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Conflict, Closure, Dilemma: Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*

This study posits a 'what if'. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, his spiritual autobiography published in 1666, has been generally received as the classic model of that literary form. As recently as 2010, Michael Davies has written that it 'can be read according to a lucid process of salvation . . . faith in which brings blessed relief for Bunyan from incarcerating fears and doubts'.¹ What if there is no relief, however? What if Bunyan's 'faith' in 'a lucid process of salvation' fails to assuage this sense of fear and doubt? What if Bunyan asks more of himself than he can answer in any lucid sense? What if Bunyan's soteriological scepticism prevents him from experiencing definitive confirmation of salvation? This study asks these questions of *Grace Abounding*.

By reading Bunyan's text against Jean-François Lyotard's theories of the differend and the little narrative, *Grace Abounding* will be seen to say more about the turbulent psychological state of its author than his successful journey towards a state of grace. Lyotard defines the differend as being a state in which there can be no source of legitimation, where no hegemony can dominate with any real potency.

A differend would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in

¹ Michael Davies, 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography', in Anne Dunan-Page (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.74.

order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both if neither side admits this rule).²

In his most influential book, *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard described a crisis of legitimation in science, economics, and the arts and posited that, far from being a negative situation, this state should be welcomed and seen as the natural reaction to modernist positivism: 'Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name'.³

Lyotard's postmodernism stresses the limitations of unifying concepts. He instead favours scepticism towards forms of authority and towards assumptions based on institutionalised hegemonic thought. As Stuart Sim put it, according to Lyotard we have

outgrown our need for universal theories: grand narratives, metanarratives, as he dubs them. We must turn instead to 'little narratives', those designed for specifically delimited objectives, as a way of reconstructing and revitalising our political processes. The *evenements* would be one such example of a little narrative, where workers and students joined together in a loose coalition to protest against certain French government policies. Postmodernism as conceived of by Lyotard is a rejection of universal theories (Marxism, for example), and the authoritarianism that, for Lyotard, inevitably accompanies them.⁴

Distrust in universal explanations and, more importantly, the authority behind them, places emphasis instead upon individual behaviour and the little narratives that arise from subjective needs and experience. In the case of art – and in particular, writing – the

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. xi.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 82.

⁴ Stuart Sim, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy: The New Scepticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 15–16.

redundancy of the grand narrative becomes even more evident, and this has obvious implications for writings such as spiritual autobiographies, coming as they did from a period of great spiritual and political uncertainty. As Lyotard states:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.⁵

Freedom from authority (or at least the compulsion to be critical of it, to question it) is, for Lyotard, an essential attribute of postmodern thinking, and I believe this scepticism is essentially the same as that which drove devout individuals in the nonconformist community, such as Bunyan, to such intense soul-searching and extreme forms of dissent in the seventeenth century. The unwillingness of a large minority of the population of mid seventeenth-century England to accept homogenous rule whether in terms of government or church, led, it may be argued, to a mood of scepticism analogous to that described by Lyotard.

Grace Abounding shows Bunyan to be in dispute with just about every aspect of his internal and external world. Ostensibly a classic model of Puritan spiritual autobiography (and in many ways the text is the popular epitome of the form) it is also a record of the conflict Bunyan experiences both physically and psychologically during his progress through to salvation, his *conversion*, his grand narrative. In it, Bunyan records a series of emotional and spiritual breakdowns that constitute something of a crisis of legitimation and call into question his role as a writer of a classic spiritual autobiography, as well as his position as a minister, and so a spiritual role model, in his Dissenting community. The text

⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

casts doubt as to the success of his conversion experience, of its being the true confirmation of election it is supposed to be. It also identifies disputes within the core belief systems of the nonconformist sects.

