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Bunyan: The Prisoner and The Pilgrim

ROGER SHARROCK

Anniversaries have now become such a common coinage that a kind of Gresham's law begins to operate and the less important drive out the really significant ones. The tercentenaries of the death of John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and that of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 are passing without anything like the stir warranted by their part in the moulding of English people. The Revolution settlement established the mould of English political society; Bunyan's book has left an ineffaceable mark on the mental life and forms of thought of English individuals. The images of the latter work were still living and communicable to Dickens and Thackeray and to their readers, the comprehensive title metaphor of *Vanity Fair* or the recurring fable of the individual's pilgrimage along life's road. If the tercentenary celebrations of Bunyan tend to be confined to literary specialists and seventeenth-century scholars it is not because he has been ousted from his place as a classic of religious literature but because educated minds in the present day are no longer fed by the life of the imagination as they were in the Victorian period.

But this imaginative impoverishment is not confined to neglect of Bunyan the writer and creator. Bunyan has another dimension as well as the literary: as one who went to prison for his beliefs he is a hero of the Nonconformist conscience and it can not be said that his religious descendants have done enough to commemorate this fact adequately. Yet he spent twelve years in an imprisonment of varying severity and endured a second imprisonment of part of a year. At any time he might have secured his release if he had given a pledge not to conduct illegal prayer meetings (conventicles) and to preach in the surrounding countryside on behalf of the Bedford separatist church. The present is an age when the liberal or pluralist West is acutely aware of political or religious persecution in other places in the world. Two of our daily papers regularly publish accounts of prisoners of conscience in countries where persecution exists. Perhaps our most available mode for coming to terms with Bunyan three hundred years after his death is to see him like this as a prisoner suffering for his beliefs under an oppressive society. To do so need not separate the Puritan pastor from the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*; the evidence is considerable though not conclusive that the allegory was composed at least in part during the first and longer

imprisonment; if so, the act of bearing witness led directly to the act of creation. The introspective self-examination which Bunyan describes in his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* had to be redirected and projected outwards into the real world of other people in which the prisoner had to suffer; prison was his choice, the act of his free-will, and so in like manner the vision of Christian's journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City was the free act of his creative will. The presences of the pilgrimage, friendly or hostile, are objective realities, not like the tortured figments of his imagination with which he had to struggle in the period of temptation to despair in the early years of his conversion. Certainly the Bible provides the sources both for the dark inwardness of the dramatic contest between Satan and the convert recounted in *Grace Abounding* and for the externalized drama of *The Pilgrim's Progress*; but the overriding difference is that in the latter truths felt inwardly have been transformed into recognizable public facts.

The background to Bunyan's free choice of martyrdom was the confused church policy of Charles II which after his Restoration ranged from universal toleration to violent persecution of all the Nonconformist sects. The Quakers were on the whole more cruelly treated than any other religious group: their refusal to take the oath or to uncover in court laid them open to prosecution under a writ of *praemunire* irrespective of proceedings under the new legislation aimed specifically at behaviour disobedient to the Act of Uniformity. By Charles II's Declaration of Breda issued in May 1660 before he left Holland to claim his throne, toleration was promised to all peaceable Christians, and it was hoped that Parliament would endorse this document after giving to it 'mature deliberation.' At the Savoy conference Anglicans and Presbyterians attempted to hammer out a form of modified episcopacy. But the intolerance of some bishops, especially Sheldon, and the hostility of Charles's chief minister Clarendon, but finally the appetite for revenge of the ordinary country gentry, made all accommodation impossible. The latter had suffered from war, fines and sequestrations; their charge of disloyalty against Nonconformists was partly a statement of their real attitude to the political society of the Restoration, though beside the point when applied to the non-resistance of the Quakers and many others. Though his motives may have been influenced by his desire to obtain rights for his fellow Catholics Charles does seem to have had a temperamental inclination to tolerance which was in advance of his time, or as cynics have suggested, a mark of his possessing no profound religious feeling. In any case, when the scars of the Civil War were finally healed, by the establishment of limited monarchy in 1688, legal persecution of all Nonconformists except Catholics ceased¹. The effort represented by the legislation which has come to be known as the Clarendon Code was essentially a rearguard action

