SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Some Contexts for *Grace Abounding*

I have three main aims in this paper: to discuss the language of spiritual experience in *Grace Abounding,* to see the ways in which the Post-Structuralist debate about 'the crisis of the subject' might relate to a Christian sense of the subject ('subject' as in 'subjective' rather than 'the subject of English'); and, in particular, to examine the category 'spiritual experience', as it was understood in Bunyan's time by those of a Puritan persuasion. *Grace Abounding* announces itself as the account of a spiritual experience, a 'relation of the merciful working of God upon my Soul'.(1) How useful is the category, and what are the criteria for assessing it?

1. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

(a) Spiritual and Material At the end of the second chapter of *Mimesis,* Erich Auerbach identifies an antagonism between sensory appearance and reality at the heart of the Christian perception of things.(2) It is a habit of looking through incidents or texts to the meaning which God is conveying. We may enter a caveat, that a Manicheean or Gnostic dualism (spiritual good, material bad) is a heresy which denies the goodness of created earth; but it is indisputable that Auerbach has identified a central feature of Christian semiology, that events in the material world are parts of God's book which we must read and interpret, not simply enjoy for their own sake.

At the time Bunyan was writing, there was the beginning of a modern, scientific reading of these signs, attempting to deduce natural rather than religious laws from natural phenomena. While the consequences for Christian belief were to be ambivalent, at least part of the original motive for this flows from the same kind of impulse that recorded extraordinary providences as a sign of God's judgement on an apostasizing England.(3) In the years leading up to 1666, which saw the publication of Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* as well as *Grace Abounding,* there were a number of compilations of books of 'prodigies', interpeted by one anonymous commentator in 1661 as God's protest at the removal of godly ministers (Bunyan, you will remember, was in prison for preaching at the time): 'the defect of their ministry hath been eminently supplied by the *Lords* immediate preaching to us from *Heaven* in the great and wonderful works of his Providence'.(4) The material world, then, is full of signs of God's intentions. In the case of interpreting prodigies, the seventeenth-century word for 'signs and wonders', 'antagonism' may not be the right word to describe the relationship between phenomenon and meaning; when it comes to the way in which ordinary, or at least some specifically personal experience is interpreted, there may be something to it. The way that many seventeenth-century Christians told their story shows what to a modern reader is a ruthless selectivity.

It used to worry me that all we learn from *Grace Abounding* about Bunyan's first wife (who had died in the interim) is that she brought two books of piety with her as a kind of dowry. It is the kind of

tough, even unnerving spareness that also marks *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But Bunyan is positively prodigal in his supply of information compared to some. In the experiences appended to Samuel Petto's *The Voice of the Spirit* (1654), we are left completely vague as to circumstantial detail. Even the metaphorical language of transcendence is missing. Dean Ebner identifies a spectrum of practice across the various denominations:

> Baptists and Independents employ a tight, psychological structure, antithetical syntax, mental dialogues, Biblical allusiveness and homely metaphor; Anglicans use an episodic and digressive structure; Quakers have a habit of substituting metaphorical language for exact description, of employing a syntax of linear addition and cultivating discontinuity of narrative; and Presbyterians alternate internal and external experience as a structural pattern.(5)

The more radical, the less historical. There are some exceptions, but, bearing in mind the spectrum from Baxter to Coppe, it is an accurate summary. It will not do to regard this feature as simply a reflection of the level of political interest in the various groups, and thus their interest in the outcome of public (as opposed to private) events. Theology may be a more important indicator: the early Quakers were less interested in incarnation, and so less likely to see the intrinsic importance of the material world. At least, it is in those terms that Bunyan, in his first published works, attacked the Quaker Edward Burroughs, suspicious of his stressing of the 'Christ within' as against Christ 'the son of Mary'. It is not a completely satisfactory controversy, because the opponents go past each other at key points, and Bunyan can no more deal with Burroughs on John's Gospel than Burroughs can deal with Bunyan on Paul. But Bunyan does recognise that he needs a Christ within as well:

> Q. But do not the Scriptures make mention of a Christ within? 2 Cor.13.5.
> A. Yes, and he that hath not the spirit of Christ is none of his. Rom.8.9. But he that hath it, is led out of himself by it; and as I said before, it shews the soul, what the blessed son of the Virgin Mary hath done and suffered, and is a doing for it.(6)

'He that hath it, is led out of himself by it' is the key idea here: that inward experience should not stay simply inward. It is, in effect, Bunyan's equivalent of the sacrament, the outward sign of inward grace; or, more precisely, the way in which he identifies himself with Christ, and takes hold of Christ's work for himself.

