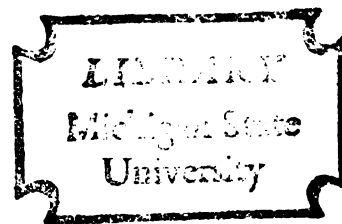


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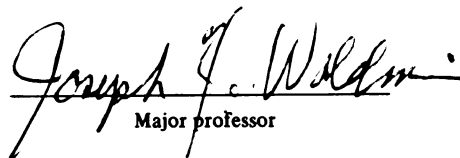
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THE REDISCOVERY OF WONDER: A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS
OF FREDERICK BUECHNER

By
Stacy Webb Thompson

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

THE REDISCOVERY OF WONDER: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS OF FREDERICK BUECHNER

By

Stacy Webb Thompson

Frederick Buechner has published nine novels since 1950. They have received only minimal critical attention, yet Buechner's fiction is recognized by such critics as John Aldridge and Ihab Hassan, and by such novelists as Reynolds Price and John Gardner, as worthy of extended critical attention. David Madden's REDISCOVERIES amply proves what many literary critics and scholars know, even if they are not always anxious to admit it: that there is a large body of excellent fiction that has gone unrecognized or unheralded, or simply been forgotten. This neglect is due to a variety of complex causes such as shifts in literary fashion, or an individual author's failure to produce anything of note after writing an initial tour de force. Had we but world enough and time, such works as Djuna Barnes' NIGHTWOOD, Glenway Wescott's APARTMENT IN ATHENS, Christina Stead's THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN, or Frederick Buechner's THE FINAL BEAST would have received the attention they deserve. But we have not and they have not. Such neglect is particularly unjust and troublesome when it involves not just a single work but a whole body of work, as it does in the case of Frederick Buechner.

This study is an attempt to pay a long overdue debt by providing a critical introduction to the novels of Frederick Buechner. It concentrates on the three major themes that are most consistently developed throughout the novels: the theme of wonder; the theme of innocence; and the theme of transformation. These themes are examined through a careful analysis of the novels' major allusions, dominant patterns of imagery, and characterization.

Buechner's major themes function as correctives to such typical themes in modern literature as alienation, purposelessness, or metaphysical doubt. Buechner indicates that modern life is largely problematic, yet he insists that even within a problematic interpretation of existence there are still legitimate bases for affirmation, for celebration, for joy. The theme of wonder in Buechner's novels stresses the extraordinary nature of what we usually understand as ordinary experience. Reading Buechner, we are constantly invited to reappraise much that custom and habit have led us to take for granted--life itself is miraculous, Buechner suggests, and mysterious, and wondrous. The theme of innocence is embodied in those characters in Buechner's novels who are able to remain open to the most wondrous elements of their experience. Innocence seems to be a prerequisite to wonder, and includes the ability to maintain a lightness of heart in circumstances that would lead many to despair. The theme of transformation functions as the agent of spiritual perception in Buechner's characters. It

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is the means by which wonder and innocence are tested and justified. The harshest aspects of modern life are made bearable through transformations in characters' lives that allow them to be aware of the metaphysical implications of their lives. These transformations are of three basic types: 1) the personal, e.g., answers to questions of identity; 2) the interpersonal, e.g., strengthened love relationships; 3) the symbolic, e.g., moments of metaphysical insight or vision.

It is clear in his first few novels that Buechner is a child of modernism, and that he inherited a good many modern assumptions. But Buechner's major themes, increasingly important as we move away from Buechner's earliest fiction, remind us that modern life is not entirely dark or demonic. To see only the bleakest prospects, to believe only the worst news, is to distort and unnecessarily to impoverish our existence. In an age when much of our literature is dominated by metaphors of the waste land and images of darkness, Buechner's fiction is refreshingly and unsentimentally affirmative.

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INTRODUCTION

Frederick Buechner has published steadily since 1950, often receiving fine reviews, yet his novels have received practically no attention from critics. Ihab Hassan devotes about one page in *RADICAL INNOCENCE* to Buechner's first novel, *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, and John Aldridge discusses the same novel in greater detail in *AFTER THE LOST GENERATION*. One doctoral dissertation devoted to the influence of formal theology on Buechner's novels has recently been completed. This is the only critical attention that Buechner's novels have ever received. Occasionally Buechner is listed in the indexes of books on the contemporary novel, but in almost every such case he is merely mentioned along with a handful of others in a paragraph about the other authors who deserve to be, but are not, studied in any detail in the book. Both Hassan and Aldridge recognize the brilliance and the promise of Buechner's first novel. Yet since the publication of *A LONG DAY'S DYING* in 1950, eight equally interesting novels have followed (*THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* in 1952, *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS* in 1958, *THE FINAL BEAST* in 1965, *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK* in 1970, *LION COUNTRY* in 1971, *OPEN HEART* in 1972, *LOVE FEAST* in 1974, *TREASURE HUNT* in

1977), surely enough to suggest that Buechner is more than a promising contemporary American novelist, or that whatever the first novel may have promised, the others are likely to have achieved.

The purpose of this paper is to examine that achievement by providing a critical introduction to the novels of Frederick Buechner. Its essential method will be to explicate the individual novels and thereby provide "readings" which focus primarily on the thematic and formal concerns of each of the nine novels, as well as to account for those wider thematic and formal patterns which develop in and run through all of the novels. The themes which will receive extensive examination are the themes of wonder, innocence, and transformation; the formal elements of greatest importance to the development of these themes include the major allusions, the dominant patterns of imagery, and characterization.

Buechner's career as a novelist begins at roughly the end of the literary period we identify as modern and stretches for twenty odd years into the post-modern or contemporary period. Yet, as Jerry Bryant (*THE OPEN DECISION*) suggests about the work of several other contemporary American novelists, it is primarily the problems and issues of modernism that continue to interest Buechner. In fact, Buechner's major themes all seem to be responses or correctives to some of the ideas and assumptions we have come to associate with modernism.

Now such a generalization requires a great deal of qualification and support, for when we speak of modernism as the dominant strain in Western literature for the past century or so we automatically risk saying nothing at all. Like "romanticism" or "classicism" or "existentialism" the term "modernism" has been used in so many different contexts to mean so many different, even apparently contradictory, things, that its usefulness has been severely jeopardized. Still, however treacherous its use might be, it is difficult to get along without it. As Irving Howe contends, when we use the term "modernism" we mean to suggest roughly the following clusters of ideas and assumptions: 1) the loss of religious certainty and moral absolutes, and their replacement by skepticism, doubt, agnosticism, and intellectual relativism; 2) an emphasis upon estrangement (often called alienation) from the prevalent standards of society, which are seen as corrupted, mediocre, or hypocritical; 3) a preoccupation with human subjectivity--that is, the notion that what matters most in our time is not the nature of the external physical world nor the social world, but, instead, the ways in which our impressions of these worlds are registered on human consciousness; 4) a feeling that in a universe deprived of God and the comforts of religion, man has been left homeless, an anxious stranger in the universe; 5) an increasing doubt as to the value or relevance of rational thought; 6) a feeling that men must engage in bold

experiments to forge a new order of values; 7) a disturbing doubt as to the purpose or value of human life.¹

Together, these ideas, very evident in American novels of the last two decades, suggest "that human existence is profoundly and inherently problematic."² Raymond Olderman, in his book on the American novel in the 'sixties, reasserts what Ihab Hassan and Jonathan Baumbach had already firmly established about the novels of the 'fifties. The major assumptions of modernism help to produce fictional worlds in the American novels of the 'fifties in which "absurdity rules human actions; there are no accepted norms of feeling or conduct to which the hero may appeal; the hero [or anti-hero] is at odds with his environment, and much of his energy is the energy of opposition; human motives are forever mixed--irony, contradiction, and ambiguity prevail."³ The ambiguity and irony which prevail, not only in the novels of the 'fifties but in many modern novels, lead to a position of inaction, of stasis, for many modern protagonists. The more they know about the dead-ends of action, about the limitations of intellect, about their own mixed motives, the less likely they are apt to commit themselves to any course of action. Ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox indeed prevail, and the result is often paralysis. Undoubtedly, any reader could supply his own extensive list of the American novels of the last few decades that include variations on the broad themes of modernism already mentioned. The important

thing to note here is that Frederick Buechner's first two novels, *A LONG DAY'S DYING* and *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, could easily serve as textbook examples of many of these themes as well.

Tristram Bone, protagonist of *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, is preoccupied with questions about the value of his existence. He wants someone to authenticate his existence for him, some "witness" able to testify to its meaning. But Elizabeth, the woman he apparently loves and the most logical "witness" in the novel, slips impulsively into a meaningless relationship with another man and, though curious about Bone and occasionally sympathetic, she sees Tristram, finally, as a reserved and stuffy man. Emma, Bone's maid, and Simon, Bone's pet monkey, seem to be his only remaining possible witnesses, but the one is rather dense and the other is not even human. All human relationships seem to fail in this novel of "cripples and show-offs"⁴ (this is Motley's phrase--he is the novelist in this novel), and the plot of the novel moves from Tristram Bone pontificating on love to his manicurist (he never speaks of love to Elizabeth), to the death of Maroo, Elizabeth's mother, perhaps the only character in the novel who has been able to lead a fulfilling life. Tristram, a large, fat man, cultivates weightiness in his thought and seems always concerned with personal dignity. He has money, leisure, the respect of peers; he has an apparently vast intelligence, and he has wit. One form that Tristram's desires for meaning and

order take is propriety, but beneath that propriety is Tristram's sense of himself as a fool, and Buechner describes him as a whale who seeks the safety of isolation in the submarine depths of self. Bone is lonely and loveless and, unlike the birds in his aviary, stuck in a cage: the cage of self. The possibility of dramatic change and escape, indeed of transformation and flight, is present in the constant allusions to the myth of Philomela. But the ancient myth serves only as an ironic counterpoint to present reality. The miraculous transformation of the myth which saves the sisters from a life they can no longer bear is not available to Tristram. Tristram's fate, like that of so many modern protagonists, is to have to keep on keeping on. And Bone's problems are more than a mere mechanical repetition of the symptoms of modernism already well charted by other American novels. They begin to lead us to one of the dominant concerns in Buechner's fiction: Buechner's⁵ insistence that modernism (represented here by Bone's sensibility) is ultimately inadequate.

And this sense of inadequacy pervades THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE as well. Sara and Samuel Dunn are thoroughly modern characters, and their sophistication is played off against the innocence and freshness of the children in the novel and of the child-man, Peter Cowley, the Dunns' cousin, who seems "'to have had a vision.'"⁶ Sara's art (she sculpts) and Sam's intellect (similar to Tristram Bone's) give some purpose and direction to their lives,

but they are skeptical of "visions," as any modern caught up in ambivalence and ambiguity must be. It is not surprising that the Dunns' best friend is a character named Lundrigan, modern man incarnate, a "fact" man, a complete skeptic whose life is empty and anxious. Nor is it surprising that when they are gathered together by Cowley to witness what might be an encore of the miraculous vision which he thought he had already experienced, their responses merely reflect their own preoccupations, skepticism, or indifference. Sam sleeps through the event, and Lundrigan sees nothing, just as he has maintained that Cowley had really seen nothing previously. The final impression left by Sam, Sara, and Lundrigan is that many of the possibilities of life are closed to their modern sensibilities, and that their lives are thereby impoverished.

Through the characterization of Peter Cowley and of the children he tutors, Buechner first presents some of the themes that function in his novels as correctives to the inadequacies of many of the assumptions of modernism. Through their eyes we see the beauty of the commonplace, the extraordinary nature of the ordinary, and the possibility, however wild or contrived or even trite it might seem to the sophisticates in the novel, that human life is meaningful, even beautiful. But there is nothing simple about the presentation of these themes, and Buechner is far from naive. The irony and ambiguity that pervade most modern fiction pervade Buechner's as well. He is not a

breezy sentimentalist who, faced with the twentieth century, decides to do an about-face and ignore it. In *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, the irony and ambiguity stem from Buechner's decision to put what might be the words of truth in the mouths of babes, or in the mouth of Cowley, who may be slightly "cracked" even though he might also be a kind of saint, or in the mouth of a character named Dr. Lavender, who is obviously crazy. Between the modernism and ultra-sophistication of the characters in this novel whose lives seem anxious and inadequate (Sam, Sara, Lundrigan), and the innocence of those whose lives are overly idealistic or immature (Dr. Lavender, Peter Cowley, the children), there may be a middle ground (Mollie Purdue, Sara's model), but even that middle ground is riddled with ambiguity, as are the extremities. Buechner seems at times to romanticize innocence and the child's-eye view in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, but he also makes us aware that he is doing so, and that a romanticized view of human experience is finally just as inadequate, however tempting, as the over-sophisticated, world-weary views of Tristram Bone or Lundrigan. Apparently Buechner subscribes to the view that human life is essentially problematic. But, as much of this study will attempt to prove, Buechner does not see this as a legitimate cause for despair.

To the degree that they are ironic, ambiguous, and problematic, Buechner's first two novels conform in some important respects to the general tendencies of the

American novel in the 'fifties. But there are also significant ways in which Buechner is at least beginning to go against the grain. In all of the novels after *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, Buechner refuses to stop with a statement of the ambiguities of modern experience and the suggestion, implicit in his technique, that an ironic perspective is probably the only means we have of dealing with them. He continues to recognize ambiguity and irony as the water-marks of our age, and they are the basis of much that is important in his own novels, but he insists on the inadequacy of the paralysis they may produce. Too often, Buechner implies, this problematic view of human life robs us of wonder and leaves us helpless. This need not be the case, and Buechner's *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS* is a good example of this.

Ansel Gibbs is a concrete universal, a highly individualized character who is also representative of larger truths; "as much as any other single man . . . Ansel Gibbs indeed was civilization, was among the rarest treasures that his era had yet produced: a living proof that idealism could still flourish in out-of-the-way corners of the political scene."⁷ All of the characters closest to Gibbs feel that he is eminently suited for appointment to the President's Cabinet, and Buechner presents Gibbs quite sympathetically. Yet Gibbs's own comments on what it means to be modern and civilized are very telling:

"To be civilized means to stand at the top, to be the last and best as far as things have gone to date, the educated, liberated man with his back to the grotesque mystery of his origins and his face to God knows what. . . . To be civilization, to be civilized, is to be aware of so many possible courses of action at any given time that no one of them ever seems to be without qualification right. Everything is qualified." (pp. 113-114)

And again:

"For the civilized man there aren't apt to be any absolute principles or holy causes. That's what makes civilized life possible. We may not be heroes, but by and large we're also not villains--either collectively or taken one by one. Tolerant. Ambivalent." (p. 120)

"'Ambivalent.'" It has a familiar ring. And THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS is Buechner's most extended study of ambivalence. Ansel Gibbs is even physically representative of this ambivalence. He is strikingly handsome at the same time that he has a whole range of "disorders, real and rumored, such as a silver plate in his skull with a flap of toupee to cover the scar, a brace at his back, and some vascular disturbance, an intermittent numbness of the hands and feet which necessitated hydrotherapy and a careful diet."¹⁰ Ansel is perhaps as close to being a great man as modern civilization has produced, yet he has more than his fair share of difficulties, and he feels that he may have fallen short of common humanity. He feels guilty because he was unable to save a close friend who committed suicide (Rudy Tripp). He is guilty of having a daughter he barely knows. He is unable to trust his best friend's son. He feels that a Senator's distrust of himself and men like himself is perhaps justified,

since this Senator is a man of the people whereas Gibbs remains "'on the outer edge of things. I populate the coasts and borderlands of the world. I've never had occasion to know the homely inner details. If my views are apt to be liberal and disinterested, it may be simply that compared to Farwell I'm at heart uninterested'" (pp. 91-92).

Gibbs is an articulate man of words in a world that may need action instead. He has spent the last two years before his "return" on his Montana ranch, writing an introspective and literary autobiography centering on his experiences during the war years (World War II), quite retired from public life. After his return, when he has second thoughts about entering public life again and momentarily decides to decline the presidential appointment, it is partly out of a sense that words are his life, and that he should return to the ranch to finish his autobiography. A commitment to words, to language, has been characteristic of Gibbs's life. Senator Farwell, Gibbs's political and intellectual foil, attacks Gibbs as a man given to language and incapable of action. Gibbs responds by admitting that he has always been

"rather ashamed of my words. . . . Because they've been so necessary. When you suggest that I'm an overly verbal person, you've put your finger on something. There have been times when I've wished I had chosen the kind of life that more clearly speaks for itself. A soldier's life. Or a priest's. Even a prodigal's. The kind of life that doesn't have to depend so heavily upon words to define it." (p. 117)

To be modern and civilized is also, it appears, to be

attracted to language, dependent on language, and nothing is more ambivalent than language. Kuykendall, Gibbs's former professor of religion who now ministers to the social and religious needs of the poor in Harlem, delivers a sermon on the story of Saul and David that could also serve as a parable of Gibbs's ambivalence. Kuykendall stresses Saul's indifference; he had neither loved nor hated enough to kill Agog or to save him. The code of the gentleman--Gibbs's code--is similar. Gibbs knows, almost instinctively, that to commit oneself wholeheartedly to anything is in questionable taste, quite out of keeping with the disaffiliation of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, modern man. The gentleman has only words. Once again, Gibbs on himself:

"If seeing as much falseness as truth in almost everything paralyzes you when it comes to the action of self-commitment, it leaves you peculiarly fit to describe what it is you've been unable to commit yourself to, and I have words for such describing. I have been at a loss for everything else perhaps but never for words. I was made for words. I sometimes believe I am made of words." (pp. 245-246)

More emphatically than the two novels which precede it, *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS* stresses the inadequacies of such symptoms of modernism as ambivalence and paralysis. The novel ends, significantly, with Gibbs deciding to commit himself to action by accepting the presidential appointment that has teased him out of his semi-retirement. Until this point, the result of Gibbs's awareness of the ambivalence of human life has been a detachment from those

things in his life that Buechner suggests could have been most meaningful: his relationship to wife, daughter, friends, colleagues. If we are to take Gibbs's relationship to Porter Hoyer, his secretary and attorney, as typical of Gibbs's human relationships, surely Buechner is suggesting that Gibbs's relationships leave much to be desired. The commitment to other human beings represented by Kuykendall, however imperfect its result might be, is the new direction Gibbs's life must take. Ansel Gibbs has truly returned by the end of the novel. His final speech testifies to a new direction in his life, and it makes explicit that which had previously only been implicit in Buechner's earlier novels: "'You cross your fingers and hold your tongue and do what you can in the time that's left. That is the only holy cause, my dear, ambivalence be damned. . . . No more words. It's a promise I've made'" (p. 308). At the same time that a cocktail party is being held to celebrate Gibbs's appointment to high governmental office, Inez Rosas's baby is bitten to death by rats in a cold-water apartment in Harlem. There is work to be done, people who need help, and Gibbs is the best man for the job even if he is, as he insists, no prophet.

In all of his first three novels, Buechner is implicitly weighing his protagonists on a moral scale. To the degree that their modern sensibilities lead to isolation, to paralysis (those typically modern themes), they are guilty: Tristram Bone is guiltiest; Lundrigan is a

close second; Sam and Sara Dunn tie for third. Ansel Gibbs is also guilty, but he will atone for that guilt. To the degree that their sensibilities lead to commitment, even to affirmation, Buechner's characters are forgiven. This emphasis on affirmation over resignation carries over into all of the rest of Buechner's novels. The paralysis of a Tristram Bone is displaced by commitment to the significance of human relationships, by action, and eventually by wonder. But there is nothing soft or easy in Buechner's affirmation. He continues to present human life as essentially problematic, and the fictional worlds of his later novels often include harsher elements than do his first three. The suffering of prison camps, the agony of slow death by cancer, the despair of the forlorn and the loveless, the paradoxical contentment of demented individuals who seem only half human: these are at the center of Buechner's later novels. Yet Buechner is firm in his implication that to emphasize only the worst, most grotesque or demonic aspects of modern human experience, as much modern literature does, is to distort and to impoverish.

The movement away from ambivalence and isolation toward commitment and affirmation noted in *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS* parallels the thematic development of Buechner's fiction generally, and also represents microcosmically what Raymond Olderman sees as a major direction in American novels of the 'sixties. In *BEYOND THE WASTE LAND*,

he maintains that instead of such metaphors as "the American Adam" or "the American Dream" or "lost innocence," the novel of the 'sixties finds its "controlling metaphor in the image of the waste land."⁸ The inhabitants of the waste land

are characterized by enervating and neurotic pettiness, physical and spiritual sterility and debilitation, an inability to love, yearning and fear-ridden desires. They are sexually inadequate, divided by guilts, alienated, aimless, bored, and rootless; they long for escape and for death. . . . their lives are vain, artificial, and pointless.⁹

Just as Buechner's first three novels are dominated by the assumptions of modernism and attempts to overcome them, Olderman suggests that many of the novels of the 'sixties which present the waste land as the most comprehensive metaphor of modern experience also seek "to move beyond the waste land."¹⁰ The general resolution of these novels, he maintains, "is not escape or even 'accommodation'; it is the bare, necessary, and simple affirmation of life over death."¹¹ This affirmation is achieved by seizing "upon the very surface texture of life and affirming its value."¹² The means of this affirmation is often black humor, and the form these works take is the form of the modern fable as explained by Robert Scholes in *THE FABULATORS*.¹³ But the affirmation, the joy, of these works is tempered.

For the contemporary fable, by containing the horrors of the waste land in a form that contradicts its content . . . exorcises those horrors and implies the possibility of love and wonder in the world. But the joy it supplies is usually too complicated by pain to be very much more than fragments shored against our ruins.¹⁴

The joy in Buechner's novels is often "complicated by pain," but it represents much more than "fragments shored against our ruins."

Olderman also maintains that since we live in the waste land, it is "the enduring wish of our age that someone, some quester, would heal us and make us whole."¹⁵ He suggests that "wonder has been . . . obscured by the profusion of deadening detail in contemporary life,"¹⁶ and that the "rediscovery of wonder in the world may ultimately be the best that our decade [the 'sixties] can offer as a substitute for a truly accepted mythology to move us out of the waste land."¹⁷ By Olderman's own admission, in the novels with which he is most concerned, this wonder is evidenced by an emphasis on the fabulous in the form of the novels, in their self-conscious proclamations that they are, after all, stories, and we should delight in the "story for its own sake."¹⁸ But the vision of these novels is still dominated by the metaphor of the waste land, and form in fiction is, it would seem, a long way from being a "healer."

In Buechner's novels of the 'sixties and the 'seventies, the possibility that the old stories are still the truest, that there is a mythology which makes sense of things, even if we are obliged constantly to reinterpret it, is of central importance. Buechner also turns to the fabulous, even to the miraculous, in his novels, and Scholes's and Olderman's generalizations about the

rediscovery of wonder in the contemporary American novel are more than applicable in Buechner's case. But in Buechner's later novels it is not just the form but the content as well which is cause for joy. The following comment from *BEYOND THE WASTE LAND* is perhaps even more applicable to Buechner than it is to the novelists Olderman treats in detail.

Life can still be affirmed, but laughter seems even more necessary as the ambiguities and paradoxes multiply. The man who would affirm life must pull affirmation from the very causes and roots of paradox; he must be "made bold by his very fright, comforted by . . . the slimness of his chances."¹⁹

If there is a single thread running through all of Buechner's later novels, it is that he pulls "affirmation from the very causes and roots of paradox."

Richard Rupp suggests that one of the central problems in contemporary American fiction is "a general inability to celebrate reality."²⁰ He maintains that genuine celebration is rare in contemporary life and in contemporary fiction, yet "the need to celebrate reality in the face of the apocalyptic present is primary in contemporary fiction."²¹ It would be difficult to state the general direction of Buechner's fiction more succinctly. Buechner's novels, particularly his later ones, are acts of praise expressing "faith in the livability of life."²² With their constant emphasis on the miraculous nature of ordinary life, Buechner's novels do just what Olderman, Scholes, and Rupp seem to agree that the best contemporary American

fiction does. They confront the problematic nature of modern life and, at the same time, present us with an extended "assent to reality, a willingness to live."²³

A detailed analysis of the themes of wonder, innocence, and transformation in Buechner's novels should lead us to a greater appreciation of Buechner's rediscovery of wonder, of his joyous and hard-won affirmation of life. Since his work has been largely neglected by critics, it might also lead to a reassessment of Buechner's substantial contribution to contemporary American fiction.