on behalf of a closed society whose intellectual claims were no longer valid. A parallel may be found in the spate of witch trials and burnings in the seventeenth century which coincided with a period of increasing scepticism concerning witch phenomena among the educated classes and preceded the eclipse of the belief in witchcraft. Another parallel may be detected in the theological superstructure which as a sop to prejudice Hobbes adds to his essentially secularist argument in the third and fourth books of *Leviathan*.

The Act of Uniformity of 1660 led directly to the ejection of 961 parish clergy, almost a tenth of those in England and Wales, from their livings on Bartholomew's Day, 1662. The Quaker Act of 1661 was followed by the Conventicle Act of 1664 which made illegal all assemblies of five or more persons over sixteen years of age under colour of religion; after fines for a first and second offence, on a third offence the convicted person could be transported to the plantations; then in 1665 the Five Mile Act prevented Nonconformists from living within the boundaries of corporations. Penal legislation was prosecuted with zeal after a new Conventicle Act of 1670 which imposed fines on persons permitting religious meetings to be held in their houses, thus closing a gap in earlier laws. Charles's Second Declaration of Indulgence (1672—the first had been issued after his return to the throne) marked a lull in persecution; it was under this Declaration that Bunyan was released to become pastor of the Bedford congregation.

However Bunyan's prosecution and imprisonment were conducted before any items of the Clarendon Code could be introduced and only six months after the Restoration. He was arrested at a meeting in Lower Samsell in south Bedfordshire on 12 November 1660 and brought before a magistrate on the following day. A month previously the Bedfordshire magistrates had issued an order restoring the Book of Common Prayer as the instrument of public worship. It seems that it was expected that the meeting would be broken up and arrests made. A warrant was out for Bunyan, and a fellow-worshipper, whom he described as 'more afraid of me, than of himself', sought to dissuade him from holding a service. Not to be daunted, he declared,

No, by no means. I will not stir, neither will I have this meeting dismissed for this . . . if I should now run and make an escape, it will be of a very ill savour in the country. For what will my weak and newly-converted brethren think of it, but that I was not so strong in deed as I was in word.²

Bunyan at this time was thirty-two years old. His father had been a brazier, not a travelling tinker, but one who carried out blacksmith's work in a limited area around the village of Elstow, two miles from

Bedford. He also had a cottage in Elstow left him by his father: both men made wills, as did Bunyan. They were not of the very poor who had no property to leave, but belonged to the lower segment of the yeoman class. John Bunyan followed his father's trade and his life would have been unexceptionable but for two events. He was caught up in the national upheaval of the Civil War. He served in a county levy from November 1644 to July 1647. Whether he saw much active service is doubtful; muster rolls with his name on them show that he was drafted for service at the garrison of Newport Pagnell during this period. The governor was Sir Samuel Luke who achieved fictional fame as the Presbyterian knight of Butler's *Hudibras*, the eponymous hero of that poem. It is likely that during his service Bunyan was exposed to the exhortations of some of the itinerant ministers and lay preachers who followed the Parliamentary armies. At least two of the radical sectaries, Paul Hobson and Henry Denne, had preached at Newport Pagnell in the same years.

