

The Temperature of Hell (The Current Readings)

Thomas A. Smith

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I. Hell Is Hot

I am no expert on Hell; I've never been there, at least in any commonly understood sense. But I do read a thing or two, and I can confidently tell you this much: Hell is hot. This bit of information could be taken from a number of texts, biblical and otherwise, about lakes or rivers of fire and the like. My textual authority for this diagnosis, comes, however, from none of these, but from that hallowed volume *Books In Print*, which reveals that since 1988--coincidentally the year of my arrival at Loyola--to the present, roughly a dozen books have been published on Hell, and that does not include books on Satan, demons, Purgatory, and the Antichrist. Treatments range from the scholarly *Geschichte der Hölle* of Herbert Vorgrimler (1993) and *Histoire des Enfers* of Georges Minois to the excellent and very readable 1993 *The History of Hell* by Alice Turner, whose day job finds her in an editorial position at *Playboy* magazine. Strangely, an almost universally-repeated theme in this minor avalanche of infernal literature is the lament that no one is interested in Hell anymore. The Italian literary scholar Piero Camporesi says, "The maps of Hell have become illegible. Not only do we not know how to get there, but it is no longer clear where Hell is to be found."¹ And yet a major American university press thought enough people wanted to know that a handsome hardbound English translation of Camporesi's book was produced in 1991. I might also mention here the existence

¹ Piero Camporesi, *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe*, tr. by Lucinda Byatt (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), vi.

of a very popular CD-ROM computer simulation game called *Afterlife*, which allows the player to become a Demiurge and design a virtual Heaven and Hell. A thirteen-year-old friend recently let me play, on condition that I not muck it up. I told him I needed it for research.

This newfound “hotness” of Hell is surprising. The first surprise is the suddenness of Hell’s re-emergence after a prolonged period of banishment from both scholarly and popular religious discussions. Rumors of Hell’s demise have, it seems, been greatly exaggerated, or to return to my controlling metaphor, its temperature has risen dramatically. Indeed, one need not be a scholar to have picked up on the rise in temperature. In the Fall of 1993, unsuspecting readers of the morning paper were no doubt interested to learn that the Southern Baptist Convention of Alabama, after careful research, had concluded that 46.1% of Alabama’s citizenry were on their merry way to Hell. Understandably, a goodly number of Alabamans—presumably even some of the heaven-bound—thought that calculation a bit over the top, and the whole nation, thanks to the wire services, had a jolly time with the story for a week or two.

And if like me you are the sort to skip past wire-service stories and move directly to the funny pages, you cannot have missed through the 1980s and 1990s the long series of cartoons devoted to Hell concocted by Gary Larson in his *Far Side* series: Hell is the home of the unmakeable 7-10 split; a place where doomed symphony conductors are led into a chamber full of banjo players; where the weather forecast always seems to find a cold front that barely misses; where the gluttonous do aerobic repetitions numbering in the millions, and where, thinking of everything, they even make the coffee cold.

But when the chuckles die down, we find that large numbers of people in late twentieth century America believe in the existence of Hell; a recent Gallup poll puts the figure somewhere around sixty percent, up from fifty-two percent in 1953.² Other polls put this number higher, and in a more narrowly targeted 1983 survey of the readership of *U.S. Catholic*, some eighty-six percent reported believing that Hell exists. That such belief, and even such interest among those

² Alice Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 4.

who do *not* believe, should persist and see sudden increase here in the 1990s certainly seems noteworthy. By the way, only four percent think themselves likely to go there.

A second surprising aspect of the resurgent focus on Hell is its surrounding context in popular religion. A trip down the cappucino-scented Religion aisle of a retail bookshop, or an index finger run down a bestseller list, will reveal a strange and fascinating world, one that is decidedly supernal rather than infernal. We have apparently entered a realm here in late-1990s America that is chock-full of beings from on high, most notably angels and denizens of other planets. These beings, even the more forbidding of them, are ultimately benevolent, concerned with improving the lot of the human race by hastening our spiritual evolution.

