

Emerging out of the traditions of exemplary lives and self-analysis at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the genre of spiritual autobiography writing is fluid and unstable both textually and generically. The individualism that has often been taken to define the autobiographical project is problematized in these accounts, which tend to foreground self-transcendence over self-assertion, collective over individual identities, and exemplarity over uniqueness. The spiritual framework provides a language of self-narrative and self-analysis, structured around affliction and redemption, and privileging inward over outward experiences. As a mode which insists on the truth of experience, it allows marginal selves (including women and lower-class men) a public voice, above all in the gathered churches of the revolutionary decades and after, while also containing those voices within tight conventions. The simultaneous restrictions and liberations of these various frames offer important perspectives on debates about the early modern self.

selfhood; subjectivity; spiritual autobiography; memory; experience;
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CHAPTER 13

Autobiographical Writings

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When the musician Thomas Whythorne's autobiographical manuscript, written in the 1560s, first appeared in print in 1962, it was published in two separate editions. One was aimed at a scholarly readership, reproducing his original text exactly (including his challenging revisionist orthography). The second, for the general reader, modernized the spelling and also cut 'some repetitive or otherwise tedious passages' from the original (Whythorne 1962: vi)—primarily Whythorne's religious reflections. 'Here Whythorne presents a long discourse on Divine punishments', notes the editor, James Osborn, while omitting it; 'Here Whythorne distinguishes between worldly sorrow and Godly sorrow' (Whythorne 1962: 124, 126). Self-evidently, such material was uninteresting—generic and predictable, adding little to our understanding of Whythorne the man.

The transformation in scholarly views of such writing over the last half-century has been dramatic. Narratives of religious experience, once regarded as dull pieties, or as records of misrecognized mental illness, have moved to the centre of debates about the early modern self. Spiritual

autobiography illuminates early modern inner worlds. It grapples with the problems of self-knowledge, self-assertion and self-denial, and the relation between self and others (including the divine); it shows how religious convictions and commitments frame and direct individual lives, highlighting the shaping force of religious language in early modern understandings of the self. The urge to tell the story of one's own spiritual quest became increasingly pressing during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It spread across confessional boundaries; Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, Fifth Monarchists, perhaps especially Quakers, were caught up in the desire to understand and explain God's workings in their hearts and lives. It drew in men and women whose lives were marginal and insignificant, from artisans and shepherds to the disregarded single daughters of the gentry. Participating in the great project of spiritual renewal, above all during the years of the English Revolution and afterwards, many found new meaning in their own experiences, and no less importantly the possibility of access to an audience.

The rich mix of modes in which they wrote, along with the centrality of autobiography to the history of the self in this period more generally, has in turn generated extensive debate about how this material is to be defined and understood. Autobiography, once limited to an extended and generally chronological first-person life story, has fractured and

fragmented into new modes and terminologies. Early modern autobiographical narratives took many forms. Recent work has interrogated recipe collections, parish registers and account books for traces of the autobiographical voice; terms such as life writing and ego documents have gathered together a fluid mix of genres and styles, complicating the boundaries we set today between private and public, between letter, diary, memoir, and autobiography. Religious discourse, however, remains strikingly at the centre of many of these forms of self-expression. Writing the self, for many early modern people, *was* writing about religion.

Religion was also very commonly the context in which stories about lives were summoned up. The century after the Reformation in England saw a rapid expansion of devotional writing across a range of areas. Rising levels of literacy, among women as well as men (though women's literacy remained significantly lower), opened new possibilities for the dedicated Christian. The Bible was, of course, the central pillar of Protestant reading and writing, but it was supplemented by a steady stream of print: sermons, homilies, guides to practical divinity, religious poetry, meditations, mother's legacies. Exemplary lives of the godly were widely circulated; Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was succeeded by many accounts of the spiritual struggles of ordinary people, men and women. Even writing

that was not explicitly an account of a life often implied some element of spiritual narrative: what sufferings and trials did this person undergo (inward or outward), what were their experiences and what did they learn from them? Alongside printed works, too, letters, journals, meditations, and prayers circulated in manuscript within communities of the godly, part of an extensive devotional culture in which people shared thoughts and experiences, encouraging those in despair and recounting doubts and triumphs. The question of what it meant to lead a godly life and to be among the elect was posed repeatedly; and the idea that it could be answered through a retrospective narrative of personal experience became increasingly familiar.

Spiritual autobiography thus emerges as part of the wider culture of devotional writing, both print and manuscript, that permeated early modern England. The incorporation of these dispersed fragments of individual lives into a narrative offering the reader a story of the self, however, does not happen immediately or consistently; and in many ways it seems to have been almost a process of spontaneous generation.

Journals, surviving from the sixteenth century in increasing numbers, are often held to have been encouraged as part of the Protestant project of self-examination, though texts recommending the practice only appear in the mid-seventeenth century. Retrospective narratives emerge slightly later,

but very few early autobiographers mention influences or models for their enterprise; Elizabeth Isham, writing in the 1630s, explicitly models her account on Augustine, but she is surprisingly unusual in doing so. But even without direct precursors, a life plan was laid down within the framework of Calvinist theology which shaped the narrative of the self. Early autobiographers interpreted their stories through the categories of election and reprobation, following the phases of the regenerate soul's life, and interrogated their experiences for signs of grace; their accounts thus have generic elements even before there is a genre. Dionys Fitzherbert, writing around 1608, uses this framework to explain her experience as one of spiritual crisis rather than mental disorder, and other early manuscripts, such as Richard Norwood's, use the same model. These works seldom made it into print, although some circulated in manuscript (as Fitzherbert's did), but their reliance on the same spiritual structure underlines the importance of the common culture in which they were embedded. It is a culture and a framework that retains its force throughout the seventeenth century.