NOTES--Introduction

¹This is an abbreviated and paraphrased version of the list Howe provides in his "Introduction" to Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground," in CLASSICS OF MODERN FICTION, ed. Irving Howe, 2nd ed. (New York, 1972), pp. 5-6.

²Ibid., p. 6.

³Raymond M. Olderman, BEYOND THE WASTE LAND: A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL IN THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES (New Haven, 1972), p. 13.

⁴Frederick Buechner, A LONG DAY'S DYING (New York, 1950), p. 111. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation ALDD along with the page number.

⁵Whenever "Buechner" is used in this way, the reference should be understood as the "implied author" rather than as the historical person. The concept of the "implied author" is delineated in: Wayne Booth, THE RHETORIC OF FICTION (Chicago, 1961), pp. 71-76, pp. 211-221.

⁶Frederick Buechner, THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE (New York, 1952), p. 6. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation TSD along with the page number.

⁷Frederick Buechner, THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS (New York, 1958), p. 6. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation TROAG along with the page number.

⁸Olderman, BEYOND THE WASTE LAND, p. 8.

⁹Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Ibid., p. 7.

¹³New York, 1967.

¹⁴Olderman, BEYOND THE WASTE LAND, p. 26.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 53.

²⁰Richard H. Rupp, CELEBRATION IN POSTWAR AMERICAN FICTION (Coral Gables, 1970), p. 18.

²¹Ibid., p. 19.

²²Ibid., p. 218.

²³Ibid., p. 18.

I
THE THEME OF WONDER

The theme of wonder in Buechner's novels is perhaps the most all-inclusive of his themes. It represents an awareness of the possibilities of contemporary life, however wild or outrageous some of them might be, as well as an acceptance of its limitations, ambiguities, and paradoxes. Margaret Wimsatt suggests that there is a moral in Buechner's fiction that is Bunyanesque: that "grace turns up in the most unlikely places, not by any means in the channels you might expect . . . [it] is not to be commanded nor commandeered . . . [it] is a condition of openness to all the worlds."¹ This condition of openness, this willingness to affirm and to celebrate life even though contemporary life is largely problematic, is essential to Buechner's theme of wonder. The characters in his fiction who can successfully maintain an openness to their experience, who can see in their ordinary and mundane experience elements that are extraordinary and wondrous, are granted a kind of success that is denied other characters such as Lundrigan or Tristram Bone.

In *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, the theme of wonder is at best only implicit. We can perhaps infer it from its absence, or from the wondrous nature of the Philomela myth

to which the novel so often alludes, but we may merely be looking for it here because of its obvious importance in Buechner's later work. Still, with the above precaution in mind, it is useful to examine the novel to see if it contains even slight indications of Buechner's later interest in the theme.

In AFTER THE LOST GENERATION, John Aldridge devotes considerable space to denigrating A LONG DAY'S DYING. He suggests that Buechner's first novel really has no substance at all, that it is merely a fashionable imitation of the kind of fiction that was academically most respectable at the time. The sources for the novel came from the university classroom, Aldridge argues, and its technique was "learned not from practicing novelists but from teacher-critics who merely write and lecture about the novel."² The most fundamental objection Aldridge raises concerns Buechner's allusions to the Philomela myth, their importance to and function in the novel. Aldridge feels that these allusions are rather heavy freight which the insubstantial material of this novel is unable to bear. He sees the novel as a kind of brilliant exercise that succeeds in meeting the requirements of a creative writing course, but in little else. He says that Buechner

has been taught that, to be truly acceptable, a novel which pretends to come to grips at all with the contemporary world should make liberal use of the resources of myth and symbol, and that it should be written in a language which will suggest, in its tone, imagery, and structure, the full implications of the theme the author intends to evoke.³

Aldridge sees T. S. Eliot's criticism and poetry, James Joyce's fiction, and Mark Schorer's criticism as the basis of what Buechner's professors have allegedly taught him. He then suggests that for such acknowledged masters as Eliot or Joyce, myth and symbolic language are tools used as a means of achieving full significance. He distinguishes between using these tools as a means and as ends in themselves in a work of art. For Eliot and Joyce, he argues, they were clearly "the most effective means of presenting the material which they had already chosen to present . . . in each case, myth or language was the result and not the cause of the writer's work."⁴ In *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, Aldridge maintains, the process is reversed.

A LONG DAY'S DYING represents an attempt to apply both methods literally and for their own sake to the writing of a novel; and apparently it was undertaken for no other reason than that Buechner thought such an application fashionable at this time. The result is a novel written in strict observance of all the rules but in which the game for which the rules were devised never gets around to being played.⁵

Since Aldridge does not see the problems of the characters in Buechner's novel as significant or convincing, he resents Buechner's reliance on myth as a means of suggesting their significance. When T. S. Eliot used the Philomela myth in "The Waste Land," Aldridge argues, he did so because it was organically necessary and allowed Eliot to make a connection between the theme of spiritual sterility and the theme of sexual violation, and to link antiquity and contemporaneity in a fresh and meaningful

series of parallels. Of Buechner's use of the same myth, Aldridge suggests the following:

the myth remains a static story detached from its ancient setting and applied merely as a story to a contemporary setting. It does not serve to enhance the meaning of the dilemma described in the novel but is simply a borrowed framework on which the characters and their problems are hung and through which Buechner obviously hoped to create an illusion of their significance.⁶

Yet later, attempting to explain why Buechner has taken such great pains working out the parallels between the Philomela story and the lives of the major characters in his novel, Aldridge states what would seem to be an important justification of Buechner's allusiveness. Aldridge sees Buechner's reliance on the myth as an attempt

to come to terms with the problem which the novels of nearly all his contemporaries have been attempts to solve--the problem of ordering and making dramatically meaningful the experience of a valueless time. Through the myth he has tried to bring to bear on his material the form and richness of an ancient truth; through symbolic language he has tried to extend the implications of that truth to the outermost limits of his material.⁷

Since Aldridge sees Buechner's novel as dramatizing "a trivial dilemma centering around a trivial act and perpetrated by trivial people who had nothing inside them,"⁸ he assumes that Buechner's set of parallels between the myth and the present exists in order for the richness and resonance of the one to suggest by analogy the richness and the resonance of the other. The novel fails, Aldridge argues, because Buechner is unable to "make the dilemma of his characters either moral or significant,"⁹ and he

cannot do this because he cannot "discover a system of moral value on which to project it."¹⁰

It would be difficult to state the major theme of Buechner's novel any better than Aldridge does in his objections to it. He sees much of what the novel accomplishes, but expects or desires something else of it and thereby fails to appreciate it. The lives of the major characters of A LONG DAY'S DYING are trivial. That is just the point Buechner is most intent upon making. The problem of the novel is precisely that these characters live "modern" lives; they exist in a "valueless time" and they cannot "discover a system of moral value" on which to base their lives.

Aldridge correctly identifies the parallels Buechner suggests between the characters of the myth and the major characters of his novel. Aldridge also correctly identifies the major changes Buechner introduces when he adopts the myth for his own purposes:

Elizabeth is King Tereus made female. Motley, in the beginning, is Procne made male; for it is he who brings Elizabeth and Steitler (Philomela made male) together. But as soon as Motley reports his suspicions of Elizabeth to Bone, Bone becomes Procne, the outraged wife turned suitor, and Motley takes on the function of the tapestry that brought the news of Philomela's violation to Procne. Elizabeth's affair with Steitler of course constitutes his violation; and the lie she tells Bone about him not only parallels Tereus's lie to Procne but amounts to a figurative cutting out of his tongue to prevent him from telling the truth.

The meeting of Bone and Steitler to discuss Elizabeth's accusation parallels the meeting of Procne and Philomela to plan the death of Itys; and even though the two men decide not to tell Leander of his mother's

lie, it is Elizabeth's fear that they will that brings on her anger.¹¹

It would seem that Buechner is playing fast and loose with his mythic parallels, and in many respects he is. He is not interested in exact parallels, and the two other changes he makes in his adaptation of the Philomela story attest to this. In the myth, Procne and Philomela murder Itys and are pursued by Tereus until finally they are trapped and there is nothing left for them but to pray to the gods for deliverance. Their prayers are answered and Tereus, Procne, and Philomela are miraculously transformed into birds. In *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, Leander (Itys) is saved rather than killed and the transformation of Tereus (Elizabeth), Procne (Bone), and Philomela (Steitler) does not occur. In Buechner's version of the story it is apparently important that the gods (Maroo and Bone) save Itys (Leander). However, since Aldridge sees nothing in Leander's character that seems to him worthy of salvation, it is difficult for him to accept this change from the mythic version of the story as meaningful or significant. Since he sees Bone as a man whose life is pointless, "as empty of spiritual conviction as the others,"¹² and Maroo as undramatized and mysterious, it is impossible for him to accept them as the agents of Leander's salvation. Since Aldridge suspects that the major theme of Buechner's novel is supposed to depend upon "the difference between blind primitive vengeance and an awareness of universal

human guilt,"¹³ it is not surprising that he is disappointed by the contrast between the richness of the myth and the haplessness of the major characters in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*.

But if we see the myth in the novel operating more as a contrast to the present than as a parallel to it, then the myth functions consistently and well. Its richness and wonder lend strength to Buechner's emphasis on the meaninglessness and triviality of the present, and that is the major theme of the novel. The world of heroic action represented by the myth is unavailable to the likes of Tristram Bone or Elizabeth, and the resolution of the myth is likewise unattainable for them. Buechner's alterations of the myth clearly suggest this. In altering the myth for his own purposes, Buechner also suggests the fond hope that at least one character, Leander, can be saved from the fate of most of the others--the emptiness, triviality, and haplessness of their lives. But he clearly denies to the majority of his characters any resolution at all, and Leander's salvation may be only the hopeful dream of a dying woman.

In terms of their symbolic roles in the novel, Aldridge is equally disappointed in Buechner's major characters. He sees Buechner's attempt to manipulate them as symbols as pretentious. Now if Bone is meant to be the priestly agent of a mysterious truth embodied primarily in the seemingly omniscient and serene Maroo; if Elizabeth

and Steitler represent echoes of original sin; if Leander represents the idea of salvation; and if we are to see all of this as somehow suggestive of a Christian version of a pagan story, then Aldridge may well be right. But it is also possible that Aldridge condemns the novel not for what it does but for what he thinks Buechner intended it to do, or what Aldridge thinks it should have done.

Bone is presented as a priestly figure in the novel, but Aldridge fails to see that Bone is, at best, a mock priest unable to preach (he cannot tell Elizabeth of his love for her) since he has no gospel other than the gospel of self; he is most priestly in the barber shop, the mock church which glorifies fleshly vanity. The most important characteristic of the Elizabeth and Steitler love scene is its lack of passion. It is sad precisely because it is so casual, so empty, closer to being a parody of love than anything else. And Leander's salvation is both uncertain and ironic. What has he been saved from? The answer is clearly that he has temporarily been saved from learning the truth of what actually transpired between his mother and Steitler. His salvation does not embrace or represent the truth as Aldridge suggests; it is rather an ironic reversal in which salvation is ignorance.

Much of Aldridge's distaste for this novel can be traced to a weakness in the novel that is apparent. Buechner does not dramatize his characters as successfully as he might; they are less fully realized than they could be,

and this failure is partly due to Buechner's interest in the Philomela myth and its predominance in the novel. But the novel is not as flawed as Aldridge accuses it of being, and once we understand what the novel actually does, rather than what Aldridge thinks it should have done, the novel's accomplishments are clearer and many of Aldridge's objections to it pale.

The themes of innocence and transformation also help to clarify the nature of Buechner's accomplishments in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, as later chapters on these themes will show. The theme of wonder is not as important to this novel as they are, but there are some seeds of the theme in it. The most obvious failure of Tristram Bone, Elizabeth, Steitler, and Motley is their inability to see in their everyday lives a basis for wonder and joy, a basis for affirmation. They respect and admire Maroo, particularly her ability to see life clearly and see it whole. She delights in life, even though she sees in it the same ambiguities and difficulties as they. She cares deeply about her friends, her neighbors, her family; she remains open to their difficulties and offers them some warmth and comfort. But Maroo's joyousness, graciousness, and openness (her sense of wonder) remain mysterious to them and inimitable. Just as the Philomela myth functions essentially as a rich contrast to the lackluster lives of most of Buechner's major characters, Maroo's life functions as a contrast to their lovelessness and anxiety. In the act

of dying, she is described as all-accepting and serene. In the act of living, they are described as frustrated and paralyzed.

One other possible source of the theme of wonder in *A LONG DAY'S DYING* may be the prose style of the work. The richness of the Philomela myth is mirrored in Buechner's rather self-conscious, Jamesian style. The major imagery of the novel is imagery of entrapment, flight, and transformation: all directly linked to the action of the myth. Even Aldridge is struck by what he calls Buechner's "sensitive, carefully polished, meticulously allusive, and oftentimes quite excellent style."¹⁴ But he does not see what purpose it serves. The Philomela myth serves Buechner as a source for developing his own rich imagery and as a source for the wonder and suggestiveness of his own prose style. It is precisely this sense of the suggestive, the wondrous, that attracts Buechner to the myth, and it is the death of any such wonder (Maroo's death, that of the novel's title) that his novel so eloquently presents.

The theme of wonder is much more than implicit in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*. The novel's plot is simple. Sam and Sara Dunn are spending the summer relaxing at their summer home. With them are various friends and an assortment of children who are being tutored during the summer by Peter Cowley, a cousin of the Dunns'. One day while exploring the grounds, Cowley sees something miraculous,

something he thinks must have been a metaphysical vision. The reactions of the major characters to Cowley's vision; his attempt to recreate the circumstances of the vision so that it might reoccur and the other adults might witness it; and a staged vision, done by Mollie Purdue (Sara's model) and the children, form the basis of the plot.

The sense of wonder and possibility that Cowley's vision represents in the novel is introduced early when Sam and Sara have the following discussion:

"Come to think of it, you might call flying a kite very much like fishing--fishing in the sky, of course. Mightn't you, Sam. Sam?"

". . . Only what would you be fishing for in the sky, I wonder?"

"Well, for God I suppose. If you were Cousin Cowley, that is, and it pleased you."

"Yes." She considered this. "I can just see Peter pulling God down out of the clouds, His mouth all ragged and bleeding. . . ."

"Yes," Sara agreed. "Peter would catch him if anyone could." (pp. 5-6)

The metaphoric attempt to pull God down out of the clouds, to reinvest the world with wonder, is essential to Buechner's thematic purposes in this novel. The fact that his major characters are unable to see either Cowley's original vision or the staged vision, the "surprise" put on by the children, as miraculous merely underscores their modernity. That there is a connection between the wondrous world of Cowley's vision and the ordinary lives of the major characters is implied consistently throughout the novel.

The setting itself is wondrous; Buechner describes the lavish grounds of the Dunns' summer home as if he were

describing an earthly paradise. There are numerous formal gardens, stately and ancient trees, spacious lawns. The novel opens with an extended description of "the extraordinary summer beauty of the place" (p.3). The house itself is labyrinthine and wondrous, especially to the children. At one point Buechner even suggests that, for children, the Dunns' summer place might be "the Emerald City of their giddy Oz" (p.4). But what are we to make of all this? It remains difficult to understand the full importance of the setting until Buechner's major allusions are understood.

One of the major allusions of this novel is the allusion to Andrew Marvell's "The Garden." The long and lovely description of the Dunns' summer house and the flora and fauna of its grounds and gardens which begins on the very first page of the first chapter is repeated again, almost verbatim, at the beginning of the last chapter. There are numerous references to Sam's library and to his penchant for seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. At the end of the novel, when Lundrigan comes to bid farewell to Sam and finds him, he thinks, asleep, Sam explains that he has not been sleeping, that what Lundrigan took to be sleep was "just a green thought in a green shade" (p. 300). This famous line from Marvell's "The Garden," this final hint about the particular nature of the major themes and sources of metaphor in this novel, suddenly draws our attention to the elaborate conceit that Buechner has been

developing all along. The reference, through allusion, to the spiritual confidence and innocence of a previous age, the mystery of the inexplicable summer beauty of the Dunns' residence, the numerous references to gardens, the innocence of the children, Peter Cowley's bachelorhood and alleged virginity, the dramatic introduction of Woman (Mollie Purdue) into this setting, Dr. Lavender's fall, the children's introduction to death, the implicit suggestion that the Dunns' gardens may be distant echoes of the garden, of Eden, as Marvell's garden is in his poem, and Cowley's insistence that under an apple tree, no less, he had a vision that convinced him of the reality of spiritual experience--all of these parts finally fall into place and the puzzle is indeed complete. Once we look carefully enough, one of the faces we see in this complex picture-puzzle is Marvell's. Relying on the indirection of metaphor, irony, and allusion, Buechner has written a modern analogue of "The Garden."

But the serene world of spiritual contemplation described and advocated by the speaker of Marvell's poem exists in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* only as a distant memory. Sam, the novel's most contemplative character, is a modern man, however devoted he may be to seventeenth-century poetry. In place of the spiritual confidence and serenity of the speaker in Marvell's poem, we find in Sam the mock serenity of manners. Sam's life is outwardly serene; he is always polite. But politeness, the gentleman's belief

that one should always be civil, is hardly a substitute for belief in God.

The sensuous beauty of the Dunns' summer retreat rivals the sensuous beauty of Marvell's garden, but only for Peter Cowley does this sensuous beauty function to suggest another and a higher form of beauty. Even if Peter's initial vision weren't a vision at all, and even if his restaged vision amounted, finally, to no more than the imposture of Mollie and the children combined with an extraordinarily beautiful sunset, Peter's sensitivity to the natural beauty of the physical world is itself a form of spiritual reward. His life is fuller, more meaningful, than the lives of the other characters in the novel. His openness, his ability to recognize the problematic nature of human experience without being defeated or paralyzed by it, without losing faith or hope, functions to allow him an appreciation of the wonder of this world, of the miraculous nature of this world, that is impossible for Sam, Sara, or Lundrigan.

The authenticity of Peter's initial vision is never confirmed or denied in the novel. Peter believes that he witnessed, perhaps by coincidence, a kind of miracle. The children in the novel overhear the adults discussing Cowley's vision and finally agree among themselves that what happened to Cowley is somehow magical. The other adults in the novel are, of course, skeptical. Their responses range from simple disbelief to questions of Cowley's

sanity. Sam and Sara fear that Cowley may have become mildly fanatical. The various responses to the staged vision parallel those to the initial alleged vision, but they are thematically more important than the responses to Peter's story of his original vision.

While Peter organizes the adults, preparing them for what he hopes will be a miracle repeated, Mollie Purdue and the children practice a surprise for the adults. Their surprise is a skit in which Mollie plays the lead as a mysterious saintly figure surrounded by children, dressed in sheets, pretending to be angels. Their skit is meant to be a humorous parody of the stories they have been hearing (and themselves inventing) about Cowley's initial vision. Peter leads the adults out to the apple tree, the location of his original vision, and he prays for a miracle--for some visible manifestation of the invisible. What the adults then see, vaguely because of the splendor of the sunset in the background, is Mollie and the children performing their surprise. After their own initial surprise, most of the adults finally realize what they actually saw. Now it would logically follow that they should react to the whole affair of the staged vision as if it were a hoax, innocently perpetrated and mildly ironic. Sam and Lundrigan do. But Sara is charmed by it, and Mollie's response to participating in the incident suggests that it can not be as easily dismissed as Sam and Lundrigan think it can. In fact, Mollie's response seems closest to what Buechner

approves, and it clearly contributes to the development of the theme of wonder in the novel. Discussing the matter with one of the adolescents in the novel, Mollie speaks to some of the novel's central issues.

"We were awful to do it maybe, and maybe I was the most awful of all. But it was almost beautiful, and I didn't even mind when Georgie messed things up by spinning too long and nobody could hear him. So could it be awful and beautiful both? Anyway it wasn't what Colley came to see. A vision, didn't you say, and that he really believed in it? And it was only us. Maybe if we hadn't've been there, he'd've gotten what he wanted. And maybe . . . But this is so queer I can hardly say it. I told you I prayed that he'd get whatever he wanted, and maybe he did. Maybe we're it!"

"You mean we were the vision?" Harry asked her.
 "Maybe," she said. (p. 209)

Buechner's theme of wonder depends heavily upon such words as "maybe." Maybe our lives are themselves miraculous. Cowley himself recognizes that the children's surprise was not the miracle that he had hoped for, however beautiful and startling it was, but he also learns that it was foolish to expect what he had expected. His final appraisal of his spiritual command performance echoes Mollie's position:

"But whatever my feeling used to be, I no longer believe--and that's what I had to look a lot farther to see--that miracles are our only hope or even our hope at all. What we've got already is enough." (p. 221)

What Sam, Sara, and Lundrigan must realize is that what they have already is a legitimate basis for the wonder and awe inspired in Peter by his vision. Peter realizes this, and Mollie is well on her way. For the others it will be a difficult, if not impossible, lesson to learn.

The theme of wonder is displaced in THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS by the general issues of commitment and affirmation mentioned earlier, but in THE FINAL BEAST the theme of wonder reappears, once again in a broadly religious context, and the question of whether the old stories are the best, the question of a credible mythology, takes us to the heart of the protagonist's dilemma. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Theodore Nicolet, the minister in the small town of Myron, has bolted and left his two children in the care of his housekeeper, Irma Reinwasser. We soon discover that Rooney Vail, a parishioner and a good friend of Nicolet's, has gone off somewhere too, and left her husband, Clem, behind. Nicolet and Rooney Vail meet in Muscadine. Their departure, their return, and the reactions to them by the citizens of Myron are the central elements of the novel's plot.

While wondering if Nicolet will ever return, Irma Reinwasser introduces some of the novel's central problems. Irma decides that Nicolet will return because of his two girls, Lizzie and Cornelia (nicknamed Lizard Boy and Pie Face),

but she discarded every other reason. . . . There was God, of course, but God made Irma Reinwasser very angry. He asked so much of His servants and rendered so little: marry and bury, christen and counsel, joke with, solicit from, try somehow to live by Him, live with Him. It emptied a man. . . . "And when they tell me he looks like Abe Lincoln," Irma said, "I tell them after Abe Lincoln got shot is what he looks like. If you got God for a friend, you don't need any enemies." What did God give in return? A dead wife, knots in the stomach.¹⁵

Nicolet's wife has been dead for about a year when the novel begins. Nicolet himself is a skinny young man with "a clown's arched eyebrows . . . [and] a gay foolish smile, like a drunk's or a lover's" (p. 6). But his service to God is a harrowing experience, and we are led to believe that it has taken its toll. His housekeeper

had seen him come back haggard from their dying [old ladies], his stomach in knots. The doctor told him that there was nothing wrong with him but just that he had sat out too many terminal cancers--a simple stroke, a heart failure, and he would be back on his feet again. (p. 12)

Irma questions the worth of Nicolet's calling; Rooney, full of doubt, runs off to consult with a spiritualist; Nicolet himself is troubled over his commitment to the church, and his doubts are presented just as dramatically as his faith. The novel is full of doubt and the modern reasons for doubt. Yet this doubt leads to affirmation, a peculiar, paradoxical affirmation full of joy, laughter, and wonder. The paradoxical nature of this affirmation is easily illustrated. Here is Irma, once again, thinking about her employer: "You could never be sure about Bluebeard [one of Nicolet's many nicknames] and God. There were times when she felt that each must take the other as a kind of joke" (p. 13). On the other hand, she knew "it might not be a joke at all" (p.14).

