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

Stephen R. Yarbrough

Biography, Volume 22, Number 4, Fall 1999, pp. 621-623 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/bio.2010.0188

Yarbrough, Stephen R. "The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism (review)." Biography. 22.4 (2010): 621-623. Print.

orthodoxy that governs so much academic research and writing. Nonetheless, the book as a whole bears out beautifully one of the axioms with which it begins: "whatever else she may represent, she always represents lack" (xxix). That *Royal Representations* reconstitutes that "lack" as plenty is chief among its virtues.

Mary Jean Corbett

Rodger M. Payne. *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism.* Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1998. 123 pp. ISBN 1-57233-015-5, $27.00.

Payne attempts to tackle a very difficult problem—an explanation of the relationships among the Enlightenment conception of the autonomous self, the evangelical Christian conception of self, the experience of the individual's conversion to such a self, the language of the convert's autobiography, and the converted self's subsequently changed perception of its relation to its community. The primary evidence for Payne's investigation comes from American nineteenth-century evangelical spiritual autobiographies, and his main claim is that the discourse in which these authors wrote descriptions of their conversion experiences did not merely "demonstrate a degree of correspondence between their experiences and a preordained morphology of conversion" (91) or "replicate the pietistic formula of despair, conviction, and conversion (86), but rather, these "texts of conversion (as opposed to texts *about* conversion) served to constitute self, experience, and community for early American evangelicals" (2). In other words, such descriptions of conversion could not and did not represent an experience of something existing prior to and independently of the discourse that claims to report it, but, as with any other experience of "fictional realities" (my words, not Payne's), the experience of conversion is an experience of an entanglement in signs whose only referents are other signs.

Payne draws theoretical support for his thesis that conversion rhetoric does not merely represent but constitutes evangelical religious experience from a number of twentieth-century poststructuralists and social constructionists, such as Clifford Geertz, Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt, and Michel Foucault, for whom all the objects of human experience, and indeed the very human self, are unfounded cultural products, the result of the mediating force of systems of conventions and discursive formations. According to these theories, no element within a system can make sense except in relation to the whole system, and thus change must always be explained as a series of ruptures. Such historical

discontinuity Ferdinand de Saussure first institutionalized with his distinction between diachronic and synchronic linguistics, but the notion that history is thus discontinuous permeates all structural and poststructural thought. As Payne notes of Foucault's explanation of the rise of new "discursive formations," "The individual elements of any discourse may have been present for years, even centuries, within a culture but may not have functioned as discourse until the formation of a specific historical context that sanctions the combination of these elements into a meaningful form with paradigmatic value." Accordingly, "new discursive formations may arise quite suddenly and almost immediately attain the status of 'truth' as they become the basis for analyzing and explaining the human condition" (5).

Payne argues that conversion discourse emerged in precisely this way, starting in the seventeenth century, as "changes in the theoretical and political life transformed Western culture, creating a correlative sense of confusion and disorder" (7). Most disruptive, in Payne's view, was the conception of the autonomous self, a self that could use the new science and technology to create choices and change its way of life, so that by the mid-eighteenth century "even grace itself had become a matter of choice to be accepted or rejected by human beings" (7). In order to salvage the Protestant tradition, which had relied heavily upon the doctrines of providence and predestination, a whole new discourse of conversion was required that could both "affirm the traditional Protestant values of personal humility and human inability" and also "embrace and secularize the concept of the autonomous self" (8).

This salvaging effort's result was that conversion came to be described (unconsciously) as the consequence of what might be termed a cultural/linguistic immersion. Through such immersion (again, this is my analogy, not Payne's), one became Christian in much the same way as an immigrant alien might become an American. And, as Payne explains, using Stanley Fish's terminology, "Only by appropriating the rhetorical and interpretive strategies that had been legitimated and sanctioned by the larger 'interpretive community' was the experience of the individual validated" (11). In other words, becoming Christian, like becoming American, was an arduous process, marked by uncertainty and interpretive doubt, but one having a goal toward which one could engage one's autonomous will, even if the actual experience of being Christian (or American) could only be understood after the fact of conversion, and even if the validity of that conversion could be affirmed only by other Christians (or Americans).

Not surprisingly, then, just as, according to structural theory, the elements of language precipitate into a system in one fell swoop, evangelical autobiographies typically recorded the exact time and

place when their conversion occurred—when and where conversion discourse suddenly made sense. The time was instantaneous, or out of time. As one of these autobiographers, Ariel Kendrick, reports, "'In these few moments more knowledge of God, His law, the evil nature of sin, and extreme enmity of my heart; was communicated to me, than ever before in my whole life'" (69). The place of such synchrony is one of stasis, or rest—the end of a confused, wandering journey, a journey often "conceived in both literal and metaphorical terms" (74). This journey finally ending in rest became the conventional structure of conversion, affecting not only the autobiographies but also the religious rituals. In the autobiographies, "the author, as a character, had to ritually 'move' through the narrative in a way that paralleled the ritual movement of conversion" (75). In the frontier revivals, with the innovation of the "altar area" or the "mourner's bench," the "ritual structures of revivalism began to incorporate actual physical movement into the conversion process": "By physically and publically separating themselves from the congregation . . . potential converts who entered the altar area entered a ritual space where the transformation of conversion could properly be effected" (74, 75). Such a rite of passage symbolized "the separation, transformation, and reaggregation of the convert away from and back into the society" (75).

Payne concludes his well-written and documented argument with the following claim:

> By admitting the autonomous self into the American consciousness, the discourse of evangelical conversion created an enduring paradigm of American literature, not by contributing a linguistic formula that would later be "secularized" but rather by creating a modernist discourse where the ambivalence and tensions of modern selfhood could be confronted. (90)

"Avoided," not "confronted," would have been the better choice of terms here, for what Payne demonstrates above all else is that the paradoxes of evangelical rhetoric prefigure those paradoxes of modern structuralism that the poststructural theories Payne utilizes consistently attack. Payne's poststructural perspective does indeed help us to understand the dynamics of evangelical rhetoric. Unfortunately, since poststructuralism shares most of structuralism's basic assumptions about how language works and relates to reality, that perspective cannot, as Payne does not, provide any sort of critique of evangelical discourse. As far as this book is concerned, the evangelical movement was just something that happened.

Stephen R. Yarbrough