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The romance of self-surrender in four historical novels of Helen C White

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THE ROMANCE OF SELF-SURRENDER IN FOUR HISTORICAL NOVELS
OF HELEN C. WHITE

by

Joyce Ahn

Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in English
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
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The Thesis prepared by

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Entitled

The Romance of Self-surrender in Four Historical Novels of Helen C. White: *A Watch*
in the Night, Not Built with Hands, Dust on the King's Highway, and Bird of Fire

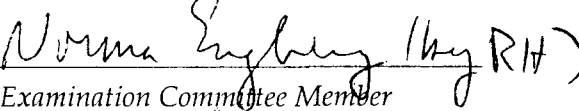
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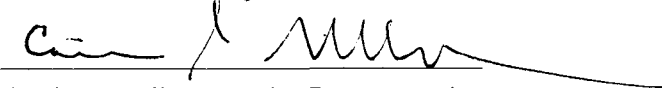
Master of Arts in English


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ABSTRACT

The Romance of Self-surrender in Four Historical Novels of Helen C. White

by

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Helen C. White (1896–1967), a long-time professor of English at the University of Wisconsin Madison, was also an accomplished historical novelist. Although her six novels met with popular and critical success on publication, they seem to be largely forgotten today, and all are currently out of print. This study examines four of White's six novels, *A Watch in the Night*, *Not Built with Hands*, *Dust on the King's Highway*, and *Bird of Fire*, in light of the romance of self-surrender they portray. Each of the novel's protagonists – Jacopone da Todi, Countess Matilda of Tuscany, Father Francisco Garcés, and St. Francis of Assisi, respectively – struggles with strong suffering in the context of some of the perennial problems of the human race: the problem of pain, the problem of civilization, the problem of communication, and the problem of inspiration and order, respectively. In the course of this pilgrimage each one gradually attains the romance of self-surrender when at last he learns to surrender his self-will and accept God's will.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Helen C. White (1896–1967) was a teacher, scholar, novelist, administrator, diplomat, and a lover of history and travel. White was born in New Haven, Connecticut, but her family moved to Boston when she was a child, and she was reared and educated there. After earning her B.A. and M.A. from Radcliffe College, she taught at Smith College for two years before moving west to the University of Wisconsin Madison to teach and begin her doctoral work. The move, originally intended to be a one-year sojourn, to “get out and broaden my outlook by going West for a year,”¹ proved to be a permanent one. She remained in Madison for the rest of her life, always returning to her adopted home from her frequent trips for research, travel, and other varied professional and humanitarian activities. White grew to love and respect Wisconsin because of its “broader, more generous spirit.”²

The love and respect was evidently mutual, for four years after White’s death the University of Wisconsin dedicated its new undergraduate library building to her memory. One can hardly do better than quote from a tribute paid to White on the occasion in the *Wisconsin State Journal*:

Helen White would love the thought of a library bearing her name.
And she would love the site of the University of Wisconsin’s new Helen C. White Undergraduate Library on a spot she knew well. It’s at the foot of Bascom Hill she climbed more than a half century [sic; actually it was for forty-

eight years] to classes, two blocks from the apartment where she lived for years, three from St. Paul's University Catholic Chapel where she attended daily Mass.

.....
In her lifetime Helen White was something of a campus landmark herself, a queenly, white-haired woman with a gentle smile, an incisive mind, and a purple hat.

Prof. White was an internationally known scholar of English and one of the most distinguished people ever to serve on the University faculty.

She was the first woman to earn a doctor's degree here in letters and science (1924), first woman full professor (1936), first woman to head the American Assn. of University Professors (1956). And back in 1927 she led the first student trip abroad.

She wrote 13 books, received many honorary degrees and fellowships, and was festooned with awards – among them the Laetare, Cardinal Newman, and Mercy Medals and the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, the latter bestowed by Queen Elizabeth.³

She held numerous high offices – including that of commissioner of the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization – and for years found it necessary to travel constantly. She hated wasting time on clothes so she simplified things by buying everything in one color: purple.

The article concludes with the words of the University's Chancellor, Robben Fleming, who called her ““a top-ranking scholar, a gentle but persuasive voice in the cause of academic freedom, and a dedicated humanitarian.””⁴

White was a devoted and enthusiastic teacher throughout her career. Her arrival at the University of Wisconsin coincided with the return of waves of First World War veterans to school. She found their English to be in a deplorable state – for which their “favorite alibi” was, “You’ve no idea, Miss White, what the army does to your English” – and White wholeheartedly set herself to a “rescue operation.”⁵ Summing up her twenty-five-year teaching career for the *Radcliffe Quarterly* in 1942, she began, “I meant to teach English and I have. It has been great fun.”⁶ Some twenty years later, White said during a newspaper interview, “Teaching is more fun than anything.... It’s the most worthwhile thing a person can do.”⁷ Many of her students remembered her with fondness and gratitude long after their school years. Three of White’s former students – Margaret

Thoma, Mark Schorer, and August Derleth – and Harold Latham, White’s editor at Macmillan, joined forces to honor her (1942).⁸ In the same year, an unnamed graduate student said that White, “mother confessor” to many students, “has unlimited sympathy and a great capacity for getting at the heart of things.”⁹ Anna P. Butler, with the collaboration of friends and associates of White, composed White’s biography (ca. 1949).¹⁰ A student of White’s later years, Toni McNaron, wrote a passionate eulogy entitled “The Purple Goddess” (White’s nickname among English Department graduate students, according to McNaron) nearly twenty years after White’s death (1985).¹¹

Summing up White’s career, *American National Biography* says that it “epitomizes the single-mindedness that characterized academic women in the early years of this century,” adding that she “never married.”¹² If White’s “single-mindedness” is a necessary conclusion from the fact that she “never married,” then she was single-minded. However, when White’s manifold activities, interests, and involvements – academic, humanitarian, as well as personal – are considered, the label strikes one as misleading. For they reveal a person who was warmly interested in a great many people and things. White was well aware of the cost of the diversity of her interests. In the *Radcliffe Quarterly* article mentioned above, she added after enthusiastically enumerating her various activities (teaching, travel, research, belonging to things, and writing), “Of course, I know that really good work entails concentration, but – what would one leave out?”¹³ Narrow concentration was definitely not the path that White took. Instead, she chose a broad and balanced outlook on life, and the same was true of her approach to literature. Her approach to literature is aptly summed up by her metaphor “three roads to Parnassus,” which represents a complementary relationship among the three main

branches of literature, which she identified as “teaching, research and writing,”¹⁴ or “literary scholarship, particularly of an historical character, literary criticism, and literary creation.”¹⁵

This complementary approach is borne out by White’s career. She was a teacher, critic, and researcher before she was a novelist.¹⁶ Indeed, it is accurate to say that her venture into the writing of historical romance grew out of her scholarly work. For it was during her doctoral research into Blake’s mysticism in the 1920s, when she was reading much of the world’s mystical literature, that she came to read the great Catholic mystics. In particular, writings about St. Francis of Assisi and his century, the thirteenth, exerted a profound influence on her. Then in 1928–29 she spent a year in England on a Guggenheim fellowship (awarded for her first book, *The Mysticism of William Blake*). In her own words:

It was a wonderful year. I lived at Crosby Hall, headquarters of the International Federation of University Women. My friends at University College opened all sorts of doors, and I dug in at the British Museum Reading Room with wonder and delight. I went to Italy with a sculptor friend for a month’s holiday – Rome, Florence, Venice – and Olive [White’s sister] came over, and we had a summer together at Oxford, an unforgettable summer of reading in Duke Humphrey’s Library and taking long walks in the Oxford countryside on those magic English summer nights. I did the work for one critical book and laid the foundations for another, but before the year was out, an old impulse of story-telling had come back. I had decided long before that I was not a creative writer but a critic. In the freedom of this London year, however, I began to wonder, and I began to think of stories again. It was not until 1933 that the first novel came out, but it was in that year abroad that the impulse to do it was born.¹⁷

Thus was conceived her first novel, *A Watch in the Night*, the story of Jacopone da Todi, Franciscan friar,¹⁸ poet, and mystic.

Over the next twenty-five years White published five more. Her second novel, *Not Built with Hands* (1935), also set in Italy but about two centuries back, focuses on the

efforts of Countess Matilda of Tuscany and Pope Gregory VII to establish standards of civilization and humanitarian values based on Christian principles. Her third, *To the End of the World* (1939), is set around the French Revolution and is concerned with the efforts of the Church of France to continue its work in an entirely new political order. The fourth, *Dust on the King's Highway* (1947), set in eighteenth-century New Spain (the present-day American Southwest), depicts the hopes, aspirations, struggles, and conflicts involved in the coming of the Spanish missionaries and colonists. The fifth, *The Four Rivers of Paradise* (1955), portrays the fall of Rome around 410 A.D. And her last, *Bird of Fire: a Tale of St. Francis of Assisi* (1958), studies the adult life of St. Francis of Assisi and the infancy of the Order he founded.

As is apparent from the above brief survey, White's interest in history was a wide-ranging one and she liked to paint her stories on broad canvases. Nevertheless, three of her six novels are set in the Middle Ages: *A Watch in the Night*, *Not Built with Hands*, and *Bird of Fire*. More specifically, all three are set in the period of 1050–1300, which the historian R. W. Southern called “the age of growth”: it was an age of “rational and coherent advance”¹⁹ of Europe in every way, in population, in economy, and in intellectual and geographical boundaries. Two of these three, namely, *A Watch in the Night* and *Bird of Fire*, plus *Dust on the King's Highway*, feature Franciscans as protagonists. This essay will study these four stories in light of the romance of self-surrender they portray. I use the term “the romance of self-surrender” in contrast to the typical “romance of the self” which Richard Chase found in many American novels.²⁰ White's novels, while partaking of many of the romance elements of the American novel, arrive at a very different kind of romance. Each of her novels does affirm sympathetically

the experiences and consciousnesses of individual characters and acknowledges the “contradiction” and “extreme ranges of experience”²¹ inherent in the human condition, but instead of resting in them it transcends them. White’s stories celebrate the uniqueness of the individual, but they pass through “the poetry of disorder”²² to arrive at the poetry of order. The quality that makes this difficult balancing act possible in her novels is the romance of self-surrender. This romance of self-surrender takes many forms. It is the romance of self-denial rather than self-gratification. It is the romance of renunciation rather than possession or acquisition. It is the romance of self-forgetfulness rather than self-centeredness or self-consciousness. And finally, it is the romance of self-sacrifice, self-giving, of pouring oneself out, rather than self-seeking or self-fulfillment.

One of White’s particular strengths as a novelist is her ability to portray the interconnectedness of individual and society and the private and the public, and this essay examines her novels through the two main, interrelated subjects they study. On the personal level, each of White’s novels is the story of the pilgrimage of the protagonist’s soul. On the social level, each one studies one of the perennial problems of the human race: the problem of pain, the problem of civilization, the problem of communication, and the problem of inspiration and order, respectively. Each protagonist’s pilgrimage is lived out in the context of a particular social struggle, and each one’s pilgrimage is a gradual attainment of the romance of self-surrender. The four chapters discussing White’s novels individually will, I hope, reveal this romance of self-surrender, and the theme will be examined more closely in the final chapter. Detailed plot summaries of the novels are provided as appendices. But first, a few words about White’s views on the writing of historical novels are appropriate. It should also be helpful to look at some aspects that

pervade each of White's novels: medievalism, the Order of St. Francis, and mysticism.

Finally, I close the next chapter with a response to the most frequent complaint concerning White's novels: their length and discursiveness.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL NOVEL AS A BRIDGE

Truth is the criterion of historical study;
but its impelling motive is poetic.
Its poetry consists in its being true.

—G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History*²³

...the historical novel is a “form” of fiction as well as of history.

It is a tale, a piece of invention;
only, it claims to be true to the life of the past.
—Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel*²⁴

Of all general appraisals of White’s novels that I have found, the most perceptive is this: “Her fiction probed the minds and souls of sensitive men and women gallantly attempting to live out their ideals in a blemished church and world.... She filled a broad canvas with lavish historical detail against which opposing forces of order and chaos, freedom and bondage, persuasion and violence played themselves out. Her sympathetic delineation of the delicate conscience and missionary zeal is unsurpassed in spiritual insight.”²⁵ The passage aptly sums up the central theme and approach of White’s stories, for each of her tales is concerned with the struggles of men and women who experience suffering and failure and yet strive to remain true to their ideals. It also shows an understanding of the fundamental characteristics of White’s novels: romance, realism, and sympathy. White always referred to her novels as historical romances, and indeed

they are romances grounded in vigorous realism, treated with sympathy and understanding.

The *American National Biography* entry on White previously referred to notes that her novels are “each set at a crucial period in the development of the history of the Catholic church,” and concludes that they all “follow the same basic pattern: a religious principle or objective is blocked by a secular or pragmatic concern, and the conflict temporarily defeats the spiritual forces of good. God always works in mysterious ways, however, and the spiritual ends up victorious in the end.”²⁶ There is a grain of truth in this appraisal. By the same token, however, it oversimplifies “the pattern” of White’s novels. To say that they portray the battle of religious or spiritual good against secular evil of which the outcome is a foregone conclusion is to subject literature to a kind of reductionist view. According to this way of thinking, the same thing can be said of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*! The central concern of White’s novels – as of the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* – is the struggle, the journey, the quest, of man for goodness and love and constancy. The oversimplified view also ignores the fact that the worst of the obstacles and tests in each story more often than not come from *within* the Church, or from other Christians.

Writing from a Catholic perspective about White and her novels, Austin J. App praised her contribution to Catholic literature. Her work, he wrote, “strips the romantic fallacy from our Catholic past and presents its true mixture of high ideals and sinful performance. Before the Reformation, Dante and Chaucer critically depicted Catholic sins and produced Catholic masterpieces. Since the Reformation, Catholic writers have depicted rose-cheeked curates and Protestant villains and created no *Divine Comedy* or

Canterbury tales [sic].”²⁷ App’s mention of *Canterbury Tales* is very apropos, for White’s tales display the same large, humane acceptance, the same delight and appreciation, of diverse human characters and their motives as do the *Tales* – not to mention White’s robust sense of humor and sympathy toward her characters.

White and Historical Romance

In her article “The Writing of Historical Romance” White suggested that the storyteller may have “something that he wants to study” rather than something that he wants to teach. She added that setting a story in a distant past offered the advantage of “greater perspective and greater freedom.”²⁸ For if she [White] were “so rash as to write a novel about the English department in a state university, everybody would be looking to see if he could identify the more outstanding characters and scenes.”²⁹ Thus White made a deliberate choice to create an artistic distance by setting her novels in the distant past. At the same time, however, she also took painstaking care to recreate faithfully and realistically the life and times of each chosen period. To that end, she did careful research into not only the social and political context of the times and places but minute details of ordinary life such as clothing, food, etc., and took care to fully integrate them into the fabric of her tales. “As for detail of setting,” White said, “the romancer needs more and not less truth than the sober pages of history afford.... It’s the little things that give authenticity, and it’s the little things that are often hardest to get hold of.”³⁰ Her fidelity to history and historical detail was appreciated by discerning critics. In an article assessing the state of American novel, Francis X. Connelly singled out White (along with her sister Olive) as two of the few historical novelists who “combine narrative talent and historical

accuracy,” thereby providing rare “exceptions to the rule” of the perversion of history and poor craftsmanship pervasive among the writers of historical novel.³¹

Also, White chose to write mostly about actual historical personages, using their real names. Most historical novelists from Sir Walter Scott on have used historical persons as background or minor characters to help establish a historical context and create an illusion of reality, while creating central or main characters that are fictional. In contrast, White took the unusual step of depicting well-known historical persons as central or main characters, so much so that one reviewer called one of her novels a “fictionized version” of a piece of history. The protagonists of the four novels which are the focus of this essay are all well-known historical persons: Jacopone da Todì (*A Watch in the Night*), Countess Matilda of Tuscany (*Not Built with Hands*), Father Francisco Garcés (*Dust on the King’s Highway*), and St. Francis of Assisi (*Bird of Fire*). For her other two novels White created fictional protagonists – Michel de la Tour d’Auvergne (*To the End of the World*) and Hilary of Bordeaux (*The Four Rivers of Paradise*) – but she also incorporated an abundance of historical characters into each story as significant characters. Finally, in order to make the distant past come alive to the modern reader White decided to employ “the personal approach” and make each of her central characters also the story’s center of intelligence: “It is hard to make the average individual, however, sociologically inclined, think of himself as just another digit, or describe his own impulses as manifestations of impersonal forces. So in reading of the past, he will be more interested in the story of an individual, a human being like himself.”³²

As to the object of her endeavors, the metaphor White applied often in connection with the writing of historical romance was a “bridge.” Her view of the goal of the historical romancer she put in these words:

He is trying to throw a bridge, a very fragile one, across the great gulf of time and of different social context so that we may succeed in reaching the common humanity.³³

In keeping with this goal of bridge-building to connect human hearts and minds, White’s predominant attitude toward her characters is sympathy. This is evident from the stories she tells and her narrative tone, but it becomes even clearer when we consider the way she uses her historical sources. While remaining true to the overall picture and the essential truth of history, her practice is always to be generous in attributing the motives of her characters, to give them the benefit of the doubt. A clue to this approach can be found in her critical comments on John Donne. While speculating on the motives behind his youthful conversion to the Church of England from Roman Catholicism, she said: “for the purposes of understanding any human problem, it is safer to risk the more generous interpretation. We shall be surer at least of seeing the man as he saw himself.”³⁴ This same courtesy and sympathy toward the subjects of her scholarly writings White also extended to the denizens of her historical novels. Further, her generous, sympathetic portrayal of the characters applies not only to central and main characters but also to minor ones, including those not easy to like.

White’s Medievalism

The historian R. W. Southern concludes his *Making of the Middle Ages* with the observation that all of the achievements of the early Middle Age – expansion of physical

and intellectual boundaries, the emergence of the individual, and the supremacy of logic – are comprehended by “the change from Epic to Romance”: “The contrast is not merely a literary one, though it is in literature that it can be most clearly seen. It is a reflection of a more general change of attitude which found expression in many different ways.”³⁵ In particular, men began to think of “life as a seeking and a journeying” rather than “an exercise in endurance,” and themselves as “pilgrims and seekers” rather than “stationary objects of attack by spiritual foes.”³⁶ Southern’s observations about the Middle Ages are remarkably consonant with the Middle Ages that emerge in White’s novels. When we consider that all but two of White’s novels predate Southern’s book (published in 1953), this consonance is even more remarkable. It is as if her works of imagination anticipated Southern’s work of historical scholarship. In any event, White’s novels indeed present an authentically medieval view of life and man.

In White’s lifetime the medieval period was widely misunderstood, despite the great advances made in historical scholarship since the publication in 1895 of Frederick Maitland’s seminal work *The History of English Law*. The revolutionary idea behind Maitland’s book was the assumption that what appears to be arcane and useless complexity in medieval law must have arisen out of, and served, the needs of the medieval people. As the historian Norman F. Cantor put it, Maitland sought “to understand [medieval English law] thoroughly, as though we ourselves lived under it.”³⁷ Similarly, White’s approach as a historical novelist might be put thus: to understand medieval human experience as though we ourselves lived under it.

Previous to the twentieth-century, the Middle Ages had been viewed through two opposite ways of thinking: first, the Enlightenment thinkers dismissed them as a long

period of “barbarism, ignorance, and superstition”; then the Romantics rebelled against the cold rationalism of the former and resurrected the Middle Ages, glorifying them with “the shining image of a Gothic culture steeped in idealism, spirituality, heroism, and adoration of women.”³⁸ Thus, the medieval period was considered either as part of the barbarous Dark Ages or as the mythical Golden Age of the Arthurian legend. In either case, what was lacking was a desire and willingness to consider the Middle Ages on their own terms, based on facts and evidence.

White was well aware of this lack, and she once succinctly summed up the result by remarking that the Middle Ages were “usually underestimated or overestimated but almost always misunderstood.”³⁹ It was one of her aims to help ameliorate that misunderstanding by taking her readers “beneath the surface”⁴⁰ of that age. The world beneath the surface that unfolds in White’s novels is one of great complexity and diversity, bursting with life and tension and change. *A Watch in the Night*, *Not Built with Hands*, and *Bird of Fire* paint a world in which there was much that was cruel and inhumane and also much that was splendid and fine, but above all where men and women of various natures and temperaments lived and thought and felt, and the more generous and thoughtful of them grappled with the perennial problems of the human race, each in his own way and according to his own light. There is also a certain largeness of mood in that world, inhabited by tremendously diverse characters from the whole spectrum of society – popes and princes (both good and bad) as well as social outcasts and pariahs, prosperous merchants as well as struggling artists, saints as well as demagogues and rabble-rousers, men of principles as well as self-serving opportunists, and men of faith as well as agnostics and atheists – acting and reacting and interacting with one another. In

fact, in many respects it is a world not unlike modern America. As Cantor observed, its “quality of complexity and contradiction makes the medieval world much closer to our own than was even dimly imagined a century ago.”⁴¹

The Franciscan Order

The Franciscan Order was founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1208 or 1209, when he and his two first followers walked into a little parish church in Assisi, a town in the Umbrian hills of Italy, to seek God’s will. There, “after some moments of prayer, Francis reverently opened the Gospel-book” and took as their “life and rule” the words which met them: they were, first, “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt find treasure in heaven”; second, “Take nothing with you on your journey”; and last, “He that will come after me let him deny himself.”⁴² Accordingly the three men made a vow before God to follow the apostolic counsels which Jesus had given His disciples twelve centuries before, and to consecrate themselves to a life of poverty, humility, and simplicity. The really remarkable part of that story is that after walking out of the church, the men actually went and sold all they had and gave to the poor and then lived according to those words, nearly starving themselves to death and suffering ridicule and persecution in the process. When something has been around for nearly eight centuries, it is perhaps not easy to realize how radical and revolutionary it was perceived to be at its beginning. But it is a fact that when Francis and his first disciples began to live literally by the Gospel in the early thirteenth century, the idea appeared to *their* contemporaries as strange as it probably does to most of us today. Seeing them “barefoot and dressed in rags” preaching repentance, people “thought that they were either mad or

drunk. Women fled from them in fear, while the menfolk chased them away with sticks and stones”⁴³ – most likely the same sort of treatment they would receive today if they were to come along and try to do the same thing!

Southern considered St. Francis as representing “the climax of the developments”⁴⁴ which led to the achievements of the high Middle Ages. More specifically,

[St. Francis] is the embodiment of the spirit of Christian romance which we have watched in some aspects of its development from the time of St. Anselm. The inward quest of St. Anselm or St. Bernard – faith seeking understanding, or carnal love seeking its spiritual object – was given an external symbolism in the homeless, wandering, unsheltered life of the beggar. The most negative and drabdest of the monastic virtues – Poverty – was transformed Cinderella-like into a fairy princess, and invested with the fascinating qualities of a romantic heroine.... With St. Francis and his followers, the fruits of the experiences of St. Anselm and St. Bernard were brought to the market place, and became the common property of the lay and clerical world alike.⁴⁵

Similarly, Evelyn Underhill noted that the Franciscan Order “in its first purity seemed the perfect flower of the medieval soul.”⁴⁶

White and Mysticism

Although White read and taught literature of all periods in the course of her career, her main scholarly interest lay in religious literature, a field in which art meets religion, (in White’s words) two of “the most human of activities, the activity of humanity trying to transcend itself.”⁴⁷ Mystical literature was also of a lifelong interest to her. If the Middle Ages were commonly misunderstood in White’s day, mysticism seems to have fared no better. When, for example, she set out to study the mysticism of William Blake in the 1920s, she found the field of mysticism in general in a state of complete chaos, full of vague, contradictory, and conflicting information. Mysticism was badly in need of definition. Accordingly, after reading the great mystics of the world, White formulated

the following characteristics of the typical mystics: first, there must be a “definite and well-developed tradition,” followed by degeneration within that tradition resulting in “[i]ndifference, formalism, and rationalism,” out of which emerge the great mystics, who are “lovers of the reality that lies behind the shows of things, lovers of goodness, lovers of God.”⁴⁸ Thus, the essence of mysticism is love, and great mystics arise not out of a world abounding in love but out of a world *in need* of great love. The genius of those mystics is three-fold: first, they have a strong consciousness of spiritual reality; second, a faculty of concentration upon that reality; and third, an ethical strenuousness in striving after that reality.⁴⁹ Put another way, the great mystic knows the supernatural object of his love, desires and wills to love that object, and perseveres single-mindedly in that pursuit.

