

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)**

John Bunyan

Bunyan's background Bunyan was born in Bedfordshire, the son of a tinsmith, received a minimum education, joined the army and spent three years in it, in his teens, returned from war to marry in his hometown, and settled down to raise his several children, and to follow his father in the tinsmith trade—keeping local pots and pans in useable condition. Troubled inwardly by religious scruples, and sensitive to certain remarks about his over fondness for bell ringing, and for young man games played on the village green, he found himself drifting into religious circles, talking and even preaching among members of the Bedfordshire Free Church, a local expression of dissent against the Anglican Church.

Restoration of the Monarchy With the Restoration of the British monarchy, in 1660, John Bunyan found himself on the wrong side of laws of assembly designed to reserve exclusive rights, to public worship, for the Anglican Church of England. Refusing to accept these laws, Bunyan continued to preach as a dissenter. The result was imprisonment. At first his imprisonment was assigned for three months, but Bunyan's absolute refusal to abjure future preaching led to an increased prison term of what Bunyan in the end became twelve years—with occasional permissions for release, and even for the pleasure of rejoining and preaching at his Bedfordshire Free Church. In 1672 Bunyan was released from prison, having written in jail a good part of his masterpiece, *Pilgrim's Progress*—and other texts, as well, like *Grace Abounding*. The final publication of *Pilgrim's Progress* occurred after Bunyan's release, and was an immediate success.

Bunyan and Milton *Pilgrim's Progress* was completed in the 1670's, and rapidly became a best seller. (It is said to have been the next best seller to the Bible, in British literary history.) We note with fascination that John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 1667, written by a child of privilege and high education, and probing the mysteries of Christian theology, was created out of the same milieu, and virtually at the same time, as *Pilgrim's Progress*. One could hardly imagine a clearer double case study, for grasping the Christian imagination in the seventeenth century, still embroiled in versions of those Christian anti-papal wars which preoccupied the cultural environment of Michel de Montaigne, a century earlier.

The Christian imagination Like Bunyan, Milton had composed a Christian allegory, devoted to other-worldly themes of fall, sinful mind, grace, and paths to redemption within the Christian repertoire. Unlike Milton, Bunyan had projected his theological tale onto a rustic dream, and spread its actions, directed as they were toward the search for salvation, over the course of purportedly naïve narratives of one man's journey onto the path to salvation. Christian, as the man was called, was to be the journeyer who made an exemplary ascent into salvation

The Christian narrative In a dream, Bunyan's narrator recounts a striking scene, which he observes in a field. A weary and ragged man is walking there, obviously in pain and exhausted, crying out that he longs to escape the City of Destruction, in which he was trapped. He declares an immediate catastrophe—the City of Destruction is to be burned to the ground—and he begs his family and friends to flee with him, escaping the disaster. At first they deride him for exaggeration, then they simply attempt to keep him quiet, to leave them in peace.

The Encounter The distraught burden bearer, Christian, who is continually crying for help, eventually encounters a much needed ally, Evangelist, who directs him to a wicket-gate, on the other side of a wide field, 'Do you see yonder shining light?' Christian can barely discern the light, but expresses his readiness to go toward it, and to knock for entry. As he charges across the field, toward the gate, his family spots him, and runs out of the house, begging for Christian to stop. In one of the high dramatic moments, of the entire narrative, Christian ignores his family, and races ahead purposefully, crying 'Life, life! Eternal life!'

Ascending together For a short distance his friend Pliant walks by his side, but when the pair of them reach the Slough of Despond, a viscous and muddy pond, Pliant begins to feel himself being sucked in , and abandons the journey as not for him. Pilgrim soldiers ahead, though, finally getting a fresh push from a fellow named Help, who emerges encouragingly from the Slough, but just as quickly disappears. So much for the protestations of Help. The Slough, as it turns out, is one of the allegorical passages which continually recurs, as an image of the Inherent obstacles on Pilgrim's journey.

Mr. Worldly Wiseman After Help has vanished from the Slough of Despond, characteristically indifferent to the true dilemma facing Christian, Mr. Worldly Wiseman materializes—as out of thin air; thus interchange places In seamless continuum the many characters with whom Christian and his occasional friends, allies, or foes meet in the forthcoming journey to eternal rest. Mr. Worldly Wiseman is above all prudent, and urges Christian not to undertake a perilous journey of uncertain outcome. Instead it would be better, he argues, to take a detour to the pleasant and well run village of Morality. There Christian can live with his wife and children in security and comfort, abandoning the arduous struggle of ascent. Christian is tempted, yet as he is walking toward Morality he sees an austere figure approaching him.

Evangelist It is Evangelist, there to reprove Pilgrim sharply for his initial gesture of leaving the path of righteousness. Pilgrim blushes with shame, realizing that he had been on the verge of yielding to the familiar comforts of his own home. Evangelist urges Pilgrim to head straightway for that wicket-gate which will be the true entry to the path of ascent. As the wicket-gate swims into sight again, we realize how craftily Bunyan has brought us to the present point in the narration, the entrance to the ascent.

Literary strategy The characters around which Bunyan is starting to spread his tale are both characterless—when it comes to fine points of appearance, dress, manner—and vivid, sharply representative of the distinctive attitudes they 'represent.' At the same time, the pace of Bunyan's journey is quick, forceful, goal oriented but fascinatingly doomed to twists and turns, struggles inherent and incremental triumphs, as Pilgrim rises to ever more exalted heights.

