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READING A QUAKERS' BOOK: ELIZABETH ASHBRIDGE'S TESTIMONY OF QUAKER LITERARY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Ashbridge offers one of the most striking transatlantic spiritual autobiographies of the eighteenth century. While historians and scholars alike have given careful attention to this now-canonical text, no one to date has yet positioned this narrative in the context of the transatlantic Friends' unique literary traditions. Turning to the first generation of Friends, who also called themselves 'The Publishers of Truth', this essay explores the Quakers' mystical relationship to language, prophecy and writing, and their subsequent creation of a New Word. I trace how the Friends created their own literary theory, locating the written word as the site of divine opening. They consequently created a religious print culture, perceiving their literature as a spiritual and political force which had the power to convince, to heal, and to usher in the apocalyptic world. Elizabeth Ashbridge's spiritual autobiography upholds and reflects this tradition in the eighteenth century: framed around her pivotal moment of reading a Quakers' Book, hers is ultimately a text about spiritual literacy and the act of reading – the sacred act which transforms lives. Placing her work in relation to other Quaker women diarists, Spiritual Mothers and Traveling Ministers, I consider how Ashbridge's narrative represents the transatlantic religious reading culture among Friends which intentionally fostered and influenced succeeding generations of readers and writers.

KEY WORDS:

Women's autobiography; Elizabeth Ashbridge; Quaker Prophesying; Religious enthusiasm and writing; Manuscript culture; Quaker transatlantic literature

do with me according to thy Word[1]

Elizabeth Ashbridge

Elizabeth Sampson Sullivan Ashbridge (1713-55) has received careful attention by historians and literary scholars alike for her eighteenth century Quaker autobiography, *Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*. Written sometime between 1741-46, circulated in manuscript form for several decades thereafter, and then published posthumously in 1774, Ashbridge's spiritual narrative has had a remarkable influence on Quaker readership as well as contemporary autobiographical studies. Now published as a canonical work in nearly every early American literature anthology, this spiritual autobiography is recognised as an extraordinary representation of eighteenth century women's literature. Scholars have focused primarily on Elizabeth's journey to find a voice and an identity, and they cover such wide-ranging topics as the autobiographer's liminality, her self-invention, her 'ventriloquism', and her 'rhetoric of otherness'.[2] While such considerations contribute a great deal to the understanding of Ashbridge's writing, I find that it is equally imperative to read her narrative as she and fellow Friends would have done so: through their spiritual lens. In this light, I find that her autobiography quickly becomes a text about reading – the sacrosanct act which transforms people's spirits and literally saves their lives. Indeed, at the heart of her narrative, Elizabeth represents her transatlantic religious society by giving testament to the earliest Friends' revolutionary relation to language, their subsequent development of a literary theory, and their resounding message of spiritual literacy through a reading and print culture.

Elizabeth Ashbridge was by no means a typical Quaker woman in the eighteenth century transatlantic world. Her autobiography, in fact, reveals the extreme hardships and challenges she endured through the many positions she embodies in her text: from eloping daughter to 15-year old widow, from transatlantic indentured servant to early American singer and dancer, from abused wife to religious prophet, from meagre schoolteacher to prominent Quaker Elder. Upon becoming a member of the Religious Society of Friends, she entered a long tradition of Quaker women who were prophesying, reading, and writing autobiographically for future generations. Elizabeth's decision to pen her own narrative came at a time when her Quietist Quaker community had become exceedingly stringent in enforcing religious practices and regulating publications in their sect. As a result, she – like many other women Friends of her time – never submitted her text for publication (and its implicit censure), but rather circulated the narrative in the thriving Quaker manuscript culture of her day. Quite interestingly, writing her memoir retrospectively and without censorship, Elizabeth chose to situate her story around the power of language, specifically accentuating the earliest Friends' mystical, enthusiastic connection to the Word. In this way, she reclaimed her religious society's seventeenth century, quite intimate experience of prophecy and language, promoting literature's power to move, change, open, and convince[3] readers. Controversial as it may have been to

conservative Quietist leaders, her message – in manuscript – circulated widely and influentially, and ultimately culminated in its posthumous publication, at last endorsed by the religious society at large.

