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Smile to See a Burning World—Story as Hope in John Jantunen’s *A Desolate Splendor*

***A Desolate Splendor* by JOHN JANTUNEN**

ECW Press, 2016 \$18.95

Reviewed by **JEREMY LUKE HILL**

John Jantunen's *A Desolate Splendor* is set in an ambiguously apocalyptic future. The world has become reduced to isolated communities and sometimes just to single homesteads in an encroaching wilderness filled with the threats of nature and the far more dangerous remnants of human civilization.

Given this setting, the book's epigraph, taken from John Wesley's hymn, "The Great Archangel's Trump Shall Sound," takes on the role almost of an interpretive key. The verse it quotes reads,

We, when the stars from heaven shall fall, And mountains are on mountains hurl'd, Shall stand unmoved amidst them all, And smile to see a burning world.
(13-16)

Taken in their original context, these lines express a certain religious perspective on the apocalypse, where the "we" who have the assurance of God's favour can remain unmoved and even joyful in the midst of the world's destruction because this ending only heralds the beginning of a new and more glorious world to come.

This was certainly John Wesley's professed belief. He preached in "The

Great Assize" that the end of the world would be accompanied by tremendous upheavals in the heavens and the earth, but also by the physical return of Christ in glory. To Wesley, and to those who sang his hymns, the apocalypse was not to be feared, but to be welcomed as the sign of a new heaven and a new earth. It was in this sense that they could smile to see a burning world (398-419).

Most of the characters in *A Desolate Splendor* also smile to see a burning world in one sense or another, but rarely in the sense of Wesley's hymn. In a short opening section, Jantunen introduces the Echoes, a group of vicious cannibals who cut out their own tongues. He describes them with biblical language but does so in a context that explicitly subverts its traditional religious interpretation. The Echoes use children to lure settlers from their homes, Jantunen writes, because "it had been written that a child shall lead them and so it was" (front matter), a reference to Isaiah 11:6, which reads in full,

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. (*New International Version*)

This passage is traditionally interpreted as describing paradise, and commentators have tended to emphasize the radical peace that it depicts, wherein even the most fearsome predators live in harmony with their prey and a little child doesn't fear to lead them. This interpretation accords nicely with Wesley's beliefs, in

which the tribulations of the apocalypse will give way to a better world.

The Echoes, however, interpret this passage very differently, using it with terrible irony to justify sending children to lure settlers to their deaths. The language of wolves living with lambs becomes sinister as they kill families and burn their homesteads. The language of lions lying with yearlings becomes horrific as they rape young girls. The Echoes are certainly smiling to see the world burn, but not remotely in the way Wesley intended.

Jantunen reinforces this representation of the Echoes later in the story, when two young native men come across the aftermath of the Echoes' destruction. They find a handwritten sign that paraphrases Genesis 6:13: "God said, the end of all flesh has come before me for the earth is filled with violence through them" (114). The passage is from the story of Noah, in which God decrees the destruction of the world by water, and it is generally understood to mean that God needed to cleanse the world because of humanity's violence.

Once again though, the Echoes reinterpret the passage, this time to mean that they are themselves the violence that will end all flesh. By implication, they are the second cleansing of the world, the cleansing that comes with fire. Their purpose is to purify the world of its violence through a final and terrible violence. They smile to see the world burn because it is the fulfilment of their purpose to burn it.

In sharp contrast to the Echoes, the character of Ma, usually just called "the woman," does read the scriptures in a Wesleyan way, but even she fails in

the end to find comfort there. In one early scene, she quotes the Gospel of Matthew: "Look at the birds of the air, she recited, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (18), and she finds a "truth hidden in there that she had never seen before and was comforted by its simple message of hope" (19). She turns to scripture in this way several times early in the story, and she also sings hymns to cheer herself and her family.

As she's dying, however, this assurance leaves her. She begins to fixate on her incestuous marriage to her brother, a matter of necessity but no less evil in her mind. The scriptures that had once been a comfort now seem only to condemn her, and she becomes convinced that she's damned (163). The *smile* of Wesley's hymn, at the very moment it should be fulfilling its promise, seems frail and powerless in the face of her burning world.

This is perhaps the reason that her son, named only as "the boy," gives up on his mother's faith after she dies. Before her death, he prays several times and is able to find some comfort this way. Once, when his father has gone to hunt some marauding dogs, he prays to little effect, and then prays again. "This time," Jantunen writes, "hope spilled out of him and he knew that no harm would come to his father" (47). This is the smile of Wesley's hymn as it is meant to be, but after the woman's death, the hope of prayer is no longer available to him. He reads a randomly chosen scripture one last time over her grave and then tosses the Bible in after her, burying her faith alongside her body

(166). From this point on, the boy almost never talks about prayer or religion again.

In fact, the novel itself only makes one more explicit mention of these themes. Elsa, a mother and grandmother who has been captured by the Echoes and rescued by the two native youth, is captured again by a band of ex-soldiers. Having injured one with an arrow, she is hung by the soldiers so that only her toes can touch the ground. Left to suffocate slowly, Jantunen writes, “she hummed old hymns, whispering to herself between the verses, One more breath. That’s all, old girl. Just one more breath” (234): perhaps the only character whose belief holds true.

At this point in the novel, the use of Wesley’s hymn as an epigraph begins to feel like a harsh irony. At best, Jantunen represents it as failing to make good on its promises. At worst, he shows it to be the foundation of a twisted and sadistic violence. Elsa’s example feels like a tragic exception that proves a worse-than-tragic rule and that leads only to a painful death, in any case.

There is, however, a sense in which *A Desolate Splendor* recuperates the assurance and joy of Wesley’s hymn—not in religion but in story. There is a moment when the boy’s father takes him to the quarry for his birthday, an annual tradition. They eat taffy, they drink moonshine, and they tell stories that draw on past mythologies and new

myths arising out of their own lives. The boy returns several times to the quarry and to the giant tree that his father tells him is the centre of the world. It becomes a symbolic place to him, a place where he can both literally and figuratively look out and take stock of his world, where he can tell the stories that make sense of it.

Later, the boy helps rescue Elsa’s surviving family from the soldiers, and he leads them home toward his father’s homestead. He begins telling the women and children the stories and myths of his life, the ones handed down to him at the quarry and new ones also (260). They become the emotional correlate of the physical journey out of captivity and violence into peace and security.

Later still, as the boy is waiting at the quarry with one of the rescued girls, he tells stories for her, too, once again drawing from the stock of family myths and adding stories of his own invention (289). The boy is able to tell the girl her own story as he sees it in the stars, and through the telling he is even able to make her laugh, despite the violence lying both behind and before her.

In each case, *A Desolate Splendor* holds out these stories to be the smile in the midst of a burning world. It suggests that telling stories from one person to the other offers perhaps the only remaining means to stand unmoved as the stars fall from the sky and the mountains are hurled atop each other.

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