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Monsters and near-death experiences in Eric McCormack's *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*

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ABSTRACT Following Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as "repetition with a difference", this essay exposes how a contemporary Canadian novel parodically responds to seminal Early Modern English pre-texts. Eric McCormack is not only a Canadian postmodernist (and postcolonial) writer born in Scotland but also a specialist in Early Modern English literature and thus an ideal representative of the intertextual situation of Canadian writing between literary tradition and the challenges of postmodern/postcolonial writing. The essay interprets McCormack's sexual gothic novel *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* discussing the way in which a literal or even literalist—rather than metaphorical—interpretation of literary and religious texts of the Early Modern period can make an important and sometimes harrowing difference in the lives of somewhat unsophisticated literary characters. McCormack's ominously named character Andrew Halfnight literally interprets religious and literary texts he sees as signposts and guidelines of his personal behavior, thus showing how a literal interpretation of "canonical" texts limits the character's ability to lead a self-determined happy life. The texts he refers to include the pamphlet *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* by Scottish reformer John Knox, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and these subtexts are more than challenged through their intertextual transfer into erotic or perhaps even pornographic contexts which probably would have shocked the Early Modern authors (although, for example, Milton was at least not unwilling or unable to include eroticism in his work). Towards the end of the novel, the imagined reversal of the life-giving act of birth turns into a monstrous sexual act, which coincides with the protagonist's near-death experience in an automobile accident on a snow-covered road in northern Ontario. This experience *cum* sexual act leads to the "un-birth" or "re-birth" of the novel's main character into what he takes to be a happier and more fulfilled life in a paradise found or regained in Camberloo, Ontario.

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Article text

In this essay, I interpret a rather unusual novel, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* by contemporary Canadian fiction writer Eric McCormack, and I discuss the way in which in this novel a literal or even literalist—rather than metaphorical—interpretation of seminal literary and religious texts from the Early Modern era can make an important and sometimes harrowing difference in the lives of contemporary literary characters. In McCormack's novel, we are confronted with the imagined or dreamed reversal of the life-giving act of birth into a monstrous sexual act. In addition, this event coincides with the protagonist's near-death experience in an automobile accident on a snow-covered road in northern Ontario. This near-death experience *cum* sexual act then leads to the "un-birth" or "re-birth" of the novel's main character with the ominous name Andrew Halfnight into what he takes to be a happier and more fulfilled life.

Analyzing this pattern of death and resurrection, I discuss intertextual connections between this postmodern "sexual gothic" novel of a paradise found or regained in Camberloo, Ontario, and several more or less well-known sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century religious and literary texts, among them the pamphlet (1558) by John Knox that bears the same title as McCormack's novel, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and John Milton's seminal epic (1667) about a paradise that was lost in the biblical Garden of Eden. John Milton is without any doubt still seen as one of the great writers in the English language causing a certain "anxiety of influence" among contemporary writers, as Harold Bloom once put it. Robert Burton is probably known for the title of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* and not much more, even though a recent literary history of the seventeenth century such as Thomas Corns's states that, "despite its endless presentation of facts and theories from a myriad of predominantly academic sources, this is a masterpiece of literary creativity" (Corns, 2007, p. 160). John Knox, as the founder of the Church of Scotland, is a theologian of international renown, but outside of Scotland and those interested in Early Modern theology, he is probably not that well-known any more, either, and if he is, his reputation is chequered at best: As church historian David B. Calhoun puts it, "There are examples of bitter words and harsh actions from John Knox's life, but there are also illustrations, not always noticed, of a man who was honest, sensitive, humble, thoughtful, and kind" (2014, p. 4).

