



Storytelling  
in the Works  
of Bunyan,  
Grimmelshausen,  
Defoe, and  
Schnabel

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Janet Bertsch

*Storytelling in the Works of Bunyan,  
Grimmelshausen, Defoe, and Schnabel*

The modern novel appeared during the period of secularization and intellectual change that took place between 1660 and 1740. This book examines John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Johann Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and J. G. Schnabel's *Insel Felsenburg* as prose works that reflect the stages in this transition. The protagonists in these works try to learn to use language in a pure, uncorrupted way. Their attitudes towards language are founded on their understanding of the Bible, and when they tell their life stories, they follow the structure of the Bible, because they accept it as *the* paradigmatic story. Thus the Bible becomes a tool to justify the value of telling *any* story. The authors try to give their own texts some of Scripture's authority by imitating the biblical model, but this leads to problems with closure and other tensions. If Bunyan's explicitly religious works affirm the value of individual narratives as part of a single, universal story, Grimmelshausen's and Defoe's protagonists effectively replace the sacred text with their own powerful, authoritative stories. J. G. Schnabel illustrates the extent of the secularization process in *Insel Felsenburg* when he defends the entertainment value of escapist fiction and uses the Bible as the fictional foundation of his utopian civilization: arguments about the moral value of narrative give way to the depiction of storytelling as an end in itself. But Bunyan, Grimmelshausen, Defoe, and Schnabel all use positive examples of the transfiguring effect of reading and telling stories, whether sacred or secular, to justify the value of their own works.

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of Bunyan, Grimmelshausen,  
Defoe, and Schnabel

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*To my sister, Heather*



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J. B.

June 2004

## Abbreviations

- FA* Defoe, Daniel. *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe Being the Second and Last Part of His Life*. London: William Clowes, 1974.
- GA* Bunyan, John. *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Ed. Roger Sharrock. Oxford: Clarendon, 1962.
- PP* Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to That which is to Come*. Ed. J. B. Wharey and Roger Sharrock. Oxford: Clarendon, 1960.
- RC* Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*. Ed. J. Donald Crowley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- SP* Grimmelshausen, Hans Jakob Christoph von. *Der seltsame Springinsfeld*. Ed. Franz Günter Sieveke. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1969.
- ST* Grimmelshausen, Hans Jakob Christoph von. *Der Abentheurliche Simplicissimus Teutsch und Continuatio des abentheurlichen Simplicissimi*. Ed. Rolf Tarot. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967.
- WF* Schnabel, Johann Gottfried. *Wunderliche Fata einiger See-Fahrer*. 4 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1973.

## Introduction

Then they had them to some new places. The first was to *Mount-Marvel*, where they looked, and behold a man at a Distance, *that tumbled the Hills about with Words*.<sup>1</sup>

IN *GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS* (1666) and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, part 1 and part 2 (1678, 1684), John Bunyan tries to show his readers how to enter a world founded on the language and story of the Bible. Believers walk the path of righteousness by learning to read. They attain salvation by learning to tell their stories.

The seventeenth century was a time of religious upheaval and social and intellectual transition throughout Europe. Because of these political and ideological upsets, the seventeenth century also witnessed profound tensions in terms of language use and language theory. Medieval writers in the Augustinian tradition believed that there is an inherent, God-given correspondence between words and the things they describe, but new attitudes toward language and the process of signification emerged during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The central debates during the religious turmoil of the seventeenth century centered on questions concerning the status of biblical language, the authority of rival interpretations of the Bible, and the relationship between sign and meaning. Changing attitudes toward language resulted in changing attitudes toward reading and writing.

My analysis of works by two English and two German authors focuses on the impact of these attitudes toward reading, signification, and the Bible on the early modern novel. The following chapters discuss John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Hans Jakob Christoph von Grimmelshausen's *Der Abentheurliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (Simplicissimus, 1668) and *Der seltzame Springinsfeld* (Springinsfeld, 1670), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and the four volumes of Johann Gottfried Schnabel's *Wunderliche Fata einiger See-Fahrer* (The Island Felsenburg, 1731–43).

The initial goal of the protagonists of these works is to rediscover a use of language that is pure and direct, where words have a single, straightforward, divinely guaranteed meaning. The main characters in each of the

books share a similar problem: human conduct does not always conform to Christian moral norms, nor does human experience always follow the paradigmatic structure of the Bible. The most effective way of learning to understand personal experience is to move beyond simple interpretation. Characters learn to tell their individual life stories to each other. These stories share a similar basic structure, use of language, and moral outlook. They thus contribute to the sense that a valid master narrative exists. The individual stories are variations on this single model.

