

Circulation, Appropriation, Translation: George Herbert and John Bunyan. Introduction

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Introduction

The members of the Quaker congregation portrayed in Egbert van Heemskerck's famous painting, *A Puritan Meeting*, dated 1678, are engaged in a somewhat disorderly performance of religious worship.¹ In the gallery, one man seems to be testifying while another one is wiping the sweat from his brow. In spite of the open window, the room seems stifling hot. In the centre foreground below, a woman collapses into a fit. One of her fellow worshippers is holding her hand, his solicitude in stark contrast with the sardonic smile worn by the painter in the left-hand corner – presumably a portrait of the artist himself. On the bench to the right, a man with upturned eyes experiences a form of religious ecstasy. Some of the members of the congregation are praying or singing, at least one of them appears to be sleeping, others are talking. The painting captures the meeting in full sensory detail. Dominated by a multiplicity of voices, the assembly's soundscape seems to dissolve into an indecorous cacophony. Robert Raines has noted that the painting

calls to mind Celia Fiennes's comment from Scarborough in 1697: 'I was at a Quakers Meeting in the town where 4 men and 2 women spoke [...] but it seem'd such a confusion and so incoherent that it very much moved my compassion and pitty to see their delusion and ignorance.'²

The confusion of voices in van Heemskerck's satirical representation of a Quaker meeting reflects both the soundscape of religious meetings and the polemical use of noise in early modern religious disputes.³ As Laura Feitzinger Brown has shown, 'many early modern English religious writers, whether separatist, Puritan, conformist or recusant [...] rhetorically invoke[d] noise to condemn worship practices with which [they] disagree[d]'.⁴ In a Protestant context such as van Heemskerck's, the central role of hearing in the process of salvation gave added justification to the dismissal of potentially subversive expressions of Dissent as noise.⁵

Recent scholarship has highlighted the sensory dimension of religious expression in the Long Reformation, with a special focus on speaking and hearing.⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch has described the Reformation as a period of noise, not only because of its repudiation of monastic silence, but also because of its emphasis on preaching and psalm singing, not to mention its taste for controversy on theological and ecclesiological issues.⁷

Additionally, publications on music and singing, public and private devotion, spaces of worship, emotions, concepts of community and identity, and book history have complicated our understanding of religious experience in early modern Europe, and in 2009 the French social historian Arlette Farge published her *Essai pour une histoire des voix*.⁸ To probe further into these issues and explore their implications for the history of Protestant Dissent, the Eighth Triennial Conference of the International John Bunyan Society, which convened in Aix-en-Provence, 6–9 July 2016, concentrated on the representation and expression of Dissent, Nonconformity and Puritanism in the Long Reformation, with an emphasis on the relationship between written and oral cultures.

Among the themes that were discussed during the conference was the variety of exchanges and interactions not only within Dissenting communities, but also between Dissenting and non-Dissenting traditions.⁹ Papers and plenary lectures dealing with the circulation and adaptation of ideas, texts and practices across confessional, geographical or chronological boundaries brought to the fore the diversity of expressions of Dissent in the Long Reformation and identified multiple echoes of early modern Dissenting voices in more recent periods. The essays collected in this special issue explore these interactions from a literary and artistic point of view, examining expressions of Dissent in practices such as poetry, hymn-writing, ‘gifting’ of books, stained-glass work, and translation.¹⁰ Focusing on George Herbert and John Bunyan, they highlight conversations between different religious denominations in the seventeenth century as well as in the broader context of British religious history from the Long Reformation to the present day. They reveal patterns of reception and strategies of adaptation which indicate that, in certain circumstances, the noise of religious controversy is muted or silenced as common denominators are emphasized; in other cases, however, processes of circulation and appropriation result in intergenerational transmission of family piety and reaffirmation of denominational identities.

In the first essay, Helen Wilcox explores the manifold uses of poetry by post-Restoration seventeenth-century Dissenting writers. She argues that Dissenters as a whole acknowledged poetry as a rich medium of spiritual expression and showed little reluctance to take their inspiration from earlier Conformist poets. Their special affinity with George Herbert’s lyrics, whose emotional and devotional qualities chimed in with Dissenting spirituality, is also the topic of Jenna Townend’s essay, which focuses on seventeenth-century appropriations of poems from *The Temple* in the Dissenting tradition of psalm translation, hymn-writing, and devotional singing. Townend identifies strategies of adaptation that aligned Herbert’s poetic voice with expressions of Dissenting experience

