

PETER HOWSON AND THE LANGUAGE OF SALVATION: THE ROLE OF  
THE GROTESQUE IN REDEMPTION'S HADES CYCLE

Caleb Froehlich

*University of St Andrews*

Biographical Note: Caleb Froehlich is a PhD candidate in the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) at the University of St Andrews. His dissertation examines how ostensibly non-religious art in the United States opened up or introduced people to religion during the first half of the 1970s.

Abstract

Since his conversion to Christianity in 2001, Peter Howson's religious paintings have generally been met with critical incomprehension. A case in point was his 2012 exhibition *Redemption*, where reviewers suggested an irreconcilable incongruity between its grotesque imagery and redemption, the exhibition's title. In response to this critical bewilderment, the present article argues for the appropriateness of the grotesque in Howson's depictions of salvation by examining the significance of his conversion experience and providing a more sophisticated and developed analysis of the grotesque as his visual language. More specifically, it utilizes insights from an analysis of the content and practice of the artist's belief system and a new taxonomy of the grotesque in a close

reading of the *Hades* cycle, featured in Howson's *Redemption* exhibition, in order to show how the artist communicates salvation through the grotesque. It is hoped that this article may serve as useful groundwork for other scholars engaging with Howson's extraordinary religious art.

### Keywords

Peter Howson; religious art; conversion; grotesque; salvation; depravity; hell.

### Introduction

Since his Christian conversion in 2001, Howson's religious paintings have frequently attracted critical bewilderment. A case in point was his exhibition *Redemption* (2012), which art collector John Kohan described as "a major countercultural event" (29). Reviewers recognized that Howson had found religion, but they were not convinced that he had found salvation. One commentator wrote that Howson's Christ looked like "a victim not a redeemer... a street person betrayed by the crowds in the street" (Kuspit, "Bipolar Paintings"). Similarly, art critic David Cohen insisted that "in pictorial terms, the convert remains happiest in Hell," remarking, "(Howson) is a painter who takes such relish in the underbelly of humanity, dealing out cruel satire, that one wonders how he could paint salvation or bliss" ("Hell and Back"). These reviewers suggest an irreconcilable

incongruity between the grotesque imagery of Howson's paintings and redemption, the exhibition's title. Consciously or not, they associate redemption with heaven or with traditional portrayals of "the resurrected, transfigured, everlasting Christ."<sup>1</sup>

One exception to this critical tendency is Kohan, who rightly correlates Howson's hellish imagery with his personal conversion, and, in addition, argues that -- for Howson -- Christ may meet a person in the depths of his own Hell or difficult, challenging circumstances. Kohan thus makes a first attempt to respond critically to the polarization -- Hell is the site of damnation *not* of salvation -- typically espoused by Howson's commentators. Kohan, however, fails to grasp the broader theological implications of Howson's visual language. This article builds on Kohan's critical reappraisal, then, by providing a more sophisticated and developed analysis of Howson's use of the grotesque as his language of salvation. More specifically, I utilize the *Hades* cycle featured in the Howson's 2012 exhibition *Redemption* to argue for the appropriateness of the grotesque in his depictions of salvation.

Since Howson's presentation of the grotesque as the language of salvation is deeply tied to his conversion experience, the first section of my article examines the particular content and significance of these events. This, subsequently, establishes a contextual framework for a new taxonomy of the grotesque in the second section. With the exception of Donald Kuspit's brief discussion in *The Inhuman Condition According to Peter Howson* (8), at no point do commentators provide any critical reflection on the grotesque as a "mode" or "genre" in Howson's artwork. Thus, before reappraising the *Hades* cycle, I provide an operative definition of the grotesque and outline the primary ways Howson realizes and makes use of the genre. In the concluding section, I apply insights from this

critical apparatus to my close reading of the *Hades* cycle, specifically looking at how the artist communicates salvation through his portrayal of human depravity and brokenness.

### I. Howson's Conversion Experience

When Howson announced his conversion to Christianity in 2002, the art establishment widely regarded it as an extension of his previous waywardness, another irrational act in a well-documented history of excessive behaviors. Critics who found these imperfections a useful tool for interpreting the artist's imagery shrugged off this newfound faith under headlines like "Brush with God" (Miller) and "Howson Sees the Light" (Fraser). In a 2003 article for *The Sunday Times* entitled "You May Not Like It, but I'm a Christian," Howson responded: "It is ironic that people are more comfortable with me discussing the alcoholism and drug abuse that ruined my marriage, made my daughter's life a living hell, and threatened to destroy my career as an artist than they are hearing about my Christian faith" ("You May Not Like It"). Such dismissiveness has unwittingly resulted in a critical failure to take seriously Howson's conversion experience and, consequently, its impact on his visual language. In fact, Robert Heller, in arguably the most comprehensive study of events which shaped the artist's work, quickly passes over this occurrence in order to focus on how "the old artist is thoroughly alive and kicking within the reborn Howson" (*Peter Howson*, 2003, 160). I give the artist's personal conversion more credence. In this section, I examine the content and practice of Howson's belief system through the micro-context of his conversion experience -- namely, the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous

(AA).<sup>2</sup> Framing the artist's conversion experience in this way provides insights into the immediate influences which shaped his notion of salvation, offering a deeper, more complex understanding of his visual language.

In the spirit of AA's emphasis on story construction and storytelling, I begin by telling the story of Howson's conversion. The events leading up to the artist's conversion are thoroughly documented by biographers Heller and Alan Jackson. Therefore, my telling gives special attention to the conversion experience itself. I have pieced together an account of this experience from Howson's responses to interview questions (e.g. Spicer, "Peter Howson"; Grady, "In Confidence"), brief references in a number of art reviews (e.g. Davidson, "Peter Howson"; Cranfeild, "Seeing into Hell Itself") and the artist's abbreviated "testimony" in the aforementioned article for *The Sunday Times*. Certain events in the account may sound to some like incredible symptoms of Howson's circumstances. However, despite the difficulty of determining the reliability of Howson's own description of his conversion, the particular way the artist perceives the inauguration of his religious journey plays a central role in how he conceives of salvation.

As a child, Howson believed that God existed, "but it took me more than 30 years to find Him and surrender my life to His care" (Spicer, "Peter Howson"). The artist grew up in a Christian household and attended countless church services with his parents. Although he did not enjoy church, he was, nevertheless, obsessed with the crucifixion, the book of Revelation and the second coming of Christ. Howson often shut himself away in the attic and worked away at "hundreds and hundreds of pictures," mostly depicting his anxieties about the end of the world.<sup>3</sup> One of these early works shows a near naked Christ hanging on a cross (1964). The crucified figure floats over a swirling black void with his shadow

cast across the surface of the earth. Even at this young age, the artist seemed to dwell on the darker side of reality.