(b) Acceptability How were these signs of grace to be judged? Without a hierarchical church polity, the local group, the gathered church, had to discern the working of the Spirit. It is in this context that we must see the various formal contraints on the spiritual autobiographies that arose from the mid-seventeenth-century Puritan and Nonconformist churches. One is the necessity of giving an account of one's spiritual experience to gain entrance, either to the membership of a gathered church, or as an accepted preacher of the

gospel (in this latter case, recognition by other churches was important, and so these are more likely to have been published). The other form, parallel to the funeral sermon tradition, is the bequest, the posthumously published account, often left to the writer's family rather than the faithful in general. Both share aims - to encourage and inform believers and waverers in the providential and saving work of Christ. Particularly after the Restoration, they read like crisis documents; as A. W. Brink argues:

> the urge to record inward experience always occurred in close relation to disturbing external events, and that the pressure of historical circumstances forced men of the Puritan variety to look for religious insight and certainty above all else.(7)

Before considering some examples, let us consider three kinds of evidence which might be expected of a Puritan spiritual autobiography: the understanding of the process of salvation, the rules of gathered churches, and a text which encourages keeping a journal.

Out of a number of early Puritan treatises on conversion I have chosen one by William Perkins, a Cambridge preacher, one of the founding fathers of Puritan doctrine. *The Foundation of Christian Religion* (1591) is a kind of extended catechism. There is also an incidental parallel with the language of *Grace Abounding:* at the beginning of the third section Perkins writes 'A Dog or a Toad when they die, all their miserie is ended: but when a man dieth, then is the beginning of his woe'.(8) At a depressed moment in *Grace Abounding,* Bunyan writes 'Now again I blessed the condition of the Dogge and Toad, and counted the estate of everything that God had made far better than this dreadful state of mine'.[p.33]

According to Perkins, God prepares men's hearts by 'bruising them, as one would break a hard stone to powder' and by a sight of the moral law. Next come three 'inward motions of the heart', acknowledging the need of Christ, 'an hungring desire and a longing to be made partakers of Christ', and praying with fervency. Perkins then notes a movement from the least measure of faith to the state of assurance, when repentance and struggling against the world, the flesh and the devil have been practised for a while.

Perkins is, then, producing a very confident pattern and psychology of the conversion experience, probably in deliberate contrast to the kind of agonising that informs not only Bunyan's but others' conversion narratives; it is the overview of the experienced pastor. If we translate this into literary terms, we might say that it expects emotional intensity and inwardness from conversion narratives conforming to its pattern; along with a certain, recognisable number of 'moves' from calling to assurance. This second point reminds us of Propp's Formalist analysis of the folk tale, where character is seen as a function of action, and where stories are built out of a limited range of 'moves' (e.g. hero is given magic helper) which always occur in the same order, although with the possibility of redoubling certain sequences.(9) Translate folk fatalism into Calvinism and you have the tensions of Puritan narrative - intense, inward individualism on the one hand, and a recognition of predestination on the other. Weaken

the latter, and you are heading towards Defoe.

Most of the actual narratives that have survived are those of preachers; the justification might be that preaching is a more public activity, and that the call to preach needed to be published and defended beyond the bounds of one church fellowship. However, some collections of ordinary believers' experiences do survive. *Experiences of Sundry Believers* (1652) was collected by Henry Walker, and printed with a preface by Vavasor Powell, a Welsh evangelist who may have been the model for Mr Valiant-for-Truth.(10)

The 'experiences' were related on a day leading up to the formation of the church. Many of them are not stories at all but itemisings of the speaker's attitude to themselves, the church and God. The focus is away from past conversion to present attitude. There are some exceptions, like T.R., a sailer whose numerous escapes, from the Turks, starvation, drowning, and Roman Catholics, form the bulk of his experience. There is no summary; only the formula 'it pleased God', and the gladness in affliction which is taken as the principal sign of grace. But sailors are inveterate story-tellers. The others who tell a story seem mostly to come from outside London, where the church was gathered; it may be that the Londoners knew each others' stories, and those from outside, like M.W., whose husband was killed by Royalists, and who was converted after reading a section of a Bible while hiding in a barn, needed to be more informative to be accepted.