Grace Abounding would appear, in almost every sense, to epitomise the conventional Puritan conversion narrative. Bunyan's spiritual autobiography was massively influential, something of an instruction manual to subsequent writers like his fellow Bedford church member Agnes Beaumont, and immortalised in its later fictionalised form as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is without doubt the only example of spiritual autobiography from the seventeenth century to boast anything approaching a popular readership today. That its survival is due in the main to the immense popularity of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, of which Christopher Hill writes that it was 'a best-seller from the start among the middling and poorer sort, though despised by the literary establishment',⁶ cannot be denied. Its importance as the most successful example of classic spiritual autobiography however is similarly assured – and Michael Davies's recent comment that other seventeenth-century examples of the genre are 'rarely as detailed or as well-written as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*'⁷ is difficult to dispute. Its popularity and endurance aside though, *Grace Abounding* provides, for the purposes of the current study, a classic model that represents the failure of the spiritual autobiography as a genre and highlights the spiritual shortfall apparent among the radical nonconformists. This spiritual crisis, something I will identify as a soteriological differend, and its impact on *Grace Abounding* will be interrogated here.

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⁶ Christopher Hill, 'Bunyan's Contemporary Reputation', in *John Bunyan and His England 1628–88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sim (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1990), p. 15.

⁷ Michael Davies, 'Shaping Grace: The Spiritual Autobiographies of John Bunyan, John Newton, and William Cowper', *Bunyan Studies*, 12 (2006/2007), p. 42.

Doubt and fluctuation are the primary emotional qualities of Bunyan's spiritual autobiography. We cannot fail to be struck by the immediacy of the spiritual peril he describes in *Grace Abounding*; predestinarian logic gnaws away at any sense of spiritual hope the author experiences until we see a man unable to trust in his prospects of election:

And as I was thus before the Lord, that Scripture fastned on my heart, *O man, great is thy Faith*, Matt. 15. 28. even as if one had clapt me on the back, as I lay on my knees before *God*; yet I was not able to believe this, that this was a prayer of Faith, till almost six months after; for I could not think that I had Faith, or that there should be a word for me to act Faith on; therefore I should still be as sticking in the jaws of desparation, and went mourning up and down in a sad condition, crying, *Is his mercy clean gone? is his mercy clean gone for ever?* And I thought sometimes, even while I was groaning in these expressions, they did seem to make a question whether it was or no; yet I greatly feared it was.⁸

Bunyan writes that he was 'not able to believe' and 'could not think' that he had faith. This is self-doubt fuelled, not by experiential evidence of reprobation, but rather by extreme, unhealthy self-scrutiny. This, I would argue, is what Bunyan communicates in his spiritual autobiography. The fact that he returns to themes of disbelief so regularly, and that these periods of disbelief are as strong towards the end of the narrative (even after the apparent conversion experience) as they are at its beginning suggests that his empirical spiritual reconciliation, his grand narrative of evidence of salvation, is as fleeting as it appears to be in the passage quoted above. That he continues to assert this position means that any notion of Bunyan's spiritual growth assumes the form of a cyclical pattern without resolution. The reality of Bunyan's soteriological state does not follow the linear progress to which he

⁸ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 63. This edition is cited hereafter as '*Grace Abounding*'.

aspires, and as a result, the message of *Grace Abounding* retains a pessimistic edge that dissents from its own claims, leaving behind unresolved ‘little narratives’.

To take this point further, it is worth examining more closely the extent to which Bunyan accepts the irreconcilability of what I would call his soteriological differend. Stuart Sim makes a similar claim about irreconcilability with regard to the notion of individual will versus God’s will in *Grace Abounding* when he writes:

We have narratives which in psychological terms of reference cannot be reconciled, and the angst of the spiritual autobiographical protagonist (and surely no one has ever caught this better than Bunyan has in *Grace Abounding*) is an acknowledgement that a differend exists which calls into question the whole basis of one’s grand narrative.⁹

Bunyan unquestionably displays acute angst – and with unflinching honesty – in his writing and he appears to be aware of its underlying presence when he is ostensibly in a state of grace.

Now began I afresh to give myself up to a serious examination after my state and condition for the future, and of my Evidences for that blessed world to come; for it hath, I bless the name of God, been my usual course, as alwayes so especially in the day of affliction, to endeavour to keep my interest in Life to come, clear before my eye.