Howson became all too familiar with the bleak world he portrayed in these early pictures. As someone who struggled with the alienating effects of Asperger Syndrome, the artist was a prime target for bullies both in school and in the army. He drifted in and out of art classes during this period, eventually spending his days body-building at the gym and his evenings working as a bouncer at the local nightclub. Life on the streets provided Howson with his creative material: “I tended to do a lot of walking round at night and specialized in doing prostitutes and fly-by-night characters of Glasgow” (Heller, 1993, 16). These brutish portraits of hooligans, drinkers and homeless “dossers” in dark cityscapes immediately caught the attention of critics and buyers. He sold paintings to major national museums and to international celebrities **such as** Madonna, Sylvester Stallone and David Bowie. Shortly after Howson achieved wealth and fame as one of the “New Glasgow Boys,” an influential group of figurative painters, his personal life deteriorated. A harrowing venture as an official war artist in Bosnia, combined with two broken marriages and excessive substance abuse, brought on what Howson described as “a sickness of the soul” (Jackson 8).

Howson’s sickness peaked in the new millennium. The artist spent most of that year in bed “depressed and ill and drunk and drugged out” (Heller, 2003, 153) and, although he still believed that God existed, he wanted nothing to do with Him. One morning, when Howson was meant to be watching his thirteen-year-old daughter Lucie, he was so inebriated that he failed to notice that she had packed up her things and wandered out into a seedy Glasgow park. Upon Lucie’s return five hours later, Howson realized that he had

reached his own personal gutter (153, 155). The artist promptly admitted himself into the rehabilitation clinic at Castle Craig Hospital in Peeblesshire, where he “worked” AA’s twelve-step program. Howson frequently contemplated suicide in the recovery process until one night, as he was about to take his own life, “suddenly something came into my room and a voice said: ‘Peter, this isn’t the time for you to die, so get up’... The whole room filled with light. I never saw anyone... it was just light, pure light and love, incredible love” (Spicer, “Peter Howson”). Something like this experience occurred each evening at the clinic over a four-week period (Heller, 2003, 160). From the first encounter, Howson recalls, “every dark compartment in my mind started to empty its rubbish. Something of infinite power was prodding about within me and straightening me up.” According to the artist, the source of this transforming power was God in Jesus Christ. In surrendering himself into the “arms of Christ... my old life died and I was reborn into the new” (“You May Not Like It”).

Regardless of his Christian upbringing, Howson did not experience an intimacy with God or the radical effects of conversion -- the feeling of love, the divine prompting, the sense of new life centered upon Christ -- until he worked AA’s twelve-step program.<sup>4</sup> The twelve steps, as Howson explains, teach “that an alcoholic cannot get off booze without The Higher Power” (Heller, 2003, 159). For many members of the AA, including the artist, this higher power is God. In fact, half of the twelve steps (2-3, 5-7, 11) acknowledge and affirm the existence of God and direct the member to interact with “Him” through prayer and meditation. It is anticipated that this direct interaction will result in divine intervention for the member. Most of the time, this intervention is a gradual process, but on occasion, a member may experience what Bill Wilson calls “sudden and spectacular upheavals”

(Alcoholics Anonymous 569). In either case, the intervention is viewed as miraculous, the ultimate miracle being the member's achievement of sobriety. Sobriety in the context of AA, however, is considerably more than quitting drink, it is what the final step names as a "spiritual awakening" (Connors et al. 219-220). According to *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, one of AA's two core texts,<sup>5</sup> a spiritual awakening "amounts to a new state of consciousness and being... a very real sense that (the member) has been transformed" (106-107).

Howson articulates his own transformation through the terminology of William James' "twice-born" conversion type, which he likely encountered in AA.<sup>6</sup> James argued that this new state of consciousness is fundamentally religious and may be superficially found among "healthy minded" people, those who "live habitually on the sunny side of their misery line" (*Varieties of Religious Experience* 135), but it is more often and most authentically found in "sick souls." According to James, these are people who affirm the reality of evil and see in their essential selves "wrongness or vice... their lives are one long drama of repentance and of effort to repair misdemeanors and mistakes" (134-135, 169). Conversion for the sick soul is the process by which its divided existence becomes "unified" -- fulfilled as one might say -- "in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (189). This new state of mind is what James called the second birth. It is a dramatic change in belief and psychological make-up which propels the convert into a new existence. To suggest, however, that Howson's conversion experience can be fully explained as an alteration of consciousness, as James proposes, is to not only disregard AA's expectations, but also the artist's own understanding of what occurred. From his



standpoint, without God's direct intervention there would have been no transformation, no conversion.

The particular form this intervention took for Howson is perhaps best described as mystical. Characterized by a sudden burst of light and insight, this experience is difficult to put into logical or coherent terms. The vision recounted by Howson stands out as somewhat extraordinary within AA and, indeed, within many facets of the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> One critic who makes reference to his conversion fittingly associates it with the experience of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus (Heller, 2003, 159). Like the Pauline vision, Howson apparently encountered the living Christ, who entered into the artist's dark circumstances and, irrespective of his initial intentions and self-interest, brought about a radical transformation. Where Howson's account differs from that of Paul's experience and indeed other Christic visions, however, is that he offers no description of what Christ looked like, no details as to whether this experience was corporeal apart from the feeling of love and a voice telling him that it was not his time to die. The vision seemed to function for Howson as an assurance of divine presence, a manifestation of the artist's new intimacy with Christ.

In contrast to widespread critical opinion, Howson's divine encounter initiated true change in his life. The artist recalls: "When I came out of the clinic I felt different I did not crave a drink. I felt that I needed people... Something mysterious and wonderful was happening in my life. It did not happen instantly, but over a few weeks. It seemed as if layers of scab and leprous skin were falling off me. Now I walked through the park and noticed squirrels and birds and the colors of the trees" ("You May Not Like It"). Howson experienced a kind of salvation, but it is important to note that, for the artist, this salvation

was not a mere transition into happy, healthy-mindedness. As the artist explains in a number of post-conversion interviews, the conversion experience did not remove the idols and struggles of his life, he remains “broken,” battling the same illness, the same clinical depression which initially placed him in Castle Craig (e.g. Holloway, “Peter Howson Interview”). In many ways, this fits with AA’s emphasis on the hold of addiction. It is true that AA offers hope, renewal and joyful life to its members if the twelve-step program is followed, but the illness itself, the evil which alcohol represents to the member, can never be completely overcome, even by God (Mercadante 78-79). Whether Howson espouses this view is difficult to tell, however, the artist clearly recognizes his own fallibility, imperfection and powerlessness in the face of his illness. What shape, then, did Howson’s salvation take? Did he personally gain anything in surrendering himself to Christ? To answer these questions, perhaps it is best to examine the content and practice of the artist’s belief system.