The conventional religious themes of temptation, sin, guilt, doubt, and salvation are given a most unconventional treatment in THE FINAL BEAST. Nicolet is described as a combination of such fabulous characters as Bluebeard, Noah,

and St. Nicholas. Irma is one of the clumsiest and oddest saviors in our literature. Nicolet is so in love with this world that Poteat, the editor of the local newspaper, accuses him of paganism in an "Epistle to the Myronians." Although the novel deals largely with spiritual issues, its dominant imagery is, oddly, animal imagery: Lizard Boy, Betty Blackburn, Irma the "chicken," Poteat the "beast," Metzger the "squirrel," Clem's "furry chest," and Clem's Something Shop which is a "damned pack rat's paradise," (p. 20) and includes among its paraphernalia "donkey bells, goat bells, cow bells, camel bells" (p. 20). Lillian Flagg, the spiritualist, may well be a charlatan or a fanatic, yet Nicolet wonders whether she is not closer to the truths of Christianity than he is himself. Nicolet's father, a hypochondriac, is "making an art of dying," (p. 38) and Nicolet has difficulty understanding him, forgiving him, loving him. Nicolet is running both to and from God as he also runs to and from Rooney. He is paradoxically a clown and a saint, a doubter and a believer, guilty and innocent at the same time. He first thought of becoming a minister when he heard a beer-drinking college friend combine words he had never heard combined before, nor ever thought of combining: "Christ and . . . eats it" (p. 82). The novel is riddled with paradox, but there are no attempts to rob paradox of its power by explaining it away. The result is affirmation.

The rather unconventional religious affirmation of

THE FINAL BEAST carries with it certain quite conventional implications about our responsibilities to one another. Rooney is struck by Nicolet's definition of sin:

"Nicko said that sin meant moving farther and farther apart . . . from other men, God. . . . Like points on the surface of a balloon you blow up, the distances grow greater and greater until distance is all there is wherever you look . . . landscapes of air." (p. 59)

Nick and Rooney, the novel's major characters, grow by being capable of forgiveness and by learning to love. Nick can finally forgive and properly value his father. Rooney returns to Clem and will, it is suggested, give birth to his child. But however easy these resolutions might seem, they are not easily come by. The latter chapters of the novel are overshadowed by the absurd and unnecessary death of Irma Reinwasser. Rooney's questions may or may not have been answered. When she tells Nicolet why she comes to church, she suggests that she has only one reason: she wants to know whether what the church represents is or is not true. When Rooney goes to Lillian Flagg she asks her to "'make it very clear . . . what a person has to believe in,'" (p. 54) and Lillian responds, as if it were quite simple, "'Miracles. Miracles. Miracles'" (p. 54).

However alien and apparently anachronistic the above might seem in a serious American novel written in the 'sixties, it is surely miracle, the miraculous, that Buechner has in mind. The density, the nuance, the

variegated texture of this world, this life, is truly miraculous, Buechner implies, however paradoxical, and however little we understand it. Like Peter Cowley's in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE, Nicolet's sensitivity to life itself seems to be a form of spiritual reward. This world as miracle. This life as miracle. Lying in a field out behind his father's barn, Theodore Nicolet hears two branches rub together and the "clack, clack" of those branches introduces one of the most joyous and wondrous experiences described in contemporary American fiction. The commitment of Ansel Gibbs has become the faith of Theodore Nicolet, and with it Buechner's rediscovery of wonder is well under way.

In THE FINAL BEAST, the wonder is underscored by the hundreds of animal and fecal images which constantly reinforce the central allusion of the novel--the allusion to the story of Noah's ark. It is important to see that such words as "fabulous," or "miraculous" help describe Buechner's view of ordinary reality in his later novels, as well as the stories he alludes to and builds upon in all of his novels. Forty days and forty nights of rain: it is almost always raining in THE FINAL BEAST. Nicolet is compared to Christ, to Noah, and he is, after all, a Christian minister. How absurd, how outrageous, we might think, at first. And Buechner would apparently agree: yes, absurd; crazy; outrageous; impossible; miraculous; wondrous. The world of Buechner's later fiction is a world of wonder and a world

of possibility. It is a world in which to

wake up is to be given back your life again. To wake up--and I suspect that you have a choice always, to wake or not to wake--is to be given back the world again and of all possible worlds this world, this earth rich with the bodies of the dead as our dreams are rich with their ghosts, this earth that we have seen hanging in space, our toy, our tomb, our precious jewel, our hope and our despair and our heart's delight. Waking into the new day we are all of us Adam on the morning of creation, and the world is ours to name.¹⁶

It is also a world often described by images of air, earth, fire, and water: the four basic elements of seventeenth century cosmology. Here as in the majority of his novels, Buechner fashions his imagery out of the stuff of his major allusions. Since the major allusions of THE FINAL BEAST are to the story of Noah and to Pentecost, it is appropriate that the imagery should be as elemental as it is, but it is also interesting to note that the imagery of air, earth, fire, and water is dominant in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE, THE FINAL BEAST, and THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK, the three novels in which the theme of wonder is most prominent. It appears that Buechner finds in seventeenth century cosmology a richness and beauty that our scientific age lacks, but could nonetheless rediscover. This would explain why Buechner makes the protagonists of each of these works out to be in love with the world. Peter Cowley fears that he loves it too much; Peter Ringkoping wants to give away his mountain, but fears doing so because he has loved it so much and so long; Theodore Nicolet is accused

of loving the world so much that he may be a pagan.

Imagery of the four basic elements is so pervasive in THE FINAL BEAST that there is no need to dwell upon it. A glance should suffice. Nicolet suggests at one point that the air we move about in veils a wondrous reality; we would see this if only we "'could get hold of it by the corner somewhere, just slip . . . [a] fingernail underneath and peel it back enough to find what's there behind it'" (p. 182). The fecal imagery of the novel is a kind of earth imagery obviously connected to the Noah story, and the water imagery, the dominant imagery of the novel, also comes naturally out of the Noah allusions. Nicolet's church becomes the ark awash, and when Nicolet returns from Muscadine (a wonderfully earthy name) he sees himself piloting the ark to safety. The water imagery also supports the spiritual cleansing associated with Nicolet's tribulations. By the end of the novel, the fecal material is washed away. The imagery of fire functions in much the same way as the water imagery: to transform, cleanse, and purify. Irma's suffering is ultimately relieved by her firey death. The novel ends on the fourth of July. As the fireworks of the local celebration explode in the air, Buechner suggests that the town of Myron is "being inundated by fire from beyond the darkness" (p. 253). Much of the previous fire imagery is associated with Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Buechner makes a point of indicating that Nicolet's sermon on Pentecost is preached

weeks late: the birthday of the church and the nation's birthday, the Holy Spirit and political freedom are oddly merged. The secular and the spiritual are never separate in Buechner's version of things, but continue, however oddly or outrageously, ambiguously or paradoxically, to be presented as one. This curious mixture of the sacred and the profane is nowhere more startling than in the death of Irma Reinwasser. Irma's recurrent dream of her experience in a Nazi prison camp is filled with images of beasts and torture, but as she dies it is replaced by a serene dream in which images of earth, air, water, and fire abound in radiant harmony entirely supportive of Buechner's theme of wonder.

But however wondrous Buechner's later novels might be, many of the symptoms of modernism remain; the irony and ambiguity of the early novels are still evident in his later works. The implication that the inadequacies of modernism can be overcome is perhaps itself the most radical element of Buechner's later fiction, child as it is of modernism. As the ambiguity, irony, and paradox persist in his later novels, the wonder Buechner insists upon is produced by ever more outrageous characters and situations.

Peter Ringkoping, the octogenarian protagonist of *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*, thinks that there may be doorways in the air, behind which some kind of other-worldly reality lurks, teasing such worldlings as himself into fanciful dreams or visions. He sees ghosts, or thinks that he sees

ghosts, and the ghosts he sees are Shakespeare's ghost and a vision of Gloriana, the Faerie Queen. The entire novel is an updated retelling of the Oz story: Peter Ringkoping is the tin woodman in search of a heart; Peter's son, Tommy, is the straw man, in search of a brain; Peter's son, Nels, is the cowardly lion in search of courage; Peter's grandson, Tip, like Dorothy in the original, is concerned with finding out where his home is. A character named Strasser is the wizard, and Sarah, Peter's wife, and Alice, Tommy's wife, are the witches. As the novel begins, we even have an outrageous image of Alice with her feet sticking out from under the house where she is looking for a lost ring. The Oz of the original story is replaced by a "pilgrim village," run by Strasser, which is a sanctuary and clinic for mongols and assorted others who are either less or more than "human."

The pilgrim village seems to be a combination of paradise, full of lost innocents, and the kind of enchanted island brought to mind by the many allusions in the novel to Shakespeare's *THE TEMPEST*. The major device of the plot is, of course, a journey, and the journey becomes a metaphor of life itself; "'The journey becomes your life. . . . It is not just a journey any more, don't make any mistake about that.'" ¹⁷ This allows Buechner to suggest the various ways in which the major characters got lost along the way, as well as the hopeful possibility that they may once again find their way.

The ways in which the major characters in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK have become lost are most evident in their interpersonal relationships. However seductive Peter Ringkoping's metaphysical visions may have been, their effect has been to lure him away from his family (he spends much of his time in an old barn that has been converted into a used book store), and to alienate him from his family. This alienation has resulted in difficulties for Peter's children who have had no father in any sense that matters. The inability to love characteristic of Peter is reflected in his progeny. Nels, the Dean of Students at an eastern prep school, has convinced himself that the barrier he has always insisted on placing between himself and the students is necessary, even beneficial. But the suicide of one of the students at Putnam who obviously needed something more than a bureaucratic, authoritarian response from Nels, something more on the order of compassion, ultimately shows Nels that he erected the barrier for his own benefit, and that his essential concerns (he is constantly worried about his heart) are, and always have been, egocentric. Tommy fails in his relationships by never taking them seriously. In fact, he seems unable to take anything seriously, and his reactions to life are a series of comic "takes"; he has become a full-time practical joker. His equipment includes the following:

A bow tie with flashlight bulbs that lit up when you pressed a button and a set of monster teeth were among his other props, worst of all perhaps, a pair of lips

made out of red chewing-gum wax. The double take, the slow burn, counting his fingers after he had shaken your hand, his repertoire was as classic as the phrases that accompanied it: Goombye. Abyssinia . . . What can I do you for? (pp. 15-16)

Not until he overcomes his fears of his own inadequacy can Tommy break the comic, rather pathetic, mask he hides behind and learn that he, too, is loved and can love. Each of the major characters in this novel is his own problem and solution at the same time. The heart, the brain, the courage, and the security sought by the travellers in Oz were theirs to begin with, to create for themselves out of their own "journeys." But it is always difficult to distinguish precisely between the world as it is, the world as we subjectively perceive it, and the world as we think it ought to be. One of the major sources of ambiguity in Buechner's fiction results from the tension between the objective and the subjective, as Strasser suggests brilliantly when he mentions that he does not know whether the mongols of his village dwell in Paradise, since they have no fears of death and see everyone as their friends, or whether Paradise dwells in them.

Ambiguity is still at the heart of Buechner's complex vision, even in this fairy tale for adults. Love is the great necessity in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*; isolation and loneliness are too often the realities. All of the major characters in this novel, except Strasser, have neglected the human relationships which could have provided them

fulfillment. Peter Ringkoping has spent his life dreaming of "the land of heart's desire," (p. 249) some enchanted, metaphysical landscape theoretically more attractive and more meaningful than this world. He keeps looking for a loose corner on a patch of air that he could tear loose and peer through. He may even have had a few fleeting glimpses of this other world. But Peter finally finds a kind of demi-paradise in and of this world. He and his family journey to Strasser's village and discover a community of lost innocence, a place in which human warmth, acceptance, and love are all-pervasive. Yet, as Strasser reminds us, it is really not available to us.

"For us it is too late for Paradise," he said. "We have come along too far. The mongol is the raw clay we are all of us molded out of, but we have been molded now and glazed and baked in the oven. He alone comes to remind us of our original being." (p. 218)

The world that is available to us, however, the imperfect, problematic, every-day world, is quite enough, Buechner implies, and far more wonderful and beautiful than we ordinarily admit. THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK ends with Buechner's most sustained presentation of the theme of the extraordinary, wondrous nature of ordinary reality. The mongols, with some help from their visitors, make a mosaic on a feltboard out of bits and pieces of brightly colored cloth. Significantly, they name their creation "Today," and indicate that it is an artistic rendering of this day of the Ringkopings' visit. Strasser, commenting on the mosaic, describes many of the causes for wonder that have

come up throughout the day, that come up in all of our lives each day. And they involve the many ways in which we are inextricably related, bound to one another in a common effort, responsible to one another for making each day what it finally becomes.

"That is a good name," Strasser said. "Thank you. Today. This day. There it is," he said. "A little bit of this and a little bit of that. There has never been a day just like it before, and there never will be again, not just like it anyway. How queer and beautiful it is, and we have made it together. It was not easy to make it. Who says it was easy? . . . The gold and the violet and green of us. The blue and red. We overflow the board into the air. We flow in and out of each other every moment. We crowd each other and change shape. Sometimes it is very painful. Can you tell me why it could be anything less, to make something so rare, so precious?" (p. 239)

In the urbane, cosmopolitan worlds of the earlier novels, Buechner stresses the inadequacies of the major characters' lives, their entrapment in the self, their inability to communicate meaningfully with one another, and suggests that if there is a way out it is not available to them precisely because of their sophistication. In the innocence of the pilgrim village in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK, the major characters are allowed to find at least some partial answers to their problems, and the prevailing tone of the novel is far more affirmative than that of A LONG DAY'S DYING or THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE. The affirmative resolution of THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK is implied all along by the many allusions to the Oz story. Peter Ringkoping begins to realize the importance of involving

himself in this life, this world; Nels gains the courage necessary to overcome his previously oppressive fears of death; Tommy lays aside his practical joking and quits acting like an idiot; Tip decides to spend more time at home.

This retelling of the Oz story, with its mixture of realistic journey, fabulous visions, and dreams, is full of wonder. And the wonder of ordinary reality, Buechner implies, is just as great as the wonder of Peter's visions. In fact, the two are ultimately inseparable. Peter's visions are believable, must really have been visions, he suggests, precisely because of certain realistic details that no one could possibly attribute to ordinary dreams. When Shakespeare appears to Peter in the entrance to the horse stall (now used to shelve the books on drama) which used to house a horse named Porlock, he speaks part of Macbeth's famous soliloquy. The crazy thing about it, the realistic flaw that Peter figures he couldn't merely have dreamed, is that Shakespeare's ghost speaks with a lisp and mixes his r's and w's. The speech comes out "tomowwo and tomowwo" (p.98). The same quirk is evident in Peter's vision of Gloriana, the Faerie Queen. She appears all dressed in white in a dress that has a large ruff, like a peacock's tail, and she seems to be in every detail visionary. Then she opens her mouth. "'She had the worst set of teeth I've ever seen, as if she'd been eating blueberry pie. Now the dress and all could have been a figment of

my imagination. The dress I could have dreamed, but not the teeth. It would have taken a dentist to dream a set of teeth like that'" (p. 247). In the book he wrote about his visionary experiences, called *DOORWAYS IN THE AIR*, Peter had "never made it clear whether he was writing autobiography or fairy tale or whether, as he saw it, there was even any difference between them" (pp. 54-55). In *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*, Buechner implies that the two, real life and fairy tale, the ordinary and the fabulous, are really one.

As in *THE FINAL BEAST*, the dominant patterns of imagery in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK* are of earth, air, fire and water. Peter's mountain is presented, through his love of it and Strasser's paintings of it, as wondrous and beautiful. When the Ringkopings arrive at Strasser's village it is raining, and the rain refreshes the travellers and buoys their spirits. Peter's search for doorways and less obvious openings in the air allows Buechner to develop his images of air and space in a wholly wondrous context. Alice, old and arthritic, dreams a peculiar, recurrent dream (similar to Irma's in *THE FINAL BEAST*) in which grandmothers like herself become burning candles and their pain and age are transformed by fire into aesthetically lovely images, serene and mysterious. The many references to Shakespeare's *THE TEMPEST* reinforce the same kind of seventeenth-century cosmology that Buechner draws upon in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* and *THE FINAL BEAST*. Strasser's village is a combination of Oz and the enchanted island of

Shakespeare's play, complete with the cosmology of wonder that Buechner borrows from Shakespeare's age.

The outrageousness of Buechner's characters and situations is intensified in his next three novels, *LION COUNTRY*, *OPEN HEART*, and *LOVE FEAST* (a trilogy). With this trilogy, Buechner turns his attention to the comic novel, the form which Raymond Olderman maintains is most suited to pulling affirmation from the very causes and roots of paradox. Leo Bebb, the character who dominates our attention and fascinates the narrator of the trilogy, Antonio Parr, runs an illegal diploma mill called Gospel Faith College and advertises by running such items as this in local newspapers:

"Put yourself on God's payroll--Go to work for Jesus now."¹⁸

Never more than a step or two in front of the law, Bebb claims "'All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. One corinthians ten'" (LC p. 3). With these words, one of the most outrageous scamps in contemporary literature is introduced. Parr's association with Bebb begins when Antonio decides to do an exposé of Bebb's religious con game, and Antonio's casual investigation of Bebb surely turns up more than enough suspicious evidence to justify the exposé he intends to write. He discovers that Bebb was previously imprisoned for sexual exhibitionism. Bebb claims that he is constantly being investigated and pursued by agents from the FBI and the IRS as well as representatives of lesser bodies of the law. Bebb courts the favor of a wealthy Indian named Herman Redpath (an oil baron with a

ranch in Texas and numerous sexually demanding wives), and eventually gains that favor plus an apparent sinecure by performing a curiously mixed pagan-Christian fertility ritual to restore Redpath's virility. Bebb prays to God to help Herman Redpath.

"He is here that he may mount up in thy service like an eagle, so grant him the strength of a young man to mount with. Herman Redpath is here to receive from thy hands the holy power to love, so of thy love-power give him good measure, pressed down and shaken together and running over so that he may receive it into his lap and scatter it abroad like seed. Grant him the gift of charity so that he may be very charitable." (LC p. 215)

Redpath gets an erection; Bebb gets one hundred thousand dollars and a permanent church instead of his church of Holy Love in Armadillo, Florida. The people closest to Bebb are themselves further evidence of the legitimacy of Antonio's suspicions about Bebb. Lucille, Bebb's wife, is an alcoholic addicted as well to television. She may have killed her only child. Bebb's right-hand-man, Brownie, is effeminate. Bebb's daughter, Sharon, turns out to be adopted, in her early twenties, and sexually adventurous.

Yet the more Antonio learns about Bebb, the more enigmatic Bebb seems, and the less certain Antonio is that Bebb is entirely a fake. Even though he knows that it is crazy to think so, Antonio begins to think that Bebb might be something of a holy man after all. Brownie tells a convincing story about Bebb raising him from the dead in the presence of several amazed witnesses; Herman Redpath did regain his virility rather dramatically; Lucille constantly

suggests that Bebb is really an extraterrestrial being with more than human powers. While they are all motoring through "Lion Country," a wild game reserve in which wild lions roam unfettered, Bebb gets out of the car and confronts the animals with no fear and no difficulty. The Holy Love of Bebb's advertisements might be curiously mixed up with con games and sexuality, but it might also contain elements of the truly religious. The ambiguities of Bebb's personality and situation may be the outrageous features of the mask of faith in a largely faithless world. In the person of Leo Bebb, Antonio Parr, part-time free-lance writer, some-time English teacher, full-time skeptic, may have discovered a saint. And through Leo Bebb, Buechner seems to be asking us to at least consider some of the most outrageous, unlikely possibilities; a credible mythology is one of them, and faith, and hope, and wonder. Bebb and his entourage may be, as Charles Rice suggests, "more than they seem. The religion they peddle just may be, by some outside chance, a religion they possess."¹⁹

By the end of the trilogy, Antonio has himself become a member of Bebb's entourage: he has married, separated from, and rejoined Sharon; he has become the part-time substitute father for his two nephews, one of whom has sexual relations with Sharon; he has witnessed the ambiguous success of a series of religious revivals sponsored by Bebb including some "love feasts" held at Princeton that eventually deteriorated into sexual orgies. But he has not and

will not write the exposé he set out to write at the beginning of the trilogy. Through Leo Bebb, Antonio has begun to realize that maybe anything is possible. As Buechner himself suggests elsewhere, the

language of God seems mostly metaphor. His love is like a red, red, rose. His love is like the old waiter with shingles, the guitar playing Buddhist tramp, the raped child and the one who raped her. There is no image too far-fetched, no combination of sounds too harsh, no spelling too irregular, no allusion too obscure and outrageous.²⁰

As a form, the comic novel lends itself remarkably well to the development of Buechner's theme of wonder. Leo Bebb is to Buechner what Falstaff is to Shakespeare. If Bebb is inconsistent and a liar, it is only "in order to protect himself against the conventional dishonesty of other men."²¹ Bebb's experience is varied and seamy; he has "suffered all sorts of hard knocks . . . yet there is in him no fatigue, no world-weariness, and he retains a remarkable zest and enthusiasm for the human adventure."²² That Bebb's character is so outrageous need come as no shock to us if we simply remember the shared tendencies of most comic characters, for as Nathan Scott suggests

the comic man is unembarrassed by even the grossest expressions of his creatureliness: though the world may not be all dandy, he has no sense of being under any cruel condemnation; nor does he have any sense of desperate entrapment within a caged prison. He can say, without ironic bitterness, "I'm only human," in full recognition of the fact that the making of this admission is itself the condition of his life being tolerable and of his being able to address to God an appropriate Confiteor. He does not insist upon life's conforming to his own special requirements but consents to take it on the terms of its own created actuality, and the art of comedy is devoted to an exhibition of

his deep involvement in the world: so it shirks nothing--none of the irrelevant absurdities, none of the vexatious inconveniences, that are the lot of such finite creatures as ourselves.²³

A tragic view of the human condition, a view we often find in works that subscribe to the major tenets of modernism, tends to stress "the burden of human finitude."²⁴ The anguish and anxiety which accompany this burden are often paralytic, reducing the possibilities of wonder and affirmation by overemphasizing the imperfection or injustice of the human condition. For the tragic man (e.g., Tristram Bone or Lundrigan), human finitude

is a profound embarrassment and perhaps even a curse, for he would be pure intellect or pure will or pure something-or-other, and nothing wounds him more deeply than to be reminded that his life is a conditioned thing and that there is nothing absolute at all in the human stuff out of which he is made.²⁵

The stuff of everyday life, its density, its nuances, its stresses, strains, and small rewards, are subordinate for the tragic man to his sense of quest or vision or rebellion. But the comic view, the view that informs Buechner's trilogy, immerses us in the very stuff of ordinary life and "enables us to see the daily occasions of our earth-bound career as being not irrelevant inconveniences but as possible roads into what is ultimately significant in life."²⁶ However imperfect, absurd, or outrageous the world of Buechner's trilogy may be, it is always profoundly affirmative, constantly surprising and wondrous. That comedy, Christian faith, and the theme of wonder are as easily combined as they are in the trilogy is best explained by

Nathan Scott in his essay, "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith."

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." And upon what is implicit in this single sentence rests the whole Biblical interpretation of life and history, for that is a view of things which is fundamentally premised upon the assumption that the world of finite and contingent existence is not essentially defective simply by reason of its finiteness. Indeed, when the Christian faith has been true to itself, it has never quite forgotten that its genius in large part consists in its understanding that the finitude and particularization of created existence are not in themselves evil, since they are a part of God's plan for the world.²⁷

TREASURE HUNT, Buechner's latest novel, adds little to our understanding of any of Buechner's major themes, so it will receive little attention in this study. It continues in the comic vein of the trilogy, and could easily be seen as an addition to the trilogy since its narrator and major characters remain the same. However, without Leo Bebb and without any really new thematic direction, it is difficult to see the novel as anything but a kind of post-script to the earlier novels. In it, we discover that Leo Bebb was actually Sharon's natural father, and that her mother is married to Leo's twin brother, Babe, whose surprising existence (there is no reference to him whatsoever in the trilogy) is the only apparent justification for this novel's existence.