While the dramatic 'tavern scene' of Elizabeth's narrative has long been a popular focal point, largely due to her husband's abusive behavior, I turn, rather, to another incident – Elizabeth's moment of reading a Quakers' Book – and posit that this is the pivotal action which not only frames her entire narrative but also her life as a Quaker woman, prophet, and writer. In this scene, positioned early in her retrospective memoir, Elizabeth sets out to visit her relations in Pennsylvania and learns upon journeying there that they are members of the Society of Friends. As an eighteenth century woman who is a spiritual seeker and ardent anti-Quaker herself, she bewails: '& what was the worst of all my Aunt a Preacher'. Elizabeth continues:

> I was Sorry to hear it, for I was Exceedingly prejudiced against these People & have often wondered with what face they Could Call them Selves Christians. I Repented my Coming and had a mind to have turned back (Shea 1990: 158).

But she doesn't.

Upon arriving, Elizabeth writes that just within three hours' time, she 'met with a Shock ... For seeing a Book lying on the Table (& being much for reading) I took it up: My Aunt Observing said, "Cousin that is a Quakers' Book".' All focus, all emphasis, is on *that* book. Her aunt seems to be issuing a caveat to Elizabeth, as if this were an ominously powerful text to behold. Yet, Elizabeth, 'being much for reading,' is curious in spite of herself. As she 'revolves' in her mind: 'what can these People write about, for I have heard that they Deny the Scriptures & have no other bible but George Fox's *Journal*, & Deny all holy Ordinances?' Elizabeth cannot keep herself from reading; the temptation is finally too strong, and the results are dramatic.

> So resolved to read, but had not read two Pages before my very heart burned within me and Tears Issued from my Eyes, which I was Afraid would be seen; therefore with the Book I walked into the garden, sat Down, and the piece being Small, read it through before I went in; but Some Times was forced to stop to Vent my Tears, my heart as it were uttering these involuntary Expressions (Shea 1990: 158-59).

Upon first glance at this reading encounter, one might actually mistake Elizabeth for an attender at a Great Awakening revival, with her effusive, emotional responses to the Word. In her hands is a small book written by Stephen Crisp, a schoolteacher who first vindicates Friends and then shares his personal insights on Quakerism as a religion and practice (Crisp 1704; Higgins 1993: 175; Madden 1999: 178). Only two pages into this treatise, she is so

profoundly affected that she feels she must go alone into the garden where she can complete her reading privately. The garden itself is laden with both literary and biblical connotations: during Elizabeth's time, the popular literary genre of seduction novels (with such books as *Clarissa* in England) often set a woman's seduction or turning point in a garden; the garden scene in the biblical Genesis moreover locates Eve's (and womankind's) transgression as she strives to acquire knowledge. In effect, the garden becomes the popular site of not only seduction but also knowledge, and more particularly, a woman's knowledge. This moment, then, seems quite fitting for Elizabeth's threshold into Quakerism.

She is so radically moved and corporeally affected by reading this Quakers' Book, with her many tears and involuntary expressions, that she exhibits the beginning of her convincement experience. The words have pierced and stirred her very soul, and her spontaneous outpouring of emotion – her religious enthusiasm – frightens her. She decides hastily that there is only one course of action: 'for Some weeks Did not touch any of their Books' (Shea 1990: 159). And, when she later wonders why she had not been so affected while previously staying with her Quaker relations in Ireland, she concludes: 'During the time I was there I never read one of their Books nor went to one Meeting' (Shea 1990: 159). It is worth noting here that although she had never touched a Quakers' Book while in Great Britain, she emphasises that it took her only three hours to do so in Pennsylvania, perhaps indicating her early American community's strong leadings for a literary culture.

