

“The Wilderness of This World”

— Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*

THE EXPRESSION “Puritan art” still sounds like a paradox. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* gains much of its force from recognising itself in those terms: the very energy of exclusion is one of the reasons for its continuing power.

The extraordinarily compressed first paragraph is a clear example of how this works. The dreamer-narrator is walking through “the wilderness of this world” before he dreams the dream which is the substance of the book. The phrase is at once traditional and biblical, and it is given a particular sharpness by Bunyan’s Puritan consciousness. (I use the term “Puritan” rather than “Dissenting” or “Sectarian”, which might be more accurate in describing a text of the 1670s and 1680s, because of this use of tradition. Politically, Bunyan sounds the authentic sectarian note of defensiveness; aesthetically, he is a radical medievalist in the manner of the Puritan parliamentary lawyers.)

As I walk’d through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a Denn; And I laid me down in that place to sleep: And as I slept I dreamed a Dream. I dreamed, and behold I saw a Man cloathed with Raggs, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own House, a Book in his hand, and a great burden upon his Back. I looked, and saw him open the Book, and Read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled: and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry; saying, *what shall I do?*¹

That first key phrase, now seen in context, puts the narrator into a definite relationship with “the world”. It has nothing fruitful growing in it, and it becomes a hindrance in travelling to the Celestial City. The alliteration, the Psalm-like repetition of words and phrases (“parallelism” as such is not labelled until the eighteenth century) and the idea of sleep and dream, all add up to an impression of world-weariness. The “Denn” is glossed in the margin of the third edition as referring to the gaol where Bunyan was imprisoned. The world is hostile as well as dangerous.

The figure of the pilgrim wandering through a wilderness which is this world is commonplace from medieval times on. Some examples may help to clarify how Bunyan’s pilgrim stands in relation to this tradition.

Robert Henryson’s fable “The Trial of the Fox” (late fifteenth century) contains this stanza in the closing “Moralitas”:

The Meir is Men of gude conditioun,
As Pilgrymes Walkand in this wildernes,

Approvand that for richt Religioun
 Thair God onlie to pleis in everilk place;
 Abstractit from this warldis wretchitnes,
 Fechtand with lust, presumptioun, and pryde,
 And fra this warld in mynd are mortyfyde.²

Henryson's concern here is with the application of the concept. There is a double movement of mind involved: to recognise the world as wretched (the word "wretch" originally meant an exile), and also to mortify oneself in order not to be tied to it. By seeking God's approval the disapproval of the world follows. Chaucer's ballade "Truth" (late fourteenth century) had taken this thought a stage further:

Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!
 Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;
 Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede;
 And trowth thee shal delivere, it is no drede.³

The movement of mind leads into an exhortation to get on the road towards the pilgrim's real home, heaven.

Both these references are miniatures, and as such brief but explicit. When it comes to longer imaginative treatments there arises the problem of what to do with the wilderness. Does it remain simply a word, plucked out of Biblical geography and transplanted into bare figurative use? Or does it become an imagined, visually available landscape? Nicholas Breton, in his *Pilgrimage to Paradise* (1592), takes the second option; and his is an English, rather than a Middle Eastern wilderness:

Now lies this walke, alonge a wildernes,
 A forrest, ful of wild, and cruel beastes:
 The earth untilde, the fruit unhappines,
 The trees all hollow, full of howletes nestes,
 The aier unholosome, or so foule infected:
 As, hardely restes, that may not be rejected.⁴

The interest is, of course, atmospheric rather than topographical, and this is precisely Bunyan's interest in describing this wilderness; though he tends to build his picture around sounds rather than sights. A Puritan suspicion of the visual aid? Perhaps; more likely a reflection of his earlier experience of the voices that called him to salvation or damnation (described in *Grace Abounding*), an experience that leads him to make noise a central feature of his description of hell in *A Few Sighs from Hell* (1658). It is difficult to find any visual detail in *The Pilgrim's Progress* that does not have a direct allegorical significance. And this is in keeping with the idea of the world as a text to be read, an idea that informs a number of Bunyan's works, but one that was gradually going out of use.

