

# THE BUNYAN TERCENTENARY

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THIS year marks the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Bunyan, who was born at Elstow, a village near Bedford, in November 1628. For minor writers, such as Etherege or Pomfret, an anniversary of this sort would mean little more than the temporary exhumation of a reputation long since dead, the laborious examination of the grave by researchers of the burrowing mole variety, and perhaps an arid memorial volume for some graduate school. When, however, a man's work has been great enough to retain vitality for three hundred years, the tercentenary becomes a legitimate occasion for tribute. At such a time one may even justify an attempt to reevaluate the man and his books in the light of a later day.

John Bunyan will actually profit by such a stocktaking. The twentieth century has begun to neglect him, and the few who still praise him do so largely for the wrong reasons, glorifying him as an exponent of their own seventeenth-century theology. If the rising generation is to accept him at all, the true nature of his greatness cannot be too often or too frankly set forth.

A brief summary of his life will itself lay many misconceptions to rest. The son of an honest hard-working tinsmith, he was given a sound elementary education in the historic Grammar School at Bedford. In spite of the frantic accusations of a super-sensitive conscience, it is evident that he was a model son—chaste, temperate, serious-minded, and with the exception of boyhood profanity, phenomenally virtuous for his century and station. At the age of twenty, he married a pious girl, whose sole dowry was two books, *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, and *The Practice of Piety*. These turned his thoughts towards religion, and were soon supplemented by the Bible. For several years he underwent a terrific mental conflict, striving to rise above a psychopathic obsession of guilt to a state of spiritual peace. When conversional experience came at last, he joined the Baptists and began to preach. Contemporary evidence would seem to make him the most powerful evangelist in seventeenth-century England. After the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, it became illegal to hold divine service except in regular churches. Acting on principle, Bunyan refused to conform, and although his pertinacious obstinacy should technic-

ally have resulted in his deportation to America after three months (with hanging if he ventured to return), the kindly lenience of the local officials kept him in loose confinement in one of the Bedford gaols till 1672, comfortably provided for by his Baptist friends. He had already published *Sighs from Hell, or the Groans of a Damned Soul* (1658) and other tracts. In his prison he had leisure to write much more abundantly. His chief intramural works were *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, his great spiritual autobiography, published in 1666, and the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written in 1663 (some say 1675) but not published until 1678. The Declaration of Indulgence in 1672 set him free, and he was comparatively unmolested for the rest of his life. In 1680 he published *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, in 1682 *The Holy War*, and in 1684 the weak second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This closes the list of his principal works, although he published some sixty books and tracts altogether. He died of fever in 1688, as the result of a forced ride through summer rain undertaken to reconcile a father with his son.

To the modern reader, the chief defect of Bunyan's work lies in its ghastly theology, a defect of the Puritan age rather than of the author himself. The law of the universe was that every soul, for its innate depravity, was to be kept alive and fiendishly tortured throughout all eternity. Hell had enlarged itself to accommodate this devilish outworking of the divine will upon the hapless children of men. And the only escape from this lay through a man's conviction of his own utter loathsomeness and through his acceptance of the blood of an innocent god-man shed to appease the wrath of an implacable deity. The outworn terms of this lurid soteriology still survive in the cant babblings of our more conservative theologians. It may be that like many of the coarser orgiastic religions of the past they are of value in the more violent types of soul-sickness. But they have become simply unthinkable as a general interpretation of man's relation to the cosmos.

Particularly painful are Bunyan's own counsels for the pious bewilderment of childhood. "My judgement", he says, "is that men go the wrong way to learn their children to pray. It seems to me a better way for people to tell their children betimes what cursed creatures they are, how they are under the wrath of God by reason of original and actual sin; also to tell them the nature of God's wrath and the duration of misery, which, if they would conscientiously do, they would the sooner learn their children to pray than they do. The way that men learn to pray is by conviction of sin, and this is the way to make our sweet babes do so too".