The most riveting story is E.C.'s; her two journeys to the brink of suicide, one in the grip of post-natal depression by a pond in Leeds, are precisely located and told. On seeking 'to joyne myself to that society which was truly godly', she discovers that the real problem was that she loved her husband too much in a fleshly sense. But, she says after he has left her, 'I should not hang upon husks'. It is a little like Mercy in the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* refusing Brisk's marriage proposal as a clog to her soul. Like many of these folk, E.C. has a vivid sense of the presence of the Devil and the voice of God, like a scene from *Dr Faustus*. What seemed in the sixteenth-century drama to be dramatised doctrine has become inner reality for these seventeenth-century Christians.

M.K., whose experience is the longest in this collection, is also a woman, though she has a different frame of cultural reference in her sophisticated sense of her story as a tragical comedy, and her daily readings as a child in Erasmus on the four evangelists. Like many of her fellow-believers, she feels guilty for the death of a near relative; but it is only after her marriage to a minister's son, when they spend time and money in idleness, that Satan makes his appearance, persuading her that there is no God. But this is followed by the most striking moment in the narrative, when she goes to the top of her house, opens the window, and looks out on the trees and birds; she then realizes 'they could not make themselves'.

M.K.'s experience shows clearly enough that conversion may not be the most vividly realised moment in these narratives. James Olney argues that autobiography is a search for a metaphor 'which will

express the unknown in terms of the known'.(11) We might extend this to say that many of the most effective of the autobiographies of this period have a symbolic, even visionary axis, which by its very intensity (spiritual and literary) seems to organise the rest of the narrative round it. *Grace Abounding* has more than one, though - the voice of God calling Bunyan from the game of cat, the vision of the people of Bedford in the sun, separated from him by a narrow opening, and the fear of the church bell falling on him. But then this is paralleled by the principal structural feature of the book, that just when one thinks that Bunyan has arrived, he is plunged into doubt or despair again, until, eventually, there is some settled sense of assurance.

Something of that confluence of spiritual and literary intensity can be seen in Charles Doe's *Collection of Experiences of the Work of Grace* (1700). Doe was a friend and publisher of Bunyan, and reading Bunyan occurs as a staging post in two of the three accounts Doe prints. It would seem here that the sense of imminent Hell has more of an effect on their imaginations than the rapture of conversion. So Will Davenport is 'awakened' by a lecture (i.e. sermon) and resolves to give up swearing; but as he is walking:

> me thoughts I saw my self hang over a bottomless pit by a small Cobweb, and every blast of Wind did so shake me, that I was amazed I was not dropt long before; as from this time I began to see that my Estate was not safe.(12)

Thomas Shepard's autobiography, posthumous and addressed to his son, focuses first of all on an extraordinary escape from shipwreck as he was sailing to New England; only then does the story return to his birth and conversion. The escape is obviously the symbolic axis of his story, and it is matched by a strong emphasis on Providence throughout the story - though this is usually more of a feature of the bequest than the entrance qualification.(13)

It is not so obvious, then, that these Christians are writing their stories to a pattern with conversion as the central axis. Although the sequence we saw in Perkins is observable in many, with a few omissions or redoubling of the sequence, there is considerable sophistication in handling and knowledge, even in apparently uneducated converts. But should the pattern disturb us, as a sign of inauthenticity, of conforming to the pattern set down rather than the individuality of the experience?

On the one hand, the pattern can be seen as an attempt to say to fellow-Christians 'I'm part of you' as well as 'I'm right with God' - testimony to a community experience, not just a private one. Something like one in two of the accounts I have read point to love for fellow-Christians as a mark of conversion.