As well as this traditional side of the wilderness motif, there is the direct influence of the Bible on Bunyan's imagination to consider. This direct influence is certainly as important as that mediated by the medieval tradition. In Part II of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Honest

makes an explicit reference to the main Biblical source, the wanderings in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land as described in the Pentateuch:

I have seen some that have set out as if they would drive all the World afore them, who yet have in few days, dyed as they in the Wilderness, and so never gat sight of the promised Land.⁵

The wilderness is seen in Old Testament terms as a time of testing ("the day of temptation in the wilderness", Psalm 95, v. 8), which is continued in the temptations of Christ as described in the gospels; and as a time of grace ("the people found grace in the wilderness", Jeremiah 31, v. 2). But perhaps most significant for the reader of Bunyan is the summary of Old Testament faith in Hebrews 11, vv. 13-14:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

The margin of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is dotted with Biblical references; but it is this set of references which provides the over-arching context.

Peter N. Carroll, in a study of the New England Puritan response to the real wilderness, summarises their vision as follows: a place of religious insight, a place of trial and temptation, a refuge, a symbol of sin, and a place to be transformed.⁶ Much of this can be transferred directly into Bunyan's metaphoric wilderness, but there are difficulties. How are we to find a refuge in such a hostile environment? (Even if Red Indians are preferable to English judges.) And is Bunyan really interested in transforming the wilderness? The answer is different for the two parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The pilgrims in Part II demolish Doubting Castle, which is a way of decreasing dangers in the wilderness. Christian and his companions in Part I do not go in for those ground-clearing operations. However, the important staging posts on Christian's pilgrimage, the House of the Interpreter, the House Beautiful and so on, can be seen as part of the church's enterprise in the world, planting gardens in the wilderness, to use the New England expression.

At the end of an illuminating article, John R. Knott comments:

In the terms of Bunyan's narrative one can gain entrance to heaven only by learning to understand the visible world of ordinary experience in the metaphoric terms established by the Word: as an alien and ultimately insubstantial country through which God's people must journey until they attain the ultimate satisfaction of communion with God. To accept this mode of thought is to see in the Exodus a pattern explaining and assuring the deliverance of the faithful of all times.⁷

As he seems to be hinting earlier in the article, this assurance is

problematic because the pilgrim's vision is incomplete. It is at this point that Bunyan skilfully and realistically marries the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints with his own personal and pastoral insights into the actual experience of that doctrine, and provides *The Pilgrim's Progress* with some of its most moving episodes.

The central emotional components of this understanding are fear and courage. The depth of personal experience behind those two abstracts is documented in *Grace Abounding*; Holyman's account of the true pilgrim in Part II of *The Pilgrim's Progress* may serve as a reminder:

There are two things that they have need to be possessed with that go on Pilgrimage, *Courage* and an *unspotted Life*. If they have not *Courage*, they can never hold on their way; and if their Lives be *loose*, they will make the very Name of a *Pilgrim* stink.⁸

Pity is not necessarily the appropriate response to those who fall; the proceedings in the Bedford Meeting Church Book as well as both parts of the allegory remind us of Bunyan's concern for the reputation and integrity of the band of pilgrims. The respect for fear and courage is balanced by a hatred of hypocrisy.

Much of the most interesting recent criticism of *The Pilgrim's Progress* has concentrated on the educative nature of the journey through the wilderness, and in particular the role that memory and meditation have in building the character of the pilgrim.⁹ This approach has a number of merits: the places of rest along the way are understood as integral parts of the action instead of tedious, undramatic interludes; any development of "character" is firmly linked to growth of knowledge in the special, religious sense of that word; and Bunyan's work can be seen as proceeding from earlier seventeenth century concepts of religious discipline, not solely Puritan in origin.

But does this approach do justice to the courage of the true pilgrim? It is true that part of Christian's fear arises from his not having learnt his lessons properly—the slavish fear he demonstrates to the Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains, for instance. But Bunyan also insists on Christian's courage against fearful external assaults—from Apollyon, or from the corrupt court of Vanity Fair. And, perhaps more crucially, he deals sympathetically with the fearful state of mind. In *Grace Abounding* it had been his own; certainly by Part II of *The Pilgrim's Progress* he is dealing with the problem as a pastor would, as the case of Fearing is discussed by Honest and Greatheart. To use Greatheart's elaborate musical metaphor, Mr. Fearing's trouble was that he could never get from playing the bass notes to the higher and more joyful parts of the music of the soul.¹⁰ This is regarded as an imperfection in Fearing; the fears of damnation, which ought naturally to have afflicted him before his experience of conversion were never put completely behind him. Yet he had "the Root of the Matter"; he had entered the Wicket Gate