I highlight this pivotal scene of reading the Quakers' Book because it succinctly illustrates the millennial vision of literacy held by Ashbridge's transatlantic Religious Society of Friends. Indeed, I would argue that her narrative is one primarily about the power of reading – the political agency of reading and its spiritual, life-changing consequences. The Quakers' revolutionary relation to prophecy and language originated at the onset of this religious movement. During the 1650s in England, founder George Fox preached to thousands of people throughout the country that the Age of Prophecy was resurrected. The bible, he said, was not to be perceived as highest scriptural authority; rather, the Word dwelled in and moved forth from its worshippers and 'that of God' in them. With the advent of Quakerism, Fox declared that all people – despite their gender, race, age, or social status – were one in Christ Jesus. In his theology of christopresentism, the religious leader announced that Friends, or the Children of Light, should wait for spirit to pour onto flesh, whereby they would become the living Christ and then be moved to minister as the living scripture, with perfection proclaimed (Tarter 1993, 2001; Bailey 1996). This convincement experience, Fox explained, all must know 'experimentally' – that is, experientially (Fox 1975: 11).

As Fox shares in his *Journal*, his own convincement experience gave him a new understanding of language:

> All things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter...so that I say I was come up

> to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell. The creation was opened to me, and it was showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue (Fox 1975: 27).

In this spirit of enthusiasm, or 'divine indwelling' (Nuttall 1948: 23), Friends thus returned to a prelapsarian relation to language; perfection on earth was thereby achieved, manifesting corporeally and linguistically. Distinctly linking enthusiasm to prophecy – or the body to language – Friends would often move quite viscerally and dramatically during their Meetings for Worship. Numerous accounts relate how men and women would begin to tremble, quake, and shake as they received such motions of God: this manifested in the language, the tone, the cadence, and the delivery of their prophecy in all of its nuances and inflections. As Friend Francis Howgill declared, in awe and wonder, 'they say none speak like us' (Barclay 1841: 19). Theirs was an alternative language, connecting the enthused body to the divinely inspired Word. Nigel Smith explains, 'the body [had] become scripture in the Quaker imagination' (Smith 1995: 68). In effect, when a Friend was moved corporeally to language, the body became the text.

First generation Friends believed that the words were not only infused with spirit, but they embodied and transmitted the Inward Light,[4] the spirit and force of God. It was the Quakers' conviction that such language would penetrate and open the worshippers, shake loose the Seed of God within them, and consequently set them free in this new birth of Christ. As Spiritual Mother[5] Martha Simmonds wrote to the Children of Light at the beginning of the Quaker movement, 'Feel the fruit of the Holy one springing in thee, moving to be brought forth in thee' (Simmonds n.d.: 4). Divinely inspired language, that is, held the potential to spark and move the 'Holy one springing' in every witness or beholder. While scholars today review the intricate ways in which language is culturally inscribed, it is challenging and fascinating to consider the earliest Friends' perception of words as being spiritually borne: that is, as spirit pours onto flesh, quickens and then stirs the worshipper, a new Word ensues. Quakers were encouraged to shake loose 'Reason' and surrender ecstatically to their sect's feminisation of worship and language (Tarter 2001:147-50). Nigel Smith assesses that Quaker language had 'effectively become an anatomy of Quaker regeneration;' he notes, 'discourse not only showed the workings of the inner light but also embodied them' (Smith 1995: 67, 57). This was the evolution of a New Word, a mighty Word, that connected spirit and substance and concomitantly united these early seekers to all of creation.

In effect, prophesying became the Quakers' revolutionary act and impetus for a literary movement. Realising that the power of such prophetic language could be transmitted onto the written page, the growing religious society created their own literary theory for the writing, printing, and reading of texts. Literature, they determined, was a most forceful medium for reaching and convincing readers throughout the world, and thus they acknowledged that the act of reading was potentially the most powerful agent for apocalyptic change.