But Richard Baxter had less confidence in the pattern, indeed seems to have found it a hindrance:

> And as for those doubts of my own salvation, which exercised me many years, the chiefest cause of them were these:

> 1. Because I could not distinctly trace the workings of the Spirit on my heart in that method which Mr Bolton, Mr Hooker, Mr Rogers and other divines describe; nor knew the time of my conversion, being wrought on by the forementioned degrees. But since then I understood that the soul is in too dark and passionate a plight at first to be able to keep an exact account of the order of its own operations ... I understood at last that God breaketh not all men's hearts alike.(14)

For Baxter, one route out of this was to recognise that the Spirit worked through the body - 'a soul in flesh doth work so much after the manner of the flesh that it much desireth sensible apprehensions' - the other was that 'education is God's ordinary way for the conveyance of his grace, and ought no more to be set in opposition to the Spirit than the preaching of the Word'. Baxter was unusual, but he does point to a hesitation within a fairly mainstream Puritanism. But his story comes out much later (posthumously edited in 1696), and is not about authenticating ministry or membership in the same way that the early flowering of Puritan spiritual autobiography is.

Dating can also help resolve a recent critical view of *Grace Abounding*. Many readers have noticed the importance of the active language relating to Scripture in the book - 'the words broke in upon my mind', 'that Word would sometimes create in my heart a peaceable pause', 'That Scripture did also tear and rend my soul', and so on. [pp.22-3, 26, 33] Commenting on this, Peter Carlton argues: 'Bunyan represents himself as a passive locus for the activity of alien agents' and thus objectifies the subjective without a proper, self-conscious and responsible sense of the conventions that govern that move.(15) Apart from the implicit denial of a certain kind of spiritual experience that Carlton himself takes for granted, this misses the function of the date of telling the story in the convention. In 1666 Bunyan had been converted for about fifteen years and had been ministering for ten. He is looking back and identifying a pattern of experience which had once seemed random, and thus suggesting that the power of God was more significant than that of the authorities who were enforcing passivity on him in prison at the time of writing.

One's own experiences, other Christians', God's, the Devil's: it is a way of dealing with experience which can all be attributed to identifiable causes. There may be doubts - no stigma there - frustration and opposition. Few of these accounts are suspiciously neat. But nearly all of them are confident about causation and concrete in its expression. Not, for instance, 'I felt suicidal', but 'I have been waken in the night by the devil ... and directed where to have the knife'.(16)

2. THE LANGUAGE OF INWARD EXPERIENCE

The language and the experience are not so separable that we can say one precedes the other. In an important sense the language determines the experience: it is part of the perception of it as it happens to us. This is particularly the case when the experience is closely interwoven with a text like the Bible.

Grace Abounding is most striking in its description of inward experience because the language is so physical - 'down I fell as a Bird that is shot from the top of a tree, into great guilt and fearful despair'. [p.43] Nor is it simply a matter of emotional intensity; there are all those images of the either/or of faith, like the narrow gap in the wall, or the child fallen into the millpit, and the Biblical images that match them. These contrast with the images of Catholic and Anglican devotion - St Teresa's watered garden, Donne's passing-bell, for example - which tend to stress that spiritual experience is a continuum, and that mankind is an indivisible whole. Also, when Donne is riding westward on Good Friday, he is able to see that, in a paradoxical fashion, as an image of his spiritual state: he is facing in the wrong direction, and yet in the right one. Bunyan has no such method of reconciling opposites; rather he wishes to preserve them as markers. His interest in place is as a trigger to memory, that crucial spiritual virtue for the Puritans - 'Have you forgot the Close, the Milk-house, the Stable, the Barn and the like, where *God* did visit your soul?' [p.3]

We might expect that key Reformation doctrine, justification by faith, to generate lots of legal metaphors and trial scenes, but they are oddly absent. It is as if the sects had such a bad experience of courts that the image was corrupted in their mind; God was not to be confused with Judge Hategood.

