed. Like other professing members, Brewer publicly laid down her defenses before her church, denying her inclination to keep her feelings bottled up and resigning ego, her transgressions, her anxieties, and what little she knew of the Lord's "promises" to the Cambridge faithful as a token of her humility and faith.

It is in this concession – in this act of self-denial – where we may begin to explore the connection between conversion narratives like Brewer's and the ideology and spirituality informing the recovery plan Alcoholics Anonymous outlines for its members. For whether an alcoholic in AA or a 17th century Puritan convert arriving at spiritual conviction, to accept one's ineffectuous state of being and submitting to a power and logic greater than oneself is seen as a compulsory component of real personal change. Just as Brewer knew that her limitations was the starting point of her spiritual transformation, alcoholics in AA are taught that the terms of their recovery are contingent on their recognition of the fact that they are limited – that they are helpless against their addiction, and that only with the assistance of a power greater than themselves can they hope to gain the power to quit drinking.

This way of thinking, of perceiving one's life situation, is fundamentally grounded in a rhetoric of evangelical Christianity that sees conversion as a gradual process in which a person acknowledges his sins, his helplessness in being able to overcome them on his own and, through faith, his dawning confidence that he can prevail over them through a newfound spirituality that can bring him to personal redemption. As one alcoholic

recounts in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA's seminal text which is often referred to as the "Big Book," "God and A.A. were able to do for me something I was unable to do for myself" (358). Indeed whether an aspiring saint or an alcoholic in AA, both must learn to accept the notion that they do not have control over themselves and their power to overcome their negative behavior. In both cases, it is only when each recognizes that aid can only come from a source outside themselves that personal change begins.¹¹

As Carmen Suero, a social worker at the Addiction Institute of New York at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital whom I interviewed for this chapter explained to me, faith, or what can be more loosely called spirituality or belief in the idea that no one has complete control over his destiny or that no one has all the answers, is an essential part of any drug treatment program, including the one proposed by AA. While groups like the AINY and AA introduce those in need to new thought and behavioral patterns, they also stress that a proven method to accomplish personal change is through a patient's acknowledgement that, as an abuser, he suffers from a chronic illness that does not have an outright cure and that, as a result, he must continuously seek help outside of himself to sustain positive behavior. Belief that a force outside oneself, whether Christ or one's own conception of a Higher Power, is thought to right the abuser's wayward path, and gives the addict a greater sense that he not only can but *will* recover. This conviction, one instilled through hope and through faith, gives the abuser what Ms. Suero described to me as the "essential motivation" needed to maintain the entirely new system of values and beliefs that he must learn to in order to reject his alcoholic way of thinking. At the same time, it helps him to network with other alcoholics who similarly identify with his condition as he struggles to establish a new attitude and behavior cycle. Spirituality, or a faith in a force outside oneself, consequently gives the alcoholic a much needed sense of support and community. Careful to avoid direct reference to a specifically Christian God, AA instead suggests that those willing to get better simply look into the possibility of how an abstract Higher Power (in whatever form comfortable to the patient) can help in the processes of their recovery. This is important because it allows those of any faith, creed, class, and background to feel welcome in AA just as long as they have a sincere desire to get better.

What matters is not where the alcoholic comes from but how much he wants to be rid of his disease, which he sees as the cause of his misery as well as the pain he has

potentially inflicted others. As was the case for the Puritan convert, an alcoholic's personal redemption is always contingent on the type of willingness and self-resignation demonstrated in Brewer's narrative rather than his belief that he can overcome his shortcomings on his own. To recover, then, first means accepting one's diseased condition of mind, body, soul just as the road to salvation for a 17th century Puritan like Barbary Cutter rested in her acceptance of her iniquities, of which she "went through with many miseries and stumbling blocks" (*Confessions* 90). Despite AA's adaptability toward the religious preferences of its members, the alcoholic who hits bottom is still similarly taught to see his recovery much like Cutter understood her spiritual predicament: as a circumstance of life and death, or as the Big Book describes it, as a situation in which an alcoholic's defunct being desperately needs to be pulled "back from the gates of death," yet whose "results" are ultimately "up to Him" (490).

Careful not to distinguish itself as a religious organization, AA still urges its members the same form of ego deflation Calvinist doctrine demanded of its converts. It reminds members that they are not only sick physically and psychologically but also spiritually, and that the source of their illness is themselves, so that the solution to their problem must rest elsewhere since the alcoholic, if he indeed accepts his alcoholism, is powerless to do anything about his addiction on his own. As Bill W., one of AA's founders explained to his colleague in a December 15, 1950 letter, "[e]very Step, every Tradition [AA espouses], takes a healthy swap at careening egos" – of teaching members not only that "the drunk hasn't any power at all on his own," but also the process of "ego-deflation and [a] dependence upon a Higher Power." Like the New England minister who taught believers how their salvation rested entirely on grace and that "if sinners were willing to be converted they would cry to God" rather than to their "own selves" to "turn them" toward grace, AA's literature teaches addicts "that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success," and more, that their disease stems from an "ego-centric" way of thinking; that the alcoholic, like the Puritan unregenerate, "is the extreme example of self-will run riot" (Jensen 60-62).¹²

Forewarned that their "troubles . . . are basically of our own making" and "arise out of ourselves," particularly their inability to see that they cannot control their desire and decision to drink, alcoholics are offered a life-line through a substantive faith in

surrender (Jensen 60-1). To admit that he is powerless over alcohol is the first stage in an alcoholic's recovery, and consequently, the first step he takes toward his personal transformation. This is commensurate with how Puritan converts were enjoined that they, too, were powerless – against their own human natures, over the spiritual consequences of their actions, and over their redemption. Just as AA teaches alcoholics that they must “[c]ome to believe” that, as individuals powerless against their vice, “a Power greater than ourselves” can restore them to sanity (Step 2), Puritan doctrine told its faithful to “lean upon Christ for salvation” as sinners “rooted in the world, rooted in your pride.” To “get faith, [a Christian] first must feel . . . inability,” as Shepard instructed his flock, where faith can only “come down to heaven to thy soul” (“Sincere Convert” 67). This rationale is why Kurtz has described the “nature of [AA’s] insights concerning . . . vulnerability” as “firmly located . . . in the history of religious ideas,” even if “in secular and modern garb” (198). So while AA’s founders have tried to make the “Big Book” seem less overtly Protestant in its rhetoric and ideology in subsequent editions, where “Higher Power” used to read “God,” for instance, it still maintains an essentially Calvinist structure in the practices it encourages. As Kurtz explains, nowhere is this more pronounced than in the way AA guides its members toward the view that, as addicts suffering from a disease, they are fundamentally “limited, and so,” that they must learn to be “able to exult in the strength” that arises “from . . . weakness,” just as a Puritan convert like Hannah Brewer knew (and any practicing Christian knows) that only through an acknowledgement of her limitations could she hope to overcome them through God’s mercy (198).

Indeed what links Puritan theology with AA’s ideology of recovery is that both promote a way of thinking that is more contradictory than logical, one where doubting oneself, in contrast to most therapeutic approaches, is encouraged as a positive act since it is the self, the ego, or in spiritual terms, one’s soul, that is diseased. From AA’s perspective, alcoholism arises from an individual’s unmanageable self-absorption and arrogance. As a result, alcoholics must strive to abandon the sense of entitlement they feel. They must learn, as one alcoholic whose testimony is recorded in the Big Book learned, “to discard my ‘rights,’ as well as my expectations” (420). As Rob K., a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser whom I interviewed for this chapter explained to

me, “[e]ntitlement was just oozing out of me,” a feeling that only “progressively got worse” with each successive drink and which was based in a self-centered logic of “I make my own rules . . . I’m living my life and this is what I do.”¹³

For Rob K., recovery could only take place after giving up his sense of entitlement. He had to understand that he was powerless over his addiction rather than in control of it; that he is unable – nor will he ever *be* able – to effect his sobriety on his own. Like the 17th century Puritan convert, Rob K. had to learn to accept his condition, which often occurs, as it did in 17th century New England, after hearing and identifying with the testimony of other alcoholics in a similar position; with sinners – or alcoholics – who have been granted the grace to accept the things they cannot change, are given the courage to change the things they can, and are blessed with the wisdom to know the difference between the two.¹⁴

Whether Puritan faithful or recovering alcoholic, both must learn to assume a paradoxical understanding of personal regeneration where strength arises out of complete defeat. Just as the first step of Hannah Brewer's conversion arrived with the recognition of her insufficiency – in her impotence rather than her aptitude – recovery, as AA's founders point out, “is not grounded so much in success as upon failure,” where “pain is . . . the touchstone of growth,” and “the loss of one's old life a necessary condition for finding a new one” (Kurtz 296-7). As a Calvinist, Brewer felt this pain in the trepidation or “misery” she experienced at the realization that she was a sinner unable to apply the concept of grace to her life. For Rob K., recuperation began with the visceral feeling of being “just, so disgusted,” especially in himself. But as an addict, Rob K. can't change his behavior just as the sinner cannot be without sin, even if he knows and acknowledges that he has a drug problem. This impotence leads to fear, frustration, desperation, and further abuse. Indeed it was “a dark phase in my life,” Rob K. recalls. So dark, in fact, that he remembers “looking in the mirror and seeing absolutely nothing inside of me. No soul . . . [just] this darkness to my eyes.” Even more disconcerting is how Rob K. remembers “liking it. Like, honestly reveling in the darkness. I don't know. It was like something else had taken over at that point.”

Like Brewer's misery, it is at this point when “the bottom fell out” for Rob K. Paradoxically, it is also at this moment, out of Rob's extreme sense of self-loathing

associated with “reveling in the darkness,” that a spark of hope ignited in Rob K’s mind that, for the first time, made him willing to do whatever it took to remain sober. Looking at himself in a mirror, Rob K. finally saw himself as the drunk he was. At this point sobriety no longer became an abstract concept, but instead “a life and death errand” just as salvation was for the Puritan faithful – an errand that Rob K. is still on, and one in which he continually reminds himself that “I am not the solution to my problem.” In a move characteristic of early New England Calvinism, ego deflation, or what Kurtz identifies as the AA mantra in which an alcoholic must remind himself that he is not-God, became Rob K.’s first crucial step toward assuming a new, sober identity. In a theme that animates most notions of religious transcendence, Rob K. gradually became aware that as an addict he must learn to escape the private prison of his narrow self; that he must learn to accept his shortfalls in order to transform them into a source of personal strength.¹⁵

Although this idea is generally spiritual, it more specifically resembles the theology that informed Puritan conversion. As individuals afflicted by a condition that renders them powerless to effect their own change, alcoholics like Rob K. must look elsewhere for an answer, a search that, according to AA’s founders, can only be accomplished if an alcoholic “gets honest with himself” and realizes – and accepts – that he’s a drunk. As Bill W. wrote AA co-founder Doctor Bob, it is only “*because I accept my alcoholism, my weakness, my limitation, [that] I have found that . . . I am someone; I am one who finds invitation to wholeness, the opportunity for it, [which] arises from the very weakness of my limitation.*” For Bill W., not just surrender but surrendering to one’s *weakness* “is the meaning of sobriety” (Kurtz 36). Yet it is also the definition of having Christian faith. And for Puritans like those who attended Shepard’s church, this faith arrived, as it does for alcoholics in AA, when a person finally accepts a moral view that says he is fundamentally weak. Like Barbary Cutter, the alcoholic, if genuine in his desire to change, realizes that he is “more miserable than ever” without help from a Higher Power. For Cutter, this realization came when she saw “Christ . . . and that need of Him to take away [her] iniquity” (*Confessions* 90). For an alcoholic like Rob K., it arrives when he first understood that he need not “be ashamed” that he is an alcoholic, and that the meaning of his disease is precisely the fact that he cannot control his alcoholism by himself – that he needs “to look elsewhere.”