But the other momentous event of his early life was to come a few years later, after his return to Elstow from the army and his marriage. His religious conversion was spread over three or four years; it was characterized by hideous bouts of spiritual despair during which he felt that he had surrendered or betrayed Christ. The intense Separatist emphasis on salvation by free grace proffered to the sinner in despite of all works or voluntary actions by him dramatically increased the terror of rejection. Texts which seemed to proclaim that rejection rang in his head or seemed sometimes to buffet and strain against him like physical presences.³ These terrors are minutely recorded with all their day-to-day variations, and ebb and flow of psychic energy, in the central sections of *Grace Abounding*, his spiritual autobiography written during the imprisonment. Gradually he overcame his fears, and attached himself to the Bedford separatist congregation founded by John Gifford; this must have been about the middle 1650s. Soon his gift for preaching was discovered, and he also engaged in controversy with the Quakers whose evangelist Edward Burroughs appealed to the same class of small yeomen and tradesmen from which the members of the Bedford church were drawn. His first published work *Some Gospel Truths Opened* (1656) was a salvo in this campaign. By 1658 there is already talk of a charge against him for preaching to conventicles⁴ and in 1659 a letter in the Friends' House Library speaks of the Bedford church as 'Bunyan's people'⁵; already he was assuming a leading position in the area though it was not until 1672 that he became the pastor of what was later known as Bunyan Meeting.

After his arrest Bunyan was brought before a local magistrate Francis Wingate. The vicar of the neighbouring parish of Harlington tried to persuade him to give an undertaking not to preach again; so did William Foster who was to cross his path later as archdeacon of

Bedford: he was promised his freedom if he would give an undertaking. His blunt answer, as reported, was, 'I durst not make any further promise, for my conscience would not suffer me to do it.' When brought before Wingate he was committed for trial and finally came before the quarter sessions at Bedford in January 1661. At the beginning of that month an event had occurred which was likely to prejudice the prisoner's chances in any court. The fanatical Fifth Monarchy advocate Thomas Venner had led a desperate and ineffectual rising in London which had ended in its rapid suppression and his own execution. Inevitably all sectaries including the peaceable Quakers came under suspicion as potentially seditious persons.

Since the laws which were to constitute the Clarendon Code had not yet been framed Bunyan was indicted under the old Elizabethan act against conventicles, 35 Elizabeth cap.i, a law originally aimed at the suppression of Catholic worship.⁶ The penalty prescribed was three months' imprisonment in the first instance; if the offender continued to preach or to attend conventicles and refused to conform to the Church of England, he was liable to transportation. On re-entering the realm without royal license the offender became liable to the penalty of death, though this was rarely if ever invoked for religious disobedience unconnected with treason or sedition. However Bunyan must while he was in prison have heard a garbled version of the punishments possible under the act, or possibly he was deliberately misled by Foster or another in an attempt to break his resistance; for in the early days of confinement he was haunted by the threat of hanging and doubts whether he had the courage to comport himself properly on the scaffold.⁷

The principal justice Sir John Kelynge, later to be lord chief justice, was a local landowner and Royalist who acquired a reputation for harshness and prejudice towards Nonconformists. Yet his dialogue with Bunyan from the bench was not unreasonable, as it is reported in *A Relation of My Imprisonment*. They disputed theology and Scripture together. At one point, in answer to Bunyan's statement that few could say the words of the Lord's Prayer as if having the experience of being born again by the spirit of God, he declared 'that that was a truth.' But the gap in ideas was too great: the defender of the socially and officially acceptable liturgy against one who believed uniquely that 'the spirit itself maketh intercession for us, with sighs and groanings that cannot be uttered.' Kelynge finally lost his patience and Bunyan was sent to prison for three months. He was not brought before the next assizes in April but remained in prison. This may have been a sort of kindness: he was not transported either. One of the justices, Paul Cobb, had interviewed him in his cell and found him still obdurate. Since in his ignorance of procedure he had not sued for pardon, he could not

benefit from the amnesty for prisoners at the King's coronation. At last he did submit a petition to be heard again before the judges. It was carried to London by his second wife Elizabeth whom he had married only the year before. She had lost the child she was carrying through the strain occasioned by his detention (and no doubt through the drudgery of looking single-handedly after the four children to whom she was stepmother). To make such a journey to London must for her have involved some of the trouble and anxiety of travel into a foreign country. Only one of the judges she saw was helpful: the humane and honorable Sir Matthew Hale. He told her that she had three courses: to apply to the King for a pardon, sue out a pardon of the indictment, or to apply for a writ of error. But though Bunyan during 1661 and 1662 exerted himself to have his name inserted in the kalendar, the list of prisoners for trial at assizes, he was not successful; and he was probably too poor to fee lawyers to plead an error in the indictment (the most popular mode of defence in criminal cases in the seventeenth century and one exploited to masterly effect by George Fox).

