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*The Forsaken Son: Child Murder and Atonement in Modern
American Fiction* by Joshua Pederson (review)

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(Review)

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the line from biography to outright literary analysis (261–64). And she offers a less thorough exploration of the poet's relational struggles than Greene does. Overall, however, she weaves together a plenitude of information—much of it from Levertov's own poems, talks, journals, even unsent letters—in a way that sustains interest and reveals her subject.

Hollenberg's fuller biography should be the first choice for a general reader who wants to know Levertov better, as well as for scholars seeking biographical associations and interpretations of specific poems. Greene's may be useful for those who want more holistic interpretation of the poet's life, especially its relational and spiritual aspects; the summaries in Greene's chapter-opening paragraphs also make her volume accessible to students and others who just want to catch the highlights. But the two authors' approaches are sufficiently different that they often complement rather than compete with one another. As Greene writes, hers is an "experiment" rather than a final "definitive" account (234). Each book offers a specific angle on a complex and ultimately mysterious "inscape" (*ibid.*).

Levertov's poems often seem strikingly transparent to her own experience; yet they also leave much unsaid. And while she asserted the priority of poetry, her own story deserves to be told. Greene and Hollenberg together help illuminate Levertov's work for scholars, fellow-writers, and all those who have been moved, delighted, and instructed by her poems. Both deserve a share of the gratitude that Levertov herself sought to cultivate toward the goodness and wonder of the world.

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The Forsaken Son: Child Murder and Atonement in Modern American

Fiction. By Joshua Pederson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016. ISBN 0810132273. Hardcover \$99.95. ISBN 0810132281. Paperback \$34.95. Pp. ix + 173.

Since the 1960s, a growing number of Christian theologians have developed a thoroughgoing reassessment of traditional theories of the atonement, arguing that our dominant modes of understanding the crucifixion have unwittingly legitimated violence and exploitation in both our interpersonal relations and our broader social norms. In his recent work, Joshua Pederson argues that the alarmingly frequent child murders that occur in postwar American fiction are expressions of their authors' skepticism about atonement theology and function as aesthetic extensions of a critical theological discourse that regards the death of Jesus as a filicide rather than a redemptive sacrifice. He contends that a number of leading contemporary American novelists create narratives of infanticide, where murdered children operate as Christ figures, in order to engage in "a deep and honest struggle with Christianity" (10). Like their theological counterparts, these authors—Flannery O'Connor, John Updike, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, and

Cormac McCarthy—grapple with traditional atonement models in an attempt to reveal the significant ethical problems they entail.

In two introductory chapters, Pederson begins by reviewing the two theological models that have constituted Christianity's traditional interpretation of atonement. He then offers a literary review of the postwar protest theologians that have critiqued those interpretations. Then, in each of five subsequent chapters, he examines a single contemporary American novel to elucidate how it contributes to the indictment of atonement theology. Pederson explains that, since the Middle Ages, atonement theology has taken two primary forms. The first is best represented by the thought of Anselm of Canterbury who conceived of atonement as an "economy of sin and redemption" (19). Here, humanity, through sin, collectively accrues a debt to God that they cannot repay. Jesus functions as a kind of sacred currency and through His suffering and sacrifice is expended as a ransom, redeeming our debt by repaying it on behalf of humanity. Anselm contends that, in this holy exchange, Jesus satisfies the debt owed to God by acting as humanity's surrogate, compensating God through his death. This interpretation has given us what has alternately been known as "substitutionary, satisfaction, and ransom models of atonement" (20). Around the same time, Peter Abelard developed an alternative interpretation of the crucifixion. For Abelard, Jesus serves as an exemplar of ideal human behavior through His "obedience to the divine will," functioning as a perfect moral example for humanity to emulate, thus spawning the *imitatio Christi* tradition (8).

