

ABSTRACT

The Witness of the Saints:
Literary Method and Theological Matter in the Hagiographical Novels
of Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Buechner, and Walter Wangerin, Jr.

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Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Buechner, and Walter Wangerin bring the contemporary witness of three obscure saints to life in the pages of their historical fiction. These modern hagiographers perceive divine revelation in all aspects of the natural world, and their fiction reflects this worldview and attempts to make it manifest for their audience. Sometimes they succeed brilliantly; at other times the seams in their tapestry of art and faith are glaringly visible—to the point that they compromise the fabric's integrity. Many secular critics dismiss their work because they admit to plying their artistic talent for the sake of illuminating sacred mysteries. Waugh, Buechner and Wangerin recognize the pitfalls of embodying supernatural realities in concrete images, but they are eager to imitate the biblical model by recasting sacred mystery into story. The way they found to do this in *Helena*, *Brendan*, and *Saint Julian* is to use the outline of a historical saint's life and experiment with the genre, narrative voice, metaphorical language, magical realism, and comic vision to shape a work of literary art that reflects their faith perspective. Moreover, they weave their own life-stories into fictionalized

accounts of saints' lives. Their obsessions with sin and penance, their fears of abandonment and death, their concerns about strained relationships with parents and difficult neighbors—all find a place in these writers' hagiographical narratives. Waugh idealizes the supernatural, so he writes about a saint who goes in search of a physical symbol of faith to represent the inner transformation of baptism and belief. Buechner romanticizes the natural world, so he conjures a saint who seeks a celestial paradise but finally finds hope and love in his earthly companions. Wangerin yearns to show his readers a way to ease the weight of sin and guilt, so he retells an ancient legend about a seemingly hopeless case to show the triumphant power of God's grace and mercy. All three perform a valuable service by reviving the cult of an early medieval saint for a contemporary religious audience, but the one who most effectively unites form and function is Walter Wangerin in *Saint Julian*.

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad with love from your first blessing

To my sisters—Rebecca, Sarah, and Susanna—thanks for being my best friends

And to my nieces—Abigail, Taylor, and Lauren—may you always feel cherished

CHAPTER ONE

Sainthood and Story: How Artistic Form Fits Hagiographic Function

Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims in his *Discipleship* that the most pressing question for the contemporary Christian community is: “How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?” (60) This perennial question has been asked by theologians, members of the clergy, and artists alike. How three Christian authors in the late twentieth century respond to it by rewriting saints’ lives in fictional form is the subject of this dissertation. To an audience bombarded by secularism and beset by apathy, Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Buechner, and Walter Wangerin render hagiographical accounts of three characters whose holiness is exceedingly unusual. The Catholic Church has officially recognized Helena the Finder of the True Cross, Brendan the Navigator, and Julian the Hospitaller as saints worthy of veneration and verified many of the details of their early medieval lives, so Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are free to treat the supernatural deeds and spiritual sayings of their subjects as historical fodder for their art. Their novels tend to demystify the saints, however, by emphasizing their quotidian virtues and stripping away the paranormal elements of their lives. The writers’ self-assigned task is to re-imagine these three figures as ordinary humans who, caught up in extraordinary events, bear witness to an uncommon grace.

Waugh’s *Helena* (1950), Buechner’s *Brendan* (1987) and Wangerin’s *Saint Julian* (2003) offer convincing fictional renderings of eccentric saintliness to anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see. What this dissertation aims to develop is a skilled approach to

reading both well-known and unknown works of hagiographical fiction—a method to judge the quality and relevance of any number of works whose genre, religious worldview, and narrative technique are similar to those of the novels by Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin. Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, G. K. Chesterton’s *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Mark Twain’s *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, as well as countless others, were all considered as potential sources for this dissertation and were only rejected because of time constraints.

The novels under review in this paper cross genres and disciplines: they are works of literature, but they are also examples of sacramental art¹ in that they serve as divine signposts, mediating invisible grace to those whose hearts are open to receive it. In classic works, this pairing does not present a problem: readers admire the artistic virtuosity of a Dante or a Milton just as they acknowledge the Christian faith that inspired the artist’s work.² Today, however, the literary world tends toward an obsession with

¹ These three writers offer a vision of the world in which God’s grace works mysteriously in the lives of men and women through the Catholic sacraments, those “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (*Catechism* 1131). Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac claims that the sacraments are by their very nature communal rather than individualistic. He argues that the grace “produced and maintained by the sacraments does not set up a purely individual relationship between the soul and God or Christ,” and “since the sacraments are the means of salvation, they should be understood as instruments of unity” between persons; they do not merely benefit individuals (De Lubac 82). Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin all agree that the Church needs to be understood as a society of believers and that the saints belong to a community that extends beyond the boundaries of time and place. Their fiction reflects this belief and attempts to revive the memory of three forgotten members of the Christian community.

² Flannery O’Connor writes in her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country” that she believes it would be a luxury to live and write in a time and place (like Dante’s thirteenth century Italy) when she could presume that her audience held the same beliefs she did. In that situation, O’Connor says, a writer could “relax a little and use normal means of talking to it [the audience]” (*Collected* 805). Since this ideal state no longer

categories. A publishing house demands classification before agreeing to list a book in its catalog; an editor requires conformity to a certain style handbook before revising the text; an agent must confirm the work's target audience before attempting to market it; a critic determines criteria from similar works before assessing the manuscript's literary merits and shortcomings.

The rules of academic classification are stringent and often artificial. Separation of art and faith has seeped into the academy to such an extent that works are often forced to bear the arbitrary title of a religious or secular category regardless of the author's intent or the reader's response. This dissertation will explore the sometimes awkward bedfellows of religion and literature through the lens of reading fiction about saints' lives. Saints, like all human beings as well as the incarnate Christ, inhabit two worlds: the world of bodies weighted by sin and the world of supernatural grace. Christian fiction writers also coexist in the realms of concrete reality and ethereal ideas. In the shadow of René Descartes' Enlightenment thesis on the separation between the rational mind and the spiritual soul, some novelists with religious concerns have seen an opportunity through writing fiction to reconcile reason and faith. They assume a responsibility to

exists, however, O'Connor determined that a Christian writer must make his or her vision "apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling (even grotesque) figures" (*Collected* 805-6). Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin appear to be following O'Connor's lead in attempting to shock their complacent readers into recognizing revelations of grace in the lives of saints. The late-modern conviction that the natural and supernatural realms are utterly divided presents a particular challenge to writing about early medieval saints for whom the link between the two realms was virtually seamless, but these three writers consistently foreground the miraculous in an effort to counteract humanistic doubt in their audiences.

bridge the Cartesian split, to translate the truths of God to fallible humankind through the medium they have available—lives submitted to God and the literary imagination.³

In his 1975 essay, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” Southern Catholic novelist Walker Percy writes about the existential struggle to render faith into fiction: “As it happens, I speak in a Christian context. That is to say, I do not conceive it my vocation to preach the Christian faith in a novel, but...my world view is informed by a certain belief about man’s nature and destiny which cannot fail to be central to any novel I write” (111). Percy thinks that the twentieth-century Christian novelist faces a “peculiar dilemma”—on the one hand he or she professes “a belief which he holds saves himself and the world and nourishes his art besides,” and on the other, “Christendom seems...to have failed” (116). Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin wrestle with this same difficulty: the faith they profess is not shared by a significant number of their readers, and the Christian message can appear weak when considering the weight of the world’s problems.

Percy continues his essay by lamenting the failed vocabulary of the Christian faith. He worries that the writer who proclaims this weak-sounding message will find: “The old words of grace are worn smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has

³ Roger Lundin’s book, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*, traces how the medieval world’s shared belief in an external reality has been supplanted by Enlightenment rationality, nineteenth-century romanticism, and twentieth-century postmodernism. Lundin sees individualistic, disembodied reason replacing tradition, community, and external authority (74). Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are seeking to counteract this movement by recovering the pre-Enlightenment Church’s conviction that being is predicated on people’s ongoing participation in God’s work on earth. In these novels, in other words, “I think therefore I am” becomes “I have embodied experiences therefore I am.” Being part of a story larger than ourselves means that we are not disembodied minds that think our way to the truth intellectually but embodied souls that learn to respond when we recognize revelation.

occurred, like a poker chip after it is cashed in” (116). Percy poignantly compares the plight of this Christian novelist to a starving Confederate soldier who finds a hundred-dollar bill on the streets of Atlanta, only to discover that everyone is a millionaire, and the grocers refuse to accept his currency. In another example, he writes that the Christian novelist is like a man who retreats into the wilderness, seeking to discover the truth within himself. After much soul-searching and suffering, he meets an apostle who reveals a great piece of news with authority. When the seeker believes the news and hurries back to civilization to share his revelation with the world, he discovers that the news has already been broadcast all over the country—in fact, it is “the weariest canned spot announcement on radio-TV,” and he might as well be shouting, “Buy Exxon gas!” for all anyone is listening to him (Percy 117). This cheapened exploitation of the message of grace is what Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are struggling against with their hagiographical fiction.

Unlike a Saint Francis or a Saint Joan, the stories of Helena, Brendan, and Julian do not command cult veneration in the twenty-first century. Their images do not inspire garden statuary or popular movies; their legends are largely forgotten, and even the faithful may be unable to appropriate their witness for our time. In contrast to Percy’s poker chips, however, they are undervalued rather than devalued. The saints are like buried treasure: with a little cleaning and a marketing strategy, they may yet prove valuable to an enterprising antique dealer. Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin have the chance to capitalize on their subject’s underexposure to highlight the saints’ relevance for a contemporary audience. Like these three novelists, my stance toward the saints is not neutral. I speak from within the Protestant tradition to address fellow Christians and all

people of good will in the hope of overcoming the widespread prejudice against overt hagiography. I am convinced that these three novels achieve such a high level of literary artistry and theological insight that they will strike readers as worthy not only of admiration but imitation. I want to avoid suggesting, however, that artistic mastery and theological significance are somehow dependent on one another. They often clash, but I believe they are not mutually exclusive. In these three novels, in fact, I will show that method and matter are largely integrated with one another.

Readers may be dubious about finding relevance in the lives of these three saints: 1) a third-century Roman Empress Dowager who rediscovered many of the Christian landmarks in Jerusalem (including, legend reports, the cross on which Jesus was crucified); 2) a sixth-century Irish seafaring missionary who may have journeyed as far from home as Newfoundland in his hide-covered bark; and 3) an early medieval ferryman and hermit who served the least in God's kingdom as penance for the rash sins of his youth. Yet Waugh and Buechner and Wangerin fictionally recreate the lives of Helena, Brendan, and Julian, making them figures who impinge on modern moral and religious sensibility. Each novelist demonstrates that by steadfastly pursuing the vocation they believed God had assigned them, these three unlikely saints transform humiliation and failure into marks of holiness. Wholly absorbed in their identity as mere children of God, they become models of piety before their peers. In their irrational eagerness to renounce the world, they are refined into saints worthy to inherit it. They emerge briefly from the masses of anonymous faithful to make their mark on the pages of religious history and then subside back into obscurity. Three modern novelists, however, were not content to let these saints' lives be forgotten.

Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Buechner, and Walter Wangerin all admit to interweaving a bit of their own biographies—reminders, as it were, of our own unedited foibles—into the mysterious details and tattered legends that make up their saints’ lives. They depict these saints as our contemporary, if eccentric, neighbors: Helena, the stubborn matron searching for a certain piece of wood in a distant holy land; Brendan, the reckless adventurer pursuing the bliss of eternal youthfulness on the open seas; and Julian, the impetuous youth seeking to expiate the guilt of a violent past by bearing others’ burdens. The settings and circumstances in which these three act out their brief hour upon the stage of life are exceedingly strange, but their phobias and sins and failures are not. What Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin would have readers see is that Christ’s gospel is an arresting paradox. One must risk total humiliation in order to receive final sanctification—not because God withholds His grace from sinners, but because “we all, like sheep, have gone astray,” closing our hearts to God’s mercy as we ignore our spiritual destitution (Isaiah 53:6).⁴ As the Christian scriptures warn, the message of the cross appears foolish to the worldly wise “who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). Helena, Brendan, and Julian may be nearly anonymous among the ranks of saints, but their lives continue to inspire Christians by offering a distinctive witness to the current age.

Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin—a British Catholic and two American Protestants—are working against the grain of traditional hagiography to draw out the particular link between their subjects and an authentic Christian witness. In this dissertation, I will examine the successes and failures of their hagiographical projects,

⁴ This quotation, and all future scripture references in this paper, is taken from the *New International Version Bible* (©1984) unless otherwise noted.

seeking to highlight a method by which the quality of their work may be measured. The three writers use various literary techniques to personalize their saintly accounts and to signal a marked difference in style and purpose between their narratives and other standard hagiographic texts. This dissertation will examine the authors' use of irony, genre experimentation, magical realism, metaphorical language, and narrative interjections in the text to comment on their subjects, rendering them accessible to our skeptical time. Through their artful re-imagining of three saintly characters, each of the novelists succeeds to some degree in portraying an unconventional figure whose witness wins our admiration as overtly dogmatic hagiography repels it.

Thus we come to the central argument of this dissertation: to the degree that modern fictional hagiographers remain true to their subjects' traditional Christian message (despite exercising considerable artistic license and occasionally deviating from the letter of the historical record), they perform a valuable service for the contemporary Christian community by rescuing these early medieval saints from an obscure and dubious record. Moreover, they attempt to bridge the Cartesian divide between reason and revelation by fictionally representing a saint embodied in his or her historical context. For these authors, their ideal audience is not solely religious. They believe that if presented honestly and artistically, the particular witness of each of these saints' lives will speak truth to all those with ears to hear in the modern age.⁵ For these works to

⁵ To say that the novelists under consideration in this dissertation are "modernizing" saints' lives is to confront us with the task of a comprehensive diagnosis of our present time and also a consideration of the concept of modernity. Wayne Floyd and Charles Marsh comment on modernity in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*:

For some, it designates a limited epoch in history, now behind us, after which we entered the "postmodern" period. For others it points to a

succeed artistically, form and function must cohere seamlessly. Easy miracles, romantic acts of heroism, painless humility must all be eschewed if the account is to be considered authentic by devout and skeptical readers alike.

Defining Sanctity in the Christian Tradition

Each of the three novelists highlighted in this study desires to capture the previously unrecognized character of his subject. In the process of writing about a pious man or woman, each author must somehow grapple with the mysterious nature of sainthood. I will begin this study of three saintly lives by examining the model of sanctity as it has been endorsed and perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church. A brief history of canonization will prove useful insofar as it is relevant to the three holy persons under consideration. I will frame this history by tracing the popular Catholic understanding of saints as martyrs, confessors, and virgins/moral exemplars.⁶

historical project, namely the project of freedom and autonomy—a project which will never be finished as long as persons experience oppression and the lack of freedom. Under a different perspective, finally, modernity is understood as modernization—a process which is determined by the progress of science and technology and mostly structured by the capitalistic organization of economic power.... The keyword of modernity, taken seriously, requires a diagnosis of our present time in an embracing sense (Floyd 6).

For the purposes of this dissertation, modernization will be understood as a combination of all three definitions. In the sense that these writers are grounded in their late twentieth-century context, they define modernity as a limited contemporary epoch. Bringing saints from the past into the modern age, however, also involves the authors in an ongoing project of moving from oppressive darkness and chaos to freedom of perspective and circumstance. Embracing modernity requires clear vision and an ability to distinguish between actual progress and regressive change.

⁶ This delineation is standard in several introductions to hagiography, but I have mostly relied on William Granger Ryan's 1995 commentary on *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* and Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* for my understanding of the history of saints in Catholic thought.

The earliest saints honored by the Church were first and second century martyrs whose shed blood helped to propagate the faith. A visit to the catacombs in Rome reveals records of petitions to departed friends and family who were believed to be in heaven interceding with Christ on behalf of their loved ones. Churches transcribed the details of the life and death of martyrs in their congregations and sent them to neighboring parishes to encourage their persecuted brethren. Christians who suffered and died for their faith were regarded as virtuous epic heroes. Their memory was invoked as a way of honoring their sacrifice but also of encouraging the living to persevere in following their example. During the religious celebration which took place on the day on which St. Polycarp suffered martyrdom (155 A.D.), the Church of Smyrna first outlined the dual purpose Christians have in celebrating the life and death of saints. As they took up his bones, “more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold,” and laid them to rest, the congregants prayed that the Lord would “permit us to come together...and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in gladness, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be” (Kirsopp Lake 337).⁷ The ceremony was designed both to memorialize the dead and to prepare future martyrs to imitate their sacrifice.

In the fourth century, after Constantine legalized Christianity and physical persecution and martyrdom became less frequent, the Church began to extend the concept of saints from martyrs alone to other holy men and women whose ascetic practices and heroic virtue constituted a spiritual martyrdom and thus rendered them worthy of honor after death. Today, Catholics recognize and celebrate four categories of saints during the

⁷ This source is translated from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18.2-3.

year: 1) apostles, who are regarded as preeminent in power, authority, faith, and humility; 2) martyrs, who may have suffered a martyrdom of blood or a three-fold “bloodless” martyrdom⁸; 3) confessors, who confess faith in their hearts, in their mouths, and in their works; and 4) virgins (Ryan 276-77).⁹ Although the apostles are highlighted in this classification, the categories do not represent a strict hierarchy of value because the Catholic Church recognizes the exemplary sacrifices made by members of each group and that is why it continues to encourage parishioners to study and emulate the faith and works of all the saints.

Because two of the authors being considered in this study come to explore the nature of saintliness by way of a mainline Protestant understanding of exemplary virtue, it is crucial to discuss the divergence of Protestant models of saintliness from those of Catholics. The Protestant view of saints is similar to the Catholic model in that both traditions recognize that when a person’s life and/or death reflect the character of Christ, he or she ought to be honored and imitated by the Christian faithful. Protestants reject the notion that sainthood is limited only to persons who have been officially approved by the canonization process, however. They regard all Christians as saints-in-the-making since only Christ has attained perfection in this life. Further differences emerge when

⁸ According to William Granger Ryan’s introduction to Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, bloodless martyrdom can manifest in three ways: 1) abstinence in the midst of abundance and patience in adversity; 2) generosity in poverty and compassion for the afflicted; and 3) chastity in youth and love of enemies (276).

⁹ One of the characters in Frederick Buechner’s *Brendan* offers an interesting addendum to this categorization of saints using colors: red martyrs shed their blood for Christ; green martyrs fast and punish themselves for their own and others’ sin; white martyrs forsake home and family to spread the gospel; and blue martyrs “scour the blue storms of the sea for the peace of God” (86). St. Brendan falls into this last sub-category.

Catholics focus on the intercession of the saints and deemphasize the separation between living and dead members of Christ's body. Some progressive Protestants have recently made efforts to reclaim their co-inheritance of the communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*) as attested in the Apostles' Creed.¹⁰

Catholics contend that a right attitude toward the saints, which includes offering up humble prayers for help, is one way all believers become mutually accessible and accountable to one another and to God. Early in his career as a reformer, Martin Luther affirmed the egalitarian communion of saints in an effort to condemn the corrupt excesses of the pope.¹¹ When he later formulated his theory of justification by faith alone, however, Luther dropped his defense of saints because he posited that no human could mediate between God and humanity when salvation was at stake. For the same reason, many Protestants scorn the idea of seeking intercession from an earthly figure, no matter how saintly he or she appears to be. To follow the standard line of thought for Protestants: if a sinner may ultimately be justified only by appealing directly to Christ in faith, why would he or she pray to a dead human being for help with more mundane matters? To rely on the saint's treasury of holiness by appealing to them for spiritual aid

¹⁰ See Jon M. Sweeney's *The Lure of Saints: A Protestant Experience of Catholic Tradition*, Donald M. Steele's "With All God's People: Toward a Protestant Reclaiming of the Communion of the Saints," and John Witte's *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation*.

¹¹ Before breaking with the Church, Luther defined the communion of saints as "the most divine, the most heavenly, the noblest fraternity," a holy gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ, "so closely united that a closer relationship cannot be conceived. For in this fellowship we have one baptism, one sacrament, one food, one gospel, one faith, one Spirit, one spiritual body, with each person being a member of the other" (qtd. in Witte 98). See the progression of Luther's affinity for the saints in his *Works of Martin Luther* and in Carol Heming's *Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe, 1517-1531*.

is, for most Protestants, to question the complete sufficiency of the salvific work of Christ. Comparing and contrasting Protestant and Catholic views of sainthood will allow us to examine the saint-like figures that Protestants admire, considering the difference between concrete and symbolic models of sanctity.

The communal and active witness of the saints is unique to Catholicism; Protestants generally accept saints as moral exemplars, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and even as friends of God deserving of special honor because of how they strengthen and encourage the Church, but they commonly reject them in the role of intercessors. The Lutheran Calendar of Saints encourages veneration of a diverse group of individuals: 1) Biblical figures such as the prophet Elijah, the matriarch Sarah, and the disciple Mary Magdalene; 2) traditional Catholic saints including Augustine, Catherine of Siena, Constantine and Helena, Francis of Assisi, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas; 3) non-Catholic holy men like George Herbert, Jonathan Edwards, John Calvin, and Martin Luther; 4) and modern saints like Martin Luther King Jr., Florence Nightingale, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero. Lutheran saints fall under the categories of theologian, missionary, teacher, priest, patriarch/matriarch, apostle, evangelist, deacon, martyr, prophet, renewer of the church, and renewer of society.¹²

Catholics tend to edge out Protestants in cultivating devotion to saintly personalities who are recognized and appreciated after their deaths, but Protestants have an advantage in providing a democratic opportunity for all adherents to become part of the priesthood of all believers, actively participating in the living body of Christ on earth

¹² See Philip H. Pfatteicher's 2008 *New Book of Festivals & Commemorations: A Proposed Common Calendar of Saints* for a recent effort to standardize main-line Protestant commemoration of saints' days.

and having direct access to divine power and the Word, regardless of their level of personal sanctity. Both sides recognize that what each member of Christ's body does or suffers in and for Christ strengthens and bears fruit for all members. Protestants prefer to recognize members' contributions to the Body in this life, while Catholics generally consider it prudent to wait for a generation or two before honoring a particular member's gifts.

Considering the case of St. Peter's role in the Catholic tradition and the Apostle Paul's position among Protestants may highlight some of the key differences between their views of saints. First, consider the names: Peter is almost always called a "saint" by Catholics, and Paul is often referred to as an "apostle" by Protestant churches. Saul/Paul is remembered for his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus; he is a well-educated and thoughtful writer on theological subjects as well as a Roman citizen with a desire to preach to the Gentiles. He demands perfection in the disciples he gains during his missionary journeys. Before his conversion, he was a zealous Jew known for persecuting Christ's followers, and even after becoming a Christian, he continued to earn a practical living as a tentmaker. He emphasizes Christ's crucifixion and deity while encouraging new believers to be justified by faith with a changed heart. Peter, on the other hand, was a direct disciple of Christ who was given the "keys to the kingdom" even after he denied knowing Jesus. This poor local fisherman who rashly decided to follow Jesus worked out his salvation in stages while focusing on the Incarnation and humanity of Christ. He inspired followers through his home-based network and is more of an emotional/experiential disciple than Paul. He emphasizes tradition and salvation by works and following the laws of church teaching.

Lawrence Cunningham locates the Roman Catholic understanding of sanctity within the more inclusive call to discipleship of all Christians: “The Catholic tradition is a history of people extended in time in all their particularities. They have encountered Jesus who is the Christ and, in that encounter, have attempted with faltering steps to imitate him and encapsulate the meaning of his life into their own” (*Catholic Heritage 2*). Theologians of all Christian denominations affirm that the word “saint” has many meanings in the Bible. The word is used in the New Testament to refer to those who are members of the Church. A saint is also defined as anyone who enjoys the vision of God in eternity; in that sense sainthood is the designated end of the Christian life and the vocation to which all are called. Cunningham delineates three historical roles and functions of saints: sources of religious power, spiritual resources, and models or paradigms of the Christian life (*Catholic Heritage 207*). Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has struggled to rein in excesses within these categories, and, beginning in the late fifteenth century with the Reformation, Protestants saw an opportunity to highlight the problems associated with venerating the saints. There is a growing movement among Protestants to reassess their blanket condemnation of the Catholic stance on saints, but a fourth category in the list of reasons for revering saints—the traditional role of intercessor—presents a particular obstacle for Protestants.¹³

Catholics defend the practice of venerating and invoking the intercession of saints by contending that since not even death can separate Christians from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, and since the Church is the body of Christ and has its life in Him, then the Church Triumphant (Christians in heaven) ought to be able to pray

¹³ Donald Steele’s 1995 *Theology Today* article, “With All God’s People: Toward a Protestant Reclaiming of the Communion of the Saints,” emphasizes this concern.

effectively for the Church Militant (Christians on earth) and the Church Suffering (Christians in Purgatory).¹⁴ The second edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, “We believe in the communion of all the faithful in Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is [always] attentive to our prayers.”¹⁵ Although Catholics believe saints commune with the living, they have varying interpretations of how this communion manifests itself in daily practice.

Flannery O’Connor writes in her introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann* that the Church’s name for the action by which charity grows invisibly among the living and dead members of Christ’s Mystical Body is the Communion of Saints: “It is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state” (23). She later comments on the danger of trying to represent perfection in literature: “Ideal Christianity doesn’t exist, because anything the human being touches, even Christian truth, he deforms slightly in his own image. Even the saints do this” (O’Connor *Collected* 1182). Catholics deny that saints become divine when they die; they merely contend that they are closer to God, and therefore in a better position to be effective advocates for their friends on earth.¹⁶ Theologians claim that honoring the saints serves

¹⁴ See Rom. 8:38-39; Eph. 2, 4-5; 1 Cor. 12, 15; and Col. 1 for biblical references to prayer and the relationship between the living and the dead. Also, see George Joyce’s article on “The Church” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Joyce).

¹⁵ See Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 9, Paragraph 5, Line 962 on p. 220 of the 1999 Burnes & Oates edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

¹⁶ Catholics regard saints as friends and servants of God, not gods themselves like in the pagan practice of *apotheosis* (Sollier). The saints’ holy lives have made them

four basic purposes: 1) honoring God by honoring His friends; 2) helping sinners overcome their weakness; 3) increasing a sinner's hope for grace by recognizing the fallibility of others who are in heaven; 4) inspiring people to imitate Christ (Ryan 273).

The Catholic Church canonizes only those whose lives have been marked by the exercise of heroic virtue, and only after this has been proved by common repute for sanctity and conclusive arguments. If St. Paul can claim that his Christian brethren help him with their prayers to God on his behalf, then Catholics argue that they ought also to be able to seek help from their departed brethren who are now enjoying fellowship with Christ in heaven.¹⁷ When Protestants object to saintly intercession, Catholics contend that they limit the redeeming power of Christ that allows us all to approach God with our sins wiped clean. Moreover, they argue that refusing to acknowledge the power of saints' intercession also denies the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the communion of all members of Christ's Mystical Body, living and dead. Protestant views on intercession reveal a concern about the temptation to exalt the saint and his virtues as unattainable and superhuman.¹⁸

worthy of God's special love; Catholics worship God alone, but they honor the saints because of the divine supernatural gifts which have earned them eternal life, and through which they reign with God in heaven as His chosen friends and faithful servants. In other words, Catholics honor God by humbly revering His saints because they recognize His loving gifts in them.

¹⁷ See Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4:3; and Eph. 6:18-19 for references to petitioning saints for prayer. Catholics affirm that Christ is the one Mediator, the one High Priest and Redeemer for Christians, but He is not their sole intercessor or advocate. Instead, all may seek mercy at the throne of God and supplicate on behalf of one another.

¹⁸ See Jon M. Sweeney's *The Lure of Saints: A Protestant Experience of Catholic Tradition* for more on the different views of sanctity held by Protestants and Catholics: The Protestant imagination focuses on the gulf that separates us from God, while the Catholic view is of the sacramental nature of all that is around

Catholic saints were not canonized through a formal ecclesiastical process until after the twelfth century.¹⁹ The heroic virtue of Helena, Brendan, and Julian, therefore, was recognized by their peers and they were locally venerated long before the Church decided to officially add their names to the universal calendar of saints. Standardizing the many lists of local saints venerated throughout Christendom began in the sixteenth century and continued through the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s when Church officials were charged with the difficult task of retroactively affirming or rejecting the title of saint for individuals who may have been publicly venerated for many centuries.²⁰

us. It is no wonder that while Protestant spirituality focuses on the Word of God (preaching it, hearing it, applying it) in order to repair the separation that divides us from God, Catholic spirituality focuses on finding, lifting, and releasing the Spirit of God that is sometimes hidden or latent in the world around us. This is the world as sacrament, the world incarnated (33).

Sweeney sees Protestants analyzing the meaning of spirituality by dissecting it while Catholics imagine its depths and make new connections.

¹⁹ The procedure for canonization continued to evolve from the twelfth century until the Congregation of Rites assumed the responsibility in 1587 and Pope Urban VIII codified its rules in 1634. In response to the threat of Catharism in the Middle Ages, saints were increasingly sentimentalized and portrayed as unrealistically perfect. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s marked a shift toward depicting saints more as fallen people receiving divine grace than as cloyingly good exemplars. See Stephen Wilson's 1983 collection of essays in *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* for more on the process of making saints, especially the introduction and Pierre Deloos's essay, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church." Today's criteria for establishing sanctity include assessing a candidate's actions and thoughts during life as well as the postmortem miracles attributed to him or her.

²⁰ Information about this process was largely drawn from articles on "The Communion of Saints" and "Beatification and Canonization" in the online version of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (www.newadvent.org/cathen/) by Joseph Sollier and Camillo Beccari.

During the review period, the so-called “saint auditors” found little or no historical evidence to support the claims of sanctity made about a few individuals, including the popular St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers. When such a gap in the historical facts appears, the retroactive canonizers elect either to remove the saint’s name from the record of the blessed and to suppress universal veneration of him or her, or to allow the name to remain on the honored list with a provisional note of caution regarding the dubious historical record of the saint’s life. In St. Christopher’s case the model of the saint’s exemplary virtue, which inspires the faithful masses to imitate his life as he imitated Christ, has been deemed sufficient reason to allow his name to remain on an unofficial list of saints. Individuals, dioceses, and even states or nations may locally honor these a-historical saints, but the Church does not include their names on the official calendar for universal veneration. Many Catholics today still revere St. Christopher even though the Church’s stance is that the man of the legends may never have existed in history (or that his story may be a compilation of the lives of many holy persons).²¹

Because they did not undergo an official canonization trial, the historical accounts of the time Helena, Brendan, and Julian spent on earth are a relative *tabula rasa*, which probably attracted the three modern authors who seek to revitalize their stories for a new generation. The biographical ambiguity surrounding these saints offers Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin a chance to retell stories of mystery and faith and heroic virtue without historical critics reviewing their every narrative move. No one can criticize these

²¹ For a popular overview of the St. Christopher controversy and people’s response to his “demotion,” readers may consult an essay entitled “Out Go the Beloved Saints” by Jordan Bonfante in the 23 May 1969 edition of *Life*, and for the Church’s version, see Terry Matz’s 1996 “St. Christopher” article at www.catholic.org/saints/. Christopher’s case becomes particularly relevant for this paper when we come to the conflicting legends recorded about the life of St. Julian (see Chapter Four below).

chroniclers for ignoring or changing the historical facts of the saints' lives because no one knows the details—this leaves just enough room for creative genius to fashion a piece of art. Writing about a popular saint like St. Francis or St. Augustine requires hundreds of hours of historical research to sift through the countless documents and to evaluate the political and social climate the saints were operating in and reacting against.²² Even then, a fiction writer can never be clear of the long shadow cast by the saints themselves and by their many biographers and hagiographers, not to mention the countless aficionados and critics commenting on their lives through the centuries.²³ The case of Joan of Arc's hagiography is a prime example of this problem.²⁴ Although readers know many historical facts about St. Joan's life, cultural interpreters, hagiographers, historians, and legend-makers seem to prefer a series of familiar archetypal motifs that often have very

²² G. K. Chesterton's commentary on the life of St. Francis is a notable exception to this pattern. Chesterton sat down to write his reflections on the life of the poor stigmatic of Assisi almost without a single biographical note. Decades before his conversion to Catholicism, Chesterton recognized Francis' joy and selfless love as a necessary antidote to the poisonous cynicism of his own sullen age. God's sanctified troubadour, the Jongleur de Dieu, was Chesterton's personal patron of the arts and faith. He wrote a poem in 1892—thirty years before his conversion—dedicated to the “lonely dreamer” of Assisi, the “poet whose whole life was a poem,” and he maintained and cultivated his fascination with the saint throughout his life (*Collected Works, Vol. II* 83).

²³ For example, Mary Gordon notes that there are more than 20,000 books about Joan of Arc in the Bibliotheque Nationale, and she claims that her own meditation on the life of the saint is by no means a comprehensive effort to distill the treasure of information available. She merely wishes in her book to show how this complicated character relates to us in the modern age, and she concludes by reviewing the numerous re-creations of Joan on stage and screen in the twentieth century.

