

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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THE THEOLOGICAL TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC FICTION (2018) BY SIMON MARSDEN

Review by Eleanor Beal

The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 210 pp.

Simon Marsden is a well-known commentator on the theological in early Gothic Romances, principally the works of Emily Brontë, on which he wrote his book *Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination* (2014). In this, his most recent book, *The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (2018), he continues his attempt to re-draw the contemporary literary map and the materialist trend in Gothic scholarship by turning to Christian theology in the contemporary Gothic. As the front cover of the book suggests – with its twilight cast over a ruined church in the background, a gravestone in the forefront and the subtitle, “Holy Ghosts” – the reader of contemporary Gothic fiction enters an uncertain world “haunted by Christianity” (1). Recurring themes include the spectral and ghostly, the residue and stain of past sins, and, most prevalently, the awareness of an absent, missing, or silent saviour. Marsden interprets these echoes of Christianity as symptomatic both of the decline in religious belief and of the Gothic’s ongoing attempt to represent specifically theological concerns by imagining the religious “as a source and site of horror,” a “nostalgic yearning,” and “tentative glimpses of redemptive possibility” (3).

In his book, Marsden takes a generically Christian perspective, rather than speaking from any particular orthodoxy. He does, however, imaginatively seek to “reveal not only the theological threads in contemporary Gothic,” but, perhaps more radically, also “the Gothic threads in contemporary theology” (2). Marsden thus sets out his book as a dual project that gives equal space to both the Gothic, as a theologically engaged discourse, and theology as a discourse engaged in dark conflicts. This duality is illuminated in Marsden’s writing, which deftly moves between theological traditions, radical repositionings, and postmodern theories that re-evaluate theology and narrative in the contemporary moment. What becomes increasingly obvious, throughout of the book, is that, just as the Gothic challenges conventions and pushes the boundaries of orthodoxy, theology is not a static or stagnant thing, but offers innumerable approaches to reading the impulses and crises depicted in Gothic texts.

The chapters featured here are both complex and diverse in their dealing with contemporary theological ideas. Marsden’s book begins with the chapter “Gothic Heresies,” establishing the relationship between religious orthodoxy and heresy as “one of both dialogue and exclusion,” and arguing that, traditionally, the Gothic participates in both (23). Theological heresy, Marsden

points out, “is as old as the genre itself,” but so has the Gothic’s “exploration of the transgressive [...] often been employed as a way of reaffirming the limits of orthodox belief and practice” (23). After establishing the Gothic as anti-fundamentalist and heretical, rather than radically opposed to religion, Marsden then launches into an analysis of Marlon James’s *The Devil and John Crow* (2005), Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Accursed* (2013), and Andrew Michael Hurley’s *The Loney* (2014), three contemporary texts that theologically and heretically challenge the limits and boundaries of orthodox faith.

Chapters Three and Four, focus more closely on the specific theological issue of evil, each chapter presenting a close reading of a single Gothic author connected by their interest in material and ontological questions in this regard. The analysis that follows in these two chapters stipulates the pressing social and ethical issues shared by theology and the Gothic. Chapter Three, “There Were Some Stains That Could Not Be Removed,” explores the unbounded place of the theological and the material in the works of Adam Nevill, and what Marsden argues is Nevill’s dramatisation of “the struggle of individuals to free themselves both from their own capacities for (self) destructive behaviour and from the histories of transgression that continue to taint the communities in which they participate” (47). Chapter Four, “Much Ado About Nothing,” introduces for Gothic readers and scholars the theological term ‘privation,’ which Marsden defines as “quite literally nothing; it is an absence where there should be a thing” and “a distortion of a specific good.” (7) His discussion focuses on connecting this term to the use of spectral evil in the works of Peter Straub.

Chapter Five turns from evil as lack or absence to some of the ways that Gothic writers have responded to the death, absence, or silence of God in 1970s. While some of Marsden’s earlier readings explore the use of theology in the work of unbelieving Gothic writers, this particularly lucid chapter examines the orthodox Catholic writer, William Peter Blatty, and the often-overlooked priest characters in his most famous novel, *The Exorcist* (1971), his long-neglected sequel *Legion* (1983), and *The Ninth Configuration* (1978). The beauty of this chapter is not just Marsden’s location of the religious anxieties of Blatty’s texts in relation to the earlier decade’s reprisal of Nietzsche’s philosophies, or his argument that Blatty is in “‘dispute’ with a Fallen world” (91). It lies also in his identification of radical theological echoes within the orthodox concerns of the novels. While this move certainly enables Marsden to explore Blatty’s redemptive response to the religious crisis of the age, as well as supporting his claim that the Gothic is haunted literature engaged in both orthodoxy and heresy, it also covertly engages with the boundaries between the radical and orthodox theologies currently being debated more widely in contemporary philosophy.