Charles Doe also demonstrates some sophistication in his handling of images. He describes his weariness on the way to a fair in 1674 (he was a combmaker and going to sell) as follows:

> but presently came into my Mind, as if spoken or intended to me, that Scripture, *Hold out to the end, and thou shalt be saved.* I knew very well, that that Text was not written concerning my kind of travelling.(17)

What this use of images points to is that, for many Puritans, the language of spiritual illumination was the language of scriptural exegesis. The habit of mind derived from all those sermons they heard expounding the word of God finds its way into the experiences and relations as 'then was that Scripture opened unto me'.

These works were written at a time when the language of nature as a medium for God to speak through was being viewed in a new way. From the surviving medieval notion, the universe as a source of detailed messages to be read allegorically (as in *Mr Badman*), to the concept of an organised entity obeying laws and thus speaking in more general terms of the beneficence and power of God is a major shift. With a potential gap opening up between nature (the general truth) and grace (the specific intervention) it has its dangers, but it does not do to be nostalgic about such shifts in the history of ideas, as if an intellectual Eden existed before them. But the shift does lead to a century of abstraction in the Christian language of inwardness (with the exception of Charles Wesley). Is there ever a moment in Christian history when we can go back to Adam's naming, the seamless join between words and object, without hesitation or mistake? As Bunyan sees it, the world is a place where God visits us, but it is also a

wilderness through which we pass, and for that a wilderness language is best. But perhaps that cut-down simplicity demands a confidence in the self's simplicity, individuality and authenticity - something that is increasingly under question in contemporary thinking about 'the subject'.

3. SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE CRISIS OF THE SUBJECT

Part of the post-structuralist hostility to metaphysics has focused on the 'subject', the individual. What is under attack is the Cartesian *cogito* which, it is argued, provides 'the notion of a constituting ego which offers itself as a phenomenological centre from which *free will* radiates into the world, establishing meaning'.(18) Instead, Benoist proposes a man as 'the great absence' in a network of relationships - syntactic patterns, structures of kinship, linguistics, and so on.

The really influential statements have come from Lacan and Foucault; in the context of French ideas, their main targets have been Enlightenment and Romantic ideas of the subject. But is not the Christian concept of the individual, responsible before God, also under threat from such ideas, increasingly popular in literary critical circles? In Michael Edwards' chapter on language in *Towards a Christian Poetics,* he puts up an interesting counter to this, that Lacan's notions of 'decentering' the self, lack and gap are exactly what one might expect of a 'fallen' mankind, and so the concepts are less threatening to the Christian than to the secular humanist.(19)

It is certainly something one can find in the English seventeenth century, as in the beginning of this poem of 1647:

> Traitor Self, why do I try
> Thee, my bitterest enemy?
> What can I bear,
> Alas! more dear,
> Than is this centre of myself, my heart?
> Yet all those trains that blow me up lie there,
> Hid in so small a part.(20)

Michael Foucault, probably the most important of these thinkers, and the most influential in Britain, is interestingly elegiac by comparison to some of the more carnivalesque decenterers who rejoice in the death of the old bourgeous subject. In the wake of Nietzsche, he suggests:

> it becomes apparent, then, that the death of God and the last man are engaged in a contest with more than one round: is it not the last man who annouces that he has killed God, thus situating his language, his thought, his laughter in the space of that already dead God, yet positing himself also as he who has killed God and whose existence includes the freedom and the decision of that murder? Thus, the last man is at the same time older and yet younger than the death of God; since he has killed God, it is he himself who must answer for his own finitude; but since it is in the death of God that he speaks, thinks and exists, his murder is itself doomed to die; new

> gods, the same gods, are already swelling the future Ocean; man will disappear.(21)

The death of God is the death of 'man'; but interestingly for a seventeenth-century perspective, the problem turns into one of judgement. Man is he who has killed God and taken the responsibility, but the consequence is his own death, conceptually, as he explodes into the world upside-down of laughter, wearing only masks behind which is no longer any true 'identity'. The centre cannot hold because it no longer exists. But to a Christian 'I told you so - that's what happens to you if you attempt to dispose of God' comes the challenge that the idea of the individual is a 'fold in history', and that the rise of these autobiographies at a particular juncture, quite late in Christian history, is evidence of that. And what can now become of our ideas of a Last Judgement on individuals thus decentered in (Benoist again) 'the short-lived metaphysical period of consciousness'?