If language and reading cause the problem, they also provide the solution. The protagonists in these texts resolve the gap between real life and biblical language by creating alternative, fictional communities bonded together by a shared vocabulary and the constant exchange of stories. Telling stories creates meaning because storytellers and readers or listeners agree about how to interpret and describe their experiences. This attitude toward communication approaches the modern idea that language is a process and that social consensus defines how words are used. Nonetheless, the way that these texts use storytelling to create meaning depends upon an understanding of the reading process that was common when they were written.

The medieval idea that reading and memorization transform the body and soul remained common into the early eighteenth century. The emphasis on affective reading that appeared during the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation strengthened the idea that texts transform their readers. According to Erasmus of Rotterdam, there is a unity between the educational and the entertaining experience of a text. The emotion created by reading or listening to a story moves the will and thus has a concrete moral effect on the reader or audience.<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther's faith in a self-interpreting Scripture privileges the book's ability to carry and create meaning above the interpretive and intellectual efforts of the reader.

The concept of experiential reading that appeared in the wake of German mysticism and pansophism during the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup> had a democratizing effect. The goal of mystic contemplation is to return to the unity between utterance and existence that characterized God's words during creation. The possession of a simple, unbiased heart makes readers receptive to religious illumination. Intellectual knowledge only obscures the relationship between the soul and God. The truth inherent in God's books, the Bible and the Book of Nature, can enter and affect the soul if readers empty their minds of preconceived notions and cultivate a passive and receptive attitude toward the truth the text contains. Well into the eighteenth

century English sectarians and German pietists described the experience of reading the Bible as transcending the merely literal comprehension of the story. The Bible's power is to make its readers *feel* its truth, not just understand it intellectually. The Holy Spirit imprints the Bible's meaning into the hearts of believers.

Readers no longer view reading in the same way; as printed matter has become more common, they have learned to value it less. To a seventeenth-century English nonconformist or an eighteenth-century German pietist it was clear that the content of a story could be so moving, so sentimentally affecting, and so full of spiritual truth that it would simply seize its readers and *make* them believe. The authors discussed in this book reply to the seventeenth-century loss of confidence in the divinely determined meaning of Scripture with an ever-increasing emphasis on the power and authority of the sympathetic, emotional experience of the text. They are confident that stories told sincerely and with a serious moral purpose have the power to change their readers.

The common description of reading as "eating" a book reflects this older attitude toward reading. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* the feast at Gaius's inn uses the digestion metaphor to describe understanding and internalizing the lessons of the text. The root of the metaphor lies in the Book of Revelation (10:9), but it also appears in more secular contexts. In the *Book of Common Prayer*<sup>4</sup> and in Bunyan's work this metaphor applies to Scripture, but Phyllis Mack also mentions that seventeenth-century Quakers apply the digestion metaphor to learning more generally.<sup>5</sup> A similar secular use of the motif appears in the description of memorization in the comical *Lalebuch* of 1597.<sup>6</sup> A text, read and understood, becomes a part of the reader. The idea that reading actually alters the reader's will, intellect, and physical substance strengthens the normative and didactic impact of the text. In their capacity to provide mental refreshment or nourishment, books possess a power that is almost magical.

The four writers claim that their stories have a real value because the readers' emotional and sentimental responses to a work cause them to internalize its moral lesson. According to Grimmelshausen, Defoe, Schnabel, and even Bunyan in his allegory, the works may be fictional, but they have a moral value similar to or greater than real-life experiences. If the events in the texts did not occur, they really should have occurred and would have occurred if the world were not so corrupt. The truth of the stories matters less than their positive, ameliorative effect on their audience.<sup>7</sup>

The tension in these stories is unavoidable because of the gap between the secular/empirical and the spiritual realms that pervades seventeenth-century literature. Grimmelshausen, in particular, tries to justify his work by connecting it with the spiritual autobiography. He uses a retrospective narrator to provide religious commentary throughout *Simplicissimus*. At the same time, he describes a world of realistic details and strange occurrences that simply refuses to conform to a single, narrative model. While they risk exposing themselves to ridicule by writing imaginative works, all four authors also inherit the basic problem of the spiritual autobiography: How can personal experiences in a world that is corrupt, chaotic, and unstructured conform to a narrative model that demands that human experience demonstrate an underlying structure and meaning?

