# Rediscovering Evelyn Waugh's *Helena*: an Orthodox Approach

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*Evelyn Waugh a toujours considéré son roman **Helena** une très valeureuse œuvre; pourtant cette-ci n'a pas été bien reçu sur son publication, et même aujourd'hui le public ne l'apprécie pas suffisamment. C'est l'intention de cet article de démontrer comment ce roman peut être intéressant pour le lecteur orthodoxe Roumain, puisqu'il revêt d'un style directe et moderne un sujet profond et traditionnel.*
*L'auteur met en évidence la perspective orthodoxe, pour montrer que cette perspective engendre des interprétations nouvelles de ce roman. Par sa sincérité et originalité, cet œuvre peut aider le lecteur à redécouvrir des dimensions spirituelles oubliées. Pour cela, l'auteur a utilisé le texte d'André Scrima, **L'expérience spirituelle et ses langages**.*

*Key Words: religious perspective, modern literature, Orthodox viewpoint, Saint Helena.*

Although Evelyn Waugh's *Helena* is artistically exceptional because of the way in which the author chooses to blend a modern style with a traditional theme, it was not well received by the mid-20th-century audience, nor is it now one of his most acclaimed novels. Additionally it has not been translated into Romanian, although some of his other novels have been. Nevertheless its author considered it to be his favourite book, while he was aware that its very essence would make it unpalatable for many critics.

Unlike religiously indifferent critics, the Orthodox reader can discern the essence of *Helena* and can use the forthrightness and freshness of Waugh's approach to rediscover forgotten personal spiritual dimensions. Evelyn Waugh was a Catholic, yet the Orthodox public will find this religious topic familiar, since Saint Helena, who is one of the most important Christian saints, has been venerated both in the Orthodox East and in the Catholic West for centuries.

Besides the religious theme, which might appeal to any believer in any time, I think that Waugh's style, which preserves a delicate balance between humour and piety, might be appealing to the contemporary reader. Helena, as a character, is so full of contrasts that she cannot fail to charm the modern reader, who finds her both vivid and energetic, on the one hand, and rational and well organized on the other hand.



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## 1. The Book and its Author

I would like to mention at the beginning of this article, in which I focus on *Helena*, that after his conversion to Catholic Christianity, Waugh's fiction became increasingly preoccupied with his characters' religiosity, and this was not a fortuitous occurrence, but rather a programmatic decision, since in 1946 he declared that in his subsequent novels, besides style, he would concentrate on representing "man more fully, which to me means only one thing, man in his relation to God. … I believe that you can only leave God out by making your characters pure abstractions" (according to McCartney 97). Waugh's desire to depict profound characters did not affect his style, which remained vivacious and witty.

It would be untrue to assert that Evelyn Waugh did not expect a rather cold reception for his book, as he wrote to A.D. Peters, "I am finishing the life of St. Helena. That will be a very difficult work to publish – [it] falls between all stools" (according to Heath, 198) and later on in another letter he predicted "How it will flop" (according to Eulàlia Carceller Guillamet, p. 214). Yet, this did not prevent his being disappointed to see how his "masterpiece", which he characterised as "the best book I have ever written or ever will write" (in a letter to Christopher Sykes, according to Heath 199), was disregarded and forgotten. Sykes also confirmed (in one of his own letters) that this situation was "the greatest disappointment of his whole literary life" (according to Eulàlia Carceller Guillamet, p. 214)

Trying to find reasons for Evelyn Waugh's attachment to this book a researcher realises that it was not only the historical character, herself, who was dear to him,[1] but also the fact that he found common grounds with her, which is visible in the way he presented her. Helena's image, as Waugh painted her, is a brilliant picture of a practical, down-to-earth woman, who believed in action and was not only courageous, but also resilient. She was a person anyone should admire and a person with whom the author could identify[2].

[1] As proven by the fact that in 1952, when asked to write a short article in a Catholic Journal entitled *Saints for Now*, edited by Clare Booth Luce and published by Sheed & Ward in New York, he wrote "Saint Helena Empress".

[2] After Waugh visited Jerusalem and decided to write historical fiction, he chose Helena as the subject of his novel. Yet, whether the result is historical or rather more fictional remains a matter of debate, since the author himself says, at the end of his preface: "The story is just something to be read; in fact a legend" (*Helena* 11). It is a fact that most of the important characters (perhaps with the exception of Marcias, Helena's tutor turned gnostic) are historical persons (Pope Sylvester of Rome, Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem, Lactantius, Constantius Chlorus – Helena's husband, Emperor Constantine the Great, his wife Fausta, his son by Minerva, Crispus, etc.), but all the dialogues are invented, as are the real personas of any (and all) of these characters, as can be grasped from their interactions which are just fictional.



