

‘out of their owne mouths’  
Conversion Narratives and English Radical Religious Practice  
in the Seventeenth Century

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*Abstract*

This article focuses on a form of writing, the conversion narrative, which was familiar to mid-seventeenth-century godly readers. The purpose of the narrative, which was a prerequisite for admission to the Church of Visible Saints, was to give the congregation a spoken account of the experience of conversion and of the workings of Grace in the life of the regenerate individual. Some of these reports were transcribed, revised, and published by the ministers of the churches. By focusing on the complex relationships between the ‘original’ experience, its expression, and subsequent written transmission, the tension between individuality and conformity, and the various forms of editorial intervention adopted by the ministers, this study attempts to highlight the collaborative nature of the textual construction of the conversion narrative and to address some crucial issues concerning both the authenticity of the memory recorded and its ‘true’ author.

*Keywords:* Conversion Narratives, Editorial Methods, Revision, Spiritual Experience, Transcription.

A man’s whole life is but a conversion.  
James Fraser, *Memoirs*, 1738

... we might muster many Authors together  
to beare *testimony* to this truth.  
John Rogers, *Ohel, or Beth-shemesh*, 1653

... what you end up remembering isn’t always  
the same as what you have witnessed.  
Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 2011

1. *Introduction*

In mid-seventeenth-century England, a number of accounts of spiritual experiences appeared almost simultaneously, collected and edited by the ministers of some gathered churches. Taken together, these collections alone brought more than a hundred first-person narratives to the public, most of them by laypeople raised in a Protestant milieu. The narratives record a great variety

of spiritual experiences and describe the circumstances of the reception of Christ's call, showing the centrality of conversion in the believer's life. Here conversion should be understood as an intensification of faith and a spiritual awakening within it.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the narratives, which qualified the individual for formal inclusion in the Church of Visible Saints, was to give the congregation a spoken, and convincing, account of the experience of conversion and the subsequent workings of Grace in the life of the regenerate individual: 'Every one to be *admitted*', the Independent minister John Rogers explained, 'gives out some *experimental* Evidences of the work of *grace* upon his *soul* (for the *Church* to judge of) whereby he (or she) is *convinced* that he is *regenerate* and *received* by God' (1653, 354).<sup>2</sup> The account had to be corroborated with testimonies by reliable witnesses as to the uprightness and blameless 'carriage' of the individual concerned.

For the ministers, who transcribed, revised, chose and published the narratives, the public testimony of a 'genuine' experience of conversion served to validate the 'true' church, as 'a free society or communion of visible Saints, embodied and knit together, by a voluntary consent' (Bartlet 1647, C3r).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the 'false and counterfeit' Church of England, to the 'superstitious' Church of Rome, and to all those churches formed on the parochial principle, the gathered churches believed that it was 'A Union of hearts rather than a vicinity of Houses ... to make up a Congregation' (Cook 1647, 7). By publicly declaring the presence of Christ's redeeming power in the whole body of the Church, the testimonies also functioned as powerful 'reminder[s] of the community's basic values and goals' (Rambo 1993, 137).

The public delivery of one's conversion experience also responded to an evangelical concern: by 'power[ing] out their *Experiences*, and tell[ing] the *means*, and showi[ng] the *effects* of their *Call*' (Rogers 1653, 361), the Saints helped initiate others into a conversion experience. 'In their *Experiences*', John Rogers says, 'you shall heare how they are *changed*' (362), 'By their *Experiences* you will learne how various God is in his *wayes* and *workings*' (366). Furthermore, '*Experiences* declared do *oblige* others, and *allure* them exceedingly to relye upon God, and to *beleeve* in him' (367); they also help develop humility and tolerance in the congregation by teaching 'to *suspend* ... *censures*', and by forbearing 'prejudicate *opinions*, or harsh *judgement* of such as *suspire* ... and *aspire* under *lamentable soule-travel*, and heart-pangs' (364). All in all, 'by *observing* the *Saints* in their *Experience*', a person can 'learn the way to *live* in Christ' (366).<sup>4</sup> A conversion narrative generates further conversions.

The aims of the exposition of the story of one's conversion were thus manifold: the public delivery could be effectual in instructing, exhorting, comforting, teaching and edifying the believers who, by sharing their experiences, helped one another construct their (spiritual) identity as part of a close-knit community.<sup>5</sup>

In order to prove their godliness and the authenticity of their conversion, not only did believers have to tell the story of their conversion but they also had to submit themselves to the 'public' gaze. Through the converts' words as well as self-display, by their speaking and appearing, the assembly could ear-witness and eye-witness God's 'worke on the soule' and thus 'know (so far as may be *judged* by the *effects*) who are the *Elect* of God' (358).<sup>6</sup>

Seen in terms of speech events, rather than written texts, conversion narratives share with other 'cultural performances' a set of characteristic features. First of all, such events tend to be scheduled, set up and prepared in advance; they are temporally and spatially bound, that is they are enacted in a space (and time) that are symbolically marked off; they are also '*coordinated public occasions, open to view by an audience and to collective participation*' (Bauman 1989, 264). In sum, they are events that are 'situated, enacted, and rendered meaningful within socially defined situational contexts' (264):<sup>7</sup> the sense of the conversion narrative and the forms, manners and concrete circumstances of its delivery are inseparable.<sup>8</sup>

In 1653 two substantial collections of experiences were published.<sup>9</sup> *Spirituell Experiences of Sundry Beleevers* (most likely edited by the London Independent Henry Walker, and prefaced by the Baptist/Fifth Monarchist Vavasor Powell) contained sixty-one accounts 'wherein is wonderfully declared Gods' severall workings in the various conditions of his chosen ones' (taken from the title page). In the same year, the independent John Rogers published *Ohel or Beth-shemesh: A Tabernacle for the Sun*; it included thirty-eight testimonies from the members of his Dublin congregation.<sup>10</sup> Another small collection was published the following year (1654b) by the Independent Samuel Petto in *Roses from Sharon or Sweet Experiences Gathered up by some precious hearts, whilst they followed on to know the Lord*.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. 'Experience': Definitions

The emphasis on 'experience' is a characteristic of seventeenth-century England; the word itself appears in the title of Walker's and Petto's collections and frequently occurs in the adjectival form 'experimental' in all three collections. What the Puritans meant by 'experience' is well illustrated by Vavasor Powell in the epistle 'To the sober and spirituall Readers' which opens Walker's collection. '[A]mongst the various wayes of Gods teaching', says Powell,

*Experience* is one of the chiefest; for that is the inward sense and feeling, of what is outwardly read and heard; and the spirituall and powerfull enjoyment of what is believed. *Experience* is a Copy written by the Spirit of God upon the hearts of beleevers. It is one of *Faiths* handmaids, and attendants, and *Hopes* usher. (1653, A2r-A2v)

Jane Turner, who published a 'spiritual autobiography' in 1654, defines the 'true Christian experience' as 'truth brought home to the heart with life and

power' (1653, 202), and Samuel Petto describes it as 'intercourse and communion' between Christ and His people (1654b, O4r).

