INTRODUCTION: MRS. ELIZABETH WHITE AND THE PROBLEM OF EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

WHO WAS MRS. ELIZABETH WHITE?

On the fifth day of December in the year 1669, Elizabeth White, a well-to-do young woman who had been married for twelve years and who had already borne at least one child, lost her life in giving birth to another. Among the belongings that were found in her chamber after her death were some personal writings that were later to be printed—at different times in Boston, Glasgow, and London—in a format both familiar to, and popular with, the saintly readers of the day. The work appeared under the title The Experiences of God’s Gracious Dealing with Mrs. Elizabeth White. As they were written under her own Hand, and found in her Closet after her Decease, December 5. 1669; directly beneath the title the publisher provided—again, in familiar seventeenth-century style—an illuminating portion of Scripture: “Psal. 66. 16 Come and hear all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my Soul.”

The Experiences of Mrs. Elizabeth White is only one of many such accounts that circulated on both sides of the Atlantic during the first few decades of the Puritan gathered churches (those that restricted their membership to professed believers). Although it is not known whether Mrs. White wrote her narrative to gain membership in a church, her story bears many earmarks of the formal conversion “relation,” that is, a testimony of personal religious experience that had to be spoken or read to the entire congregation of a gathered church before admission as evidence of the applicant’s visible sainthood. Like many such testimonies, hers progresses from ignorance and self-deception to “notional knowledge,” to “bitter grief” for sins, to terror of the devil and of

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1 This was one of the proof-texts most frequently cited to support the dissemination of religious experiences, appearing, for example, on the title page of all four surviving editions of Bunyan’s Grace Abounding (1666–88).
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"being consumed in some strange Manner"; her soul hangs on "the Word preached and read," catches a glimmer of "some secret Supports from the Lord," oscillates between those "sweet supports" and fear of "Delusions"; takes temporary refuge in "Duties"; sees its overwhelming "Vileness" and yearns to cast itself entirely upon "Christ Jesus that sure Foundation"; here patrols the borders of despair, there struggles toward "some Pin-hole of Hope." Out of this excruciating vacillation, suffusing the drama almost to the end, springs at last a cautious comfort in the "Unchangeable" God and a final listing of five "Evidences," given "as a further Testimony of my Interest in Christ, by the Effects of my Faith." In short, a preliminary dissection reveals within this narrative a skeletal structure that looks indistinguishable from that of any other conversion story. Here is the expectable sequence of sin, preparation, and assurance; conviction, compunction, and submission; fear, sorrow, and faith.2

It is not, after all, surprising that in the 1660s a young woman might seriously anticipate dying in childbirth; that she might want to leave behind a memoir of her religious experiences, either as a testimony to her own sainthood or as a teaching witness for her children; that the adventure of her twice-born soul might follow, at least on the surface, the general contours of the "morphology of conversion" laid down by the early Puritan divines; and that such experiences would almost surely find a publisher to help feed "the inordinate appetite of that age for 'good books'" and "guides to godliness."3 And yet, the story of Mrs. Elizabeth White is a remarkable one—not so much for the bare theological content of the narrative, nor even so much for its vivid personal details, as for its placement in the history of American literature. The Experiences appears not only in the standard listings of books printed in early America but also in the most complete bibliog-


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ography of American autobiographies. Moreover, the work is treated (as a revised conversion narrative) in Daniel B. Shea, Jr.’s *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*, a major study of the genre in the colonial period, and it is cited (as a “diary”) in at least one other recent study of colonial New England. In effect, a small but definite niche is now established for Mrs. White in the museum of minor American authors.

It is, therefore, all the more startling to discover that Elizabeth White was not an American Puritan. On the contrary: with her husband, Thomas White, she lived and died far away from Boston, in the hamlet of Caldecot, in the parish of Newport Pagnell, in the county of Buckingham, England, and there is no indication anywhere that she ever set foot on the American strand. Some of these facts may be gleaned from