Lucille's suggestion that Leo Bebb might be from outer space, maintained humorously throughout the trilogy, is taken up and developed in TREASURE HUNT through the character of Babe Bebb who just happens to live in the

Bebbs' ancestral home in Poinsett, South Carolina, which he has transformed into a "Uforium"--a museum of artifacts supposedly from outer space. It is quickly apparent that Babe is at least as outrageous and ambiguous a figure as was his brother: he holds consultations in his Uforium for those who are troubled and in need of cosmic advice; he maintains that the little black dots on his teeth are transistors, and that his teeth are somehow attuned to the frequencies of outer space; he suggests that flying saucers make frequent landings near his house; and finally, he suggests (shades of Leo) that Jesus was a spaceman.

"There's some say I'm cuckoo. A phony. You name it. So what? Sticks and stones. It's the wave of the future. Hope of the world. Most folks I don't tell the half of it. Come see me in the office sometime and I'll show you things. Blow your mind."

He talked about Jesus. He said, "You thought I was funning you about Jesus. I was and wasn't both. Know something? Someday Jesus'll climb out of a saucer. Sunshine in his hair. Gather his own up just like it says. Only he's a spaceman, that's what. You'll see."28

Obviously TREASURE HUNT is more topical than Buechner's earlier works, though signs of this topicality begin to appear in the trilogy as well. Instead of allusions to seventeenth century poetry and images drawn from seventeenth century cosmology, the trilogy and TREASURE HUNT are full of allusions to our technological age, particularly to films, radio programs, and the famous characters (usually comic) we have come to know because of these media. The natural imagery of the earlier novels is replaced by the artificial imagery of recorded sights and

sounds. In response to the outrageousness of some of the suggestions and behavior of Leo and Babe Bebb, Antonio himself introduces many zany, flippant, outrageous suggestions, allusions, and analogies. In TREASURE HUNT, for example, Antonio often refers to Christ as The Lone Ranger. He sees the brothers Bebb as the Laurel and Hardy of his own comic, ironic existence. When he dreams of his dead sister, the comic allusions of Antonio's dream illustrate perfectly the nature of Buechner's comic allusions throughout TREASURE HUNT.

She says her doctor looks like Groucho Marx. She asks if I think dying is going someplace or just going out, like a match, and I am inspired to tell her how I have a fantasy in which Jesus is Don Giovanni, the great lover himself, with a little gold earring in one ear and an Errol Flynn smile as he runs Satan through with a sword and puts Death to rout. Bene, Bene, Antonio, she says. For once I have said the right thing al- though I can be sure of nothing except that it's a thing I've said. (p.217)

Antonio's most serious moments are often oddly mixed moments in which the faces of comedy and tragedy are almost indistinguishable from one another, or moments in which dreams and life and film are curiously mixed together. Death wears the face of Groucho Marx and Jesus is Errol Flynn. Antonio's answer to Miriam's question is in many ways no answer at all, yet the suggestion that an answer may lie in an analogy between life and film is one that dominates the trilogy and TREASURE HUNT. In the trilogy, Antonio suggests that he sees his life as a home movie, and in TREASURE HUNT it seems to be the movies, especially the comic ones, that speak to him about his life. Reality

and fantasy may be closer to one another than we ordinarily admit. As Antonio says, thinking of dreams: "In a world where we are often closer to the truth in dreams than anywhere else, who is to say what is possible and not possible, true and not true, any more than in dreams you can say it?" (p. 189)

The evanescent nature of dreams and films provides Antonio with a suggestive metaphor of the evanescence of life. The curiously vivid and immediate reality of dreams and films strike Antonio as similar to that of life itself. The intensity of waking human experience is underscored by a consciousness of death, and this consciousness lends to life itself an illusory quality which destroys the sense of solidity or permanence that we customarily associate with life, undermining the apparently solid distinctions we maintain between the present and the past, dreaming and waking, the imaginary and the real. Memory and dream, Buechner suggests, are much like film, allowing the past to continue to live in the present, unaffected by the stream of time that separates them in our conscious lives. In *TREASURE HUNT*, Gertrude Conover discovers a tape recording left behind by Leo Bebb. The information it provides about Leo's relatives and property affects the lives of all the major characters of the novel. In fact, it generates the entire plot of the novel. In the trilogy and in *TREASURE HUNT*, images captured on film or tape allow lives that have flickered out to flicker on again, providing a

life beyond life, and the metaphysical implications of these technological resources provide Antonio with a source of speculation and wonder that rivals the visions of such characters as Peter Cowley (THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE) or Peter Ringkoping (THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK).

Although Antonio Parr remains a far more skeptical character throughout the trilogy and TREASURE HUNT than many of the characters who support Buechner's theme of wonder in earlier novels, he remains willing at least to entertain the possibilities of wonder represented by such slapstick characters as Leo and Babe Bebb. The difficulties of his own "treasure hunt" (his life) do not overcome him or paralyze him. He remains a modern character for whom irony is the bedrock of all human experience, but, as he suggests near the end of TREASURE HUNT, he has

moved step by step to a kind of panicky openness to almost any possibility, which I suspect must be, if not the same thing as what people like Bebb would call faith, at least its kissing cousin. (p. 189)

Coupled with an awareness of the problematic nature of contemporary life, Buechner's theme of wonder often seems wildly outrageous. That is perhaps the reason that Buechner relies so heavily upon irony throughout his work. The characters who bear the weight of Buechner's moral concerns almost always appear to be far-fetched: Babe Bebb, in TREASURE HUNT, claims to have access to extra-terrestrial intelligence; Leo Bebb, in the trilogy, may be a con man, a cheap opportunist abusing people's fondest

wishes; Joey and Bonzo, in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*, are, by definition, less than fully human; Irma Reinwasser, in *THE FINAL BEAST*, is accidentally burned to death by a fire that was started in a paper bag full of human feces; Lillian Flagg, of the same novel, may be a charlatan; Peter Cowley, of *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, may or may not have had a vision; and Dr. Lavender, of the same novel, "marries" the children Peter tutors. The list could be extended a great deal before it would be exhaustive. The important thing to note about this outrageousness is that it often introduces other thematic concerns that run through many of Buechner's novels accompanying and complementing the general theme of wonder already detailed above; they are the themes of innocence and transformation.

NOTES--Chapter I

¹Margaret Wimsatt, "A Novelist for the New Church?" America, 127 (Oct. 7, 1972), p. 261.

²John W. Aldridge, AFTER THE LOST GENERATION (New York, 1951), pp. 219-220.

³Ibid., p. 220.

⁴Ibid., p. 221.

⁵Ibid., pp. 221-222.

⁶Ibid., p. 223.

⁷Ibid., p. 230.

⁸Ibid., p. 230.

⁹Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 230.

¹¹Ibid., p. 226.

¹²Ibid., p. 229.

¹³Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁵Frederick Buechner, THE FINAL BEAST (New York, 1965), p. 13. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation TFB along with the page number.

¹⁶Frederick Buechner, THE ALPHABET OF GRACE (New York, 1970), p. 22.

¹⁷Frederick Buechner, THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK (New York, 1970), p. 27. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation TETP along with the page number.

¹⁸Frederick Buechner, LION COUNTRY (New York, 1971), p. 6. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation LC along with the page number.

¹⁹Charles Rice, "Theology as Autobiography in the Novels and Sermons of Frederick Buechner," an unpublished paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Washington, D.C., 1974, p. 9.

²⁰THE ALPHABET OF GRACE, p. 13.

²¹Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," in COMEDY: Meaning and Form, ed., Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco, 1965), p. 105.

²²Ibid., p. 105.

²³Ibid., pp. 93-94.

²⁴Ibid., p. 93.

²⁵Ibid., p. 93.

²⁶Ibid., p. 107.

²⁷Ibid., p. 109.

²⁸Frederick Buechner, TREASURE HUNT (New York, 1977), p. 104. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation TH along with the page number.

develops variations on the theme of innocence. As does William Blake, in his "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," Buechner suggests the necessity of both views of human experience. Modernism is almost entirely on the side of experience: everything is mixed and imperfect; nothing is fresh and uncomplicated. But this is only a partial view, Buechner implicitly argues, however much it might seem to be complete. And the more we stress this partial view and accommodate ourselves to it, Buechner implies, the more "the waste land which holds us in thrall could come from within as well as from without."¹

Innocence, the conscious protection of innocence, and the realization of the importance of innocence, are means of countering the effects of the waste land in Buechner's novels. And this innocence takes many forms. In several of the novels, the theme of innocence develops out of the subplots and minor characters. In *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, innocence is a minor theme, less important than it becomes in the later novels. Yet it is unmistakably a concern even in this first, most modern of the novels. Leander, Elizabeth's son, is in college, and Maroo, Elizabeth's mother, writes long, beautiful letters to Leander, the intent of which is apparently to protect Leander. Maroo, herself, is apparently an aged innocent whose neighbors speak to her "'as they would to a drunk or a child, thinking . . . that the old citizen isn't what she once was and that they had therefore best jolly her along'" (p. 91).

II

THE THEME OF INNOCENCE

Since Buechner presents modern life as essentially problematic, and since problematic experience can lead to the skepticism, despair, or ennui exemplified by such characters as Tristram Bone in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, or Lundrigan in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, one of Buechner's most difficult problems is to present convincing reasons for the affirmation and wonder of his novels. Buechner's many "innocents" are both the causes of and the vehicles for much of the affirmation in his novels. In innocence there may still be some hope.

The sophistication of the major characters of the early novels is highly valued by its possessors and serves them as a kind of tonic for their essential malaise. The world of good books, good music, vintage French wines, civilized friends, and witty conversation provides some insulation from the barbarities of modern life, and serves as well to distract Tristram Bone or Sam and Sara Dunn from the emptiness, the purposelessness of their lives. But this distraction is merely a distraction, Buechner implies, and, as previously noted, Buechner insists on its inadequacy. As a corrective to the inadequacy of the various tonics available to his characters, Buechner carefully

develops variations on the theme of innocence. As does William Blake, in his "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," Buechner suggests the necessity of both views of human experience. Modernism is almost entirely on the side of experience: everything is mixed and imperfect; nothing is fresh and uncomplicated. But this is only a partial view, Buechner implicitly argues, however much it might seem to be complete. And the more we stress this partial view and accommodate ourselves to it, Buechner implies, the more "the waste land which holds us in thrall could come from within as well as from without."¹

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Maroo enjoys being treated as an innocent, even though she is certainly not as simple as her neighbors might believe. She is conscious of just how fragile innocence is in the modern world, and she is conscious as well of its necessity. Somehow she managed to age and mature, to gain insight into the dangers and fears of life without being embittered by experience or overwhelmed by the darker possibilities which have brought other characters in the novel to the edge of despair. Hers is not an innocence based on ignorance, and it is important to recognize this as a first step to understanding the ways in which the theme of innocence functions in Buechner's novels.

Steitler, one of Leander's instructors, suggests the following about his educational function:

"I teach them English is all," he continued, "and the pay-off they finally get is a kind of corruption, because what they learn, when they've had the full treatment, is nothing about any particular book or any particular author or period so much as something fairly unnerving about life." (p. 59)

Maroo knows that Leander will have to learn to face much that is "unnerving," just as she has, and we are told that if "it were possible to imagine fear as ever being her motive, then it could be that she was afraid for the boy as of or for nothing else" (p. 92). Her letters to her grandson are gracious, witty attempts to provide him with some ability to defend himself. The style of the letters is dominated by irony and ambiguity, the very tools of modernism used, in this instance, to resist and combat it.

Could he only become accustomed to danger, to the sense that to be alive was perilous, as the quaint fiction of an old lady, might he then not come to see the acts of fear or their possibility as a fiction too; yet all this must be done humorously, quaintly, in just the ways least likely to reach him, for otherwise he might pay too much heed. . . . Oh what a delicate game . . . to point out the trap yet pretend not to notice it. (pp. 92-93)

Leander's innocence is preserved in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, but the cost is enormous. Leander's mother has sexual relations with Steitler, who is Leander's friend as well as his teacher, and the complications which arise from the attempts to keep this knowledge from Leander are enough to strain almost all of the relationships in the novel and to wreck Leander's friendship with Steitler. The danger to Leander of "corruption" from Steitler and his modernism is overcome. But the fragility of Leander's innocence is evident. It is best stated, metaphorically, by Tristram Bone when he is speaking to Steitler:

"When anyone is walking his lonely tightrope," he paused, the image growing in his mind, "without a safety net, with a minimum of courage or conviction and a maximum of vulnerability, dangerously, imperatively, it is a kind of sin for someone else even to suggest that by jumping down there is nothing to lose but a precarious balance and the questionable safety of the far platform." (p. 182)

The necessity of protecting innocence is evident even to Bone. Yet for all the characters in *A LONG DAY'S DYING* other than Leander and Maroo, innocence is irretrievably lost. What this novel clearly establishes through its theme of innocence is Buechner's interest in the possibility of recognizing the dangers of modernism and remaining,

somehow, invulnerable to them. It also suggests that this is not a simple matter.

In *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, innocence is a major theme, though once again it is embodied primarily in the minor characters. Buechner details three principal types of innocence in the novel: there is the conventional innocence of the children; there is the innocence of Peter Cowley, an idealistic, child-like adult; and there is the innocence of Dr. Lavender, perverted to the point of fanaticism.

The children's innocence is valuable in that it enables them to view the world as continually wondrous. Almost everything is new to them and anything seems possible. With little experience and few ingrained habits, the youngest of the children in the novel are more open to experience than any of the other characters in the book. Since Buechner's theme of wonder has already been introduced, it should be obvious that those elements in the children's experience which help to produce a sense of wonder and awe are likely to be approved. And they are. Yet the innocence of the youngest children in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* is not entirely sufficient. Georgie Bundle's innocence is, after all, merely inexperience; he and the other young children will outgrow it, just as they outgrow their clothes. As experience begins to weigh more heavily upon them, they will, like Rufus Este and Harry Fogg (the adolescents in the novel, the "Uglies," as they call

themselves), begin the adolescent process of losing their innocence, will even become desirous of losing it. But in the meantime their games will continue to reflect a world of innocence, of unlimited possibility.

Sam Dunn believes in protecting the innocence of the children, and Lundrigan, who values nothing as highly as he values maturity, tells Sam that this attitude is poppycock and that the "artificial prolongation of innocence" (p. 30) is immoral. The contrast and opposition of these attitudes exist dramatically as well as propositionally in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*. The children's innocence, which is natural and transitory, has its counterpart in Dr. Lavender's idea of innocence, which is unnatural and fixed. Lavender romanticizes innocence to the extreme point of seeing children as the source of the modern world's salvation. He tells Peter Cowley that "'in order for the world to be saved, the world must see things simply again and in innocence'" (p. 126). He then suggests that

"complexity is unhappiness and damnation too, and the race of man is unhappy and damned because it is complicated. If only it might be replaced by the race of children! Then there would be simplicity again, and happiness and salvation." (p.127)

Much of what Lavender suggests about the children as a source of salvation is convincing if it is taken metaphorically. Lavender himself reminds Peter Cowley of Christ's injunction to "'be as a little child'" (p. 118). But Lavender responds to Christ's words literally; he joins in the children's games with them, much to their bemusement,

and he attempts to perpetuate the race of children by actually marrying the children in the novel, one to another. His idée fixe becomes the source of what can only be described, finally, as fanaticism. Lavender's romantic notions of innocence eventually lead to his own death. In an attempt to climb up to the children's tree house, Lavender falls and kills himself. Ironically, rather than helping to perpetuate their innocence, Lavender tarnishes that innocence by introducing them to death. Lavender's ideas of innocence are important in the novel. Even Sam admits that Lavender may have been "'the best and wisest of us all. Wrong, wrong, but just wrong'" (p. 281). Yet Lavender is ultimately a foolish old man. Buechner seems to be suggesting that innocence must be preserved as a possibility, as a state of being that does have its own charms and rewards and insights, as something to learn from. But Lavender's insistence that innocence alone is the answer is nonsense.

In between the extremes of the children's natural innocence and Lavender's ideas of innocence there is the innocence of Peter Cowley. Cowley is "a quiet, pleasant young man, much devoted to his profession as a teacher, but certainly never wild-eyed about it, nor about anything . . . certainly not a mystic or a visionary" (p. 43). Yet Cowley has had a vision, at least he thinks he has, and this vision convinces him that he was right in believing what he had previously only hoped that he was right in believing,

"'that there is God, and that we matter to Him. Very much'" (p. 79). The entire plot of THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE depends upon Cowley's vision, his attempt to restage that vision for his friends, and the reactions to both of these events by all of the other characters in the novel. The sophistication and the skepticism of Sam, Sara, and Lundri-gan exist in vivid contrast to the innocence of Cowley, an innocence which, at the very least, allows for the possibility of the authenticity of an apparently visionary experience. Cowley is a childlike adult, but unlike Dr. Lavender, Cowley does not seem to be unnaturally straining to maintain his innocence. Lavender believes that he ought to be childlike; he desperately wants to be childlike. Cowley is.

Cowley is the only character in this novel who receives Buechner's unqualified approval, and this approval seems to be linked to Cowley's innocence. Cowley desires to live meaningfully and he does. Like Maroo, in A LONG DAY'S DYING, Cowley seems to be the single adult character in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE whose initiation into adult life has not left him embittered or helpless. Also like Maroo, Cowley has preserved a precarious innocence which has left him open to life and has allowed him truly to love life. In Peter's case, as in Maroo's, this love of life, this innocence, is not the coefficient of ignorance. He knows that much of human life involves suffering and defeat. Still, just after a dramatic reminder of this (a

performance by the freaks in the visiting circus), Peter is "filled with an emotion like great grief or great happiness but richer than either, [and he] gave unspoken thanks for a life of which his only fear was that he loved it perhaps too dearly" (p. 67).

By the end of the novel, Cowley has decided to forego his teaching of children and to teach instead, or at least try to teach, Sam, Sara, Lundrigan, Julie McMoon. The novel has already proven, through the relative failure of Cowley's restaged vision and the difficulty he has had convincing his friends that his first vision was genuine, that it is precisely these people who will be the hardest to reach with the lessons of wonder, affirmation, and love at Peter's disposal. Sam's response to Peter's decision makes this very clear.

"So we're to be the ones then. Well I can only praise your valiance. You won't find us easy, although I daresay you've learned that already. The first time you say anything, even the glittering truth itself, so that it sounds however remotely like a cliché, you'll lose half of us because that's an indelicacy we can't forgive. And as soon as you start trying to appeal to our--what do they call them?--our emotions, you'll find the other half has also gone because that's a breach of taste they simply won't have been able to abide. . . . We're too clever to react to threats or bribes, and don't remind us of our peculiar faults because we're fully aware of them as is, and don't ignore them either because they're a source of considerable pride to us." (p. 282)

Yet Sam also admits that Peter may have something to teach the rest of them, and he even suggests a method of doing so remarkably similar to Buechner's own method, in his later novels, of presenting his themes of affirmation.

"Teach us," he said . . . "teach us to love maybe. Better still, perhaps, teach us to suffer. . . And at the same time, don't neglect to laugh at yourself a bit, and at us, because there can be little under the sun quite so amusing as a game of blindman's buff played on the scale you've chosen to play it. Then maybe we'll listen to you. Maybe we won't, of course, but the advice is still excellent." (p. 283)

As in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, the innocence Buechner details in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* is presented as necessary and valuable, but its existence is perilous, and the chance that it will be properly valued is slim. Like Maroo, Peter Cowley will have to approach those most in need of what he can tell them through indirection, and only through indirection.

The theme of innocence is not evident in *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS*, but in *THE FINAL BEAST* it is again a major theme. Its treatment there is very similar to its treatment in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*. Again there are children, innocent and charming. Again the character who receives the implied author's approval is a character who recognizes the problematic nature of human experience, but is not defeated by it. Again this character affirms the reality of the spirit and opposes the impoverishments of modernism. However, in *THE FINAL BEAST*, the theme of innocence is not developed primarily through minor characters, as it was previously. In this novel it is embodied by Theodore Nicolet, the protagonist.

Nicolet's innocence is more complex than Peter Cowley's. We can understand Cowley almost exclusively in

terms of his innocence, but Nicolet's innocence is complicated by elements in his character such as guilt, doubt, and apparent failure which make it difficult for him to maintain his innocence. As is Peter Cowley's, Nicolet's innocence is developed largely through its opposition to the world-weariness, the over-rationality, and the despair of another character. In this case his name is Poteat. But, unlike Peter Cowley's, Nicolet's innocence is opposed from within as well as from without.

Buechner even provides Nicolet with a genealogy of weakness and failure. Nicolet's grandfather adopted the pseudonym Leon Laliberte, and was involved in a series of misadventures. Roy, Theodore's father, remembers Laliberte this way: "'He was a romantic, my poor young dad, and an idealist, but it was one bad joke after another for him all the way through'" (p. 156). And Roy carries on the family tradition of incompetence. Faced with the demands of life, he seems to prefer death. He has been "dying" for almost as long as his son, Theodore, can remember. Nick (Theodore's nickname), put out with his father's constant demands on his time, refers to Roy as an artist of death.

"He's been on the point of death for thirty years, maybe longer--a specialist," he said, "a specialist in dying, an artist when it comes to the death-bed summons, and they're always remarkable for this same literary flavor. Medicos! Medicos! Where does he get it? He runs a boardinghouse, you know--strong as a horse. Dying is just a hobby for him." (p. 38)

Nicolet's innocence is precarious, and as the novel

progresses we discover that Nicolet is skeptical of his own work amongst the faithful of Myron, uncertain whether he is running from his congregation and its needs or to Rooney, and uncertain as well of the adequacy of his own faith. Every element of Nicolet's life that has previously been meaningful and fulfilling now seems to be problematic and charged with anxiety. His wife, Franny, has been dead for only a year. Her death has placed Nicolet under a good deal of emotional stress, and the task of raising their two daughters without her help and counsel is a large one. Nicolet's relationship with his congregation is strained, and this strain is taking its toll. His relationship with his father is obviously deteriorating. Nicolet is slandered and accused of paganism by the local newspaper editor who is jealous of Nicolet's relationship with Rooney Vail. Nicolet's faith itself is apparently being tested by the emotional stresses of his situation; he is tempted by the flesh, by self-pity, and by doubt. Yet, by the end of the novel, he has not only maintained but strengthened his faith, and it is clear that one prerequisite to his renewed faith is the same kind of innocence described above as important in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE.

Nicolet's innocence involves his ability to recognize those aspects of human life which lead others to despair, or to a kind of death-in-life (e.g., Metzger, Po-teat, and Roy, Nicolet's father), but not to be overpowered

by them, not to allow his own trust in the essential goodness of life to be shaken. Like Peter Cowley of THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE, Nicolet is able to be lighthearted and to maintain a childlike joy and spontaneity which cause some of Myron's citizens to see him as something of a clown. The irony is that they are not entirely wrong, that Nicolet is something of a clown, and there is at least a large comic potential in his situation. As a man of faith, Nicolet is involved in the same game of blind man's buff that Sam suggests as an appropriate metaphor of Peter Cowley's faith in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE. Nicolet's effectiveness as a minister is somewhat dependent on the lightheartedness and spontaneity that are so large a part of his clownish personality.

They had eaten the Gospel out of his hand--his own brand of it, warmed and sweetened by no particular skill that he had as a preacher but by some curious lightness of heart that seemed to be in him, a way that he had in the pulpit of smiling sometimes as though he knew beyond all doubt a hilarious secret which was that the glory that he was proclaiming either really was, or really was not, true, but that in either case it was a cause for lightheartedness: life was a joke too terrible or too wonderful to take any other way. They ate up anything that he chose to give them, jolly Saint Nick. (pp. 192-193)

Yet Nicolet's lightheartedness is itself ambiguous. His innocence is not the result of inexperience; his faith is tempered by doubt as well as by a sense of modern experience which acknowledges the darkest possibilities. Beneath the clown's painted smile there may be tight lips. Life may be, after all, "too terrible" to take in any but

a lighthearted manner.