As these definitions highlight, the term 'experience' referred to something personal, to inner religiosity, a source of knowledge by which an individual is consciously affected; they also postulate, especially Powell's, that the doctrine 'read and heard' should be intimately 'felt' and emotionally 'lived', and then made known through narrative and testimony. 'Now to a poor soule', John Rogers stated, 'all such things as are in the soule, are made known by *experiences; experiences, we say, proves principles*' (1653, 355).

The emphasis on oral discourse, on verbal expression and public communication of the 'experience', is one of the reasons why so many reports have faded away after being spoken. Those preserved in the collections mentioned were transcribed, abridged, revised, chosen and published by the ministers of the gathered churches expressly for the benefit of 'many precious Christians' outside and inside the congregation, for, as Vavasor Powell puts it, in the collection, the readers 'maysee not only [their] owne hearts, but many hearts, and *heart-knowledge*' (1653, A3).

### 3. *Collections of Experiences*

Though the account of experiences is described by Rogers as a 'most *satisfactory testimony*; that comes from *within*' (1653, 290), the conversion narratives do not only voice the intimate experience of the 'conversion of the heart' (as opposed to 'formal' conversion) but they are also examples of a highly structured and codified discourse by which the converts record their progress towards 'sainthood'. Although these narratives vary in terms of local experience and theology (the three collections are shaped by the teaching and discipline of the minister who transcribed them; their appearance in print is therefore context specific), their basic structure shows an observable continuity with the applied theology of Perkins and other Elizabethan Puritans, who had provided a guide to help unregenerate individuals discover their prospects of salvation.<sup>12</sup> With little variation, the narratives follow a pattern – the so called 'morphology of conversion' – which detailed stages of sin, false confidence, doubt, conviction, faith, temptation and assurance, a pattern that gave a structure and chronology, therefore an interpretation, to a range of events and experiences; 'adherence to these conventions confirmed and valorised the godliness of the author' (Hinds 1995, 12). In order to be accepted as 'a genuine guarantee of salvation', the experience 'would have to fall within a specific pattern: otherwise the conversion might be a false one, and the sinner caught in the hypocrisy of a false confidence in their salvation' (Hobby 1988, 66). Puritan divines such as Perkins, Culverwell, Hildersam, Ames endeavoured to describe in detail the processes through which

God's free grace operates in the salvation of men. ... They wished to trace the natural history of conversion in order to help men discover their prospects of salvation; and the result of their studies was to establish a morphology of conversion, in which each stage could be distinguished from the next, so that a man could check his eternal condition by a set of temporal and recognizable signs. (Morgan 1963, 66)

The narrative is thus constructed in relation to the 'collective' assumptions, genre conventions and cultural ideologies shared by the religious community the convert seeks affiliation to. If converts do not reveal what God has done for them, and/or if they do not do it according to the language and conventions of the church they wish to join, they cannot be recognized as 'new creatures' and thus cannot be counted among the elect in the Visible Church. In this sense, if not actualized in an act of speech, if not sealed with a public demonstration of the person's transformation and her/his new religious and social commitments, conversion remains 'ineffective'.<sup>13</sup> Thus the conversion experience is inseparable from the expression of the experience itself (see Payne 1998, 1-12).<sup>14</sup>

In a sense, the distance between the narrative and the expectations of the community has to be grammatically negligible: the 'truthfulness' and value of the spiritual experience and of the person who lived it are gauged by the degree of observance to a recognized, and sanctioned, model. The 'new birth' is indeed an experience of the heart, deeply personal and intimate, but it is also a process that is stimulated, nourished and directed by the assumptions and expectations of the religious community.

A fundamental problem concerns the conflict between the personal meaning, the individual living experience and the social and discursive conventions that are supposed to convey them; it regards how an experience, that was generally considered beyond expression, could be 'converted' into language and communicated to others, who, in turn, had to sanction it. The pressures to shape one's own life according to a dominant paradigm were likely to arouse anxious feelings in converts. In this respect, the following, oft-quoted remark by Richard Baxter is particularly illuminating: 'I could not' – says Baxter – 'distinctly trace the Workings of the Spirit upon my heart in that method which ... Divines describe' (1696, 6); but then he 'at last' understands 'that God breaketh not all Mens hearts alike' (7).

The conversion narrative is the result of both a linguistic transformation and biographical reconstruction, processes that are never innocent from an ideological and psychological point of view. It is a retrospective account of what the convert thinks or wants others to think she or he has experienced; in this sense, the narrative explains and justifies the radical change that has affected the life of the individual and legitimizes the conversion; it asserts the difference of identity between a past, sinful 'I' and a present, godly 'I'. Not only is the narrative an interpretation and conceptualization of a significant experience of change and a justification for 'turning away from' past allegiances, but it is

also a self-interpretation in that the narrator describes how s/he became – out of what s/he was – what s/he presently is (see Starobinski 1980, 79).

Narrators shape their material; knowingly or unknowingly, they choose what to tell, they suppress and repress a great deal. What is recollected and told is not only filtered by affective factors, both emotional and psychological, but crucially, by a frame of reference and an axiology that are in tune with the ethos and goals of the religious community the regenerate individual has joined or wants to join. The cultural, social and religious expectations of the group shape to a great degree one's conversion story and biographical reconstruction; as Rambo puts it, 'learning to give one's testimony of conversion is often an integral part of the conversion process itself' (1993, 137, see also 118-121, 137-138).

In this context, it is important to recognize the role played by the editors of the collections in their reconstruction, revision and selection of the spoken accounts, the input they had, the constraints they imposed upon them, as well as the degree of (more or less conscious) self-censorship exercised. Such interference raises crucial issues concerning both the 'authenticity' of the memory recorded, and its 'true' author.

#### 4. *Issues of Authorship*

As I have tried to show, the narratives of spiritual experiences contained in the 1653 and 1654 collections are highly 'mediated' texts, and they are 'mediated' at different levels.

The conversion story had to attest to the power of God's work, 'to bear witness', as Rogers maintained, 'to the world of the *workings of Gods Spirit*' (1653, 417). This claim immediately raises a major critical problem. It concerns the relationship between the original event, to which we do not have access, and the narrative that describes it, which is an available and observable piece of evidence. It involves the issue of representation in discourse, that is, how we translate into language, and describe to others, an experience such as conversion, that is ultimately mystical and ineffable, 'available only subjectively to the convert and beyond the power of language to objectify' (Payne 1998, 61).<sup>15</sup>

In *A Legacy for Saints*, the Fifth Monarchist prophetess Anna Trapnel pauses on the incommunicability of the experience of conversion, which she defines 'unexpressible':

oh how transcendently glorious is the true sealing of the Spirit! sure no tongue is able to speak it out, the pen of the readiest writer cannot write this, it may give some hints of this seal, but for depth, length, and breadth, who can give a full description or relation of it, it is a thing impossible to be published? (1654, 11)

The question of how to express such an experience and how to communicate it in such a way that others might be convinced of its 'authenticity' was

momentous for converts, since that was the key opening the door of the community of Visible Saints; an issue that Puritan divines and ministers were well aware of. 'As to that impression which the Holy Ghost leaves upon the heart of a man', the Independent minister Thomas Goodwin remarks, 'that man can never make the like impression on another; he may describe it to you, but he cannot convey the same image and impression upon the heart of any man else' (1862, 297).

