A Pilgrim's Progression in Representation: John Bunyan's Use of Image, Word, and Imagination

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The Pilgrim's Progress is more than a timeless allegory that encodes Protestant doctrine. It also reveals strong undercurrents of the theological controversies in John Bunyan's time—specifically the long-warring debate over image, word, and imagination. Ernest B. Gilman observes, "What echoes in the poetic record of the age [of the English Reformation] is . . . the continuous interplay, and the occasional major collision, between strongly iconic and strongly iconoclastic impulses" (3). The English Protestant iconoclasm that tore down pictures in churches and replaced them with words of scripture entered the literature of the time. Bunyan had served in the English Civil War on Cromwell's side; he would have been well versed in issues of iconoclasm.1 As a writer, he knew the power of representation in word and image.

The Puritans' iconoclastic efforts were spurred by a desire to uproot anything popish, anything approaching Catholicism's iconic traditions. They condemned Catholic means of representation—visual images—as idolatrous. Calvinist Protestants decried visual images as a faulty means of representation of the truth; they saw words as a more trustworthy means of representation. "Protestantism," Thomas Luxon observes, "is a radically word-centered religion" (444). And even in this logo-centric approach, not all Protestants considered all realms of language trustworthy means of representing truth. Some Puritans saw allegory as inappropriate because it involved the imagination so heavily, akin to Catholic

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1 Lasting much of the 1640s, the English Civil War was basically a war between the supporters of King Charles I and those of Puritan Oliver Cromwell. Because of Laud's work under Charles, much of the high church ceremony and visual ornamentation returned. Puritans wanted to keep these iconic tendencies in check, stemming from their belief that the visual could mislead. The Puritan iconoclasm would reign under Cromwell's Protectorate.
Reformation meditation prescriptions. Perhaps Bunyan was bold to choose allegory to narrate his so-called dream of Christian, a Puritan Everyman, who travels the oft-dangerous road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

Although Bunyan's work has been read as the quintessence of Protestant thought for centuries, Bunyan seems to be toying with ideas that oppose Puritan ideals of representation and interpretation. As U. Milo Kaufmann says, "No elaborate exploration of sources is necessary to indicate that Bunyan was doing a variety of things with Scripture that were actively discouraged in the received Puritan hermeneutics" (25). And Robert Kiely suggests that when Christian is taught in the House of the Interpreter, Bunyan's allegory "shares with its Catholic predecessors a skepticism about language" (127). At the House of the Interpreter, Christian and the readers seem to learn a paradoxical lesson: distrust what can be seen with the eye, even though the Interpreter is teaching through images and the allegory is conjuring images in the minds of the readers. Thomas Luxon posits that "the tension between Word and image...is crucial to the success of Bunyan's project in the Interpreter's House episode" (446). Seeming to use iconic means to teach an iconoclastic message, Bunyan points to the Interpreter (the Holy Spirit) as the resolution of that seemingly insurmountable paradox between word, image, and imagination and prepares Christian and the readers to bypass idolatry in the House of the Lord of the hill.

**CHRISTIAN'S LESSON AT THE INTERPRETER'S HOUSE**

Christian's most significant schooling in trustworthy means of representation happens at the House of the Interpreter. Christian comes laden with a burden representing sin and the word of scripture. He enters the House, which represents entering the pages of scripture, where he is taught by the Interpreter, who represents the Holy Spirit. Interpreter takes Christian by the hand and shows him seven images: first a two-dimensional picture, then four three-dimensional human figures in motion, and finally, two scenes with men who talk to Christian (44–54). It seems odd that if Bunyan, like Calvin, believes humans always misread and misinterpret images, he has Interpreter teach in images. But Interpreter also privileges words—his teaching is mediated through language. At each scene, when Christian asks the Interpreter what it means, Interpreter answers in the language of scripture and doctrine. Images are mediated through language. But, as Luxon observes, Interpreter's words
and the images don’t seem to correlate; it seems a paradox that the Interpreter is teaching Christian a lesson in hermeneutics when nothing seems to match.

**DOES INTERPRETER’S METHOD OF HERMENEUTICS TEACH CHRISTIAN HOW TO INTERPRET?**

Yet when Christian leaves the House of the Interpreter, he credits the Interpreter with having shown him “things to make [him] stable” (Bunyan 53). Robert Kiely bypasses this passage when he argues that in the House of the Interpreter, Christian fails to receive coherent instruction that will help him interpret images he encounters on the rest of his journey. Kiely further argues that “there is clearly no . . . glossary of terms which Christian and the readers can refer to along the way” (125). Others agree that Christian never receives tools that will enable him to interpret his journey progressively. Is Christian’s observation about his experience in the House of the Interpreter naive? Will his experiences there prove him unstable when he must interpret images later in his journey?

