

Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative as Confessional Literature: "After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?"

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At the end of Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," (1855) the Yankee captain, Amasa Delano, exclaims to Cereno, "You are saved! You are saved! What has cast such a shadow over you?" Delano cannot understand the continued depression of the Spanish captain after Cereno has been rescued from his captivity at the hands of the slaves he had been transporting. For Delano, though a descendant of Puritans, "saved," means simply physically rescued; that profounder sense of the verb illustrated by the perennial Christian question "Am I saved?" has been lost to him.

"Benito Cereno," written when Puritan religious strictures and articles of public faith were no longer powerful and socially pervasive, permits Melville to pun on his restored captive's fate as both "saved" and profoundly despairing and damned. Though without any Puritan compulsion to see his restoration as particularly Providential, the Catholic Cereno can acknowledge the power of evil in the world and of his complicity with it. As if to underline the distinction he makes between divine and human agencies and fates, and between Delano's presumed virtue and his own sinful nature, Cereno tells Delano, "God charmed your life, but you saved mine." Delano cannot hear his precise distinction and piously and mechanically responds, "Yes, all is owing to Providence."

For Mary Rowlandson, a Puritan among Puritans, her experience while in the hands of the Indians, her own behavior during her captivity and tribulations, as well as her restoration, were ultimately all "owing to Providence." Returning to safety from Indian captivity was generally regarded by Rowlandson's Puritan community as evidence of direct Divine intervention and approval.

However, her restoration, for which a public Day of Thanksgiving had been officially declared, has left her in a state of personal despair and communal alienation not unlike Cereno's, unresolved by her redemption at the hands of God.¹ Forced by her faith and by the official verdict of her community to regard her experience as exemplary, confirmatory, and divinely ordered, she is denied even the consolation of forthrightly articulating her despair as Cereno can. Rather than having her anxiety as to her spiritual condition allayed, as Richard Slotkin suggests, by permitting her to discover "the will of God in respect to one's soul, one's election or damnation," she is left in a condition of profound spiritual disorder by her experience.² As a consequence, the narrative she will write will function doubly, as a testimonial to "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God," but also as a confession of sin that, paradoxically, is both public and private.

In her title page, Rowlandson distinguishes between the private and public dimensions of her work: "Written by her own hand for her own private use, and now made public at the earnest desire of some friends..." It is public, of course, in its nature as a published document and in its reification of communal myth; it is private, however, in that it contains a self-indictment that is half hidden, from herself, perhaps, as well as from her readers, behind its conventional, sincere pieties, permitting her to confess to sins she never fully confronts committing. Her recounting of her experience is, on one hand, a serious and devout attempt to illuminate those elements in her personal adventure which embody and illustrate the Providential will and distinguish them from those merely human and contingent; at the same time, her account permits her to acknowledge obliquely her sense of her own profound complicity in sin.

This double intention results in two stories: a surface narrative illustrating God's Will concerning Rowlandson and the Indians, and a

1 See James LeVernier and Hennig Cohen, *Indians and Their Captives* (Westport, Conn.:Greenwood Press, 1977), XVIII.

2 *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Conn, 1973), p. 101.

secondary, interior one concerning Rowlandson's own divided self. The surface story is by its nature closed, unalterable, and without suspense: "Captivity and Restoration." The simple existence of the work makes its plot resolution inevitable, even if the title had not announced her deliverance at God's hands. In this sense, the beginning and end of the work are the only significant portions of the primary public narrative; everything in between is simply retardation, and additional incidents or fewer would make no difference. Modern editors, for this reason, feel free to omit one or another section when reprinting the text.

The secondary, interior narrative, recounts Rowlandson's struggle with herself to acknowledge and live with what she has learned of her own human fallibility, despite official public religious assurances to the contrary. This story remains painfully unresolved; however, it is this unresolved story which energizes the work. Michel Foucault, in quite another context, wrote, "The more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we have to renounce ourselves, and the more we want to renounce ourselves, the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves."³ In this regard, Rowlandson's interior *Narrative* might be described as an ambivalent attempt to bring to half-light the suspected reality of her unacknowledged self.

