Parallel Narratives and the Question of Novelness in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: A Reading of its Genre

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Abstract:

The present study attempts to probe into a genre reading of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress* as this is deemed as one of the founding texts in English letters. It thus tries to have Bunyan's work re-contextualised within the historical and formal debate of the rise of the novel and the very idea of *Novelness*. Within the framework and practice of novelness, it is proposed here that formal (generic) self-consciousness is pre-structured within the allegorical renditions of the human condition; these renditions are more likely to be seen as gearing toward being part of the pre- or parallel-history of the novel vis-à-vis the debatable norms of formal realism.

Keywords: parallel narratives, inclusionism, novelness, meta-allegory.

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is to be approached here by borrowing the aesthetic of "inclusionism"[1] and, as it were, its ensuing practice of the "*genus universum*"[2] from the field of the medieval literature and criticism. Inclusionism roughly means the meshing together of diverse literary genres, styles, and conventions within the contour of one literary piece of writing. This approach is made necessary by the fact that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not canonised by the now well-established norms of formal realism to be the literary ancestor of the English novel. This is Ian Watt's pivotal argument about the *novelness* of Bunyan's work:

> In the earlier fiction of the Puritan movement … or the stories of Bunyan … we have many elements of the novel: simple language, realistic descriptions of persons and places, and a serious presentation of the moral problems of ordinary individuals. But the significance of the characters and their actions largely depends upon transcendental scheme of things: to say that the persons are allegorical is to say that their earthly reality is not the main object of the

> writer, but rather that he hopes to make us see through them a larger and unseen reality beyond time and place.[3]

However, it might be proposed here that the allegorical scheme of the work has within its own quasi-novelistic discourse what might here be termed as meta-allegorical and para-allegorical facets betrayed in the writer's self-conscious treatment of his material.

The question of whether *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a pre-novel, near-novel, or a novel proper, is not a matter of critical consensus, nor is it characteristically settled in the eighteenth-century English canon. That is why it is such an unrewarding task to judge whether this piece is merely an allegorical rendition conceived within the writer's system of belief, or a moral fable, or, to some extent, a fairy tale, or a religious romance. This concurs with Edward Wagenknecht's pronouncement that views the book as having "a threefold significance ...: it is at once a fairy tale, a picaresque adventure-story, and a realistic novel."[4] Still, Wagenknecht does not underestimate the fact that it is originally "an allegory of the Christian way."[5] However, the book is the pedigree of the intermarriage of various narrative genres and conventions; the fact that makes it, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, go floating in the air of "Novelness"[6]. The following reading will linger upon the question of the parallel narratives/genres that *The Pilgrim's Progress* internalises. This narrative perspectivism, moreover, is the kernel of the inclusionist view of the text.

As a point of departure, one had better make reference to Ian Watt as he draws upon Erich Auerbach's critique of *mimesis*; this would serve as an introduction to the discussion of the genre and the disputed realism of *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

> The gospel narratives treated the doings of humble people with the utmost seriousness and on occasions, indeed, with sublimity; later, this tradition was continued in many of the medieval literary forms, from the lives of the saints to the miracle plays; and it eventually found its greatest expression in Dante's *Divina Commedia*.[7]

This critical statement helps trace the genesis of Bunyan's work and the primordial narratives it might have drawn upon. Furthermore, it helps measure Bunyan's sublimity or seriousness of topic when this comes to be catalysed through his formal and generic consciousness.

The Dantean nature and design of Bunyan's work is everywhere to be found. The quintessential element of the journey is a mutual structural unit in both Dante's epic and Bunyan's quasi-epical design. Added to

this is the serious thematics of the theological bearings in both works: the catholic doctrine in the first and the Puritan doctrine in the second.

To begin with, both works lend themselves so readily to the allegorical scheme and exegesis. *Divine Comedy* has the sub-titling of *Vision* and it does initiate with one when the poet wakes onto a nightmarish wood:

> In the midway of this our mortal life,
> I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
> Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell
> It were no easy task, how savage wild
> That forest, how robust and rough its growth,

And he goes on detailing:

> How first I enter'd it I scarce can say.
> Such sleepy dullness in that instant weigh'd
> My senses down, when the true path I left.[8]

Bunyan's dream vision draws upon Dante's, following the latter's artistry and frame of mind:

> As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and, as I slept. I dreamt a dream.[9]

This is, to a larger extent, the same dream dreamt by the narrator in the *Vision of the Piers Ploughman* by Langland whose Prologue thus goes:

> And I dreamt a marvellous dream: I wag in a wilderness, I could not tell where, and looking Eastward I saw a tower high up against the sun, and splendidly built on a top of hill; and far beneath it was a great gulf, with a dungeon in it, surrounded by deep, dark pits, dreadful to see. But between the tower and the gulf I saw a smooth plain, thronged with all kinds of people, high and low together, moving busily about their worldly affair.[10]

The Dantean poet, the Ploughman's narrator and the Pilgrim-dreamer share the same vision with slight variations. In that view, these narratives are alive and responsive to the expectations of their genre which is, in this case, the allegorical dream vision. One pivotal aspect of this genre is the vision that the dreamer or the poet-narrator has when he falls asleep after wandering and pondering upon the world and what has become of

it. In the main, this world is depicted as a vanity fair or a secular place crying out for salvation while on the brink of the apocalypse. The other critical and genre expectation one meets in these visions is that the world is finally rendered into a dim forest as is the case with Dante, or a wilderness as is the case with Langland and Bunyan.

The dream vision as a convention or a form has much more to it than that. J. F. Goodridge posits:

> This form [dream vision] gave the poet unlimited scope and freedom, though it sometimes led to diffusiveness. It did not require a consistent story, and it allowed him to mix realism with fantasy in whatever proportion he chose. *He could include, within the framework of its debates, almost every variety of human utterance*, from the philosophical lecture to the gossip of the street or tavern. There could be any number of characters—new ones might suddenly appear, while others merged together or disappeared.[11] (Italics added)

This designation of the allegorical dream vision can be so readily applied to the fictional universe as created by Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The heteroglossic nature of this sub-genre; i.e., the variety of its narrative discourses or "speech genres"[12] that allows for "every variety of human utterance" bespeaks the prehistory of the novelistic discourse as it would come to verge upon the quasi-realism with Banyan. Arnold Kettle posits that Bunyan's work, being allegorical and colloquial at once, serves as a link between the medieval allegory and the moral fable of the eighteenth century as represented by Jonathan Swift.[13] So Bunyan's work proves to be transitional as it partakes of the medieval allegories such as Dante's and Langland's, and of the eighteenth-century allegories such as Swift's that annex new venues to the idea and practice of novelness through colloquialism. As such, Bunyan's work might be deemed para-allegorical in that it is replete with the seeds of the near-novelistic genre.

As far as the allegorical exegesis is considered, it varies according to the moral as well as aesthetic purposes the work is put for. In view of that, each poet or writer may or may not fulfil the generic expectations of allegory. Commenting on Dante's *Divina Commedia*, T. S. Eliot posits that allegory "was not a device to enable the uninspired to write verses, but really a mental habit, which when raised to the point of a genius can make a great poet as well as a great mystic or saint."[14] This concurs with what Goodridge has to say with regard to Langland: "His purpose in

writing was first to discover the truth of himself, for allegory is not a poetic device, but a way of thinking."[15] As a mental habit or a way of thinking the allegorical rendition sometimes breaks free from the limitations of the genre, and emits traces of a personal dilemma and its real-worldly mundane ambiance, and this is how, into *The Piers Ploughman*, "we read … the naturalism of the Novel of Manners."[16] The same almost holds true of Dante's journey in the realms of inferno and paradise; his depiction never escapes the presentation of this-worldly topical characters and events of the Florence of the time, and he allows himself a room to depart the allegorical and metaphorical depictions.

As for *The Pilgrim's Progress*, "The Author's Apology", where Bunyan justifies his method of allegorical narrative, can be consulted:

> And thus it was: I, writing of the way
> And race of saints, in this our gospel day,
> Fall suddenly into an allegory.
> ---
> ---
> ---
> And they again began to multiply,
> Like sparks that from the coals of fire do fly.
> Nay, then, thought I, if that you breed so fast,
> I'll put you by yourselves, lest you at last
> Should prove *ad infinitum*, and eat out
> The book that I already am about. (PP l)

Somewhere else in his apology Bunyan goes on telling the reader that God's "gospel laws, in olden times [were] held forth / By types, shadows, and metaphors" (PP 4). Like Dante does in his *Convivio* when he explains and justifies his adopting Thomas Aquinas's four-fold theory of allegory as propounded in the latter's *Summa Theologica*[17], Bunyan validates his artifice as coming naturally to him given the fact that he is treating of a Godly treatise. Moreover, his use of this artifice is meant and intended to depart the traditional lines of allegories such as Dante's and Langland's that cope with the speculative nature of the Catholic faith. This is thus because "the Puritan tradition reinforced the distrust started by the early Protestants for speculative and metaphysical theology."[18] That is why the writer is deploringly deprecating the multiplication of his work into metaphors and shadows that take it adrift and afar in the realms of imagination and divert him from the edifying purpose of the book. Bunyan is thus more concerned with literalisation than with allegorisation, or to put in Louis I. Bredvold's wording: "Bunyan was more interested in experience than in Doctrine."[19] Hence, it

is tempting to say that Bunyan's quasi-realism begins when, in his hands, the traditional allegory is transformed into para-allegory; i.e., his depictions tend to downplay the symbolic facets of the allegorical rendition. That is what draws the wedge between *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other pre-date allegories.