The general story of the Bible appears as the defining pattern for experience in the spiritual autobiography. Justifying the value of all of these texts depends on the fact that they try to imitate the structure of the Bible and reflect a specifically Christian set of moral and spiritual norms. By drawing parallels between the way their characters read the Bible and one another's stories, these authors claim the same affective qualities for their own texts. They refer to biblical teachings and use a loosely biblical structure in their works in order to substantiate their authority, their legitimacy, and their positive effects on the reader. In their most ideal and complete form, individual narratives re-create Scripture on a personal level by following the Bible so closely that they seem to become a part of that master text.

In relating a spiritual autobiography, an individual narrator learns to structure his or her story so that it follows the scriptural paradigm and learns to understand this story in the context of the divine plan for creation. The narrator thus defines himself or herself as a participant in a more comprehensive story written by God. By learning to tell their individual stories, the protagonists in the works of Bunyan, Grimmelshausen, Defoe, and Schnabel become the authors of their fates. They decide their futures by acting in the way that harmonizes best with how God wants them to act. Ideally, individual stories and God's plan share the same final goal, namely, returning to a prelapsarian state of perfect communication with God.

Although these four authors begin by affirming the authority of Scripture, they also tend to transfer the qualities that they attribute to Scripture to their own individual works. This causes a number of tensions. Part of the reason that closure becomes such a problem in these texts is that the biblical structure they follow has a very strong teleological impetus. The necessity of

giving a definite ending to his works conflicts with Bunyan's theological position and creates many of the tensions in *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan moves from a focus on transcendent salvation in the first part to describing the community of believers in the second part out of a need to provide a satisfactory ending to his text.

The Bible is an extraordinary text because it claims to tell the entire history of creation and the history of mankind. As a story, it includes each and every one of its readers. The Bible tells its readers that history will end at the day of judgment, when the saved enter heaven and the damned go to hell. Its readers' individual fates are bound up in this comprehensive vision of human destiny. Because Grimmelshausen, like Bunyan, imitates the structure and the function of the Bible, his work also needs to reach an ending that is free of tension. To reach this satisfactory conclusion, however, he must foster the sense that the reader continues to participate in the text even beyond its happy ending. Simplicius's spiritually enlightened isolation at the end of the *Continuatio* thus gives way to the prosperous, inclusive community that appears in *Springinsfeld*.

The strength of the biblical paradigm is also responsible for the positive attitudes toward stories and storytelling that appear in the texts. Reading the Bible is an interactive process, and these authors urge their readers to participate in their texts in the same way. Bunyan includes marginal glosses in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, while Grimmelshausen and Defoe use retrospective commentary to provoke their readers' active interpretation of the text and enliven the reading process. To an even greater extent than the other authors, Schnabel includes examples of reading and storytelling in his work in order to heighten the sense that his book includes the reader within the community of narrators and listeners.

Modeling a narrative on the Bible — *the* paradigmatic story — creates a demand for completeness, comprehensiveness, and for an active interaction between the text and the reader. As an influence on the texts, the Bible's content becomes subservient to its status as a book. These texts actually become more secular because they try to imitate the Bible. They claim to lead readers to a salvation that is earthly and fictional, if not heavenly and spiritual. Protagonists become savior figures and effect a return to the Garden of Eden. They do this by learning to read their experiences and narrate them successfully. Thus, the process of reading and telling stories becomes sanctified as an end in itself.



These four authors attribute a power that is magical, transforming, and life-giving to the interaction between reader and text. Even when they appear most secular, these works retain their faith. It is a faith in the power of stories rather than a belief in the content of Scripture. At the same time that these authors are describing how difficult it is to maintain religious belief in a corrupt and chaotic world, they are creating an alternative reality through their fictions. Their stories affirm nothing less than the creative power and value of fiction itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to That which is to Come*, ed. J. B. Wharey and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 285. Subsequent references to this work are cited in the text using the abbreviation *PP* and page number.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Waswo, *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987), 229–30.

<sup>3</sup> In England the dissolution of censorship associated with the civil war resulted in the publication of numerous translations of German mystic and pansophic works, including books by Jakob Böhme (1645), Hendrik Niclaes (1646), and Valentin Weigel (1648). See Philip C. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 46.

<sup>4</sup> The reference appears in the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent. See *The Book of Common Prayer, 1662* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Anon., *Das Lalebuch*, ed. Stefan Ertz (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), 71.

<sup>7</sup> See Wolfgang Kayser, *Die Wahrheit der Dichter: Wandlung eines Begriffes in der deutschen Literatur* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1959), 12.