²⁴ Robin Blaetz writes in her *Visions of the Maid: Joan of Arc in American Film and Culture* that artists often resort to an ideological frame for historical fiction in order to communicate their own opinions and to offer social commentary. Blaetz observes that Joan's iconography is remarkably unstable as she is used to serve causes that span the ideological spectrum. Her book discusses writers and thinkers as varied as Shakespeare, Voltaire, Napoleon, Alexandre Dumas, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who all took up the story of the Maid of Orléans.

little correspondence to any historical record: “She is an amalgam of religious, political, and folk myths, each reflecting its own time and adding to the ever-changing persona” (Blaetz 2). St. Joan’s story can mask or resolve social conflict depending on the writer’s perspective and the symbolic weight he or she places on the main character.²⁵

I will examine the material that Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin choose to frame the narratives of Helena, Brendan, and Julian in order to outline their ideological construction of history. The writers’ manner of organizing the plot lines to imitate or diverge from traditional myths and romantic legends will reveal some of the authors’ views on art, faith, and history. Choosing relatively unknown saints like Helena, Brendan, and Julian allows these novelists the freedom to tell the saints’ lives creatively, focusing on the aspects that peak a writer’s imagination and ignoring those facets that unnecessarily complicate the story.²⁶

The words “witness” and “communion” will serve as theological touch-points for this study of contemporary novels about saints’ lives. The strength of the saints’ witness is in their communion with Christ, with one another, and with Christians on earth.²⁷ The

²⁵ Ann W. Astell considers the problem of writing about St. Joan with a spiritual agenda in *Joan of Arc and Sacrificial Authorship*, which surveys works by Mark Twain, G. B. Shaw, Friedrich Schiller, Samuel T. Coleridge, and Virginia Woolf. William Searle shows how the saints can be used as vehicles for their hagiographers’ messages in *The Saint and the Sceptics: Joan of Arc in the Work of Mark Twain, Anatole France, and Bernard Shaw*. Finally, a collection of essays edited by Stanley Weintraub reviews Shaw’s dramatic approach to writing about Joan of Arc in his 1973 *Saint Joan: Fifty Years After*.

²⁶ See Chapter 2 below for a discussion of Evelyn Waugh’s attempt to wrestle with the questions of truth, historical accuracy, and art in the “Preface” to *Helena*.

²⁷ Anglican scholar Michael Perham offers a hopeful view of the witness possible in a community of siblings in Christ who are in the process of being sanctified:

degree to which each of the three novelists highlights and participates in this witness in an authentic manner will help determine how successful his narrative is. Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin have discovered the witness of three saints whose place in the community of believers has been neglected. Their novels are attempts to revive models of Christian heroism and sanctity from a forgotten age. The theological witness of their art stands or falls on the premise that if a tiny part of what the saints represent is missing, then that aspect of God's concern, guidance, and power remains hidden.

A contemporary view of the saint as paradigm must encompass the humanity of the saint, so that geography, class, race, and gender are not limitations but contributions. In his essay "Our Friends the Saints," Georges Bernanos confronts the issue of unapproachable heroic perfection:

Saints are not heroes in the manner of Plutarch's heroes. A hero gives the illusion of surpassing humanity. The saint doesn't surpass it, he assumes it, he strives to realize it in the best possible way.... He strives to approach as nearly as possible his model,

Participation in the communion of saints involves recalling, and being encouraged by, Christian heroism and sanctity in every age in almost all conditions [humanly] known, in the face of nearly every threat to life or faith. It is the totality of what the saints have stood for that is important. The witness of God's holy ones down the ages is a striking testimony to us of God's concern, guidance, and power. The word "witness" is additionally a useful and instructive one because, whereas to use the word "example" is to concentrate on the saint and his achievements, to speak of witness is to empower the saint to point beyond himself to where his strength comes from, to the God of whose power at work in human life he is a witness (96-97).

Knowing our weaknesses and forgetfulness, God establishes the ongoing participation of the saints in human history. Not only does God continue revealing Himself through the Word and the Church, but He also uses the communion of saints to serve as guides on the path to salvation. Perham marvels at the creativity of God's orchestration of the universe. He sees the saints promoting and participating in the divine plan to redeem the world through Jesus Christ and worries that in losing the sense of the cohesive communion of saints, Protestant Christians risk failing to recognize an ongoing revelation of God's character.

Jesus Christ, that is to come as close as possible to Him who was the perfect man, with a simplicity so perfect that in reassuring others he disconcerts the hero; for Christ did not die only for heroes—he died for cowards, too (*Last Essays* 240).

I will show in my study of contemporary hagiography that Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin conscientiously seek to avoid the trap of portraying saints whose exceeding virtue precludes imitation. Their novels capture the saints in all their human imperfections; they present cowardly saints who wear their sins on their sleeves and whose merits are muted by their inadequacies. The saints must rely on Christ for everything, and thus Christians come to regard them as heroes because they see Christ in them.

Discipleship modeled in those who have gone before makes similar obedience seem possible and believable in our contemporary circumstances, and gratitude and hope are evoked by studying our spiritual ancestors' example. The saint models sanctity in his or her ability to follow the model of Jesus in the midst of human limitations. What makes a paradigm of holiness useful is the relationship to the rest of the human family: the more the saint exhibits the vulnerability common to all, the more credible is the witness for the larger Christian and human communities. Calling on the saints as intercessors allows the Church to maintain the model of an interdependent family of believers, living and departed, and to dispel the illusion of self-sufficiency that threatens to become an idol of our age.

Protestants and Catholics alike see God at work in our modern world, laboring to redeem not only individuals but social structures, people, and nations. The three twentieth-century fictional hagiographers under examination in this paper present a view of community that is integrating and life-giving—essential for a gospel that frees and

unites in the midst of oppression, discord, and death. Individual sanctity and hierarchical or elitist approaches to holiness will not suffice to illumine God's activity or purposes or to invite the participation of others. No less than a renewed vision of the communion of saints, mutually accountable and mutually vulnerable in time and space, will call forth the image of the Church as a human family united in Christ.

Depending on the state of a person's relationship with God, saints can be friends or adversaries; they reassure the devout when the world's oppression feels too great to bear, and their shining examples remind Christians of God's best intentions for humanity. For centuries, saints have mediated between worldly fallibility and heavenly perfection. They walk among us on earth for a time, but their spirits rest only in God for eternity. Some see them as heroes, others as demigods. Saints' lives oscillate between the quotidian and the marvelous; they exist outside of a particular time, place, or ordinary rule, and thus they are inherently uncontrollable. They appeal universally and individually to the human condition, and they model a break from the normal social patterns, altering the structure of daily life by freeing the imagination.

The saints are an exception to the natural order and show how history is open to the intervention of God. They play Beatrice to our frail Dante-pilgrim in this world of shadows—inspiring believers, guiding them, offering them succor when they are beset by the temptations of the world, and strengthening their feeble faith with steadfast virtue. They model humble obedience and patient suffering, and, above all, they bear witness to the light of heavenly glory that awaits the faithful. Students and teachers beseech St. Gregory the Great when the strain of learning wears on them; parents call on St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine of Hippo, when their rebellious children wander from the

way of righteousness; amorous souls appeal to St. Valentine when the sacrifice of love becomes too great to bear. Devout Catholics may seek a saint's intercession when they seek safe travel (Christopher), when a precious possession is lost (Anthony), when they want to conceive a male child (Felicity), when they want to sell a house (Joseph), or when a loved one is sick (Bernadette of Lourdes or Therese of Lisieux). Catholics believe that the interconnectedness of the faithful members of the body of Christ, living and dead, allows them to call on exemplary figures from the past to aid them in their current struggles.

The writer of Ephesians prays that believers, "being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people [saints], to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph. 3:17-18). The possibility for such an eschatological hope rests in the One who works in the midst of the believers throughout all generations. A reclaiming of the communion of saints honors that biblical witness. Only in the company of all God's people—sinners and saints alike—can the community discover the "fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). For frightened, isolated, imperfect disciples, that hope is not only communal, but personal:

And so God gives us a calendar of saints and a mutual regard for one another as ordinary signs that love and repentance and fidelity and courage still count in a world that seems so intractable. . . . The saints show us the perfect manner of Christian living—not in their deeds but in their holding on. The calendar is our faith that we will one day join their number. For the Church is one body—many have preceded us, we are many, and the many will follow after us. But each of us, in our own time, is the center, the saint whose life is Christ, whose death is precious, whose bones will rise up in glory (Reeder 7).

In a discussion on liturgical practice, Rachel Reeder urges us to consider that each saint is unremarkable in him/herself, but representative of God's greater working in the universe

and a reason to hope. The three novelists in this paper use saints' lives as their canvas, gesturing toward something beyond the individual miracles and acts of heroic virtue to a Creator and Redeemer who seeks to restore a broken relationship with His creation through the sacraments. And they remind readers with Henri de Lubac that the communion of saints is made possible through the Church: "Each individual receive[s] such grace in proportion as he is joined, socially, to that one body whence flows this saving life-stream" (82).

Many biblical stories, on which hagiography at its best is modeled, show saintliness intermingled with the failings that are common to humanity. The shortcomings of the most revered characters serve as a foil to their own laudable traits and actions, and they send the message that people do not need to be perfect to be exemplary. Conscientious writers of fictionalized hagiography play with the distance between what a saint appears to be—a failure by human standards—with how God perceives him or her—as an effective conduit of divine providence. In this way, they imitate the biblical style of narration. The apparent plot of a weak individual thwarted by sin and suffering in the temporal realm thus ironically contrasts with what the audience knows to be the real plot: a faithful success story that takes a few detours before it reaches its redemptive conclusion.

The biblical landscape is rife with characters such as Joseph, Moses, David, and Paul who are nearly overwhelmed by fears, doubts, and weaknesses, yet God persists in transforming these flawed vessels into works of sacred art. Joseph was overly proud of his father's gift of a richly ornamented robe and suffered his brothers' retribution for many years in exile before being reconciled with them and saving Israel from starvation;

Moses doubted God’s ability to use him as a spokesman and reaped the double-edged sword of his brother’s help throughout his ministry; David sinned mightily with Bathsheba but is still regarded as the greatest king of Israel; Paul persecuted the early followers of Christ before becoming the world’s most famous ambassador for the new faith. Most readers know the end of the story before they begin reading these accounts, so the delight comes from watching the circuitous route to distinction unfold. Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin imitate this biblical style of showing the strengths alongside the flaws of a holy character.²⁸ I will next turn to examine the Church’s evolving method of composing hagiography.

Romance, History, Moral Doctrine: The Genre of Hagiography

The origin of the standard hagiography—an effort to prove that an individual is worthy of universal veneration and canonization—bears on this discussion of the nature of sanctity. Traditional hagiography intends to edify the Church community through highlighting the exemplary character of saints. The term is reserved for any writing which is “inspired by devotion to the saints and intended to promote it” (Delehaye *Legends* 2).²⁹ A hagiographer may highlight any and all roles of a saint, which include

²⁸ The Gospel has been dismissed as nonsense since the Apostles first set out to tell the story of Jesus’ life and death. The novelists in this study are therefore trusting the biblical promise that what serves as a “stumbling block” and “foolishness” to a doubter can become “the power of God and the wisdom of God” to one who believes: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men’s wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than men’s strength” (1 Cor. 1:23-25).

²⁹ Hippolyte Delehaye (1859-1941) was a Belgian Jesuit who joined other followers of seventeenth-century hagiographical scholar Jean Bolland in working to apply the critical method of sound archeological and documentary scholarship to texts relating to the Christian saints and martyrs. For more on the Bollandist enterprise and how it contributed to developing critical historical method, see Delehaye’s 1922 *The*

but are not limited to: moral standard, friend, guide, and intercessor. The goal of the hagiographer is to capture and reflect the character of his or her multifaceted subject. If the Church is to approve a saint's life as suitable reading material for her members, the hagiographical account must, at the very least, instruct the faithful on how to live righteously, encourage them that perfect virtue is attainable in this life through Christ, warn them of the consequences of sin, and teach them that they are not alone in their efforts to follow God.³⁰

Although he wrote at the turn of the twentieth century, Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye's work is significant for this dissertation because it sets the foundation for the critical study of saintly lives. As historical criticism was first being applied to hagiography in the early twentieth century, the result was somewhat unsettling to the general public: religious-minded people who followed the tradition of uncritical veneration were disturbed by the Enlightenment's rational critique of holiness. They believed that saints and everything sacred associated with them were under attack, inspired by the revolutionary secular spirit that permeated society and extended to the Church. These faithful conservatives believed the historical critics to be highly derogatory toward the heroes of their faith; if the holy biographer or the miracles of the saints were questioned or even critically examined, it was viewed as a direct attack on the

Work of the Bollandists Through Three Centuries, 1615-1915. Delehaye's 1907 definition of sacred biographical writing in his introduction to hagiography, *The Legends of the Saints*, is the one most commonly used by religious historians today: "In order to be strictly hagiographic, the document should be of a religious character and should aim at edification" (2).

³⁰ These criteria are outlined in several Church documents, but the Bollandist literature collected by Hippolyte Delehaye in the early twentieth century are the sources most commonly referenced; see note above. Also, consult Lawrence Barmann and J.T. Talar's chapter on Delehaye in *Sanctity and Secularity During the Modernist Period*.

saints themselves. Delehaye's work addresses the devout who fear that revelation of historical inaccuracies would indicate flaws in an entire belief system; he warns them against skepticism of historical criticism and maintains that his efforts are inspired by strong piety.³¹ The Bollandists, led by Delehaye, seek to counteract romantic idealism by performing a useful service to the religious community in collecting, classifying, analyzing, and publishing the lives of the saints.³² Delehaye's standard, derived from his examination of thousands of examples of hagiographic literature, is well-suited to help us distinguish between the best and the worst that this genre has to offer the Church. He recognizes the flaws of saccharine rhetoric, of sentimental drivel, of overbearing commentary, and he has the language and experience to discredit them so that they do not prejudice our view of good hagiography as characterized by authentic piety, faithful heroism, and simple historical facts.

³¹ Although he sometimes questions their historical accuracy, Delehaye reports that he loves reading about the lives of the saints because "the thought which inspires them is noble and elevating"; hagiography is "the concrete realization of the spirit of the Gospel" and because legends make the ideal real, they are like poetry in being able to "claim a higher degree of truth than history itself" (*Legends* 230). The Bollandist scholar argues that a single document can be both hagiography and "historic record of the first order" if it is written with the object of "edifying the faithful and with careful attention to historical accuracy":

The work of the hagiographer may be historical, but it is not necessarily so. It may assume any literary form suitable to the glorification of the saints, from an official record adapted to the use of the faithful, to a poetical composition of the most exuberant character wholly detached from reality (*Legends* 1-2).

In writing a hagiographical novel, each author under consideration in this dissertation must determine where his work will fall on the continuum between history and poetry.

³² The self-identified aim of Delehaye's *The Legends of the Saints* is to highlight the proper spirit for studying hagiographic texts, "to lay down the rules for discriminating between the materials that the historian can use and those that he should hand over as their natural property to artists and poets" (xii). Delehaye appreciates the role of both historical document and art in hagiography; he does not contend that they are mutually exclusive or of differing values, only that they should be recognized for what they are.

Hagiography unites the universal Church by highlighting the same icons of saintly virtue in daily masses heard from Jerusalem to Rome to Canterbury to San Salvador. For these reasons, hagiographers have generally felt enormous pressure to idealize the details surrounding a saint's life, teachings, and death. The saint is a person whom many in his or her community believe to be specially blessed by God: a holy martyr for the faith whose life is to be copied in every detail because he or she models Christian virtue. In standard hagiographies, there is no room for doubts or mistakes; a saintly figure, early hagiographers and their audiences believed, must be perfect as Christ is perfect. Accuracy is traditionally deemphasized in favor of unmitigated adulation. Sacred biographers retain few qualms about skirting a dubious part of the potential saint's past because they feel pressure from several groups: 1) wealthy and powerful patrons who hope that sponsoring a successful cause before the Vatican will result in earthly and heavenly rewards; 2) Church leaders who aspire to ride the coattails of a successful saint candidate to power and glory in Rome; and 3) pious peers who hope that a local saint will bless their community, heal their children, intercede on their behalf in heaven, etc. Thus, the greatest pitfall in writing traditional hagiography is the temptation to spiritualize the saint's motives and to idealize his or her actions.

Gregory of Tours, a well-known medieval hagiographer, figures prominently in the history of the genre. The preface to Gregory's sixth-century collection of the cult of the saints states that his interest in writing sacred biography is to build up the church by declaring the saints' words and actions and by exciting the minds of his contemporaries

to emulate them.³³ Gregory's style of narration in the early Middle Ages reflects a growing trend toward emphasizing dramatized action over apologetics; hagiographic writers increasingly focused on how the saints imitated the exemplary behavior of Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament. Because their primary audiences were illiterate, this literary strategy provided a way to authenticate the behavioral paradigm approved by the community's religious leaders. Sacred biographers have a "veritable thesaurus of established approved actions" at their disposal for illustrating sanctity in the lives of the saints (Heffernan 6). By repeating Christ's miracles recorded in the Gospels or actions from earlier saints' lives, the hagiographer can ensure his subject's veneration as a saint as well as reinforce the community's standard of sanctity. Thus, the narration of a saint's life can be compared to the stained glass in a church—a "catechetical tool" which surrounds and instructs the faithful during worship (Heffernan 6).

Hagiography—like saints and the Christ whom they imitate—mediates between two extremes: God and humanity, or spirit and flesh. The goal of telling a saint's life is not to emphasize the differences between the realms of heaven and earth, but to reconcile them and to explore their points of interaction. In the form of fiction, hagiography can integrate themes from a sociological, theological, philosophical, and historical perspective, among others. Michel de Certeau, in his study of the writing of history, contends that critical tradition has repressed fiction and regarded hagiography as unreliable folklore, yet he notes that this skepticism is often tempered by an awareness of

³³ Thomas J. Heffernan's 1988 work, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*, is an excellent source on the topic of historical hagiography and how Saint Gregory helped promote it.

the genres' useful function in social control and moral influence.³⁴ Works on the nature of sanctity and the genre of hagiography as interpreted through history prove central to formulating my thesis. I do not want to argue that Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are employing a new genre to tell their saints' stories, but I do contend that their novels (along with others that might have been included in this study) offer a fresh approach to an ancient art and style. Thus, I will consider critical works on the traditional elements of this form in order to properly analyze its more modern manifestations.

Gregory the Great insists on speaking of the saints' lives (*vitae*) as one life (*vita*) because he believes that in all their diversity they ought to single-mindedly proclaim the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.³⁵ The significance of this apparent idiosyncrasy lies in the link made between language and theology. His decision reveals the understanding of his sixth-century time: language and grammatical rules can and should be manipulated to serve theological truth. Gregory furthers his argument by referring to St. Augustine's claim in *De Doctrina Christiana* that wisdom and eloquence

³⁴ De Certeau's *The Writing of History* argues that the climate of the times indirectly influences history by acting like a filter, determining what does or does not count as reality on the basis of the collective biases of its readers (67). He credits the growth of historical criticism and source studies beginning in seventeenth-century Western Europe with the dismissal of traditional hagiography as "mere legend" belonging to "the period of an ancient prehistoriography" (De Certeau 270). Modern scientific biography may share some traits with this genre, but the secular scholar tends to suspect the authenticity of historical facts within hagiography because its overt aim is to show that God is glorified in and through the saint's life rather than to narrate the actual events of that life. De Certeau claims that both history and hagiography represent some version of the past as well as serve as literary artifacts. He rejects the evaluation of one genre—hagiography—by the laws of another—historiography (De Certeau 270).

³⁵ St. Gregory's reasoning for his unusual grammatical decision is that "although there is a diversity of merit and virtue, in the world one life nourishes all bodies" (qtd. in Heffernan 7). In other words, Gregory wants his audience to remember that the saints, along with the faithful church community, are all one in Christ's body.

should always coexist to the point of being codependent (Heffernan 8). The literary art created by the early hagiographers was designed to be both didactic and beautiful. If it failed on either front, the Christian community was advised to censure the work.

Just as early hagiographers believed the saint coexists in two worlds, the heavenly and the earthly, so they insisted that sacred language serves a dual function, to represent the presence of the divine and to record the historical details of a saint's life. In this genre, narrative serves as a medium for symbolic representation of metaphysical truth, and therefore our reading and interpretation of sacred narrative should take seriously its dualistic structure (Heffernan 11). In studying more contemporary expressions of sacred biography, I will consider how modern constructions of reality and historiography compare with those of the medieval writers who originally composed the saintly legends. I will also look at ancient and contemporary authors and audiences to contrast the culture in which the works were originally written and read with the one we occupy today. This comparison will help define and explain elements of genre, structure, style, and purpose. For example, I will consider questions about the literary expectations of the reading community, the degree and standard of accuracy in the historical record despite the conflation of saints' lives, the verbal cues that may signal symbolic action, and the freedom of the author to add and subtract details from the account of a saint's life.

The role of the first holy biographers in instructing, edifying, and entertaining their often diverse audience was a crucial one. The religious community is always privileged and affirmed in traditional hagiographical accounts because ultimately its members are the ones who will either cultivate the saint's memory or allow it to lapse. The *vita* serves as an additional relic in the veneration of a saint; therefore, it often

conforms to a certain generic code. Moreover, a series of repetitive, symbolizing structures ensures the authenticity of the subject's sanctity. The received tradition of hagiography maintains a continually evolving focus aligned with the changing needs of the community it serves.³⁶ The intention of hagiographers, therefore, is to validate saintly worth and to ensure the veneration of their subject. Hagiographers must respond to the Church's need to protect and promote her own doctrinal authority by documenting the lives of saints as *exempla*, but they must also consider their audience's conflicting social concerns and shifting notions of piety. Hagiography is a textual representation that is ultimately also a cultural and historical construct. An investigation into the genre reveals much about the culture in which it was created, its power relations, its discourse, its ideology; within its pages, meanings are defined and contested.³⁷

³⁶ Gail Ashton, the author of *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*, discusses malleable ideologies in the case of female hagiography in which representations of saintliness become inextricably mingled with representations of ideal womanliness. She sees the code of sanctity which the hagiographer incorporates into his or her story as subject to different expectations for a male saint than for a female (Ashton 2).

³⁷ In Laistner's *Thought and Letters in Western Europe*, he contends that good hagiography is not a simple recitation of historical facts but instead follows a complex set of literary rules:

The lives of saints, martyrs, and outstanding figures in the Church owed their popularity to many causes. Their historical accuracy counted but little with the average reader who found in them a good story. If the adventures of the saintly hero conformed to pattern, that was assuredly not regarded as a fault (282).

In this primitive pattern, the adventures of the Christian hero come to embody a sort of hagiographic epic in which the pagan culture's forces of evil confront the Christian community's forces of good and the latter eventually prevails.

Elliott's *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* traces the evolution of a more complex pattern in which the saint is motivated by a "gradational view of the universe in which good is opposed to better and worse. The narrator relates a series of events that are designed primarily to reveal the confessor saint as one set apart from his or her fellows and better than they are" (17). She sees hagiography as stories

Religious historian Peter Brown chronicles the role of the “ancient holy man”³⁸ in a community by arguing that saints, as “arbiters of the holy” in pre-Christian societies, serve as canonical texts in and of themselves; they reinforce traditional values and facilitate the creation of new religious patterns of observance (*Authority* 60). From Brown, readers get an early discussion of the process of “syncretism” by which disparate religious forms and views are reconciled; Church historians tend to discount this fusion as “semi-paganism,” but it factors heavily into our question about the role of saints in changing social and religious landscapes (Brown *Authority* 62). The saints depicted in the novels of Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin validate the religious status quo, but they also challenge it. Before they become standard bearers for conventional belief in a religious community, holy men and women often serve as patrons for the pre-Christian society and facilitate the transition from paganism to established Christianity.³⁹

Merging conflicting systems of faith and synthesizing diverse articles of faith requires delicate mediation between pagan and Christian groups, which the saints are in a unique position to provide; they can experiment with cultic practices, incorporating crucial elements of Christian belief and practice into the pagan world. In an ambiguous

that feature symbolic rejection of the lesser goods that comprise the lives of ordinary Christians and commitment to the quest for the better. Elliott’s work provides a clear and informative analysis of the structure and genre of Latin hagiography during the early Middle Ages and its continuing influence on the modern genre.

³⁸ Brown uses this term to refer to both men and women in late antiquity. He further discusses the concept of saints as bearers of a central value system in his 1983 article, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity.”

³⁹ This especially happened in Ireland during the move from the traditional faith in druids to widespread acceptance of the Roman church. See the chapter on *Brendan* below for more about this process and how the local understanding of saints transitioned from Celtic cults to more mainstream Christianity.

supernatural environment, it comes as no surprise that late antique hagiography was largely concerned with bringing order and balance to a culture characterized by competition, instability, and opportunism. Thus, the importance of the stereotyped and repetitive quality of so many of the incidents that were narrated in the lives of the early medieval saints cannot be discounted or underestimated. Recent study of the working of social memory has made plain that such frequently repeated stories provide us with a set of stock explanations to help us interpret our perception of reality. When twentieth-century fiction writers employ this powerful pattern, they contribute to the formation of a central narrative—a specifically Christian form of religious “common sense, catching the holy in a fine web of Christian words” (Brown *Authority* 69). Allowing divergent myths to coexist in people’s minds was considered dangerous by hagiographers, so conflicting reports of how a cure was executed were frequently edited down to the basic procedure. A significant element of the saints’ appeal in late antique society, however, was their ability to embrace and validate a wide range of potentially exclusive explanatory systems. Their supplicants assumed that holy men and women had access to knowledge of the holy in all its manifestations, and such expectations committed them to activities that ranged far beyond established practices.

Modern Hagiographical Art

In considering more contemporary hagiographical accounts, we see similar struggles and also new ones. Modern hagiographers often romanticize the lives of their subjects as their medieval predecessors did. They speculate that their doubting readers will be convinced with certitude and conviction. Thus, idealization may mask insecurity. Modern hagiographers imagine that flaws depicted in a saint’s life will threaten the

tenuous faith of the masses, so they attempt to gloss over any less-than-perfect details. Their motives may be well-intentioned, but the effect is rarely conducive to faith. Readers of Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* will recall Luis, the rebellious youth who is subjected to his pious mother's saccharine account of the life and death of San Juan, a romanticized figure who supposedly suffered and died as a martyr during the Mexican government's early twentieth-century persecution of Christianity. The fictionalized saintly character disgusts the boy, but his encounter with the flawed whiskey priest inspires true faith, causing him to reject his adoration of power and the law as represented by the Lieutenant. Luis admires the authentic witness of a fallible human being, whereas a sentimental saga about an unrealistic saint prompts a psychological gag reflex.

Critics know and discredit false idealism when they see it, but writers of faith are often loath to trust their readers' sense of the truth. Sentimental glossing over flaws, in our age of harsh realism, distances the subject from the discerning audience, yet many artists fail to recognize that readers will reject perfection—like Luis rejected St. John—because they cannot relate to it. Flannery O'Connor writes that sentimentality is to Christianity what pornography is to art: it cheapens and tarnishes whatever it touches.⁴⁰ The process of updating the image of an obsolete saint bears many temptations and pitfalls. Therefore, this study will remain vigilant to condemn the tendency to sentimentalize, distort, or idealize the saint's core witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁰ See O'Connor's essay "The Church and the Fiction Writer" in her *Collected Works* for more on how both sex and religion become trivialized when disincarnated from their true and righteous end within God's will.

Despite hazards inherent to the genre, contemporary accounts of saints' lives can appear in a form palatable to the skeptic and the believer alike. Literary art, because of its freedoms and its demands, both avoids and corrects the errors of standard hagiographies, which exist largely to portray the saint in idealized terms. The artist rendering a fictionalized account of a saint's life (especially one like Helena, Brendan, or Julian with scant historical evidence related to it) can exercise artistic license; he or she can pick and choose among the legendary details of the saint's life to find those parts that most appeal to reason, faith, and the imagination.

Nikos Kazantzakis writes in the prologue to his fictionalized narrative on St. Francis that he freely omitted, altered, and added to the sayings and deeds of the saint:

[I did it] not out of ignorance or impudence or irreverence, but from a need to match the Saint's life with his myth, bringing that life as fully into accord with its essence as possible. Art has this right, and not only the right but the duty to subject everything to the essence (11).

The author contends that art has a life of its own: it feeds upon the story, shapes it, and transforms it into a "legend which is truer than truth itself" (Kazantzakis 11). This sentiment echoes Hippolyte Delehaye's assertion that well-written hagiography can present more truth than history does (*Legends* 230). The definition of truth forms itself in the space between the author's intent and the reader's interpretation. Legends, myths, fables, and romance are distinct forms that can stand alone or blend into one another, depending on the goals of the one using them to tell a story and the audience who chooses how to hear it.

Kazantzakis leaves the idea of a saint's mysterious "essence" intentionally vague, but Flannery O'Connor may suggest a similar idea when she speaks in "The Church and the Fiction Writer" of the Christian novelist who hopes to reveal divine

mysteries through his or her fiction. Instead of spiritualizing or romanticizing a secular scene, O'Connor advises the fiction writer to approach a religious legend by "describing truthfully what he sees from where he is" (*Collected Works* 811). O'Connor deplores the religious critics who demand an ideal image of heavenly bliss on earth and thereby limit the freedom of a Christian writer to observe and describe how human beings have squandered God's gifts.

Sometimes literary art will transform a legend to such an extent that it appears unrecognizable to those familiar with the original story. When it is good (and sometimes also when it is bad), art can overwhelm the inclinations of the artist, so that he or she becomes a slave to the creative process. Great literary art demands time and attention, consistency and real experience. If it hopes to make a lasting impression, it must avoid sentimentalism and never exaggerate for the purpose of spiritualization. If it can avoid these temptations, fictionalized hagiography has the potential to serve both the Church and the world: the Church by seeing how fallen, doubtful, and errant our saints always are, and the world by seeing how convincing and real the saints are. Hagiographical fiction can be the best or the worst form for telling the saints' stories, and, as the narrator of Wangerin's *Saint Julian* reminds us, therein lies "hope for us all" (xx).

Although this dissertation is not principally a study of source material, it will be important to illustrate the range of resources used, and sometimes consciously ignored, by Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin in their quest for hagiographical authenticity. The bibliography of hagiographical material available for the three novelists to consult is immense. There are hundreds of books that either mention or exclusively focus on these three saints, ranging from scholarly compendia to inspirational tracts. I will not attempt

to be exhaustive in covering all the potential source materials, but provide only an overview, mentioning a few prominent texts central to the study of each saint.

For the topic of this dissertation, the identification of the genre and the source of the authors' original mine of information is an important prelude to an interpretation of the material after it has been incorporated into the fictional text. Documentary resources and intertextual models matter for literary criticism. Citing details about the three writers' source materials will allow us to learn something about the manner in which they composed their hagiographical novels. Additions to (as well as deletions from) the available saintly legends reveal distinct themes that Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are attempting to underscore or downplay. When one of these writers chooses to ignore a prominent aspect of a saint's life, or when he accentuates an obscure part of the historical record, readers glimpse the particular witness he wants them to see in this holy story. In the process of retelling it for a contemporary audience, each author highlights what he finds most significant in the hagiographical accounts passed down to him from previous generations. By comparing and contrasting these raw materials—ancient legends and pious testimonials—with the final product of a fictionalized saint's life created for a skeptical modern reader, I discern how hagiographic piety interacts with artistic form.

A complete study of the particular genre-synthesis that Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin are using also calls for a brief consideration of the characteristics of historical novels and romances as they appear in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴¹

⁴¹ Several studies of saints' lives and their literary afterlife figure in my measure of *Helena*, *Brendan*, and *Saint Julian*. My understanding of the relationship between faith and the literary imagination has been enhanced by my reading of Fr. William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* and by considering his question of what makes history live (or die) in a work of fiction. He contends that in order to create a coherent wholeness in a

Authors with Christian concerns strive, but do not always succeed, to avoid didacticism and what Flannery O'Connor names "fictionalized apologetics"—history evoked in a way that actually dissociates readers from the concrete level of action, "imposed like an overriding scheme of values, and not generated dramatically from within the action itself" (*The Presence of Grace* 72-73). Literary techniques like irony, magical realism, and first-person narrative interjections prove significant in how well each writer's saintly tale is received and the durability of its message for later generations.

Before the modern age, the hagiographer was perceived as a professional narrator, commissioned by the community and charged to preserve its knowledge of a saint. Today, this role is no longer valued in our culture. Three writers decided to take a risk, to try the patience of an admiring public in telling a tale that most readers would not recognize or appreciate, but in which a few might see a contemporary witness in early medieval garb. Their work met with varying success, but Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin state in interviews and essays that they believe their novels perform a valuable service for a world that might never acknowledge or even recognize the value of their gift. This dissertation will assess the artistic quality of what they composed and the theological significance of their witness to a skeptical modern audience.