Eric McCormack, who was born in Scotland in 1938, is not only a prize-winning creative writer but also a specialist in Early Modern English literature now retired from Saint Jerome's College at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. His 1973 doctoral dissertation, which he wrote at the University of Manitoba, deals with Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as a prose satire, and McCormack's knowledge of this and other more or less arcane works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries intertextually pervades his own literary production. So does his native Scottish background, which appears in more or less eerie and unsettling ways in many of his novels and short stories, together with rather mundane Canadian settings and more harrowing exotic places ranging from the South Atlantic beyond tropical islands and deserts to Latin America. W. H. New in *The Cambridge History to Canadian Literature* refers to McCormack's work as "combin[ing] magic realism with the macabre" (2009, p. 384), and Allan Hepburn in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* states that "Eric McCormack specializes in Gothic fiction, with an emphasis on twins, dead mothers, dismemberment, and cold-blooded thrills" (1997, p. 850). McCormack's early stories, some of which I briefly deal with in this essay, have been criticized by Janice Kulyk Keefer for their "near uninterrupted succession of male fantasies involving big-breasted, thewy-thighed, eminently penetrable Fata Morganas" (1989, p. 219), but—in order to avoid arousing any readerly expectations—in *First Blast*, even suggestively named characters such as Amber Tristesse or Catherine Cleaves will hardly live up to the sexual expectations they may tend to arouse. Keefer argues that "the question of gender must surely enter into any critique of McCormack's work," and it will be briefly addressed in this essay (also referring to the texts by Knox, Burton and Milton on whom McCormack relies), but a thorough feminist critical approach is unfortunately beyond the confines of the present essay. My analysis will show, however, that a reconciliation between the gender positions is provided at the end of McCormack's *First Blast*.

As a writer born in Scotland and now living in Canada, Eric McCormack is caught in the intertextual relationship between earlier texts from the former imperial center of Great Britain and contemporary literary works from a former colony into which they are now re-integrated or transplanted. Through this parodic use (according to Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as a "repetition with critical distance" (1985, p. 6), in Salman Rushdie's words, the empire is writing back to the center (see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989, p. 33).

As already indicated, McCormack's *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* adopts its title from John Knox's probably most well-known and certainly most controversial text, a misogynist pamphlet by the Scottish Calvinist reformer that was first published in 1558 and warns of the dangers that female (Catholic) rulers may mean to their countries. Knox states in his *Blast* that he is "assured that God hath reueled to some in this our age, that it is more than a monstre in nature, that a woman shall reigne and haue empire aboue man" (1878, pos. 252), and he talks about "this monstriferouse empire of women, (which amongst all enormities, that this day do abound vpon the face of the hole earth, is most detestable and damnable)" (pos. 274). Knox especially fears women rulers such as Catherine de Medici, the Queen of France, Marie de Lorraine (also called Marie de Guise), the Queen regent of Scotland and mother of Mary Queen of Scots, and Mary Tudor (see Arber, 1878b, pos. 67), who re-established Catholicism in England, also became known and feared as Bloody Mary and became "that cruell monstre Marie (vnworthie by reason of her bloodie tyrannie, of the name of a woman" (Knox, 1878, pos. 861). An interesting connection with other intertexts that are later referred to in McCormack's novel is established by Edward Arber, when he links Knox's apparent misogyny with John Milton's alleged antifeminism that has been read into the latter's writings on divorce. Arber expresses his biographical interpretation of Milton's supposed antifeminism in the following way:

> Just as MILTON was led to the discussion of the conditions of divorce, through his desertion by his wife MARY POWELL; so the fiery martyrdoms of England led KNOX to denounce the female sex in the person of her whom we still call "BLOODY MARY" that was the occasion of them all. (Arber, 1878b, pos. 85)

This view of Milton as a misogynist has found its way into twentieth-century literary works such as Robert Graves's 1943 novel *Wife to Mr. Milton* (2011) and especially into critical works such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and their quotation of Virginia Woolf's mysterious reference to "Milton's bogey" (1979, pp. 187–188). But this view of Milton as a misogynist has also been qualified by critics such as Joseph Wittreich in his *Feminist Milton* (see Kolbrener, 2014, p. 207, and Leonard, 2013, pp. 650–651). Karen L. Edwards states in her essay on "Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Paradise" that "an interpretative strategy that finds Milton to be a modern feminist

is as inadequate as a strategy that finds him to be a misogynist" (2007, p. 145).

