

12-3-2010

The Grotesque Gospel of Buechner's *Godric*

Emily Burris Geary
Cedarville University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english_seminar_capstone

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Geary, Emily Burris, "The Grotesque Gospel of Buechner's *Godric*" (2010). *English Seminar Capstone Research Papers*. 5.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english_seminar_capstone/5

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Seminar Capstone Research Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Emily Burris Geary

LIT 4220

Donald Deardorff

03 December 2010

The Grotesque Gospel of Buechner's *Godric*

"But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not been rent."

William Butler Yeats "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop"

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have

trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." NIV, John 16:33

A monk, a pirate, and two snakes walk into a bar—it sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but such are the characters in Frederick Buechner's novel *Godric*. The monk of Buechner's tale is both saint and pirate; he is both a recluse for God, and friend of snakes. Godric is both oppressor of the poor, and their symbol of hope. These contradictions are part of the grotesque mode Buechner plows to plant the Christian salvation story into its appropriate place: the material world.

The presence of the salvation motif in *Godric* has been acknowledged by scholarship. Dale Brown's alludes to the concept of the grotesque in his assessment of Godric in the *Book of Buechner*. Brown, arguably the most prolific scholar of Buechner, discusses his works in a tone Buechner accepts as "the voice of a friend" (Brown ix). Brown reads *Godric* as a narration of the human condition. He believes *Godric* was a result of Buechner's struggle with

his daughter's near fatal anorexia. Brown elaborates that "caught up in his daughter's starvation, Buechner begins to recognize his own hunger" (Brown 227). Buechner is confronted with the neediness of humanity through the physical depravity of the body.

Buechner's familial struggles force him to evaluate his own mortality; Brown writes that Godric was Buechner's form of coping with his situation, and "trying on various ways of growing old and facing death" (Brown 228). Buechner uses his novel to grasp for hope, writing that "from old Godric I learned much about how to bear loss, great pain, and about faith in the face of despair and something like joy in the midst of great sadness and anxiety" (qtd. in Brown 228). Here Brown reveals the tension that drives *Godric*: the deep dark of the world versus faith renewing perseverance. It is the story of humanity—"of good and evil; the ever-wed impulses that define human nature" (Brown 244). *Godric* is the account of the fall of man and the possibility of renewal in Christ. Brown correctly identifies that "the real strength of Godric is the truth it tells about us [...] holiness and sinfulness inextricably bound" (Brown 244). This is the tension that the theory of the grotesque body furthers—the story of the struggle of mankind between the dual natures that war within.

Brown writes that Buechner "can furnish those significant religious words—especially such words as *sin* and *forgiveness*, *guilt* and *grace*—with sharper colors and shocking contrast in a narrative that, despite the archaisms, has astonishing relevancy (Brown 234). What Brown fails to identify is the method by which Buechner renews the religious terms: the grotesque mode. Buechner revitalizes the Christian method by using the grotesque to lower and re-imbue the gospel message with hope. Brown was correct in identifying Buechner's message as tinged with sadness at the broken state of man, as initiated by his daughter's struggle with anorexia. Brown notes that even Buechner's "most powerful affirmations are often spoken with a lump of doubt in

the throat. The grace is amazing enough, but the suffering and desolation always have their say” (244). By using the grotesque, specifically Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body and the cosmic, one can better understand the extent to which the themes Brown correctly identifies (sin and grace, death and renewal, hope and despair) work to serve Buechner’s intent.

Elements of the Grotesque

The concept of the grotesque extends beyond Bakhtin; however all theories of the grotesque have certain elemental characteristics. While the scholar Harpham admits that the grotesque is the “slipperiest of aesthetic categories” (qtd. in Evans 136), certain common traits emerge in grotesque studies. The term grotesque means “distorted, fantastic, [or] ugly” to most contemporary readers (Schevill 2). While those adjectives do describe the grotesque, there is more to the term. Most academics acknowledge that the grotesque in literature must arouse three emotions: disgust or horror, astonishment, and laughter (Evans 136). Without these three reactions, the work can not be considered grotesque because it does not fulfill function of the grotesque; examining the three reactions to the grotesque will illuminate the overarching function of the grotesque mode.