Poor Bunyan himself seems in this very respect to have been the victim of Puritanism. His childhood imagination, sensitive to a supreme degree, was poisoned by the venomous eschatology of the day. For twenty-five years it made life a torment to him; to the end of his life it seldom ceased to taint his peace of mind. A man who might, under less pernicious auspices in childhood, have grown graciously in spiritual stature without these unspeakable agonies, became, as William James has pointed out, "a typical case of the psychopathic temperament, sensitive in conscience to a diseased degree, beset by doubts, fears and insistent ideas, and a victim of verbal automatisms, both motor and sensory". To his overstrained brain, texts would come in hallucinatory voices and buffet his soul to and fro like a shuttlecock. A nightmare gloom of despair would settle over him: "I was both a burthen and a terror to myself; nor did I ever so know, as now, what it was to be weary of my life and yet afraid to die. How gladly would I have been anything but myself! Anything but a man! And in any condition but my own! . . . Now I blessed the condition of the dog and toad, yea, gladly would I have been in the condition of the dog or horse, for I knew they had no soul to perish under the everlasting weight of Hell or Sin, as mine was like to do. My original and inward pollution, that was my plague and my affliction. Sin and corruption, I said, would as naturally bubble out of my heart as water would bubble out of a fountain. I thought none but the Devil himself could equal me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind. Sure, thought I, I am forsaken of God; and thus I continued for a long while, even for some years together".

Bunyan's theology and spiritual experiences seem repulsive enough to us. The literary form which he most favoured is likewise, in itself, outworn and distasteful. Allegory, especially moral allegory, is one of the dreariest and most futile of literary types. A modern appetite for it we associate either with moral obsession or with a low intelligence quotient. It is hard to comprehend how in romance, satire, vision, and morality play, it could once have been the dominant interest of Europe for centuries. A few great allegories—*The Book of Jonah*, *Deutero-Isaiah*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*—stand out as glorious exceptions to the rule of dullness; but the secret of their power lies in factors quite other than the allegory proper, with all its ingenuity of symbolic device.

When these reservations have been made, the enduring greatness of Bunyan becomes all the more evident; in literary achievement, in character, and in religious thought.

In his writings, his most obvious greatness is in style. His simple inevitability of expression—fresh, vivid, direct, noble—places him among the chief masters of our language. His mind had drunk unfailingly from the pure springs of England's greatest prose work, the King James Bible; and to this cup he had added freely, as recent research has shown, of the poetic wine of Edmund Spenser. That his spiritual zeal also affected his style is indicated by his express declaration that in his writing he sought to deal plainly with God, as God had dealt plainly with him. Nor should this academic reckoning of "influences" overlook the essential directness and lucidity of his own mind as the most important factor of all. A masterful example from *The Pilgrim's Progress* will be worth more than detailed analysis: "After this, it was raised abroad that Mr. Valiant-for-truth was taken with a summons, by the same Post as the other, and had this for a token that the Summons was true: That his Pitcher was broken at the Fountain. When he understood it, he called for his friends and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my Fathers, and tho' with great Difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My Sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my Courage and Skill to him that can get it. My Marks and Scars I carry with me, to be a Witness for me, that I have fought his Battles who now will be my Rewarder. When the Day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the River side, into which as he went, he said, Death, where is thy Sting? And as he went down deeper, he said, Grave, where is thy Victory? So he passed over, and all the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side".

Greater even than Bunyan's style is his imagination. During the latter half of the seventeenth century, he and Milton stand incomparably apart among English writers in this respect. The seeming fantasies of his childhood are paralleled only by those of William Blake. Haunting phantoms so woke him from his sleep that he frightened the family with his cries. He beheld foul spirits in monstrous shapes, puffing flames from their nostrils. Once he dreamed that he saw "the face of heaven as it were on fire, the firmament crackling and shivering with the noise of mighty thunder, and an archangel flew in the midst of heaven, sounding a trumpet". In another boyish vision "an earthquake rent the earth, out of which came bloody flames, and the figures of men tossed up in globes of fire, and falling down again with horrible cries and shrieks and execrations, while devils mingled among them, and laughed aloud at their torments". It is not hard to understand how the

brain of the mature man was inexhaustible in its powers of invention. Few writers are more original than Bunyan; none have greater ability to give their plastic creations the illusion of complete reality. The end of the trial of Faithful is a living example: "Then went the jury out, whose names were Mr. Blindman, Mr. Nogood, Mr. Malice, Mr. Lovelust, Mr. Liveloose, Mr. Heady, Mr. Highmind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Cruelty, Mr. Hatelight, and Mr. Implacable, who every one gave in his private verdict against him among themselves, and afterwards unanimously concluded to bring him in guilty before the judge. And first, Mr. Blindman, the foreman, said: I see clearly that this man is a heretic. Then said Mr. Nogood, Away with such a fellow from the earth. Aye, said Mr. Malice, I hate the very looks of him. Then said Mr. Lovelust, I could never endure him. Nor I, said Mr. Liveloose, for he would always be condemning my way. Hang him, hang him, said Mr. Heady. A sorry scrub, said Mr. Highmind. My heart riseth against him, said Mr. Enmity. He is a rogue, said Mr. Liar. Hanging is too good for him, said Mr. Cruelty. Let us despatch him out of the way, said Mr. Hatelight. Then, said Mr. Implacable, might I have all the world given me, I could not be reconciled to him; therefore, let us forthwith bring him in guilty of death".