In his second chapter, Pederson reviews the work of the protest theologians calling for a reassessment of the atonement and cogently explains their respective criticisms. While these thinkers approach the matter from a variety of perspectives they share the fundamental premise that traditional interpretations of the crucifixion suggest that "violence [is] a condition of salvation," that suffering, victimization, and even murder can be redemptive (22). By making Jesus' pain and death salvific, atonement theology sacralizes violence. Anselmian forms of atonement assert that sin and punishment can be transferred to a surrogate, substitute, or scapegoat, and through "this shift," theologians like René Girard and Delores Williams argue, "the Christian miracle of redemption becomes a tool of oppression and persecution" (97). On the part of potential oppressors, such a theology "encourages violent behavior and the dehumanization of the other," bolstering "systems of oppression like racism and misogyny" (22). Others, like Mary Daly, argue that Abelard's model of atonement glorifies "the passive acceptance of suffering" and thus sacralizes victimhood (98). When we call adherents to imitate Christ, we argue that "the true believer should be the perfect victim" (33). Theologians such as Girard, Gustaf Aulén, Jürgen Moltmann, and James H. Cone contend that what makes traditional notions of the crucifixion so problematic is that they remain "discontinuous," that is, they figure the relation between God and Jesus as one in which the father orders the murder of His son while remaining remote, standing apart from the act. This gives us the image of a cruel, abusive, murderous God, and with it an atonement theology that legitimates injustice. These thinkers wish to replace this configuration with a "continuous" conception

of the crucifixion, where “God is co-present with Jesus in his death,” suffering with Him on the cross, therefore offering us a model of solidarity in which we are called to suffer with the poor, oppressed, and exploited (31).

Pederson’s professed critical methodology is to combine elements of post-secular literary studies, trauma studies, and witness testimony studies à la Dori Laub in order to properly frame theological and literary critiques of the atonement and to emphasize the therapeutic working-through these texts can potentially enable. He argues that critics of atonement conceive of their work as means of bearing witness “to the trauma of the cross” and believes that interpreting the many instances of infanticide in contemporary American fiction as aesthetic “acts of witness” allows us to “read the wound” at the core of Christianity and thus to overcome that trauma (13, 12, 14). In this way, Pederson hopes that his work will contribute to “a theology of trauma” or “trauma theology” (35). He maintains that this method will enable us to rethink the meaning of the cross and thereby create a more authentic and just reading of the crucifixion.

Pederson begins his series of close readings with Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear it Away*. While O’Connor thematizes the horror of the atonement through the murder of a child that is meant to represent Christ, the novel is ultimately a poor proof-text for Pederson’s thesis. As the author acknowledges, O’Connor maintained that suffering and violence have the capacity to be a catalyst for religious transformation and can therefore possess “spiritual merit” (52). Contrary to the postwar protest theologians, O’Connor not only recognizes and piously accepts the repulsive aspects of atonement theology, she “laments that an increasingly secular world” has forgotten that “the price of redemption is often paid in violence” (45).

Next, we turn to Updike’s *Rabbit* tetralogy which, on the basis of the author’s statements, Pederson regards as a series of theological novels. Pederson argues that in *Rabbit, Run*, after the accidental death of a child, Harry Angstrom comes to accept the theology of Skeeter, a character modeled on James H. Cone who promotes a continuous model of the atonement. Though he gives credence to the notion that “God enters the world in Christ to share our suffering with us,” for Updike the “skeptical believer,” God “is not omnibenevolent” (66, 58, 68).

Pederson then turns to Morrison’s *Beloved*, arguing that the novel’s central filicide, and Sethe’s evolving understanding of it, poses a challenge to traditional atonement theology. Pederson believes that the theology of Delores Williams offers insight into the religious content of the novel. Williams writes that Anselm’s model of atonement, where Jesus acts as humanity’s substitute, unduly sacralizes surrogacy. Historically, this has “support[ed] and reinforce[d] the exploitation” of African American women by legitimating the practice of requiring a social subordinate to take the place of and do the work of another (75). *Beloved*, then, is about a “woman’s efforts to reject surrogacy” (75). In order to be truly free, Sethe must reject traditional atonement theology and the sanctification of substitution. In the sixth chapter, Pederson examines Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *My Sister, My Love*. Here, “the killing of the main character by her devout mother allows

Oates to develop” the argument that traditional atonement theology can “potentially justify infanticide” because it suggests that murder can be redemptive (89). In his last and finest chapter, Pederson reads McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* through its biblical intertext, the Gospel of Matthew and its parable of the talents, to show that the seemingly senseless violence portrayed in the novel is consistent with Matthew’s image of God and His potential for cruelty. Here, McCarthy reenacts “the crucifixion as child murder” to argue that Scripture itself warns us that “God is not wholly good” and “may abuse us” (117, 105).