The most prominent reaction to the grotesque is disgust or horror. Bakhtin writes that “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (303). The exaggeration of body parts, the hyperbolic phallic images, or the excessive debauchery of characters—this is what horrifies and disgusts the reader. Michael Gillum best analyzes this disgust, writing: “Grotesque art is art with bad manners. It challenges our ideals and our notions of proper order with dissonant elements—disgusting, embarrassing, incongruous, or frightening intrusions” (13). The horrifying dissonant elements impose on the one’s sense of safety because one is confronted with an element deemed improper or taboo. The

reaction of disgust or horror builds the platform through one questions preconceived ideas of the proper, of order.

Inextricable from the one's reactions of disgust or horror is the feeling of astonishment. The astonishment of the reader comes from the "suddenness, surprise, and estrangement" that the grotesque text employs to shock the reader. One is startled, and tension is created between what one expected and what the grotesque text exhibited. The common and the established are subverted; the grotesque draws attention to the traditional by the very act of subverting it. One's astonishment further forces one to question the set expectations of what is conventional, and why the grotesque text deviated from the conventional.

The final and most revealing reaction to the grotesque is laughter. As one scholar puts it, "The grotesque is incongruous and incongruous is funny" (Gillum 14). The reader laughs because incongruity is legitimately comedic, but also because the incongruity highlights the disparity between the subverted conventions and the grotesque. The horrifying and astonishing elements of the grotesque create anxiety within the reader, and laughter is a form of coping with the anxiety.

Therefore, the function of the grotesque mode is to undermine the established traditions with which one is comfortable. J.R Holt, a professor at Centenary College, describes this process best, writing:

The grotesque aesthetic is a "beautiful ugliness" because it breaks down our conventional notions of beauty, harmony, order, and meaning, forcing us to find sense beyond our familiar categories of beauty and knowing. In the process, we come to realize that those familiar categories themselves are artificial, and as such can distort the truth behind appearances. Grotesque art, then, employs distortion to correct distortion. (Holt 189)

The reactions of disgust or horror, astonishment, and laughter work together to first break down the reader's established ideas, then build the reader to realize they are artificial.

Elements of the Grotesque in *Godric*

Images of the grotesque body pervade Buechner's novel *Godric*. Buechner employs exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness to disgust, astonish, and amuse his readers, and lay the groundwork for his critique. One of the most prominent examples of the grotesque in Buechner's novel is the protagonist's body. The first images the reader digests is Godric, who is walking home in the wet cold his "ballocks shriveled to beansize in their sack and old One-eye scarce a barnacle's length clear of [his] belly and crying a-mercy" (Buechner 3). Immediately, one is confronted with the grotesque conception of the body; the body is reduced to its genitals. Not only does the image arouse horror, but also astonishment that a saint would be discussing his genitals with such openness. Godric continues to draw attention to his body, later noting "I've got an old dam's dugs. My privities hang loose as poultry from a hook" (40). The emphasis on the reproductive organs of a man who is supposed to be chaste is a grotesque contradiction that creates tension between what the reader expects and the grotesque image that Buechner depicts. These images are also grotesque because they are comedic. Godric's flippant tone and his degradation of his genitals are amusing in their inappropriateness.

Buechner's imagery of Godric's nose further reduces the character to the grotesque. Bakhtin notes that the nose is a phallic image, especially when described as the dominant feature on the face, or when it acquires animalistic qualities (316). Godric is characterized as having a "beaknose" which "fleshed out to the great hook it became" (Buechner 14). Buechner associates Godric's nose to an animal, and uses of lusty term "fleshed out" to create a grotesque hyperbolic symbol of a phallus. It is significant that Godric's large nose is his most notable feature; even

when he is separated from his family for several years, his mother is able to recognize him through his “snout” (51). Godric’s body is characterized by his genitals, or symbols of them; these images are incongruous with conventional depictions of monks and astonish the reader.

