**Redeeming the End in Contemporary Gothic Fictions**

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For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first’

(1 Thessalonians 4: 16)

In modern Gothic fictions, the returns and renewals imagined in Christian apocalyptic have been refigured as sources of horror. If Christian eschatology anticipates a day upon which ‘the dead in Christ shall rise first’, Gothic narratives often imagine a world in which the dead have already risen; risen not into the renewed life of the heavenly city, but in parodic and hopeless versions of resurrection. As John Sears has noted, it is a trope of Gothic fictions that ‘whatever returns is *never* Christ’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet these Gothic returns derive something of their horrifying affectivity from their relationship to the redemptive returns that they deny. The risen dead of Gothic fictions – returned as vampires, spectres, zombies – both invoke and refuse the redemptive trajectory of Christian eschatology. Gothic’s relationship with Christian apocalyptic, always implicit in Gothic versions of resurrection, has become increasingly overt in the work of several prominent contemporary writers, a shift that remains largely unexamined by scholars in both Gothic studies and literature and religion. This paper begins to chart this renewal of Gothic interest in Christian eschatology and apocalyptic, with a focus on the work of the contemporary American novelists Peter Straub and Justin Cronin. I will argue that, contrary to the disturbing or horrifying eschatologies invoked by much of the Gothic tradition, both Straub and Cronin employ versions of apocalyptic that can be properly called redemptive.

The apocalyptic tendencies of Gothic in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been shaped not only by the ‘sense of an ending’ provided by biblical apocalypse, but also by the revelatory nihilism of Nietzsche. The madman who speaks prophetically of the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1882/7) becomes for some Gothic writers the model of an apocalyptic discourse that refuses the very possibility of a meaningful end. ‘Whither do we move?’ asks Nietzsche’s madman. ‘Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder?’[[2]](#endnote-2) The madman invites his audience to contemplate a vision of endless time; an eternity devoid of content or meaning. In twentieth-century Gothic, the most influential exponent of Nietzschean prophetic nihilism was H. P. Lovecraft. Echoing the revelatory tone of Nietzsche’s madman, Lovecraft’s narrators open visions of terrifying absence and chaos behind the veneer of human rationality. Humanity is on an inevitable trajectory toward the unbearable revelation of our own insignificance – a future emptied of redemptive possibility – as depicted in the opening of Lovecraft’s most famous story, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto armed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Lovecraftian Gothic thus echoes the revelatory function of biblical apocalypse while maintaining that the visionary’s glimpse of elsewhere can reveal only chaos. Subverting Frank Kermode’s ‘sense of an ending’, Gothic writers in the tradition of Nietzsche and Lovecraft imagine endings emptied of redemptive significance; rather than the *kairotic* time in which the present moment is ‘filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end’, Gothic writers have often imagined the present as emptied of significance by the prospect of a meaningless end.[[4]](#endnote-4) These Gothic eschatologies are often framed overtly as distorted versions of Christian apocalyptic. In Stephen King's 2014 novel *Revival*, for example, a glimpse beyond the horizons of time and space reveals a hopeless eternity:

The foolish mirage of earthly life had been torn away and instead of the heaven preachers of all persuasions promised, what awaited them was a dead city of cyclopean stone blocks below a sky that was itself a scrim. The howling stars weren't stars at all. They were *holes*, and the howls emerging from them came from the true *potestas magnum universum*. Beyond the sky were *entities*. They were alive, and all-powerful, and totally insane.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Gothic apocalyptic of *Revival* is self-consciously parasitic upon Christian eschatology, simultaneously invoking and denying its trajectory toward a redemptive ending.

