

## On the Pleasures of Seeing Salvation\*

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\* Draft introduction to a book-in-progress titled “Friday’s Tribe: Eighteenth-Century English Missionary Fantasies.”

This paper begins by reading a declaration by “Philip Keitasscot,” a Wampanoag sachem who, after discussion with “Anthony Abahton” and “William Abahton,” two Christian Indians, expresses some acceptance of Christianity. His speech is especially moving because such a change requires a humility contrasting with his status as a sachem. What better testimony could there be of the success of Christian missions among the Indians of New England?

Except no sachem named Philip ever spoke these words. This speech appears in *The Indian Dialogues* by John Eliot, minister of Roxbury and missionary to the Massachusetts and Wampanoag peoples, and published in 1671. The dialogues allude to actual people: Philip Keitasscot resembles Metacomet, who took the English name Philip in 1660 and became sachem in 1662; the Abahton brothers resemble Anthony and William Nahauton, Massachusetts converts whom the Natick church of “Praying Indians” had dispatched to Philip in 1671. The context of this visit and the outcome were quite different from what *The Indian Dialogues* describes, however. That very year Philip and the Plymouth Colony were building to a violent confrontation from which he backed down, having made painful concessions. Four years later the war that bears Philip’s name broke out, with devastating consequences for indigenous and colonial populations alike.

How are we to understand this text, especially in light of the circumstances that followed its publication? Certainly it is a colossally incorrect forecast of this Wampanoag sachem’s response to Christianity. It is not a “lie,” for Eliot admitted the text was not entirely factual. In its blending of documentation with imagination, this scene constitutes a willful failure to see the world as it was: to recognize not only how fervently Philip opposed Christianity, but how closely he identified it with the problem of colonial encroachment. What we have here is a vision of how missionary work could take place if the world and its human inhabitants were different than they really are. It is, in sum, a fantasy.

The next section interrogates the concept of fantasy as literary genre and as psychological phenomenon. The English word’s earliest connotations are rooted in questions of what can be perceived or seen, riding a fault line between data acquired through the eyes and scenes concocted by the mind. It is obvious but crucial to observe that fantasy’s relationship to reality is a complex one. To describe a text such as *The Indian Dialogues* as a fantasy might seem a way to dismiss it from arenas of serious consideration. But fantasy is neither so trivial nor so simple, especially in its departure from what is true. As Freud asserted, “phantasies possess *psychical* reality.” Slavoj Žižek’s vision of fantasy as a doubling of (or circling back upon) the real—bringing into being exactly what is denied—also is of relevance here. This is especially the case when the fantasy *is* of helping others, of caring, of doing good in the world.

This book is about the forms such apparently selfless fantasies took in early modern English descriptions of Christian mission. It is informed by scholarship on colonial and imperial discourse even as it focuses on religious fantasies, especially of non-European, non-Christian persons transformed into Protestant Christian believers. It does not limit itself to reading these vignettes of religious conversion as pretexts for secular conquest, for one premise is that religious

motivations are more than masks for secular desires. They constitute desires in and of themselves, and they need to be examined on their own terms.

The paper then distinguishes missionary fantasies from other missionary writings through a close reading of one tract: a letter written in 1752 by John Brainerd, missionary to the Lenni Lenape of Bethel, East Jersey, to “A Friend in England.” It does so with caution that such texts appeared in an era when, as Lennard Davis has noted, the categories of fictional and factual writing still were coalescing. Such a sorting into categories still is useful when we attend less to how accurate such writings are than to how they position their readers in relation to perceived reality.

Even when they engage in salesmanship, general missionary writings aspire to be anchored in the realm of *what is*. At the same time, they seek to inculcate in their readers a wish to change the world, talking about what their readers *should do*. Missionary fantasies operate differently. It is not simply that they are unreasonably optimistic or insufficiently empiricist. They adhere to the basic norms of verisimilitude (humans do not fly or disappear into thin air). In their consideration of Christian mission, however, they are untethered from the world as it is. They do not propose to change the world they describe or call their readers to action. They do not ask their readers to care. Rather, they tell stories or present vignettes in which successful missionary encounters *already have taken place*.

These writings appeared in four major genres: novels, poems, dialogues, and short prose writings all claimed to articulate the experiences of non-European converts. They merit inclusion within English literary history, and they merit attention as a group. Certainly they spoke to immediate circumstances, but their significance also transcended local concerns and current events, speaking to readers’ more deeply situated desires. They operated within a well-established repertoire of images and stories surrounding the peoples whom exploration and colonization had brought to the attention of Anglophone readers. These texts expanded that colonialist repertoire with new elements, reconstituting the mental framework that English readers brought to bear on their imagination of non-European peoples. In so doing, they promised various forms of pleasure: most of all, the delight of seeing salvation in action, without the requirement of active involvement or concern.

Missionary fantasies are also fundamentally distinct from—even opposed to—many expressions of hope, for fantasies tend to voice wishes that are tacitly recognized as unachievable. Indeed, it is one of the operating assumptions of this book that fantasies typically flourish when well-founded optimism has died. In this way the book follows the outlines of Freud’s understanding of fantasy as “a wish-fulfilling activity that can arise when an instinctual wish is frustrated.” It is partly on the basis of this psychoanalytic understanding of the term that I mark English missionary fantasy as a genre of the eighteenth century, for the texts I include in this category began to appear as the initial optimism of English—and later, British—missionary endeavors faded. I situate Eliot’s *Indian Dialogues* at the origin point for this tradition, for it occupies a transitional position in colonial history as well as in its depiction of Christian mission. Missions continued, new ones were launched, and there were renewals of widespread hope in the gospel’s propagation abroad. Still, from the late seventeenth century onward the possibility of failure could not be erased from discussions of Christian mission.