This double intention is expressed textually in the typographical double surface her manuscript presents to the reader: an ordinary type format for the literal account in which her secondary, confessional intention is embedded and, indicated by italics, a divine text consisting of those parallels, echoes, and passages relevant to her captivity she has discovered in Holy Scripture. The relationship between Rowlandson's human narrative and the italicized scriptural texts she cites is normally topological, often linking her experiences to David's or Job's or Daniel's stories, and linking, by extension, herself to those Biblical heroes: for example, in the Thirteenth Remove, having had ashes thrown in her face, she writes, "...I hope it is not too much to say with *Job: 'Have pity upon me, O ye my Friends, for the Hand of the Lord has touched me.'*"⁴

3 M.F., "Sexuality and Solitude," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky, John Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, 1985, p. 368.

4 In "A Narrative of Hannah Swarton, containing Wonderful Passages relating to her Captivity and Deliverance," Swarton, a contemporary of Rowlandson, acknowledges that "God delivered us into their hands to punish us for our sins" as "we turned our backs upon God's Ordinances to get the World's Goods," in Cotton

In seventeenth century Massachusetts, Bible stories were both eternal and privileged; ordinary temporal narratives served as their occasions, settings, and illustrations. The italicized scriptural texts quoted by Rowlandson validated and legitimized her contingent narrative, but, by the power ratio implicit in the relationship between biblical and human experience, between the spiritual and the temporal, they also diminished it. Though for the modern reader, it is Rowlandson's personal experience that is most interesting, for the devout Puritan its significance lay in the degree to which it illustrated and corresponded to Biblical texts.

These scriptural texts are not uniformly distributed throughout Rowlandson's narrative. After the formal italicized announcement of the divine significance of her experience on the title page, the italicized phrases and sentences grow relatively less dense, sometimes only one or two to the page, until the last section, the last remove, when the concluding pages of her account are crowded with almost one third of the italicized scriptural quotations. The effect is to create a pious envelope of privileged text within which the under-privileged text, the extended personal narrative, is rhetorically subordinated. Such a two-tiered work, however, while diminishing the significance of the human account, in Rowlandson's case liberates it to express its own confessional purpose. Another consequence of this hierarchical domination of one text by the other may well have been to obscure the fact that the relationships between the scriptural texts and the homely specifics of Rowlandson's story are, on occasion, not parallel or illustrative, but disjunctive, tension filled, and even oppositional.

Rowlandson's Narrative of her captivity and restoration begins with the attack on her community and her capture by King Philip's Wampanoag Indians, while her husband is away on business. This attack is followed by twenty "removes," her term for the passages and encampments in the wilderness made by her captors in order to flee the pursuing English and for their own purposes. These removes constitute the dramatic units of her account, each usually centering on one or another incident. Otherwise, they are spatially undifferentiated except in the most minimal ways: a river to be crossed, a hill to be climbed. They are generally made without indicated direction to places without names.

Mather, *Maqnalia Christi Americani*: (London, 1702), p. 34. Unlike Swarton, and like Job, Rowlandson never appears to see her captivity as merited punishment for a specific transgression.

For Rowlandson, at least, the spaces in which she lives with the Indians are almost completely incomprehensible. Time is equally undifferentiated: at the beginning of her account she makes some attempt to order time: "the next day," "nine days later;" however, by the middle of her story, all of her references to time disappear, making it impossible to determine from her description the duration of any later remove.

This absence of spatial and temporal differentiation is mirrored in the absence for her of comprehensible moral and social codes. She repeatedly complains of her confusion at the Indians' behavior; she cannot anticipate the consequences of her actions; she is surprised again and again by unexpected kindnesses, unlooked for cruelties. None of the codes of behavior she is accustomed to appears to work: the Indian who generously feeds her in his wigwam has just killed two Englishmen, and their bloody clothes lie about her; the Indian who steals her spoonful of meal leaves her five kernels of corn in its place; the Indian who has just returned from the burning of Medford gives her a Bible from his loot which is capriciously torn from her hands by yet another Indian. The Indians are "ravening beasts," but carry their old mothers and the ill on their backs to safety from the English. Even God's Providence become to her increasingly "strange" in the wilderness: why, she asks, do the Indians appear to have more courage, more selflessness, greater ability to survive than do the Christians? She can ravel out pious answers to these questions, but only after being forced to confront them.

