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Spiritual Autobiography in Seventeenth-Century England. Trends in Literary History and Criticism, 1948 – 2012

Abstract

This essay focuses on the most influential scholarly contributions to the study of English spiritual autobiography, a genre originating from radical sects in the seventeenth century. I argue that criticism published between 1948 and 2012 has fallen into roughly three trends: the study of spiritual autobiography with regard to the rise of the novel; the evaluation of key-figures, like John Bunyan, who contributed to the genre's diffusion; and the analysis of (spiritual) autobiographical material with purposes of generic definition. While a number of shorter works have been left out, special attention has been devoted to the dialogical exchange between scholarly positions and to the critical revival that the study of spiritual autobiography in its various expressions has been enjoying lately.

1. *Introduction*

Acknowledged as one of the most representative literary outcomes of the so-called Puritan age in England, the situation of spiritual autobiography against the broader panorama of English studies is one that deserves special attention. As I shall argue in this essay, the debate around the specific type of autobiography which concentrates on the spiritual development of the author's life displays some very peculiar aspects, which point to changing approaches to its form and ideology.

For a long time, at least up until the last years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the study of spiritual autobiography has been a privileged field for theorists and scholars of the early novel and novelists, especially Defoe. This tendency is demonstrated by groundbreaking pub-

lications, like George A. Starr's *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (1965)¹, J. Paul Hunter's *The Reluctant Pilgrim. Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (1966)² and *Before Novels. The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (1990)³. All of the books above cited dealt, more or less extensively, with the intercourse and exchange between the early novel, as exemplified by the work of Daniel Defoe, and spiritual autobiography or conversion narratives. In short, no matter how crucial the study of spiritual autobiography was deemed to be, the legitimate focus of these works was still solidly stuck to the proto-history of the great innovation of modern literature. In the same time-period, however, another wave of scholarship was being produced by critics who were more interested in the study of single authors, rather than in wider generic issues. I am here referring to those Bunyan-scholars who, following in the steps of Roger Sharrock (still the most prolific *connoisseur* of the Bedford preacher), published a considerable number of articles and essays where questions of genre were nevertheless addressed. Of course, as it often happened in such cases, the methodological pattern employed was more grounded in philological analysis, thus far from the theoretically innovative discussions brought forth in the works by historians of the novel. At any rate, despite the outworn appearance of some positions, the contribution of these critics to the study of spiritual autobiography still bears a degree of importance. Short works like Sharrock's "*The Pilgrim's Progress*" and *Spiritual Autobiography* (1948)⁴ and his introduction to the Clarendon edition of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief*

¹ George A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1965.

² J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim. Defoe's emblematic method and quest for form in Robinson Crusoe*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1966.

³ J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, Norton, New York and London, 1990.

⁴ Roger Sharrock, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*" and *Spiritual Autobiography*, "The Review of English Studies", Vol. 24, No. 94 (April 1948).

of *Sinners* (1962)⁵, or longer ones, like Michael Davies's extensive *Graceful Reading. Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (2002)⁶ discuss the implications and shape of spiritual autobiography, though necessarily narrowing the focus down to the self-proclaimedly unlearned preacher who happened to set its standards in 1666.

In very recent years, however, the thorough re-discovery of minor authors and works, which is constantly changing the appearance and trends of English studies in Great Britain and, even more so, the United States, has led to an increased attention to spiritual autobiography as a phenomenon deserving thoughtful analysis in its own right. Of course, I do not mean to imply that no important study was produced until recently: books like Paul Delany's *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (1969)⁷, Owen C. Watkins's *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (1972)⁸, and Leopold Damrosch's *God's Plot and Man's Stories* (1985)⁹ – not to mention capital works by early Americanists, like Patricia Caldwell's *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (1983)¹⁰ – enjoyed critical success and marked significant advances in the field's scholarship. After a couple of decades of declining interest, a significant revival seems to have started some seven years ago. Three book-length studies have been released, with quite short intervals, by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, signaling the renewed interest of first-rate scholarly publishers. It was D.

⁵ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962.

⁶ Michael Davies, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002.

⁷ Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969.

⁸ Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography*, Schocken, New York, 1972.

⁹ Leopold Damrosch Jr., *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985.

¹⁰ Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

Bruce Hindmarsh's theologically inflected *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (2005)¹¹ that opened this renovated trend, followed by Adam Smyth's *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (2010)¹² and, very recently, by Kathleen Lynch's excellent *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (2012)¹³. What is still striking, however, is the fact that, among the authors cited above, only Watkins and Hindmarsh define their objects with the phrase «spiritual autobiography», while Lynch opts for «protestant autobiography», and Delany and Smyth omit the qualifying adjective altogether. A discussion of the implications deriving from these different choices will be provided in the closing section of this essay, but for the moment it will be useful to remark the instability (in nomenclature, as well as in subject matter) that spiritual autobiography is destined to even in a time of renewed interest.