Sophie Burnham's *A Book of Angels* is moving toward million-seller status, one of several angel books with cumulative sales of several millions. The three authors of *Ask Your Angels* tell us that angels, described as "the social workers of the universe," offer us love and comfort, as well as confidence in the face of death, which, as it turns out, is not to be feared, because it is merely a transition to a higher plane of existence. Angels, as a matter of fact, step into our lives all the time. Those events we mere mortals regard as coincidence--missing the doomed flight because of a traffic jam, finding the fast line at the grocery store--are the doings of angels, joyous and solicitous minions of a universe that takes great delight in giving us what we need.

Somewhat creepier higher beings also feature in the popular consciousness; I refer of course to aliens, and to their disquieting propensity to haul us off in spaceships. Two books, *Abduction*, by John Mack, and *Communion*, by Whitney Strieber, head the list of recent bestsellers dealing with alien abductions. Some of the accounts are frankly terrifying, at least at first blush: in several instances human abductees are subjected to sexual abuse. But upon reflection, in the aftermath of such encounters, the literature puts a positive spin on them. As it turns out, aliens, more highly evolved than we, are simply trying to mate with humans, to engineer a hybrid resistant to stupidity and various unevolved behaviors. We can take heart, in the final analysis, that we live in a well-populated, benevolent universe where death, terror, and

evil have no substantial reality; they are but names we mistakenly give to underdeveloped or underevolved consciousness. All will be well. If they ask, go ahead and take them to your leader.

Even without recourse to supernal cohorts, the market is saturated with this message of a smooth upward journey to the highest end of humankind. *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield, which recently passed its hundredth week on the New York Times best-seller list, is a case in point. This work, winkingly set as fiction, tells of a man who travels to Peru, where he finds an ancient manuscript, in which lie the “Nine Insights” that hold the key to the perfection of the human race. In the newly perfected order of things (according to these insights), we will all be guided by our fully-evolved intuitions to solve all the world’s pressing problems. At the end, fully evolved, we will all become bits of vibrant, or more precisely, vibrating, spiritual energy, in an eternal, harmonious mode of existence. It’s nice work if you can get it, and you can get it if you try, that is, if you “break through the habits of skepticism and denial” and consciously engage your own evolution.

With so many friends in high places, with angels and ETs and warm welcoming beings soothing us in our near-death experiences, in a universe that actively helps us up the asymptotal curve of consciousness, there are ample grounds for species-wide optimism. Whence, then, all these party-poopers faintly smelling of sulphur? Just as we were getting to like the idea of an eternity spent invisibly vibrating, we are treated to bookfuls of vivid portrayals of eternal torment and separation from God, and to very serious academic philosophers arguing strenuously in favor of some kind of post-mortem torment. Just when we were gaining some confidence in our ability to float effortlessly down the stream of universally evolving consciousness, someone interposes a dam, or a damn, in that stream.

Why should it be that Hell has become “hot” lately? Before we can try to answer that question, we must ask why Hell should have arisen in the first place, and how its temperature, as it were, has risen or fallen through history. Where did Hell come from in the first place and how has it evolved? None of us has the time or the patience for even a highly compressed history of

Hell, but perhaps we can advance our understanding by looking at a few revealing moments in Hell's history.

II. The Emergence of Hell

A. Deep Backgrounds

Hell, in the brief definition of the intellectual historian Alan Bernstein, is “a divinely sanctioned place of eternal torment for the wicked.”³ Alice Turner in her recent book says that “the landscape of Hell is the largest shared construction project in imaginative history.”⁴ Hell is and always has been a construct, a landscape that exists in the imagination, then as a literary and artistic topos. The construction project has gone on over considerable time; it has involved laying a foundation, then adding various layers of structure and superstructure. Not all who were part of the building process, especially at its early stages, were aware of it. Yet in one form or another, at one stage or another, Hell has been an almost universally recognized place in human religious history. For reasons of brevity, we will largely restrict ourselves here to the trajectory of the Christian Hell. Christianity, of all the world's religions, has given Hell its most fulsome expression. But as far back as literature exists we find accounts of an underworld or otherworld place of the dead, and of brave or foolhardy folks who pay visits to it. Descent motifs, what we have come to call the “harrowing of Hell,” feature in the epic of Gilgamesh, and in the many “dying vegetation-god myths”: the Akkadian Tamuz and Ishtar, the Hittite Telepinus and Kamrusepas, the Ugaritic Baal and Anath, and later the Egyptian Osiris and Isis, the Greek Persephone and Demeter, and so on.

