As a “pilgrim people,” we Baptists are surrounded on all sides by temptation. As Christians keenly aware of our status as strangers and wayfarers, we forever run the risk of becoming like the “very grave Person” in *Interpreter’s* image – the world wholly at his back, his gaze cast “to the world that comes next” (30). Pilgrimage can become an excuse to focus solely on what is beyond, and wayfaring can be a means of escape. However, pilgrimage can also mean taking the present world seriously, precisely by seeing it for what it is and what it can mean to us on our journey.

This paper explores the concept of allegory as it relates to Baptist theology and spirituality, and more specifically, how it shapes our pilgrim identity. Through this exploration, it proposes the unlikely importance of fiction (and allegory in particular) in expressing a Baptist theology of pilgrim people who rightly understand the world, and thus understand the Christian life in and through that world.

To do this, it first examines the theological dimensions of allegory, identifying both its temptations and its possibilities, as well as the threat posed by the move from allegory to “allegorization.” To aid this understanding, it turns to Flannery O’Connor and her “theology of fiction,” which fully

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1 To rein in the proliferation of footnotes, throughout this essay page references for Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* will be given parenthetically in the text itself. All citations refer to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Bunyan’s work (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Additionally, I follow the spellings of this edition when referring to people, places, and ideas by their proper names, which will appear in their original italics (cf. *Dispond*, etc.). Names of characters will also follow the text’s italics, apart from Christian, whose name is repeated often enough throughout this essay that the italics serve only to distract.

2 Here, “our” is meant to denote the Baptist emphasis on pilgrim identity. However, this should not be understood as an exclusive claim or the sole property of Baptist theology. One need only look at Pope Francis’ papal bull from 11 April 2015, *Misericordiae Vultus*, to find the Roman Church’s claim to the centrality of pilgrimage to the Christian life and the human person’s essential status as a *viator* or pilgrim. For the connection between pilgrimage and the declared Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, see §14.
expresses these dangers as well as these possibilities.3 O’Connor is expert at diagnosing the Christian temptation to bypass the concrete and particular in order to reach the divine and transcendent, which she believes is the bedeviling sin of the modern mind, and a hindrance for both fiction and theology.

Thus armed, this paper returns to Bunyan, examining whether his own use of allegory serves as an apt guide for pilgrims, and whether it embodies and enlivens the concrete and personal realities of the Christian life. The ultimate claim of this essay is that the temptation to treat these same realities as merely symbols (things which serve primarily to point to another) both emerges from and reinforces the Baptist penchant for an otherworldly soteriology, eschatology, and spirituality. Its purpose is to reconsider pilgrim theology as that which rightly understands the way the present world – and our place in it – forms us for and orients us toward the future world.

Allegory and its Theological Dimensions

Allegory has long served both the world of fiction and the life of the church. From medieval biblical interpretation forward, allegory has had a central place – serving as a general term for the non-literal senses of scripture in toto, as well as operating interchangeably with them.4 As a system of reference and representation, allegory has the capacity to uncover great depths of meaning in the seemingly straightforward, and has illuminated the minds of many who seek to understand how the entirety of scripture manifests the unity of the divine promise and participates in the continuous narrative of salvation history. However, anemic understandings of allegory – where one thing exists merely to point to another – also serve to hinder this valuable capacity and denude allegory of its complexity and nuance. As

3 O’Connor does not claim to offer a “theology of fiction.” The term is my own, but I believe it is an apt description of the deeper logic of much of her writing – both fiction and non-fiction.

4 Traditionally, these are the literal, the typological, the tropological (or moral), and the anagogical. One of the great masters of allegory, Dante Alighieri, notes in his preface to the Paradiso that allegory is both the second sense (the typological sense) and a general term for all the senses aside from the literal sense.
such, allegory holds both promise and temptation for readers and, as we shall discover, for would-be pilgrims.

*The Temptation of Allegory*

Roger Pooley, Past President of the International John Bunyan Society, hopes to point us in the right direction by noting that allegory “is distinctive among the symbolic modes as being a mode of reading as much as a mode of composition.”5 The history of allegory is a “history of reading, of finding hidden meanings in texts” and its form, “whether engaged in as reading or writing, is about making meaning – a meaning which is ideological, ethical or theological.”6 For the reader as well as the writer, allegory offers the promise of a complex apparatus for illuminating nuanced meaning in a single text. If Pooley is correct, then allegory enables a text to function theologically and to engage its reader in the both the production and reception of significant, even divine meaning. What, then, is the danger in reading *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as an allegory?

The danger is not, primarily, that the reader cannot understand the function of allegory or navigate its execution. Rather, the threat of allegory arises when it coincides with a worldview that is already inclined to seek meaning elsewhere and to slight the present and the material in view of the eternal and the spiritual.7 Thus the problem lies less with the genre than with the metaphysics of the writer or the reader of allegory themselves. So say Bunyan’s critics,8 at least, when they note that “allegory is a mode peculiarly suited to finessing the issue of the real,” but qualify that recommendation with the caveat


6 Pooley, 82.

7 Recall here the claim in the Introduction that cheap allegory and cheap pilgrim theology emerge from and reinforce Baptist tendencies toward an otherworldly focus.