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Waugh's novel is not only witty and entertaining, but it is also subtle in rendering details of Helena's strong, but gentle, personality, for instance her sensitivity to the people around her, once she has become a Christian. When the author insists on the differences between her inner self before the conversion and after, one suspects that his admiration, obvious in the description, springs form a feeling of communion, or even empathy, which may be the result of his identification with her: "Waugh, who was a convert of English background, thus represents himself in a woman of British background, who grows up as a pagan in late Roman Britain, and who is converted to Christianity later in life" (Potter 117). Not only the personal history of conversion is made to look similar, but also the way corrupt Rome is presented may hint at mid-20th-century modern civilization, which had just emerged from the Second World War.

Evelyn Waugh views Christianity in a straightforward and simple way. His Helena approaches her new religion in a very direct manner and she endeavours to open herself up to God's will. According to Drijvers "Helena's humbleness, her plainness, her self-discovery, her good taste and the fulfilment of her vocation through the discovery of the Cross were qualities which Waugh greatly admired and with which he could identify himself" (in his essay). Other authors have also pointed out this symbolic bond (Eulàlia Carceller Guillamet, 214, for instance).

Perhaps the most powerful episode that supports this suggestion is the moment when Helena reaches Bethlehem, on Epiphany, and while attending the Mass she feels the strong connection with the "three royal sages" (144-145). The long speech she gives, as if talking to them, is deeply emotional (one of the very few such instances in the novel), and the prayer is even more so: "You are my special patrons and patrons of all late comers, of all who have a tedious journey to make to the truth, of all who are confused with knowledge and speculation" (*Helena* 145). It is clear that Waugh, too, feels that he is one of the late comers, who are sometimes confused by superfluous knowledge, and that he counts himself among the people that Helena prays for.

Due to the fact that they were both converts, Waugh and Helena "share a process of quest" and the "liberating outcome" which – according to Eulàlia Carceller Guillamet, again – is very convincing, making Helena "alive and enduring" (p. 214). One of Helena's most endearing qualities, the one that makes her very modern, is her practicality, which is shown to be so prevailing that even mysticism and asceticism become a matter of practicality:

Helena was exempt by her age for all obligations [fasting]. Nevertheless she decided to fast. It seemed to her a matter of practical expediency. Her



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interrogations had come to nothing. She had exhausted all the natural means of finding what she sought. 'Very well' she said 'I'll see what fasting can do'. (*Helena* 146)

Helena's rational approach to religion and her determination, once she judges her enterprise worthy, are qualities appreciated by the modern mind, and it is no wonder that Waugh felt comfortable with the character he created.

Yet Waugh's identifying with Helena is just a literary device, and not an imitation, since in his essay *St. Helena Empress* he clearly advises against such an illusion, which cannot be helpful spiritually. We may invoke the saints' help, but each person can become a good Christian only if he (or she) follows his (or her) own personal path. It is Waugh's deep belief that everyone has a calling and a personal vocation and only by fulfilling it can he (or she) find salvation.

There is only one saint that Bridget Hogan can actually become, St. Bridget Hogan, and that saint she must become, either here or in the fires of purgatory, if she is to enter heaven. She cannot slip through in fancy dress, made up as Joan of Arc (Waugh *St. Helena Empress* 39).

It is this conviction that emerges clearly when one reads the short article, *St. Helena Empress*, which is part of a collection of essays with the title *Saints for Now* edited by Clare Booth Luce. Furthermore, it is this very conviction which is at work in *Helena*, since repeatedly he shows how Helena's whole life is a slow progress to this fulfilment of her own unique quest.

Her quest was finished. She had done what only the saints succeed in doing; what indeed constitutes their patent of sanctity. She had completely conformed to the will of God. Others a few years back had done their duty gloriously in the arena. Hers was a gentler task, merely to gather wood. (*Helena* 156)

Equally Waugh's task as a writer was "gentler", too, yet not necessarily easy, as his artistic sensitivity, which made his creation possible, made his life difficult. Sometimes his religious convictions made him doubt the usefulness of art (i.e. literature) for salvation. Even worse, like C.S. Lewis, who wrote at the same period, he wondered, at the beginning of his article *St. Helena Empress*, if too much entertainment was not detrimental to the salvation of the soul, since the escape from reality through cinema and/or literature might diminish man's ability to meditate and concentrate.