But I had no sooner began to recall to mind my former experience of the goodness of God to my Soul, but there came flocking into my mind an innumerable company of my sins and transgressions, amongst which these were at this time most to my affliction, namely, my deadness, dulnes, and coldness in holy Duties; my wandrings of heart, my wearisomness in all good things,

⁹ Stuart Sim, ‘Bunyan, Lyotard, and the Conflict of Narratives (or, Postmodernising Bunyan)’, *Bunyan Studies*, 8 (1998), p. 74.

my want of love to God, his ways, and people, with this at the end of all, *Are these the fruits of Christianity? are these the tokens of a blessed man?*¹⁰

It is as if Bunyan's natural state is one of reprobation, punctuated only occasionally by glimpses of the possibility, or the hope, of salvation. It is a fatalistic position to adopt and evidence perhaps of Bunyan's acceptance of the conflicting little narratives (the doubt, hope, despair) that make concrete evidence of election impossible. Sim continues his argument by suggesting that 'those post-conversion backslidings to which the author admits he remains prone in the closing passages of *Grace Abounding*, the "many turnings and goings upon my heart both from the Lord, Satan, and my own corruptions", might be read as the return of the differend'.¹¹ I would argue that the differend never goes away, that Bunyan is reconciled to conflict from the outset, that he is unable ever to trust in God's grace, and that the 'post-conversion backslidings' are evidence of that. Without any firm structure – other than the seemingly unassailable goal of salvation – upon which to base his experiences, and without a fixed belief in a Church or even in himself at this point, Bunyan's ability to negotiate his spiritual crises becomes increasingly impaired. As Roger Sharrock posits, 'the urgency of the personal experience at work is a continuing urgency and if some crisis or revelation seems to bring it to a climax another is always waiting in the wings'.¹² Bunyan is, at this stage, his own worst enemy and the personification of a differend. He is searching desperately for evidence of grand narrative and yet is encroached on by a constant stream of little narratives, each contending for his attention.

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¹⁰ *Grace Abounding*, pp. 79–80.

¹¹ Sim, 'Bunyan, Lyotard, and the Conflict of Narratives', p. 74.

¹² Roger Sharrock, 'Temptation and Understanding in *Grace Abounding*', *Bunyan Studies*, 1 (1988), p. 8.

Roger Sharrock suggests that a period equating roughly to the first division of conventional spiritual autobiography, that relating to what he characterizes as Bunyan's 'unregenerate life: sin and resistance to the Gospel', spans the first thirty-six paragraphs of *Grace Abounding*. These paragraphs, he says, show Bunyan 'before conversion'. Although conceding that Bunyan's narrative displays 'significant departures from the autobiographical norm',¹³ Sharrock maintains that the contents of the text can be grouped in a similar pattern to that found in biographies of believers, such as Thomas Taylor's *Profitable Memoriall of the Conversion of Mrs. Marie Gunter* (1633). This pattern includes a period of unregenerate life, an awakening or conversion, followed by a calling to the ministry. This opening section of *Grace Abounding* provides an outline of Bunyan's early life during which time the author does involve himself in all manner of 'cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God',¹⁴ and so would seem to follow the prescribed pattern. The difficulty comes when we attempt to identify an event that leads to Bunyan's conversion. Sharrock suggests that the conversion occurs over the course of paragraphs thirty-seven to 252, but that conclusion is dependent upon there being a sense that Bunyan does eventually attain proof of salvation. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this is not the case and I would argue that there is, in fact, no conversion experience at all in *Grace Abounding*.

The process of conversion is, in Bunyan's narrative, a drawn out, faltering process that extends over the vast majority of the text to no satisfactory conclusion. John Stachniewski admits that it is 'extremely difficult to say when Bunyan is converted',¹⁵ an understandable sentiment given that Bunyan himself finds it necessary to ask, 'How can

¹³ Sharrock, Introduction to *Grace Abounding*, p. xxx.

¹⁴ *Grace Abounding*, p. 6.

¹⁵ John Stachniewski, Introduction to *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xix.

you tell you are Elected? and what if you should not? how then?'.¹⁶ It is nevertheless widely held that by the end of *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan is in a state of grace. Christopher Hill goes so far as to conclude that 'looking back after six years of imprisonment Bunyan writes with the confident conviction of one whose elect status has been confirmed by martyrdom'.¹⁷ I would suggest instead that Bunyan's predicament by the end of his spiritual autobiography is not resolved and that his elect status is still very much in doubt.