As I discuss elsewhere, the earliest Friends, who also called themselves the 'Publishers of Truth', perceived their role as purveyors of the New Word (Tarter 1993). In the first decade of Quakerism, they initially invited all members to transform spontaneous, divinely inspired prophesyings into print. In effect, they perceived such prophetic writing as the inscription of a 'pure' language moving from their 'inward parts', ultimately leading readers to the very openings of God (Blackborow 1660: 1). Suspicious of any form of intellectualisation, Friends who were prophesying and writing were encouraged to stay connected to the spirit and motion of language, rather than to formal, institutionalised rhetoric. In the primary experience of God, they were to inscribe their prophetic words as quickly as they felt them, trusting that the spirit of the language would be captured in the transcription and would ultimately move its readers. As Spiritual Mother Sarah Blackborow begins one of her tracts, 'This coming to my hand, from a pure Fountain, eternal life springing forth itself, a necessity was laid upon me to put it in print, that so it might do its service, and have unity with its own' (Blackborow 1657: 1). Others wrote that words came to their hand with force and fervor. Dorothy White accentuated the immediacy of this literary process in the introduction to one of her tracts: 'the word of the Lord came unto me saying, Write, and again I say write with speed' (White 1659: 1). Indeed, many individuals pronounced that it was the virtual 'command' of God to transcribe their divine motions into writing with urgency and immanent elocution (Barbour 1986: 66; Cotton n.d.: Broadsheet).

In his study of seventeenth century Quaker tracts, Jackson Cope notes that the sound waves of these prophetic texts, accompanied by scriptural phraseology and repetitious words and phrases, induced an incantatory, hypnotic effect among readers (Cope 1971). This resulted in what Nigel Smith calls 'a daring verbal experimentation' (Smith 1995: 68; Cope 1971). As Friends were invited 'to know experimentally', they in turn were inspired to write experimentally, trusting that such divine motion would 'find unity with its own'. In this way, Quakers moved in vital relation to the Word, and believed it would, in turn, poignantly move its readers; like prophesying in a Meeting for Worship, writing was practised in what might be called a Meeting for Worship for Writing – the inscription and regeneration of spirit from the most divine of inward sources.

Investing the written word with a living, breathing spirit, first generation Friends consequently created not only a literary movement (in the truest, physical sense of the word) but also a religious reading culture. It was their conviction that literature had the potential to convince, to heal, and to usher in the apocalyptic world. Transcribed prophecy – in its movement of spirit lifting off the page – would bring readers to the source of God, to a knowledge and an experience beyond words, and ultimately to their own convincement experience (Bauman 1983: 81). Friends were to read with an 'Inward Eye', focusing on the mystical motion of language that opened their bodies and spirits. As Spiritual Mother Rebecca Travers began one of her prophetic tracts, addressing her religious family, 'Fill not your head, but feel the life of what in this following paper is declared, for which my soul travells, and breathes after in the whole

creation' (Travers 1658: 12). The testimony of this literary theory was most clearly demonstrated when George Fox healed Oliver Cromwell's sister of her depression by sending her a divinely inspired letter in 1658. Nothing else had helped or affected Lady Claypole, but upon reading Fox's letter, she felt that the language had opened her, moved her, shaken and cured her (Bailey 1992: 196).

Contemporaries of the early Friends also believed in and wrote about the physiology of reading, yet they challenged the Quakers' radical and enthusiastic approach to literary engagement. Scientists and philosophers of Restoration England, for example, carefully scrutinised and evaluated what happened to people when they read, paying particular attention to the brain and passions and noting the detrimental, 'distempered' effects of enthusiasm. They perceived the potential of literature to affect people, and consequently attempted to discredit readers' emotional responses while valorising their reasoning capacities. (Johns 1996: 154). Becoming an increasingly 'private and anarchic' activity in early modern England (Raven *et al* 1996: 2), reading – and its myriad consequences – thus posed a threat to social and political hierarchies. In contradistinction, the Publishers of Truth embraced and celebrated the possibilities of language and epitomised their radical views through their literary theory. In effect, the Children of Light deemed that reading was much more than an intellectual pursuit: it was, in fact, a spiritual, a quite physical, and an enthusiastic encounter, where writer and reader met in divine intimacy through the power of the Word.