2. *Spiritual Autobiography at the Origins of the Novel*

In beginning this survey on the most important scholarly contributions on the genre of spiritual autobiography in the English seventeenth century, it will be almost inevitable to turn to the works on the early novel as a safe point of departure. This choice is not dictated by chronological reasons, though Starr's *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*, published in 1965, is indeed among the earliest; much rather, the books that are going to be analyzed in this section stand out for the great success and scholarly acclaim that have transformed them into classics in their own right. It will only be fair to open our discussion by concentrating on George A. Starr, the one person who, besides inaugurating an innovative (as well as fruit-

¹¹ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

¹² Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

¹³ Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2012.

ful) path in early novel studies, had the merit, for our purposes, of bringing spiritual autobiography into the spotlight as a clearly identifiable phenomenon.

Starr devotes a dense, thoughtful chapter of approximately fifty pages to the definition of spiritual autobiography *per se*, as a means of introducing the book's subject matter before dealing directly with the reading of three Defoe novels (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Lady Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*). A further chapter, significantly titled *The Transition to Fiction*, focuses on what could be called the afterlife of spiritual autobiography, that is to say the ways in which the «transition» from (assumed) non-fiction to fictional narrative came into being. Here I will almost exclusively focus on Chapter I, although some references to the following chapter will still be brought forth.

Just as J. Paul Hunter does in his much later (and much more complex) *Before Novels*, Starr spends some time trying to reconstruct a background situation to the emergence of the practice of spiritual autobiography in seventeenth-century England. It is clear from the very first pages that Starr is positive in acknowledging that such a practice, prepared for by an extensive habit of diary-keeping, rose and spread among religious radicals, preeminently Puritans. Diaries and private journals or records (which proliferated throughout that century and the following) were conceived as instrumental in keeping track of one's own existence, satisfying the theologically dictated call for self-scrutiny which played such an important role in the construction of the Puritan mind. Relying on little-known texts like Sir John B. Williams's *Memoirs of the Life and Character of Mrs. Sarah Savage & c.* and the sermons collected in the precious *Morning Exercises at Cripplegate*¹⁴, Starr categorizes some of the inputs which

¹⁴ Preached at Cripplegate, St. Giles-in-the-Fields, just outside London, between 1659 and 1689, the so-called *Morning Exercises* (a denomination acquired when they were published organically in the mid-nineteenth century) represent a crucial evolutionary phase in Protestant (especially Puritan) English spirituality. As I shall discuss later, these sermons (preached by a conspicuous number of diverse "ministers of the gospel") brought about the new status of the casuistical practice.

«naturally promoted the writing and reading of spiritual autobiographies»¹⁵. Among other assumptions, the critic bestows great relevance upon the principles of universality and recurrence in human life and spirituality:

History repeats itself not only in man's outward, group existence, but in the spiritual life of individuals. Circumstances vary, but only accidentally or superficially: however much they may obscure basic similarities from the casual observer, on closer view they actually confirm and heighten the constant, general features of religious experience. [...] A man need not have done anything remarkable in the eyes of the world for his autobiography to be worthwhile; or, if his spiritual life did happen to be unique in its circumstances, or extraordinary in its intensity, it would nevertheless correspond with that of all other Christians, and be meaningful to them for this very reason.¹⁶

The very last sentence quoted above displays exemplary understanding of the mechanisms and patterns of spiritual autobiography as a literary genre: the experience of the soul narrated in it must bear the quality of meaningfulness, in the sense that its meaning could be extracted from the subjectivity of the tale and then regain meaningfulness in somebody else's (possibly the reader's) own experience. This is probably one of the keys to the success of the genre of spiritual autobiography in terms of literary afterlife, as well as an explanation of its having originated in a time of high instability, both religious and social. Spiritual autobiographies began to be written in considerable numbers only after the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy, which is when the radicals whose ideas had brought about the outbreak of the Civil War were being greatly oppressed, and pushed towards the uncomfortable position of Dissenters as the Clarendon Code came to be enforced (1661-1665). The necessity of relating an experience which, though individually felt, bore universal relevance and recurred in human experience also conditioned the expressive features of the spiritual autobiographical discourse. Starr is extremely perceptive to

¹⁵ Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* cit., p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 14.

these rhetorical aspects, especially when he provides arguments on the autobiographers' predilections in terms of what to say and what not to say. One could add that, rather than a written confession, a spiritual autobiography is a well-conceived persuasive instrument which, resting on the self-sufficiency of its internal elements, employs rhetorically effective elements in order to gain authority. This is achieved, as Starr underpins, by avoiding elements which could be too tied to the author's uniqueness:

[Spiritual autobiography] attaches significance to what all Christians have felt and undergone, and disregards or suppresses idiosyncrasies except as they illustrate typical stages or predicaments in the soul's development. In this light, the traditional idiom seems entirely appropriate: it amplifies the rendering of individual experience by associating it with the experience of all Christians. In short, the spiritual autobiographer naturally found himself thinking "what oft was thought", and since he felt that it had been "ne'er so well expressed" as in the Bible, he was content to employ the same imagery and turns of phrase. Little wonder that the psychologist, in search of revealing peculiarities, finds many religious diaries and autobiographies of limited value¹⁷.