Like the 17th century Puritan convert, the present-day alcoholic who is willing to do whatever it takes to reset the course of his life realizes that his recovery “is directly proportional to my level of acceptance,” as Rob K. clarifies. Whether alcoholic or Christian convert, both come to see that change is possible only when they “leave the results up to Him,” knowing that “however it turns out, that's God's will for me.”¹⁶ Slowly grasping how every day begins a fresh battle against their vices, alcoholics like Rob K. see “[s]elfishness – self-centeredness” as “the root of [their] troubles,” just as Cambridge convert Nathaniel Eaton saw himself “lost” without “God's presence” and saw “an emptiness in myself, [where] there was no grace nor peace there nor nothing.” Only by casting himself aside, resigning himself to God's will, and understanding how “there was life revealed and bound up in Christ,” does Eaton find the strength to “come to him” so that his soul “should be eased, and that the Lord would dwell with me” (56). Only by being honest and by looking at themselves clearly for what they are can the Puritan convert or the alcoholic in AA hope to salvage his life. This move toward honesty is essential to the process of personal regeneration that conversion and substance recovery demand, whether this be an acknowledgment that he is an alcoholic or a sinner whose spiritual destiny rests completely on God's mercy. This is precisely why Cambridge converts like Martha Collins repeatedly drew attention to their “original corruption and miserable condition” (among other sins, like Sabbath-breaking or being “blockish and sottish”) as an inescapable fact of their identity (131). Change, whether for Collins or a recovering alcoholic like Bill W., begins by accepting failure because like the convert, the alcoholic in AA is told that he must reckon with his spiritual and moral condition in order for this condition to improve.

The idea behind this principle is simple: seeing himself for what he is allows the addict to admit his dependence on alcohol so that he may begin to place his faith in God or in a Higher Power of his choosing as a source of remedy and strength, just as the Puritan convert cried to the Lord to cast away his sins and prick up his ears at sermon time when he himself could not. To accept his own powerlessness and God's capacity to disburden him from his moral failings is *the* crucial step of awakening for convert and addict alike. “Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic – or “once a sinner, always a sinner” – is the doctrine and mantra both must accept in order to come to terms with their

predicament, and consequently, to understand their need for a Higher Power who can lighten their troublesome loads. For the Puritan convert, this meant coming to terms with his innate depravity and having faith in God's capacity to forgive him and wash him clean. According to Jensen's study, for alcoholics in recovery it means that “[e]vents are perceived as being part of God's plan” rather than attributable to oneself. As the alcoholic grows conscious of his problem and finally, after much misery, becomes willing to do whatever it takes to overcome it, he accepts the idea that “[t]here are no accidents” in life, and so, “[t]he necessity of the disease of alcoholism is replaced by the order of God's plan.” As Jensen explains further, after a while even “difficulties are viewed as an opportunity to improve and grow as a spiritual person,” where “God provides the resources and support that the [alcoholic] needs to solve his problems” and through which he “achieve[s] transcendence” (126).

It seems, then, that the alcoholic who participates in AA becomes a fatalist. He comes to understand that even his alcoholism is part of God's plan, just as Shepard's congregants knew that their destiny as well as the order and events of their lives were determined by God's will rather than their own. The “solution” to an alcoholic's problems, as *Alcoholics Anonymous* explains, will require constant “self-searching, the leveling of our pride, [and] the confession of our shortcomings.” Yet these stipulations were ones the Puritan convert also met, where in both cases the answer to their respective problem is to be found in spiritual terms. In fact, AA is unwavering in its belief that to recover means to “have had” nothing less than “deep and effective spiritual experiences,” ones that result in what observers can only refer to as a conversion experience or a change in the alcoholic's “whole attitude toward life, toward [his] fellows and toward God's universe” (25). For alcoholics to finally “believe in themselves” equates with believing “still more in the Power which pulls [them] back from the gates of death” (xxvii). It means having faith in a Higher Power – who can also be called “God” – who wills their lives and who effectively intervenes on their behalf to give them the strength to accept their weaknesses.

For Rob K., one of the most important phases of his recovery came as a result of a transformative and unaccountable experience. While for a convert like Brewer this may have been a sense of deep sadness and anxiety at the thought of dying “eternally” without

knowing of God's promises, for Rob K. it was as "a point . . . when I felt empty," a point when he became increasingly aware of an "erosion going on inside of me" that he didn't "know how to stop." As was the case for Brewer, the emptiness and sense of deterioration Rob K. felt also brought emotional pain. "It really hurt," he recounts, "[i]t really scared the shit out of me" and led to an unshakable fear of "what . . . is going to happen now," as Rob K. finally understood how "[e]verything that I had in my life that was somewhat good was taken away from me" because of his addiction. Like the "misery" Brewer recollects, Rob K. is not only "hurt" but afraid of where his addiction was leading him. Yet his awareness of his desperate condition, one accompanied with an acute feeling of self-loathing coupled with his desire to finally face his addiction head-on, became the starting point of Rob K.'s salvation. As an addict, Rob K. still admits to not having the power to stop his negative behavior on his own. Yet his honesty with himself, the internal pain he remembers having felt, and his willingness to do whatever it takes to get better (which, for AA includes placing one's sovereignty in a power outside oneself), not only frees him from his pain but also enables him to "finally" see "what was really important."

As the second Appendix of *Alcoholics Anonymous* points out, Rob K.'s experience qualifies as a "spiritual awakening" or "spiritual experience," terms often repeated in AA's literature as well as by those in the program, and which are defined as a "personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism." These "personality changes, or religious experiences," much like the one Brewer described, are not "sudden and spectacular upheavals." Instead, they "develop slowly over a period of time" in the same way that spiritual assurance grew for a Puritan saint. "We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection," AA's founders are careful to explain. "The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines" – to make a life-long commitment to living, thinking, and acting with God in mind and with a sense of their own insufficiencies at heart (60).

Alcoholics Anonymous is careful to mention, however, that this is something that only "God makes that possible," since there is "no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid" (62). It reminds members like Rob K. that sustained sobriety can only arrive through a life of active spirituality, one that needs to be reevaluated and reinforced every day. For both alcoholic and Puritan convert, transcendence is variable proposition:

a continuous process of self-scrutiny in an effort toward self-improvement. In the same way that Shepard's congregants considered their conversions a continual process that included seeing their "sloth and sluggishness" and so, "pray[ing] to the Lord to make [them] fit for church fellowship and the Lord," sobriety is a practice of constant self-maintenance based in an optimism that one's Higher Power can help sustain his recovery (55). Still, what brings the alcoholic to a renewed appreciation for life, or what the Big Book designates as a "spiritual experience," is always something ultimately beyond words. And while this change manifests itself among alcoholics "in many different forms," that it "could hardly have been brought about by [the alcoholic] alone" remains consistent in every case (567).

For Rob K., his conversion moment, the moment in which his thought-pattern and awareness of himself as an addict grew to a point where he knew that something had to change, came during a binging period when, "[a]ll of a sudden it just slipped, and I slipped out, and I was removed from my body"; when, in a half-conscious state, Rob K. remembers hearing a supernatural voice asking him: "Do you want to live or die?," where only life or death were Rob K.'s options. Out of his mind – and body – Rob K. recalls that it was here when "I made a conscious decision that I wanted to live and it was like ('smack') right [back] into my body." Regaining consciousness, Rob K. immediately noticed "these empty bottles of wine . . . and empty beer bottles . . . and all this drug paraphernalia around me and I was just so disgusted. It was, like, I couldn't take it any more."

Rob K.'s experience was clearly transformative. His near-death encounter, a psychological, physiological, and spiritual manifestation of the darkness to which his life was leading, led him to conviction – that "I gotta do something." "So I made the decision [to try to get better]," and so began Rob K.'s path toward recovery and toward accepting the fact that he was an alcoholic out of control. Where certain ideas, attitudes, and emotions were once the guiding force of Rob K.'s self-destructive behavior, they are, as a result of his spiritual encounter, immediately "cast to one side" as "a completely new set of conceptions," such as the notion that life works according to God's plan, "began to dominate" his perception. But again, this push only came when Rob K. realized that his human resources were not sufficient, nor are they sufficient today. Lacking self-control,

addicts are enjoined by AA's recovery program to find an alternative source of strength in order to facilitate the type of emotional rearrangement described above, meaning in order to be willing to do anything one has to do to remain sober, including allowing oneself to be guided by a spiritual force. As one of AA's pioneering members recounts in the Big Book, understanding that only "with God's power" can an alcoholic "put everything" he has into his recovery leads him, as it led Rob K., to "feel a great release" from the burden of his addiction. Faith in a Higher Power's guiding force – "a helper whom I could rely upon [and] who wouldn't fail me" – gives the abuser the confidence that he can "make it" even if he never believed in God or in the capacity of a supernatural power that can redeem him (189-90). This is why AA thinks of surrender and acceptance as the first of its 12 Steps; faith in God's plan, in coming "to believe that a power greater than ourselves" can restore the alcoholic's mental insanity, is the second, followed by the "decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" (59). What form this "God" takes is unimportant, so long as the alcoholic is honest with himself and is willing to turn his will and life over to his personal conception of this God.

These crucial first steps encourage the alcoholic to gain fortitude from a source outside himself. Yet they also betray AA's Calvinist or fatalistic undercurrent despite its founder's repeated assertions that AA "is not allied with any particular faith, sect, or denomination" (*Alcoholics Anonymous* xiv). In fact, AA considers itself unwavering in its agnosticism, the Big Book dedicating an entire chapter on the subject. Yet notwithstanding its attempts to disavow its affiliation with any religious institution, 5 of the 12 Steps (3, 5-7, 11) refer directly to God, while Step 2 mentions a Higher Power, and Step 12 gives the recovering alcoholic the evangelical commission "to carry" the "message" of one's "spiritual awakening" to "others" (59-60). These ideas are founded on the assumption that an alcoholic's salvation, much like the Puritan convert's, can only be gained through faith and through divine intervention, where the possibility of relief can be had only "if He were sought" (60). To dissuade sectarianism however, AA's founders are insistent that when "we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God," which "applies, too, to other spiritual expressions" in the Big Book (47). They go on to explain that AA has "no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired," that "[t]here is no friction among us over such matters" or over

“what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals” (28). Yet this recovery process, beginning with an addict admitting his powerlessness over alcohol and leading to his hope that a power greater than himself can restore him to sanity if he simply turn his will over to this force, is an idea fundamentally aligned with Calvinist doctrine as we can see from Shepard's *Confessions*. For early New England Puritans like Hannah Brewer or Martha Collins, believers were taught to place their entire trust in God's mercy if they were to have any hope of salvation. God, not man, is the catalyst of a believer's spiritual awakening and regeneration, just as an addict's Higher Power is understood as the sole source of hope for an alcoholic in recovery.