Contrary to local legend Bunyan's imprisonment could not have been in the old town lock-up on the bridge over the Ouse. His offence had been in the county and he would serve his time in the county gaol.⁸ He had made the great surrender of personal liberty which any form of coercion by the state imposes. He had placed himself among those condemned by the ruling class of the day. As his wife had said with great bravery to Judge Twisden, 'Yes, and because he is a tinker and a poor man, therefore he is despised and cannot have justice.' But after St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, the gaols were filled with Nonconformists, whether ordained ministers or lay preachers, and Bunyan could steel his resolution by feeling that he belonged to an elite of the persecuted. How severe were the conditions of his confinement? It is difficult to be sure because the state of seventeenth-century prisons, as G.R. Cragg has remarked, varied all the way from comparative comfort to indescribable squalor. To understand their nature one must enter a world completely removed from the strict discipline and constant supervision of modern penal methods.⁹ In the county gaols, as in the London prisons of the time, privatization was triumphant. Though in point of law the gaol came under the jurisdiction of the high sheriff of the county, the character of the gaoler was everything. He might even have bought the prison from his predecessor. He usually received no salary and lived on the fees he extracted from the prisoners. The rate of fees varied from gaol to gaol and every incident of prison life was made subject to a fee. The gaoler also catered, at a range of prices, for food, fires, lights and bedding; he controlled a profitable tap for the sale of drinks. A prisoner who was well-off or whose friends were might have the best chamber and his meals sent into him as if he were at an inn. The poor

man might have to live in the common part of the prison with the felons and without a proper bed; and in the worst gaols men and women were herded promiscuously. It is interesting to note, in view of recent discussion of the treatment of prisoners on remand, that in the seventeenth century the majority of the prison population were not condemned felons but debtors and those awaiting trial, with in addition a fluctuating number of recusants and Nonconformists. The poor prisoner who could not afford to send out for meals might have to subsist on the 'county bread',¹⁰ the meagre allowance given out of public funds for food. Even when he had served out his sentence the gaoler would not release him until all his fees were paid.

Conditions might be truly terrible, especially in the dungeons into which Quakers in particular were sometimes thrust. Fox describes the place called Doomsdale in Launceston gaol where the prisoners lay in their own filth;¹¹ also Lancaster, 'a cold, raw, unwholesome place'; and Scarborough Castle where his fingers swelled with rheumatism in a wet room without chimney or fire hearth.¹² The greatest danger was from disease, especially the form of typhus called 'gaol fever', which could during an assize carry off prisoners, turnkeys, counsel and judges; disease was exacerbated by overcrowding during periods when many Nonconformists were arrested at the same time and awaiting trial. With a few exceptions the worst sufferings were due to maladministration and gross neglect. It is a world away from the planned horrors of the concentration camps of the twentieth century, but this moral distinction was of no comfort to the sufferers.

In this unplanned world of muddle and corruption, lenity and laissez-faire, Bunyan at Bedford may have fared better than some prisoners. A century later Bedford was the first gaol to be visited and described by the reformer John Howard after his appointment as High Sheriff of the county. At that time the day-rooms were without fire-place and the prisoners slept upon straw, £5 a year being allowed to the gaoler for that purpose.¹³ There is evidence that Bunyan was allowed out on parole on several occasions, a clear sign that he was on good terms with his gaoler.¹⁴ There is also the legend that once, being seized with misgivings, he arrived back before the expected time; soon afterwards one of the magistrates came to inquire whether he were safely under lock and key, which caused the relieved gaoler to tell him he might come and go as he liked, since he knew when to come and go better than he could tell him. The fact that almost the same story is recounted by John Gratton, the Quaker,¹⁵ does not necessarily make it out to be a tall tale, a sort of exaggerated joke of Restoration prison life. The anecdotes show that parole was a reality; and there is the further evidence of Bunyan's attendance at meetings of the Bedford church recorded in the *Church Book*.¹⁶ Given that imprisonment was not harsh, and even the loss of liberty not total, the gravest feature of life for a seventeenth-century prisoner was his