The 'impression upon the heart' is the work of the Spirit of God, a work that Goodwin himself describes in terms of writing. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is an author that 'writes first all graces in us, and then teaches us to read his handwriting' (1636, 116). In order to make known to the 'world' 'the *workings of Gods Spirit*', and become a member of the Visible Church, the individual believer has to appropriate the socially sanctioned discourse (of conversion) that enables her/him to give a name to what has possessed no prior cultural reality. The language of the larger 'interpretive community' (Stanley Fish's expression) validates the individual experience and, in a sense, actually creates it. Thus, the ordinary believer becomes the focus of (public) attention not only as the teller and protagonist of her/his own story, but also as its 'author': 'telling a story', Roger Schank observed, 'isn't rehearsal, it is creation' (1995, 115). In order to be remembered, an experience must be told:

We need to tell someone else a story that describes our experience because the process of creating the story also creates the memory structure that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives. Talking is remembering. (115)

Moreover, as Schank argues, listening to other people's stories shapes the memories we have of our experiences.<sup>16</sup>

The very action of telling her/his own story of conversion establishes, in a sense, a uniqueness of self, a self that is placed in the spotlight as 'author', a self who claims authority over her/his discourse on the basis of her/his own experience. This position, however, strongly collides with the experience of conversion itself, an experience that involves self-denial, even self-dissolution, in order to take place.<sup>17</sup>

The moment of the original 'performance', when the believer appears before the whole assembly to give her/his account, is inaccessible to us, its participatory and empathetic aspects being irremediably lost. All we have is but a *reconstructed account* of what was said, whose authorship appears problematic and 'dispersed' among several people.

Indeed, the ministers of the gathered churches who attended to the publication of the collections of the experiences, 'converted' the oral stories to written accounts, transcribed and framed them, and in so doing, not only transposed the 'real' words from one (anterior) context to another, but, more importantly, turned them into 'new' texts. The criteria they followed are only

sometimes, and partially, made explicit. On the contrary, what is apparent is that (presumably) the ministers were guided by intentions, and pursued goals, sensibly different from those of the believers who first gave the oral accounts. One may assume, for instance, that the compilers – who were also in charge of their respective congregations – endeavoured to portray the spiritual and social cohesion of their own church, a picture that could be conveyed by standardizing and homogenizing the texts chosen. The individual accounts were assembled and juxtaposed within a larger unity, the ‘book’ of experiences, which gave them an overall organization and provided a frame of interpretation. Put together, the experiences produce a cumulative effect and display ‘the variety of [God’s] dispensations in grace’. Furthermore, they show the regenerate nature of the true Church of Christ, as a ‘fellowship of Saints’, formed by individual ‘competent Members’, ‘gathered into one body’ (Rogers 1653, 417, 59, 61, 70).

An initial important consequence of the editors’ intervention is that we cannot have a complete picture of the phenomenon of conversion, since the stories included in the collections always have a ‘happy ending’: they all involve the assurance of salvation, and imply sanctification. However, it is by virtue of their ‘happy ending’ that the narratives can reveal the ‘dark side’ of the converts’ soul and personality: profane thoughts, disorderly and ungodly behaviour, conflictual relationships, negative feelings, (self-)destructive impulses, and all kinds of transgressions are taken up and become ‘acceptable’ subjects of the narratives, precisely because they herald renunciation and submission. Indeed, their disclosure, within the authorized discourse of the public testimony, signals the fact that they have been dominated and have already become part of the past (see Pallotti 2007, 33-54, 49, 54).

The collections also appear to establish, and belong to, an intertextual and interdiscursive context, not only because they rely on the framework of doctrine, but also because they make details of experience public and encourage an intense exchange amongst like-minded believers, both as speakers and hearers, and writers and readers.<sup>18</sup> The presentation in print of the ‘fruits of experience’ was – as Watkins remarks – ‘an extension ... of the obligation which all Puritans accepted to admonish and exhort one another up in the faith’ (1972, 234).

In a passage reflecting on the aims of his collection, Rogers reveals that his endeavour has been to ‘incite others to doe thus, *viz.* to *gather out* the *flowers* of their *garden*, to *present* them to the *Saints* in *other places*’ (1653, 417), that is, to compile similar works, shaping them on his own collection. Rogers offers his collection as a model for other ministers to follow, one that allows them to overcome the tension between individuality and conformity in the narratives,

So that the *variety* of the *flowers*, and of the *colors*, and of the *natures*, and of the *formalities* of them, *gathered together into one*, give a *glorious lustre*, and like the *Rain-bow of many colors*, signify *fair weather for Ireland*. (417)



This move draws attention to Rogers's construction of the book and authorial role, eventually helping increase his own stature as a minister and enhancing the reputation of the Dublin congregation that he guides so authoritatively.

In the epistle to the reader in the second, enlarged, edition of *Spiritual Experiences*, Vavasor Powell refers to earlier publications, saying, 'What hath been Printed of this nature, hath both been acceptable and profitable, to many precious Christians' (1653, A3). While preparing his own collection, John Rogers says that he had the chance to see 'a little peace, titled, *Spiritual experiences of Sundry Beleevers*, recommended by Mr. Powel'. He also wishes that

every *Church* appoint the *Pastor*, or some others to take up all the *experiences* which the *members* declare, and to bring the *best & choicest* of them into *publique light*, Oh how *beautiful* would they be abroad! ... it is a *burning shame* they should lye *buried* alive, and not to be brought into the *light*, which are *given* in to all the *Churches* in this *age*, that are of *excellency* and *use*. (1653, 355, 450)<sup>19</sup>

'Members declare', 'the *Pastor*, or some others' 'take up ... the *experiences*'. Two different roles are highlighted here: the first, attributed to the converts, is limited to exposition, the second, that of 'others', involves 'acquisition', selection and transmission. What is postulated is a re-creative practice on the part of 'the pastor or some others', aimed at the preservation and diffusion of what otherwise would 'lye buried', a practice that ultimately validates what has been previously 'declared'. 'Have them upon record', exhorts Samuel Petto, talking about experiences (1654a, 182).

The compiler's role, presenting the fruits of experiences, appears to be as prominent as that of the subject who has 'actually' lived and 'declared' them. The texts appear thus to be the work of multiple participants and involve a collaborative discourse; they are the product of a community acting on shared beliefs.