These fantasies pair longing for a morally purer and more effective British presence abroad with desire for a more pliable other: a foreign people who can be won over easily to Christianity. Missionary fantasies thus tend to feature what I term *Heathen Converts*. These figures have little to do with the real people whom Christian missionaries sought to convert, so I conceptualize

them as a tribe of the imagination, rooted in a colonizer's outlook, with Defoe's Friday as their most famous member.

Missionary fantasies show three figures—noble savage, heathen convert, and ignoble savage—to form a triangle of colonizing taxonomy within English writings. The role of the heathen convert is to modulate between the claims made through the other two figures even as he (usually he) opposes both of them in the relationship he establishes to empire. The opposition lies in the static versus dynamic nature of each type, for noble savages and ignoble ones cannot or should not change; their role is to present a contrast with Christian European civilization. Heathen converts are defined *through* change. They encourage readers to think of non-Europeans as beings who want to and can become British and Christian. They present religious and cultural transformation as an almost automatic, predestined matter, paralleling and perhaps modeling the dynamic of nineteenth-century manifest destiny.

This book concludes with texts from the 1770s, for my sense is that heathen converts were obscured by other figurations of non-European peoples as the century went on. Even as noble savages acquired more prominence in English literature, what Tim Fulford terms “Romantic Indians” began to appear following the Seven Years’ War. In both Britain and the United States another figure, the dying or vanishing Indian, also rose to prominence.

Heathen converts figure prominently in this book, but so do some of the actual human beings whom British missionaries sought to Christianize. Throughout the book I juxtapose readings of missionary fantasies with texts describing the responses from real individuals or communities whom missionaries approached. To alternate and intertwine non-Europeans’ responses with the fantasies is to offer a small and inevitably incomplete corrective to the ways in which missionary writings, especially fantasies, obscured the humans they designated as the objects of their evangelical desire.

All of the fantasies discussed in this book describe Protestant missionary ventures that produce Protestant converts. This fact can hardly be surprising, for the ideology of anti-Catholicism marked Britain as a virtuous, religiously pure underdog engaged in a global struggle to such a degree that England had gone so far as to overthrow its own Roman Catholic King, James II (also James VII of Scotland), in 1689. This sense of identity forged through struggle was intensified by a powerful historical narrative of Catholicism as a false religion epitomized by corruption, tyranny, savagery, and the merciless abuse of power. The ritualized narrating of key horrors in this history had the effect of linking dispersed peoples across place and time as victims of Catholic cruelty. If, given this background, it is obvious that English missionary fantasies would feature heathen converts to Protestantism, what is more striking is that these texts do not merely narrate the *fact* of successful Protestant missions. Instead, they show missionary endeavors succeeding through Protestant pedagogies and spiritualities, Protestant compassion, even Protestant aesthetics.

Of course, the very concept of a Protestant form makes little sense except in opposition to Catholicism, for it ignores the differences among confessions. Often in missionary fantasies these forms are presented as highly specialized in order to elevate one denomination over others. Heathen converts thus are presented as ventriloquizing elements of debate among Protestants. Overshadowing these internecine disputes, though, was the imperative of rebuking the practices and even styles that evoked Roman Catholicism. This imperative required elevating words over images, and plainness over ornament. It was the conventional wisdom of Protestants that these factors were simultaneously what marked Catholicism as a false church (along with other standard accusations from the ideology of anti-papery) and what made heathen peoples adopt it so easily.

Such claims translated into a focus on words as the instruments of missionary encounter. These texts thus are intensively meta-verbal, with missionaries operating through Bible and prayer, story and sermon, and, most of all, talk. There is a powerful irony here, for fantasy would seem to be irreconcilable with the sober authenticity of Protestant aesthetics. The paradox is that these fantasies operate through apparently non-phantasmic ways, purging missionary encounters of drama and glamour, and showing conversion to be the outcome of a gradual process involving the mind as much as the heart of the convert. This eschewal of the easy path—the path of conversion through the instilling of fear and awe—is consistent with a Protestant, especially Puritan, aesthetic of plainness.

However, Protestant missionary fantasies exhibit intense ambivalence about their very emphasis upon Protestant form. This is fitting, for such ambivalence parallels the mix of disbelief, condemnation, and envy with which British agents of Christian mission are well known to have greeted Catholic accomplishments in the global arena. Even as the fantasies show Protestant methods to be better than Catholic ones, such as various forms of rhetorical or visual seduction, these texts also occasionally describe Protestant missionaries adopting some of these methods.

Most of all, though, these texts traffic in competing desires: to witness distant heathens brought into conformity with one's own behaviors and beliefs, to see a colonial arena of violence transformed into a scene of love and care, to think of one's own people as motivated by good, and to be entertained by story and spectacle. The task of fantasy is to reconcile those desires somehow with each other, delivering them to readers in a single package.