Nicolet wants some sign that will release him from his doubts, some indication (like Peter Cowley's vision) that human life, problematic as he knows it to be, is ultimately meaningful. Just as much as Rooney Vail or the rest of his parishioners, Nicolet wants to know whether the message he has been bringing to them is true, whether he can, in good conscience, continue to preach "the best . . . knowing the worst" (pp. 174-175). Once Nicolet has successfully resisted the temptation of the flesh (Rooney), and is well on his way to reconciliation with his father, Buechner grants him his revelation. Lying in the grass out behind his father's barn, thinking of the sermon he wants to preach on the coming Sunday, Nicolet suddenly feels that something is about to be revealed to him. He prays for Jesus to come and he expects to hear something conventional such as "'Feed my sheep'" (p. 177) if Jesus does miraculously appear. But He does not appear. When Nicolet raises his head he sees that "nothing was happening except that everything that he could see--the shabby barn, weeds, orchard--had too much the look of nothing happening, a tense, self-conscious innocence" (p. 177). Then something, however slight it seems, does happen.

Two apple branches struck against each other with the limber clack of wood on wood. That was all--a tick-tock rattle of branches--but then a fierce lurch of excitement at what was only daybreak, only the smell of summer coming, only starting back again for home, but oh Jesus, he thought, with a great lump in his throat and a crazy grin, it was an agony of

gladness and beauty falling wild and soft like rain. Just clack-clack, but praise him, he thought. Praise him. Maybe all his journeying, he thought, had been only to bring him here to hear two branches hit each other twice like that, to see nothing cross the thresh-old, to hear the dry clack-clack of the world's tongue at the approach of the approach perhaps of splendor. (pp. 177-178)

This ambiguous "clack-clack," this "approach of the approach perhaps of splendor," is enough for Nicolet--more than enough. We know that Poteat wouldn't have heard it at all, and Nicolet thinks that Denbigh, a more conventional clergyman than himself, would have heard the Apostle's Creed instead. But Nicolet heard "clack-clack," heard God calling to him through the world, and the music of the spheres could not have been sweeter.

The ambiguity of Nicolet's innocence, Buechner implies, parallels the necessary ambiguity of the central concepts of the Christian religion that Nicolet preaches. The central symbol of Christianity, Christ's crucifixion, represents a "magnificent defeat,"² and such Christian concepts as grace, miracle, and salvation have always been essentially paradoxical. Buechner is obviously not interested in explaining away what he dramatizes as the essentially mysterious nature of human experience; his refusal to deny the ambiguities of Nicolet's innocence or of his peculiar moment of grace lends power to the themes of wonder and innocence in *THE FINAL BEAST*.

The theme of innocence receives its most extensive treatment by Buechner in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*. The

Ringkopings' journey to Strasser's sanctuary becomes no less than a journey to discover the significance of lost innocence; it poses the question of what those who have lost their innocence can learn from those who have not. The four major characters, Peter, Nels, Tommy, and Tip, are all guilty of not knowing themselves very well, nor anyone else. In varying degrees, they have all failed in their human relationships. They are all "innocent" in the sense in which the word implies absence or incompleteness. Their innocence tends to be negative; it prevents them from living well rather than fostering their well-being.

Peter's innocence is the innocence of the dreamer. He has spent a large portion of his eighty years preoccupied with his notion that at some time during his life he might have a moment of pure metaphysical insight. He hopes to find a loose corner of the air and to tear it back to find, well, he does not know exactly what, "'something like fire'" (p. 29) perhaps. He has written a book in which he described those moments in his life when he came closest to his dreamed-of vision. They were moments when he saw, or thought he saw, the ghosts of Shakespeare and of Gloriana, the Faerie Queen. But Buechner is not as sympathetic to Peter Ringkoping's visions as he was to Peter Cowley's, in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, nor as he was to Nicolet's crazy moment of grace in *THE FINAL BEAST*. These three characters are unquestionably involved in similar kinds of experiences; even the ambiguities of

these experiences are similar. In Peter Ringkoping's case, the visions may be "either the product or the discovery of his imagination," (p. 98) and even his book on the subject never makes it "clear whether he was writing autobiography or fairy tale" (p. 54). But the result of these metaphysical yearnings and experiences is not the same for these three characters: Peter Cowley's visions lead him to dedicate himself to teaching and helping those near him who most need the kind of insight he might be able to provide them; Theodore Nicolet's experience leads him to reaffirm his dedication to his faith, his church, his congregation; Peter Ringkoping's "ghosts" lead him into isolation not only from people generally but from his own family. The isolated, uncommitted life is not one of which Buechner wholly approves, however tempting it might be. Peter Ringkoping is a sympathetic character, and the possibilities that his visions represent uphold Buechner's previous rejection of modernism and his themes of wonder and innocence. But Peter's journey to Strasser's colony of innocents teaches Peter that he has not been a good father nor a good husband. Only when he realizes this, only when he begins to involve his life with the lives of others, does Buechner suggest that he is forgiven.

Tommy's innocence is evident in his perpetual clowning and in his avoidance of responsibility. He is an absentee father and husband, or might as well be. He apparently feels that he is entirely unloved, and he is unloving in

return. The reasons for Tommy's clowning are not made clear until Tommy thinks of a boyhood friend, Bill Barnum, who was, "unlike Tommy, a natural clown. He used no props, did it all by making everything seem larger than life" (p. 90). Barnum was a spontaneous fellow, full of life and vitality, who might have been able to provide Tommy with some direction in the absence of any from his father. "If Bill Barnum had lived, things might have been different. Bill Barnum had told him about sex--maybe he would have told him other things" (p. 91). Tommy's life not only lacks direction, but the only person he ever knew who seemed able to live life meaningfully, to confront the darkness, found his final victory simply in not giving in to the darkness. In a passage suggestive of some of the ideas we associate with the waste land, Tommy remembers Bill Barnum's drowning.

Puffing and hooting, Bill Barnum had clambered to the top of the high wall and stood there against the sky with the starlight on his shoulders. With his two fists he pounded an ape-man vibrato out of his hairless chest, then leaped feet first, knees jack-knifed, arms spread, into the night, into the depths of the quarry where in prehistoric shapes, bearded with rust and rot, the old machinery craned up to make a terrible mess of that great mess of a boy. (p. 92)

In the waste land, water is for drowning. Tommy sees his own clowning as similar to Barnum's drowning. "Play it for laughs. And when they came at you with their demands to be a man, a husband, . . . let them have it in the eye with your feather duster or a squirt from your trick boutonniere. There were more ways than one of drowning" (p. 93).

Tommy, the clown, wears several masks to disguise what is actually the darkest interpretation of human experience in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK. In the pilgrim village, just before nightfall and darkness, Tommy glances around at his relatives, Strasser, the mongols, and thinks

there was nothing ever given back that darkness took. They had, each one, an arrow through the head and wore a set of monster teeth fixed in a skull that flesh could not disguise for long. . . . There was no winning against the dark except as for a moment Bill Barnum had won by leaping into it before it had a chance to leap at him, two hundred pimply pounds razzing it out of at least the dignity of victory. (P. 242)

Finally, after the evening meeting of the inhabitants and the visitors in Strasser's village, Tommy is told that he, too, is loved. Shortly after this, it occurs to Tommy "that he could tell them nothing about the darkness that they did not already know, and if he had any business there . . . it was to hold his tongue for once" (p. 243).

Nels is clearly an inhabitant of the waste land. He is a bachelor and apparently has nothing to do with women. He is Dean of Students at a boys' school, and his life there is dominated by pettiness, sterility, and fear. He attempts to deal with the emptiness of his life by living in a very orderly manner; he is a man of schedules, dominated by the clock, by routine, by his job. He has a recurrent dream of dying, unnoticed, in a hospital room, surrounded by strangers and sterility. His fear of death has turned him into a hypochondriac, constantly worried about his heart. But Nels's heart trouble is metaphoric

rather than literal or physical. He is inordinately self-concerned, and he has failed to love others. He thinks of himself as a tough Dean who is helping to turn boys into young men by being authoritarian and demanding. He disapproves of the essentially friendly approach to the students of Penrose, the English teacher, whom he sees as a "bleeding heart." On the way to Strasser's, Nels runs over a cat when he could easily have avoided doing so, and this image of repressed violence and frustration speaks volumes about the Dean. Eventually, when he is informed of the suicide of a student he was going to expel from school, Nels begins to face himself more honestly and to put his own fears of death to rest.

Tip is the most conventionally innocent of the four major characters. He is a dreamer, like his grandfather, and his dreaminess is compounded by his sexual innocence and his adolescence. The idealized object of Tip's dreams is not, however, as insubstantial as Peter's ghosts; Tip is in love with Libba Vann. He is too shy to tell her of his love. Instead, he writes her an interminable letter, that he will probably never mail, telling her about his most private thoughts and feelings. Tip feels isolated from his parents, and he is drawn to his grandfather's views of our general isolation from one another. Tip imagines all human beings

moving around through space like those contraptions
that they used for exploring the bottom of the sea,
in each of which, all by himself, a person sits

looking out of his porthole and manipulating from within those grapples and feelers that make contact with a world with which he can never make direct contact himself. . . . He thought that . . . in even the most intimate embrace that he might contrive with a fellow creature, the sound that they would make would be only the clanking of bathyspheres. (pp. 56-57)

When he is home from college, Tip spends most of his time with his grandfather up on Tinmouth Mountain in the old barn that Peter has converted into a used book store.

Tip's mother complains that he doesn't seem to know where home is any more, and when Tip thinks about what his motive for the journey to Strasser's might be, he realizes that his "reason for going was perhaps no more than just that-- to find out where home was" (p. 67).

For each sojourner, the journey to Strasser's colony of innocents produces greater self-awareness. In this peculiar place, at the end of their journey, the major characters are confronted by innocence. Strasser describes the mongols as human beings "'in whom heredity has been almost entirely excluded. . . . You and I, we look like father, like mother. There is a family look about us. . . . But with the mongol, no. He never looks like his parents. He is only like other mongols'" (p. 216). Since mongols do not reproduce themselves, Strasser maintains that modern history itself is somehow responsible for their increasing numbers. He maintains that before 1900 there was very little mongolism; "'it is a phenomenon that seems to have appeared only since the start of this century'" (p. 216). The innocence of the mongols is

very complete. "'There is sex, for instance. They seem to make no distinction between male and female. All are very much alike to them, and everything that is human they love. Also they are themselves without sexual ripeness'" (pp. 216-217). Added to the above there is the fact that the "'mongol has no fear of death. He has no knowledge of it apparently, as we have, always, off somewhere in the back of the head'" (p. 217). The mongols are all very tender-hearted and very bashful, and they consider everyone their friend. This prompts Peter to suggest that the mongol lives in Paradise; Strasser responds, "'Or Paradise in him,'" (p. 217) and Tommy asks where he can sign up. Strasser's response to Tommy underlines the innocence of the mongols and strongly suggests their didactic function in this particular novel. Strasser says it is too late for us and that this "'is why mongols have started being born, I think. They are messages to us from a world that we've lost'" (p. 218). The mongols, peculiarly less than fully human, are complemented in the village by fellow villagers, like Bonzo, who are strangely too human. Bonzo is

"too human for his own good. He is always crying because he is naked to the wind. The lachrymae rerum, you see . . . how sometimes you will see a certain kind of face in a crowd, maybe just a pair of old shoes forgotten in a closet, and suddenly you want to weep. Only to Bonzo it is lachrymae mundi. Life itself is the old shoes, the face. To him we must say, 'come and be only as human as we are. . . . Be like the rest of us, and do not feel so much.' And to us he also is saying something. I think that to us he is maybe a message from a world we have not yet reached, a world where each stands naked to the other's pain." (p. 219)

In between the "'world that we've lost'" and the "'world we have not yet reached,'" there is the present. In the present there is something to learn from these examples of extreme innocence which the world itself, in dire need, seems to beget. It can best be illustrated by what Strasser says we know about helping the victim of a grand mal seizure; "'one way to help is to take him in your arms . . . and hug him as tightly as you can while he struggles with his demon . . . locked in each other's arms . . . against death, [you] make this little bond of life'" (pp. 213-214).

However indiscriminate and however much less or more than human Strasser's villagers might be, they are capable of loving everything human. This excessive, indiscriminate love of the villagers finds its counterpoint in the novel's major characters: Nels has been able to love only himself, and not very successfully; Tommy's marriage has become an empty formality; Peter has isolated himself from others for as long as he can remember; Tip is struggling to learn how to deal with his love for Libba Vann. Each of these characters needs to discover that he has the ability to change his life, and that changes for the better will depend largely upon relationships to others.

The innocence that Joey and Bonzo represent is an innocence that is not available to the Ringkopings. Their world is the problematic world of human isolation which has caused all of them much pain. This is not to say that

THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK discounts the theme of wonder evident in so many of Buechner's works. In fact, the allusions to THE WIZARD OF OZ and to Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST reinforce an atmosphere of enchantment and innocence which make it the most idyllic of Buechner's novels. But Strasser tells a little joke about mankind that keeps the themes of wonder and innocence in a problematic perspective: "'Man, I say, is the missing link between the ape and the human being'" (p. 175). We are neither capable of loving everyone nor of being entirely open to each other's pain, yet the innocence of Strasser's villagers reminds us that we can do something; we can try to love one another, however imperfectly. In THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK, as in THE WIZARD OF OZ, the emphasis is on the individual's responsibility, and the final magic is that there is no magic.

In the trilogy, LION COUNTRY, OPEN HEART, and LOVE FEAST, the theme of innocence is embodied in two characters: Leo Bebb and his adopted daughter, Sharon. Neither of these characters is unequivocally innocent. In fact, Buechner emphasizes the ways in which they are not innocent. Many of Bebb's activities are morally and legally questionable: conning wealth; exposing himself to children; selling mail-order diplomas; sponsoring love feasts; confusing temporal and divine love; and failing to make his marriage to Lucille successful. Yet, as noted earlier, Bebb might be the real thing, a truly religious man, a

saint masquerading as a clown and a pervert. Bebb's innocence is the innocence of the naif, the comic character so true to his own view of the world that he seems honest and appealing even when his views and actions are diametrically opposed to those of the world at large. Since Leo's innocence ultimately produces the same results as Peter Cowley's or Theodore Nicolet's, an ability to affirm life, to keep faith, even though he understands fully how problematic human experience is, there is little need to detail his innocence any further here. It is interesting to note, however, how far Buechner has come by the time he introduces Leo Bebb. No longer are the outrageous possibilities of Buechner's major themes cautiously embodied in characters who are understood to be safe, sane, or conventional in all ways other than their peculiar moments of grace. In Leo Bebb, Buechner's audacity is reflected in every element of the character himself. Bebb's "radical innocence" seems to be the objective correlative of Buechner's most consistent concerns. Bebb is the word made flesh.

With Sharon, Bebb's adopted daughter, the theme of innocence is given an explicitly sexual context. Antonio Parr, the narrator of the trilogy, is somewhat overwhelmed by Sharon. In direct contrast to the polite, refined, intellectual Ellie Pierce (the New Yorker Tony had been seeing on and off and thought he might be in love with), Sharon is sensual, direct, even a little vulgar. She

dresses in ways that allow her to flaunt her sexuality, and Antonio is overcome by her wiles. In LION COUNTRY, he begins an affair with her and eventually marries her; in OPEN HEART, Sharon is unfaithful to him with his own nephew; in LOVE FEAST, they separate and painfully work their way back together. Yet Sharon seems innocent all along, even in adultery. She treats sex as a kind of natural appetite, easy to satisfy and not really of much moment. When she and Tony first make love, in the Salamander Motel, she tells him that it isn't the first time for her and it won't be her last time either. When she begins regularly making love to Tony's nephew, she does so very casually and with no apparent feelings of guilt or shame, as if sex were the same to her as to the pair of lions she and Leo and Tony had observed copulating in the sunshine in Lion Country. Sharon is an almost purely physical character, uncomplicated by mind. Her responses are direct and spontaneous. She is as confident, as self-assured a character as any Buechner has created. Yet, however fascinated he might be by Sharon, Buechner does not wholly approve of her. Antonio approaches Sharon and falls in love with her with the wit and the playfulness of John Donne's love sonnets always in the back of his English-teacher's mind. When Sharon thinks of their love, she thinks of slick, popular songs, such as "Chantilly Lace," in which Big Bopper sings about feeling "all loose/like a long-necked goose" (LC p. 117) when he sees the wiggle in his

honey's walk and hears the giggle in her talk. Antonio says many times that "Sharon" is a dime-store name; it seems she also has a dime-store sensibility.

It is tempting to want to see life as simply as Sharon does, and this is surely one of the things that draws Antonio to her. But Sharon's sensuality is finally insufficient. Sharon's innocence, unlike that of a Peter Cowley or a Theodore Nicolet, or even a Leo Bebb, tends to restrict the possibility of wonder rather than enhance it. Sharon is so self-possessed, so invulnerable, that we get the impression that she would not be surprised by anything. Buechner, it seems, would prefer to see us surprised by everything.

NOTES--Chapter II

¹Raymond M. Olderman, BEYOND THE WASTE LAND: A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL IN THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES (New Haven, 1972), p. 10.

²The title of Buechner's first collection of religious meditations is THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT. It was published by The Seabury Press in 1966.

III

THE THEME OF TRANSFORMATION

If wonder is the response to life Buechner most approves and innocence is often a prerequisite to wonder, transformation would seem to be the means by which both wonder and innocence are tested and justified. The theme of transformation involves the changes in a character's "self," the causes of these changes, and some sense of their significance. In all of his novels, for example, Buechner is concerned with the ways in which people change as they age. One of the most striking examples of this concern appears in *THE FINAL BEAST* when Nicolet looks at his daughters and imagines them in their old age; he sees in their youthful faces signs of all the different faces they will ever have, all the different selves they will ever be. In *THE ALPHABET OF GRACE*, the concern appears very directly:

Beneath the face I am a family plot. All the people I have ever been are buried there--the bouncing boy, his mother's pride; the pimply boy and secret sensualist; the reluctant infantryman; the beholder at dawn through hospital plate-glass of his firstborn child. All these selves I was I am no longer, not even the bodies they wore are my body any longer, and although when I try, I can remember scraps and pieces about them, I can no longer remember what it felt like to live inside their skin. Yet they live inside my skin to this day . . . and although I am not the same as they, I am not different either because their having

been then is responsible for my being now.¹

This process of transformation is caused partly by the mere passing of time; time acts on the stage of the self and transforms it. But the physical self is also the roadmap of the metaphysical, indicating possible directions taken or yet to take as well as various dead ends. The scale of this transformation varies widely from slight, hardly perceptible, changes in a character up to and including death, the inevitable transformation.

Buechner acknowledges change as one of the few constants in human life. As an individual changes, as he is transformed by the world around him, he in turn transforms that world and other people in it. The new self renews other selves in turn.

I am a necropolis. Fathers and mothers, brothers and cousins and uncles, teachers, lovers, friends, all these invisibles manifest themselves in my visibleness. Their voices speak in me, and I catch myself sometimes speaking in their voices.²

Transformation is a rough term to describe this subtle and constant process whereby the characters in Buechner's novels are affected by their world and its inhabitants and affect them in turn. Ultimately, it is one of Buechner's subtlest themes. It is also essentially mystical rather than logical. Buechner seems to maintain through his theme of transformation that we must allow for the possibility, as we see it in Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground," that two plus two may equal five. The ultimate cause

behind the series of transformations that constitute a human life is as unknowable as the "reason" for life itself. But one thing is obvious; Buechner believes that the transformations of human life, the many selves we become, are the very stuff of novels, and in his novels he examines, dramatizes, and celebrates an impressive variety of characters and their transformations, selves and changes in self.

But the theme of transformation encompasses more than the above; it takes many different forms in Buechner's novels, as do the themes of wonder and innocence. The general function of the theme is, however, fairly clear; transformation works as the agent or catalyst of spiritual perception in Buechner's characters. It transforms the harshest aspects of modern life and makes them bearable. Buechner's many attempts to connect the ordinary with the extraordinary, the profane with the sacred, the mundane with the wonderful, involve transformations in characters that allow them, however temporarily in some cases, to be aware of metaphysical implications in this all too physical existence. Peter Cowley's visions in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, Nicolet's moment of grace in *THE FINAL BEAST*, and Peter Ringkoping's mystical moments in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK* are a few obvious examples.

Since the ability to love also functions as an agent of transformation in Buechner's novels, the emphasis on the success or failure of interpersonal relationships in his novels is normally accompanied by the theme of

transformation. Like the themes of wonder and innocence, the theme of transformation is more important, more successfully realized in the lives of the characters in Buechner's later novels. But even in his first, most modern novels, the theme of transformation is significant.

In *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, transformation exists as a series of hopeful possibilities none of which is very fully realized in the novel. As noted earlier, the lives of all the major characters except Maroo are characterized by a sense of purposelessness, a sense of life as a metaphysical vacuum. This is particularly true of Tristram Bone, and he is the most articulate spokesman of this position in the novel. His desire to fill the vacuum of his life, to make sense of things, to transform his life, is his most dominant characteristic.

He felt there should be a reliable witness, impartial as a mirror, to report with overwhelming accuracy each detail . . . of all his experience, of Tristram Bone involved with actuality. A reliable witness, impartial as a mirror but able to retain what it reflected, having seen everything. (p. 26)

This witness would certify Bone's existence for him much as the movies do for Binx, the protagonist of Walker Percy's *THE MOVIEGOER*.³ The search for such a witness, for relief from his isolation, for transformation, is built in to the structure of *A LONG DAY'S DYING* through its plot, its characterization, its major allusions. It takes essentially two forms, and they are the most typical forms that the theme of transformation takes in Buechner's other

novels as well: the symbolic and the interpersonal. Symbolically, there are three possible witnesses Bone either encounters or uses in his search for understanding, for a sense of significance in his life.

There is a wooden statue of a saint, the representative of a Christian view of life which Bone finds attractive and would apparently like to believe. In fact, Buechner often describes Bone as a rather ponderous priest in love with ceremony:

for, whenever he found himself surrounded by the apurtenances of ceremony, even the earlier ceremony that day of the barber shop, its mirror and acolyte, his immensity appeared to him to assume a new and peculiar appropriateness that permitted him to wear it with tremendous dignity as a kind of alb or vestment. (pp. 23-24)

But if Bone is a priest at all, he is finally a kind of mock-priest, a thoroughly modern man for whom the chance encounter with a wooden statue of a saint, however it might remind him of his need for a greater sense of significance in his life, can only be, finally, embarrassing, even humiliating. Tristram somehow manages to get his hand caught between the statue's hand and its chest. Tristram's response to this moment of his own clumsiness clearly illustrates the ambiguity of Bone's position vis a vis traditional Christianity as a possible source of greater meaning, of transformation, in his life. Initially embarrassed and humiliated, he hates the wooden figure and wants to "kick and deface it" (p. 25). Then he kneels before it wishing to "explain matters more fully to the saint" (p. 26).

Ultimately the entire scene seems ludicrous and pathetic.

Then there is the major allusion of the novel, the allusion to the story of Procne and Philomela: the complications of these sisters' relationships to Tereus, the tapestry that tongueless Philomela weaves to tell Procne of Tereus's infidelity and cruelty, their terrible revenge on him and his consequent pursuit of them, all of which ends in the miraculous answer to the sisters' prayers, the transformation of all three into birds, "'nightingale, a sparrow, and a hawk . . . [which] fly screaming into the blue sky'" (p. 83). In the pagan myth, as in Christian tradition, there is relief for and from human suffering; there is transformation; there is a connection between the human and the divine. That it is just such a connection that Tristram is searching for is made clear by Buechner's repeated allusions to the Philomela story in the novel. Tristram tries to tell Elizabeth of his love for her and curiously winds up telling her a confused version of the Philomela story instead, thereby entirely baffling her. Later, the story is told correctly and in great length by Motley when he presents a lecture on the contemporary significance of myth. In case this still isn't enough, Buechner allows Tristram the appropriate avocation of supporting an aviary, and he suffuses the entire novel with imagery of flight. The many parallels between the myth and the actions and characters of Buechner's novel have already received ample attention. Here it should be

sufficient to note that the plenary existence of the characters in the myth is denied to all but one (Maroo) of the characters in Buechner's modern adaptation of the myth. Tristram's desire for an explanation of the significance of things, for just such a clue to the meaning of his life as Philomela's tapestry provided Procne, remains unfilled.