What I find most fascinating in the history of early Friends is the number of Quaker and anti-Quaker tracts which attest to the powerfully physical reactions readers undergo after picking up a Quakers' Book. In the case of Mary White, for example, she finished reading a Quaker tract and soon fell into convulsive fits, whereby '3 or 4 could scarce keep her in her bed' (Anon. 1655: 5-6). According to this propagandistic pamphlet, Mary's reading of a Quakers' Book allegedly induced her violent quaking and animal-like gestures and sounds. To mainstream seventeenth-century society, the act of quaking was socially contested and perceived as nothing less than demonic possession. These pamphleteers impressed that the physiology of this woman's reading experience was both enthusiastic and passionate, leading to her wayward demise. Yet, to Friends, Mary's physical reaction to reading this book could have been the loosing of the spirit in the body and the concomitant birth of the Inward Christ. Such a corporeal response was deeply revered by Friends, while intensely feared and misinterpreted by society at large. In fact, the corpus of *Anti-Quakeriana* of the 1650s consistently issued a warning to all, stressing the dangers of reading Quaker literature which led to quaking, howling, barking, or even dying. However, this apparent social fear of Quaker literature implicitly belied the protesters' belief that these words did indeed move and change readers, albeit in a socially unacceptable or uncontrollable way. At the origins of this religious sect's history, Quaker literature was conceived as a vital, spiritual, and political force which viscerally and permanently affected its readers; as a result, their spiritual family invested a great deal in literary production and its potential for enthusiasm, promoting the power of transmission from spirit to flesh to page.

Yet, the Quakers altered in their views quite dramatically after the first generation of publishers had established these foundations in a literary culture. With the striking rise in persecutions, incarcerations, and deaths among Friends during the wave of anti-Quaker prejudice in the seventeenth century, Quakerism gradually moved from an enthusiastic religion to a more institutionalised, Quietist discipline of the eighteenth century. As a direct result of this change, Quaker literature was strongly affected in both theory and practice. Most specifically, British Friends initiated a censoring committee in 1672 – the Second Day Morning Meeting – which determined every tract to be published by the religious society; an early American counterpart was established in 1709, reinforcing censorship on a transatlantic scale. Many scholars note that Quaker writing, as a result, became much more formulaic in language and content – and Luella Wright goes so far as to say that a 'barrenness' in Friends' literary productivity ensued (Brinton 1972; Wright 1932: 97). However, in looking at these eighteenth century texts through the lens of spirituality and the Quaker reading culture, I find that many of their spiritual autobiographies, whether subversively or not, sustained the significant, original, and radical tenets of the earliest Friends. That is, while so much had changed within the religious society and its practices, literature remained a locus of spirit, a medium for moving others towards God. And this is precisely where I turn to Elizabeth Ashbridge's narrative.

For hers is, finally, a text about the power of Quaker language and reading – the spectacular, sanctified, and life-transforming act of reading. In a sense, Elizabeth moves from darkness to light through her engagement with words and texts, and she frames her entire life story around the possibilities of literary exchange. Writing her autobiography in retrospect, she has carefully selected the events of her life that tell her story of spiritual growth, and it is the power of the Word that she punctuates as central to regeneration. While all published Quaker memoirs by this time were held to a conventional form and style, Elizabeth chose to write and circulate her manuscript without committee censure. Not a formulaic Quaker autobiography at all, Elizabeth 'moves far beyond generic commonplaces' after the first paragraph of her narrative (Levenduski 1996: 61). Keeping in mind her reading audience of Friends, she acknowledges that literature has the potential to embody an intimate Meeting for Worship, where reader and writer connect sacredly through the divine motion of language. Elizabeth is therefore recalling and simultaneously reproducing the literary tradition of first generation Friends who sacralised language, as she inscribes her own personal encounter with texts and specifically with the Quaker lexicon.

Structuring her autobiography around language, Ashbridge reveals her vigilant adherence to 'holy conversation', a Quaker tenet which stressed the sacredness of a person's every word and action. One of her earliest memories, she recounts, is when her mother taught her at an impressionable age that 'if [she] used any Naughty Words God would not love [her]' (Shea 1990: 148). The power of language, that is, could lead to her eternal destruction. In this way, the autobiographer is setting a solid foundation for her pathway towards Quakerism. As an immigrant and an indentured servant, she later comments that

her master could pray only when he had his prayer book with him. When the book is lost, he gives up prayer and communion with God altogether. As she will later understand as a Friend, this man depends upon a prayer book, yet its language has no efficacy because it does not sustain any connection to his own prophecy or Inward Light. Without the book, the man cannot even pray. She accentuates his emptiness and hypocrisy as a Christian: a tyrant who has abused her so cruelly that she is unable 'to Convey in Characters [words]' the sufferings she bore (Shea 1990: 151). In the presence and under the rule of his darkened state, she is devoid of language altogether, finding the experience desolate and ineffable.

