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***Alan P. R. Gregory.*** *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime.* ***Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015, x +318pp.***

This is quite simply a marvellous book. In *Science Fiction Theology,* Alan Gregory has given a model for responsible theological engagement with both literature and pop culture. His vast knowledge and patient exposition of science fiction (SF) and his ability, moreover, to weave deep readings of SF within a sophisticated account of Christian metaphysics are certainly enviable. Those who attempt similar projects of comparison should definitely take notice; reverse-engineering its composition would be worthwhile for any author in the genre.

Gregory's aim in this monograph is both historical and constructive: he seeks to show how in "Contesting the Christian sublime, science fiction created its own in the substance of space itself, the imagination of technology, the destiny of scientific reason, and the vast, disruptive exigencies of the universe itself" (p. 232). In particular, he hopes to demonstrate how different iterations of the sublime, shorn or real transcendence or beautiful manifestation, have permeated the imagination of SF writers from its early beginnings until the present day.

In Chapter One, Gregory gives a division of the sublime, drawing upon the usual suspects of Addison, Baillie, Burke, Kant, and Young. Broadly-speaking, he thinks that the sublime was historically aligned, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the potencies of the natural world, our capacity for self-transcendence and will-assertion – as well as with the character of God. However, this fascination with power, in which "the greatness of God and of humanity are correlate", comes to mean that the "elevation" of human possibility is often "unmediated by the divine kenosis and condescension that forms Christianity's narrative" (p. 24). As far as a historically Christian context is concerned, this is a significant transformation. Moreover, in the imaginary of the industrial age, the

"natural sublime" gradually transforms into a technological one: from the towering skyscrapers of the metropolis to mushroom clouds of New Mexico. Within the post-industrial, "technological sublime", the arrow of potential is made progressive and horizontal so that "Transcendence is immanentized, the uncontrollable force of the divine projected into history" (p. 30). In the shadow of these developments, theological speculation was impacted: especially after Newton and Boyle, God is conceived in some quarters as, simply, the most elevated and powerful agent *within* a mechanistic universe, a fact not dissipated by the plethora of imagery relating to divine immensity within that same period. For if this ontotheological schema is accepted, then "No matter upon what qualifications theologians insist, if public religious language sustains an imagining of God as a reality *within* the entire realm of beings or in continuity with that realm, then the crucial difference between Creator and creature is lost" (p. 36).

Chapter Two to Five feature several in-depth readings SF works and authors. Starting from the earlier tradition of Hugo Gernsback and Abraham Merrit's "science-fictional democratizing of the sublime" (p. 46), Gregory moves through to John Campbell and H. P. Lovecraft. The contrast between these two imaginaries is striking: while Campbell conceives of a technological sublime of "engineering heroics" (p. 58) in which the "the irreducible diversity of reality is denied" (p. 59), Lovecraft's weird-fictional universe is one of final "abjection" (pp. 73-75) and "impossible perversity" (p. 71). The subliminal horror of Lovecraft is that chaos and disorder have true finality, with the world being not only "antitheological" but even more pointedly "antihumanist" in its drift (p. 69). In opposition to any Logos, Christian or otherwise, "Lovecraft turns abjection into metaphysics" and fictionalises a world dominated by "a terror of cosmic proportions", "the nonform of anticreation" (p. 75). It is not a coincidence that Lovecraft is beloved by speculative realists/materialists like Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux, who have attempted think the contingency of being without any correlation to the workings of mind or sufficient causality.

In a comparable mood, H. G. Wells's pessimistic futurism, especially in his late period, imagines a world of vast evolutionary development with little care for human well-being. We have no guarantees of final beatitude within his vision. Moreover, Well's god is a finite, non-sublime entity who mysteriously influences history, while human achievement against the

odds is the truly sublime fact to be celebrated. But as Gregory says, this conceptualization "has failed to attend to such obvious questions as to how a finite God – a personality … just like ourselves – can 'influence' and 'act upon us' without violating the moral freedom that Wells treasures" (p. 94). Behind Gregory's question is the broadly classical and Thomist assumption that God's being-as-actus purus should not be defined over-against any created causes. Anything less would make God, in some sense, a product of the temporal. Olaf Stapledon, for his part, also imagines a universe of immense scale, filled with wonder and terror, but where the idea of any transcendent God becomes less and less important, eventually being left behind altogether. Nonetheless, Stapledon does have some kind of a god, a Star Maker; but this being, as Gregory says, is "identified more closely with power than love, constituting a severe deformation of the Christian God" (p. 116), a god who assigns fate but without any providential care. Ultimately though, Stapledon thinks that "the spiritual path to the human sublime must be marked off from faith" (p. 101) – even as he draws on a secularised, Christian and Dantesque mythology – and that Christianity should be "overcome and transcended in a worship purified from all faith and wishful thinking" (p. 117).