³ *The Formation of Hell. Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴ *History of Hell*, 3.

Myths of this kind form part of the deep background of Christian Hell, as do several more elaborately worked-out constructs. Zoroastrianism, arising from rather misty origins in the Middle East perhaps as much as a millenium before Christ, posited a realm of the dead ruled by Yima, or Yama, the first man to die. The souls of the newly dead had their earthly deeds placed on a scale by Rashnu, the angel of justice, and if the bad deeds outweighed the good, even by a little, it was off to a horrific hell packed with creative torments. In the end, according to this dualistic religion, a great cosmic battle will ensue between good and evil, and those in hell will be delivered by a savior named Soshyans, the virgin-born son of Zoroaster. Hell having been destroyed, the newly-freed souls will reunite with their respective bodies and partake in the general resurrection.

The classical Hades of Greek and Roman literature, first sketched out by Hesiod and Homer, mediated through Pindar, given new content by Plato, then newly elaborated and dramatized by Virgil, provides a stockpile of images that have become standard features of the edifice of Hell. Many of these have been so effortlessly co-opted by a Christian semiotics that students are often amazed to learn their source. References to the torments of Tartarus (the lowermost region of Hell), to the River Styx and Charon its boatman, and to the vengeful Furies, abound in Christian art and music. It is worth noting, however, that the early Greek stories at least figure Hades, relatively speaking, as neutral, if scary. All the dead go there, and some of them seem to be perpetually in dire straits (witness Tantalus, Sisyphus, et al.). But while on the whole you might rather be in Philadelphia, the *raison d'être* of Hades is not retributive justice; the guilty, like Oedipus, tend to get theirs in this life. One of the most prevalent activities in Hades seems to be the recounting of one's own death circumstances to any who will listen. Hell indeed. By the fifth century B.C.E. Greek writers seem to have taken up more widely ideas of punishment of souls in the afterlife. By the time of the Roman Republic and Virgil's *Aeneid*, Hades is tricked out with a few new features: a definite location (Hell is directly beneath Italy, accessible via the cave at Cumae near Naples), spooky sounds, and repulsive fumes. Limbo (Lat. *limbus*: border, fringe) makes its first appearance.

B. Hell as Sublimated Justice

We have barely scratched the surface, but clearly the ancient Mediterranean world supplied a broad array of infernal images, a substructure rooted deep in the consciousness that produced the earliest human literature, built upon through successive generations, languages and cultures. We now move from the general to the particular. The most obvious proximate background to the emergence of Hell is to be found in early Jewish writings. The oft-repeated word for the realm of the dead in the Hebrew Scriptures is Sheol, translated variously as “hell,” “the grave,” “the pit.” It is difficult, though perhaps not impossible, to imagine a more boring locale than Sheol (present location excepted). It houses the dead, all of them, whether good or evil; like the realm of Hades, it is not a place of moral judgment. When in the third century B.C.E. the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the translators, plainly seeing this likeness, rendered “Sheol” as “Hades”. And so in the hellenized Judaism that forms the backdrop and context for much of the New Testament, the two notions—Greek and Jewish—are interwoven as the place, if you will, of neutral death. This unification of all the dead in one neutral place mirrored, some have argued, the centralizing and unifying tendencies of Israel’s monarchy.⁵ Sheol is a place of descent, vast and impossible of escape.