Yet Gothic’s engagement with Christian eschatology and apocalyptic is more complex than the mere affective negation of the redemptive ending. *Revival* is not simply a parody of Christian eschatology, but a critique of the notion of heaven used both as a cheap consolation for earthly suffering and as a cynical money-making tool for celebrity evangelists. The novel’s revelation of a hopeless eternity compels its protagonists to seek meaning and significance in the ordinary experiences and relationships of human life; despite the novel’s superficially anti-religious tone, King’s concerns are theologically and ethically serious. Indeed, one of the striking features of contemporary Gothic is the emergence of a renewed and nuanced interest in theology consistent with the religious ‘turn’ in contemporary western culture identified by Zygmunt Bauman and others.[[6]](#endnote-6) Some religious commentators have viewed this cultural turn with unease: Graham Ward, for example, sees in postmodern deployments of religious iconography an attempt to baptise contemporary culture with ‘the allure of cheap transcendence’.[[7]](#endnote-7) For Gothic fiction, religious symbols and iconography have become tropes of the genre that continue to be deployed outside of specific religious contexts: the cross need not be worn as a sign of Christian faith to remain a useful method for fending off vampires. Yet if Gothic seems particularly prone to the kind of fetishized, commodified deployment of religion described by Ward, I want to suggest that the genre also provides space for more sustained and serious theological reflection and debate. As I will attempt to demonstrate, the American novelists Peter Straub and Justin Cronin approach the nature of evil and redemption with a considerable degree of philosophical and theological nuance. I will argue that both Straub and Cronin allow moments of authentic transcendence, and that these glimpses of transcendence are orientated toward the possibility of a redemptive ending.

The eschatological themes of Peter Straub’s fiction are perhaps most overt in his novels *lost boy lost girl* (2003) and its sequel *In the Night Room* (2004). The novels are based around a fictional series of child murders committed by the now-deceased Joseph Kalendar. One of Kalendar’s presumed victims was his daughter, Lily.[[8]](#endnote-8) Both novels are narrated (at times indirectly) by the novelist Tim Underhill, the narrative voice shifting between Tim’s journal entries and a series of creative rewritings. At the beginning of *lost boy lost girl*, Tim’s nephew, Mark, has disappeared; it is discovered later that he has become a victim of a copycat killer who now owns the Kalendar house. In Tim’s reimagining of his nephew’s death, however, Mark meets and falls in love with a girl named Lucy Cleveland, who appears to live in the Kalendar house. In this alternative narrative, Mark is drawn into the Kalendar household – and therefore to his death – by his desire to protect Lucy.

*lost boy lost girl* is a metafiction that frequently signals its own constructedness. It is concerned less with the distinction between the fictional and the real than with the ways in which the real is mediated in narrative. In this respect, it illustrates Geoffrey Hartman’s observation that ‘[w]hat active reading discloses is a structure of *words within words*, a structure so deeply mediated, ghostly, and echoic that we find it hard to locate the *res* in the *verba*. The *res*, or subject matter, seems to be already words'.[[9]](#endnote-9) When Tim is told by a friend that he writes his journal as if it were fiction, he replies: ‘What makes you think it isn’t?’[[10]](#endnote-10) As the novel moves towards its conclusion, Tim tacitly acknowledges what the narrative has brought subtly into view: ‘Lucy Cleveland’ is a fictionalised version of Lily Kalendar, resurrected in the pages of Tim’s narrative.

Yet the disclosure of Lucy’s identity, and thus of the fictional status of her relationship with Mark, is presented not as a denial of hope, but rather as a moment of redemptive revelation when Tim glimpses Mark and Lucy together in a café:

It was a gift. Not the only one, but the first. Mark and his “Lucy Cleveland,” whose real name I knew, had exited their *elsewhere* long enough to display themselves before me in all the fullness of their new lives. After all, *elsewhere* was right next door.