8 Here and throughout this essay, “critic” or “critics” will be used simply to mean those who participate in the academic practice of literary critical theory. Neither term is meant to suggest that their reading is critical of Bunyan in the pejorative sense. If that additional meaning is implied in their reading, that will be made plain by their arguments.
that “reality is a particularly problematic category in Christian discourses, especially those of the Puritan sects of the English seventeenth century.” The indictment, then, is of Christian uses of allegory in particular, and takes the form of a charge that the Christian conception of salvation depends upon not merely instrumentalizing this present world, but seeing it as an allegory of the true world, the world that is to come. Thomas Luxon in particular finds this view alive and well in Bunyan, where he avers that one’s admittance through the gate of the Celestial City – for the writer and for his characters – “depends upon how successfully one has passed through this world as if it were a dream or an allegory.” Other readers of Bunyan go on to claim with certitude that this is central Christian teaching, and that the positive content of Christian pilgrimage depends upon this kind of suspended reality through which Christians move on their way to somewhere else. Indeed,

In the terms of Bunyan’s narrative one can gain entrance to heaven only by learning to understand the visible world of ordinary experience in the metaphoric terms established by the Word: as an alien, and ultimately insubstantial country through which God’s people must journey until they attain the ultimate satisfaction of communion with God.

Not only is the visible world comprised of mere shadows that point would-be Christians elsewhere to a really real beyond, but the stakes of mistaking these shadowy figures for anything substantial or worthwhile are eternal. Here, Bunyan’s critics call as evidence those characters who are denied access to

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10 Luxon at times nuances that this is a particularly Puritan view, but his entire work is devoted to this problem across the spectrum of the “Reformation Crisis” as a whole. It is not clear whether he takes this to be a perduring Christian view, but my argument suggests that the tendency toward this way of viewing the world persists and is precisely what results in the problem I name “allegorization.”

11 Luxon, 159-160.

12 John Knott, as qtd. in Luxon, 160.

13 Using the term “figures” may even be a stretch if taken to mean a figural representation of the world to come. Some of Bunyan’s readers have, in fact, interpreted his message to be a warning that there can in fact be no “collusion” at all between the present world and the world to come. Writes James Turner, “Bunyan repudiated this above all else; either you can have your cake in this world, like Dives or Passion, or you have it in the next, like Lazarus or Patience. There can be no compromises between Vanity Fair and the saints.” They are and remain “diametrically opposed.” See Turner, “Bunyan’s Sense
the Celestial City. Their damnable sins, it is noted, are precisely that they take matter, flesh, blood, and temporal things to be, in fact, real. They have mistaken what is material for what is truly real – things invisible and divine promises of things to come.¹⁴ Luxon in particular takes this to be Puritan theology more generally – a testimony to the unreality of this world and of salvation through its denunciation. For this reason he claims that Bunyan finds means of punishment for any characters (including, at times, Christian) who believe in “the outward thingness of the way” or take the landscape or even its inhabitants to be real in themselves. He believes that Bunyan’s text “everywhere encourages its readers to adopt [the perspective that] the things one encounters on the way should appear as they do to Mr. Valiant-for-Truth: ‘as so many Nothings’…[as] ‘dross’ to be discarded once the ‘Gold’ of truth is experienced.”¹⁵

The textual form of allegory, under the auspices of a dream no less, is said to be Bunyan’s way of reminding his fellow pilgrims that this world lacks real meaning and, moreover, that we pilgrims ought not to trust in our capacities to understand or articulate real meaning from this world. Our hopes for knowledge and for meaning are better cast toward the world to come.

The first problem with this kind of reading is that allegory is portrayed as a form that does not hold meaning itself but rather exists as a problem: solve for X, where the value of X is the meaning that lies outside the allegory and to which it serves only to point.¹⁶ In fairness to this view, allegories popular

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¹⁴ Luxon, 179.

¹⁵ Flannery O’Connor jokingly refers to this as a method by which “the story becomes simply a problem to be solved, something which you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment,” MM, 108. In keeping with the norms of the field, all references to O’Connor’s work will be abbreviated MM or CW with page number following. These abbreviations and all page numbers refer to her edited collection of Place,” in The Pilgrim’s Progress: Critical and Historical Views, ed. Vincent Newey (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), 102.

¹⁶ Not only are these wanton and “un-blessed” characters in the narrative punished, but Luxon goes so far as to say that they are not even real themselves. Instead, they are merely “allegories of the pilgrims’ progress in purification as they pass through this allegorical (non)existence to a new reality.” Luxon follows this claim with a harrowing observation that we note the progress of the pilgrims precisely in the destruction of these non-entities. They only become real (or, Luxon argues, “real enough”) to undergo a violent destruction: “They do not evaporate; they suffer eternal torment in Hell, and their very real suffering somehow guarantees their status as having always been unreal,” 182.
at the time of Bunyan’s writing would have done little to discourage this understanding. As Pooley notes, these works most often “combine[d] the allegorical generality of abstract names standing for personal or spiritual qualities” or in some cases would have been thinly veiled allusions to historical figures or events, leaving the reader to discern those intended referents. 17 Though Bunyan’s spiritual allegory and the heavenly world it assumed are noted to be an exception, many of these seventeenth century allegories “present[ed] themselves as puzzles to be decoded.” 18

The second problem is slightly more extreme, and follows the interpretation of celebrated literary critic Stanley Fish. In his reading of The Pilgrim’s Progress, he argues that Bunyan’s work does not only assume this claim about the impotence of meaning-making: it is an enactment of it. Precisely as Bunyan repeatedly demonstrates the inability of his narrative to contain the truths of faith in “temporal-spatial forms of thought,” he is demonstrating to his readers that our acts of reading cannot truly be efficacious, that our acts of interpretation cannot find fulfillment, and that our life as pilgrims is meant to be a movement out of this world. Fish believes this is what Bunyan intends by his hope that “This Book will make a Travailer [traveler] of thee.” 19

To refute these readings is not our purpose here. Rather, I argue that these readings of Bunyan and of Christian theology more generally will persist so long as we perpetuate facile readings of allegory. While allegory holds much promise, its false form (where one thing merely stands in for or points toward another) aids and abets bad theology. Allegory becomes “allegorization,” where the latter connotes not a

non-fiction essays, Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) and to her Collected Works (New York: Library of America, 1988), respectively.