Until the mid-seventeenth century, most surviving autobiographical narratives are manuscripts, often lengthy, and intended for a restricted audience; their authors were of relatively elite background. The spiritual energy and upheaval that was part of the mid-century revolution in

England transformed and radicalized the writing of spiritual autobiography, along with much else. The rise of dissenting religious groups was accompanied by an explosion of publications. The gathered churches were engines of literary production; books and pamphlets streamed off the presses, to be sold by small booksellers up and down the country. Censorship was suspended for much of the 1640s, and even once it had been restored, the publication of spiritual and devotional literature continued at a high rate. And from the early 1650s on, much of this literature was autobiographical, bringing new voices—small artisans and traders, women and men—into the public domain. As with earlier traditions of devotional literature, generic boundaries are blurred. A spiritual autobiography may consist of three pages on the writer's spiritual experiences as a brief digression in a long polemic; it may be two hundred pages of close analysis and reflection on the inner life; it may be an account of spiritual activities—preaching, prophecy, travel, prison. These later narratives, many published under the controlling influence of the group and with more or less explicitly missionary aims, are often very short and formulaic, though this is not necessarily to say that there is (as the writers may claim) 'no self in this'. But the printed writings of the later period also include long and intensely self-analytical accounts, even if what they analyse is the movements of the soul rather than the emotions;

and longer manuscript narratives continue throughout the century, often with spiritual and secular concerns inseparably intertwined.

The theological centrality of personal experience is central to the expansion of spiritual autobiography. To speak or write of one's own experience, important from the Reformation onwards in devotional circles, increasingly becomes a spiritual communication in itself, supported by Calvinist experimental theology. This emerges especially forcefully in the gathered churches of the revolutionary period. In the new world God's spirit would pour out, and the obscurantist priests of the old churches, with their learned languages and their supposed expertise in matters of religion, would be cast down by those they had despised, who would emerge as God's true voices. The poor and lowly could bear witness to the workings of God's grace in their own hearts, and this would be more valuable than learned commentaries on texts. Many radical churches required aspirant members to declare their spiritual experiences in public before accepting them into the congregation, and a few collections of these were published (Rogers 1653; Powell 1653). These fragmentary autobiographical narratives, with their debatable authorship and scanty detail, nonetheless reinforce the idea that faith and election can be demonstrated in narrative, as the story of what brought you to the place where you stand.

The textual as well as the generic status of these accounts, as this suggests, is complicated. Oral and written accounts intersect; prominent figures like George Fox and Anna Trapnel left multiple versions of the same event, sometimes taken down by an amanuensis. First- and third-person narratives may co-exist in the same text, with testimonies, commentaries, and letters added in. For published texts, above all those supervised by church authorities, there are undoubtedly other mediations; occasionally, as for Fitzherbert, both original and public versions of a text survive, but in most cases it is impossible to know the level of editorial intervention between the original narrative (spoken or written) and the eventual publication. The genre is thus more diverse and problematic than can fully be explored in this discussion. Drawing mainly on the printed texts of the later seventeenth century, and working with a narrow definition of spiritual autobiography as a retrospective prose first-person account of a life that is centred on religious experience, with the relationship to God as the organizing principle, I have flattened out many distinctions between different sects, as well as change over time. However, it should be emphasized that authorship and authority here are textually and conceptually complex.

Both 'autobiography' and 'self', in fact, can be challenged as terms with which to approach these writings. The genre of autobiography is only

problematically present at the time; the self, too, is differently understood and experienced. Early modern spiritual autobiography implies assumptions about the self which trouble the very idea of autobiographical writing. Subjectivity is complicated by a spiritual discourse that sees selfhood as a problem rather than something to be celebrated; the goal of the spiritual journey is self-transcendence rather than the self-assertion conventionally associated with autobiography. Since the project of spiritual autobiography is authorized by God, the place of the self as author is always only provisional. The focus on inner rather than outer life disrupts temporality and leads to wildly varying levels of detail in relation to the defining elements of modern selfhood. The trajectory of the conversion narrative, in which the self is made new, is in these accounts often ambiguous and uncertain, characterized by recurrent doubts and anxieties. And while autobiography has been commonly defined in relation to an autonomous individualist subject, spiritual autobiography is often more concerned to demonstrate what is shared with others; it frequently traces a journey from isolation and doubt into a collective voice and identity, offering a life as exemplification of a pattern. Spiritual autobiography throws up tensions: between private and public, individual and collective, self-assertion and self-annihilation, divine and personal agency.

At the same time none of these oppositions is simple. Early modern spiritual autobiography is marked by a series of negotiations between autonomy and self-abnegation, between inner and outer worlds. It aims to describe and enact a journey of self-transcendence rather than self-discovery; but the formal paradox implicit here makes that annihilation more ambiguous than it would perhaps like to acknowledge. *'Oh! let me be unto thee, O God, what I am'*, writes Elizabeth Stirredge, *'and not unto man'*; but the implicitly asserted *'I am'* remains to disrupt its own denial (Stirredge 1711: 17). The self in spiritual self-narrative remains present even if problematically, and in unfamiliar ways. Gender and class also inflect our understanding of voice and selfhood in these texts. For women and non-elite men, spiritual autobiography offered an unprecedented public voice. The value that could be claimed by marginal selves in the experiential theology of radical Protestantism, even if claimed under the sign of disavowal, complicates any reading of these accounts as merely formulaic, and reminds us that it is problematic to define authentic selfhood in terms that have historically belonged to the privileged. These texts invite us to reflect on the contingency and historical specificity of concepts of self, but not necessarily to suppose that early modern selves are without interiority, or that genre and subjectivity are in fact identical.