It should be obvious by now that the three marks of the mystic bear remarkable resemblance to those of the romantic lover. Naturally the lover must first find the object of his love, his beloved; then all his attention and energies are directed toward that beloved; and he persists after his beloved until he wins her love. This similarity of love of God to romantic love is particularly strong in *A Watch in the Night* and *Bird of Fire*. Like all true lovers, both Jacomo and Francis are ardent lovers of God from the time of their first conversion and they never waver in their pursuit of God, but it is only gradually that they come to realize a deep, steady, strong love, a love “strong as death”⁵⁰ that the Song of Songs celebrates, of true and tested lovers. On a related note, Kurt Reinhardt in his study *The Theological Novel of Modern Europe* contrasted Catholic and Protestant views on mysticism. According to the Catholic view, God, while transcendent, is at the same time immanent, and therefore mystical union with Him is possible; contrariwise,

orthodox Protestantism sees in mysticism “a kind of sacrilegious presumptuousness on the part of the finite creature,” and therefore looks on it with suspicion and skepticism.⁵¹

A Response to a Frequent Complaint Concerning White’s Novels

White’s characterization and diction were uniformly praised. On the other hand, the complexity and wealth of details in her stories were frequently criticized. The *ANB* entry on White attributes the “sheer bulk and weight” of her novels as the cause of their “major weakness,” and adds: “Each book is discursive, with multiple narratives running in a manner that diffuses the main plot line.... the luxuriant details and extemporaneous tone undercut the focus and power” of her work.⁵² App, in an otherwise positive article discussing White’s first three novels, *A Watch in the Night*, *Not Built with Hands*, and *To the End of the World*, felt that her apparent desire to present “a well-rounded picture than a streamlined story” and her “luxuriance of detail” might deter many people from reading her novels.⁵³ Another critic felt that:

Unity – the “essential virtue of form” – is not Helen White’s strong point. Her fiction lacks a depth of organic connection blending her abundant material in a unified whole. Indeed each of her novels carries enough material for three novels in one; ... [the writers goes on to say that the sheer volume of her stories discourages reprint editions] ... [White’s novels give one an impression of] both an anthology of magnificent figures of speech and masterfully delineated characters, and a text-book of history read simultaneously on a single night. The prime cause of this defect is the lack of rigorous selection of matter; Helen White’s personal interest in history and her broad knowledge are its secondary cause.⁵⁴

Any reader of White’s novels could probably sympathize with this critic’s list of difficulties.

However, and without dismissing such comments, I would like to suggest that the manifold details and events that can so exasperate a reader nevertheless also serve an

important artistic function. It is that they help create a dimension in time⁵⁵ and space, alive with associations, impressions, and peripheral activities, into the midst of which the reader is drawn. It is true that the world that unfolds in White's novels is more like bustling town plazas or marketplaces than artistically produced stage-sets. But that is rather in keeping with the nature of the Middle Ages and the medieval mind, which, according to C. S. Lewis, wanted "a place for everything and everything in the right place."⁵⁶ There is in White's novels something even of "the tranquil, indefatigable, exultant energy of passionately systematic minds bringing huge masses of heterogeneous material into unity" which Lewis discerned in the best of medieval achievements.⁵⁷ Huge masses of heterogeneous material are bound to be bewildering and overwhelming to a newcomer. However, when one has persevered and become acclimated to the strange surroundings and begun to understand their workings, they can turn into treasure-troves of experience and knowledge and delight, full of diverse kinds of men and women and children and their histories which unfold in worlds at once particular and universal.

CHAPTER 3

A WATCH IN THE NIGHT

I am not ague-proof.
—King Lear⁵⁸

Messer Jacomo, isn't knowledge of pain
the one sure knowledge we can count on
in all of the children of Eve?
—Prioress of the Convent of the Poor Ladies⁵⁹

The protagonist of White's first novel is Jacomo (or Jacopo) dei Benedetti (ca.1228–ca.1306), better known to posterity as Jacopone da Todi, ambitious lawyer turned Franciscan friar. According to Frederick Ozanam, as a lawyer Jacomo “sacrificed honor for fortune, in the pursuit of which he showed more ability than conscience.”⁶⁰ But the sudden death of his wife led to his conversion, and after passing through many eccentricities which were the signs of “the first throes of a magnificent repentance” Jacopone was transformed into a poet who could utter words like “Call nothing thine that thou canst lose,” and finally into a man of “holy madness” who could pray, “Lord, grant me to know and do Thy will here below, then care I not if damned or saved I be.”⁶¹ Today, there are extant ninety-three poems accepted as authentic works of Jacopone.⁶² They do not include the famous *Stabat Mater*, which used to be attributed to him until fairly recently (and on that basis White referred to it as Jacopone's work as late as 1960⁶³) but is now regarded as someone else's poem.⁶⁴ In any event, this poetic aspect of

Jacopone's career is something White chose to exclude from her novel, as some of the reviewers pointed out. Perhaps she wanted to present his *life* itself, out of which his poetry poured out; perhaps to draw attention to the fact that his life – the journey of his soul – itself was a kind of poetry. In any event, White focused instead on his spiritual journey as he struggles to cope with pain and loss in a world that seems indifferent or even hostile. "The resultant figure," the *New York Times* reviewer remarked, "is more dignified, more tragic and more consistent than that handed down through the tradition of his fellow-Franciscans."⁶⁵ White's Jacomo is easy to recognize in Evelyn Underhill's summation of him as a man who "touched existence at all points ... a lawyer and a man of the world, a wandering missionary and didactic poet, religious reformer, politician, and contemplative friar."⁶⁶ More recently, George T. Peck has stressed the essential modernity of Jacopone, commenting that "once the veil of time is drawn aside, he speaks to our conditions."⁶⁷

A Watch in the Night was reportedly voted the winner of 1933 Pulitzer Prize by the jurors, but their decision was overruled by the advisory board and the prize was given to another writer.⁶⁸ As might be imagined, critical reception was favorable. One enthusiastic reviewer compared it with the works of Willa Cather and the Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset.⁶⁹ In her own original way, he wrote, White's novel displays Undset's "frank, strong realism combined with mystical intuitiveness" and Cather's "power of almost musical evocation of the beauty and mystery of human life merging into the deeper mystery of divine life."⁷⁰ The comparison must have pleased White, for she openly admired both writers. The *TLS* reviewer judged it "a sincere and strikingly successful endeavour to trace the mental and moral development of a follower of St. Francis," and

commented that “underneath each scene and struggle throbs the rhythm of a man’s selfless seeking for peace and righteousness.”⁷¹

Each of White’s titles for her novels serves a significant symbolic and unifying function. Even so, the title *A Watch in the Night* is unusually suggestive. When asked how she decided on the title, White replied that she must have been thinking of Jesus’ words to his disciples “Could you not watch one hour with me?” in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁷² The connection is made obvious in the sermon Jacomo preaches to the mass of plague victims (to be discussed below). But there is another fitting biblical source of the title: Psalm 90 (which, incidentally, is the only one of the psalms attributed to Moses):

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as *a watch in the night*.
Thou dost sweep men away, they are like a dream,
like grass which is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers. (emphasis added)⁷³

Its theme of the fleeting, fragile nature of human life versus the eternity of God is indeed appropriate for the novel. For Jacomo’s story is that of a man whose eyes are painfully opened to the nature of man’s earthly existence, and who by degrees gains understanding into God’s eternity. The leper’s words to Jacomo “I will watch a little, too” (100) are a succinct summary of the nature of man’s life on earth.

A Watch in the Night is the most Shakespearean of White’s novels. It has echoes of some of his tragedies, *King Lear* in particular. Jacomo is a passionate, proud man who is used to having his way until the tragedy of his wife’s death brings home “the brittleness of life” (26) and relentless reminders of man’s mortality begin to assail him. Like Lear who discovers that he is “not ague-proof,” Jacomo learns that he, too, is vulnerable.

Jacomo's subsequent agony and wanderings, to the extent that he was reputed to have gone mad, also have something of Lear's tribulations. And, most significantly, the transformation of that passionate, selfish spirit into a deeply compassionate and generous one makes Jacomo a worthy literary descendant of Lear. Like Shakespeare also with his histories, White took large liberties with historical facts in this novel. In particular, she compressed the events of the story into a ten-year span (in reality Jacomo lived for nearly forty years after his conversion), with the resultant collapsing and rearranging of events. Several reviewers and readers noted them. One reader, a seminary professor, wrote a scathing letter cataloging all of the historical inaccuracies of the novel and rebuking the wayward author severely.⁷⁴ White's response to his criticism is not known. But in her subsequent novels she was painstakingly faithful to historical detail, and was more than once criticized for failing to exercise the art of selection.

White is concerned with two things in *A Watch in the Night*. As regards the Order of St. Francis, White said that she wanted to study the problem of "inspiration and order."⁷⁵ On a personal level, she was interested in tracing "the pilgrimage of Jacopone's spirit."⁷⁶ The former of the two I propose to reserve for the chapter on *Bird of Fire*, for the conflict between inspiration and order was something St. Francis had to struggle with during his own lifetime. This chapter, therefore, will focus on tracing the pilgrimage of Jacopone's spirit. More specifically, we follow his quest in search for an answer to the problem of pain. It is perhaps not necessary to note here that the problem of pain is also implicit in the other three novels under consideration – as indeed it is implicit in the human condition itself.

The Problem of Pain

In all of White's novels Jacomo is perhaps the only hero who suffers from an existential crisis. A successful man of the world and a connoisseur of the good things of life, he had led a completely selfish existence until the hour of his wife's tragic death. His spiritual life had been all but nonexistent, and he had never noticed its lack. Then the sudden death of his beautiful young wife makes him realize "the brittleness of life" (26) for the first time in his life, and the life he had built up and enjoyed comes tumbling down. Ironically, the event that turns into the scene of Vanna's death is the crowning glory of Jacomo's life: the tournament given in his honor. (Historically, the scene of the tragedy was a wedding feast,⁷⁷ but White changed it and turned it into something of special significance to Jacomo, who might be called the prototype of the modern yuppie. He has climbed up a few rungs of the socio-economic ladder, and the tourney is a definite sign that he has arrived.)

When some time after Vanna's funeral his father-in-law pays him a visit, the chasm between their different responses to the same loss becomes clear. The lord of Ravallo is able to draw consolation from his faith, but Jacomo cannot. He had of course gone through the motions of being a Catholic, but he had had no real belief in his religion. Now, faced with his father-in-law's example Jacomo is forced to acknowledge his own unbelief, for God and hell alike have no meaning to him. So, finding himself unable to believe and yet unwilling to accept that life is but an empty dream, he "seethed in his own pain until he felt his reason begin to reel" (27). His agony makes him recall the occasion of his loss of religious faith long ago, on the night of the frustration of his first love: when his desperate prayers for God's help to be able to marry Lisa had gone unanswered, he

had despaired and given up all faith in God. As if the floodgate of pain had been thrown open, in the next few months Jacomo meets one specimen after another of victims of cruel pain. First, there is Giolotti the hangman whose sincerely pagan father had been burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic, and who had kept nothing of his father's faith (pantheism) or precepts save his reverence for the human body. An ultimate cynic who practices the logical conclusion of unbelief, the hangman calmly tells Jacomo, "to the cleansed body [of a dead man] I render the homage of the enraptured dissector who alone can appreciate the wonder of man" (47). "There is no God" (47) and there is no afterlife, Giolotti says, in which case "our grief is futile" (48).

The characters Jacomo encounters on his pilgrimage come in contrasting pairs. The first pair was of the confirmed believer (Jacomo's father-in-law) and the utter unbeliever (Giolotti). The next pair consists of the harlot (Lisa) and the virgin (the prioress). In a country inn Jacomo notices two prostitutes trying to comfort each other, "the world's outcasts sheltering each other from the world's storm" (57). The younger of the pair turns out to be Lisa, the piquant, pretty girl with tinkling laughter whom he had passionately loved and with whom he had exchanged vows of betrothal in front of the cross in a roadside church. When his family would not allow him to marry her, he had gone on with his life, and until the moment of Vanna's death it had been a good one. But all the while Lisa had been paying the price of their love, without complaint and without self-pity.

The next two characters Jacomo meets, the prioress of the Poor Ladies and a leper, are old people who in their youth had suffered beyond their power of endurance until they had met St. Francis. As such, they are able to offer Jacomo perspective as well as sympathy. The story of the prioress, reminiscent of the story of Heloise and Abelard, is of

her love for a priest which she could not give up even after taking the veil. Even as she drew “warm content” (87) from thinking of him, she had known that she was damning his soul as well as hers. And when she had tried to fix her eyes on Christ on the crucifix, she says, “lo, it was the face of that other which I looked upon” (87). Implicit in the contrasting pair of the prioress and Lisa are two points. One is a realization of how much closer the virgin and the harlot are to each other than one would think. Lisa had loved Jacomo licitly, since they had solemnly plighted their troth before God, but his desertion and her consequent destitution had led her to turn to a life of prostitution. The Prioress had harbored an illicit love for a priest, and – to judge from her own words – given a chance, would have willingly transgressed the moral law. That she has been spared the kind of misery and indignity that has been Lisa’s lot is solely due to her more fortunate circumstances. And this understanding takes us to the other point, which is that we are *all* sinners, and we should have compassion for fellow sinners rather than condemnation. The Prioress sees both points clearly, I think, for she reminds Jacomo of the fact that “a maid cleaner than any of us stood beside a harlot” (89) at the foot of the cross at Calvary. Finally, it is Jacomo’s compassion for Lisa that has brought him to the Prioress.

To return to the Prioress’s story, while she was engulfed in pain and guilt Francis had come and talked with her. He had told her that “our sister Pain” was God’s greatest gift to her, for pain is “the key of the whole world, and the mystery of all God’s mysteries” (88). He had gone on to say:

We will pray for each other, little sister. We will not ask God to take away the memory of your love, and we will not ask Him to make my brethren all of one mind. We will ask Him for His grace that we may take this love which He has forbidden and this peace which He has withheld, as His gift, and we will ask Him to make the measure of grace equal to the measure of pain, that when my

few days and your many days, little sister, are finished, we two may know Him in beauty forever. (89)

And so the prioress, then a young novice, had been comforted by Francis' words full of sympathy and mystery of love. It is relevant to note here the original meaning of the word "comfort" implicit in Francis' words. The word comes from Latin *com-* and *fors*, that is, "with strength." Francis talks of asking God to "make the measure of grace equal to the measure of pain," to make her strong enough to bear the pain, rather than asking Him to make the pain disappear – like an athlete who prays not for the exemption from a hard race but for increased strength to finish it.

Similarly, the leper, the next person Giacomo meets, tells him of his experience with Francis. The first of the third and last pair of characters Giacomo meets on his way to Assisi, the leper represents the class of the ultimate pariahs of society. Society has use for harlots as suppliers of temporary pleasure; it has none for lepers, and all ordinary human intercourse is forever denied them. As a young man, the leper had been driven mad by his unrequited lust and by his anger at his cruel fate. He recounts to Giacomo his state of mind at the time:

Ah, Messer, the warm flesh rots, but desire burns on. I was nearly mad. I cursed the spring and this fever of its bloom, and I prayed that it might wither from the earth, and this terrible thirst dry in the bodies of men, and life drop empty in the arms of life. And then I cursed the God who bound all His creatures in this terrible net and put that spot [of leprosy] in my hand that walled me off from all the joy and the rest that lay in the whole, untarnished flesh of my fellows. (97–98)

One day, exhausted from roaming the darkness "like something mad" for two whole nights, the leper had lain down to sleep in the soft spring grass outside the little church, praying that he might never wake up. When he awoke, the first thing he saw was "a thin brown face like the face of some earth creature" looking down at him as if he [the leper]

were “just another creature, too, and perhaps pleasant to rub against” (99). One can only imagine how he must have felt to be offered this fellowship and friendly interest: to be treated like a normal human being! But when the leper begged him to cure him of leprosy, Francis had said that he could not because it was “God’s gift” to him. And he had offered him “the key” to that gift: though men have cast him out, the beauties of nature will not shrink from him and neither will angels and saints, and when his time on earth is done he would be welcomed into God’s house in Paradise. In the meantime, he had said, “this, too, is His house, brother, and He hath dwelt here in the flesh, too, and in the spirit He is all about us” (100). The leper, who is now a very old man, concludes, “Christ is watching His last night, and I will watch a little too” (ibid.).

After Jacomo decides to join the Order of Francis, he learns the story of Father Filippo’s own conversion to the Order after witnessing a Franciscan priest, Angelo of Clareno, convert an unrepentant murder convict in a prison cell. The convict had insisted on his innocence of the crime, and consumed with anger and hatred at the injustice of his fate had violently repelled all attempts at spiritual consolation and the last absolution. While Filippo stood by helplessly Angelo had come, and after acknowledging that the world had done him terrible injustice, had talked to the young man not of repentance and God’s mercy but of the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ:

“The God I am asking you to worship, my brother, is this God, whom the Devil put to death,” and he plucked from a fold of his robe a crucifix, and he held it up so that the condemned man could see it.... “Even as he is putting you to death tomorrow, my brother. And I do verily believe that every time men do a deed like that which they are going to do tomorrow, that the Devil crucifies Christ afresh. It is that God which I ask you to worship. Do you remember the good thief who found himself on Mount Calvary hanging beside Christ, and the promise which Christ made to him? ‘This night you will walk with me in Paradise.’” ... “to you, my brother, He hath given a short struggle and a swift welcome into His kingdom, which is not of this world.” (133)

With these words Angelo had turned the wisdom of the world on its head and turned the shameful death into a shortcut to eternal life. The next morning, Galeotto, the condemned man, had submitted to hanging with calm assurance, with these last words: “I forgive all who have wronged me, as I pray that I may be forgiven” (133). And straightway Filippo had become a follower of St. Francis. We have seen that Giacomo’s journey toward self-surrender began quite by accident. But for the accident of his wife’s death, he would have continued on the path of worldly ambition and self-gratification. At first absorbed in his own pain and isolated by it, he gradually comes to see that other people have suffered, too, and so begins to think of the universal meaning of pain.

In her *Spiritual Biography* of Jacopone Evelyn Underhill says that “we do not know how he came first under the influence” of the Franciscan Order, but that such an influence was prevalent in Todi, and indeed all over Umbria.⁷⁸ White’s depiction of Giacomo’s encounters with the various characters, each with his own story of pain, establishes a psychologically believable process of Giacomo’s conversion. It also shows how those meetings gradually enlarge his sympathy, his heart, which had previously “never stretched beyond the demands of selfish interests and loves,”⁷⁹ and how he is brought in contact with the common humanity through pain. Also, by ignoring chronology of history White makes Giotto’s paintings instrumental in Giacomo’s decision to become a follower of Francis. In fact, the basilica and the pictures were completed only toward the end of Giacomo’s life, and we do not know whether he ever saw them. Similarly, Angelo of Clareno is made a mentor of Giacomo’s, when it was the other way around. St. Bonaventure is Minister General of the Order at the time of Angelo’s imprisonment, but historically he died in 1274, four years before Giacomo joined San

Fortunato. By ignoring correct chronology and bringing together important personages in the history of the Order in the novel, White makes Giacomo's story more dramatic and increases his connection with the first generation Franciscans.

Jacomo's final enlightenment comes to him in the depth of his darkest hours. Locked in the dungeon of the Colonna keep at Palestrina, he has given up even trying to pray, for when he tried it seemed as if "the heavens themselves were walled against his prayers," and sits like a zombie until he feels as if he were "lying dead beneath his misery" (381). Then there comes a day when a band of flagellants comes to the ruined courtyard, and Jacomo climbs and clings to the bars of the one window high in the wall to watch. As Jacomo watches, the people work themselves up into a frenzy of whipping and beating and clawing and tearing of their naked flesh. And he becomes aware of their great banner crudely depicting "a terrible figure, a great giant in the act of hurling flame upon a cowering pygmy," representing "an outraged God smiting the puny creature whom He had made and would now destroy" (387). As the bloody, spent band straggles away, Jacomo "knew that the despair of his own soul was the mood of the world" (387). As one critic has noted, Jacomo's spiritual trials are indeed "illustrative of the 'dark night of the soul.'"⁸⁰

Despite the winter of Jacomo's soul, however, the seasons keep their inexorable pace, and the spring comes again, and with it Easter. The sweet and clear sound of Easter bells reaches him even in the dungeon, and as he prays,

Suddenly, it came to Jacomo that here was the central action of all time, and that as the macrocosm is forever reflected in the microcosm, so the history of the race was reenacted in each human history. He had been dead, and he had risen again. (399)

As he continues his meditations, the whole of his past life passes before him, and he remembers a little wooden sword of his early boyhood, “his most cherished possession of his first years” (401). He had lost it once, the first time “absence had come between him and something he loved,” and had cried himself to sleep night after night, until it was found again. Then his uncle had brought him “a leaden sword with a carved hilt” from Rome, and he had known his wooden sword for what it really was, “a baby’s toy” (402).

So now he looked upon the life that might have been, and he knew that if he could have it now before him to take and this dark winter cave in which he stood alone, excommunicate, he would not hesitate a moment, fair as that other life looked. (402)

Thus with the knowledge gained through his final and greatest loss he comes to understand the meaning of his first loss, and by extension the universal meaning of loss. After many pains Jacomo’s eye is opened to the universal meaning of pain. In the following days his thoughts grow and deepen, until he begins to understand Francis’ disillusionment and failure over the Order he had founded when his ideals were twisted and perverted by his own followers. The converted Jacomo is the kind of brother that would have warmed Francis’ heart, and Jacomo had tried his heart’s blood’s best to live according to Francis’ ideals. Having given his best and having lost utterly, Jacomo is able to truly identify with Francis’ anguish and agony, and by extension also with his surrender of his dearest dream.