The third possible symbolic witness Bone encounters is a tapestry, actually a series of tapestries, hanging in the Cloisters in New York City where Bone asks Paul Steitler to meet him so that they can discuss what happened between Paul, Leander, and Elizabeth on the evening of Motley's lecture at the university. What actually happened was that Paul and Elizabeth made love to one another. But when Tristram asks Elizabeth about what happened, she lies to him and suggests that Steitler's amorous interests were directed at her son, Leander, not at her. Bone wants to protect Leander and thus the conference with Steitler. The result of this meeting is an understanding on the part of both men that Elizabeth had lied and perpetrated much confusion and misunderstanding. More to the point here, however, is Steitler's response to Bone's choice of a setting for their meeting: a room filled with symbolically storied tapestries.

"All I want to know," continued Steitler, indicating the tapestries with a gesture, "is whether I'm to take all this as real significant and symbolic. If the unicorn is here to help, I'd like to know about it . . . because I tend to bridle at this sort of thing.

There seems to me a kind of arrogance in thinking life so easy that you've only got to stop short for a moment, keep your eyes peeled, look sharp after years of indifference, and find right around you, in these tapestries for instance, the answer to most everything. I don't think things work that way; we're never going to have things so good, Mr. Bone." (pp. 198-199)

Bone's desire for a reliable witness, for a sensible overview of life as well as a skeleton key to it, is represented by his choice of the room filled with the unicorn tapestries in the Cloisters. Steitler has clearly discerned Bone's desire for transformation expressing itself in his love for the ceremonial, the ritualistic, the symbolic.

Bone suggests that Steitler is being unjust to him in indicating that his responses to life are overly simple. Surely Steitler is unjust, and there is irony in the fact that Bone is actually the major spokesman in *A LONG DAY'S DYING* for a problematic interpretation of existence, the very position Steitler sees himself as representing, and toward which he accuses Bone of being insensitive. Bone's attraction to the wooden saint, to the pagan myth, to the subtle tapestries, is caused by his own sense of the problematic nature of modern life, and his consequent need of transformation. They represent views of human existence that are unavailable to Bone since he knows that they are, however beautiful, antiquated. It is precisely their unavailability that draws Tristram to them. He would of course like to discover in them some key to an understanding of contemporary life that would be equally comprehensive and invigorating. But through his experience with

these witnesses of the past, Tristram is always left with the sad contrast between the past and the present. His symbolic witnesses fail him. Transformation remains at best a hopeful possibility for him rather than an actuality.

Other possible sources of witnessing and of transformation in Bone's life are his interpersonal relationships. He directly refers to Emma, his maid, and to Simon, his monkey, (Simon is treated as if he were a person) in this context. "In the end they were, the two of them, his most reliable witnesses, he thought, but of the pair it was Simon that he most trusted and loved" (p. 237). As his maid, Emma is privy to many homely details of Bone's life that no one else could know, yet there is really nothing in the novel to suggest that she understands him; his hope that she might be a reliable witness is largely the result of Bone's vanity. Nothing ever really comes of their relationship. Tristram's notion that his monkey might be such a witness is difficult to explain realistically since the monkey, however well he might be able to mimic his master, is bound to be insufficient for the formidable task of witness. Symbolically, an explanation of Simon's significance is possible, even if it does not seem to be entirely satisfactory. Simon's name is suggestive of the sin of simony, of "buying or selling ecclesiastical preferments or benefices."⁴ Simon represents Tristram's desire to become truly priestly. But Tristram's church remains the barber shop of the opening scenes where Tristram, the mock-priest,

pontificates on love. Simon functions as a symbolic denial of the possibility of transformation for Tristram, and in keeping with this function Simon, a grotesque alter-ego, mimics Tristram's gesture of suicidal despair (Tristram, toying with the idea of suicide, pulls the blunt edge of a straight razor across his throat) and slits his throat with his master's razor. Exit monkey and excess symbolic baggage.

The greatest single possibility of transformation in Bone's life resides in his love for Elizabeth. He hopes that she can invest his life with greater meaning and thereby transform him into a new being. It is very logical, then, that when he tries to tell Elizabeth of his love he does so via the sophisticated conceit of applying the Philomela story to their own situation and suggesting that their lives are in need of transformation. His notion is apparently that mutual love might bring this about. But Elizabeth does not even understand what Tristram is saying. Besides, she does not love him. Bone is finally, as he admits to Steitler, his own most reliable witness. Both the symbolic and the interpersonal possibilities for transformation fail Tristram Bone. Ultimately he is stuck in the cage of his own self. His life, like the lives of so many characters in this novel, remains essentially static.

The transformation scene from the Philomela story does have its parallel in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, but it is associated not with new life and escape, but with death.

Maroo functions throughout the novel as its moral center, the only character who has been capable of living a purposeful life and the character to whom many of the others turn in their purposelessness for guidance and consolation. Even Steitler, resident modernist at the university, is struck by her moral force when he reads a letter she has written to her grandson, Leander. In fact, in a peculiar inversion of the Philomela myth, Leander (who would be Itys in the myth) is saved from the destructive forces around him rather than sacrificed as Itys is in the myth. This salvation is attributed to Maroo whose letters to him have been intended to preserve his innocence and keep him safe. Her power and wisdom parallel those of the gods in the Philomela story. It is the death of this wisdom, this source of transformation, that ends the novel and to which the title refers. Maroo's death itself is described in terms of the transformation and flight of the Philomela story:

Her head sank more deeply into the pillows while the rushing noise as of wind or many wings grew stronger, pierced here and there by wordless exclamations, murmurs and cries, lonely and keen like the cries of birds . . . circling still, wings spread, around, around, through what appeared a sky high, high and blue above. (p. 266)

If it is successful, transformation makes the harshest aspects of Buechner's characters' lives more bearable; it allows them to recognize the darkness of their times at the same time that they refuse to give in to it; it provides a context that relieves the apparent or immediate

difficulties of their lives. Maroo's life was just such a transformed life, but her death represents the disappearance from the other characters' lives of the only viable model of transformation in the novel, the only character capable of belief or love.

The spectrum of possible transformation is more complete in *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, ranging from children so innocent that they have no need of transformation to Lundrigan, who thinks he is so mature that he is beyond the need of transformation. Both Sam and Sara Dunn pursue symbolic forms of transformation; Sara turns to her sculpting, to the creation of works of art, and Sam turns to his seventeenth-century English poetry, to the contemplation of works of art, for a sense of significance and consolation. Their lives are extremely modern, and their need to relieve this modernity of its vitiating consequences is very clear. Julie McMoon, a widow whose husband committed suicide, feels that her life is entirely empty. She desperately needs transformation, but she is so afraid that it is not available that she will not venture to find out. Peter Cowley has a vision and finds himself transformed by it and by his renewed dedication to the symbolic system of ideas it represents--Christianity. Dr. Thomas Lavender is also dedicated to Christianity as a source of transformation, but his transformation seems to have gone awry. As an answer to the problematic nature of modern life, Lavender

believes in innocence, in recapturing childlike innocence in order to respond to life freshly, spontaneously. But his vision of a world in which childlike innocence is universally reborn is itself puerile. Lavender's vision of an ideal world of childlike innocence is not a realistic means of coping with the problematic elements of existence; it is a fanatic's impossible vision of a world he would prefer to the real world. The proper function of transformation is not to allow for escape from the problematic world, but to allow for living in it more fully. This brings us to the "Uglies," Harry Fogg and Rufus Este, whose adolescent problems illustrate more clearly than any of the other characters in this novel what has been only implicit in the comments on the theme of transformation until now: the paramount importance of the search for self, for a sense of identity, to the theme of transformation in Buechner's novels.

Rufus and Harry are both fourteen years old. They occupy that treacherous ground between the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood called adolescence. Their budding sexuality and their increased interest in the world around them cut them off from the other children in the novel, all of whom are younger than they. But they are still, after all, children, so they are cut off from the adults of the novel as well. In one another they find the consolation of mutually shared difficulty. Both boys have had experiences which suggest that the world and life are

not as pleasant as they might like them to be; both boys are beginning to realize that life has its darker side, and that they need to be able to face and to deal with it. They need transformation of some kind. They discuss the first "horrible thing" (p. 48) that ever happened to each of them. Harry tells Rufus about killing a sick and crippled robin by squeezing it to death in a brown paper envelope. Rufus tells Harry about finding a robin's egg, frozen solid, with a little, stiff leg sticking out of it. Agreeing that these experiences are very ugly and represent a type of experience they will face more and more, the boys decide to call themselves "the Uglies!" (p. 50) Their friendship provides each of them with a stay against loneliness and allows them to begin to define themselves as distinct individuals.

"Uglies are so lonely," said Rufus. "An Ugly is an island. So is a person."

"But two Uglies are an island whereas two people are two islands. That's the difference." (p. 51)

The sometimes painful business of growing up, of individuation, of having to learn to face the ugliness, the loneliness, the difficulty of human life, involves constant transformation in that it involves constant change as well as the perpetual need to understand and to cope with that change. Rufus and Harry are quite deliberate in their attempts to deal with the darker side of human existence which they are beginning to see as one of the duties of maturity.

When confronted with something broken, helpless, hideous or . . . dead, there was no looking vaguely away, no furtive stare and pretense then of blindness, but rather, the direct inspection, the articulated observation. (p. 57)

Through the struggles toward maturity of Rufus and Harry, Buechner implies that the more highly developed the definition of self becomes, the greater the loneliness. The price of maturity, of individuation, is an increased sense of loneliness because the essential assumptions of modernity rob the individual of a sense of the significance of self by cutting the self adrift from the major sources of meaning, such as godhead, nature, or community, which previously helped to define the self. At the same time that it undercuts the significance of the self, however, modernity also suggests that the self is perhaps the only reality; it emphasizes the essential subjectivity of human experience and the essential uniqueness of each person. The result is a type of solipsism that Buechner presents as an emotional and psychological dead-end.

Ultimately, the problem for the Uglies is to recognize that the loneliness and confusion which they believe is peculiar to themselves is actually a general part of adult human experience. By the end of the novel, the Uglies have realized that the distinctions they have insisted upon between Uglies and People do not really exist.

"We know, of course," Harry continued at last, "what an Ugly is . . ."

"Of course."

"But I've decided now that I also know what a Person is."

"Ah," said Rufus, "that has always puzzled me."

"I think a Person is just an Ugly who doesn't know he's an Ugly." (p. 296)

Harry and Rufus find some transformation in their relationship to one another. Having known and trusted one another, both have been better able to deal with the harsher aspects of their initiation into greater and greater maturity. Each passing year will bring Rufus and Harry closer to the kinds of difficulties their elders know; the novel's title itself seems to refer to aging and to the increasing need for transformation as death approaches. Yet the problems of the young and the old in this novel seem to differ more in degree than in kind. All alike are faced with identity problems, Sam and Sara at a different level than Rufus and Harry, but the problems are essentially the same. Even death, a problem which adults tend not to associate with children, is a problem faced by the young in their own indirect way. When the children of this novel play, their games might easily represent the kind of perpetual transformation which Buechner sees as representative of the continuum of life. All of the games the children play are ultimately one game that has

neither a beginning nor any end. . . . Roles changed, and today's aged beggar might be day after tomorrow's most reckless young aviator, the afternoon's tyrant might become the object of the evening's tyranny, but a curiously consistent atmosphere prevailed, a sameness of intensity and direction, that fused all personages and events, however diverse, into a single, panoramic legend. (p. 288)

Aging, suffering, and death are the result of "the

penalty of Adam/The seasons' difference,"⁵ and they intensify the problems of identity in an age which stresses the isolation and the uniqueness of the self, as ours does. We find at least a partial answer to the problem in Rufus and Harry's realization that even though they are alone, their aloneness is itself a common denominator which brings them together and ultimately suggests that their relationships to other people are important as well. In our common aloneness we still have one another and our lives are "however diverse . . . a single panoramic legend" (p. 288). But this insight belongs essentially to the implied author of THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE and to its narrator. As suggested earlier, the kind of transformation it represents remains largely unavailable to the majority of the characters in this novel other than Peter Cowley.

In THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS, the theme of transformation is present primarily in the interpersonal relationships of the novel's major characters. Ansel's daughter, Anne, falls in love and spends much of her spare time trying to help the poor in Harlem. Kuykendall is a constant reminder to all of the novel's major characters of their moral obligations to one another. Ansel, himself, re-establishes several human relationships which he has allowed to languish. The novel begins with Ansel's return to public life consequent upon his realization that the private, luxurious, secluded life he has been living (it continues to tempt him until the novel's end) is somehow

not enough. Although he is not certain that getting involved in national politics will do much good (Ansel is too conscious of ambiguity to be certain), he finally decides that he must at least try. If nothing else, Gibbs's decision to return to an active public life provides him the opportunities he needs to straighten out the major interpersonal relationships of his life.

By the end of the novel, Ansel has begun to get to know and to love his daughter again. He has also begun to deal directly with his feelings of guilt over the suicide of a former close friend, Rudy Tripp. Ansel's isolation, his feelings of guilt, and his sense of the paralysis of modern life are all overcome by his return. Yet it is obvious that Gibbs's return to public life is a less significant issue in this novel than his return to meaningful relationships with others. We can only guess whether or not Ansel's political future holds much hope for the country or for him. We can be certain, however, that the future of Ansel's most important interpersonal relationships is a hopeful one. Therein lies the transformation that Buechner offers Ansel Gibbs.

All of the major elements of the theme of transformation, its emphasis on the self, its concern with interpersonal and symbolic means of making the harshest elements of modern life bearable, and finally, by implication, its emphasis on the celebration or affirmation of life, are combined in *THE FINAL BEAST*. Here, once again, Buechner's

strategy is to juxtapose characters whose lives are transformed with those whose lives remain untransformed, i.e., anxious, desperate, lonely.

The minor characters in this novel tend to lead the kinds of untransformed lives typical of so many of the major characters in Buechner's previous novels. A few examples should suffice. Madge Cusper, one of Theodore Nicolet's parishioners, has lost her daughter to disease and finds herself deserted and lonely. She unsuccessfully tries to soothe her sorrow with drink. Metzger, a high-school English teacher in Myron, leads a self-centered, loveless life. His only friend is Poteat, one of Buechner's most modern characters, whose life is a kind of living death. Metzger is even less alive than Poteat. When Rooney Vail angrily confronts Poteat over an editorial in which Poteat suggests that the local minister, Nicolet, and she are involved in an affair, Metzger flees the scene and the narrator's comments on his character are exceptionally telling:

When Rooney Vail had burst in mad as a wet hen at the outrageous piece in the "Repository," he had thanked his stars that he was not old Willy Poteat. He had fled gladly. But what he had fled was just what hexed him now. It had been an ugly scene, he was sure--garbled, teary, unnecessary--but human at least, with the blood trembling and fire in the bowels. A life lacerating a life. The gust of it had blown him away like chaff. The world of men was no place for a squirrel. Willy had not even thought to introduce him. It was as if among the living he had no name. (p. 212)

Poteat, himself, is the character whose life seems most in need of transformation. The most important event of his

adult life has apparently been his almost accidental seduction of Rooney Vail. Before it occurred, Poteat's life was barren; after it occurred, Poteat became jealous and petty and vindictive. The seduction itself was more like wish-fulfillment or erotic fantasy than anything else, and since no one, including Rooney, ever does anything to acknowledge that it really happened, Poteat finds himself doubting the actuality of the experience. When Poteat finally realizes that he no longer cares about Rooney at all, he is strangely pleased. He likes not feeling anything. When he gets a bad cold, his escape from feeling is complete.

He drank lots of fruit juice, and he gargled. But he knew well enough that a cure was the last thing that he wanted. Not to be able to smell the world or to taste it, to hear everything as if it came from another room with the door closed--this was his peace and it was enough. (p. 251)

Poteat's escape from feeling (both emotional and sensual, in this case) is a kind of final step in his gradual retirement from life. Poteat's is the most hopeless life in THE FINAL BEAST not because his life remains untransformed but because Poteat does not even desire transformation. If a fuller life were miraculously available to Poteat, he would undoubtedly reject it. He prefers not to live fully; he prefers failure; he prefers death.

Transformation, at least partial transformation, is available for a few of the minor characters in THE FINAL BEAST. Lillian Flagg's takes the form of evangelical religion; but the sheer simplicity of her position tends to

undermine it in the context of a novel as committed to an exploration of the problematic nature of modern life as this one is. Roy, Theodore Nicolet's father, desires forgiveness for his shortcomings as a father. Old and lonely, he also simply needs more attention from his son. By the end of the novel, he has gained both of these, however tentatively.

Whatever had happened between himself and Theo, he was afraid to press it too far . . . for fear that neither of them would be able to sustain it. (p. 218)

The reconciliation between father and son has not been complete. Theodore will not be as attentive as his father might wish him to be. Nonetheless, Roy's life is more bearable once he believes that his son has forgiven him, and some relief from his loneliness has occurred. The transformation Buechner provides Roy may well be transformation in a minor key; it is nonetheless better than nothing.

In the early novels, Maroo, of *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, and Peter Cowley, of *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, are the only major characters whose lives seem adequately transformed. In *THE FINAL BEAST*, transformation is available to most of the major characters.

Rooney Vail seems to desire transformation in each of its major forms: the personal (the quest for identity), the interpersonal, and the symbolic. Her marriage to Clem provides ample evidence of Rooney's difficulties on the personal and interpersonal levels. Her marriage seems

peculiarly tentative, right from the start. On their honeymoon, Rooney ran away from Clem. If he hadn't miraculously found her she may never have returned to him. Since she never explains why she ran away (indeed, she apparently does not know), Clem remains puzzled and anxious; she could always run away again. Clem is content in Myron operating his Something Shop; Rooney is restless and discontent. "Rooney seemed to remain on the surface here, uncommitted, while Clem went out of his way to hem himself in wherever he could" (p. 26). Rooney's marriage to Clem is just not enough for her. She runs away again, notifying only Nicolet that she has gone to Muscadine. Rooney is tempted to begin an extra-marital relationship with Nicolet. She has been serving as a guardian of Nicolet's children since their mother's death, and this role of substitute mother, substitute wife, has brought her unusually close to Nicolet.

As a parishioner of Nicolet's, Rooney has been drawn to him for spiritual guidance; she is anxious and frustrated partly because she wants to know with certainty if the Christian story is true. In Muscadine, Rooney's quests for interpersonal and symbolic transformation are merged. On the one hand she goes to Muscadine to seek the advice of Lillian Flagg and to try to overcome her feelings of guilt over her brief sexual encounter with Poteat. On the other hand, she seems to be inviting Nicolet to come and help

her, even if it means becoming her lover as well as her minister. By the end of the novel, Rooney and Nicolet have managed to remain friends. They have not become lovers. Rooney has learned that she can face and accept her guilt, and she has returned to Clem. Since it is suggested that she might be pregnant with Clem's child, there is every reason to believe that Rooney's desire for a means of making the loneliness and rootlessness of her life more bearable may be achieved. She seems, finally, to be able to accept herself, thanks to Lillian Flagg and Nicolet. It is clear that her marriage will be stronger in the future. Rooney's bout with anxiety and loneliness is by no means over, but she has realized some success in her fight against them. Rooney's life is transformed on the personal and interpersonal levels; it appears that symbolic transformation, faith in the "truth" of Christianity, may remain problematic for Rooney. It is important to note, however, that the catalysts of Rooney's personal and interpersonal success have been Flagg and Nicolet, the novel's major representatives of Christian faith.

In Theodore Nicolet, the protagonist of *THE FINAL BEAST*, Buechner's theme of transformation finds its most compelling representative. That Nick needs transformation is obvious. Since his wife's death, Nicolet's dedication to the Christian ministry and his faith itself have undergone severe tests, severe doubt. Suddenly the difficulties, the sorrow, the suffering which Christian faith is

at least partly intended to make understandable, even perhaps to soothe, are his own. Suddenly, after years of faith, Nicolet is uncertain and puzzled. He feels alienated from his congregation, annoyed with his father, attracted to a woman with whom it would be disastrous for him to be intimately involved. Several of the previous sources of meaning and direction in Nicolet's life are now either gone entirely or have begun to seem dubious to him. The entire plot of THE FINAL BEAST is based on Nicolet's attempts to deal with these crises. The transformation that attends his success in dealing with these crises represents all of the significant varieties of the theme: the personal, the interpersonal, the symbolic.

Since Nicolet's personal and interpersonal difficulties and transformations are so intimately related to the symbolic transformation he undergoes in the novel (his reaffirmation of his Christian ministry), it is the latter that demands attention here. Nicolet's explanation of his initial impulse to become a Christian minister is itself redolent of the theme of transformation. Nick hitches a ride to Muscadine and when he tells the boy who is driving that he is a minister, the boy, surprised, asks, "'No sweat, what makes a guy decide to be a thing like that?'" (p. 80) Nick explains that there were essentially three steps in his decision. The first was a realization of how crappy the world is. He came to this realization in a rather startling way through a college drinking buddy.

"Eats it," Nicolet said. "The great fecal indictment. It's all he could say. I suppose I should have been able to see what was coming next, but I didn't. We'd gotten on religion, I told you. Well, he suddenly said a memorable thing, an epic thing--at least it was to me. . . . He just put together two things I'd never heard put together before. One of them was eats it. . . . And Jesus Christ. . . . According to him, Christ eats it too." (p. 82)

Nicolet goes on to explain to the boy that Christ does eat it because "'it's all that this world has ever given him to eat'" (p. 83). The second step of Nicolet's "call" to the ministry involved his recognition of the richness and the mystery of the Christ story, though it occurred, ironically, in a context of utter silence. Nicolet visited a monastery where the monks were sworn to virtual silence for the rest of their lives.

"None of them spoke except to God. Imagine it!" . . . But instead they rapped wood; rapped on the door of his cell at dawn with a muffled "Christ is risen!"--rapped on the refectory table as they finished their food . . . and when he met them in corridors not even good morning, good night. They would only nod and smile as though it was some joke too rich for telling. (p. 85)

The young driver never hears of the third step since he comes to the road where Nicolet has to turn off before Nicolet gets a chance to explain it, but Nicolet remembers it as he walks the remaining five miles to Muscadine. A college preacher had been delivering a sermon in which there was

nothing that you could not have expected: like Caesar, the Lord had refused a crown when the Tempter offered it . . . yet again and again in the hoping heart of the believer he was crowned, yes, of course, "crowned amidst confession and tears," the preacher said, yes . . . "crowned amidst great laughter."

The preacher had barely paused at the phrase, but it was the end and the beginning of Nicolet: the great laughter at the heart of silence, the incredulous laughter and rain dance of faith. (p. 87)

Previously, Nicolet had apparently known and felt much of what the preacher was saying; the references to God's glory and to His silence were nothing new, but the laughter -- "that was the secret, he thought: the laughter. And that was also the third step" (p. 86).

From the point at which Nicolet recognized Christian faith as a peculiar mixture of the vulgar and the spiritual, the serious and the absurdly comic, expressive of an essential joyousness, his call to the ministry had been clear. In the present, however, he finds himself deeply troubled by personal problems which threaten his joyousness, uncertain of his ministry, severely doubting his efficacy as the spiritual leader of a rather staid congregation. Once he meets Lillian Flagg, he even wonders whether her brand of Christian faith, lacking as it does any ambiguity whatsoever, isn't perhaps more genuine than his own: a modern's faith, riddled by, perhaps even based upon, a sense of irony and ambiguity.