Autobiographical Selves: Annihilation, Affliction, Collectivity

The self is a problematic presence in early modern spiritual autobiography. The aim of the narrative is not to say ‘this is how I became the person I am’, so much as ‘this is how the person I was managed to transcend the bonds of self’; the ideal is to reach a point where self is nothing. The very word ‘self’ is commonly used to identify all that is worldly and must be done away with. ‘Let none conclude that the Self is here set up;’ writes Dorothea Gotherson, ‘for *by denying the earthly, the sensual, and the devilish part*, is this so come to pass’ (Gotherson 1661: 30); Alice Hayes declares, ‘let nothing be attributed to that *Monster Self*, which too often appears both in Preachers and Writers’ (Hayes 1723: 65). Yet these and many other writers published narratives that placed the self—or some version of it—as the subject. The validation of spiritual experiences, and their value in supporting and encouraging others, outweighed anxieties about self-aggrandizement.

However, the self is defined in relation to very different priorities and interests. In a theology that privileges the inner over the outer as source of meaning and truth, what matters is above all the relation to God. Time spent on matters not spiritual is time wasted; anything perishing, as

Jane Turner remarks, is ‘too low for them [Saints] to spend much of their precious time or thoughts about’ (Turner 1653: 194). For the sectarian writers in particular, this is often taken to an extreme point, as details of what now seem the central elements of a life—childhood, love, family, work—are relegated to the domain of the worldly. Childhood, now generally seen as key to an understanding of the adult self, is often passed over in a couple of sentences. Human relationships are important to the extent that they affect the relationship to God; so a minister or a neighbour who spoke to one’s condition may be far more significant in the life story than husband, wife, or parents. Work in the sense of earning a living is often disregarded; the true work is happening internally. The movements of the soul, by contrast, may be debated at great length. Dreams, visions, temptations, reflections, doubts, and fears, all call for extensive exploration and interpretation.

The analysis of the self is directed at interpretation of divine intent, and the examination of a life—one’s own or that of others—is in such retrospective narratives less a balance sheet, measuring sins against evidences of grace, than a hermeneutical inquiry into the meaning of signs, and how to determine election. But while this attention to the inward implies rigorous self-examination, the self is examined for conformity to a pattern rather than uniqueness. Exemplarity suggests a very different set of

priorities for the autobiographer: not exceptionality and autonomy, but typicality and dependence (on the divine and on other believers), define the contours of the self. Thus many spiritual autobiographies present a conventionally structured and described set of experiences, characterized by a common purpose, especially as the dissemination of autobiographical narratives becomes increasingly conditional on conformity to the expectations of religious authorities.

However, the project of self-examination could not always be contained in the structures offered by theology or by the expectations of the group; the practices of self-interrogation and self-narrative in themselves encouraged a degree of overflow. The consequences of the inquiry are intensely emotional; not just self-knowledge but eternity depends on successful reading of the signs, and for many writers the experience of self-examination seems to have been a challenging one. Writers such as Bunyan or Turner record a sense of self-exposure, of stepping out in an unknown direction and baring one's innermost self; even seemingly conventional and generic accounts often suggest the struggle of going through the process of self-analysis and self-representation, understanding and capturing the nature of spiritual experience. The language of interiority at this period remains relatively restricted; complex emotions were organized by the imperatives of

election and the need to fit oneself to the divine model. But the language of spiritual experience, embedded in Biblical stories and enriching its vocabulary as the sharing of life stories developed across the century, offered an increasingly flexible and expressive framework for the articulation of emotion, as introspection became embedded in spiritual practice.

The journey of the early modern spiritual self is defined by its encounter with peril. Spiritual autobiographers locate their authority to write in their experiential knowledge of religious doubt and terror; the extremity of their condition, so long as it can be assimilated into the frame of spiritual affliction, strengthens their claim to special knowledge. Where the self becomes interesting, for spiritual autobiography, is where it struggles and suffers. And a primary site of anguish is the encounter with one's own sinfulness. Searching the self to the depths revealed iniquity—and if it did not, you needed to look harder. 'I am thronged with unruly passions, madd, if let loose to wickednesse', writes Richard Carpenter, ' . . . I am the void, and empty Cave of ignorance, the muddy fountaine of evill concupiscence; dark in my understanding, weake in my will, and very forgetfull of good things . . . left to my selfe, I am not my selfe, but a devill in my shape' (Carpenter 1642: 34). This vileness need never issue in behaviour; sin is an inward condition. When Hannah Allen announces that

she is a monster of sin, her family protest, 'We see no such a thing in you'; 'But you will', she responds (Allen 1683: 23). Anna Trapnel struggles to understand that she is as sinful as the worst murderer or adulterer in the world, despite outward appearances; but she does eventually accept it. A virtuous exterior may signal no more than hypocrisy, and in the Calvinist sense one may be a hypocrite without knowing it; hence Jane Turner's advice, that 'self-examination, self-watching, self-judging, self-humbling', are duties 'no hypocrite can truly do' (Turner 1653: 185). It is only by knowing the self to the worst depths that one can find at least a provisional assurance.

