

(De)shackling Subjectivity; How the prison narrative reframes imprisonment in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and Richardson's *Pamela*

David Slot

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Abstract:

In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), the experience of imprisonment stands central to its protagonists' narrative. Through the act of writing, both Pamela Andrews and John Bunyan renegotiate the conditions of their captivity. This essay explores the tension between captives and the power structures that hold them and observes the ways in which subjectivity mediates this process.

Specifically, it reveals the manner in which authorship creates the subjective authority needed to reformulate the condition of imprisonment, either leading to release, as is the case of Pamela, or by reframing spiritual purpose and incorporating captivity within it, as is the case for Bunyan. Within this analysis, the Saussurean concepts of 'signifier' and 'signified', as they are employed in Lacan's works, will assist in the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, which will play a central role to the study of the captive's condition.

To frame the discussion of imprisonment narratives, a brief explanation is made of the manner in which Lacan's discussion of the dichotomy of signifier and signified situates the position of absolute and objectively held 'reality' – the signified – in a position of inaccessibility. Any discourse concerning its nature never transcends the realm of subjective experience – the signifier. Textual evidence from both texts is employed to reveal the process through which the protagonists' narratives manage to displace or alter their state of captivity, analysing the alternate interpretations they enact and maintain to do so.

The essay concludes with the observation of the effects of both narratives: the very circumstance of imprisonment has changed through authorship of subjective experience.

Amongst the shared thematic and structural features of Richardson's *Pamela* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, one of the most notable is their common role as prison narratives, where the act of writing becomes not merely a reflective, but also interpretive means with which to engage with the circumstance of imprisonment. After all, when Bunyan and Pamela compile their experiences, this is as much an enactment of their subjective narrative as it is its construction. In the case of *Grace Abounding*, Bunyan's religious imprisonment in Bedford County Gaol, where he spends twelve years (Dunan-Page XV), becomes an essential component to his own experience of spiritual growth. In *Pamela's* case, her attempts to resist the unwanted advances of her master, Mr. B, who, following several instances of sexual assault, eventually kidnaps her in his Lincolnshire estate (92), are, in their written form, a direct threat to his authority. His attempts to silence and stifle her communication through letters and journals reflect his awareness of how dangerous a competing narrative is, as he himself evidences when he eventually succumbs to Pamela's own. This essay will explore the tension between the characters' subjective experiences and the externally dictated 'truth' headed by Mr. B and the Bedford legislative body. Moreover, it will address the way subjective experience gains authority through the performative act of writing. Echoing Lacan's proclamation of language as "insisting, not consisting" (419), subjective narrative can undermine conventional knowledge, because it reveals the internal instability of the essentialist presumptions of, in this case, religious experience and naturalised class differences. And because both these are as ungrounded in objectivity as the texts' oppressed subject narratives are, their claim to 'true' knowledge can be usurped with equal ease.

Before proceeding to the analysis of textual tensions between authoritative truth and subjective experience, their respective natures must be more clearly defined. When this essay refers to 'objective' truth, it does so with the understanding that while the relationship

between officially recognised *signifier* and the elusive *signified* to which it reaches – in this case, predominantly-held understanding and ‘true’ knowledge –, is presumed to be direct and naturalised, this is an ungrounded assumption which may be challenged through alternative signification. This is the position which subjective experience can take when it is enacted by religious prisoners such as Bunyan, or sexual victims such as Pamela, who are capable of creating an accessible narrative of their own. By providing an alternative framework for the interpretation of ‘truth’, they dismantle the authority of ‘recognised’ knowledge by revealing its own reliance on subjectivity. While contemporary poststructuralists such as Lacan use this argumentation to defend the impossibility of ever reaching the *signified*, instead placing the subject within a system of endlessly deferring signifiers (Lacan 421), Pamela and Bunyan do not seek to dismantle the accessibility of ‘true’ knowledge, rather intending to replace a muddled interpretation of it with their own, infallible one. Their ability to do so, however, supports the post-structural notion that the *signified* must be unattainable, all knowledge being interpretative and deferential, because without arbitrary signification it would be impossible to exchange signifiers the way Pamela and Bunyan do.