**2. Waugh's Helena – a Christian Saint**

I consider that this novel, which was treasured by its author, is important for the Orthodox public and that it has a penetrating spiritual message which can be revealed when reading it in the context of Orthodox theology. While in Christians' memory Helena is remembered for her single act of finding the True Cross, in Waugh's book her portrait includes many details and she appears as a model Christian. She is depicted as a point of reference for any Christian, honest in both her inquisitiveness and her devotion.

I will discuss some of Helena's defining characteristics starting from Father Andre Scrima's study on spiritual experience in Orthodoxy (Experiența spirituală



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și limbajele ei). According to him one of the major attributes of a devout Christian is his itinerant, peripatetic condition, which does not only refer to physical movement, but rather to continuous spiritual travel, all through his earthly life, towards Heaven (p.176-193). Another aspect, equally important is a Christian's ability to wonder and to be amazed, avoiding, thus, a repetitive life, devoid of a vision (p.95-99).

*a. Helena – the Pilgrim*

Helena, as portrayed by Evelyn Waugh, is constantly on the move from place to place (from Colchester, to Ratisbon, to Nish, to the Dalmatian coast and Trèves and then to Rome), trying to understand reality and to see beyond appearances. It is this openness of mind and also her aspiration to achieve great things, unthinkable for the others, that set her apart. Chlorus, her husband, cannot understand her, and neither can the other women in Ratisbon. Although considered "stand-offish", by some ladies, she is actually quite liberal in her views on people's rights and on what they are entitled to. For instance, it is her generosity of spirit which, in Ratisbon, prompts her to declare, to Chlorus' surprise, "…couldn't the wall be at the limits of the world and all men, civilised and barbarian, have a share in The City?", words which prefigure the Christian destiny of Rome.

Actual physical movement is necessary for Helena, and indeed for any Christian, because only in this manner, by experiencing different kinds of environment, can she (or he) find her (or his) most appropriate type of existence. Thus, Father Scrima shows how after Constantine the Great decreed a formal end to persecution and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, there were many people who left the city to go to isolated desert places, as a form of "abandoning the world", which was interpreted by Scrima, as a subversive reaction which contested this "sedentarisation" (Scrima 182). Helena's pilgrimage is equally a reaction against "sedentarisation" (*Helena* 92). Helena refuses to enjoy her rather newly acquired position as Empress Dowager because she is too full of life and too honest to accept being assimilated into the imperial, but corrupt existence.

Helena feels that her life is over when she is young (in Dalmatia) and conversely when she is old she feels vigorous and indomitable (in Jerusalem), and this is due to her Christian fervour and the drive to find the True Cross. A lack of action and superfluous comfort does not satisfy her, a fact made obvious by her discussion with Calpurnia (a respected Roman matron), who says: "…here I am well and cheerful, busy all day long, doing no one any harm and some people a little good, with the finest garden on the coast and a collection of bronzes. Don't you call that a full life? / No, Calpurnia, not really" (*Helena* 60).

Helena needs to find her own place in the world, that is, she needs to find and fulfil her vocation. She feels the same lack of purpose when she is an abandoned wife as when she is a respected, but inactive, Dowager Empress. She does not belong in the world full of intrigues in Rome, and she equally rejects sterile intellectual debates, either among pagans or among Christians. Helena goes on a



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real pilgrimage, both spiritual and physical, and her finding of the Cross comes as the natural climax of her spiritual experience. In other words she also revolts against sedentary ideas, which seemed unchangeable and she fights the scepticism of many of the Christians she encounters, starting with Pope Sylvester to Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem. Her itinerant condition and material quest are accompanied or rather guided by her spiritual transformation, due to her inner vocation, which she discovers gradually.

When trying to discuss "the itinerant condition", which requires an onward movement, Father Scrima notices that time remains a constant, and he quotes Saint Anthony the Great in his description of spiritual life "Forgetting those that are behind me and yearning for what awaits in front of me, I run to fulfil my purpose telling to myself: I start again every moment" (according to Father Scrima 190). Helena moves all her life, trying to find a place or an existence which defines her, while feeling as old at forty as at seventy.