[…]

*God bless Mark Underhill*, I say within the resounding chambers of my heart and mind, *God bless Lucy Cleveland, too, though already they are so blessed, they have the power to bless me.* (*lblg* p. 296)

Tim is given one more glimpse of Mark and Lucy, via an online film sent to him from Mark’s email address and viewable only once; ‘a webcam, Tim thought, broadcasting to an audience of one from a world where there were no webcameras’ (*lblg* p. 330). As Tim watches the film, outside the detectives begin the recovery of the bodies from Kalendar’s garden; a recovery that in the novel’s closing sentence is described in terms strangely suggestive of resurrection. Tim and his brother ‘looked on as the first of the adolescent dead began his journey upward into daylight’ (*lblg* p. 336).

The ending of *lost boy lost* girl, then, juxtaposes the material reality of the bodies recovered from the garden with the imaginative attempt to find redemptive possibility. The glimpses of resurrection and new life in the novel are fictions, a fact made explicit in the novel’s sequel *In the Night Room*: ‘Tim had written a novel that permitted Mark the continued life a monster named Ronald Lloyd-Jones had stolen from him’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Yet in emphasising the fictionality of the new life given to Mark Underhill and Lily Kalendar, Straub insists upon the possibility that storytelling itself might become a redemptive act. Tim’s persistent rewritings of Mark and Lily are acts of love: they seek to return to the children the gift of being. *In the Night Room* is another retelling, this time focused on a woman named Willy Patrick, a character in Tim’s latest novel who escapes the confines of the novel and enters Tim’s own reality (which is, of course, another narrative). Willy is a combination of Mark and Lily, another attempt to restore the children to life: ‘that’s what *you’re* doing, you old writer’, Willy tells Tim; ‘You’re washing away his crimes, and you’re doing it through me’ (*ItNR* p. 354). For Christian theology, as Gerard Loughlin observes, ‘love’s gift of being is more commonly known by way of the doctrine of creation’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Straub draws the analogy between divine creativity and the creative work of the novelist when Tim articulates his love for Willy, the character summoned into being by his words: ‘These simple words, all this deep feeling. I hope this is what God feels for his creatures’ (*ItNR* p. 250).

*lost boy lost girl* and *In the Night Room* offer no assurances of restored life for the murdered children. The glimpses of elsewhere that permeate the novels are aspects of Tim Underhill’s persistent attempts to rewrite the stories of Lily and Mark. Yet in constructing these multiple textual returns for the murdered children, Straub stakes a claim for storytelling itself as an act of grace. With the only creative tools at his disposal, Tim seeks to give renewed being and freedom to the children from whom it was taken away by Joseph Kalendar and Ronald Lloyd-Jones. Where Lloyd-Jones sought the repetition of Kalendar’s crimes, Tim seeks to write the story differently. The ending of Tim’s narrative in *lost boy lost girl* is redemptive not in the sense of assuring a resurrected life for the children, but in its aspiration to undo the privations inflicted upon them. Tim’s attempts to rewrite the story, to change the ending, are acts of creative love.

A similar emphasis on story and the redemptive power of rewriting is integral to Justin Cronin’s *Passage* trilogy (2010-2016). Set for the most part in a post-apocalyptic America ravaged by a form of vampirism caused by military research into the biological enhancement of soldiers, Cronin’s trilogy juxtaposes a military struggle against the vampires (‘virals’) with a metaphysical struggle for the redemption of humanity. The narrative signals its theological heritage overtly: the military research that creates the virals is known as Project NOAH, a name chosen initially to reflect the great age of the biblical Noah, which the project aims to reproduce in its subjects, but which ultimately identifies the viral outbreak as a second flood; another cleansing of the earth. Though the virals number in the millions, most are controlled by a group known as the Twelve: the military’s original test subjects, each of them a convict sentenced to death. Behind the Twelve is Zero, originally a research scientist named Tim Fanning who was infected in South America and became the source of the virus given to the Twelve. ‘Zero’ is a military codename – as the source of the virus, he is Subject Zero – but also reflects the Augustinian roots of the novel’s metaphysics. Zero is a figure of privation, who seeks to efface variety and hope from the world. As Anthony Carter – the only one of the Twelve to have been wrongfully convicted of the crime for which he was sentenced to death – observes, Zero ‘wouldn’t rest until the whole world was a mirror to his grief’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Zero seeks to efface all other human lives and stories and to replace them with his own, reshaping the world in the image of his own pain.