Even more horrifying than Godric’s discussion of his genitals is the hermit’s narrative of his life as a pirate. Godric recalls how he and his bandit friend, Roger Mouse, cheated pilgrims of all their money; they raped maids, and stole nearly everything they possessed (Buechner 44). Thieving and raping are not Godric’s most disturbing transgressions, however. One of the driving tensions of the novel is Godric’s grotesque relationship with his sister, Burcwen. The reader flips the pages in horror, both anticipating and dreading the moment Godric and Burcwen consummate their feelings. Buechner uses incest, one of the most established social taboos, as a grotesque image to break down the one’s certainty in the established regulations. Godric mourns that “The worst that Godric ever did, he did for love. Nor was it of an earthy sort that seeks its own but love that gives itself away for the beloved’s sake, and thus, when all is said and done, the love that God himself commands” (Buechner 155). Godric’s grotesque love evokes sympathy therefore furthering one’s willingness to question the established conventions.

The excessiveness of Godric’s debauchery is horrifying, especially since the reader has been introduced to him as a saint through the character of Reginald, a monk who is writing Saint Godric’s biography. The grotesqueness of Godric’s debauchery is highlighted by the conflicting voice of Reginald, who interrupts Godric’s own narrative with his interpretive narrative of Godric’s life. Godric resents this, and after telling schoolboys his own edited version of his life story, he muses “How seemly is a life when told to children thus, with all the grief and ugliness snipped out. I suppose it’s how monk Reginald will tell of mine” (Buechner 132). Reginald

wants to cut the grotesque out of Godric's life the same way the astonished and horrified reader wants to ignore, or simply laugh at, the incongruous details of the monk's life.

The human desire to edit the grotesque out of life is exactly what Buechner is using the grotesque mode to critique. This critique surfaces in two key scenes: Godric's discussion with Hedwic, and the Christmas mass at Durham.

Godric meets Hedwic when serving her husband, the nobleman Falkes de Granville. Hedwic is mistreated by her husband, who uses her only as a means to beget heirs even though she has not yet reached puberty. Hedwic causes Godric to reexamine his life one night when she points to the floor, which has been freshly strewn with sweet-smelling herbs and rushes. She tells Godric "What's underneath is turds of dogs and grease and spit and bits of bone" (Buechner 85). Images of excrements are inherently grotesque as they disgust the reader and link the body to the material world. Hedwic confides to Godric that the grotesque image of the freshened floor reminds her of her own life because "The part you see is fair and fresh. The part you do not see is foul" (85). Hedwic's life is grotesque because her husband has degraded her identity to only genital and reproductive organs. She tells Godric how her husband "decked her out in silk and precious stones yet treated her like dung" (85). She reminds Godric of the grotesqueness of his own life, and the futility of trying to bury it.

This theme surfaces again later in Godric's narrative, and this time he is the one seeing the truth: the foul beneath the fair. At the Bishop's beckoning, Godric leaves his hermit-home by the River Wear for the first time in twenty years to attend Christmas Mass at Durham. As Reginald the monk and Perkins, Godric's friend and helper, clean Godric to prepare him for the Christmas Mass, one is reminded of Hedwic's metaphor of the freshened floor. Just as the floor was strewn with herbs, Godric is sprinkled with rosewater. They pull mouse droppings out of

Godric's hair, and put fresh clothes on him (Buechner 121). Godric's true state is disguised; the foul has been covered by the fresh. When he enters Durham, however, he is confronted again by true grotesque need of things. The people gather for Godric to bless him, and he narrates "Dogs bark. A child makes water in the street. Women lean from windows waving flags. (Buechner 122). Godric is alarmed by the human need that confronts him when he returns to civilization. The city of Durham is a grotesque picture—the animal noises and urination bring the city to the lower stratum.

In response to the grotesque scene, Godric prays "Dear Father, see how these thy children hunger here. They starve for want of what they cannot name. Their poor lost souls are famished" (Buechner 122). The raw grotesqueness of the human needy state is ignored by the Church, whose Christmas Mass ceremony goes on unsullied. Godric notes, listening to the Latin chants, "even as their monkish voices dip and soar like doves, I see with my heart's eye the steaming dung of beasts, their cloudy breath, the clodish shepherds at the door. I see the holy mother gazing down, and there among them, in the straw, the freshborn king" (Buechner 124). Godric has the ability to see glimpses of the past and future, and his vision of the Savior's birth reveals truth not in the elevated voices of the monks, but the grotesque image of animal's defecating and Christ in earthy straw.