Rather than displaying any sense of conviction with regard to his salvation, Bunyan's writing throughout *Grace Abounding* is at best conflicted and at worst unconvincing. His lack of faith in his own salvation is a result of the despair he experiences after allowing himself to succumb to the temptations he himself constructs. These continual disappointments create a climate of paranoia and fear of his own personality and he becomes wary of soteriological evidence, aware that what he calls 'the hinder part of the Tempest', the nagging doubt that tempers every fleeting sense of hope, is a constant threat:

because my former frights and anguish were very sore and deep, therefore it did oft befall me as it befalleth those that have been scared by fire, I thought every voice was fire, fire; every little touch would hurt my tender Conscience.¹⁸

This admission gives a startling insight into just how damaging Calvinistic doctrine could be to the Puritan mind. Hill writes that 'This double sense of power – an individual self-confidence and strength through unity – produced that remarkable liberation of energy

¹⁶ *Grace Abounding*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 74.

¹⁸ *Grace Abounding*, p. 72.

which is typical of Calvinism and the sects';¹⁹ but neither sense of power can be found in the John Bunyan of *Grace Abounding*. The impact of cumulative depression leaves Bunyan at odds with himself, as far from a position of strength or power, or of conviction as he could be.

An overriding characteristic we see in Bunyan's writing here is timidity. Visited by a succession of temptations and berated internally by Satan, Bunyan approaches every episode with trepidation. The majority of *Grace Abounding* – in fact, the long central portion Sharrock identifies as being the conversion process – is a repetitive and rather cumbersome account of the author's turbulent mood swings. There is little, if any, spiritual advancement. Bunyan is hardly more assured of his salvation at the end of his spiritual autobiography than he is at its beginning.

There are times, it is true when Bunyan seems to write with the assurance of one whose salvation is definitively confirmed. I have illustrated the meandering fluctuation between hope and despair he experiences during the years he writes about in his autobiography and yet there are occasions when he appears so convinced of his elect status that spiritual slippage back into reprobation would seem unthinkable. This is as close to a soteriological grand narrative as Bunyan gets in *Grace Abounding* but, as I believe the following passage illustrates, the doubtful little narrative immediately asserts itself and although is ostensibly quieted, the underlying differend remains:

Now did my chains fall off my Legs indeed, I was loosed from my affliction and irons, my temptations also fled away: so that from that time those dreadful Scriptures of God left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God: So when I came home, I looked to see if I could find that Sentence, *Thy Righteousness is in Heaven*, but could not find such a

¹⁹ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 154.

Saying, wherefore my Heart began to sink again, onely that was brought to remembrance, *He of God is made unto us Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption*; by this word I saw the other Sentence true, I Cor. 1. 30.²⁰

The highly symbolic vision of chains falling off Bunyan's legs obviously brings to mind the burden that fell from Christian's back but the physical relief, the empirical truth, is tempered by the rising sense of panic that ensues in the wake of Bunyan's inability to cement his assurance by finding a particular scripture. Spiritual success is fleeting and a persistent conflict, or at least the possibility of its re-emergence, endures.

The title-page of the first edition of 1666 states that *Grace Abounding* shows how 'the Lord at length thorow Christ did deliver [Bunyan] from all the guilt and terrour that lay upon him'. Yet in the concluding words of the narrative, Bunyan is still unable to shed an acute sense of inner mistrust: 'I can do none of those things which God commands me, but my corruptions will thrust in themselves; When I would do good, evil is present with me'.²¹ This does not sound like a writer confident of his salvation and it shows the kind of contradictory mentality that informs the majority of the text. Bunyan's decision to quote Romans 7:12 at the very end of his spiritual autobiography highlights the differend apparent in the prospective saint's reading of scripture. If conflict exists *here*, what hope is there of the prospective saint attaining knowledge of salvation (particularly with regard to a definitive confirmation experience)? The difficulty for Bunyan then, is that his lack of conviction in faith and, more importantly, his inability to resist temptation perpetuates the differend. Even after what appears to be sound evidence of grace – either as flashes of empowering scripture or deliverance from worldly dangers – Bunyan's conscience inevitably gnaws away at itself until despondency takes him over. Stachniewski correctly

²⁰ *Grace Abounding*, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

notes of examples of ‘euphoric experiences of triumphant certainty’ that these are ‘always at risk of retakes, subject to self-directed charges of subjectivism and to the evacuation of all spiritual sense’.²² It is this tempering of euphoria with internal doubt that prevents a single soteriological epiphany taking place.