17 Pooley specifically refers to the existence in print of Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene (1590-6), Richard Bernard’s The Isle of Man (1626), The Holy War (1680), Richard Overton’s The Araignement of Mr Persecution (1645), the anonymous Theophania (1655), Aphra Behn’s Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister (1684-7). See Pooley, 83ff.

18 Pooley, 84.

19 For a lengthy treatment of Fish’s reading, its hermeneutical (or anti-hermeneutic) significance, and its relation to Puritan theology, see Luxon, 161ff. Bunyan speaks of making his reader a traveler in his Apology to The Pilgrim’s Progress.
specific literary technique but a general tendency to view both the literal text and the present world only in light of their extensions of meaning – to look only for their future form to the detriment of their present coherence.\textsuperscript{20} Put another way, reading allegory badly serves simply to reinforce the tendency of pilgrims to read the world (and our life in it) in much the same way. How then shall we read it well?

\textit{The Promise of Allegory}

Allegory, rightly understood, possesses the superior ability to move into, as well as out from, the text toward further reaches of meaning and purpose, without making the text merely instrumental. The greatest danger of allegorization is that it is parasitic on this ability – capitalizing on its capacities to move the reader toward greater meaning but stopping short of this call to return to the text and to take it seriously in all its concretion.

With apologies to Stanley Fish,\textsuperscript{21} I find Bunyan’s \textit{Apology} for his work to refute the very possibility that he has chosen the form of allegory precisely because it reinforces the inability of the (material) form to contain the (divine) content. In fact, I believe it suggests the opposite.

For though he does not inspire much confidence from the outset – his title page is explicit that this work is about progress “from/this world,/to/that which is to come” and that it is all “delivered under the Similitude of a/Dream”\textsuperscript{22} – in the pages that follow, Bunyan makes plain his belief that allegory is indeed an apt container for truth. He makes his case – at length – that while some things are best laid out in a straightforward manner, others elude and must be captured by other means. Fishers and Fowlers use whatever devices they must, lest their objects not be caught. Against those who claim that the communication of “things Divine to men” requires more solid, more direct writing, Bunyan proposes that

\textsuperscript{20} Quotation marks denote a neologism, not quoted text. Future uses will not retain this practice.

\textsuperscript{21} I should add that I also proceed with full caution about the author’s ability to fix the meaning of his own work with his own words.

\textsuperscript{22} Hardly a recommendation to concretion!
scripture itself is full of “Types, Shadows, and Metaphors” (5), of “Dark Figures,” and of “Allegories” (6).

His method, he persuade, is not meant to obscure but to enlighten, and though it speaks with figures or similitudes, it does not deny the reality that underlies them. He writes, “I find that holy Writ in many places/Hath semblance with this method, where the cases/ Doth call for one thing to set forth another:/ Use it I may then, and yet nothing smother” (7, emphasis added). The purpose, he is clear, is not to question the materiality of this world in light of the reality of the next, but to so engage the reader in the meaning-making process of the work that it implicates that reader and does not leave her unchanged by it. He declares, “This Book will make a Travailer [Traveler] of thee,/If by its Counsel thou wilt ruled be;/It will direct thee to the Holy Land,/If thou wilt its Directions understand” (8). To Fish, this is allegory as temptation: it is an exhortation for fleeing. To the contrary, I argue that this is allegory as promise and as possibility. Bunyan’s words are not an instruction to take the text as a jumping off point toward greater truths, but are an invitation to engage the text more deeply, more imaginatively, and more concretely.

This engagement with the text will require a better understanding of allegory, where allegory is not simply a means of extrapolation or abstraction (What does this character stand for? What is the real meaning here?), but is a complex web of meaning in which and through which we move as we read. Thus, Bunyan’s reader must learn to move into the book and not out of it. We must learn to take seriously the immediate and very particular human situation of the text before we follow that through to the deeper levels of meaning opened thereby.

Indeed, the ability to draw us into the text is precisely what makes Bunyan’s work powerful as allegory. As W.R. Owens has it, “It is no abstract theological dogma that lays hold of our attention and makes us want to read on: we are taken immediately into a very particular human situation.”

meaning, rather than sending us in the other direction. And it is only as we read that we are able to make these deeper connections. As we move into the book, we become pilgrims alongside Christian. Our knowledge of divine truths does not come to Christian or to us *deus ex machina* but in human ways, along human paths, from human guides. We not only learn about our beatific end but about the wayfaring that leads us there. As Owens reminds us,

Bunyan’s poetic vision of eternal felicity is not a morbid rejection of life here and now. His characters are certainly travelling through this earthly life towards an eternal life in Heaven, and in Bunyan’s view there was no doubt that then the wicked would be punished and the righteous exalted. But the central, enduring quality of his book lies in its portrayal of the pilgrims’ lives in this world.

Thus we discover the intimate connection between allegory and pilgrim theology. If allegorization can teach us that pilgrim theology is otherworldly, allegory (rightly understood) can teach us a new pilgrim theology. We may find anew that a robust understanding of the promise of allegory acknowledges its capacity to make theology personal and particular. Accordingly, it can serve as an apt and able guide for pilgrims who are tempted to take for granted the meaning-making capacity of this world on our way to the next.

*Flannery O’Connor and the Concrete Mystery of Fiction*

To better understand the capacity for a work of fiction to perform this function, we turn now to the writings of Flannery O’Connor. Her writings, above all, offer us a powerful account of what is at stake when our otherworldly expectations lead us to separate the particular from the universal or uncouple fact from mystery.