The answers to these questions depend on the answer to the question of how Christian learns to interpret. Although the Interpreter gives the meaning of images in language, Kiely posits that the indeterminacy Christian encounters reveals Bunyan’s distrust of language as a means of representation (127). Kiely’s observation is valid to a point; during the English Reformation Richard Rogers set forth: “The word of God *rightly interpreted,* is the word of God” (qtd. by Kaufmann 26, Kaufmann’s emphasis added). The Interpreter shows Christian images, but mediates the interpretation with words. Which one is trustworthy? Luxon says, “It is a mistake to assume that Bunyan has simply allegorized the experience of reading emblems without addressing the problem of the undependability of images and things as modes of revelation” (446). In Calvinism, although words are favored, neither words nor images are dependable without further aid. Images can be interpreted correctly only by the word of scripture; but more is required—words, too, will remain inaccessible without experimental knowledge, what Luxon calls the process by which

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3Hermeneutics originally referred to scriptural exegesis but has been used in recent academic discussions in place of words like “interpretation” to avoid connotations given by past scholarship. It basically means a method of interpretation.

4Brian Nellisc argues in “The Pilgrim’s Progress and Allegory” that “In the allegory, this indeterminacy becomes not a side effect but the real issue. Christian’s experiences induce in him a condition of nescience, bounded by hope and discouragement” (146).
the words of scripture become more than just things themselves because they are illumined by the Spirit (448–49).

More than using words to interpret the images correctly, Interpreter uses his authority. Only after leaving the lesson of the Interpreter is Christian relieved from the burden on his back, the burden of scripture. Never again will he have the burden of interpreting scripture alone. It is only with the Holy Spirit’s help that Christian can rightly interpret images with the language of the word of God.

TEACHING THE READERS HOW TO SAFELY READ THE ALLEGORY

In Bunyan’s apology at the beginning of his work, he shows hesitancy to use figurative language out of fear that the readers will misunderstand his message; further, Bunyan seems to worry that his mode of representation—using images and imagination—will cause further misunderstanding. The House of the Interpreter must also teach the readers how to interpret the allegory. Without guidance, the readers could turn their images into icons of sorts, idols that fail to represent their immaterial subject. In Aristotelian terms, Bunyan’s means of representation (language) was approved by Puritan doctrine; however, his manner of representation (allegory) came as close to Catholicism’s use of image and imagination as possible within the means.

English Reformation Bishop Hooper explained what can happen when men use their imaginations without the mediation of the Holy Spirit:

The mind of man, when it is not illuminated with the Spirit of God . . . imagineth and feigneth God to be like unto the imagination and conceit of his mind. . . . He purposeth to express by some figure or image God in the same form and similitude that his imagination hath first printed in his mind; so that the mind conceiveth the idol. (Qtd. by Woods 130)

To combat what may come from an active, but misled, imagination, Bunyan teaches Christian and the readers that the Holy Ghost is requisite

1U. Milo Kaufmann in The Pilgrim’s Progress and Traditional Puritan Meditation asserts that Bunyan’s apology is his aesthetic brief, which sets forth his doubts about his allegorical aesthetics and the clarity of meaning (8–15).

2W. J. T. Mitchell writes, “Aristotle says that representations differ from one another in three ways: in object, manner, and means. The ‘object’ is that which is represented; the ‘manner’ is the way in which it is represented; the ‘means’ is the material that is used” (“Representation” 13).
for hermeneutics. To further combat the readers' misreading of Bunyan's representational means and manner, Bunyan reminds the readers how to read his allegory as Christian leaves the House.

Interpreter teaches Christian at the end of his visit:

“For the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen are eternal.” But though this be so, yet since things present and our fleshly appetite are such near neighbours one to another; and again, because things to come, and carnal sense, are such strangers one to another; therefore it is that the first of these so suddenly fall into amity, and that distance is so continued between the second. (48, emphasis added)

The warning cry is to Christian, as well as to the Christian readers: don’t forget the distance between the image and the object. The object is sacred, not the image; forgetting that distance results in idolatry. The warning becomes useful for Christian and the readers as they near the House of the Lord of the hill.

RELICS AT THE HOUSE OF THE LORD OF THE HILL?

Later on Christian's journey, he enters the House of the Lord of the hill, where he meets Piety, Prudence, and Charity. These guides teach Christian first, in words and second, in images. They tell him about the Lord of the house—“he was the son of the Ancient of Days”—and they read to Christian “some of the worthy acts that some of [the Lord's] servants had done”; they had “stopped the mouths of lions” and “waxed valiant in fight.” They also read him “several other histories of many other famous things . . . both ancient and modern” (70). Old Testament themes continue to echo through the house’s halls when they show Christian “some of the engines with which some of his servants had done wonderful things.” The list is long:

They showed him Moses’ rod; the hammer and nail with which Jael slew Sisera; the pitchers, trumpets, and lamps too, with which Gideon put to flight the armies of Midian. Then they showed him the ox’s goad wherewith Shamgar slew six

