
NEGOTIATIONS WITH PARADOX

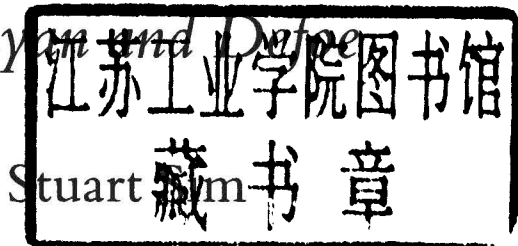
narrative
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STUART SIM

NEGOTIATIONS WITH PARADOX

*Narrative Practice
and Narrative Form in
Bunyan and Defoe*



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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BJECS</i>	<i>British Journal for Eighteenth-century Studies</i>
<i>BQ</i>	<i>Baptist Quarterly</i>
<i>BS</i>	<i>Bunyan Studies</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
<i>ELR</i>	<i>English Literary Renaissance</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>English Studies</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MQ</i>	<i>Modern Quarterly</i>
<i>PBHRS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Psychological Review</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature</i>
<i>SH</i>	<i>Social History</i>
<i>TSE</i>	<i>Texas Studies in English</i>

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

THE debt that Bunyan and Defoe owe to the tradition of spiritual autobiography and the Calvinist-influenced predestinarian soteriology that so often accompanied it (particularly amongst sectarian practitioners) has been well documented.¹ Both writers rely heavily on the genre in their major fictions, and texts such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* are recognisably conversion narratives.² What has been less well documented is the way that the paradoxes associated with both Calvinism and spiritual autobiography shape narrative in the two writers, as well as how paradox functions ideologically within their fictive discourse. That forms the subject-matter of the present work. The particular bias is to identify Bunyan and Defoe as writers who engage in a very direct, indeed often confrontational, manner with the paradoxes inherent in the genre: those paradoxes, for example, connected with predestination, salvation and reprobation, conversion, and grace. Such paradoxes will be seen to disclose large-scale contradictions in the authors' own belief-system – a belief-system in a counter-cultural relationship with the dominant ideology of the period – and their texts will be treated as highly-charged ideological artefacts: determinate productions that operate within a context of conflict-ridden cultural debate.

The underlying Calvinist theology to be found in Bunyan and Defoe's fiction can be considered to contribute a 'narrative of predestination'; that is, a basic framework and set of

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sequences which automatically generate acute personal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and ideological contradictions, within which an author can proceed to explore, in many ways is *forced* to explore, wide-ranging problems concerning the individual's sociological and ontological status. Characterisation practice, narrative form, and ideological subtext in Bunyan and Defoe are profoundly affected by the paradoxes encoded within the narrative of predestination. Those paradoxes surrounding predestination and soteriology cast doubt on the validity of human action and decision making, thus bringing to the fore the problem of free will: a phenomenon loaded with ideological significance in modern European history. In the act of grappling with the complexities of free will and predeterminism, Bunyan and Defoe are brought up against some of the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of personal identity and social existence – again, areas of experience fraught with ideological implications. They are also forced to shape their narratives to accommodate these debates, and in the case of *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, *The Holy War* and *Roxana*, this has resulted in works generally perplexing to the critics, who have not always paid adequate attention to the ideology of form involved. My argument would be that, given their choice of the narrative of predestination as a site of operations, both authors are required to engage in a constant process of negotiation with paradox and its effects. It will be in and around the aporias of Calvinist soteriology that some of the most crucial decisions concerning the development of the modern novel will take place, and these decisions resonate with ideological import, given that both Bunyan and Defoe are engaged in a sustained critique of contemporary social values.

Paradox demands decision, both on the part of the author and his characters, and such decisions dictate the course of narrative. Robinson Crusoe is simultaneously a free-willed individual and a pawn in a divine game-plan to which he can have no access. It is Crusoe's personal decision to break with his family background ('I would be satisfied with nothing but going to Sea'³), but his 'free' decision is played out against a

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divinely-crafted narrative punctuated by providential warnings. Christian, too, has to make a personal decision to flee home and family, but his progress is to be very carefully monitored thereafter by a series of divine agents (one of whom originally planted the seed for the notion of flight in his mind anyway).