To be effective, the spiritual autobiographer must be able to clarify the underlying universal structure sustaining his/her work. It is only if this is successfully achieved that the autobiography will be apt to pursue its intent, which is to evangelize and teach. The pattern originating from this very avoidance of the particularity of subjective experience is one that allows the readers (and hopeful re-writers) to discern, recognize, and rejoice in «the tokens of grace and election by reading of them in others»¹⁸. On the other hand, the reader could be «startled out of reprobate habit by discovering their symptoms and aftermath»¹⁹.

Rather on the same line, Hunter emphasizes how the fallibility of human memory was also to be taken into account and how the instrumental

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*.

purpose of spiritual autobiography relied on the necessity of writing things down in order to keep them from fading, or altering (as a narrative report by alleged prophetess Anna Trapnel points out with singular clarity). As he indicates in *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, when discussing what he defines the “Providence”²⁰ tradition,

because man’s memory was not wholly to be trusted and because one man’s deliverance could benefit others, recipients of God’s mercy ought not only to *recall* but to *record* their experiences. [...] To authenticate their demands, the providence writers drew upon the example of the Bible and upon the long-established reasons for keeping a diary or a spiritual autobiography.²¹

The materiality of the written word, of the page and, ultimately, of the book itself was indeed matched by another implicit materiality, that of the exemplary history related. Hunter is keen on stressing how much the late seventeenth-century suspiciousness towards «religious or philosophical abstraction»²² resulted in a greater attraction to «practical examples»²³. Hunter’s assumption, however, is better understandable if the attachment to «practical examples» (which he correctly identifies as one of the driving forces behind spiritual biography and autobiography) is connected to two more aspects, one of which had already been touched upon by George A. Starr. The practical example (i.e. the life of Mr. X) was on the

²⁰ See Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim* cit., p. 54. By “Providence”, Hunter indicates a tradition of educational writings which revolved around the presentation of exemplary histories in which the shaping power of Divine Providence is manifested. In Calvinist theology, Divine Providence «was considered especially active in bringing about the repentance and conversion of God’s elect, for in a postlapsarian world man was impotent even to receive the proffered grace unless God interposed specifically to grant him special powers in a special situation. [...] Once converted, man could count on even greater attention from providence, for even though God oversaw all of creation, he bestowed special attention on the righteous, granting continual providential guidance so that they remained on a heaven-bound course».

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 72.

²² *Ivi*, p. 77.

²³ *Ibid.*.

one hand legitimated by an increasing trust in first-hand experience, while on the other derived from the Calvinist obsession not just with recording but also with analyzing life through the lens of self-scrutiny, as Starr suggested. To complete the picture, I would add that the resulting habit of dealing with practical examples counteracts the risk of fostering personal interpretation, which, to the Puritan mind, was something to avoid by all means.

In this particular discussion, which is altogether crucial for the overall consideration of the spiritual autobiographical genre, two convergent, though separate, critical positions emerge: Starr's view is more safely grounded into the religious or spiritual aspects of the literary phenomenon, while Hunter highlights a secular attitude which considers spiritual (auto)biography as the product of a newly formed, and impetuously changing, environment. I feel, however, that what emerges from this complex picture is that the genre analyzed is actually caught in the process of being secularized, still keeping its theological grounds fairly intact while displaying signs of the ongoing process which would, in a few short decades, lead to the birth of modernity's emblematic literary product.

Before Novels, published some twenty-five years after *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, shows a broader object as well as a much subtler, more detailed argumentative strength. Although, again, the focus is not to be found in the genre of spiritual autobiography in the English seventeenth century, Hunter's book still provides some very crucial insight, advancing the debate on that specific matter even when not directly handling it. A new, important perspective on the emergence of diaries and spiritual autobiographies (two categories that Hunter often, and rightfully, connects) is provided by a thoughtful, erudite digression on the renewed practice of casuistry in the second half of the seventeenth century. The broad plethora of casuistical writings which was produced at that time differed, in some respects, from past examples which were more tightly grounded in speculation and reasoning for their own sakes. What the object of casuistry was and why its effect was so powerful on late seventeenth-century pri-

vate writings and autobiographies Hunter explains with remarkable clarity:

A large body of Protestant “casuistical” literature – ethical wrestlings with individual “cases of conscience” – had developed by the late seventeenth century [...]. Later English Protestants tried to resurrect the art and purify its name, wishing to apply biblical injunctions sensibly to modern conditions. In Elizabethan and Jacobean times, English casuistry developed a respectable body of case materials, but it was at the end of the Puritan Interregnum that casuistry took a [new] turn [...]. The traditional purpose of casuistry was to examine how moral and ethical generalities apply to specific circumstances. When, in the mid-seventeenth century, it begins to apply its method to highly particular circumstances and specific situations within a context of changing assumptions about human nature, it becomes a version of the developing “individualism” [...] Casuistical treatises wrestle with issues, focusing not on general rules or patterns of guidance but the ethical shading of a particular instance.²⁴

The practice of casuistry, with its structured employment of explanatory patterns which would lead towards ultimate understanding, did not influence spiritual autobiography (as well as private journals) by direct contact. A fundamental mediation, as Hunter maintains, was provided by the most representative para-literary genre of the time, that is the sermon. The Cripplegate Sermons display the earliest symptoms of this newly re-fashioned casuistical technique. The instances favored in these sermons, which circulated with a certain degree of success, managed to enrich the growing debate on how to interpret life in the correct way. It will have to be remarked that this particular issue was not only of primary relevance to the spiritual development (or, to use an emblematic word, “progress”) of a Puritan, but it was also crucial in the leading of his/her earthly life, a life that needed to take into account the projection of an otherworldly existence of bliss or damnation²⁵. As the character Bunyan in *Grace*

²⁴ Hunter, *Before Novels* cit., p. 290.

²⁵ See *Ivi*, p. 303, especially: «The recording and analysis of these events, in minute and painstaking detail, became a sacred duty and a common Protestant practice, and diary keeping (although primarily insisted upon by Puritan theorists) became a na-

Abounding to the Chief of Sinners bursts out into his desperate «How can you tell you are Elected?»²⁶, so the average Puritan, awakened to repentance, struggles with the problem of finding out the actual destiny of his/her soul after death. This is why the empirical foundations of casuistry proved particularly fruitful to the development of literary products like spiritual autobiographies in that specific time period: as Hunter vigorously stresses, the process of secularization, bringing about factual reliability rather than dogmatic belief, is pictured in its definite, irreversible development.

3. *Bunyan and Spiritual Autobiography*

If, on the one hand, historians of the novel (in particular J. Paul Hunter) are more keen on observing the peculiarities of the spiritual autobiographical genre through the lenses of a secularizing culture, of a progression both social and ideological which would eventually lead to the “rise of the novel”, on the other, specialists in seventeenth-century authors generally ground such literary products into the frame of the theological background from which they emerged. In this section I shall concentrate on two very representative works, an article by Roger Sharrock and a ponderous monograph by Michael Davies. Despite my selecting just these studies, however, a large amount of scholarly work has been published on single spiritual autobiographies of seventeenth-century English authors, and often of very good quality. Unsurprisingly, great attention has been devoted to female voices (Agnes Beaumont, Anna Trapnel, Sarah Davy, and more), with the publications of important volumes, like the anthology *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Eng-*

tional habit practiced by a large percentage of those who were literate. [...] Exactly when personal writings began to be mined, refined, and sent abroad into the world of print is a complex story involving fundamental cultural changes».

²⁶ Bunyan, *Grace Abounding* cit., p. 20.

*lishwomen*²⁷, or articles such as Kathleen Lynch's biographical contribution on Beaumont²⁸, and Effie Botonaki's on women's personal writings²⁹. The experience of the writing of the self is read, by such critics, as an act which has subversive overtones, radicalizing the relationship with the otherworldly order to the extent of touching upon aspects of quasi-mystical perception. When dealing with male autobiographers, especially with John Bunyan and his canonical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (implying a self-imposed Pauline character in its very title), the critical treatment is substantially different. As I have said, the Bedfordshire preacher's spiritual autobiography, still the best-known example of the genre in England's literary history, has been extensively treated as the result of a theological reasoning deeply ingrained in the author's awareness.

The central argument in the article by Roger Sharrock that I shall briefly analyze here – the fact that *The Pilgrim's Progress* reflects the structure, both narrative and conceptual, of spiritual autobiography as it had been codified in *Grace Abounding* – cannot help but rely on the definition of its guiding assumption: what is a spiritual autobiography and why it was such a powerful expressive means for radical Protestants. The material Sharrock collects to support his explanation is, as we are about to observe, of a strictly theological sort:

There is a central principle in Calvinist theology which resolves the tension between the total depravity of fallen man and the transcendent goodness of God; the soul can achieve salvation through no merely human righteousness, only through the imputed righteousness of Christ displayed in his incarnate life and sacrifice, and 'imputed' or given to man because of no individual merits but by free grace in election.' Like other

²⁷ Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, Helen Wilcox (eds.), *Her Own Life. Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, Routledge, London and New York, 1989.

²⁸ Kathleen Lynch, *Her Name Agnes: The Verifications of Agnes Beaumont's Narrative Ventures*, "English Literary History" No. 67 (2000).