It is significant that Godric highlights the Durham monks singing in Latin—as the official language of the church, it was high and elevated in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon dialect Buechner gives Godric. Godric is purposeful in his use of the common tongue. Even after he is taught Latin, he prays in the common language. Godric notes "I learned the *Pater Noster* too, but kneeling by my cot at night, I always prayed it in our own rude tongue. *Father in Heaven, holy one, cone be our king that we may do thy will below as they above*" (Buechner 133). Buechner

further his critique of the church ignoring the true grotesque state of humanity by narrating his novel in *skaz*, a dialect used to portray a certain character. The Anglo-Saxon dialect throughout the novel purposefully distinguishes Saint Godric from the church.

Buechner critiques the church's standards of beauty through Godric's experience at the Christmas Mass. As everyone celebrates the birth of the Christ-child, Godric meditates how easy it is to love a fair babe, "But babes grow into men at last. That's where it turns a bitter brew. 'He hath no form or comeliness,' Isaiah says. 'No beauty that we should desire him. A man of sorrows we despise.'" (Buechner 125). Godric notes that it is easy to revel in the hope of the baby Savior, but hard in this grotesque world to follow the grown Christ's mandate to follow him. Godric cries "But there's more here than can be borne. The gorgeous robes of priests. The altar all aflame. The clouds of incense rich and sharp. And in the midst Old Godric, keeping Christmas, blubbers like a child" (Buechner 125). The monks and the cathedral are cleaned and freshened like Godric and Hedwic's floor, yet around them Durham reeks with human need that is not being met. The fair ceremony ignores the foul outside, but Godric can not forget. Immediately when he leaves the Mass he is attacked and beaten by robbers. It is a grotesque scene. Godric reports "My cup and bowl lie broken on the floor. Before they left, they pissed the fire out. They've slit my heifer's throat for spite" (Buechner 127). Godric is immediately struck with grotesque again, and it reminds him that "So Christmas comes and Christmas goes, and the world the hold child is born to rests, as ever, full of dark so deep that all the Norman bishops in the land with all their candles aren't enough to drive it back an inch" (127). He has returned from the elevated ceremony to the grotesque reality of the world.

Godric resents Reginald's editing and his unwillingness to see anything but the fair. Godric grumbles "I scoop out the jakes of my remembrance, and he censes it all with his clerkish

screed till it reeks of mass” (Buechner 6). Godric’s anger over the monk’s editing is displayed through Godric’s grotesque application of the word “mass.” Official ceremonies are ineffective to Godric—he notes that Reginald’s hands “as pale and soft as cheese” (19). They have not worked in the grotesque world. Buechner is critiquing the ineffectiveness of the when they ignore the grotesque. Godric grumbles that “But all is light for Reginald. What do they know of dark and death, he and his brother Durham monks?” (19). Godric’s calls the Durham church “The Loft” for “mighty high and lofty are their ways” (19). According to Godric, the Durham monks miss the heart of the story by ignoring the death. This is the essence of Buechner’s critique: one can not be Found unless are Lost; one can not be renewed until they have tasted death.

Death and Renewal in Bakhtin’s Grotesque Body

Bakhtin is particularly concerned with the significance of the grotesque body, and he is justified. Scholars agree that “of the dissonant elements that characterize the grotesque, one of the most prominent is the grossness of the human body” (Gillum 14). For Bakhtin, the grotesque body intrinsically depicts the universal chronicle of death and rebirth; a narrative which is ultimately positive. Bakhtin believes that those who interpret the grotesque body as satire oversimplify the significance of the grotesque body. Bakhtin uses his Rabelais’ works to show how satire alone does not account for the complex and dual-nature of the grotesque. Bakhtin criticizes Schneegans for reading the grotesque text too much from the “narrow artistic and ideological norms of his time” which prevented him from finding the “right path to the grotesque” (Bakhtin 308). The grotesque does not function solely as a negative critique, but ultimately as a symbol of hope and renewal—a symbol which parallels Godric’s mantra of “All’s Lost, All’s Found.”

