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The Achievement of John Bunyan: The View from the Tercentenary

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As yet, the souvenir shops in Bedford have not issued replicas of Bunyan's portable tinker's anvil; that material and extraordinarily weighty prototype of the burden on Christian's back at the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is still on view at the museum in Bunyan Meeting. But the commemorative tea-towels, mugs and stained-glass windows are out in force, along with a fair clutch of books, conferences and memorial services. Bunyan is still worth appropriating, it would seem, whether for commercial, intellectual or spiritual gain. But what view of Bunyan was coming into focus last year?

Presentation volumes of Bunyan may not be the fashion at Sunday School anniversaries so much these days, but he can now be bought and read almost completely for the first time since the middle of the nineteenth century, and in decent editions. The Oxford *Miscellaneous Works* project, now only three volumes short of the projected twelve, means that Bunyan's sixty works, rather than two or three of them, can be the basis of our sense of him.¹ The allegorist and autobiographer is joined by the preacher, the pastor, the controversialist and the poet. The imaginative reader of Bunyan can begin to recover what it might have been like to be preached to by Bunyan, or argued with, or comforted.

In academic circles, however, the first-fruits of this re-editing have been a better grasp of Bunyan's place in the seventeenth century. With all the work that has been done recently on the Puritan and Nonconformist sects, with an eye on their politics as much as their theology, we can see much more clearly how Bunyan reacted to the way in which radical Puritanism was forced or fell into a relatively quietist Nonconformity. For example, the most recent volume of the *Miscellaneous Works* contains *Seasonable Counsel: or, Advice to Sufferers* (1684), which shows how Bunyan advised his congregation to cope with the renewed persecution of Nonconformists during the Exclusion Crisis.² There is a very clear rejection of the military option: 'If he must be a Warrior, let him levy War against his own unruly passions, and let him fight against those lusts that war against his Soul' (p.34). Though Bunyan had probably served in the Parliamentary army in 1644, when he was just 16, he was always careful to distance himself from violent attempts by Nonconformists

to overthrow the restored monarchy, whether by Venner and the Fifth Monarchists in the 1660s or by Monmouth in the 1680s. Whether this simply reflects a cautiousness understandably produced during twelve years of imprisonment (it is hard to find many dissenters in the period who were imprisoned for longer), or a recognition that the military option had already failed, even before the Restoration, is difficult to tell. There is a relish for military spectacle in some of the scenes in *The Holy War*, counter-marching and banners and so on, but in such a rigorously thought-out allegory it is difficult to discern a call to arms of any but a spiritual sort.

Still, which ever way we take Bunyan's statements about the use of force, he was regarded as a troublemaker by the Bedford gentry who kept him in prison for so long. Although the Nonconformists after 1662 had to develop rapidly a theory of the separation of private religion and public loyalty, the Anglican/Royalist establishment was much slower. The title of Christopher Hill's new biography, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church*, indicates how Bunyan's stands for his right to preach might have seemed to those back in authority. Hill has already argued that 'Bunyan is the most class-conscious writer in English literature. He was always and deliberately on the side of the poor, in style and content.'³ Hill's opposition to 'the usual hagiographical guff' is based on a deep understanding of the political context of the period, and the opposition to the 1650s' upsurge of popular preaching, not just to the poor but by the poor and uneducated. It may be a partial view, but it is probably truer to Bunyan than the stained glass memorials to him that decorate more than one Nonconformist chapel. Most of Christian's opponents in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are Lords or gentry, whatever else they might be at an allegorical level.

An important essay by James Turner, 'Bunyan's Sense of Place', relates the discontinuities in the landscape of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to its author's 'paradoxical and unstable' social position; he came from a despised profession, was excluded from landowning, and yet was descended from yeomen and small traders.⁴ We might add that in later life, a certain celebrity as preacher as well as author meant that he was more secure, with friends like Sir John Shorter, a Lord Mayor of London, though even then the threat of persecution was not too far away.

This interest in Bunyan the radical acts as a counter to a Bunyan who had become increasingly domesticated as the writer of a universal spiritual quest-narrative whose main connexion to the Bedfordshire of his times was topographical. The new emphasis goes back at least to William York Tindall's *John Bunyan Mechanic Preacher* (1936) which, despite its occasional tone of exasperation, did give Bunyan a context in the unlearned sectarian preachers of the 1650s and after. But it is an emphasis that has other implications.