The fragility of faith, how to sustain it, how to live in accordance with it, how to be sure one has it—these are constant anxieties. The soul is imperilled by sin and weakness, but also by the cost of struggling with these. Faced with the apparent impossibility of being certain of salvation, believers are assailed by temptations to doubt, anger, and blasphemy; misery engulfs them, and they become convinced of their own damnation. The recurrence of melancholy and mental disorder in these narratives also registers the suffering of the self as a mode of spiritual experience, in which the foundations of the self are shaken. Early modern autobiographers repeatedly describe a struggle back from the brink of breakdown, if not a complete collapse. The boundaries between affliction

for sin, melancholy, and outright madness were unstable and constantly renegotiated; devotional writers dedicated many pages to elucidating the differences, while the language of distraction is commonly invoked to describe periods of intense distress. Thus Crook ‘thought I should have been Distracted, because of God’s Terrors that were upon my Soul’ (Crook 1706: 32); John Rogers behaved so wildly that, he says, few who saw him thought him ‘fit for any place but *Bedlam*’ (Rogers 1653: 429). Suicide is a recurrent theme. Trapnel was ‘forced by *Sathan* to walk up and down the field, attempting to throw my self into a Well . . . I took Knives to bed with me, to destroy my self’ (1654b: 8). Rivers and rafters beckon Fitzherbert, who is tempted ‘by some menes to make away myself . . . to unburdon my mind of thes unsoportable thoughts & sting of concenc wherwith I was continually afflicted’ (Fitzherbert c.1608: 212). The assumption that a period of deep affliction is inevitable for the regenerate soul places spiritual anguish at the heart of the Christian experience.

Suffering and weakness overcome, however, illuminate God’s power more wonderfully. Especially for women, the weakness of the self and the rejection of the flesh are often literalized in bodily weakness. Fasting, trance, and prophecy were visible signs of grace, though they could also be temptations; the suffering of Christ was imitated in the bodies of the faithful. Bodily collapse, in these narratives, is tied to

spiritual authority. The Quaker Joan Vokins, confronting the dark powers tormenting Friends in Long Island, struggled also with sickness: ‘the night before the General Meeting I was near unto death, and many *Friends* were with me, who did not expect my life, and I was so weak when I came there, that two *women-friends* led me into the meeting’; but God ‘filled me with the word of his power, and I stood up in the strength thereof’ (Vokins 1691: 34). The language of spirituality, indeed, is intensely embodied and fleshly; spiritual experiences are articulated through the body, the bowels, the heart, the eyes. ‘Vision! the body crumbles before it, and becomes weak’, exclaims Trapnel, and describes in detail the corruption of her flesh during a dramatic period of prophesy and sickness, before God raises her up again (Trapnel 1654b: 74).

This focus on physical collapse is part of a wider insistence on human helplessness before God. The gathered churches were strongly attracted by the Christian tradition that saw wealth, power, and wisdom as hindrances in pursuit of truth:

He is a God of wisdom unto the foolish, and strength unto the weak, and honours his power in contemptible vessels . . . but those that are in the wisdom of the world, which comes from beneath, and have many arts and parts . . . that provokes him to wrath. Vokins (1691: 30)

Better to be a contemptible vessel and cast yourself abjectly on the mercy of the Lord, than to take any pride in your own position, qualities, or capacities. For many this was a rhetoric that could legitimize apparent immodesty in putting forward their own views, or indeed their own lives: God speaks through them. ‘And this I must say, and that in the Bowedness of my Spirit,’ writes Alice Hayes, ‘that I have no Might of my own, nor Power, nor Ability, but what he shall be pleased to give me’ (Hayes 1723: 65). For the powerful the evacuation of agency is more challenging. John Crook struggles with himself to relinquish his worldly authority, but the moment when he finally lets go is one of release; God ‘subjected the Spirit of my Mind unto himself, that I was made through its Prevalency to yield, and be still, that so he might do with me what himself pleased’ (Crook 1706: 32–3). When the self acknowledges its own incapacities and is abandoned to God it can cease to struggle. Henceforth it will be at God’s command that the writers act, and their choices are described in a new language.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this self-relinquishment also opens new possibilities; alongside suffering and weakness, for some, are power and agency. Quakers in particular were repeatedly moved by the spirit to confront and defy ministers, judges, and even (like Elizabeth Stirredge) the king. Stirredge argues with other Quakers about women preaching, with

constables who come to distraint her possessions, with justices of the peace. 'I will not wrong my Conscience for the King, nor no man else'; she tells a justice trying her for speaking at a burial, 'and I do not know whether ever the Lord may open my Mouth again; but if he do, and unloose my Tongue to speak, I shall not keep silent' (Stirredge 1711: 117–19). (He calls her an 'Old Prophetess' and a 'subtil Woman', not as a compliment.) Agnes Beaumont similarly appeals to higher authority to reject her father's order that she should give up Baptist meetings: 'My soul is of more worth then so . . . if yow could stand in my steed before god to give an Account for me at the great day, then I would obey yow in this as well as other things' (1998: 201). And for the intrepid few who travel as missionaries to America, or to the Ottoman empire like Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, relinquishing self-will to divine authority opened up the possibility of extraordinary adventure and activity. Refusal of God's command is not an option. 'I hid the Word of the Lord in my Heart until it was as a Fire in me till I had declared it', writes Alice Curwen, under orders to go to the 'Bloody Town of Boston'; and although it is painful to her to leave her husband and children, 'the Lord made me willing to leave all' and head for persecution (Curwen 1680: 2). This is a rhetoric that is perhaps especially potent for women; but in the hierarchical family and social structures of early modern England, self-abnegation paradoxically

legitimized a degree of autonomy for men and women alike, under obedience to God's law.