5 Edward Arber, *The Term Catalogues, 1668–1709 A.D.: with a Number for Easter Term, 1711 A.D.: A Contemporary Bibliography of English Literature in the reigns of Charles II, James II, William and Mary, and Anne . . .*, 3 vols. (London: By the Author, 1903), 1:70, provides, under the heading “A Catalogue of Books Printed and Published at London in Easter Term, 1671,” the following title: “The experiences of God’s gracious dealing with Mrs. Elizabeth White, late wife of Mr. Tho. White, of Caldecot in the county of Bucks; as they were written under her own hand, and found in her Closet after her decease: she dying in Child-bed, December 5th 1669. In Octavo. Price, stucht, 4d.” No extant copy of this first edition being reported, Donald Wing does not list it in his *Short-Title Catalogue . . ., 1641–1700*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951). He does record editions in 1696 and 1698 published in Glasgow and lists the 1671 edition in *A Gallery of Ghosts: Books Published Between 1641–1700 Not Found in the “Short-Title Catalogue”* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1967). The work has slipped into the American canon by virtue of its publication in Boston during the Great Awakening in 1741, perhaps at the instigation of Thomas Prince, as Shea suggests (*Spiritual Autobiography*, p. 184). Prince’s personal copy of this edition is the one now held by the Boston Public Library and the only reported copy in the United States. Kaplan’s bibliography purports to include works of “authors born in the United States, who lived abroad,” and “authors born outside the United States who lived in this country for an appreciable period” (p. v), but there is no evidence that Mrs. White fits either category. Her name does not appear in the Boston Registry Department’s *Boston births, baptisms, marriages and deaths, 1650–1699* (Boston, 1883), nor in Clarence Almon Torrey, “New England Marriages
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Edward Arber’s record of the title page of the first (and now lost) London edition of Mrs. White’s memoir, and from the same source it may be surmised that the Whites—“Mr.” and “Mrs.”—were gentlefolk and that Mr. White outlived his wife. These clues are corroborated by chronicles of Buckinghamshire, which trace the history of the White family’s Caldecote [sic] Manor from William the Conqueror’s day (and incidentally suggest that it was an impressive place: According to an 1862 report, “there seems to have been a mansion here in former times: a portion of the moat still remains”). The record shows that the manor, which was about a mile from Newport, was sold in 1541 by a family named Hanchett to a John White and that by 1600 it was in the possession of a succession of Thomas Whites, beginning with John’s great-grandson. The latter’s son, also Thomas, died lord of the manor of Caldecote in 1670, and his son Thomas is known to have made a will in 1678. This younger Thomas—presumably the “Mr. Tho. White, of Caldecot” who was still alive in 1671 when the memoir was published—was almost certainly Elizabeth’s husband.

But apart from these sparse facts, or supposing that we did not have even this much information, what can actually be known about Mrs. Elizabeth White? And why, beyond the satisfaction of setting the record

Prior to 1700,” Xerox copy (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1971). Inaccuracies about the death date have slightly compounded the problem: Evans, Shipton, and Kaplan report it as 1660; the Boston Public Library catalogue gives 1669; the correct year is 1669.
7 Newport Pagnell was an important post for Parliamentary forces (and therefore for radical Puritans) during the Civil War. “An old muster roll shows that John Bunyan was one of the Newport garrison for two or three years, and it has been inferred that he gained his conceptions of a fortress in his ‘Holy War’ from his experiences at Newport” (John Parker, ed., Records of Buckinghamshire, . . . [Aylesbury: Architectural and Archaeological Society for the County of Buckingham, 1903], p. 406). Bunyan probably served under Sir Samuel Luke, the original of Butler’s Hudibras, who was Commonwealth commander there for three years. Another Newport friend of Bunyan was John Gibbs, the town’s first nonconformist minister. Vicar of Newport from 1652 to 1660, he was removed at the Restoration, whereupon he gathered his flock in a barn and preached to them there (Clement Shorter, Highways and Byways in Buckinghamshire [London: Macmillan, 1910], p. 322). Gibbs may well be “the Minister of the Parish” Mrs. White refers to in her memoir.
9 Unfortunately, the White family pedigree (in W. Harry Rylands, ed., The Visitations of the County of Buckingham Made in 1634 by John Philpot, Esq. [et al.] [London: (Mitchell, Hughes & Clarke, printers), 1909], p. 127) stops before this generation.
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straight, is it important that we understand her and her one small contribution to our literature?

