The Pilgrim’s Active Progress

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In *The Pilgrim’s Progress* John Bunyan is concerned with progress\(^1\) or forward movement (Manlove 23-25; Swaim 23) that is dependent upon the activity of the pilgrim. Christian’s journey is an active progress, the hero exerting individual effort as he advances toward a “better Countreyy” (Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress* 49).\(^2\) Bunyan utilizes the allegory to illustrate and explore the inner, spiritual life that is invisible. The strength of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, explains Henri Talon, is that “the incidents in Christian’s tale are symbolic of the inward life,” and “the inward action has taken concrete form” (“Space and the Hero” 158). Those actions represent the fruits of Christian’s faith and prove that the pilgrim is engaged in an endeavor requiring more than profession. Instead of a passive figure, Christian is an active character who exercises his free will to seek something better. In the pilgrim, Bunyan depicts a very human, imperfect traveler who, despite his errors and setbacks, presses forward with faith and hope and succeeds in realizing his intended objectives.

This reading of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as an active progress challenges previous works of critical scholarship by Stanley Fish and Thomas Luxon.\(^3\) For example, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Fish declares, “There is, it would seem, no progress in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*” (233). He specifically cautions against reading the work as a progress (236), asserting: “The only consistent spatial pattern Christian’s actions trace out is cyclical, for whenever a new opportunity to fall into an old error presents itself, he invariably seizes it” (232). Luxon, who tends to favor and build upon Fish’s work, argues that Christian’s experiences are passive (i.e., God is the One deciding and doing). According to Luxon, the allegorical journey “requires that a pilgrim think nothing and do nothing of his own mind and will,” adding that the “‘doing’ is God’s activity and the believer’s ‘passivity’” (“Passive Progress” 92).

Although Luxon relies heavily upon Luther’s *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* as a way of reading the allegory, Bunyan’s *The Heavenly Foot-Man* provides an equally (if not more) relevant framework by which to examine and illuminate our understanding of the pilgrimage allegory.\(^4\) Bunyan was writing *The Heavenly Foot-Man* when the inspiration for *The Pilgrim’s Progress* began to form in his mind (Sharrock and Wharey xxx-xxxxiii; Midgley 133-34; Greaves 211, 215-16; Lynch 77; Owens xxvi; Swaim 36), as he explains in his *Apology to The Pilgrim’s Progress*:

When at the first I took my Pen in hand,

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Thus for to write; I did not understand  
That I at all should make a little Book  
In such a mode: Nay, I had undertook  
To make another; which when almost done,  
Before I was aware, I this begun.  
And thus it was: I writing of the Way  
And Race of Saints in this our Gospel-Day,  
Fell suddenly into an Allegory  
About their Journey, and the way to Glory. (1)

Published posthumously in 1698, The Heavenly Foot-Man is a sermon on  
“the Way / And Race of Saints” that Bunyan wrote sometime between  
1666 and 1671 (Talon, John Bunyan 316; Midgely 134). According to  
Richard Greaves, “Since Bunyan began writing The Pilgrim’s Progress about  
March 1668 . . . he must have been working on The Heavenly Foot-Man  
between about December 1667 and February 1668” (211).  
Moreover, The Heavenly Foot-Man is a useful framework for studying  
The Pilgrim’s Progress because it contains Bunyan’s instructions for the pilgrim’s manner of travelling or running. In the opening sentence of The Heavenly Foot-Man Bunyan states that everyone desires heaven and happiness, but one cannot obtain heaven simply by wishing for it; the Christian disciple must run for heaven (147). This is based on a concept taught by the apostle Paul: “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain” (1 Corinthians 9.24). Bunyan’s sermon focuses on the need for running (personal effort) and on the prize to be obtained (heaven). He cites Hebrews 12.1: “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”  

In his Apology to The Pilgrim’s Progress, Bunyan clarifies his intention to illustrate allegorically what he had started in his sermon:

This Book it chaulketh out before thine eyes,  
The man that seeks the everlasting Prize:  
It shews you whence he comes, whither he goes,  
What he leaves undone; and also what he does:  
It also shews you how he runs, and runs,  
Till he unto the Gate of Glory comes. (6)

The complete title of the treatise, The Heavenly Foot-Man: or, A Description of The Man that gets to Heaven. Together, With the Way he Runs in, the Marks he Goes by: Also some Directions, how to Run, so as to Obtain, suggests the correlations to the content of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Bunyan describes in The Heavenly Foot-Man three types of running: flying, pressing, and con-