The new version of the self towards which these narratives reach is positioned in relation not only to God, but to other people. The boundaries of subjectivity are fluid and open; the self whose life is being told seldom appears as a contained and neatly delimited entity. Subjectivity is permeable, constituted by other people's stories, and the story of the person at the centre of the narrative is understood in relation to a network of others. The Bible offers countless analogues; the sufferings of David, the weakness and betrayal of Peter, are cited repeatedly by spiritual writers. Similarly, stories of friends and relatives, of fellow believers or of those who proved weak, of good and bad deaths, are part of the currency of spiritual discourse. To write one's own story adds it in to the circulation of these significant lives, and makes the writer an instance who may later console others in the same case, as well as one whose example can reinforce and confirm a collective truth—an impulse that supports all the many proximate genres through which spiritual experiences are communicated.

The reiterated motive of helping others who are suffering highlights the importance of shared experience, whether on the title page (from Fitzherbert's 1608 dedication to 'the poore in spirritt', through to

Susannah Blandford's *Small Account* in 1698, subtitled 'Incouragement to the Weary to go forward') or directly stated. Alice Hayes, recollecting 'the Struglings that I felt in those Times', hopes 'that these *Lines of Experience* may . . . be of Service to some poor, distressed Traveller, that may have these Steps to trace through' (Hayes 1723: 29). It also reminds us again of the psychic stress inflicted by much early modern religion. Vast quantities of spiritual writing were dedicated to the encouragement of the afflicted (much of it not very likely to encourage), and testimonies of personal experience are especially likely to focus on this. Many describe a conviction that their suffering was unique, that nobody else had been through such an experience (despite the increasing number of published accounts). 'Truly I have thought,' wrote Hayes, 'that if I had met with the like Account of any that had gone through such Exercise, it would have been some help to me. I searched the Scriptures from one End to the other, and read several Books, but I thought none reached my State to the full' (Hayes 1723: 29). To discover that one was wrong in thinking one's anguish unique is a consolation; likeness, rather than uniqueness, affirms the truth of experience. By sharing suffering writers claim both membership of and contribution to a wider spiritual community, and celebrate the mercy that has brought the suffering to an end.

The spiritual community is in many cases physical as well as literary. The wish to find like-minded believers is a powerful impulse in these narratives, and the move from isolation and unhappiness to collectivity and content is retold again and again. For the radical sectarian writers, of course, this is a driving force that shapes both the writing and the publication of their accounts, often with clear missionary aims; the joy of finding a church in which one feels at home is presented as a finding of one's true self in a collective enterprise, to be shared with and extended to others. The identification with the stories of others is perhaps most powerfully visible in the group autobiographies that emerge from the gathered churches. As the minister Vavasor Powell, introducing his collection, explains, 'that which cometh from one spiritual heart reacheth another spiritual heart . . . herein you may see not only your own hearts, but many hearts' (Powell 1653: 3); John Rogers similarly introduces his collection with the observation that, '*Spiritual Experiences* declared out of the heart, *Mat.* 12.35 are like a *store-house* opened, whence a man fetcheth forth *things*, for use and need' (Rogers 1653: 386). Testimonies collected from the gathered churches work formulaically through a series of points which serve to confirm the truth of all other stories through their mutual resemblance. Publication, whether oral or written, is an opening out, a move away from the hidden and private self to a shared and public one.

In this move towards collectivity and typicality, the self dissolves into a community rather than representing a fixed core of individual difference: the part is subsumed into the whole, and the boundaries of subjectivity are experienced as permeable. Instead of laying claim to a unique inner self, the speakers put their lives at the service of common experience, in which similarity to others is what allows them to believe that they too can be saved. But the importance of this shared identity is founded on a previous experience of difference; the spiritual autobiographer is driven by an initial sense of being out of step with others, not satisfied with the forms of religion as they have been experienced in the past. Dissatisfaction propels the self from one collective to another, through a constant assertion that this is not one's place. Arguments about the autonomy or individuality of the subject of spiritual autobiography are thus complicated by shifting positions. Spiritual affiliations are the product of an assertion of difference; and such affiliations sustain the self at the same time as absorbing it.

Conversion Narratives: Remembering the Past,

Remaking the Self

For writers of autobiography the past is both the subject matter and the problem. The founding paradox of autobiography, notoriously, is the

relation between the I who writes, in the present, and the I who is written, in the past, somebody who was me but now is not. In spiritual autobiography, as in other narratives pivoting on a transformative moment, the paradox is especially sharp: the self 'before' is by definition someone who is different to the self now—worldly, unhappy, mistaken. St Augustine's declaration, 'I am not what I was', could be seen as the foundational model for conversion narrative, widening the gap between the I who writes and the I who is written to a chasm, and retrospectively changing the meaning of all past events. The writers of spiritual autobiography are thus engaged in complex negotiations around the relation of past and present, the place of memory, and the nature of the self whose progress is recounted in the narrative.