The collections as a whole contain at least two different points of view: that of the narrator of each story, the convert, that is in turn shaped by the cultural as well as discursive expectations of the community, and that of the compiler of the book, who 're-presents' the stories of conversion, using the direct speech form. The impression created is that the reporter exercises minimal control over the propositional content and the words used to utter that content: direct forms, linguists remind us, seem to evoke the original voice and help produce the effects of immediacy (see, among others, Short, Semino and Wynne 2002, 325-355). Though the effect of the direct speech form is that the account we read seems to be a word-by-word reproduction of the original with no apparent, external intrusion, reporters do intervene, and their interference cannot be underestimated. All transcription, it is often noted, 'involves subjective interpretation' (Culpeper and Kytö 2010, 79); by no means can we assume verbatim faithfulness to the original speech, even in the case of direct speech form.<sup>20</sup>

The most obvious instance of the compilers' mediation is shown by the presence of a heading preceding each account; the heading introduces a speaker in the third person, thus 'evoking' the voice of another speaker reporting the first person's discourse. A double process of enunciation is therefore linguistically signalled and made explicit through the relationship narratives establish between their headings and the text proper.

The transition from the third person of the heading to the first person of the text leads the readership from the public domain to a more private sphere. The print context of the testimonies, therefore, as Coolahan remarks, 'presents them simultaneously as individual narratives [they are written in the first person] and community texts' (2010, 235).

### 5. *Shaping 'Experience': the Editorial Work*

While introducing 'Examples of Experiences', John Rogers informs readers that he 'constructed' the testimonies 'as well as I can *collect* them out of the *Notes* which I took of [the converts] from their own *mouths*, when they were admitted into the *Church*' (1653, 391).<sup>21</sup> Then he makes clear that he selected the testimonies in order to 'present, as a sweet *posie* of some of the *chiefest-flowers* that I have met with this *spring-time* in the *Garden of the Lord*.' (391), therefore 'purposely omit[ing] many *experiences* of inferior glory, and lower appearance' (450). Though Rogers claims that he has 'dealt *faithfully* with all, as I finde them in my *Notes*, as near as I can to a *tittle*', taken out of their *owne mouths*' (417), he, in fact, reveals how he interfered with the converts' texts:

I shall premise this, for the godly *Readers* sake, that I must *contract* much their *experiences* as they were *taken*, least they be too *voluminous*: And although in the *choicest* and most *extraordinary* ones, I shall gather the *stalk longer*, least I hurt the *beauty* and *hide* the *excellency* of those *flowers*; yet without *hurt* to the rest, in those which are *ordinary*, I shall be very short, ... I shall *gather* out the *flowers* only, and give you the *sum* of what they said, and so *tie* them up *together* for a *conclusion* of the *whole matter*.... a very great many more I might adde to them, ... many more do lie *prepared* by me. (392)<sup>22</sup>

By signalling a division between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' experiences, Rogers highlights a distinctive feature of his ministry; it relates to the ways in which the workings of the Spirit can be known by converts. This could be done in an *ordinary* way, through preaching, praying, reading, writing, by the transforming effects of Grace on 'judgement, will, and affections'; and in an *extraordinary* way, by trances, '*dreams*, and *visions*, and *voices*' (354).

Not only did Rogers 'contract much', summarize, extract passages from the testimonies and organize them in a text of his own devising, but he also annotated them so that they would appear in print with directions in the margins, showing the reader particular points she/he should take note of, as

well as 'When? where? and how?' the conversion took place and 'the effects' it produced (392). In order to illustrate how annotation is part of the design of Rogers's text, I reproduce here Rebecca Rich's testimony (413).

30. *Experience of Rebecca Rich.*

I was wont (by Gods *providence*) to hear Mr. *Cradock* by whose *Ministry* the Lord *wrought* much upon me, and I thought I was the *person* that he particularly spoke to; and I lay long *afflicted* under the *sense* of my *naturall condition*, and under the *burthen* of a *wounded spirit*, and after that whilst I lived nigh *London*, I lived much upon *forme*, till God was pleased to *come in* by his *Spirit*, and then all was *nothing*; but *Christ* was all, and the *best of all*, and ever since I have *received Christ*, I have *loved* his ways, and *desired* the *society* of his society. Was much *comforted* and *confirmed* even last night in *Michaels* publique place, by that Ordinance of *prophecyng one by one*, which the Church *kept so sweetly*, and I was very much *convinced* of your *walking together* in *love* and *unity* of spirit.

Captain *Rich's*  
Wife.

Called,

1. When,  
where.

2. How.  
Lived much  
on formes.

3. Effects.

Confirmed by  
that ordinance  
of prophecyng

Rebecca Rich's testimony is a very short, and, presumably, summarized account. Here little space is given to the narrator's inner life. However, the testimony fulfils the requisites for conversion illustrated by Rogers himself and displayed in the marginal notes: 'When? where? and how? with the effects' (392). The marginal notes clearly point out the transition from one stage of spiritual progress to another, (externally) supplying a soteriological scheme, providing an interpretative framework through which the account should be read (and given), and the convert's life shaped. The typographical arrangement displays the dialogic structure of the text; it highlights the ongoing conversation between the main-block text, Rebecca Rich's *experience*, and the margin, Rogers's glosses, which draw the readers' attention to the points he thinks worth considering. The persistent repetition, with little variation, of the same items appears to be an instructional strategy on Rogers's part, a way of constantly reminding his audience about the essentials of a 'true', and convincing, conversion.

In the collection, marginal notes also function as annotations providing references, particularly to Scripture, in this function, shoring up the texts of the testimonies with Biblical authority. By and large, marginalia are used to control the reading process, becoming as William Slights suggests, an exercise in 'reader management' that led the reader to enter the text 'through what the marginalist, ... deemed appropriate doorways' (1989, 683, 697-98). Drawing attention to the interpretative nature of editorial apparatuses, Evelyn Tribble argues that the margins of texts and the 'text proper' are in 'shifting relationships of authority':

the margin might affirm, summarize, underwrite the main text block and thus tend to stabilize meaning, but it might equally assume a contestatory or parodic relation to the text by which it stood. Nor is the margin consistently the site of the secondary, for the margins of texts were often central in their importance. (1993, 6)

Rebecca Rich's account casts some light on Rogers's general editorial method, a method that seems to reinforce, as Watkins observes, 'the tendency for the accounts to display a standard scheme of interpretation' (1972, 41). All the testimonies in Rogers's collection present a similar structure, containing the circumstances of conversion and its effects on the convert's life and attitudes and displaying the split self characteristic of 'autobiographical' writings; nearly all end with her/his determination to hold back from sin and serve God (see also Watkins 1972, 40-41). Rogers's own conversion narrative follows the same trajectory, his life story being edited and shaped in an analogous way. In a self-reflective passage that opens the account, he writes:

To give a *formall account* from year to year of my *life*, would make me *too tedious*, to you and my self; and I fear somewhat *offensive* to such as are to follow, though I may safely say in every year since I can *remember*, I have been *inriched* with so many and such remarkable *experiences*; ... to tell you some few for the present, I shall *cite* some of the most *remarkable passages* which (to my present *remembrance*) I have met with in *former years* to this *day* ... . (1653, 419)

Thus Rogers prunes his own story, and chooses to report only what he considers 'the most *remarkable*' pieces of information. What is 'tedious' here is, as Coolahan observes, 'the comprehensive, detailed life; what is important is the trajectory towards conversion and assurance' (2010, 236).