When he meets Lillian Flagg, Nicolet asks himself, with typical ambiguity, is she "a great warrior of the faith or a deluder of the credulous, a deluder of herself? Could the line be drawn neatly at all?" (p. 104) Suspecting that Christianity is the basis of a kind of con game for her, Nick is slightly outraged at the possibility

that some people might take her as a more tenable Christian leader than himself.

Who, looking at them, would take her for the professional, he wondered, and himself for the fumbling dilettante, or was this part of the divine absurdity, part of the great laughter? (p. 111)

Yet, in a demonstration of Buechner's pervasive sense of irony, it is precisely Lillian Flagg who brings Nicolet back to a sense of the joyousness of Christianity that had led him to the ministry in the first place. Rooney goes to Lillian Flagg hoping that Flagg can somehow make it possible for Rooney to have a baby; Lillian diagnoses Rooney's problem quite accurately as a desire for forgiveness of sin. Nicolet goes to Lillian Flagg to recover Rooney; in the process, Flagg suggests to him the nature of his own greatest difficulty, his own sin. She tells him that sin is "'not being full of joy'" (p. 115).

Later, when he has left Muscadine and gone to visit his father, Nicolet realizes the truth of Flagg's suggestion and admits to himself that he has been a "love-sick, God-sick little man," (p. 166) confused and astray. He then wanders out behind his father's barn, thinking about Rooney, about Flagg, about Pentecost and the birth of the church, and the sermon that he wants to preach the next Sunday. Suddenly he feels that something is about to be revealed to him; perhaps some sign, some tangible evidence of the intangible, is about to be revealed.

His heart pounded, and he did not dare open his eyes not from fear of what he might see but of what he might not see, so sure now, crazily, that if ever it

was going to happen, whatever it was that happened--
joy, Nicolet, joy--it must happen now in this unlikely
 place as always in unlikely places. (p. 176)

What follows is the wonderful "clack-clack" scene described earlier. The connection between the physical and the metaphysical is re-established for Nicolet, and while Poteat retires from modern life, an emotional cripple in a modern waste land, Nicolet undergoes a symbolic transformation that allows him, once again, to embrace life. The "clack-clack" scene functions as the catalyst of the completion of Nicolet's other transformations in THE FINAL BEAST: the personal (a recovered sense of self, of identity), and the interpersonal (the return to his congregation, his children, his father). It does not come as a surprise. The "clack-clack" scene is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Nicolet is heading for Muscadine, uncertain of his reason for going. The journey to Muscadine and Nicolet's life itself are presented as extended metaphors of faith.

It was good to be going and not to know why; if you waited until you knew why, you would never go anywhere. It was faith, after all: simply to go--to have as having not, to grasp nothing but always to hold in the open palm of your hand. (p. 45)

Nicolet knows that life can be bewildering and sorrowful, difficult and lonely, even for those who are not as lost as the Poteats and Metzgers of the world. But his symbolic transformation, his reaffirmation of faith and purpose allow him to return to his congregation with a message of joy: to "preach the best . . . knowing the worst" (p. 174).

Another example of symbolic transformation in the novel is presented through the character of Irma Reinwaser, Nicolet's live-in housekeeper. During the Second World War, she was imprisoned in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. A German officer adopted her as a kind of mascot, thus saving her from much of the torture and privation suffered by her fellow prisoners. At the same time that he served as her defender, however, he also subjected Irma to much humiliation (e.g., forcing her to imitate a chicken for the amusement of his colleagues), and became her tormentor as well, ultimately disfiguring her feet so severely that she still has difficulty walking without pain. The memories of her imprisonment infect her dreams, and one dream, full of images of beasts and barbed wire, recurs over and over again. That Irma has suffered and suffers still is unquestionable. The relief from this suffering, the transformation she is afforded, is not as immediately satisfactory as Rooney's or Nicolet's. It does less to relieve her of her anxieties than theirs. It is, however, thematically significant, even tantalizing, for the transformation Irma is provided occurs in her dreams and is suggestive of outrageous possibilities: the barbed wire is transformed into flowers; Heinz Taffel, her persecutor-savior, turns into Nicolet; the disorder and stench of the world are transformed into images of geometric order and precision. Even the fire which kills Irma while she sleeps is transformed in her dream into an image of aesthetic

beauty.

At one end of the lintel, a rose of fire blossomed, then another and another until the whole door was framed in roses. They spread out along the shelves where jars cracked, shooting brilliant roots down into the newspapers. Scarlet and lilac, gold, green, coral, the floor was thick with flowers. By the time that Irma opened her eyes, the little room had become a bower. (p. 264)

Irma's prison camp experiences serve as a reminder of the worst things we know about ourselves in this accursed century; her dreams, however, symbolically transform everything, even the barbed wire of the prison camp, into images of great beauty and spiritual calm.

In mental states not entirely subject to rational control and occasionally, by coincidence, in life, the most outrageous things crop up. When Nicolet's children dream, they dream of angels, tiny and black like flies, according to one of them. The blasphemy of Nicolet's college drinking companion eventually leads Nicolet into the ministry. The dung of the world, such as Poteat's ugly rumors about Rooney and Nick, eventually leads to something extraordinary, such as Irma's valiant attempt to save Nicolet from the gossip-mongers and to shift all the blame for the Rooney-Nicolet rumors to herself. The language of our experience in the twentieth century, Buechner seems to be implying, is the language of paradox; the language of paradox, to take Buechner's implication one more step, is the language of faith. Irma's German officer, Heinz Taffel, was her "savior betrayer, gentle torturer," (p. 135) and

Irma wonders at one point if "God himself [has] such a face" (p. 135).

In THE FINAL BEAST, many of the formal elements as well as the major characters contribute to the theme of transformation. In the plot, death, sorrow, and suffering lead to spiritual renewal. The novel's major allusions, to Pentecost and to the story of Noah and the ark, are the sources of much of the most important imagery in the novel: the imagery of feces, of fire, and of rain. The rain and fire transform the "dung-heap world," (p. 135) purifying it and cleansing it of its accumulated feces. The ugly and the vulgar are transformed into the beautiful. Nature itself, through Buechner's natural imagery, is presented as a process of wonderful and perpetual transformation. And the many transformations in the novel ultimately function to support what Nicolet dreams of saying (or of not saying) to his congregation:

The madness of presuming to speak for God; better if you had the courage, to stand up there and be silent for God or to say, as he had dreamed by Roy's barn of saying, just "Yes. It is true about God. Whoever would have believed it? But it is true." And then the silence, he thought. No organ hamming it up. Just the slap and rattle of the rain at the tall windows. (p. 225)

As indicated earlier in the treatment of the theme of innocence, THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK is partly a retelling of Frank Baum's THE WIZARD OF OZ. Its major characters all have difficulties, all take a journey to a kind of enchanted land, and all receive some help for their problems.

The problems these characters experience are similar: each is full of self-doubt, and each desires to live a fuller, more meaningful life; for each this means cultivating interpersonal relationships. Through these relationships, each can gain a better sense of self, of identity. The transformations of *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK* are primarily personal and interpersonal, though with Hans Strasser, the major agent of transformation in the novel, the symbolic element of the theme is important as well.

Peter's family is not well known to him; he has spent too much time dreaming his metaphysical dreams and pursuing the ghosts of his visions. Nels is an anxious man, afraid of death, who hides his loneliness and self-doubt behind a mask of self-confidence and authoritarianism. He is not a compassionate man, yet his role as Dean of Students at Putnam demands just such a quality of him. Tommy is a clown, a practical jokester of the first order, unable or unwilling to face the demands of being a husband and a father. Tip is too shy to tell Libba Vann that he loves her. He is also confused (as who would not be with Tommy for a father?) about the responsibilities of the adulthood he is on the verge of entering.

The journey to the pilgrim village introduces or reintroduces each of the main characters to Hans Strasser, the owner and manager of the sanctuary. Since Strasser is the character in the novel who parallels the wizard in the allusions to *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, it is not surprising that he

functions as a magician of transformation in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK. Yet his secret is precisely that he is not a wizard, that he has no more in the way of ultimate answers than the next man. Whatever transformation he helps to provide for his villagers (mongols, epileptics, and others with physical and/or psychological disabilities) is provided through wholly human means. The two main sources of transformation Strasser favors are art and love.

When Strasser used to visit Peter and Sarah on Tinmouth Mountain, he would paint landscapes that transformed the mountain completely; they did not correspond to the empirical reality of the mountain.

"He used to paint the queerest pictures I've ever seen" Sarah said, "sitting up there in the meadow under his umbrella day after day. He made his trees look like fountains, and his skies were covered with little dabs of color--coral and yellow and gold."
(p. 78)

Now Strasser shares his artistic leanings with his villagers, providing them with a flannel board which they use to transform their experiences into art. Through their artistic renderings of their own experience, they are enabled to deal with it, to accept it, even to celebrate it. But it is primarily through loving one another that the villagers are able to transform their lives. Earlier, in the treatment of the theme of innocence, the notion that Strasser's sanctuary is a kind of Paradise was introduced.⁶ The mongols in the village love everything and everyone.

There is no indication in the novel that the major

characters (other than Strasser) can or should be as loving as the villagers; there is much indication that the best source of transformation available to them is nonetheless their interpersonal relationships. What Strasser and the villagers do for the major characters of this novel is to show them that what they seek is wholly within their own power, that they will only solve their problems through their own efforts. By the end of the novel, Peter (the tin-man in search of a heart) realizes that he has been very lonely and that he must pay more attention to his family, less to his barn full of books; Nels (the Cowardly Lion searching for courage) learns to cope with his fears of death, even to reduce their influence on his life, and he also discovers that the barrier he has imposed between himself and the students at Putnam is not entirely necessary; Tommy (the Scarecrow, looking for a brain) has begun to "wise up" to the fact that his constant pranks are not an adequate substitute for responsibility, that he should think less about himself all the time and more about his wife and son; Tip (Dorothy, searching for home) will spend more time at home and will apparently make his feelings about Libba Vann better known to her.

The journey to Strasser's village (the journey to Oz) has made the ordinary lives of the major characters more precious to them; it has allowed them to return to their ordinary lives with a greater sense of wonder and of possibility. The dreamlike sense of enchantment which

pervades the village becomes the source of a renewed sense of the enchantment of ordinary life. Sarah's dreams are dreams of transformation. Peter's land, which he has intended to give to Strasser, is given back to him, and he realizes that the "land of heart's desire" (p. 248) he has sought all his life is the land he already had. Strasser (the Wizard) is a wizard indeed, able to transform his own life and the lives of his villagers through the magic of human love, able to transform the lives of his visitors by his own example.

The many allusions to THE WIZARD OF OZ combined with the allusions to Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST, reinforce one of Buechner's most prevalent implications: that there is much in life to celebrate, much that is wonderful and enchanting. How easily the disabilities and abnormalities of the villagers could be used to develop the kinds of themes we expect from and find in much contemporary American fiction: isolation, incommunicability, hopelessness. It is important to note that for Buechner they become instead the sources of wonder and transformation, love and affirmation.

In Buechner's comic trilogy, LION COUNTRY, OPEN HEART, and LOVE FEAST, the theme of transformation is developed primarily through Antonio Parr, the narrator and protagonist. His need for transformation is clear from the outset. Antonio's story begins at a difficult time in his life: his twin sister, his other half and only immediate

family member, is dying of a rare disease which causes her bones to disintegrate; Tony is nearly thirty-five years old and sees himself as once again between periods in his life (e.g., teaching, writing incomplete novels, messing about with scrap iron sculpture, almost anything that keeps him distracted and preoccupied); and a long-cultivated relationship with his female friend, Ellie, seems less and less likely to become anything but friendship, so that Antonio is beginning to think it likely that he will remain a virtual celibate. In New York City, where he lives, gray November has set in.

LION COUNTRY, the first novel of the trilogy, takes Antonio from New York City and Madison Avenue to Armadillo, Florida, and the tourist attraction called Lion Country, from bachelorhood and the proprieties of his relationship with the prim Ellie Pierce to marriage and the improprieties of the lovely Sharon ("Hey peckerhead"), from the buttoned-up world of his ivy-league background (Wesleyan, class of '55) to the peculiar mixture of piety, vulgarity, and opportunism of Leo Bebb and his church of Holy Love. Ultimately, Antonio's journey to Armadillo can be mapped in psychological as well as physical terms, for it involves a pilgrimage toward greater selfhood, the various stops along the way in the gradual transformation of self that Antonio undergoes in the trilogy.

When we first meet him, Antonio is a sophisticated, skeptical, even somewhat cynical fellow reminiscent of the

Dunns in THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE. His ivy-league education and his economic independence (he grew up on Park Avenue and has an independent income) suggest a good deal about the parameters of his experience. He is somewhat bored and uneasy. His life does not seem to be progressing satisfactorily. It has no center. His various periods, as he calls them, are obvious evidence of his lack of direction, his willingness to let his life be shaped and defined by circumstance. He sees himself, or is it his lack of self, reflected in his scrap iron sculptures:

Old ratchets, wheels, tongs, strappings, hasps, hinges and nails, whatever I could lay my hands on I would paint with Rustoleum black and then assemble in various interesting and I hoped entertaining ways. I resorted as little as possible to welding but used balance wherever I could or the natural capacity of one odd shape to fit somehow into or on top of or through another--entirely autobiographical, in other words--the idea being to leave the lover of my art (of me?) free to rearrange it. (p. 8)

Antonio sees his next period as investigative reporting. As a kind of a lark, he responds to one of Leo Bebb's advertisements for Gospel Faith College and gets himself ordained as a minister of Holy Love. When Antonio sets up a meeting with the head of this mail-order diploma mill it is entirely in keeping with his intention to write a magazine article exposing Bebb as a fraud. When Tony goes to Armadillo to visit Gospel Faith College and Holy Love (Bebb's church), it is with the same intent; he thinks he will be able to amass evidence of Bebb's charlatanism and chicanery. Much to his surprise (and the reader's), what

Antonio finds in Armadillo is not as clear-cut as he had expected it to be.

Antonio discovers that Bebb probably is a fraud in a legal sense, at least. The IRS, the U.S. Post Office, the Better Business Bureau, and the Interstate Commerce Commission are all investigating his business affairs; Bebb also spent five years in prison for an act of sexual exhibitionism performed in front of a group of unsuspecting children. Yet Antonio also uncovers evidence of another side of Bebb's character which disallows his writing Bebb off simply as a fraud or a con man. However tangled Bebb's worldly affairs may be, his religious zeal is apparently genuine. According to Brownie, Bebb's devoted assistant at Holy Love, Bebb raised Brownie from the dead twenty years ago in Knoxville, Tennessee. When Antonio suggests his own disbelief by saying that if such a thing had happened there, and there were as many witnesses as Brownie says there were, it would have "put Knoxville, Tennessee on the map" (p. 189) and the place would have become a sort of shrine attracting pilgrims from all over the world, Brownie's response introduces one of the basic issues of the trilogy, and extends the paradox which the character of Bebb comes to represent:

"When you come right down to it, dear, you see, people don't want miracles."

"But that's just what they do want," I said. "Get the rumor started that a statue of the Virgin's nose has started to run, and within twenty-four hours people will be lined up six deep."

Brownie said, "Little miracles, yes. People will

flock to anything that seems to mean there is still some magic left in the world, some little leftover piece of holiness. But a real miracle--something that makes everything you ever thought you knew about the world look kind of sick and that doesn't leave you much choice except to believe in something--nobody wants one of those kind, dear." (p. 190)

Antonio, thinking of his dying sister, suggests that a real miracle is exactly what he does want. Brownie says:

"Well, maybe. For you. But in the case of most people, a real miracle upsets too many applecarts and leaves too little room to turn around in. So they explain it away. Take the miracle of life, for instance. People say it's all acids." (p. 190)

Further evidence suggesting that Bebb may somehow be the genuine article continues to turn up throughout the trilogy. At the end of *LION COUNTRY*, Bebb ordains Herman Redpath and restores his virility. In *LOVE FEAST*, once again in an extraordinarily ambiguous situation, Bebb at least begins to heal a crippled boy. At the end of *LOVE FEAST*, Bebb is reportedly killed in an airplane crash; but there is no evidence in the wreckage that Bebb actually died in the crash. There is no trace of him.

Bebb's character does not lend itself to easy interpretation. The issue of Bebb's authenticity is never resolved in the trilogy, is, in fact, central to many of the other problems that the trilogy explores. It is clear, however, that the world of faith and possibility that Bebb represents is an increasingly necessary alternative for Antonio Parr. That this alternative is difficult in the modern world probably goes without saying. It is even difficult for Bebb himself.

"Antonio," Bebb said. "I believe everything."
 It was the second time in my life that I'd heard
 him make a remark of such classic grandeur.
 "You make it sound almost easy," I said finally.
 "Don't kid yourself," Bebb said. . . . "It's hard
 as hell."⁷

For Antonio, the difficulty is immense. His parents died when he was only twelve years old. He has been lonely for years, and his loneliness is compounded by the fact that his sister, Miriam, the only person he ever felt very close to, is dying in a New York hospital of an illness that seems to him unspeakably cruel and unjust. Buechner does not provide Antonio with the kind of Christian symbolic transformation that he provided Nicolet in *THE FINAL BEAST*. Antonio remains a lapsed Catholic, like his sister, and his fascination with Leo Bebb does not affect his own religious faith. He remains a light half-believer of a casual creed (to paraphrase Matthew Arnold) throughout the trilogy. Buechner does, however, indicate that for Antonio the mere possibility that Bebb might be the genuine article provides some transformation, allowing Antonio to leave some doors open that are shut for many men, doors that had gradually been closing for Antonio before he met Bebb. And even if symbolic transformation is incomplete for Antonio as far as Christian faith is concerned, there are two other sources of symbolic transformation available to him in the trilogy; there are the lions of Lion Country, and there are Antonio's art projects.

Shortly after Antonio arrives in Armadillo, Bebb and

Sharon take him to visit Lion Country where the lions roam free in a large compound very like their native habitat.

At one point Antonio sees a majestic male mount a female.

There didn't seem to be any passion about it as far as I could tell, but on the other hand it didn't seem perfunctory either--rather like two old friends seeking refreshment in each other's company toward the middle of a hot afternoon. (LC p. 129)

He thinks of his friend Ellie, how she would have found the coupling improper, would have "pretended not to notice when the lion with the kink in his tail took a leak" (LC p. 131). Antonio, himself, is fascinated by the lions, and allusions to them recur throughout the trilogy. The peculiar mixture of the vulgar and the majestic that he sees in the lions is similar to what attracts him in Leo Bebb; and the apparent ease of the lions' existence, their unself-consciousness, attracts Antonio as well, for he is plagued by self-consciousness. The lions become a symbol in the trilogy of all that Antonio vaguely feels his life lacks, and function as a reminder of and a contrast to his previous existence: the majesty of the lions versus the domestication of his pet cat, Tom; the cold of New York versus the warmth of Florida; the sophistication, intellectuality, propriety, and caution of his New York, ivy-league acquaintances versus the openness and spontaneity of his new acquaintances, particularly Sharon; the skepticism and denial of life represented by Charlie Blaine, Miriam's husband, who sleeps his life away and fails even to visit his dying wife, afraid to confront her pain or

his own directly, versus Leo Bebb who bounces out of the car to photograph the lions (Antonio refuses to get out of the back seat), who is willing to take whatever chances he must in order to live fully, who affirms life in all its variations including its pain and suffering. However trite it may sound, Antonio seems to realize (like Saul Bellow's Henderson) that he needs to become more like the lions, that in his own peculiar way that is exactly what Leo Bebb has done.

In OPEN HEART, five years have passed since the events described in LION COUNTRY took place. Antonio married Sharon at the end of LION COUNTRY; they now have a baby boy and live in Sutton, Connecticut, where Antonio has taken a job as an English teacher at Sutton High. Miriam is dead, and Antonio has taken in her boys, now teen-agers, to live with his family. Bebb has left Brownie in charge of the new Holy Love founded on Herman Redpath's generosity in Houston, Texas, and Bebb has moved to Sutton to begin a new church which he names Open Heart. In this second novel of the trilogy we discover that another form of symbolic transformation, of making the difficulties of his life bearable and protecting himself from the various threats to his psychological equilibrium, is available to Antonio. It is art, his own and that of others. In LION COUNTRY, Antonio notes that his scrap iron sculptures are largely autobiographical; in OPEN HEART, he builds a huge wooden mobile roughly the shape of the letter A, and he tries to

teach Sakespeare's KING LEAR to his students.

Antonio's own art work seems to allow him to transform his pain and bewilderment into something he can live with, functions, in other words, as a type of therapy for him. His scrap iron sculptures may easily be seen as metaphors for the particular difficulties he was having when he made them; the loneliness and formlessness of his pre-Armadillo life are mirrored by works which are themselves essentially formless, or at least capable of assuming a multitude of different forms, no one of which is any more legitimate or final than any other. His huge wooden mobile represents another stage of his existence and other problems. While in New York, Antonio bumps into his old friend Ellie Pierce and they have dinner together. During the meal, Antonio tries to describe his new art project to her:

"Is it supposed to be anything, Tono?" She had always liked things to be something.

I told her I didn't think so, and when she asked me to describe it, I was reduced to trying to draw it on the tablecloth with my butter knife.

"It looks like a big A," she said, and she was right. I hadn't noticed before, but it did. Was it Miriam's A-shaped cast, I wondered, or A for Antonio which, the way things were happening, might turn out to be a brand new name for number two. "It's the scarlet letter," I said. (p. 131)

The final stages of Miriam's illness, the continuing struggle to define himself, and adultery: these are central problems for Antonio in OPEN HEART and they are reflected in his mobile. That Antonio sees his mobile as just as autobiographical as his scrap iron sculptures is clear from the use he makes of it. When he is troubled, he often

wanders back to the shed where the mobile was built and is now stored.

After dark I went out to commune with my Thing, my dangle. . . . Nothing is as fascinating as something you've made yourself. Just as your own handwriting on an envelope, or a shelf you've put up, even a crap you've taken--they give you the feeling, if you look in a certain way, that they contain a secret and that if you could only get at the secret you'd find out that maybe it was the secret of your life. (p. 64)

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Antonio's art is not that it represents various stages in the constant transformation of his own life, but that the works themselves seem to be mysterious objects of perpetual transformation: the scrap iron sculptures are free form sculptures that can be rearranged into a practically infinite number of shapes; the wooden mobile has many parts that constantly move, others that can be readjusted by hand. Antonio even decides to leave the wood unfinished so that its color and texture will change as the piece weathers.

It should be obvious by now from the many references to Buechner's allusions that Buechner relies heavily upon other works of art, primarily literary art, to explain and clarify his own. In like manner, Antonio, an English teacher, alludes to a wide range of literature when he attempts to put his own experience in perspective. His literary background serves Antonio as another source of symbolic transformation. As his life becomes more complicated, he turns to the complexities of literature for some

relief. Teaching KING LEAR, for instance, he fastens upon certain lines as if they had been prescribed for him. After he discovers that his wife has gone to bed with his nephew and his own mental state is dark indeed, Antonio thinks of Lear's "Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination" (OH p. 111). When his nephew breaks a piece of Antonio's wooden mobile, Antonio responds by quoting Bacon: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion" (OH p. 254). When he broaches the subject of her infidelity to Sharon, Antonio thinks of the opening lines of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." In LOVE FEAST, when Antonio is separated from Sharon, he begins a brief affair with Laura and he thinks of Lear again: "'And we will take upon us the mystery of things'"⁸ Later: "Ripeness is all" (p. 165). To be able to see his experience in terms of the imagined experience of literature at least allows Antonio to step outside himself momentarily, and even if the relief this provides is only the kind suggested by the old cliché about misery loving company, it nonetheless helps.