Freely arrived at human decisions are seen to shape a journey whose end is already predetermined by divine decree. The pattern applies whatever the individual's nature, and both Mr Badman and Roxana choose to continue as sinners, thereby imposing a certain pattern on their careers, while apparently being predetermined to damnation. Authors and characters are aware, at some level, of being in a constant process of negotiation with their system of belief, and that system of belief in its turn with a dominant establishment ideology. These are fictions which, as Macherey would have it, 'interrogate' ideology;⁴ both consciously, as paradox is manipulated by their polemically-minded authors, and unconsciously, as paradox discloses the layers of contradiction buried within that ideology. Narrative must chart the twists and turns of this complex set of negotiations.

All of Bunyan and Defoe's major fictions can be slotted into the tradition of spiritual autobiography, but for the purposes of this study those works which are most marked by paradox are the most interesting. Those I take to be *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Mr Badman* and *The Holy War* in Bunyan's case; *Robinson Crusoe*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* in Defoe's. I briefly consider the specific character of each author's relationship to the tradition of spiritual autobiography and conversion narrative in the second part of this introduction, prior to detailed analysis of the texts above, in terms of paradox, in later chapters. Also prior to the detailed analysis is an examination of Calvinist soteriology, and then of its incorporation into Puritan prose fiction in the work of one of Bunyan's major influences, Arthur Dent, whose *The Plaine Man's Path-way to Heaven* affected both Bunyan's theological and literary development.⁵ This act of incorporation has considerable ideological significance. Soteriology rapidly

becomes a valuable weapon in the polemical war waged by Puritans and dissenters, allowing them to condemn their opponents as reprobate, hence beyond all possible redemption, and inviting their supporters to identify with the elect élite. The war is fought no less in the field of fiction than of pamphleteering,⁶ and Calvin must be rated a major source of influence in Puritan aesthetics. Theology in this period assumes an ideological position, and Calvinistic Puritanism exploits soteriology for all it is worth as a method of interrogating and undermining the currently dominant ideology.

I also consider another key figure in the development of Puritan aesthetics, the sixteenth-century French logician and Calvinist Petrus Ramus, whose importance to the structural aspect of Puritan writing (fiction and non-fiction) is quite crucial. Combine Calvin and Ramus and you have the underlying metaphysics and argument form of Puritan prose fiction: in effect, the ideological subtext. We are then in a position to consider how, almost immediately, as in the fiction of Dent, the form is brought up against paradox. At that point ideologically-implicated negotiations ensue, and these are followed on through into the relevant Bunyan and Defoe texts.

Bunyan will be seen to be the more straightforwardly politically-engaged writer of the two, hence the more openly judgemental. His Calvinistic division of mankind into mutually exclusive elect and reprobate categories is sharp and severe, and pertains directly to the position of nonconformists under the Restoration settlement, with Bunyan adroitly manipulating predestinarian soteriology's anti-hierarchical bias as a means of questioning the dominant values of his society. Bunyan would seem to be very much on the side of the poor and the dispossessed, and his is an essentially anti-bourgeois position.⁷ The dissenting vision is articulated in fictional form with a distinctively combative element. Parables are being provided for an elect suffering under particularly adverse socio-political conditions. While just as much a product of the Puritan heritage – presbyterian upbringing,