Next, Elizabeth reviews her experiences with 'Priest Craft', and the 'ridiculous stuff' a hired minister has told her from one of his books (Shea 1990: 152). Again, she is wrestling with the theology of various religious elders and their empty texts. In subsequent years, when Ashbridge worked as an actress and singer, she reflects that she alternated between reading books of scripture and drama – always searching for the language that would open and move her but noting, 'the more I read the more uneasy I grew' (Shea 1990: 154). She is struggling to find the words, or more precisely the spirit and force of words, which will have resonance with her soul. As she realises that she cannot find anything that is genuinely effective – reaching all along the trajectory from scripture to drama – she becomes increasingly unsettled because she is an avid reader longing to find connection. In effect, Elizabeth is ripe for her Quaker convincement through reading, but does not comprehend this at the time.

Finally, in a night of terror during a thunderstorm, Elizabeth recounts how she heard a voice, 'O! Eternity, Eternity, the Endless term of long Eternity,' and saw 'a long Roll Wrote in Black Characters', which she understands to be her sins (Shea 1990: 156). This vision of text horrifies Elizabeth, makes her tremble and shake in awe, as the Characters unveil her darkest hours. Yet, set poignantly against such a dark background is her dream of a grave woman holding a lamp. In Quaker fashion, Elizabeth records the dream's prophetic message in her autobiography: 'Thy lamp shall not be put out in obscure darkness,' the grave woman declares, but only if Elizabeth listens, succumbs, and deepens in the spirit of her Inward Light. This prophecy is her eternal Lamp, her holy Word – and it is, in a sense, the message of her entire narrative, for it is her beacon of hope and the voice of her Inward Teacher.

She has been on a long journey with language, and she is now ready to receive its power. Shortly thereafter, she meets her relations in Pennsylvania and encounters the Quakers' Book. Although her aunt warns her about reading this text, implying the portent and power of Quaker literature, Elizabeth opens it, reads it, moves with it to the garden in tears, and is viscerally transformed, even to involuntary sighs. She is permanently changed by the living spirit of its linguistic and spiritual motion. Elizabeth's final testimony about language resounds as she prays to God, 'do with me according to thy Word' (Shea 1990: 167). She gives voice to the mystical, transformative nature of language and thereby pronounces and illustrates the literary theory that first generation Friends had established a century before her.

As I have suggested above, Elizabeth's enunciation of her corporeal, enthusiastic response to the Quakers' Book echoes the religious fervor of her mainstream culture, set in the time of the Great Awakening. The early American Protestant world surrounding Elizabeth was surging with religious revivals: itinerant preachers were traveling from town to town to deliver sermons under tents, and worshippers came from far and wide to listen and respond with excessively corporeal responses to the Word. During these religious gatherings, attenders sighed, moaned, cried, and were moved to physical rapture. Quite ironically, the eighteenth century Quietist Quaker community had established increasingly stringent codes of behavior in their exclusionary sect and had eschewed any displays of enthusiasm – quite antithetical to their spiritual forebears who promulgated this expression as a force of spiritual and political revolution. Julie Sievers' insightful scholarship explores the outsider Elizabeth's 'rhetoric of otherness', and her recalling the traditions of the earliest Friends who stood fast in their positions of 'strangeness' or alterity. According to Sievers, Elizabeth is tapping into the history of Quaker prophesying, and her text is written to awaken and ultimately challenge the prevailing, controlling codes of Quietism: 'strangeness is returned to its unpredictable, yet more powerful, association with divine prophesy [sic] and uncompromising moral testimony, rather than with outward social forms' (Sievers, 2001: 245). Through her identifying with Quaker prophecy and its egalitarian, 'peculiar', and unpredictable nature, Elizabeth is simultaneously protesting her religious society's privileging of 'social forms' and thus promoting spiritual reform within her hierarchised community.