Howson unabashedly calls himself a Christian, but neither he nor his biographers provide specific information as to the kind of Christianity the artist converted to, and indeed from. When pressed about his denominational affiliation, Howson sometimes describes himself as an “unhappy Protestant,” caught somewhere between the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholicism (Greaves, “Hand of Destruction”). More often, however, the artist refers to himself simply as a “follower of Christ.” In utilizing this designation, Howson is not merely communicating his desire to become like Christ and serve God, he is suggesting that his Christian faith should be understood primarily as a personal relationship with Christ. The artist sees this relationship as resulting in salvation, which, for him, manifests itself in two spheres -- the eternal and the temporal. Howson describes the latter of these

spheres in predominantly mystical terms. During a BBC interview in 2017, for example, Howson responded to queries about his battle with depression by stating that he “always felt close to the spiritual entity, the master that made everyone. I felt close to Jesus Christ” (Holloway, “Peter Howson Interview”). This language evokes the mystical encounter which he describes as marking his conversion to Christianity, suggesting that Howson has appropriated the key precept of AA’s twelve-step program -- specifically, that only the ongoing presence of Christ can empower this day-to-day reprieve.

This section highlights Howson’s conversion experience in order to show how it shaped his belief system – specifically, his concept of salvation. In detailing AA’s twelve-step program, the micro-context of the Howson’s conversion, I sought to make the nuances of his salvific understanding more explicit. The patterns and themes outlined here provide a contextual framework for exploring the artist’s visual language. In the following section, I explicate this language by providing a taxonomy of his realization and use of the grotesque.

## II. Taxonomy of the Grotesque: Howson’s Visual Language

Critics have used the term “grotesque” to describe Howson’s work since his first major exhibition with *New Image Glasgow* in 1985.<sup>8</sup> Their descriptions include statements like “constructions of grotesque men” (Goldstein 157), “the grotesque and terrifying” (Elliott and Lewison 25), “fantastic, grotesque characters” (Flowers, “Prophecy”) and “grotesque treatment of the human form” (Davidson, “Islington News”). There is a general failure,

nonetheless, to distinguish the “grotesque” from other evaluative terms such as “ugly,” “strange,” “uncanny” and/or “ludicrous.” This may be due, in part, to the fact that Howson’s critics tend to recognize the grotesque through its instances rather than with regard to any agreed upon meaning.

What, then, might be an appropriate operative definition of the “grotesque” in relation to Howson’s artwork? The “grotesque” originated as a descriptive term for elaborate hybrid figures adorning the walls of Roman ruins and gradually acquired a cluster of not only pejorative, but also supportive or “playful” connotations. Consequently, wherever the term is employed descriptively, it is subject to exceedingly broad variation. Aestheticians generally navigate this ambiguity by emphasizing different elements in grotesque works.<sup>9</sup> Some, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, tend to associate the grotesque with the ridiculous and bizarre, whereas others, such as Wolfgang Kayser, privilege its more horrific elements. Still others, recognizing this incongruity, insist that the very purpose of the grotesque is to celebrate contradiction or ambivalence through works which simultaneously engender laughter and terror, mirth and revulsion, amusement and disgust.<sup>10</sup> The possible affective and expressive elements of the grotesque are arguably as diverse as the works which fall under its label. Even so, most aestheticians agree that the grotesque is recognized through artwork whose form destabilizes normative ways of viewing reality. The philosopher Noël Carroll gives a particularly helpful definition which, although not applicable in all instances, does seem pertinent to Howson: “something is an instance of the grotesque only if it is a being that violates our standing or common biological and ontological concepts and norms. That is, the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order” (Carroll 308). There

are arguably four principle ways through which Howson realizes this formal principle of the “grotesque” in his paintings: monstrosity, distortion, exaggeration, and excess.

The monsters which populate the artist’s canvases very seldom resemble the hybrid creatures originally named by the grotesque. Aside from a three-headed Cerberus in *Landlord’s Castle* (2008), a mermaid in *Prophecy* (2016), occasional snake-like dogs and a handful of winged or horned angels, the kind of hybridization on display in most of Howson’s paintings is subtler, more a fusion of animal characteristics with human forms rather than a combination of animal and human appendages. An example of this kind of subtlety is Howson’s Patriot. The artist usually depicts this brute with a thick neck, large ears and a protruding, up-turned nose, leading Heller to describe the character as “pig-eyed” and “pig-faced” (Heller, 1993, 52; 2003, 9). Other critics have similarly likened Howson’s muscular forms to bulls (Januszczak 3; Gleadell, “Colin Gleadell”), apes (Heller, 2003, 167) and one even to a brontosaurus (Januszczak 5). Monstrosity emerges from the animality of the figure, an appearance which essentially relegates it to the margins of humanity. In this way, Howson’s subtle mixture of the human with the non-human disrupts the boundary of what is commonly expected of the human form.

The artist has often spoken about the way he models most of his figures after people he has observed. In Heller’s biography *Peter Howson* (1993), however, the artist explains that “I never actually... paint someone as they are. I’ve always got to invent things and change things around and create characters.” Howson achieves this effect by distorting his subject’s features, altering the shape of their legs and arms, their torso, face and posture. He takes an actual human figure and blurs the boundary of its “existing as itself” and “not existing as itself.” The Dossier, one of Howson’s most well-known characters, for example,

was a real person roaming the streets of Glasgow in 1985-87, and, while Howson has not seen him since, he is featured in several of the artist's paintings, though not as he once appeared (29). In some of these artworks, the Dosser's hands are massive and heavy, in others they are long and spindly. Howson manipulates the man's facial structure, raising his cheek-bones and bringing his jaw-bone into a kind of point. The artist's use of a monochrome palette and chiaroscuro further shapes the Dosser's head to look like a skull.<sup>11</sup> These kinds of alterations imply not only a familiarity with the subject in question, but also a sense of what counts as distortion, what types of changes encroach upon the subject's identifying features and begin to transform it into something which is not itself. It is by distorting the form that Howson violates our normative understanding of the human figure.