In his twentieth-century *First Blast*, McCormack integrates Knox's and other sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century religious and literary texts and passages into a postmodern novel, thus transplanting the reformer John Knox and his fundamentalist ideas on religion and gender (and, to a certain extent, John Milton and his ideas) into a contemporary Scottish and North American context. A decade before publishing his *First Blast*, McCormack himself had first created an example of such a transatlantic adoption and/or adaptation in 1987 by sending the Scotsman "abroad" to Canada, to "New France." In "Knox Abroad," the hardy Scottish theologian, whose overwhelming aura—or brutality—is recognized by the Native Canadians who take him for the European counterpart of a shaman, turns out to harbor repugnant mysteries.

McCormack's novel, published in 1997 and a finalist for the Canadian Governor General's Award, claims to answer a central question that has forever been of foremost interest not only, but especially, to devout and fundamentalist Christians who are intent on believing the message of the Bible word for word: "What if a book revealed maybe the most sought-after piece of practical information any human being could ever want? I mean, the location of Paradise on this earth—its exact co-ordinates: latitude and longitude, and a description of how to get there" (1997, p. xiv). However, as indicated above, the Canadian novel also reverberates with allusions and intertextual references to sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century religious and literary texts that—at least if they are interpreted literally—have a tendency to become traumatic and to haunt especially young and malleable persons. This is the case, at least for a long time before his final redemption, for the novel's protagonist, Andrew Halfnight.

The setting of the first part of McCormack's novel is a Scottish small town in a region from which several of the protagonists in his stories and novels hail: "It happened in Stroven, one of those little mining towns deep among the Upland hills" (1997, p. 3). When we first see Andrew Halfnight, he is still a boy growing up in Scotland, before fate transplants him to an island in the South Atlantic called Saint Jude. In the course of the novel, and after returning from Saint Jude to Scotland for a time, he finally settles in Canada. Rather forebodingly, his father had committed suicide shortly after the birth of Andrew and his twin sister, with whom Andrew had been closely entwined at birth, both twins carrying a large birthmark:

> In fact, our bodies must have been so close together for so long in the womb that each of us had made an imprint on the other. Midwife Findley had to prise us apart. "They're stuck together like a package of sausages," she said. A dark purple stain in the shape of a triangle marked the upper body area, from nipple to nipple to belly-button, of both me and my sister. The shape looked vaguely like a dog's head, or maybe some kind of rodent. (McCormack, *First Blast* 4)

The motif of such a close relationship of twins may remind readers of McCormack's character Malachi in his earlier short story "Twins," where the physical separation of a pair of twins for some reason does not occur: Malachi "is meant to be twins, but somehow the division has not occurred, and he has been born, two people condemned to one body. Reverse Siamese Twins." Furthermore, Malachi "is the one who speaks with two voices, two different voices, at the same time" (1987b, p. 225, pp. 223–224). In *First Blast*, Andrew Halfnight's father had been responsible for the death of Andrew's baby sister because he had inadvertently crushed her to death with his prosthetic arm, holding her too tightly shortly after her birth. Probably overcome by his guilt, he commits suicide soon afterwards, so that there is a double funeral of father and daughter early on in the novel. The funeral—attended by women only—is a lugubrious affair; surprisingly, Andrew seems to have clear memories of the ceremony, although these memories appear to be intertextually affected by his later reading of John Knox's pamphlet against the "monstrous regiment of women"—or rather by having encountered and misunderstood its fear-inspiring title:

> As the funeral procession passed through the Square, I was in someone's arms at an upstairs window. The women of Stroven, of every shape and size, followed the black-curtained hearse, marching four abreast, in slow time, *like a regiment in mourning*. (1997, pp. 17–18, my emphasis)

After the death of his twin sister, Andrew is engaged in a perpetual but unsuccessful search for this female counterpart. The relationship with the other important female in his life, his mother, becomes very close and unfortunately problematic, especially when she expects him to look after her during her long and terminal sickness. The relationship soon grows traumatic and sexually suggestive, and Allan Hepburn rightly points out that "all Andrew's subsequent, difficult relations are conditioned by this exposure to the ailing, maternal body" (2002, p. 144):