First, it chimes with the 'New Historicism' in English studies, which, with rather more theoretical sophistication than traditional literary history, seeks clues to literature in the history of its time, and diagnoses of its times in the literature. Second, it struck me particularly during the conference on 'Bunyan and his England', held this September at the Open University, that this is also a way in which a secular imagination might grasp something of Bunyan's power.

There is another way of perceiving this, one which might follow J.C. Davis's controversial argument in his book on the Ranters. Davis suggests that Marxist historians like Hill and A.L. Morton 'needed' the existence of the Ranters to validate their sense of the English Civil War to make it seem more of a revolution than it was.⁵ I think the Ranters were much less of a media creation than Davis argues; but we do have to beware of transferring our own sense of what a political organization was back into the seventeenth century. We must also recognize that, certainly for popular movements, Christianity was the only available language for debate about political matters. In those circumstances it is very difficult to distinguish a spirituality-led social radicalism from a popular movement that uses the language of Christian freedom because that is all that is intelligible or acceptable.

All this leads to a much clearer sense of Bunyan's self-definition as a Christian and a preacher in the late 1650s and 1660s. His theology and practice was worked out in conscious opposition to Ranter and Quaker ideas; in resisting their antinomian inwardness, he asserted a spirituality that was no less radically personal, but which adhered more to the pattern of sanctification that had been mapped out by the English Puritans from the 1590s onwards. Bunyan the mechanic preacher was in perceptible agreement with the first Reformers. There is a fascinating episode in *Grace Abounding* where he describes the importance to him of reading Luther on Galatians at a moment of crisis in his conversion: 'I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled as if his Book had been written out of my heart'.⁶ But while Bunyan's experience was Lutheran in its terrors of the Law and sense of release from 'legal righteousness' his doctrine was English Calvinist. Gordon Campbell and Richard Greaves have demonstrated Bunyan's debt to William Perkins, the founding father of 'experimental' Calvinism for the English Puritans.⁷ But though this works well for the doctrine of the sermon-treatises and the schematic *Mapp Shewing the Order . . . of Salvation and Damnation*, there are difficulties in matching the pattern of the Calvinist conversion-experience to the narrative of *Grace Abounding*. I follow Vincent Newey, that it is a mistake to identify a single moment of crisis and certitude for Bunyan, according to the Pauline model, or Perkins's.⁸ The earlier part of the expected pattern is present, the 'legal' conversion after awakening to sinfulness,

followed by a realization that 'doing' and self-satisfied sanctity is not enough. But there is no subsequent resting-place that is free from the assaults of fear. There are moments of assured exaltation, and there is certainty—*Grace Abounding* was written six years into Bunyan's imprisonment for unlicensed preaching, and Bunyan is certain that he was called to preach. To stop preaching, and bow before authority to buy his freedom, would thus be an unthinkable betrayal, like giving in to the temptation to 'sell Christ' that he had resisted earlier in his story. Even so, he confesses his fears, that he will go to the threatened gallows trembling, and thus open his fellow-Christians to ridicule; and he also discloses the doubts and terrors he feels before and after stepping into the pulpit.

Those recurrent fears may be difficult for the pattern-hunter to accommodate, but they do give us a clue to the main purpose of *Grace Abounding*. It is a startling personal testimony—in some ways the crucial text of Bunyan for the late twentieth century, even more than *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But it also needs to be read as a document from persecution to the persecuted, validating Bunyan's divine call to be a preacher even if the law of the land said differently. A persecuted church may fear its adversaries with their apparently limitless prison sentences and the gallows, but that is nothing to the genuine fear of the wrath of God and the assaults of the Devil. It seems that in 1666 Bunyan genuinely feared that he would be hanged for his defiant stand; certainly he had been threatened with death during an earlier court appearance. But these threats had to be seen in the eternal perspective, and so he recalls his experience to remind himself and his church of the much greater dangers of apostasy. Recalling fear may seem an odd way of encouraging the fearful, but Bunyan's work constantly brushes aside false emollients in order to declare the real thing.

