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John Sutherland

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Contents

1. John Bunyan 1628–1688

I have … used Similitudes.

John Bunyan was born in Bedford in 1628, in the lowest stratum of that middle England town. His father was an illiterate brazier and tinker, a wandering tradesman. Bunyan later allegorised life's wanderings into a pilgrimage, heavy pack on back.

Largely self-educated, Bunyan had steeped himself in the English gospels. The most familiar portrait shows him with one book under his arm – the Geneva Bible. This is the volume which, at the outset of his *Progress*, Christian claps to his bosom, fingers in his ears, as he runs away from his amazed wife and family, shouting 'Life, life, eternal life' (and to hell with child support). It struck even Mark Twain's Huck Finn as odd. He recalls (among the little he has read) a book 'about a man that left his family, it didn't say why. I read considerable in it now and then. The statements was interesting, but tough.'

Like others of his station in life, the pulpit was Bunyan's university and preachers his teachers. Religion, in Bunyan's view of life, was battle; and the pilgrim's staff was a weapon with which to crack heretical skulls:

No Lion can him fright,
He'll with a Giant fight,
But he will have a right
To be a Pilgrim.

The other cheek was never turned.

He was a Christian soldier, forever marching as to war – literally. Before the age of sixteen John Bunyan enlisted in Cromwell's 'Roundhead' parliamentary army. He recalls that service and the epic victories over the long-haired foe and – not least – his sinful self in the spiritual journal, *Grace Abounding*. There he chronicles his heroic struggle with such vices as bell-ringing (and worse) and his life-and-soul discovery that he was, after all, one of the elect. Election was confirmed when a comrade took his place on guard duty only to be 'shot into the head with a musket bullet'. Could a sign be clearer?

He married around 1650 and had four children by this first marriage. His wife's names are unknown – but it is deduced she strengthened his religious sense of mission. She died in 1658 and he remarried the following year. From 1655 he addressed congregations as a militant Baptist preacher. He despised Quakers almost as much as Royalists. The schisms of this period defy description: they would have split the atom, if it had been theology. In 1660, with the return of the new King Charles (one of the elite, not the elect) from France and the downfall of the Commonweal, Bunyan was imprisoned for obstinately preaching without a licence and 'devilishly and fiendishly' not attending lawful church service.

He would spend, with brief intervals of freedom, some twelve years in Bedford prison – as what we would call a prisoner of conscience. It was there, suffering for his faith, that he conceived and wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as a flood of other books, verse and pamphlets. He expected to die in prison and was prone to crippling bouts of what he called 'despond'.

The Bedford jail was, in the late seventeenth century, rather more humane than the human sty which appalled the great prison reformer, John Howard, a hundred years later. It was situated in Silver Street, in the bustling centre of the town. It was in the prison day-room that Bunyan wrote. Inmates, even in a relatively humane penitentiary could not expect candles – leave those to the sinful playhouse.

It was more a kind of house arrest than incarceration, if not actually a 'club penitentiary', as Americans call their open prisons. Solzhenitsyn, who compiled the *Gulag Archipelago* in Stalin's vile camps, was obliged to consign his great narrative to memory, while the incarcerated Bunyan evidently had access to writing materials – and printers. It wasn't quite Proust's cork-lined bedroom, but adequate. Victorians, such as the artist Frederick Walker, liked to picture Bunyan in durance vile, but the truth was less melodramatic. Something more like Virginia Woolf's room of one's own might be more appropriate – but with the lock on the outside.

The full title of Bunyan's great work is:

> The Pilgrim's Progress FROM THIS WORLD TO That which is to come. Delivered under the Similitude of a DREAM. Wherein is Discovered, 1. The manner of his setting out.— 2. His Dangerous Journey; and — 3. His safe Arrival at the Desired Countrey.

Bunyan justified the imaginative aspect of his allegorical work (Puritans have always been suspicious of fiction) with an epigraphic quotation from the Book of Hosea 12:10: 'I have … used Similitudes.' Similitudes, or 'Fiction' was licit: the Bible said so. But it was slippery. Clearly the gospel story was historical truth – not 'similitudinous'. Like every novelist after him, Bunyan was a conceptual fence-straddler: 'Real, but not real.' One leg on either side.

The Pilgrim's Progress's influence on the subsequent history of fiction is clear enough. The pulpit is always there, for a certain kind of novelist. Before embarking on *Vanity Fair* (the title, of course, flagrantly lifted from Bunyan) Thackeray informed the editor of *Punch* – the wonderfully named Mark Lemon – that he regarded his mission as a novelist as ‘serious as the parson’s own’. D. H. Lawrence went a step further: the novel was, he declared, ‘the one bright book of life’ – the Bible for modern man. At least, as written by Lawrence it was.