And at last Jacomo arrives at “a sense of penetration into the heart of the mystery” after meditating on Christ’s cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (402–403). All through that spring and summer, Jacomo “prayed and prayed, when confession and prayer for forgiveness, and tears and self-reproach and

purpose of amendment and submission to God's unknown will succeeded each other," until one day he stopped for "very weariness" (405). Then,

he had a sudden sense that he was not alone, that he was surrounded by a presence, a companionship, which he could not define or lay hold upon, but which warmed his whole being with a sense of content. (406)

And as he continues in his solitude and silence through the winter, there comes a day when he finds himself thinking of Gaetani, his lifelong enemy, "without hatred or rancor or envy or contempt" (407). Giacomo's spiritual quest is complete, and the pilgrimage of his soul is over. But there is one last encounter with pain left for him, and he goes out of his way to meet it. On being set free from his dungeon, he heads for Assisi, to join Filippo and the other brethren who have "kept their faith with Saint Francis all these years" (413). But learning of an outbreak of the plague in the town of Montefalco, he goes to help, and is asked to preach to the plague victims who have been carried to the town plaza. Looking on the scene of mass, anonymous misery before him, he reflects on Christ's agony in the Garden of Olives, and a yearning comes to him "to lift up the individual pain into its proper context of universal misery" (430). "That pathetic cry of the lonely man and the lonely God, 'Could you not watch with me one hour?,'" he says, "He has asked that question here and now, tonight in the garden of this square":

It is one hour only that He asks you to watch with Him. And as He comes here tonight, he asks you, 'Can you not watch with me one hour?' O my brethren, answer, 'Yes,' to Him, for this night you are watching with your Lord, and tomorrow night you will walk with Him in Paradise. (431-32)

The end of Giacomo's long journey comes with his death. The historical Jacopone died on Christmas Eve of 1306, three years after his release from the Palestrina dungeon, in a convent of the Poor Clares.⁸¹ White keeps the day of Giacomo's death, Christmas Eve, as the fitting birth day of his spirit. But she has him die in a cattle-byre on the way to

Assisi, after a delay caused by his visit to the plague-stricken town. The cattle-byre recalls two precedents: the legend of Francis' birth in a stable behind his family home in Assisi, and the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. And by having Jacomo die of the plague he caught from nursing the other victims, White turns his death into an act of ultimate sacrifice and self-giving. Thus Jacomo, the erstwhile pushy, selfish, and sensuous lawyer who had renounced his home and birthright, every creature comfort and every sensual indulgence, and finally even his freedom, spends his final hours serving and comforting his fellow creatures, and having poured himself out – having watched his last night, as it were – dies *on the way*, as if to emphasize the fact that all of human life is a journey.

CHAPTER 4

NOT BUILT WITH HANDS

It is in law that I am trying to build these troubled years
where in happier times
my predecessors built in marble and in silver and gold.
—Pope Gregory VII to Countess Matilda⁸²

White's second novel, *Not Built with Hands*, is set in the early Middle Ages when Europe was struggling to rise out of barbarism and into civilization. Civilization presupposes law and respect for law, the very memory of which had grown so dim in the eleventh century that it seemed all but lost forever. The two centuries preceding the temporal setting of *Not Built with Hands* – from 850 to 1050 – had suffered from anarchy following upon the breakup of the strong central government of the Carolingian Empire and the devastation caused by invasions and threats of the Saracens from the south, the Magyars (Hungarians) from the east, and the Normans from the north.⁸³ Lay dominion of the Church at all levels, feudal custom, and weak, degenerate papacy all combined to contribute to the moral and political chaos of the time. This lawless violence is amply illustrated by two examples from the religious sphere: the fates of nine of the forty-four popes between 867 and 1048 who “met violent deaths: two by poison, four by murder or execution in prison, one by strangulation, and two under suspicious circumstances”⁸⁴; and the fate of an abbot who tried to reform his monastery but “whose monks cut off his hands and gouged out his eyes rather than submit to stricter discipline.”⁸⁵ But there were

also many reform movements, the chief of which were the Cluniac and the Gregorian reforms, the moral regeneration of the former preparing the way for the political reform of the latter.⁸⁶ Against this backdrop of a battle between barbarism and civilization *Not Built with Hands* tells the story of Matilda Countess of Tuscany (1046–1147), a woman ruler who strove in that brutal world to be true to her deepest convictions and to live up to the ideals of the Christian prince.

White's comments about the temporal setting of *Not Built with Hands* are worth noting. Looking back on her first acquaintance with the period in her freshman year, White reflected that it must have seemed to her "a wild and violent age"; but since then "a good many other colors came into that dark picture of the eleventh century," for "the second half of the eleventh century seems to be one of those times when there comes a sudden freshening in the winds of the spirit, and a new energy awakes in the torpid souls of men. In all its darkness and confusion may be discerned the beginnings of those great efforts of will and imagination to which we owe the creative originality of the twelfth century and the rich flowering of the thirteenth."⁸⁷ Previously I commented on the remarkable consonance of White's medievalism with that of the historian R. W. Southern. The temporal setting of *Not Built with Hands* is 1067–85, when the manifold growth of Europe was gathering momentum. It was during this period that the reform of the papacy begun during Pope Leo IX's rein (1049–54) culminated in the decisive acts of Gregory VII (1073–85). Another important factor was the influence of Cluny – "When men thought of religion, they thought of Cluny"⁸⁸; it attained a harmonious blending of "the traditions of a pagan and a Christian past, the corporate grandeur of the new

monasticism and the simplicity of a monk”⁸⁹ – which also reached its high point during this period.

The story of Matilda of Tuscany, “the Great Countess”⁹⁰ as she was known through Italy and Germany, and her collaboration with Pope Gregory VII, was a subject which excited White’s interest early on. Matilda was, said White, “the sort of woman, and hers the sort of life, that interested me as early as my sophomore year in high school when I first became aware of the suffrage movement”; and her interest in Gregory VII dated at least from her freshman year at Radcliffe.⁹¹ It would be natural for White to have felt particular kinship with this remarkable woman who had lived over 800 years before her own time. They had many qualities in common. Both were women of intellect and lively imagination whose callings entailed entry into spheres of activity dominated by men. Matilda was lord of Tuscany, at the time the mightiest and richest realm in Italy, who was impelled by her state and her conscience to participate in religious and political disputes of her day. She was also highly educated and cultured: she was master of four languages and could write her own letters in Latin when literacy among the laity was rare, and she was a patron of art and learning; she also had good knowledge of jurisprudence, and she was trained in arms.⁹² White was an assistant professor in a state university, when academia was still predominantly male. Each was of a generous and compassionate disposition, and each keenly observed injustice and suffering and worked hard to alleviate them. A former student of White’s saw the parallel and commented: “Like her own Matilda of Tuscany, Helen C. White has given her all for God and country.... As a statesman, an artist, a teacher but especially as a human being, Dr. White presents a picture of devotion to all that is noblest in our American way of living. With her

contagious chuckle helping over some of the ruggedness which we all encounter, she faces the world as it presents itself and searches for the best in lives about her. Through her greatness of mind and her willingness to give of that greatness she is always the gracious and truly great teacher.”⁹³

Inevitably White’s second novel was compared with her first. One reviewer, after giving a favorable opinion overall, added nevertheless that it “lacks the power and clarity” *A Watch in the Night*.⁹⁴ On the whole White’s characterization and her depiction of events were judged favorably. Her characters are “intensely, often boisterously alive,”⁹⁵ and reading her book is “like seeing a crowded medieval tapestry come to life before one’s eyes.”⁹⁶ The author has “caught the spirit of the eleventh century with its heroism and its fears,” while avoiding the sin of strewing archaisms in her dialogue.⁹⁷ White’s choice and treatment of the subject matter was the occasion for the praise of one reviewer, who was refreshed by her transcendence of “the usual fictional preoccupations” of contemporary writers: “Her concern is with philosophical or, if you like, religious significance in the life of man, with the profounder seekings of the human heart. . . . [White’s characters met] their inevitable problems and dealt with them, not as derivatives of an economic cycle nor as outcroppings of sexual disorders, but as signs and warnings on a road that should be leading to God.”⁹⁸ But another reviewer saw in the novel “a feminist interpretation of a contest that is often thought of as essentially masculine, the long struggle between church and state.”⁹⁹ An English critic expressed polite surprise in approved Anglophile fashion that an *American* author had written a novel “rooted so firmly in the Catholic tradition of medieval Europe” and moreover it had been a great success, and asked “why on earth does not Hollywood make use of them.”¹⁰⁰

The portrait of Matilda which White paints is of a very winsome young woman just entering the large world. In Matilda there is something of the freshness and impulsiveness, the youthful generosity and healthy lust for experience, of Dorothea Brook of *Middlemarch* and Isabel Archer of *A Portrait of a Lady*. In fact, it is easy to imagine Dorothea or Isabel reading the story of Matilda with pleasure and interest, and probably also with more than a little envy of the freedom the medieval countess enjoyed. Reviewers responded to Matilda's character with sympathetic interest and admiration. One reviewer, observing Matilda's wholehearted support of the great Pope's efforts, noted that she was the one who "best understood Pope Gregory and sympathized most deeply with his aims."¹⁰¹ Another remarked on the strangeness of Matilda's relative obscurity compared with "her almost contemporary Heloise, to whom the learned Benedictine Dom Luigi Tosti compared her, finding 'a sisterly kinship uniting their two souls in a chivalrous abnegation, by which both aided the birth of modern civilisation.'"¹⁰² This last comment brings us to the problem of civilization which will be the main thread of this chapter discussion.

The Problem of Civilization

The plot of *Not Built with Hands* follows Matilda's young womanhood, from "her first confident pride of youth" (292) to her maturation eighteen years later. Early in the story her encounter with Hildebrand of Soana leads to a fundamental change of philosophy regarding the role of the ruler, and her naïve acceptance of "glory and honor" as the ruler's due gives way to a deep conviction in rule by justice and mercy.

Matilda's encounter with the problem of civilization and its underlying principle of law based on justice is preceded by a very different kind of experience: a heady victory in her first battle on the way to Rome. Now according to Antonia Fraser the victory belonged to Matilda's stepfather, Godfrey of Lorraine,¹⁰³ but White changes it to make young Matilda the hero of the hour. Accordingly, the opening chapter of paints vividly Matilda's natural, innocent pride at her first victory. "The greatest pride of all her twenty-one years," she had lived up to the ideal of the feudal lord when "she had taken the sword, and she had defended her lands and her allies" (4). Further, she had not only defended her allies but also saved Rome, for the Normans she defeated had been headed for an attack on Rome. Arriving to a hero's welcome at Rome, Matilda gives herself to the mood of the glorious tumult with abandon. Thus White makes of Matilda a very attractive heroine who is natural and human enough to give in to the mood of the moment. Also, this sets her up for the contrasting scene that follows.

For Matilda is soon forced to face examples of brutality and cruelty. The most painful is an account of an act of her late father, Count Boniface, whose memory she idolizes. A veteran knight with a fierce and scarred face, intending nothing but praise for the dead man, recounts of the time Boniface had ordered the noses and ears of all the men of a town be cut off. The town's only offense had been that they took the horses of some of his troops for damaging their crop in their fields. Sick to the heart and yet trying to be loyal to her father's memory, Matilda wants to insist that her father was "a great man," yet cannot help wondering that being a great man should be "so pitiless a thing" (34). The next day, Matilda overhears a conversation between a German bishop and Hildebrand. The bishop's position is belligerently simple. "You can't change human nature. Men

fight, they have always fought, they always will fight” (38–9), he says, and “Knights and earls ... will fight, and they will gather gold, and they will burn and kill, and they will whore” (39–40). White’s depiction of these scenes illustrates the reality of the lawless brutality of the age when expressions such as “survival of the fittest” or “might makes right” were no mere theory or slogan but facts of life.

Next comes Matilda’s life-changing talk with Archdeacon Hildebrand, a man of small stature and unprepossessing appearance, but with “a dark, haggard face with piercing glance from under heavy brows, a face raked to the bone with thought and will” (31). This scene, which follows immediately on the heated debate mentioned above, marks a definitive turning point in young Matilda’s life, so is worth quoting at length. To Hildebrand’s observation that power and strength are naturally “[b]lind and brutal” (45), Matilda, still trying to stay loyal to her father and to her class, tries to defend rule by force by saying, “But, father, God has given the lord the rule, and the brave man the glory” (45). And Hildebrand counters,

“My lady Matilda, was it of God this mutilation [the cutting of noses]?”

She winced, but his eyes held hers.

She tried to speak, and she could not.

“Is it of God all this war we see? All this burning and killing and pillaging?” He had risen to his feet, and he flung his arms wide as he spoke. “He is greatest who burns and kills the most. He is mightiest who tramples down the weak most ruthlessly. He who knows no conscience and no pity, he is the most glorious. They blow bravely in the wind these lords’ standards, but they are dyed in blood and made fast in tears. They walk proudly, these lords, but their robes are stiff with the mud into which they have ground their betters.”

Every muscle frozen in horror, Matilda watched the little man stride back and forth, his dark face blazing with indignation.

“And then they say God has given this. Nay, it is the Devil himself has given his charter to the princes of this world, and it is they who do his work. Work,” his voice rose, “that the fiends in hell for very pity would refuse to touch. Power and glory! I think, Matilda, that God himself on His throne in heaven must shudder to hear those words!”

And then something snapped within Matilda's breast, and she was shaking in great, fierce sobs.

When the first storm was a little spent, she dried her eyes and looked up to find Hildebrand gazing down upon her, all the wrath gone from his face, and all its fierce darkness lightened by a look of wonder.

"Do you understand this?" he asked incredulously.

And then he took hold of her arm and looked into her face.

"Perhaps it is because you are a woman and not a man," he said thoughtfully.

.....
"Listen, Matilda. Do you remember how the Gospel of John opens?"

"In the beginning was the Word," she began obediently.

"Yes, but you remember what comes a little after? 'And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.'" He looked at her as if he expected her to see it all now. But she was puzzled.

"It is dark," he said. "Never since the world began, I think, was it darker, so far as this world is concerned. But there is this light, this light of the Word of God, shining in the darkness."

She nodded. "You mean this Peace that the abbot [Hugh of Cluny] was speaking of?"

For the first time in the last half hour, he smiled.

"That is one thing, but there are others." He stretched out his hand to her.

"There is all the law of God. If we could make men hearken to that law, if we could bring them to see it only, then verily I think the light would shine in the darkness, and every man be lightened."

"But how shall we see this light?" she asked, carried along but not quite entirely possessed by his enthusiasm.

"It is the Church," he answered. "That is the lantern which holds this light and lifts it up so that men may see."

"The Church!" she repeated thoughtfully to herself.

"To bring order into chaos, to make light shine in the darkness."

"And the prince?" she challenged him.

"He is a Christian, too. His power is of God—Not to satisfy his own whim, his own greed, his own vanity, but to keep the law of God and to defend it."

"Ideally," she agreed, "but in this world?"

"Even in this world, Matilda. If only I could make you see. One just prince!"

"I am only one, and a woman." The self-mockery fell bitterly on her ear, and she was ashamed even as she spoke.

He rose. For a moment he stood there with his hands folded against his black dress. Then he bowed to her, and before she could say anything, he had left her. She heard the door close, and then she laid her head in her arms and wept without any restraint of pride or conscience. (45-47)

Henceforth Matilda's concept of the prince will be as the keeper of the peace and the protector of the poor and the powerless, rather than as the pursuer of power and glory and honor. And this woman of splendid endowments and great heart who might have become a kind of Italian Queen of the Amazons becomes instead a chivalrous and humane prince. Incidentally, this transformation of Matilda's may be compared with that of Coriolanus in Shakespeare's play. Hildebrand's bitter words "He is greatest who burns and kills the most" describes perfectly the Coriolanus throughout most of the play, who is called a "god" and even a "thing / Made by some other deity than Nature."¹⁰⁴ When, however, at the importunate entreaty of his mother he agrees to spare Rome and seals his own doom a short while later, the failed epic hero is transformed into a tragic hero.

More than any of the other novels of White's, *Not Built with Hands* treats of high abstractions such as power and justice. A balancing measure of the concrete and the personal was called for, and White provides it in the form of children and peasants. The stories of the suffering of innocent children and peasants interwoven with Matilda's own serve to enlarge her already compassionate heart and increase her resolve to promote justice. The children and peasants who are the most significant are: Matilda's son who dies in infancy, her brother who had died in childhood, a peasant woman and her dead children, Henry and Bertha's infant son, and the idiot boy and his adopted mother.

First, we consider Matilda's only child, a son, who dies at about six months' end, and her brother who had died as a boy in prison. After Matilda's father was murdered, Beatrice had married Godfrey of Lorraine, who was an enemy of King Henry III of Germany. Henry, frustrated and angered that he couldn't gain control of Boniface's vast lands, had kidnapped and imprisoned Beatrice and her children, while Godfrey went into

hiding. After Matilda's son is born, her mother talks to her of this brother who had died long ago in prison, and her decision that came of it: "It was then when your brother died ... that I decided that I would do everything I could to strengthen the hand of the Church. There are bad and cruel bishops, and there have been bad popes, but that is the work of men. The pattern which they botch in their deeds is good. That is of God" (110). In this scene White makes a typically skillful use of a private family occasion to provide a warm human scene while at the same time connecting it with the political philosophy and state decision of both mother and daughter. It is natural enough that the occasion of Matilda's childbirth should draw her and her mother in a special feminine bond. It is also natural that the occasion should remind Beatrice of *her* son who had languished and died in prison because of an unjust ruler. And yet these natural affections and the homely picture are also the basis of the women's resolve to support the Church. In their dual roles as mother and governor, Matilda and Beatrice learn from painful experience that something as basic as the right to rear one's children is intimately related to matters of state.

After Matilda's infant son dies of a fever while she was away on an errand of mercy, she suffers from a sense of guilt and failure. Her rough, chauvinistic husband offers no help and, in the end, release and comfort come from an unexpected source. While Matilda stands feeling forlorn in the chapel where the little boy's body has been laid, a peasant woman comes in with a bouquet of wild flowers:

She knelt down awkwardly as she pressed the flowers into Matilda's hand. Some of the damp earth still clung about their roots, but they seemed to fill the whole chapel with their fresh fragrance. In the light their flush of pink seemed a warm and living thing. It was with a sense of comfort that she laid them in the midst of the pale and scentless snowdrops.

"Do not grieve, my lady," said the woman, her eyes shining with tears and pride. "You will have other sons."

"You have lost, too?" Matilda asked, incredulously.

“Three blessed angels,” said the old woman. “Ah, my lady, it is as hard to get the children through the winter as the cattle. It is a deal of labor to go in a night.” And the old woman put her arm about the waist of her lady timidly. But Matilda laid her head on her shoulder and wept without restraint. She had not thought how many dead children there would be in those great fields of heaven. (145–46)

Thus the loss of her son opens her eyes to the realization that other women have lost their children, too, and have grieved and sorrowed. Like Jacomo whose loss opens his eyes to the suffering of those around him, so Matilda’s loss brings her in touch with her common humanity with this peasant woman who has lost “three blessed angels.” Still, it takes Matilda a long time to become reconciled to the loss of her only child. Even as her fame as the Great Countess spreads, she struggles with her pain and emptiness. It is only much later, during a state conference, that Matilda realizes that, having no children to carry on her house, and thus freed from any selfish considerations, she is able to devote all her energies to the ideals of justice and peace: “for the first time the full significance of the death of her son came over Matilda, and for the first time her grief found a moment’s assuagement” (199).

Henry and Gregory at Canossa is one of the great and famous scenes in history. But the part of that story that concerns us here is the fact that he has brought his wife and infant son with him, as additional leverage in a desperate and bold political gamble to force the Pope’s hand and have his excommunication lifted. The historical Henry was unaccompanied by his wife and son at the meeting with Matilda.¹⁰⁵ But White makes Henry bring them with him, and seeing the suffering of Bertha and her little child touches Matilda’s heart on a very human level. At any rate, Henry and Bertha entreat Matilda’s intercession with the Pope, and she accedes, moved with pity at Bertha’s suffering and her steady love for Henry who has not been a good husband to her.

The following exchange where Gregory tells her the reason for his firmness is worth noting. In their first talk at the beginning of the novel Gregory (then Archbishop Hildebrand) had talked to her of the need for “one just prince.” Now, many long years later, his first theme is still justice, and why justice must be upheld even if it appears a hard-hearted thing to do. For the Pope is well aware that even many of his supporters think that he has gone too far.¹⁰⁶

And the Pope smiled. “It is like a woman, Matilda, to think so hard of the one human being whose misery she sees that she forgets all about the millions who are not there before her eyes. Of course, the Queen and her son are a pitiful sight to move the hardest heart, but how about all those other women and those other children who will have cause enough to weep and worse if Henry goes on as he has been doing? It is they who are in my eyes tonight, Matilda, when you describe this one wretched woman out of all the world’s misery.”

“But those others we can’t see tonight, and we can’t do anything for them, but this one is on our very threshold –” she stopped in despair.

“God bless you, Matilda, for your pity, but remember this – that charity is not only pitifulness. It is a good thing and a beautiful to comfort and relieve wretchedness, but it is a better, if you can, to prevent it. That is why justice is an older command than mercy. Law is not as winsome as charity, my child, but its good is wider and more lasting.” (332–33)

At Matilda’s persistent entreaty the Pope finally relents and lifts the ban on Henry. Nora Duff in her biography of Matilda says, “What arguments she used we do not know.”¹⁰⁷ White’s rendering of Matilda’s “arguments” is both plausible and profoundly simple. Matilda has already seen the Pope’s displeasure at her importunity and he has steadfastly refused to see Henry, but she resolves to talk to him one more time. When Gregory asks why he should see Henry, “clear out of the confusion as if from quite outside herself came her answer, ‘Because, my lord, he is a penitent come to ask pardon of a priest’” (352). And this basic reason persuades Gregory.

The last example of children and peasants we consider is the old woman and her idiot boy at Fontara, the last and the ablest of Matilda’s rebellious vassals. When the

besieged lord of Fontara orders all useless mouths to be put outside the castle gates, an old woman fights ferociously to save her boy. Fascinated by her pluck, Matilda watches the scene and when the woman clutching the boy makes a mad dash across to her side, she receives them into safety:

As the woman staggered into her arms, Matilda heard an arrow sing over her head. Another followed, and her arm stung. Then she was dragged, still clutching the woman and her burden back to safety.

"A fine mess," said Arduino. Matilda let go of her clutch, and the woman sank to her knees in the snow and took the sodden hem of her robe in her hands. Above her, Matilda saw the melee of soldiers hurling themselves like something insane against the gates of the castle.

"They went crazy when they saw that arrow strike you. Now they'll kill themselves there like a pack of idiots. And look—" He pointed to the rescued boy who sat in the snow, in spite of his obvious seven or eight years, gurgling like an infant in arms.

"An idiot!" he hissed with contempt and turned from the sight.

But the woman clutched the boy to her breast, her torn gray hair falling over his head, sobbing and crying, "He is all I have in the world, all, my darling," and the idiot, though purple from the cold, crowed with delight. (489–90)

Then Matilda learns that the boy is not the old woman's grandson but an orphan whom she adopted after she lost all her family. Precisely the fact that the woman and the boy could not be of any possible use to Matilda or to anybody else makes their rescue all the more significant. For civilization based on justice and mercy should mean that *everybody*, even useless old women and idiots, should have the right to life and liberty. This notion may seem self-evident to us moderns today, but that is because there have been Matilda and others like her who fought for the principle.

When at long last Matilda succeeds in restoring order in her lands, the first thing she does is raise an army to go to Salerno to escort the Pope back to Rome. As she set out with a goodly army behind her, "the cup of her exuberance was full, and for the first times in years she laughed with the wantonness of sheer delight" (494). But the next day

Anselm of Lucca¹⁰⁸ meets her with the news of the Pope's death, and gives her this famous account of his death-scene:

“Only one cry escaped from his lips, and that was just before he died.... He had received the Viaticum. Then he looked at us all, and he cried out with his old passion and something of the old flash in his eyes, ‘I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile.’”

Something of the passion of the original voice entered unconsciously into the low voice of Anselm of Lucca, and the cry of the dying Gregory rang on the night. (497)

The next few days wear an air of unreality for Matilda. When she realizes that life must go on and there is work to be done, she “understood that it was all to do over again, and now there was no reason for doing it” (501).