Zero and the Twelve live in a state of perpetual repetition of key moments in their lives. For most of the Twelve, these moments are the crimes for which they were sentenced to death: many of them take pleasure in the repetition of murder and sexual violence. The virals initiated into the collectives controlled by each of the Twelve are compelled to repeat the same memory, taking the place of the killer and enacting the crime within the dream-memory that they now share. There are two exceptions to these repetitions of violence. Carter, an innocent man wrongly convicted of the murder of his employer – whose life he tried to save when she drowned herself – relives the death of the woman, Rachel Wood, as a moment of profound grief. Zero/Fanning’s dream is similarly a repetition of grief: he relives endlessly the death from cancer of Liz Lear, the woman he has loved since they met in college. Liz had dated and married Fanning’s friend and fellow scientist Jonas Lear; only in Liz’s final days, as Jonas was absent on the expedition that would discover the virus, did she and Fanning become lovers. As Zero, Fanning now seeks to refashion the world in the image of his grief; to make his story the sole narrative of the world.

The virals thus represent a condition of stasis: an endless, identical repetition of a single narrative that effaces all other stories. Catherine Pickstock has argued that ‘[w]here divine transcendence is occluded, one finds oneself in the domain of the buttressed immanence, in which nothing new can occur, since the ontological bounds of finitude have been transcendentally set once and for all’.[[14]](#endnote-14) The repeated dreams of Cronin’s virals are analogous to this state of buffered immanence. By incorporating all people into the repetition of their own stories – and thus to make all people identical repetitions of themselves – the virals seek to efface the possibility of transcendence or change: reshaping the whole of reality into the image of their dreams, they deny the possibility of an ‘outside’ from which interruption or change might come. Yet this attempt to shape reality in accordance with their own stories is, ironically, a denial of story. Pickstock writes:

Above all, there is only story because of the resurrection. Resurrection is the process at work in non-identical repetition by which that which is repeated is not unmediably different, but analogously the same. This redemptive return is what allows a person to tell a story, since for there to be a story, there must be “analogous” subjects and objects, persisting as same-yet-different.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The identical repetitions performed by Zero and the Twelve exclude the possibility of newness or change and, therefore, the possibility of redemption. Zero’s dream is ‘a nightmare of infinite waiting in a universe barren of pity – without hope, without love, without the purpose that only hope and love could bear upon it’ (*TCOM* p. 229).

A new openness to redemptive change is introduced into the narrative by Amy, a quasi-messianic figure who as a child is infected with an alternative strain of the virus by Jonas Lear in the hope that she will become an antidote to Fanning’s strain. Rather than offering a biological or chemical defence against the virus, however, Amy becomes the opposing pole in a metaphysical contest with Zero. Carter, the innocent man appalled by the viral that he has become, is the only one of the Twelve to understand what Amy represents:

That was when he felt her: Amy. Not dark, like the others; her soul was made of light. A great sob racked his body. His loneliness was leaving him. It lifted from his spirit like a veil, and what lay behind it was a sorrow of a different kind – a beautiful, holy sorrow for the world and all its woes. (*TCOM* p. 267).

Where Zero seeks to transform the world into the image of his own grief, Amy embodies agapeic love that seeks to give itself to the world and to receive in return the world in all of its infinite variety. In Cronin’s rewriting of the biblical flood narrative, Amy is the ship: she carries the memories and identities of the people incorporated into the Twelve and returns these identities to them as their viral bodies die.