What Bunyan perceives rather explicitly in *Grace Abounding* is an awareness of the importance of the individual human subject. When he writes: “[t]he Tempter [came] upon me [...] with such discouragements as these: You are very hot for mercy, but I will cool you; this frame shall not last alwayes” (32), he envisions that it is this subject that forms the site of spiritual battle, where the forces of God and Satan meet. This state is a reason for misery, as expressed when Bunyan describes: “O how happy now was every creature over I was! For [the sun, the roof tiles and cobblestones] stood fast, and kept their station, but I was gone and lost” (54), as well as his proclamation: “now I was sorry God had made me a man [...] I counted man, as unconverted, the most doleful of all the Creatures: thus being afflicted by my sad condition, I counted my self alone” (27). Even when in an addition, Bunyan corrects the

latter statement saying that: “Man indeed, is the most noble, by creation, of all the creatures in the visible World”, he adds: “but by sin he had made himself the most ignoble” (27). To Bunyan, this sin stems from man’s innately ‘unconverted’ state, which renders his (re)conversion a personal responsibility, submitting him to continuous “combats and conflicts” (55) in its duration.

This focus on individual responsibility is characteristic of the Lutheran roots of Bunyan’s faith, and explains the importance of theological typology. Baker defines typology as “historical”, stating: “It is not a method of philological or textual study but a way of understanding history. The fundamental conviction which underlies typology is that God is consistently active in the history of this world” (152). In this view, “typology is the study of types and the historical and theological correspondences between them; the basis of typology is God’s consistent activity in the history of his chosen people” (153). Typology does not merely study the relationship between New and Old Testament, but also between present and past. As such, it places the individual Christian at a position of unprecedented agency, acting as mediator between the undeniable truth of the Bible and the events of the contemporary world, and as interpreter of the ways God’s work is continued into his or her personal spiritual paths of reformation. To Bunyan, Biblical truth is unquestionable, yet the modern, individual Christian is the lens through which this truth is translated into the present:

Early in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Pliable asks, "And do you think that the words of your Book are certainly true?" Christian answers, "Yes verily, for it was made by him that cannot lye" (13). His assertion is supported by a citation of the Epistle to Titus [...]. Bunyan’s characteristic uses of Scripture in both books suggest that, in his view, the words of the Bible encompass and define the spiritual struggles of all future Christians. [...] Bunyan’s own journey of faith and that of his fictional characters

constitute a kind of literal reenactment of the truth of Scriptural language. (Stranahan 342-343)

In this “re-enactment”, it is through interpretation that the Bunyan frames his spiritual journey within a greater system of knowledge, shadowing the events of the Testaments as preceding ‘types’ he recognises in his own life. And in *Pamela*, this interpretative role is equally essential.

One of the key components to Mr. B’s sexual advances towards Pamela is the existence of two radically opposed interpretations of the situation. When he makes his first assault, Pamela states that “all his Wickedness appear’d plainly” as he takes her in his arms, she “so benumb’d with Terror” (23), while he replies: “I’ll do you no harm, *Pamela*; don’t be afraid of me [...] I own I have demean’d myself, but only to try you: if you can keep this Matter secret, you’ll give me the better opinion of your Prudence” (23-24). Her experience of sexual assault is immediately contrasted against a narrative that serves her Master’s honour. It is in that same instance, however, that he adds: “I charge you say nothing of what has past” (24), so revealing the fragility of his ‘official’ interpretation of events. Mr. B is as sharply aware of her narrative’s potential to dethrone his own, as Bunyan is of his own ability to create a narrative that reframes his imprisonment as an act of moral rectitude, not a criminal disregard for Christian values, accused as he was of “being a witch, a highwayman, a Jesuit, a gypsy and a whoremaster” (Dunan-Page 1). Indeed, Mr. B comments on few of Pamela’s qualities as negatively as he does of her tendency to write: “This Girl is always scribbling; I think she may be better employ’d” (22); “methinks she might find something else to do” (26); “Yes, you mind your Pen more than your Needle; I don’t want such idle Sluts to stay in my House” (48); “I can’t let her stay, I’ll assure you; not only for her own Freedom of Speech; but her Letter-writing of all the Secrets of my Family” (72). Her resisting his sexual advances is not so much a thwarting as is her ability to vocalize a competing narrative, and this

explains the importance of her letters: they form a direct threat to Mr. B's narrative, and therefore his person and reputation. It is therefore understandable that he attempts to silence her, through the theft and forgery of letters, as well as prohibition to continue writing them. But Pamela devises a correspondence with Mr. Williams through a cache "between the Tiles" (124), resisting censure. Eventually, these are found by Mrs. Jewkes and given to the Master, who asks: "So, Pamela, we have seized, it seems, your treasonable Papers?" (228), and yet, this discovery will mark the beginning of Mr. B's yielding to Pamela's persistent resistance, which culminate in their marriage. And where he once rejected her writing, now he will confess, before Pamela and her father:

What a prodigious Memory, and easy and happy Manner of Narration this excellent Girl has! And tho' she full of her pretty tricks Artifices, to escape the Snares I had laid for her, yet all is innocent, lovely, and uniformly beautiful. (300)

This emphasis on "Memory" and "Manner of Narration", underlines the inextricable relationship between style with content, and therefore of form and performance as much as with contained information. When Pamela writes, she does not merely recollect the events of her life, but rather organises them within a framework that maximises her own, as well as the reader's, understanding and sympathy. Just as with Bunyan's biographical relation, these letters are designed with a reader in mind, which Pamela persuades to her point of view with "[her] Style and Expressions" (281).