Howson exaggerates individual features and/or exaggerates the entire frame. In the first case, his figures often merge with caricature.<sup>12</sup> Howson's portraits for a 1987 series entitled *Saracen Heads*, for example, display the faces of twenty-five frequenters to *The Saracen Head Inn*, the oldest pub in Glasgow, with their most striking features, a nose or a forehead, disproportionately articulated. These portraits display what art historian Ernst Gombrich describes as the "like in unlike," a representation which transforms the subject without losing its resemblance (77). It is through the "unlike," the exaggeration, that Howson exceeds the limits of what is considered natural for the human face. The second use does not simply exaggerate individual features, but the entire frame. In several of Howson's paintings, giants or "colossi" tower over dilapidated buildings<sup>13</sup> or stride across bleak landscapes, as in *The First Step* (2000).<sup>14</sup> The bodies of these figures are unusually large, greatly surpassing the standard size of human beings. I should note that the same transgression, although inverted, can also be attributed to figures the artist depicts as

exceedingly small, as with the dwarf in *Sublime and Ridiculous* (1989) and other forms of diminishing sizes. Whether Howson exaggerates individual features or the entire frame of his human subjects, he goes beyond the limits of what is generally thought possible.

Any of the aforementioned qualities -- monstrousness, distortion, exaggeration -- can be cited as an instance of excessiveness. However, the artist's use of excess is most clearly exemplified in his crowded canvases. As Mariana Vaizey observes, Howson has the ability to "command huge and complex compositions, deploying scores of figures" (Heller, 1993, 44). This skill is particularly evident in his more recent paintings where, in the words of one critic, bodies spill into view as "a horrendous voluptuous twist of flesh, like thick-corded branches of trees. They seem almost torn out the earth itself; it's as if they were heaved from its bowels" (Berkoff 3). The largest painting in Howson's latest exhibition *Prophecy* (2017), for example, depicts a mob gathering in a dense, tumultuous swarm around the central figure of a crucified Christ. The structure of the mob is nearly impossible to comprehend because it seems to shift and adjust according to where the viewer's eyes meet the canvas. It is almost as if the mass is being continually reconstructed by various limbs and torsos through a seemingly endless piecing together, a perpetual reassembling. In these paintings, Howson infuses order with chaos, and in so doing subverts what is natural or acceptable through overdose, an excess of the unnatural or the unacceptable. The mass assaults our vision, preventing the viewer from identifying intelligible human shapes.

All four of these qualities can be understood as violations of our biological and ontological concepts and norms. However, in restricting the grotesque to these categories, our characterization excludes, as a defining feature, violations of our moral standards.

Several of the women in *The Temptation of St Antony* (2007) and *Solomon* (2014), for example, are not, strictly speaking, grotesques, even though they might represent a distorted or exaggerated mixture of moral characteristics. This is not to say that calling these female figures morally grotesque is not an appropriate description of them. It is only rejecting the idea that they literally fit into the same visual or stylistic category as one of the artist's colossi. Indeed, Howson typically couples his grotesques with human brokenness, immorality and some with blatant evil. His "pig-faced" Patriot, for example, is meant to represent bullies, fascists and racists, anyone who uses brute force to violent ends. That is why the figure is often depicted holding a club or saluting to a person tied to a post.<sup>15</sup> As Kuspit observes, the artist's strong interest in the grotesque is primarily due to the fact that "it spontaneously conveys moralizing genre meaning... He is not simply curious about almost absurdly misshapen but still recognizably human physiognomies, but in the uncanny, symbolic import of their misshapeness." The grotesque, Kuspit goes on to say, is Howson's way of "articulating the inherent monstrousness of human beings -- of pointing to the primitive monster that is axiomatically the case in every inner life" ("The Inhuman Condition" 8).

The artist's use of the grotesque in this way is understandable for a number of reasons. In general, as Carroll observes, that which stands outside our biological and ontological expectations often has the capacity to harm us. It is not a far stretch, then, to regard something that is potentially harmful as evil (308). More particularly, however, much of the human brokenness and immorality Howson has been exposed to, especially in the years leading up to his conversion, was manifested through what might be described as grotesque forms, from the mutilated bodies of the Bosnian war to the hardened, characterful



faces of Glasgow's back alleys.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this is why critics are prone to invest the artist's imagery with such pronounced moral energy. It is arguably the frequent association of the grotesque with distasteful phenomena which makes this mode Howson's natural vehicle for depicting brokenness, immorality and evil -- the depravity of the human condition.

This taxonomy of the "grotesque" in Howson's oeuvre is by no means exhaustive. There are other ways in which the artist realizes and makes use of the grotesque in his imagery, such as eliciting certain affective states in the viewer.<sup>17</sup> My concentration on specific qualities -- monstrousness, distortion, exaggeration, excess -- and a particular use -- conveying moral significance -- nonetheless establishes the beginnings of a more critical reflection on Howson's adaptation of the grotesque. In the following section, I will apply this hermeneutic frame of the "grotesque" alongside insights from my analysis of Howson's conversion experience to his *Hades* cycle.

### III. Human Depravity and Salvation in *Hades*

The *Redemption* show came in the wake of Howson's mental breakdown in 2010 as the result of a massive commission for the Metropolitan Cathedral Church of St Andrew in Glasgow. To promote the assignment, BBC documented the two-year project in a gripping television special entitled *The Madness of Peter Howson* (2010). At one point in the film, the artist impulsively destroys nine months of gruelling work with a few strokes of his brush. The intense mental strain that Howson endured eventually led to his internment in a mental hospital for severe depression. It was there, in his hospital room, that the artist

found great consolation painting the *Hades* cycle (Mansfield, “Artist Peter”). In an interview only moments before the *Redemption* show opened, Howson recalled that even “at the deepest point of his bout with depression he was still aware of the presence of Christ” (Kohan, “Peter Howson”). His experience in the hospital bore a remarkable semblance to his Christian conversion in 2001, which Howson dramatically communicates in this quartet. All four paintings show the figure of Christ surrounded by a writhing mass of grotesque human forms.