The trouble with an egalitarian post-mortem destination for all is that it fails to satisfy a human longing for justice. If the Deuteronomic notion of justice, whereby evildoers could expect recompense in the form of a miserable life and an early, humiliating death, failed, that is, if many evildoers seemed not only to avoid humiliation but to do rather well ignoring the Law, it somehow seems wrong that they should go on simply to lie in Sheol with the faithful. Can’t something be done? Couldn’t God arrange at least *some* distinction among the dead? The prophet Ezekiel, writing in the sixth century B.C.E., began to subdivide Sheol, for the first time

⁵ Cf. Bernstein, 139-40.

in Hebrew Scripture moving Sheol beyond the realm of mere neutral death: oppressors are segregated from the oppressed, the uncircumcised from the faithful (Ezek. 32:18 ff.). The Pit now has “depths” and “uttermost parts” in which lie the especially blameworthy.

Around the same time, another possible destination was added to the travel manifest. It had a real, earthly location, just outside Jerusalem: a ravine called the valley of Hinnom, or in Hebrew, *Ge-Hinnom*. The Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures rendered this *Gehenna*, usually rendered in English translation as Hell, or left untranslated. The valley in question was given prominence by Jeremiah. It had a history as a place of pagan worship, and of human sacrifice, and thus its very mention conjured images of shame and of burning. The bodies of executed criminals, and of other, nondescript dead, were dumped there. Such a nasty place—you wouldn’t want to be caught dead there—provided an apt metaphor for the final destination of the wicked.

Other biblical images converged to suggest that God could have worse things in store than early, humiliating death for the unrighteous. The most frequently repeated image of such punishment involves fire. The prophet Malachi compares God’s enemies to stubble that will be burned up in the Day of the Lord (3:14). So we have a future judgment in which the wicked will be destroyed. This image is shared by other writers of Hebrew Scripture; Psalm 11 speaks of the Lord raining coals of fire and brimstone on the wicked, and in Psalm 140 the Psalmist asks concerning his enemies: “Let burning coals fall upon the wicked! Let them be cast into pits, no more to rise!” Again, the fate of the wicked is destruction, not prolonged suffering, while the righteous dwell in God’s presence, presumably for a very long time. The late writer of Isaiah 66 adds yet one more, especially consequential, element to the picture. He envisions all nations coming to Jerusalem at some future time, and while the elect will be gladly welcomed, they will then take an excursion outside the walls to view a horrid sight: “And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (Isaiah 66:24). We are invited to imagine a pile of corpses so huge that the worms will not die, the fire will keep on

burning interminably. This is not really punishment—after all, these are corpses—but rather a kind of enduring testimony to the fate of those who oppose the Lord.

So after the Babylonian Exile we find many of the building blocks of Hell nearly ready for assembly: a pit where the bad are set apart, a vivid real-life analog in Gehenna, fire, and worms. Lacking still is some way to make the result of God’s judgment really hurt. Just as the head of the Old West posse who might be heard to lament “hangin’s too good fer ‘em,” it seems there were those who felt that having your carcass interminably slow-roasted and munched by worms falls somehow short. Or, put more succinctly, destruction’s too good fer ‘em. Judaism’s long resistance to the idea of an afterlife stood in the way. On this point, however, dissenting voices arose in the centuries that just preceded and included the nascent Christian movement. Besides hints like Isaiah 26 and Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones (37: 5-13), we have a very explicit and influential reference in the book of Daniel, chapter twelve: a future test will take place, and only those whose names appear in God’s book will pass this test. Subjects of said test will include the dead, many of whom will be raised from the dust of the earth; some of these will be raised to everlasting life, others to less pleasant occupations, namely, “shame and everlasting contempt” (12: 2).