²⁹ Effie Botonaki, *Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen's Spiritual Diaries: Self-Examination, Covenanting, and Account Keeping*, "The Sixteenth Century Journal", Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 1999).

attempts at systematic theology, this is a restatement of one main article of traditional Christian belief around which the rest are built up. Calvin professes to find all the Fathers except Augustine unconvincing on the perplexing question of the limits of human free-will [...] It is this doctrine of election and reprobation which has usually drawn the critics of Calvinism, but what concerns us here is not the unpitying logic on which they usually dwell, but the striking dramatic potentialities. Bunyan's own doctrinal writings show clearly that he was impregnated with all the situations of this theology and had full command of the enthusiastic preacher's manner of reconstructing them dramatically.³⁰

Rather than in the social and cultural milieu into which the author was living, the motive for the composition of a spiritual autobiography like *Grace Abounding* is to be sought, for Sharrock, in Bunyan's own doctrinal speculations, preeminently those presented in *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* (1659). Bunyan's autobiographical work, therefore, is to be regarded as an attempt to resolve «the tension between the total depravity of fallen man and the transcendent goodness of God»³¹: what the author illustrates is nothing more than the tangible experience of his own soul (and, of course, his own self) in the intercourse between earthly sinfulness (that is what would become, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the City of Destruction) and the possibility of eternal bliss (exemplified by the allegorical Celestial City). A spiritual autobiography, with its well-structured internal composition, would be the ideal means to display the three crucial steps in the life of an elect: the awakening to repentance from a situation of (almost exaggerated) ungodliness, then the "pilgrimage" (ideal in *Grace Abounding*, material in *The Pilgrim's Progress*) towards bliss, and, ultimately, the achievement of salvation with the beginning of evangelization. The brilliant point made by Sharrock when discussing Bunyan's compositional technique, however, seems to detach itself from the purely theological reasoning which had occupied the argument thus far:

³⁰ Sharrock, *Spiritual Autobiography in "The Pilgrim's Progress"* cit., pp. 103-104.

³¹ *Ibid.*.

When the stages in the author's calling described in *Grace Abounding* are compared with the episodes of the *First Part* [of *The Pilgrim's Progress*], it is remarkable how in the grasp of his vividly concrete imagination quotations from Scripture are already, even within the limits of autobiography, becoming personified. Ideas about justification speedily take on sensuous life; the metaphors are not merely illustrative imagery but express the essence of his experience. In this Bunyan conforms to a particular type of mystical mentality. But he does not aspire like the great mystics to a spiritual union with the divine love. His concern is only with salvation. He enjoys the immediate illumination of the mystic; for instance, in this celebrated passage where the relief that came to him found words very like those of Luther he had read [...].³²

The construction of images and scenes in *Grace Abounding* is therefore tightly linked to what could be defined the “literalization” of religious perception: the comparison that Sharrock advances between Bunyan's sensitivity and mystical mentality – though inappropriate in some respects – highlights its composition process, which shaped the spiritual autobiography as we know it. A similar point has been made by Michael Davies in his *Graceful Reading*, where the problem of the exchange between theology and narrative technique in the main works of John Bunyan is directly addressed³³.

Davies's book, which is the most articulate, complete discussion of the preacher's best-known literary works (that is, excluding his non-narrative tracts and pamphlets, and of course his poems) to have been published so far, devotes two ponderous chapters to *Grace Abounding*. Although my aim in this essay is not to concentrate on Bunyan's work, but on spiritual autobiography as a genre, it will nevertheless be useful to shortly investigate the main theses brought forth in these chapters because, though tailored to the singularity of the case study, some of the critic's assumptions bear larger theoretical value. The chapter “Bunyan's Exceeding Maze: Doctoring and Doctrine in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*” illus-

³² *Ivi*, p. 108.

³³ See also his essay *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in Anne Dunan-Page (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bunyan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

trates how, starting from a famous scene in the book (that of the sudden voice that «dart[ed] from Heaven into [his] Soul» while «in the midst of a game at Cat»³⁴), the device of “amazement” places the author into the position of somebody who can teach from personal experience. For our purposes, however, the most relevant contribution is to be found in the following section of Davies’s volume. Chapter 3, titled *Of Things Seen and Unseen: Graceful Reading and Narrative Practice in “Grace Abounding”*, concentrates on the so-called “theology of Grace”, a central concept in Puritan doctrine originating from Paul the Apostle’s thought as expressed in the epistles to Galatians, Romans and Corinthians (I and II), and re-read under the radicalized interpretations of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Davies rightfully argues that the search for signs of Grace (which would imply a benign plan on the Lord’s part) shaped the author’s mind to such an extent that the narrative structure of the spiritual autobiography itself reflects it. On the same level, the “graceful reading” also indicates the achievement of the ability to properly read the Scriptures, that is, to blindly trust their historical factuality and trust its written word. As a consequence to this increasing doctoring, Bunyan’s progression towards bliss and a fuller understanding of his own spiritual dimension is effected through a series of steps and trials which need to be surpassed in order for him to reach a higher level, in a way that is singularly in accord with the allegorical picturing of Christian’s adventures in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. But this path is not so straightforward as it might appear: quite the opposite, it gives way to the hesitations, instabilities and wonderings which are a distinctive feature not just of *Grace Abounding*, but of the spiritual autobiographical genre as a whole. As Michael Davies argues,

³⁴ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2008², p. 20.