and had been cheered by the sight of the Cross. Self-effacing, he took comfort in the instruction offered by the House of the Interpreter and the House Beautiful. There were some things he did not fear, things that it might have been natural for him to be afraid of: "When he was come at *Vanity Fair*, I thought he would have fought with all the men in the Fair."¹¹ Worldly temptations are no inducement; Fearful's problems are inward, culminating in a fear of death. It is here that Bunyan moves from tender insight and sympathy into emphasising the picture of a loving God who tempers the trials of men according to their capacities. The Valley of the Shadow of Death is quietened and the River of Death itself is shallower for Fearing—the wilderness is tamed. An accommodating God is the natural concomitant of the genial atmosphere of Part II, but there is a more important aspect of the episode which is pointed to by its close. A number of the pilgrims comment that hearing the story has done them good, because they, too, have been secretly fearful about their "Interest in that Celestial Country".¹² What Bunyan has done is to extend his concept of heroism from the traditional heroics of battle in Christian and Valiant-for-Truth to include the fearful, even within his boldest heroes. The process is parallel to Milton's redefining of the desirable heroic attributes in his major works. The Puritan artist changes the ethical rules of his form. Greatheart, in a curious reversal of the allegorical method, describes Fearful as having "a *Slow of Dispond* in his mind".¹³ But Fearful is heroic in his battle for faith, and, like all the heroes in the book, his triumph is a triumph of grace. James remarks succinctly "No fears, no Grace".¹⁴ Is that what is meant by Fearing having "the Root of the Matter in him", however troublesome he may have been on the way?

We can transfer this insight about the importance of fear back to the very opening of Part I, quoted earlier. The fear of Graceless before he becomes Christian has the same kind of theological significance as the physical elements making up the emblematic picture. To borrow a distinction from Bunyan's *Treatise on the Fear of God* (1674), he is showing godly fear rather than the slavish fear which comes from paying attention to Satan.

The five texts cited in the margin help us to read the rest of the picture properly. The man's clothing is linked to Isaiah 64, v. 6, "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags". Luke 14, v. 33 is the place where Christ says, "Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all he hath, he cannot be my disciple", so the phrase "his face from his own House" is indicative of the affections, not just the body. The "great burden" is identified with sin by the reference to Psalm 38, v. 4, "mine iniquities are gone over my head: as a heavy burden they are too great for me". The Book, of course, is the Bible, and Bunyan chooses Habakkuk 2, v. 2 to emphasise that its message demands a response: "the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it". This might link with the verse "Apology for his Book", the

author's self-defence for publishing an allegory of the Christian life. The last of the five verses is Acts 16, v. 31, where the gaoler asks "What must I do to be saved"; to whom Paul and Silas reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house". In a way this is the most interesting reference of all. More than the others, it gives a specifically doctrinal content to the paragraph. And it settles the issue; he has been effectually called, as the Puritans used to say, and the journey thus becomes more a matter of perseverance than discovery.¹⁵ The text also raises the problem of Christian's family. At this stage they are part of the world, and thus a hindrance to the individual's salvation. Nothing is neutral in this book. In *The Strait Gate*, which immediately precedes Part I of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan notes "in all ages but few have been saved".¹⁶

This investigation of the Biblical background to the opening of the book leads to a more general observation about Bunyan's allegorical technique: that it is a reverse of his expository method. Allegory, in fact, begins as a mode of reading as much as a way of writing.¹⁷ Exposition requires considerable verbal dexterity, but, more than that, it is a way of looking at the world, of apprehending reality, that is directly related to the Christian faith. What lies behind it is "the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality".¹⁸ The seventeenth century version of what Auerbach is pointing to is that understanding the real meaning of things is akin to the act of reading and expounding a text. For Bunyan the Bible is the key to the other texts much as the key of Promise opens the door of Doubting Castle. The danger is to misread the texts and go off, in a worldly fashion, down By-path Meadow.

A grasp of the relationship between Bunyan's practice of expounding texts and his allegorical method contributes to an understanding of some of the salient virtues of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The simplicity with which an important incident is expressed is a consequence of Bunyan's seeing the richness and power behind a single word or phrase, a weight of potential for exposition which he and his audience would have seen. A good example of the way this works is the incident of Christian's encounter with the cross.

The first striking thing is how short the incident is in comparison to its importance in the pilgrimage—after all, it is the point where Christian loses his burden. This leads us to consider the peculiar timeless quality of the journey. A novel exists in a framework of time, but there is little reference to time here.¹⁹ Sometimes it is signified by distance; but what makes this incident convincing as a turning point is the great depth of implication that is brought into play when the words "Cross" and "Sepulchre" are mentioned:

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a *Cross*, and a little below in the bottom, a *Sepulcher*. So I saw in my Dream, that just as *Christian* came

up with the *Cross*, his burden loosed from off his Shoulders, and fell from off his back; and began to tumble; and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.²⁰

Because the Cross is known, through expository preaching, as the place where Christ died to save men from their sins there is no need to reiterate its significance at this point. The effect is that of simplicity combined with considerable and exact theological content. With the word in italics, it is almost as if the cross had become an emblem of itself.