The testimonies are numbered progressively and, as mentioned above, always preceded by a heading where the believer's name and, sometimes, the place where the account was first given, are spelled out. At times, and in the case of male converts, Rogers supplies information about the profession exercised, or the military rank held by the speaker. When the 'author' of the testimony is a woman, the compiler sometimes illuminates his readership about her ties of kinship. In the marginal notes, he glosses of Elizabeth Chambers, for instance, 'Her husband a Captain' (1653, 406); of Rebecca Rich, that she is 'Captain *Rich's* wife' (413).<sup>23</sup> According to Coolahan, these identifications 'locate the Cromwellian context for these texts' (2010, 235). They also lend authenticity and originality to the conformist pattern of the regenerate life.

This editorial practice enables the immediate identification of the speaker of the narrative, to whom, at least apparently, the responsibility for the discourse is attributed. At the same time, it makes explicit the editor's (intentional) choice of presenting information as a direct speech report. What emerges is that Rogers's reporting method in 'his' conversion narratives appears to foreground both the report and the attribution.<sup>24</sup>

Again, some headings exhibit comments revealing how Rogers dealt with particular accounts. In the case of Elizabeth Avery, for instance, he offers his readers 'A fuller Testimony' (1653, 402). The narrative of Adrian Strong, on the contrary, is accompanied by a caption reading: 'In short thus:' (9),<sup>25</sup> which highlights Rogers's editorial intervention. Another heading casts doubt on the reliability of Rogers himself as a 'faithful' reporter; the text reads: 'Experience of *Henry Johnson*, which is taken imperfectly, and very short' (408).

More revealing are those annotations where the minister exhibits his church connections by mentioning his 'spiritual associations', or lends authority to himself by drawing attention to his role as an instrument of God's will. Illuminating in this respect are the marginal notes next to Elizabeth Avery's and Elizabeth Chambers's accounts.

In the case of Elizabeth Avery, Rogers writes that 'Mr. *Parker* was her father, that able Divine that writ *De Eccles. Polit.* so largely; but she married Master *Avery* a Commissary in *Ireland*' (403). Avery's father, Robert Parker (c.1564-1614), was an important minister and preacher who, because of his nonconformist convictions, was suspended from his ministry and died in exile in the Netherlands. *De Politeia Ecclesiastica Christi et Hierarchica Opposita, libritres* (1616), published posthumously in Frankfurt, was Parker's most controversial work. Written in Latin, it was held in high regard by congregationalists, especially in New England; there, Parker was acclaimed father of the faith (see Sprunger 2004). In a significant way, by mentioning Parker, an authoritative writer, and his authoritative work, Rogers makes explicit his credentials as well as the religious and confessional context against which he knowingly endeavours to shape himself and his congregation.

Not only was Elizabeth Avery the daughter of such a revered 'Divine', but, more revealingly, she was herself a radical writer who, in 1647, had published three prophetic letters, under the title of *Scripture-Prophecies Opened*, which, for their radical and millenarian content, brought an accusation of heresy against her. In her book, Avery casts herself in the role of prophet and describes her writings as endowed with a charismatic message which she must communicate on God's behalf: 'I finde the immediate acting of the Spirit in giving in, and ... in carrying me forth to communicate it to others' (1647, A3). In order to defuse the suspicion of heresy, she posits herself as a mere instrument of God, a lack of agency that is reinforced by strategic conformity to the discourse of female inadequacy and by the traditional argument of negative capability, whereby God would choose an apparently inappropriate instrument to fulfil His designs. In *A Copy of a Letter ... to his Sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Avery* (1650), her brother Thomas, minister of Newbury, Massachusetts, one of the few ministers in New England to hold Presbyterian views, strongly attacked her both on 'theological and patriarchal grounds' (Coolanhan 2010, 234).<sup>26</sup>

In her lengthy spiritual testimony, contained in Rogers's collection, Avery significantly recalls her activity as a 'writer', when she '*writ down* what *God*

had *done* for me, and *writ* down about to *my friends*' (Rogers 1653, 406); some of these letters constituted Avery's own tract, *Scripture-Prophecies Opened*, published before her reaching Ireland with her husband, 'Master Avery a Commissary' in that country (Baston 2004).

The biographical note next to Elizabeth Avery's account, which informs the reader about Elizabeth's family background and marital status, enables Rogers to advert to his confessional stand, and to provide a context for 'other women's testimonies' (Coolahan 2010, 234).<sup>27</sup>

While the annotation accompanying Avery's account attests Rogers's church connections, the gloss next to Chambers's text seems to represent an act of self-endorsement on his part. The note reads:

Her Husband a Captain. This Gentlewoman declared to several Church-Members, that before the Author came over, she had in a dream one night of her troubles, a vision of him so plainly, that after he was in *Dublin*, the first Sermon he preached, she told her friends this was the man that God had declared to her in a vision, should comfort her soul. (Rogers 1653, 406)

As the note claims, the arrival of Rogers in Ireland was 'extraordinarily' announced: it was revealed by divine inspiration. In her account, Chambers herself recalls that she 'was without *assurance*, and had no *full* and *clear satisfaction* all this while; until the *Lord*, who heareth prayers, sent over Mr. Rogers from the *Council of State* to us' (407). Rogers fulfils the prophecy: he is an instrument sent by God to perform His divine will in the congregation.

The inclusion of the marginal note does not only represent a (self)-celebratory gesture on Rogers's part, but could also be seen as a move aimed to prevent possible criticism against his church policy and doctrine. Significantly, in the note, Rogers does not identify himself distinctively by name or title, but describes himself as 'the Author', the writer of 'this' book, who, by invoking a Saint's 'experience', claims authority over his own discourse and practice, an authority that ultimately derives from God. Being such an author, the implication is, his work must have the divine hallmark stamped on it.

Interestingly, in the collection, Elizabeth Chambers's testimony immediately follows Elizabeth Avery's, this sequence perhaps not being fortuitous. The notes next to the two testimonies exhibit two different standards of 'truth' that seem somehow reconcilable and to parallel the two ways of attaining Grace, 'ordinarily' and 'extraordinarily', that Rogers has conceived. In Avery's case, he offers biographical and bibliographical information that adds documentary objectivity to the testimony and its 'author'. The insertion of these factual details functions as an authenticating procedure that enables Rogers to show the sound doctrinal basis on which his church rests and from which it receives legitimation.