Flavius Josephus, the Jewish-Roman historian of the first century of the Common Era, tells us that the Pharisees believed in an afterlife that featured the grant of a new body, and/or eternal punishment down below.⁶ We know from primary sources that such beliefs had been vividly expressed in the Jewish community, even if they were not widespread. Despite many questions of date, composition, and authorship, there is no question that certain Jewish apocalyptic writings provide more bang for your infernal buck than any other body of literature in antiquity. The foundational text is *I Enoch*. In this composite work we are treated to a tour of the universe, including glimpses of a bottomless pit rimmed with fire (18:10-13), and a massive fire pouring out further pillars of fire: this is the prison house of the angels, where they are to be

⁶ *Jewish War* 2.14.163.

held forever. Sheol makes an appearance as a kind of subdivided holding area. The latter chapters of *I Enoch* bestow upon the reader a wealth of detailed infernal images, such as the notion that the condemned experience to the fullest extent the particular fruits of their misdeeds, and the appointment of “angels of punishment” who punish those they have led astray, even as they themselves experience punishment. Fire here is augmented by the introduction (67) of turbid water infused with sulphur. It is a very effective combination, the more so because the people burning or being doused are alive to experience it. So at least in this strident brand of apocalyptic Judaism, Hell has for the first time become “hot.” A whole tradition of “tours of Hell,” both Jewish and Christian, complete with punishments gross enough to please even the most discriminating adolescent, followed after *I Enoch*.

C. Foundations of Christian Hell

The earliest Christians understood themselves to be quite a remarkable people, a liminal community poised on the very edge of human history, situated, in fact, between temporal and eternal life. St. Paul, the first Christian from whom we have any literary product, is utterly uninterested in Hell; he mentions it precisely once, and even this is not properly a reference to Hell: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor. 15: 54b-55). The last of those “deaths” is the Greek *Hade--Hades* (in the vocative case!), the place of neutral death. Paul refers here, of course, to Christ’s having undone the power of death. So Paul’s fleeting *hapax legomenon* of “Hell” is to announce its defeat. Christ brought about a new, resurrected life for believers. Clearly, of course, not all are “in Christ.” Paul, a Jew, had inherited a menu of options available to describe the fate of those not included in this new life: simple destruction or annihilation, some sort of post-mortem punishment, or what is sometimes called universalism, i. e., new life for all. Some of Paul’s language betrays a leaning toward universalism, but his only direct statements suggest that he

held to an annihilationist position: if one does not share the resurrected life of Christ, one simply perishes away. The Gospel of John, probably from the last decade of the first century, articulates a similar view, though in a decidedly different vocabulary and thought-world: the wrath of God brings about a denial of eternal life, but of any lasting punishment, not a word.

Other New Testament writers drew more severe conclusions. Some key passages from the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), authored during the generation after Paul's death, make clear the eternal punishment due sinners. The ninth chapter of Mark has Jesus combining Isaiah's fire and worm with Gehenna; this passage would seem to be the earliest New Testament text suggesting an eternal Hell. The Gospel of Matthew similarly invokes the fires of Gehenna, and supplies us with "the single most important biblical passage for the history of hell"⁷ in Matthew 25, which includes the parable of the wicked servants who, being unprepared for their master's return, will be sent off to "the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (25:30). Matthew's Jesus will separate the obedient sheep from the rebellious goats: sheep to the right, goats to the left. And to those sinister ones who fail in charity, the king will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (25:41). And then: "... they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (25:46). Luke's tale of the rich man and Lazarus adds a more personal narrative to the notion of hellfire: Lazarus, poor in life and denied the hospitality of his rich counterpart, now finds comfort in Abraham's bosom, while the rich man is tormented in flames. Abraham denies the rich man's request that Lazarus dip a finger in water to cool his tongue, saying that a "great chasm" has been fixed, which cannot be crossed.

It is curious on its face that works whose very title is *evangelion*—good news—should be purveyors of such bad news. But precisely here lies an important rhetorical and psychological

⁷ Bernstein, 231.

point: good news *requires* bad news to constitute it as good, and to add to its persuasive power.⁸ The choice between eternal life in Christ and simple cessation compels only moderately; the notion that death is the deadline for a choice between life and eternal torment certainly loads the dice.

Apocalyptic visions of Hell continued in early Christian literature, most famously in the *Apocalypse of John (Revelation)*. Familiar motifs recur here: the Beast, representing the Roman Empire, and the Dragon, representing Satan, will in the end be cast into a “lake of fire and sulphur” where they will be tormented “forever and ever (*eis tous aionas ton aionon*).” In the final judgment, all, including the dead in Hades, are judged according to their deeds, and those whose names are not in the book of life will also be sent to the lake of fire, to be tormented night and day forever.