Like the farmer Robert Holmes, Cambridge converts described themselves as innately fallen and deprave – as “living in ignorance,” “disobedience,” and “subject . . . to every lust.” In time, however, and with faith, the Holy Spirit steps in, altering their mindset and behavior. At first, Holmes gained “nothing but sleep” during Shepard's sermons. “Rude as ever before,” Holmes took “no care for [his] soul,” preferring “covetousness” instead of thinking about his “spiritual state.” But through the grace of God, and Holmes' willingness to believe in this grace, a life-changing force unexpectedly intercedes on his behalf, allowing Holmes to see “at last” the spiritual side of “all things,” which in turn shows him how all his actions have been but “empty vanities.” Grace transforms Holmes when Holmes is powerless to do so himself, opening his heart and loosening his tongue (much as it did for Hannah Brewer) so that Holmes can finally ask God to “help . . . reveal Himself.” Holmes' humility, coupled with a greater appreciation for his spiritual condition, leads to answered prayers. Now, instead of falling asleep, Holmes’ “heart was melted all sermon time.” At “sacrament time,” Holmes now finds himself going “home” and crying “to Him” because he is “so affected.” Knowing that “I am oppressed,” Holmes places his trust in Christ who saves sinners just like himself. Still “doubting” his election, Holmes nevertheless finds relief in his act of self-surrender, explaining to Shepard's congregation how he will “follow on” no matter the outcome; that “if He damn me He shall do it in His own way,” which for Shepard's congregation gave ample evidence of Holmes' faith (142-3).

While never making any direct reference to the morphology of Puritan conversion, AA's approach to recovery nonetheless maps directly onto the type of

experience Holmes described. As social psychologist Daniel M. Wilcox outlines in his study on language and belief in Alcoholics Anonymous, the “process of healing,” like Holmes' journey toward regeneration, “is paradoxical in many respects. By giving up the compulsion to be in control of everything, AA members realize more actual control over their lives” (106). Accepting their dependence on alcohol, that they cannot control their lives or their ability to keep themselves from drinking, alcoholics in AA learn to transfer their dependency to a personal conception of God who they believe is able to restore them to sanity. Like Holmes, who turned to God as his only source of help after having evaluated his moral shortcomings, the alcoholic turns to a force outside himself to recreate the terms of his life. Putting his recovery into action, he carries out the lesson that “alcoholics are undisciplined,” letting “God discipline” him instead (Wilcox 88). Restless and discontented, the suffering alcoholic illogically feels that drink will offer him solace just as Holmes finds comfort in “work and covetousness.” As Bill W. once wrote in the Big Book, alcohol becomes a necessity – a way of life, an alcoholic's “master,” which the addict is powerless to overcome (5). Such powerlessness leads to a vicious cycle of “remorse, horror and helplessness” (6) in the same way Brewer felt sad and sick at the realization of her Godlessness or Holmes suffered a “spirit of mourning” when he “could not find repentance for sin” and his “life past” (143). Yet both convert and addict find strength by accepting their weaknesses; both learn that “[r]eal rewards aren't material in nature.” As one alcoholic whose testimony is recorded in the Big Book explains, it is only by arriving at this understanding when “[t]he Promises” – of a better life and of “a promising future” – “have begun to materialize for me” (327).

Grasping that their behavior will eventually lead to their complete annihilation, both alcoholic and Puritan convert face themselves with grace's assistance. Like Brewer, who realizes that without God's grace she will be eternally lost, alcoholics in AA are asked to recognize, as Bill W. learned during his recovery, that “I was nothing; that without Him I was lost” (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 13). To be “lost” creates the potential to be “found.” To be “nothing” makes room for an individual to become “something.” As Wilcox's study has shown, alcoholics gradually feel “lost . . . as a result of their drinking,” becoming “estranged from families and significant others” yet continuing to drink since they do not have the power to stop (34). In this the alcoholic finds no

pleasure. His obsession is “heartbreaking” and plagued with repeated failure. But if he is lucky, the alcoholic comes to see the path of “oblivion” he is on through the grace of his Higher Power, having experienced what Wilcox describes as an “awful awakening,” much like Rob K.’s, that puts his recovery into action (151).

Lost in every sense, alcoholics are offered salvation through their willingness to discount themselves and believe in a higher spiritual force, a process which is reinforced through the community, ritual, and traditions AA offers its members. Turning his will, his very being, and his destiny over to God, the alcoholic is next asked to make “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of himself (Step 4) in order to admit “the exact nature” of his wrongs to God, himself, and other human beings (Step 5), thereby demonstrating his readiness “to have God remove all these defects of character” (Step 6). From here he asks “Him to remove” these “shortcomings,” knowing that only God can (Step 7). Making “a list of all persons” he has “harmed” and “willing to make amends to them all” (Step 8), the alcoholic does so “whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others” (Step 9), effectively acting out his desire to lead a better life through affirmative action (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 59). Following these first nine Steps both encourages as well as helps sustain the alcoholic’s recovery. When revisited, they further assist the alcoholic to reinforce his positive behavior and his new way of thinking.

As Wilcox has shown and as professionals from the medical and social-work communities maintain, AA’s 12 Steps are “the only effective long-term solution to alcoholism” that has been proven to work, one in which the alcoholic develops “a new set of propositions on which to base [his] beliefs,” and which ultimately change his behavior as a result. By being taught that a Higher Power can be the source of their permanent restoration, a crutch upon which any alcoholic may stand, addicts in recovery are offered “new meanings for old terms and concepts” (110). In other words, they learn a new language – a new way of thinking about themselves and the world – as they are brought from their darkness into a sobering light, which in turn becomes a marker of their change. Seeking and seeing a Higher Power rather than alcohol as the primary facilitator of all their experiences, AA’s members gain a fresh mode of explanation and description that replaces their former self-involvement. They become new men and women transformed by their spirituality, if not their faith.

Recovery, then, is to acquire a new referential system; a new ontology, a new sense of self-understanding, and new faith in how things work. Recovery in AA “enabled me to see my part in my resentments and fears,” one alcoholic explains in the Big Book, providing “me with knowledge about my reactions to the conditions in my life” and a way “to control my well-being and behavior” after having “asked my Higher Power to remove from me everything that stood in the way of my usefulness to Him and others, and to help me build a new life” (468). But as stated before, deliverance does not necessarily arrive in epiphany in the same sense that conversion was a life-long process for the 17th century New England Puritan. AA’s 12 Steps are a testament to this, where members are encouraged to repeatedly revisit each step even if they have already gone through them all. The 12 Steps form a support system for alcoholics, just as regular meetings do. It is a set of doctrines to which alcoholics repeatedly return in their enduring battle against their addictive personalities, a set of doctrines founded on the underlying principle that recovery is a tenuous and unpredictable affair, and that the alcoholic *needs* all the support he can get. Each step tries to instill the idea that once a person is an alcoholic he is always an alcoholic; that sobriety must be taken one day at a time, and that recovery is always a work in progress.

As every individual in AA gradually comes to realize, sobriety is a concept that those in recovery struggle with every day, since with acceptance arrives the insight that, as addicts, they are personally powerless against alcohol’s temptation. This is why it is so crucial that the alcoholic appraise himself honestly but on a regular basis – to examine and re-examine his commitment to every step he has taken, effectively revisiting his sobriety through his addiction in an effort to sustain it. It was precisely to this effect that a preacher like Thomas Hooker advised his flock how personal and spiritual change can only happen if a sinner “hath surveyed the compass of his whole course, searched the frame of his own heart, and examined the windings and turnings of his own ways.” Whether a sinner who desires salvation or an alcoholic in AA who wants to be sober, Hooker’s advice applies to both. Only by seeing “what sin” – or for the alcoholic, what his addiction – “is, and what it hath done, how it hath made havoc of his peace and comfort, ruined and laid waste the very principles of reason and nature, and morality, and made hm a terror to himself,” can either believer or addict hope to sustain a new way

of thinking as well as the faith it requires ("True Sign" 293-4). This is why a Cambridge convert like Holmes reported to "still" find himself perpetually "doubting" the extent of his regeneration despite informing Shepard's congregation how grace has changed his life. For both alcoholic and convert, to revisit one's insufficiency stirs faith, whether in a power greater than oneself that can restore one to sanity, or in the "powerful supremacy of His just will" and "the fullness of His wisdom" (143).

For both Puritan congregation and those in AA, ambivalence toward oneself stimulates faith. In fact, it is this very same self-doubt that pushed a convert like Holmes to "follow on" much as it inspired one alcoholic, whose testimony is offered in the Big Book, to continue with AA because he believed the "power AA possess . . . is God" (308). To "follow on," however, not only implies a new spiritual approach to life but also a process. For the Puritan faithful and the alcoholic faithful to his recovery, life is reinterpreted as a journey of correct moral living. As the Big Book reminds members new and old, AA is at heart a "spiritual program of action." So even if an alcoholic's sanity may be restored, he is still told that he is "not cured of his alcoholism." Instead, "[w]hat we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition," where the thought that "[e]very day is a day when we must carry the vision of God's will into all of our activities" is one that "must go with us constantly," as the Big Book explains (85). When Bill W. envisioned the 12 Steps, he knew that not just sobriety but "[f]aith has to work twenty-four hours a day in and through us, or we perish," a concept similar to the Puritan idea of God's "plot" or plan for human salvation, which was to be worked out through a believer's every-day effort to discern grace's influence in his life (16). Seeing even the most mundane of experiences as laden with spiritual import, the Puritan New Englander constantly tested his faith as a way to confirm its durability and strength, testing it since opportunities for relapse – for further transgressions – were virtually infinite. Like conversion in 17th century New England, recovery is a matter of gradual spiritual development. Sobriety is "spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection," and is made possible "so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition" (60, 85). This is why AA "is not a plan for recovery that can be finished and done with." Rather, [i]t is a way of life" – a way of being in the world, acting with others, and thinking of oneself in the context of God's higher plan (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 275).