inability to support his family. Economic disaster might ensue if a man was not there to take the corn to market, or if he were not available to till the fields at the approach of seed-time. However the curious freedom-within-coercion of the Restoration penal system allowed the prisoner to work in some way for money. Here again fortune or industry seemed to favour Bunyan who supported himself and his family by making laces. As an anonymous account of the time says:

He did not spend his time in supine and careless manner, nor eat the bread of idleness, for I have been witness that his own hands have ministered to his and his family's necessities, making many hundreds gross of long tagged laces to fill up the vacancies of his time, which he had learned for that purpose since he had been in prison.

He had his wife and the four children of a former marriage to maintain including a blind daughter Mary. It is not known whether the church was able to help; certainly this separation from his family was the greatest agony brought about by his decision to resist the law.¹⁷

He must have enjoyed sufficient privacy to be able to write and enough privilege to send manuscripts out of prison to the bookseller, even though there must have been difficulty in correcting proofs since in the later seventeenth century this was usually done by overlooking the sheets in the printing-house. Eight books were published during this first imprisonment. One of these was the seminal *Grace Abounding*, the greatest of Puritan spiritual autobiographies and the indispensable key to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Endurance of prison, whatever its hardships or their partial amelioration, produced a complete self-assurance against the world. It is the very opposite of the weakness and self-torture to which the whole man is exposed in the autobiography as it chronicles his painful road towards assurance of salvation in the early 1650s.

Grace Abounding was not ranked very highly by many earlier readers of Bunyan; it was taken to demonstrate only a morbid introspection, the weakest side of the Calvinist life-model. Ruskin was one of these unsympathetic readers. He thought the autobiography dangerous because it encouraged people to think of religion as 'a particular phase of indigestion, coupled with a good imagination and bad conscience.'¹⁸ Modern taste with its preference for portraits of the artist in preference to works of art, has done full, perhaps overflowing justice, to *Grace Abounding*. The achievement of the book is not at all solely in the presentation of a religious psychology or the analysis of a disturbed personality. There is indeed an anticipation of the pure inwardness and organic artistic shaping of later autobiographies and *Bildungsromanen*; *The Prelude* and *Sartor Resartus* immediately spring to mind. M.H. Abrams has drawn attention to the link between Puritan dwelling upon grace and the

Romantic progress through 'epiphanies' or moments of intense personal vision to some final resolution of impulses bringing about the integration of the personality¹⁹ (cf. Wordsworth's 'love of nature leading to love of man'). Bunyan's narrative is artistically constructed in a manner not encountered in other Puritan spiritual autobiographies. The chief pattern in its symmetry is the balancing of two victories: the overcoming of spiritual terrors in the duel with Satan which occupies the central sections, and the overcoming of real physical fears which forms the climax and conclusion when he relates how he goes voluntarily to prison. The fears comprise death by hanging, the economic destruction of his family, and his own severance from free society. The significance of the work lies not in some luxury of the aesthetic of a tormented conscience, but precisely in the fact that all these terrors are overcome and banished from the mind. In so doing our modern distinction of the inner and the outer life is rejected in favour of a conception of the integrity of the whole man.²⁰