In the art of fiction, says O’Connor, meaning must be “embodied in” and “made concrete in” the work itself, or it will never achieve anything apart from it. Her account of the art of fiction – which I call

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24 On this point, Owens draws upon the words of C.S. Lewis who notes, “We ought not to be thinking ‘This green valley, where the shepherd boy is singing, represents humility’; we ought to be discovering, *as we read*, that humility is like that green valley. That way, *moving always into the book*, not out of it, from the concept to the image, enriches the concept,” (qtd. on xxii, emphasis added).

a theology of fiction – places us precisely at the juncture between human and world, and therefore cannot escape a deep significance in our study of allegory and pilgrimage. O’Connor again and again avers that the concrete, the sensory, and the particular are the place where human knowledge begins. This is also, says O’Connor, the place where fiction begins. O’Connor’s novel claim is that this concrete, sensory medium is not strictly an encumbrance or a limitation to be tolerated or surmounted; rather, it is the very means by which the writer may best express his ultimate interest in mystery.

Indeed, O’Connor is insistent that this concretion is the only means for talking about content that is greater and deeper than what lies immediately before our gaze and that “it’s well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene.” O’Connor’s point about fiction and the power of limitation is that it is only by writing about the particular that one can write about the whole world, and about the truth of that world, which includes its relation to the world that is to come.

However, when we note O’Connor’s claim that fiction is a medium of the concrete and the particular, we must also note that the concrete is not simply the tangible or that which has observable shape and mass. Rather it is the form which elucidates truth – precisely by bringing the truth into our presence. Fiction, then, is an apt medium for both this form (the concrete) and this subject (truth), because, O’Connor claims, fiction is “the concrete expression of mystery – mystery that is lived.” In fiction, mystery cannot possibly be otherworldly, cannot remain nebulous and still be recognized. For O’Connor, any attempt to approach the universal apart from the particular is profoundly Manichean, and deserves censure as such. Because “the fiction writer doesn’t state, he shows, renders,” then fiction

26 CW, 816.
27 MM, 77.
28 Letter to Eileen Hall, 3/10/56.
29 Letter to A., 9/8/56. To the Manichean worldview, limits represent boundaries. For the Christian, they must, at one and the same time, represent possibilities. Anyone interested in mystery (she is speaking specifically of the writer of fiction but calls us to this posture as well) does not and cannot
demands the elucidation of more than a disembodied, abstract truth (which could be described or demonstrated, but not rendered).\textsuperscript{30} Fiction demands a world, which it must render truthfully, and it cannot render truth apart from that truthfully rendered world.

\textit{Limits, Mystery, and Pilgrims}

In calling the writer (and, I would argue, the reader) to the concrete, she is not calling her to an end but to a beginning – not an exhaustion but a deepening. This is a call to attend to the concrete as it is, but not as an end in itself. This is a call for attention because we are human and we traffic in the physical, particular, and limited world. In the same sense, the greatness of our cherished writers is not their ability to write about truths that transcend, but their ability to make that truth concrete – to make it present to us in manifestly ordinary terms. For this claim O’Connor’s greatest exemplar is Dante, who knew well that

\begin{quote}
The business of the artist is to deal with that, in writing about one man, he writes about all men, and in writing about one time, he writes about eternity. He writes about manners, but in such a way that manners reveal mystery.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The concrete is the embodiment of that sense of mystery; rendered rightly, it possess the ability to push the limited toward its greater extensions of truth. However, those extensions depend upon our capacity to expect an extension in the first place, and this is where we are vastly aided by our pilgrim theology. Because we know that we are strangers and sojourners, we shall not expect the concrete – no matter how thoroughly it is portrayed, plumbed, explained, and probed – to exhaust the depth of what it contains. We must orient ourselves toward the concrete but not as its own end; rather, we follow where it points.

\begin{quote}
“slight” the limited, the concrete, the “real.” He cannot slight them if he is going to be able to move through them. In order to do this, his work must manifest a fidelity to the physical world if it has any hope of rendering any other kind of meaning. But because of his vision, the true Christian is able to move \textit{through} what he sees on the surface to “an experience of mystery,” (CW, 816). On this view, the limit is also a \textit{via}.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} Letter to Eileen Hall, 3/10/56.

\textsuperscript{31} It is not beside the point that Dante is a master of the art of allegory. Unpublished typescript of talk given to the Georgia Writer’s Association, “On the Significance of Being a Georgia Author,” December 1, 1955, box 1, folder 6, Coll. 59, Flannery O’Connor Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
On the other hand, our pilgrim theology makes us vulnerable, for we cannot assume that allegory leads us out from the text to a greater truth. This is too facile, and it results in naïve reading as well as, I argue, bad theology (especially pilgrim theology). We must take allegory seriously on the literal level, or else it cannot do its work.

O’Connor makes clear to us that if a writer cannot render things on the literal level “believable in themselves, he can’t make them believable in any of their spiritual extensions.”32 Our call as readers is to attend to how the narrative first operates “on the surface,” and only thereby does it have the capacity to “increase[e] the story in every direction.”33 The essential thing to note is that this increase is an extension from the literal level, and not apart from it.

O’Connor’s warrant for this argument is not (or not solely) rooted in her aesthetic convictions or literary critical theory. She begins with the literal level (of the text and of the world) because she believes that it is always and already saturated with meaning, having been endowed with meaning by its creator and always pointing us toward that creator. She takes the text seriously because she takes the world seriously as a site of divine meaning-making. To take the world seriously in its life as the meaningful creation of a meaning-making creator is a theological claim. And because meaning is present, we look for it there. We may be “concerned with ultimate mystery,” but our concern (like the writer of fiction’s concern) should be on that mystery “as we find it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience.” And it is because of this greater truth that she can claim that “all levels of meaning in fiction have come increasingly to be found in the literal level.”34 We begin with the actual because it is incumbent up on art

32 MM, 176.

33 MM, 71.

34 MM, 125, emphasis added. This is true for us as we seek to understand the narrative’s relevance to the journey of the Christian life. However, it is also worth noting that this is even truer for those readers who are not expecting to find deeper truths. For O’Connor avers that “the more a writer wishes to make the supernatural apparent, the more real he has to be able to make the natural world, for if the readers don’t accept the natural world, they’ll certainly not accept anything else,” MM, 116. My point in including O’Connor in this paper is that this should be the anticipation for the Christian reader as well. We should not simply take the literal meaning for granted as we move out of it toward a deeper or more
(and the artist) “to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe.” However, this duty exists because the visible universe is already endowed with meaning by its creator. Again she reminds, “one does not have to render justice to what has no meaning.”