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Dissenting Academy education⁸ – Defoe is not as overtly propagandistic in approach and his targets are, politically speaking, perhaps more diffuse than Bunyan's; although in their own way just as combative and ideologically-sensitive. Both authors' creations confront a hostile world with a body of knowledge rooted in soteriological schemes, and attempt to relate the events of that world, as they impinge on them, to those schemes – with varying degrees of success. Walter J. Ong has referred to the dialectic of 'discourse knowledge' and 'observation knowledge' in the post-Renaissance period, and characterises its mode of operation as a gradual shift from the former to the latter.⁹ That would be a good way of describing what is being enacted in Bunyan and Defoe's fictions. Observation knowledge is being processed through discourse knowledge, external events through internalised soteriological doctrines, in a way that insistently challenges, and requires justification of, the characters' and authors' ideological assumptions. Where Bunyan swiftly moves to shore up his own ideology when contradictions come on the scene, Defoe is more prone to highlight the problems of dealing with such contradictions and to pursue them through to their often unpalatable conclusions. Defoe's attitude to ideology – his own and the dominant one of his society – is the more subversive and interrogatory precisely because he does pursue the contradictions through with such honesty, and he is correspondingly more exercised by the gaps he locates. Discourse and observation mesh together less neatly than they do in Bunyan, albeit that the latter's meshing process requires considerable logical sleight of hand.

Despite such differences each author is recognisably operating within the same area of discourse, sharing many of its ideals and wrestling with its common problems. They are conducting a critique of their respective societies from an ideologically-committed position, and they conceive of this critique within the terms of reference of spiritual autobiography. In the process they establish dissent as a major influence in the English novel tradition, bequeathing to that tradition not just dissent's ideals but also its paradoxes and

contradictions. Although expressed differently in our time, of course, given the decline of religious belief in the interim, those paradoxes and contradictions are now part of our general cultural heritage and are apparently no less intractable than they were in Bunyan and Defoe's world. To observe the authors locked in dialogue with these phenomena is to observe a fundamental cultural conflict being enacted which still touches us all in some respect in the late twentieth century. It is the debate between free will and determinism that we are witnessing. Determinism has a wider frame of reference than it had in the seventeenth century, and now embraces such varieties as the genetic and the sociological (both of which were subsumed under the theological in Bunyan and Defoe's time), but the impact is much the same. Its claim is that the individual is subject to, or victim of, forces out of his control. Arguments can be put forward that genes leave precious little freedom of choice to the individual, or that the poverty cycle makes a mockery of the idea that anyone is free to choose their position on the social scale; yet the ethical, legal and political codes of Western culture are based on the premisses of free will and individual responsibility for one's actions. The debate is complex, tortuous and far from being resolved. There are few more thoroughgoing engagements with it in literary history than are to be found in the fiction of Bunyan and Defoe.

Schematising the route of argument it goes as follows: Bunyan and Defoe are both critical of the value-system of their times; they both construct fictions to present a counter-cultural case to that value-system; their counter-cultural case, heavily based as it is in Calvinist predestinarian theology, is encoded with paradox; to make their soteriology-reliant critiques work effectively they must engage in negotiation with the assumptions of their own belief-system; and lastly, that such negotiations plunge them into the heart of the free will/determinism debate. Negotiation with paradox: interrogation of an ideology; those will form the principal subjects of this study.

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BUNYAN has the less problematic relationship to conversion narrative, as befits an author with such clear-cut ideological objectives and one who has left us what is arguably the greatest of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies, *Grace Abounding. Pilgrim's Progress* Parts One and Two and *Holy War* all deal with successful pilgrimages through life – although qualifications have to, and will, be made in respect of the latter text – while *Badman* maps out an unsuccessful pilgrimage. Bunyan's other major piece of writing, *Grace Abounding*, similarly traces an individual's successful progress to a state of grace and is worth considering briefly before proceeding to the fictions. The narrative conforms fairly closely to the standard three-stage division of spiritual autobiography, with Bunyan describing successively his sinful pre-conversion existence, his process of conversion, and his post-conversion state of new-found resolution in the face of spiritual trials. *Grace Abounding* establishes the major themes and concerns of Bunyan's fiction: the overriding obsession with salvation; the constraining influence of a predeterminist theological scheme ('I was bound, but he was free', as Bunyan notes of his relationship to God (p. 103)); the manic-depressive pattern of the individual's spiritual development; the sense of a heroic personal struggle against overwhelming spiritual and social odds. The sheer intensity of the narrative is its most striking characteristic, and we are left in no doubt as to the extent of the emotional upheaval involved in striving to reach a state of grace through the paradoxes of one's theology:

Thus, by the strange and unusual assaults of the tempter, was my Soul, like a broken Vessel, driven, as with the Winds, and tossed sometimes head-long into dispaire . . . Oh, the unthought of imaginations, frights, fears, and terrors that are affected by a thorow application of guilt, yielding to desperation. (p. 60)

Bunyan the man confronts the paradoxes of predestinarian theology head on in *Grace Abounding*, and 'I was bound, but he was free' elegantly and economically sums up the dilemma

facing the sincere candidate for election. It is a dilemma that will form the horizon of Bunyan's fictions. In his personal narrative he must learn to live with the sense of insecurity that such a realisation as 'I was bound, but he was free' brings in its wake: 'God might chuse whether he would give me comfort now, or at the hour of death' (p. 103). The narrative, in other words, must be left incomplete. Such incompleteness is something that Bunyan is usually concerned to overcome in his fiction, and *Pilgrim's Progress* Parts One and Two and *Badman* all counter the incompleteness of spiritual autobiography with their protagonists' death. *Holy War*, however, will leave its protagonist's life incomplete, thus remaining in many ways the closest of Bunyan's fictions to the standard spiritual autobiography pattern.

Pilgrim's Progress Part One is archetypal conversion narrative territory. Christian is discovered by the reader all but overwhelmed by a sense of his own sin and possible damnation. He subsequently risks everything on a pilgrimage to the Celestial City, undergoing a constant series of trials and tribulations – some from external and some from internal forces – on the way. There is an unmistakable conversion experience to be noted ('just as *Christian* came up with the *Cross*, his burden loosed from off his back; and began to tumble'¹⁰) and ultimately there is the transition to a permanent state of grace in the Celestial City. What we witness in *Pilgrim's Progress*, as we do in *Grace Abounding*, is the slow, painful, but absolutely inexorable progress to grace, in which conversion marks a critically significant break with the subject's past. Christian may in several respects fall short of the pilgrim ideal – he can be led astray, he can lead others astray – but his eventual success seems assured. Having been singled out from his fellows and given the divine seal of approval, he cannot fail to gain the fruits of election. On leaving the world he knew – the world of wife, family, and neighbours in the City of Destruction – he enters a brave, new, and often menacing world of signs, where everything is coded according to the dictates of predestinarian soteriology. Elect and reprobate are to be divided, judged and dealt with

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accordingly. The conventions of the conversion narrative genre are handled in a practised manner by an author supremely confident in the use of its techniques.

Pilgrim's Progress Part Two covers much the same ground, and fits the conversion narrative model of irresistible progress towards a predestined goal in the case of Christian's wife, children, and their sundry pilgrim acquaintances. While the landscape of election can still appear harsh on occasion, in general it presents a kindlier face to its pilgrims than its Part One counterpart, and there is less sense of individual isolation to be noted. If conversion narrative tends to feature a sense of tension between the justice and mercy sides of Christianity, then in Part Two it is mercy that is in the ascendancy – 'The King, who hath sent for me and my Children, is one that delighteth in *Mercie*' (p. 185) – whereas it was manifestly justice that prevailed in Part One.

Holy War would appear also to fit into the conversion narrative pattern. Mansoul is repeatedly besieged by evil forces, the tirelessly energetic Diabolonians, and just as repeatedly saved by divine intervention. For all the success against invasion, however, Mansoul is not brought through death into the Celestial City by his creator. We leave the scene of soteriological conflict with the issue still unresolved, Bunyan opting for an open-ended narrative on the *Grace Abounding* model in this instance. Mansoul is enjoined by Emmanuel to 'hold fast till I come' in the event of future attack, but not given his ultimate reward of eternal grace as yet. Despite its open-endedness, however, it is clear from all the signs we are given in *Holy War* that Mansoul is of the elect and destined for eternal salvation: '*Remember therefore, O my Mansoul, that thou art beloved of me . . . I command thee to believe that my love is constant to thee*'.¹¹