> She lay back and I began to sponge her body. I sponged her chest, the dark nipples protruding from the flattened breasts. I sponged her belly, marvelling at the silvery tracks across the skin.
>
> I would have stopped at that for I was afraid to proceed.
>
> "You're not nearly finished," she said. Her green eyes were on me. (McCormack, 1997, p. 27)

Not unlike several other protagonists in McCormack's fiction, Andrew Halfnight feels eternally haunted by destructive fate (and women). This only comes to an end when he has a near-fatal automobile accident in a wintery Canadian landscape and, after that, is finally reunited in Camberloo, somewhat improbably, with an old girlfriend from the island of Saint Jude, where he had, as mentioned above, spent part of his youth. This woman becomes his teacher and lover, so that he will, in the end, overcome alienation and fear of women through the positive force of love and trust.

After the death of his mother that is described in Part Two of the novel, orphaned Andrew Halfnight sets out for the South Atlantic island of Saint Jude on a merchant ship in order to join his only surviving relative, his mother's sister, Lizzie, and her husband. During the lengthy passage, the steward Harry Greene, an unexpectedly well-educated and especially well-read sailor, looks after him and introduces him to the world of literature, which is a new realm for the boy, as his mother had taught him "that words weren't trustworthy. She treated them as though they were the remnants of something that might once have made sense but now were generally misleading and to be avoided" (1997, p. 49). Language for his mother belongs to a postlapsarian world, the Fall of which is most famously described in the Bible and in Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* and which, according to many interpretations, also has important repercussions on communication between God and men, but also amongst humans. What might once have been a reliable message one could believe and believe in now presents a truth that can only be guessed at "through a glass, darkly" (*Holy Bible*, 1980, 1 Cor. 13:12). As Stevie Davies writes, *Paradise Lost*, in dealing with the fall of man, also problematizes "perception and recognition themselves and the medium through which understanding is achieved: language" (1991, p. 101, for a more detailed study of Milton's semiotics, see

Kuester, 2009), or as Mary Nyquist puts it, "Adam and Eve have "unknowingly lost their original innocence as a result of denying the Father's Word" (Nyquist, 1992, p. 170).

On his way to the South Atlantic, Andrew finds "some words" glued to the door of Harry Greene's washroom on the steamer, and he first takes these to perhaps be "an old saying" (1997, p. 52) which goes: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." Most students of English literature will know that this is not exactly "an old saying" but rather a central quotation from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1971, 1.254-55). The speaker here is Satan, "the lost archangel" (1.243), whom the Father had expelled and banished to Hell after he had incited the War in Heaven. Satan had started this rebellion after seeing another angel, the Son, being preferred over himself in the heavenly hierarchies, and now, banished from Heaven, he uses this statement to comfort himself and to persuade himself that not all is lost.

The importance of Hell (and Heaven) in the context of this novel will become obvious later, when I establish a clear parallel between Satan's confrontation with Sin in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Andrew Halfnight's highly unusual—and probably imaginary or hallucinatory—sexual intercourse with a woman on a trip north of Camberloo. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan, for his part, is on his way to the newly created Garden of Eden to seduce Adam and Eve, the Father's new creatures who are meant to make up for the loss of the fallen angels.

In Harry Greene's surprisingly well-stocked library on board of the steamer taking him south to Saint Jude, Andrew finds another book that will influence the way he sees—or later re-interprets—his own life:

> In the middle of a head under the porthole I saw an old one with a stained leather cover. On the spine, all I could make out were the words "Blast" and "Monstrous." I opened the book, and saw the complete title—a very long title:
>
> *First Blast of the Trumpet*
>
> *Against The Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1997, pp. 56–57)

Andrew takes the title of the book literally, and he uses this title to finally understand or re-interpret his own life story. His misreading of its words explains in hindsight why he had referred to the women who had been attending his father's and sister's funeral in Scotland as a "regiment" earlier, and this vision and fear of a threatening army of women keeps haunting him during his dreams and nightmares. He thus uses the title of Knox's pamphlet, rather than its anti-feminist political and religious content, and misreads it in an overly literalist fashion as if it had a clear correlation to his own life.