Bunyan's understanding at this stage in his conversion [after meeting the "good wives" of Bedford] is both problematic and distressing because it is primarily transitional and hesitant. Having plunged himself so deeply in the Word, and yet having no sure faith in its promises, Bunyan is forced to inhabit an intermediary realm of interpretation in which he simultaneously receives comfort and pain from Scriptures which seem to work physically and metaphysically upon him in a spectacular whirlwind of spiritual doubt. Continually caught between uncertainty and hope as to his own salvation, Bunyan oscillates from having the Word 'trample' and 'fall' violently upon him to it refreshing his spirit intimately with 'such strength and comfort' that 'I was as if it talked with me'. In this state of soterial uncertainty, the Word seems both to persecute and shelter a Bunyan 'greatly assaulted and perplexed' by doubts and fears of salvation and damnation³⁵.

The excellent analysis proposed by Davies is, as I have just pointed out, easily applicable to almost any English spiritual autobiography from the seventeenth century. The typical oscillation that Davies recognizes in *Grace Abounding* derives from the uncertainty of dwelling between hopeful salvation and the fear of going to hell. It is in order to attempt to put a remedy to this that spiritual autobiographies were read and broadly circulated in a period of social and religious instability, and responds to the very necessity of overcoming a theologically ingrained doubt. The uncertainty in the repentants' spiritual health is, therefore, matched by a widespread feeling of precariousness. On the whole, however, Davies, as opposed to people like Starr or Hunter (but also McKeon), carefully avoids bringing issues of a secular nature into the discussion, thus following the traditional consideration of Bunyan (and of the autobiographical genre he practiced) as a direct product of a theological reasoning which goes far beyond the immediate consequences of private devotion, seeping into the machinery itself of literary production.

4. *(Spiritual) Autobiography Reconsidered*

³⁵ Davies, *Graceful Reading* cit., p. 126.

In order to complete my survey, it will be necessary to finally examine the publications which explicitly deal with some kind of generic definition. The works upon which I shall concentrate in this final section usefully highlight one of the assumptions that opened this essay: alongside the successful scholarship of critics like Paul Delany and Leopold Damrosch Jr., a new wave of work started being produced in the mid-2010s, with results which appear to follow paths that are traditional (D. Bruce Hindmarsh) as well as more audaciously innovative (Kathleen Lynch and, especially, Adam Smyth).

Published in 1969, Paul Delany's *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*³⁶ has for a long time remained the most complete, autonomous contribution to the study of this literary phenomenon. Although somewhat outdated, both because of its extreme schematism and because of the clear-cut distinction he makes between «religious autobiography» and «secular autobiography» (a distinction which Kathleen Lynch indirectly discusses in her own book, as we shall see later), Delany's volume still provides interesting insight, especially in the long chapter (almost ninety pages) dedicated to the first type. The author proceeds by recording the literary antecedents which he deems instrumental for the birth of spiritual autobiography. Starting from what he defines the «scriptural origins»³⁷ (the Psalms in the Old Testament, and Paul the Apostle, hailed by the Protestant reformers, in the New), he then goes on to identify the steps of a tradition which brings together the autobiographical experiences of eminent personalities like Augustine³⁸ and lesser-known (but recently re-evaluated) figures like the English medieval mystic Margery Kempe. The crucial shift, as Delany argues, between the late classical and medieval heritage, and the post-Reformation is to be identified in a new fashion of dealing with the personal *exempla* which crowd seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies:

³⁶ Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* cit.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 28.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 31.

In the Protestant autobiographer's use of the *exemplum*, the emphasis has shifted away from the article of doctrine which the medieval preacher sought to make more vivid by means of an illustration. Now the stress is laid, not on dogma, but on the autobiographer's search for salvation, and on the vital relevance of this search to the reader's own struggles – the autobiographer himself incarnates the example.³⁹

Delany's point is fascinating, and easily acceptable if one considers both the renovated theological foundations of Protestantism and the increasing necessity of empirical data, emphasized by the statistical penchant of Puritan casuistry. The push towards the exemplary consideration of the author in autobiographical writings was, moreover, reinforced by the fact that «there [was] no authoritarian priest to lay down the law for everyone»⁴⁰, therefore emphasizing the implicit aspect of making anybody an example for everybody.