Badman represents the mirror-image to the conversion narrative of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Holy War*. Here we have a narrative of predestination where conversion is conspicuously lacking and the signs all point towards damnation. Bunyan is just as rigorous in plotting the course of reprobation as he was election, and this is yet another inexorable progress towards a

predestined goal that we are being asked to witness: 'I will tell you, that from a Child he was very *bad*: his very beginning was *ominous*, and presaged that no good end, was, in likelyhood, to follow thereupon'.¹² Badman can no more arrest this particular progress by his own efforts than Christian can his elect one, and it is the absence of the expected critical points of the conversion narrative genre – unsolicited doubt, conversion experience, courage in adversity, willingness to heed providential warnings and to engage in doctrinal dispute – that mark this protagonist as doomed in spiritual terms of reference. The coding is firmly against Badman, it is predestined to be so, and he cannot escape the inevitable fate that awaits him.

Bunyan's fictions, therefore, fall fairly unproblematically into the conversion narrative genre, and he employs the genre with identifiably polemical intent. There is a concern to pass judgement on individuals from a very committed, dissenting, ideological position. Which is not to say that there is complete predictability about Bunyan's disposition and distribution of that genre's conventions throughout his narratives. *Holy War* does stand out from the other texts somewhat in its open-endedness and lack of final resolution, which resolution to come has to be taken on trust by the reader rather than being openly visible in its enactment as in *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this sense it is closer to Bunyan's own spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, than his other fictions. 'God might chuse whether he would give me comfort now, or at the hour of death' but one must continue onwards regardless, despite one's uncertainty as to God's probable conduct. What Bunyan achieves in *Holy War* is to communicate a sense of the continuing struggle that the individual must wage in daily life, where final resolutions must remain in the realm of promise rather than reality. He succeeds brilliantly in capturing the psychology of Calvinism in the process. For all its insistence on predestination, Calvinism tends to promote a perpetual sense of unease in its adherents: a sense of lingering doubt, even after the apparently conclusive conversion experience.¹³ It is a state of mind that recalls Samuel Beckett's pithy observation: 'do not despair, one of the thieves was saved; do

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not presume, one of the thieves was hanged'.¹⁴ In *Badman* Bunyan relentlessly pursues his victim, turning all his more sympathetic character traits, such as his apparent resignation in the face of death, into doom-laden signals: 'no man can tell whether a man goes, by *any such* manner of death' (p. 157). Yet if 'no man can tell' then, viewed from humanity's perspective, Badman's redemption is theoretically still a possibility and we enter the realm of paradox. Outward behaviour, so consistently read as an index of spiritual condition in Bunyan, ultimately reveals itself to be an unreliable sign; as N. H. Keeble has remarked, 'the experiential fact of uncertainty is incontrovertible' to the Calvinist.¹⁵ Over the course of Bunyan's fictions, we are to observe periodic disjunctions of sign and spiritual fate that belie the inexorability of predestinarian soteriology. In the final analysis man can only *predict* soteriological status, and a certain note of frustration creeps into Bunyan's fiction at this realisation. Both *Badman* and *Holy War* bear witness to this frustration at human limitations. Bunyan's negotiations with the narrative of predestination and its inbuilt paradoxes disclose not just the limitations of the form, but also its immense potential for development. It is as much in the breakdowns and gaps of Bunyan's handling of conversion narrative that his continuing fascination as an author lies, as in his successful adaptation of it to the theme of fictional pilgrimage. In the meeting of narrative form and theological imperatives lies Bunyan's greatest struggle, and his greatest achievement. In his hands conversion narrative begins to develop into a form with an unparalleled responsiveness to a fundamental human dilemma: the conflict between free-willed individualism and determinist cultural system.

Defoe, too, confronts this fundamental dilemma in a range of fictions that stand in a more self-consciously problematical relationship to spiritual autobiography. In some cases, *Colonel Jack* and *Captain Singleton* for example, the conversion narrative content is fairly minimal and handled in a somewhat perfunctory way, and one wonders just how seriously the author is taking the spiritual theme. Yet the genre