Chapter Summary

When considering possible sources for this project, I decided to limit myself to a fifty year time span—stretching from post-World War II to post-September 11, 2001—because the work under consideration in this study is both a firmly-grounded response to

work of historical fiction, there must be a fluid relationship between theme and form in the way an author's vision of history is realized because this element has the power to determine both its aesthetic and its ontological validity.

the authors' late twentieth-century milieu and an argument that Christian history is timeless. I chose these three authors because they were all well-known writers with a sizeable Christian audience as well as a secular one: Evelyn Waugh, a Catholic convert known for his witty satire; Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian theologian and award-winning writer of fiction and autobiography; and Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor and author of children's books and religious historical fiction. They are influenced by different faith trajectories but each is a writer guided by his Christian faith. Also, each man chooses to write about a historical saint from the first millennium who has faded into obscurity. The time frames I chose—for both the novels' composition and the source material—are somewhat arbitrary in that they derive chiefly from personal interest, but the method I outline for evaluating this material can be applied with some modification to novels written earlier or later, as well as to historical fiction based on holy persons from other periods.

When readers examine how and why each writer resurrects a certain “lost” saint, they may begin to recognize a pattern: these three novelists write fictionalized hagiography to experiment with genre forms, historiography, humor, and the nature of sanctity. Within a saint's life, they see a particular Christian witness that needs to be reintroduced for a contemporary audience. For each author, the temptation to use the authorial voice to narrate a personal corrective to an abuse or exaggeration in contemporary Christianity is nearly overwhelming. Despite readers' frustration with Waugh's departure from writing social and political satire, he regarded *Helena* as his best work for it represents his movement from a Protestant cynicism concerning the saints to a Catholic sense of vocation within community, informed by Church tradition. In *Brendan*,

Buechner experiments with magical realism, and the saint he creates is an everyman rooted in a particular time and place. Wangerin's *Saint Julian* incorporates style elements of the fable to retell the classic legend of Oedipus in hagiographical form.

Chapter Two aims first to determine what enduring moral value Waugh himself found in Helena's story and, secondly, to evaluate the skill with which he rewrote her tale for the modern age. Assessing the faithfulness of his version of the Helena legend involves recognizing and condemning any manipulated views of history that reinforce the author's ideas about vocation, faith, and the modern world. Waugh's didactic motivation for rewriting this saint's life necessitates a careful evaluation of the cultural and moral commentary that he offers within the novel. The famous satirist admitted having moralist tendencies: he wanted his audience to recognize the contemporary witness of this saint, but he did not want to sacrifice the integrity and quality of his prose in order to make his vision more apparent.

Reveling in his new-found Catholicism, Waugh was frustrated that not everyone in the Church was as enthusiastic about defending and promoting Christian tradition as he was; he hoped to use *Helena* to recreate a setting where faith and art mesh seamlessly. Waugh regarded secular post-war society as disconnected from spiritual truth, so he adopted literary forms such as irony and metafiction that allowed him to offer a saintly model for resolving a crisis of faith. He defiantly defended his writing of fictionalized hagiography because he saw it as his only hope for attaining sainthood by fulfilling his particular vocation. Waugh wielded his artistic talent in the temporal realm to make his vision of the divine order of the universe apparent to skeptical readers. Waugh's *Helena* testifies to how far an author will go to reconcile his spiritual view of the supernatural

realm with a contemporary sense of reality. Waugh's secular critics demanded more shallow satires and they ridiculed characters with authentic faith, so the author responded by increasingly exaggerating his subject's piety to compensate for his audience's skepticism. In *Helena*, he uses the ironic tone his readers are familiar with in order to mock shallow faith and to convey his spiritual revelation: the last shall be first, and the least become the greatest in the Kingdom of God.

In Chapter Three, I examine how Buechner experiments with magical realism in *Brendan* to highlight the fine line between the natural and supernatural realms, and to show how holiness infuses our quotidian life. In my search for clues to the author's motivation for rewriting this story, I consider the textual evidence—from the style of narration to the use of humor—and the cultural and moral commentary that Buechner offers within the novel against the backdrop of the tenth-century source material. Assessing Buechner's fiction provides ample opportunities to discuss the way in which saints have attempted to revitalize their own and others' Christian faith by evangelizing within their contemporary culture. Christian hagiographers like Buechner must avoid the snares of cultural assimilation as they seek to counteract secularism and reinterpret the life-stories of their spiritual ancestors. The temptation to manipulate a traditional account of holiness to make it reflect current cultural virtues is an on-going threat to writing good historical fiction, and Buechner's role as a Reformed preacher and theologian make him especially susceptible to it.

Buechner writes fiction to recreate a time when religious art was appreciated and respected, when pissing and coupling and breaking wind were part of the colorful backdrop to an earthy faith. Moreover, he wants to avoid being called narrow or strict in

his Christian practice. He cultivates openness to the presence of revelation in all aspects of daily life. Perhaps salvation can come by reading *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Power and the Glory*, Buechner contends. If the story of how God interacts with human beings continues beyond “Acts” and “Romans” in an extra-biblical canon, then Buechner wants to participate in the ongoing revelation of Christ in the world through his hagiographical fiction. He thinks that a person can be saved through natural means just as readily or maybe more easily than through supernatural means. Buechner follows the romantic model of seeing everything in nature as beautiful and mystical.⁴² He uses miracles and humor in *Brendan* to surprise and woo his readers into adopting his belief that the Kingdom of God can be realized on earth. The fundamental moral witness he finds in the character of Brendan is a reminder that the meek shall inherit the earth.

Chapter Four looks at how Walt Wangerin’s *Saint Julian* incorporates forms as varied as the confession narrative, the fable, the parable, and classical mythology to retell the story of Oedipus with a Christian twist—a passionate and impulsive teenager runs away from home to protect the parents he loves but also to seek his fortune in the world; when his past vices catch up with him and he commits a double parricide, he spends the rest of his life repenting and is ultimately redeemed not by the acts he performs but by the extravagance of grace. The way that Wangerin chooses to frame this story and to emphasize the essential unworthiness of its flawed main character makes the process of becoming a saint look foolish and simple to readers who view it as something occurring

⁴² Christina Bieber Lake’s 2004 book *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor* explains that an artist working to create incarnational art must resist romantic theories of the imagination and religious life by taking the “broken and limited human body as its starting point” in order to reveal the divine through flawed humans (12). See Chapter Three for more on how Buechner’s failure to insist on the incarnational aspect of his fiction reveals his particular theological struggle with Cartesian dualism.

in the natural world. Living in exile near his abandoned childhood home and ferrying former enemies across the river does not appear to warrant redemption, but Wangerin makes the case that this story finds its deepest meaning on the supernatural plane, where he believes that truth is revealed. Like Waugh and Buechner, Wangerin is concerned with the fundamental nature of truth; he does not want to define where it begins and ends, but merely to capture some of its mystery in his text.

Addressing the core of Christian beliefs and the fallen nature of humanity in *Saint Julian*, Wangerin responds to abuses in his own tradition—especially Luther’s fear that his followers will rely on cheap grace instead of the costly discipleship that Dietrich Bonhoeffer outlined in his *Discipleship*. Wangerin does not force the text to reflect his theological vision; he allows it to follow naturally while he focuses on crafting a good story. Wangerin’s healthy corrective in *Saint Julian* is a model of authentic faith married to artistic excellence. Although he composed much of his work before 2001, parts of Wangerin’s novel offer a Christian non-violent response to the new reality of a post-9/11 world. In *Saint Julian*, he writes about an early medieval saint battling the infidels during the Crusades, but he is also concerned with timeless issues of sin, fear, repentance, and forgiveness. The universal witness of this saint is that people must all bear one another’s burdens because sacrificial suffering is an effective antidote to violence.

Just as the Gospels present a multi-faceted view of Jesus, these three saints’ lives remind us of the literary strength of sacred texts that blend the celestial and the commonplace, giving us a window to see both the supernatural and the flawed sides of humanity more clearly. Before the reforms instituted by the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, saints were often presented as cloyingly virtuous figures whose

exceeding piety would be more likely to repulse a potential convert than inspire imitation. Starting with Waugh's *Helena* and moving on to *Brendan* and *Saint Julian*, three fiction writers in the late twentieth century found a way to depict saints as imperfect characters who were transformed by receiving grace regardless of their worthiness. Modern literary saints' lives are an attempt to revisit lost elements of the sacred in our world. Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin recognize something is missing in their contemporary society, but they do not know how to go about reclaiming it, so they do the only thing they know how to do—they write fiction about a time and place and person they are certain embodied authentic faith. This dissertation evaluates the efforts of three novelists who find ways to balance their sublime subject matter with practical concerns about how to write a good story.

CHAPTER TWO

The Last Shall Be First: Evelyn Waugh's *Helena*

Saint Helena lived most of her days in obscurity, and is remembered for a single great act. Nearing her eightieth birthday in the early fourth century AD, Helena emerges briefly from the anonymous ranks of imperial families when she decides to undertake an arduous 1500-mile pilgrimage from Rome to Jerusalem to search for the remains of the wooden cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified more than two hundred years before her birth. Evelyn Waugh's fictional account emphasizes both how ordinary Helena's life was before this decision and how extraordinary it was after God intervened in it. Like the first martyrs of the early Christian church, Helena distinguished herself in the final days of her life. Unlike the earliest saints, however, Helena did not suffer a violent death. As Waugh reminds his readers at the close of his 1950 novel, "Hers was a gentler task, merely to gather wood. That was the particular, humble purpose for which she had been created" (242).¹ Helena's vocation fascinates Waugh, and he highlights parallels to his own experience in the historical fiction he composes about her life.

Helena is Waugh's personal favorite from among his own novels²—a work of hagiographical fiction that offers a consciously reverent interpretation of the life of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all future page citations in this chapter will refer to the 2005 Loyola Classics edition of Waugh's *Helena*.

² In his letters, Waugh writes about working on the novel from 1944-1950—the longest he ever spent composing a fictional piece. He encountered many interruptions and distractions—not least of which was World War II—while he was composing his "great masterpiece," and, though he regarded it as his best work, he was convinced it

Constantine's mother. Although he is writing on a sacred subject in *Helena*, Waugh never abandons the satirical writing style that marks his best-known novels. The irony which he employs so effectively in writings such as *Scoop* and *The Loved One* is not neglected in *Helena*. Comic plot elements appear throughout his fictionalized biography.³

The historical details of Helena's life and mission are difficult to confirm. Waugh first became fascinated with telling her story when he heard legends surrounding the tenacious elderly pilgrim during his 1935 visit to Jerusalem; he wrote in a letter to a friend soon afterward that he was considering writing a history of the age of Constantine centered on the English heritage of St. Helena (*Letters* 103).⁴ Using Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, *The Itinerary of* (the pilgrim from) *Bordeaux*, and other well-known chroniclers of ancient Roman civilization, he establishes the historical background of a steadily disintegrating empire and foregrounds a timeless saint's life.⁵ Few admirers of

would be a popular and critical "flop" (Waugh *Letters* 313). Waugh regarded *Helena* as "far the best book I have ever written or ever will write" (qtd. in Sykes 319). To John Freeman in a BBC Television interview, he reports that it is "the best written" of his books and has "the most interesting theme" (Waugh qtd. in Hastings 239).

³ In a 1950 interview, Waugh tells a *New York Times* reviewer that he regards *Helena* as "an absolute masterpiece," something new and yet timeless: "It has a great deal of humor.... It's a broad humor, but there's lots of hidden humor in it. Because I'm treating a religious subject, people think it can't be funny. Particularly Protestants" (qtd. in Breit BR20). For examples of humor in the text, see the section on "Ironic Artfulness" below.

⁴ In 1945, he wrote to Ronald Knox that he was working on "an unhistorical life of St. Helena which absolutely no one will be able to bear" (Waugh *Letters* 206). The next year, he told his literary agent that the book was "one third written and very good" but that there would be "no money in it" and "the yanks will think it awful" (Waugh *Letters* 219).

⁵ Waugh reports in the "Preface" to *Helena* that his initial interest in the saint derived from "desultory reading in history and archeology" (3). While he acknowledges that his book is a work of fiction, he maintains that "there is little that has not some

Waugh's work have read or even heard of *Helena*, and the critics who review it often condemn it as a work of shallow piety or unfavorably compare it to his more overtly satirical works.⁶ According to George Weigel's introduction to the 2005 Loyola Classics version of *Helena*, it is the only one of Waugh's works to have fallen out-of-print (xi).

Born into a staunch Anglican family in a London suburb in 1903, Waugh rejected his childhood faith while studying at Oxford. The major turning point in his life and his career came in 1930 when Waugh converted to Roman Catholicism. His approach to entering the Church was factual, objective and unemotional. In the 1949 essay "Come Inside," Waugh explains that his conversion followed his realization that life was "unintelligible and unendurable without God" (*Essays* 367). He sought permanence and truth, and in the particularities of Catholic Christianity he found them. Weighing the claims of Catholicism, Protestantism, and agnosticism, Waugh reasoned:

support from tradition or from early documents" (4). Besides Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the *Cambridge Ancient History* and *Medieval History* volumes, Waugh does not reveal many of the specific documents he consulted, but his letters indicate that he very meticulously researched the time period and historical details (Stannard *The Later Years* 275). Even after the book was published, however, he lamented that *Helena* was at one time "the most important woman in the world, yet we know next to nothing about her" (*Essays* 407).

⁶ James Carens' *The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh*, for example, criticizes the author for his "want of charity" in imbuing his fiction with an "overtly apologetic" strain that unnaturally makes satire the "instrument" for his own "didactic" version of Catholicism (117). An early admirer of Waugh's snobbishly comic point of view, American literary critic Edmund Wilson named Waugh in 1944 "the only first-rate comic genius that has appeared in English since Bernard Shaw," but he later dismisses *Helena* as his "weakest novel" and as "mere romantic fantasy"; Wilson decries the author's abandonment of his "comic convention" in the 1945 *Brideshead Revisited* and calls Waugh's later works "disastrous" (299). Joe Dever's 1950 review in *Commonweal* calls *Helena* Waugh's "most curious book, a work both consciously puckish and consciously devout," a combination which highlights both the author's comic skills and his faith, while making historians "grind their teeth" at the liberties taken with this "novelized biography" (68-69).

If the Christian revelation was true, then the Church was the society founded by Christ and all other bodies were only good so far as they had salvaged something from the wrecks of the Great Schism and the Reformation. This proposition seemed so plain to me that it admitted of no discussion. It only remained to examine the historical and philosophic grounds for supposing the Christian revelation to be genuine. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to a brilliant and holy priest who undertook to prove this to me, and so on firm intellectual conviction but with little emotion I was admitted into the Church (*Essays* 367-68).

He was instructed in the faith by the noted Jesuit, Fr. Martin D’Arcy—the same priest who was instrumental in receiving many other members of the Catholic Renaissance movement into the Church during this period.⁷ D’Arcy testified in a letter to biographer Christopher Sykes that Waugh was remarkable among his pupils for his single-minded focus on rational truth:

I had never met a convert who so strongly based his assents on truth. He was a man of very strong convictions and a clear mind. He had convinced himself very unsentimentally—with only an intellectual passion, of the truth of the Catholic faith, that in it he must save his soul (Sykes 107).

A dilemma Waugh faced after his conversion is a common one for religious writers and thinkers: how to make one’s art serve one’s religious beliefs without compromising one or both vocations? Waugh seems to be working out his response to this question in *Helena*. The supernatural element of Helena’s discovery of the cross, especially as it is informed and prefigured by her natural talents and desires, is what interests Waugh because he hopes that divine inspiration will transform him and his work if he is faithful to the vocation God has given him. Further, as Helena’s sojourn to the holy land affected millions of Christians for centuries after her life, so Waugh yearns for his work to be honored by God and to be remembered by future generations.

⁷ Fr. Martin D’Arcy was a distinguished neo-Thomist who lived from 1888 to 1976; he served as Rector of Campion Hall at Oxford and later as Provincial of the English Province of the Society of Jesus.

Speaking to a *New York Times* interviewer in 1950, Waugh expresses concern that contemporary writers do not delight in their subjects the way he does: “Words should be an intense pleasure just as leather should be to a shoemaker. If there isn’t that pleasure for a writer maybe he ought to be a philosopher. [Writers have] no right...thinking they’re prophets” (qtd. in Breit BR20). Waugh reveals in this interview that he worries about didacticism, about being so consumed with a message that he allows it to supersede the narrative. He wants the author and audience to be inspired by the themes and characters and to avoid any attempt to impose an external agenda. Waugh sees himself as a craftsman, shaping the text in the same way that a carpenter would mold a rough piece of timber. A writer, Waugh suggests in his travel narrative *Ninety-Two Days*, “is not really content to leave any experience in the amorphous, haphazard condition in which life presents it; and putting an experience into shape means, for a writer, putting it into communicable form” (10). Waugh feels he knows the order of the world that his writing should reflect, and that order is the one determined by God and the Catholic Church.

The aim of this chapter is first to determine what enduring moral value Waugh himself finds in the patron saint of converts, divorced people (and those in difficult marriages), and archeologists and, secondly, to evaluate the skill with which he rewrites Helena’s story for the modern age. The guiding question for this chapter is: does this writer use the skills of his trade to faithfully recover the legend of a lost saint who deserves to be restored to prominence in the Christian calendar, or does he simply employ satire to manipulate an ancient myth and thereby reinforce his own ideas about vocation, faith, and the modern world? In considering this question, I will examine the textual evidence in *Helena*—from the author’s preface to his style of narration to his

experiments in genre—in search of clues to Waugh’s motivation for rewriting this story; and, I will evaluate the cultural and moral commentary that Waugh offers within the novel. This methodology will allow readers to determine if Waugh’s contemporary revisions register as authentic updates or as polemical addendums to the original tale.

Helena in History

Perusing Waugh’s text for details about the historical St. Helena, we come first to the claims he sets out in the preface to his novel.⁸ In the brief opening lines, Waugh presents a reasoned defense for his perhaps foolhardy choice of the historical novel genre for narrating Helena’s story. He follows the example of one of his spiritual and literary heroes, G. K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*, by setting up his work as a response to a skeptic’s challenge to authentic Christian belief. Chesterton is best known for his collections of pithy aphorisms. Thus, he writes *Orthodoxy* as an apologetic treatise—a form that comes naturally to him and which he often uses to convey his strongest-held views. Waugh, on the other hand, asserts his views through writing satirical fiction. His primary aim in *Helena*, he contends, is to retell an old story in novel form. In responding to a modern woman who returns from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with doubts about the most essential truths of the Christian faith, Waugh channels a saint who made the same trip almost 1800 years before and who brought back irrefutable proof of the crucified Christ.

⁸ As discussed in the introduction, my purpose in this dissertation is not to prove that an author’s autobiographical statements necessarily reflect the content and quality of his prose. Waugh’s literary merit cannot be based on a consideration of what he says that he intends to write. His statements of authorial intention are only relevant because they offer a potential new way of glossing the changes in his prose style from his pre- to his post-conversion writing. The literary techniques Waugh uses in *Helena* are the primary evidence for this study, but his non-fiction commentary on the craft of writing offers a fruitful backdrop to his books; thus, it should not be ignored.

Not many concrete facts are known (and/or agreed upon) about the life and achievements of St. Helena. Most historians credit her with being the mother of Constantine the Great (272-337 A.D.) and thus proclaimed Empress Dowager when he came to power in 306, with living to be at least 80 years old in Rome in the late third and early fourth centuries, with converting to Christianity sometime in middle age, and with traveling to Jerusalem late in life on a pilgrimage to encourage veneration of the holy sites (Drijvers 28-30).⁹ Waugh admits to a liberal composition strategy resulting from his “desultory” reading in the subjects of archeology and history:

Where the authorities are doubtful, I have often chosen the picturesque in preference to the plausible; I have once or twice, where they are silent, freely invented; but there is nothing, I believe, contrary to authentic history (3-4).

He risks being discredited by literal historicists when he claims to be merely collecting and organizing the details in Helena’s story that excite a novelist’s imagination.¹⁰

⁹ Concerning her discovery of the Holy Cross, St. Ambrose of Milan first mentions Helena’s role in 395 A.D. in a funeral oration for the Emperor Theodosius, more than 50 years after Helena’s death in 329 (Coon 100). Some critics question the veracity of this story because it was not reported by her contemporaries such as Eusebius of Caesarea and the veneration of relics was not a practice indulged by the early Church (Drijvers 30). Lynda Coon’s *Sacred Women* argues that medieval hagiographers “recreated the Helena legend to magnify a growing Christian interest in pilgrimage to the Holy Land and in the efficacy of the relics of the passion” (102).

Historian Jan Drijvers speculates that Helena’s visit to Palestine in the years 327-328 may have had significant diplomatic purposes as well as the religious one well-documented by Eusebius (30). Because of her role as the kind and gentle face of the empire, her acts of devotion and charity may have served as political appeasement for people in the East who were dissatisfied with Constantine’s radical religious reforms and sought confirmation of Rome’s stability. In the service of humanizing the imperial family and promoting piety among the populace, early historians transformed a dutiful matron into a charismatic mediator of grace for the empire.

¹⁰ Harry Sylvester’s review of *Helena*, appearing in an October 1950 edition of *The New York Times*, charges Waugh with arrogance for taking “liberties with history” (BR3). The critic of *The Observer* (5 Oct. 1950) is extremely negative; he remarks that

Anticipating the audience's critiques, the writer addresses the reasonable enquiry, "How much is true?" (4). Waugh says he has taken artistic license where the record is silent or unclear because the life of St. Helena "begins and ends in surmise and legend" (4).

Waugh acknowledges that there is precious little extant information on the historical Helena, but he contends that there is enough information to do justice to her story. Jan Drijvers admires *Helena*, but he argues that reading it is probably only worthwhile with some prior knowledge of Waugh's writing style and religious notions, some information about the Constantinian period and acquaintance with the legends of the discovery of the Cross (49). In a self-deprecating tone, Waugh anticipates this assessment in a letter to a friend: "[*Helena*] will be interesting only to the very few people who know exactly as much history as I do. The millions who know more will be disgusted; the few who know less, puzzled" (*Letters* 312). Waugh in his preface admits to using "hints," "devices," "guesswork," "certain willful, obvious anachronisms," "echoes and reflexions"; he finally asserts that the story is "just something to be read; in fact a legend" (x-xiii). C. S. Finnegan's 1951 review admires how the author enhances

in spite of Waugh's reputation for wit, *Helena* is "flagrantly dull, inelegant in both its seriousness and frivolity, and unconvincing" (qtd. in Drijvers 35). The first *New York Times* review of *Helena* calls it "mildly diverting" because its author knows how to create "an atmosphere of pleasant comedy by putting modern colloquialism into the mouths of persons many centuries dead" (Prescott 29). Prescott speculates that Evelyn Waugh has won his large following by his gifts as a "satirist with a serpent's tongue," but he disapproves of the more devotional theme of *Helena*: "There are a few reminders of the old Waugh in *Helena*, but not many" (29).

R. D. Charques' early review of *Helena* in *The Spectator* dismisses the novel as "a lightly devotional, decorative, frequently entertaining, but not very substantial work of fiction" (388). The first review of *Helena* to appear in *The Times Literary Supplement* is concerned that "in this novel learning, obliquity, and delicacy never quite manage to fuse with simplicity" (Powell 641). Jeffrey Heath argues that Waugh should not have been surprised at the negative criticism *Helena* received, for it was "too doctrinaire and lacked both the subtlety of his satires and the romance of *Brideshead Revisited* (199).

his “finely-conceived portrait” of the saint “with elaborate frills of legend and fiction” (33). The story is much more than a simple morality tale to Waugh, however. Like the child’s injunction to “take up and read” in St. Augustine’s *Confessions* which led the wayward saint to open the biblical book of Romans in a Milan garden, astute readers recognize the earmarks of a conversion narrative in Waugh’s preface. The Romans 13 text that Augustine read bore the power of God for transforming a sinner, and Waugh is confident that the story of Helena bears similar weight.¹¹ Sharing Waugh’s admiration for the story of St. Helena, George Weigel asserts that *Helena* may be the British satirist’s best work because it contains his “most intentional statements about the truth of Christianity and about vocation as the heart of Christian discipleship” (“St. Evelyn” 36).

What is the value of underscoring the lack of historical veracity in the novel? By this point in his career, the reading public has recognized Waugh as a gifted novelist; he

¹¹ In his 1946 essay “Fan-Fare,” Waugh writes: “You can only leave God out [of fiction] by making your characters pure abstractions,” and in the same article declares his future novelistic intentions as “the attempt to represent man more fully which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God” (*Essays* 301). Waugh biographer Douglas Lane Patey reports that the critical response to *Brideshead Revisited* “seemed to confirm his new sense of his writerly vocation” (296). Waugh himself called it “my first novel rather than my last” (qtd. in Patey 224). Although he struggled with negative reviews of his work, he found them easier to disregard when he was convinced of the moral and technical worth of his books.

Walter Sullivan argues that Waugh was an embarrassment to the English-speaking literary community, which “bridled at his politics and snickered at his religion” (444). *Brideshead* was the height of Waugh’s celebration of Catholicism and the English aristocracy, and it polarized his fans and his critics, many of whom could no longer ignore their favorite writer’s unfashionable proclivities. Christopher Hitchens’ centennial article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, for example, concludes that in *Brideshead* “the narrative is made ridiculous by a sentimental and credulous approach to miracles and the supernatural. This is what Orwell meant by the incompatibility of faith with maturity” (109). What critics failed to recognize, however, is that Waugh’s comic spirit depends on his snobbery as well as his faith. Attempting to read Waugh without some understanding of the Catholic impulse that shapes his fiction is like trying to read Faulkner with no knowledge of the South.

knows that his strengths lie in telling a good story, and so do they. Readers have come to expect a comical yet realistic portrait of their own situation whenever Waugh takes up his pen. In deviating from his usual style to narrate a romanticized account of an obscure historical character, Waugh takes a significant yet calculated risk. He may alienate his more secular readers, but he may also be able to impress on them his belief in the presence of an organic harmony—centered on the kingdom of God—which he fears they lack.¹² As early as 1937, Waugh acknowledges the danger involved in using Catholic source material for a novel:

It is a common complaint against Catholics that they intrude their religion into every discussion.... This is, in a way, true; the Catholic's life is bounded and directed by his creed at every turn and reminders of this fact may well prove tedious to his Protestant or agnostic neighbors (*Essays* 206).

Waugh acknowledges that his growing moral commitment threatens to put his famous comic detachment in jeopardy, but he believes his stylistic experimentation may prove fruitful if his fiction can represent Helena's distinctly Christian witness.

In one historical account of her life, Helena begins her journey toward becoming the Roman Empress Dowager as a simple stable girl in Colchester, England (Harbus

¹² Walter Allen in *The Novel Today* states that “for Waugh, Catholicism is a profoundly romantic thing, the core of a nostalgic dream of an ideal past by which the present is judged and found wanting” (qtd. in Corr 393). Allen's review of *Helena* in *The Irish Monthly* points out that Waugh has two primary groups of readers—those who are drawn to his satires of high-society London life and those who are attracted to his pious fiction and essays (97). He argues that the reason *Brideshead Revisited* attracted such strong criticism was that it challenged the agnosticism of Waugh's aristocratic audience and the liberalism of his religious one. Waugh's message in *Helena* is likewise difficult and unfashionable. Waugh asserts in both books that the impressive talents of the upper class can only be fully realized within the Catholic Church. And he believes that Christianity finds its fullest and best expression within conservative, nationalistic, always literal and often flawed English characters like his Helena.

13).¹³ In Waugh's fictionalized hagiography, Helena marries for love on a whim—mostly to escape the drudgery of her lessons and to seek her fortune in the wide world. The youthful Helena is enamored with the possibility of adventure and romance evoked by the thought of running away with Constantius Chlorus, the green Roman soldier with big dreams who has come to Britain to broker peace with her father and other tribal leaders. As she contemplates riding off into the sunset with the dashing young commander, her classically-trained imagination threatens to run away with her. Her position as the favored youngest daughter of a Celtic chieftain who values education gives her a slight advantage in her quest to escape mediocrity. Nevertheless, the young Princess Helena's favorite pastime is riding horses, she knows little of Christianity, and she is still a long way from Rome, much less from Jerusalem. Like Jesus born in a Bethlehem stable and Esther orphaned in a foreign land,¹⁴ the details of Helena's

¹³ In *Helena of Britain in Medieval Legend*, Antonina Harbus argues that Waugh's *Helena* is the first and only text to draw an explicit causal connection between Helena's legendary British origins and her success in finding the cross. She asserts that the novel stakes a claim for Helena's British temperament as supplying the requisite practicality and curiosity for carrying out the quest. Harbus offers a detailed analysis of an individual saint that demonstrates how religious icons and the legends that surround them are shaped as much by social and political pressures as by spiritual concerns.

Waugh loved with a fierce passion the land of his birth and its heritage of faith—not the England of the present but the old England: the England of the ancient traditions which maintained deference to the rightful authority of talent and achievement. His Helena pays homage to these earthy traditionalists. He hated with an equally fierce passion the modern society in which he found himself, satirizing its individualism, social leveling, competitive commercialism, noise, liberalism, and disbelief in the supernatural.

¹⁴ Queen Esther in the Hebrew Bible is remembered for one great act which saved an entire people group. She risks death to save the Jews from an ethnic cleansing campaign. Her uncle Mordecai suggests that it is “for such a time as this” that God has placed Esther in a position of prominence in the Persian kingdom (Esther 4:14). Mordecai assures her that God will always find a way to rescue His chosen ones, but Esther has an opportunity to be used by God to execute His plan of salvation. She decides to act, and the Jews are delivered from danger. Waugh's Helena is also faced

unremarkable beginning do not bode well for achieving future greatness. Many of the most famous saints and biblical characters are marked for special recognition at birth or even earlier,¹⁵ but we learn nothing of Helena's birth and little of her childhood in Waugh's account. Helena's father appears briefly, and her mother is not even named. Her tutor Marcias plays a much more significant role than either of her parents in her youthful development.

Helena starts in "once upon a time..." language with a picturesque portrayal of a princess and a slave sitting in a flower-rimmed upper window reading an old story. While ostensibly studying the classics together, each is engaged in private reflection. Marcias, the philosopher-slave who has been hired to instruct Helena, ruminates on the nature of intellectual freedom. His young protégée, meanwhile, is caught up in adolescent fantasies, imagining herself a classical heroine on horseback. While her tutor patiently reviews the *Iliad* with his headstrong pupil, she daydreams about being Helen of Troy. Constantius, Helena's future husband, also has horse fantasies which reveal aspects of his ambitious character: he yearns to ride in triumph at the head of an army. On his rise to power in the Roman Empire, he has not anticipated falling in love, but as the "unpremeditated... thing had happened," he prepares to "expeditiously" settle the matter by asking King Coel for the princess' hand (31).

with a choice and an opportunity. She can wallow in self-pity and seek revenge on the husband and friends who deserted her for their own political gain, or she can risk her life in a foreign land to find the True Cross and save current and future Christians from heresy and weak faith. Waugh honors her memory by highlighting Helena's choice to become a living martyr and reminds readers of the heroic sacrifice she made to obey God.

¹⁵ Consider the prenatal predictions of future glory and grace received by the parents of Samuel (I Samuel 1), Samson (Judges 13), and John the Baptist (Luke 1), in addition to the other saints in this study.

The tone in *Helena* often shifts abruptly from the romantic to the clinically prosaic. In the initial scene of the novel, Helena pulls herself from her imaginary equine world to return Marcias to shackled reality by reminding the slave that “secret freedom” of the mind, which he claims satisfies his wanderlust, will not allow him physically to leave the British castle and go visit his learned friend in Alexandria (12). This practice of engaging in abrupt transitions helps readers bridge the chasm between the unfamiliar subject material and their own situations. If the audience identifies with characters in the novel who shift easily between diverse settings, dialects, and points of view, then Waugh wagers that readers may be more receptive to gleaning contemporary life lessons from ancient history.

Fantasy and reality are frequently intertwined in the novel. Readers catch glimpses of Helena’s thought process as she listens to Marcias’ reading and “with half her mind” considers what it would be like to fly like an eagle (6). Later, during the state dinner to entertain the visiting Roman ambassadors, she falls into a trance in which she is horseback-riding and then becomes a frisky chestnut herself (22-25). Helena’s adolescent dreaming sets up her later adventures in the Holy Land seeking the true cross; Waugh here demonstrates his interest in the natural forerunners of supernatural grace.¹⁶

Helena’s slave tutor is the first to mention religion in the novel. Marcias describes what probably refers to Gnosticism—a mix of eastern myths with Greek philosophy—as an obsession with “a Way [of purification] and a Word [of enlightenment]” that people in Antioch are discussing, while “twenty genuine Indian sages [are] at work teaching a new way of breathing,” which may allude to yoga (13).

¹⁶ See the end of the section on “Literary Style and Experiments in Genre” below for analysis of Waugh’s use of foreshadowing in *Helena*.

King Coel of Colchester, a delightful blending of the legendary Old King Cole (complete with pipe, bowl, and fiddlers three) and Helena's father, practices a form of ancestor worship and scorns the ephemeral beliefs of his Roman visitors. When Helena meets her former tutor later in life, she asks him practical questions about the origins of the Gnostic religion he espouses: "When and where did all this happen? And how do you know?" (115). The scholar answers in a circuitous manner that reminds readers of many a modern-day politician attempting to conceal his ignorance and lack of evidence: "These things are beyond time and space. Their truth is integral to their proposition and by nature transcends material proof" (115). At this point, Helena's only creed seems to be literal rationalism tinged with romantic imagination. She is obsessed with archeology and finding the physical proof to support or disprove the supernatural beliefs to which others subscribe. She rejects Marcias' haughty lies with a bold statement: "If I ever found a teacher it would have to be one who called little children to him," and Marcias replies, "That, alas, is not the spirit of the time. We live in a very old world today. We know too much. We should have to forget everything and be born again to answer your questions" (116). Waugh here allows his didactic agenda to result in a heavy-handed endorsement of Christianity from a naïve character. Helena is not yet a saint, but readers have no doubt imagining after this exchange that she will soon adopt the Christian faith.

