

Seeking Sacred Language

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John Bunyan's novel *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, are both "spiritual travelogues"¹ (Franck 1996: 55), and yet when we examine each work individually we find them reflective of vastly different religious traditions. Bunyan, the English Puritan Christian author, employs literary methods reflective of Calvinist concerns, whilst Matsuo Basho, the Japanese author writing in the tradition of Zen Buddhism, writes in a style reflective of the Zen experience. Whilst the authors are linked in their search for meaning and their search for ways in which to convey meaning in literature, they are fundamentally different in terms of religious experience and expression. Bunyan, writing in 1678, asks his readers to "look within [his] veil" (149) while Basho, writing travel sketches through *haiku* poetry and prose from 1684, points to the "genius hidden among weeds and bushes" (85). We can deduce from this literature which points towards hidden truths that the link between Basho and Bunyan rests in their attempts to *unveil* truth while their differences stem from distinct *experiences* of truth particular to their religious traditions.

Bunyan's novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*, sits within the tradition of Christian Puritanism and the literary methods chosen by the author reflect the nature of the Puritan religious experience. In one particular episode in the novel, "Christian" and "Hopeful" find themselves at "Doubting Castle" and imprisoned by "Giant Despair" (Bunyan 104-110). In just this one episode we find a reflection of several major features of Puritan ideology. As a journey towards the "Celestial City", the novel is primarily allegorical and based on biblical authority. Through the undying determination of "Christian" to struggle onwards and through the novel's repetitive, methodical style it is reflective of Puritan zeal for pious practice (Furlong, 1975: 23). Importantly, the Puritan suspicion of both sense enjoyment and the nature of the human heart, find themselves illustrated through constant reference to the ignorance of man, the manifestation of sinful character types and a literary style which has no embellishment.

In every episode within *The Pilgrim's Progress* there are direct references made to the Bible while the journey from the "City of Destruction" to the "Celestial City" is allegorically the story of the universal Christian journeying through life following the authority of the bible. In the episode surrounding "Doubting Castle" the first biblical reference is to the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31:21: "Let thine heart be towards the highway, even the way that thou wentest: turn again" (Bunyan 105).

The reference to this biblical passage is inserted at the point where “Christian” and “Hopeful” have become lost on their journey which is, otherwise, a direct route towards the “Celestial City”. In this Calvinist tradition, there is only one right path and it is towards the future and along “the way” (Bunyan 103). There are right and wrong actions, blessed and non-blessed readers (Luxon, 1995:160) and a rigidity which appears to categorise humanity and systematise religion itself. The “Celestial City” is the promise of joy in the afterlife whilst the path of life itself contains very little joy. “Christian” and “Hopeful” at “Doubting Castle” are thrown into a “nasty and stinking” dungeon (Bunyan 106) and subjected to beatings “without any mercy with a “grievous crabtree cudgel” (Bunyan 106). They are asked by “Giant Despair” to consider why they should “choose life, seeing it is attended with so much bitterness” (Bunyan 107). Their reasons for not suiciding are based on biblical understanding:

the Lord of the country to which we are going hath said though shalt do no murder, no not to another man’s person; much more then are we forbidden to take his counsel to kill ourselves. (Bunyan 107)

Their final escape from this suffering comes when they realise they have a key called “Promise”, which calls forth the biblical promise of eternal salvation in which one should have faith in *future* joy (Furlong, 1975:41) in order to endure suffering.

“Christian’s” capacity for endurance is a reflection of Puritan religious zeal:

The Puritan movement...took it for granted that a man would suffer all things for what he believed was right (Furlong, 1975: 16)... Despite so much misery and hardship in the present, however, Puritans comforted themselves with the thought that their real delights were to come (Furlong, 1975:40).

While doubts often appear in “Christian’s” mind, they are balanced with the manifestation of positive characters such as “Faithful” and “Hopeful” who help him maintain his devotion. Whilst “Christian” declares at “Doubting Castle”: “I know not whether is best to live thus or to die out of hand? My soul chooseth strangling rather than life” (Bunyan 107). Hopeful responds with “let’s be patient, and endure awhile” (Bunyan 107). Thus “Christian” and “Hopeful” are dichotomies within one personality which is representative of the struggling universal pilgrim faced with the existential crisis. The pilgrim begins his journey with the sincere plea: “What shall I do to be saved?” (Bunyan 18). The novel then becomes a manual for pilgrims who have this same query. The journeys undertaken by “Christian” are repeated constantly as he describes them to the characters he meets. The ultimate repetition comes with The Second Part of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in which “Christiana” follows in her husband’s footsteps and once again confirms the “way” of the pilgrim towards the “Celestial City”. Bunyan’s repetitive, methodical and lengthy novel therefore illustrates the great Puritan zeal for pious practice and the necessity for suffering.