One way in which Bunyan spaces out these simple words so that our attention is drawn to them is by introducing himself as narrator, a relatively rare occurrence. "I saw in my dream" underlines what is to follow. Similarly, the description of Christian's emotional reaction, merry, struck with amazement, crying and leaping for joy, is not simply for psychological realism, but to add weight to the word "cross". The incident contains no description extraneous to the allegorical content of the passage. The scene-setting is reduced to what has a meaning beyond its own physical presence. Even the positioning of the cross on the hill and the sepulchre "below in the bottom" (on the way to hell?) might have an emblematic significance. Using four words where one would do does not just alter the rhythm—and Bunyan has a very good ear—it alerts one to an extra weight of sense. This lack of insignificant detail can be seen as the stylistic equivalent of "the wilderness of this world" idea. The only way to redeem the world of sense is to recognise it as the sphere of God's providential operations, in other words, to allegorize experience. The religious discipline is thus closely allied to a certain kind of artistic discipline. Two further examples may help.

The first is the refusal of worldly wisdom in the encounter with Mr. Worldly Wiseman. Just looking at the pages, he has much more to say for himself than Christian, and this in itself is suspicious. From his earlier published works, Bunyan rates plain dealing in speaking of religious matters very highly, and brevity is the soul of plainness. Worse than that, Mr. Worldly Wiseman speaks like a Latitudinarian. He is not at all happy that Christian has been reading his Bible:

Worl. How camest thou by the burden at first?

Chr. By reading this Book in my hand.

Worl. I thought so; and it is happened unto thee as to other weak men, who meddling with things too high for them, so suddenly fall into thy distractions; which distractions do not only unman men (as thine I perceive has done thee) but they run them upon desperate ventures, to obtain they know not what.²¹

We remember that the governments of both Charles I and Charles II had sought to limit the topics of sermons to expositions of such uncontroversial subjects as were contained in the Prayer Book Cate-

chism, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer.²² Worldly Wiseman is a legalist and a moralist; he offers justification by works, and, interestingly, social status—'credit and good fashion'.²³ Christian has a choice, to be absorbed into the value-system of the world, or to live in it by another. According to Evangelist, it is Mr. Worldly Wiseman who is the alien.²⁴

The other example is the description of heaven. Bunyan was not afraid to describe heaven in terms of the best beauty that earth could offer. But then he is using earthly beauty and status as, precisely, a shadow of what is to come. In *One Thing is Needful* (1688) he meditates:

If palaces which princes build,
Which yet are made of clay,
Do so amaze when much beheld,
Of heaven what shall we say?²⁵

Bunyan's Pinner Hall lecture, *The Greatness of The Soul*, makes it clear that what we can gain of spiritual matters on earth is a shadow and a foretaste of heaven. The following passage comes in the course of a discussion about the "intelligent" soul grasping spiritual mysteries:

I think I may say, without offence to God or man, that one reason why God made the world was, that he might manifest himself, not only by, but to the works which he made; but, I speak with reverence, how could that be, if he did not also make some of his creatures capable of apprehending him in those most high mysteries and methods in which he purposed to reveal himself? But then, what are those creatures which he hath made (unto whom when these things are shown) that are able to take them in and understand them, and so to improve them to God's glory, as he hath ordained and purposed they should, but souls? . . . it is the spirit of a man that goes upwards to God that gave it. For that, and that only, is capable of beholding and understanding the glorious visions of heaven.²⁶

"Improving" is an important word, because that implies the effort that has to be put in. Bunyan emphasises the difficulty of the operation in his description of heaven. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* Christian and Hopeful are shown Heaven through the Shepherd's Perspective Glass, and yet they see "something like the Gate, and also some of the Glory of the Place" because their hands are shaking with fear—the slavish fear of doubt. The vision of heaven is related to current states of spiritual progress.

Once the pilgrims have crossed the river, and have put off mortality, they are able to discourse with the Shining Ones about heaven with more assurance. But even then there is a reticence: "The talk that they had with the Shining Ones, was about the glory of the place, who told them, that the beauty, and the glory of it was inexpressible."²⁷ Exactly, "inexpressible".