The Pilgrim’s Progress is the all-time fiction bestseller. There have been more editions than anyone has counted. It is still widely read by the multitude (particularly in residually puritan America) for the same reason that it was read in the seventeenth century – it is a novel which can be read by those who distrust novels. But Bunyan’s achievement is greater than moving tons of copies out of the Amazon warehouse, year-in, year-out. His allegorical narrative made room for the novel to be morally serious. It was the necessary first step for the book of life.

He died as he would have wanted. Having been drenched in a rainstorm and subsequently contracting a chill, he insisted on preaching, precipitating a fatal fever which stopped his voice forever.

FN John Bunyan
MRT *The Pilgrim’s Progress*
Biog R. Sharrock, *John Bunyan* (1954)

2. Aphra Behn 1640–1689

She is not so much a woman to be unmasked as an unending combination of masks.
Janet Todd

The novel (or ‘new thing’) happened in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. It coincided with, and arguably depended upon, an array of preconditional factors: for example, mass literacy, urbanisation, mercantilism, the Protestant Ethic, the rise of the bourgeoisie, female emancipation, new technologies, parliamentary democracy and individual authorial genius. Scholars have tried, but a juggling octopus could not keep all those balls in the air. Enough to say – it happened.

‘Eaffrey’ Johnson was born in 1640 near Canterbury. What scant evidence there is suggests her father was a ‘barber’. Among other things, these intimate attenders to the male person were the first ports of call for those with venereal problems. Eaffrey’s mother was a wet nurse – a woman, that is, who put her breasts out to hire to mothers of higher station than herself.

In return for services rendered the Johnsons received favours from powerful local families. It was thus, one assumes, that Eaffrey’s father, the barber, was appointed in 1663/4 Lieutenant General of Surinam, a British colonial possession. It has a touch of Caligula's horse about it. But the Civil War had (temporarily) disturbed the usual power, patronage and privilege circuits, and Surinam was hardly a plum posting – even for a governor with a royal commission in one hand, and a shaving bowl in the other. Everything about Aphra's early life has a question mark hanging over it.

The colony was located where Guyana now is, between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers (a stream which, as Behn charmingly notes, is 'almost as large as the Thames'). It was not far from where Robinson Crusoe is shipwrecked at exactly the same period of time that Miss Eaffrey was there – if, indeed, she were.

Three colonial powers – France, Holland and England – competed for this far-off patch of colonial dirt, but currently the English flag flew. Surinam was put to the cultivation of sugar: the appetite for the sweetener was ravenous in Europe – as ravenous as that in the US today for the other white powder which South America supplies.

Slaves from Africa worked the plantations for whomever the current overseer was – English or Dutch whips were all the same. Black cattle were notoriously ill treated. It was a black man's hell and a white man's grave. Thus it proved for Aphra's father who evidently died there. Did his daughter accompany him to Surinam? The question vexes readers of Behn's primal novel *Oroonoko*. It seems, from the ostentatious accuracy of her local description and the introduction of actual historical figures, that she indeed knew the place at first-hand. But sceptics argue that she was no more there than the adult Defoe was eyewitness to the Plague Year.

It seems (again, the details are hazy) that in her mid-twenties Aphra Johnson married a trader – possibly in slaves – called Hans Behn. He was Dutch or German and apparently died (in the plague?) or absconded, shortly after the wedding ceremony. Aphra may even have invented him to render herself a 'respectable' widow. Whether or not the shady European spouse existed, Mrs Behn (as she hereafter inscribed herself) knew Europe very well. In 1666 war broke out between England and Holland. Now in her late twenties, Aphra (codename 'Aphora') served as a spy for the newly returned Charles II, in Antwerp. The 'she spy' did good work. Legend, apocryphal alas, has it she warned her country of the Dutch Navy's incursion up the Thames in 1667. But Aphra did not profit from her service to the nation: 1668 found her in debtors' prison. From seventeenth-century 007 to Moll Flanders.

She came in from the cold, with her first play, *The Forced Marriage*, in 1670. Actresses ('Mrs Bracegirdle', et al.) had broken the old 'boys only' convention – so why not go a step higher and write the things? Particularly if you could do it as wittily – and king-pleasingly – as Mrs Behn. One of her comedies, *The Feign'd Courtezans*, is dedicated to Nell Gwyn. Behn would market more profitable fare than oranges to her monarch and his retinue. The wicked Earl of Rochester, she claimed, 'helped' her. He liked helping handsome young ladies.