That this is true of fiction has been demonstrated. For Flannery, however, this is true for our sacred texts, as well as for our world. She writes, “The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: the allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; the moral, having to do with what should be done; and the anagogical, which had to do with the Divine Life and our participation in it.” Having understood her theology of fiction, we cannot fail to note what she is making plain about the biblical text: that these other senses find their life in the literal sense. The allegorical, then, does not simply take the text as a point of departure, but finds its life within that text and draws its meaning from that text. From here, O’Connor extends her argument one step further, reminding us that “[a]lthough this was a method applied to Biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation and a way of reading nature.” In O’Connor we are again reminded that our way of reading texts and our way of reading the world are intimately connected, though she does not

(expansive meaning. We ought to demand that our fiction take the world seriously, so that we might do likewise.

35 The language of rendering the highest possible justice to the universe is Joseph Conrad’s, she tells us, but the rest of the quote is O’Connor’s own gloss on the theological significance of his words. “Untitled typescript,” Coll. 59, Emory University.

36 Although it is not our topic for this essay, it is interesting to note that while the anagogical is often referred to as the divine sense, the eternal sense, or the future sense, O’Connor’s own definition of the anagogical fits entirely with our subject here. Rather than simply being a forward-looking sense, in O’Connor’s hands, it becomes both a focus on the divine life and on our participation within that divine life. Thus it is both an orientation and a task, a destiny and a path. “Untitled typescript,” Coll. 59, Emory University, emphasis added.

37 “Untitled typescript,” Coll. 59, Emory University. Parts of this quoted text have been published, though not all of it and in slightly different form. Many of O’Connor’s published non-fiction essays began as talks she gave in various contexts and to different audiences. The published versions are something like the “final form” of the text, and represent either one iteration of that essay or a culmination of various versions. Whenever possible, I will refer to the published version of her works, but in this case, I refer specifically to the unpublished typescript which was given as a talk before the essay was formalized in print. The differences between this typescript and the published version are useful.
say which follows from the other. Therefore we are free to consider the sense in which they are mutually reinforcing – a matter of great import to the question of allegory and pilgrim theology.

**Stakes**

No evidence exists to suggest that O’Connor ever read Bunyan, nor does she offer us a strategy for reading allegory. Instead, what O’Connor offers is a piercing vision of how fiction is uniquely equipped to hold together the movement of deeper truths and the reality of the world in which those truths are made manifest. In doing so, she admonishes us that this unity of truth and form\(^{38}\) can heal the false divisions we have erected between material and spiritual, between this world and the next. It can, I contend, teach us about being pilgrims.

O’Connor’s wisdom is that faith does not look like an arrival at certainty but a call to walk amidst the great Christian mysteries. It is an attempt to make the mysteries concrete, while maintaining their status as mystery. Our pilgrim call is to “live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions.”\(^{39}\) Like allegory itself, the life of faith is “an invitation to deeper and stranger visions,” but we must entertain the idea that these strange visions will return us to the world, rather than makes us strangers to it.\(^{40}\) O’Connor’s vision applies to the reader of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as well as to all pilgrim believers. For she states that the person who can understand good fiction (including allegory) will have “the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery.”\(^{41}\) In good allegory, we do not leave the sign in search of the signified: we live in the tension and correspondence between the two until our understanding of both is deepened.

\(^{38}\) Recall Bunyan’s explicit arguments about the proper form for conveying “things Divine to men.”

\(^{39}\) CW, 812, emphasis added. It is well worth noting that she attributes to fiction the ability to call us to this task.

\(^{40}\) MM, 184.

\(^{41}\) MM, 79.
**Bunyan, Baptists, and Pilgrims**

Having understood the significance of meaning as it resides in the literal level of both our texts and our world, and the relation that bears to our pilgrim living in and through the present world, we have reached a new vantage. We have understood Flannery’s criterion that the fiction writer first offer us a truthfully rendered world, within which meaning can grow and flourish. Thus illuminated, we now return to Bunyan. We have already examined his own stated reasons for choosing allegory as the most apt means of communicating “things Divine to men.” In this final section, we consider whether and how Bunyan’s work is successful in doing so. We examine whether he offers us a whole and truthful world, a pilgrim worthy of emulating, and a narrative that functions according to the promise of allegory, rather than its temptations. Accordingly, we can finally adjudicate whether *The Pilgrim’s Progress* can serve as a ready guide for Baptists in their pilgrim living now.

*Rendering a Truthful World*

In applying our first criterion of a whole and truthful world, we cannot avoid the fact that the narrative itself begins as a dream. It is a fiction within a fiction – a somnambulism of the (fictional) narrator’s mind. Indeed, s/he never quite lets us forget it. Again and again, the narrator’s voice interrupts the prose – “Then I saw in my Dream” – never letting us move too far into the narrative that we lose sight of the fact that this is a hallucination, a conceit, a phantasm.