After marrying and moving to Gaul, Helena hears rumors about a thriving new religion and its passionate followers, but it is not until her son's rise to power decades later that she begins to investigate the belief system that resulted in Constantine's famous military victory at the Milvian Bridge. In an ironic succession of events, the son's political maneuverings result in the mother's curiosity, which in turn leads to the son's

public conversion and finally to the mother's private baptism. Thus, it is fitting that St. Constantine and St. Helena are honored by the Orthodox Church on the same day in the Christian calendar, May 21. Like other well-known mothers and sons in Christian history—Mary and Jesus, St. Monica and St. Augustine, Susanna Wesley and sons John and Charles—their faith is co-dependent and represent different sides of the Christian experience. Helena's piety, humility, and ministry to the poor humanize historians' tendency to over-emphasize the Emperor Constantine's military power. In traditional hagiography, the actions of the emperor and his mother—militant and humble, political and devotional, triumphant and charitable—together represent the ideal of the Christian empire. Waugh believes that the record is unbalanced, however. His narrative on St. Helena seeks to correct the account of the early Christian empire which glorifies Constantine. Waugh depicts Constantine as an ambitious convert who seeks "Power without Grace" (186)—he needs a way to unify the warring tribes that make up his empire, and Christianity offers an expedient compromise. The Emperor is determined not to allow his political decision to adopt Christianity to inconvenience him personally, however, and Waugh shows how political power has corrupted him and blinded him to truth.

Helena, on the other hand, is like Waugh in her reticent faith—coming to believe only after carefully weighing the truth claims presented by Christianity and competing ideologies. Both are slow and cautious converts who fear conformist zeal and recognize that joining the Church is not something undertaken lightly or for selfish motives like political expediency. Two decades before he published *Helena*, the author's 1930 conversion letter in the *Daily Express* entitled "Converted to Rome: Why It Has

Happened to Me” makes clear that he believes civilization owes its survival to Christianity: “The whole moral and artistic organization of Europe... came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance” (*Essays* 104). Authentic conversion for the saint and her fictional biographer involved transformation of both the mind and the heart. In return, they believed Christianity offered participation in what Peter Berger later calls a “nomos”: a meaningful order that comprehends and integrates the whole of a person’s experiences and beliefs, both spiritual and material (19, 54).

After Waugh sets the stage for his saint story with some glimpses of Helena’s childhood and adolescence, he declines to fill in many of the traditional gaps in information about her life. Scant details are provided from the time of her marriage until her son’s succession forty years later and her first visit to Rome. Saints are often represented as imitating Christ, and Helena’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem is the act in which she most imitates the life of Christ: by leaving her home and going alone to find the cross, she follows the path of Christ who abandoned his heavenly home and ventured to a foreign land to accomplish a salvific task that only he could do. Other saints had miraculous births or performed miracles at a young age, but Helena waited to receive her commission from Christ until the end of her life—at the exact moment when the cross is “most needed” (183).

According to Waugh’s reading of her in *Helena*, the saint confronts the skepticism of her age and decides to oppose it by going to search for the material evidence of Christ’s death and resurrection. In the era of the Council of Nicaea (325), when Christian theologians were engaged in debating the fine points of scriptural

language about the divinity of Christ (*homoiousios* versus *homoousios*), Waugh's Helena utters these words: "Just at this moment when everyone is forgetting it [the True Cross] and chattering about the hypostatic union, there's a solid chunk of wood waiting for them to have their silly heads knocked against. I'm going off to find it" (196). Helena's attitude echoes Waugh's own frustration with his contemporaries' lack of faith and ignorance of the riches of Christian tradition. Waugh responds to his friend John Betjeman's complaint that Helena "doesn't seem to be like a saint" in November 1950: "Helena's sanctity...is in contrast to all that moderns think of as sanctity.... She snubbed Aldous Huxley, with his perennial fog, by going straight to the essential physical historical fact of the redemption" (*Letters* 339-340). The British satirist sees his peers abandoning the concrete truth of Christianity in favor of moral relativism and rationalism. What he posits they cannot see, however, is that they are also losing the key elements of the only thing that can save them from despair: faith in Christ.

Waugh portrays Helena as a kindred spirit; she is concerned, like him, that the people she loves—her son and fellow Roman citizens—are discarding the essential truths of Christianity. In his 1952 essay, "St. Helena Empress," Waugh contends that Christendom faced a unique challenge in the time of Constantine that only his mother Helena was equipped to overcome by God's grace:

She accepted the fact that God had His own use for her. Others faced the lions in the circus; others lived in caves in the desert. She was to be St. Helena Empress, not St. Helena Martyr or St. Helena Anchorite. She accepted a state of life full of dangers to the soul in which many foundered, and she remained fixed in her purpose until at last it seemed God had no other need of her except to continue to the end, a kind, old lady. Then came her call to a single peculiar act of service, something unattempted before and unrepeatable—the finding of the True Cross (10).

Waugh sees himself in Helena—a late convert with a vocation known only to himself and God. He too wants to use his talents in a “single peculiar act of service,” reminding the world of the faithfulness of a forgotten saint. In Waugh’s account, while her contemporaries are fretting about theological doctrine, the empress dowager goes to Jerusalem to find the cross and, hopefully, to prompt a revival (or at least a commitment of baptism from her indecisive son). She brings back a piece of wood to remind the mighty Roman Empire of the story of a God who humbled himself and came to earth as a man—and who suffered a painful death so that his followers might have eternal life.

Waugh takes pains to show that Helena is an unexceptional character—in young adolescence she dreams of being renowned but instead is confined to a supporting role for most of her life. Helena hopes that marrying a young Roman soldier will help her realize her ambitious goals, but her new husband is only interested in their offspring and will not even take her to visit the great city of Rome. Helena must wait until God deems her ready to assume the saintly quest that only she is qualified to complete in that exact time and place. Helena’s fascination with archeology and her desire to find tangible proof for abstract ideas guides her search for the true cross. Her natural inclinations are subsumed into her vocation and miracles interrupt the natural order until the supernatural task is completed and Helena fades back into obscure history. Waugh’s views on universal sainthood—everyone is called to a sacred vocation—are revealed in the narrative arc of Helena’s story.

In the midst of his writing career, Waugh became captivated by the concept of vocation. He wanted desperately to become the particular saint that God had called him to be. Waugh wrote in a 1950 letter to his friend John Betjeman: “It is no good my

saying: ‘I wish I were like Joan of Arc or St. John of the Cross.’ I can only be St. Evelyn Waugh” (*Letters* 339). He gave this lifelong obsession with sainthood his full artistic attention in *Helena*. Waugh’s vision of sanctity involves a particular understanding of divine purpose. He is convinced that to be obedient is to discern the will of God for one’s life and to follow it. In Helena’s case, that special purpose was to find the wood of Christ’s true cross and to use it to encourage the Christian community; according to Waugh’s hypothesis, the empress dowager could not conform to God’s will in any other way than by choosing to fulfill her individual vocation. All her natural talents and experiences specially fit her for the supernatural task to which she is called late in life. Waugh introduces Helena in an essay as:

A lonely, resolute old woman with a single concrete, practical task clear before her; to turn the eyes of the world back to the planks of wood on which their salvation hung.... What we can learn from Helena is something about the workings of God; that He wants a different thing from each of us, laborious or easy, conspicuous or quite private, but something which only we can do and for which we were each created (“St. Helena” 13).

Waugh believes Helena became a saint by performing a task that no one else could do. She was called neither to face the lions in the arena, nor to lead an army into battle, nor to manifest the stigmata—her sole purpose was to recover a certain piece of wood in a foreign land and to distribute it throughout Christendom for the encouragement of the community of faith. Waugh’s exploration of St. Helena’s life and deeds through fiction draws him closer to discovering God’s purpose for his own life and allowing this knowledge to rescue his generation from their fear and doubt.

Literary Style and Experiments in Genre

Waugh's fears about modern civilization manifest themselves in reports of his quirky habits and are also evident in his novels. His habitual rebellions against the modern age include: refusing to learn to drive; writing with a pen that must be dipped continually in an inkwell; and preferring to communicate with his neighbors by written message than resort to using a common modern contraption—the telephone (Rolo 82). Rejection of the contemporary world tends to produce the best and the worst in a writer's craft: in Waugh's case, it allows him space to satirize progress, but it also limits his perspective on the actual period in which he lives. Waugh's nostalgia often represents a yearning for an irretrievable lost cause, and thus his expressions of faith in literary art tend to be bound up with worship of antiquity itself and do not always translate to the condition of the modern reader.¹⁷

Waugh clearly has much invested in blurring the categories of faith and history throughout *Helena*, and this leads him to blend fact and fiction as well, creating an early form of what postmodern critics term “metafiction.” When he rigidly adheres to the standard criteria for a Catholic historical novel, he limits the innovative style and genre-breaking possibilities of his work, but exploring the outer limits of genre forms allows

¹⁷ In a 1946 article in *Time*, Waugh is described as “a devout Catholic...also a devout esthete and a devout snob.... [T]hese three traits are inseparable parts of his fastidious revulsion from the godless, uncivilized age in which he finds himself” (“Scribe” 69). Although critics tend to over-generalize his respect for the old, for the Victorian, and for a religious world that has passed, as class snobbery, Waugh himself perpetuated the characterization. He wrote a letter to an Irish newspaper in 1947 declaring, “I think perhaps your reviewer is right in calling me a snob; that is to say I am happiest in the company of the European upper-classes” (*Letters* 255). Although Christopher Hitchens does not subscribe to the Christian faith, he believes that charity requires him to forgive Waugh his snobbish vices “precisely because it was his innate—as well as his adopted vices—that made him a king of comedy and of tragedy for almost three decades” (116).

Waugh the artistic freedom that his subject deserves. Waugh sees the world as fallen; he takes sin seriously and wonders how goodness can survive against it. This problem underlies all his novels. Waugh is disillusioned and disgusted by changing ideology and a rapidly eroding class structure because these are outward symptoms of the change from a stable and moral society into what he sees as an unbalanced and decadent one. In Waugh's writing, seemingly trivial events become "symbols of a massive, irreversible, and terrifying victory of barbarism and the powers of darkness over civilization and light" (Greenblatt 4). Evelyn Waugh, therefore, is a sort of Jeremiah, lamenting over a wasted Jerusalem, joining his fellow modernists in a funeral dirge for the civilized world.

Harry Sylvester believes Waugh in *Helena* "is at some pains to indicate how confused and heresy-ridden the growing Church was," to recall the faithful to the central truths of Christianity, and to name and affirm the hard core of the true religion amid the tides of swirling heresy (BR3). Joseph Carens agrees that Waugh's work is concerned with "the decay of a civilization, futile sensuality leading to boredom [and] the poverty of spiritual life" (13). He believes Waugh is convinced that "everything meaningful—the British Empire as a civilizing force, the English aristocracy, Western civilization, the English language itself—is threatened, near dissolution, or dying" (Carens 136). While Carens is correct both in this estimation of Waugh's pessimism and his adherence to an imagined ideal, he does not give enough attention to the solution Waugh offers of belief in spiritual development and Catholicism.

Throughout his career, Waugh continued to insist that *Helena* was his best work, but he feared readers would not understand or appreciate his style, theme, and genre choices. An essay he wrote to introduce the piece expresses his disappointment that he

“failed” in most cases to communicate his enthusiasm for Helena’s time and place through the “semi-historic, semi-poetic fiction” he composed (Waugh “St. Helena” 2). Because Waugh regarded his world as hopelessly ruptured, he searched for a literary form that would allow him first to imitate the spiritual schism, and then to offer Christian reconciliation as a means to resolve the fracture. His defiant defense of an unorthodox theological biography, therefore, stems from his belief that *Helena* is his only hope for attaining personal sainthood.

Waugh experiments with various genres in his literary work. In addition to his novels (and sometimes within them), he composed travel books, satires, journalistic pieces, biographies, and an autobiographical volume.¹⁸ Within these categories, there is even more stratification. In the work under consideration in this chapter, Waugh explores the forms of fictionalized biography, memoir, historical essay, conversion narrative, romance, epic, hagiography, novel, travelogue, and satire. His innovative literary style, combined with his sense of religious vocation, ensures that these works reveal as much about the author as they do about his saintly subject. Through studying the distinctive characteristics of three literary forms preceding the modern novel—romance, Baroque novel, and hagiography—and by comparing them to Waugh’s *Helena*, we may begin to

¹⁸ Soon after his conversion, Waugh first engaged in the devotional exercise of writing about a saint. He composed the biography of Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion in 1935 for three personal reasons: 1) to honor his spiritual director, Fr. D’Arcy; 2) to mark the renovation of Campion Hall at his alma mater, Oxford; and 3) to prove the authenticity of his conversion to his future wife Laura and Catholic in-laws. Likewise, his 1959 book on Fr. Ronald Knox is a warm celebration of his friend’s life—a man whom Waugh saw as displaying saint-like characteristics. Waugh admires how Knox’s faith existed, like his own: “in violation of all his tastes and human sympathies, in obedience to his reason and in submission to what he recognized as the will of God” (176). Waugh converted in 1930 soon after his first marriage collapsed. Believing that church laws against divorce would prevent him from ever marrying again, he resigned himself to living alone for the rest of his life.

see what demands these forms place on the writer, where he imitates them, and where he deviates from them. In addition, the ways in which he anticipates the genre of metafiction will become apparent.

Mikhail Bakhtin writes that the chivalric romance was created in the midst of a literary consciousness obsessed with “translation, reworking, re-conceptualizing, and re-accenting” (377). That is, romance writers are concerned with layers of intertextuality, with making words and ideas interact with one another regardless of setting and context. We see Waugh engaged in these same activities as he composes *Helena*. He comments on his contemporary situation through his fiction. Veiled behind the screen of *Helena*’s fourth-century setting, Waugh represents his own world as he sees it. The original ideal on which he is basing his critique of modernity is the model of the early Church before apathy and heresy threatened to destroy it. He shows the natural and supernatural realms interacting within the frame of *Helena*’s time and place. *Helena* is a romantic and eschatological work because it is concerned with both the physical and the spiritual worlds. Quotidian facts about *Helena*’s experience as a young girl in England or as a middle-aged divorcée appear nonessential to the plotline beyond offering readers an opportunity to identify with the main character, but Waugh includes no extraneous material in his novel. Each natural inclination and characteristic is carefully incorporated into the process of perfecting a saint.

The romance form that Waugh uses to compose *Helena* allows for, and even necessitates, a direct interaction with the minutiae of everyday life. The author includes apparently unnecessary details about the heroine’s daily life such as her girlish obsession with horseback riding and her lonely years as a country farmer after her husband divorces

her, but this stylistic feature of romanticism directly serves Waugh's theological goal of combating the subtle influence of Gnosticism persisting into the twentieth century.

Waugh hopes that highlighting the wholesome aspects of human nature will remind readers that all matter is not evil and that God became a man in order to redeem humanity.

Bakhtin's discussion of the second stage of the development of the modern novel form focuses on the emergence of the Baroque or historical novel genre. This form combines elements of the chivalric romance and the epic and allows an author to present new material clothed in old language, imbuing the historical context with new meaning because of the present-day gloss through which readers interpret the old material. For Waugh, this is exactly what he wants to accomplish in writing *Helena*. He needs his readers to suspend the limits of their narrow modern context in order to engage the truths evident in the life and attitude of a little old lady who hatched a wild scheme to go find a few scraps of wood in a distant land.

Alluding to one of Waugh's chief compositional concerns, Bakhtin writes that the particular focus of the Baroque novel is "to find oneself, to realize oneself in the alien, to heroize oneself and one's own struggle in alien material" (387). Evelyn Waugh aims to find, realize, and heroize his quest for sanctity in *Helena*. Passivity in characters' thoughts and actions—the generic pitfall of this form—occurs when historical novels and their authors try to postulate a predetermined value system that lacks the flexibility of "becoming." In its primitive state, the Baroque novel does not allow characters room to develop; it merely measures whether or not they meet a predetermined ideal standard. Waugh labors in his novel to avoid creating flat or stereotyped characters; he allows the

stock figures in *Helena* to evolve beyond their traditional types—his Helena is more than a scorned wife turned pilgrim; his Constantius, more than an ambitious soldier; his Constantine, more than a diplomatic Christian emperor.

Waugh's characters frequently defy stereotypes and traditional models. Helena does not even pretend to look, act, or talk like the women of her time. She is a proto-feminist loosely based on the historical saint: she throws out colloquial terms like “bosh!” and “what sucks!” with the ease of a twentieth century British schoolgirl, and her father Coel allows her to choose her own husband (52, 18). Helena often flits between a fantasy world and reality. From childhood, she has compared herself to the classical Helen of Troy. On her honeymoon voyage, she imagines the excitement of stealing away in the night with her illicit lover to Ilium, but her dreams of grandeur are comically offset by her Roman warrior husband's petulant seasickness. Constantius' young bride “nightlong strode the deck, saw the stars swing into view above the dipping sails, blaze and darken and appear anew; saw at length the whole sky lighten, the line of fire arch and rise until the whole sun stood clear over the water and it was full day” (41). This Helena is not a stock character; she rarely responds to a situation the way people expect. She rattles the status quo in Rome when she refuses to indulge her son's strange cult practices and again when she goes to Jerusalem seeking the cross and does not comport herself the way people believe an empress dowager should.

When Helena meets her son Constantine for the first time in twenty years in Rome, she ridicules the green wig he wears on his head, she questions the authenticity of his precious labarum, and she scolds him for listening to false counselors. Little is known of Helena before she arrives in Jerusalem, and the people expect “someone very

old and very luxurious” (197). Instead, they meet an eccentric busybody; Helena is “more than a crank, [she is] a saint” (197). She refuses to act or speak in the way they expect a dignified royal to behave. The majordomo and other members of Helena’s welcoming committee invent facts to impress the famous member of the royal family upon her arrival in Jerusalem. The official gets carried away with his story about the government house being Pilate’s former Praetorium, however, and as Helena becomes more impressed with her surroundings, the majordomo expands beyond reasonable fact to imaginative conjecture: he announces that the marble steps leading up to the palace are “the identical stairway that our Lord descended on his way to death” (198). No one is prepared for the empress’ dramatic response: she immediately drops to her hands and knees, commanding her entire court to follow her example, and proceeds to “painfully and prayerfully [climb] the twenty-eight steps on her knees” (198). She chides the bishop for not properly revering the sacred artifacts and promptly orders the stairs to be disassembled, numbered, boxed, and packed on wagons to be sent to Rome, where Pope Sylvester will accord them “proper importance” (198).

As the romance, epic, and hagiography genres begin to converge in the standardization of the modern novel form, the idea of trial as an organizing theme emerges. Waugh, searching for a unifying motif for his sacred biography, finds the testing factor particularly appealing. The notion of vocation echoes from Waugh’s fictional prose to his nonfiction commentary. Bakhtin stipulates that vocation—the testing of a hero’s “faithfulness to his calling, a testing of his genius and his ‘chosenness’”—emerges as a special variant on the idea of the trial (389). Vocation is an inherent concept in the forms Waugh was experimenting with while writing his

romanticized hagiography, and thus it comes as no surprise that mission figures prominently in his version of St. Helena's life.

The difference between an epic and a historical novel has to do with the status of the hero. In the former genre, doubting the protagonist's heroic qualities was inconceivable, but in the case of the latter form, the idea of a necessary test of the hero's worthiness developed and began to serve as the organizational reference point for entire works. Bakhtin posits that the concept of examination was drawn in large part from the hagiographic tradition in which the saint undergoes trial and temptation before being granted sacred status. In the Baroque novel, therefore, the trial element combines supernatural themes with compositional patterns that are generations in the making (Bakhtin 389). This is exactly the force Waugh needs to unify the diverse strands of his narrative, and he utilizes the form liberally, capitalizing on its potential for highlighting psychological complexity. As Bakhtin credits the "organic unity" of Dostoevsky's "adventures, confessions, problemativeness, saints' lives, crises and rebirths" to the author's use of the historical novel genre, I would credit the same force for operating beneficially in Waugh's *Helena* (391). Although Waugh admittedly does not accomplish the perfectly cohesive unity possible in the Baroque novel form, his experimentation with the genre testifies to the height of his literary ambitions.

Martin Stannard suggests in the second volume of his biography of Evelyn Waugh that understanding the character of Helena is key to grasping both Waugh's self-identity and his mature vision of Christian life in the world. He remarks on the literary experimentation in *Helena* whereby Waugh combines myth and history to highlight a truth that is more profound than natural reality. Stannard calls *Helena* "a vital technical

experiment, neither modernist nor realist, but postmodernist, metafictional” (*The Later Years* 275). Stannard’s commentary highlights the strength of Waugh’s work in purposefully engaging the space between romance and realism.

Waugh’s stylistic experimentation forces readers to abandon their prejudices toward literary and historical realism. By privileging the “metafictional” mode as a means of narrating truth, Waugh moves toward creating “a new kind of theological realism” in *Helena* (Stannard *The Later Years* 273). An improperly executed historical novel will either fail to make the reader aware of the problems of his or her own period, or will fail to make him or her want to resolve them. This is not the way to bridge a spiritual schism. Waugh continually insists that *Helena* is his best work. In it, he applies his well-honed writing talents to what he considers the most important spiritual subjects. When Waugh subordinates the simple narrative to a didactic theme—how Divine Providence gave a fourth-century saint the special vocation of reaffirming the truth of Christianity—he falls into the Baroque novel pitfall of engineering one’s characters to serve a preconceived invention. But when he utilizes the strengths of the various literary forms employed in *Helena*, Waugh breaks free from set patterns and defies the dictates of his predecessors. Thus, he begins to venture into the realm of metafiction.

According to Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon, metafiction emphasizes the fictionality of both fiction and reality; it frequently juxtaposes fictional characters and historical figures, highlighting their differences and similarities.¹⁹ The form also uses literary frames, and often includes “external” elements such as a preface, epilogue, or

¹⁹ I draw my understanding of historiographic metafiction chiefly from Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), and Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (1988).

note from the author within the text. Metafictional writers tend to parody realistic texts as well as official history to reinforce their positive view of literary intertextuality. Parody is one of the postmodern ways of incorporating the historical past into the text of the present. Intertextuality desires to close the gap between the reader's past and present; it thrives on rewriting the past in a new context. Postmodern novels teach that both fiction and history refer to other texts: we can know the past, they stipulate, only through studying the texts it leaves behind. Writers use the metafictional genre to discount the notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and objective world. For them, language is an independent, self-contained system that generates its own meanings; thus, traditional concepts such as reality and identity are no longer understandable or meaningful. Critics such as Robert Scholes and Robert Alter call this experimental form "self-reflexive," "self-conscious," "introverted," or "narcissistic" fiction (Hutcheon *Narcissistic Narrative* 4).

Metafiction was first recognized in post-Second World War novels dating from the 1960s, but Waugh's use of a significant number of its characteristic techniques in *Helena* shows that he shared the later generation's disillusionment with modernity and authority. Thus, he anticipates many of the genre techniques used in the decades after his death. First, Waugh introduces his text with an ironic preface in which he tells readers that history is an arbitrary record and his work of fiction is just as reliable (or unreliable) as ancient documents. In fact, he practically mocks authors who would aspire to historical faithfulness, questioning whether such a thing as truth even exists. To the reader who inquires how much of this story is credible, Waugh responds that the "Age of Constantine is strangely obscure. Most of the dates and hard facts, confidently given in

the encyclopedia, soften and dissolve on examination” (4). Second, the narrator interrupts the action of the novel to gloss the historically significant scenes, musing about how a character’s choice will affect the future or why she was interested in archeology or how he earned his nickname. Finally, Waugh regards faithfulness to the historical record as a foolish aim for his hagiographical legend. If the story of the Wandering Jew, for example, catches his fancy, then Waugh will not hesitate to incorporate it into the text without regard for its historical veracity. These are not the characteristics of a Baroque novel, and they indicate a distinct break from the historical novel genre.

An example of Waugh’s experimentation with literary style concerns his use of the narrative voice in *Helena*. It often interjects to interpret, to guide, to teach. It is also in line with many of Waugh’s own thoughts and feelings as he expresses them in his personal letters and diaries. He uses the narrative voice to comment on scenes he finds particularly significant. Early in the novel, the light-hearted exchange of nicknames between the protagonist and her beau occasions the narrator’s ruminations: “And so these two names, ‘Chlorus’ and ‘Stabularia,’ lightly blown, drifted away into the dawn and settled at last among the pages of history” (29). Although this scene is not theologically significant, it highlights Waugh’s transient view of history as open to interpretation and fictionalizing. Later, when Helena is confronted with Constantine’s lofty political aspirations, she warns her son to stay out of the pages of history and to avoid the temptation to save the world (102). Waugh uses his narrator to comment on the futility of seeking fame. Even before her conversion, Helena knows that no good can come of pursuing glory for one’s own benefit.

After Helena finds the cross, she rejoices that God has rewarded her courage and diligence. Rather than displaying visible emotion, however, Waugh's character remains demure in the midst of her triumph. Only the narrator is privy to the empress' private elation, noting that Helena has accomplished "what only the saints succeed in doing; what indeed constitutes their patent of sanctity. She had completely conformed to the will of God" (242). At this point, the story does not necessarily call for interpretation, but Waugh nonetheless glosses the text with his own authorial viewpoint on how the event should be read. In this and other instances of narrative interpretation, Waugh reveals a heavy-handed tendency to tell rather than show the characters' emotions. The narrator's summary statement in this scene bears remarkable similarity to a letter in which Waugh admits the reason for his admiration of the title character: "I liked Helena's sanctity because...she just discovered what it was God had chosen for her to do and did it" (*Letters* 339). As Waugh struggles to discern his own place in the Christian community, he attaches himself to the simple faith of a fourth-century British schoolgirl who allowed God to make her a saint.

Despite its bursts of didacticism, *Helena* is noteworthy for its spare narration and experimental style that allow the author to negotiate smoothly between the facts and the legends surrounding the saint's life. *Helena* poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality by means of the omniscient narrator who highlights the constructed nature of history by interrupting the flow of the story to comment on the modern-day effects of a character's decision or to hypothesize about what a character ought to have said or done in a certain situation. This narrative intrusion emphasizes irony in the text and mediates reality through linguistic structures to suit the author's

purposes. For example, after Constantine issues the Edict of Milan and legalizes Christianity, the narrator imagines that some of the emperor's contemporaries were oblivious to the significance of the decision:

The Caesars marched across frontiers, made treaties and broke them, decreed marriages and divorces and legitimizations, murdered their prisoners, betrayed their allies, deserted their dead and dying armies, boasted and despaired, fell on their swords or sued for mercy. All the tiny mechanisms of power regularly revolved, like a watch still ticking on the wrist of a dead man (123).

Roman civilization, Waugh believes, began to collapse the moment that edict was decreed. As Christian faith spread throughout the empire, the narrator imagines how everything began to change:

From every altar a great wind of prayer gathered and mounted, lifted the whole squat smoky dome of the ancient world, swept it off and up like the thatch of a stable, and threw open the calm and brilliant prospect of measureless space (123).

Waugh asserts through his narrator's commentary that Christianity allows supernatural grace to gain prominence over earthly power and opens up a new world order.

Helena's quest in ancient Jerusalem was for a physical vehicle of salvation; similarly, Waugh seeks a symbolic vehicle for combating heresy in modern history. He uses the character of Helena to define and enliven his faith. During the writing process, Helena becomes a friend in Waugh's imagination; he becomes intimately familiar with her quirks and faults and finds bits of himself in her character. Like an old married couple, they begin to imitate one another in life and fiction. Waugh muses in his personal letters about what Helena would do in a contemporary situation, and she echoes his

thoughts and feelings on the pages of his novel.²⁰ Waugh and his fictional narrator become nearly interchangeable as the book progresses. Novelists often comment on the remarkable habit that strong characters have of wresting control of their own narratives from their creators, and Waugh's heroine is no exception to this pattern.

Waugh frequently saturates his text with saintly piety, highlighting any references to sanctity, "chosenness," or vocation. While the narrative voice in *Helena* is sometimes limited to the objective third-person point of view, it not infrequently enters the mind of the title character to relate her thoughts and feelings, particularly as they reflect Waugh's own sentiments. At one point near the end of the novel, Helena is contemplating the three foreign kings in the nativity scene when the narrator interrupts the action to have the character ponder whether "her fame, like theirs [the wise men who came to visit the infant Jesus], would live in one historic act of devotion" (223). Again, the narrator's perspective is suspiciously similar to the author's agenda. The purple prose forces a comparison between Helena's fears about her fate in history and the author's own theological concerns about the moral climate of the modern age.

²⁰ The story is composed from the point of view of Helena—which is closely aligned with Waugh's view—and throughout breathes the admiration the author had for this saint of the Church. By casting off error and apathy on her long journey to the truth, Waugh sees Helena actualizing the identity which has long been latent within her. He views the performance of her vocation—finding the Cross—as an act of self-realization. In "The Holy Places," Waugh writes:

There are evident dangers in identifying ourselves with Saint Francis or Saint John of the Cross. We can invoke the help of the saints and study the workings of God in them, but if we delude ourselves that we are walking in their shoes, seeing through their eyes and thinking with their minds, we lose sight of the one certain course of our salvation (*Essays* 411).

He argues that each person must become his or her own saint, either on earth or in purgatory, and pretending to be a famous saint will only bring heartache and frustration. Waugh believes God wants something unique from everyone, something only he or she can do, and which will demonstrate a person's good faith, good taste, and self-discovery.

Waugh does not often miss an opportunity to enlighten his readers with cultural commentary on the modern age. He worries that the changing times signal the rise of a dangerous moral climate in which it will be increasingly difficult for people to recognize, much less resist, the “tyranny-masquerading-as-humanism that lay just over the horizon of Western decadence” (Weigel “St. Helena” 33). Talking to her son about the problems associated with progress, Helena voices Waugh’s concerns, saying that she sometimes has a terrible vision of the future: “Not now, but presently, people may forget their loyalty to their kings and emperors and take power for themselves.... Think of the misery of a whole world possessed of Power without Grace” (186). Twenty years before inserting this statement in his fiction, Waugh wrote in a conversion testimonial—printed in an October 1930 edition of the *Daily Express*—that he was concerned that the moral and artistic fabric of the world would unravel in the face of an increasingly grave religious vacuity (*Essays* 103). Unless modern civilization can learn to acknowledge its roots in Christianity, Waugh asserts, it is doomed to disintegrate into a baseless realm of “Power without Grace.”

Helena demonstrates flawed human impulses for most of her life: her youthful idealism leads her to believe that she is destined for greatness so she tries to make her vision a reality by running away with Constantius, but she ends up living in humble obscurity for decades while political chaos swirls around her. Waugh reminds us that redemption manifests in mysterious ways, and until God calls her to the special purpose of finding the cross late in life, readers may wonder where Helena’s life went off-course or what the first two-thirds of the novel have to do with her final quest.

As a personal friend and astute critic of Waugh's work, Frederick J. Stopp identifies the consistent narrative arc of *Helena* and asserts that the notion of character development held by a novelist and by God can be seen as complementary. Helena's adolescent flights of fancy described in the early pages of the novel foreshadow the fulfillment of her life's purpose in unearthing sacred chunks of wood. Stopp argues that Helena has a natural reason for wanting to perform a supernatural task, which is related to her early fascination with romance, archeology, and tangible facts.²¹ The Bible is full of characters whose natural gifts, like Abraham's wanderlust and Paul's rhetorical skills, directly facilitate supernatural revelation for themselves and others. Waugh's writing follows in the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, who believed that truth is known through both reason (natural revelation) and faith (supernatural revelation).²²

Helena demonstrates the straightforward association of poetic symbol and Christian legend—the protagonist's desire to be one with Christ the bridegroom is foreshadowed in her lustful attraction to Constantius; the quest for the holy city Jerusalem is perceived in her yearning to visit Rome; the fascination with unearthing archeological proof of Christ can be seen in her tutor's stories about the pagan heroes of

²¹ Stopp writes admiringly of *Helena* in his 1958 biography of Waugh: The imaginative fusion of the historical tradition and the author's own basic view of Helena's sanctity, the extreme artistry with which, after intensive pruning and shaping, the main threads of spiritual symbolism were drawn throughout the apparently exiguous material, makes this one of the most subtle and chiseled of his novels (43).

Stopp argues that Waugh's sacred and profane memories are so consistently interwoven that the profane imaginative pattern is succeeded after years of anticipation by its sacred counterpart in the way in which type answers type in the Christian, typological view of the continuity of history.

²² See John Jenkins' *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* for more on this dichotomy.