Two peculiarities of Bunyan's text

Biblical References To note, about the text Bunyan is laying before us: it is permeated by Biblical references, which are allowed to accumulate around every passage with a Biblical reference behind it. (Bunyan, a devout church goer with an infallible memory for the Bible, had had only two books with him during his twelve months in prison; one was the Bible—the other Fox's *Book of Martyrs*. He found himself able to draw on his dense knowledge, of biblical passages, to enrich his own narrative argument, and to keep the presence of the holy near the weave of his tale.)

Capitalizations The omnipresence of capitalized names with abstract meanings. The capitalization of names, in itself no peculiarity in seventeenth century British spelling of English, distances the persons of the narration—no one goes unnamed—transporting them in an eye to an abstract meaning zone. That is the zone in which they coincide with their presences as Biblical support passages.

The development of the tale

The Cross An inventive series of obstacles awaits the reader who has entered the wicket-gate with Christian. That reader will, of course, surmise that the journey upward, to the Celestial City, will eventually reach its goal. Bunyan does not win attention by raising doubts, about eventual success, but rather by establishing a fascinating set of obstacles to ascent, and of ingenious paths for circumventing disaster. Christian is met, at the far side of the wicket gate, by benign and helpful figures like Good Will, and then Interpreter, who begins to explain to him the sacred Christian symbols which will landmark his journey upward. Christian comes upon the Cross itself, whereupon his burden falls from his back, and in a twinkling he is greeted by Celestial angels, The Shining Ones. (Bunyan shows masterful control of his stage properties, introducing each new phenomenon before the traces of the previous event have left the mind.)

Apollyon and Hell A bleak darkening of Fortune strikes, at just this point, to throw Christian into furious battle with the brutal beast Apollyon, who tries to block the path, and to trick Pilgrim by a dangerous orifice, that leads abruptly downward into the Gates of Hell. Circumventing these nearly fatal obstacles, Christian takes advantage of the much needed presence of Faithful and Hopeful, who give him the courage to take the final bitter strides to the Celestial City. The small band of pilgrims enters joyfully into the golden streets of the City.

Christiana's journey After the journey upward of her husband, Pilgrim, his wife Christiana receives an invitation from Jesus Christ to attempt the salvational journey to the Celestial City. On a long and arduous journey, marked by obstacles and beasts, as well as by life saving acts of mercy, Christiana and her retinue, which has swollen in number by this time, make their ways to the Holy City, where Christiana is reunited with Pilgrim, while the the couple's immediate offspring remain behind, to people the thriving Church of Christ on earth.

Bunyan's genius The success of C.S.Lewis as an allegorist, say in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 1950, still fascinates both children and adults, proving that the Romantic sense of imagination is not the only literary organ in town. Lewis charms, astonishes, and even scares modern readers of all ages, with his *Narnia* series. Christian magic replaces the transformative magic of which Romantic poetry was so rich a source. Bunyan knew how to experience the world allegorically, in terms of jagged intermissions between moments of peril and moments of grace, experienced by simplified figures from Christianized theology. By tapping into universal concerns with grace, life after death, and holy terror, Bunyan assures himself of an audience from within the indestructible center of the human experience.

Study guide

We are surprised to learn that in Bunyan's and Milton's moment, the former was far more popular, widely read and widely sold, than Milton. Why might be surprised? Milton writes in the great literary epic tradition of the West. His language is rich, ornate and Latinate, and his theology is complex and coherent. Unlike Milton, Bunyan is telling a simple tale about simple pilgrims. And yet, Bunyan is telling a tale archetypal search for heaven, on the level of archetypal believers wandering through archetypal landscapes—landscapes plotted out with every kind of obstacle and encounter, as Dante might have stage managed it. We sympathize with Pilgrim and his wife—at the same time we view them as cardboard characters. (Are there characters to sympathize with in *Paradise Lost*? Adam, or Raphael, or even Satan? Or do we sympathize in Milton with our own fall?) Perhaps we get out of Bunyan what we put into the experience of Pilgrim, the tireless quester in ourselves. That might be why Pilgrim's Progress is second only to the Bible in English-reader popularity.

What do you make of the use of abstract, capitalized names in Pilgrim's Progress? Does this practice detract from the 'reality' of the narrative, or does it enhance the narrative by stressing the global argument nestling inside Bunyan's tale? Is Bunyan interested in the reality of his characters? Would his text find a readership in literate circles today, say in a contemporary University course? What would be the chief obstacles to his success?

With Bunyan and Milton before us, are we still on the track of the growing modernity of Early Modern literature? Can we 'think back' to Pico or Erasmus or Sir Thomas More, and feel that we have 'come to some place' won from time, unpeeled to from a core of emergent significance? Are we still convinced of the actuality of this temporal tapestry, and of the, even if stuttering, continuities that are built into it? Surely we did not expect a linear movement into modernity, originating from some ground level point? Surely we were not so enwrapped by what would become the doctrine of 'progress,' which reached gospel status in the nineteenth century? Address this question closely and you will be approaching a critique of the entire project of this book.