Having spurned the bottle, alcoholics must still conscientiously and continually enact their sobriety in order to maintain it, every day living “upon spiritual principles” so as to arm themselves for the “long period of reconstruction ahead” (83). They focus on the spiritual because their alcoholism isn’t just a scientific or psychological problem but also a moral one that needs to be worked on every day so that sobriety – or a change in perception and perspective – can be preserved. In the way Puritan New Englanders understood conversion and sanctification as an every-day affair, as a constant struggle of successes and failures through which individuals learn to slowly gain confidence in their actions, thoughts, and convictions, so too does AA envision recovery as a tireless and unsure affair. As Jensen’s study has shown, while some alcoholics might work through the 12 Steps quickly, others, particularly members who have been in the group for some time, tend to think of the steps as a guide or moral code that keeps their sobriety on track and reminds them of who they are and what they believe (9). Steps 10-12 reinforce this specifically. As they recover and remain sober, addicts are urged to continue taking a “personal inventory” of their moral actions (Step 10) and, “when we were wrong,” to “promptly” admit it while pursuing daily “prayer and meditation” to improve “conscious contact with God” and the “knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out” (Step 11). Finally, AA’s members are encouraged to (Step 12) “carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs” – to spread the word of their victory over alcohol so that others may begin the process of their own transformation (59-60). As one alcoholic describes recovery, one cannot simply take one’s moral inventory “and then file it away.” Instead, “the alcoholic has to continue to take inventory every day if he expects to get well and stay well.” He must make efforts to act out his recovery every day (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 264-5).

As Jensen study has illustrated, one can think of AA’s final three steps are a “kind of spiritual maintenance . . . as a means of continuing spiritual progress and staying in touch with the fellowship” (56). As I have been suggesting, this corresponds with the life of the Puritan devout. Seeing his faith tested at every turn, the Puritan gains a gradual but unsteady confidence in his salvation, which is reinforced through repeated contact with his spiritual community. Throughout this process, the strength of his conversion is repeatedly put to work, tested and appraised in a fluid and unpredictable series of events

that help him better understand God as well as himself. Although only grace rather than works or virtuous deeds was thought to regenerate a Christian soul, it was the level of a covert's tireless vigilance over his spiritual conviction that served as an indication of whether he was truly saved. *Alcoholics Anonymous* takes a similar position in its final three steps, ones that are founded in the idea that “[f]aith without works is dead” – that recovery ultimately, and over time, rests in an alcoholic's “intensive work with other alcoholics” (88).

Working with other addicts puts the abuser in a position to re-examine and reaffirm each step he has taken or will take as he helps other individuals struggling with the same affliction. Working with others also supports the idea that AA *actually works*, which in turn contributes to continued recovery. As the next section tries to show, however, what creates fellowship between addicts is not only a new, shared way of thinking and behaving; it is also a matter of speaking generated specifically through acts of personal disclosure. Taking time to work with other alcoholics is only successful insofar as an alcoholic is willing to share his experiences of failure, strength, and hope, where personal admission and stories of enduring strength fastens the communal binds that tie AA's members and lead to renewed triumphs over addiction. Speaking out both facilitates as well as sustains recovery. It generates a therapeutic community bound through a reciprocal vision of sustained spiritual and personal change.

An example of this came during an AA meeting I attended on 10/11/2010. As a rule, AA encourages those who attend meetings to speak up and to address their alcoholism in the context of the meeting's set agenda. On this night, the schedule asked those present to share the joys they've experienced while sober, in other words, how one can “still have fun without alcohol.” Finally, the turn to speak fell on an alcoholic attending his first meeting. Visibly shaken, obviously experiencing withdrawal, and in an unsteady voice, this individual simply stated how “just being here, at a meeting, and being around others, and hearing their stories” was “helping me stay alive right now and telling me that I can get better because I need help.” Although only in his first day of recovery, this alcoholic drew the courage to “stay alive right now” by hearing the voices and stories of other alcoholics who were maintaining their sobriety (and having fun doing it). Listening to the cumulative experience of those who have rebounded from the visible

discomfort this first-day member felt that evening gave him strength and hope in the possibility that he can, with some “help,” “get better.”

Judging from this example, we can see how the function of personal confession in AA recovery is consistent with how it was conceived in 17th century New England, where church applicants opened their private experiences of personal change to others who, like them, have undergone, will undergo, or were currently experiencing a similar sort of transformation. Just as the act of confessional disclosure bound members of a Puritan congregation while representing the possibility that spiritual change was possible for even the most lowly of sinners, it similarly draws those in AA together, creating a community set on helping each other and who share a similar language as well as a similar spiritual approach to recovery. Fellowship is an essential component of recovery, whether from addiction or from sin, as individuals bound by a common plight congregate to hear each other's personal experiences and to learn that personal redemption is an achievable goal even if a tireless process.

Like the act of speaking up, the “Serenity Prayer,” a staple of every AA meeting, is another example of how AA conceives sobriety as a continuous as well as shared process of self-management born under humility and unflinching honesty. An hymn of sorts that typically concludes most AA meetings, the prayer, spoken out-loud and often as members hold hands, invokes a notion of shared acceptance, and by extension, a shared sense of experience, purpose, and more importantly, faith. The Serenity Prayer reminds alcoholics how God is in control of their fate, their lives, and their actions, calling on members to ask “God” to “grant” them “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” One of the many rituals in which AA asks its members to participate, the prayer reminds the alcoholic of his limitations and sustains his faith in God's capacity to help him as it joins members through ritual and language.

Still, it is hard to overlook the Calvinistic undercurrent of AA's message, where believers are taught to shun their self-will in favor of a Higher Power that controls their destiny. The fact that the Serenity Prayer is taken directly from Proverbs (3: 5-6), which petitions believers to “[t]rust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” – that “in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths”

– makes this point decidedly clear. Indeed the form of spirituality AA asks its members to adopt, particularly with respect to how it sees an alcoholic's "spiritual awakening" as an integral component of recovery with respect to bringing about "the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery," sides decidedly with the type of faith New England's early settlers possessed. Like the alcoholic who claims that his "circumstances have steadily improved as my spiritual life grows and matures" and who knows that for a sustained recovery his "humility is key," that only by "the grace of God" has he come to grow "more comfortable with life," the Puritan convert similarly entrusted the Lord to keep him on course (511). So when Jane Palfrey, who joined Shepard's church in 1640, told her congregation how she had understood her "need of Lord's strength and support every moment" and that only this strength could save her from "falling to the same condition again," she expressed a belief that, to date, has helped millions of alcoholics across 150 countries maintain their sobriety (152).

For AA's members, a better life begins, much as it did for the Puritan convert, when a person finally accepts his inherent powerlessness. It continues when he arrives at faith: when he comes to believe in God's capacity to restore him to sanity and rid him from the afflictions he can no longer bear. Whether a member of AA or a 17th century Puritan congregation, regeneration is both driven and sustained by the searching moral inventory each is encouraged to make, and is cemented, finally, by an open confession of one's transgressions – to himself and to others – together with an earnest plea to God to cure him of his moral plight. With this in mind, the present chapter will now turn to the restorative power and community-building purpose of confessional disclosure itself, both in AA and in early New England, in an effort to explain how both understand redemption as a force that can only come after an individual openly admits his imperfections to other souls equally imperfect.

[3]

While the experience of alcoholism is different for every sufferer, those who seek recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous enjoy a fellowship in which the disclosure of private experience is understood as an integral aspect of recovery. Members share not only a common condition but also a common approach to improvement, one in which

active engagement with other members, particularly through energetic discussion, is seen as a catalyst for triggering sobriety. For Rob K. and for many of those in AA just like him, hearing another person's story of struggle, strength, and hope gives the abuser the feeling that "Ok. I can do this," as Rob K. recalls. This feeling, this moment of realization, arises precisely because there are others in the program with whom Rob K. can identify – others who suffer from his condition and who are willing to battle their addiction as they fight to stay sober one day at a time.

To promote the healing process that this identification affords, those in AA and who read the Big Book are expected to be as involved within the alcoholic community as they are in their own personal recovery and are taught that one cannot work without the other. Indeed all of AA's 12 Steps work to stimulate action, beginning with an inward personal admission and ending with the determination to lend oneself to others by sharing the joys of "[h]aving had a spiritual awakening as a result of the [twelve] steps . . . in all our affairs" (60).

To share the joys of having had a spiritual awakening promotes hope by providing a model for others. It teaches those who have not yet gained such joys that they too can feel them, no matter how horrible their condition. No longer wanting to drink but knowing that he can't stop on his own, the alcoholic feels relief in another's story of perseverance, finding also a community – a fellowship – in which he casts his lot and draws from the strength and lessons of others. By seeing himself in their stories of struggle and redemption, the alcoholic finds a sphere in which he can move beyond his shame, secrets, and fears, and so, opens himself up to the possibility of personal and spiritual growth. Influenced by the psychological theories of Carl Jung, among others, AA works on the principle that, as Jung has written, "we are all in some way kept asunder by our secrets." Because of this, it adopts Jung's notion of how it "is only with the help of confession that" one can throw themselves "into the arms of humanity" and be "freed at last from the burden of moral exile." Having long denied his condition for some time, the alcoholic lessens his alienation from himself and others often by simply admitting "I'm an alcoholic," a confession that others have also made. In Jung's view, this disclosure helps the addict move past self-denial to acceptance: to accepting what he has been and what he will always be – an alcoholic – except for the important fact that, through his admission,

he begins to feel included in a supportive new community that understands him (108).

Before offering their experiences at a meeting, alcoholics are typically asked to first identify themselves as alcoholics, their audience responding in turn with an accommodating “Hello.” This call and response is standard. So much so, that it has become a recognizable part of AA culture. As Jensen has noted however, this seemingly uncomplicated exchange invites “an active participation between speaker and audience,” establishing a dialogue “that is repeated again and again as roles shift, as one of the audience becomes speaker and speaker becomes one of the audience” (2). A straightforward admission, to characterize oneself as an alcoholic, fosters the kind of relief described above. It also serves as a reminder of the need to hold one's personal ambitions in check and to downplay the ill effects of an inflated personae while simultaneously promoting group harmony. At the same time, it can also cause a speaker to feel nervous, self-conscious, and even embarrassed over what he is about to say. However, by seeing others also speak and often struggling with their speeches, the alcoholic gains a confidence he did not have because he realizes he is not alone, an awareness that helps him to see that he, too, can deal with (and admit to) his problems, whether those in the past or in the present.

Open dialogue with others gives the alcoholic a sense of inclusion within a community, which alternatively liberates him from the alienation and self-loathing he feels as a person ultimately unable to control himself. Like the first-timer at the AA meeting I attended in 2010, the addict finds succor in the idea that, while he may be alone, he is not lost. Yet this is made possible only because in AA all participants are strongly encouraged to speak up and exchange their experiences. When shared, these stories shed light not just on an alcoholic's but *any* alcoholic's disease, where members see others suffering just like them – undergoing the same “sin of pride” Cambridge's Elizabeth Olbon spoke of – and learn that alcoholism, just like recovery, isn't an isolated experience (38).

