
Book Review

Timothy Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 310 pp., \$26.95 / £22.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-231-21471-1.

Hell is a difficult book to classify, owing in part to its kaleidoscopic itineraries. But one may nevertheless safely describe it as literary criticism composed in the genre of ‘infernal’ descent that was inaugurated by Dante (1265–1321) and continued most famously by John Milton (1608–74) and William Blake (1757–1827). That is, *Hell* is a treatise delivered over the course of a journey, narrated in high style and running parallel to an account of the traveler-narrator’s own spiritual development. The venerable premise is splendidly fit for purpose in Tim Morton’s synthesis of phenomenology, ecological thought, cultural criticism, and their own lived experience.

Morton has long been known in academic circles and far beyond for theorizing ‘hyperobjects’—manifestations of the gargantuan sublime—as the signature of modernity and interpretive key to climate crisis. Readers familiar with Morton and their work may puzzle over the word ‘Christian’ in *Hell*’s subtitle—and, indeed, *Hell*’s *raison d’être* is Morton’s recent religious conversion. *Hell* pairs Morton’s trademark meta-narration of climate change with an account of their own 40-year path: from teenage self-identification with Buddhism to a born-again Christian awakening in March 2023. The 36-page preface serves largely as a primer for the autobiographical references (e.g., the role of Lucifer on *Hell*’s infernal stage is arguably filled by Morton’s own father).

Morton calls their Christianity ‘flipped Gnosticism’, or ‘double-flipped Feuerbach’ (p. 3), gesturing towards the primacy of the corporeal and embodied. On this view, ontotheology is Satanic and teleology a metaphysical malignancy. Morton suggests, ‘If one puts a teleological system to work on a system that does not have a telos, the teleological system will go about erasing the other one’ (p. 42). Morton envisages a world free from what they regard as the demonic tendencies of telos, or end-oriented being, an insight in which Morton’s personal transformation converges with a theory of the ‘sacred’ biosphere. Along the way, *Hell* often reads like a 2024 almanac of Western culture. Its nine chapters—corresponding to the Dantean ‘nine circles of Hell’—contain a Miltonic pandemonium of ideas and cultural references: from MDMA and critical race theory to QAnon and Lil Nas X, to name a few.

Indeed, it is to Morton’s credit that they convincingly weave together so much different subject matter between the covers of a slim quarto volume. Morton is also a tremendous stylist, and although *Hell* sometimes veers towards the self-indulgent and self-concerned, it is awash with apophthegmatic gems. Remarking on the perplexing quiddity of poetry: ‘Poems are . . . we don’t really know, but we do think

we know that poems announce that they're poems' (ellipsis in original, p. 21). Noting the perspectival chaos unleashed by social media: 'My sense that you're slipping a note under my office door doesn't match your sense that you're slipping that note under my *bedroom* door' (p. 93). Examples could be multiplied.

But the polysemy and multiplicity of *Hell* also mean that it contains many stops and starts. For example, Morton opens with a programmatic discussion of Freud—'no one has ever asserted the possibility that the human incest taboo might be an expression of human awareness of life as such' (p. xl)—but the boldly stated thesis vanishes by book's end. Alongside Morton's own conversion experience, *Hell* is anchored in Blake, who serves by analogy as Morton's Virgil / Milton. They write, 'We do still live next door to William Blake. The wigs and scenery have changed, but we still live somewhere around the end of the Enlightenment' (p. xviii). Morton channels the radical and heterodox spirit of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (2011), Blake's own entry in the genre of infernal descent. Insofar as Morton's arguments bear upon live issues in scholarship, it may be Blake scholars above all to whom *Hell* will be of interest.

Morton self-identifies as an evangelical Christian even whilst much of *Hell* is concerned with the perfidy of 'evangelical Christianity', in particular with regard to structural racism and climate change: 'It is unfortunate that several forms of Christianity are just the wrong kind of Satanism' (p. 70). But Morton's most concrete source for such Christianity is Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series of fantasy novels (p. 221). Morton refers to himself as a scholar—'my job as a humanities scholar is to "only imagine" things' (p. 49)—but they nevertheless seem uninterested in any portrait of North American evangelicalism informed by serious scholarship. Much of *Hell*'s argument is couched in left-wing shibboleths of American political discourse, with the result that Christianities different from Morton's own tend to be represented with all the sophistication and nuance of a broadsheet cartoon.

Alongside its pandemoniac and confessional features, the genre of infernal descent provides Morton a thermal metaphor of climate change. Although this is familiar territory for Morton, they nevertheless manage to keep it fresh. Morton remarks, for instance, on the latent wish for climate crisis itself to serve, perversely, as a source of collective goods: 'Burning the Earth to hasten the Second Coming? Apocalypse No! Allowing what is already the case—the sacred biosphere—to appear in the act of destroying it is indeed the end of the world, in a bad way' (p. 219). And Morton has choice words for 'the Andreas Malms out there who talk a big talk about blowing up pipelines but, in the words of us Texans, are all hat and no cattle' (p. xxxix). Positioning themselves as the Bjørn Lomborg of literary criticism, Morton articulates what some will welcome as a rebuttal of calcifying platitudes and others will decry as a species of climate quietism.

True to the model of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Morton's *Hell* is sure to disturb many of its readers—in particular with the graphic and bracing material in its autobiographical passages—whilst remaining highly attractive as a literary production. Fittingly for a book so concerned with the primacy of the tangible, *Hell* is

printed in full color and on heavy paper. The poetry and illustrations, largely Blake's or Blake-adjacent, effectively support the exposition. The prose is a living thing, and the editing is impeccable. To fully appreciate this exasperating, dazzling, and deeply personal book is to grasp Morton's principle of phenomenology: 'The *how* is the *what*' (p. 4).

References

Blake, William. 2011. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Bodleian Library).

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