Gregory's discussion of Philip K. Dick marks somewhat of a shift in his argument. The previous and subsequent chapters focus on several authors, while Chapter Four focuses on a single SF writer. This seems to be because Dick provides a slight diversion from the trajectory Gregory has been developing. Whereas others have tended to focus on the unfathomability and power of the so-called mathematical and dynamical sublime, Dick was critical of "sublimity as a discourse of power and manipulation", which led him somewhat to "opening up a dialectical relationship between unknowability and manifestation", beyond the noumenal restrictions of the Kantian sublime (p. 232). There is a place for love and real difference within Dick's imaginary: Rick Deckard's "bildungsroman" (in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) narrates how he "achieves an induction into the shock of other life" as this is contrasted with the way "Mercerist empathy and domestic mood machines neutralize and consume difference". Here "transcendence occurs, but it takes place within the cracks that dislocation, partial insight, and renewed tenderness open up in the world" (pp. 128-129). Moreover, in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, there is an

implicit critique of the Burkean portrayal of the sublime in which the sacrifice of Barney Mayerson punctures "a totality", that is, "the ubiquitous force of self-preservation" insofar as it "intimates a motive of the heart strange to the self-preserving logic and … the possibility of its breach by love" (p. 138). In VALIS, Dick also appears to dramatize and undermine a Gnostic myth of overweening divine power that comes at the expense of the integrally human. Gnosticism becomes a metaphorical shorthand for "oppressive ideological and cultures empowered by technology", and the novel seeks to put forward a "critique of authoritarian soteriologies" and a story of "that ambiguous salvation that limps into the world and squeezes between suffocating powers of "the Empire" (p. 152).

The last chapter of SF exposition focuses on what he calls "the apocalyptic sublime". Here Gregory contrasts "biblical apocalyptic", which is "theocentric", with a "sublime apocalyptic" that "reorders attention around nature" (158). He discusses several works within this later genre, including William Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Greg Bear's Blood Music, Thomas Disch's The Genocides, and John Christopher's *The Death of Grass*. All these novels tend to cede or eliminate the presence of the human in relation to the nonhuman, though others like George Zebrowski in his *Omega Point Trilogy* imagine some kind of persistence, but one where "ontological difference" and "the harmonies of materialities and of matter and mind" are not sustained eschatologically (p. 184). All in all, as in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, these visions tend toward a purely immanent, posthumanist future, whether "they reveal in hopelessness the inescapability of time and world or discover in celebration the shape of a glory born from human powers" (p. 190). These versions of the apocalyptic sublime chime quite well with "the nihilism of postmodern interpretations of sublimity", such as Jean-François Lyotard's, which in their aversion to "totality" (ironically to Gregory's mind) finally "precipitates human beings into a radical equivocity without escape, arguably an especially hopeless totality" (p. 280n.103).

Gregory then turns towards the more constructive aspect of this book. In particular, he seeks put forward an alternative theological vision that is able to sustain an account of transcendental being, beauty and love. To this end, he engages the extraordinary Reformed theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards, who to his mind "developed a theology and metaphysics

articulated upon the centrality, not of the sublime, but of the beautiful" (p. 200). He shows how Edwards, drawing upon a Christian Neoplatonism inspired by Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, develops "a Trinitarian ontology' in which

> Beauty always involves relations, not only, however, those at the level of parts and wholes or among material entities, but primarily between being and knowing, loving minds. Beauty is existence as known and loved and thus recognized as good. All entity exists … in and through consent, the first place through the divine consent that is God's threefold joy in his own being and in that being shared as the forms of finite existence (p. 208).

An Edwardsian metaphysics, which is deeply consistent at many points with traditional, analogical account, imagines a universe in which "Beauty is not confined to the plane of the merely sensible – as it is for Kant – and through beauty the plane of immanence opens to the infinite God". For Edwards, "Beauty mediates the mystery of God whose beauty it is and so always elicits further forms of consent through the infinite extension and diversification of contemplation, imagination, invention, acts of love, forms of community, speech, and art". Throughout the monograph, the language of sublimity is largely construed as problematic for orthodox Christianity. But here, for a moment, Gregory wagers that "sublimity … returns as beauty's inexhaustible depth" in which "Beauty … sustains difference and demands it, but not as the Heraclitean flux in which difference merely cancels and never secures being" (p. 234). This buttresses an "agapeic imagination", a term he draws from William Desmond; insofar as this relates to realms of art and fiction, Gregory thinks that "the agapeic imagination experiments with the possibilities for existence and with the consent existence invites as existence within the horizon of God's creating" (p. 228). In summation, he writes that "the peculiar suggestiveness of science fiction for Christian faith lies not in its critique of divinity, which is largely misplaced, grappling as it does with the theological distortions of sublimity, but in the imaginations of radical otherness, which at their best attain to an agapeic imagination". This should encourage Christian theologians to hold in check "any anthropocentricism that limits their theological vision, especially in connection with doctrines of creation and eschatology" (p. 229).

Overall, this is a wonderful monograph that marries the concerns of Christian orthodoxy with a robust exposition of the SF imaginary. It is undoubtedly not just an exercise in a somewhat nerdy and historical passion, but a sophisticated essay which will be appreciated by those with an interest in theological aesthetics, metaphysics, SF/Fantasy, and the contemporary transformation of the beautiful and the sublime.

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