This feature of universality, already remarked by George A. Starr, marks an even stronger point in Leopold Damrosch Jr.'s later work, *God's Plot and Man's Stories*⁴¹. Although the book itself would rightfully belong to the category of “histories of the novel”, I have nevertheless chosen to list it in this section because it devotes substantial attention to the definition of spiritual autobiography. The question of exemplarity for the sake of a communitarian (ecumenical, one could say, though risking the implications of Roman Catholicism) feeling is indeed brilliantly explained by Damrosch, whose intent is nevertheless rooted in the construction of fictional imagination up until the mid-eighteenth-century novel. In Chapter Two, evocatively titled *Puritan Experience and Art*⁴², the critic explores the notion of conventionality in early spiritual autobiographies:

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*.

⁴¹ Damrosch, *God's Plot and Man's Stories* cit.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 18. *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* cit. is also the title of a book by Watkins published in 1972, which enjoyed good success. Here I

Naturally enough, people tended to understand their lives in terms which they learned from others. Autobiographers were constantly exposed to the conventional scheme in sermons and godly memoirs, and since like Baxter [an eminent Puritan thinker] they wanted to see their experience as typical and not exceptional, they looked for evidence of the scheme when they pondered their own lives. [...] Sinners overwhelmed in a shoreless sea of guilt needed to be told that their condition had a name, was common to most of the elect, and was preparative to a joyful conclusion.⁴³

After a detailed discussion of the “lives” of four Puritans, however, Damrosch touches an aspect of primary relevance, both to spiritual autobiography and the early novel. The questions of historicity and temporality, which seem to be constantly dragged in by the Puritan narrativization of exemplary existences, are indeed of a very delicate sort, especially considering their reversed treatment in the eighteenth-century novel: time and history were, in a way, confined to a secondary role not just because of the timeless applicability of exemplary conduct, but also because of the strive towards eternity and the timelessness of blissful after-life.⁴⁴ So, on the one hand, narrative inevitably involves temporality while, on the other, its very representation is shaped by the ideology underlying the *exempla*. Incidentally, it is no coincidence that Bunyan would then “translate” his autobiography in the a-temporal allegorical epic of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. A consequence of the tension between temporality and its refusal is clearly expressed by another duality, which is presented in the very title of the work: the co-existence of a macrocosm (God’s plot, so to say) and a

have chosen to omit reviewing it because its arguments are in many respects touched upon by Damrosch himself.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 60, especially: «Confronting the mysteriousness of Providence, and deeply aware of the crucial importance of each of their actions, Puritans tended to stress temporal separateness rather than continuity. For the sake of clarity their attitude may be described in three related ways. First, the moments of experience are separate and disjunct; second, interest focuses more on the ongoing present than on past or future; and third, there is a consistent effort to translate time into eternity, history into myth».

microcosm (man's stories, like the individual narratives) upon which the early novel would build its originality.

For some twenty years, Damrosch's volume remained the last organic contribution to the study of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography. During the last seven years, however, three important new volumes have been published, demonstrating how much the genre of spiritual autobiography is still open to a variety of possible interpretations. Despite a somewhat misleading title, D. Bruce Hindmarsh's 2005 monograph *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England*⁴⁵ is actually rooted in the analysis of eighteenth-century texts, though still providing a very good introductory chapter on the *Early Modern Origins*, as well as widespread references to seventeenth-century material throughout the book. Needless to say, Hindmarsh is particularly interested in one aspect of spiritual autobiography, which has often been identified with the whole genre in a kind of synecdochal process, that is the "conversion narrative". His book is an erudite, and very pleasantly written, illustration of the various ways the crucial stage of conversion was pictured in autobiographical narratives from the eighteenth-century, of the generic conventions of these narratives and, of course, of their conceptual background. It is interesting to remark that, although explicitly theologically biased, the discussion which takes place in the chapter on early modern spiritual autobiographies displays knowledge of some instances proposed by a "secular" reader like Hunter. For example, the author shows an interest in material culture that leads him to affirm that,

the introspective piety that such self-examination encouraged was also reflected in the detailed elaboration of Puritan casuistry to deal with cases of conscience. Puritan preachers were described as physicians of the soul, and they produced a voluminous literature which bore this out – a growing number of books of pastoralia and manuals, culminating in the seventeenth century in paranetic works such as Richard Baxter's monumental *Christian Directory*. In all of this the Puritans fostered a religious culture

⁴⁵ Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative* cit.

that stressed the importance of “experimental knowledge” and the need to correlate experience with biblical theology.⁴⁶