Bunyan's tendency toward literalisation is very well expressed in his defence of his use of this honor-ridden religious-literary form, and while doing so, his art shows aspects of the seventeenth-century baroque allegory. This Bunyan does, to consult Brenda Machosky, through questioning the epistemological nature of this art form and how it confuses the ontology of reality and fiction.[20] This is clearly shown when the writer in his "Conclusion" addresses the reader who might be misled in his reading of the work:

> Now Reader. I have told my dream to thee
> See if thou canst interpret it to me;
> Or to thy self, or neighbour: but take heed
> Of mis-interpreting: for that, instead
> Of doing good, will but thy self abuse. (PP159)

The diffusive nature of allegory is what makes Bunyan worried about having his story misinterpreted. One may have a glimpse of this diffusive nature when, for instance, Christian reaches the Interpreter's House and is led into its chambers. The Interpreter then goes on taking apart the allegorical significance of the scenes and the incidents Christian is taken by. Bunyan here is presenting the reader with his view of the baroque allegory, which is an allegory within an allegory or self-reflexive allegory. Thus, *falling into an allegory* betrays Bunyan's unrest with the illusive nature of his literary vehicle, and, therefore, he finds that it would be safer if he stops the plethora of metaphors, shadows, and tropes, and the misinterpretations that these tropes might proliferate.

He then falls back on experience, instead, and takes to the delineation of the topical issues of his nation. Here Jerusalem becomes England which is caught between the City of Destruction and the Celestial City: the New England.[21] And by so doing he verges upon the utopian fiction which, though not quite realistic, is nearer to literalisation than Dante's Paradiso or Langland's Heavenly Tower. So, in Bunyan's descriptions and observations one is met with the down-to-earth depictions honest to the England of the time

Moreover, this down-to-earthness is helped and sustained by the picaresque element that saturates the work's structure and thematics. Again, the idea of the journey comes into play as one of the realistic genre's legacies handed down to Bunyan from within the English

literature in works such as Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, or, *The Life of Jack Wilton* (1513), or from the world literature in works in the vein of Cervantes's *Done Quixote* (16l5). In this regard, Walter Allen stretches the term 'Picaresque', for this to be applied to Bunyan, making use of the element of journey shared out by *The Pilgrim's Progress* and its precursors in the genre.[22] Accordingly, Christian is seen as the seventeenth-century unfortunate traveler (or, here, fortunate traveler), or Don Quixote De La Mancha of the seventeenth-century Spain, roving the towns and countryside and is met with all sorts of condition and class of man. The tendency towards literalisation and topicality finds its genesis in the rogue-element that brings Bunyan closer to the frontier of realism. In his *Nation and Novel*, Patrick Parinder[23] puts forth a reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, seeing it as a nexus of the medieval romance and the picaresque fiction. Here Bunyan's hero, Christian, is an amalgamation of the Arthurian knight-errant and the picaro.

The allegorical landscape is a composite of the biblical holy land, the land of the folk tales and medieval romance, and contemporary England. This landscape gives space for different interpretations of the work. Here the nexus of the pilgrim-knight-picaro has to have a passage in a land that enriches his story with different narrative nuances. First, this land reminds of the River Jordan and the monument to Lot's wife overlooking the Cities of The Plain. He is heading towards Jerusalem, and during his passage, he happens on the Delectable Mountain where there are both vineyards and the shepherds. And to his horror, he has to come upon Doubting Castle where the Giant Despair is. It is told that he has already overcome the dragon Apollyon. This very Apollyon night be interpreted as a modern English landlord who erects signs to stave off trespassers. Yet, this Apollyon-landlord is more like a fairy-tale figure. The Slough of Despond and the Difficulty Hill are recognizably English main roads, while Vanity Fair is a modern market town in which produce from Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain is brought and exchanged. There is the Valley of Humiliation where "many labouring men have got good estates," and "there is no rattling with coaches, nor rumbling with wheels" (PP 236). This earthly paradise is an England in which poor classes are no longer oppressed by the landowners. So far the depiction of this land goes harmonious with the fairy-land narrative. Still, it is peopled with characters who are spiritual travellers standing in slight contrast with the Arthurian knight and the typical rogue-characters. Nevertheless, when they are related to the landscape, they are made to show aspects typical of the picaresque narratives. Bunyan's pilgrim-errant stops at roadside inns and other resting-places such as the Delectable Mountain and The Palace Beautiful, and he must also be on