The setting of the narrative is hardly more credible. Bunyan’s portrayal of place in his narrative is variable at best, and his own descriptions and depictions of place throughout the work have been described as

sometimes realistic and expansive and sometimes truncated almost to nothing, sometimes purely metaphorical and sometimes intensely literal, sometimes regarding places as hideous exemplifications of the world and its dangers and sometimes as delightful escapes from them.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{42}\) Turner, 97. Turner goes on in the following pages to offer a fascinating account of this variability, claiming that Bunyan’s sense of place and his relationship to it is “inseparable in Bunyan’s imagination from the social means of [its] control, from lordship, tenure and sale, trespass actions and enclosure claims.” That Bunyan lived and wrote during a period of religious turmoil in England is certain.
While Bunyan’s critics have noted the starkness of the world picture he offers, this may be (and has been) read charitably as “a deliberate artistic choice” wherein “the narrowness of the Way has already found a rhetorical form.” Yet, oftentimes the description of the world in which Christian and his companions move is more than spare and verges on nonsensical. The Way becomes directionally challenged, discontinuous, or even contradictory. There are issues of scale, problematic variations in latitude and climate, discrepancies between descriptions of the same events in Part I and Part II, inconsistent use of daylight and darkness, interiors that “turn into exteriors without warning,” and spaces that generally defy the laws of geometry. Vistas fare no better, for, as one critic notes

no lens could capture what [Bunyan’s] pilgrims see: the Delectable Mountains are so far from the House Beautiful that they can only be seen on a clear day, but Christian sees fruit and flowers there…; pilgrims make out the gate and the pavements of the Celestial City with the help of optical instruments, even though it is on a vast mountain above the clouds.

He goes on to note that by portraying a world (even a dream world) that does not assume human modes of viewing or traveling nor even three dimensional continuous space, Bunyan “often seems to undercut his

Yet it behooves the reader to remember that the 16th and 17th centuries were also times of great change for land and property rights in England, with the result that physical space and places (of which land is a central concept) took on ever more political and social significance. Turner’s argument about Bunyan’s place-imagination is an apt reminder that we must consider the complex socio-political contexts that form a person in their place(s) and thereby form their relationship to places in that world. This thought must be carried along with this paper’s argument for the theological significance that the world possesses, even (or perhaps precisely) for people on pilgrimage.

43 Turner, 110.

44 Though divergence from the Way in narrative terms “means certain damnation,” topographical deviations throughout the work find the straight path confounded (as with the Slough in Part I and the muddy pit in Part II), identical straight paths emerging alongside the true Way, and alternative descriptions of the path as being walled like a garden or open like a field. See Turner, 93.

45 Turner notes at least eight textual problems of scale, including the fact that Doubting Castle would have been a landmark for miles since it is described as being visible from the Hill Caution, but the pilgrims note they “could not ‘so much as see Doubting Castle’…which implies that it had been clearly visible (and so easily avoided),” 93-94.

46 In an amusing cadence, Turner notes how, “in the House Beautiful, Christiana is taken successively to a closet, to the place where Jacob’s ladder goes up to heaven, to the actual mountain where Abraham offered up Isaac, and then immediately ‘into the dining-room,’” 95.

47 Turner, 95.
own realism, to withdraw from a scene or place, to provide not even a frame for us to inscribe our
daydreams but an absentmindedness which leads to contradiction.”48

The objection can certainly be raised that this is merely a dreamscape, or even that this is simply
an allegory – a showing or revelation of a greater truth, without the need for descriptive consistency or
credulous scenes and settings. However, O’Connor will insist that it is precisely the wholeness of a
narrative world that makes its revelatory purpose possible. Accordingly, one of the most damning
critiques of Bunyan is the simple declaration that throughout the work, “Where is subsumed into what.”49
In his pursuit of allegory, Bunyan at times loses the tether of the real precisely in service of the truth he
means to convey. With O’Connor’s words still ringing, we pilgrims must ask if this manner of subsuming
is not wrongheaded from the start.

**Embodying a Worthy Pilgrim**

Turning to our second criterion, we find that Bunyan’s protagonist often struggles to offer much
encouragement to the kind of pilgrim we have claimed. From the earliest pages of the work, Christian’s
pilgrimage is not primarily an act of seeking (the Celestial City, say) but an act of fleeing (from wrath and
“Destruction”). He initiates this flight by stopping up his ears so that he does not hear the cries of his
Wife and Children, and Bunyan tells us in detail how he “ran on crying Life, Life, Eternal Life: so he
looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain” (12-13, emphasis added). We soon learn
that Christian’s native country and all that is in it and that he retains from it is accounted “an anoiance” to
him (50). To think of it at all is done with “much shame and detestation” (50).

For him (and for Bunyan, it often seems), to “desire a better Countrey; that is, an Heavenly” one
is precisely to lose sight of the present one (50). If we consider only this, then the picture we have of

48 Turner, 93. Turner will later claim that on occasion Bunyan does muster a mode of realism
precisely in those places where “it furthers the model of violent opposition between pilgrims and the
world,” 104. The irony is of course that Bunyan’s starkest moments of realism serve to further the
message of the non-reality of the world he is so accurately describing.

49 Turner, 106, emphasis original.
pilgrimage would seem to be only the leaving of one thing (one’s native country) in search of the singular goal of another (Mount Zion).

Weaving a Credible Narrative

Our final criterion turns to the narrative elements of the story and how they work together on their own merits, apart from their allegorical extensions. Though we cannot here survey the narrative in its entirety, a few key scenes will illuminate a general trend. Beginning with the scene where Christian visits Interpreter, we find a facile form of allegory to be sure. As he leads Christian through the house, the narrative is solely occupied with didacticism and the narrative suffers. The house is filled with things having little meaning in themselves; rather they are simply pictures, representations, and the point of the scene is to determine what they really mean. The people in the room are merely figures; their actions are object lessons; and the import of all of these is not apparent to Christian, but must be unfolded by the one who holds the key to unlocking the meaning. In all cases, this meaning is hidden to Christian, who cannot perceive it but must be taught it. Aha! “Now I see,” says Christian (32, emphasis added).