Grace Abounding's almost neurotic intensity comes out in the bell-ringing episode:

Now you must know, that before this I had taken much delight in ringing, but my Conscience beginning to be tender, I thought that such a practice was but vain, and therefore forced myself to leave it, yet my mind hanker'd, wherefore I should go to the Steeple house, and look on: though I durst not ring. But I thought this did not become Religion neither, yet I forced my self and would look on still; but quickly after, I began to think, How, if one of the Bells should fall: then I chose to stand under a main Beam that lay over thwart the Steeple from side to side, thinking there I might stand sure: But then I should think again, Should the Bell fall with a swing, it might first hit the Wall, and then rebounding upon me, might kill me for all this beam; this made me stand in the Steeple door, and now thought I, I am safe enough . . . but then it came into my head, how if the steeple it self should fall, and this thought, (it may fall for all I know) would

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when I stood and looked on, continually so shake my mind, that I durst not stand at the Steeple door any longer, but was forced to fly, for fear it should fall upon my head.⁹

That working through of the consequences, if it is not perceived as comic, is likely to have us reaching for the language of pathology, but that might be unnecessarily dismissive. The same impulse can also produce the kind of systematic exploration of the issues in theological works like *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, a relatively early (1659) text in which Bunyan explores the biblical dialectic that underlay his conversion experiences. He did not remain self-absorbed, but made use of his experience to give pastoral counsel to those who were tackling similar feelings.

The exhaustiveness of much of Bunyan's writing is also attributable to his use of a concordance. While his claim (in *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized*) that he used only Bible and concordance in his writings is an understatement, his use of the combination is often evident. The concordance is a way of putting texts together, of exploring the key-words. It also has its dangers, of ignoring contexts and pushing texts together that do not necessarily fit together. But, although paragraphs may suddenly dissolve into a sequence of proof-texts, a more usual result comes from the desire to see the Bible whole. In the experience described in the first half of *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan's head (sometimes his whole body) is assaulted by a whole range of biblical texts, some of which lift him up, some of which seem to stand against him. So the Esau episode seems to indicate that he is lost for ever because he has, albeit involuntarily, 'sold' his birthright; whereas John 6.37 shows that he is accepted by God. One of the most important steps to Christian stability was being able to see which text fitted him in the context of the whole Biblical revelation. Texts no longer seem to fight with each other.¹⁰ It is still important to remember 'the Word that first lay hold upon you; but there is much more to Scripture than that. Yet it still can be said to have one message:

*There is nothing more certain than this, that as to Justification from the curse of the Law, God has rejected man's Righteousness, for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof; and hath accepted, in the room of that, the glorious Righteousness of his Son; because indeed, that, and that onely, is universal, perfect, and equal with his Justice and Holiness. This is in a manner the Contents of the whole Bible, and therefore must needs be most certainly true.*¹¹

Bunyan was a New Testament Christian in a very specific sense. He had felt the crushing weight of the law of Moses, just as Paul had, just as Luther had. The palpable relief of the lost burden in *The Pilgrim's Progress* comes after the terror of the Mount Sinai episode. But what had led Christian in the direction of Mount Sinai was a misunder-

standing, and by 1678, the date of Part One, Bunyan saw that as more likely to come from the doctrine of the Latitudinarian Anglicans than from the kind of fragmented exploration of the Bible in which he had floundered during the early 1650s. The increasing popularity, or rather respectability of the position of the moralising Mr. Worldly Wiseman, introduced in the third edition, had to a large extent replaced the threat from the Quakers that Bunyan had spent his first published books refuting. Edward Fowler, a Bedford Anglican who was later Bishop of Gloucester may be the prototype, though there is also a possible fictional source in Richard Bernard's *The Isle of Man* (1626), which has a Sir Worldly-Wise. Bunyan had attacked Fowler's *Design of Christianity in A Defence of the Doctrine of Justification*. Even the contrast in titles gives an insight into the differences between the new Anglicanism and Bunyan's Reformed Christianity. 'Design' has a cool, almost scientific feel; Bunyan's full title has the wordiness of the older style of exhaustive controversy as well as the key term of the Lutheran Reformation. As Isabel Rivers has pointed out, Fowler's sense of Christ's rôle as essentially exemplary is what really sets him apart from Bunyan's position, but his insistence on 'the purity of the human nature', which Bunyan angrily rejected, comes a close second.¹²

Bunyan's controversial works, we notice, can often be traced to some threat to the local Bedford congregation, though the later ones have a wider application. As he became more widely known as a popular preacher, particularly in the Nonconformist chapels and meeting-houses in London in the late 1670s and 1680s, so the national dilemmas of the Nonconformists come more into focus. But even the earlier defences of the faith in Bedford are not so much warning off rivals in his territory as defending the essentials of his gospel, those promises that had rescued him from the pit of despair. The sentence by sentence approach to refutation most of them take is rather grinding, but there is still a dramatic urgency over the issues which rescues them from the mustiness of long-dead arguments. Not that any of the issues where Bunyan crossed swords have completely gone away. For example, the Quakers may have changed considerably since the 1650s, but the contrast between the doctrines of 'the light within' and the inherent sinfulness of humanity, or the significance of the historic nature of Christ's humanity as against his spiritual kinship with us are still of considerable weight in determining a Christian identity. Both these were issues that Bunyan and Edward Burrough argued over inconclusively in 1656-7. And there are still Edward Fowlers in the Church of England.