If the theological framework for early modern spiritual autobiographies is overwhelmingly Calvinist, tracing the journey of the soul to regeneration, the generic framework is that of the conversion narrative, founded on a transformation of the self. The old sinful self, in this model, is radically different. Thus Richard Norwood at twenty-five was 'wholy taken up with the lusts of the flesh with pride and self conceitednes and with vanity and lying imaginations' (Norwood *c.* 1639: 144), and confesses that 'for many years . . . I so greivously stayned my life, and lived so dissolutely, that I even abhor the remembrance of those

times'; grace has since shown him the error of his ways (125–6). Mary Rich describes herself at the time of her marriage as 'as vain, as idle and as inconsiderate a person as was possible, minding nothing but fine and rich clothes, and spending my precious time in nothing else but reading romances and in reading and seeing plays, and in going to court and Hide Park and Spring Garden . . .', but (after a period of sanctified affliction in marriage) she is brought to a new understanding: 'I was so much changed to my self that I hardly knew my self, and could say with that converted person, "I am not I"' (Rich 1672: 21). However this model of conversion, sharply contrasting sinful youth with the reborn new self, is surprisingly rare, especially among published accounts (both Rich and Norwood left manuscript lives). For most the story told is one of a continuing journey, in which it is hard to be sure when the destination has been reached—a quest as much as a conversion narrative.

Thus what we see in many narratives is not a clear and positive transformation, but rather something muted and oblique. Many writers represent themselves as having been lost and unhappy, longing for religion but unable to find it. 'When I came to eleven years of age', recalls George Fox, 'I knew pureness and righteousness; for while I was a child I was taught how to walk to be kept pure' (Fox c.1675: 1). Elizabeth Stirredge was similarly sober and serious, rather than wild: 'In my tender years I

was one of a sad heart, and much concerned and surprized with inward fear what would become of me when I should die'. Even her godly parents, indeed, thought she carried things a bit far: 'my Mother feared I was going into a Consumption . . . and would say unto me, *Canst thou take delight in nothing? I would have thee walk forth into the Fields with the young People, for Recreation, and delight thy self in something.* And to please her I have sometimes . . . gone forth with sober young People, but I found no comfort in that' (Stirredge 1711: 7). John Crook before the age of ten or eleven 'often mourned and went heavily, not taking that delight in Play and Pastime which I saw other Children took'; this made him conclude they were saved and he was not, and he spent much of his time praying in by-corners (Crook 1706: 6). The pre-converted self is preoccupied with secrecy: in one account after another the suffering seeker prays in secret, goes away into hidden places, feels secluded or excluded from the common play and pastime of their contemporaries.

With such starting points, it is hardly surprising that the sins of which they accuse themselves are generally mild and minor—at least to the view of the outside world. Confessing to past misdeeds, of course, is complicated; some sins, even firmly located in the past, would count as unspeakable, especially for women. Both the writers and the churches under whose auspices many of them were published had reputations to

protect. Thus women reproach themselves for ‘foolish mirth, carding, dancing, singing, and frequenting of music meetings’ (Penington c.1680: 17), or ‘Dancing, Singing, telling idle Stories’ (Hayes 1723: 14). Fine clothes are a source of temptation and sin in both sexes. John Crook, as an apprentice admired for his godliness and ability in extemporary prayer, reproaches himself for youthful vanities: ‘never much to outward Prophaneness, but only to idle Talk, and vain Company . . . minding Pride too much in my Apparel . . . wearing long Hair, and spending my Money in vain’ when he might have bought good books and given charity (Crook 1706: 9–10). Some men (not women) also accuse themselves of too much love of sport, or drunkenness, and very occasionally confess to ‘pollutions’ or sexual indiscretion. Norwood hints at masturbation—‘my master sin’ (Norwood c.1639: 145). George Trosse has an entanglement with a pious young woman who ‘pretended to more *Religion*’ than her family, but although the two of them behaved ‘foolishly and wantonly together’ in private, he claims that God restrained them ‘from grosser Enormities’; unsurprisingly, no pious young woman records herself behaving like this (Trosse 1714: 58, 59). Bunyan, on the other hand, insists that he always disliked women. Even when the writers accuse themselves of worldly pleasures, too, they emphasize how deeply unpleasurable they really are. ‘But in the midst of all this’ says Mary Penington ‘my heart was constantly

sad, and pained beyond expression' (Penington *c.* 1680: 17). Joan Vokins declares, 'if I had at any time, through persuasion of others, gone to that they called recreation, I should be so condemned for passing away my precious time, that . . . I could take no delight in their pastime' (Vokins 1691: 15); Hayes was so consumed with guilt at her idleness that she 'would seek some secret Place, and there I would fall upon my Knees' (Hayes 1723: 16). Many stress their misery and dissatisfaction with the forms of religion, and the emptiness of their lives and pleasures.

Similarly, while conversion itself may be experienced as a moment of dramatic transformation, it is seldom conclusive: the narrator continues to be assailed by temptations, fails to live up fully to the new commitment, and struggles with the demand that everything worldly be relinquished. This is particularly the case for those committed to constant self-monitoring for election, like John Bunyan, whose conversion—recorded in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666)—is famously provisional. Repeatedly interrupted by doubts, temptations, and struggles with Satan, it needs constant renewal—'suddenly there fell upon me a great cloud of darkness, which did so hide from me the things of God and Christ, that I was as if I had never seen or known them in my life', he writes, on one of many such occasions; 'I could not feel my Soul to move or stir after grace' (Bunyan 1998: 74). Norwood reflects on his similarly insecure experience

of conversion, 'It may seem strange that a man should be so suddainly changed from so much peace and comfort to such perturbations and terrours, and it seemed strange to me even at those times' (Norwood c.1639: 151); but it is an experience recorded by many.