An interesting point is then made by Hindmarsh when, resting on the theory of the so-called “morphology of conversion” proposed by Edmund Morgan in *Visible Saints*⁴⁷, he depicts the way in which the understanding (an actual orientation process) of one’s self corresponded, in the written work, to localization within the narrative space. The ultimate aim in a Puritan’s experience, Hindmarsh argues, would be the connection between the outward and the inward⁴⁸, ultimately needed in order to figure out one’s before and one’s after. Alongside this necessity, however, the critic underlines how much the shape and forms of early spiritual autobiographies (the example he cites is Richard Kilby’s 1616 *The Burthen of a Loaden Conscience: or, The Miserie of Sinne: Set Forth by the Confession of a Miserable Sinner*) owed to the coexistence (which Bunyan himself would clearly display) of «self-examination and confession», «biblical exposition», «sermonic exhortation», and «factual narrative», resulting in a hybrid product of literary and conceptual transition.⁴⁹ What is lacking, in Kilby’s autobiography, is the awareness of a narrative construction, consequently resulting in a much stronger concentration on self-analysis and confession:

In the midst of Kilby’s examen of conscience and his various exhortations to the reader, we find short passages of autobiographical narration, yet there is little of the larger narrative syntax of what Aristotle called *mythos* – or beginning, middle, and end. There are points at which Kilby seems about to tell his story for its own sake, but then he returns to self-examination or exhortation.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, New York University Press, New York, 1963.

⁴⁸ Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative* cit., p. 38.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 40.

Again, this peculiarity, namely the setting aside of “plot” in order to develop reasoning, is indeed a distinctive feature even of more mature examples of the genre; although for people like Bunyan or Beaumont, the very structuring of a teleological narrative is deemed a necessary condition for the dovetailing of their spiritual crisis, thus finally connecting the experience of the self to that of the soul.

Quite on a different note, Adam Smyth’s *Autobiography in Early Modern England*⁵¹ is the result of archival research which, though relevant in its own right, does not add much to the discussion so far brought forth. It will still be interesting to remark that, out of all the material in which “autobiographical writings” were carried out in early modern England, the author traces four particularly successful media: the printed almanac, the financial account, the commonplace book and the parish register⁵². In other words, Smyth’s book has the merit (similar to J. Paul Hunter’s at the time when *Before Novels* was published) of investigating texts that «scholars of autobiographical writing have largely overlooked»⁵³. It is too early to say how deeply this radically new approach will affect future studies, but the by-ways and less obvious paths of autobiographical writing illustrated by Smyth are certainly likely to stir curiosity in the panorama of contemporary scholarship.

Much more traditional, in approach and conclusions, is the last book that I shall here survey. After dealing with the matter in a valuable essay on «the verifications of Agnes Beaumont’s literary ventures»⁵⁴, Kathleen Lynch has finally published an autonomous volume earlier this year, by the title of *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World*. The critic constructs her study around the proposition to reconsider Protestant autobiography as «an agent of circum-Atlantic

⁵¹ Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* cit.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*.

⁵⁴ Lynch, *Her Name Agnes* cit.

community formation»⁵⁵, that is concurrent in the re-organization of society between the Old and New Worlds. Rather than in «inward aspects», Lynch is interested in what she calls the genre's «outward reaches»⁵⁶: in other words, instead of trying to reconstruct the inputs which led to the spreading of spiritual autobiography, she wishes to put an accent upon the consequences it bore, both in England and in the American early colonies. By giving great relevance to the reception and appropriation of the genre in societal discourse, *Protestant Autobiography* detaches itself from questions of formal or generic definition. What is offered in the book is

a new analysis of the rhetoric of the truthful – the elect – self, and [special emphasis upon] the ways in which spiritual experience was rendered discursive and became another conceptual opportunity for the construction of experience as an authorizing principle in the seventeenth century.⁵⁷

Kathleen Lynch's deeply knowledgeable study marks yet another step in contemporary scholarship on matters of (spiritual) autobiographical writing during the seventeenth century. Of course, the afterlife of the genre has long been a source of interest for historians of the novel, as I have tried to illustrate in the first section of this essay. What is inherently new in *Protestant Autobiography* is that the author takes into account the fortune of a literary practice in order to deploy its meaning in the broader context of the society (or, societies) that made use of it. The intrinsic literariness of the texts examined is clearly set aside; what matters is the way they affected the building of a new sense of community across the Atlantic, as well as influencing social structures in the shift from motherland to colony. Emerging from Lynch's sophisticated use of primary sources (from Norwood to Baxter, Beaumont and, of course, Bunyan) is the un-

⁵⁵ Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography* cit., p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 13.

derlying assumption that, in a milieu of religious radicalism, spiritual experience and social behavior were almost overlapping patterns.

The number of studies devoted to the theory, history and practice of spiritual autobiography in the English seventeenth-century is not, however, confined to those I have so far analyzed, or that address the issue in an explicitly recognizable way. A great deal of information and insight is to be found in almost all scholarly publications on the English Revolution and its aftermath, precisely because a phenomenon like the one that has been here discussed is the product of a very specific ideological environment. To think of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies in exclusively literary terms would mean to utterly disregard the social forces which brought them about and that were, in turn, re-fashioned by their increasing diffusion. The books and articles that I have chosen as elements for discussion exemplify the approach just suggested, even to the extreme of looking for traces of the self – spiritual or mundane though it may be – in the most diverse written materials.

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