As the third part of the novel recounts, Andrew lives for a time with his aunt and uncle on Saint Jude, an island that is a former women's penal colony (1997, p. 79), until his aunt Lizzie murders her husband and consequently is herself sent off to prison. Andrew, who now has lost all family connections, moves in with a local family. In Part Four of the novel, he has his first sexual experience with the daughter of the island's doctor, Maria Hebblethwaite. Rather inefficiently, Maria's mother, who had witnessed the budding romance between the two adolescents, had tried to discourage him from closer and bodily contact with Maria by drawing his attention to another seminal text from the seventeenth century, a passage in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Partition 3, Section 2, Member 3, p. 155) that was meant to dissuade potential lovers from falling in love. While Chris Baldick defines an anatomy as a "written analysis of some subject, which purports to be thorough and comprehensive" (1990, p. 10), Mrs. Hebblethwaite's use of the anatomy is rather less academically inclined and more pragmatically interested in the suppression of Andrew's sexual desire regarding her daughter through a literary shock treatment. This is what Burton's warning message had suggested: "Love is blind, as the saying is. Every lover admires his mistress though she be very deformed of her self, ill-favoured, wrinkled, pimpled, pale, red, yellow, tanned, tallow-faced, have a swollen Juggler's platter-face…" (McCormack, 1997, p. 138).

These anti-erotic lines that McCormack includes in *First Blast* he had also quoted and analyzed himself in his own doctoral dissertation on Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. He there refers to these lines as a "famous passage upon the attraction of the mistress" (1973, p. 348). But most importantly for the future life of Andrew Halfnight (and also that of Maria Hebblethwaite), the island of Saint Jude is destroyed by a meteorological catastrophe which we nowadays might call a tsunami. Andrew is among the few survivors (as Maria turns out to be in the end), but he feels guilty; for him, there is an evil omen that influences his life and the lives of those associated with him: "So many awful things had happened wherever I was: the deaths of my sister, my father, my mother, my aunt, my uncle, and now the Chapmans. The obliteration of St Jude." He even goes so far as to conclude, "I was a walking time bomb, a booby trap to be avoided at all costs" (1997, p. 152).

Andrew returns to Scotland, spends some time in a prison-like orphanage constructed upon the principles of Bentham's panopticon, then becomes a ticket clerk in a railway station, has a superficial love affair with a woman insinuatingly called Catherine Cleaves (1997, p. 165) and finally follows his mother's former lover, Dr. Giffen, to Camberloo, Ontario, Canada, where he settles down to work as a travel agent. In Camberloo, his rather unfulfilling love life continues, but at one point he also runs into his old friend and teacher, the sailor Harry Greene, again, and he befriends a certain aptly-named woman called Amber Tristesse, who in one of his nightmares bears "a dark purple stain that was a mirror image of my own" (1997, p. 214) thus reminding him of his dead twin sister.

Another stain becomes even more important, however. Driving through the countryside around Camberloo that is characterized by its very traditionalist Amish and Mennonite population, he is struck by a hand-painted billboard quoting Matthew 7:5: "CAST THE BEAM OUT OF THINE OWN EYE/AND THEN SHALT THOU SEE CLEARLY TO/PULL OUT THE MOTE THAT IS/ IN THY BROTHER'S EYE" (1997, p. 216). From now on, Andrew's vision seems to be impaired by such a "literal" mote that appears before his eyes again and again. As Allan Hepburn comments on Andrew's literal interpretation of the biblical quotation, "Misinterpreting this command, Andrew treats the mote as a physical, not spiritual entity" (2002, p. 141).