Pamela has won the affection of all her fellow servants through her behaviour and character: "for all my Fellow-servants have lov'd me" (43), and once married, of those gentlemen and women around her, including Lady Davers: "I wish you joy with my Brother, and so kissed [Pamela]" (440), yet with her writing she reaches further than those of her station and immediate surroundings. Through Pamela's letters, she not merely defends her

own actions and ideas to herself and her parents, but reaches Mr. Williams, who is so moved by her circumstances that he offers her marriage (144) and Mr. B at the time that he is her Master, not husband (230). In the case of the latter: “her views cause him first to review his actions and then to submit to her imaginative reconstruction of experience” (83), writes Conboy, adding: “Mr. B. is the original reader of Pamela's novel, and eventually the heroine's perception of his character appears better to him than his perception of himself. Pamela not only achieves self-knowledge by means of language, but also discloses to Mr. B. his best self, and makes him strive to realize it” (83). With this statement, Conboy confirms the notion of Pamela's narrative as a subjective experience which ‘creates’ truth, or perhaps unveils one that existed in potential, yet hidden. Mr. B takes on Pamela's view of him and herself, albeit with initial reluctance, and in doing so Pamela's narrative enacts her subjective experience into the world. Where Pamela has (unintentionally) moulded her own position, as well as Mr. B's intentions towards her, through a written narrative of subjective experience, so is Bunyan's spiritual autobiography able to reshape his own circumstance of imprisonment. Firstly, in his own eyes, as Zim writes: “Life writing is similarly a means to integrate and save the subject self. Interpretation and selection of ideas to make a life in writing can make the flux of life seem stable and coherent” (133). Indeed, this is something of which Bunyan himself seems conscious, as the narrating voice – present Bunyan – is keenly distinct from Bunyan's state of mind at the time of the events he relates: “For though as yet I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet [then] I loved to be talked of” (13). In his description of spiritual reformation and journeying, Bunyan's lawful imprisonment is made in his eyes a natural yet unjust consequence to his discovery and propagation of greater truth, which the world is yet blind to. He writes:

If any man can lay any thing to my charge, either in doctrine or practice, in this particular, that can be proved error or heresy, I am willing to disown it, even in the market-place. But if it be truth, then to stand to it to the last drop of my blood. (113)

And with the mention of “market-place” the intended audience of his autobiography is made visible. Bunyan has already stated that the purpose of his text is to assist fellow Christians with similar struggles (5), and even his imprisonment is “to confirm the Truth by way of suffering, as I was before in testifying of it according to the Scriptures, in a way of preaching” (79). Imprisonment now transformed into a purposeful expression of Christlike suffering, it becomes an essential component to his spiritual journey. Zim notes: “He foresaw that his authority would be founded on his record of that spiritual experience composed in the midst of his captivity and, paradoxically, that evasion or escape would be detrimental” (129).

Ultimately, therefore, to both Bunyan and Pamela, subjective experience is not merely a route to ‘true’ knowledge, but also the means which enacts it. Bunyan’s life – deemed criminal by the authorities that have imprisoned him – became an example of God’s continuing work in the present, which can be explained and understood through the Scriptures He has provided the modern Christian. When Zim writes that “By his own account, the Bible was literally and metaphorically Bunyan’s salvation in prison”, he explains this in light of it allowing him “to revisit his past imaginatively and thereby make the present imprisonment both comprehensible to himself and useful to others” (141), and this reflects how Bunyan’s current experience of imprisonment justifies his past doubts and struggles, and places it in service of a greater spiritual Truth. In *Pamela*, subjective experience is an equally important means of communicating the truth of Pamela’s predicament, and its written form not only helps her solidify her own sense of its truth, but also reorders the world around her to meet it. Conboy writes: “Whereas Pamela was once literally held captive, Mr. B. admits that he has changed positions with her, and has done so willingly” (92), when he says: “the

sweet Girl has taken me Prisoner; and, in a few Days, I shall put on the pleasantest Fetters that ever Man wore” (248). Whether or not it may be considered truth is uncertain, but to Pamela, it is certainly her subjective experience of it that has set her free.

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## Further Reading

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