Continuing the theme of absence and silence in Chapter Six, Marsden takes us from a dead or missing Christian God, to the invisible or absent Christ in vampire fiction. The chapter sets the groundwork by arguing that, over time, the reduction of Christ to certain identifiable and empirical features, a strategy underscored by the fixation on Jesus as a historical figure, has led to a similarly fixed and stultified image of Christ in discourse. But, asks Marsden, “in what ways might the imaginative resources of Gothic fiction serve to make this Christ strange again?” (117). Noting how vampire fiction has often been fascinated with strange, ambiguous, and transgressive

figures of atonement, Marsden pursues an answer to this question in his analysis of Justin Cronin's vampire trilogy: *The Passage* (2010), *The Twelve* (2012), and *The City of Mirrors* (2016). This series' contemporary take on narratives of vampirism and contagion, Marsden argues, is full of strange Christological allusions that engage the theological and political, along with hailing newness and change through its ambiguous messiah figure, Amy.

No study of the theological Gothic would be complete without an exploration of one of the most popular and prevalent Biblical figures, the Devil. However, as Marsden questions: what "has become of Satan in contemporary Gothic fictions?" (143). This once polysemous theological character, previously embodied in imagination and art as fallen angel, corruptor, and significant symbol of revolution and rebellion has become, in the twenty-first century, a figure of "alienation and isolation in a fragmented and superficial culture," and "the embodiment of the structural failures of twenty-first century society" (144). In his chapter, "Sympathy for the Devil," Marsden turns to a number of satanic characters in contemporary Gothic texts, including Glen Duncan's *I Lucifer* (2002), Chuck Palahniuk's *Damned* (2011) and *Doomed* (2013), and Joe Hill's *Horns* (2010), arguing that, while the devil is no longer "exclusively Christian," Christian theology is useful in tracing how the Devil has developed a disenchanted, disillusioned sensibility in contemporary Gothic texts that reflects our own hyper-postmodern experience of the world.

"Few novelists have taken their readers and characters 'back to the start' quite as often as Stephen King" announces Marsden, before turning to the fitting topic of apocalypse in his final chapter (163). Recognising both the mutable, polysemous character of the apocalyptic discourse and the complicated relationship that Gothic authors and readers have with endings, Marsden attempts to trace Gothic's development and departures from traditional Christian eschatology to its concurrent existence with secularism and modern crisis, acknowledging that "the end, rather than ushering a longed for new world as it does in biblical apocalypse, has become a calamity to be averted or survived" (165). For Marsden, King's fiction conveys an understanding of contemporary apocalypse as a narrative that opens out into renewed crises rather than cathartic endings, and in which characters cling to a notion of hope rather than certainty.

Reverting to his earlier analysis of the Gothic as a fiction haunted by Christianity in his conclusory chapter, Marsden emphasises that there is no homogenous theology to the Gothic but that the turn to theology imaginatively challenges the familiarity of Gothic convention, enabling novelists, critics, and readers to go beyond the inherited religious symbols and aesthetics of Gothic writing. He ends his discussion with a call for consideration of how the turn to theology in contemporary culture promotes a greater understanding of some of the complexities of Gothic writing that engages with religion.

One of the biggest strengths of Marsden's book is its intelligent and lucid handling of complex theological idea that does not shy away from the political and historical, nor is it afraid to deal with religion's frequently dark and violent past. Those who share Marsden's view that the anxieties of the Gothic are associated with the religious and theological will find an engaging challenge in Marsden's

The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction. Without rejecting the Gothic as a species of writing often negatively haunted by its Christian ghosts, Marsden encourages us to look not just to the past for meaning, but to the contemporary Gothic as a focal point of theological anxiety and redemptive relief engaged in questioning aspects of modern society. The book is also a useful introduction to students and scholars new to theology and looking to engage with these overlooked aspects of the contemporary Gothic. In particular, the book serves as a helpful pointer towards key moments in current history, such as the rise of radical theology and the introduction of the Death of God movement in the 1960s, as well as situating key theological themes such as evil, original sin, fallenness, the Devil, and apocalypse in the contexts of postmodernism, consumerism, and atheist writing.

Marsden organises his book as a series of more or less independent essays, each of which explores an aspect of Christian theology in relation to a specific author's work and in context of the Gothic fiction. Yet these chapters are also deftly interlinked and carefully cross referenced so that they bring together seldom-related ideas, themes, and images in the novels, revealing conjunctions between some prevalent Gothic themes, characters, and critical forms of theological thinking. Several key contemporary theological thinkers are profiled, discussed, and engaged through the Gothic in Marsden's work, and he uses an interesting and intelligent medley of contemporary Gothic authors to highlight the connection between Christian theology and the Gothic's "struggles with human failure, transgression and guilt," its preoccupations with "the flaws of human power structures," and its heretical outpouring of "voices of protest against the divine" (191). In doing so, he offers fresh perspective and raises rich awareness of the possibilities opened up by a turn to the theological in Gothic Studies, all the while asserting theology's importance in understanding the Gothic's engagement with contemporary culture.

BIONOTE

Eleanor Beal lectures in English literature and film at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, and is an associate of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies. She specialises in religion, theology, and the Gothic with particular interest in the intersections and debates between the religious, the secular, and the female body. Her publications include chapters in *Divine Horror: Essays on the Cinematic Battle between the Sacred and Diabolical* (McFarland, 2017) and *Transmedia Creatures: Frankenstein's Afterlives* (Bucknell University Press, 2018). She is the co-editor of *Horror and Religion: New Literary Approaches to Theology, Race and Sexuality* (University of Wales Press, 2019)