The contest between Amy and Zero is fundamentally a contest between two views of reality. The night of Liz’s death was a metaphysical awakening for Tim Fanning; it was the moment when he became Zero emotionally and ideologically, if not yet physically:

Believe me, I appal myself sometimes. But the truth is the truth. There’s no one watching over us. That’s the cold heart of it, the grand delusion. Or if there is, he’s the cruellest kind of bastard, letting us believe he cares. I’m nothing, compared to him…What God would let Liz be all alone at the end, not the touch of a hand or a single word of kindness to help her leave her life? I’ll tell you what kind, Amy. The same one who made me. (*TCOM* p. 482)

The novel finally resists Zero’s nihilistic worldview not simply by destroying him – though he is killed in his final struggle with Amy – but by granting him the possibility of redemption. In death, Fanning is reunited with Liz. She allows him to see and to grieve for the full extent of his crimes, yet she also offers him forgiveness and healing grace:

It took some time. It took days, weeks, years. But this was unimportant. It would pass in a blink, not even. All things fell into the past but one; and what that was, was love. (*TCOM* p. 521)[[16]](#endnote-16)

The ending of Fanning’s story echoes the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13: ‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.’ In the *Passage* trilogy, love is understood overtly in terms of gift-exchange: to love is to give the gift of oneself and one’s story to another, and to receive their reciprocal gift in return. Love in the novel is an act of faith, as Peter, the leader of Amy’s followers, is told by one of his companions:

When I was growing up in the orphanage, the sisters always taught us that a person of faith is someone who believes something he can’t prove. I don’t disagree, but that’s only half the story. It’s the end, not the means. A hundred years ago, humanity just about destroyed itself. It’d be easy to think that God doesn’t like us very much. Or that there *is* no God, there’s no rhyme or reason to anything and we might just as well hang it up and call it a day. Thanks, planet Earth, it was nice knowing you. But that’s not you, Peter. For you, hunting the Twelve isn’t an answer. It’s a question. Does anybody out there care? Are we worth saving? What would God want from me, if there is a God? The greatest faith is the willingness to ask in the first place, all evidence to the contrary. Faith not just in God, but in all of us.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In different ways, both Justin Cronin and Peter Straub identify creative, agapeic love as a redemptive response to evil’s privations. For Straub, this love is located in the work of the writer who seeks to revise out of existence the horrors of the past, and to restore the goodness of being that has been lost. This restoration remains located outside the realm of the possible: redemptive possibility in *lost boy lost girl* is identified not with a secure happy ending for Mark Underhill and Lily Kalendar, but with the creative love that seeks to grant them such an ending. Cronin’s *Passage* trilogy stakes a bolder claim for love as redemptive possibility, enabling non-identical repetition to break cycles of stasis and violence. Cronin and Straub represent the emergence of a theologically-nuanced version of horror fiction for which Gothic returns represent not the denial of a redemptive ending, but rather a hope staked in the possibility of new creation.

1. John Sears, *Stephen King’s Gothic*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011, p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Thomas Common, New York, Barnes & Noble, 2008, p. 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. H. P. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi, London, Penguin, 1999, pp. 139-69 (p. 139). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Stephen King, *Revival*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2014, p. 351. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992. For a helpful overview of the postmodern theological turn and its implications for literary criticism, see Gavin Hopps and Jane Stabler, ‘Introduction: Grace Under Pressure’, in Hopps and Stabler (eds.), *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, pp. 1-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Graham Ward, *True Religion*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, p. ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It is revealed in *In the Night Room* that Lily Kalendar survived her father’s abuse and now lives under an assumed name. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Peter Straub, *lost boy lost girl* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), p. 289. Further references are given in parentheses with the abbreviation *lblg*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Straub, *In the Night Room*, New York, Ballantine, 2006, p. 18. Further references are given in parentheses with the abbreviation *ItNR*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Justin Cronin, *The City of Mirrors*, London, Orion, 2016, p. 267. Further references are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *TCOM*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p. 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. p. 521. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Justin Cronin, *The Twelve* (London: Orion, 2012), pp. 262-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)