Others struggle with the outward transformation required by their new convictions. Alice Hayes cries to God, '*spare me a little longer, and I will become a New Creature*'; she 'found a very strange Alteration and Opperation in me . . . the Foundation of the Earth began to be shaken in me, and strange and wonderful it was'; but for years she continues to go to the 'Steeple-house'—'sorrowful went I in, and so I came out'—before eventually finding her way to the Quakers, to her husband's outrage (Hayes 1723: 22, 32). Crook experiences spiritual renewal when he encounters the Quakers: 'my Eyes were opened, and my Strength was renewed, and Victory I obtained . . . over those Lusts and corrupt Desires which rose against those little Stirrings and Movings after the living God, which I had felt working at times in my Heart' (Crook 1706: 24). But the rigorous demands of living as a Quaker, for one who had been a justice of the peace with 'great Acquaintance' and 'publick Employment', result in a lengthy battle with 'the Reasoning-Part' before he can subdue worldly pride (74). The consequences for many were serious: family conflict, financial penalties, whippings, and gaol might follow conversion to a new

church, and while these could become the evidence of suffering for God and of divine favour and rewards (as in the Quaker books of suffering) they were not easy to undertake.

A further structural complication for the conversion narrative is that writers not only have inconclusive or delayed conversions; they also realize with hindsight that they have previously been mistaken about their spiritual condition—whether through a wrong choice of church, or through an apparent state of grace which turns out to have been error. Confessional choice is seldom a prominent issue in the earlier decades of the seventeenth century. Occasionally Catholics and Anglicans may cross boundaries, like Carpenter and Norwood, who both temporarily became Catholics; or in the opposite direction, like Catherine Holland, whose account for her confessor describes how she defied her father to become a Catholic. Carpenter, a Catholic convert who returned to the Church of England, describes rather defensively how he was seduced by Rome: ‘What mervaile now, if greene in Age, and shallow in experience, I gave up my soule, into the black hands of error?’ (1643: 20). As the radical congregations of the revolutionary years proliferated, however, the question of how to be certain that the search was over and that finally one had arrived at a state of grace was complex, and involved constant reinterpretation, of inward as well as of outward conditions.

The first step on the path for many was a state of being under the law, as they would subsequently call it: attending church, studying scripture intensively, and worrying about the state of their souls, but still (they later realize) in darkness, even if they appeared godly and regenerate to others. The stories repeatedly proceed from this apparent state of election to a realization that it is all outward; the inward person is still in bondage, and the quest must continue. Anna Trapnel describes repeatedly being convinced of her election, only to discover that she was mistaken. John Crook as a young man spent some years as a member of an Independent congregation, where the spiritual tone was elevated and the emphasis was on collective self-examination:

we were kept watchful and tender, with our Minds inwardly retired, and our Words few and savoury; which frame of Spirit we were preserved in, by communicating our Experiences each to other . . . with an Account of most Days Passages between God and our own Souls.

But after a while 'it grew formal; and then we began to consider . . . whether we were in the right Order of the Gospel . . . we began to be divided and shattered in our Minds and Judgments about it' and the congregation fell apart (Crook 1706: 19). Laurence Clarkson goes from the Church of England to Presbyterianism, and on through Independents,

Baptists ('I was satisfied we onely were the Church of Christ in this world'), and Seekers, preaching as he goes; he concludes as a rare self-professed Ranter, declaring, 'of all my formal righteousness, and professed wickedness, I am stripped naked, and in room thereof clothed with innocency of life, perfect assurance, and seed of discerning with the spirit of revelation' (Claxton [pseudonym of Clarkson] 1660: 12, 34). Such accounts suggest the disconcerting possibility that the same person writing a few years earlier would have told a different story—and indeed that they might revise their views again in the future.

Jane Turner's reflective and analytical account of her own spiritual path in *Choice Experiences* (1654) highlights the difficulty of understanding one's own experience, at the time or subsequently. Her narrative is organized into 'Notes of Experience', in which she describes a set of events, followed in each case by 'brief observations from this note of experience', where she draws the appropriate lesson; the whole is concluded by 'a few lines as to Experience it self, what it is, how, and by what means it is attained' (Turner 1653: 193). But this apparent privileging of experience as the means to know truth is increasingly problematized. Her narrative is framed according to the usual pattern. After an irreligious childhood ('It pleased the Lord I was civilly brought up from a child, and kept from such gross evils as persons meerly civil do

not allow, but otherwaies very vain'), she went through a period of faith in 'Kings and Bishops': 'I grew very superstitiously zealous in all things suitable to the service Book, or a Cathedrall kind of Worship, and I thought the more I abounded in fasting, book prayer, and observation of daies and times, mourning and afflicting my self for sin, the better it was' (10, 11). In the second phase she had 'affectionate heart-workings towards God and godliness', but was still under the law: 'the more strict I was . . . the more my bondage was increased' (26). Emerging from a period of spiritual anguish into a state of contentment, she spends some years believing herself to be regenerate; but although change had taken place, it was not yet '*life by believing*' (41).

