

# The Iron Of Melancholy: Structures Of Spiritual Conversion In America From The Puritan Conscience To

BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Iron of Melancholy: Structures of Spiritual Conversion in America from the Puritan Conscience to Victorian Neurosis.* By JOHN OWEN KING III. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1983. xi + 457 pp. \$30.00.

Rather than a garden, America has seemed a wilderness to pilgrims and their descendants. For the anxious and estranged, the New World has been predominantly a scene of conversion, a place where one can sort out temptations from delusions, moving from bewildering obsessions to true spiritual identity. Highlighting the role of melancholy (later called obsessional neurosis) in the process of conversion, King examines "a national spiritual text" (p. 81) composed by the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards, the elder Henry James and his son William, Josiah Royce and James Jackson Putnam, and, finally, Max Weber. King observes the differing ways in which these men relied on the models—or "pre-texts"—of such classic writers as Augustine and John Bunyan to provide forms of expression through which their own turmoil could be ordered.

Following Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that "expression organizes experience," King focuses on the making rather than the finding of truth, exploring the ways people make sense of themselves rather than reductively "explaining" their lives in tidy psychological categories. This pragmatism moves King's work beyond etiology toward the broader concerns of American cultural history, an orientation that pays off richly in the links revealed between the major figures and in the connections discovered between each individual's view of his inner life and pursuit of his intellectual work. The risk of King's pragmatics is that as the interpretation proceeds, virtually anything can begin to be considered constitutive of autobiography; in the sections on William James, Royce, Putnam, and Weber, "the whole analysis thus spins off into ever further, recursive texts" (p. 210). Such American Victorians as Henry Adams did write actual autobiographies, the inclusion of which might have saved King from including "high-wire" hermeneutics along the lines of Foucault, Barthes, and Norman O. Brown. Fortunately King is too good a historian to lose his balance for long.

Some readers will rejoice in the wealth of biographical detail King provides; others will wish for tighter control of material, more coherence of argument, and more direct syntax. It must have been a wonderful dissertation, but it didn't get the editing it deserves, and we are left with a difficult, expensive, important book that finally requires more attention than it rewards.

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