*b. Helena – the Innocent and Amazed Explorer of Life*

Father Andre Scrima emphasises the importance of pilgrimage as a way of moving through life with a spiritual purpose, while time remains more or less unchanged, and the present becomes an eternal re-enactment of history. The pilgrims "follow a sort of coordinates which have a spiritual or trans-historical meaning" (Scrima 185). Father Scrima also underlines the importance of the ability to wonder, as one of the crucial features of a Christian. "The ability to be amazed" he says "places the being in a state of wakefulness, i.e. of intense lucidity….This amazement offers us the dimension of profundity" (Scrima 97).

It is perhaps this feature which was best highlighted by Waugh when he created his Helena. She has a fresh and unique approach to religious matters, an approach which is extreme and at the same time exceptional in its innocence. Helena does not have prejudices and although she is not gullible, she does feel amazed whenever she encounters something that resonates with her soul. Perhaps one of the most suggestive instances which exemplifies her unprecedented interests is her discussion with Pope Sylvester:

And then Helena said something that seemed to have no relevance.

"Where is the cross, anyway?" she asked.

"What cross, my dear?"

"The only one. The real one."

"I don't know. I don't think anyone knows. **I don't think anyone has asked before**" (*Helena* 128).

What she actually looks for – and finds – is a revelation, and her sacrifice is legitimised by the finding of the True Cross, which is a sign of the ultimate material reality, namely a proof that the Crucifixion, and consequently the Resurrection had been real. Her inquisitiveness prompts her to uncover that which is unique, baffling the witnesses who have given up the search as futile. Helena surprises everyone not only with her determination to continue her search, but also



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with her ingenuous belief that finding the Cross can be done, because she will receive God's help.

She is not afraid or surprised when miracles (like the meeting with the Wandering Jew) occur, but she is amazed (and enthusiastic) when she encounters material proof of Jesus' presence in Jerusalem (For instance the steps He walked on, which she quickly sends to Rome.) She seems to follow the motto "Truth must be conceived spiritually and itinerantly, as amazement in front of creation, and as a living experience" (Scrima 191). Helena does see her accomplishment as the fulfilment of a spiritual quest that defines her by pointing out her vocation, which has kept her alert and has prevented her from straying away from her conviction.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, it is her newness to Christianity that makes it possible for her to investigate matters that have not been undertaken before. She, who is free of theoretical theological ideas, is also free of bigotries. She does not understand the theological debates, nor does she understand the reason behind them, but she has, because of the freshness of her religious knowledge, the ability and even predisposition to find the material foundation of our belief in the Crucifixion and implicitly in the Resurrection. Her lack of philosophical training and constraints regarding established, acceptable pursuits, gives her the opportunity to find her own unique way towards devotion and worship.

Father Scrima underlines the fact that "The one who is captive in his routine does not know how to remember and cannot remember. (…) Getting used is a form of amnesia and the Mystery is chased away" (Scrima p. 178). Helena refuses to conform and against all odds and despite the lack of help or confidence from the others, she prevails. Therefore she rejects any sort of routine and finds the Mystery, defeating thus the *amnesia* (or apathy) which might be the result of standardised (or even dispassionate) religious education or three hundred years of persecutions, which held back theological research.

It would, perhaps be the time to mention that there are some aspects which might hurt Orthodox believers' sensibility or at least unsettle them, and perhaps the most obvious is the irreverent image of Emperor Constantine the Great, who although regarded as a saint by the Orthodox Church, is not considered as such by Catholics. Such a depiction, as a half crazy person, obsessed with his power and situation (proudly considering his possible immortality, and thinking about the prospect of being raised in a chariot) and also duplicitous (as he seeks entertainment in witches' performances) is far from the canonical one and hardly coherent with the image of a responsible God-loving Emperor. Yet, his image is contrasted with Helena's lucid and sunny attitude and his weaknesses show even more clearly the temptation which comes with power and into which Helena does not fall.

### 3. Facing Temptations and Assuming Risks

Evelyn Waugh assumed a great risk when writing *Helena*, an endeavour which challenges the reader, as for a modern its content is too traditional and for a traditionalist its style is too modern. Yet, such a combination tests our openness of



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spirit and questions our inner self, which is both wild (original) and modern on the one hand and educated (tamed) and traditional, on the other, as it has been pointed out: "With its relentless juxtaposition of the modern and the primitive, Waugh's fiction constantly calls us back to the fragile partition that separates the savage from the civilized not only in the world at large but also within ourselves" (McCartney 141). Just like Waugh's fiction, Helena, the character, has to face temptations and she assumes risks.