Both questions are best answered by the work itself, for the elusive Mrs. White or, more properly, her meaning in literary history is capturable not in the external data but in the text that she wrote and in a comparison of that text with other narratives of conversion from the period. The intriguing point that such a comparison demonstrates is that English saints like Mrs. White are not indistinguishable from the New England Puritans when it comes to expressing their religious experiences. In important ways, their testimonies sound different both in factual (or historical) reference and in literary character and technique. Even if we knew nothing about Elizabeth White, her narrative should tell us that she never crossed the ocean.

The differences are meaningful even if Mrs. White’s Experiences cannot be established definitely as a strict church “relation.”10 When the White document is seen against the vast panorama of English spiritual autobiography,11 it quickly becomes apparent that the work has much in common with the kind of conversion narratives being given in English churches at the time.12 Like them, it is fairly concise (eighteen and a half printed pages, of which only twelve are strictly narrative), con-

10 Shea claims that the document “diverge[s] from the usual seventeenth-century pattern in order to revise testimony originally given for church membership” (Spiritual Autobiography, pp. 183–4), but Mrs. White herself is silent on the subject. She does append to her experiences three “Reasons why I write them”: for “sweet Supports to me in a Time of Darkness”; for “Remembrance” of “that which is good”; and to “testify my Obedience to God and his Word.” Apropos of the last reason, she writes, “I have been often called upon to see that my Principles be right, and to make sure my Evidences for Heaven,” but she does not say when or how she was thus called upon. (The Experiences of God’s gracious Dealing with Mrs. Elizabeth White [Boston, 1741], p. 20. All subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in the text by page number.)


12 Among these, the largest and most representative group comprises sixty-one relations from Henry Walker’s Independent congregation at Martins Vintry in London; it was published there as Spirituall Experiences, Of sundry Believers in 1653. Two smaller collections from the same period are thirty-eight “Examples of experience” from John Rogers’s Independent congregation in Dublin, included in his book on church discipline, Ohel or Beth-shehem: A Tabernacle for the Sun (London, 1653); and “Choice Experiences,” in Samuel Petto, Roses from Sharon (London, 1654). Subsequent references are to these editions and, where clarity permits, appear in the text by page number.
fines itself exclusively to the parts of the subject’s life that exhibit the work of grace in the soul, and depends heavily on scriptural reinforcement. It ends with a formal statement of numbered “evidences” of faith (a common practice in Henry Walker’s London congregation) and a recital of “my Principles,” containing the kind of doctrinal material often “professed” by candidates following the testimony of religious experience in the church. And though it is more detailed and to some degree more introspective than most publicly delivered relations, it is not, like a confessional diary, a free-form, running chart of the writer’s spiritual temperature. Nor is it, like some more elaborate and didactic spiritual autobiographies, a demonstration of God’s Providence at work in history or experimental evidence of the truth of the writer’s teachings. It is, or purports to be, a straightforward attempt to testify to the personal experience of conversion as precisely and persuasively as possible.

All these generic characteristics are found in the conversion narratives of New England as well. What immediately strikes the reader as different, however, is the factual content—actual items of historical reference. Mrs. White’s narrative is silent on all the points we might expect to find (and do find) in the New English materials. There is no word of a move to America nor (for she might have been born and reared there) any talk of people and places in New England; whereas every American conversion narrative is thickly laced with the names, personalities, and activities of ministers in the New England pantheon from Bulkly to Weld. A tiny detail almost clinches the matter: In the midst of her doubts, Mrs. White says, she was advised by a friend “to read Sheperd’s sincere Convert.” No American conversion narrative ever refers to any minister, living or dead, without the title of “Mr.” or “Dr.”; but even

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13 Hereafter, the word relation, meaning story, narrative, testimony, or confession, appears without quotation marks. These words are used interchangeably, although the word confession has one other technical meaning, to be discussed in Chapter 1.

if this were not so, her impersonal use of his last name reveals that Mrs. White assumes a distance from “Shepherd” that would not be possible for any New England Puritan, even after Shepard’s death. 15 A final and decisive item of evidence is that, early in her story and just before her marriage in 1657, Mrs. White went “to the Minister of the Parish, to be Examined before I was admitted, and finding my self able to Answer him, I thought all was well with me then, and so unworthy I went to the Lord’s Table” (p. 4). Such an event—acceptance at the Lord’s Supper before effectual conversion and a public relation of it—is unlikely to have happened in New England in the 1650s. But even if it had, Mrs. White’s use of the term Parish means that at the time she was in England, not in New England, where the parochial system was unpalatable to Congregationalism. 16 Twelve years after the time of this incident, she was dead; yet nothing in the narrative suggests a subsequent trip to America—an event so central, even traumatic, for American Puritans that only a handful of them fail to discuss it. Mrs. White was not in New England before her marriage, and she was not in New England after her marriage.