Visions of Hell were raised to a new height, or more properly, sank to a new depth, in a work written in the early second century, the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Here the horizon of eternal life fades from view in favor of lurid descriptions of punishment aptly described as “a form of self-righteous pornography.”⁹ In this work Jesus reveals to Peter and the apostles what will come to pass when he returns. Using the palm of his hand as a screen, Jesus unveils a scenario of unbridled vengeance for particular sins: in an atmosphere in which all the elements have been transmuted into fire, we find a panoply of torments. Some clearly connect crime and punishment: blasphemers are hanged by their tongues over a lake of fire; idolators are burned along with their idols. Those who collaborated in sins are joined by their partners in crime: adulterous woman, who style their hair to attract men, hang by that hair over a gurgling cesspool of muck, while their illicit lovers hang by what are delicately called their thighs, or feet, with

⁸ Instructive here is Carl Jung. *In his Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, speaking of the splitting of the archetype of the self, he notes that Christ is “so one-sidedly perfect” that there must be “a psychic complement to restore the balance.”

⁹ Turner, *History of Hell*, 85.

their heads in the sewage. Murderers are thrown into a ravine full of beasts, and gnawed upon by a vast cloud of worms. Those who obtained abortions are sunk up to the neck in pools of bodily discharge, while the fetuses cast rays of destruction at them. The list goes on, and I commend it to your reading. Suffice it to say that by the mid-second century of this era, Christians had within their imaginative grasp a fully-equipped and thoroughly unpleasant Hell. All future constructions, however elaborate, would be riffs played on an established theme. Hell is a place of justice, of the vindication of God's purpose, and also a kind of foil for the community, a description of the *limes*, the boundary not only between this world and the next, but between the community of faith and a hostile world.

III. The Superstructure of Hell

A. The Early Reception

Hell came to Christians as a given—some at least regarded the *Apocalypse of Peter* as Scripture—and the overwhelming majority of Christian writers of the first five centuries, including practically every Latin-writing Westerner—held that the wicked were to be punished eternally. As one example among many, witness Tertullian, a catechist of Carthage writing in the early third century. In a treatise called *De spectaculis* (*The Shows*), he warns the reader off attending idolatrous public games such as gladiatorial combats and athletic contests; such events incite the passions, and do not encourage the religion of the savior. In the last chapter, he comforts the faithful with the cheery thought that they will have a chance, “at the fast-approaching advent of our Lord,” to be in the audience for the greatest spectacle of all: when the blessed in heaven will contemplate the damned being tormented forever (*Spect.* 30). *Schadenfreude* is thus established as a heavenly virtue, a notion frequently repeated in the history of Christianity.

Not all Christian writers were so blithe about these matters. Clement, an intellectual of Alexandria roughly contemporary with Tertullian, had a few hesitations. God, he argues, does not simply punish, but corrects; God's actions must be remedial, such that the wicked are eventually brought to repentance (*Stromateis* 7.12-16). Clement was not systematic, for elsewhere he echoes the standard view of an eternal hell, but his intuitions were carried forward in the theology of the most prolific theologian in early Christianity, Origen (c. 185-254). Were punishment everlasting, reasoned Origen, God's express will to save all would be frustrated. Surely no soul could be so wicked that God's power could not purify it. Souls must endure a purgative fire, for a period whose length depends on the degree of the soul's taint. Eventually Hell would be empty.

But an empty Hell is no fun, and Origen's ideas, though they contributed to the later medieval idea of Purgatory, were decidedly outside the mainstream. Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379) argued that a soul in Hell, cut off from the Holy Spirit, could not repent. In the early fifth century Augustine of Hippo (354-430) argued at considerable length against the old Origenian idea in the City of God, book XXI, summarizing one of his points as follows:

Suffice it to say that argument enough was given above to prove, first, that living creatures can continue in fire without being consumed and in pain without suffering death; second, that this is in virtue of a miracle of the omnipotent Creator; and, third, that anyone who denies the possibility of this miracle is simply unaware of the Source of all that is wonderful in all natures whatsoever.