Reviews of the exhibition have yet to engage with the entire quartet, looking instead at how one or two of the paintings might reflect the sensational details of the artist’s life. As a result of such a narrowed focus, critics have failed to explore what the four paintings communicate about the human condition in general and its relation to the nature of salvation. I shall approach, by contrast, the entire cycle, examining the particular ways in which Howson utilizes the grotesque to communicate these themes in *Hades I* (2011), *Hades II* (2011), *Hades III* (2011) and *Hades IV* (2011). I first examine how Howson represents human depravity, and then how this representation unlocks his understanding of human salvation.

Howson has long focused on the city as a window onto the depravity of the human condition. His subjects are often those who haunt its most unsavory corners, areas typified by cheap nightclubs and homeless shelters, brothels and disreputable pubs. The lurid brutality with which he imbues some of these paintings has led critics to relate their imagery to “Hell.”<sup>18</sup> In the *Hades* cycle, however, Howson makes this association explicit, casting the city as an actual infernal place. Beyond fixing his attention on particular urban vices -- prostitution, narcotics addiction, criminal violence, etc. -- the artist seems more

intent on capturing a particular atmosphere, a sense of desperation or panic that manifests itself in overcrowded settings. Kuspit, in his review of the cycle, describes these circumstances as “a behavioural sink, where people are in such close proximity that they sometimes crazily act out to make space for themselves.” Howson’s hellish city, he goes on to say, “is a violent, chaotic, oppressively crowded yet lonely, alien place”, an environment “where people often self-destruct.”<sup>19</sup> This destructive potentiality is primarily conveyed through the cycle’s grotesque figurations -- in particular, through diabolical creatures, the mob and more isolated humans.

Given the prevalence of monsters in portrayals of Hell throughout the history of Western art, Howson’s inclusion of infernal creatures in the *Hades* cycle is not very surprising. Their seeming ubiquity has likely contributed to the critical failure to address their presence in his imagery.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, Howson himself has very little to say about monsters outside of his hallucinations of “devils, demons and goblins” while under treatment at the mental hospital. He recalls that these fiends continually whispered in his ear that “there was no point to living” and that he might as well take his own life (Greeves, “Hand of Destruction”). The devils and colossi of this cycle seem to convey a similar malevolent presence. They lurk behind the turmoil, looking out at the viewer with ghastly smiles. Some face the crowds with enormous mouths agape, awaiting their next human morsel. Others swoop down from the darkness to toss unsuspecting humans into the air. Roger Hazelton gives an apt description of the function of these diabolical creatures: “They give voice and shape to the persuasion, as inescapable as it is intolerable, that something in being does not wish us well” and “seeks our destruction” (78). Howson’s devils and colossi represent the menace, whether moral, physical or spiritual, to human

existence. He renders them in a grotesque manner -- mixing animal and human elements or exaggerating their entire frame -- because he means to express unwelcome intrusions into orderly patterns of being.

Another destructive force that must be contended against is the mob. For Howson, “the mob is a very pliable thing, it’s like plasticine, and it’s an ugly, horrible thing. Any ordinary person on the street...can get sucked up into it...It can be anyone from any walk of life, it could be a bank manager, warehouseman, road sweeper, a stockbroker, a schoolteacher” (Heller, 1993, 49). In the *Hades* cycle, Howson depicts the mob as almost having a life of its own. It swirls around the figures in the foreground, entangling them in its mass. These members then seem to take on the identity of the mob, perpetuating its aimless hysteria. The mob’s apparent autonomy in these paintings corresponds with a quality which crowd psychologists term like-mindedness, or “mental homogeneity” (Greenberg 1009). Gustave Le Bon, a renowned theorist in the field, characterizes the mental homogeneity of the mob in terms of “contagion” -- a disease-like spreading of effect from one person to another (“The Crowd” 9-23). Howson illustrates this contagion in his cycle through the excessiveness of the mob. As figures are consumed by the tumultuous throng in the background, they lose their formal integrity, becoming mere appendages to this infernal instrument of chaos. The grotesque thus becomes the artist’s outlet for communicating the elimination of individualized humanity.

Howson further conveys destructive potentialities through more isolated humans in the foreground of each canvas. Several of these characters harken back to the artist’s excursions into inner-city Glasgow, what he calls “the twilight zone” (Januszczak 3). The most recognizable of these humans are arguably the drunks featured in *Hades III*. One

leans against a boarded-up building with a hangman's noose above its entrance, another seems to have passed out while others writhe in horror, the upper half of their bodies protruding from the ground like the empty bottles strewn about them (fig. 3). The particular way Howson adapts the grotesque to depict these figures -- contorting their faces into agonizing expressions and/or completely removing their legs -- suggests a punitive quality, something akin to the way particular sins were punished through prescribed sequences of tortures in medieval conceptions of Hell. However, aside from truncated human torsos, these punishments are presented more as natural consequences of addiction, casting the figures as victims of their own appetites and troubled relationships. In this Dantean way, they serve as portraits of humanity's self-destructive tendencies.

Howson's use of the grotesque to depict instances of human depravity has led a number of critics to draw parallels between his artwork and realist paintings from the Northern Renaissance (Kiehl, 20; Kuspit, "The Inhuman Condition" 8). Waldemar Januszczak, for example, writes that the artist's paintings of Glaswegian lowlife are reminiscent of "the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century interiors of Steen or Teniers" in which "the carousing peasants were shown drunk and in *flagrante delicto* as a warning to the audience of the dangers of moral turpitude" (4-5). As with the drunks in *Hades III*, a number of other figures in the cycle seem to perform comparable functions. In the lower right corner of *Hades II*, for instance, two nude women seductively caress a man from behind, preventing him from seeing their distorted faces and grossly exaggerated limbs (fig. 2). The scene has a similar moralizing feel to Quentin Metsys' *Ill-Matched Lovers* (1520-1525), a painting whose repulsive characters are widely thought to signify the foolishness of loose or lecherous behavior. It is the grotesque which not only provides Howson a

means to expose those debaucheries he deems particularly corrupting, but also a figural vocabulary with which to warn viewers against the dangers of a profligate lifestyle.

As I have already indicated, critics who reviewed Howson's scenes of "massed damnation" and destruction in the *Hades* cycle generally found his exhibition title, *Redemption*, wildly optimistic, if not absurd (Cohen, "Hell and Back"). Their rejection of his grotesque depictions of Christ in the centre of diabolical, fanatic and degenerate figurations not only reveals a failure to reconcile the grotesque with their own vision of salvation, but to grasp its role in Howson's statement about the salvific work of Christ. Christian tradition has generally understood this work to encompass the entire gospel story, including the interval between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Christ's descent into Hell was believed to provide the opportunity for those who died before the Incarnation to find salvation. However, while some Christians merely relegated the descent to the upper regions of Hell, regions reserved for those who looked forward to the Messiah, others insisted that Christ infiltrated its lowest depths (Luther 49-50). Howson's cycle appears to convey the latter of these two convictions. The four paintings suggest descending levels both through the numbering in their titles and through their composition – specifically, their lighting and formal complexity. Their apparent progression gives the sense that Christ is journeying through the underworld. I do not intend to merely document this journey but to explore how the artist's grotesque portrayals of Christ within each level highlight particular aspects of his salvific work.