The grotesque is often seen as negative because it lowers venerated ideologies. Bakhtin writes “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 19-20). By lowering the high, the spiritual, the ideal, and the abstract, the grotesque does not simply satirize or corrupt, but rather imbues them with a new and positive significance. Bakhtin writes that “To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (Bakhtin 21). When the venerated ideologies are lowered to the material level, they are renewed. In essence, this is what is happening in *Godric*. Spiritual ideas are humanized and renewed.

Because the grotesque body symbolizes both death and renewal, it is what Bakhtin calls an “ambivalent” image. In the image of the grotesque body, seemingly opposing ideas manifest— creating a contradicting image. Bakhtin believes this trait is necessary, writing that the grotesque image must contain “both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (Bakhtin 24). Therefore, the purpose of the grotesque is to illustrate what Bakhtin calls the “double-faced fullness of life” (62). Death and degradation are necessary steps to renewal and rebirth; to ignore either the negative or the positive elements of the grotesque image would bisect the significance of the image.

The ambivalence of the grotesque body makes it what Bakhtin calls “a body in the act of becoming” (317). Within the grotesque body, the conflict of death and renewal pushes and pulls the body so that it is “never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the

world” (317). The duality of the grotesque body shows the earthy conflict that wrestles the body from birth to death to rebirth.

Death and Renewal in *Godric*

It is arguable that Buechner uses Bakhtin’s concept of death and renewal in the grotesque body to further his critique of Christianity that is separated from the earthly realm by revealing the necessity of death. Buechner depicts the salvation story in a grotesque way—it is lowered to restore hope. The salvation story, when degraded to the material stratum, finds renewed significance.

Bakhtin’s theory of death and renewal in the grotesque body threads throughout *Godric*. One of the most poignant scenes in the novel is when Perkin helps Godric hew out his coffin. It is a scene of significance to Buechner, as he often chooses this passage to read when he does readings (Brown 243). The act of carving out one’s own grave is in essence a grotesque act. It forces humans to face the death in their bodies, and Godric realizes he has “just an inch or two to creep” until he expires (Buechner 97). Buechner weaves a picture of what Bakhtin terms “pregnant death” (Bakhtin 322). Perkin pollinates Godric’s grotesque performance of whittling out his deathbed because he represents renewal. Godric endears Perkin as his offspring, saying that although his relations with women never beget children, Perkin was the son he never had (Buechner 97). Death will not end all; Godric notes that Perkin is “the years I’ll never see, and thus my son” (97). Godric and Perkin both are able to face death singing and laughing as they work because they lower supernatural death to the material world through their grotesque hacking at the earth, at the stone which will encase Godric in death. The death is charged with renewal, which culminates in the scene where Perkin and Godric jump into the tomb together. While they lie in the tomb Godric watches the sky and thinks “my tomb will seem less lonely far

for knowing that my boy once lay there too” (98). Buechner is depicting how the grotesque body holds the potential to help one cope with death. The grotesque body lowers the abstract and allows one to confront it; because the grotesque body is ultimately a story of death and renewal, one achieves hope in living.

This hope is the driving theme in Buechner’s grotesque novel. Consider the character of Elric. Like Godric, Elric is a hermit. Elric punishes his body to honor Christ; he is a grotesque character in his struggle with the duality of his body. The hermit even lives in a “rock-hewn cave” (Buechner 112), the very word grotesque originates from “grotto, a cave, underground and phantom-infested” (Bloom xv). Elric’s grotesque home is just that—buried into the earth and haunted by spirits, or fiends. It is these very fiends that distinguish Elric from the protagonist. Godric sees visions of the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and even Christ. In contrast, Elric is constantly mocked by in wake and sleep by demons. Buechner is showing the effects of missing the rebirth in the grotesque. Elric sees only death, as symbolized by his fiends, and as a result he is not ready to face death as Godric does: singing with Perkin. Elric trembles on his deathbed, saying “I fear in Paradise I’ll even miss the fiends” (Buechner 119-120). Elric’s inability to grasp the renewal in the duality of the grotesque body leads him to cling to the death, the fiends, at his end—because even fiends are better than nothingness.