However, subjects of her realm continue to come to her with various petitions and supplications, to which she must respond. One of them is young Irnerius, who eagerly presents his plans to set up a new school to teach the long-forgotten Justinian law. Moved in spite of her apathy by his youthful enthusiasm and high ideals, Matilda (having nothing else) gives him a brooch that holds her mantle to start his school with. It is interesting to note White's portrayal of the scene. According to Duff's brief account, the historical Matilda “employed a certain scholar, Irnerius ... to collect and rearrange the well-nigh forgotten code of Justinian, and did all in her power to promote and encourage the revival of the study of the Roman law.”¹⁰⁹ But the background information Duff gives of the state of jurisprudence of the time helps us see why it was so necessary to study the universal law. Until that time “there had been much confusion in Italy regarding the practice of the law, since the various barbarian conquerors had brought with them their own laws, and in many parts of the country the old Roman code was well-nigh

forgotten.”¹¹⁰ Before there could be lasting order and peace there had to be a universal standard in law.

The scene of Matilda and Irnerius recalls that of young Matilda and Hildebrand at the beginning of the novel, and the two scenes frame the novel. In the first scene Matilda had learned from Hildebrand the ideal of “one just prince” and the role of the Church in upholding standards of justice and mercy. In this second scene Matilda becomes mentor and protector to young Irnerius who proposes to work for the same end that she and Hildebrand have striven for. What Matilda and Gregory had tried to do as rulers and leaders, Irnerius proposes to do as a legal scholar and teacher. As he “plunged headlong into his appeal,”

For a moment, Matilda was astonished to hear the young rhetoric student inveighing against the turmoil and lawlessness of the age. But she was still more surprised when she realized that this young man was not repeating what he had heard from all the Jeremiahs of the day but was speaking from his own heart the conclusions of his own thought. (504–505)

And to Matilda’s question “how shall we win that order that we all crave?” Irnerius

launched on a glowing exposition of his remedy for the world’s woes that first amazed and then caught the sympathy of his hearer. There was more than a touch of youthful absurdity in the conviction that all the world needed to heal its manifold griefs was a revival of the study of the Roman law. There was nothing new in the idea, either, Matilda reflected. When she was a girl she had heard the Archdeacon Hildebrand expatiate on the beauties of the Roman law to the Empress Agnes and her mother. And every thoughtful and learned man she knew had looked back enviously to those days when the law of Rome had ordered with reason and social interest the passions and the appetites of men. But this young man was not content to look back wistfully, or to yearn for a revival of that ancient order. He was sure that he can do something to bring it about, and he had a plan for doing it.... He would like to start lecturing on the Pandects in the city of Bologna. If he could find a patron to protect him and to support him, he was sure that he would get students. And beginning there – “My lady, it is like throwing a stone into a pool. There is no telling how far the ripples may spread!” (505)

White's novel ends shortly after this scene, but Irnerius does go on to establish the most influential school of law at Bologna: "the great impulse which juridical studies received at Bologna ..., and from there began to spread throughout Europe, was entirely due to the school of Irnerius."¹¹¹

As with the time after her son's death, in the end it is the commonest of sights that brings her comfort and hope. As she rides back to Canossa near the end of day she observes peasants working busily in the fields, "hunched brown figures" looking as if they had "come out of the very earth itself" (511–12). As she reflects on their humble, unregarded lives, "to the sad woman ... who had seen so many hopes perish and such heroic energies fail, there seemed something invincible in their very anonymity" (512). And at the sight of the peasants kneeling down to pray at the sound of the bells of Evensong ringing out from Canossa, Matilda's thought turns to a meditation on the Incarnation.

Yet it was to the least of His children that the Lord of the world had come, putting on their flesh and the vesture of their lives. And it was to the common things of their unremembered days that He had entrusted His most precious gifts – bread from their fields and their making, wine pressed out of the grapes they had gathered. Plowing to an unknown harvest, sowing where they should not reap, not understanding but yielding out of a patience and a persistence beyond wisdom – of the commonplaces of the lives of humble men He had fashioned this life which He had shared. (512–13)

The practical application of this mystery of the Incarnation would seem to be the view that popes and princes exist so that "the commonplaces of the lives of humble men" may go on. Matilda realizes that though her lord and mentor the Pope be dead, his vision lives in the lives of the least of God's children.

CHAPTER 5

DUST ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY

We have failed because we have not understood.
—Father Garcés in his last dispatch to Querétaro¹¹²

The temporal setting of White's fourth novel is nearly contemporaneous with her previous one, *To the End of the World*, but its geographical setting is the New World, in what is present-day American Southwest, mostly southern Arizona. *Dust on the King's Highway* depicts the last ten years of the life of Franciscan missionary Father Francisco Garcés (1733–81). In the background of Garcés's story there was being waged a fierce competition for the control of the Pacific Northwest. The territory was nominally Spanish, but its claim was being pressed from the north by Russia and from the east by Britain and France. In an effort to secure this vulnerable colony King Carlos II of Spain had ordered stepped-up establishment of missions and settlements. Considering the formidable difficulties in travel by sea or land and the thinly-stretched resources of Spain, her missionaries and colonists were making truly heroic efforts, of which group Garcés was one.

Garcés seems to have been one of those rare men who are truly liked by everyone. A translator of Garcés's diary of his monumental 1775–76 travel calls him "one of the most attractive and respectable figures in all the early history of the Southwest."¹¹³ A native of Aragon, Garcés was ordained a priest in Spain, trained as a missionary in a seminary at

Querétaro, Mexico, and sent to the frontier mission of San Xavier del Bac, then “on the very edge of hostile Indian country.”¹¹⁴ Garcés was a “hardy, generous, essentially warmhearted man” who had a “direct and friendly” way with Indians and who was “on the best of terms” with his fellow priest; he even “got along well enough with the Spanish military”; he had “a sharp and knowing eye” as an observer of Indians and contributed to modern ethnology as well as contemporary Spanish knowledge of Indians.¹¹⁵ A devoted priest and enthusiastic frontiersman, he was “beaten to death on July 19, 1781, when hostile Indians fell upon two small mission-posts on the lower Colorado River and killed all four of the missionary priests there.”¹¹⁶

The idea for *Dust on the King's Highway* was conceived during White's 1939 stay in California on a Huntington fellowship. She had originally set out to write about another missionary (probably Diaz, the scholarly and history-minded fellow priest of Garcés who is also killed at the end), and had learned about Garcés in the course of her research. Now Garcés, essentially a simple man with little interest in history or art or learning, was not the sort of character that ordinarily appealed to White's imagination. Nevertheless, his “knack of feeling with the Indians, and of sympathizing with their plight” captured her fascination, and, having been encouraged by her editor at Macmillan, she “stuck to that story, weaving in and out other strands of the missionary picture.”¹¹⁷ So the story of Garcés was a story which she could not but choose to tell. Incidentally, Father Garcés continues to engage the interest of modern Americans, because of his contribution as a frontiersman and explorer.¹¹⁸

This novel was given the least favorable reception of all four of White's novels thus far. The most frequent complaint was its slow action. The terms employed by reviewers

ranged from the polite “scholarly completeness”¹¹⁹ to more explicit “far too slow”¹²⁰ and even “tedious.” They felt that especially the first two-thirds of the book suffered from not enough action and repetitiousness of minute details of Garcés’ day-to-day life and travels. The fact that the novel’s protagonist is a Catholic missionary invited comparison with Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,¹²¹ usually to the detriment of White’s story. One reviewer cited White’s “reverence and her scholarliness,” but felt that White aimed to “glorify” Catholicism, and she was not selective enough of the events.¹²² Fellow Wisconsin novelist (and former student) August Derleth called it “a fictionized version of a portion of American history, told with unquestioning fidelity to subject and setting, but told colorfully and dramatically.” While admitting that action was subordinated to Garcés’ spiritual journey and the story moves slowly, he maintained that the deliberate pace was necessary.¹²³ The character of Garcés received favorable notice, as a representative of “Spanish American culture at its best”¹²⁴ and “a convincing portrayal of a great missionary and explorer.”¹²⁵

As with White’s previous novels, the story of Garcés has a personal level and a social. On the personal level it is the story of the pilgrimage of Garcés’ soul. On the social level it is the story of the problem of communication, the most obvious aspect of which is the language barrier between Spaniard and Indian. But there are other, more subtle barriers which are more difficult to overcome: the different ways of understanding and responding to the world around one which grow out of entirely different ways of living and thinking, the consequently different expectations, and finally misunderstanding even among people who speak the same language and share the same culture, as a result of prejudice, ignorance, or blindness. Throughout the novel Garcés’ encounters with

these and other barriers to human understanding and sympathy are nearly constant, rather like the ubiquitous dust of the desert. But there comes a particular moment of knowledge and self-knowledge to Garcés when the personal and the social levels of the story distinctly intersect. The moment of truth is brought about as a consequence of his reflection on his greatest failure to communicate. At the farthest reach of his 1775–76 exploration he had reached a distant Hopi tribe, the Moqui of Oraibe (located in present-day Colorado). There, for the first time in his missionary career, he had been utterly rejected and repulsed by the Indians. And “for the first time, he saw that to understand the present enough to do anything with it, one must know something of this past that so brooded over it” (263). So he begins to read about the history of the conquest of New Spain and learns of the unfortunate pattern of history: prior Spanish efforts to Christianize the Indians and to establish settlements had been fatally flawed because of ignorance and misunderstanding, and had ended in a cycle of bloody revolt and revenge. This new historical awareness enables him to foresee the tragic end to which the present course of events must lead, and the foresight brings him the wisdom to prepare for it.

The Problem of Communication

The initial problem of communication Garcés encounters in his missionary career is that of language barrier. At the story’s beginning he has been living among the Pimas for three years, and has sufficient command of colloquial Pima. Still, he does not have mastery of the language, and when he tries to explain religious ideas, he must often settle for approximations. The first such instance occurs when he tries to assure an old Papago who is very disappointed that Garcés did not bring his banner of the Virgin and Child. It

is “the brightly painted linen banner ... with the picture of the Virgin and Child on one side and the picture of a lost soul on the other” which Garcés had made as “the readiest way to introduce his message to the primitive mind” (21). His Papago vocabulary having been exhausted, he talks with the old man through an interpreter. When Garcés promises to bring the banner when he comes again, the interpreter says, “He says he is very old, and he may die before you come, and then who shall teach his grandson the magic, for his sons are dead?” (21). The friar begins to reply,

“Tell him if he is dead, I will teach his grandson—“ Garcés groped for the Pima word for “truth” and came up again at the blank wall of the language that so far he had mastered only in the words of everyday intercourse.

But he had heard too much in the last days of the word “magic” to risk any misunderstanding he could help; so he revised his sentence, “Tell him that I shall teach him the things that are good for him to know.” (21)

More problematic perhaps, even words of equivalent meaning turn out to have important differences, as determined by different ways of life. For Papagos, the words “good” and “bad” are synonymous with lists of friendly and enemy tribes, respectively:

“Who are the good?” asked Garcés quietly.

The laugh was more general as the medicine man answered, “Any woman-child knows that. The good are the Pápagos and Pimas, and the Pimas of the Gila, and some of the Yumas.”

There was silence, as if the inclusion of the last name were not so certain.

“And the bad?” said Garcés. He did not recognize all the names which the medicine man hissed forth, but there was no mistaking the main fact that this was the roster of their enemies, and he noted that it was much longer than the list of their friends. (24)

The weight of the burden that the constant, conscious effort such groping meetings of vastly different minds placed on Garcés is revealed in a passage describing his relief at being able to converse freely in Spanish with similar minds. He has been speaking with his fellow Franciscans, and despite the fact that they have been talking about the frustrations of being subject to bureaucratic red tape, “Nevertheless, it was a comfort to

talk in one's own language with a man who knew the sense in which one used such a word. It was pleasant to bring out the abstractions again, and to be able to imply, and to suggest, and to smile a little over one's anxieties" (318).

Closely related to language barrier is the problem of understanding the cultural assumptions that lie behind language, a more difficult problem because it is more diffused and therefore harder to identify, let alone solve. One particularly recurring instance concerns the Indian word for "magic." Various Indians, and notably Palma, refer to the doctrine of the Gospel and Catholic liturgy as "magic." We have already encountered Garcés' chariness over the word. As Garcés says Mass one morning for Anza's first expedition, he notices Palma standing on the outskirts keenly following all his movements. After the Mass is over, Garcés asks him, "What do you think of the Spaniards' worship, Palma?," and the latter replies gravely, "It is good magic" (89). Garcés is interrupted before he could do anything to correct "the dangerous impression" (89), and this is a problem that is never resolved in the story. When later in the story Anza says to Garcés in the course of their conversation, "You know more about that part of it [Indian way of thinking] than anybody else" (270), the latter is disturbed, and lies awake thinking about it: "It was the sudden realization that he was supposed to know more than most men about the thoughts that flickered in those dark eyes and the feelings that beat behind the mask of those calm brown faces. For if in a crisis men should look to him for that understanding, and there should be no better understanding than his, then where would they all be?" (271) But when the crisis comes he finds with great surprise that he does see clearly what he ought to do and say.

Although apparently as unsolvable as the mystery of the human mind, the problems that cause so many conflicts and frustrations on all sides are of more definite kinds. They are the problems of misunderstanding caused by political, philosophical, and racial differences or prejudices. As much as Garcés and Anza like and respect each other, their basic loyalties and goals diverge, as shown in the following exchange, which takes place as Anza is making plans for a settlement expedition to Monterey.

“Your Father Serra is a very wonderful person,” he unbosomed himself to the friars in his tent that night after supper, “but those missions of his will never secure the country for his Majesty.”

“That is not their primary purpose, you know,” Diaz, who had come with Anza, objected gently. “They are first of all to convert the Indian and make him a good Christian, and so a good subject.”

“Of course,” Anza hastened to agree. “You don’t need to argue that with me. But when the Indian is made a good Christian and a good subject, he must have a Christian community to go into. He can’t live all his life in that school at San Gabriel or San Luis Obispo. You don’t keep grown men in schools, at least not married men with families.”

Garcés hesitated, “Of course, ultimately. But Father Serra says that it will be a long time before the Indian is ready to go into a colony of Spaniards and hold his own.”

Anza frowned. “I don’t know what you mean by ‘holding his own.’ He won’t be the priest or the commander, true, but there will be things he can do in his own sphere, within the limits of his capacities. It takes all sorts of men to make any community. You need hewers of wood and drawers of water, if anybody is to do anything else....” (157)

For Anza, a military and political leader and as such a servant primarily of the king, the ultimate goal is to “secure the country for his Majesty,” and the welfare of the king’s Indian subjects is of secondary consideration. To be fair to Anza and other Spanish soldiers, theirs was no ordinary work of colonization but a desperate struggle to establish and hold permanent Spanish presence in virgin territory peopled only sparsely by primitive Indians of no settled lifestyle and no civilization to speak of.

Anza's words also show his assumption that the Indians will naturally occupy lower rungs of the ladder in an integrated society, doing simple manual labor for their Spanish neighbors. When the settlement expedition is finally on the way, Garcés and Anza talk on the same theme again. Garcés has asked, "Will the Indians find their place in that colony?" (183), and Anza assures him that the men will need all the Indian laborers they can get for farming and cattle-breeding, and the women are looking forward to having Indian maids. And when Garcés pursues, "But will the Indians want to do it?," Anza cannot see why not. Garcés tries to give an analogy:

"Look at this party," he said. "Back there in those towns in Sonora, if you had looked at those people there, would you have guessed that they would think of owning land and raising flocks and the rest of it? They seemed born to be underlings to their masters, and now they are thinking of being masters."

Anza gazed in astonishment at his friend. "But the Indians—sure they are not thinking of being anybody's master?"

The friar smiled, "I don't think they are, but I don't think they are thinking of being anybody's servant, either." (183)

This disparity of expectations is another barrier that is never resolved. Moreover, other commanders are even less enlightened than Anza. For example, Captain Rivera, commander of the presidio of San Diego, explodes when Garcés argues for humane treatment of Indians based on recognized standard. Rivera cries, "I have had all I want to hear about the natural rights of these sub-human savages" (222). Sadly, for every Anza there are many Riveras, and most of the civilians are not much better than Rivera.

During Mass on Ash Wednesday of his last year, Garcés notices that the Spaniards monopolize the front of the church and the Indians are in the back. Then, as the congregation moves forward to receive the ashes on their foreheads and the Indians come last, he notices that "some of the settlers' wives pulled their children toward them so that the Indians would not brush against them" (368). Shocked and perturbed by what he has

seen, Garcés preaches a sermon about the common humanity of all men, basing it on the biblical text “Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?”¹²⁶ (368). Many people of the pueblo thank him for the sermon, but it is Doña Francisca Manuela, the commander’s wife, who cuts to the heart of the matter. For she asks, “Father Garcés, do you really think the Indians are as good as we are?” (369). But such glimmer of understanding comes too late to avert the disaster. And even such limited and unsatisfactory intercourse comes to an end, for the Yumas decide they’ve had enough of the short end of the stick and build a church of their own.

Ultimately, however, it is the dispute over land which forces the final outcome. This is the kind of conflict that was foreseen by the friars when they protested against the three-in-one settlement plan. (The historian Hubert Howe Bancroft calls this “new system,” as it was called, “a criminally stupid blunder,” and notes that on being told of it “friars and officials qualified to judge in the matter protested against the system as suicidal.”¹²⁷) When Yslas, commander of the presidio, divides up the Yuma lands with most of the fertile bottom lands going to the Spaniards, Garcés objects that the land belongs to the Indians. Yslas reminds him that all the land of the area was legally granted to the pueblo at its founding. When Garcés pleads with him to at least talk it over with Palma, Yslas refuses curtly. At the conclusion of their fruitless conference,

The friar rose and stood before the soldier, “There are more than three thousand souls in the Yuma villages, and of them at least four or five hundred must be seasoned fighting men.”

“Are you threatening me?” shouted the commander.

“No, I am only reminding you of the judgment of God if you do this great injustice.” Even as he said it, the friar was astonished himself at the clearness with which he now saw it all. (363)

Soon enough, there are cries of anger and outrage on the part of the Indians whose lands have been planted over by Spaniards, and violence is only narrowly averted through Garcés' intervention. The Spaniards find it hard to understand that the Indian owns his land even if there are no visible boundary marks around his land and even if his way of farming is poking holes in the mud and dropping seeds into them as the planter walks about in a leisurely manner. When one Spaniard offers to buy an Indian's land,

The friar shook his head. "He doesn't own it in that sense. The whole village owns it, but it is his to plant and to tend, and he takes the crop for the use of his family. He couldn't sell it if he wanted to, but no man can take it from him so long as he takes care of it."

A cunning look came into the face of Gabriel Tebaca. "Well, he doesn't plant it and take care of it this year, for I have done that already. So the crop goes to me according to his own law."

"No," said the friar. "Only the heads of his tribe can take the use of the land from him, and they haven't done it yet. Don't you see," the friar pleaded, "he has simply been robbed of his right." (377-78)

As the situation goes from bad to worse, Yslas does finally talk with Palma, but predictably nothing comes of it. When Yslas complains of Palma's lack of understanding, Garcés says, "It is not easy for men of two races to understand each other when they know nothing of each other's way of life and of thought" (392). As they discuss the ascendancy of Palma's political rival, Pablo, Yslas assumes that that makes Pablo a rebel:

"But Palma is their leader, born that way, or however they get to be chief. Colonel Anza told me that he had expressly asked the Yumas if they recognized Palma for their ruler, and he said they did without opposition."

"That is the trouble," said the friar sadly. "That is always the trouble," he added. "When we talk, what we say means one thing to the Indians and another to us. Palma is the chief of the Yumas because he is the man among them who gives the rest of them the sense of having the most power in himself.... But if somebody else can persuade the Yumas that he is more powerful and more successful than Palma, then I am not at all sure that Palma will stay chief." (393-94)

On the eve of the massacre, Garcés writes his last dispatch to his superiors in Mexico City. He has barely a half-hour before the courier leaves, and as he ponders on what to say,

A sentence from a prayer of Saint Francis came into his mind. "My Lord, grant that I may not be anxious to be understood but only to understand." That was what he wanted to say. He wanted to get some word of this experience back to his brethren in Querétaro. So he began to write, "We have failed. It is not because we have not tried. It is because we have not understood." That was so clear that it seemed foolish to have written it. He considered beginning over again, but he knew that his time was running out. So he took a firm grip on his pen and began a new paragraph. "There is one thing that we ask now. It is this. There will be talk of punishing the guilty. It is very hard to find the guilty in such an affair as this. The innocent and the ignorant and the helpless will suffer, too, and that will breed hate and a desire for revenge, and the cycle will begin all over again. Only forgiveness will cut the evil round, and make it possible to begin again." (421)

After the first attack in which many of the Spanish men are killed, Garcés turns now to address the Indian side of the conflict, and gives Teresa a message for Palma:

"... I do not want the Spaniards to come and burn the Yuma villages and kill the Yumas. It will not bring José and the other back. Tell Palma and his men that if they keep the women and the children unharmed, and when the expedition comes, return them safely, I do not think the Spaniards will do anything more. Tell them that living or dead, I will pray God for that. But tell them that if they hurt the women and children, then I cannot answer for what will happen...." (437)

The next morning Garcés finds a cross made of broken arrows on the fresh grave of José, Teresa's husband, and correctly interprets its meaning as Palma's positive answer to his message. And after Mass that day, Garcés gives his last sermon. He begins with a reminder that as Christians they ought to know that their great grief is "the gate to a great joy" (450). After assuring them that the dead are in God's hand, he goes on to instruct them about the coming trial. They would probably be captured and made slaves to Indians, but "in their thoughts and in their prayers they would be free. Their experience

would be a great opportunity for their faith to show itself" (450). In conclusion, after assuring them that they would be rescued, he concludes his sermon with a reminder that "of all the forms of Christian worship none was more acceptable to God than the cheerful acceptance of His will because it was His will" (450–51).

In the second attack, the Indians burn the church and take the women and the children. Yuma friends of Garcés almost succeed in saving the lives of Garcés and a young fellow priest, but a harmless movement by the latter triggers a fit of violence on the part of some out-of-control warriors, and they are beaten to death:

And though he [Garcés] could not see anything but the gleaming clubs distinctly, his head was perfectly clear. Only he was having difficulty remembering something. He was in the middle of a very important rite, and he could not remember the proper words. "Father, forgive them," no, that was what Christ had said on the cross. That was nothing for a sinner to say of his fellow sinners. "Lord, forgive us, for we know not what we do." What was better, but it still did not sound as if he had the words right.

Again, he heard the clubs whistle through the air, and, again, the sea of flame burst over his body and rose above his head. And in a mighty agony the spirit thrashed that it might not be completely engulfed in the body's foundering. And then above the pain there shot up like a hand above a sinking head, a sharp spear of consciousness, and he cried out, "My Lord!" and then he knew with a great clarity that this time the words did not matter. For He would understand. (464–5)

After again and again dashing his heart against the many walls of misunderstanding and miscommunication of the world, Garcés knows in that last flash of consciousness that he is now passing into a realm of perfect understanding and love. Also, he does succeed in his last earthly attempts at communication. For Palma does keep safe the women and children, and there is no Spanish revenge on the Indians.