Howson has said that he is obsessed with the image of Christ (Perry, "Peter Howson's"). According to Kohan, the artist begins his painting routine each morning with a sketch of the figure or face of his savior. Howson states, "You can depict Christ

thousands, even millions of times, and you won't get the same face or expression. I don't believe I could ever repeat myself. Every single time I do the...image of Jesus, I draw tremendous strength from it" (Kohan, "Peter Howson"). Christ is the clear focus of each painting in the *Hades* cycle. He stands or, in the case of *Hades IV*, floats in the painting's high center, visually isolated from the violent mass swirling around him. What is immediately striking about Howson's savior is that he bears similar grotesque features to those in the mob. These physical similarities not only disassociate Christ from the immaculate, idealized portrayals Howson's critics seem accustomed to viewing, but also cause the savior to be identified with the figures who populate each canvas.

If one takes into consideration the moral import Howson bestows on the grotesque, this physical affinity between Christ and the masses takes on new significance. In the Bible, God is said to have placed the sin of humanity on Christ while he hung on the cross: "For our sake, (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin" (*English Standard Version*, 2 Cor. 5.21), and "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53.6). By linking Christ's physical appearance to the crowds, these images graphically communicate the biblical proclamation that Christ "himself bore our sins in his body" (1 Peter 2. 24; see also Rom. 4. 25; 1 Cor. 15. 3; Col. 2. 14; Heb. 9. 28). The meaning of this solidarity, however, varies from one painting to another, revealing a particular salvific action for each visual context. My examination of these actions in the subsequent paragraphs follows the numbering of the cycle: *Hades I*, *Hades II*, *Hades III* and *Hades IV*.

At first sight, the savior of *Hades I* appears to be the most bizarre of the cycle's Christ figures. He resembles a stop-action photo with three simultaneous postures. The background figure is nailed to a cross with his head hanging forward, accented by a

sparkling aureole. Emerging from his body in the foreground is another figure who looks as if he has just been released from the cross. His aureole has disappeared and his hands and feet show unusually large crucifixion wounds. Beneath him in the middle ground is a crouched figure who reaches out to a supplicant. This scene is brighter than all other paintings in the cycle. It is the only image to show the sky as part of its composition. The setting suggests that Christ is in the atrium of Hell. This is further reinforced by the figure of Death sitting on a boat full of people as it draws near to the pier, a clear visual allusion to Charon and the river of Acheron, with Dante observing the passengers' arrival.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these different elements imply that that Christ's three postures are a prelude to the salvific work to come (fig. 1).

Below the spotlight beams of *Hades II*, the oversized figure of Christ stands on a mound looking over a tumultuous mass of nude figures. His arms are stretched out to their limits, exposing a gaping wound in his side. Not one figure in the painting, however, looks toward his towering form. It is difficult to tell if these inferno dwellers are rejecting the savior or are merely blind to his presence. David Kiehl, in speaking about Howson's subjects, states that they "are not sightless," but "they may be morally blind and they are assuredly mentally blind. They no longer think, they just do" (22). Kiehl's remark seems especially true of the figures in this painting. Indeed, Howson accentuates their moral and mental blindness by not only placing them in Hell but also by depicting their non-acknowledgment of Christ. While they are indifferent to him, he is not indifferent to them. As his exaggerated frame suggests, this savior earnestly strives to seize their attention. Redemption pursues these figures despite their blindness (fig. 2).



With *Hades III*, light emanates from the body of Christ, illuminating the dregs of this urban inferno. The savior moves among them dressed in tattered rags. His gaunt appearance clearly indicates that he identifies himself with the rabble.<sup>22</sup> Kohan remarks that “this is a Christ that we might recognize on Judgment Day from the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, and the imprisoned whom we helped -- or ignored -- in this life” (Kohan, “Peter Howson”). The savior particularly associates himself with the outcasts, and these figures, in contrast to *Hades II*, appear to have a special reception to Christ’s presence. Although they may be regarded as “scum” and “underclass hooligans,” as Howson remarks, these figures are “real” and “nearer to salvation” than those who are generally accepted in society. They appear “desperate” to draw near to Christ’s dazzling light (Kuspit, “Bipolar Paintings”) (fig. 3).

Christ’s cruciform figure rises above a sea of ghoulish forms in *Hades IV*. He appears ghoulish himself, looking across the masses with deep-set, glowing eyes. The darkness and congestion of the scene give the impression that these figures are in the lowest depths of Hell. Unlike the frenetic bodies in the other *Hades* paintings, they look as if they can barely move. Some are even trapped in the ruins of old buildings and rotten wooden boats. Christ’s presence startles many of these brutes from their stupor. They look up to a portal of blue and white light behind the savior. The savior’s cruciform posture is telling. Its allusion to the crucified figure in *Hades I* suggests Christ’s salvific work on the cross is still in progress, even in the deepest regions of Hell. As Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, the cross not only makes possible the descent but gives it all of its redemptive value.<sup>23</sup> Howson powerfully conveys the same idea in this scene. In order for figures to enter into the portal of light, they must pass under Christ’s outstretched arms (fig. 4).

These four different yet concurrent portrayals of Christ not only show him in the lowest regions of Hell, regions reserved for what one might describe as the most grotesque figures, but show a savior whose appearance corresponds to the particular conditions of these figures. While it is likely that Howson altered the appearance of Christ from canvas to canvas in order to maintain stylistic consistency, the savior's figural variation suggests that he is capable of taking on a form which specifically corresponds to those he has come to save. Various early Christian writings use the term "polymorphy" to describe a similar idea. That is, according to István Czachesz, Christ was widely thought to assume different "forms either simultaneously or subsequently" for different people.<sup>24</sup> The idea of a polymorphous Christ is grotesque, whether or not he changes into a grotesque form. But it is precisely the grotesque which gives this capability profound salvific import. It enables Christ to accommodate himself to people's specific capacities and conditions (the Incarnation being the prime example). Howson's cycle vividly illustrates the metamorphic lengths Christ is willing to undergo in order to secure the salvation of the destitute and depraved. This savior does not merely take on human form, but the particular form of a dying criminal, a tattered vagrant, a looming giant and a hair-raising ghoul.