Troy. Helena's was a "heroic and Homeric fantasy," embraced with epic gusto (Stopp 209). The true *civitas* of the Church is contrasted with the parody of the invincible nation-state, and Waugh again disguises truth as satire. A Roman Triumph celebration, highlighted with elephants, tigers, and the plundered resources of the known world, anticipates Helena's Triumph, which consists in finding fragments of timber, for which in all humility she left Rome and began a dangerous and lonely quest.

Constantine's Labarum—"a superb and sumptuous product of the jeweller's art, the epitome of the falsification of the past in the spirit of myth which is the mark of pseudo-religions"—stands as the perfect pagan counter-symbol to the true cross, and the revelation of both items is covered by the term "invention" (Stopp *Evelyn Waugh* 126). For Constantine, enjoying power without grace, the cross is an attractive and useful myth, to be fashioned at will. For Marcias, the slave, with neither power nor grace, Troy is another beautiful myth, a world of which "there is nothing left but poetry" (Stopp *Evelyn Waugh* 126). For Helena, however, with both power and grace, the cross and the City of God are realities; her task is to show their authenticity by knocking foolish people's heads against them.

Although Waugh employs postmodern literary forms such as irony and narrative interjections in his fiction, his unique style is primarily affected by his deep faith. He distrusts modern progress because he fears its effect on Christian belief. As he considered his style, theme, and genre choices, Waugh knew very early on in the writing of *Helena* that readers would probably not like the novel. He writes it, however, with the confidence and distance of an artist commissioned by God Himself. After his death, the author's wife and daughter speculated on the reason Waugh liked the character of Helena

so much: “He felt a particular affinity for Helena at this period of her life because she was trying to cope with the Modern Age of her own time” (qtd. in Phillips 95).²³ Critics and readers were welcome to appreciate *Helena* if they could, but their appraisal did not matter to Waugh in the end. He composed his favorite novel for an audience of One.

Ironic Artfulness

In *Helena*, Waugh is serious about his subject matter, so he employs irony much as writers like Jonathan Swift and Jane Austen do, by exaggerating and distorting the truth in the service of revealing it. When a writer like Waugh sees a culture so shockingly ignorant of the truth of Christianity, he responds by appearing to mock the one thing he believes is sacred. Much as Flannery O’Connor reacted to the ignorance of Catholicism displayed by her Southern Protestant neighbors and her Northern agnostic friends by drawing large and startling caricatures of grace in her fiction, Waugh exaggerates his subject matter in a desperate attempt to capture his audience’s attention and map the route to truth and moral certainty. He negotiates the tension between his sacred subject matter and his satirical impulse throughout *Helena*. We chuckle when the day-dreaming schoolgirl imagines a life of grandeur with the young and awkward soldier Constantius; she uses her tutor’s lessons as fodder to invent stories about the future and pictures herself like Helen of Troy dazzling the Roman crowds with her beauty. Readers know, however, that she is destined to become a saint, so we laugh at the contrast between her naïve vision and the way she actually becomes famous. Yes, Helena will be greeted by wildly enthusiastic crowds when she finally arrives in the big city, but the

²³ Patey’s biography reports that Waugh’s daughter Harriet said *Helena* was “the only one of his books that he ever cared to read aloud” (289).

people of Rome will embrace her not for her physical beauty but for her wisdom and strength of character in finding the miraculous proof of Christ's life and death.

Literary experts disagree about what qualifies as ironic, but all senses of irony revolve around the perceived notion of an incongruity between what is said or done and what is meant.²⁴ In an ironic situation, the reality that the character or the reader understands or expects will not match what actually happens. As a mode of expression, irony calls attention to the character's knowledge base and contrasts that with the audience's understanding. Satire is a subversive form of irony that questions the status quo, unsettles people's thinking, assaults the deep structure of conventional patterns and aims to make its audience uncomfortable. Satire relies upon a norm—a stated or implied standard of virtue or right behavior by which the criticism is being conducted.²⁵

²⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines irony as “a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt.” Also, “a condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things” (OED). Dramatic or tragic irony highlights an incongruity that appears when “the significance of a character's speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned” (OED).

²⁵ In his preface to *The Battle of the Books*, Swift calls satire “a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it” (53). In addition to providing an explanation for why satire is fun to read and generally popular, Swift's idea of satire as a mirror reveals the way it reinforces ideology. It confirms “contemporary moral standards [and is] based on shared cultural values” (Griffin 38). Waugh held strong opinions about maintaining and reinforcing the conservative social, political, and religious values of the past. He uses satire to highlight the difference between an imagined, nostalgic ideal of morality and class structure and a current reality that is regarded as degenerate or insufficient. He employs it to reflect on his fears of the problems and inadequacies of the modern age. Waugh begins his autobiography *A Little Learning* with a reflection on H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*:
I longed for the loan of the Time Machine.... What a waste of this magical vehicle to take it prying into the future, as had the hero of the

Like satire, hagiography also depends upon social and spiritual norms because any hero is defined in relation to his or her community's status quo. By definition, heroes (and saints) function as an inspiration and they codify a culture's values and beliefs. Creating heroes allows a community to transmit its values and its moral identity. G. K. Chesterton reminds us in his treatise on St. Thomas Aquinas that saints are the religious heroes that an age requires, but rarely are they the ones wished for.²⁶ During the canonization process, the Church's decision to highlight certain virtues in the life of St. Helena signaled that her contemporaries and later generations valued tangible evidence of the life of Christ and admired dogmatic piety, and Waugh's choice to retell a version of her life in the twentieth century indicates that he also privileges these virtues and desires to cultivate them within his intended audience.

Helena shares some characteristics with traditional hagiography in that Waugh's tone is often pious and direct, and even didactic at times. However, this historical novel about the Roman empress also harkens back to Waugh's more satirical style in the works he is best known for, such as *Decline and Fall* and *A Handful of Dust*. Critics celebrate Waugh's biting wit, disdain for modernity, and vivid portrayals of war in his books, but

book! The future, dreariest of prospects! Were I in the saddle I should set the engine Slow Astern. To hover gently back through centuries (not more than thirty of them) would be the most exquisite pleasure of which I can conceive (1).

In 1964, less than two years before his death at age 62, Waugh is fearful of the future and apparently sure that the last thirty centuries are more interesting, and more worthy of observation, than the next thirty will be.

²⁶ Chesterton writes: "The saint... will generally be found restoring the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects, which is by no means always the same element in every age. Yet each generation seeks its saint by instinct; and he is not what the people want, but rather what the people need.... Therefore it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.... The world, to do it justice, has an instinct for what it needs" (*St. Thomas* 424).

they fail to recognize more subtle humor in his religious novels. They lament the loss of a “comic spirit” in *Brideshead Revisited*²⁷ and ignore or downplay elements such as sarcasm, irony, and caricature that are clearly evident in *Helena*.²⁸

Waugh uses satire and irony in his other novels in order to mock his characters’ self-righteous tone—in *The Loved One*, it was Americans and their commercialization of death he disdained; in *Scoop*, sensationalist journalism; for *Vile Bodies*, the hedonistic interwar society. Waugh’s respect for the religious beliefs of his subjects in *Helena*, however, does not prevent him from employing ironic humor in this novel too. He draws

²⁷ See, for example, Rose Macaulay’s 1946 *Horizon* review of *Brideshead*:
If Mr. Waugh would sternly root out the sentimentalities and adolescent values which have, so deplorably as it seems to many of us, coiled themselves about the enchanting comic spirit which is his supreme asset as a writer, and return to being the drily ironic narrator of the humours of his world and of his lavish inventive fancy, he would thereby increase his stature...in contemporary and future letters. His genius and his reputation seem to stand at the crossroads; his admirers can only hope that he will take the right turning (375).

Macaulay is one of many of Waugh’s contemporary critics who lament a perceived loss of ironic detachment in his later works. George Orwell’s unfinished review of *Brideshead* concludes that “Waugh is about as good a novelist as one can be...while holding untenable opinions”; Orwell saw the chief faults in Waugh’s work deriving from the fact that “one cannot really be Catholic and grown-up” (qtd. in Hitchens 107). In his authorized biography of Waugh, Christopher Sykes suggests that a potential flaw in *Brideshead* is “the Roman Catholic religion and its power over unlikely subjects of its discipline,” and he suggests that non-religious general readers may view it as “institutionalized fantasy” (256).

²⁸ Frederick Beaty’s 1992 study of *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh* justifies ignoring *Helena* and Waugh’s other “serious” novels because:

although they may contribute to his stature as a literary artist, critic of society, and Catholic apologist, they do little to advance his reputation as an ironist...[s]ince their more direct approach, increasingly solemn tone, and preoccupation with religious themes diminish the possibilities even for technical irony (165).

Christopher Sykes reports in his 1975 biography of Waugh that the novel’s “indifferent reception” by critics and fans alike “was the greatest disappointment of his whole literary life” (337).

his audience into mocking the excesses of Imperial Rome in the same way that he might lead readers to laugh at the corrupt political situation in Britain in the twentieth century. An example of this appears near the opening of the novel when an ambitious district commander casually comments on the death of a Roman emperor, mocking him as “a dummy, skinned, tanned, stuffed full of straw, swinging from the rafters for the Persians to make fun of” (14). The irony of this passage lies in the fact that the speaker wants nothing more than to attain the lofty rank of emperor which this stuffed dummy has so dramatically just vacated, and he has convinced himself that the unfortunate fate of his predecessor will not befall him. Readers familiar with Roman history and the bloody rules of succession, however, will ascertain the dark humor in this naïve hope.

Even the holy process of conversion is not safe from Waugh’s biting wit.

Constantine proudly announces his scheme to game the salvation system by waiting to be baptized until the last possible minute before death:

He [the “smart” sinner] lets the sins pile up blacker and heavier. It doesn’t matter. They’ll be washed away in baptism, the whole lot of them, and then all he has to do is to stay innocent, just for a very short time, just to hold the devil at bay for a week or two, perhaps a few hours only. It shouldn’t be too difficult. That’s strategy, you see. I’ve got it all planned (176).

Readers will find Constantine’s line of thinking familiar, although the devout may be surprised to see it represented in such an illustrious figure in Christian history.²⁹ A calculated decision to postpone repentance until the moment of death so as to avoid

²⁹ Critic Harry Sylvester worries that “the pious will be shocked and saddened by Waugh’s portrait of a Constantine whose Christianity was three parts expediency and one of superstition” (BR3).

punishment in Purgatory is still popular today,³⁰ and Waugh highlights the foolishness of such a proposal.

Waugh sometimes uses negative examples to disparage the lack of virtue in ancient as well as modern times. Constantine seems to be a particular target. Not only does he plan to con the divine order of salvation, he also sees himself as too important to die in a mundane manner. As Constantine prepares to leave Rome and set up a new capital in the East, he tells Pope Sylvester that the Church may bury anyone it wishes in the sarcophagus prepared for the emperor because he believes that God, “in his bountiful mercy” and “for his own good reasons,” may dispense with “all that degrading business of getting ill and dying and decaying” in Constantine’s case (179). Therefore, if the pope hears that Constantine has not died “in the ordinary way,” he and the Roman people should not be surprised because the emperor is God’s special servant (179). Constantine wants to start something new in Constantinople, without all the “unpleasant associations” such as Rome’s “tunnels full of martyrs” (180). In a paraphrase of Tertullian’s words about the role of martyrs in Church history, Pope Sylvester reminds Constantine that “unpleasant associations are the seed of the church,” but the emperor is determined to

³⁰ The first recorded deathbed conversion appears in the Gospel of Luke where the so-called good thief, crucified beside Jesus, repents of his crimes and expresses belief in Christ. Jesus accepts the man’s conversion and promises immediate redemption: “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 24:39-43). Historiographers often attribute Constantine’s deathbed baptism in 337 to political expediency (Grant 212). Persons as varied as actor John Wayne, gangster Dutch Schultz, writers Oscar Wilde and Wallace Stevens, and King Charles II of England have been suggested as possible deathbed converts. See Rob Wilson’s *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted* and Joseph Pearce’s *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* for more on the tradition of last-minute conversion.

build a new holy city (180).³¹ Helena compares the New Rome to the “newly swept house in the Gospel that was filled with devils” (180).³² She suspects that superficially clean things are rarely what they seem to be. The abstract virtues of peace and wisdom do not come to those who take them for granted or who expect to be able to house them in elaborate temples. Helena exclaims, “Give me real bones every time” (181).

Constantine acts like a petulant child with his mother after she scolds him for his rash, murderous actions while he was under his wife Fausta’s influence. He defends himself and prepares to show his mother his precious standard: “All I need is to be understood and appreciated.... If you promise not to be very angry with me anymore I’ll show you Something Very Special” (177). With the “eager clumsiness” of a child, he unwraps the sacred cross that he claims to have carried into battle with him at the Milvian Bridge (177). As he waits for his mother to admire it, he stands “posing grandly with it in his right hand” (177). His confidence bubble bursts in the next minute, however, as Helena doubts its authenticity because it is overly ornate and cumbersome. Moreover, it bears the images of Constantine’s children who were yet to be conceived at the time of the battle. Constantine is annoyed and responds “huffily” to his mother’s reasonable questions about its origin, “I tell you it was a miracle.... If you’re not interested I’ll put it away” (178). Helena in this scene is the voice of common sense and true faith, a role she

³¹ The exact quote by the third century church apologist—“Semen est sanguis Christianorum”—is usually translated as “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (Chapman “Tertullian”).

³² See Luke 11:24-26 for Jesus’ parable about the demon who is cast out of a man only to return with seven more evil spirits to reclaim the “newly swept” and orderly house it had just vacated.

often plays in Waugh's novel. She recognizes that the cross is a fake, and she wants to expose it.

Waugh delights in extolling Helena's moral virtues, but he also engages in some humor-driven criticism of her character flaws, primarily as they manifest before her conversion. The conventions of good literature typically require that round characters demonstrate limitations throughout their lives, but Waugh adapts his satirical style to the rules of "hagiographical romance" which dictate that the narration of a saint's life must move from sinful imperfection toward a redeemed ideal (Drijvers 49). After Helena gives birth to Constantine, lives in the shadows for several decades, and finally converts to Christianity, the narrator puts her on a hagiographical pedestal and uses her as a straight (wo)man character to mock the ambition, greed, and pride of her contemporaries. Although critics tend to ignore irony in *Helena* altogether, the main problem with Waugh's story of saintly piety is that it lacks consistent ironic distance with regard to its main character. If Waugh would surprise us with some humorous anecdotes about Helena searching for the cross and failing, readers might be able to take the story more seriously.

When Helena arrives in Jerusalem on her quest, she seeks out the forestry experts and architects and anyone who might have information about the specific 300-year-old wood she seeks. Upon asking the assembled authorities for their thoughts on where to locate Christ's cross, she receives conflicting answers: one theologian remarks that the cross is believed to have been "compounded of every species of wood so that all the vegetable world could participate in the act of redemption" (201). Another clergyman conjectures that the cross was constructed entirely of aspen and "that it [is] for this reason

that the tree now continually shiver[s] with shame” (202). An Egyptian scholar adds to the mayhem with another elaborate hypothesis:

When Adam was ill...his son Seth went to paradise for some Oil of Mercy. The archangel Michael gave him instead three seeds, which arrived too late to save Adam from death. Seth put them in the corpse’s mouth and from them grew three rods, which Moses later came to possess. He employed them for a variety of magical purposes, including the blanching of Negroes, until in David’s day they turned into a single tree (203).

Helena roundly dismisses these exaggerated accounts as “nonsense,” “rot,” and “bosh” and determines to find the wood on her own (201-203). The collected “expertise” of these authorities is clearly preposterous, but Helena’s idea to consult them is somewhat ridiculous as well, and an unbiased narrator ought to highlight the outlandishness of her approach. Waugh here reveals his uncritical love for this character and his idealization of her motives and methods.

Helena’s daughter-in-law Fausta is ambitious, proud, and a hilarious send-up of the classist stereotype of a common woman who “marries up.” She makes abrupt judgments about everyone and everything. At one point, she gets Pope Sylvester in her sights and pronounces that the venerable church leader is “something of a bore” (132). She assures Helena that she is “all for holiness, of course. Everyone is now. But after all, one is human. I’m sure in heaven when we’re all holy, I shall be very pleased to spend hours on end with Sylvester. Here on earth one does want a little something besides, don’t you think?” (132). Waugh uses a comical figure—a woman who glitters and pouts to such an extent that her mother-in-law compares her to a goldfish—to highlight a problem he sees in himself and in contemporary society. Religious leaders can be extremely dull characters, and we have all been guilty of wanting to avoid their

company. Fausta's influence is short-lived, however. She oversteps her bounds by threatening the monarch's mother, and the one who has prided herself on being "the elect of God; his own especial favorite and consort" is baked to death in her beloved sauna "like a fish on a slab" (169-170).

Waugh employs irony not only to make fun of figures who lived centuries ago, but also to smile at his own period's pride and idiosyncrasies. Third-century Christian apologist Lactantius seems to appear in the book primarily to allow Waugh to simultaneously endorse his profession's virtues and to deride its members' hubris. As Helena's spiritual mentor and a well-known author in his day, Lactantius responds to her zeal for Christian service with a word of tongue-in-cheek caution: "It needs a special quality to be a martyr—just as it needs a special quality to be a writer. Mine [being a writer] is the humbler role, but one must not think it quite valueless. One might combine two proverbs and say: 'Art is long and will prevail'" (109). Waugh is here mocking writers who are tempted to take their work too seriously while also contending that authorship ought to be considered a vocation just as martyrdom is.

Waugh also takes an opportunity to deride an influential historian who he feels has distorted the public's view of Roman history and the early years of Christianity. Lactantius voices Waugh's concerns about inaccurate historical accounts: "Suppose that in years to come, when the church's troubles seem to be over, there should come an apostate of my own trade, a false historian, with the mind of Cicero or Tacitus and the soul of an animal," and he nods toward the gibbon who frets his golden chain and chatters for fruit (110). Waugh here indulges a personal grudge against Edward Gibbon whose 1776-1788 masterwork, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,

he believed to be an unfair denigration of Catholic Christianity. He saw Gibbon's approach to history as a tendency to "write down the martyrs and excuse the persecutors" (110). He was concerned that the popularity and apparent authority of Gibbon's work would lead scholars to remember his words long after they had forgotten the refutations.

Derisive jibes, inside jokes and humorous colloquial dialogue appear in Waugh's hagiographical romance, though the overall tone of *Helena* is serious. Waugh's fervent Catholicism is sometimes tedious and even overbearing, but his message is clear and consistent: Helena's gift to the world is a straightforward rebuttal of secular humanism in any age.

Problems of improper execution are possible in any technical form, but they are especially prevalent when the author has a set agenda in mind and is attempting to use a particular genre to make it apparent in his or her prose. From Evelyn Waugh's non-fictional statements, particularly ones that explore the relationship between faith and literary art,³³ we can surmise that he had such an agenda and that he was trying to work it

³³ Writing nine years after his conversion, in *Robbery Under Law*, his book about his travels in Mexico, Waugh describes the vision of Christianity he holds:

that man is, by nature, an exile and will never be self-sufficient or complete on this earth; that his chances of happiness and virtue, here, remain more or less constant through the centuries and, generally speaking, are not much affected by the political and economic conditions in which he lives; that the balance of good and evil tends to revert to a norm (16).

During the remainder of his life (he died in 1966), he struggled to hold mind and spirit together, and to write as a Catholic, knowing what that commitment might do to his sales and critical reception. In 1946, he declared in *Life* magazine:

The failure of modern novelists since and including James Joyce is one of presumption and exorbitance.... They try to represent the whole human mind and soul and yet omit its determining character—that of being God's creature with a defined purpose. So in my future books there will be two things to make them unpopular: a preoccupation with style and the attempt

out in *Helena*. His problem may be similar to one that Flannery O'Connor faced. Walker Percy greatly admired his fellow Southern Catholic writer's work, but his primary criticism of O'Connor's fiction is that despite her best efforts she sometimes lets her univocal theological vision overwhelm her artistic virtuosity. He suggests that her analogies and metaphors sound forced or contrived, and her narrator's point of view sometimes overrides the reader's impressions.³⁴ Although this was a weakness O'Connor condemned in other Christian authors and sought to root out of her own writing, Percy highlights certain rhetorical embellishments in her work in which the literal sense and the historical analogue are severed and "disincarnated" (qtd. in Giles 364). Percy perceives that in some of O'Connor's stories, she reveals an ulterior religious motive by attempting to force reconciliation between secular realism and her divinely-inspired vision.

In Waugh's *Helena*, a similar tendency results in abrupt shifts in perspective and inconsistent views of history. The author plants modern ideas and theological questions early in the novel—a form of foreshadowing—that are addressed finally in the narrator's musings in the last few pages, but readers may feel cheaply compensated for their time and attention. Waugh has secondary purposes for his prose: he wants his audience to recognize the contemporary witness of this saint at any cost to his art. Evelyn Waugh believes this particular Christian witness needs to be re-introduced in our time because he sees the Church and individual Christians once again being distracted by petty, temporal issues that do not promote the kingdom of heaven. Waugh, along with St. Helena who

to represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God (*Essays* 303).

³⁴ See pp. 233-40 in Lawson's and Kramer's *Conversations with Walker Percy* for a further discussion of this critique.

also converted later in life, thinks that the temptation to separate ideal from reality can be counteracted with a renewed emphasis on the concrete details of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He wants to reinstate a radical Catholic supernaturalism—a faith that would send old women off on pilgrimages and knock abstract intellectuals’ heads against “a solid chunk of wood”—to offset the unbelief of the skeptics and the detractors of our time. Waugh is concerned that a jaded post-World War II generation, who only want to forget the sacrifices and horrors of war, is forgetting the One who suffered and died for their sins. Waugh orchestrates his narrative to remind us that only by putting our own comfort and ambition last can we hope to become great in the kingdom of God. Yearning to become a saint himself, he exercises his God-given talent in service to the divine order of the universe that supersedes selfish whims. Waugh’s *Helena* testifies to the extent an author will go to reconcile his ethereal vision of the supernatural realm with a contemporary sense of reality.

CHAPTER THREE

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth: Frederick Buechner's *Brendan*

Frederick Buechner's account of the life of St. Brendan the Voyager offers an unconventional twist on classical hagiography, which tends to idealize its saintly subjects, in that Buechner insists on portraying all the human flaws in the saint's character. Buechner's Brendan emerges as a saint despite himself. His Christian witness appears all the more authentic for his humble acknowledgment of his shortcomings. Not only does Buechner refuse to glorify his subject, he admits and even highlights Brendan's reluctance to be a spiritual exemplar. In a clerical tone that resembles that of Georges Bernanos' main character in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Buechner demonstrates that saintliness can more readily transform a culture through offering a flawed yet honest witness than through modeling heroic perfection.

In the traditional seventh-century account of St. Brendan's life, the saint is portrayed as an epic voyager for Christ, even a precursor of Christopher Columbus, who reportedly braved death at sea to "bear Christ" to the heathen cultures of the world.¹ Many interpreters of Brendan's life claim that his missionary voyages in the sixth century

¹ Columbus is mythologized as a religious hero in many sources. Mary Gordon reports that Columbus's case for canonization was dropped only in 1892 because he had an illegitimate son, which was an insurmountable problem even for the man who "did not hesitate to conquer the dark sea and to thrust himself into every kind of vicissitude in order to acquire new shores for the Gospel and enter into their possession in the name of Jesus Christ" (166). Also, see Claudia L. Bushman's *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero*, Gunnar Thompson's *Discovery: The Real Story*, Geoffrey Ashe's *The Quest for America*, and Edward Everett Hale's *The Life of Christopher Columbus*.

took him from his home in Ireland as far away as Newfoundland and even on to tropical islands off the coast of Florida.² Buechner revises this theory by painting his unsaintly protagonist in the vein of the many selfish sailors seeking gold, glory, and eternal youth on the high seas. In this way, he satirizes the hubris of the American dream. Brendan is an Everyman who craves worldly riches and honor, and he must repent and be humbled before he can be exalted to the right hand of Christ for eternity. Buechner's Brendan appears like a Jonah character, fleeing the divine will even onto the back of a whale before God calls him home. Readers of *Brendan* follow the saint on his earthly pilgrimage and they learn of the eternal merits of obedience, selflessness, and compassion alongside the saint himself. In this contemporary parable, we see a man who gains the whole world and yet is in danger of losing his soul, leaving him with nothing. Finally, as is the case with many saints, Brendan learns that he may win people to Christ only by relinquishing earthly ambition; he must ultimately become the master of his own pride before he can offer an authentic witness to others. Buechner's novel shows readers how a selfish vision of earthly Paradise can be countered with radical obedience and compassion for others. Participating in the eternal glory of God often requires sacrificial humility and teamwork, and the life of St. Brendan reflects this truth.³

² Refer to the "Brendan in History" section below for more on the historical account of St. Brendan's life. Also, see Geoffrey Ashe's *Land to the West: St. Brendan's Voyage to America*, Paul H. Chapman's *The Man Who Led Columbus to America*, and Tim Severin's *The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints*.

³ Buechner reports telling church groups that the best thing for their faith would be for the church building to burn down and the pastor to be run over by a truck "so that you have nothing left except each other and God" (qtd. in Kauffman 33). Not only does he believe Christians need to work out their salvation in community, he suspects that one's relationship with a neighbor might be more crucial to salvation than following

Frederick Buechner's novel about the patron saint of sailors, whales, and those suffering from ulcers is a humorous and bawdy tale. In Brendan's mouth, the blandest of Bible stories become the most exciting of adventures, and he knows how to work a crowd:

He'd make them laugh at how Christ gulled the elders out of stoning to death the woman caught in the act of darkness. He'd drop their jaws telling them how he hailed Lazarus out of his green grave and walked on water without making holes. He'd bring a mist to their eyes spinning out the holy words Christ said on the hill (49).⁴

A born story-teller, Brendan spins tales like a court jester, flirting and teasing his audience until he has them hanging on his every word. He makes the message of the gospel immediate for each new hearer he encounters. Like St. Francis of Assisi, Brendan is concerned with cultivating an appreciation of the specific wonder of creation. When Brendan and a companion are locked in the bowels of a nearly capsized ship during what they are sure is their final voyage, Brendan starts composing poetry, crying out, "Praise God for the pizzle of the whale! Praise God for the watery womb of the world!" (18).

God's will. The vision of harmony Buechner evokes in *Brendan* with his portrayal of life on the ship borders on heresy for the way it links Brendan to Christ:

The three score men...aboard come to love one another like brothers. They stopped all their spatting. If food run short they'd chop off their fingers and roast them for each other like sausages. Later all their fingers grew back. Brendan said all he had to do if it got rough was chide the waves and they laid flat for him. He said one of the monks fell overboard in a storm once and he walked dryshod through the foam like heather and saved him (140).

Buechner recalls an Old Testament professor at Union Seminary who told his students that "we really can't hear what the stories of the Bible are saying until we hear them as stories about ourselves. We have to imagine our way into them, he said" ("Eyes" 30). Buechner takes this advice to heart in *Brendan*, and his fictional writing reflects his obsession with translating the stories of God into human language through the imagination.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical page numbers in this chapter refer to the 1987 Harper & Row paperback edition of Frederick Buechner's *Brendan*.

For him, praise and thankfulness are not dependent on one's circumstances. Along with the psalmist and Job, Brendan cries out honestly to God no matter how he feels.

When his sister comes to console Brendan in his old age, an observer says they both look like “clowns for Christ” with their decrepit bodies—“He was white as a corpse there in the sun. His beard was filthy. His rags was scarce enough to hide his nakedness.... [He] looked [like] a clown for King Christ.... That shipwreck of a man” (211). Amid sorrow and disillusionment near the end of his life, Brendan clings to his sense of humor. Meeting a grumpy old Welsh monk who spends his days recording the sins of all the kings of Britain to ensure that God remembers to punish each one according to his misdeeds, Brendan quips, “How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings” (217). Although he does not agree with the monk's work, he recognizes that direct criticism will only alienate the man so he jokes about his sour attitude instead and ends up making a friend.

The account of the narrator Finn—a fictional contemporary and confidante of Brendan—may appear somewhat removed from the views of the author at first glance, but readers get a distinct sense that Buechner is not far away when Finn muses about Brendan's thoughts and fears. Buechner is deliberate in his use of literary markers to direct the audience to the narrative's comedic highlights. He uses earthy animal imagery and crude humor to coerce snorts and giggles from his readers. Hearsay and exaggeration are prevalent in the story, which often assumes mythical proportions. Gabriel García Márquez would be impressed by the fantastic miracles that appear throughout the narrative—*islands of eternal youthfulness that emerge from the ocean mist, chaste nuns who nurse starving children through their fingertips and toes, people*

who ride horse-shaped waves across rivers and oceans, bishops who blow wool into the wind and watch it turn into fog too thick to see a hand before one's face. In his narrative style, Buechner suggests that he has adopted the exaggerating tendencies of his chief subject, a saint who "made every villain he ever met more villainous and every grey wave that ever heaved him wilder" (8). Brendan is a larger-than-life character; both his triumphs and his failings bear witness to the God he serves.

In this chapter, I will use Brendan to talk about the way in which saints have attempted to revitalize their own and others' Christian faith by evangelizing within their contemporary culture. I will examine how a Christian hagiographer seeks to counteract secularism by reinterpreting the life-story of his spiritual ancestor. I will look at the temptation to manipulate a traditional account of holiness to make it reflect current cultural virtues. In her brief survey of Joan of Arc's most famous hagiographers and their relationship to secular and sacred culture, Mary Gordon reports that writers using Joan as their subject have "taken what they needed of her" because artists' choices are "based on what suits their gifts and their convictions about what is important in the world" (148-49). Evelyn Waugh echoes this belief, writing in the preface to *Helena*: "The novelist deals with the experiences that excite his imagination.... Where the authorities are doubtful, I have often chosen the picturesque in preference to the plausible; I have once or twice, where they are silent, freely invented" (3). This chapter considers the question of whether and how we can update the lives of our religious heroes for the twentieth century.

I will begin my analysis of Buechner's work with a comparison of his account of Brendan's life with a survey of historical details about St. Brendan. Next, I will consider

the critical reception that Buechner's books have received. Also, because he writes extensively in the autobiographical form, I will contrast his non-fiction writing style with his novels. Buechner himself acknowledges in interviews that several significant events in his childhood and young adulthood factor into his fiction.⁵ Finally, I will look at Buechner's use of humor, magical realism, and fictional narrator. As I search for clues to the author's motivation for rewriting this story, I will assess the cultural and moral commentary that Buechner offers within the novel against the backdrop of the twentieth-century *Navigatio*. This methodology will allow me to determine if Buechner's contemporary revisions register as authentic updates or as hindrances to the artistic integrity of the original story.

⁵ Buechner writes in his 1982 memoir *The Sacred Journey*, "All theology, like all fiction, is at its heart autobiography" (1). A traditionalist might interpret this statement as heresy, but what Buechner says aligns with the early hagiographers' assertion that all saints' biographies are essentially an imitation of the life of Christ. We all have unique stories of joys and sorrows in our lives, but Buechner argues that memoirs and fiction are similar in that they tell a universal story that gives all readers another perspective to assess their own lives. In a 2002 *Christian Century* interview, he says,

My great cry as a writer of nonfiction and, in a way, of fiction has been, Listen to your life. Listen to what happens to you because it is through what happens to you that God speaks: your daughter almost dying of anorexia, or your father committing suicide. It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there powerfully, memorably, unforgettably (Kauffman 30).

Buechner agrees with other writers such as Marilynne Robinson who resist hard distinctions between fiction and nonfiction. In her essay "Facing Reality" in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, Robinson argues that we need a deeper and truer definition of reality than the one our culture presents: "Our present model of the world is a fiction, based on notions of objectivity and of the character and implications of science which are a hundred years out of date" (77). She asserts that fiction-writing full of humor and generosity captures a reality that is truer than the fear-based collective fiction we adopt as a culture.

Brendan in History

Brendan of Clonfert (486-578), known as the Navigator or Voyager, was one of the great inspirational figures of the early Irish *peregrinatio*.⁶ Constantine's rule and the relaxing of persecution against Christians resulted in a rise in the popularity of religious travel. The surge of pilgrim activity was largely traced to the efforts and example of Constantine's mother Helena. Instead of following her overland path to the Holy Land, however, Irish monks developed a tradition of taking their pilgrimage to the sea (Harpur 25). According to the tenth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, St. Brendan and seventeen fellow monks sailed west early in the sixth century in search of the "Island Promised to the Saints" (Harpur 38). St. Patrick died 25 years before Brendan's birth, and scholars report that the Navigator's life initiated the "heroic age of monasticism" in Ireland when local pagan customs and Druidic heroes were absorbed into a unique tradition of Celtic Christianity (Hoffman 12). Saints' lives offer a vehicle for social commentary and correction, and early Christian leaders did not hesitate to incorporate Brendan's journeys into their spiritual lore. *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* is a mix of Homer's *Odyssey*, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the

⁶ Several sources describe the self-imposed penitential exile voyage, called a *peregrinatio*, as generally limited to the Irish. For more on the tradition of monastic travel and pilgrimage in Ireland, see Lisa M. Bitel's *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland*, Thomas Charles-Edwards' "The Social Background of Irish Peregrinatio," James Harpur's *Sacred Tracks: Two Thousand Years of Christian Pilgrimage*, Barbara Hillers' "Voyages Between Heaven and Hell: Navigating the Early Irish *Immram* Tales," Kathleen Hughes' "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," and Jonathan Wooding's anthology, *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*. David Dumville's "Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition" traces the development of Irish adventure voyages from a trip designed to facilitate pure adventure-seeking to a more purposeful religious journey. The *Navigatio* has characteristics of both genres, and Frederick Buechner is obviously playing with the combination of sacred and mythic history in his account of St. Brendan's life.

voyages of Sindbad the Sailor in *Arabian Nights*, and the miracle stories of the New Testament Gospels—“a big, bold tale of spiritual quest and transformation writ large over a background of sun and surf. The hard part is trying to separate history from hagiography, fact from fantasy, and mysticism from maritime adventure” (Rabey 126).