Buechner tempers the idea of the grotesque body offering both death and renewal through the character of Richard Flambard. For Buechner, the grotesque body is not itself the source of death and renewal, but merely the slate on which these abstract ideas are etched. Flambard represents Buechner’s conviction in the futility of looking to the grotesque body as salvation rather than the microcosmic representation true redemption. Flambard’s philosophy is that God no longer rules in heaven high, but the grotesque lower stratum. He claims God “rules within the

privy parts and wits of men. With privities we make us others like ourselves as God made Adam once. With wit we'll make a new and wondrous world as God made this one long ago that now grows old and stinks" (Buechner 136). Flambard's strategy of the grotesque proves unfulfilling. On his deathbed, Flambard turns to the high, the abstract, and prays to "a God he must have hoped by then ruled elsewhere than the carcasses of mortal men" (Buechner 137). The duality of the grotesque body is useful, Buechner believes, as the salvation story incarnated in the material world—not as the world renewing itself.

Another example of Buechner degrading the Christian salvation message is through Godric's dream of Gillian. In Godric's dream, he is a bear. Godric's animal transformation has grotesque character; he is degraded to the beastly lower. In his dream, Godric watches the bear greedily feast on fruit from a tree, then excrete "all that sweetness out it's hinder parts" (Buechner 66). Bakhtin theorizes that defecation and all the "acts of bodily drama" are essential to the dual nature of the grotesque body because "In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (317). Godric is confronted with his grotesque state through his dream in which he is degraded as a bear, and defecating; he is linked to the world through the act. Gillian warns Godric to be wary of his bond to the earth "lest all be lost" (Buechner 69). When Godric drinks from a pond later, Gillian appears to him saying "such drink will leave you thirsting yet" (71). In this passage, Buechner again highlights the Christian doctrine of deliverance by using the grotesque body as a motif for death and renewal. Like Flambard, Gillian tempers the element of the grotesque body that pervades Buechner's work by voicing a need for renewal outside of the material world. At the same time, the images of waste and need in the grotesque body are necessary to depict the death that is part of the duality Buechner's "All's Lost, All's Found" salvation metaphor. Buechner degrades the Christian message to renew it; it is

brought down to the reproductive lower stratum to be renewed. The culminating example of this is when Godric visits Jerusalem.

Buechner chooses to the city in which Christ died as the birthplace for Godric's renewal. Buechner points out the inherent grotesqueness of the Gospel; Christ is lowered to human form and slaughtered. Godric is fascinated by the landscape where there are "traces of thy blood and fingerprints upon the stone" (Buechner 101). The concept of the grotesque body applies literally to Christ's sacrifice; he was lowered from his high state to a material body. He bled human blood on the earth. He experienced death and interacted with the material world. Godric goes to the spot where Christ was nailed to the cross, and cries "they nailed thee to a tree, thy tender flesh so rent and torn it was more full of wounds than ever was a dovehouse full of holes" (Buechner 103). The image Buechner creates of Christ ties him to the grotesque lower reproductive sphere; he is literally nailed to the world. Bakhtin notes that orifices are the main images of the grotesque body because that is how the body is linked to the earth. During the Crucifixion, more holes are put in his body, connecting him more to the world he bleeds on and for.

Christ choosing to degrade himself by becoming human and experiencing death shows the necessity of the grotesque concept of the body as Bakhtin describes it. The Christian motif of salvation truly is that of death and renewal. There has to be death for there to be renewal; Christ had to become the grotesque human body. He had to die, but his death offered renewal that covered the death in the grotesque duality of all people. Even the renewal Christ offers is grotesque because it required his own death.

Buechner continues the grotesque cycle of death and renewal through Godric's baptism. Godric hears the voice of God speak to him while he is baptized, a voice that has called to him his entire life, saying

“Take, eat me, Godric, to thy soul’s delight. Hold fast to him who gave his life for thee and thine” (Buechner 104). Christ offers the death of his flesh as the food for renewal for all. The salvation story is therefore a “two-bodied image” in which death and life are both necessary (Bakhtin 322).