But even style and imagination would not account for Bunyan's contribution to the literature of power, apart from the compelling force of experience which lay behind his work. We may deprecate the environment which imposed such spiritual agonies on his youthful mind; we may pity the distracted Elstow tinker as he struggles in the deadly net of the Puritan tradition; but we must grant too that from the terrific intensity of those appalling years he emerged with emotional resources of transcendent power. The people of Verona used to say of Dante as he walked their streets, *Eccovi l'uom ch' e stato all' Inferno*. Poor Bunyan had been in hell too—the hell of a mind driven mad by the horrors of theology—and the experience gave intense reality to all that he wrote. For his works were not intended as literature, nor written for the pleasure of himself or others. He looked into his own heart and wrote of the quest for salvation which gave life significance for him. *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War* no less than *Grace Abounding* live with the heart's blood of his own struggles and triumphs. Where the simple soul of Faithful had found sunshine throughout the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Christian (who is Bunyan himself) passed there through the darkest night of peril. Bunyan knew well the spectres of that lonely way, the whispered suggestions that he might, after all, be striving after an illusion, that moral

values had no meaning except on earth, that he himself was but the fleeting creature of a dying world where "all are dust and shall turn to dust again". He knew also the hazards of Bye-path Meadow and the despairing uncertainties of Doubting Castle. These events have moving reality because they have been lived through by their author.

If we reverence Bunyan's work, we respect the man himself in equal measure. His character, apart from his credal tenets, was great and good. His tolerance in the matter of church membership offended his congregation. Towards his fellowmen, he showed no savage fanaticism, but only tenderness and pity. He was humble, mild in his conversation, rigorously just and honest in all his dealings, and graciously earnest as a peacemaker. Most notable of all, to the modern mind, is his indomitable courage, the courage of a man who has known the most terrible of fears and has outfaced them. The animal courage of a coarse-grained man is far inferior to the self-mastering bravery of a nervous and imaginative one; and we have seen that Bunyan possessed these latter qualities to a superlative degree. Yet he wrestled successfully with his Apollyon; and when imprisonment brought before him the grisly possibilities of hanging, and perhaps of hell, he faced the issue with magnificent fortitude: "Yea, it was my duty to stand to His Word, whether He would ever look upon me or no, or save me at the last. Wherefore, thought I, the point being thus, I am for going on and venturing my eternal state with Christ, whether I have comfort here or no. If God does not come in, thought I, I will leap off the ladder even blindfold into eternity, sink or swim, come heaven, come hell".

We have finally to consider the abiding value of his spiritual message, for our day and for the future. Bunyan's gospel was that of the Puritan party; his books are the truest and most cogent expression of its creed. Our task thus becomes an assay of the permanent worth of that great moral and religious movement.

On the debit side must be placed all the fierce harshness of Puritanism, the crude unloveliness of its mind, the ignorant and bigoted cruelty of its activities. Its whole theological scheme of things has passed into the limbo of discredited nightmares. Yet all this must not blind us to the austere nobility of its quest for righteousness. The English Puritan, like the Hebrew prophet, was a man of one idea. His ruling passion was the government of man's moral nature, the subjection of the whole of life to what he conceived to be a divine plan of "salvation". He had succeeded, to a degree rarely approached in history, in fusing religious enthusi-

asm with an adamantine code of ethical purity. The fruit of this blending was a character of tremendous potency, which, diluted by time, has contributed permanently to the moral strength of the English people, and has been one of the chief elements in their national greatness.

Nor is Bunyan without significance for the religion of the future, that "religion without revelation" which is steadily becoming the faith of all thinking men. As we leave the old familiar headlands behind and push prows of courage and humble sincerity into the "dark broad seas" of scientific reality, we shall have need of some compass for the uncharted deep. A fearless acceptance of nature is not enough. Intellectual integrity is vital, but man has other needs as well; and for these we must have an additional set of values by which to measure and enrich our inner life of experience. The world of beauty must also contribute the transforming influences of music, art, and literature. But above all we shall need a canonisation of moral ideals, through which alone can come that grave stability of character which is the sole guarantee of civilisation's permanence. As long as human society endures, conduct will continue to be three-fourths of life; and the austere seriousness of John Bunyan and his generation will have its message for the sons of men.