Again, we see how Bunyan uses the technique of the intrusive

narrator. In the last two and a half pages we have a whole series of "Then I saw in my Dream", "Now I saw in my Dream", "Then I heard in my Dream", "I also heard", "I wished myself among them", "Now while I was gazing upon all these things", "Then I saw", and finally "So I awoke, and behold it was a Dream", as if by then we needed reminding.²⁸ Because heaven is so difficult to represent, we have to be made aware that this is only an attempt at a representation.

It is the meaning of this vision that is important. Perry Miller writes:

By temperament and by deliberate intention the Puritan was less of an "imagist" than the Anglican and more of an allegorist. He was not insensitive to beauty or sublimity, but in the face of every experience he was obliged to ask himself, What does this signify? What is God saying to me at this moment? . . . whatever made the meaning clearer was better.²⁹

The consequence of this idea for certain specific parts of the book, such as the House of the Interpreter, has been well recognised.³⁰ But it is also important to see how it helps to place these rather recalcitrant incidents into the main structure of the book, the pilgrim's conflict. There is a battle for the mind going on at the level of meditation with an either/or just as relentless as that involved in the struggle with Apollyon. Everything presented to us in the book is either for heaven or for burning. Thus there is a remarkable unity in the book which extends from the nature of the pilgrim's journey to the very mode of perception and description of each place and incident. For the pilgrim everything has to be evaluated—else he might get as far as heaven's gate only to fall back to destruction.

NOTES

¹ *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J. B. Wharey, rev. Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1960), p. 8. (This edition is referred to subsequently as *PP*.)

² Robert Henryson, *Poems and Fables*, ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh, 1933), p. 41.

³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Complete Works*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edition (Boston, 1961), p. 536.

⁴ Nicholas Breton, "The Pilgrimage to Paradise", p. 6 in *Works*, vol. I, ed. Alexander Grosart, reprinted 1966. (Individual works paginated separately.)

⁵ *PP*, p. 257.

⁶ Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness* (New York, 1969).

⁷ John R. Knott, "Bunyan's Gospel Day", *English Literary Renaissance*, III (1973), p. 461.

⁸ *PP*, p. 276.

⁹ Knott, *op. cit.*; U. M. Kaufmann, *The Pilgrim's Progress and Traditions of Puritan Meditation* (New Haven, 1966); Stanley Eugene Fish, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley, 1972).

¹⁰ Cf. Percy Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* (Oxford, 1934), esp. Appendix 11.

¹¹ *PP*, p. 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁵ For "effectual calling" see Richard L. Greaves, *John Bunyan* (Abingdon, 1969), pp. 61-64.

¹⁶ Bunyan, *Works*, ed. George Offor, vol. I, p. 379.

¹⁷ John Macqueen, *Allegory*, 1970; Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory*, 1974.

¹⁸ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. W. R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 49.

¹⁹ Jacques Blondel, "Allégorie et réalisme dans *The Pilgrim's Progress de Bunyan*", *Archives des Lettres Modernes*, III (1959), p. 36.

²⁰ *PP*, p. 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²² Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, 1961, p. 83; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1662*, p. 517.

²³ *PP*, p. 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁵ Bunyan, *Works*, vol. III, p. 730.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 117.

²⁷ *PP*, p. 159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-3.

²⁹ Perry Miller, Introduction to Jonathan Edwards, *Images and Shadows of Divine Things*, p. 4.

³⁰ E.g., Roger Sharrock, "Bunyan and the English Emblem Writers", *Review of English Studies*, XXI (1945), pp. 105-16.

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The Penguin Shorter Atlas of the Bible. Luc. H. Grollenberg. Allen Lane, 1978. £5.95. Pp. 247 plus indices, maps, plates, historical charts. £5.95. (Also published by Penguin Books in paperback, £1.75.)

I always used to say that Grollenberg's *Atlas of the Bible* was the next best thing to a trip to the Holy Land. Its maps covered every stage of biblical history and its articles related that history in detail, with the latest archaeological information available; while its pictures were magnificent and brought the topography and history to a new and vivid life. The trouble was that, while not as expensive as a trip to Palestine, its costs became frightening, so that the "Shorter Grollenberg", published in 1959, was extremely welcome—the equivalent of a long weekend in the country. For Penguin now to have published this shorter atlas at the astonishing price of £1.75 is to have brought Palestine within the reach of the equivalent of the day-tripper. Of course, the original text, first published in 1956, is now somewhat out of date, so much archaeological research having yielded so many new results since then. But if you want a good companion to the Bible, do get this. At this price a whole mine of information is being offered virtually as a gift, and it will be a long time before the mine stops yielding you treasures of every kind.

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