Because it is not, AA explains that it should be acknowledged among members – that it should be shared so that it can be remedied. As Rob K. pointed out to me, a large part of his recovery took place when his friend and sponsor instilled within him the courage to take on his addiction “because of his own” – meaning his friend's –

“experience.” “He was just showing me his experience . . . and he kept reiterating it to me.” This “reiteration” is as much verbal as it is behavioral and active. As such, members are united expressively – linked through a linguistic and performative exchange that sustains the rhetoric of this communication as much as it does each member’s sobriety through the sharing of experience. This “rhetoric,” however, is underpinned by a Calvinist moral logic that sees individual powerlessness, and one’s acceptance and especially one’s *practice* of this reality, as an individual’s only source of freedom from the emotional, spiritual, and psychological pain that comes with being human.

As Dr. Edward J. Khantzian has written in *Treating Addiction as a Human Process*, contemporary therapy models, and AA especially, see “successful treatment” as always striving to “de-demonize a demonized population.” By learning to accept that part of being human may in fact entail disorder, the addict accepts himself as a person for the first time (xiii). In AA, exchanging personal and personality-revealing stories facilitates this de-demonization. Just like Rob K., who learned to control his impulses by seeing how his friend had through the experiences his friend imparted, addicts gain strength by identifying with each other – and themselves – as addicts. They concede their addiction to one another, and having done so, together get down to the business of maintaining their sobriety. As an alliance of equals who suffer the same illness and have fallen under the same moral predicament, one impartial to their respective creeds, backgrounds, and religious upbringings, AA’s members are united in their mission to stay sober even if they come from all walks of life. Despite differences, they all share a familiar story of frustration, anguish, and hope, each coming to believe – and *see* through each other’s stories – that with active work and conscious practice deliverance from alcoholism can be achieved.

This should reflect how, despite attempts at anonymity, AA really does seek the personal, and self-disclosure in particular. Paradoxically however, this confession works to create a consensus of experience. As personal stories are shared, they foster an experiential network – a pool of common experience – from which every alcoholic can draw or include himself, one that grants him reprieve from the isolation he may feel as part of the addictive process. Telling stories brings people together of course, and in AA, this is true even if these stories are about different people. Indeed the Big Book insists

how those in AA really aren't that unique from the standpoint of their experiences, which should lead them to the insight that they are not alone in them as well. Rather than focus on the individual, AA focuses on the general human dynamic. "We are average Americans" in which all "sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds." In AA, "people who normally would not mix" are mixed, democratized by their substance abuse and joined through a willingness to do whatever it takes to get better, including acknowledging out loud to others members the full measure of their disease (17).

From this standpoint, the importance of personal-turned-public confession as it functions within AA culture – as a crucial term of recovery, redemption, and re-commitment – resembles its role in 17th century New England. In both cases, each community is sustained by the words, and experiences, of every member, as language acts as both a catalyst for and a signifier of the change in awareness, attitude, and action members fight to uphold every day. Just as all alcoholics in AA are asked to take all 12 steps, read the same AA literature, recite the same Serenity Prayer, and introduce themselves in the same way before they speak no matter which AA meeting they attend, every Puritan convert was asked to consider his experience within a larger group dynamic so that, in relinquishing his private experiences with grace to the group's, he could share in their experiences of conversion and hope much as they shared in his. Just as every alcoholic in AA is encouraged to offer his experiences with alcohol so as to create fraternity by promoting a collective experience of recovery, Puritan converts offered their accounts of sin and assurance as a token of the common faith each congregant shared, a faith that, when spoken and acknowledged aloud, produced a joined reality in which life is rationalized if not simply better understood and whose terms are more easily accessible and comprehensible.

As Carolyn Knapp has discussed in her memoir of AA recovery, members are asked to repeatedly come to meetings, engage in rituals, share their experiences with each other, and adopt a language sustained through common experience that levels each member so as to create a sense of conviviality and mutual support. According to Knapp, "the language of twelve-step programs is nothing if not repetitive and right from the start you hear the same cliches and catchphrases and slogans over and over and over. *Don't*

drink, go to meetings, ask for help: the AA mantras . . . But I welcomed the sense of brainwashing. I felt like my brain could use a good scouring" (252). As they learn to recognize themselves as their biggest problem, alcoholics like Knapp find help elsewhere – in their Higher Power, and in others whom have gone through similar experiences and who similarly share their understanding of and hope for recovery. Like the stories alcoholics share, the repetition Knapp describes works to maintain sobriety, just as open dialogue reinforces the idea that no addict is alone in his addiction. Little by little, alcoholics like Knapp come to understand the process of their recovery through this repetition while engaging in AA's rituals, which includes everything from telling an anecdote to cleaning up after meetings – rituals that provide a sense of community experience that gives each member the crucial courage to continue with their sobriety.

Knapp's account is not unique but it is noteworthy nonetheless. In the same way that Protestant converts like Jonathan Edwards and John Marrant entered a new public sphere in the 18th century by printing their own conversion accounts when most 17th century converts did not have the chance thereby altering the ways conversion was understood and presented, Knapp prints her memoir as an example of one addict's special "love affair with alcohol" and her desperate escape from its clutches. Yet her portrayal as well as language is still typical those recorded in the Big Book, which reveal individuals just like Knapp who were at first disenchanted by AA's slogans but who gradually came to see its repetitiveness as essential to their sobriety. While AA prides itself with not siding with a systematic dogma, it still strives to create and reinforce a new way of thinking and speaking shared by all its members based on repetition and animated through persistent reference to the same rhetoric and ideas. Knapp's experience, however unique to her, is just like any other alcoholic's. This is why Wilcox has suggested that observers regard Alcoholics Anonymous as a "speech community" as much as a plan for recovery. It is a community with "a set of principles embedded in its specialized language . . . by which a different set of meanings is acquired for previous behaviors" (104). Sharing narratives of misery, struggle, and perseverance allows members to both see and remember how alcohol has caused them to suffer, a realization that, if taken in earnest, often leads them to their first Step.

At the heart of AA recovery one finds the central role of confession, an activity in

which differences between alcoholics are put aside – where a person's idiosyncrasies are figured as problems shared by everyone else. Just as was the case for the professing convert in 17th century New England, whether a person is good with words or what his personal history is isn't so important as these things in context of his infirmity. In AA the agenda is – and must always be – recovery, where the personal details of an alcoholic's life is only significant in the way it paints a picture of a drunk, no matter who this drunk is. In staying sober, and sharing his story of this sobriety, one drunk gives other drunks hope who, in hearing his story, find themselves in his position, which is also their own. Whether a member of a Puritan church or a drunk desperately seeking AA's help, confessional self-disclosure binds members through this reciprocity, one which nourishes an invested empathy that in turn sustains the faith every alcoholic needs that he *can* remain sober and that he *can* be saved. Being able to identify with another's experience – to see it as one's own – is essential to this process.

As Kurtz has commented, the testimonies appended to the Big Book were purposefully edited to underscore the “different phases of the drinkers' common experience” so that alcoholics who read these stories, which almost every alcoholic in AA ends up doing, feels no different from the person telling it, and so experiences inclusion within AA's social fabric (73-4). These accounts also allow newcomers to see that there are others out there just like them; that sobriety is not a myth for alcoholics who are as sick as they. United by a common experience of alcoholism that is at the same time personal for each individual, those in AA enjoy a community cemented through language and verbal performance. By telling and listening to other alcoholics discuss their personal and always uneven road to sobriety, abusers come to a cumulative vision of what they face independently, understanding their own experiences to be one among many, and consequently, as part of a greater social and spiritual venture. Going to AA meetings and hearing how others are working out their sobriety bolsters the alcoholic's decision to become sober. Seeing how others have gained power over their addiction, the alcoholic engages in the same discourse through which he gains the necessary courage to overcome his disease. In a sense, the alcoholic looks at himself through the eyes of his peers and through their tales, especially when it is hard for him to face himself directly. So while Rob K., like so many others, was unsure of himself and whether AA was the right place

for him early in his recovery, he gained confidence that he could “do this” when, “walking into a meeting there’s a guy standing there up front, and he goes through his story and, you know, its identical to mine . . . And it was just like: ‘Wow. Ok.’”

Knowing that this “guy” had “gone through the same shit” persuades Rob K. that he can go “through” it too, just as seeing others speak of their spiritual assurance left Puritan converts open to and hopeful of the possibility of their own. As Kurtz explains, exchanging personal experience lays “the foundation for saving identification,” which serves as “[t]he antidote for the deep symptom of [an alcoholic’s] denial” and is “marked by open and undemanding narration infused with profound honesty about personal weakness.” The curative power of identification rests primarily in the witness it gives: “a witness to the healing potency of *the shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged*” (61). Like the Puritan convert, the alcoholic in AA doesn’t just admit that he is powerless over alcohol to be done with it. He also admits his weakness through the stories he tells – and retells – about his addiction. Sharing his experience provides much-needed catharsis as well as for those who hear him, members who acknowledge and accept his predicament rather than deny it, an acceptance that clears the way for a solution which both listeners and speaker share.

In the Foreword to the third edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, readers learn how “recovery begins when one alcoholic talks with another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength, and hope” (xxii). For alcoholics, recovery is made into reality not only after admitting one’s alcoholism and seeking a solution in a Higher Power but also by sharing one’s story and, with every subsequent AA meeting, by repeating this process – by once again surrendering to the notion of one’s alcoholism, but this time, out loud to oneself and to others. Practicing a new way of thinking derived through an earnest acknowledgement that they are powerless over their addiction, alcoholics go to meetings instead of Cheers, a place where everybody knows their first names as well as what everyone is going through and what they are each trying to accomplish. To this extent, the practice of confession in early New England was no different, though it was more than likely that congregants knew each other rather well. Here, as in AA today, self-disclosure worked to sustain the spiritual involvement of not only professing members who claimed, like Cambridge’s John Sill, that he “looked for mercy from the Lord because he found

himself wanting,” but also that of their spiritual community as a whole (45). For early New England congregations like Shepard's, conversion narratives represented Christian history coming to life, which centered on Christ's redemptive sacrifice for those willing to accept Him. To hear of a convert's moral conflicts, his gradual spiritual awakening, and his conviction in Christ as his savior animated a congregation's faith perhaps more than any sermon, displaying its justness on a personal level that could be shared by every member through the similar pronouncement of faith he or she made.

That verbal testimony of a confessional nature is an integral component of AA recovery is a fact represented by the forty-three recovery stories published in the Big Book that, according to its original authors, “bear witness that release from alcoholism can really be permanent” (169). As an early member simply identified as “Alcoholic Anonymous Number Three” put it, while discussing his alcoholism often promoted resentment and hostility, talking to other “drunks just as I was . . . wasn't so bad.” When Number Three hears that two other alcoholics want to talk to him because talking “was going to help *them* to stay sober” while others who had previously wanted to lend a hand “wanted to help *me*,” Number Three found himself compelled to “listen . . . for a short time” (185). It was an open dialogue, one in which all interlocutors could all relate with each other's experiences, that launched Number Three toward recovery.