In the traditional account of Brendan’s voyage recorded in the *Navigatio*, the pilgrims take only limited supplies, and God miraculously provides water and food each time they are about to run out. After forty days of wandering on the ocean, the men encounter an island populated with gigantic sheep and a man who acts as their spiritual guide. He directs the monks to spend the coming Easter vigil on an unnamed nearby island (which they will return to every year at this time), and Easter Sunday itself on one called the “Paradise of Birds” (Harpur 38). Everything is just as the steward has foretold, except that when the monks try to light a fire to cook their Easter breakfast, the island—which is in fact a whale—starts to move, and the men must scramble back to their boat and cast off to avoid being capsized.

The *Navigatio*’s account of the voyage of St. Brendan and his companions follows a circular rhythm, punctuated by surreal sights and dangerous encounters: a fire-breathing creature destroying a sea monster; an island where choirs sing psalms continually; a bird that saves them from a menacing griffin and then brings them grapes the size of apples; a huge column of pure crystal (probably an iceberg) rising from the sea; a grim smoking mountain that the men think is hell; a man perched on a rock alone at sea who turns out to be Judas Iscariot, granted a temporary respite on the rock from the torments of hell (Harpur 39). On an island near the end of their journey, the monks discover a Robinson Crusoe-like figure called Paul the Hermit, whose naked body is

covered with snow-white hair. This good steward directs the monks, after one final Easter celebration on the whale's back, to the Island Promised to the Saints. After negotiating a thick, dark fog, the monks reach the shore and find the island full of fruit trees. A forty-day journey inland brings them to a young man waiting by a river who blesses them, tells them they have found their destination, and directs them to return back to Ireland to report their finding (Harpur 39). Scholars still debate whether Brendan's journey actually landed him in North America, but the successful voyage in 1976 of a British explorer named Tim Severin lends credence to the idea that Brendan's voyage was possible with the early medieval materials and technology he had available to him.⁷

The Brendan of the *Navigatio* confidently entrusts his vessel to God, relying on the divine will rather than equipment such as a rudder to guide the monks to their destination, but at the same time it includes meticulous navigation charts and lists of materials used to construct the boat and sails. For all its authentic sea lore, however, the *Navigatio* is pervaded with an atmosphere of the supernatural, a characteristic of the medieval *Lives* of saints, which mix fact with legend.⁸ The *Navigatio* also draws on a rich tradition of pagan Irish stories of adventures and voyages, which are filled with the

⁷ Severin writes about his experiment in *The Brendan Voyage: A Leather Boat Tracks the Discovery of America by the Irish Sailor Saints*. He links the island of giant sheep referenced in the *Navigatio* with the Faroe Islands; the mountain of hell with the volcanic region of southern Iceland; the column of crystal with the icebergs off the coast of Greenland; and the fogbound, fruitful Land of the Blessed with Newfoundland itself. He comments on the unusual style employed in Brendan's account of his own voyage: "*Brendan* is a work of hagiography, albeit an atypical one in that it is more a romance of the saint than a catalogue of miracles or biography... [It is] not so much a legend as a tale which is embroidering a first-hand experience" (Severin 9-10).

⁸ See more on traditional hagiography in the "Introduction" chapter of this dissertation.

miraculous.⁹ Other elements apart from the frequent miracles give the *Navigatio* an air of unreality, such as the recurring symbolism of the numbers three and forty, with their biblical connotations of the Trinity and the forty days of Lent, and the marked emphasis on religious observance—singing psalms and celebrating Mass—which gives the story a strong sacramental character and the sense of a liturgical rhythm in harmony with the circular rhythm of the voyage (Harpur 40). Like the epic heroes of ancient mythology—Jason and the Argonauts, Odysseus, and the protagonists of Irish *immrama*—Brendan has a specific goal for his quest: the Island Promised to the Saints. The search for this particular Island gives the *Navigatio* a strong narrative current and sense of mission. The quest theme also makes the danger the monks encounter seem purposeful, as if their faith and mettle must be tested before they are deemed worthy to attain their goal, the promised land.

Frederick Buechner's version of Brendan's life follows the basic pattern of the *Navigatio*, but he adds a humorous human element that is not present in the original account. Also, he begins his fictional hagiography with the birth and childhood of the saint and continues it long after his return from the Land of the Blessed. Buechner has a different purpose in writing than the hagiographer who first recorded Brendan's story, and he therefore highlights moments in the saint's life—especially when he fails or has

⁹ These stories include the "Voyage of Bran," in which the hero sets out to find the Land of Women (or Fairies), and the "Voyage of Máeldúin," in which the protagonist, seeking to avenge the death of his father, lands on 31 islands and finds such wonders as giant ants and shouting birds (Harpur 40). Oliver Davies writes of "The Voyage of Brendan" as a combination of ancient Irish motifs, pagan mythological sagas of voyage and discovery, Christian apocalyptic visions, biblical reminiscences, and early medieval zoological and geographical lore, designed to create a classical narrative for the early Irish church (34).

doubts—that the traditional hagiographer was likely to omit. Also, having the fictional character of Finn narrate Brendan’s story significantly alters the perspective because Finn recognizes all his friend’s faults and temptations. He admires Brendan, but he does not attempt to conceal or rationalize his flaws. Abbess Ita assigns Finn as a traveling companion for Brendan to help ground him in reality and rein in his exaggerating tendencies. The boys are skeptical of each other at first:

We circled and snuffed each other like hounds not sure whether to start baring our fangs or go off together at a trot. Brendan was the one picked out for no reason I could fathom to be the darling of the world. . . . He was full of brags when he talked and full of sourness when for miles he’d trudge along mute as a cabbage (37).

Finn’s honesty about his struggles to love his friend make him a more reliable narrator. The distinction between the two men only becomes more pronounced as they age.

Early in the novel, Finn describes Brendan as “a scrawny hollow-chested wreck of a boy. . . half wore out with growing too fast and dragging his big feet about with him wherever he went” (23). When the saint sets out on his first mission to bring the bishop’s blessing to the newly-appointed King Hugh at Cashel, he faces danger and threats with a smile that Finn calls “blithe as a juggler’s” (45). Finn is scared at first when they meet a rowdy warlord on their way, but he quickly recognizes that Brendan is more than he appears to be. The youthful saint-to-be is already learning to rely on heavenly strength and wisdom rather than on his own incompetent merits. Brendan refers the local thug to the “great wizard of the world [who] washes you clean of all your nastiness. . . our lovely wizard Christ himself,” and to Finn’s surprise, he appears not to be shocked when the bully replies meekly, “Whatever you say is enough for me,” and promptly agrees to be baptized (46). When Brendan later brags about his adventure, however, Finn admits to

readers that the holy man tends to exaggerate and forget to acknowledge the contributions of others: “To hear the way he spun it out to Erc you’d have thought he won most of the people of the world on the way out and all the ones left over on his way home.... Maybe it was to glorify Christ Brendan told it like that, yet it was to glorify his own self as well surely” (88). Finn loves and respects his friend, but he sees his role as helper and truth-teller when Brendan gets too carried away with his boasting.

Buechner imitates the ancient hagiographers in one significant way: his Brendan is a Christ figure. The novel begins with Brendan’s birth depicted in the exaggerated style of magical realism.¹⁰ Bishop Erc reports that he saw the woods behind Brendan’s house catch fire on the night of his birth “in a single vast flame” that failed to scorch a single dry twig; “the color of the flame was such a fiery gold clear through that it turned the house gold and the eyes of Erc gold as he stood in the dark watching and waiting” (3). Like Christ surrounded by the stable animals in traditional Nativity scenes, Brendan begins attracting the attention of wild creatures while he is yet a baby. When Brendan grows sickly soon after his birth and his mother’s milk dries up, a doe appears daily at the door to his parents’ cottage and suckles him back to health (6). After the child leaves his parents to begin his priestly instruction at the monastery, he admits to feeling pride when he learns things his father does not know (110). The Christian Gospels report that Jesus separated from his parents in Jerusalem and went to seek out the wise teachers in the Temple for He knew He served a heavenly rather than earthly father (Luke 2:46-50).

During one of his missionary journeys, Brendan merely has to “chide the waves” during a rough storm to make them lie flat (140). He protects the monks in his care by

¹⁰ See the section below on “Humor and Sacramental Art in the Commonplace” for more on miracles.

calming the sea just as Christ commanded the choppy water on the Sea of Galilee to “Be still!” in Mark 4:39. Similarly, both Jesus and Brendan chide their followers for a lack of faith. Jesus asks, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:40). And Brendan instructs the sailors to “fear not” when the land under their feet begins to sway and they discover they have landed on a whale’s back instead of on dry land (116). Finn suggests that some of these accounts may be exaggerated hearsay, but he also claims to have witnessed several miracles first-hand. Brendan is a brave, good man in Finn’s estimation, and he has helped guide many souls toward Christ, so the narrator believes a few embellished stories will not harm peoples’ faith.

Like Christ ascending the Mount of Transfiguration and later retreating to Gethsemane before his crucifixion with only his closest disciples, Brendan escapes the crowds following him and begging to hear miracle stories by sailing to a deserted island with only Finn and two other monks accompanying him. He makes a tree trunk his cell and fasts to the point of starvation. Finn finds him on the ground “stretched out with his bare back flat to the earth and his arms flung to either side staring at Heaven through the dark branches”; he prays with his eyes closed “as if to shut the sight of Heaven out. He was sailing the seas inside himself. His prayers was his craft. Rue and shame was the winds that drove him. His back was bloody when he rose. You could see the mark of roots and stones in it” (207). Brendan is Christ-like in his willingness to bear the burdens of others on his back. He grieves for the sins of his companions as much as for his own failings.

After a pesky young monk in training takes Brendan’s heated words too literally and ends up drowned in the river, Finn tries in vain to comfort his guilt-ridden abbot

friend. He finally concludes that “you need somebody bigger than yourself to comfort you. Maybe he never had a comforting friend” (144). Finn laments the lonely path that a great leader must tread in order to succeed. As Brendan lies on his deathbed and confesses that he fears “the presence of the King” and “the sentence of the judge,” Finn says that if he were to judge Brendan as Christ he would sentence his friend to “have mercy on himself” and “less to strive for the glory of God than just to let it swell his sails if it can” (240). Recalling how he spent his youth vainly chasing after Tir-na-n-Og, and his old age in penance, “caring after the naked and hungry and sick at home,” Brendan wants to set the record straight—the service he rendered anonymously to the least in God’s kingdom is more valuable in God’s eyes than the most heroic missionary voyage (219). St. Brendan will inherit the earth not because he plundered its treasures or discovered its secrets; his reward is in meekness—he learned to conquer his own selfishness and thus found the peace he sought.

One day during Brendan’s second voyage, when Finn and the saint are trapped below deck during a rough storm, Brendan recounts his early fascination with watching the sea and hoping for a glimpse of the Land of the Blessed:

Way off I saw a lone wave suddenly. Oh, high-crested and proud it was, Finn. Sure as I’m here to tell you, there came a white steed at the gallop behind it. The water could have been solid earth the way he rode it. . . . A man was astride him. . . . Just as the wave was about to dash to pieces on the shingle, the horse sprang free and leapt. It was the sky itself he leapt into with his rider on his back. I saw it with my own eyes, Finn. . . . It was Tir-na-n-Og they leapt to. It was the Land of the Ever Young. There’s no death there at all, you see, I glimpsed it for a moment only. It was floating over the water like a cloud. The beauty of it broke my heart, I think. I’ve scoured the seven seas for it ever since (15).

Brendan admits to Finn that it may be his own selfish wish to fulfill a childhood dream that has brought them close to death on this journey rather than a desire to glorify God,

but he hopes that the voyage's purpose may yet be redeemed. When the men start grumbling after days at sea and no sight of land, one monk complains that they are merely chasing after "will-o-the-wisps in a ship of fools," but Brendan maintains they are pursuing "The Land of Fair Hope" rather than foolish illusions (112).

Although the sailors submit to the "winds of Heaven to puff them wherever they listed," Brendan believes it is God's will that each man find his "heart's desire in the end" (86, 121). This sentiment aligns with Buechner's view that a person finds his or her vocation in the place where one's "deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (*Wishful Thinking* 95). In other words, if a person is happy doing something and the world needs to have that job done, then God is likely directing the individual to that work. By all accounts, Brendan loved the sea and the world needed an explorer eager to plough the waves for Christ, so by Buechner's estimation Brendan was fulfilling God's will even if his journey was selfishly motivated.

Brendan's foster-father, Bishop Erc, inspires the boy to explore the sea and find the Land of the Blessed by telling him of monks who "tossed their oars and rudders over the sides altogether and left it to the winds of Heaven to puff them wherever they listed with nothing save fish to feed on or gulls' eggs when they could find them" (86). These sea-faring saints substituted the ocean for the desert fathers' wilderness place of spiritual purification, and some of them drifted at sea for months or even years on end, fasting and praying and depending on God's favor for sustenance. Erc describes his version of the taxonomy of sanctity: red martyrs shed their blood for Christ; green martyrs fast and punish themselves for the sins of the world; white martyrs give up home and family to spread the gospel; and blue martyrs "scour the blue storms of the sea for the peace of

God” (86). According to the bishop, the wonders of Hy Brasail include a lack of shame, death, tears, and cruelty. Brendan is fascinated by this vision, and vows to become a blue martyr himself. After Erc’s death and the disappearance of his biological parents, Brendan sets out to surpass even St. Patrick in his missionary endeavors:

If luck was with him he’d come at last to the Country of the Young where age has never come nor death either, the Land of the Blessed where lovely brave women and men lay about in the shade and all you’ve ever prized and lost is once more found (94).

The motivation for Brendan’s journey is a realistic mix of selfish desire for fame, childish whim, and holy vocation. Buechner suggests that Brendan was not born a saint, but his virtue lies in his openness to allowing God to transform him into one.

Faith Lost and Found in Buechner’s Life and Work

Buechner’s fiction is overflowing with autobiographical references. He lost his father to suicide when he was only 10, and the memory of that event haunts him still.¹¹ Several of his books follow the theme of searching for a lost father-figure, and *Brendan* is no exception. Abbot Jarlath, Bishop Erc, and Abbess Ita all serve as surrogate parents to the lonely Brendan at one point or another in the novel. Erc claims Brendan for the service of Christ almost before his umbilical cord is cut, and he carries the child off to be raised with orphans in Ita’s abby soon after he is weaned. The abbess gives the children a mix of practical and spiritual knowledge, teaching them to hunt and fish as well as recite

¹¹ Buechner’s father’s suicide left a hole in his life that has never completely healed. He says in a 2002 interview that the event “has a great deal to do with everything I’ve become. It happened when I was 10 years old, 65 years ago. I still live with it every day of my life” (Kauffman 26). Buechner’s 1969 Noble Lectures at Harvard, published in 1970 as *The Alphabet of Grace*, develop his ideas about the intimate relationship among fiction, theology, and autobiography (283).

Latin. The three things she says are most valuable to God are “true faith. A simple life. A helping hand,” but she admits that men tend to prize “a fair wife, a stout ox, a swift hound” instead (11). After he leaves the abby, Erc and Jarlath continue Brendan’s education in holy and material matters. Jarlath is chiefly entrusted with the boy’s religious training, while Erc teaches him the ways of the world. Erc likes to boast that St. Patrick won him to the Christian faith, but Finn believes that not even the holy man himself could “route the druid out of him entirely” (17). Erc knows “things a man’s better off not knowing” like how to understand the “rustling speech of trees” and how to read clouds “that show the shape of things to come” (17). Despite their quirks, Brendan feels safe with these strange characters and grows to love and fear their God. Like Buechner, he believes in embracing the the strangeness of one’s own life and allowing faith and meaning to emerge from the depths of experience.¹²

After his ordination in 1958, Buechner comes to see writing as a form of ministry. He says in a 1971 *Publisher’s Weekly* interview: “As a preacher I am trying to do many of the same things I do as a writer. In both, I am trying to explore what I believe life is all about, to get people to stop and listen a little to the mystery of their own lives”

¹² Buechner writes in his 1983 *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*:

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace (3).

Buechner says in *The Alphabet of Grace*: “I am a congenital believer, a helpless hungerer after the marvelous as solace and adventure and escape” (42). Believing that people, the world, and God are ultimately unknowable, Buechner has nonetheless spent his career as a fiction-writer writing in a comic style that both enlarges and embraces the fantastic strangeness of the other. He reports that writing novels developed his “sense of plot and, beyond that, a sense that perhaps life itself has a plot—that the events of our lives, random and witless as they generally seem, have a shape and direction of their own, are seeking to show us something, lead us somewhere” (Buechner *Sacred Journey* 95).

(Buechner “Authors” 11). Although he was ordained in the Presbyterian church, Buechner reports that his choice of denomination was more the result of a happy “accident”—the example of a Presbyterian preacher named George Buttrick who spoke “authentically out of the truth of who he was”—than an intentional plan (Kauffman 32).

Buechner has never been a parish pastor, and he only infrequently participates in a local Episcopal church.¹³ Buechner admits to imagining himself an evangelist preaching the good news of grace through his novels and nonfiction, although he recognizes that his readers are mostly Christians:

I always hope to reach people who don’t want to touch religion with a ten-foot pole. The cultured despisers of religion, Schleiermacher called them. Maybe some of my books reach them. But most of my readers, as far as I can tell, aren’t that type. Many of them are ministers. They say, “You’ve given us something back we lost and opened up doors we didn’t think could be opened for people” (qtd. in Kauffman 28).

Buechner thinks that people are always wondering if the Bible and the stories of a good, wise, and loving God are true, even if they have been in church all their lives, and he sees his job as a writer as explaining where and how he has found the answer to that question. Karl Barth imagines a congregation asking the same thing—“Is it true?”—in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, and his preaching style inspired Buechner to write about his own experience with the presence of God as well as His absence.¹⁴ Some critics

¹³ Buechner responds to an interview question about the state of the modern Christian church: “I’ve never taken any part in the life of the church as a church, and I’ve never served a Presbyterian church... My own experience in church for a long time was a very negative one” (Kauffman 32). Buechner continues the conversation by saying that after much searching he has formed a close relationship with an Episcopal rector whose preaching is in the “vein-opening” style he appreciates; Buechner believes a good priest knows how to “get out of the way” to make room for the Holy Spirit (Kauffman 29).

¹⁴ In a 2006 PBS *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* interview, Buechner comments on Barth’s influence on his life and writing: “As a preacher Barth said, ‘When I look out

complain that Buechner is overly apologetic in his fiction,¹⁵ but he addresses this critique in his 1983 memoir *Now and Then*: “As a novelist no less than as a teacher, I try not to stack the deck unduly but always let doubt and darkness have their say along with faith and hope” (59-60). Buechner admits that shadows often threaten to overwhelm his own soul, so his desire to reflect the truth of human experience dictates that he not ignore the struggle for faith in his writing.

When writing about an eleventh-century Welsh saint, Godric, Buechner penned words that he wants inscribed on his tombstone: “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was set next to life would scarcely fill a cup” (*Godric* 96). On the darkest days, when all in the world and within his own heart seems hopeless,

at the congregation, I realize they are here with one question: Is it true? Can it be true that there is a God who is loving and wise and powerful? Answer that question. That’s the one thing they want to know’.” When Buechner tells Richard Kauffman about the “vein-opening” writers and preachers he most admires and appreciates, Kauffman asks if he considers himself a vein-opening writer and Buechner responds:

Yes, I’m writing out of my passion, my sense of wholeness and despair. I’m writing out of the deepest parts of who I am as a human being... In both my fiction and nonfiction I’m trying to be as honest as I can to my own experience—my own experience of God, my own experience of the absence of God (27).

Buechner believes that truth and experience are inextricably linked. He writes out of his experience in the hope of finding truth and an authentic connection to his readers. Buechner claims to use the “eyes of the heart” to see and convey truth in his fiction because “our [physical] eyes are not all we have for seeing with, maybe not even the best we have” (“Eyes” 32).

¹⁵ Anna Shapiro calls Buechner’s style “preachy” in a 1984 *New York Times* review of *A Room Called Remember*: “Insights that would do for a paragraph are dragged out with a doggedness that will presumably bring the idea home to even the most resistant and inattentive” (18). She writes that Buechner’s greatest strength as a writer is revealed when he allows himself “to embody faith rather than advertise it” (Shapiro 18). Joseph Dewey claims that Buechner’s work illustrates “agenda fiction, temple rhetoric from an ordained minister” (2). Dewey views Buechner’s characters as providentially-controlled figures maneuvered by a propagandist who determines their fate before reality allows for other alternatives.

Buechner draws on the faith of his characters to sustain him. He claims that writing fiction gives him courage, like whistling in the dark, reminding him that “dark is not all there is” (Buechner *Secrets in the Dark* 182). St. Brendan, like Godric and Buechner himself, is concerned with finding hope in a world full of dark shadows. He tells Finn that he determined to sail to the Land of the Blessed because he believed that that is where “all you’ve ever prized and lost is once more found” (94). Buechner mines the pain and loss of his early years in developing a sense of purpose in his fiction. Several of his works follow a quest pattern in which characters spend their lives searching for lost innocence, joy, and love only to discover faith emerging from the darkest corners of their own experience.¹⁶

Reading Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*—about “a pathetic little alcoholic, adulterous, cowardly man who happens to be the last priest left in revolutionary Mexico”—had a profound effect on Buechner’s writing: “Ever since I read that book, every work of fiction I’ve ever written has been about a ‘saint’ like that whiskey priest—not a plaster saint, not a moral exemplar, but a person whose feet are just as much of clay as your feet and my feet. Yet God uses that person” (Kauffman 30). He comments in another interview that he sometimes thinks “my whole literary life has been

¹⁶ For example, *The Entrance to Porlock* (1970) is a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* expedition that fascinated Buechner in his youth. In a sermon about *The Wizard of Oz*, Buechner points out that the travelers in Baum’s story already had in them what they set out to find on their quest, but the purpose for their journey is universal: “We want very much what these three wanted, and that is...to become fully persons. And we want it for the same reason that they wanted it, because as things stand now we know that we are only partly [whole]” (*Magnificent* 55).

Similarly, *On the Road with the Archangel* (1997) is a fictional version of the apocryphal Book of Tobit, set in Nineveh, woven with themes of searches and longings and hopefulness. In it the archangel Raphael disguises himself as a human named Azarias to accompany Tobit’s witless but stout-hearted son Tobias on an important errand.

an effort to rewrite *The Power and the Glory* in a way of my own” (Nelson “Buechner” 44). Like Evelyn Waugh, Buechner believes that writing is a vocation given to him by God. He sees his literary art as the exercise of ministry:

Since my ordination I have written consciously as a Christian, as an evangelist, or apologist, even. That does not mean that I preach in my novels, which would make for neither good novels nor good preaching... I am a Christian novelist in the same sense that somebody from Boston or Chicago is an American novelist (*Now and Then* 59-60).

Buechner believes people want to read about characters who wrestle creatively with moral choices and spiritual meanings, characters who tell the truth, even if it is painful or frightening. The narrator Finn muses about the nature of truth after Brendan returns from his first missionary voyage: “Things get muddled after months at sea with nothing much to tell plain truth from fancies by. Nor is plain truth the only truth there is either any more than what you see with your two eyes is all there is to see” (102). Finn is commenting on how his factual manner of relating events differs from Brendan’s flamboyant style, but he is also echoing Buechner’s belief that there are not firm boundaries separating the natural and supernatural worlds.

Brendan opens with words from G. K. Chesterton in the flyleaf: “In the very shape of things there is more than green growth; there is the finality of the flower. It is a world of crowns.” Throughout the book, Buechner is fascinated with observing God’s finishing touches in nature. He sees Chesterton’s “world of crowns” in the morning dew, in fish jumping, and in a stormy sky at sunset. The line that Buechner quotes to set the tone for his novel contrasts “green growth” with “the finality of the flower”; the stubble that covers the ground in springtime looks rough and unpromising to a casual eye, but the novelist shows that God is in the business of taking unpolished people and transforming

them into the crown of creation. This theme is repeated throughout Buechner's novel. The protagonist as well as many of the minor characters do not look like perfect flowers when we first encounter them; they do not trust God or each other, they are fearful of shadows, and they make devastating mistakes. But Buechner believes that these weak and ignorant souls can be redeemed and transformed by loving and serving each other. He illustrates this truth repeatedly in his novel.

After Dismas, one of the four sailors accompanying Brendan on his first missionary journey, falls into the violent sea near a volcano and drowns, his closest friend Gestas curses God for allowing the accident to happen: "The fiend is God himself!... God betrays this bleeding world for sport each bleeding bloody day. Hell and his fires has no crueler torments than the way he buggers us that serves him best" (126). Gestas mourns his friend day and night and slowly loses his mind to grief. The four surviving monks think they have finally reached Tir-na-n-Og when they see a beautiful lush island with fair-haired children playing on the beach. In his feverish delirium, Brendan hears a white bird speaking to him and assuring him that "we'll all of us grow to something grand in the end if the crows don't get us" (128). When he relays this message to the other men, Gestas responds spitefully: "Ah, but it's a world of crows, you fool!" (128). The bird responds through Brendan, "There's the crows to be sure, my dear, but I'd sooner call it a world of crowns. One day we'll all be wearing them if the Glory of Things has its way with us" (128). It appears that Gestas will have the last word as the sailors venture inland only to come upon a group of natives around the fire feasting on human flesh and admiring their collection of human skulls. The monks flee back to their boat and set sail again in search of the Blessed Isle.

At the end of the novel, after Brendan has given up Gestas for a lost soul, he encounters him again: the old man lives alone in a cave and never speaks, but he makes dolls for orphans and Finn remarks that he has never seen a “merrier man”—a man “at peace” with cheeks “ruddy from living at the heavens’ mercy like a squirrel” (235, 236). Gestas, like his mentor Brendan, finds joy and peace at the end of his life by serving others. Buechner repeats this pattern of fear, doubt, and devastation followed by redemption throughout the novel. In Brendan’s journal, when he fears he and his companions may be lost at sea, he admits that the voyage was motivated by “vainglory and self-seeking” (103). He must acknowledge his pride and selfishness before he can lead others to salvation.

Early in Brendan’s first voyage, the men lose courage when they see a pod of whales swimming near them and threatening to capsize their tiny boat. The monks see them as fearsome water tyrants, but Brendan imagines that the whales regard the sailors as monsters themselves:

Perhaps they [the whales] are right. Some by being blind and witless. Some by sin. Some by only dying...and breaking the hearts of the ones left behind.... By a single toss of their mighty tails, the monsters below could shatter us to pieces. And by one thing or another as we move through the deeps of the world there’s hardly a day goes by we don’t shatter each other to pieces as well (111).

Buechner recognizes the human capacity for wounding one’s neighbor. But his narratives also portray characters being offered a chance to heal one another with love. His sermons reiterate this claim: “Your life and my life flow into each other as wave flows into wave, and unless there is peace and joy and freedom for you, there can be no real peace or joy or freedom for me” (Buechner *Magnificent* 143). For Buechner, a whole human life experience requires love of others. He writes in his memoirs: “You can

survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own” (Buechner *Sacred* 46). Becoming fully human requires sacrifice and a deep connection to one’s fellow human beings, according to Buechner.¹⁷

Buechner also believes that faith requires the ability to read life experiences critically. Chris Anderson sees *Brendan* and *Godric* as stories about “obscure saints who devote their lives to trying to understand and communicate the absurdity of the grace of God” (16). An experience of God can look like either revelation or false hope, and we often need strong powers of discernment to tell the difference between them. Anderson writes that Buechner succeeds in this sense because he has “the ability to write critically...wrestling with the complexities of who we are and should be” (18). Just as a writer must wrestle with the complexities of language, so people of faith must wrestle with the interpretation of life experiences.

Brendan’s second missionary voyage ends with a poignant scene where the weary sailors react to the news that they may have finally reached the Land of the Blessed—Hy Brasail (189-90). Each man pictures a long-dead loved one he hopes to see again, and all of the adventure-seeking and selfish ambition drops away as the monks dare to hope that their dearest friends and family are waiting for a joyful reunion just beyond the next valley. This scene demonstrates the often fine line between false hope and an authentic

¹⁷ Cecelia Holland, in her 1987 *Washington Post* review of *Brendan*, writes, “In our own time, when religion is debased, an electronic game show, an insult to the thirsty soul, Buechner’s novel proves again the power of faith, to lift us up, to hold us straight, to send us on again” (C4). Holland recognizes Buechner’s refusal to tolerate a weak and tradition-less form of Christianity that says a believer must muddle through the trials of life alone. He and our spiritual ancestors, the saints, can guide and protect us on our way toward sustaining a living faith.

encounter with the divine. Buechner believes strongly in the importance of listening to one's own life to interpret the meaning of reality in this world and the one to come.

Humor and Sacramental Art in the Commonplace

Frederick Buechner uses humor to emphasize the flawed humanity of saints. Brendan is like his peers both before and after his salvation; he does not magically transform into a holy superhero when he decides to become a monk. His story unfolds in an ordinary way except for a few isolated incidents when miracles interrupt the natural order. When whales and birds talk, when abbesses walk on water, or when milk flows from a nun's fingers and toes to feed hungry children, readers laugh because the distortion of the natural order is shocking and funny. Buechner suggests that God uses miracles to remind us that the world is not a predictable, safe place, and neither is our position in it. The Pevensie children in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* learn that the great king of Narnia is not a "safe" or "tame" lion, but he is a strong, just, and "good" ruler, and that is infinitely better than being harmless (8, 17).

Buechner's narrative warns against the competing human impulses to operate either in a secure realm uninterrupted by mystery or in a supernatural wonderland where miracles are so commonplace that they lose their meaning and surprise. G. K. Chesterton claims in *Orthodoxy* that laughter requires a leap of faith because people are prone to solemnity: "It is easy to be heavy; hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity" (128). Buechner recognizes with Chesterton that humor derives its power from a transcendent leaping of the gaps left by life's inevitable uncertainty. The Gospel story is

comic at its core, and any writer who imitates its message will use humor to reveal truth.¹⁸

Appreciating joy in the midst of his sorrows, Brendan comes to revel in his identity as a bumbling fool for Christ. Faced with the danger of taking himself too seriously, he learns to embrace the humility that God taught Job: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” (Job 38:2-4) The saint transforms humiliation and failure into humorous marks of holiness. Wholly absorbed in his identity as a child of God, he becomes like a child before men. In his irrational eagerness to renounce the world, he is refined into a saint worthy to inherit it.

Buechner’s narrative is so firmly set in the natural realm that the human body is a great source of amusement and mystery. The monks in *Brendan* sometimes “break wind” or “piss” during tense moments (15, 92). Finn reports that “the high angels wet themselves” at the mere sound of St. Patrick’s name (4). Early in the saint’s life, Brendan and another child are practicing swordplay in a field near the convent where they live. Brendan is bragging about his superior fencing skills while his female companion grows increasingly frustrated with his arrogance. In an effort to shut him up, she resorts to lifting her skirts and showing him her vagina. Finn comments:

I don’t believe it was out of lewdness she did it at all. I believe Brendan was so busy crowing about what a fine fellow he was she just wanted him to know there was this one little tuck in her flesh she had that he hadn’t. I doubt she’d even guessed the full use of it by then. She could just as soon

¹⁸ See Ralph Wood’s *The Comedy of Redemption* for more on fiction that imitates the comic structure of the Bible.

have showed him anything else she had that she thought might make him sit up and take notice (20-21).

The girl's exhibition has its desired effect, and Brendan is shocked to the point of running away "like the fiends of the air was upon him" (21). His sister Briga chuckles at the memory years later: "Those days I might have showed my own if I thought it would catch anybody's eye. I've long since willed it to Heaven with the rest of me.... You'd think it was one of the holy prophets scowling at you in a grey beard if you was to see it" (21).

Men's and women's differences continue to be a source of both friction and mirth throughout the novel. When Abbess Brigit undertakes to counsel Brendan on how to start a monastery, she says God cares nothing about "whether you're tasseled like a stallion or cleft like a mare.... Howsomever I keep them both at different tasks even so. That way each honors the mystery of the other better and their own mystery as well" (133-34). She doubts that God is either woman or man and notes that "God's fiery grand glory," like the sun, "brings forth like a mother and pierces deep like a father" (134). Buechner sees the natural world as an extension of the heavenly realm and a canvas for displaying the mysteries of God. He uses bawdy humor to emphasize the wild and strange beauty of God's creation.