It is only fair to point out that there are a few instances of successful communication or unity in *Dust on the King's Highway*. The chief among them would have to be a description of the typical roadside Mass said for the Monterey settlement expedition. The

twenty families that make up the expedition have come from diverse places and backgrounds and are strangers to one another. Garcés' first impression of the group upon his arrival at the town square of Caborca, the jump-off point of the expedition, was of "a cross between a fiesta and the day after an Indian raid":

The whole square was filled with packs and bags and boxes of luggage scattered, quite without design, across its gray cobblestones. And over this luggage sprawled and straddled and stretched and climbed the most varied assortment of humanity of all ages that the Franciscan had ever beheld. Men sat smoking and staring doggedly into the dust of the cobblestones between their outstretched legs, women sat fanning themselves, their quick eyes following every move in the thronging square, little boys chased each other over and around the piled-up luggage, and little girls, their small brown fists clutching tiny skirts, leaned against their mothers' knees, watching with big eyes all the excitement of the scene. Here muleteers were dipping their wooden pails and carrying them dripping in the foaming dust to their charges, braying thirstily by the walls of the surrounding buildings. Here the women were bobbing up and down in their broad-beamed skirts and splashing gobs of white linen in the washing trough at the base of the fountain, while others reached down shining dippers of water to half-clad children. Here and there a woman sluiced the contents of a dipper over a squirming head, while a couple of her neighbors firmly held their naked offspring under the stream of water from the topmost jet. (163–64)

This diverse mass of humanity yet manages to attain singleness of form and purpose once a day, when "the striking of Anza's silver tankard, which Font [the expedition's chaplain] used as a bell on the road, brought most of the company to its knees in front of the tent [in which Mass is said]" (168):

It was not only the most solemn moment in the noisy and distracted day, but it was, also, the one time when the disparate fragments of the whole expedition were pulled together into one unified consciousness and intention. There was no mistaking the earnestness of petition in all those eyes drawn like steel by a magnet to the Host in Father Font's hands. A moment before, they had been so many individuals, hurrying through their own morning chores, fussing over their own children, their own pots and pans, their own bags to be packed; now they were one in a single act of common worship. The spell would be broken in a minute.... But for those few precious moments the basic intention of the enterprise had been realized, and the solidarity of the Christian community vindicated. (168)

White is nothing if not realistic, and this moment of transcendent spirituality is followed by a quick return to ordinary behavior of the congregation. Once “the high moment” is past, the congregation rises to wait for the “*Ite, Missa est*,” the signal of dismissal, “with the poised alertness of the worshipper who, meaning not to fail in his duty, is yet resolved to be among the first to get out of the church” (168–69).

The way Garcés comforts the dying Señora Felix and directs her funeral plans reveals his intuitive knowledge of the human heart and his incomparable natural tact. As the unfortunate woman nears death, she is beset with worry and anxiety for her husband and children whom she must leave wifeless and motherless. As Garcés takes her cold hand,

She seemed to find strength again for something that desperately needed to be said, “You will ask Our Lady to take care of them, won’t you?”

The priest held her hand firmly and bent down so that he was speaking into her ear, “You will ask her yourself, and she will listen to you, and do it.”

The look of anxiety vanished. For a moment the eyes opened and looked steadily into the friar’s. Then the white face relaxed, and a little sigh of contentment fluttered through the pale lips. (174)

In those last painful moments the Franciscan is able to comfort Senora Felix by reminding her of the fact that even after her bodily death her soul can continue to care for her family and that she will have recourse to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God who had had known earthly sorrow. The assurance the priest gives and the dying woman receives stems from the doctrine of communion of saints, which teaches that the members of the Church which form the Mystical Body of Christ, whether in heaven or on earth, are able to share spiritual good.¹²⁸ As regards the funeral of Senora Felix, Garcés takes her body to his own mission of Bac and arranges for a proper lying-in-state and Requiem Mass followed by “a little feast” (177). When Font, the official chaplain, who seems to

have more than a touch of the Puritan in him, objects to “that heathen nonsense” (177), Garcés assures him that there will be no drunkenness. And he goes on to give his homely version of the beneficial psychological effect such a gathering would have: “our women will get a bit of supper ready, and the captain of the garrison will want to give the men a little aguardiente. They can all talk about their grandfather’s funeral, and how their favorite aunt died with her first child, and it will all feel more homelike and more like one village” (177).

With the ill-fated missions in the land of the Yumas several years later, it is the wedding of Teresa and José which serves to unite, for a brief while, the disparate settlers as well as the Spaniards and the Indians. Before the wedding, when José comes to Garcés complaining that Teresa insists on having a Nuptial Mass rather than a private wedding, the latter advises him to listen to her. The friar reminds the soldier, “you’re marrying like the two self-respecting Christians you are, and you want to stand up in front of your friends with your wife and let them all see that you are proud of her” (354). The preparations for the wedding naturally involves the whole community, including the commander who volunteers aguardiente for the fiesta and his wife who offers Teresa a bridal outfit. Having prudently refused high-heeled slippers and other things she could not comfortably wear, Teresa is married in her grass skirt, augmented by a plain linen jacket and a mantilla:

So the wedding was held with the barefooted bride wearing her somewhat motley costume like a queen, and the full splendors of the Nuptial Mass to dazzle the Indians And then, when the nuptial blessing had been given, and Teresa with her willowbark skirt rustling had walked with great dignity beside José in his dress uniform to the door of the church, there was a great cheer from both races. (355)

The wedding is followed by a feast, a drinking of toasts, speeches by the Commander and Palma, and both Spanish and Indian dancing. The happy, festive occasion concludes with “both the pueblo and the village form[ing] an escort, half procession and half mob, to bring the bride and groom to their home” (356). The “exhilaration of the first fiesta” lingers for a while, bringing people together in “a community spirit” (356) of friendliness and neighborliness.

CHAPTER 6

BIRD OF FIRE: A TALE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

I am Christ's night, and I have taken up my quest
and put on the livery of His pain...
something that speaks to the common heart of man.
—Francis to Brother Leo, after receiving the stigmata¹²⁹

With what proved to be her last novel, White turned to the life of the founder of the Franciscan Order, St. Francis of Assisi (ca.1182–1226), the spiritual father of Jacopone da Todi and Francisco Garcés. In an article published a couple of years before *Bird of Fire*, White had called St. Francis “one of the most happily spontaneous spirits that ever lived”:

If ever there was a man who tried to live the spirit's brightest inspiration, immediately and completely, it was Francis. And the immediate result was singularly winsome. There are few things in legend or history so charming as the stories of his first companions. But the very magnetism of that example drew thousands into his following, thousands as diverse as the aspiring of humanity usually are. It was all highly creditable to human nature, but that very expansion brought in its wake all the problems of relating inspiration and order to a man who had never dreamt of considering either in systematic fashion. What Francis faced was one of the basic problems of all social life, secular or religious.¹³⁰

In *Bird of Fire* White studies the saint's efforts to live the spirit's brightest inspiration amidst a world bent on fleshly pursuits. Today St. Francis is easily one of the best-known and -loved saints of all time. He is also one of the most misunderstood saints of all time. Writing in 1919, Evelyn Underhill already noted that the modern enthusiasm for St. Francis focused on “the simplicity, gaiety, and sweetness of his character, upon his love

of nature and hatred of possessions,” and neglected or ignored “the supernatural aspects” of his life.¹³¹ White’s novel shows both sides of the saint, but her story diverges from typical saints’ lives in that her focus is on more human, that is, frail, aspects of the saint, rather than the more edifying ones.¹³² The *New York Times* reviewer noticed this also, and said that throughout the novel Francis is shown “not so much triumphant as beleaguered,” and the story’s focus was on the man as “a suffering servant.” The reviewer also praised White for avoiding two pitfalls common to biographers of Francis: “the saccharine (birds, saintly simpleton, etc.) and the salty (Francis was really an expression of the growth of the bourgeoisie [sic], of class discontents; he was an early heretic who managed to evade the fire; his friars were a merely sociological phenomenon, etc.)” and presenting him as a believable human person.¹³³

The Middle Ages are often called the Age of Faith by moderns. To medievals themselves it seemed far otherwise. The thirteenth century seemed, according to Underhill, “to the best of those who lived in it hopelessly corrupt; riddled with dreadful sins, given over to luxuries, formalism, heresies, violence, and intellectual pride,” and everywhere there was “the passionate cult of luxury and pleasure, the open sin and violence.”¹³⁴ Thus all of the elements for the coming of a great mystic were abundantly present: Christianity with its 1200 years of history and tradition was at a particularly low point, and the three-fold signs of degeneration – indifference, formalism, and rationalism – were rampant.

There are two birds of fire in the novel: one natural, and the other supernatural. First, there is the bird of fire which Francis saw through the high window of the dungeon of Perugia. It was a “drab, gray creature, perhaps some sea gull that had come up the Tiber,

looking for the sea among these barren hills”; but, as he looked, it “had flown into the light. Suddenly it was a shining thing, the gray wings dazzling white. As it few on, the flame of the sunset caught it, and it glowed, as if it were made wholly of fire and light” (4). The story of Francis is in a way the story of his efforts to realize that marvelous transformation of that drab, gray common stuff into a shimmering, glowing bird of fire. The transformation is wrought by the power of the mellow fire of the setting sun on a gray bird. One rare bird alone can soar into the light by sheer inspiration and become a bird of fire. But, if it wishes to guide many other birds to attempt the same, rules of life and methods of training must be developed. Such was the problem of inspiration and order Francis faced. “Bird of fire” is also suggestive of other aspects of the story of Francis. Paralleling that gray bird that soared into the light became a bird of fire, there is the transformation of poverty from a thing of misery and misfortune for the general public and the drabest of virtues even to religious, to Lady Poverty, the fairest and the most gracious of the ladies of medieval romance. Bird suggests freedom and renunciation; one has to cut free of worldly affections in order to soar into the air. Fire burns and inflicts pain, but also gives light and warmth; it purifies and refines. Finally, all these paradoxical qualities and associations are mystically forged and tempered into the bird of fire that courses through Francis’ body on Mount La Verna.

The Problem of Inspiration and Order

The character of Francis may be safely called the embodiment of romance and spontaneity. A small, neat man of the most winsome personality, light-hearted and high-spirited, gay with songs and tales of romance that always began “A bird sang in a wood

...,” he had been the favorite companion of the young nobles of Assisi. Even in the dungeon of Perugia he had been singled out and been transferred to their prison (from the commoners’ down below) to keep them company. Perhaps one of the most amazing things about Francis’ vision is that it could, and did, inspire men like Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Catanii. Bernard, a substantial citizen of sense and sobriety, and Peter, a trained lawyer and a canon lawyer at that, were not at all the sort of men likely to be swept off their feet. And yet the indubitable fact is that they and many others willingly renounced the world and joined Francis’ band of begging brothers. The key to this seeming paradox must be found in Francis and the source of his inspiration.

I have already mentioned Francis’ irresistible personality. It might have been great for his carousing ventures with other young men and for selling his father’s cloth, but it would never have persuaded men like Bernard and Peter. They might have been indulgent toward the young man’s fashionable follies, but they would never have given up everything they had worked for to become his disciples. But Francis’ spontaneity and guilelessness which make him an incurable romantic also make him unusually receptive to spiritual influences of a more serious nature. When dream visions or visitations come to him, Francis accepts them with the intuitiveness and wisdom of a child, and once he is sure what he must do, acts with the simplicity and directness of a child. There are many such recorded visitations and other supernatural events, and as is her custom White presents them faithfully as to their essence but with added dramatic and imaginative touches and colorings. In the following pages we will examine some of the most significant of Francis’ encounters with the supernatural, interwoven with the problems of organization Francis faces.

The first night out of Assisi on the way to Apulia, Francis has an unusual dream. He dreams that he is back in his father's shop, and that it is filled not with cloth but with beautiful armor. And he hears "a very clear voice speaking with a fullness of reasonable assurance that riveted him to the spot, 'Francis, these are the arms that are waiting for you and for your knights'" (18). The voice goes on to say, "And there is a bride waiting for you, too, the fairest of all brides for you to wed" (18). What is unusual about the dream is the waking up from it. "For he awoke not with the usual feeling of coming from a warm, bright world of dreams to a cool, flat world of actuality, but with the same kind of sunny, clear, reasonable assurance as had filled the voice" (18-19), and, moreover, "that sense of clear and reasonable certitude" (19) stays with him all day. The second night, Francis dreams again and hears "the clear voice again, so sure, so completely reasonable," speaking as if it were "within him":

"Francis," said the voice, "what do you think you are doing?"

Startled at the direct questions, Francis paused, and then he answered, "I am seeking honor and glory."

"How shall you win this honor, this glory?" asked the voice.

"By serving Walter of Brienne, who is serving the Pope."

"Walter of Brienne, the Pope," repeated the voice, still clear but now softer.

"Tell me, Francis, is it nobler to serve the servant or the master?"

"The master, of course."

"Go then," said the voice, "back to your own town of Assisi, and there you will find out how you may serve me."

Francis waited, but the voice said no more. Presently Francis awoke All he could think of was that voice that still echoed in his deepest consciousness. Not the servant but the master? Not Walter of Brienne, not even the Pope – and then Francis knew. For the first time in his life his way was clear and sure. His Lord had spoken, had told him to go back home. (19–20)

Being Francis, he immediately turns back to Assisi, heedless of the shocked, contemptuous looks and words of other men in the party who assume that he has lost his nerve for battle.

White's description of the voice which Francis hears deserves note. St. Bonaventure called it simply "a divine voice" or "the familiar voice of a friend."¹³⁵ Now it is obvious that White amplifies the quality of this voice quite a bit, but what is emphasized and repeated each time is the clearness and reasonableness of it. This is in full accord with what St. Teresa of Avila said of Christ's voice when He spoke to her. It spoke from deep within her, "in the depth of the spirit," yet she was conscious of its otherness; it was quiet and reasonable, yet it commanded her full attention, infinitely more than if somebody had spoken loudly to her, so that it was impossible to fail to hear the words, impossible to fail to understand them, impossible to forget them.¹³⁶

It is in the middle of a group of beggars on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica that Francis discovers the identity of his Unknown Bride – Lady Poverty. But it doesn't come quick or easy for him to fully embrace his Lady and to wed her. Like his disciple Jacopone, Francis is a man of fashionable and fastidious taste about his person and his dress, and it's hard enough to get used to "dirt and lice," but the deformed and the lepers make "his very flesh writhe" (41–42). For a good while Francis is torn between his delicacy and his self-condemnation, chiding himself, "You will go as far as the poor and the sick, but you hang back at the deformed, and you turn your face from the outcast. You give your coin, which you would waste anyway, but yourself you hold back" (43). Then one day, as he haunts the roadside shrines outside Assisi with Leo, suddenly a leper stands in front of him. Francis, about to toss a coin into the leper's outstretched hand, pauses, and presently, "the first cold shock had turned to fire":

While the leper waited for the safely flung coin, Francis ran toward him with outstretched arms, and as the leper in his turn shrank back a little, Francis flung himself upon him and seized the still groping hand and covered it with kisses. Then he kissed the swollen mouth of the leper and begged him to forgive him.

For a moment the leper stood still as if transfixed, and then he was gone. Francis looked about him, but the road was empty. He felt no surprise, no wonder. Only now the fire had turned to a great sweetness, and it seemed to him that all his being was full of unheard music. It was the same ecstasy that had filled him on the steps of St. Peter's, only this seemed to him even sweeter and fuller. (44)

Now White makes this scene much more dramatic than history records. St. Bonaventure's official biography of St. Francis gives the following account:

when the poor man stretched out his hand to receive an alms, he kissed it and filled it with money. Having again mounted his horse, he looked around him over the wide and open plain, but nowhere could he see the leper; upon which, being filled with wonder and joy, he began devoutly to give thanks to God, purposing within himself to proceed to still greater things than this.¹³⁷

White keeps the basic event, but makes Francis much more spontaneous, flinging himself with abandon on the leper, and embracing and kissing him. Also she adds the leper's reaction naturally to be expected on being faced with such an unusual reception. And after the encounter White's Francis is psychologically elated and translated, like a knight who has just done a particularly difficult task for his lady. White's scene is heightened with greater drama; it is also much more human. Her Francis is a flesh-and-blood human being, who has just done something very much contrary to normal human nature and has therefore and paradoxically become more deeply human. White's rendering of the scene emphasizes Francis' ardor and his heart on fire, rather than the halo over his head which St. Bonaventure's passage suggests.

In the rest of the book White tells of the seemingly irresistible spreading of Francis' vision and experience, his sweetness and unheard music. Before he can begin doing that, however, there is a period of uncertainty. After observing with admiration the ordered life of the Benedictine monks of Mount Subasio, Francis reluctantly decides against joining them. The "very order of their days" (46) frightens him, for his own gift is entirely "for

the moment's improvisation" (47). Meanwhile, at the abbey of Mount Subasio three ecclesiastics sit discussing Francis' troubles. They are the Abbot of Subasio, the Bishop of Assisi, and the Cardinal Ugolino. At the conclusion of their talk, the need for a ministry to commoners and Francis' unique fitness for that ministry emerge. After being assured that Francis is not at all interested in the Patarin heresy¹³⁸ popular at the time, Ugolino says,

"Perhaps we think too much about the big church and not enough about the little churches."

"I have thought of that, too," said the Abbot. "Without the big church, it falls apart into the confusion of the heretics; but without the little churches, what are we going to do with all of them down there?" He went to the window. The moon had come out, and the light lay white on the tile roofs of Assisi, rising like steps below them.

"It is under those roofs that you would like to do something, isn't it, my lord?" said the Cardinal gently.

"Yes, and I doubt if Saint Benedict himself would know how to do it."

"But if not he," asked the Cardinal, "who then?"

"I have wondered sometimes if Francis might not be able to do something about it." (59)

Even if the nature of Francis' calling – to found a mendicant order that unites "utter poverty to entire subjection" to the Pope and that devotes itself to "the evangelization of the masses"¹³⁹ – seems obvious to the Abbot, it takes Francis himself a while longer to see it. Indeed, his calling probably becomes clear to him only after he begins acquiring followers. When Bernard and Peter become the first disciples of Francis, the three men have a Mass said for them and then seek to know God's will by each one opening the Gospels at random. Francis is the first, and his text is: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give it to the poor"; Bernard's is: "Take nothing for your journey; neither staff, nor scrip, nor bread, nor money"; and Peter's: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and come follow me" (76). Now the

finding of these three passages is historical. While being true to history, however, White emphasizes the brotherly spirit of the three men by having each of them open the book in turn; according to Bonaventure's account it was Francis who opened it all three times.

As Francis begins to attract more followers the problem of organization begins. For the way of life they lead in literal imitation of the Gospels is unconventional, to say the least. There had always been men and women who had renounced wealth and honor and become religious, but until now the established mode had been to join an existing convent or establish a new one. The homeless band that Francis is gathering around him is unsettling to the citizens of Assisi. When the group grows to "Our Lord's own twelve" (98) and Francis still adamantly refuses to have a settled abode, the Bishop of Assisi suggests that he obtain formal sanction of the Church: to make "a rule of life so that men will know what they undertake when they join you, and so that the rest of the world will know who belongs to you, and who steals your name. And then take this rule to Rome and get it approved as men desirous of perfection have always done" (99–100). This reasonable advice appeals to Francis, and he happily sets out for Rome with Bernard and Peter.

Each age perhaps has its own heresy, but all heresies have one thing in common: denial of the authority of the Church and the pope. Francis' extreme asceticism and insistence on poverty initially arouses ecclesiastical suspicion of heresy. What reassures the minds of the ecclesiastics is his immediate and unquestioning obedience. The first such instance occurs during Francis' audience with Pope Innocent III. This scene, by the way, would appear to be a complete invention by White. Bonaventure records that Francis' arrival interrupted the Pope who was in deep meditation, and that he meekly

retreated at the latter's rebuke.¹⁴⁰ White turns this austere exchange into a broadly comic and more communal one. She has the Pope not in solitary reverie but in public audience, perhaps tired from a long day's work, and the entire scene takes place in a splendid marble hall surrounded by eminent ecclesiastics and awed pilgrims. Francis, Bernard, and Peter have just arrived at the Lateran Palace, and as Bernard and Peter are judiciously considering how best to approach the Pope,

Francis darted forward and flung himself on the ground and kissed the Pope's feet. Perhaps the Pope was weary from the day's throng of pilgrims, for as Francis rose to his feet and flung his arms wide before him, Innocent asked, "Who let this swineherd in?" And then fixing an eye on the little man that had made many a more important man quail, he spoke sharply, "Little swineherd, go back to your pigs in their sty." (104)

Francis darts out at the angry words, and Bernard's and Peter's hearts sink at this disastrous scene. However, in a few minutes Francis is back dripping with swine muck and smelling to high heaven, and flings himself again before the Pope. As the angry Pope exclaims, "Get away from me, madman!" Francis replies, "I have done what you told me to do, my lord. You told me to go to the pigs and I have," and adding, "What you told me to do, my lord, I did as I always will!" (105). For good measure White makes the Pope curious and logical enough to ask Francis how he had found the pigpen to roll in, and makes Francis answer: "Oh, as we came in through the city and they said, 'There are the Pope's stables,' I smelt the pigpen, and I thought the Pope's pigs smell no better than any peasant's pigs" (105). It is hardly necessary to observe that White's treatment infuses humor and warmth into a scene that could easily have been formal and colorless. What also deserves mention is that at the same time she reveals with few deft strokes the various characters' personalities – the imperious but not unkind Pope, the prudent and conventional Bernard and Peter, and the ardent Francis with his childlike directness.

At any rate, convinced of the little man's sincerity and orthodoxy if not of his sanity, the Pope finally decides, "Christ in Umbria? Let the little man try it" (108):

So the Pope summoned Francis, and he told him that he might go on with the way of life indicated in the rule, and he gave him the responsibility for the guidance of the fraternity. Then in the Pope's presence, the brethren promised obedience to Francis, and Francis promised obedience to the Pope. Innocent would have ordained Francis priest on the spot, but he declared himself quite unworthy. All he would agree to was the diaconate for himself, and the small tonsure for the brethren not yet in orders. As for parchment or written license, they were quite unnecessary once the Pope had spoken. (108)

The Order of Francis is officially begun, complete with a Rule and a simple hierarchy.

With its twelve first brethren, the Order is able to strike a perfect balance between inspiration and order. The genesis of Francis' little Order was his supernatural visitations.

The ideal of the Order is total renunciation of the world and total dedication to serving the least of their brethren. And this ideal of renunciation becomes true self-surrender by submitting itself to authority. Thus, obedience is the means by which the freedom to pursue Francis' ideal is perfected, because through it the freedom becomes part of the universal order and harmony instead of setting up its own.

In a few years his Order grows into thousands of men and women, and Francis is beset with the problems of managing a growing organization.

He had not even thought, as he once would have, of the possibility of fresh recruits, for the Portiuncula was overrun with new brethren now, and Francis often begrudged the time and thought that must go into the building of fresh dormitories and the initiation of new untried novices.

Every time he sent a couple of brethren out for a preaching mission into the country or towns about, there were fresh problems. There were the recruits of all kinds and degrees of promise. There were problems of inheritance. There were offers of houses. It seemed to Francis now that he spent more and more of his days talking over these matters with Bernard and Peter, and though it was he who usually cut the knot and came up with the solution, he begrudged the time it took to dispose of all the difficulties which Bernard and Peter were always conjuring up. Yet he had learned that in the end it saved time to listen to

Bernard, and anything that Peter thought of would occur to the Cardinal of Ostia, also. But still it seemed a poor way to spend one's days. (129)

In a few more years, there are nearly ten thousand friars roaming the towns and villages, "overrunning the land like locusts" (135), as Cardinal Ugolino says some of the bishops complain, and Francis begins to feel unequal to the task of running such a vast organization.