Before very long we began to relate some incidents of our drinking, and pretty soon I realized that both of them knew what they were talking about, because you can see things and smell things when you're drunk that you can't other times. If I had thought they didn't know what they were talking about, I wouldn't have been willing to talk to them at all. (185)

Hearing the story of other alcoholics – of those “that knew what they were talking about” – pushed Number Three to a state of openness and, eventually, acceptance. He became receptive because his companions seemed authentic. They could “see things and smell things” that only another drunk could see and smell. They could relate to Number Three just as he could relate to them, and so, the “incidents” of “drinking” discussed took on a shared quality that made Number Three “willing” to continue listening – and talking.

Listening to the tales of another alcoholic's personal struggles and triumphs drove Number Three to his first of 12 Steps. “I admitted that from then on I was willing to let

God take over instead of me.” But as his account reveals, this only happened after he “realized” not only that the people who wanted to help him were also drunks who were staying sober but that they were equally there to help *themselves* with their alcoholism just as much as they were there to help Number Three with his. Hearing and identifying with other alcoholics – other alcoholics who are willing to do whatever it takes to be free of their disease – facilitated Number Three’s decision to change, just as it sustains this decision for countless others. Yet in every case it is self-disclosure, which in turn reinforces the alcoholic’s identity as an alcoholic but also one who is willing to get better, which stimulates recovery.¹⁷

For Dave B., whose testimony is also in the Big Book, “[t]elling my story” serves another important function. “[It] reminds me that I could go back to where I was,” as his tale triggers difficult memories that remind him of the destructive path he was on and that he could at any moment “go back to,” thereby helping him remain determined to stay on course with his sobriety. By sharing his experiences, Dave B. both tests and reestablishes his resolution to remain sober, the experience of speaking humbling him, reminding him of his powerlessness as an alcoholic and of “the wonderful things that have been given to me,” just as “God is the guide that keeps me on this path” (193). Conversations with oneself, and with others, consequently strengthens an alcoholic’s faith, and stand as a model of determination, hope, and collective strength. To another early member, sharing his experiences of alcoholism and hearing others speak of theirs invites both communion and better self-understanding. Seeing others like him makes him realize that “I wasn’t the only person in the world who felt and behaved like this! I wasn’t mad or vicious – I was a sick person” (205). For this sufferer, to hear how others also suffer from *his* “disease” invites what the Big Book characterizes as a “That’s me. That’s me. I drink like that” moment when the alcoholic, feeling an intense emotional and experiential connection with other sufferers, moves past denial to acceptance and, hopefully, to change (157).

The sympathy and compassion that only other alcoholics can provide offers crucial solace in the course of struggle, especially in the idea that one’s experience with alcoholism, one that for the alcoholic in recovery is tested every day, is one that others are experiencing at the same time. Indeed one of the basic principles of AA is that no one can understand the problems of the alcoholic quite like another alcoholic, which is

precisely why AA invites members to share their feelings. Personal disclosure creates a therapeutic environment like no other, one in which common trust and a sense of fellowship is established. More than sharing an affinity or a disease, those in AA form communal bonds based on a shared ontological condition. Like a modern-day congregation, members enjoy a similar vision of recovery founded on the same core beliefs, traditions, and rituals that are dutifully performed at meetings and at home. Going to meetings and talking to other alcoholics keeps alcoholics sober while showing new members how to achieve sobriety. In turn, the communion AA's members enjoy, nurtured through the experiences they share and the specific rhetoric of surrender, humility, and acceptance they use to both to describe these experiences and come to terms with them, stimulates the kind of spiritual change the Big Book outlines.

Telling stories engages the AA group in a psychotherapeutic exercise that uses language as a primary instrument of behavioral change. By sharing their experiences, members learn a new referential system that helps them sustain their recovery, one through which AA integrates new members. As Wilcox's study has shown, sharing a specific language founded on a core set of beliefs leads alcoholics to typically feel that only other alcoholics can truly understand them and their experiences. When members outside of the group refer to concepts like pride, surrender, acceptance, control, powerlessness, resentment, or even God, they communicate something very different than when AA members refer to them since recovering alcoholics, interacting within the context of a specific speech community, enjoy a discourse that promotes a common viewpoint (Wilcox 8-9). This is why alcoholics are encouraged to work with one another and to continue attending meetings, since the experiential and discursive bond they engage in cannot be duplicated by the outside world. Like the Puritan saint, the alcoholic is in the world but not of it. AA recovery teaches him that he has given up this privilege – that indeed it was a false sense of privilege that led to his destructive behavior in the first place. As a result, he must learn to adapt to a new set of beliefs and must learn to speak in new terms if he is to live without fear, just as he must learn to work with others like him if he is going to get better.

This dialogic alliance between AA's members that rests beyond the discursive reach of the non-alcoholic community also helps prevent the transference associated with

the type of confessional disclosure AA promotes. As Jung has noted, the disclosure demanded by psychotherapy can often weaken neurosis to the point where the patient's illness disappears, or at least to the point where his symptoms vanish. Thus "[t]he patient could now be dismissed as cured if it depended on the physician. But he . . . cannot get away," since now "[t]he patient is bound to the physician by the act of confession. And if this apparently meaningless attachment is forcibly severed, there is a bad relapse" (37). In other words, if an alcoholic's secrets and experiences isolate him, personal confession draws him closer to others, especially those who can grasp the full import of his words and who also speak through the same referential system. So when an alcoholic admits to his moral failings, his powerlessness, and his disease to other alcoholics, transference, as well as the type of fixation and dependence associated with it, is prevented since other alcoholics, serving as a proxy for a therapist, share his experiences of abuse, recovery, and hope.

Alcoholics open their lives to other members and to their sponsors who do the same. Through a dialogic relationship that places importance on personal confession and ritual performance – on verbal as well as symbolic or extra-verbal acts of self-surrender – alcoholics both acquire and retain a shared idiom that sustains the positive attitudes, concepts, and values they need for recovery. This in turn gives them a much-needed sense of humility embodied by the notion that however far along an alcoholic may be in his recovery, he can always still learn "a tremendous amount from [another alcoholic's] serenity, directness, and honesty" in ways that reinforce his own positive behavior (Jensen 39). Describing her first experiences at AA, Knapp recalls how "every time I heard someone tell his story at an AA meeting, I connected with some part of it, saw a piece of myself. The people I heard at meetings also had a confidence, a calm self-acceptance, I'd coveted all my life, and I wanted what they had: serenity." Like others in AA, Knapp sees herself – and what she truly wants – in the stories of abuse, spiritual change, and self-transformation she hears even if she has not gone through them herself. She can relate with members as alcoholics, their tales filling in the gaps of her own experiences as they give her a picture of the "serenity" and "calm self-acceptance" she craves (253).

Conversation – and confession – sustains this process, where stories of tragedy,

perseverance, and recovery are repeated at every meeting in order to reestablish both a collective and individual sense of progress through joined purpose. But while talk may help push alcoholics beyond the irrepressible desire for drink, those in recovery still know that maintaining their sobriety is never guaranteed, which is why both the Big Book and the majority of alcoholics refer to recovery as a “perpetual quest” – as a life-journey made more manageable through the knowledge and comfort that others are also in on it. For while alcohol may no longer be a “part of my life and I no longer have the compulsion to drink,” as one Big Book testimonial exclaims, “it can still occur to me what a good drink tastes like and what it can do for me” (396). As this alcoholic explains, it is exactly at these points when “[i]t's time to get back to basic AA and see what needs changing” – when one must “be an active member of AA” so as to rekindle the support that only talking with and being around other alcoholics can provide. Speaking publicly re-triggers self-scrutiny. While alcoholics understand “[t]hat special relationship with alcohol will always be there, waiting to seduce [them] again,” they also know that their sobriety can always “stay protected” if they continue to engage with the alcoholic community, who helps them to see themselves clearly and with an honest eye (396-7).

An important cornerstone of this change is to be able to watch other alcoholics maintain their sobriety. As another alcoholic recalls in the Big Book, by hearing “one of my old hobo buddies” – “an alcoholic” – recount how, “with a big smile on his face . . . he'd quit drinking,” he becomes inclined to compare himself with his sober friend: that “[i]f he can do that, I can do that.” Taken “down to this club where there were some other recovered alcoholics,” this addict is further persuaded that recuperation can be achieved as he drinks “coffee while they all told me how they had changed.” Like Knapp, seeing the personal and spiritual transformation of other alcoholics immediately arrests this alcoholic's attention. “It looked like he might have something here,” he explains, as he begins to see that “[i]f they could do this, maybe, just maybe, I could too.” Exposed to the possibility of recovery and convinced by his friend's “enthusiasm,” this alcoholic feels an inexplicable “excitement inside,” one that leads him to quit drinking the following day. Yet “[t]here are no words to explain why it happened or how it happened; it just did. It was a miracle,” one that can only be described as a “gift from a Higher Power” (442).

Grateful to his Higher Power for the gift of his sobriety, the alcoholic's recovery is also motivated by the fellowship he feels toward other alcoholics which, as the example above illustrates, often comes in the guise of a spirited competitiveness – that if *he* can get better, then surely “*I* can do that” too. Confession opens the door for this camaraderie, helping to displace the sense of shame, isolation, worthlessness, and fear of discovery that precipitates heavy drinking and almost certainly perpetuates it.¹⁸ For Bill W., it was only by “ruthlessly” facing his “sins,” and by admitting to himself and to others that “of myself I was nothing,” that he could finally be “willing to have my new-found Friend take [these sins] away, root and branch” (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 13). In other words, it was a probing form of self-scrutiny and confession, particularly of his “sins,” that led Bill W. to a sustained faith in a spiritual “Friend” whom he knew could vanquish his sins.

By sharing their experiences, alcoholics like Bill W. reinforce the idea that personal change through faith is possible, and more, that the type of faith AA espouses actually works. More importantly, it leads to a form of faith that is real, just as hearing of another's conversion made real the mysterious process of conversion to the 17th century Puritan who accepted the fact that his destiny was ultimately a matter of God's will. Through a consensus of experience gained through personal disclosure, church members, with every conversion narrative they heard, found more reason to believe in the sanctity of not only their own faith but their religion as a whole. Like the carpenter William Hamlet, who came to New England in the late 1630's, Bill W.'s recovery also began by accepting his personal weakness. In Hamlet's case, this arrived when he finally realized how “profane and wicked” he truly was. Facing a congregation of mixed ages and vocations, Hamlet gave “up myself to Christ” after having “found my condition” like so many of Shepard's converts, just as Bill W. ruthlessly faced his sins so that they could be taken away by his larger-than-life “Friend” (126-7).