Animals figure prominently in *Brendan* and lead to both awe and laughter. After a long journey across the sea, Brendan's monks land on a magical island and believe they have arrived at the long-sought Land of the Blessed. As they follow the natives into the tropical paradise, they spot many marvelous creatures never seen in their home country. Among them is "a thick-barked tree floating among the lilies" in a brackish pond (172). Finn reports the sailors' reaction to this strange sight:

We was just passing when it come alive. It swung open a great mouth with rows of teeth in it straight as a comb. The roar of it was like the fires of Hell. The monks all froze in terror. The creature was full half the length of our mast. It had eyes on top of its head and a wicked snout with smoke curling out of it. The next thing it slid up onto the far bank and went racing off on stub legs dragging the heft of its scaly tale behind it through the muck (171).

Upon seeing this exotic terror, one of the priests remarks, “If this be Heaven, Finn, please God they find me unworthy” (172). The wonders of creation are both terrible and fascinating, but they reinforce the belief that God is great.

Buechner suggests that some miracles—like when Brendan and his sailing companions appear to have found the island of eternal bliss and are soon to be reunited with their long-dead loved ones—are just flawed human desires distorted to look like divine wonders. Brendan is so desperate to find his mentor and departed father-figure, Bishop Erc, that he allows himself to be conned by a crazy man on a deserted island with a red-haired pet monkey. An old monk called Tara who has lived on the island for many decades tells the newly-arrived group his story and relays a few tips about dealing with the native inhabitants: “They wasn’t a bad lot when they wasn’t paring the skin off their enemies’ heads. He showed them with a finger on his own head how they did it” (177). This is grim gallows humor, but Buechner’s use of comedy here makes readers aware that all is not right in Paradise.

As Tara relates the horrible fate of his ship-mates, Finn begins to suspect that the island is a sham; traditional theology teaches that no one suffers and dies in heaven, much less is “gobbled” up by a fearsome wild animal. Brendan, however, ignores the warning signs and asks the local guide, “Might you have chanced on an old dear friend of mine, I wonder? He was bishop in his time and worthy of this blessed land if any ever was”

(176). The old man muses, “That will be a fair-haired slender bishop, I believe” (176). Brendan is saddened and confused by his response, but Tara notes his expression and corrects himself with the speed of a fortune-teller feeding a story to a grieving loved one: “Ah but of course now, he’ll be more of a stout dark man if I’m not mistaken” (177). “A stout dark man indeed. The very one! You’ve seen him then?” Brendan is so excited by the news that he starts to get up and go searching for his long-lost friend immediately, but Finn and Mahon sense a problem with the old man’s story. When Brendan reports that Erc was baptized by Saint Patrick himself, Tara responds with a wink that he has been talking to the holy saint only an hour before the sailors arrived. When the men appear shocked at this news, Tara explains, “It’s better than talking to myself anyhow. I live all by my lonesome, you see. I’d go silly in the head if I didn’t have Patrick for blathering with now and then” (177). The irony in this passage lies in the fact that the men are now realizing that going “silly in the head” is exactly what has happened to the old man, but their eagerness to believe prompts them to listen to the old man’s senile ranting for a little longer.

Frustrated at being pestered again later about how to find Erc, Tara says, “He’s a bishop you say? Bishops are thick as fleas here. I’ve all I can do keeping my beasts fed let alone gadding off after every bishop comes along” (187). The layman’s Irish accent adds to the humor of the passage as Tara in all his strangeness becomes a grumpy old man we have all encountered. When Tara wakes the men at dawn and tells them that Saint Patrick has arrived, they dare to believe again and tiptoe outside to see the great saint for themselves:

Saint Patrick was hunched on a low branch. He was eating a piece of yellow fruit with the skin hanging off it. He had sorrowing lovely eyes.

His feet was black and long-fingered as his creased hands. He was covered in red hair from head to toe. Only his face was bare and his leathery small ears that stuck out. He drew back his lips and give us a fierce smile. He chattered something at us in a tongue we didn't know.... He reached out with his long red tail and took a hold of [another fruit lying on the ground] (185-86).

In this world, bishops and saints may take the form of monkeys or parrots, and the holiest characters in the novel assume naturalistic features. Abbess Ita takes the shape of a deer to nurse Brendan when his mother's milk dries up; she later keeps the orphans in her care alive during a drought by suckling them from every available appendage "like the great blue-eyed double-dugged sow of the world" (8). Bishop Erc appears like a pile of rocks with "a boulder on top that was cracked straight across" and "his breath had the musty moulder and damp of caves to it" (4). The greatest miracle of the Brendan story happens when a whale grounds itself on a sandbar on Easter morning so the monks can say Mass on dry land.

Like humor, miracles upset the reader's expectations of the natural order. They remind readers that the supernatural world is closer than we imagine, and mystery threatens to disrupt our lives at any moment. James Wood's *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* asserts that the reality of fiction must "draw its power from the reality of the world. The real, in fiction, is always a matter of belief, and is therefore a kind of discretionary magic: it is a magic whose existence it is up to us, as readers, to validate and confirm" (xi). Wood argues that fiction derives its chief power from its gentle request that readers accept and enter the picture of reality it presents. The moment that we doubt the plausibility of the fiction writer's version of reality is the moment that the story collapses in our imagination. Magical realism, however, expands our understanding of truth by positing that it is not the opposite of falsehood, but of

implausibility. Therefore, a skillful fiction writer may create an imaginary world that is more believable than the reality we encounter every day. J. R. R. Tolkien makes this point decisively in “On Fairy-Stories” when he argues that fantasy: 1) helps readers recover a true view of the meaning of ordinary and humble things that make up human life; 2) offers escape from one’s narrow and distorted view of reality; and 3) leads to joy and consolation as it points to the truth of the Gospel—the greatest story ever told because it combines historical fact with mythical significance.

Brendan’s life is marked by mysterious miracles from the night of his birth when the woods catch fire but do not burn to the peaceful mist he conjures from wool fluff to prevent a war just before his death. In the beginning, the saint boasts about the wonderful things that happen to him, but later he learns humility and is content to be still and listen to others’ stories. It is not always clear how or if these miracles prove the existence or will of God, but the narrative reality is consistent and honest. The Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche that C. S. Lewis retells in *Till We Have Faces* echoes this idea by reminding skeptics that “belief in the true God is not thin and clear like water, but rather thick and dark like blood” (50). When a person reads a work of fiction, he or she must suspend disbelief in order to be fully caught up in the reality of the story. Similarly, Buechner argues that when a person begins to live the Christian life, he or she must accept that the kingdom of God is a strange and wonderful place where the laws of nature can sometimes be suspended.

As an evangelist, Brendan is most effective when he relies on his story-telling gift to relay the simple truth of the Gospel. Finn remarks with wonder at his friend’s artful skill: “It was like flirting or courting the way Brendan did it. He’d tease them along till

they was hot for more and them skitter off saying he'd be back one day soon...to tell them another tale or two if they'd mend their ways in the meantime" (50). Heavy-handed preaching does not entice people to keep listening, but a story that feels truer than life itself will catch and keep the interest of the most skeptical audience. Finn recognizes that no one has a "luckier tongue for holy things" than Brendan (48). After the saint returns from his first sea voyage and founds a monastery, men "come to Brendan part for his rule I think and part for his tales.... Sometimes with his eyes open, sometimes with them closed, he'd spin out his wonders through his great teeth" (140-41).

Brendan's maternal mentor Ita sends him out on a second journey in search of the Land of the Blessed just before her death; to remind him that he is "a sinner and ninny just like the rest of us for all your grand deeds," she charges him to take a bitter attendant as penance (154). When Brendan and his weary companions finally arrive at the shore of an impassable river that supposedly separates them from Tir-na-n-Og, Finn imagines that "bravery and loveliness ripened there like fruits. The air was fresh with honor. Forgiveness glittered like dew on the grass" (196). He wonders at Brendan's complacency with being so close and yet unable to reach their final destination, but then he remembers how the saint loves to give people "a peek through the pearly gates every now and then but never knock them silly with the whole grand glory of it at a clap" (197). Finn believes that Brendan prefers the hints of the supernatural he finds in nature—"just the whiff of Heaven you get in the salt breeze sometimes or the glimpse of it in a whale's eye"—to the overwhelming reality of it (197).

Late in life, Brendan begins to despair the emptiness of words that entertain but do not bring life or the power to change. He comes to hate being pestered by people

eager to share in the glories of his voyage. One day when he is cornered by a wild group after weeks of silence, he surprises them with a response:

I'll tell you about my voyages, then. They never did anybody a bit of good least of all Christ.... There's only one true port. That's Heaven. God grant we never put our souls in danger of sin, for sin is the only death in the world worth fearing.... Pray for yourselves and your kindred. If you've any breath left in you pray for me then there's no worse sinner in the land nor a greater fool (206).

After this outburst, the crowd parts in stunned silence and allows Brendan to escape to a lonely island where he attempts to adopt a rule of silence and self-mortification.

To confront Brendan and pull him out of his abject mood, his friend Brigit walks on water to cross a wide river. Finn marvels at the miracle and reflects on the other wonders he has seen in his lifetime: "I was with Brendan when he healed the man with the spear in his nipple.... I have looked into the eye of Jasconius [the whale]. Most wondrous of all I was there at the birth of my boy and at his death as well" (209). Finn equates the supernatural miracles of healing and speaking to animals with the natural event of childbirth and the pain of his son's death. Brigit treats her miraculous walk as an ordinary event and sternly instructs Brendan that he needs to return to "harvesting souls for Christ" because he was "never cut out for this sort of monkishness.... You're a nimble-tongued footloose man. They say there's none since Patrick with a knack like yours for winning heathens. You should be out there with the reapers" (210). When Brendan complains that people no longer want to hear him preach Christ, Brigit wonders what they could possibly want of him instead: "Not your great beauty surely. You weren't much to look at the first time I saw you what with more teeth in your mouth than you've room for and a queer shape to your head. But now they could use you for scaring off crows if you don't mind my saying" (210). The nun's attempt at levity fails,

however, as Brendan moans that God has cursed him to tell tales of his voyages for all eternity. Finally, Brigit advises him to go someplace where no one knows him or his travels: “Find a place where there’s folk who’ve never heard of your voyaging and all that. Bring Christ to them, Brendan, and in God’s good time perhaps they’ll bring him again to you” (211). In the end, this is exactly what happens, and Brendan’s salvation comes back to him gradually through simple acts of service.

Buechner uses humor to lighten the mood or to draw attention to important theological points. Brendan and Finn meet “Gildas the Wise” when they arrive in Wales but after interacting with the man who is busy “bemoaning Welsh sins” day and night, Finn proposes that the name “Gildas the Sour” would fit him better (213). Buechner touches on a theological debate over free will when Brendan introduces himself to the local monk:

You’ve come to win souls for Christ, is it? Some say only Christ wins souls for Christ. They hold once Christ has cocked his holy eye on you, you’re as helpless to flee him as a bird in a net. There be others as well howsomever—like your countryman Palagius the heresiarch here not so many years back—that hold the High King of Heaven himself can’t tinker with men’s freedom to flee him to the uttermost parts of the sea even if that’s their fancy (214-15).

Brendan fears that Gildas knows of his journeys and is accusing him of fleeing God instead of seeking him on the high seas, but Gildas is caught up in his own work—recording the sins of all the kings of Britain to ensure that God remembers to punish each one according to his misdeeds. He divides them into specialized categories and seems to take great joy in assigning each sinner a label in his book: “Peccatores. Hypocritae. Ebriosi.... Adultereri. Fornicarii. Sepulchra dealbata. Progenies viperarum” (215). Hearing of the sinfulness of his countrymen, Brendan sees this as an opportunity to

reform them, but Gildas responds sharply that this is his vocation and he has no intention of pointing the sinners toward redemption: “When the Day of Judging comes, there’ll be so many sinners running about some may escape the flames altogether. My work is to set their names down here with all their sins written about them so the angels don’t let a solitary one slip through their fingers” (215). The monk’s dedication to his work is humorous, but the exchange allows Buechner to comment on a timeless religious problem: the faithful are often quick to judge and slow to show mercy. Gildas’ attitude reminds readers of the prophet Jonah who is sent to Nineveh to preach repentance and flees to the belly of a fish rather than complete his divine assignment. Jonah is angry at God for offering mercy instead of smiting His enemies like he thinks they deserve.

Buechner uses humor in the Gildas dialogue to emphasize a theme central to Christianity: believers are called to be Christ’s hands and feet on earth. After hearing Gildas’ plan to spend his life observing and recording the sins of others, Brendan asks if perhaps God wants something more than judgment on behalf of one’s fellow human beings: “Perhaps it’s from us the good must come,” Brendan says (216). “He asks from each of us what we have in us to give,” Gildas responds. “Perhaps we’ve given all but what he truly wants,” Brendan muses. When Gildas asks sharply what Brendan thinks that is, he has no answer. Finn wonders on his friend’s behalf if God’s desire is for His followers to win souls at any cost or “sail the grim deserts of the sea” or starve themselves by fasting or “scatter monkeries and nun houses over the green earth like corn at spring planting” or for “each one to have a loving heart” (216).

Frustrated that he cannot reach the crusty old monk, Brendan uses sarcasm to comment on the negativity of Gildas’ mission: “How beautiful upon the mountain are the

feet of him that bringeth good tidings!” (217) Gildas stands to reveal that he only has one leg and replies that the visitors ought not to examine his feet in search of beauty, then, for they will find none. When he loses his balance and nearly falls before Brendan catches him, however, he softens and admits, “I’m as crippled as the dark world.” The exchange leads to an understanding among the men present that all are crippled by life’s pains and that perhaps “the only work that matters in the end” is to “lend each other a hand when we’re falling” (217). Thus, Buechner suggests that Brendan’s (and all of our) path to becoming a saint is rooted in a life of selfless service rather than in performing bold missionary feats. One character claims that Christ is so helpless, “He’s got no hands to help with save our own,” and Brendan responds, “Christ have mercy *of* us then” (238, emphasis added). This use of the preposition “of” instead of the customary “on” reveals an important facet of Buechner’s Protestant liberalism: he believes that Christ’s mercy can be administered only through the work of human hands, and thus he comes close to asserting that human beings performing good deeds can save themselves. The next chapter on *Saint Julian* staunchly rebuts this suggestion of divine impotence in the face of human agency.

Like the sinners in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Brendan’s penance is a direct correction of the sins he committed before his death to self. Because he was wont to “blather for hours on end of the wonders he’d seen” during his youth, his old age is marked by long hours spent listening “silent as a stick while some poor soul spun out his own drab story” (220). Finn imagines that it is probably a sense of duty more than a loving heart that drives Brendan to practice the discipline of silence, but he believes the motivation does not matter because many draw comfort from his presence: “What he brought them of

Heaven I'm not one to say but he brought them himself. They none of them seemed the worse for it anyhow" (220). Buechner suggests that love, mercy, and humility are the keys to Brendan's redemption. After his years seeking personal glory on the high seas, Brendan spends the rest of his days serving beggars, widows, and orphans in anonymity.

Frederick Buechner asserts an intimate relationship among fiction, theology and autobiography, and he resists strict categorization of his work. His nonfiction conveys his concerns about the modern waning of faith and people's failure to glean important lessons from life experience. In his fiction, he labors to introduce an earthy theological realism to a world that is obsessed with dour apocalyptic visions. Buechner's insistence on a bawdy version of spirituality counteracts readers' harsh stereotypes of the Calvinist tradition—a puritanical culture that disdains en fleshed models of sanctity because it fears their imperfection will lead the simple astray. He believes Brendan's message is needed in our time because we live in a world dominated by pride and the celebration of selfish gain. Thus, Buechner reminds readers of the biblical mystery that it is not the strong and powerful, but the poor in spirit who shall inherit the kingdom of heaven and the meek who shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3-5).

CHAPTER FOUR

Bear Ye One Another's Burdens: Walter Wangerin's *Saint Julian*

The patron saint of carnival workers, ferrymen, hunters, wandering musicians and other nomadic souls may never have existed in history. Like St. Christopher and many other saints who were popularly canonized by the faithful before the Church instituted an official process for recognizing saints, St. Julian the Hospitaller is now generally believed to have been a figment of the collective medieval imagination. Although the details of his life can be found in the thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives known as *The Golden Legend*,¹ there is no historical evidence of Julian's having lived or died in a particular place. The mysterious and often conflicting accounts of his life suggest that this fascinating story is a compilation of numerous legends which captured the public imagination and inspired cult veneration before the saint's authenticity could be verified. Nevertheless, the details that have become associated with Julian's life are worthy of consideration, and Walter Wangerin's account is a valuable source of moral instruction and entertainment.

In Wangerin's novel, the fictional compiler of Julian's legend is an elderly pastor of a small, inner-city parish somewhere in Europe, in the late 1800s or early 1900s.² The

¹ *The Golden Legend* was a highly popular text in the Middle Ages; it was reprinted several times and based upon the influential *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine, compiled around 1275 (Ashton 41).

² A cross-reference in the 2009 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) of words such as "intimate" (1659), "puffery" (1782), and "incunabula" (1824) used by Wangerin's story-teller suggest that his fictional tale was composed in the Victorian

story of St. Julian once brought the cleric out of despair, and he is anxious to retell it for the spiritual benefit it may bring to his parishioners and others. He perceives Julian as “the Saint of them that have sinned uncommonly, whether by heart or by hand,” as well as “the Saint of every ordinary mortal” (xx).³ The anonymous character who frames the account of Julian’s life—a minister to the poor who has been saved (reconciled to God and his own mortality) by the hearing and telling of Julian’s life—reminds us of Georges Bernanos’ *The Diary of a Country Priest* and also of Brendan’s Finn. His narration of Julian’s story requires our trust and an “obedient spirit” as he tells us how it contains “hope for us all” (xix, xx). The narrator reminds any with ears to hear that sin isolates people from God and their fellow human beings, but hearing the confession of a broken sinner has the power to change lives by modeling a humble response to revelation and allowing its mystery to heal the broken-hearted. Julian’s is a tale, as the narrator tells us, “bright with interest, filled with wonders and warrings, and such marvelous human accomplishment as can take your breath away” (xix). But a simple adventure story it is not; being transformed into a saint is an arduous process for all of us who are made in the image of Christ, and for some, like Julian, it requires blood and tears.

period because of the particular diction and thematic content. The narrator uses modern spelling but his word choice is generally archaic, reinforcing his claim that his account has been cobbled together from various medieval sources. Also, the compiler mentions in the “Prologue” that he first encountered the tale of Saint Julian “in the book of a French man,” which probably refers to Gustave Flaubert’s 1877 “The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller” (xxi). Finally, the narrator references Gerard Manly Hopkins’ 1877 poem “The Windhover: To Christ Our Lord” on page 51. See below for more on the narrator and Flaubert’s version of St. Julian’s life.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all future page citations in this chapter will refer to the 2003 HarperCollins edition of Wangerin’s *Saint Julian*.

Born under miraculous signs in medieval Europe, Julian struggles with bloodlust from a young age. As a teenager reared in wealth and comfort in a noble family, he goes hunting purely for the ecstasy of the kill. After slaying all the animals in a nearby forest on the eve of his sixteenth birthday, Julian shoots a stag which mysteriously survives and speaks to the boy while an arrow protrudes from its brow. The beast's statement is ominous: Julian will murder his own parents because he has rashly slain so many of God's creatures. Like the communication Moses receives from a burning bush and Balaam's experience with a stubborn donkey, nature relays a message from God. Julian flees his home in terror of the prophecy, becomes a crusading knight in a foreign land, and takes a dark-skinned maiden as his wife. Years later, his parents come to his castle looking for him. Though Julian is away hunting, his wife receives them warmly and unwittingly offers them her bed. When Julian comes home frustrated without a kill, the stag's prediction reaches its inevitable, tragic fulfillment as he brutally slays the pair in his bed, believing them to be his unfaithful wife and her lover. Wallowing in grief and guilt after the double parricide is revealed, Julian leaves his wife and becomes a wandering beggar, seeking degradation in every form and doing good works for the poor. He tries to earn his way back into divine favor through penance, but he sees his murdered parents' faces reflected in every happy, gracious soul he encounters. After attempting suicide, he finally comes to himself in a dark wood with the assistance of a Virgil-like Almoner. He lives out the remainder of his years in a shack as an anonymous hermit ferryman. The great conqueror allows Christ's terrible mercy to conquer him, rescuing the saint-in-the-making from his own sinful nature as he learns to forgive himself and in turn accept God's forgiveness.

Within the broad strokes of Julian's tale, readers will discern several moral lessons: forgiveness and grace are possible through penance but not because of it; selfish rage can be dispelled by sacrificial suffering and mercy; an open-handed gift of hospitality counterbalances fearful and jealous guarding of one's possessions; careful peace-making redeems careless violence. Some of these messages are carried over from the original legends about St. Julian the Hospitaller and some are new to Wangerin's version. In this chapter, I will examine Wangerin's novel in its historical and theological context, considering how it compares to traditional accounts of the saint's life as well as how it fits in Wangerin's canon and alongside other works of hagiographical fiction. Also, I will assess the author's use of the narrative voice, metaphorical language, and irony in *Saint Julian*. Like Waugh and Buechner before him, Wangerin is searching for a hint of medieval mystery and holiness in this saint's life. He wants to translate whatever grace the saint has found in his medieval Catholic context for a twenty-first century Protestant audience.

Julian in History

Saint Julian the Hospitaller may never have existed, but that does not mean his story is untrue. There is no historical evidence of his having lived or died, and the mythic properties of his life suggest that his fascinating story may be a compilation of disparate legends which captured the public imagination and inspired cult veneration before the figure's historicity could be verified. Wangerin invites readers to ask, "Is it true?" in the way common to children: hoping not for a dry historical lecture, but for an affirmation

that this story reveals something true about the ways of God and humankind.⁴ The facts of Julian's life are largely drawn from *The Golden Legend* (c. 1275), but the witness offered by its title character is timeless. The themes of violence, sacrifice, selfishness, and honor do not pertain to a particular time and place; they speak truth about the human condition in all generations.⁵

Timeless as the themes in Wangerin's fiction may be, a reader cannot dismiss the novel's medieval setting. The author's expertise in Medieval History serves to ground

⁴ Virginia Owens asserts that "every cluster of human beings has gathered myths to contain their group's painfully acquired clues as to the overall shape of life.... Myth held the precious, accumulated knowledge that made it possible to live together and survive" (1190). She sees Wangerin's stories operating in this genre, reminding people how and why to live together in community with the common shape of Christian tradition to give their lives meaning. Owens distinguishes between myth and fiction by suggesting that we have lower standards for the latter: "While we look to myth to tell us the truth about life in the real world, we require fiction only to be internally consistent. What we once relied on stories to tell us, fiction no longer promises to deliver" (1191). She believes that a few contemporary writers, however, refuse to settle for mere internal consistency and instead use mythic means to make their faith manifest in the broader world. She sees Wangerin as one whose stories make their teller's faith manifest. Wangerin himself recalls how his father's story-telling could quiet his fears about chaotic existence by creating a consistent fictional cosmos (Owens 1191).

⁵ Ralph Wood praises Wangerin for offering readers of *Saint Julian*:
a sly and salutary alternative to our standard historical-critical approaches to ancient texts. For all the good they have done, the scientific excavators of Scripture—as Hans Frei and others have shown—often impoverish our reading and living of the sacred text by having us ask whether the things narrated "really happened" rather than what they theologically signify. Wangerin's fictional life of Saint Julian is neither fact or fiction but something akin to the genre that the Jewish critic Robert Alter assigns to the narrative portion of the Hebrew Bible: he calls it a non-fiction novel ("Reading" 34).

Wood maintains that Wangerin's book fits in the tradition of myth—something to be read and enjoyed and imitated as it gives our lives shape and meaning in every generation.

the various hagiographical legends in a particular era.⁶ The framing device of using a fictional compiler for the novel helps to unify the disparate accounts and lends order to a disorganized set of tales. Though the vocabulary spans centuries, the fictional cleric at the story's center places the dialogue and description in a particular place and time.

The nameless narrator is unassuming yet earnest, humble yet forthright, cautious yet bold. He introduces the text in the first few pages, alerting readers to the power of St. Julian's legend to transform a life and bolster faith. The humble cleric asks to be remembered and called by the name of Julian, "the least of him" (xxiii). The pastor continues to interject comments on the story throughout the work, correcting his audience's misunderstandings, exhorting readers to obedience and humility, and addressing any who might dismiss the particular message for which he thinks the saint ought to be remembered. The compiler closes his account with an epilogue that reminds readers of the novel's key points of moral instruction. Furthermore, he encourages others to imitate his art as he imitates the saint who in turn follows Christ. The priest-narrator releases his tale "into the hearts of its hearers, where it shall abide as your own experience until one of you...is moved to tell the tale again, unchanged...and yet, like sunrise, ever new" (207). He contends that "to dance" with the story, rather than to analyze it, brings the tale and its protagonist to life, and therein lies salvation (208).

The fictional minor cleric who compiles the legend of St. Julian describes how he faithfully pursues the role of a "plain and necessary" pastor; he explains that he has been a "common, consistent man" preaching sermons of "quiet caution and quieter comforts"

⁶ Wangerin's first and second novels, *The Book of the Dun Cow* (1978) and *The Book of Sorrows* (1985), also feature characters from medieval legends and reflect the author's interest in and study of the literature of the time period developed during his graduate work at Miami University (Owens 1191).

and battling “wanhope” wherever he sees it because depression has been his own “private malady” (xvii-xviii). He seeks an audience with an “obedient spirit” as he ends his life by relaying the story of St. Julian the Hospitaller (xix). The narrator explains that this story fascinates him because it describes how our ancestors lived their lives “more than an age ago—the tale is as accurate as my own persistent studies can have made it” after extensive readings in “Old Latin, ecclesial history, the means of sanctity, the Sweet Rose of the Mystics” (xx).

In order to compile the tale we are reading, the narrator relates that he “made a sincere study of the contexts of...the lives of our spiritual ancestors, clothing, worship, fears, faith and feigning and fightings.... I am assiduous for the small fact” (xx). He requests the reader’s trust that he is faithfully relaying these facts but also belief when he says that this saint’s life has sustained him, given him hope, and helped him recognize the truth of life in a new way. He admits that he has sinned “Davidic sins,” but he refuses to recount them because that would be a form of pride (xxi). These sins have forced him into a spiritual solitude wherein he has turned in upon himself, acting outwardly normal to his congregation but internally suffering from guilt. However, in the midst of his private anguish, he read about an ancient saint and “in the life and the deeds of Saint Julian my secret self found form and direction and terrible truth and confession and hope at the last” (xxi). He has found new life through entering Julian’s life “by the force of my imagination and the gravity of my own interior life” (xxii). From the story of the “terrible and beautiful Saint Julian” the compiler has learned to love God and the poor “in wisdom and in mystery” and has gained an “altogether contented” heart (xxii). He claims that he has included these personal facts and confessions not to call attention to himself

but “to draw your trust in my telling” that readers might themselves “take up residence in the tale of this Saint” (xxiii). On his tombstone, he requests the following inscription: “I am, my Lord, your Julian, the Least of him” (xxiii). Julian’s tale thus becomes a variation on the confession narrative for the fictional cleric-narrator.

The narrative interjections in *Saint Julian* serve to reinforce the author’s Lutheran and pastoral sensibilities.⁷ He highlights the challenges of composing historical fiction when sources are silent or conflicting. In the first lines of the novel, the narrator admits that he does not know the saint’s mother’s name. He has searched for it in the historical records, but “in no account” is it recorded (3). Nonetheless, she is an important figure in the life of the saint, and honor demands that readers acknowledge her place. Later, the narrator comments on the widespread problems with recovering the holy names and historical details about St. Julian that have been “lost in obscurity” (14). He calls readers to join him in seeing this loss as a blessing in disguise:

I am not sorry to labor within this dimness surrounding the clear center of my tale.... I am not sorry that the tale must be told uprooted from the names and the dates of more cogent chronicles: for such unmooring grants a timelessness to the Saint and to all that I shall say of him, yea, though of the past, and of our deepest past, Saint Julian *ought* to seem to dog our heels, ever close behind us, in whatever age we make our habitations and our meanings (14).

⁷ Wangerin spent more than a decade in the 1980s serving as the pastor to an inner-city, mostly-black Lutheran congregation in Evansville, IN, before he became a writer-in-residence at Valparaiso University (Owens 1191). He relates many of his familial and pastoral experiences in his 1988 book, *Miz Lil and the Chronicles of Grace*. In his 1994 novel, *The Crying for a Vision*, Wangerin uses the Lakota mythic world as a parallel to the Christian Gospels. He explains that both emphasize that “we are to see through the material world to the spiritual, rather than separating them into dual universes. Creation is a lens we use to focus on the holy” (Owens 1192).

Like other hagiographers before him, the narrator sees the saint's life as timeless and therefore more true and applicable to the situation of the current generation than the example of their own heroes.⁸

The narrator often comments on the nature of truth and historicity in the story. After the conflicting accounts concerning Julian's miraculous birth, he admits that he cannot "vouch for the truth of the slippery tongues of gossip" (25). The accuracy of the underlying facts, however, he pledges with "absolute surety as a scholar and a pastor and an intimate of a thousand private moments" (25). The cleric has witnessed the intimate moments shared among families as they rejoice at the birth of a healthy baby, and it is this universal love, joy, and peace that the narrator assures us was present at the birth of the saint. The narrator also offers humorous commentary on human nature, as when he notes in an aside that a Cardinal who claims to be engaging in conversation with a priest "in gratitude for your hospitality" was more likely in love with the sound of his own voice (100). Even when the reports conflict or do not serve his purpose, the pastor maintains that he will include them in his account "as I am pledged to record for your benefit each detail I myself have been able to uncover" (77).

Some details that the narrator desperately sought, such as the name of Julian's gentle wife, have failed to emerge despite persistent research "down a warren of historical tunnels" (118). Although he admits to having "danced with her" in his

⁸ The universal applicability of stories is the reason Wangerin believes they stand at the center of all religious belief:

Religions do exist without doctrines and theologies; but no religion has ever existed without a story at its core, not as an illustration of some doctrine, but rather as the very truth, the evidence and the testimony of God's action for the sake of the believers (*Little Lamb* 102-103).

He sees stories as essential cultural myths, and his rewriting of a medieval saint's life is an effort to participate in creating and sustaining those myths.

imagination, the compiler cannot conjure the woman's name from the obscurity of history (118). He believes that good story-tellers must be willing to learn their characters "not by fact and analysis only," for a single-minded focus on historical facts will render them unable to "know their hearts nor grant them life" (118). Frustrating as his inability to name his character is, the narrator implores readers to love Julian's wife "even as I do, on account of the sacred solemnity and the ineffable grace of this woman's suffering" (119). He continues his entreaty by comparing her to a biblical character, Jephthah's daughter, "another woman who walks unnamed through a story which is named for the man she loves" (119). This comparison echoes Wangerin's belief that Julian's story carries the same weight as a biblical one.⁹ The narrator makes the biblical parallel explicit by describing the virtue that the two women have in common with Christ: "to suffer because of the sin of another, and yet to do so for love of that other" (120).

When Julian finally commits the parricide foretold at the beginning of the story, the narrator laments the burden of relating the details: "Ah, dear reader, I am more sorry than I can say. But I have been enjoined to tell the truth" (137). He admits the temptation to gloss over the gruesome facts, but a commitment to truth-telling requires him to include everything. Because of his own struggles with "wanhope," he knows the power of this story to help a sinner consumed by guilt to accept grace and mercy. After engaging in numerous acts of penance, Julian allows himself to hope that his good deeds

⁹ Wangerin states his belief in *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith* that God is often apprehended only through human experiences: "God is not a God of the pulpit, though the pulpit proclaim him. He is a God in and of the histories of humankind" (80). He believes that the incarnation is God's "personal immersion in the events of the lives of the people" (Wangerin *Ragman* 83). Moreover, the stories of the Bible and the saints represent experience on a universal scale. Therefore, telling stories is "the fullness of witness" (Wangerin *Ragman* 91). In an essential sense for Wangerin, the story-teller who relates the truth of God interacting with humans in the world is an evangelist.

may someday earn him the right to rejoin human community. The narrator, however, knows that hope can only come through trust in Christ: “Ah, Julian! Julian, you will break my heart! Such trust is perilous, Julian!” (162). The Lutheran pastor addresses the saint directly, and thus the reader who identifies with him, and begs them not to trust in works but in faith alone.¹⁰

There are a few key differences between Wangerin’s *Saint Julian* and the stories recorded in *The Golden Legend*. First, pagan witches curse the baby Julian and condemn him to murder his parents. His father seeks to murder the child, but his mother protects him (Ryan 127). When the stag alerts Julian to the prediction, he runs away from home to escape it. He fulfills the curse many years later, however, after mistaking the couple in his bed for his wife and her lover. The biggest difference comes when Julian’s wife claims joint responsibility for the terrible act, and she refuses to abandon him: “Far be it from me, dearest brother, to desert you and let you go away without me! I have shared your joy, now I shall be with you to share your sorrow!” (Ryan 128). Julian and his wife work out their penance by building hospitals and houses for the poor as well as ferrying pilgrims. A leprous stranger reveals himself to be Christ in disguise, and he foretells that Julian and his wife, “full of good works and almsgiving,” will find forgiveness and eternal rest (Ryan 128). This account differs in that Julian does not have to face his dark night of the soul alone, and the narrative suggests that his redemption comes through the good works he performs—a notion that Wangerin explicitly rejects.