From her earliest years, she took lovers whom, in the libertine spirit of the age, she evidently preferred to husbands. Two partners figure prominently in what has come down to us. William Scot she may have met in Surinam, and he may have been her 'control' during her career as a spy. A 'regicide', he was later executed. The other partner was a bisexual lawyer, 'Jack' Hoyle. As Janet Todd describes him, Jack was 'a learned, bullying man who would, a few years on, be tried for sodomy and killed after a tavern brawl' – an everyday career in Restoration London.

Late in what would be a short life, Aphra Behn turned to fiction of which *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, is judged her masterpiece. The London theatre, with the monarchy again in bloody dispute, was in recession. And Behn, it is known, was again hard up: in her forties, 'friends' may have been harder to come by.

Whatever the motive for writing it, as with her male counterpart Defoe, fiction was late-life fruit. She died months after the publication of *Oroonoko* and is buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey, the first woman author, and the least cloistered, to be so honoured. On her tomb, instructs Virginia Woolf, 'All women together ought to let flowers fall … for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.' One suspects Aphra would have tossed the flowers back.

The 'True Story' as the title proclaims itself (the term 'novel' was yet to be invented) is the manifestly untrue story of a 'Royal Slave'. The oxymoron is piquant in the context of the 1680s. An African prince, Oroonoko, along with his wife Imoinda, has been transported to Surinam, from West Africa, to labour in the plantations. His history is 'set down' by this anonymous young English woman, the daughter of the newly appointed deputy governor, who has just died.

The narrator befriends the luckless African pair. He, being a Prince in Exile (as was Charles II in France), can speak both French and English elegantly. Even in remote West Africa, he has heard of the execution of Charles I and found it – as did all right thinking people – 'deplorable'. The narrator is struck by the couple's native dignity, though their beauty is anything but native. Oroonoko (renamed 'Caesar' by his captors) has straight hair and 'Roman', not negroid, features. He is less a noble savage, a hundred years *avant la lettre*, than a noble, *tout court*. A black blue-blood. We recall that the nickname for the notoriously swarthy Charles II was 'the black boy' (it survives as a common pub name in England).

But Oroonoko is no common slave. He kills two tigers and has a vividly described battle with an electric ('benumbing') eel. When Imoinda becomes pregnant, Oroonoko is determined that his son shall not be born into slavery. He organises an uprising, and is cheated into surrendering on the point of victory. Realising it is the end, Oroonoko cuts off Imoinda's face, after he has cut her throat, so that no one will gaze on her beauty again. He disembowels himself, but is sewn up by surgeons to be executed, sadistically, for the delectation of a white rabble. Behn's Royal Slave is even more stoic, at the moment of regicide, than the Royal Captive, Charles I, calmly puffing away at his pipe as his genitals are cut off.

Oroonoko is short (at 28,000 words it might have problems qualifying for the 1689 Man Booker Prize) and it lacks *Crusoe*'s narrative machinery and masterful suspense (whose *was* that footprint on the foreshore?). But no one can deny Behn's inventiveness and intuitive feel for the as yet undefined elements of fiction. They are well worthy of Woolf's bouquet.

FN Aphra Behn ('Aphora', née Eaffrey Johnson)
MRT *Oroonoko*
Biog J. Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1996)

3. Daniel Defoe 1660–1731

It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. Along with Oliver's gruel, the best-known moment in English fiction

If Daniel Defoe had died in 1718 he would be remembered, if at all, as a fertile pamphleteer and pioneering English journalist with an adhesively memorable name. Living as he did, until 1731, he ranks as a founding father of the English novel – as significant a figure in the evolution of the national fiction as Cervantes in Spain or Rabelais in France.

Tantalisingly little is known of Defoe's life. 'Did he in fact exist at all?' asks one recent study. Even more tantalisingly, it is not known why a man close on sixty years of age (Methuselean in the early eighteenth century) should suddenly change his literary modus operandi so drastically and creatively. In the absence of intimate information, one is thrown back on the skeletal public records. The first fifteen years of Defoe's life occupy barely that number of pages in Paula Backscheider's 700-page biography. 'Lives' of Defoe, like hers, dissolve into lifeless catalogues raisonnés of his tracts, articles and occasional writings (whose precise authorship is much disputed) – with a running commentary on the big historical picture in whose foreground any image of 'Daniel Defoe', infuriatingly, refuses to materialise. The curriculum vitae, as we know it, is easily summarised. If there are interesting times in English history, Defoe lived through the most interesting. Something that fascinated him throughout his life, judging by his choice of subject matter, is that he *had* actually