Mitchell points out that allegory is a way to represent the immaterial; it is one of the “signs that ‘encrypt’ representation in a secret code” (“Representation” 16).
hundred men. They showed him also the jaw-bone with which Samson did such mighty feats. They showed him, moreover, the sling and stone with which David slew Goliath of Gath; and the sword also with which their Lord will kill the Man of Sin. (70–71)

Because Christian was first taught through language, were the images safe? If language could make these images safe, this might seem like an echo of William Laud’s opinion (which Bunyan fought against in the English Civil War): with proper education, images could be reintroduced into Protestant worship.7

But Bunyan is certainly not Laudian. These images are not an integral part of Christian’s experience, and he is nothing more than “delighted” at seeing them. Even if this experience seems different from his lesson in the House of the Interpreter, the premise is the same. There, the images were different. The seven scenes were represented symbolically to Christian and the reader; that is, they were represented in arbitrary symbols. It seems that the visual qualities could change while the meaning would remain, as long as Interpreter was telling Christian their meaning.8 However, when Christian sees the “engines of God,” he sees the instruments themselves. They seem close to Catholic relics, which indexically represent Christ. The images at the House of the Lord of the hill may be different, but the lesson remains. Christian’s experience at the Interpreter’s House taught him not to trust what is immediately seen by the eye and touched with the hand. Because he has lost the burden of interpretation and been taught by the divine interpreter, Christian can see these things merely as indexical representations of the Old Testament prophets, not items to be worshiped or reverenced themselves.

ARE THE READERS PREPARED TO RESPOND TO THE IMAGES?

Unlike Christian, readers cannot tell if they have lost their own burden of interpretation; further, they cannot immediately see the instruments. These images—represented to them symbolically (in language),

7Ernest B. Gilman writes that “the Anglican establishment attempted to negotiate . . . under Laud, that since popery had been abolished and the people were now properly admonished on the abuse images, there could be no danger of idolatry in Laud’s program” (40).
8In “Representation,” Mitchell describes three modes of representation: iconic (representation through resemblance), symbolic (representation through arbitrary assignment), and indexical (representation through cause and effect or existential evidence) (14).
iconically (resemblance of intended representation), and indexically (representation of Old Testament heroes)—seem to have all the requisites for Protestant relics of sorts for the allegory’s readers, images made to dwell in their imaginations like idols. If Bunyan was apprehensive about using figurative language because readers might misunderstand, why did he?

These relics in words could be seen as ways to validate Protestantism. First, they provide a history steeped in Old Testament tradition—they are shown to Christian after he receives a history that spans both ancient and modern times, thus linking all the prophets and Christ to Protestantism. Second, they could provide relics millennia older than Catholic relics. Perhaps these are images that are purer because this brand of relic is encoded in language, a means often considered safe by the logo-centric Protestants.

Yet with Christian’s example of showing mere delight in the images instead of giving them undue attention, it seems unlikely that the readers will give greater attention to these could-be relics. But if readers did turn these images into a form of iconic tradition would it be acceptable even for Protestant iconoclasts? W. J. T. Mitchell explains that even iconoclasm can be seen as laced with idolatry; he says it can appear as “simply the obverse of idolatry” because it is “idolatry turned outward toward the image of a rival. . . . When [the iconoclast] is pressed, he is generally content with the rather different claim that his images are purer or truer than those of mere idolaters” (Iconology 198).

Bunyan never “turns outward toward the image of a rival”; he never examines or vindicates the other. Mitchell’s idea shows that the central issue is not how to escape representation, but rather how to find the appropriate line along a continuum of representation, ranging from pure representation to impure representation. The question becomes: Which means and manner of representation are appropriate? The answer in The Pilgrim’s Progress reveals that any means and manner are inappropriate without the hermeneutical guidance of Interpreter. Does it reveal the converse? Are any means and manner appropriate with the guidance of the Interpreter? Calvin answers this outright: sin and carnality make men misinterpret images immediately seen with the eye.9

**CONCLUSION**

Bunyan chooses a backdoor approach to eventually show agreement with Calvin. He creates images through words that exist vividly in the

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9See Luxon’s article for an expansion on this idea.
readers' imagination; but through Christian's experience in the House of the Interpreter, Bunyan reveals that images are not trustworthy. For this reason, as Luxon points out, image and interpretation seem mismatched. But the interpretation resides with the Interpreter, from whom Christian learns what true representation is: a facade to encourage people to come to the Holy Spirit and learn his interpretation. Images are faulty for a reason, Christian learns from Interpreter. Things seen immediately deceive. Those who can understand this—and trust in eternal things that remain unseen—will be safe in life's journey. After Christian loses his burden of interpretation, he can see images as they are. Through Christian's progression in his attitude toward representation, he receives, as do the readers, the promise of a day when the immaterial and divine will no longer be represented, but presented to him.

Luxon shows this from the beginning of his article and uses it as a basic assumption to his argument.

Bibliography