What does happen during the course of Bunyan’s spiritual awakening is that he becomes alive to the *possibility* of election. In this sense conversion, while neither a single event, nor even a convincing process, is perhaps an awakening to the criteria of salvation; as Roger Pooley says, ‘Comforting feelings are not the final message of *Grace Abounding*; nor is spiritual assurance’.²³ What we do find, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, is a depiction of a man now reconciled to the conflicted nature of predestinarian doctrine. Bunyan seems content to struggle with internal opposition for what would likely be an indefinite period of time. Some words from 2 Corinthians 12:9, ‘*My Grace is sufficient*’, sustain him, he says, ‘for the space of seven or eight weeks, but the comfort he draws from them does not last. He continues to be tormented by the idea that there are ‘three or four’ sentences in the Bible that ‘would keep me out of Heaven’: ‘O if it were not for these three or four words, now how might I be comforted!’²⁴ Bunyan, we might say, has reached a state of incredulity with regard to his soteriological state, and there is a palpable sense of his condition being like that described by Lyotard in *The Differend*, where ‘One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy’.²⁵ Faced with such a conflict, Bunyan accepts a state of differend at the expense of a conversion experience.

Acceptance of such an irreconcilable conflict – of a differend – has a number of implications as to our reading of the Dissenting individual. How can a seemingly empirical

²² Stachniewski, Introduction to *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, p. xix.

²³ Roger Pooley, ‘*Grace Abounding* and the New Sense of the Self’, in *John Bunyan and his England 1628–88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1990), p. 105.

²⁴ *Grace Abounding*, pp. 64–66.

²⁵ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xi.

state such as election have any legitimacy when the subject is never assured of his status, and never can be? The grand narrative of salvation begins to look increasingly fractured. Stuart Sim and David Walker point to the collapse of authority in England during the seventeenth century as bringing about an environment ‘where the traditional narratives of church and state collapsed . . . dramatically in the 1640s, leaving a full-scale legitimation crisis in their wake’.²⁶ This is a compelling observation and it follows that spiritual autobiography, as a mode of writing designed to identify evidence of certainty with regards to salvation, would then rather become a tool that reflects this crisis.

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This essay has questioned an assumption about *Grace Abounding*. When Michael Davies speaks of Bunyan’s conversion narrative as a ‘lucid process of salvation, charting the sinning believer’s journey from a guilt-ridden state of enslavement under the covenant of law and works . . . to the liberty offered by a covenant of grace’²⁷ he is making a supposition similarly made by many, if not most, readers: that Bunyan is, by the end of *Grace Abounding*, in a state of grace. I would dissent from this view, and would argue, furthermore, that because Bunyan remains conflicted as to his soteriological fate, and because *Grace Abounding* was so influential and remains the exemplary model of the form, this crisis of legitimation raises implications for the genre as a whole in terms of both structure and content, and for the literature that was to appear in its wake.

It is widely agreed that all autobiographical writing is necessarily selective in terms of what the writer chooses to include, or rather, what they leave out of their account of their past. The spiritual autobiography, obsessed as it is with soteriological advancement,

²⁶ Stuart Sim and David Walker, *Bunyan and Authority: The Rhetoric of Dissent and the Legitimation Crisis in Seventeenth-Century England* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 11.

²⁷ Davies, ‘Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography’, pp. 73–74.

usually excludes almost all material not pertaining to religious experience. This is particularly evident in *Grace Abounding* where, as Roger Sharrock notes, Bunyan's 'exclusions are of practically all the events and experiences which are usually thought to be of interest in a secular autobiography'.²⁸ If such an exclusionist text then fails to communicate its single implied purpose, to record conclusive evidence of the author's election, what exactly *does* it achieve?

After a period of illness, Bunyan slips into a particularly crushing bout of depression during which he again removes himself from the elect and gives startling insight into the paradox of his situation:

At the apprehension of these things, my sickness was doubled upon me, for now was I sick in my inward man, my Soul was clog'd with guilt, now also was my former experience of Gods goodness to me quite taken out of my mind, and hid as if it had never been, nor seen: Now was my Soul greatly pinched between these two considerations. *Live I must, Die I dare not.*²⁹

It is as if bodily sickness has caused his spiritual degeneration. This episode illustrates the crisis at the heart of his spiritual life and is indicative of *Grace Abounding* as a whole. The cyclical – at times ponderously so – nature of the narrative reflects, perhaps unwittingly, the lack of conviction Bunyan has in his faith; because of the subjectivity and mono-dimensional structure of spiritual autobiography, that mode of writing aptly records these crises.