and identity and contributed to create ‘communities of godly devotion’. Turning from George Herbert to John Bunyan, Sylvia Brown traces the practice of ‘gifting’ copies of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* within social and familial networks from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, as well as the special role of women in transmitting Bunyan’s most famous work on both sides of the Atlantic. Material traces left by several generations of readers enable her to underline the role played by the circulation of ‘good books’ such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in the transmission of Dissenting identity. Nathalie Collé, on the other hand, addresses the legacy of Dissent beyond the boundaries of Dissenting communities. Examining representations of Bunyan and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in stained-glass windows set up in British churches from the end of the nineteenth century, Collé (who specialises in art history and the relationships between texts and images) shows how a key figure of English Dissent is being reclaimed by the Anglican tradition. As she argues, this is a striking enlargement of reputation for a figure who symbolized a British identity defined by resistance to oppression. Stained-glass windows have barely been touched upon in Bunyan scholarship. This is a topic that would certainly deserve further treatment, taking into account the spectacular variety of Victorian art and the Victorians’ special relationship with Bunyan. Finally, Xie Jiapeng and Su Yuxiao take us to China with an essay that reviews Chinese translations of the *The Pilgrim’s Progress* from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The authors argue that the variations between the different translations they examine must be read as so many attempts to adapt Bunyan’s work to changing priorities: the evangelisation of the Chinese population by British missionaries, who authored the first translations, the appropriation of Bunyan by Chinese Christians, who translated *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to give voice to their individual spiritual experiences, and Bunyan’s place in the canon of classic world literature, which has fostered translations aiming to make *The Pilgrim’s Progress* accessible to Chinese university students.¹¹

Taken together, these essays testify to the enduring legacy of Dissenting voices and the persistence of Dissenting art and culture from the eighteenth century to contemporary societies, from Britain to the United States and China. Following such seminal works as Isabel Hofmeyr’s *The Portable Bunyan* (2004), they remind us that much still needs to be done to gauge the heritage of Dissent. And that heritage can be seen (or indeed heard) not only through the political, philosophical, religious texts that have shaped the religious history of Protestantism but also through the works of artists and cultural intermediaries – whether they be musicians, painters, printers, craftsmen, translators, missionaries, or mothers who gave good books at Christmas.

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Notes

¹ On Egbert Van Heemskerck, see Robert Raines, ‘Notes on Egbert van Heemskerck and the English Taste for Genre’, *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, 53 (1987), 119–42; Harry Mount, ‘Egbert van Heemskerck’s *Quaker Meetings* Revisited’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 56 (1993), 209–28.

² Raines, p. 123, quoting *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. Christopher Morris (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 92.

³ See for instance, John Craig, ‘Psalms, groans and dogwhippers: the soundscape of worship in the English parish church, 1547–1642’, in *Sacred Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 104–123. Specifically on Dissenting meetings, see Anne Dunan-Page, ‘Espaces, bruits et récits’, *L’Expérience puritaine. Vie et récits de dissidents, XVII^e–XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2017), pp. 134–37.

⁴ Laura Feitzinger Brown, ‘Brawling in Church: Noise and the Rhetoric of Lay Behavior in Early Modern England’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34 (2003), 955–972 (955).

⁵ On hearing, see Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing. English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer Rae MacDermott, “‘The Melody of Heaven’: Sermonizing the Open Ear in Early Modern England”, in *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 177–95.

⁶ *Ibid.* For a discussion of the full range of the senses in early modern religious life, see Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: a Christian History* (2013; London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 127–60.

⁸ See Arlette Farge, *Essai pour une histoire des voix au dix-huitième siècle* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2009). See also *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nathalie Mears and Alec Ryrie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); *Heart Religion: Evangelical Piety in England and Ireland, 1690–1850*, ed. John Coffey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); *Puritanism and Emotions in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alec Ryrie and Tom Schwanda (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Samuel Thomas, *Creating Communities in Restoration England* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); ‘*Settling the Peace of the Church*’: 1662

Revisited, ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Dunan-Page, *L'Expérience puritaine; Church Life in Seventeenth-Century England: Pastors, Congregations, and the Experience of Dissent*, ed. Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page and Joel Halcomb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); *Dissent and the Bible in Britain, c.1650–1950*, ed. Scott Mandelbrote and Michael Ledger-Lomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ See Jenna Townend, “Voicing Dissent in the Long Reformation” – The Eighth Triennial Conference of the International John Bunyan Society, Aix-en-Provence, France, 6–9 July 2016’, *Bunyan Studies*, 20 (2016), 153–57.

¹⁰ A second series of essays, to be published in *Études Épistémè*, will study pre- and post-Toleration English Protestant Dissent in the light of debates in the history of ideas: *The World of Seventeenth-Century English Dissenters: Philosophy, Theology and Worship*, ed. Paula Barros, Anne Dunan-Page and Laurence Lux-Sterritt (forthcoming).

¹¹ See also, for another example of cultural transfers, Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan. A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).