The challenge is not easy to answer, or to dismiss. The elements of a study of 'man', from these autobiographies, would be of a self in deep crisis, dependent on grace, providence and the community of believers; a far cry from the self made progressively more knowable through the human and natural sciences of the last two centuries. It is, perhaps, in the crisis of formation, rather than dissolution, which is the story of our time; but then the Christian self has always been recognised as a battlefield of words and desires, even if the divine signification of some of those words is called into question by the new philosophy. The spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth century demonstrate that the relationships between individuals, communities and God are difficult to describe and sustain; the language of crisis and alienation is as much a part of the Christian lexicon as selfhood and assurance.(22)

NOTES

1 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock, 1962, p.5. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.

2 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, tr. Willard Trask, 1953, pp.48-9.

3 See Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration*, 1975.

4 Quoted in Michael McKeon, *Poetry and Politics in Restoration England*, 1975, p.196. As McKeon points out, attention to prodigies and their interpretation was a Royalist as well as a Nonconformist practice.

5 Dean Ebner, *Autobiography in Seventeenth Century England*, 1971, p.13.

6 John Bunyan, *Some Gospel-Truths Opened*, 1656 in *Miscellaneous Works*, 1980-, I, 110.

7 A. W. Brink, *A Study in the Literature of Inward Experience 1600-1700*, unpublished London PhD thesis, 1963, p.i.

8 William Perkins, *The Foundation of Christian Religion,1591*, sig.B 1v.

9 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1968; first published in Russian, 1928. My essay 'The structure of The Pilgrim's Progress', *Essays in Poetics*, 4, 1979, 59-70, is an attempt to apply Propp's method to Bunyan's allegory.

10 A memorial poem to Powell begins 'Valiant for truth on earth...';

The Life and Death of Vavasor Powell, 1671, p.191.

11 *Metaphors of Self*, 1972, p.31.

12 Charles Doe, *Collection of Experiences*, 1700.

13 Michael McGiffert, ed., *God&s Plot: the Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard*, 1972.

14 *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. N. H. Keeble, 1974, pp.10-11.

15 Peter Carlton, 'Bunyan: Convention, Language, Authority', *ELH* 51, 1984, pp.17-32.

16 Anna Trapnel, *A Legacy for Saints*, 1654, p.2.

17 Doe, p.31.

18 J.-M. Benoist, *The Structural Revolution*, 1978, p.14.

19 Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, 1984, p.130.

20 John Hall, 'Self' in *Poems*, 1647, reprinted in Saintsbury, *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, 1906, II, p.220.

21 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 1970, p.385.

22 An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the November 1986 meeting of the Literary Studies Group of UCCF; I should like to thank the group for their criticism and encouragement.

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REVIEW

Gordon Wilkins, *By Hands, Bullocks and Prayers*, 1987. Available from author, 1 Hill View Close, Colwall, Malvern, Worcs, WR13 6RF. £8.95 + £1.00 p & p.

This book has a charm of its own and although written about the Kond Hills in India and in particular about the Moorshead Memorial Hospital at Udayagiri; it has something in common with 'Miss Read' and Laurie Lee. The reminiscences of Dr Gordon Wilkins and his wife, Honor, have been considerably helped by the discovery of 170 letters sent home to Gordon's father between 1936 and 1946.

The record is meticulous and wide-ranging. It includes information on how to make needles for record-players, home-invented board games and what to do when the local community runs out of small change, as well as details of local life and the maintenance of good health in the tropics. The period covered begins in the pioneer days of the thirties and is continued to the present day. This must be one of the last records of a pioneer, and thus has an advantage of being able to compare early treatment with some modern techniques. The period also relates to the transfer of responsibility to Indian hands. It is not possible to read this book without developing a respect for the commitment of missionaries referred to and to the continuity of the contribution of several missionary families. Whilst having a clear impact on the local community, these missionaries worked hard to maintain their own culture and tradition amongst themselves. One ponders too on the prayer support which must have been generated by the correspondence.

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