This article addresses the critical failure to appreciate Howson's portrayal of salvation through the grotesque. Building an analysis of the artist's conversion experience (section I) and a taxonomy of the ways in which he realizes and makes use of the grotesque (section II), the article illustrates key insights from these sections with a close reading of the *Hades* cycle (section III) in order to show how Howson's visual language of the grotesque is, in fact, entirely appropriate (and extremely powerful) for depicting salvation. In painting a grotesque Christ, the artist depicts the savior from his personal struggles, a

savior who enters into the darkest depths and shapeshifts to bring about redemption, if not for eternity, at least for that day. It is, I believe, this synergy between Howson's grotesque style and his personal experience which gives his post-conversion paintings a certain universality. His work has not only resonated with prominent cultural figures and celebrities, but also social outcasts such as Scottish prison inmates, for whom salvation can seem distant and unattainable (Flowers Gallery, "Peter Howson"). The artist's ability to speak to social peripheries attests to his enduring skill at capturing the dark side of humanity, while also paradoxically providing hope. In examining Howson's distinctive visual language, my hope is that this article serves as useful groundwork for other scholars engaging with his extraordinary and, in our times, prophetic, religious art.

#### WORKS CITED

- Alcoholics Anonymous. *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of how Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976.
- Alcoholics Anonymous. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981.
- Allthorpe-Guyton, Marjorie. "New Image Glasgow at the Third Eye Centre." *Artscribe International* 54 (September-October 1985): 58-59.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Berkoff, Stephen. *Peter Howson: The Third Step*. London: Momentum Publishing, 2002.

Carroll, Noël. “The Grotesque Today: Toward a Taxonomy.” *Minerva’s Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture and Moving Pictures*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2013.

Cohen, David. “Hell and Back: The Religious Paintings of Peter Howson.” *The Life and Works of Peter Howson*, 5 March 2012, <https://www.peterhowson.co.uk/hell-and-back-the-religious-paintings-of-peter-howson/>. Accessed 16 May 2016.

Connors, Gerard J., et al. “Spiritual Change in Recovery.” *Recent Developments in Alcoholism: Research on Alcoholics Anonymous and Spirituality in Addiction Recovery*. Vol. 18. Ed. Marc Galanter and Lee Ann Kaskutas. New York: Springer, 2008. 209-227.

Cranfield, Nicholas. “Seeing into Hell Itself.” *Church Times*, 12 Nov. 2008, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2008/14-november/books-arts/visual-arts/seeing-into-hell-itself>. Accessed 28 March 2018.

Czachesz, Istvan. *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse: Hell, Scatology and Metamorphosis*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

Davidson, Neil. “Christian Painter Faces his Demons in Hellish Exhibition.” *Islington Tribune*, 10 Oct. 2008, [https://www.thecnj.com/islington/2008/101008/inews101008\\_10.html](https://www.thecnj.com/islington/2008/101008/inews101008_10.html). Accessed 18 May 2016.

- Davidson, Neil. "Peter Howson: Andrew, Portrait of a Saint." *Socialist Worker*, 13 Jan. 2007,  
<https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/10231/Peter+Howson%3A+Andrew%2C+Portrait+of+a+Saint>. Accessed 28 March 2018.
- Elliott, Patrick et al. *Contemporary British Art in Print: The Publications of Charles Booth-Clibborn and His Imprint the Paragon Press, 1986-95*. Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art; London: The Paragon Press, 1995.
- Flowers Gallery. "Peter Howson -- Prophecy." *Flowers Gallery*, 03 May - June, 2017,  
<https://www.flowersgallery.com/exhibitions/view/peter-howson-prophecy>.  
 Accessed 06 October 2017.
- Fraser, Steven. "Howson sees the Light in the Kirk." *The Scotsman*, 3 March 2002,  
<https://www.scotsman.com/news/howson-sees-the-light-in-the-kirk-1-1360876>.  
 Accessed 28 March 2018.
- Gleadell, Colin. "Colin Gleadell profiles Don Quixote by Scottish artist Peter Howson."  
*The Telegraph*, 05 July 2004,  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3620130/Object-of-the-week.html>.  
 Accessed 10 August, 2017.
- Goldstein, Laurence. *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Gombrich, Ernst, "Raphael's Madonna della Sedia." *Gombrich on the Renaissance*, vol. 1: *Norm and Form*. London: Phaidon, 1993.
- Gooding, Mel. "British Women Surrealists; New Image Glasgow." *Art Monthly* 91 (November 1985): 9-12.

- Grady, Lorna. *In Confidence*. Sky Arts, 2002, <https://peterhowson.co.uk/in-confidence-peter-howson-with-lorna-grady/>. Accessed 28 March 2018.
- Greaves, Mark. "Hand of Destruction." *The Spectator*, 29 January 2011, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2011/01/hand-of-destruction/>. Accessed 25 March 2018.
- Greenberg, Martin. "Mob Psychology." *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*. 4th ed. Vol. 3. Ed. Irving B. Weiner and W. Edward Craighead. Hoboken NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010.
- Greeves, Mark. Accessed 10 August, 2017.
- Hazelton, Roger. "The Grotesque Theologically Considered." *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Ed. James Luther Adams et al. Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997. 75-81.
- Heller, Robert. *Peter Howson*. Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1993.
- Heller, Robert. *Peter Howson*. London: Momentum, 2003.
- Holloway, Richard. "Peter Howson Interview." BBC, 10 April 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04zmr29>. Accessed 28 March 2018.
- Howson, Peter. "You may not like it but I'm a Christian." *The Sunday Times*, 9 March, 2003. *LexisNexis Scholastic UK*. Accessed 12 February 2018.
- Hugo, Victor. "Preface to Cromwell." *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*. Harvard Classics Series. Vol. 39. Ed. Charles Eliot. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909. 354-408.
- Jackson, Alan. *A Different Man: Peter Howson's Art, From Bosnia and Beyond*. London: Mainstream Publishing, 1997.