In other places in the narrative, the story can only make sense as allegory. It has little to no internal coherence and seems to be designed only to illuminate the dangers of this world. Faithful’s story of meeting Adam the first is a fine example. There appears to be no internal logic for a stranger to approach a wandering pilgrim and immediately to offer him a dwelling, to ask of him “work” that entails only the enjoyment of “many delights,” in return for which his “wages” would be to become this stranger’s heir. A house full of “all the dainties in the world” would be his, as well as the polygamous marriage prospects of all three of his daughters (with such believable names as “the lust of the flesh,” “the lust of the eyes,” and “the pride of life”). The only crime Faithful commits against this man is the

\[50\] Consider the difference between these three female characters and the ones we previously met at Palace Beautiful - Discretion, Piety, Charity, and Prudence. Those women, with proper names, were present to Christian, spoke with their own voices, and reasoned with him about the nature of his journey and where it might lead, as well as teaching him his purpose at their dwelling. By contrast, these names (which do not even merit capitalization) are merely representations of absent characters, designed to stand in as ideas rather than persons. In the case of Discretion, Piety, Charity, and Prudence,
refusal of his extravagant offer, yet the old man reviles him, promises bitter retribution, and then sends out his emissary who overtakes Faithful and beats him, repeatedly, to the point of death. Further, Christian explains to his friend that this enemy was Moses (aka, the Law with no mercy), yet immediately afterward tells Faithful that he ought to have stopped at Palace Beautiful to see the Rarities – one of which is the rod of Moses, we will recall – for they have made such a lasting impression that Christian will remember them until the day he dies! Little in this scene makes sense on its own merits. Instead the reader is treated to thinly veiled didacticism at the expense of whole, believable characters in a whole, sensible world – through whom and through which we might come to truths even greater than Bunyan had in mind at the time of his writing.

An Able Guide?

The evidence assembled thus far is disheartening. Why, then, should we even bother with Bunyan? Is all lost? To the contrary, I propose that despite its lapses, the narrative of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* can be an incredibly compelling aid for Christian wayfarers. Taken as a whole, Bunyan’s work possesses the capacity to function as a lucid and alluring embodiment of the great truths of the Christian faith. If the temptation of allegory is that it runs the risk of making these truths more distant, the promise of allegory is that it also makes them more concrete.

In Bunyan’s hands, destruction is not an idea, but a place. The City of Destruction is not simply an attitude or a path, but it is a dwelling. We do not simply deserve destruction or even court it. We dwell in it. We make a life of it, alongside our Neighbors (13). Despair is a place, and we watch as Christian wallows in the Slow of Dispond, sinking in its Mire and as a result of the heavy burden of sin (16). Despair again overtakes our protagonist in the form of a giant who imprisons him in Doubting-Castle – making real and concrete the ways in which Bunyan himself had been held in thrall as he doubted his own

we are able to move *through* the virtues personified to understand greater truths about the human journey to God and the gift of rest and community along the way. In the case of these three daughters of Adam the first, we have been so blatantly informed of their significance that it does not even occur to us that further significance should be sought.
Yet, there is great beauty in this concretion: if Despair is a human entity, so too is Help and Good-Will. If Ignorance takes on flesh, so too do Hope and Faithful.

Perhaps the most striking place for our pilgrim concerns is the Palace Beautiful. Along this journey, Bunyan makes quite concrete the notion of fellowship, mutual benefit, and succor. This peace is not an inner feeling but a particular place, an edifice, a dwelling. The members of the household here are named for virtues and dispositions (Discretion, Piety, Charity, and Prudence), so again we run the risk of taking something concrete and making of it merely a symbol – something that really means something else. However, as Christian sojourns there, in his conversations and his enjoyments, we find that this is not simply an object lesson in personal virtue (“What relationship does Prudence bear to the Christian life?”), but an embodiment of Christian fellowship in worship and witness. The gift of fellowship – certainly a Baptist virtue – is made quite concrete in these chambers and around this table.

Here we are asked to witness this moment of sharing stories with fellow pilgrims as well as the act of being storied. Entreating Christian to tarry longer, the household of the Palace read to him the Rarities: recalling the Acts of the Lord of the Hill and naming His servants; retelling the lives of the saints and their great witness; and revealing to him the elements by which the biblical story was wrought. Here, Christian beholds the rod of Moses, espies the pitchers of Gideon, and is shown the Jawbone of Sampson. In the middle of this story about a dream, Christian finds the elements of the biblical story made absolutely concrete and sensory. The story of salvation history is physically present to him, in this fellowship of believers, in the place that the Lord of the Hill has provided for their refreshment and enjoyment (47-55). Surely this is pilgrim church theology in its embodied form. The Palace is, indeed, beautiful to our pilgrim not because he was arrived but because he is still a traveler. It is a goodness to him precisely because he has far to go. It is a goodness to us, too, if we allow Bunyan to make real for us

51 See 109ff. It is easy to miss but deliciously rich that the offense for which Christian and Faithful are punished is not deviation from the Way (though that is the larger context within which this episode occurs) is that they have trespassed on Giant Despair’s land. The Christian grammar of salvation is quite clear that the nature of sin itself is trespass (“Forgive us our trespasses…”) and this becomes most perfectly embodied in Bunyan’s narrative.
– we pilgrims currently in the midst of our sojourn – the church as an embodied means of grace along our way.

*Pilgrim Living*

This is the promise of allegory: that, through it, we are empowered to consider our own pilgrimage. And just as we can critique those moments where Bunyan loses the tether of a whole and believable world, we can critique Baptists when they seek an otherworldly soteriology, eschatology, and spirituality.