More significantly, the removal of comprehensible moral codes, of institutionalized structures of value, requires that she transform and recreate herself in order to survive. Like Kurz, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, she will finally confront, if only obliquely, the self she has created, but, lacking a Marlowe to record her last judgment, she must write her own Narrative.

These removes function then as removals, as the progressive stripping away of the physical, temporal, and moral structures of coherence her life was built on before her captivity. Analogically, her transition from the differentiated physical and moral space of Lancaster, Massachusetts to the wilderness echoes the "remove" of Adam and Eve from Eden to that other Wilderness, grotesquely substituting Indians with torches and spears for Angels with flaming swords. In Genesis, however, the expulsion followed the violation; in Rowlandson's Narrative, the violation and expulsion are one. The first significant "removal" Wowlandson

experiences is her discovery that her initial determination to suffer martyrdom rather than to be taken alive by the Indians requires greater courage than she possesses. She writes, "My eldest sister being yet in the house, and seeing those woeful sights... she said, And Lord, let me die with them,' which was no sooner said, but she was struck with a bullet, and fell down dead over the threshold." Rowlandson will be offered the same choice: "the Indians laid hold of us, pulling me one way, and the children another, and said, Come along with us': I told them they would kill me: they answered, if I were willing to go along with them, they would not hurt me." Then, to emphasize the significance of the bargain she has struck with the "hell hounds", she adds, "I had often before this said that if the Indians should come, I should chuse rather to be killed by them then taken alive but when it came to the tryal my mind changed; their glittering weapons so daunted my spirit, that I chose rather to go along with these (as I may say) ravenous beasts, then that moment to end my dayes..." Her choice, she confesses, is not made in "a spirit of acceptance," as Slotkin suggests, but made in terror. This decision to live at any cost outside of Eden—will determine all of the subsequent choices she will make.⁵ Rowlandson's further confessional intention is revealed in a narrative theme that is at the center of her personal story and which exists apart from that story's public function as a testimony of divine deliverance. This theme has to do with the progressive effects on Rowlandson of hunger, leading finally to her performance of what she herself describes as an "abomination" involving eating. Significantly, the expulsion from Eden also involved such an abomination.

For a religious work, Rowlandson's Narrative is astonishingly concerned with eating. Written after the fact of her captivity, it reveals that the memory of her hunger clearly dominated the memory of the captivity itself. Her hunger appears to have outweighed any spiritual anxiety she may have felt and emerges as a major selective principle in creating her account. She seems to have remembered and recorded everything she ever ate, wished to eat, or failed to eat during her three month captivity. More than that, however, her increasing avidity generates the dominating metaphor for her own transformation during that time. At the opening of her narrative, it is the Indians who are characterized in terms

5 *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 108.

of carnivoral aggression: we, the Puritans, are like "sheep torn by wolves," the Indians are "a company of hell hounds" and "ravenous beasts." Surrounding the cabin, they are "gaping before us with their Guns, Spears and Hatchets to devour us..." As she recalls it, the climax of the attack on the settlement is the triumphant orgy of eating the Indians enjoy on the first night of Rowlandson's captivity. Rowlandson writes, "Oh the roaring, and singing and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively semblance of hell. And as miserable was the wast that was there made, of Horses, Cattle, Sheep, Swine, Calves, Lambs, Roasting Pigs, and Fowl (which they had plundered in the Town) some roasting, some lying and burning, and some boyling to feed our merciless enemies..." Beyond the vivid vision of Hell her description evokes, what is singular about this passage is the remarkable focus of Rowlandson's memory, after her restoration, recalling and specifying no fewer than eight different kinds of meat prepared in three different ways.