- James, Williams. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Ed. Martin Marty. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Januszczak, Waldemar. *Saracen Heads: Peter Howson*. London: Angela Flowers Gallery, 1987.
- Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Kiehl, David. *Blind Leading the Blind*. London: Flowers East, 1991.
- Kohan, John. "Peter Howson and the Harrowing of Hell." *Image Journal*, vol. 76, 2012, <http://imagejournal.org/article/peter-howson-harrowing-hell/>. Accessed 1 February 2016.
- Kuspit, Donald. "Bipolar Paintings by Peter Howson, The Scottish Bosch." *The Life and Works of Peter Howson*, 1 Sep. 2012, <https://www.peterhowson.co.uk/bipolar-paintings-by-peter-howson-the-scottish-bosch/>. Accessed 16 May 2016.
- Kuspit, Donald. *The Inhuman Condition According to Peter Howson*. London: Flowers East, 1989.
- Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. 4th Impression. London: T. F. Unwin, 1903.
- Luther, Martin. *A Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. London: B. Blake, 1838.
- Mansfield, Susan. "Artist Peter Howson Returns after Depression Battle." *The Scotsman*, 1 March 2013, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/artist-peter-howson-returns-after-depression-battle-1-2817904>. Accessed 16 June 2016.

- Mercadante, Linda. *Victims and Sinners: Spiritual Roots of Addiction and Recovery*.  
Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1996.
- Miller, Phil. "Brush with God Ends Artist's Living Hell: Final 1 Edition." *The Sunday Times*, 13 Jan. 2002. Accessed 30 March 2018.
- Perry, Robert. "Peter Howson's First Ever Oil Painting up for Sale." *The Scotsman*, 05 March, 2014, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/art/peter-howson-s-first-ever-oil-painting-up-for-sale-1-3328869>. Accessed 13 August 2016.
- Pitstick, Alyssa. *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent Into Hell*. Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007.
- Rambo, Lewis. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Richardson, Robert. *William James: In Maelstrom of American Modernism*. Boston: First Mariner Books, 2006.
- Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. Vol. 3. London: George Allen, 1906.
- Sandberg, Erik. "Peter Howson on Art and Politics." *Peter Howson*, 17 April 2015, <https://peterhowson.co.uk/peter-howson-on-art-and-politics/>. Accessed 16 June 2016.
- Sparks, Tav. *The Wide-Open Door: The Twelve Steps, Spiritual Tradition and the New Psychology*. Center City MN: Hazelden, 1993.
- Spicer, Emily. "Peter Howson in Conversation." *Studio International – Visual Arts, Design and Architecture*, 11 Dec. 2013,



<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/peter-howson-in-conversation>.

Accessed 27 May 2016.

Thomson, Phillip. *The Grotesque*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Mysterium Paschale*. Trans. Aidan Nichols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990.

White, William and Ernest Kurtz. "Twelve Defining Moments in the History of Alcoholics Anonymous." *Recent Developments in Alcoholism: Research on Alcoholics Anonymous and Spirituality in Addiction Recovery*. Vol. 18. Ed. Marc Galanter and Lee Ann Kaskutas. New York: Springer, 2008. 37-53.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kuspit, "Bipolar Paintings." Similarly, Cohen argues: "The problem for Howson is how to depict the saved, not to mention the Savior, when his figural vocabulary remains so resolutely binary. His murky mannerism only admits two types: the siren and the ghoul. His uncouth Christ doesn't merely conform to Gothic norms that would perfectly make sense of an artist of northern sensibility: no one would expect Howson to deliver an effete, Italianate beauty for the Man of Sorrows." See "Hell and Back."

<sup>2</sup> Those who are familiar with Lewis Rambo's seven-stage model of conversion in *Understanding Religious Conversion* will detect my indebtedness to his framework.

<sup>3</sup> Grady, "In Confidence." Many of these early pictures foreshadowed the imagery of Howson's later crowded canvases.

<sup>4</sup> AA, although having no religious affiliation since the late 1930s, unashamedly claims that spirituality is at the core of their approach to treatment. Two principle sources for AA's understanding of spirituality are the evangelical Oxford Group (OG) and William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Sparks, 45).

<sup>5</sup> The other is entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous* (also known as the "Big Book").

<sup>6</sup> Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, once wrote a letter to Carl Jung explaining his indebtedness to James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, saying that in founding AA he had done little more than make "conversion experiences -- nearly every variety reported by James -- available on an almost wholesale basis" (cited in Richardson 405).

<sup>7</sup> I should note, however, that Wilson underwent a conversion experience not unlike Howson's in the aftermath of his detoxification. See White and Kurtz 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Allthorpe-Guyton 59.

<sup>9</sup> For a good survey of major attempts to define the grotesque see Phillip Thompson, "The Grotesque" 10-28.

<sup>10</sup> Two prominent advocates of this approach are Victor Hugo and John Ruskin.

<sup>11</sup> This is especially apparent in *The Heroic Dosser* (1987) and *A Wing and a Prayer* (1987).

<sup>12</sup> Some critics fault Howson for using caricature in his artwork. Kohan, for example, asserts: “Howson’s main problem is how to keep these multilayered constructs from toppling over into caricature” (“Peter Howson”).

<sup>13</sup> For examples of giants in cityscapes see Howson’s paintings *Specter of Stockholm* (1992) and *Dalmatia* (1992).

<sup>14</sup> Other examples include *Haqiqah* (2015) and *Hell Followed with Him* (2017).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *Death of Innocence* (1989) and *Blind Leading the Blind VIII* (1991).

<sup>16</sup> See Jackson 15-66 and Heller, 2003, 69-88, 99-112.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on some of the “emotional atmosphere” of Howson’s paintings see Heller, 1993, 27-33.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Mel Gooding’s description of *Priesthill Salome* (1985) in “New Image Glasgow” 9; and Heller’s comments regarding Howson’s *The Three Faces of Eve* (1990) triptych in “Peter Howson” (1993) 44.

<sup>19</sup> “Bipolar Paintings.” Howson once stated that “the Scottish psyche is so self-destructive... because they don’t care.” See Sandberg, “Peter Howson”.

<sup>20</sup> Howson’s critics typically use the term “demon” or “demons” to refer to the artist’s personal struggles.

<sup>21</sup> The name on the boat, PAM LORAZ, is a scrambling of Lorazepam, the drug used to treat Howson’s anxiety while he stayed at the hospital. See Kuspit, “Bipolar Paintings”.

<sup>22</sup> The crowd includes Howson’s Patriot, Don Quixote and the crawling figure from *The Third Step* (2001).

<sup>23</sup> 151. For an analysis of Balthasar’s view see Pitstick, 90-98.

<sup>24</sup> 117. For more discussion on the theme of the “polymorphous Jesus” in early Christian writings see Czachesz, 115-129.