The next chapter of the novel bears the traces of a near-death experience mentioned in the title of my essay, in medical terms an "episode with characteristic cognitive and emotional features sometimes experienced by people close to death, typically involving a sensation of moving through a tunnel, feeling unnaturally calm, an out-of-body experience, and sometimes mystical or religious feelings" (Colman, 2015). At least, such an interpretation is suggested by Andrew's narrative about events that took place on his literal (and also metaphorical, as we shall see later) birthday and by the visual and mental perspective that he describes. The reference to seeing things "as though from behind a glass" can be interpreted as a reference to St. Paul's looking "through a glass, darkly" mentioned above:

> Did you ever feel you could walk away from yourself? That was the way it was with me the next morning, the morning

> of my birthday. It was as though I were watching someone else awaken: as though I no longer inhabited my body. I was an objective observer, could see what was going on in my mind, but it was no longer under my control. I saw it as though from behind a glass or under water. (1997, p. 227)

What he then describes can be interpreted as the reversal of his own birth. In a nightmare that in the end has a surprisingly happy outcome, he imagines being seduced by a strangely familiar-looking woman and engages in a sexual act with her. The sexual penetration is extraordinary, though, as—longing "to slide into her"—he is completely drawn into the woman's womb, thus reversing his birth:

> My shoulders re-entered her, then my neck. I tucked in my chin and took a last breath. A wall of slow, sweet flesh covered my lips, flattened my nose. As I closed my eyes, I heard her utter one last great shriek of effort, or triumph, or love.
>
> Then, darkness.
>
> I felt myself shoot along a brief tunnel and spill out into a balloon of pink light and opaque waters. A great throbbing surrounded me, my body vibrated with the beat of it. I tried to say the word for this, my rapture. But no word came, only a gurgle, and I cast myself off from all words… (1997, pp. 231–232)

He finally experiences a form of pre-natal rapture in which he "cast [him]self off from all words," so that he does not have to deal with "fallen" words of human language any more, no longer depending on the vision "through a glass, darkly," rather being in direct and immediate contact with his "mother," probably in a similar way as Adam and Even had been able to communicate with God directly in a prelapsarian language in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. So we are dealing here with the reversal of the life-giving moment of his birth that had ended his immediate and word-less direct (and perhaps "pre-lapsarian") contact with a woman. And this moment coincides with a quasi-orgasmic little death, the "last great shriek of effort, or triumph, of love." In Allan Hepburn's words, "a near-death experience reverses the trauma of birth" (2002, p. 150).

The sexually rather implicit act resulting in his being "unborn" also includes intertextual allusions to another Miltonic passage in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* involving Satan, Death and Sin, and incest. The lines from *Paradise Lost* describe Satan who, as described above, is leaving Hell on his mission to destroy God's new creation after the War in Heaven and the expulsion of the fallen angels from Heaven. His plan is to seduce Adam and Eve, and at the gates of Hell he encounters two formidable shapes:

> The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,
>
> But ended foul in many a scaly fold
>
> Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed
>
> With mortal sting: about her middle round
>
> A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked
>
> With wide Cerberian mouths full loud, and rung
>
> A hideous peal: yet, when they list, would creep,
>
> If aught disturbed their noise, into her womb,
>
> And kennel there, yet there still barked and howled,
>
> Within unseen. (1971, 2.650–59)

"The one" who seemed "woman to the waist" is Sin, according to John Rumrich "first described to the reader as a monster similar to Ovid's Scylla" (2014, p. 30), and she later reminds Satan that she is his daughter. When Satan starts to fight against a "monster" blocking his way, the "snaky sorceress that sat/Fast by hell gate" (2.725-26) addresses him and this monster, to whom he is obviously related, in the following way:

> O Father, what intends thy hand, she cried,
>
> Against thy only son? What fury, O son,
>
> Possesses thee to bend that mortal dart
>
> Against thy father's head? (2.727–730)

Satan is surprised at being called father and at supposedly having not only a daughter he did not know about, Sin, but also a son, Death. But "the portress of the hell gate" assures him that she, Sin, is his daughter, who during the War in Heaven "sprung" out of his head (2.758) and with whom, "Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing" (2.759), he fell in love, thus incestuously conceiving their son, Death, with whom—again incestuously or rather through rape—Sin had borne "these yelling monsters" (2.795) that time and again return and "creep … into her womb" (2.656-57). As John Rumrich puts it, the "Hellhounds … are sometimes free of her and sometimes fully incorporated, repetitively born and unborn" (2014, p. 30).