¹⁰ Julian’s penitence does not lie in acts of righteousness that somehow counterbalance his terrible sins; instead, the saint must move from recognizing his dead parents in everyone he meets to acknowledging Christ in all creation. Wangerin helps us see that when the saint finally accepts God’s grace, loving and serving his former enemies as a ferryman is a natural response.

Gustave Flaubert's account of Julian's life is almost identical in detail to Wangerin's story (287-305). At birth, his parents receive the prediction that he will become a saint and marry into an emperor's family. As a young child, Julian gets a taste for blood after he kills a mouse who interrupts his concentration in church. After slaughtering an entire valley of deer, a stag curses him to murder his own parents. He almost brings the curse to fruition twice, once when he drops a sword near his father's head and again when he pins his mother's white shawl with a javelin because it looks like a bird's wings. He seeks to escape his fortune by running away from home like Oedipus. He earns a reputation as a mighty Christian warrior, marries rich, and settles down. He avoids hunting, however, until his wife convinces him to go, but in the forest he is haunted by the spirits of all the animals he has killed. He returns home to find a strange couple in his bed, and he murders them because he assumes that his wife has been unfaithful. After recognizing his misdeed, he flees again and becomes a beggar and a ferryman. He fails to commit suicide when he recognizes his father's face in his own reflection in the pool where he intended to drown himself. When a hideous leper comes during a storm seeking safe passage across the river, food, Julian's bed, and even the warmth of his body, Julian does not hesitate and the leper is revealed to be Jesus Christ, who forgives the saint and takes him directly to heaven. Besides being much briefer than Wangerin's tale, Flaubert's novella differs chiefly in the fact that Wangerin does not blame the saint's wife for his doomed hunting trip, nor does he exonerate Julian of his responsibility by claiming that he killed his parents by mistake. Most importantly, Wangerin does not allow the saint's good deeds to redeem him. Instead, it is faith in the mercy of Christ that allows him to be saved.

Dancing and Truth-Telling in Metaphorical Language

Throughout his nonfiction works, Wangerin maintains that knowledge of God comes through hearing and telling stories. He emphasizes the power of myths and fairy tales to transmit the basic tenets of faith. In *The Orphean Passages*, Wangerin writes:

In order to comprehend the experience one is living in, he must, by imagination and by intellect, be lifted out of it. He must be given to see it whole; but since he can never wholly gaze upon his own life while he lives it, he gazes upon the life that, in symbol, comprehends his own. Art presents such lives, such symbols. Myth especially—persisting as a mother of truth through countless generations and for many disparate cultures...—myth presents, myth *is*, such a symbol, shorn and unadorned, refined and true. And when the one who gazes upon that myth suddenly, in dreadful recognition, cries out, “There I am! That is me!” then the marvelous translation has occurred: he is lifted out of himself to see himself wholly (14-15).

Wangerin not only affirms the possibility of truth in myth but refers to myth as “the mother of truth.” When we see and acknowledge the truth in myth or fairy stories, especially when we see the truth about ourselves, Wangerin believes it is both a terrible and wonderful thing. Myth is how we comprehend our own experience. In *From Homer to Harry Potter: A Handbook on Myth and Fantasy*, Matthew Dickerson and David O’Hara claim that the power of a myth comes both from its universality and from the concreteness of its symbols—“symbols that are freed from the limiting association with one single people, one single time, one single place” (49). They cite Wangerin as an example of how myth at its best can offer both “a distant view of the whole and a close mirror of the personal” (Dickerson 49). Myth and fairy tale provide the symbols that enable our imaginations to make sense of the world, and to see it as meaningful. Immersing ourselves in the world of fantasy will both enrich our imagination and train our morals. Wangerin sees his contemporaries choosing either to dismiss the central

myths of the Christian tradition as mere children's fancy or allegorizing them to an implausible extent. His *Saint Julian* charts a middle path by which the fantastic elements of a saint's life can be balanced with real human experiences.¹¹

A literary device which Wangerin frequently employs is the use of "as if" and "like" constructions to shift between concrete physical details and intangible supernaturalism. When Julian disappears from his parents' castle after nearly killing them by accident, the narrator reports that the saint "vanished *like* a dead man from the pages of the chroniclers" (91, emphasis added). Although Julian has not yet died to himself, Wangerin foretells the method by which the saint will be saved. When the river goes mad, the townspeople believe that the boy's disappearance and the weather are connected "for as falcons reflect their master's commands, so do wind and the storms of heaven reflect the mind of Almighty God" (91). This conceit signals a connection between the physical world and the supernatural realm. Wangerin reminds readers that people of the medieval time period saw no reason to divide the world into separate spheres as modernists are wont to do. The Lord and Lady of the castle mourn their son

¹¹ Robert Siegel's review of *Saint Julian* says that the book "defies easy categorization. Neither novel nor traditional saint's tale nor romance, it combines elements of all three" (11). Siegel especially admires the way Wangerin transforms the medieval saint's life to speak to a contemporary audience. The mystery of how "extremes of goodness and sinfulness dwell side by side in the soul of this reluctant saint" is a timeless question (Siegel 11). He admires how Wangerin seamlessly incorporates the miraculous and truths about everyday faith into his fictional world.

In Dick Staub's 2004 interview with Wangerin, he marvels that despite the sense of "mystery and magic" in his work, the author retains a clear sense "that God is part of every event of everyday life": "Absolutely every breath we take, every event that takes place, takes its place on this broad stage of the divinity of God. He is the protagonist, we are the antagonists" ("Walter"). Wangerin asks readers to remember that in biblical times, "the air itself was fraught and filled with spirits" ("Walter"). Whenever we are tempted to define things only by our physical senses, Wangerin enjoins us to be aware of the fact "that spirits fill the entire world and that God imbues everything" with His presence ("Walter").

and “wander the hallways of their perplexity *as if* these were tunnels underground” (92, emphasis added). The conditional voice here creates a vivid picture of grief so consuming as to make one forget about the outside world. The prayers of the Almoner on Julian’s behalf sail to heaven “*like* a tender whistling wind” (93, emphasis added). This simile makes the abstract notion of prayer concrete but also captures its ephemeral nature.

The narrator frequently points out that Julian’s red hair is the color of fire, but this comparison also serves to remind us of the danger of his unfettered rage. When he is attempting to organize troops for battle against the Saracens, he has no patience with undisciplined warriors: “The Red Knight’s rage broke through *like* fire...releasing him to fight *like* a demon of terrible calm” (100, emphasis added). In contrast to the righteous anger that his allies see and praise in him, Wangerin warns us that Julian’s violent fury is as dangerous and uncontrollable as a wildfire.

In the prelude to Julian’s parricide, he goes hunting “in the manner of animals” (127). His actions are not guided by holy wisdom and prudence, for he acts like an animal without thought or reason. Julian feels a “lovely, limitless strength now pouring *like* wine into his limbs.... *Like* a deer he bounded the planted fields, his face filled with the wind of his going, his heart *as* the falcon released from her jesses” (127, emphasis added). The comparison to the effect of alcohol on one’s decision-making method and the repeated analogies to animal-like behavior alerts the audience to the danger of acting by instinct rather than submitting oneself to God’s will.

Rather than suggesting that Julian’s fulfillment of the dreadful prophecy is pre-determined, Wangerin shows Julian being offered multiple opportunities to repent and

turn from his wicked ways. While Julian is out hunting, he spots a wolf that is seemingly taunting him to kill it: “In that peculiar instant, Julian knew as a dogmatic certainty that he had a choice. Action sped forward on instinct alone; but when that action paused, thought flowed in” (128). Julian has trained his body to kill with a machine-like efficiency, but Wangerin wants us to know that his mind and spirit are cognizant of the immorality of his actions.

When Julian’s frustration at being unable to kill animals follows him home, Wangerin turns to metaphor to describe his temperament: “He is a ravening lion...hungry is his blood tooth and unsatisfied.... It is killing on his mind. It is the will to kill he has brought home with him” (132). The time for choosing reason is past, and now Julian acts without thought or restraint. His hair drips sweat “*as if* he were leviathan rising from the sea” (133, emphasis added). Wangerin here draws a parallel between a mythical underwater dragon-beast and the horrific act Julian is about to commit. Even after the murders, Julian’s heart is “still galloping *as if* it were the charger racing still at breakneck speeds, now that the battlefield is razed and all the dead are down” (135, emphasis added). This use of the conditional voice suggests that Julian’s animalistic instincts have run away with his ability to exercise human reason and restraint. The connection between concrete reality and the spiritual realm has blended to the point of eliminating all distinction between the two.

Given the way Julian has allowed his natural instincts to rule him, part of his process of being redeemed involves a reclaiming of an appreciation of the rightful order of nature in the kingdom of God. He must act like St. Francis in acknowledging and protecting even the most humble of God’s creatures. As Julian walks toward home, he

tenderly greets the flowers by the roadside one by one: “‘God mercy thee,’ to a yellow trump, ‘God speed thee,’ to another. Thus he began to salute each natural thing in its springtime freshness: ‘God give thee grace!’ to trees and the gangs of leaves unfolding on their branches” (181). Julian even shows mercy to the rats and ravens who have made their home in the rubble of his father’s castle (190). Wangerin says that “in almost any common thing, the glory of God may strike forth and call your name” (“Glory” 79). As a writer, he believes it is his job “to seek God in the common things; indeed, to believe that God is already in the common things ahead of and outside of me” (“Glory” 72). Wangerin’s vocation is to find and acknowledge the glory of God in the world, to engage and dance with it, and to give the glory back to God as praise.

The Comic Vision in Wangerin’s Mythology

Wangerin uses humor and irony in a way similar to Waugh in *Helena*. He frequently emphasizes the discrepancy between what the characters understand or expect and what the readers know. For example, we know the terrible act that Julian will commit from the beginning of the story, but the main players do not. Julian’s father loves his son and boasts about the day when the boy will be able to “heft the bones of his withering, crippled father, bearing me from the hearth to my bed and back to the hearth again” (11). In fact, Julian will carry his father’s bones only once, after he has murdered him. Later, the weapon that almost kills his father—a mighty battle-ax passed down from his ancestors—resonates in tone with Julian’s voice as he recites Matthew 5:7: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy” (13). Julian’s lack of mercy toward all creation results in his parents’ murder, and the only way for Julian to be saved is to throw himself on the mercy of Christ. The author frequently contrasts Julian’s interior abyss of

guilt with the outward beauty of the natural world and its inhabitants. The world praises Julian as a saint for most of his life, but readers know he is a profound sinner. This discrepancy allows us to easily identify with the saint, as opposed to the usual heroes of ancient hagiography, whose renowned faultlessness we distrust even as we admire it.¹²

Wangerin depicts Julian as a flawed child from the beginning of the narrative: readers see him enjoying a secret hunting trip while others think he is praying, and he is honored for his piety just after we witness him feeding communion bread to a mouse to lure it to its death. His failings, however, make him a more believable and round character. At the age of four, Julian feels the “heat of anger” towards a mouse stealing Eucharist crumbs, but his mother’s gentle touch and a renewed focus on the crucifix cools his temper (33). The culminating words of the Latin Mass “hoc est corpus,” in which the priest declares the bread transubstantiated into the body of Christ, sound like magic¹³ to the boy when he notices the mouse emerging from a chink in the wall whenever it hears them (32). When the child tries to recreate the scene later by repeating the priest’s words, however, the mouse suspects a trick and only emerges when the bread

¹² In an interview about *Saint Julian*, Wangerin describes why he thinks his story is both timely and timeless:

I think so many of the saints that we look for and look toward are people who seem to be beyond our bounds, who accomplish miracles that we cannot do ourselves. But Julian, although he began as the son of a lord and lady of great wealth, sins the sins that we all do. When we follow him, we follow someone who is very much like ourselves. I think most of us feel as if we’re not in the height of heroism... (“Walter”).

Julian’s sins isolate him just as ours do, and running away from them only delays the inevitable. Like Waugh and Buechner before him, Wangerin introduces us to an everyman type of saint—one who has grave flaws but whose life experiences reveal the mighty power and determination of God to save humanity from themselves.

¹³ The OED suggests that the phrase “hocus pocus,” often used by magicians at the culmination of a trick, may be a parody of the Latin liturgy.

crumbs hit the floor. The boy makes the mistake of thinking that the holy words can be “plucked up and saved for real applications in the real world, no longer for games in the false worlds of story and imagination” (32). Julian feels intoxicated by realizing that he holds the power of death in his hands. This is quickly followed by shame and guilt for an “irreversible” act he cannot “call back again,” but the seeds of bloodlust have been planted (36). Wangerin’s narrative suggests that the “real” magic is the miracle of Christ’s work on the cross, and Julian will be happiest and most successful when he remembers this fact instead of dismissing the significance of the priest’s words.

As a dutiful child, Julian sees God’s love reflected in his parents’ care and training of him. After he commits parricide, however, this same realization haunts him because he feels he has murdered Christ Himself. Julian’s mother acts as Christ to the young boy as she teaches him to imitate her words and actions in managing the household: “For when thou canst perform the chores of every least servant in thine house, only then art thou lord of all and, at the same time, free of all” (39). This is a practical lesson as well as a moral one; the master must become the servant of all in order to lead by example and command respect from others. Julian’s father and the Almoner together reinforce this lesson about the importance of serving others: “Even as we serve the least of his brothers, we serve him, father, Christ our Lord and Heaven’s king” (46).

Throughout the narrative, people observe Julian’s piety and compare him to Christ. When he is a child, the priest finds him “alert and obedient in all his youthful lessons”:

All who taught him loved him, for that he seemed so much to love the learning.... ‘He increases,’ as saith St. Luke of the young Christ, ‘in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.’ But Julian’s deepest

longing, his own intensest longing, was to grow ever more expert in the use of weapons (46).

While the priest is praising Julian's holy devotion to learning, the young man is lusting after earthly knowledge of how to kill. When he first shoots a bird with a bow and arrow, Julian's heart stops and his scalp "tingled at the thing that he had done—nay, at the thing that he *could do!*" (48). He holds his breath "in a passion of unrealized delight" until the bird falls to the earth, and he "split his face in grinning" (48). He sees his bow as an "engine so immediate to his impulse that even thought needn't intervene" (48). This thrill resulting from thoughtless violence sets the stage for Julian's later crime. He conceals his hunting skill because he derives such pleasure from it that he feels it must be a sinful urge. By leaving it unconfessed, his secret bloodlust indeed becomes a sin. His hunting arm takes on a "godlike" quality because he holds the power of life and death over animals and later human beings (49).

Wangerin draws a parallel between Julian and Christ by using words from Gerard Manly Hopkins' poem "The Windhover: To Christ Our Lord" in describing Julian's knighting ceremony. He first describes the "very carnival of colors" at the event, especially focusing on the fall leaves covering the field "in a pageantry of yellows, oranges, and fire-burst vermilions" (51). Next, the narrator calls Julian "my Chevalier!" in a direct echo of the poem which compares a majestic falcon to Christ. In the scene which follows, the townspeople who have assembled to celebrate Julian's 16th birthday remark on the subdued demeanor of the honoree. They suspect that his reticence is due to humility and piety, especially when they hear the Almoner report that he found Julian "howling for mercy in the pure-dark chapel," where he spent the night "keeping vigil. Purifying his soul" (53). The villagers and even the Almoner believe this act was

inspired by his devout character, but readers learn that the motivation for his repentance has a much darker source.

Instead of “secluding himself to meditate upon five wounds and a crown of thorns,” as a castle servant imagines, Julian has slipped away from the festivities in his honor to slaughter all the animals in the nearby forest with his bow and arrows (54). Julian allows his secret passion for killing to consume him until he begins acting without thought for the consequences: “With a wordless jubilation, with mindless persistence and a terrible precision, Julian went a-hunting” (55). No living thing, neither on land nor in the air nor in water, is safe from his unfailing arrows: “He did not shoot but that he hit. He did not hit, but that he killed. And he did not kill but killing increased both will and the skill for killing more” (56). He is obsessed with finding a mighty stag that appeared in a dream to taunt him, and he will not rest until he finds and murders it. He shuts out the outcry raised in the wake of his carnage—“animal horror, creation’s grief and the Maker’s lamentation” (56). Even when he finally finds the deer at the end of the day in an Eden-like secluded valley that stirs his spirit “to a genuine reverence,” Julian still does not show mercy (58). Instead, he begins “killing them, killing them, filling the valley with his slaughter, murdering every deer” (58). When he finally shoots the great stag through the forehead, however, the animal does not fall to the ground dead as countless others before him. He walks deliberately toward Julian and utters the terrible curse that will haunt the young knight for the rest of his days: “As thou hast taken the lives of the forest, so shalt thou kill thy mother dead!... And as thou hast murdered me, my son, so shalt thou murder thy father and thy lord!” (60).

The buck's curse hangs over Julian's life from that point onward. Even when he tries to flee it like Moses running from the job of being God's spokesman to the Egyptian pharaoh or Jonah fleeing the role of prophet to the people of Ninevah, God's terrible justice finds him out. Julian nearly kills his mother with an arrow aimed at her hat, which he mistakes for a swan. During the joyous Christmas festivities that follow, as during his knighting ceremony, Julian refuses to participate in the celebration because he is haunted by the foretelling of murder, but people think he is acting like a pious future saint:

He was ever bowed, as the people believed, in pious meditations. Of course they would never hold his solemnity against the young man; for hadn't he, ever since his knighting, shown a special sanctity in all his ways? Surely, the cross of Christ had, like a long sword, pierced the heart of the lord's only son, whose bones must one day become relics deserving reverence (76).

The irony in this passage derives from the fact that people mistake Julian's behavior for holiness when in fact it is guilt that motivates him. His bones will indeed become relics deserving reverence, but not until after he commits an unthinkable crime and learns to surrender to the mercy of Christ.

When the adolescent Julian lets his passion for killing consume him during a disagreement about being allowed to go fight in the Crusades, his defiance and pride in his own strength lead him to nearly sever his father's neck with a heavy battle-ax. After his father pleads with him to stay home and protect his wife and castle, he recognizes the point when he ought to have acquiesced to his father's request: "But he took more swallows of wine. And emotions in him were like a horse already running and hard to halt; besides, there was greater glory in a war, and life was more honorable when death was near" (85). The comparison between emotions and a runaway horse is ironic because when Julian does finally kill his father, the narrator tells us that his animal

passions have consumed him, and his heart beats in his chest like a battle-horse still charging across the field even after the enemy has been slain (135). After the nearly fatal accident, Julian laments: “How thin is the glaze ‘twixt love and brutality. A little heat only, and kissing is killing instantly. How, then, can we save ourselves from the cunning of our own deepest cravings?” (87). The question at the end of this statement is ironic because Wangerin wants readers to acknowledge that they are indeed helpless to save themselves. Julian’s question is in line with St. Paul, who does not understand his sinful urges: “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15).

When Julian is triumphant in battle against the dark-skinned Moors, clerics again misinterpret his holiness for the blessings of God and signs that Julian is becoming a “New Saint in our Heaven” (99). Wangerin reminds us through irony that self-imposed pious acts do not make one a saint; only God can redeem a sinful human heart. After committing the murders, Julian flees human companionship and becomes a destitute beggar. People misunderstand the disappearance of the knight they know as honorable and self-controlled, however, and they imagine that Elijah himself has come to bear him to heaven (146). Wangerin’s narrator follows the actual movements of the saint, and traces his miserable spiral into despair. Despite his desire to die, Julian’s body betrays him by seeking food. He feels undeserving of charity, and kindness wounds him to the core. Even before the murder, Julian’s father hugs and kisses him when he returns from the war but the boy’s guilt so overwhelms him that he feels pain at his father’s tenderness:

How could this be?—that the love of his father had become a scalding thing? Well, but the love of his father was oblivious of Julian’s truer self. The one whom his father was embracing could never equal the one whom

his father *thought* he was embracing, and Julian suffered the difference all privately within himself alone (81).

Julian's shame at his sinful acts turns him in upon himself—in the way Martin Luther writes that sin manifests as an inward focus¹⁴—and renders him unable to receive love from his father or anyone else. Julian's crisis reminds readers of the attitude of the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable who felt so undeserving of his father's love and forgiveness that he ate pig slops for months before he finally “came to his senses” and begged forgiveness (Luke 15:17). Wangerin sees Julian failing to find peace because he is seeking salvation through his own efforts: “He tries to find his own salvation in his craft, in his own person, in his mind, in his hand, and then finally, when he recognizes that God will not allow him to take the next step, he becomes just a kind man” (“Walter”).

Julian's guilt presents a painful picture of masochistic self-loathing that persists for years. Mercy and beauty cause him physical agony, and his wife's love is unbearable because he does not believe he deserves anyone's forgiveness. His pride so paralyzes him that he cannot even imagine accepting God's love, which drives him to despair and a suicide attempt. He waits for death in the manner of Vladimir and Estragon's nihilistic existence in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: “Waiting, and yet not waiting at all,

¹⁴ In Luther's *Lectures on Romans*, he asserts that salvation is impossible without extensive testing by tribulation:

This is so because, due to original sin, our nature is so curved in upon itself at its deepest levels that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself in order to enjoy them...but does not even know that, in this wicked, twisted, crooked way, it seeks everything, including God, only for itself (159).

For Luther as for Wangerin, humans' sinful nature means that they tend to abuse the natural order, using God and His gifts for selfish purposes. Sin may begin by caring for oneself more than for the community, but it ends in considering oneself as God.

since a wait assumes an end to waiting, something still to come” (147). Robert Siegel suggests that Wangerin’s novel may lead readers to “feel vicariously lightened and purged by Julian’s suffering and ultimate redemption as by an act of worship or by viewing great tragedy” (11). Wangerin consistently reminds readers that heavenly mercy is always available to those who seek it with a humble heart. While the animals in *The Book of the Dun Cow* battle an external evil, Wurm, Julian models how to conquer an internal evil—debilitating and isolating guilt that refuses to accept costly grace. At the moment of his death, the saint sees that he has spent his entire life wrestling—first with God and second within himself, and he thereby communicates an important Lutheran doctrine: the process of redemption is never easy and comes only when one ceases striving and falls on the mercy of Christ alone to be numbered among the “least of these” in God’s service.

The saint in Wangerin’s hagiographical fiction offers a particular Christian message for our time: young people can overcome the world’s temptation to indulge violence and pride by becoming the servants of all until Christ restores the faithful to a place of grace and favor in His kingdom. Christ’s commandment to bear one another’s burdens, therefore, means relinquishing one’s own interest to promote the glory of God. Wangerin believes this prophesy is needed in our time to address several pressing issues: the consequences of unfettered rage and random acts of violence, our contested definition of freedom, the fear of terrorism after 9/11, the problems of pain and suffering, and the postmodern crisis of identity. Wangerin reminds Christians that whoever would be great in the kingdom of God must become the servant of all, and whatsoever believers do unto the least of these, they do unto Christ. The Lutheran tradition of cheap grace—what

Martin Luther himself feared his descendants would struggle to overcome—is Wangerin’s chief enemy. In *Saint Julian*, Wangerin offers a healthy corrective to the excesses of his religious inheritance without burying himself and his readers in guilt. In *Julian*, he creates a character who overcomes the terrible burden of his primordial guilt by means of a grace that is not cheap but deeply self-sacrificing.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Trials of Rendering Saintly Faith into Fiction

The novelists in this study demonstrate that truth-telling is a dangerous and often costly vocation. Caroline Gordon speculates in a 1951 letter to Walker Percy that many writers ought rather to be praying because they incorrectly surmise that writing is an easier spiritual discipline and more likely to end in personal gain. Rather than an escape from reality, Flannery O'Connor contends that writing fiction is "a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system" (*Mystery* 77). Evelyn Waugh, Frederick Buechner, and Walter Wangerin reveal in their fiction that they have a sense of the unqualified surrender necessary to give fictional embodiment to divine truth, to incorporate—in the sense of giving flesh to an ideal—the Christian tradition in three modern fictional narratives about saints.

Some critics argue that writers of religious fiction ply their artistic talent in the interest of promoting a preconceived view of the divine. This dissertation has shown that novelists do indeed struggle with this temptation, and sometimes they are guilty of the sin of compromising their art for the sake of highlighting a spiritual truth. But when they succeed in resisting the urge to sentimentalize, the writers have at their disposal a genre and subject matter that are inherently powerful. For better and for worse, they weave their own life-stories into the fictionalized accounts of saints' lives. Their obsessions with sin and penance, their fears of abandonment and death, their concerns about strained

relationships with parents and difficult neighbors—all find a place in these writers’ hagiographical narratives.

Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin understand divine revelation to be present in all aspects of the natural world, and they seek to make this understanding real in their fiction. Sometimes they succeed brilliantly; at other times the seams in their tapestry of art and faith are glaringly visible—to the point that they compromise the fabric’s integrity. These writers’ greatest strengths all too quickly become their greatest liabilities when they make artistic concessions for the purpose of bearing witness to the Christian faith. St. Augustine has famously defined sacraments as “signs pertaining to things divine, or visible forms of an invisible grace” (qtd. in Hansen *Stay* 2). The Church has struggled over the centuries to appropriately limit this definition to verifiable channels of grace, but twentieth-century Christian artists increasingly insist that writing can be viewed as a sacrament insofar as it occasions grace-filled encounters between humanity and God. Although these three novelists acknowledge that evangelizing is best left out of fiction, the impulse for a Christian writer to indulge in what Jacques Maritain terms “didacticism” may be more easily confessed than avoided (9). Writers with religious concerns often struggle to determine the appropriate balance between moralizing and storytelling. Smug religiosity and propaganda, however, always detract from the pure magic of good art.

Christian fiction writer and literary critic Ron Hansen affirms the power of hagiography by tracing its influence on a sixteenth-century sinner-turned-saint in an essay on St. Ignatius of Loyola. Hansen posits that unrepentant sinners and future saints alike ought to spend time examining classical and contemporary saints’ lives because we

all need “to have our complacency and mediocrity goaded, and to highlight our lame urge to go forward with the familiar rather than the difficult and serious” (Elie *Tremor* 80). He rightly identifies the tension and discomfort we feel when we read a version of the holy lives because their humble greatness bears an implicit criticism of our very real human foibles. Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin tap into this power with their hagiographical fiction, and, despite some setbacks and occasional romantic moralizing, they bring the contemporary witness of three nearly-forgotten saints to life on the page.

Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin use various literary techniques to accomplish their purpose of engaging religious faith through fiction—genre experimentation, narrative voice, humor, magical realism, metaphorical and visionary language. This dissertation analyzed hagiographical novels to assess their particular artistic and theological effect by deconstructing the primary literary devices they employ. These modern hagiographers have assessed what they think is missing in our contemporary age, and their fiction is oriented toward resolving what they perceive as a lack of appreciation for holiness. Waugh idealizes the supernatural, so he writes about a saint who goes after a physical symbol of faith to represent the inner transformation of baptism and belief. Buechner idealizes the natural world, so he conjures a saint who seeks a celestial paradise but finds hope and love in his earthly companions. Wangerin yearns to show his readers a way to ease the weight of sin and guilt so he retells an ancient legend about a seemingly hopeless case to show the triumphant power of God’s grace.

I contend that scholars and laypeople should read and study these works because they reflect the conflict that people of faith who compose fiction always face: how do I subject my belief system to the pattern of the story I am telling, or how do I make this

story convey the religious truths I subscribe to? Erring on one side or the other of this delicate balance always engenders negative criticism, not least from the writer himself. These three works have been denigrated by both secular and pious readers, but the novelists all say they are pleased with their final product and believe it accomplishes their dual purpose of: 1) telling a good story; and 2) conveying their beliefs. Thus, analyzing these novels allows us to determine if the writers did what they said they wanted to do and if their project can and should be imitated by others.

When the realms of art and faith intersect, the results can be disastrous or masterful. Flannery O'Connor claims that the Christian writer who aims to reveal the mysteries of God "will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is. An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God" (*Collected* 811). O'Connor recognizes that cheap grace and smarmy piety have no place in great literature. She claims to push the limits of reality in her fiction because she cannot help but see beyond them: "All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality" (O'Connor *Collected* 815).¹ O'Connor's vision of reality, like that of Waugh, Buechner, and

¹ O'Connor defends the "grotesque" quality of her fiction in her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country":

I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction.... When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of

Wangerin, is not confined to the natural realm. Each writer finds a way to communicate his or her belief that witnessing the truths of Christian reality in fictional form is a necessary challenge.

In *God Laughs & Plays*, David James Duncan parses the nature of “truth” as it appears in fiction and nonfiction writing. He contends that the media conspire to convince people that what they hear firsthand from a news report is “true” or “real” as opposed to the imaginative works of a fiction writer like Twain or Dostoevsky: “This is nonsense. Insofar as literature enlivens imaginations, firms our grasp of reality, or strengthens our regard for fellow humans, it serves the world” (Duncan 190). The three writers in this study would agree with this assessment, and their works are framed to expand our understanding of truth by cultivating imagination, solidifying faith, and bracing compassion. On the nature of truth-telling, Emily Dickinson advises:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind— (Johnson 1129)

Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin explore this admonition through writing fiction. Their non-fiction prose tells us that they had a clear idea of the Christian “Truth” they wanted

hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures (*Collected* 804-6).

O’Connor imagines herself in the tradition of the prophets, shouting truth to a nearly deaf world and drawing “large and startling figures” for those who are nearly blind to the Gospel message. Like the biblical characters of Moses, Jonah, and Obadiah who suffer when they delay preaching God’s truth, she feels compelled to make her Christian beliefs transparent in her fiction.

to make transparent in their writing. Their fictional work leads us to consider questions such as: How steep an angle is “slant”? How circuitous is the “Circuit” to which Dickinson refers? How do we measure an artist’s “Success”? Is it advisable or even possible to gradually ease people into perceiving “Truth” or does St. Paul’s Damascus road experience suggest that seeing and being conformed to God’s reality is inherently blinding? A writer who looks beneath the surface of everyday life to consider the mysteries of human existence will be more qualified to comment on both the visible and the unseen realms. Each fictionalized saint’s life in this paper represents an author’s effort to align his work with a larger cosmic narrative—a narrative that began when God created human beings and that will end when Christ returns to earth to redeem His people.

Waugh, Buechner, and Wangerin ply their literary talent for the sake of illuminating divine mysteries. They feel a profound responsibility to both vocations, and their dual commitment leads them to embark on a dangerous project: weaving a tapestry of literary art and faith. They know the terrible cost of failure—it will dishonor both their art and their God—but they perceive a calling to satisfy the demands of creating convincing art and to honor God by building bridges between modern fiction and faith, between tradition and contemporary Christianity. These fictional hagiographers recognize the pitfalls of manipulating concrete images to fit a supernatural reality, but they are eager to recast sacred mystery into material reality. The way they found to do this in *Helena*, *Brendan*, and *Saint Julian* is to use the outline of a historical saint’s life and experiment with the genre, narrative voice, metaphorical language, magical realism, and comic vision to shape a work of literary art that reflects their faith perspective.

Seeking to reconcile their perceptions of natural reality with the “Truth” they believe is present in the supernatural realm, Waugh, Buechner and Wangerin incorporate biblical faith into modern fictional narratives about saints. Their stylistic efforts at embodying a theological vision are compromised, however, whenever the seams of their work become so visible that they distract readers from a genuine engagement with the narrative. Evelyn Waugh’s artistic mastery is diminished when he glorifies the primitive past and ignores Christ’s power to redeem modern civilization. Despite his harsh criticism of Constantine’s superficial faith, Waugh adopts a form of “Constantinian” Christianity that weds Church and State and limits the ability of God to transform secular culture. His *Helena* highlights the mighty deeds of Christ and His saints in the early Christian centuries but fails to anticipate God’s ongoing work in shaping the world’s future. Buechner’s liberal Christianity leads him to write hagiographical fiction that is firmly grounded in the experiences people have in the material world. His *St. Brendan* recognizes Christ primarily through miracles and in the morality of human beings. He suggests that God has no primary agency in redeeming humanity, and therefore people must imbue the natural realm with ethical meaning and engineer their own salvation. Wangerin’s *Saint Julian* charts an admirable middle course between these distortions of traditional Christianity: the saint he depicts is rooted in his medieval time and place, but Wangerin’s use of a fictional narrator, metaphorical language, and irony emphasizes the connection between physical and supernatural reality and thus offers “hope for us all” (xx).

The work of Christian artists reflects (either positively or negatively) on the quality of their faith. If they create brilliantly insightful works of art that help people

understand their place in the world—their relation to one another and to God—then readers may be willing to consider the viability of their religious beliefs in the contemporary age. But, if they compromise their artistic integrity for the sake of transmitting a supernatural vision, then readers will be much more likely to dismiss their work altogether as the flawed product of a religious zealot. As one might predict, the result of their labor is mixed as they seek to translate elements of traditional Christian faith into modern fiction, but the experiment bears closer examination—both for its implications for writers of religiously-influenced literature and for their readers, Christian and non-Christian alike.

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