Despite Bunyan being unable to declare conclusively that he is among the elect (something that fellow member of the Independent congregation of St. John's in Bedford

²⁸ Roger Sharrock, 'Spiritual Autobiography: Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*', in *John Bunyan and his England 1628–88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (London and Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1990), p. 98.

²⁹ *Grace Abounding*, p. 80.

and spiritual autobiographer Agnes Beaumont feels able to do³⁰) he does insist (and his repetition of the adjective ‘comfort’ is notable) that he finds comfort in the following, rather bleak, passage from Psalm 44, ‘Thou sellest thy people for nought, and dost not increase thy wealth by their price’. He is resolved that he will never ‘denie my profession, though I have nothing at all for my pains’.³¹ This resignation to uncertainty is proof surely of the failure of Bunyan’s soteriological grand narrative, proof of the impossibility of possessing absolute evidence of election. I would like to conclude by suggesting how this resignation, the acceptance of the differend, is the message Bunyan ultimately communicates to his readership at the expense of confirming grace.

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There are two striking aspects of the opening section of *Grace Abounding* that impact heavily both upon the later narrative (and of course the conversion process) and upon the character Bunyan presents to the reader. They give an indication of the fragility of Bunyan’s psychology and hint strongly at the lack of internal authority that ultimately results in his spiritual uncertainty. Bunyan’s exacting account of the nature of his early reprobation gives insight into the internalised, self-destructive psychology that he continually refers to as ‘temptation’ during the course of his narrative. The beginnings of what would become a cyclical pattern of hope and despair take root here. Conversely, Bunyan also gives a number of examples of his being miraculously delivered from all manner of earthly dangers, deliverances that suggest a glimmer of grace even during his most godless years. This paradoxical opening, adhering as it does to the conventional stylistic pattern of the spiritual autobiography, illustrates the extreme mania and depression

³⁰ See *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*, ed. Vera Camden (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992) .p. 37.

³¹ *Grace Abounding*, p. 101.

Bunyan is to experience throughout his life and introduces the internalised conflict and doubt that characterise his spiritual autobiography.

Grace Abounding opens, in the manner of most conversion narratives, with an account of Bunyan's childhood and a suggestion as to the social status of his family. Bunyan's assertion that his family home was 'of that rank that is meanest, and most despised of all families in the Land' is obviously designed to contextualise the impoverished upbringing overcome by the writer for his audience (and the connotations are that his impoverishment was spiritual as well as economical). It has often been pointed out, however, that the Bunyans were once reasonably affluent smallholders and had only recently declined to the point that Thomas Bunyan, the author's father, worked as a tinker – a profession his son was to similarly adopt. It is also worth noting that a term like 'meanest' had, in the seventeenth century, a number of connotations that might mislead the modern reader. As Keeble notes, 'Bunyan's own church was described as of the "Meanest sort". That this phrase was Bunyan's own description of his family's social status in *Grace Abounding* suggests, however, that 'mean' and 'inferior' denote not the very poorest but mechanics like Bunyan, artisans, and husbandmen.'³² That said however, Bunyan is at pains to communicate just how low his social and spiritual condition was during his earliest years. As well as dwelling upon what he insists was an impoverished background, Bunyan records evidence of his generally reprobate behaviour in a didactic tone that is pitched directly at his nonconformist readers:

I had but few Equals, (especially considering my years, which were tender, being few) both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy Name of God.³³

³²N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), p. 142.

³³ *Grace Abounding*, p. 6.