The renewal that Godric finds through Christ’s death makes the saint’s own body ambivalent. One can see this even in the two names the saint gives himself: Deric, for when he is a pirate, and Godric, for when he strives to please God. Godric wrestles his whole life with his dual body that is ever becoming, as Bakhtin would term it. The theorist says that the ambivalent body is a positive because the grotesque body is dual-natured. In bodies that are not grotesque:

Death is only death, it never coincides with birth: old age is away from youth; blows merely hurt, without assisting an act of birth. All actions and events are interpreted on the level of a single, individual life. There are enclosed within the limits of the same body, limits that are the absolute beginning and end and can never meet. (Bakhtin 322).

In *Godric*, Buechner subverts traditional chronological patterns to work against the private body and further Godric’s ambivalence. The reader is introduced to Godric in the first chapter as an elderly saint who has tasted renewal, but is quickly thrown into memories of Godric reveling in grotesque death. Nor does Godric build his way progressively away from grotesque death to grotesque renewal; instead, Godric struggles with his dual body which is ever “the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception” (Bakhtin 318). Godric narrates his life by alternating between tales of losing himself in death and finding himself in renewal. He notes that “As a man dies many times before he’s dead, so does he wend from birth to birth until, by grace, he comes alive at last” (Buechner 99). One does not work from death to renewal, but rather is stretched between the duality of their body. When Godric says that one comes alive at last, he

refers to the ultimate renewal that is brought about by ultimate death. To be renewed everlasting, one must be severed from her grotesque body through Christ. Buechner shows how the hope is not found in the grotesque body through Godric's vision of Christ. Godric has just sinned, and as he is reveling in the aftermath he sees the face of Christ calling his name. Godric realizes "When I deserved it least, God gave me most. I think it was the Savior's face I saw" (Buechner 144). It is a grotesque scene—the earthy sin of Godric contrasted with the life-giving breath of God.

Buechner uses the duality of the grotesque body to demonstrate how one can contain hope and despair at the same time; as a microcosm of salvation, the grotesque body offers a glimpse of one's ultimate death and renewal that is degraded so that we can face our fears of our innate death and find hope. Bakhtin shows how the cosmic connotation of the grotesque body works to degrade and therefore overcome human fears of the infinite.

Cosmic Connotations in Bakhtin's Grotesque Body:

The grotesque body is important to Bakhtin because of its cosmic significance. He writes, "Finally, let us point out that the grotesque body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; it is directly related to the sun, to the stars" (318). The cosmic as Bakhtin describes it is the collective and timeless fears of humanity. He writes:

We must take into consideration the importance of cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful. The starry sky, the gigantic material masses of the mountains, the sea, the cosmic upheavals, elemental catastrophes—these constitute the terror that pervades ancient mythologies, philosophies, the systems of images, and language itself with its semantics. An obscure memory of cosmic perturbations in the

distant past and in the dim terror of future catastrophes form the very basis of human thought, speech, and images” (335).

In the grotesque, the cosmic fear is degraded to the material as a way of overcoming the terror through laughter. Bakhtin traces this back to the medieval *moccoli* festival, in which they cried “death to thee,” in joyful tones (354). Cosmic images are brought to the lower stratum and mocked. Bakhtin explains it as cosmic catastrophe being represented in the grotesque by becoming “humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter” (Bakhtin 336). In this way, renewal is achieved by degrading the high to the lower stratum; terror is conquered therefore hope is renewed.

The Cosmic in *Godric*:

The river Wear functions as the ultimate grotesque symbol of cosmic fear. As water, it has cosmic significance. The cosmic element is degraded to a river, which is the water that “the earth itself sweats and pours into the sea” (330). The river is therefore comparable to bodily discharge which Bakhtin calls “gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time transforming fear into laughter” (335). The cosmic unknown is made tangible by being degraded as a grotesque body. Through this image Buechner offers his solution to searching for redemption in the grotesque world; one can resist the hopelessness that is caused by cosmic terror by looking to the grotesque body of death and renewal.