Would there be any space for a Bunyan in today's church, though? We do not put people like him in prison any more, though as Richard Burrow's impressive one-man show *John Bunyan Prisoner of Conscience* demonstrates, he was an awkward customer, and a more

repressive regime would be looking for an opportunity. There ought to be a sense of how disturbing and intransigent he could be in any account of him. Like many a working-class visionary, he fits uneasily into organizational slots, and academic pigeon-holes. For a while, he might have been the only imaginative writer of substance that evangelical Christians would endorse one hundred per cent and thus 'safe', but that may have been due to a partial reading of his work as well as a mistake in understanding what literature does. Yet although his church's discipline was quite strict, his ecclesiastical politics were not exclusive. It was not a mistake to hold an ecumenical service in his memory this year, even if much modern ecumenism regards as peripheral what he would have regarded as central. He was congregational in his approach, and there is an element of tolerance built in to the congregational tradition. If a church is gathered, based on the willing commitment of its members rather than the penalties of the church courts, it is going to stress liberty of conscience:

The *Spirit of Christ* is in himself too free, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief: he drives not, but gently leads into all truth, and persuades men to dwell in the tents of like precious Faith; which would lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.¹³

Bunyan, too, in works like *Differences in Judgement about Water-Baptism*, written against the Strict Baptists, has a firm sense that Christians should not divide, or refuse communion, over inessentials. I think modern Baptist historians are right to say he was not a Baptist in the usual sense; the tradition that Bunyan was baptized as an adult believer in the Ouse is only a tradition. It is no empty piety either, to say that Bunyan is a possession of the whole church, because *The Pilgrim's Progress* remains a spiritual classic, even if Bunyan has not really benefitted from the vogue for, or should one say the hunger for, books on spirituality.

By and large, the tercentenary has been surprisingly short of the devotional commentaries on Bunyan that were published in such numbers in 1928. An exception is *Come Wind, Come Weather*, a Lent study guide published jointly by the Baptist Union and the U.R.C.¹⁴ John H. Taylor, its author, oscillates between an interesting devotional exposition of episodes and characters—he is particularly good on forgiveness—and using the text as a springboard into more modern explanations of the same themes. His unease with some of the episodes, or at least his anticipation of modern unease, is a useful indicator of how some of Bunyan's perceptions have been left to one side by distrust of 'egoism and crude literalism'. Bunyan, who learned most of his history from Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, would have been surprised to see Catholic devotion quoted alongside him as mutually reinforcing, but the link is rarely forced or insensitive to

differences. The book reminds us that an episode by episode consideration of *The Pilgrim's Progress* still has great potential as a guide to the Christian life. What we can no longer do, as the nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators tended to, is assume its classic status or its presence in the mind of the reading public, even the Christian reading public.

It still has lots to say. The difficulties we have with it are as instructive as anything. Christian's leaving home, for example: nowadays much of Christian ethics seems to revolve around 'family values', and preventing marriage break-up, or picking up the pieces, occupies the time of many a Christian worker. Christiana does follow, eventually. Six years, and some pirated 'Part Twos' elapse before Bunyan does write about her pilgrimage; I suspect the original 'Part Two' was meant to be *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*. That would fit much better with Bunyan's sense of the choices we face. However, part of Adam's mistake was not leaving; here Bunyan gives us the complement to Milton's analysis in *Paradise Lost*.¹⁵ Certainly Bunyan does have a strong sense of the collective nature of the pilgrimage as well as its loneliness: the importance of fellow-Christians for advice, correction and companionship is as prominent in Part One as it is in its more organized form in Part Two. However, being a pilgrim involves leaving as well as community.