There is no doubt that when the Dowager Empress Helena arrives in Jerusalem she behaves like a saint and Bishop Macarius' reaction proves it: "They expected someone very old and very luxurious; and they rather hoped, gentle. Instead they met a crank; and more than a crank, a saint" (*Helena* 137). She baffles the Bishop and Prefect's expectations with her humility and her demands. The old Empress settles "in a single room among the nuns of Mount Zion where she did her own housework and took her turn in waiting at table" (138) and "she wanted the True Cross" (137). Although gentle enough (matching their initial image) she is, surprisingly for everyone, quite "indefatigable" (143), vigorous, determined and cheerful, despite the fact that no one is either helpful or hopeful. Waugh's description of what she finds in Jerusalem and how she behaves is so straightforward as to be almost unemotional, but still there are instances when religious devotion becomes emotional and quite extreme. Her fasting, for instance, proves almost deadly, since she is so weak and tired "like the body in the tomb" (Helena 146). Yet, it is this final sacrifice that brings about her miraculous victory.

But maybe the biggest temptation and piece of bitterness is the image projected by the Wandering Jew in her mind – he is about to reveal the place where the true Cross was thrown and he asks no money for this piece of information, but rather he evaluates his future profit from the commerce with relics:

Helen listened and in her mind saw, clear as all else on that brilliant timeless morning, what was in store. She saw the sanctuaries of Christendom become a fair ground, stalls hang with beads and medals, substances yet unknown pressed into sacred emblems; heard a chatter haggling in tongues yet unspoken. She saw the treasuries of the Church filled with forgeries and impostures. She saw Christians fighting and stealing to get possession of trash. She saw all this, considered it and said: "It's a stiff price'; and then: 'Show me the cross" (*Helena* 152).

One can see how her religion, her only solace, is threatened by this image and somehow she is made partly responsible for this danger. Yet, she is steadfast in her conviction, and she does not give up, as she feels that somehow such a hellish image could only be a diabolic temptation.

The fictional temptation faced by Helena has real equivalent in the various creations of modern culture. According to Waugh it often happens that our "imaginative faculties" are tested, by the cultural products of our modern society (artistic films and realist novels) and we have to preserve or/and find our own identity (Waugh *St. Helena Empress* 38) and not to get diverted by some induced imaginings. The pursuit of culture, to the extent of neglecting spiritual, humbler



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enterprises, can also be a temptation for the educated, and it was C.S. Lewis, Waugh's contemporary, who was deeply concerned about it.

In his essays on *Christianity and Literature* and *Christianity and Culture*, C.S. Lewis discusses at length in what way "the life of culture (that is of intellectual and aesthetic activity)" is good or, quite the opposite, harmful for man. The core of his analysis, which is quite detailed and uses many references (both medieval and modern, and by modern I mean 19th century), is that culture, although not spiritual, has certain values, which he characterises as "sub-Christian", and thus they "contain some reflection or ante-past of the spiritual values" (Lewis 40). Thus, according to him, culture in itself, when not abused, does not harm those who are aware of reality and of what virtuous life really means.

Evelyn Waugh wrote in his article, *Converted to Rome – Why it Happened to Me*, that "Civilisation […] has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it it has no significance or power to command allegiance" (*Daily Express*, 20 Oct. 1930,10, according to Alain Blayac, 100). Thus his position regarding the importance of Christianity for Western culture (and implicitly literature) is quite clear. Unlike C.S. Lewis he does not feel the need to expose his theoretical analysis in essays, but rather he expresses his convictions in a concrete way in his novels, of which *Helena* is only one (*Brideshead Revisited* being another example).

By writing *Helena*, Waugh rises above the futile debate whether Christianity and modern culture can coexist harmoniously and can mutually support each other or on the contrary whether they are in opposition. He shows that the portrayal of a religious figure can transgress the canons and his Helena is a modern horse-lover, who shocks with her questions and comforts with her humbleness and gentleness. It is this modern behaviour, which is appealing to the public, and makes her attractive for the contemporary audiences.

Although created in the image of a Catholic modern Christian, Waugh's Helena appeals to Orthodox readers. Even though some rigorous theologians might object to several aspects of her personality – her practicality and realism, for instance – preferring a more legend-like presentation, I believe I have shown that Waugh's work is permeated by an unpretentious and obvious wish to make Saint Helena captivating for various categories of readers. All the literary devices, which the author, in the preface, admits to having used, have the veiled purpose of creating a familiar Helena, to whom the Christians, Catholic and Orthodox alike can relate.

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