Bunyan's literary method enables him to split the personality of the universal pilgrim and manifest good and evil in separate characters whilst exploring the inherent evil believed to be found within the very heart of the Christian (Furlong, 1975: 33). "Christian" himself is responsible for leading "Hopeful" "out of the way" (Bunyan 104) through making the mistake of following "Vain Confidence" (Bunyan 104). "Christian" then declares:

Good brother, be not offended. I am sorry I have brought thee out of the way, and that I have put thee into such eminent danger; pray, my brother, forgive me; I did not do it of an evil intent. (Bunyan 105)

Vain confidence of the Christian is explored here as a negative trait which must be dealt with. In the same way "Hypocrisy" and most of the other negative characters manifest at times in the novel when "Christian" himself illustrates his own hypocrisy or some other evil nature of the heart. After criticising "Simple", "Sloth" and "Presumption" (Bunyan 42), "Christian" meets "Hypocrisy" and then proceeds to fall asleep and lose his valuable scroll. These literary methods demonstrate the Puritan's "intense suspicion of nature and the nature of the heart" (Furlong, 1975: 34). Thus the "way" for the pilgrim appears to be, according to Bunyan, the gradual realisation of the individual's own faults, including ignorance, and the subsequent realisation of the existential crisis of the human being unable to gain complete knowledge and according to some, even unable to "progress" (Luxon, 1995:161).

While Bunyan wrote as an artist imprisoned literally and somewhat creatively by a religious tradition which did not consider art to be significant (Furlong, 1975: 17), Basho wrote, quite contrarily, as an artist whose tradition of Zen Buddhism nourished his creativity. In direct contrast to Bunyan's religious experience and in direct contrast, also, to the style of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Basho's sketches in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, emerge from a meditative discipline which emphasises unity and simplicity of thought (Schloeg, 1977: 64; Suzuki, 1969: 87). Basho's *haiku* poetry expresses an intensity of perception with a particular focus on aesthetics as a result of the Zen focus on awareness (Schloeg, 1977: 62) and enlightenment (Suzuki, 1969: 17). In the first few pages of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, we find examples of these Zen Buddhist features. We also discover an important similarity between Bunyan and Basho, that of struggle, which links the authors together in an obsessive journeying and intense desire to search for meaning.

The importance of language and words in the Zen tradition is in the discretion of use and minimal analysis. Thus the *haiku* with its short, concise form is a perfect vehicle of expression for a Zen master's contemplation. The tradition of "ancient poets" (Basho 107) being respected as great sages, illustrates a deep respect for language and its use for presenting religious truths. The *haiku* form represents the mind of the, meditator whose awareness of the surroundings and the self is clarified and thus whose literary expression is simple and non-cluttered with excessive thought

or analysis. With a focus on the present tense, as opposed to Bunyan's future projections, there is an intensity of joy discovered in immediate, ordinary situations (see Schloeg, 1977: 64). In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Basho climbs the mountain "Nikko" and is overwhelmed by the holiness and beauty and declares: "To say more about the shrine would be to violate its holiness" (100). He concludes this statement with *haiku*:

It was with awe
That I beheld
Fresh leaves, green leaves,
Bright in the sun. (100)

how solemn!
green leaves, young leaves,, and through them
the rays of the sun (Ueda, 1991: 231)

The simplicity of expression is the essential nature of Zen: "Not giving in to that temptation to formulate, to conceptualize, that is Zen" (Franck, 1996: 59). The succinct and detached nature of the verse corresponds directly with the meditator's clear and watchful state of mind. Thus the *haiku* represents the transformation of religious experience into a literary form and the most successful *haiku* would then be that which translates most directly from perception to word. The tradition of Zen therefore nourishes creativity in its most simple and perceptive form.