After a further period of heart-searching, reading, and discussion, Turner arrives at sanctification by faith rather than law, and along with her husband becomes a Baptist, 'being sweetly satisfied and comforted therein' (Turner 1653: 88); but then she lapses into Quakerism. This experience requires careful handling in order to preserve her own condition as elect; she needs to explain how persuasive the Quakers were, though wrong. Thus she observes 'under how many veils Satan comes . . . beguiling and deceiving with the most plausible spiritual, Angel-like glorious appearances' (142); she reflects on the state of confusion and uncertainty in those days, which left many people unsettled and lacking in

judgement. And she notes the particular attraction of the Quakers to people like her, who tended to:

an extreme in minding truth as it relates to the inward man in point of experience, and inward workings; which is in it self very good; but being in an extreme on that hand, Satan took advantage by it. (Turner 1653: 151)

These repeated and contradictory conversion experiences leave her with a strong sense of the insufficiency of experience on its own to bring the believer into the true path. The problem of how we remember and understand our own experiences, at the time and with hindsight, is thus at the heart of her text, and her focus is above all on the difficulty of knowing what is actually happening. As she observes, ‘there is much corrupt experience in the world, and persons have been much mistaken in their experience’ (201). She thus distinguishes between ‘things merely historical or traditional’—the ‘simple facts’ of one’s life—and ‘Experience from a true sanctified knowledge’—experience guided by Scripture (196). What her memory tells her is problematic; what she remembers has changed its meaning since she lived through it, and accordingly it must be re-explained.

Memory as the guarantee of autobiographical truth is a problem in these accounts. Spiritual autobiographers, urgently required to know and to

speak the truth, are constantly reminded by memory of the fallibility of human judgement, and the inconsistency of self-knowledge; the spiritual journey is one of disruption and discontinuity, destabilizing knowledge of the self. At the same time they are peculiarly reliant on memory, since what they describe is above all inward states of mind and soul. The pressing question of the security of memory is resolved primarily by appeal to God as the ultimate author of the narrative. When Jane Turner expresses anxiety about the reach of her memory—‘it would be very hard, if not impossible, for me to remember that which has been so long since’, as well as ‘fearing lest through forgetfulness as I knew I should leave out something which was, so I might possibly write something which was not’—she is reassured by God’s promise that she would write ‘as in his presence’, and this would guarantee her truth (1653: 4). But records help too. Alice Curwen ‘questioned in my Mind, Why I should write, fearing the Subtility of the Enemy, and also not minding to keep Copies of several Papers that had been written; yet as I waited patiently to see my Clearness, it was said in the secret of my Heart, *What thou hast kept, write*’; a very Quaker formulation, in its reliance simultaneously on waiting for the secret voice in the heart, and on keeping documentary records (Curwen 1680: 2). Memory is also a matter of rehearsal, as the practice of learning and repeating Biblical passages or sermons in godly households underlines;

such skills can be translated into the repetition of one's own experiences.

But these are still under God's eye. Anna Trapnel's complex reflections on memory suggest it is supported by repetition:

Though I fail in an orderly penning down these things, yet not in a true Relation, of as much as I remember, and what is expedient to be written; I could not have related so much from the shallow memory I have naturally, but through often relating these things, they become as a written book, spread open before me, and after which I write. (Trapnel 1654a: 34)

But at the same time, in distinguishing between 'an orderly penning down' and 'a true Relation', and implying that she copies truth from a pre-written book, Trapnel locates truth as separate from the normal processes of memory, with sources beyond the self.

In principle memory asserts the continuity of the self: where the self and the world have been turned upside down, memory holds old and new selves together in narrative, giving the past a shape that conforms to the requirements of the present, and autobiography articulates that continuity. But the past is uncertain territory for these writers, as they reflect back on the 'merely historical' and 'true sanctified knowledge': whether to know it, how to know it, how to understand it. And so of course

is the self: the establishment of the self as secure and autonomous is what must be done away with, rather than what the autobiographical narrative is seeking to constitute. The aim of self-examination is not, ultimately, that the past should enable you to understand and explain, but that it should enable you to understand only so as to move rapidly on, to transcend.

Looking to the past, indeed, for many, marks an attachment to the old world, and a refusal to allow the self to be remade. Dorothea Gotherson urges her readers to let go of the past: ‘do not longer backward turn, /But if it burn, why let it burn’; and she summons up the figure of Lot’s wife who turned back to look at Sodom as they fled, and was turned into a pillar of salt. ‘And all you that are travelling out of Sodom with your faces towards Sion,’ she reminds her readers, ‘look not back; remember Lot’s wife’ (Gotherson 1661: a3^v, 94). Gotherson’s insistence on regeneration as a move from death to new life sits uneasily with the project of looking back over her own story. Self-examination is in tension with self-abandonment, and this tension underlies Dorothea Gotherson’s injunction to know one’s own past, and the contrary injunction to look forward not back. The journey desired and described ultimately is unspeakable and incomprehensible, the stopping point of narrative and communication: as she describes it, ‘too hard to be uttered, or by you to be borne’ (93). Sion is a place without memory or narrative, so as to be,

implicitly, a place without self. It is a curious paradox that autobiography surges into popularity in order to describe these absences.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Graham 1996; Mascuch 1997; Shuger 2000; Dragstra, Otway, and Wilcox 2000; Dekker 2002; Hinds 2002; Bedford, Davis, and Kelly 2006, 2007; Dowd and Eckerle 2007; Hindmarsh 2007; Cambers 2007, 2011; Hodgkin 2007, 2012; Clarke and Longfellow 2008; Smyth 2010; Lynch 2012.