This imagery of voraciousness, however, will in the course of her narrative be transferred from the Indians to herself, as she painstakingly records how she herself acquires precisely those ravenous characteristics she ascribes to her captors. In the Fifth Remove, she confesses with an almost clinical detachment the transformation she is experiencing: "The first week of my being among them, I hardly ate anything; the second week I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something, and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash; but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and dy before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savoury to my taste." In the Fifteenth Remove, Rowlandson vividly attaches to herself those carnivoral attributes she earlier had applied to the Indians: "I cannot but think what a wolfish appetite persons have in a starving condition; for many times when they gave me that which was hot, I was so greedy that I should burn my mouth, that it would trouble me hours after, and yet I should quickly do the same again. And after I was thoroughly hungry, I was never again satisfied. For though sometimes it fell out, that I got enough, and did eat till I could eat no more, yet I was as unsatisfied as I was when I began." The climax of this transformation occurs in the Eighteenth Remove in conjunction with another motif which runs through the *Narrative*. Rowlandson's six year old daughter had been wounded during the

Indian attack on the house and was carried by Rowlandson with her into captivity : "Then they set me upon a horse with my wounded Child in my lap, and there being no furniture upon the horse back, as we were going down a steep hill, we both fell over the horses head, at which they like inhumane creatures laught, and rejoyced to see it..." After nine days, her child dies, and Rowlandson is left in profound despair: "I cannot but take notice at another time I could not bear to be in the room where any dead person was, but now the case is changed; I must and could lie down with my dead babe, side by side all the night after." In this same remove, the Third, Rowlandson takes occasion to express her concern for some captive English children and to exhort them to look to God for their salvation.

In the successive removes, however, Rowlandson confesses to the reader, with astonishing candor, her own progressive hardening of the heart.⁶ In the Thirteenth Remove, she briefly encounters her son who is the captive of another Indian family: "He (my son) told me he was as much grieved for his father as for himself. I wondered at this speech for I thought I had enough upon my spirit in reference to myself, to make me mindless of my husband and everyone else: they being safe among their friends." In the same remove, she flatly records an incident that almost formally parallels the loss of her own child and the Indians' response to it: "That night they bade me go out of the wigwam again. My mistress's papoose was sick, and it died that night, and there was one benefit in it—that there was more room...On the morrow, they buried the papoose, and afterward, both morning and night, there came a company to mourn and howl (howl carries the implication of bestial) with her; though I confess I could not much condole with them."

Both of these themes, that of her hunger and her progressive narrowing of concern for others, come together in the Eighteenth Remove which is the climax of the Confessional text. "In this town there were four English children, captives, and one of them my own sister's....I went to a(nother) wigwam where there were two of the English children; the

6 This transformation of the captive into an "Indian Hater" following the death of a child was to become extended and intensified in subsequent Captivity narratives. In "The Narrative of Hannah Duston," Duston, after the death of her infant, massacres the Indian family with whom she is living, killing and scalping two men, three women, and seven children. See Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Duston Family," in *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* (May, 1836). Variations on this theme also appear in James Hall's *Le-ends of the West* (1822) and W.M.Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837).

squaw was boiling horses feet; then she cut me off a little piece, and gave one of the English children a piece also. Being very hungry I had quickly eat up mine, but the child could not bite it, it was so tough and sinewy, but lay sucking, gnawing, chewing and slabbering at it in the mouth and hand. Then I took it of the child and eat it myself, and savoury it was to my taste. Then I may say as *Job 6.7* 'The things that my soul refused to touch are as my sorrowful meat.' Thus the Lord made that pleasant refreshing, which another time would have been an abomination."