In the note next to Chambers's testimony, on the contrary, he gives more space to 'anecdotal' information that documents a 'truth' subjectively

experienced, a 'truth' that ultimately descends from God. This 'truth' concerns Rogers himself whose pastoral role and authority are thus shown to be sanctioned by divine power: he is the recognized minister of a vibrant and upright community of Visible Saints.

Though the explicit aim of ministers of the gathered churches was to bring 'into *publicke* view' the testimonies, in order to 'bear *witnesse* to the world of the workings of *Gods Spirit*' (417), the editorial approach they adopted does not necessarily imply conformity. On the contrary, each minister 'shapes' his collection according to his own teaching and discipline, elements that also influence the converts' delivery.

In order to give a glimpse of a different way of conceiving a 'book' of spiritual testimonies, I would like to expand the discussion and consider the other substantial collection of experiences published in 1653: *Spirituell Experiences of Sundry Beleevers*, probably edited by Henry Walker, an Independent minister who preached at the church of Martins Vintry in London.<sup>28</sup>

While Rogers's collection is incorporated into, and therefore is only a part of, a voluminous tract vindicating its author's personal perspective on Independency, Walker's testimonies constitute the body of the book, its content. In the second, enlarged edition, they are divided into two parts and introduced by a commendatory 'Epistle' addressed '*To the sober and spirituall Readers of this Booke*' by Vavasor Powell. The book also contains a short treatise on 'The Practise of the Gathered Churches', which is added, with its own title page, at the end of it.

The original conversion accounts are said to have been, as the title page reads, 'Held forth ... at severall solemne meetings, and Conferences to that end', a phrase that highlights the public context in which the original testimonies took place. They were delivered before an audience purposely gathered to listen to them and evaluate the effectiveness of the convert's accomplishment.

The written narratives are all constructed according to a design that comprises three major elements. As Watkins describes them, they 'embody':

a brief account of the circumstances of conversion, the quotation of some texts that helped to bring peace to the troubled soul, and the enumeration of signs by which the believer was assured of his state of grace. (1972, 41)

At the end of each narrative, the signs of regeneration are 'listed by numbers' and 'correspond to those given in contemporary treatises' (41). By and large, the narratives tend to be longer than those contained in Rogers's *Ohel*, thus giving a little more space to the converts' personal life. The 'extraordinary' phenomena that figure so prominently in Rogers's collection are here toned down, whereas selected Biblical passages, and the same ones, recur constantly, a characteristic that constitutes a cohesive tie, highlighting a common per-

spective in the congregation.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the accounts are all introduced by a heading, reading ‘*Experiences of*’, followed by the speaker’s initials only, which are also repeated at the end of each account. No marginal notes are present and therefore no annotations provide perspectives on the texts, their dialogic structure disappearing from view. In contrast to Rogers, who dwells, albeit briefly, on his editorial method, Walker devotes no space to comments on his own practice, leaving unexpressed the criteria adopted for the construction of his ‘book’. Yet, he is far from being ‘absent’.

Significantly, at the beginning of the volume, Walker provides “A Table of the Conversions of the severall Persons expressed in this Booke”, where he gives a synopsis of each testimony, focusing attention on those aspects that, from his perspective, appear more pregnant. Generally speaking, the editor singles out events and/or persons that have been the catalysts of the process of regeneration, thus providing a guide for readers on how to interpret the texts published. The table also offers information about the believers’ gender: through the use of third person pronouns and their derivatives, we are able to identify whether the original author is a man or woman. In order to show how the ‘Table of the Conversions’ is constructed, I quote here its first page:

- T.A. Converted after three yeares terrour upon his Conscience, and then rowling himselfe on Christ ...  
 T.P. The terrours of Hell laid hold on him, for offering wrong against the people of God, that he cryed out he was damned many yeares ...  
 M.W. By a Sermon at *Liverpooll* and after great afflictions, with a piece of a Bible in a barne ...  
 I.I. By waiting upon the ordinances ...  
 E.C. After seven yeares temptation to kill her selfe, for neglecting to come to the ordinances, she threw her selfe upon Christ ...  
 D.M. By a young infant, when she went to a Pond to drown her self ...

While the ‘Table of the Conversions’ introduces the actors of the testimonies in the third person, the accounts are all first person narratives, that is, the editor ‘re-presents’ them using the direct speech form, sometimes betraying the traces of their original enunciation.

In general, conversion narratives are retrospective accounts characterized, from a linguistic point of view, by the presence of a speaker, explicitly signalled by the first person pronoun *I*, and the use of the past tense that establishes a clear separation between the time of the narrated event and the time of the speech event. This construction contributes to reinforce the sense of distance between a past, ungodly *I*, and a present, regenerated *I*. While Rogers’s testimonies are all constructed in this way, some of Walker’s accounts introduce shifts in tense, from the past to the present and vice versa. Here are a few examples drawn from the ‘*Experiences of M.K.*’, an account, given by a woman, which stands out because of length and high style.<sup>30</sup>



When I take a view of my life upon the stage of this world, I may very well compare it to a comicall Tragedy, or a tragical Comedy, or a labyrinth from one sin to another, from one affliction to another. I was indeed the daughter of very godly and honest parents, who diligently brought up their children in the feare of God. (1653, 161)

... I resolved there to commit the horrid act of murther upon his body, but God who watcheth over his, whether they sleepe or wake, and worketh by meanes, which way he pleaseth, at that time put an end to all my revengefull thoughts ... (169)

... but marke, I pray you, the goodnesse of our God, who was with mee all this while, and I was not aware of it ... (175)

But now, I beseech you godly Christians, to take notice of the wonderfull workings of our good God, whose judgements are unsearchable, and his waies past finding out, that hee had knocked many times at the door of my heart ... (177)

As these few examples show, content and coding time are marked as simultaneous by the occurrence of present tenses. Moreover, the second person pronouns in the third and fourth passages signal the existence of another participant to whom the discourse is addressed. Thus the written text evokes a spoken context of utterance, it reproduces the interplay between the convert's oral performance and the assembly of believers purposefully gathered to witness it. Walker's choice to call forth the verbal dimension of the original account shows the importance that intense, verbal exchange had in his theological vision, an importance which reinforces the principle of reform that held that believers must be able to 'truly say' what was in their hearts.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, Walker's collection opens with an 'Epistle' to '*To the sober and spirituall Readers of this Booke*', signed by the Welsh Baptist/Fifth Monarchist preacher Vavasor Powell who dwells on the meaning of 'Experience' and the role it has in Christian life. He also highlights the importance of 'experimental' discourse:

That Christian beleeves strongest, that hath Experience to backe his faith, and the Saint speakes sweetest and homest, that speakes experimentally; for that which cometh from one spirituall heart, reacheth another spirituall heart. (1653, A2v)

Moreover, Powell advertises the collection as 'worth [the readers'] buying, reading, and perusing'. Reading proves crucial in the conversion process, producing emotional response and '*heart-knowledge*', a knowledge that ultimately leads to a spiritual change and turns readers into narrators.<sup>32</sup> While the preface to *Spirituall Experiences* highlights the importance and function of 'Experience' in the converts' life, the treatise at the end of it instructs 'Those that enter into Church fellowship' (U2r) in church practice and duties. It also includes, as the title page reads, the text of 'a Covenant taken by each Member, And a

Confession of Faith, Professed', to which a short letter is added that testifies 'the putting out of a scandalous Member',<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, Walker's collection as a whole focuses principally on the converts' 'experiences' – the main body of the book – an attention that is emphasised in the commendatory epistle by Powell. Little space is devoted to congregational polity, a choice that reveals where the pastoral interests of the minister lie.

Many factors concur in the experience of conversion and its representation. Regeneration is indeed an inner re-creating of the believer by the action of the Spirit of God, but it is also the result of a collaborative venture that involves the participation of individuals, who act with agency and motives in discursive, ideological and institutional environments. The study of the collections of spiritual testimonies shows both the dialogic nature of their discourse, which involves a 'dispersal' and/or multiplication of authorship, and the attempt to locate a 'working distinctiveness'<sup>34</sup> for the 'harmonizers' of voices. They consciously shape, order and publish works where these voices, otherwise destined to fade away, can be heard and find legitimation. By readapting – transcribing and arranging – existing, fleeting texts into another, 'stabler' medium, Rogers and Walker contributed to instance the fervent interaction taking place among members of independent religious communities. Their collections witness the importance of collaborative activity in non-literary texts, an activity that is strictly linked to the practices of textual transmission and the ways these practices are understood and represented in a particular historical situation.

<sup>1</sup> For intensification as 'revitalized commitment to a faith', see Rambo (1993, 12). This article is an expanded and modified version of a paper discussed at the XXV Conference of the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica (AIA), held in L'Aquila (15-17 September 2011). Since the theme of the conference was: 'Regenerating Communities, Territory, Voices. Memory and Vision, my paper was more focused on spiritual regeneration than authorship.

<sup>2</sup> When candidates for admission were 'very unable to speake in publicke ... as some Maids, and others that are *bashful*, (or the like)', they related 'in private the account of Faith' to a member chosen by the church, who either wrote down the testimony and brought it into the church or else repeated it orally to the assembled congregation (Rogers 1653, 293).

<sup>3</sup> The same definition with slightly different wording is also found on 30. The question of allegiance to true church and true faith had become momentous with the Reformation and the establishment of the various Protestant churches. In England, the political context for conversion changed during the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, so that conversion was conceived, 'at an ecclesiastical level, not principally in terms of Catholic versus Protestant ... but in terms of internal Protestant schism' (Hindmarsh 2005, 34).

<sup>4</sup> Rogers points out that there is not only one way to conversion but several 'according to the *divers* complexions, *conditions*, constitutions, *dispositions*, or the like, that [God] hath to worke upon' (1653, 367).

<sup>5</sup> The sharing of experiences was, according to the Independent preacher Samuel Petto, 'usefull 1. For conviction unto unrenewed men ... 2. For direction and encouragement ... 3.

For provocation: when they see what progresse others have made in the wayes of God, and what communion with Christ they have injoyed herein; it giveth occasion unto their reflecting upon themselves, and may create shame for former negligence, and become a spur unto future diligence. 4. For confirmation and consolation ...' (1654b, O5r.).

<sup>6</sup> It was emphasised, however, that only God could really know the truth about an individual's regeneration, 'as unto its *internal, real principle and state of the Souls of Men*'; the task of the church meeting was simply to assess 'its *evidences and fruits* in their external Demonstration, as unto a participation of the *outward Privileges of a Regenerate State*, and no farther' (Owen 1689, 4).

<sup>7</sup> According to Bauman, these aspects characterize 'all performance' as well as 'all communication' (1989, 264).

<sup>8</sup> Puritan verbal activity, Jagodzinski reminds us, 'is separated from its "popish" connections with set prayers and private, auricular confession and transformed into public performance: preaching, publication, and subjection to communal judgement and discipline. The Puritan imperative is not spiritual isolationism but communication of the divine wisdom to others' (1999, 65).

<sup>9</sup> Protestant conversion narratives began to appear in great number, both as single accounts and in collections, after the end of the Civil Wars. Radical Puritans were the first to publish their spiritual experiences in years marked by strong eschatological expectations and a widely held belief in Christ's second coming. Politically, these are the years that saw the war in Ireland between the forces of the English Parliament and the Irish Catholic army (1649-1652), the establishment of the Barebones Parliament (July-December 1653), whose dissolution ushered in the Protectorate of Cromwell.

<sup>10</sup> To these accounts, Rogers adds his own testimony 'given in two *Churches in England and Ireland*' (1653, 419-439) and that of John Osborne 'as was taken out of the Church Register word for word' (440-448). While Rogers's own testimony is a first person account; Osborne's is a third person narrative that contains passages in quoted ('direct') speech.

<sup>11</sup> Another popular collection, that was frequently reprinted in the early eighteenth century, was James Janeway, *A Token for Children* (1672; part II, 1673), which included thirteen 'exact' accounts of 'the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several young Children' (taken from the subtitle), meant to save children from their 'miserable state by Nature' and from being 'thrown into Hell Fire' (1676 edn, A6v, A8r). At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Baptist 'comb-maker' Charles Doe edited *A Collection of Experience of the Work of Grace (Never before Printed.) Or The Spirit of God working upon the Souls of several Persons* (1700) that contained three narratives published, as the subtitle reads, 'Not to Applaud the Persons, but for the comfort of Saints' and in order to 'convince the Unregenerate that there is indeed such a thing as the working of the Spirit of God upon the Soul'. As Hindmarsh remarks, the narratives witness the great influence of Bunyan, whose work and name are mentioned in two of them (2005, 55).

<sup>12</sup> The concern with introspection and assurance, 'the consistent application of the law and the gospel to govern the narrative of conversion from a psychological state of ... despair to one of peace and joy' (Hindmarsh 2005, 48) are aspects that mark a continuity with the applied theology of the Elizabethan Puritans; the new aspect of the mid-seventeenth-century narratives is, as Hindmarsh points out, in the very occasion that framed them: they are prerequisite for church membership (48).