Then Elias Bombarone joins the Order (157). A man of opposite qualities in every way from Francis, the massively-built Elias is a learned scholar and a born administrator who enjoys wielding power. Although he truly loves and admires Francis, he is incapable of understanding him. We might say that order means two very different things to Francis and Elias. Francis' order comes from the heart and spirit that is in complete obedience to the teachings of Christ. In contrast, Elias's order is based on power: those in power rule, and the underlings must obey. In the nature of things the Eliases of the world always prevail in the short run. So Elias gradually takes over the running of the Order until the authority and the function of Francis becomes more symbolic than actual. Rules are relaxed and efficiency and organization become new bywords. The brothers who insist on fidelity to Francis' primitive ideals are suppressed, and even beaten or imprisoned. By 1223, Francis is very near despair, knowing that the state of his Order is far from what it was meant to be, and that moreover it would never be otherwise. When Cardinal Ugolino sends an order to prepare yet another rule for the chapter to be held in Rome, Francis tells Leo, "A dead man does not resist" (229):

The spring was coming now. The fields were green, and there was a gash of white blossom in the soft gray-green of the olives on the hills opposite. And there was the freshness of the spring in the breeze, and in the sound of the little waterfall behind him, and in the light on the river below. But it was not just the pain in his eyes that lay like a film over it all; it was the emptiness within him.

“The beauty of the world is ashes between my teeth,” he said to himself. He was not only dead, but he was empty, and he could not remember any longer how it felt to thrill to the world’s awakening. (229–30)

Francis’ obedience is no longer free but mechanical. Nevertheless, Francis obediently goes to Rome and sets to work on the Rule. His first proposed Rule is rejected out of hand as “just a collection of texts of Scripture” (232). Francis goes back to work and returns with another attempt, to the effect that “these were the words of life, and the soul and heart of them was love, God’s love” (ibid.). The result is “poetry” which one may give to the brethren “to sing in their choir like a canticle,” Ugolino again objects, “but when men say, ‘This is according to the Rule, and this is against the Rule, and do you judge between us,’ what is there here that I can point to?” (232–33). This time, taking pity on Francis, Ugolino offers to refashion the previous Rule of Francis into something workable. Soon, he produces a document which seems to be a parchment full of legalese with no spirit at all, explaining that “this is not poetry. This is law” (233). The last embers of Francis’ spirit seem to die, and he determines to return to the Portiuncula at Assisi.

On his way back Francis stops to pray in the little church of San Damiano, where many long years ago Christ had told him to rebuild His Church.

Then deep within his spirit a voice spoke, not the voice that he had heard at San Damiano, and not the voice that he had heard in Rome. It was a quieter voice, low within the depths of his own spirit. “Francis, why are you so troubled about your Order? Have you forgotten who is its head?” And Francis stood up, and he looked at Leo, and he said, “I shall give the Order back to God, and I will concern myself no more with any rule. I shall only pray. I shall attempt nothing but what I can do by prayer and by example.”

But Leo looked so desolate at his words that Francis yearned to say something that would give him comfort, and he could not. In his great helplessness he knelt down again, and he looked up at the face on the crucifix, and it seemed to him that it was incredibly remote, farther away even than the youth he had been when he had looked up at it first, and he fell on his face before the crucifix, and he stretched out his hands, and *he gave up every effort even at prayer. And then the voice spoke clearly within his spirit, “Oh, Francis,*

little man of little faith, if you had but the faith of a grain of mustard seed, you could lift even this mountain from your heart."

"What is this mountain?"

And the voice said, "It is the mount of temptation."

Francis looked up at the remote sadness of the crucifix, and he said very simply, "Lord, let it be as You will." Then he arose, and he smiled at Leo, and he said, "Little lamb, little lion, of God, let us go and see what the Gospels have to say to us." So Francis opened the book of the Gospels on the altar, and Leo read the text, "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt." And again Francis opened the book and again Leo read, "My god, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And for a third time Francis opened and Leo read, "And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said: Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit. And saying this, he gave up the ghost." Then Francis kissed the book of the Gospels, and he laid it back on the altar, and taking Brother Leo's hand, asked him, "Is the servant greater than the master? Should we who are the heirs of Christ's passion ask for anything but His prayer, that the will of God may be wholly fulfilled in us?" And for the first time in many months, he began to sing softly as they went out into the falling dusk. (233–34, emphasis added)

Thus Francis overcomes the last and hardest temptation of man, his own self-will, as his Master had done twelve centuries ago. Even if his will – that all his brethren be of one mind and their hearts be on fire even as his own – is in itself good, ultimately that is not the very best he can offer to his God. Rather, it is his resignation to the failure of his dearest dream that is the most pleasing sacrifice to God, because his act of resignation is a true act of humility and trust: humility in acknowledging his finite nature, and trust in the mysterious, at times even incomprehensible, ways of God's providence. Like the psalmist who discovered long ago, the knowledge that "The sacrifice acceptable go God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise"¹⁴¹ is the sum and the height of Francis' wisdom borne out of this last suffering of his soul.

Subsequently, Francis appears serenely indifferent to the proceedings of the Chapter of 1223 and the systematic gutting of the Rule, and his closest brethren Leo and Bernard are troubled and puzzled. When they try to talk to Francis about the problem, he replies,

“Have you forgotten, my brethren, how little Christ Our Lord talked of rules? It was what He did that tells us His intention” (235). In purely human terms, Francis’ ceding of authority to Elias preserves his Order from open rupture. There are many conflicts among the members of the Order already during Francis’ lifetime, and they will intensify after his death, as we have seen in *A Watch in the Night*. But the formal unity of the Order is preserved, and with it Francis’ guiding spirit. In writing about the battle between the Spirituals and the Conventuals after Francis’ death, Underhill notes the “poison of conflict on the spirit” that had taken its toll on Jacomo, and adds that St. Francis had eluded this poison “by resigning his Order to Elias.”¹⁴²

The greatest trial and temptation of his life is over, and in what remains of his life there is no more spiritual suffering, although he embraces vast physical suffering. No life of St. Francis of Assisi would be complete without a treatment of his receiving of the stigmata, which he calls “Love’s wound” (250), on Mount La Verna. It is given to him as an answer to his prayer. Francis has gone “up into a mountain alone to pray” (243) for forty days, “from the Assumption of Our Lady [August 15] to the Feast of St. Michael [September 29]” (244). On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14), Francis tells the importuning Leo what he will ask of God: “I shall ask Him that I may understand the depths and the heights of His suffering in His Passion, and then I shall ask Him that I may know for Him a little of that love for me which made Him submit Himself to such pain” (247). There was no direct eyewitness of that event on La Verna, although Leo did see Francis in luminous ecstasy, from a distance. Accordingly, White has Francis describe it to Leo on the way back to Assisi.

I saw a great bird of fire come toward me out of the most high heavens. Then as it came nearer, I saw that it was a seraph such as Isaiah [described].... Then as

he came nearer – Oh, Leo, it takes me so long to tell what came in a flash ... – I saw the face and the body of the seraph between the wings, and it was a Man hanging on a cross.... The great flaming seraph came toward me and struck me and passed through me, and as I burned in every nerve, I felt it dash upon the rock behind me, and then it was darkness, and I fell upon my face. (252)

To compare the above with St. Bonaventure's account:

he beheld a seraph, having six wings, all on fire, descending to him from the height of heave. And as he flew with great swiftness towards the man of God, there appeared between the wings the form of One crucified, having His hands and feet stretched out and fixed to the Cross. Two wings rose above the head, two were stretched forth in flight, and two veiled the whole body. When he beheld this, he marvelled greatly, and his heart was filled with mingled joy and sorrow. For he rejoiced at the gracious aspect with which Christ, under the form of the Seraph, looked upon him; yet to behold Him thus fastened to the cross pierced his soul like a sword of compassion and grief.¹⁴³

It is easy to see that White makes the scene a much more personal and immediate one. By putting the words in Francis' mouth she presents it as a first-person narrative, and by making Leo, Francis' most intimate companion and his confessor, his sole audience White makes the account one of great intimacy. One can almost hear the awe and wonder in Francis' voice as he tries to convey the experience, and see the look of corresponding awe and wonder on Leo's face.

To return to the resolution of the basic conflict within Francis' soul, it comes in the same form of his first inspiration: the voice of God speaking deep within Francis' own spirit. And Francis' response to the voice is also the same. Just as the youthful Francis had then thrown himself headlong into his new life of poverty and humility, renouncing the world, now the older Francis surrenders himself to God's providence, renouncing his self-will. His part in the infinite plan of God is not to do everything right or even to succeed, but simply to do what he can, according to his light. There will be others, such as Brother Elias and Cardinal Ugolino/Pope Gregory IX, who will attend to the problem

of order. Francis' part is to inspire men and women to embrace the romance of self-surrender and the quest for perfect love.

CHAPTER 7

THE ROMANCE OF SELF-SURRENDER

What we get out of life is nothing,
what we give to it is all.
—Montrose to Louise, *The Bride*¹⁴⁴

We give beyond ourselves
to the ends we cannot see.
—Alberic, *Not Built with Hands*

In the preceding chapters I have traced the romance of self-surrender White's protagonists achieve through their struggles with life's problems. The theme of the romance of self-surrender was chosen in contrast to the romance of self which Chase found in many American novels. Chase discerned this romance of self particularly in the works of Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner; for example, the imagination behind *Moby-Dick* exhibited "solipsism, hypnotic self-regard, imprisonment within the self."¹⁴⁵ The greatest difference between the romance of self and the romance of self-surrender may be one's response to pain. Like all serious writers, Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner probed and pondered the problems of the human condition, and the result was often alienation and isolation of the individual. Contrariwise, pain in White's novels leads to the recognition of the common humanity of man. Characters who in their happiness and security were blind to the sufferings of their fellowmen are made, through their own

suffering, capable of relating to them and sympathizing with them. In that sense, pain is a great enlarger of human hearts and a great bridge connecting human hearts.

But before there can be a romance of self-surrender there has to be a self, and each of White's protagonists is a distinct, memorable individual whose heart is vulnerable. Each of White's stories is the story of the pilgrimage of the soul of its protagonist, and each one's pilgrimage takes place in the context of a particular social problem. Each character faces a series of painful challenges and suffers disillusionment, disappointment, frustration, and failure, and is often beset with doubts, fears, apathy, and despair. What saves them from final despair is faith and prayer, prayer not of "formalized chatter or a superstitious kind of petition for the good things of this world as well as of the next" but "true prayer"¹⁴⁶ that proceeds from the naked heart. Reinhardt in his study of George Bernanos' *The Diary of a Country Priest* speaks of the protagonist, the Country Priest who remains nameless throughout the novel, who calls such prayer "a truly extraordinary 'opiate'" – "one that does not turn an individual back upon himself and isolates him but rather unites him with all human beings in universal love."¹⁴⁷

In the case of Jacomo, the decisive moment of his spiritual awakening comes when he witnesses the peasant priest place Communion between the rotting lips of the leper. The incredible fact that the uncouth, semi-literate peasant priest who can't even say his Mass in proper Latin should calmly walk up to the old leper and give Communion, his thumb and forefinger not shrinking from contact with the leper's putrid flesh, and that God should condescend to give Himself to such a repulsive specimen of humanity, jolts Jacomo out of his apathy and indifference. The scene comes to him as "a vision," or "a resurrection," that brings something that had been dead "alive again."¹⁴⁸ This instance

would seem to be a typical example of the mysterious process of prayer-and-answer. For the epiphany, as it were, comes upon Jacomo completely unexpectedly. When many long years ago in the spring of his youth he had prayed so desperately for a miracle (marriage with Lisa), it had gone unanswered. Now, seemingly a lifetime later, when he has not even thought of praying comes an unlooked-for moment of grace. As Bernanos' Country Priest also learns from hard experience: "more often than not, when he needs a response to his prayer most, it remains unanswered: God does not come to him."¹⁴⁹ Conversely, when one has ceased praying, when one has ceased even caring perhaps, as Jacomo does when he stops praying "for very weariness"¹⁵⁰ in the dungeon of Palestrina, the answer comes, not as a piece of knowledge but as an all-encompassing consciousness of "a presence, a companionship" of the Divine which "warmed his whole being with a sense of content."¹⁵¹

In *Not Built with Hands* Matilda faces such a crisis twice. The first time is after the death of her son followed by the failure of her marriage. Reflecting on what seems to be the tatters of her young life, she is overcome by a sense of futility of human efforts in a fickle, inconstant world and is tempted to give them up altogether and become a nun. As she pours her heart out to Pope Gregory: "I hate and despise myself beyond anything I can tell you."¹⁵² What pulls her through in that first crisis is Pope Gregory's sympathetic reminder of the duties of her station. Good princes are rarer than good nuns, he reminds her, and she can serve God best by being "one just prince." (In this instance Matilda is being asked to accept a life mainly of action when what her wounded heart cries out for is a life of retreat and contemplation. This, incidentally, is in contrast, for example, to John Milton, who in his blindness came painfully and reluctantly to accept the truth that "They

also serve who only stand and wait.”¹⁵³) Matilda’s second crisis follows on the death of Gregory. She had offered herself as the Pope’s knight, but, beset with the problems of protecting her realm, she had been unable to do her duty by him. Now that her lord is dead, the central purpose of her life seems dead also. What brings home the realization of the true meaning of her efforts is the commonest of the sights: the wretched-looking, rag-covered peasants working at their spring planting. Like Faulkner who admired “the quiet enduring stoicism and wisdom of the heart” of the poor and the lowly and found “a saving grace in the simplest sentiments of men,”¹⁵⁴ so Matilda is moved by the anonymous and unregarded endurance of the peasants.

For Franciscan Friar Francisco Garcés in *Dust on the King’s Highway* the great crisis comes from encountering implacable rebuffs by the Moqui Indians in their remote pueblo. Until that day he had lived his frontier missionary life with gusto, keenly enjoying his explorations of the desert and his meetings with the various Indian tribes, happily oblivious of the events of the past and their influences on the present. It is only after experiencing that total isolation and expulsion from the Moqui pueblo that he turns his mind to history. And so by his painful experience Garcés is enabled to go from being a man-of-the-moment to being, in the end, a prophet. Garcés recognizes the pattern of history repeating itself – ignorance and prejudice on the part of Spaniards and anger and resentment on the part of Indians, which must lead to violent revolt – and prepares his flock spiritually for the coming trial. Further, by asking Palma on the one hand to spare the women and the children and enjoining the Spanish authorities on the other hand that there be no revenge, Garcés succeeds in preventing the vicious cycle of violence and revenge.

For St. Francis of Assisi in *Bird of Fire*, his story once his Order begins attracting large numbers of followers is the story of relating inspiration and order. The problem of inspiration and order is reflected in both incidents and characters. Incidents take the form of living word versus written rule; as to characters, Francis versus Elias. The source of Francis' inspiration is the voice of Christ; the need for order is imposed on him in the form of demand for a succession of written rules. Several times throughout the novel Francis is told to write a new rule for his ever-growing Order. The first (unwritten) rule of his nascent Order is entirely in keeping with the character of Francis. Francis and his first two followers, Bernard of Quintavalle and Peter Catanii, simply take turns opening the Gospel at random, and then take the found sentences as their Rule. The last, the Rule of 1223, could not be more different. The resolution comes in a manner consistent with Francis' character and history: the voice of Christ reminding him that *He* will look after the Order. And Francis sees in a flash that the fruit of his labors is not his own. He realizes that the true spirit of his Order cannot be contained in any rule, written or otherwise, but rather must be embraced by each heart willingly. Their motto must be, to borrow the words of Milton's Raphael, "freely we serve, / Because wee freely love."¹⁵⁵

The above recapitulation shows how White's protagonists struggle with some of the perennial problems of man: the problem of pain, the problem of civilization, the problem of communication, and the problem of inspiration and order. Each of her protagonists experiences disillusionment and failure and more than once is mired in apathy or despondence. The salutary power that pulls them through is ultimately the mystery and paradox of pain, which turns the evil of pain on its head and makes of it a holy thing, a shortcut, as it were, to the mystery of God. When all else fails, there is the bedrock of

pain that unites all men. White's characters can offer up their suffering and unite it with the Passion of Christ. As finite creatures they could not hope to know very much of the infinite goodness and power of their Creator. But in their want they could identify with their God-Man who had known hunger and thirst and cold of the flesh. In their fear and agony they could recall the agony of their Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. And in their despair they could relate most intimately to their Savior who had cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said that the whole point of the Incarnation was to make it possible for God to suffer, to make Him vulnerable, so He could know pain existentially and experientially. St. Teresa speaks repeatedly of the benefit of meditating on the humanity of Jesus, as in "We look at Him as a Man; we think of His moments of weakness and times of trial; and He becomes our Companion."¹⁵⁶ In the same way, that personal, intimate, experiential knowledge of God which White's characters do not gain from times of happiness and pleasure, can become theirs in moments of suffering, if only they would use it for what it is: the key to the mystery of God. Like the biblical Job, their eye "sees" Him after they have been touched by the hand of God.

Accordingly, the experience of pain and loss suffered by White's characters is not an end itself but a prelude to the "romance of self-surrender." The romance of self-surrender, instead of doing what one wills, consists in doing what one would rather not – which goes against one's grain and even against one's own interest – and willingly submitting oneself to it. The romance is in renouncing one's own will in favor of the will of another. It is the romance of saying "not my will, but Thy will be done," or, with St. Augustine, "*Da quod jubes et jube quod vis*," that is, "Give me, Lord, what Thou

commandest me and command what Thou wilt.”¹⁵⁷ Perhaps it is too obvious to mention that self-surrender attains to true romance only when it is painful, because that is the only way we can be sure that it is self-surrender, and not self-gratification. In any event, White’s protagonists arrive at the romance of self-surrender only after passing through painful losses. It takes Jacomo the loss of his wife and the subsequent self-knowledge. Matilda loses first her infant son, then her husband, and finally her lord and mentor, Pope Gregory VII. For Garcés who as a mendicant friar had already renounced everything worldly, it is the loss of his happy-go-lucky innocence in the face of unpalatable historical truths. And for St. Francis, it is the loss of spiritual control over his Order.

The romance of self-surrender also involves a kind of recklessness, a headlong abandon, a pouring-out of oneself, without counting the cost or consequence. It is true generosity of the spirit which simply gives and asks for neither reason nor return. So Jacomo, once an ambitious lawyer who looked “not likely to be swept off his feet,”¹⁵⁸ plunges initially into the life of a wandering penitent, and finally into a plague-stricken little town. Matilda, while offering herself and everything she owns to Gregory’s service, says she does not wish to “hoard”¹⁵⁹ herself. And young Francis, as he reflects critically on his instinctive shrinking from the crippled and the lepers, chastises himself, “you give what you would waste anyway, but yourself you hold back.”¹⁶⁰ It is not enough to give what one has, one must give *oneself*. This romantic abandon, which presupposes self-forgetfulness, is a quality which White admired also in the subjects of her scholarly writings. For example, commenting on John Donne’s elopement with Ann More, “his second conversion and a real one,”¹⁶¹ White had this to say:

[As “sophisticated and satiate” as Donne was,] he was yet capable of a great love that could sweep him off his feet, that could lift him above all his ambitions

and his plans for a brilliant career, and make him risk certain prospects for the perfection of that love. It is one of the most profoundly attractive things in all his career. Here for once one of the major tensions of his nature, the constant struggle between the moderation which his mind counselled and the excess dreamed of by imagination and feeling, was exultantly resolved in a major indiscretion and a sublime victory. And clearly as he came to realize what this romantic impulse cost him in the miserable and thwarted years that followed, there is not the slightest evidence that he ever grumbled at the price or wished it undone.¹⁶²

But, if White's protagonists arrive after much suffering at the romance of self-surrender, the matter of their stories is still the individual struggle of each character. The uniqueness and value of each character's experience is deeply and sympathetically affirmed. At the same time, each character's experience does not remain an isolated and unrelated fragment of human experience but is related and put into the context of the universal struggle for good and love and constancy. White's treatment of the human experience in her novels and the romance of self-surrender they portray reveal a writer who was seriously committed to "the true vocation of the poet and the writer—to portray reality in toto, that is, to portray life with [an] integral natural-supernatural realism."¹⁶³

APPENDIX A

PLOT SUMMARY OF *A WATCH IN THE NIGHT*

The story begins on a day of triumphant happiness for Jacomo. He is in prime manhood, he has a brilliantly successful legal career, and he has been married one year to a beautiful and virtuous young lady of noble birth, Vanna di Guidone. It is a beautiful morning in Umbria, and he is surveying the last preparations for the tournament to be held that day in his honor. It is being given by his father-in-law, the Lord of Ravallo, with whom he is stopping on his triumphant return home after successfully arguing a great case at Rome. As self-confident as Jacomo is, however, he is keenly aware of the special honor, for the tourney is the “true sport of the noble” (4) and his own family, the Benedetti, although old and distinguished, is not quite of that rank. As befits a thoroughgoing man of the world, Jacomo has chosen to ride through the pleasant scene while the others are hearing Mass. The perfection of the morning is only a little marred by his encounter with his archenemy, Bishop Gaetani (the future Pope Boniface VIII), who has come to see the Lord of Ravallo about the problem of itinerant Franciscans, whom he disdainfully calls “these beggars on the roads” (9).

In a short while, in a classic *de casibus* situation, disaster strikes swiftly. During the tourney a horse ridden by a young Roman noble Paulo di Colonna goes berserk and crashes into the ladies’ gallery, which collapses and fatally wounds Jacomo’s wife who

was sitting within. By the time Jacomo reaches her, Vanna lies limply on the ground, her lifeblood soaking her golden gown. And as Jacomo rushes to her side, she opens her eyes briefly to give him one last smile and then dies, as gently and quietly as a falling flower. Frantically he tears at her gown, trying to get at her wound, when his hand comes upon something rough and coarse, soaked and slimy with blood—and discovers with unutterable shock that underneath her rich gown Vanna was wearing a hair shirt, as penance for *his* sins. The shock of her death paralyzes him and the memory of that hair shirt haunts him.

Some time passes, and Jacomo still remains in an emotional coma, boorishly repelling all attempts of family and friends to console him. One night, sickened by the constant, watchful solicitations of his family, he escapes out of the town wall of Todi. But his momentary relief turns to horror and revulsion when he realizes that he is in the unhallowed burying ground of the outcasts, and he runs blindly and wildly, until he collapses from sheer exhaustion. Upon coming to in a strange room, he finds himself in no better place, for his host identifies himself as the town hangman. Worse yet, Giolotti calmly reveals himself as a cultured cynic with a painful past. His sole purpose in life is the appreciation of the human body, and to that end he chooses to work as a hangman for the sake of fresh corpses to dissect.

We next find Jacomo in a country inn where he stops for the night from his rural wanderings. There his long-forgotten past is suddenly resurrected when he recognizes one of two women whose profession is obvious. It is Lisa, with whom he had had a short, passionate affair in the summer of his eighteenth year but had been unable to marry because of his family's opposition. After eighteen long years, he learns what their love

has cost her. She had brought forth his stillborn son, and then, left destitute when he did not come back and her family died, she had turned harlot. The revelation shatters Giacomo's basic confidence in himself as a just man, and Vanna's hair shirt gains fresh meaning. Lisa refuses his offer of marriage or money, but allows him to "beg some provision" (81) for her by gaining her admittance into a convent. Accordingly Giacomo goes to the convent of the Poor Ladies of Francis. During his interview with the prioress, Giacomo expresses his bitterness over the problem of pain, and she tells him of her own pain long ago. Even after taking the vows she had been tormented by her love for a priest, until St. Francis of Assisi had come and talked to her. She suggests Giacomo visit Assisi. On the road the next morning, he spots a leper coming his way and takes shelter in a rude country church, only to see that same leper come into the church to hear Mass. And when Giacomo sees the peasant priest calmly and surely approach the leper and place Communion between the leper's rotting lips, a spark of life is revived in him. After the Mass, Giacomo allows the leper to approach him outside the church. And the leper tells his story. As a young outcast he had been tortured by his unrequited lust, and had cursed God and man and the whole universe. Then he had met St. Francis and had been "cured" (97). Now Giacomo is eager for Assisi.