I am rather fascinated not only by the reverse birth in McCormack's novel, which the psychologist looking after him in the hospital after his automobile accident diagnoses as "chronic oedipal condition: in fact, he believes he made a journey back into the womb" (1997, p. 239). This diagnosis is complemented by a fair dose of "massive survivor guilt" regarding the death of Andrew's twin sister. But beyond this medical explanation, I am equally thrilled by what I see as intertextual parallels between the mother figures in Andrew Halfnight's nightmare and in Milton's Hell in *Paradise Lost*, including the possibility of children, and not only "yelling monsters," returning into their mother's womb. Allan Hepburn in his excellent essay on monsters and monstrous bodies in McCormack's novel writes,

> Monsters encode misunderstandings about physiology (imagination, desire, instinct, aggression, unconscious). A disproportionate number of monsters involve fantasies of pregnancy and birth. Milton's Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost* enact a fantasy of the animalized female body. (2002, p. 139)

He later adds that in McCormack's *First Blast*

> Invocations of Burton, Milton, and Knox create a discourse of women's bodies that emphasizes opprobrium. The postmodern representation of Andrew Halfknight's own body is a response to, and a redoubling of, early modern freakishness, often sedimented in ideologies of gender. Moreover, Renaissance superstitions and prodigies exacerbate Andrew's sense of self-division. (2001, p. 142)

Andrew Halfnight sees his birth as a very problematic event, as it separates him from his sister, his female other, who later falls prey to his father's prosthetic arm. His relationship towards women, starting with his sister, then going on with his mother and his aunt—who murders his uncle—is rather unfulfilling, to say the least, until in the end, after his un-birth *cum* car accident,

he finds fulfillment with the woman he had first met and loved at Saint Jude and with whom communication and communion are possible in the end.

Throughout his life, he feels doomed by an all too literal interpretation of John Knox's title about *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, having nightmares about a threatening army of women. Although Knox's pamphlet against women in leading positions in Church and society is hair-raisingly misogynous and anti-feminist, the idea of a regiment or army of women is after all only a non-philologist's misinterpretation of the meaning of the word *regiment*: Knox only expresses his opposition to women *reigning* over men, and this is what a psychologist explains to Andrew when he is in hospital after the accident just mentioned (1997, p. 240).

Another eerie and gothic case that throws light on McCormack's use of literalism in *The First Blast* can be found in his short story "The Fragment", and it once again leads us back to his philological interest in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and to Scotland. The narrator of the story, unsurprisingly a Burton scholar of Scottish origin interested in "religious melancholy," hits upon a manuscript which may be the source of a so-far unexplained (and, I presume fictional) reference Burton makes to "Caledonian Eremites who must ever remayne, as *Jacobus Scotus* has it, *casti, muti, et caeci*; chaste, silent blind" (McCormack, 1987c, p. 24). The textual reference to Burton's work is rather doubtful, and Stan Fogel calls it "spurious": "Despite the footnotes and other academic framing devices, the passage and the sect do not appear in Burton's work" (1989). The text that McCormack thus probably invented refers to a community of monks who have radically literalized their religious vows—to be chaste, silent and to withstand the temptation of visual impressions—by having themselves castrated and by having cut out their tongues and eyes. No wonder then that Stan Fogel claims that McCormack "jeopardizes our confidence in the relationship between words and things" (1989) in exaggerated examples of religious literalism. McCormack clearly has a tendency to lead representatives of exaggerated literalism who believe in a clear relationship between signs and things into absurdist aporias.