<sup>13</sup> Both the texts by Puritan divines and ministers and the creeds and platforms of Congregationalism highlight the public dimension of the conversion narrative. In the Cambridge (Mass.) Platform of 1648, for instance, the conversion narrative is described as 'personall & publick'; 'personall', because it related the speaker's own inner experience 'of Gods manner of working upon the soul'; 'publick', because that experience had to be 'declared' before the entire congregation in order to be admitted to full membership. By delivering their reports 'personally with their own mouth', the believers submitted themselves to public 'examination' and 'trial', thus displaying their commitment to the new faith (Winslow ed., 1653, 16); see also Caldwell (1983, 50-51).

<sup>14</sup> Payne investigates conversion as discourse in Anglo-American evangelicalism in the period from 1740 to 1850, approximately. His approach, however, can be useful for early Puritan testimonies as well.

<sup>15</sup> In terms of genre, conversion narratives can be seen as instances of what Culpeper and Kytö have defined as ‘speech-based’ texts, that is texts ‘that are based on an actual “real-life” speech event’, texts that are, as far as the Early Modern period is concerned, ‘reconstructions assisted by notes’ (2010, 17). The reconstruction involves ‘interpretation and editorial decisions’ (52), that are partly determined by the effects that editors intend to produce on the readership as well as other contextual factors. The fact that conversion narratives are ‘speech-based’ texts justifies no assumption that they are exact copy of their spoken ‘original’.

<sup>16</sup> This aspect was not unknown to Puritan divines and ministers; they strongly encouraged group activities that allowed believers to share their experiences. As Watkins reminds us, believers would develop ‘the skill and confidence’ necessary for the public presentation of their experiences ‘through years of family worship, repeating sermons, wrestling with Biblical interpretation, and participating in Church life in general’ (1972, 234).

<sup>17</sup> Payne argues that giving testimony of one’s own spiritual experience reinforces the selfhood of the speaker, both as subject (the ‘I’ who speaks) and object (the ‘I’ that is spoken about), a process that creates ‘the paradox of the self’ (1998, 33-49).

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Samuel Petto admonishes: ‘Christians know not what they loose, by burying their experiences: they disable themselves for strengthening the weake hands, and confirming the feeble knees of others: and it is a great disadvantage to themselves’ (1654a, 182).

<sup>19</sup> According to Watkins, the exchange of experiences is one of the factors cooperating in the development of the spiritual autobiography (1972, 30-31).

<sup>20</sup> On the notion of ‘faithfulness’ in speech presentation, see Short, Semino and Wynne (1997 and 2002). In the 1997 study, Short, Semino, and Wynne suggest that we substitute this notion ‘with that of the “evocation” of another’s voice. The task would then be that of studying what practices and interpretative conventions are associated with different categories of discourse presentation in different contexts’ (222).

<sup>21</sup> John Rogers was commissioned by the Council of State to preach in Ireland as part of a project to strengthen Puritanism after Cromwell’s victory. He was in Dublin, where he preached to a congregation based at Christ Church cathedral, for a short time, from approximately August 1651 to the early months of 1652. He was back in England by March that year. Many of the members of his congregation were Cromwellian officers and their wives (see Coolahan 2010, 231, 232). Thus, the texts of the conversion narratives were produced in Ireland, and later printed in England.

<sup>22</sup> Rogers also remarks that he has ‘taken summarily’ ‘the most *ordinary sort*’ of testimonies (1653, 417). On another occasion Rogers’s words betray the degree of (manipulative) power ministers may exercise on the converts’ texts. While illustrating ways of dealing with believers who ‘are very *imperfect* in *utterance*, and cannot express themselves as well as others’, and therefore meet difficulties in relating their conversion stories in public, Rogers reveals that ‘[we] *get* what we can from them’, and ‘though they be but words dropping sweetness, and *savoring of grace*, yet put together, may make weight, and will signifie something *well-spelled*’ (291), a practice that may imply a radical transformation of the spoken text: from broken words to an intelligible account. Coolahan suggests that Rogers’s ‘editorial principles are not aesthetic but reader-oriented, centring on novelty and an impulse to avoid duplication’ (2010, 235).

<sup>23</sup> Many other women’s testimonies, however, lack this kind of information.

<sup>24</sup> What I argue here is that the texts of the conversion narratives seem to be constructed, by and large, as if they were faithful reports of an anterior, spoken discourse and to be understood by readers as such.

<sup>25</sup> In Rogers’s text, pagination is continuous up to page 412. A section with separate pagination, (1)-(11) follows, suggesting an addition to the ‘original’ text. After this section, pagination starts again from 413.

<sup>26</sup>In his letter, Thomas Parker admits that he has 'not seen' (1650, 10) his sister's book; yet he charges her with 'Heretical Opinions' (5) and 'Spiritual pride' (16), urging her to 'Return to [her] former Principles' (19). Revealingly, Parker censures Elizabeth for having published her book: 'your printing of a Book, beyond the Custom of your Sex, doth rankly smell' (13), and is 'an attempt above your gifts and Sex' (17).

<sup>27</sup>On the whole, in *Ohel*, Rogers offers a defence of Independency and gives voice to his millenarian beliefs. These convictions would soon lead him to embrace the Fifth Monarchist cause, though he never advocated the use of weapons against the government. For a brief biographical account of John Rogers, see Greaves (2004).

<sup>28</sup>*Spirituell Experiences of Sundry Beleevers* was partially translated into German by Theodor Undereyck in 1670. In 1698 Johann Heinrich Reitz included a German translation of several testimonies, drawn from Walker's collection, in his *Historie der Wiedergebohrnen* (see Malena 2010). For a study of the reception of English Puritan literature on German Pietism, see Damrau (2006).

<sup>29</sup>Watkins points out that the most quoted Biblical verses are, in order, Matthew 9:28, John 4:37 and Isaiah 55:1. The texts are often drawn from the Geneva translation (1972, 41).

<sup>30</sup>The 'Experiences of M.K.' is found at the end of 'Part 1' (which constituted the first edition), a position suggesting that, probably, Walker valued it more than other accounts present in the collection.

<sup>31</sup>It should be noted that self-scrutiny for religious ends was not only a Protestant practice. The Catholic faith, too, encouraged self-examination and evaluation in written forms (see, for instance, Malena's essay in the present volume). Moreover, men who wanted to join the Jesuit order had to give a short account of their spiritual life, 'usually in a formulaic way comparable to that of the Protestant conversion narratives' (Booy 2002, 11-12). Foley (1877-1882) collects a number of these accounts where the candidate introduces himself with both first and last names, then information about age, place of birth, family, parents' religion, and education received are added.

<sup>32</sup>It is perhaps worth remembering that Augustine's conversion, as described in his *Confessions* 8.12.28, is linked with reading.

<sup>33</sup>The letter 'from a Church newly gathered' informs other 'Churches of Jesus Christ' about the expulsion of an obstinate sinner and the danger he represents. Interestingly, the document implicitly witnesses the possibility of 'subversive' infiltrations in the community.

<sup>34</sup>Gordon McMullan's phrase, quoted in Hirschfeld (2001, 619).

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