According to AA, this sort of personal admission makes spiritual and personal change possible, just as it binds the alcoholic community together and much as it bound members of Shepard's church. It was precisely to this effect that Shepard wrote in his *Autobiography* how he “learned from that time never to go about a sad business” of his iniquities “in the dark” – that with God's support and with the charity of his Christian brethren he could face himself head-on so as to “[b]e renewed in the spirit” once more

(59, 43). By admitting their shortcomings to themselves and to each other, both alcoholics and converts better face the uneasy process of the self-scrutiny their respective institutions require as a necessary precondition of their deliverance. To be sure, confessing one's moments of weakness is an undoubtably difficult task for anybody. However, to see how others go through the same plight and yet are willing to submit themselves to the same scrutiny, solution, and process of self-disclosure gives members of both fellowships a sense of spiritual and social purpose that informs their lives in a meaningful way. By telling their stores of hardship, personal failure, and success, or what Jensen characterizes as a narrative of "how they used to be, how they became involved, and how they are now," members of each group institute what the Big Book describes as "a fellowship, a friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful," yet one that is, in any final analysis, engendered through verbal acts of confession (34).

By talking, alcoholics preserve a type of thinking that promotes constructive behavior. They gain mutual support and a better understanding of their own situation by hearing other alcoholics speak of their trials and successes, much as Cambridge's converts understood their place among "God's people" after "hearing of the glorious portion of the saints," particularly at times when they "could not seek [their] own" and saw themselves "farthest from God" (127). The fellowship open disclosure provides becomes a force of change catalyzed by "[t]he feeling of having shared in a common peril" that, as one AA member recounts, fashions "the powerful cement which binds us" (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 17). While this comment is taken out of the Big Book, this description closely resembles to how a Puritan minister might address his congregation, a group who drew strength from the "common peril" they shared when each stood to deliver an account of his or her spiritual transformation. On board the same "ship" – or physical, psychological, and metaphysical condition that keeps them from leading a healthy life – both converts and alcoholics give thanks to a Higher Power that, while defined differently for each individual, is nonetheless understood by each as the only force able to rescue them from the shipwreck of their human urges. Like the Puritan convert, alcoholics gain fortitude from "[t]he tremendous fact" that "every one of us . . . have discovered a common solution" (17). For both, the spiritual fraternity confession provides offers incentive and frequent prompting, helping individuals steer a steady

course toward a better way of living as they see others attempting the same. As one alcoholic reports in the Big Book, “should I have more bad times, I know that I'll never again have to go through them alone” – that “[w]ith my AA friends” and “a Power greater than myself,” the possibility of sobriety can be had (386).

Just as the language converts used to describe their encounters with grace helped sustain a close connection with each other and with God, creating what Stromberg characterizes as a “balanced connection” to their “intimate relations, family, work, [and] church membership,” the way AA teaches members to view themselves in light of their disease, emphasizing “[o]ur common welfare . . . first” and that “personal recovery depends upon AA unity, promotes a type of groupthink in which all members are joined (Stromberg 43).

By now it should be clear how AA relies on a blatantly Christian and a more specifically Calvinist rhetoric of human depravity, humility, and self-surrender to a force greater than oneself to restore sanity and strength to its members. By adopting a language of evangelical piety – and through confession, a performance of this language – to do so, AA sides itself, however reluctantly, with an ideology that brought New England's earliest settlers together in feeling, thought, and action. Just as Cambridge convert Nathaniel Sparrowhawk's faith in his religion and in God and his open confession of this faith brought him “to find [the] power . . . to see my own heart reaching after things of this world,” those in AA also undergo a similar process of acceptance and acknowledgement – to themselves and to others – that makes their sobriety and their salvation possible (64).

One may ask whether AA really needs the power of a Christian God or Calvinist tenets to help people, or whether these concepts limit AA's ideology by keeping atheists and those who may resist Christian dogma at arm's length so that AA excludes individuals from its fold? For while AA tries to dislodge itself from Christianity, even the Big Book agrees that “[t]he basis of the technique of Alcoholics Anonymous is the truly Christian principle that a man cannot help himself except by helping others” – that “there is something undeniably spiritual about AA” (572). AA sidesteps this criticism, however, because it stands firm in its belief that it can work for anybody since its appeals emphasize concepts that even the most skeptical person can embrace, concepts like

solidarity, a common goal, determination, and strength. As one Big Book testimonial puts it, “[i]t took me some time to realize that the Twelve Steps of AA were designed to help correct defects of character and so help remove the obsession to drink. The Twelve Steps . . . meant honest thinking, not wishful thinking, open-mindedness, a willingness to try, and faith to accept” (356). Indeed the “open-mindedness” AA teaches, while rooted in a Christian evangelical tradition, promotes action – a “willingness to try” – that can appeal to anyone, especially those that are so deeply mired in their addiction that they are ready to try anything.

At heart, AA doesn't ask people to believe in Christ's saving act, or even God. Instead, it challenges addicts to try out a new way of thinking and seeing the world that it knows can help them. It asks individuals to be willing – to want with enough conviction to feel the “joy inside of me” that Rob K. now feels having taken a chance on Alcoholics Anonymous and having seen, that personal change is achievable. While we can say that the Calvinistic emphasis or undercurrent that forms the basis of AA's ideology pushes people to see just how far they have fallen and that only with their willingness to believe in a Higher Power can they be redeemed piece-by-piece and day-by-day, the personal and public acts of self-scrutiny, humility, and confession it promotes has a universal appeal – indeed a *human* appeal – that corresponds with alcoholism's indiscriminate nature as a disease. It is true that the Big Book instructs AA's members that “true rewards aren't material in nature” (327). Yet its appeal to help alcoholics through concepts like honesty, self-disclosure, and the community these things provide is one that anyone, whether Christian, agnostic, or even a person who don't suffer from the disease, can gain, even if many of its central doctrines and ritual practices are ones that early New England Puritans also shared.

[4]

If we can say that New England's early religious culture influences a contemporary American institution like Alcoholics Anonymous and the lives of its members, particularly in terms of how individuals relate with one another, understand themselves, and cope with the realities of their existence, then is it also possible to say that it resides in other cultural arenas as well? As this chapter has tried to show, facets of

Puritanism's religious practice, more than simply lingering, inform the way those living in the 21st century think, behave, and act. It has tried to demonstrate Puritan doctrine's conceptual as well as practical flexibility, particularly with regard to conversion, and the usefulness of a concept like Puritan confession, which can be regarded on both secular and spiritual plains, and with special usefulness to the disciplines of religious studies, history, literature, sociology, and human psychology.

Although ostensibly non-sectarian, the 12-Step recovery *Alcoholic's Anonymous* outlines – “a useful program for anyone concerned with a drinking problem” – suggests a course of action that is fundamentally Calvinist in spirit if not in doctrine (19). As Khantzian has theorized, though with an eye to clinical recovery, “[a]lcoholics suffer because they have been vulnerable in sectors of their personality organization involving self-governance and the capacity to regulate feelings and self-care” (421). Through the intense course of self-reflection, commitment, honesty, and open dialogue AA prescribes, members rebound from these deficiencies by giving themselves over to a spiritual force in much the same way Shepard's congregation knew that the “more temptations” they faced, the more they were made “fit for church fellowship” (*Confessions* 140). Looking closely at the testimonials recorded in the Big Book, those observable at meetings, as well as those transcribed from clinical sources, all describe an individual's struggles with addiction and AA recovery in remarkably the same way the determined Puritan soul came to terms with his spiritual condition and saving experiences. Like one of Thomas Shepard's converts who perceived his immoral “condition,” understood the “necessity of a change,” and whose heart was “broken” in the “consideration of [his] own vileness” to which he finally saw the “necessity of Christ,” alcoholics in AA with a will sufficient enough to want to recover also come to realize the precariousness of their situation through the grace of a Higher Friend (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 115-6). Alcoholics also realize the desperate need to alter their behavior and way of thinking, and that the only way out of their condition, as one alcoholic puts it in the Big Book, is in “turning my will and my life over to a Higher Power” (373). So while the context has changed, the essential idea has not: God can save individuals from the brink of despair and restore them through faith so long as they are willing to believe.

Still, the correspondences between Puritan culture and AA are, for the most part,

disregarded, and so it is left for observers (and in this case, a student of early New England) to ask why. If the process of giving up one's will to God's, which in turn moves the alcoholic's "inner spirit" toward "a spiritual awakening," is an essential part of AA recovery, then how can we overlook the fact that these are views that were also shared by Puritans who had converted to Christ? How can we overlook the Calvinist undertones behind the alternating senses of anguish, despair, and hope alcoholics in AA typically use to describe their experiences when it is more or less identical to the way a Cambridge applicant accounted for his conversion – as the gradual movement whereby a "poor creature" found himself "in a lost condition and knew not what to do" except to "see that there was enough in the Lord" (174)? Can we really ignore how the performance of personal confession used to indoctrinate new members into AA, or the fact that members are acculturated into the alcoholic community by understanding and describing their experiences through shared rituals and a shared vocabulary, takes its lesson directly from how New England congregations tested believers as communicating members?

A fraternity of people united by a common social and spiritual cause, AA teaches members how to come to terms with life. It educates those who, like the Puritan devout, are confused and suffering, alleviating feelings of remorse and guilt by helping individuals sublimate their anxieties into a productive outlet. As a mainstream self-help organization, Alcoholics Anonymous brings people with the same problem – one that is as moral and metaphysical as it is biological – together, and gives these people a new lease on life. As sociologist David Robinson's study on the self-help component of AA has shown however, AA's vision of recovery involves more than mutual identification and support gained through shared experiences (9). Although vital, these factors must still be supplemented with action, which also means repetition. They must be sustained through the continuous effort an alcoholic must make to become involved in the AA community and in the lives of others (12).¹⁹

In AA, words are performative. They bring about change, which is why AA considers them dead without proportionate action. As this dissertation has explained, this, too, was the case in the early Bay colony, where church applicants sustained the reality of their religion through the confessions they delivered. This is why their leaders instructed them that they must ultimately back their words up with works – that through pious

actions that both reinforce and confirm faith, a spiritual community of visible saints living in New England could be realized.

While a person does not have to be a Calvinist to follow the recovery plan AA outlines for its members, he still goes through an order of events that teaches him, as it taught one alcoholic, to do “the right things to make [the 12 Steps] work” – to “not only have peace *with* God,” but “have the peace *of* God through an active God consciousness.” Because of AA, this individual has “not only recovered from alcoholism.” He has also “become whole in person – body, spirit, and soul” (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 457). In other words, AA has taught a person otherwise God-less a form of spirituality and a way of living in which he considers an “active God consciousness” essential to his being “whole.” AA changed this man into a person whose faith has become an intrinsic part of his identity and existence. What else, then, can we call this process but one of conversion, and its confession, a conversion narrative?

The kind of change that occurs in AA and the testimonies associated with this experience are too closely related to the way Puritan culture taught converts how to improve their personal, moral, and spiritual condition to be missed. And with an overabundance of worldwide self-help programs that take advantage of AA's pioneering 12-Step approach, can we not say, then, that Puritanism's waters run far deeper than we may suppose or would like to admit?