Factual content aside, the inward, literary qualities of these narratives by English and American saints also strike the reader as strangely different from each other. Although all Puritan conversion narratives share some basic literary techniques—a heavy reliance on Scripture, a certain amount of objective self-examination and orderly arrangement—real contrasts emerge in structure and theme and in the symbolic modes employed to knit them together. In the end, these elements add up to what can only be described as a marked difference in tone or in “feel.”

15 Cf. James Fraser (a Scottish Presbyterian minister writing around 1670): “I read Shepherds Sincere Convert in one of my calm fits, . . . but I had not read four Leaves of him when I was thrown on my Back” (Memoirs [Edinburgh, 1738], p. 41, cited in Watkins, Puritan Experience, p. 59).

16 This is the passage on which Shea bases his assertion that Mrs. White is revising testimony originally given for membership, presumably in a New England congregation (see n. 10, above). There are two questions: (1) Is it a revised church relation? (2) Was the original delivered in a New England church? The second question is easier to answer. Apart from the decisive word Parish, Mrs. White’s private examination by the minister alone is more suggestive of the Old than of the New England way. In the latter system, private examination had to be followed by public testimony; in England, church practices varied considerably during the Commonwealth period. As for the first question, Mrs. White’s visit to the minister appears on the second page of her narrative and is followed by all her subsequent experiences, chronologically arranged. The bulk of her story, therefore, cannot be a revision of anything she said to the minister. Nevertheless, I agree with Shea’s general view that this is some kind of conversion relation. A strong possibility does remain that the work grew out of testimony offered for admission to an English gathered church later in her life, although she does not say so.
Perhaps we can pin down this elusive quality if we now look at Mrs. White’s story in more detail.

**MRS. WHITE’S “EXPERIENCES”**

The theme of Elizabeth White’s memoir, not surprisingly, is deliverance; and much of the action is framed in images of constraint and release. At the outset, she presents herself as a creature in bondage to sin, enthralled by ignorance and folly (“I was a great lover of Histories, and other foolish Books, ... so bewitched by them, that I could not forbear”) and, even worse, by her own fallen nature (“I was but like a Wolf chained up, which keeps its Nature still” [p. 3]). Even when she thinks she has made some progress she finds that she is still enslaved by her own self, having merely substituted “righteous Self” for “sinful Self.” Forced to wander in the endless maze of futile “Duties,” she is in “a worse Condition than at the beginning” and one that “I plainly saw ... but how to get out of it I knew not” (p. 8). When at last the trap begins to spring, it is because she is able to give over her self; then, in a series of accelerating climaxes (but continually interspersed with relapses), she feels herself released and elevated by “this free Grace of God in chusing me before the Foundation of the World was laid” (p. 16); and this is the “plot” of her confession.

All this is very familiar, for every story of Christian redemption is a story of deliverance, and many of them use imagery like this. What makes Mrs. White’s version immediately interesting is her selection of particular situations or events to carry her toward the realization of her spiritual rebirth. These events are exclusively those of her life as a woman, in particular, some details surrounding the birth of her first baby. The saga of Mrs. White’s soul proceeds through the “stations” of her feminine progress in life: her marriage, her pregnancy and “delivery,” nursing her infant and then weaning it, her apprehensions about bearing children, and a final, eerily accurate dream prediction of her own death. It is a female story, not just in a social but in a biological sense, and in some ways a female parable, an extended metaphor derived from the universal experiences of women’s lives that draws its power, to a great extent, from those experiences—17—even though the “audience” for the parable may be only Mrs. White herself.

If the “deliverance” theme of Mrs. White’s *Experiences* is universally Christian, its structure is just as typical in the way it represents the basic motion or “shape” of that deliverance. One scholar has described all religious experience as “a succession of disclosures” within which there

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is “a downward and an upward movement or an outward and a return journey,” roughly corresponding to a question and an answer.