Pederson’s study makes a significant contribution to the growing field of post-secular literary studies. Contrary to formerly dominant narratives purporting that modernity was characterized by the thoroughgoing disenchantment of American culture, Pederson adeptly demonstrates that theological concerns were, and remain, a central and consistent preoccupation of the nation’s leading novelists. Pederson has developed a seemingly incontrovertible argument that modern and contemporary American authors have continually struggled, along with their ecclesiastical counterparts, with the dire entailments of established interpretations of the crucifixion, and has astutely identified a formerly overlooked motif in American literature that expresses this critique. Perhaps most importantly, he shows how these authors grapple with the way traditional conceptions of the atonement and their destructive consequences extend far beyond the church house to shape dominant social norms in American culture, unwittingly legitimating systematic forms of exploitation, oppression, and violence, particularly with regard to the power relations surrounding race and gender. Pederson also commendably eschews critical concerns about the intentional fallacy and a discourse beholden to the death of the author. Instead, he ably returns to a form of biographical criticism that shows how each author’s upbringing and complicated personal relationship with Christianity fundamentally influences the content of their art and their take on American culture.

However, despite the considerable virtues of Pederson’s text, it is not without its deficiencies. One third of the entire volume consists of two introductory chapters that lay out the methodological framework and theological context of the work. While much of this content is sound, the text would have been better served by combining and condensing these two chapters. More importantly, in these chapters, Pederson makes ambitious promises to read his proof texts through the lens of trauma theory in the hopes of contributing to “a theology of trauma” (35). Ultimately though, Pederson defaults on this promissory note, as his use of trauma theory is almost entirely undeveloped. With the exception of a few brief passages that appear to be tacked on and which contribute nothing substantial to the argument, trauma theory remains largely absent from the text, leaving the reader to feel that primary assurances were not delivered upon. While trauma theory appears to be a fitting framework for reading contemporary critiques of atonement theology, that reading remains underdeveloped in Peterson’s book. Similarly, Pederson pledges to show how these literary works serve a therapeutic function that enables readers to work through the trauma of the cross. However, he

does not accomplish this. Simply stating that these works “bear witness” is inadequate. Ultimately, these projections are unnecessary, as nothing is demonstrably added to Pederson’s excellent account of postwar critiques of atonement by his appeal to trauma theory. And at the risk of being too beholden to the vicissitudes of scholarly fashion, it is fair to say that trauma and witness testimony theory are rather passé and this makes the text appear critically anachronistic. This could potentially detract from a work that otherwise possesses considerable merit.

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Devotions: Poems. By Timothy Murphy. Fargo, ND: North Dakota State University Press, 2017. Pp. 160. ISBN 978-0-911042-91-7. \$ 24.95.

In his preface to Timothy Murphy’s *Devotions*, Dana Gioia reminds readers how large a role devotional verse has played in the history of English poetry. It’s a worthwhile reminder because this sort of poetry remains rare now. Certainly there is religious poetry in abundance; magazines arise and thrive on it, like *Image*, *Christianity and Literature*, and the various theological reviews. But religious poetry done Murphy’s way is something out of the ordinary.

It’s unusual first of all because it is actually verse. It metes and rhymes. Its rhymes are true, not slant, and its meters are constant, usually a bucking accentual rhythm rather than a liquid iambic flow. And it’s unusual because it is unabashedly devotional. Many of the pieces here are frankly prayer, or discussions of prayer. Some are metrical translations of the psalms, a venerable form used by the most famous poets who wrote in English. Some are meditations on the varied pains and joys of his North Dakota life. The book is unusual also in that its devotions are to worldly things, as well as to God, since the poems make clear that Murphy is also devoted to poetry, to people, and to the natural world.

Murphy’s life is an interesting one, in its present situation and in its troubled and lively past. As Murphy fans know, his poetry is so frankly autobiographical that it conveys all the pleasures and the discomforts of intimate knowledge of another person. Most remarkably, it combines staunch Catholic orthodoxy on some points with unashamed acknowledgment that Murphy is gay, and that for decades he shared life and poetry with the late Alan Sullivan. (Readers curious about Sullivan’s life and work can still consult his blog, *Fresh Bilge*.) As in all the Murphy books, one of the pleasures is getting the life story:

Interment

One boy with a guitar and dreadful novel,
another, poems crammed inside his head—