I would add to this analysis that Elizabeth Ashbridge is actually reclaiming not only the discourse and meanings of earliest Friends, but also the literary theory of her spiritual ancestors. In essence, she is exemplifying enthusiasm at a time when eighteenth century Friends were adamantly rejecting such religious expression. However, from the very moment she encounters the Quakers' Book, Elizabeth challenges her all-too-codified Quietist society by trusting in the more 'primitive Christian'[6] traditions of her religious family. In fact, her experience of reading the Word is authenticated by her enthusiastic response: tears and involuntary sighs actually confirm her spiritual state. It is her autobiography which prompts her readers to follow in kind, as they seek spiritual opening and enlightenment. And, Elizabeth's text proved to be quite effective in its mission, for it inspired lasting results. As Joanna Brooks notes, the ensuing Quaker reform movement encouraged other autobiographers to express their more 'primitive' patterns of convincement, leadings, spiritual experiences – and, I would add, their more 'primitive' writing and its implicit Quaker literary theory (Brooks, 1999:73; Sievers 2001:257, n.14).

In becoming a Friend, Elizabeth joined not only a literary tradition which upheld the power and spirit of the written word; she joined an ever-widening, transatlantic body of Quaker women ministers who were inspiring increasing numbers of women to prophesy, to read, and to write autobiographically. As I discuss in another essay, Quaker journals in the eighteenth century consequently became a new site of prophecy for Friends.[7] As the discipline of Quietism

regulated a conventional form of published writing, journals – written either as daily reflections or as narratives told in retrospect – offered Quakers a place to write as they were inspired, free of surveillance or censure. Evident in numerous manuscript diaries and letters, it is women ministers who urged their Sisters to record spiritual journeys and prophetic openings in their journals, to write down prophecy they heard in the Women's Meetings, and to read over everything carefully and repeatedly while at home (Tarter 1993). The journal, as a form of Quaker spiritual autobiography, became the locus of intimate connection for this community of women when they were apart from one another's living presence; it also became a place where the women could commune with the divine. As Ann Cooper Whitall confessed in her own diary, 'if I don't read and right [sic] on first day I don't think I do right' (Whitall 1760-62: 85). The journals included not only the autobiographer's sacred language and reflections but also her dreams (as Elizabeth's grave woman with the lamp), as well as other Friends' ministry and copied letters. These spiritual memoirs, or excerpts from them, were often circulated in manuscript form, as the women shared their revelations with their community. Autobiographical writing thereby served as a means of textual communion, sustaining the earliest Friends' reverence for the power of language.

Quaker autobiography, like prophesying, became a communal act, as eighteenth century Friends recognised the critical connections between reading, writing, and spiritual formation. It is known that by 1683, Pennsylvania – as a Holy Experiment – mandated by law that all children had to be able to read and write by the age of twelve, or their parents would suffer a five pound penalty (Frost 1973: 96; Dunn 1979: 128). As Spiritual Mothers, as leaders, and as women inscribing the pure language moving from their inward parts, Quaker women joined in this movement, deeming that membership into the Philadelphia Women's Meeting required some form of literacy. Many Quaker women, as well, ran small private schools for Quaker girls; in these schools, it was common practice for older students each to 'adopt' an incoming student, claiming the name of 'Mother' as she taught the younger one the nuances and ways of reading Quaker language and spirit (Mortimer 1996: 252). In this way, they secured and prompted the literary theory and traditions of Friends for future generations of Quaker readers and writers.