In the first phase there is the emergence and formulation of a need . . . The subject becomes aware of his own lack of symbolic meaning, [and] enters into a disclosure experience in which this lack is experienced in its depth and power. . . In the second phase the question is converted into an answer. The downward or outward movement merely raises and states the existential question while the upward or inward movement provides a response creative of integration within the subject as a result of the establishment of a harmonious relationship with the sacred beyond.18

Similarly, Owen C. Watkins defines “the normal pattern of a Puritan conversion” as

peace, disturbance, and then peace again. Bunyan said of Grace Abounding, “It is a Relation of the work of God upon my own Soul, even from the very first, till now; wherein you may perceive my castings down, and raisings up; for he woundeth and his hands make whole” . . . The casting down and raising up, the wounding and making whole, referred to the two landmarks . . . conviction of sin and coming to Christ.19

Mrs. White’s story plays some variations on these basic patterns, but, here again, all of them are allied in some way with a movement “down into” and “up out of” her own body and self. This is one reason that childbirth is an effective linchpin for the story—a physical and spiritual experience both intensely inward-turning and outward-moving at the same time. At a deeper level, beneath the entire surface of the story, the basic motive force is one that pulls Mrs. White—or, to use her own good Puritan word, draws her—through all the roles life gives her to play and toward something beyond. Thus in the first part of the narrative there is a slow outward motion away from the men in her life—from her father, then from her husband, even from her minister—and inward into her “Closet” and “into my own Heart” (p. 9), where the gestation of a need, the disclosure of her own “lack,” reaches its most intense expression—and must ultimately be answered.

In this first section she begins as something of a feral child, a “Wolf” clothed in an outwardly “Mild” girlish sheepishness, with no real life and little to say for herself despite her father’s efforts “to bring me up in the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord” (p. 3). It is only near her marriage time that she begins to awaken to any genuine religious

awareness, however limited: “I remember about a Month before I was married, my Father would have me receive the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and I was very willing to it; until I considered what was requisite to be in those which did partake thereof” (p. 4). Faintly apprehending what is at stake, she begins to suffer virginal doubts about her own worthiness to approach this awesome contact with God, but she is caught in a kind of archetypal bind, “loath to disobey my Father, and more loath to eat and drink my own Damnation.” She soon deludes herself, however, with “some notional knowledge of things” and pins her hopes on marriage, “thinking that when I was married, I should have more leisure to serve God.” Mrs. White’s premarital state, her life with father, is occasionally illuminated by some primal glimmerings of truth, but at best she learns a kind of childlike Old Testament obedience to “legal” appearances while somewhat ingenuously looking forward to a New Testament state of things in which everything will be better.

She then goes to the minister of the parish and actually gains admittance to the Lord’s Supper. Only briefly thereafter is she able to indulge her complacency, for suddenly the Lord “broke my false Confidence, and swept away my refuge of Lies”—an abrupt, almost violent breakthrough that happens, appropriately enough, “about a Quarter of a Year after I was married, in the Year 1657” (pp. 4–5). Moreover, “it was at this Time [while she was attending a sermon] that God did begin to manifest his Love to me, as I trust, in my effectual Vocation; here the Lord was pleased to open my Heart, as he did the Heart of Lydia” (p. 5).20 The intimacy of her earthly union thus accompanies, if it does not trigger, her first yielding to a genuine intimacy with God.

This habit of conflating different forms of love, long understood as characteristic of mystical religious expression, is not uncommon in Puritan writers. Anne Bradstreet’s poems, written to her husband but often read as addressed to another Bridegroom, are only one case in point; and the great preacher John Cotton is described as exclaiming of his wedding day, “‘God made it a day of double marriage to me!’”—since “it was then, that he first received a comfortable assurance of God’s love to his soul . . . and this comfort continued with him, in

20 See Norman Pettit, “Lydia’s Conversion: An Issue in Hooker’s Departure,” Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society for the years 1964–1966, pp. 59–83, for the significance of Lydia (Acts 16:14–16) in conversion theory. It is hard to pin down Mrs. White’s technical position in terms of Pettit’s “orthodox” and “preparationist” camps. Though her story is one of gradual conversion rather than of “seizure,” her own will plays no part in the process, and by calling her vocation “effectual” at this early point, she stresses God’s initiative; all of which puts her closer to “orthodoxy.”