For if, as Christian says, the truth is that “There is an endless Kingdom to be Inhabited, and everlasting life to be given us; that we may Inhabit that Kingdom for ever,” (15) then surely we must ask how the means (pilgrimage) relates to the end (inhabiting). In so doing, we understand that pilgrimage is not (or not only) an act of fleeing this world for the next, but is a kind of formation for what we shall do once we arrive. If our future is that we shall “possess the brave Country,” we must consider that the pilgrimage of this life is a kind of abiding that rightly orients us toward that place where we will find our ultimate habitation (16). Surely this journey is of a piece with that habitation, rather than its opposite.

Surely our “progress” here implies some consonance with the life that is to come, and we may profitably consider how our pilgrim living fits us for the dwelling that is to come.52

If Christian is right that our heavenly lives will be both one of “walking in the sight of God” and “standing in his presence,” then we might claim for ourselves a practice of wayfaring that includes both journeying and abiding (15, emphasis added). A theology of pilgrimage that does not entail both traveling and dwelling alike is no guide for an eternal, beatific life where our primary mode, Scripture assures us,

52 If Turner is right about Bunyan’s conception of the oppositional relationship between this world and the next, then this consonance is already out of bounds. However, I believe that a more nuanced reading is possible. Certainly Turner is right that much of Bunyan’s inconsistency in describing and depicting his landscapes can be attributed to this kind of separation (present and future, material and eternal), but we may yet find ourselves stopping short of his pronouncement that these two kinds of land are “incompatible,” 102. I believe that precisely as pilgrims we may read allegory in general and Bunyan’s allegory in particular with a view to how our sojourn in this land matters to our life in the next.
will be a form or dwelling or inhabiting. What is required is a theology that equips us to practice pilgrimage in such a way that we are both properly placed and properly oriented.

In this task, both Bunyan and O’Connor can be apt guides for wayfaring people (i.e., Baptists), calling us back to our particular places, demanding that we take them seriously and acknowledge their formative influence on us, requiring us to ask questions: how do we live in this place, amongst these people; who is my neighbor and what do I owe her. Pilgrimage may also require us to ask what it means to “dwell” here in anticipation of our future dwelling in the New Jerusalem. To take place seriously may mean to remember the sites of God’s saving work in our lives, the addresses where we have gathered as the Body of Christ, the congregations who promised to walk with us on our journey, as well as the geographies and idioms and accents that shape how we speak when we speak about God. It may mean that we consider again the embodied profession we make when we gather around the bread and the cup (and what it means to claim that Jesus is present there). It may mean asking whether we can “remember our baptism” better when we tarry in the presence of those who were its witnesses.

Though we cannot tackle this crucial idea in the space allotted here, neither can we ignore the central role that a theology of Incarnation must play in these considerations. That the Son of God came to where we are must shape our understanding of the place to which he came. Did Christ come merely as a stopover – a necessary but unimportant materialization within which he delivered an otherwise eternal truth? We pilgrims often flirt with Gnostic tendencies…

What I propose is not that we must take matter seriously before we can understand the Incarnation. Rather, I believe that it is the reverse: that the Incarnation teaches us that we must take matter seriously, and must accept the ways in which Christ’s birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension fundamentally alter the laws of matter and its destiny. Rather than an immanent natural theology or even

53 It is worth considering how placed Bunyan’s own understanding of God was. For throughout the text he refers to God as the “owner of the place,” “the Lord of the Hill,” “the Lord of the Country to which we are going,” and “the Lord of these Mountains.” The placed and placing nature of these titles certainly merits our attention.
an ethics, I believe we are confronted with a deeply doctrinal call to resist allegorization and rethink pilgrim living.  

For this reason, we are grateful for Bunyan, who offers us a picture of Christian symbol and allegory as that which moves through, rather than beyond; a picture of the Christian life that is embodied, as well as spiritualized; and a picture of the pilgrim life that is placed, rather than simply oriented.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, I contend that both “Baptist” Bunyan and Catholic O’Connor can be apt guides for wayfaring people, calling us back to our particular places, making us aware of those persons and places which are helps to us on our journey, and demanding that we take seriously their formative influence on us as we seek holiness and unity in this world. To recall Bunyan is to be put in mind of the concrete historical situation endured by religious dissenters and pilgrims in another time and place, and of their creative and sacrificial witness. Because of that very concretion, we are prompted to consider our current forms of witness and contemplate the (perhaps less obvious) ways our modern world seeks to silence our distinctive way of worship and the shape of our common life.

The task of this paper has been to propose a reconsideration of allegory, especially as it relates to a Baptist pilgrim theology. I have asked us to consider, however unlikely it seems, that allegory might be an apt guard against abstraction and pilgrimage might offer us a real theology of place. I now submit that Bunyan, read well, can be a worthy guide and The Pilgrim’s Progress a central text in rethinking both allegory and pilgrim living. In their wake, we may learn to see the present world as the place where we

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54 An ethics of place is certainly not out of the question, however. The journey of Christian requires safe passage on a protected road; rest and respite in properties that imply questions of ownership; travel that involves the transgression of boundaries and issues of private versus common property; and the refreshment from waters and orchards and vineyards that suggest a kind of cultivation in addition to the plenitude of creation. The ethics of place is of central importance for pilgrims, even if it is not the central question for this paper.

55 It is easy to claim Bunyan for the Baptist tradition. The relation of O’Connor is less certain; however, I argue that to heed the voice of O’Connor’s deeply sacramental view of the world is to receive her corrective as a gift to our Baptist charism.
expect the redemption of creation, await the inbreaking of grace, anticipate the fellowship of other
wayfarers, hope for friendship through the collective memory of the saints, practice holiness, and watch
for the presence of the divine in our midst. With Bunyan to guide us, this paper thus poses the question
for consideration amongst the group of Baptist scholars gathered around the table, around the topic,
around the text: what kind of pilgrims shall we be?