The passage is a crucial one; Richard Slotkin reads it as a moment of terrible self-realization in which "she feels herself metamorphosed into a beast, a wilderness thing the experience of her captivity thus leads her to the perception of her own fallen, debased, even beastlike condition...."⁷ I would suggest that Rowlandson permits herself no such conscious, articulated perception of the enormity of her act; instead, we are shown such a cushioned recognition only implicitly in her detailed, particularized recollection of the starving child, who "lay sucking, gnawing, chewing and slabbering at it in the mouth and hand" and in her swift glossing over of her part in the transaction, her stealing of the child's food: "I took it of the child and eat it myself..." Her use of a Biblical validating text following this description suggests the depths of her spiritual confusion, saying, in effect, a number of conflicting things: "By taking food from a starving English child, I performed what for me as a Christian, as an Englishwoman, and as a mother grieving for her own dead child was clearly an abomination; No, it was not an abomination since it was paralleled by and can be linked to an archetypal model in Holy Scripture; In any case, while it might have been an abomination in other times, here in the wilderness it was the Lord's doing." What she confesses to us is, in her own recollection, abominable, an echo of the theft that led to the expulsion from Eden; what she tells us in her selection of a Biblical text is self-exculpatory.

It is here that we can see most clearly the tension between the spiritual and temporal texts and the function of the spiritual text as a device permitting Rowlandson to control her own and the reader's confrontation with the painful matter so vivid in her memory. This Providential screen shields Rowlandson from the necessity of acknowledging the

⁷ *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 110.

clear parallels she herself has drawn between her acts and those of the Indians as proof of any common humanity or shared condition and permits her to continue to revile them as carnivorous beasts—"ravenous Wolves," "roaring Lyons," "Salvage Bears" till the end of her account. Nevertheless, this screen does not permit her to resolve her profound personal unease as to the nature of her own acts as that unease is evidenced in her painful recollection and recording of them. To turn again to "Benito Cereno," Delano pleads with the Spanish captain, "...the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves." "Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied, "because they are not human."

Like Cereno, Rowlandson remembers. King Philip's head, as was Babo's, will be stuck on a pole, but neither Rowlandson's nor Cereno's captivity ends with the death of their captors. The redemption of Rowlandson's body has not been preceded or followed by any redemptive spiritual rebirth wiping the slate clean.⁸ The memories she must live with have been twofold: if she has learned of God's goodness and strength, she has learned of her own fallibility and guilt. Caught in the familiar Edwardian tangle, her conviction of God's mercy has convinced her of her own unworthiness of that mercy. In the last paragraph of the *Narrative*, she quotes David from the Psalms: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted," but precedes it with the phrase, "And I hope I can say in some measure, as David did..." These two modifiers—"I hope" and "in some measure" can be read as modest Christian disclaimers, but they also suggest degrees of reservation, of conscious hesitation, as does the appeal to Biblical authority.

Her return to the safety and the official approbation of the Puritan community reveals her remaining alienated and resentful. In a suggestive figure of speech hinting at her feeling of beleaguered isolation, she writes, "I was not before so much hemmed in with the merciless and cruel Heathen, but now as much with pittiful, tender-hearted and compassionate Christians." On the last pages of her narrative she records, "The Council has ordered a day of Thanksgiving, though I thought I still had cause of mourning." (83) Further on, she reveals, "I can remember the time when I used to sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts,

8 Cf. *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 442 for the opposite conclusion

whole nights together, but now it is otherways with me. When all are fast (asleep) about me, and no eye open, but his who ever waketh, my thoughts are upon things past." The past is not passed for her; she remembers that she chose to live when her sister chose martyrdom, that her dead child lies buried in the wilderness, and that she has tasted the abomination and found it "savoury." She has drunk, she tells us, "the Wine of astonishment." She can no longer share the certainty with which the community, including, presumably, her husband, sleeping soundly beside her, can reduce and limit her personal and human history to its merely communal and divine significance: Knowing what she knows, she tells us, "When others are sleeping, mine eyes are weeping."

Her situation, unhappily, is not an unique one. Our own recent decades have taught us to recognize what we have learned to call "Survivor Syndrome," the leas of guilt resulting from actual or imagined complicity or compromise, or simply from survival itself, which embitter the lives of those redeemed from the death camps or gulags, of former prisoners of war, or, most recently, of political and religious hostages. For some of these, surely, greeted on their return by parades, public acclamations, photo-opportunities, even Days of Thanksgiving, and transformed officially into Warhollian fifteen minute patriots and heroes, if not precisely Saints, Rowlandson's darker personal recollections must seem disturbingly familiar.