As a Spiritual Mother herself, Elizabeth Ashbridge felt a leading and motion to write her autobiography with particular focus and intention: her love of reading drew her to the Quakers' Book, and the power of Quaker language ultimately opened the way for her own spiritual and political authority. Indeed, her widely read text inspired numerous other Friends to write their own spiritual autobiographies and share in her mystical message of the Word – most notably, it is argued, her contemporary John Woolman (Shea 1990: 138). After Elizabeth died, manuscript letters indicate that Woolman spoke with her husband and 'requested the perusal' of her writings (Ashbridge mss., 11 mo 2 1757); he subsequently wrote and then published his own autobiography – in fact, his was issued the same year that Elizabeth's came into print. In a fascinating entry in Woolman's journal, which is now the most highly regarded, canonical Quaker

autobiography of the eighteenth century, Woolman also addresses the power and divine source of language. While visiting Native Americans in 1763 to learn more about their culture, he recounts worshipping with them in silence. At the end of this tender exchange, the chief Papunehang speaks to Woolman (through a translator), and this is a tender, revelatory moment that he feels compelled to include in his autobiography: moved by the spirit of their silent worship and ministry, Papunehang declares, 'I love to feel where words come from' (Woolman 1744: 133). This message reverberates in Woolman's text, accentuating the force of Friends' originating literary theory and the spiritual evolution of words and text, even in such eighteenth century cross-cultural encounters.

From the time that Elizabeth wrote her autobiography 'in her own hand', Friends transcribed it and circulated it in their manuscript culture, testifying to the power they ascribed in literally recopying such sacred words. When her narrative was published posthumously, the religious society also chose to include it in the *Friends Library*, a compendium of remarkable and noteworthy Quaker journals. This in itself is an interesting decision among censoring Friends, particularly due to the autobiography's nontraditional, enthusiastic strains. Yet, in her lifetime, Elizabeth evolved from being a teenage widower and indentured servant to a highly respected Quaker minister and Elder, whose third husband was one of the wealthiest Quakers in the Delaware Valley. As an initial outsider or 'stranger' who became a convinced Friend and minister, she had an important message for her spiritual community: to reclaim their Quaker history, identity, 'peculiarity', and, most importantly, their enthusiastic potential in prophesying and writing. Her autobiography crystallises this revelation, and despite the Friends' rejection of enthusiasm during the Great Awakening, she nevertheless recaptures its spirit and practice in her text and consequently reclaims the 'primitive' literary theory for her own generation.

Ultimately, Elizabeth embodies her prophetic dream-woman with the lamp: inscribed for posterity, she fades not into dark obscurity but shines brightly with eternal flame, due to her written word. As the title of Elizabeth's narrative emphasises, this is the 'Fore Part' of her account, a narrative foremost about the power of Quaker language and spiritual literacy which transmits divine motion and transforms lives. Indeed, reading has shaped Elizabeth's own life in often dramatic and extraordinary ways. As she 'conveys in Characters', reading has brought her to a most intimate and empowering position in her religious society, and she concludes by leaving to the world her own prophetic autobiography – yet another Quakers' Book – for succeeding generations of readers and writers.

1 This and all succeeding quotations from Elizabeth Ashbridge's narrative are taken from Daniel Shea's 1990 edition in *Journeys in New Worlds: early American women's narratives*. Shea's version reflects the earliest manuscript copies of this text, which circulated for many years before its 1774 publication in England. This quotation is taken from p. 167.

2 Recent studies on Elizabeth Ashbridge's narrative include Edkins 1980; Shea 1968 and 1990; Higgins 1993; Levenduski 1996; Scheick 1996; Madden 1999; Gildersleeve 2001; and Sievers 2001.

3 Friends used the terms 'convince' and 'convincement' to mean what contemporary Protestants were referring to as 'convert' and 'conversion', respectively.

4 Although many scholars today refer to the 'Inner Light' of Friends, the original Children of Light – and Fox himself – used the more specific and poignant term, the 'Inward Light'.

5 For more on this term, see Tarter 2001: 149 and 160, n.14; and Barbour 1986.

6 The term 'primitive Christianity' was widely used by Fox and first generation Friends to reflect their return to the spiritual life and practices of Christ and the early Christians In this spirit, Friends sought to live truly according to the Word and upheld many 'primitive' practices, such as conducting healings and miracles, writing Epistles, and prophesying in divinely inspired language.

7 'Written from the Body of Sisterhood: Quaker women's writing and the creation of new word', conference paper presented at the Modern Language Association convention, 2000.

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