Whilst Bunyan attempts to express his religious concerns through analysis and subsequent dichotomy, Basho is involved in translating his religious experience into literary aesthetics through a keen perception of surroundings and of his own nature. The greatness of Basho's *haiku* is in the expression of unity between man, nature, mind and emotion:

[The Narrow Road to the Deep North] was based on the idea of *Sabi*, the concept that one attains perfect spiritual serenity by immersing oneself in the egoless impersonal life of nature. The complete absorption of one's petty ego into the vast, powerful, magnificent universe..." (Ueda, 1970: 30).

The emotion is expressed through the surrounds and this harmony resonates long after the reader experiences the first hint of meaning:

The faint shadow of bidding me farewell. Mount Fuji and the cherry blossoms of Ueno and Yanaka were (Basho 98)

Silent a while in a cave,
I watched a waterfall,
For the first of
The summer observances. (101)

for a while I sit
 meditating by the falls -
 start of a summer retreat (Ueda, 1991: 232)

Abstract layers of meaning emerge after several readings and illustrate the author's depth of meditation and contemplation. Commentaries have noted several different ideas concerning this one *haiku* and the poet's "purification", "seclusion" and "religious exercise" (Ueda, 1991: 232). For Bunyan, these layers of meaning would appear through several episodes, or pages, of critical, serious and concerned evaluation. Basho's *haiku* and his prose reflect a mind which is heightened in its awareness of surroundings:

The chestnut by the eaves
 In magnificent bloom
 Passes unnoticed
 By men of this world. (Basho 108)

few in this world
 notice those blossoms -
 chestnut by the eaves (Ueda, 1991: 239)

It has been said that "the instant when we begin to be aware is the moment of enlightenment" (Suzuki, 1969: 17). Thus awareness, perception, enlightenment and detached observation are intrinsically linked in the Zen experience and the aesthetic illustration of nature becomes a focus for Basho:

This 'clear seeing' is a change of attitude.. it finally results in genuine insight into one's own nature. (Schloeg, 1977: 65)

These external objects are in no way indispensable, they are merely useful to help concentrate one's attention. (Franck, 1994: 43)

The sharpening of the senses therefore represents an ability to see beyond the delusion within life at the present moment; which compares with Bunyan's attempt to see beyond the delusion of "Vanity Fair" and towards the future joy to be experienced in the "Celestial City".

Basho, whilst sleeping "in perfect peace upon [a] grass pillow" (100) and noting the characteristics of every blossom, is also subjected to self-instigated suffering. We do not really know the extent of Basho's suffering because his attention is not on suffering itself but on the "end of suffering" (Schloeg, 1977: 63). We should note that Zen Buddhism requires "enduring what is unendurable" (Schloeg, 1977: 63). Basho constantly makes off-hand references to his suffering:

My bony shoulders were sore because of the load I had carried.... (99)

As I was plodding through the grass.... (102)

He wanted to enjoy the views of Matsushima and Kisagata with me, and also to share with me the hardships of the wandering journey. (101)

We perceive a link here between Basho and Bunyan in their intensity, their endurance and their focussed attempt to reach the heart of their religious experience. We are reminded of the search for meaning undertaken by both Basho and Bunyan and the common characteristics of “all great religions” (Johnston, 1974: 170):

They share the same quest for wisdom, the same sense of man’s existential situation and need for salvation, the same belief in man’s dignity and value, and the same basic attempt to solve man’s deeper problems (Johnston, 1974: 170).

Both Bunyan and Basho express a sincere, human desire to unveil meaning and they both illustrate a willingness to struggle through life’s journey for religious and literary purposes.

Bunyan and Basho write within different cultures with particular religious experiences and truths but their responsibility as artists has been to define their religious experience and their truths in forms most suitable to their beliefs. Bunyan’s allegory allows him to convey biblical notions of future salvation and Basho’s *haiku* allows him to encapsulate the present moments of joy within mundane life. Whilst it may be that “Buddhism seems to be lacking a social ethic” (Franck, 1994: 39) and “Christian extroversion.. .has. . .the tendency to become a meddlesome paternalistic activism, unaware of the need for a profound self-examination” (Franck, 1994: 39), these two authors remain linked in their, attempts to reach the heart of the human situation and encapsulate it according to their cultural traditions. Western readers are likely to either identify with Bunyan’s language and allegory as the experience of Christianity enables them, or to encounter Basho as a breeze of fresh air enabling them to discover unity in nature, joy in the present, relief in simplicity and a belief in the potentially sacred nature of language itself.

He was the Basho
Breeze blew through his leaves
Songs sung in his bough

Fresh *Haiku* breeze on my face
He is still in his garden.

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