guard for fear he will be raided by the highwaymen and the robbers. These are not only fictional strategies but also parallel narratives indispensible for the negotiation of meaning within Bunyan's text; these narratives are, moreover, made to cross the frontier of the genre rubrics and expectations to form the poly-generic facet of novelness. As such, novelness might be taken to be the novel's inherent potential of inclusionism.

This reading has surveyed Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, having as its point of departure the concept of inclusionism. It takes into consideration the allegorical frame and nature of the work. The work is weighed in comparison with other parallel allegorical narratives. Still, the reading never dwells long on this. So, the para-allegorical facets of the work have been touched upon, and here the self-reflexive nature of the work is shown when it betrays some aspects of the baroque allegory of the seventeenth century. The literary kinship between Bunyan's work and other parallel pre-novelistic narratives is highlighted. The work is thus studied as being suffused with elements characteristic of several narrative genres such as the medieval romance, the folk tale, utopia, and the picaresque fiction. Despite of Ian Watt's critique of the work that deems it to be far from being realistic, it is suggested here that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is fraught with the genesis of realism (or the self-reflexive, inclusionist realism) that furthered the rise of the novel, or, to say the least, supplemented the *Novelness* of the English novel.

Notes:

1) Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 29. See also Colie's argument in the third chapter, "Inclusionism: Uncanonical Forms, Mixed Kinds, and *Nova reperta*," pp. 76-102.
2) Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Hamondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1957), p. 80.
3) Edward Wagenknecht, *The Cavalcade of the English Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954), p. 23.
4) Ibid.
5) Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 56.
6) Erich Auerbach, *Mimeses: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Trask (Princeton, 1953), passim, as quoted in Ian watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 82.
7) Dante Alighieri, *The Vision; or, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri* (London: Frederick Warner & Co., 1908), p. 1.
8) John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come, Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream* (London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 9. All references to the text are to

this edition, and pagination is given parenthetically, and henceforth the text will be referred to by the initials (PP) for short.

9) William Langland, *Piers the Ploughman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959), p. 63.
10) J. F. Goodridge, "Introduction" to *Piers the Ploughman*, p. 12.
11) M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1986), p. 60.
12) Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, vol. 1, to George Eliot, 2nd ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 1969), p. 43.
13) T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1932), p. 243.
14) J. F. Goodridge, p.13.
15) Ibid.
16) Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica," in *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, eds. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (New York: W. W. Norton and Englanged, 1967), p. 797.
17) N. N. Keeble, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*: A Puritan Fiction," *Baptist Quarterly* 28.7 (July 1980), p. 324.
18) Louis I. Bredvold, *The Literature of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century 1660-1798* (New York, N.Y.: Collier Books, 1962), p. 41.
19) Brenda Machosky, "Trope and Truth in *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *SEL 1500-1900* 47.1 (Winter 2007), p. 181.
20) Wendell P. Maclntyre, "John Bunyan's 'Celestial City' and Oliver Cromwell's 'Ideal Society'," *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 3 (November 1990), p. 80.
21) Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Harrnondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1954), p.32
22) Patrick Parinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 60 & 61.

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السرود الموازية وسؤال الرواية في رحلة الحاج
لجون بنيان: قراءة اجناسية

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الملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة الولوج في قراءة للنوع الادبي لنص **رحلة الحاج** لجون بنيان بوصفه احد النصوص التأسيسية في الادب الانكليزي.

تعمد الدراسة إلى إعادة موضع هذا النص في سياق النقاش التاريخي والشكلي لأطروحة صعود الرواية وفي الاطار النظري لمفهوم وممارسة الرواية (بمعنى الاتيان بما هو جديد).

تقترح الدراسة أنَّ الوعي الذاتي بالشروط الشكلية (الاجناسية) هو امر متجذر في بنى التمثلات الاليكورية (السرد–مجازية) للتجربة الانسانية، إذ تنحى هذه التمثلات إلى أن تكون جزءًا اصيلًا من تاريخ ما قبل الرواية أو أنها تجترح تاريخا موازيا بإزاء الطرح الخلافي للواقعية الشكلية.