On his arrival at the great basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, the first person Giacomo meets is his dead wife's chaplain, Father Filippo, now a Franciscan friar. After showing Giotto's great frescos depicting scenes from Francis' life, Filippo asks Giacomo, "if Christ were here in Assisi, what then should we do?" (116). And while Giacomo sits and gazes on the pictures the answer comes to him: "Go and sell all thou hast and give to the poor" (117). Giacomo goes and does just that. He then joins the Franciscans as a Third Order (i.e.

secular) penitent and begins the life of an itinerant preacher, working as a laborer when he can and depending on the charity of peasants otherwise. At long last he seems to have found peace, for in the midst of an existence lived close to the elements, with hunger and thirst and cold as constant companions and the lowly peasants as his only human companions, he experiences the freedom and repose of his soul.

But soon he comes to see that such a life has its own danger. For he has come to be a cult figure among the peasants, sometimes even venerated as a saint the hem of whose habit they try to kiss. So he decides to give up his freedom and join the Franciscan convent of San Fortunato as a regular friar, submitting himself to the rule and discipline of community life. Again, however, no sooner does he seem to have found peace than he must face the fact that the Order is in great turmoil, split between two opposing factions. The majority, called the Conventuals, wants the Order of Francis to become like the other religious orders, owning group property and becoming more organized; the minority, the Spirituals (whose cause Giacomo joins), wants to preserve the primitive rule of absolute poverty, including group property. The dispute reaches Rome, and the Pope sends his envoy to San Fortunato to hear the arguments. To the chagrin of Giacomo and the other Spirituals, the envoy is Gaetani, now a cardinal, Giacomo's old enemy and a strict law-and-order man who is hostile to their cause. Not surprisingly, the Pope refuses the Spirituals' request. After their leader is defeated and imprisoned, the remaining Spirituals, including Filippo, decide to abandon the fight and retire to the hermitage of Il Carcere to live out their ideals.

But Giacomo decides to fight on, and joins the household of Cardinal Jacopo da Colonna in Rome, in whose service it seems possible to promote the cause of the

Spirituals. Colonna, one of the most powerful men in Rome and the archrival of Gaetani (and the uncle of young Paulo whose horse caused Vanna's death), is sympathetic to the Spirituals and is more reform-minded. When the aged Pope dies and the conclave deadlocks between Colonna and Gaetani as new pope, Giacomo is instrumental in the surprise election of a third person, the saintly hermit Piero da Morrone. Reluctantly installed as Pope Celestine V, one of Morrone's first acts is to take the Spirituals under his own protection. Feeling deeply fulfilled, Giacomo returns to San Fortunato to resume the life of a friar.

Soon, however, he is urgently recalled to Rome by Colonna, when Celestine V threatens to abdicate. Straightway Giacomo goes to Rome and manages to persuade the Pope to stay, only to learn the next morning that Gaetani has engineered his abdication and called for a new election. Predictably, Gaetani is elected new pope, and takes office as Boniface VIII. Colonna regards the new Pope as a usurper, and rebels by raising the banners of Celestine at his family stronghold of Palestrina. The Pope's army lays a siege. Colonna's position is rendered moot when Morrone dies in prison, and he surrenders when the situation within the besieged stronghold turns desperate. In the ensuing settlement, the Colonna are taken to Rome in the garb of penitents, their stronghold is razed to the ground, and Giacomo is sentenced to perpetual imprisonment in the dungeon of the keep. Having staked and lost all, Giacomo faces his living death with a dead heart. He nearly dies from a fall which fractures his skull and puts him in a coma for many long months, but is nursed back to health by the ministrations of Lisa and Filippo. After their departure, in the following months of solitude and silence Giacomo finally realizes the peace which nothing on earth can shake.

After the death of Boniface VIII and the election of a new pope, Giacomo is released. Declining the invitation to rejoin the now-restored Cardinal Colonna, Giacomo begins his journey back to Umbria. He has come to see that the only right thing for him to do is to join Filippo and the other Spirituals at the hermitage and live out the ideals of St. Francis in prayer and humility. Within a day's journey from his destination, he learns of the plague in a town a little out of his way. Giacomo goes to help, and is asked to preach words of comfort to the suffering, dying people laid out in the town plaza. There he gives a deeply moving sermon about the meaning of suffering and the Passion of Christ. And there he meets Lisa again, who has come to nurse the patients. After the plague ends, Giacomo resumes his journey to Il Carcere. Twelve miles from his destination, he realizes that he has caught the plague, and prepares to die alone. But his friends find him, and Giacomo dies on Christmas Eve surrounded by Lisa, Filippo, and Paulo.

APPENDIX B

PLOT SUMMARY OF *NOT BUILT WITH HANDS*

We meet Matilda, twenty-one years old and flush from a military victory, on a hill overlooking the gleaming splendor of Rome seen shimmering through the afternoon haze. She and her stepfather, Godfrey of Lorraine, are on their way to Rome to join her mother, Beatrice, and attend the Lenten Synod of 1067. Matilda is the only surviving child of Beatrice's marriage to her first husband, Count Boniface of Tuscany, who was killed when Matilda was five. Subsequently Beatrice had married Godfrey of Lorraine, and together they have reared Matilda as the future ruler of her dead father's realm. Earlier in the day, she had turned her party's sure defeat into a surprise victory by single-handedly charging the enemy when all seemed lost. The spear of a Norman knight hangs on her thigh as the trophy of her first battle. Thus reflecting on the glory of Rome and promises of the future, she arrives at Rome to a hero's welcome. The report of her prowess had preceded her, and the Romans cheer wildly the beautiful young countess as the savior of Rome.

However, Matilda's mood of heady exultation quickly turns to confusion. During the banquet that evening at the Lateran Palace, her dinner companions begin to reminisce about her dead father, the mighty Boniface. And his "honor" and "glory" seem to have consisted of his martial valor hardly distinguishable from cruelty and brutality. While

they talk on with gusto, Matilda sits sickened. The next day Matilda meets Archdeacon Hildebrand of Soana, the future Pope Gregory VII, and they talk about the lawless brutality of the world. Hildebrand is surprised to find in Matilda a prince who sees the injustice of rule by force. To her question "But how shall we see the light?" Hildebrand replies, "It is the Church." Thus begins a great friendship and partnership between two people of generous disposition and ardent temperament.

Matilda's mother, Beatrice, has been the staunchest supporter of the Church since the death of her only son. Angered by her remarriage to Godfrey, her overlord King Henry III of Germany had imprisoned her and her young son, and the boy had died in prison. In her loss and sorrow Beatrice had seen clearly that only a powerful Church could curb the willful power of mighty princes. Beatrice and Matilda as princes who sincerely endeavor to foster justice and peace are vastly outnumbered, for most of the rulers, secular and religious alike, are motivated mainly by greed and self-interest. The great issues of the day in the Church are simony and clerical incontinence, which Hildebrand has been trying to stamp out but which many of the princes as well as bishops and priests resist.

In 1071 Matilda sends for her long betrothed, Godfrey the Younger. When he arrives, Matilda begins her married state determined to be a loyal and obedient wife, and for a while luxuriates in her new-found domestic bliss. Despite her embarrassment at Godfrey's chauvinistic over-protectiveness and his overbearing treatment of her servants, Matilda takes new hope and pleasure in the approaching birth of her first child. 1073 is an eventful year for Matilda. In the summer she attends the coronation of Hildebrand as Pope Gregory VII. In the fall her child is born, and Matilda's cup of blessings seems to be full. But the following year could not be more different. During a heavy rainstorm in

the spring, messengers come from the City of Florence to entreat its lord's help with the catastrophic flood damage and subsequent anarchy. When Godfrey curtly refuses to go, Matilda sets out instead and proceeds to relieve the drowned city. Then, anxious about her baby son, she hastens back, only to find that the child had caught a fever and died during her absence. Soon Godfrey leaves her and returns to his overlord, Henry IV of Germany. Now once again the sole sovereign of her realm, Matilda carries on with the work of governing her realm.

The political crisis which leads to the famous scene of Henry at Canossa begins with Pope Gregory's decision to strike at the root of the problems by attacking lay investiture. The custom has enabled secular rulers like Henry to name their own sycophants to clerical benefices without regard to their fitness for the offices. Henry, who yearns to be absolute ruler of his realm, defies openly. The ensuing contest between the two great rulers taxes all of Matilda's resources, spiritual and material. Arduous journeys, Henry's base slander (that Matilda is the Pope's mistress), rebellious vassals, military defeat, poor harvest, famine, the murder of her estranged husband (with whom she had hoped to be reconciled), and the death of her mother are her lot. Then comes the crucial confrontation of Henry and Gregory at Canossa. After the former's public defiance and calumny of the Pope at the Lenten Synod of 1076, the Pope had excommunicated him. Subsequently Henry's Saxon vassals had risen up in rebellion against him, and had invited the Pope to come and preside at their assembly at Augsburg to judge between them and Henry. Against the advice of all his counselors except Matilda alone, the Pope had set out for Augsburg. But on the way the report of Henry's entry into Italy had reached the Pope's party, and they had taken shelter at Matilda's stronghold of Canossa. And to Canossa also

comes Henry as a penitent, and stands barefoot in the courtyard for three days in bitter cold. Matilda persuades the Pope to relent, reminding him that it is his duty as a priest to grant absolution to a repentant sinner.

His goal achieved, Henry returns to Germany and to his old ways. In 1080 Gregory, his patience exhausted, excommunicates him again. Henry retaliates by setting up an anti-pope. The rest of the novel treats of the violent, fluctuating events of the next five years and Matilda's efforts to defend her realm and protect her subjects and help the Pope. Matilda's dearest wish is to raise an army for the Pope's cause, but the threat of Henry's attack and her rebellious vassals make it impossible for a long time. When at long last she succeeds in restoring order in Tuscany and sets out with an army for Salerno to escort the exiled Gregory back to Rome, she learns of his death on the way. Utterly empty, Matilda returns to Canossa. But constant demands for her decisions and favors rouse her, and one fine spring day as she rides through the fields outside Canossa the sight of the peasants busy about their work awakens in her a profound sense of wonder at the mystery of life—its joys and sorrows, its gains and losses, its continuity despite everything.

APPENDIX C

PLOT SUMMARY OF *DUST ON THE KING'S HIGHWAY*

The story begins on August 1, 1771, in the chapel of San Xavier del Bac.¹⁶⁴ Garcés, thirty-two years old and for three years now pastor of Bac, is already well known among many Indian tribes as the “Old Man” who visits them and tells them good words. Naturally hardy and adventurous, Garcés is a born missionary who thrives on the freedom and the hardships of the frontier life. On that summer morning, as Garcés says his morning Mass he is excited to see four strange Indians standing in the back of the little church. They are Yumas who have come from the junction of the Colorado and the Gila rivers to invite him to come to their villages. The Franciscan, always eager to meet new Indians and preach the Gospel, happily accepts and sets out. Despite being plagued with the usual difficulties of desert travel in the summer – the heat and the lack of water – as well as inter-tribal Indian hostilities, Garcés succeeds in reaching the Yumas many weeks later.

One incident that befalls him on the way will have lasting consequences in the novel. One day, after finding signs of the passing of an enemy tribe, Garcés’ frightened Indian guides desert him. Thus finding himself alone in the desert, he pauses to read his breviary by a flat rock. On finishing the reading he finds himself surrounded by Cajuenche warriors returning from a successful raid on a Yuma village. They have killed many

Yumas and burned their village, but have not much loot to show for their success other than a captive, a frightened little Yuma girl. This girl the friar manages to “buy” from the Cajuenches and sets free. The girl, later baptized Teresa (after St. Teresa of Avila), will become a crucial link between Indian and Spaniard.

Soon after reaching the Yuma land, Garcés meets their chief named Palma, a tall, proud man of great dignity and presence with “something sharp and hungry in the bright eyes” (38). Moreover, from the first Garcés senses in Palma a great hunger, a deep spiritual yearning. Around the campfire of the Yumas the friar gives his simple version of the Gospel, the story of the God who is the Father of all men and who desires them to live in peace with all men so that they can go to heaven after death. Palma professes a desire to know more about this God and invites Garcés to make his home with the Yumas. The latter recognizes that he has come into “the fullness of his calling” (48) and promises that he will do so after Palma has made peace with all other tribes. Garcés has seen in his mind’s eye a church shining on the great bluff overlooking the Colorado and heard in his heart the sweet-tolling bell calling to everyone up and down the river.

The second book of the novel brings Garcés together with the famous soldier and frontiersman Juan Bautista de Anza. Kindred spirits in many ways, the two men have been corresponding for three years, sharing information as well as hopes and aspirations. After listening with deep interest to Garcés’ account of his last desert journey, Anza tells him of his late father’s dream: to build a land-bridge that would knit up Sonora with Upper California. A series of missions stretching through the desert would create a land route between the two outposts of New Spain, bringing scattered lands and peoples into king’s peace and making possible speedier and safer transport of supplies to Upper

California from Mexico. The success of Anza's dream would depend on having strong and loyal Indian subjects, and Garcés sees in a flash that the Yumas under Palma's leadership would fill that role. However, even as they agree on the overall vision, some fundamental differences between the servant of God and the servant of king emerge clearly. As a servant of God the missionary priest's main concern is the conversion and education of Indians, for he is aware that the Indian usually requires an extensive period of training and education before he can hold his own among Spaniards. Anza, on the other hand, as a servant primarily of the king is concerned with establishing politically and economically viable territories, and as such is eager to establish settlements peopled by Spaniards. The temporal and spiritual welfare of the Indians is of simply not of primary importance to him. This fundamental divergence of views, exacerbated by ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, not to mention bureaucratic delays and inaction, will be the seed of the tragedy that befalls Garcés' Indian missions.

Anza explains to Garcés that now he may have an opportunity to achieve his father's dream, for the new Viceroy in Mexico City, Bucarelli, is that rare man among bureaucrats who actually believes in taking action. Anza's request that Garcés accompany the expedition as its official trail guide is eagerly accepted. After a circuitous course of events Bucarelli grants Anza's application for authority and funds to equip an expedition for the purpose of opening a land-route to the Upper California. After many difficulties and disappointments and compromises the expedition sets out in January 1772. Once they leave the last outpost mission, the constant struggle to find water begins, and Garcés discovers to his chagrin that finding enough water for a party of men plus their horses and pack mules is a very different matter from finding enough for a man

traveling alone or at most with an Indian guide or two. After a welcome respite at the junction of the rivers and being treated to the hospitality of Palma's people, the expedition pushes on and after more suffering reaches the mission of San Gabriel, where Garcés indulges in a rare treat of visiting with fellow Franciscans. But another frustrating hurdle presents itself when enough provisions for the entire expedition cannot be found in the isolated and impoverished missions whose existence depends almost wholly on supplies shipped from Mexico. Anza decides to proceed to Monterey with a small, select party, and Garcés, swallowing his disappointment, volunteers to lead the rest back to Palma's land where the weaker of the pack mules had been left behind.

Having succeeded at last in opening a land route to Upper California against great odds, Anza turns next to the scheme of leading a second expedition, this time of settlers who would make their new home in Monterey. This party also Garcés joins as a guide. Early in their journey one of the settlers, a mother of six small children, dies after a difficult delivery. However, the sadness and delay caused by the death and funeral of Señora Felix also has the effect of bringing the diverse settlers together into a real community, as the women galvanize themselves to care for the motherless children of the dead woman and the expedition prays together for her soul. As with the first expedition, the fertile river valley of the Yuma country at the meeting of the rivers provides the party with an oasis from the heat and dust of the desert. Palma is impatient for a mission for his own people, and Anza tries with little success to explain that these things take a long time to arrange.

Several years later, Garcés is back at his home mission of Bac from his nearly-year-long travel in 1775–76, applying himself to the routine of running a frontier mission.

Here Anza, on one of his interminable campaigns against the Apaches, stops one day and gives him an account of the Palma's state visit to Mexico City. Palma with his gift for drama and oratory had made a great impression on the Spaniards, who had given him a formal reception and a banquet, along with great promises. Garcés also learns that Palma had been baptized in the great cathedral by the Archbishop. The constant underlying uneasiness of Garcés' grows alarmed at the report, shuddering to imagine at what might happen if Palma's inflamed expectation for a Spanish mission goes unfulfilled. So he writes to his superior at Querétaro, reminding him of the Spanish obligation to keep its promise and warning of evil consequences that will follow otherwise. His letter for once produces decision, and Garcés is summoned to a conference with the civil authority in charge. The latter is full of beautiful and noble words, but Garcés sees with dismay that clearly he has no idea of the practical efforts that are required. Another blow comes when Garcés learns that Anza has been promoted to the governorship of New Mexico and will not lead the expedition—a heavy loss indeed, since Anza, in addition to being the ablest and the most respected commander of the frontiers, is already on cordial terms with Palma, and is moreover one of the few soldiers who have some understanding of Indian ways.

Thus begun inauspiciously, the new expedition is fraught with further difficulties. Without Anza's experience and authority in making thorough preparations, Garcés and Diaz, a fellow Franciscan, barely manage to patch together a meager escort. But a crushing blow is dealt when the missionaries learn that the civil authorities, inspired by Rousseau's writings, have nobly determined that the new enterprise is to be a brand-new utopia, a three-in-one arrangement consisting of mission, settlement, and presidio. The

friars know that such an experiment, with its built-in potential for racial conflicts, is a recipe for disaster but are powerless to change its course, and set out to make the best of a bad plan. However, even Garcés' troubled heart lifts when a simple church is completed on the height above the Colorado, just as he had envisioned nearly ten years before. The soldiers then build simple huts in preparation for the coming of their families. When the soldiers' families and the settlers at length arrive, there is great rejoicing. And the crowning event of communal joy and celebration for Indian and Spaniard alike comes in the form of a wedding. It is the wedding of Teresa, the little girl Garcés had rescued from an enemy tribe ten years ago, and José, a young Spanish soldier. The event even engages the interest and efforts of the commander's pretty, vain wife, who stirs out of her habitual boredom and isolation to befriend Teresa. However, as the memory of that happy occasion fades and the day-to-day life of a frontier settlement begins in earnest, conflicts begin to emerge. And with the coming of the spring land becomes the source of bitter disputes, as the Spaniards begin planting Indian lands without their permission. In vain Garcés explains to the settlers that although the Indian method of planting may seem casual and inefficient to them, it is their traditional way of farming which ought to be respected. His appeal that they at least talk it over with the Indians and give them time to get used to the drastic change is also brushed aside as a waste of time and useless coddling of the primitives.

When his pleas fall on deaf ears, Garcés to his great surprise foresees the coming end clearly. From this point on his efforts are bent on mentally and spiritually preparing his parishioners for the inevitable tragedy. On Ash Wednesday of 1781, the theme of his sermon is the common humanity of all men and the need for patience and charity. As the

summer heat intensifies, Garcés senses the end approaching. On what proves to be the eve of the Indian attack Garcés decides to prepare his flock for “the day of judgment” (410). Accordingly, his homily is about the uncertain and insecure nature of life in this world and faithfully going about one’s work in the teeth of that reality. For himself, he prays only that he might be spared long enough to shepherd his flock. In his last dispatch to Mexico City, Garcés hurriedly writes the famous words, “We have failed ... because we have not understood,” and entreates forgiveness rather than revenge (421).

The Yumas’ attack begins suddenly during Mass the next day. The commander, José, and many other Spanish men are killed at the outset. Garcés ministers to the living and the dead, comforting the injured and the frightened and burying the dead. Then he gives Teresa, who is now a widow heavy with child, a message for Palma: do not harm the women and the children, and there will be no vengeance by the Spaniards. The next day, after saying Requiem Mass for the dead, Garcés gives his last sermon, on the value of suffering with patience and faith and cheerful resignation. Later that day the second attack comes. The church is burned, Garcés is taken, and the women and children are led away. Friendly Indians try to save Garcés and his fellow priest, but both are killed by hostile, battle-crazed Indians. Palma orders them buried on the spot where they had fallen. Five months later, a Spanish expedition comes to ransom the women and the children and finds them amazingly well and unharmed. Garcés’ promise to the Yumas which he made through Teresa is fulfilled when Spanish plans for a punishment expedition come to naught through bureaucratic bickering and red tape.

APPENDIX D

PLOT SUMMARY OF *BIRD OF FIRE*

We first meet Francis lying listlessly in bed, wasted and profoundly depressed, in his room above his father's cloth shop, slowly recovering from a long illness. Nearly two years before he had gone out gaily with his fellow Assisians to fight their hereditary enemy, the Perugians, in one of their interminable squabbles. Only, instead of achieving glory and honor, the men of Assisi had been put to the rout and ignominiously thrown into the dungeon of Perugia for over a year, and Francis, who was never very strong, had suffered gravely from the effects of the long imprisonment.

To this Francis sunk in low spirits comes the Count of Assisi with an invitation to join his retinue and go to the south of Italy to fight for the Pope under the Norman overlord Walter of Brienne. Since Walter is on the Pope's side, they reason, their fighting will be ultimately for God, and of course if Walter is victorious there will be many new knighthoods to confer. The romance of fighting for a holy cause and the prospect of knighthood take possession of Francis' imagination, and he sets out with great enthusiasm. But his knightly venture is cut very short indeed, for the first two nights out he dreams of Christ's voice telling him to return to Assisi, and he obeys, to the consternation of everyone. He endures with serene indifference the teasing and the sneering jibes of townspeople, until Martin of Offreducci, one of the highest-ranking

young nobles, returns disillusioned with the whole Apulian experience. At the feast given in honor of Martin's return, Francis in the twilight catches a glimpse of the Lady Clare, a younger sister of Martin's, standing on the roof and drawing a veil across her face. The image impresses him deeply and becomes the symbol of his "Unknown Bride," who, so he begins telling everyone, is the fairest of ladies, although as yet he knows neither her name nor her identity.

Amidst much careless and baffled laughter of friends, Francis begins frequenting the countryside and ruined churches, praying and distributing alms to the poor. In his wanderings he is often joined by his young friend Leo, a quiet young man who has often been his silent, watchful companion. At the suggestion of their bishop, Francis and Leo make a pilgrimage to Rome, where Francis first experiences the joy and freedom of begging. Shocked by the niggardly offerings of the well-dressed pilgrims over the tomb of St. Peter, he pours out all the silver from his wallet, then striding out of the basilica exchanges his pilgrim's robe for a beggar's tunic, and joins the group of beggars on the steps of St. Peter's, gaily singing in French, "For the love of God, give alms" (39). He has found his Unknown Bride—his "Lady Poverty" (40). After his return to Assisi he spends even more time praying in ruined roadside churches and giving alms. However, for all his love of the poor, Francis shrinks from certain classes of them, especially the deformed and the lepers. This last obstacle of the flesh crosses his path one day in the form of a hideous leper. As he is about to drop a bit of silver into the leper's hand, Francis takes a great leap of faith and embraces and kisses the leper instead. Then he goes to the leper hospital and kisses each leper before giving them money.