Another important source of transformation in the trilogy is Antonio's relationship to Sharon. LION COUNTRY is largely the story of their romance: city boy meets country girl. The inhibited, propriitious Antonio is overcome by the sensuous Sharon who asks to use his shower at the Armadillo Motel to "'wash the lion off'" (LC p. 142) after their trip to Lion Country, then steps out of the

shower to seduce him. LION COUNTRY ends with their marriage, as Oscar Wilde suggested that all comedies should end. OPEN HEART is the story of the strengths and weaknesses of their marriage. Although Antonio is generally pleased by the marriage and by their son, Bill, Sharon seems to need more than the marriage supplies her. She is not an attentive mother and she leaves much of the care of her young son to Chris, Antonio's eldest nephew, while she seeks distraction and/or fulfillment in guitar lessons, yoga exercises, and shopping sprees. Eventually, Sharon commits adultery with Tony, Antonio's youngest nephew. The comfort that marriage had provided Antonio is replaced by pain and anxiety. What had been a source of transformation suddenly becomes psychologically and emotionally disruptive. For the rest of the novel, Antonio struggles to keep the marriage alive. OPEN HEART ends with Bebb's wife, Lucille, committing suicide and with Bebb, Antonio, and Sharon trying to get away from their difficulties by taking a trip to Europe. As LOVE FEAST begins, Antonio and Sharon are still struggling. Bebb has been wandering all over the world with a Theosophist named Gertrude Conover whom he met on the boat to Europe. Tony and Chris have both moved out of the house in Sutton; Tony has a job and Chris is at Harvard. But the strain on Antonio and Sharon's marriage has been too great. Antonio and Sharon separate. Sharon continues to live in their house in Sutton and opens a health food store with Anita Steen, a lesbian from whom Sharon

used to take guitar lessons. Antonio continues to teach at Sutton High and takes a room in the same boarding house as his nephew Tony. Once again Antonio is lonely, and the darker aspects of his life begin to trouble him. Once Antonio is alone again, Buechner returns to an element of the theme of transformation that has been implicit all along, not only in the trilogy but in all of the novels in which transformation is an important theme: ultimately the theme of transformation involves death. The self that undergoes constant transformation in life will eventually face a final transformation: the annihilation of self. In order to achieve successful transformation in life, Buechner suggests, it is necessary to come to terms with death. A LONG DAY'S DYING ends with Maroo's death and since her life has been an example of successful transformation, of facing the darkest aspects of existence without being overcome by them, her death itself is described as another beautiful and mysterious transformation. Irma Reinwasser's death, in THE FINAL BEAST, is presented in much the same way, and Sarah, in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK, dreams about a mysterious and beautiful ceremony in which grandmothers (she is one) are being burned like candles and serenely transformed. For those who are able to face life straightforwardly and courageously, death is not to be feared; in fact, a full awareness of one's mortality seems to be a prerequisite in Buechner's novels to living a full life. Antonio comes to a full recognition of his

own mortality through witnessing the illness and death of his twin sister in LION COUNTRY. In OPEN HEART, he has a similar experience when he goes to visit his sister's grave in Brooklyn.

. . . just at that instant of being brought back to myself I knew that the self I'd been brought back to was some fine day going to be as dead as Miriam. I knew it not just in the usual sense of knowing but knew it in almost the Biblical sense of having sex with it. I knew I didn't just have a body. I was a body. It was like walking into a closed door at night. The thud of it jolted me down to the roots of my hair.

The body I was was going to be dead. . . . You might say that there at my sister's grave I finally lost my virtue, saw the unveiling of middle-age's last secret. There in Brooklyn I was screwed by my own death. (p. 136)

While separated from Sharon, in LOVE FEAST, Antonio experiences an emotional withdrawal from life similar to that we have seen in other of Buechner's characters: Charlie Blaine, of the trilogy, sleeping his life away; Poteat, in THE FINAL BEAST, retiring from life before he has lived it, affecting a premature worldliness before he really knows much about the world; Lundrigan, of THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE, too mature to feel much of anything, cynical, cold, unloving. Antonio describes his own withdrawal this way:

I read an article in the Times once on the stages the old go through on their way toward death, and somewhere along the line they apparently go through one called decathexis, which the Times defined as "an emotional detachment from life." Ordinarily this stage comes on gradually and toward the end of the line, but for me it came rather abruptly. (LF p. 176)

Later he suggests that he has been precipitated by his difficulties

prematurely into that geriatric state where life itself becomes a kind of spectator sport in which there is nothing much left either to win or to lose that greatly matters. (LF pp. 201-202)

Antonio's decathexis is dramatically integrated into the last two novels of the trilogy through Buechner's increased use of photographic and cinematic imagery. Antonio, as narrator, increasingly presents the events that took place after his wife's act of infidelity as if he were seeing them on film and as if he were objectively detached from what was happening. OPEN HEART ends in a peculiarly unresolved manner with references to the film Antonio shot on the trip to Europe and with bits and pieces of what the film will show when developed. LOVE FEAST begins with the suggestion that what the reader is in for is something very like a long session of home movies.

There was a time when it was out of sight out of mind. A day, a week, a year ended, and when it ended, that was the end of it. But then they invented home movies . . . the past may drop out of mind the way it always used to but out of sight never. (p. 3)

The emotional withdrawal Antonio describes goes against the grain of the values Buechner generally approves in his characters, but by the end of LOVE FEAST Antonio has managed a kind of truce with Sharon; they are together again and he is working his way back from withdrawal to the kind of engagement and transformation he describes so well earlier, at the end of LION COUNTRY. In the entire trilogy there is no better statement of the

theme of transformation:

when I was on my way down . . . I had in me already the seeds of the Antonio I was to become; and when I finally went back up again with Sharon as my bride, I carried as part of my baggage and will carry always the celibate dabbler in unwelded scrap iron that I had been on the way down. All of which goes to show, as if that were necessary, that you cannot escape the past or the future either, and at my best and bravest I do not even want to escape them . . . all the sad and hurtful things of the past I would prevent having happened if I could, but failing that, I would not wish the hurt of them away even if that were possible.

When Miriam's bones were breaking, for instance, if I could have pushed a button that would have stopped not her pain but the pain of her pain in me, I would not have pushed the button because, to put it quite simply, my pain was because I loved her, and to have wished my pain away would have been somehow to wish my love away as well. And at my best and bravest I do not want to escape the future either, even though I know that it contains what will someday be my own great and final pain. Because a distaste for dying is twin to a taste for living, and again I don't think you can tamper with one without somehow doing mischief to the other. (p. 247)

The above represents an earlier Antonio, newly married and hopeful. It is also the necessary resolution of the conflicts of the first novel of the trilogy. Still, at the end of the trilogy, ten years older with a new set of difficulties to overcome, Antonio seems to have the kind of resilience that transformation requires. He suggests that there will no longer be any decathexis in his life. He also suggests that he can live with the death of some of the things that previously characterized his life, "youth . . . a capacity for ignoring irony . . . a taste for certain flavors of hope" (LF p. 248). Even the resignation Antonio has adopted by the end of the trilogy implies the possibility of further transformation.

Out of the wreckage of things I picked up a kind of marriage again . . . a capacity if not for rising above irony like the saints, at least for living it out with something like grace, with the suspicion if not the certainty that maybe the dark and hurtful shadows all things cast are only shadows. (LF p. 248)

All the way through the trilogy Antonio has been concerned with defining himself, intensely aware of everyone's uniqueness, his own included, and fascinated by such marks of discrete identity as faces and names. In the beginning of the trilogy, Antonio is known by his closest friends as Tono, a childhood nickname that stuck. When he breaks from his past and marries Sharon, he finally feels that he has become Antonio and left his childhood name (and identity) behind him. In an extended hallucination/dream sequence in LOVE FEAST, induced by puffing on an Indian's black, smelly cigar, Antonio imagines that he is in Lion Country again and he meets Lucille, Miriam, and Herman Redpath (all are dead) there. A pig appears and drops a silver dollar into his hand which seems to have on it the key to his identity. It is a name.

On the dollar there was something written, and-- how do I say it? What was written on it wasn't Antonio Parr or Tono or Bopper or Sir or any of the other names I've been called by various people at various times in my life, and yet it was my name. It was a name so secret that I wouldn't tell it even if I remembered it, and I don't remember it. But if anybody were ever to show up and call me by it, I'd recognize it in a second, and the chances are that if the person who called me by it gave me the signal, I'd follow him to the ends of the earth. (p. 136)

What Antonio's secret name might be we never know, but in considering Antonio's search for self in the

trilogy it is interesting to note that when Sharon and Bill return from a brief stay in Florida during Antonio and Sharon's separation, Bill gives his father a present: it is a sand dollar. And the last thing Sharon says in the trilogy is "'That Bop'" (p. 245). She shortens her usual nickname for Antonio (Bopper) and thereby provides him with a new name. Antonio's transformation may not be as complete as Theodore Nicolet's, and the problematic nature of Antonio's existence may seem more imposing than it has been for the protagonists of the novels that precede the trilogy. But by the time we meet Antonio Parr, the intimate relationship between Buechner's themes of wonder, innocence, and transformation is clear, and we should realize that whenever we find even a trace of one of them the other two must be near at hand.

NOTES--Chapter III

¹Frederick Buechner, THE ALPHABET OF GRACE (New York, 1970), p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³New York, 1960.

⁴THE RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, eds. Stein and Urdang, (New York, 1966), p. 1328.

⁵THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE, from the epigraph.

⁶cf. pp. 94-96 above.

⁷Frederick Buechner, OPEN HEART (New York, 1972), p. 29. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation OH along with the page number.

⁸Frederick Buechner, LOVE FEAST (New York, 1974), p. 164. All further references to this work will include only the page number in parentheses following the quotation or, when necessary, the abbreviation LF along with the page number.

IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It should be obvious by now that Buechner is a child of modernism, that he inherited many of its assumptions and concerns, and that much of his development as a novelist may be traced by examining the various ways in which he reacts to this legacy in his novels. As his essentially affirmative major themes develop and recur in novel after novel, the ways in which Buechner tempers many modern assumptions begin to appear as some of the most distinctive aspects of his fiction. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Buechner insists that even within a worldview that is essentially problematic there are legitimate bases for wonder, joy, and the kind of enlightened innocence represented by such characters as Maroo (A LONG DAY'S DYING), Peter Cowley (THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE), Theodore Nicolet (THE FINAL BEAST), or even Leo Bebb (the trilogy). Buechner's novels often portray characters whose lives are empty or paralytic, dominated by metaphors of the waste land, but the further we move away from Buechner's earliest novels the more we find that these characters are counterbalanced by characters who are able to recognize the problematic context of their lives without being overcome by it.

The characters who best represent the themes of

wonder, innocence, and transformation in Buechner's novels are capable of facing many of their difficulties and of resolving at least some of them. Instead of the passivity and frustration of such a character as Saul Bellow's Joseph, in *DANGLING MAN*, Buechner gives us the compassion and resolve of a Theodore Nicolet. Instead of the tentative, limited success that we associate with such a character as Frank Alpine, in Bernard Malamud's *THE ASSISTANT*, Buechner gives us the humane and successful world of Strasser in *THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK*. Unlike all but a few of his contemporaries (e.g., J. F. Powers or Flannery O'Connor), Buechner refuses to work entirely within a secular framework. His fiction is dedicated to exploring at least the possibility that there is a larger context available. In fact for Buechner, fiction itself would seem to be a means of keeping spiritual questions and views alive in a world in which such concerns are no longer even generally acknowledged.

The irony that accompanies Buechner's major themes is both the result of his being himself a modern man and a defense against being casually dismissed by a modern audience. Like Maroo, in *A LONG DAY'S DYING*, Buechner realizes that metaphor and indirection are his most valuable strategies. The irony and ambiguity that so thoroughly characterize the prevailing problematic view of human experience do not, or need not, preclude the possibilities of wonder central to the larger context Buechner explores. Actually,

Buechner suggests, they are central to it, and one of the major ironies of modern experience is that modern man's greatest need is for precisely the kind of larger context or vision the existence of which, even the possibility of which, he generally denies.

Perhaps Buechner's awareness of the skepticism of his audience helps to explain the patterns of development we find in his work. The early novels exhibit a formal style; it is highly allusive, carefully wrought, complex and elegant. Malcolm Cowley accuses Buechner's early work of containing phrases so glittering and polished that they "seem to have been picked from a jeweler's tray with a pair of tweezers."¹ The tone of these early novels is serious; their intent is didactic. The allusions of the early novels are primarily classical, biblical, or Elizabethan. John Aldridge's suggestion that *A LONG DAY'S DYING* is too self-consciously "literary" is probably applicable to *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE* and *THE RETURN OF ANSEL GIBBS* as well. But with *THE FINAL BEAST*, Buechner begins to move away from the formality of his earlier novels, and this is also the case with *THE ENTRANCE TO PORTLOCK*. In these two novels the aphoristic qualities of the earlier works are displaced by the patterns of ordinary speech, as the self-indulgence of economically and socially privileged characters gives way to the rhythms of middle-class experience. The allusions, though still literary, are less esoteric. The Philomela myth has been replaced

by THE WIZARD OF OZ. In his next four novels (The Leo Bebb trilogy and TREASURE HUNT), Buechner's style is dramatically different. The language is informal, colloquial, occasionally downright vulgar. The allusions are topical and comic rather than "literary." Gradually, Buechner seems to have understood that his major themes and the world of possibility they represent are not only ironic and ambiguous; for much of his potential audience they are likely to seem outrageous as well.

In THE FINAL BEAST, Buechner begins to explore some of the outrageous and comic potential of his major themes. With LION COUNTRY, Buechner turns to the comic novel, the form most suited to the development of this potential. Each novel since LION COUNTRY has been just a little more outrageous than its predecessor, and Buechner has remained committed to an essentially comic vision ever since his introduction of Leo Bebb.

The development of Buechner's major themes is a dramatic one; he moves from the serious to the comic, from the formal to the informal, from the probable to the improbable. The world of Tristram Bone, proprietous, empty, and sterile, leads eventually to the world of Leo Bebb, preposterous, hilarious, and vital. Bone's life, however rich its trappings, is emotionally and psychologically a series of closed doors, dead ends; Bebb's is a constant reminder that almost anything is possible, however outrageous such a notion might seem.

Implicit in the majority of Buechner's work, explicit in THE ENTRANCE TO PORLOCK, is the suggestion that modern man's plight is analogous to that of the major characters in THE WIZARD OF OZ. Modern man's fondest desires--a sense of purpose, the ability to love, hope--may be well within reach if he realizes that they exist only when they are exercised, that they can be his only if he makes them his. This commonest of psychological truths does not function as a panacea in Buechner's novels. Assuming individual responsibility for one's life is never easy, and surely cannot be for modern man stuck in the muddled middle of his problematic existence. To do so, Buechner implies, is to engage in an act of faith, and faith, as Leo Bebb reminds Antonio when he tells him that he believes everything, is "hard as hell."

Coping with the difficulties inherent in modern experience is largely a matter of psychological attitude and perception. The characters of whom Buechner most approves are unwilling or unable to adopt the resignation, cynicism, or despair represented by many of Buechner's other characters (e.g., Lundrigan or Metzger). They may not be certain that their more affirmative views of human experience are well-founded, but they recognize the eviscerating effects of refusing to entertain at least the possibility that such views are legitimate. The characters who best represent Buechner's themes of wonder, innocence, and transformation are all aware of the irony, even the

absurdity, of their hopes that the maze of secular experience, so ambiguous, complex, and paradoxical, might still somehow reflect what men used to call the spirit. They are, however, also aware of the absurdity of assuming that their lives can be adequately explained by a series of biochemical equations. Like Binx, in Walker Percy's *THE MOVIEGOER*, these characters have all experienced moments they can only understand as essentially mysterious and wondrous. It is difficult for them to trust such moments, but equally difficult to ignore them. Generally, the characters who are able to trust them are able to transform their lives, i.e., to make the harshest elements of their experience bearable, even, on occasion, to find in ordinary human experience much that is miraculous and beautiful. But even for Buechner's most successful characters, responding to life affirmatively is difficult in an age dominated by images of darkness and futility. Peter Cowley can transform his own life, but it is doubtful that he will be able to change the lives of those around him. Theodore Nicolet's doubts are overcome for a while, but he will continue to have them. Antonio vacillates between resignation and a sense of ironic hopefulness. There is no question that for Buechner the secular reflects the spiritual, but, as his major characters consistently indicate, the relationship between the two remains enigmatic.

The relationship of Buechner's work to that of his contemporaries is also somewhat enigmatic. Buechner's

willingness to entertain an essentially hopeful view of human experience places his work outside the mainstream of serious contemporary literature. Buechner's predicament is similar to that recognized by Daniel Martin in John Fowles's DANIEL MARTIN. Martin is a successful playwright and scenarist. At one point he muses over the fact that in his entire career he has never written a happy ending, that he has avoided doing so "as if it were somehow in bad taste."² Even in his current work, a comedy, he is careful to send the hero and heroine on their separate ways at the end. During all the discussions of his script, no one suggests a happier resolution--even as a possible alternative.

They were all equally brainwashed, victims of the dominant and historically understandable heresy. . . . It had become offensive, in an intellectually privileged caste, to suggest publicly that anything might turn out well in this world. Even when things . . . did in private actuality turn out well, one dared not say so artistically. It was like some new version of the Midas touch, with despair taking the place of gold.³

It strikes Martin as odd and contradictory that those most committed to artistic freedom should defer so systematically to "a received idea of the age: that only a tragic, absurdist, black-comic view (with even the agnosticism of the 'open' ending suspect) of human destiny could be counted as truly representative and 'serious.'"⁴

Another thing that separates Buechner from some of his contemporaries is the issue of technical innovation. It is a commonplace that new ways of thinking and feeling require the artist to seek new modes of expression, and the

works of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, or John Hawkes provide ample evidence that many contemporary American novelists are committed to an exploration of innovative fictional technique. The result of much of the technical innovation of recent years is a type of story (or anti-story) we recognize as "self-conscious" or "reflexive," but we find none of this innovation in Buechner's novels. This should not surprise us. Buechner's "ideas" are generally quite conventional, as we have already discovered, and he is therefore under less constraint to pave new technical roads. Since Buechner has not given up on the conventional novel, his work is closer to that of John Updike or Wright Morris (though not as well recognized) than it is to that of Barth or Barthelme.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Buechner and many of his contemporaries is his relative lack of critical recognition, and the matter of Buechner's literary reputation brings us to the final issue of this study. Why hasn't Buechner received more critical attention? It should be understood that answers to this question are bound to be highly speculative; nonetheless, the question is legitimate and deserves some attention.

It is clear that Buechner's neglect has nothing to do with his being too esoteric or obscurantist. Authors who are far more esoteric than Buechner (e.g., John Hawkes or Thomas Pynchon) have achieved much greater critical acclaim than he, even if they haven't established themselves with

a large general audience. Nor does Buechner's preference for the conventional novel take us very far; some of the authors whose works Buechner's most resemble (e.g., John Updike or Saul Bellow) have achieved both wide critical acceptance and a large general readership. If Buechner's craftsmanship is comparable to that of a John Updike (John Gardner even suggests that he prefers Buechner to Updike⁵), then either Buechner has been the victim of an injustice through inexplicable neglect of his craftsmanship, or there are matters other than craft in his work that tend to put off most critics. Both of these assertions are at least partially true, but the critical attention Buechner has received suggests that the latter is more likely the case than the former. Some small portion of the neglect of Buechner's fiction may be attributable to the fact that much contemporary fiction is technically more challenging than Buechner's and therefore provides critics with more raw material for their own technical explication. When Buechner has received critical attention, it has consistently supported the view that he is a fine craftsman. Apparently, the basis of Buechner's more general critical neglect is not to be found through questions concerning his craftsmanship. Perhaps Buechner's most characteristic thematic concerns are themselves part of the problem.

Contemporary critics are used to finding the issue of transcendent values, or their absence, in much contemporary American fiction; the mere presence of this issue

in Buechner's fiction is therefore not likely to be enough to condemn his works to critical oblivion. But when this issue is important in the works of such authors as John Updike, Wright Morris, or Saul Bellow, it is usually implicit rather than explicit; and the resolution of the issue tends to be guarded and tentative. As Joseph Waldmeir suggests:

It is little more than a cautious hope, without promises or guarantees. Simply stated, it is the belief that somewhere, somehow, there exists a transcendent set of values which the individual can discover and achieve. If he suffers long and hard enough, and is very lucky in his search for them. The message is almost medieval, though of course defrocked, for there is no fixed religious system to impose order and control on the novelist's world, and no God to whom the individual can appeal for guidance or aid in identifying true values from false.⁶

Much of the above applies to Buechner's work as well as it does to that of his contemporaries, since the differences between Buechner's emphases and theirs tend to be differences of degree rather than kind. However in Buechner's fiction, the possibility that there is a God is itself the basis of many of the most important conflicts and themes that the works develop. Rather than dealing with the issue of transcendent values indirectly, cautiously, by implication, Buechner chooses to make it the central focus of many of his novels. In *THE SEASONS' DIFFERENCE*, Peter Cowley has a "vision," and the other characters are forced to respond to this peculiar circumstance; in *THE FINAL BEAST*, Theodore Nicolet hears "clack, clack," and ultimately reaffirms his faith; in the Bebb trilogy,

Antonio is stuck with the question of whether Leo Bebb is a saint or a charlatan. Although Buechner's major themes are generally more affirmative than those of most of his contemporaries, his novels do not present or resolve metaphysical issues much less problematically than those of his contemporaries who are concerned with the same fundamental questions; but they do ask the questions more directly. As John Gardner suggests, with Buechner one always knows where one stands. The issues are always clear and direct, even if the resolution of these issues is still problematic. Contemporary spiritual malaise is the issue, Buechner suggests, laying all his cards on the table. Knowing the name of the game, the question is whether or not one wants to play. Even in the works of Flannery O'Connor, the stakes are seldom so clear.

By placing these concerns at the center of his work and treating them explicitly, Buechner may alienate critics and readers who feel that such matters are best dealt with, if at all, implicitly. It may even be that Buechner's affirmative themes strike many contemporary sensibilities as just so much wishful thinking. If this is the case, it is unfortunate. Buechner's work may exist somewhat outside the mainstream of contemporary American fiction, but surely this is less true than it might initially seem to be. Even the most casual reading of Buechner's work should reveal that in many of the most important respects Buechner's novels accomplish the same things as the

best of those of his better recognized contemporaries. In Buechner's novels, as in Updike's or Bellow's,

the quest itself is at least as important and interesting as the finding, just as the temptation of the holy man is of as much moment as the vision, or as the perilous journey across the wasteland is as interesting as the Grail.⁷

The finitude and particularity of the mundane world are as important to Buechner as they are to any novelist, indeed as they are to all of us; and Buechner renders the world of ordinary human experience with an eye for detail and nuance that clearly indicates his appreciation, his tolerance, and his approval. Perhaps, he implies, "the daily occasions of our earth-bound career . . . [are] possible roads into what is ultimately significant."⁸

Other authors of substantial merit have been, and often continue to be, ignored or undervalued. Ford Madox Ford's *THE GOOD SOLDIER* had to wait decades for a sympathetic audience. Henry Roth's *CALL IT SLEEP* was "rediscovered" thirty years after its initial publication. Conrad Aiken, Wright Morris, and Glenway Wescott have never achieved the critical reputations they so richly deserve. At least for the time being, Frederick Buechner's name seems to belong somewhere on this list. Would that it were otherwise; for his novels address needs that we have long recognized as fundamental, and his major themes "re-affirm the most ancient of answers, love and individual responsibility."⁹

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NOTES--Chapter IV

¹Malcolm Cowley, THE LITERARY SITUATION (New York, 1958), p. 50.

²John Fowles, DANIEL MARTIN (Boston, 1977), p. 402.

³Ibid, p. 403.

⁴Ibid., p. 404.

⁵cf. John Gardner, ON MORAL FICTION (New York, 1978), pp. 87-99.

⁶Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Quest without Faith," in RECENT AMERICAN FICTION: SOME CRITICAL VIEWS (Boston, 1963), pp. 55-56.

⁷Ibid., p. 56.

⁸Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," in COMEDY: MEANING AND FORM, ed., Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco, 1965) p. 107.

⁹Waldmeir, p. 62.

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