The message of perseverance inherent in the pilgrimage narrative is also interesting in view of current debates in spirituality; the value of discipline on the one hand, the emphasis on claiming the victory on the other. Bunyan steers between the two without exactly taking up a *via media*. Christian's falling asleep is disastrous; he has a hard time getting through the Valley of the Shadow of Death; and there are a number of pilgrims like Pliable who do not stick with it. But there are victories—the defeat of Apollyon, the escape from Doubting Castle and Giant Despair, to say nothing of the successes of Part Two—which suggest that Bunyan has grasped that the New Testament witness can mean martyrdom; but we should not become so anti-triumphalist as to ignore the victory of the resurrection. 'Now all the Preaching, praying, watching, and labour thou hast been at, in thy endeavour to catch men from Satan to God, shall be rewarded with spangling glory.'¹⁶

This brings us to Bunyan's treatment of death. One of the greatest passages in the whole work, the end of Part Two, describes how the pilgrims cope with crossing the river of death. There are some surprising reversals: Mr. Dispondency's daughter Much-Afraid goes through the river singing. The river is 'dry for some, while it has overflowed its Banks for others'.¹⁷ Mr. Badman dies like a lamb. This is a development from Bunyan's earlier fears about appearing on the gallows. He argues that the manner of death is no indication of the soul's destiny. Making one's calling and election sure is something to be done before the death-bed. Relatives need not be alarmed by

the way it goes at the last. Bunyan is just as good at consoling as he is at awakening.

Read him. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a guide to spiritual journeying with its roots deep in the everyday, not mundane but precise, realistic, even humorous. It is a protest document against hypocrisy and irrational hatred. It teaches how to fly from the world and how to live in it. It has the kind of ruggedness that comes from an encounter with the depths. It can still seize on the imagination. We need not be Romantic about this, suggesting that imaginative intensity is good in itself. But neither should we be precisely censoring, checking off each allegorical correspondence to see if it precisely fits. 'Wouldest thou loose thy self, and catch no harm?'¹⁹ That, surely, is the test of a Christian reading experience.

To catch Bunyan whole, there are more works than *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* to come to terms with. But those are still the places to start. They require an imaginative leap back into the seventeenth century as well as insight into a complex man for whom the Bible produced an awareness of deep despair as well as a lively hope. Bunyan's vision and values can still rebuke and encourage the Christian reader in an utterly winning way.

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NOTES

- 1 *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, general editor Roger Sharrock (Oxford 1976-).
- 2 John Bunyan *Seasonable Counsel and A Discourse upon the Pharisee and the Publicane*, ed. Owen C. Watkins, *Miscellaneous Works* Vol. X (Oxford, 1988).
- 3 'The pilgrim tinker-preacher at Vanity Fair', *The Independent*, 30 July 1988, p.15.
- 4 In *The Pilgrim's Progress: Critical and Historical Views*, ed. Vincent Newey (Liverpool, 1980), p.97.
- 5 *Fear, Myth and History* (Cambridge, 1986).
- 6 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1966), p.41 (\$129).
- 7 Gordon Campbell 'The Source of Bunyan's *Mapp of Salvation*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 44 (1981), pp.240-1 and 'Fishing in other men's waters: Bunyan and the Theologians' in *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus*, ed. N.H. Keeble (Oxford, 1988), pp.137-151; Richard L. Greaves, *John Bunyan* (Abingdon, Berks., 1969).
- 8 Vincent Newey, 'With the eyes of my understanding: Bunyan, Experience and Acts of Interpretation' in *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus*, p.202.
- 9 *Grace Abounding*, pp.13-14 (\$34-35).
- 10 See John R. Knott, 'Thou must live upon my Word: Bunyan and the Bible' in *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus*, pp.153-170; and Felicity Nussbaum, 'By these Words I was Sustained: Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*', *ELH* 49 (1982).
- 11 *A Discourse upon the Pharisee and the Publicane* (1685) in *Miscellaneous Works*, X, p.137.
- 12 Isabel Rivers, 'Grace, Holiness and the Pursuit of Happiness: Bunyan and

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Restoration Latitudinarianism' in *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus*, pp.45-69.

- 13 *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, quoted in N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester, 1987), p.10.
- 14 John H. Taylor *Come Wind, Come Weather: Bunyan's Pilgrim in Today's World* (London, 1987).
- 15 I owe this point to N.H. Keeble, *Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p.239.
- 16 John Bunyan, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (1665) in *Miscellaneous Works III*, ed. J. Sears McGee (Oxford, 1987). p.235.
- 17 *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J.B. Wharey, 2nd ed. by Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1960), p.304.
- 18 *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p.7.