This behaviour – ‘cursing and swearing, and playing the Mad-man, after my wonted manner’³⁴ – is, for the pre-conversion Bunyan, a reflection of his natural state. one that he is born into and the first real indication of the Calvinist doctrine that later dominates his religious life. Despite these apparently inherent character flaws, Bunyan is to some extent critical of his father (a figure he mentions only in relation to his religious shortcomings) whom he sees as the cause of at least some of his reprobate tendencies. He certainly blames his father for the manner of his speech for which he is soundly reprimanded by a neighbour who was ‘made to tremble to hear me’. This chastisement leads Bunyan to declare:

I wished with all my heart that I might be a little childe again, that my Father might learn me to speak without this wicked way of swearing: for, thought I, I am so accustomed to it, that it is but in vain for me to think of a reformation, for I thought it could never be.³⁵

There is irreconcilability in this despair and although Bunyan is suggesting external influences as being the cause of his ‘wicked way’, the temptations that immediately follow this deep remorse, and which he acts upon, are undeniably of his own construction: ‘I did still let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the Law of God’.³⁶ At this stage of course, Bunyan is not aware of the possibility of salvation – or of damnation for that matter – and easily reverts to his natural godless state. He underlines the absolute nature of his reprobation by portraying himself as something of an atheist:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Grace Abounding*, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

In these days, the thoughts of Religion was very grievous to me; I could neither endure it my self, nor that any other should. . . . Heaven and Hell were both out of sight and minde; and as for Saving and Damning, they were least in my thoughts.³⁷

These representations of his unregenerate behaviour are of course literary devices designed to impress prospective saints but they go some way towards showing how Bunyan saw his life before conversion. I would agree with Hill to a certain extent when he contends that

Bunyan's account of his own desperate wickedness is no doubt exaggerated with the hindsight of conversion. But the scraps of conversation which he records ring true. He went through phases of conventional piety which failed to satisfy him, and experienced long periods of 'a very great storm', in which his internal dialogue with Satan continued that with his former Ranter friends.³⁸

However, I think that rather than possessing the 'hindsight of conversion', Bunyan's exaggeration of the reprobate state in which he lives at the beginning of his life – perhaps the only period of emotional and spiritual certainty he ever actually experiences – is more an acute reflection on the state into which he is fearful of degenerating. The language with which Bunyan describes the physical manifestation of this spiritual turmoil (he is plagued by nightmares and waking visions) emphasises his internal conflict, that of his desire to be elect and his compulsion to commit sinful acts. The dichotomy is insurmountable and is an exemplary illustration of a differend:

even in my childhood [God] did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrifie me with dreadful visions. For often, after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁸ Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People*, pp. 58–59.

greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of Devils, and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought, laboured to draw me away with them; of which I could never be rid.³⁹

Grace Abounding shows Bunyan to be aware of the possibility of salvation. He experiences moments of spiritual clarity that lure the reader, and Bunyan himself, into thinking elect status has been confirmed. There are extended periods of hope during which Bunyan exists in a state approaching grace, and yet the regularity of his ‘castings down’, the continual gnawing away of the soteriological grand narrative by the little narratives of self-destructive doubt leave him in a position of uncertainty. Michael Davies has written recently about the ‘difficult labyrinths of conversion’ in *Grace Abounding*, something he sees as being an important instructional device for the prospective saint:

[W]e can begin to see how and why it is so important for *Grace Abounding* to remain labyrinthine and seemingly repetitive as an account of conversion. On the one hand, faith in grace is something to be maintained continually for Bunyan through perseverance, with all its ups-and-downs. On the other, what *Grace Abounding* depicts are the stages through which the convert may have to pass to realise true faith, a process which naturally encompasses movements both forwards and backwards, through faith and despair and back again: all those ‘*castings down, and raisings up*’.⁴⁰

The assumption that Bunyan realises ‘true faith’ is called into question by his comments at the end of *Grace Abounding*, when he declares that the ‘inclinations to unbelief’ he continually experiences, ‘convince me of the insufficiency of all inherent righteousness’.⁴¹ Bunyan is unable to pass through the labyrinth described in his spiritual autobiography: he remains inside it. *Grace Abounding* shows Bunyan to be in conflict with every aspect of his spiritual and psychological self and he never emerges from that conflict convincingly.

³⁹ *Grace Abounding*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Davies, ‘Grace Abounding to the Chief of sinners: John Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography’, p. 74.

⁴¹ *Grace Abounding*, pp. 102–3.

The dissent apparent in his spiritual autobiography is very much internal; he is dissenting from his own spiritual assumptions.

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