Some short time later, as he prays before the crucifix in the crumbling church of San Damiano, Christ speaks to him, “Francis! Rebuild my Church!” (50). Taking the command literally, he takes some cloth from his father’s shop and sells it, and brings the money to the old priest of San Damiano. But the priest, knowing Francis’ father to be a tight-fisted man, returns the money to him, who turns bitterly against his formerly favorite son. When after a month of hiding Francis finally gets up enough nerve to return home to face his father, he is mocked by the whole town and pelted with stone and mud, and then beaten and chained in the cellar by his father. Freed by his mother during his father’s absence, Francis resolves to rebuild the little church with his own hands. He succeeds in doing so by hard work and begging, but when his father hears of it he comes out with a posse and drags him to the Bishop’s palace. There in the presence of the Bishop, his father, and the townspeople, Francis renounces his birthright. Now finally and permanently freed of all worldly ties, Francis walks out feeling the freedom of a man who has died to the world.

After wandering around the surrounding villages and countryside and suffering hunger, cold, and violence, Francis returns to Assisi. Now he begins to attract disciples. The first two are older men of sense and substance: Bernard of Quintavalle, one of the richest merchants of town and magistrate, and Peter Catanii, the Bishop’s own canon lawyer. The three of them begin living literally by the Gospel. By and by more men come to join the little group, until there are “Our Lord’s own twelve” (98), as Francis proudly tells the Bishop. At the latter’s suggestion, Francis prepares a rule of life to govern the growing group and sets out for Rome to secure the Pope’s approval. Initially Pope Innocent III imperiously orders him away, thinking him a madman. But that night the

Pope dreams of seeing the Lateran Church sinking down, when a little man comes along and bears it up on his shoulder and saves it. The next morning he consults Cardinal Ugolino (the future Pope Gregory IX), who has also had a similar dream and who vouches for the little man's orthodoxy. Ugolino also assures him that all Francis wants to do is to live the way one would if Christ were to come again, here and now, in Umbria. And Innocent allows finally, "Christ in Umbria? Let the little man try it" (108). Back at Assisi, Francis adamantly refuses gifts of land and house, insisting on the letter of the Gospel and utter reliance on Providence for all their needs. In keeping with literal adherence to absolute poverty, his Order is to never own any community property, unlike the other orders such as the Benedictines.

Another phase of the Order of Friars Minor¹⁶⁵ begins when the Lady Clare, an heiress of the Offreducci and the symbol of Francis' Unknown Bride, joins it with two other women, against fierce opposition of her family. Thus the Second Order of Francis is created, and Francis agrees when the Bishop points out that the women must have a fixed, sheltered abode, unlike the brothers who can live anywhere. So the three sisters are installed at San Damiano, and guided by Clare's example and ability becomes a model of sober living and holy charity. In the next few years men and women of various backgrounds continue to flock to Francis' Order, and he struggles to keep up with the ever-growing demand for organization and administration. The next few years see continuing growth of the Order, including the creation of a Third Order, for the laity who must remain in their secular callings while living according to Franciscan ideals.

In the Chapter of 1217 Francis proposes sending missionaries to other European countries, but is dissuaded from leading the French mission himself. In any event the

mission proves to be a complete failure, and bitter fingerpointing and recrimination ensue. Francis responds by preaching an even bolder plan: “let us go to the heathen” (185–86) in Palestine, where another crusade is being attempted. This time Francis leads a small group to Damietta, where the last preparations for an assault are being made. Francis hears Christ’s voice again in his dream, saying “The city is not yet ready to fall” (191–92). He duly warns the commander-in-chief, Cardinal Pelagio, who impatiently dismisses him. In the ensuing battle the Christians are routed by the Mohammedans. From the now-chastened Cardinal Francis obtains permission to go across to the Sultan in order to convert him. So he sets out with a sole companion, a former knight, to see the Sultan. Once in the Islam territory, they are captured and taken to the Sultan. Facing the Sultan and surrounded by his men, Francis preaches the Gospel. When the Sultan proposes a theological debate, Francis pleads his ignorance of theology and counters with a challenge of trial by fire, which is not taken up by Mohammedans. The Sultan acknowledges Francis’ faith and treats him kindly, but will not be converted, and Francis returns to the Christian camp, where Cardinal Pelagio has been awaiting his return before attempting another assault. Having learned his lesson, the Cardinal takes the precaution of learning that Francis did not dream this time before ordering attack. The Christian army is victorious that night, and Damietta is taken. Sickened by wild plunder of Christian soldiers, Francis leaves for Jerusalem.

After a shaky recovery from a grave illness on board the ship, Francis makes as far as Bethlehem, where the grand and glittering Church of Nativity disillusion him. But there come reports of trouble and dissention in his Order, and he turns back to Italy without seeing Jerusalem. Having disembarked at Venice, Francis sets out for Rome

where he obtains the Pope's appointment of Cardinal Ugolino as the protector of his Order. Duly consulted, Ugolino advises him to call a new chapter and write a new rule. Francis obeys, but the new Rule is nothing more than dead letter to him, and his spirit sinks in dismay. Two years elapse, and Francis still remains in cold despair, his spirit utterly quenched, spending his time hiding in hermitages. When Cardinal Ugolino orders him to make yet another Rule, Francis's despair hits a new low. On the way back to Assisi from Rome, he stops at San Damiano to pray, and Christ's voice speaks to him: "Francis, why are you so troubled about your Order? Have you forgotten who is its head?" And the little man rises resolved to "give the Order back to God ... [and] attempt nothing but what I can do by prayer and by example" (233).

From that point on Francis stops agonizing about his Rule, or his followers perverting and betraying his ideals. He simply begins living the life that his Order was meant to represent, that is, a life of apostolic poverty and humility. That Christmas, he builds a reed hut and within a wooden manger on a barren hillside outside Grechio, where Mass is celebrated and the Nativity enacted, attended mainly by poor peasantry. Many miraculous cures begin being reported. On Easter Sunday, when his followers prepare a sumptuous feast served with gold and silver plates and crystal goblets, Francis reminds them of the lost ideal by appearing on the scene with a begging bowl.

Later that year, he retires to Mount La Verna for a forty-day prayer. There, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross he receives the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ. His conformance to Christ is complete. However, his work on earth is not done yet, and he "must come down and be about my Father's work" (250). During the remaining two years of his life, there occurs a series of miraculous cures and reconciliations, even as

their agent, Francis, is for the most part sunk under the blanket of constant pain. It is also in this last pain-wracked part of his life that he composes his famous “Canticle of the Sun” after a particularly painful and sleepless night (256–57). Even as his health is fast failing, constant movement is required of the suffering man, in obedience to Cardinal Ugolino’s order to go and be examined by eminent physicians. At length when it becomes clear that he is dying, the efficient Elias comes to take him back to Assisi. Finally having arrived at his beloved Portiuncula, Francis gives his last words of instruction and blessing, and dies reciting a penitential psalm.

Less than two years later, the cause of Francis’ beatification is proved and he is solemnly canonized at the cathedral of Assisi. Meanwhile, a few brothers, the first companions of Francis, gather at San Damiano to be with Clare, eschewing the magnificent ceremony which they reject as the betrayal of all that Francis had stood for. But Pope Gregory IX, formerly Cardinal Ugolino, comes to the little convent and explains the need for practical and permanent arrangements if Francis’ ideals are to be preserved and handed on. And the little group reluctantly acquiesces.

ENDNOTES

Most of the book reviews, articles, and newspaper interviews are from the Helen C. White papers held in the University of Wisconsin Madison Memorial Library (hereafter abbreviated as UW).

1. Helen C. White (HCW), "Forty Years of Frontiers at Wisconsin," unpublished essay (ca. 1965), 2, UW.

2. Ibid., 9.

3. The *Helen Constance White Home* page of the University of Wisconsin Madison website, <<http://college.library.wisc.edu/geninfo/hcw/>>, lists a total of twenty-one honorary degrees, as well as long lists of accomplishments and awards.

4. Helen Matheson, "Helen White Would Have Loved It," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 26 September 1971, UW.

5. HCW, "Forty Years," 5.

6. Quoted in Anna P. Butler, "Dr. Helen Constance White: A Tribute from the Gamma Chapter Massachusetts" (ca. 1949–50), 11, UW.

7. Katharine Hartman Axley, "Ready Sense of Humor Underscores Helen White's Amazing career," *Capital Times*, 20 June 1964, UW.

8. "Helen Constance White," *Demcourier* 12.2 (March 1942), UW.

9. Quoted in Louise C. Marston, "Famed Teacher, Scholar, Novelist, Helen White Wins Renown ...," *The Wisconsin State Journal*, 26 April 1942, UW.

10. Butler, "Dr. Helen Constance White."

11. Toni A. H. McNaron, "The Purple Goddess: A Memoir of Helen Constance White," *Helen Constance White Home* page, <<http://college.library.wisc.edu/geninfo/hcw/mcnaron.html>>, accessed 30 June 2006.

12. *American National Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. "White, Helen Constance," 23:210.

13. Quoted in Butler, 12.
14. HCW, "Three Ways to Parnassus," paper read at Madison Literary Club on 10 January 1955, 1, UW.
15. HCW, "Three Roads to Parnassus," *The Western Humanities Review*, 14.4 (Autumn 1960): 353, UW.
16. There are extant several manuscripts of White's early writings, mostly short stories, that predate her scholarly career. However, there is little in them other than a hint of the teenage author's expansive and sympathetic imagination that gives any indication of the kinds of novels the mature author produced.
17. "Dr. Helen Constance White," typescript biographical profile for the American Association of University Women (1941–42), UW.
18. The term "friar" (from Latin *frater*, brother) was applied in the thirteenth century to a religious of one of the mendicant orders, as distinguished from the term "monk" which designated a religious in one of the regular monasteries. John A. Hardon, *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (Bardstown, KY: Eternal Life, 2001), s.v. "friar."
19. R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Penguin Books, 1990; orig. pub. 1970), 34–44.
20. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1957).
21. Ibid., 1.
22. Ibid., 2.
23. G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History*, 4 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949–52), 1:xiii.
24. Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge: at the University Press: Folcroft Library Editions, 1971; orig. pub. 1924), 4.
25. *American Women Writers: a Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, 5 vols., ed. Lina Mainiero (New York: Ungar, c1979–c1982), s.v. "White, Helen Constance," 4:394–95.
26. *American National Biography*, 23:211.

27. Austin J. App, "contemporary Catholic Authors: Helen C. White, Scholar and Historical Novelist," *The Catholic Library World*, 11.7 (April 1940): 198, UW.
28. HCW, "The Writing of Historical Romance," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Winter 1956-57), 84, UW.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 86.
31. Francis X. Connelly, "The Novel in America Today," *Thought* 15 (1940): 594-95; also 594 n. 10, which quotes Fred B. Millet, *Contemporary American Authors* (New York, 1940), who noted that the unfortunate and frequent "con-fusion" of history and fiction in the field had brought so much censure and disrepute as to cause the critics to suspect that "the historical novel is an illegitimate form, all too frequently the offspring of bad history and worse fiction."
32. HCW, "The Writing of Historical Romance," 85.
33. Ibid., 86.
34. HCW, *The Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 96.
35. R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992; orig. pub. 1953), 222.
36. Ibid.
37. Quoted in Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 51. I am indebted to this book for an enjoyable course in the history of medieval scholarship in the twentieth century.
38. Ibid., 28-29.
39. HCW, "Three Ways to Parnassus," 13.
40. "Miss Helen White," *The Voice* (of the Students and Alumni of St. Mary's), ca. 1938-39, since it refers to White's third novel, *World without End*, which was published in 1939, as being in progress.
41. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, 27-28.
42. John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), 11.

43. Ibid, 12.
44. Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages*, 240.
45. Ibid.
46. Evelyn Underhill, *Jacopone da Todi, Poet and Mystic: A Spiritual Biography* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1919), 3.
47. HCW, *The Mysticism of William Blake* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964; orig. pub. 1927), 47.
48. Ibid., 55–57.
49. Ibid., 57.
50. The Song of Songs 8:6.
51. Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Theological Novel of Modern Europe* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), 5.
52. *American National Biography*, 23:211.
53. App, 201.
54. Micheline Lefebvre, “The Art of Helen C. White as Historical Novelist,” master’s thesis (University of Montreal, 1956), 64–65, UW.
55. Cf. Butterfield, 39, who explains the need to provide a landscape in a historical novel with “a dimension in time,” and gives the following example: “To an architect a building is not merely a dead weight of stone, but a mass of forces striking in different directions and brought somehow to a poise; the whole structure is thrilled with life and in every line of it there is motion.”
56. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, 2002; orig. pub. 1964), 10.
57. Ibid.
58. *King Lear*, 4.6.105. David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1996). All references to Shakespeare’s plays are to this edition.

59. HCW, *A Watch in the Night* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 87. All quotations cited parenthetically in the chapter refer to this edition.
60. Frederick Ozanam, *The Franciscan Poets of the Thirteenth Century* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1969), 192.
61. Ibid., 194, 198, 199, 201, respectively.
62. See George T. Peck, "Index of the *Laude* of Jacopone," *The Fool of God: Jacopone da Todi* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 234–35.
63. HCW, *Prayer and Poetry* (Latrobe, PA: The Archabbey Press, 1960), 36.
64. Peck, 150, says that the idea of Jacopone's authorship is "far-fetched."
65. *New York Times Book Review*, 9 April 1933, 18, UW.
66. Underhill, vii.
67. Peck, xi.
68. "The Editor's Say," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 20 May 1934; the same article reports that the prize was awarded to Caroline Miller's *Lamb in the Bosom*.
69. Butler, 16, quotes an amusing anecdote connected with Undset and White's preference for the color purple: "'I usually describe myself as 'the large woman in purple,' [White] says with a contagious chuckle, 'but I think of the time when I was to meet Sigrid Undset and someone called her a woman of "epic proportions." Then I feel small in more ways than one.'"
70. Michael Williams, "A Masterly Novel [review]," *The Commonwealth*, 19 April 1933, UW.
71. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 July 1933, UW.
72. *The Centralite*, [school paper of Girls Central High School, Butte, MT] 16.5 (21 February 1939), UW.
73. Psalm 90:4–6. All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
74. Letter of U. F. Mueller to HCW, n.d., UW.
75. HCW, "Writing of Historical Romance," 84.

76. S. L., "Helen C. White, American Author, Sends Greetings to St. Francis," *The Interlude* [school paper of the College of St. Francis, Joliet, IL], 13 October 1935, UW.

77. Underhill, 50–51, says that the balcony on which the guests were dancing suddenly collapsed.

78. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

79. *Ibid.*, 58.

80. Sor Ma. Catalina P. Saligumba, "A Study of Helen C. White's Historical Romances," master's thesis (University of Santo Tomas, Manila, 1964), 55 and n. 43.

81. Underhill, 208.

82. HCW, *Not Built with Hands* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 220. All quotations cited parenthetically in the chapter refer to this edition.

83. Thomas P. Neill and Raymond H. Schmandt, *History of the Catholic Church* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1957), 162–63.

84. *Ibid.*, 167.

85. *Ibid.*, 180.

86. *Ibid.*, 179, 181.

87. Quoted in Butler, 21, from HCW, "Not Built with Hands [letter about writing]," *Commonweal* 22 (24 May 1935): 91–92.

88. Southern, *Making of the Middle Ages*, 163. White's interest in Cluny and its heritage was manifested again in her next novel. *To the End of the World* features a young French priest who dreamt of restoring the glory of Cluny and the Church as a monk, but becomes instead a hard-working parish priest, and in the end, a bishop.

89. *Ibid.*, 165.

90. According to an anonymous reader's report on White's proposal of *Not Built with Hands*, UW, "The Great Countess" was in fact White's initial title for the novel.

91. Butler, 20.

92. Nora Duff, *Matilda of Tuscany: La Gran Donna D'Italia* (London: Methuen & Co., 1919), 6–7, 77.
93. Butler, 32–33.
94. Lorine Pruette, “A Glamorous Lady of tuscany [review],” *New York Herald-Tribune*, 2 June 1935, UW.
95. Jane Spence Southron, *New York Times Book Review*, 2 June 1935, UW.
96. “A Memorable Novel Recreates Medieval World with Gusto [review],” *Winnepeg Free Press*, 29 June 1935, UW.
97. “A Romantic Novel of Mediaeval Italian Life in the Days of Pope Gregory the Seventh [review],” *Boston Evening Transcript*, 26 June 1935, UW.
98. Pruette.
99. “A Novel of the 11th Century [review],” *Boston Herald*, 15 June 1935, UW.
100. *London Church Times* [review], 28 June 1935, UW.
101. Southron.
102. Barbara Barclay Carter, “The Great Countess [review],” *The Catholic Citizen* 221.8 (15 October 1935), UW. Since then there has been more interest in Matilda. See Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004; orig. pub. 1988), 131–50, and Guida M. Jackson, *Women Rulers throughout the Ages* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 282–83. Jackson, 51, also includes an entry on Beatrice, Matilda’s mother. Michele K. Spike, *Tuscan Countess: The Life and Extraordinary Times of Matilda of Canossa* (New York: Vendome Press, 2004), is highly impressionistic and unreliable, but does attest to continued interest in Countess Matilda.
103. Fraser, 139.
104. *Coriolanus*, 4.6.95–96.
105. Duff, 153, says that Henry left them behind at Reggio.
106. Cf. Duff, 161, who records that the Pope afterward acknowledged in his account of Canossa that “all those who were present” at Canossa and were witnesses to King Henry’s penance were “marveling at our unusual hardness of heart, and a few [were] saying amongst themselves that this was not the sternness of apostolic severity, but rather the cruelty of a ferocious tyrant.”

107. Duff, 155.

108. Fraser, 141, notes that Anselm of Lucca, who was Matilda's spiritual adviser, commented that she "combined the will and energy of a soldier with the mystic and solitary spirit of a hermit."

109. Duff, 229–30. Similarly, *Catholic Encyclopedia* (online), s.v. "Imerius," says that "At the instance of Countess Matilda of Tuscany he began to devote himself to the study of jurisprudence, taking the Justinian code as a guide."

110. Duff, 229.

111. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (online), s.v. "Imerius."

112. HCW, *Dust on the King's Highway* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 421. All parenthetical citations in the chapter refer to this edition.

113. Francisco Garcés, *A Record of Travels in Arizona and California 1775-1776*, trans. and ed. John Galvin (San Francisco: John Howell-Books, 1967), "Introduction," ix.

114. *Ibid.*, v.

115. *Ibid.*, viii.

116. *Ibid.*, v.

117. HCW, "On Writing," paper read at the Council for Wisconsin Writers' Second Annual Award Banquet on 22 January 1966, 4 and 5, respectively, UW.

118. For example, Garcés's pioneering role, usually in conjunction with Anza's, is extensively discussed in Alexander Avilez, *Population Increases in Alta California in the Spanish Period, 1769–1821*, (Thesis, University of Southern California, 1955; repr. San Francisco: R and E Research Associations, 1974), and Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Anza's California Expeditions*, 5 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966).

119. Christopher Matthew, "Helen White's Rich New Novel of Martyrdom" [review], *The Milwaukee Journal*, 20 April 1947, UW.

120. P.W.H., *The Binghamton Press* (NY) [review], 25 April 1947, UW.

121. Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) traces the long missionary career of French Jesuit Jean Marie Latour, whose story is based on that of the historical Jean Baptiste Lamy (1814–88), the first archbishop of New Mexico. Set nearly sixty

years after the death of Father Garcés, Cather's novel begins in 1848 and ends with the death of Archbishop Latour. In the opening scene, a missionary bishop from America on a visit to Rome presses a group of cardinals for the appointment of Latour, then a parish priest in the Lake Ontario area, as Vicar Apostolic to the newly-acquired territory of New Mexico, stressing the importance of sending a man of energy, intelligence, and order. And the Spanish cardinal, one of the three cardinals in the scene, observes, "Our Spanish fathers made good martyrs, but the French Jesuits accomplish more. They are the great organizers." See *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 8.

122. Matthew.

123. August Derleth, "Books By Wisconsin Writers," *Capital Times*, 27 April 1947, UW.

124. Matthew.

125. John W. Chase, "A Missionary Explorer [review]," *New York Herald-Tribune*, 20 April 1947, UW.

126. Malachi 2:10.

127. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The History of California* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Company, 1884), 1:358, 1:396.

128. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 946–48. In particular, "The communion of saints is the Church," and "Since all the faithful form one body, the good of each is communicated to the others.... We must therefore believe that there exists a communion of goods in the Church."

129. HCW, *Bird of Fire* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 253. All parenthetical citations in the chapter refer to this edition.

130. HCW, "Writing of Historical Romance," 84.

131. Underhill, 22–23.

132. Cf. Louis de Wohl, *The Joyful Beggar: a Novel about St. Francis of Assisi* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1958; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), which on the whole belongs to the category of hagiography.

133. Anne Fremantle, "Umbrian Genius [review]," *New York Times*, 28 September 1958, BR46, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

134. Underhill, 27, 31.

135. Bonaventure, 14.

136. *The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1991; orig. pub. 1960), 232, 233–36.

137. Bonaventure, Saint. *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, ed. Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1988), 15.

138. The original Patarines, supporters of the popes “in their struggles for celibacy of the clergy and against simony” in the eleventh century, ceased to exist after the death of their leader, Erlembald, in 1075; subsequently the name was applied to the Cathari and other Manichaeian sects, who held to philosophical dualism: “There were two ultimate principles, really two creator gods, one of good and the other of evil. They denied the value of oaths and the right to punish, commended suicide, and rejected marriage. Their ideas tended to undermine the foundations of civil society, and for this reason they were opposed not only by the Church but also by the State.” *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, s.v. “Patarines” and “Cathari,” respectively.

139. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (online), s.v. “Mendicant Friars.”

140. Bonaventure, 31.

141. Psalm 51:17.

142. Underhill, 186–87.

143. Bonaventure, 123.

144. Margaret Irwin, *The Bride* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1939), 214. The British edition, published by Chatto & Windus Ltd. the same year, bore the subtitle “The Story of Louise and Montrose.” *The Bride* is a historical novel about the Marquis of Montrose, who fought first for Charles I and then during the Interregnum for his son, the future Charles II, and Princess Louise Hollandine, a granddaughter of James I. White admired the story and recommended it to her sister Olive in a letter dated 24 October 1939, UW.

145. Chase, 107.

146. Reinhardt., 119.

147. Ibid.

148. HCW, *A Watch in the Night*, 96.

149. Reinhardt, 119.
150. HCW, *A Watch in the Night*, 405.
151. Ibid., 406.
152. HCW, *Not Built with Hands*, 173.
153. John Milton, Sonnet 19, *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: Anchor Books, 1971). All references to Milton are to this edition.
154. Chase, 212–13.
155. *Paradise Lost*, 5.538–39.
156. *Teresa of Jesus*, 214.
157. Quoted in *Teresa of Jesus*, 138–39.
158. HCW, *A Watch in the Night*, 51.
159. HCW, *Not Built with Hands*, 294.
160. HCW, *Bird of Fire*, 43.
161. HCW, *The Metaphysical Poets*, 104.
162. Ibid., 103–104.
163. Reinhardt., 237.
164. The mission church, subsequently enlarged by later missionaries, still stands today, on San Xavier Indian Reservation, south of Tucson, Arizona.
165. Francis named his brothers the Friars Minor “either after the *minores*, or lower classes” or “with reference to the Gospel (Matthew 25:40–45), and as a perpetual reminder of their humility.” *Catholic Encyclopedia* (online), “St. Francis of Assisi.”

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