In an article on how the concept of religious conversion can play a part in how graduate students are trained to teach, Nancy Welch has made precisely this argument. Like Shepard's faithful, Welch argues how new teachers are “converted” into a particular (academic, pedagogical) culture. They are taught a new “way of seeing themselves and their institutions” through the specific language and behavior they are trained to use in their classrooms. Universities engage in what Welch describes as “overt and theoretically explicit practices of socialization.” First-year teachers are shown what it is to be “ideal” teachers and are then “encouraged to convert to that idea,” much as professing Puritan saints demonstrated to those yet unconverted what a typical Christian convert should say, feel and behave when he delivered his conversion narrative (338).

Taking this relatively simple example of how a rhetoric of conversion plays a role in the way modern universities require members to participate in a “range of identity-

changing, ideologically-situated assumptions about language and learning, about the relation between individuals and institutions . . . and [about] the construction of self,” can we not say then that New England’s early religious culture can teach us something more about how these assumptions and relationships work in American society today (338-9)? If certain communities or collective pursuits can be compared to Puritan meetings, if particular institutions or programs ask individuals to take “leaps of faith” or confess their personal experiences to others, and if certain theoretical doctrines like those in AA recommend that one give up their personal agency to a Higher Power, then it seems fair to propose that Puritanism may still be a vital part of (and part of how we understand) how we live, the rituals in which we engage, and the terms through which we understand and describe the world. Yet it is easy to sidestep the religious aspects of our culture when, as a nation, have chosen to identify our society as secular in both the sense that it is open to all religious denominations and ideas as well as how, especially in comparison to 17th century New England, religiosity does not pervade as a ruling mechanism of authority. But when our political leaders close speeches with a ubiquitous “God bless America,” and when the cherished 7th inning anthem “Take Me Out To The Ballgame” is replaced in baseball stadiums across the country (baseball being America’s pastime) by a song whose title and words remind us that God indeed blesses America first and foremost, one is quickly reminded of the fact that religion is still an abiding if somehow unspoken fabric of our so-called secular culture.

Notes

¹ Shepard's *Confessions* are edited by George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley in the *Collections of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 58 (Boston: The Society, 1981). Biographical information of the church applicants cited in this chapter are taken directly from this work as they have been throughout this dissertation. Wigglesworth's *Diary* was edited in 1965 by Edmund S. Morgan and were recorded both at Cambridge and Malden. *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske* is edited by Robert G. Pope in the *Collections of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 47 (Boston: The Society, 1974) and were recorded at Wenham and Chelmsford, Massachusetts.

² Of the relatively few studies on the Puritan conversion narrative that specifically considers the ritual's literary form and impact, those of Owen C. Watkins (1972), Patricia Caldwell (1983), and Virginia Brereton (1991) stand out as the most exceptional. Michael McGiffert's introduction to Shepard's *Journal and Autobiography* (1994) is also extremely helpful.

³ Only in rare instances did converts actually describe the details of their lives. This was done to emphasize the spiritual work of the Holy Spirit rather than the convert's own will or personality. When a believer's personal history is mentioned, it is usually in the context of the convert's regeneration, reinforcing the spiritual and broader communal rather than personal value of the account being delivered. For example, when Elizabeth Olbon, a to-be member of Shepard's church, recalls hearing “[f]rom a speech” of a neighbor about the saving power of Christ, she only mentions this incident because of its spiritual value – as a speech that leaves her spirit “stirred” and which ultimately allows her to see “more of her sin” (39).

⁴ Coleman quoted in Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 197.

⁵ The most thorough and daring studies that think outside of a Weberian tradition of Puritan cultural analysis, to my mind, are those of Charles Hambrick-Stowe (1982), Charles Lloyd Cohen (1986), David D. Hall (1989), Andrew Delbanco (1989), and Janice Knight (1994). The dates of these publications are suggestive, revealing the absence (and need) of more recent work on the subject of Puritanism's relevance to American culture – an absence this dissertation has attempted to address. The most comprehensive and illuminating collection of scholarly essays on the Puritan legacy and its effect on American society, politics, and culture continues to be McGiffert's *Puritanism and the American Experience* (1969).

⁶ One of the impressive, and telling, facts about the American cult of self-help is that many of its leading proponents were clergymen. Names like Henry Ward Beecher, Horatio Alger, William Lawrence, and Lyman Abbott were equally as familiar to those who read success tracts as those who worshipped in Protestant churches. This connection can be accounted for, in part, because godliness was taught as intrinsic to personal success, as religious sanction was given to the get-ahead values of the business community. The formula was simple enough: prosperity in one's profession gave evidence of Providential favor, a blueprint first established in Puritan New England under the guise of an individual's Christian call.

⁷ Thomas Hooker, “Wandering Thoughts,” 308; “True Sight of Sin,” 254.

⁸ This quote is taken directly from the *Confessions'* title page, as edited by Selement and Woolley (29). It can only be assumed that those propounded to be received were accepted to Shepard's fold as there is no reason to believe otherwise. As such, the significance of the title page rests in the notion that this is indeed a “diverse” group of individuals. According to Puritan theology, grace is impartial to age, class, or family background, which is reflected by the mixed group of individuals who attested to their faith in Shepard's notebook, who range from future ministers to husbandmen and housewives. A diverse church would have been important to an early New England minister like Shepard, since the congregational system under which he preached considered individual churches as semi-autonomous spiritual communities whose diversity reinforces the

notion of its justified spiritual sanction. It should be noted that the length of Hannah Brewer's is only rivaled by that of Mrs. Greene, which is six sentences long, while Brewer's is five. One can only assume at this point how a narrative's length corresponds with its sanction or quality. This would certainly prove an interesting study were one up for the challenge.

⁹ Brewer's statement echoes Augustine's – that “[o]ur hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee” – which can be found in Chapter One, Book One of Augustine's *Confessions*.

¹⁰ Cotton quoted in Caldwell, *Puritan Conversion Narrative*, 92.

¹¹ To clear up any confusion, by “Alcoholics Anonymous” I am referring to the institution rather than the text by the same name – *Alcoholics Anonymous* – which alcoholics commonly refer to as the “Big Book.” This publication, which has undergone four revisions since its first publication in 1939 (1955, 1976, and 2001) serves as AA's seminal text. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations are taken from the 2001 edition. For the most part, little has been changed since the original publication because, as the Preface to the fourth edition states, “there exists strong sentiment against any radical changes being made in it” (xi).

¹² Bill W. quoted in Jensen, 96; Increase Mather, 337.

¹³ I was introduced to Rob K by a close friend who lives in Philadelphia where Rob also lives. My time with him spanned from 10/9-10/11/2010. Interviews were conducted primarily at my home in Eugene, Oregon. Rob also introduced me to AA's culture, principles, and general framework about which, I must admit, I knew very little. He also took me to my first AA meeting, which took place in Eugene on the evening of 10/11/2010. This chapter would not have been possible without Rob's guidance, kindness, openness, and support.

¹⁴ To see how acceptance is a key theme in Alcoholics Anonymous, one need only turn to “The Serenity Prayer,” which is repeated at least once every AA meeting and in which alcoholics petition “God [to] grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” One can argue how “grace” can be used just as easily as the term “serenity,” as both suggest the alcoholic's understanding of how only through a power greater than himself can the ability to gain acceptance, courage, and wisdom become possible (AA's Step 2).

¹⁵ Rob K.'s wording is telling, for as the Forward to the first edition of *Alcoholic's Anonymous* states, “[t]he only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking” (xiv). While Rob K., like most alcoholics, came to this conclusion independently of AA, that he describes his “bottoming out” experience specifically in AA rhetoric suggests how AA gives members a language through which to manage their experiences. Rob K. speaks in a language AA gives him, in a language that also signals his membership within its organization.

¹⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 420. Like the Puritan convert, what brings the alcoholic to this recognition is what is referred to as “hitting bottom.” As his alcoholism progresses, the abuser irrationally begins to drink to escape his drinking, leading to a downward spiral that, according to Rob K.’s testimony, can lead only to two possible outcomes: death or admitting that one is an alcoholic and that he needs help. As the alcoholic’s addiction progresses, his life becomes a life of the living dead. He loses his job, his family and friends, and finally, any sense of self-worth or respect he may have had for himself. Shepard’s converts similarly see their iniquity as an impending death-sentence, their sins becoming so unbearable that they – if they are lucky – finally realize that only God can help them change. Nathaniel Eaton, for example, grows to see how his moral transgressions, which he seems almost powerless to stop, lead him only to a “gall of bitterness.” In fact, Eaton’s temptations are so strong that he claims to have “neglected all” as a result, where he finally “lost my self-assurance.” Eaton explains: “I saw an emptiness in myself, there was no grace nor peace there nor nothing in the creature,” a realization that leads him to faith: “ . . . and hence I saw there was life revealed and bound up in Christ. And here I went to the Lord” (56-8).

¹⁷ This point is supported by the medical and social-work community especially. Speaking in public and sharing their experiences gives drug abusers a sense of confidence and self-esteem that they may not have otherwise had, giving them the power to continue the process of recovery as they work with others to facilitate this process. As Ms. Suelo explained to me, AINY is a therapy group that meets 5 days a week, providing educational seminars, general speaking groups, early recovery groups, spirituality groups, and health information groups to recovery patients. Social workers like Ms. Suelo give direction and suggestion to the alcoholics in terms of how they can manage their impulse to take drugs. This is facilitated through speaking – by sharing one’s experience of abuse and recovery. As Ms. Suelo informed me, “[p]atients need to hear others speak. The purpose of the group is to learn from and support each other; to see that others have gone through the same situation. The talk of a peer has far more weight than that of a professional.”

¹⁸ As one alcoholic whose testimony is recorded in the Big Book puts it: “I was ashamed, ashamed of my family and ashamed of myself . . . I was terrified of being found out. I knew that if others discovered who I really was, they wouldn’t like me and I would be left alone, worthless and alone” (423). By hearing other alcoholics describe similar experiences at meetings, an alcoholic like the one above realizes that he is *not* alone – that others have gone through (and *will* go through) what he has. This gives him a sense of strength and hope through the community bind he shares with others like him.

¹⁹ As religious historian David W. Bebbington has commented in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, philanthropic institutions like AA can be read “as a regular outcome of Evangelical belief as evangelistic endeavor.” That is to say – or as AA says – words without actions are dead, and so pronouncements like “I am an alcoholic” are typically considered only a primary (though important) step toward an alcoholic’s recovery. AA teaches that this phrase must be supported through actions, much

as a Puritan convert's assurance was considered positive, yet only a prelude to his sanctification, which was further revealed through his pious deeds. According to Bebbington, many of the 20th century's philanthropic organizations owe their reality to the Bible and "the multitude of voluntary societies generated by nineteenth-century Evangelicals." Care for the needy, for example, "was an expression of [these groups'] desire to obey the commands found in Scripture," as "the grand imperative was ever to be active in fulfilling the obligations laid on the converted soul" (238).

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