There have been other religious thinkers whose thought has been moulded by prison experience. Boethius in the fifth century, the prisoner of the Gothic king Theodoric, worked out his philosophy of Christian consolation, blending revelation with the rational insights of pagan philosophy. The visit of the personified female figure of Philosophy to him in his cell carries a thrilling dramatic charge, and the result was one of the great primary texts of the Christian middle ages, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. In our own dark age there is the example of Christian martyrdom in the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi gaols before he was finally executed at Flossenbergl. All this is recorded in his *Letters from Prison*. There is a parallel between the experience of Bonhoeffer and that of Bunyan: Bonhoeffer began to write poetry while he was in prison, and there is strong evidence that Bunyan came to write *The Pilgrim's Progress* as distinct from sermons and theological treatises while in Bedford gaol. It is after all a great poem or epic of the Christian life. The author refers to the 'Den' or gaol in which he is incarcerated, in the margin at the beginning of the book. He speaks in the prefatory verses of another work by him describing 'the Way and Race of Saints' from which he had obtained his principal metaphor of a journey along the highway. This work is now generally thought to be *The Heavenly Footman*; no first edition survives, but it must be early because of the statement 'so short a time as I have been a professor. Above all there is the close relation of the allegory to *Grace Abounding*. As befits the resolved prisoner who has overcome the pains of inwardness, new fears, doubts and hopes have been projected outwards into publicly recognizable dramatic forms. The prisoner bound to one place gains in imagination the freedom of the movement of life.

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NOTES

- 1 Restrictions continued in force on their rights to hold offices under the Crown or to enter the universities. There is an account of the Restoration church settlement and the laws against Dissenters in Ronald Hutton, *The Restoration: A Political and Religious History of England and Wales 1658–1667* (Oxford, 1985), pp.166–184, 208–14; see also David Ogg, *England in the Reign of Charles II* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1963), i.206–18.
- 2 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1962), p.106. The narrative of his arrest and imprisonment, now usually added to editions of the autobiography, was first published as *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan* in 1765.
- 3 For instance, 'that sentence in the *Hebrews*, For you know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.' *Grace Abounding*, ed.cit., p.44.
- 4 *The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting* facsimile ed. by G.B. Harrison (1928), March 1658: 'what to do with respect to the indictment against bro. Bunyan at ye Assizes for preaching at Eaton.'
- 5 Alexander Parker to George Fox, fourth day of the third month 1659, Friends' House Library, *Swarthmore Transcripts*, iii.45.
- 6 The legislation available against Dissenters in 1660 and subsequently enacted under Restoration parliaments is conveniently summarized in N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester and Athens, Georgia, 1987), pp.45–7.
- 7 *Grace Abounding*, ed.cit., p.100.
- 8 John Brown, *John Bunyan, His Life, Times and Work*, ed. revised by Frank Mott Harrison (1928), pp.151–6.
- 9 For prisons in general in the period Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Prisons under Local Government* (1922), pp.1–37, still remains a classic account; for the treatment of Nonconformist prisoners see G.R. Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1957), pp.88–127.
- 10 It usually took the form of two pennyworth of bread per day.
- 11 *The Journal of George Fox* ed. by John L. Nickalls (Cambridge, 1952), pp.252–4.
- 12 Fox, *Journal*, pp.484–91.
- 13 John Howard, *The State of the Prisons* (3rd ed., 1785) p.238.
- 14 *Grace Abounding*, pp.129–30.
- 15 *A Journal of the Life of that Ancient Servant of Christ, John Gratton* (1805) p.166.
- 16 Records of his attendance are for the earlier and later years of the imprisonment, not for the period October 1661 to October 1668.
- 17 'But notwithstanding these helps, I found myself a man, and compassed with infirmities; the parting with my Wife and Poor Children hath oft been to me in this place as the pulling the flesh from my bones; and that not onely because I am somewhat too fond of these great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, and especially my poor blind Child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides.' *Grace Abounding*, p.98.
- 18 John Ruskin, *The Works*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Vol.IV. *Letters to His Mother* (1903), p.349.
- 19 M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (Oxford, 1971).
- 20 Cf. 'The "heart" in the biblical sense is not the inward life, but the whole man in relation to God. The view that man lives just as much from outwards to inwards as from inwards to outwards is poles apart from the view that his essential nature is to be understood from his intimate background.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1953), p.160.