The Wear represents the cosmic terror of death and the beyond throughout Buechner’s novel. Godric’s brother drowns in the Wear, and even his mother identifies how it represents timelessness. She says to Godric the Wear “sings that all things pass. He sings that the winter passes. Then comes spring. The old king dies, they crown a new. Pink-cheeked lads and lasses shrivel up like apples on a shelf. There’s not a man alive today but time, like Wear, will carry

him off too” (Buechner 147). The Wear symbolizes movement of life towards the cosmic unknown. However, in grotesque form the cosmic is overcome through its degradation. When Godric tells his mother it is a sad song the Wear sings, she replies that it is not for the Wear chuckles while he sings.

Images of the Wear as a grotesque monster pervade *Godric*. The monk notes “It sucks its teeth. It sings. It hisses like the rain. It roars. It laughs. It claps its hands. Sometimes I think it prays” (Buechner 95). The river takes is the degraded representation of the cosmic that not only represents death but hints at renewed life. In its degradation, the Wear points to the Controller of the cosmic. Godric uses the lowering of the cosmic in the form of the river Wear to renew his hope in the God who became the grotesque body to die and bring renewal. Through the death and renewal of the grotesque body and the degradation of the cosmic terror to the river to Godric is able to confront his fear of death and the unknown, saying “Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off. Praise him for stillness in the wake of pain. Praise him for emptiness. As you race to spill into the sea, praise him yourself, Old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death” (Buechner 96). When Godric meditates on the Wear he sees in its cosmic degradation a glimmer of hope; a star of Mary which whispers to the saint “what’s lost is nothing next to what’s found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup” (96).

The ultimate depiction of this principle is Godric’s death, a scene fraught with death and renewal. Godric fouls himself in his death throes, and Perkin must take him to the Wear to wash. Perkin’s presence is a reminder to Godric of his renewal. Together, they are able to laugh in the face of cosmic unknown just as they did when hacking out Godric’s tomb. Godric describes his transportation to the Wear with Perkin’s help as moving like “some ungainly beast”; It is again

the grotesque image of death and reproduction in one. It is the image of renewal, Godric's son Perkin, that initiates the laughter. Then, as Godric is lowered into the river to be cleansed, he hears the Wear laughing as well. He says, "the Wear washes all my foulness off. And all the while, he slaps his rocky things and roars with mirth" (Buechner 170). Godric symbolically faces his death by immersing himself in the symbol of cosmic unknown. Because it is degraded and humanized in the form of a river, and with the aid of his son Perkin—the symbol of Godric's renewal—Godric is able to face his terror through laughter. As he slips away, Godric's last thought is "Wear chuckles somewhere in the night. His flowing cloak is decked with stars" (171), facing again the cosmic nature of the river. Because Godric is able to confront his fear of the unknown by degrading it in the form of the Wear, he is able to join in death's laugh-rattle, and see in the cosmic the ultimate message of "All's lost. All's found" as he bids farewell to the grotesque world (Buechner 171).

Godric leaves the grotesque world, but only after faithfully enduring it for a century. As the elements of the grotesque in the novel illuminate, the grotesque world is a reality and cannot be dismissed. Buechner critiques the elevated Christian church because they miss the power in the salvation story by brushing over the grotesque authenticity of it. Buechner uses Bakhtin's conception of death and renewal in the grotesque body as a microcosm of the salvation story—a story in which death is necessary for life, where Christ's wounds heal our wounding (Buechner 7). The salvation story belongs in the material world because that is where renewal takes place; Christ died on earth and resurrected us all. Buechner uses the grotesque body of death and renewal as glimmer of hope in our ultimate renewal, one that can be glimpsed in the terrifying cosmic elements that speak of a world outside of the grotesque. By using the human fear of the cosmic, Buechner depicts the broken need of humanity. Godric is able to face the grotesqueness

and the cosmic fear, and still have hope because one can glimpse renewal in the duality of the grotesque body.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Transl. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Brown, Dale. *The Book of Buechner: A Journey through His Writings*. 1st ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Buechner, Frederick. *Godric*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1980.
- Evans, Robert C. "A Sharp Eye for the Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Country People'." *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*. Ed . Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.
- Gillum, Michael. "'Great God, What They Got in That Wagon?': Grotesque Intrusions in *As I Lay Dying*." *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*. Ed . Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.
- Holt, J.R. "Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the Grotesque." *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*. Ed . Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.
- Schevill, James. "Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht, and Williams." *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Grotesque*. Ed . Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009.