Andrew Halfnight's literalist reading of Milton's and Knox's lines and titles is a less shocking example of exaggerated literalism than that of Burton's (or, rather, McCormack's) emasculated, speechless and blind monks, but it also is not the only case in the novel in which Andrew misunderstands the true meaning of the words he reads by interpreting them literally. He is not a good and experienced reader, and, probably being self-taught, Harry Greene, the sailor who opens up the field of literary texts to him, is not necessarily a good teacher in this regard, although he is supposedly able to find the exact location of Paradise through an arcane numerologist treatise. Although he has a Milton quotation on the door of his washroom, Harry Greene himself might also have learned a lot more from the political propagandist John Milton who often warns in his writings not to commit the mistake of fundamentalist literalism and who instead identifies instances of anti-literalist and "prudent" ambiguity in some biblical texts. For example, Milton's statement in *Tetrachordon* implying that Christ's language in his communication with the Pharisees was "not so much a teaching, as an intangling" (1959, p. 642) has itself become almost proverbial among Miltonists and might serve as a warning against simplistic literalism. In the context of a religiously motivated civil war in Milton's seventeenth-century England, although seemingly in contrast to the biblical interdiction of lying, the word—even the Word of Christ when speaking to the Pharisees—can be seen to be used not in its original, unfallen sense but as implying an ambiguous, figurative meaning. It turns into Christ's weapon in the sense of a performative speech act: "Much rather then may we thinke that in handling these tempters, he [Christ] forgot not so to frame his prudent ambiguities and concealements, as was to the troubling of those peremtory disputants most wholsome" (1959, p. 650).

The problem of the literal understanding of biblical or religious texts appears throughout *The First Blast*, and only at the end of the novel do we find a solution against an all too literal interpretation in the process of re-interpretation, in what Linda Hutcheon might have called the parodic "repetition with a difference." The novel's ending exposes the story's status as a metafiction, a type of writing that thematises the act of writing itself, as we see that we have been reading the contents of a notebook that Andrew, now a middle-aged owner of a travel agency, has been composing in hindsight "twenty years later" (1997, p. 265) at the instigation of and for his lover Maria Hebblethwaite. She even asks him to consider re-writing his story of the regiment of women and to not only include herself but also "'a banner with two words on it: LOVE and TRUST.'" He assures her and his readers: "'Yes, Maria. I will. I will and I have. The last words in the notebook are LOVE and TRUST'" (1997, p. 272). As part of his "cure" his literalist fear of women and the need for the imagined "un-birth" are overcome:

> My mind, which had been split in two by that gap in my memory, was joined together again. If I was sad about anything, it was because I saw now that my ecstasy with the woman in the motel, which had seemed so real and so necessary, had never happened. It was the delusion of a man who'd struck his head on the dashboard and whose brain was unraveling as his life slowly ebbed away into the freezing night. (1997, p. 262)

So in the context of this sexual gothic novel by Eric McCormack, the near-death experience leads to a happy ending which also helps the protagonist overcome his lifelong fear of women and of the feminine: the "monstrous regiment of women" is overcome by love and trust, and Maria now joins—and is written into—the "regiment of women," thus making it appear less monstrous. And in the end, Andrew Halfnight's paradise turns out to be not, or not only, Milton's promised metaphorical "paradise within thee, happier far" (1971, 12.587) but, rather, as Harry Greene claims to have found out through his literalist and numerological studies (1997, p. 270), Camberloo, Ontario (a thinly disguised Waterloo, Ontario, where McCormack taught English literature), which—by the way—is the home of the protagonists of several other novels by McCormack.

If we look for a classification of McCormack's sexual gothic novel, we might use the eighteenth-century author Ann Radcliffe's term of "explained supernatural" and classify Andrew Halfnight's adventures as works of "terror" rather than "horror": "Radcliffe proposes that there are two distinct categories of the works now grouped together as 'Gothic': works of terror (in which acts of violence and supernatural appearances are continually evoked) and works of horror (in which they actually occur)" (Robertson, 2009). And the "rational" explanation suggested by Radcliffe is also what we get in McCormack's novel: Andrew Halfnight's nightmare of his reversed birth coincides with a car accident he had north of Camberloo, Ontario, in which he regains his sanity but loses, as his father had, with dire consequences, years ago in Scotland, the function of one of his arms.

As Andrew Halfnight tells his cat: "There's always a rational explanation—not as exciting, but real, just the same" (1997, p. 262). Inexplicable gothic horror turns into terror that can be rationally explained, and fundamentalist literalism is made less frightening by our being able to interpret the underlying message metaphorically after all. We can, in the end, rewrite earlier texts, integrate them into a new, rational context and thus make them lose some of their monstrosity.

Data availability

As this is a literary paper, no data were generated or analyzed.

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