The triumph of eternal Hell was made complete in 543 at a synod of Constantinople convened by the emperor Justinian. Its decree reads:

If anyone shall say or think that there is a time limit to the torment of demons and ungodly persons, or that there will ever be an end to it, or that they will ever be pardoned or made whole again, let him be anathema.

Origen, dead for three hundred years, was declared a heretic in 553 by another synod (presumably undergoing a post-mortem change of address) and universalism was once again thwarted.

B. Architectonic Hell: The Middle Ages

The years 500-1500 are ostensibly the richest period in the history of Hell; they saw a profusion of dramatizations, a remarkable tradition of visions dating from the time of Gregory the Great (d. 604), a colorful array of sermons, manuals on proper dying, and visual representations of Hell. We could lose ourselves in medieval Hell, and so I propose, regretfully, that we look only at one aspect here. Despite the huge infernal elaborations of the Middle Ages, Medieval scholastic theologians on balance did not so much add new notions about Hell as refine and analyze the Hell they had inherited from authoritative texts. They worked to synthesize the chaotic *topos* of Hell into the harmonious, divinely-ordered universe, to blend seamlessly the architecture of heaven, earth, and Hell.

St. Anselm in the late eleventh century conceived of a universal order of things, governed by a God who is beauty, and who delights in the beauty of balance and symmetry. A reader of his great treatise *Cur Deus Homo* is continually struck by how often he refers to the beautiful or “fitting” nature of the divine economy. God’s universe can admit of no ugliness. Even the will to disobey God must somehow be converted into some way of doing God’s will and thus preserving the equilibrium of the universe.¹⁰ If God is the greatest conceivable being, then any offense against God is infinitely great; it demands either infinite satisfaction or infinite

¹⁰ On this theme see Frank Burch Brown, “The Beauty of Hell: Anselm on God’s Eternal Design,” *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993): 329-56. The notion of punishment partaking of a larger good is not new; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* (471d).

punishment. Hell maintains the balance, indeed the architectonic beauty, of the universe. The sufferings of Hell, properly seen are, to paraphrase Ray Stevens, beautiful in their own way.

Other great scholastics similarly undertook the task of making Hell a part of an elaborate aesthetic of Christian doctrine, just as their contemporaries worked infernal scenes into the stone of cathedrals that leaped toward heaven . Often they did so with what would strike moderns as peculiar literalism. Thomas Aquinas, who like Augustine insisted on a true fiery Hell whose punishments were physical as well as spiritual, puzzled over a matter that perhaps has troubled you as you sit here tonight. These worms that torment the damned: are they physical or spiritual worms? The answer is spiritual, as anyone attentive to the phrase “their worm does not die” should know.¹¹

Also partaking in, and creatively extending, this massive medieval architecture project, was the man whose name is forever linked with Hell, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). In the *Inferno* of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante brought the wild, fearsome, often repulsive hell of the visionaries, and the crude humor of medieval mystery plays, together with the Hades of classical antiquity, into the geometrically precise ordering of the scholastics’ universe. The nine circles of Dante’s Hell are a precise inversion of the nine heavenly spheres of the reigning Ptolemaic cosmology. His ingenuity, as reams of Dante scholarship will attest, is astonishing, and the *Inferno* changed conceptions of Hell forever. As has been shrewdly pointed out, Dante’s great work subtly began the process of putting Hell to an end in Western intellectual history, for the *Inferno* was so patently an artifact of his literary imagination that he made it possible to view Hell as obvious fiction, the more easily to be dismissed by intellectuals of the Renaissance and Enlightenment.¹²

¹¹ Quaestiones quodlibetales, quodlibetum VII, q. 5, a. 3

¹² Turner, History of Hell, 143.

C. The Hell of Persuasion

So far, the fires of Hell have been stoked up over the centuries for a number of reasons: as a sublimated desire for justice, as a way of demarcating a community of faith, as an expression of the sadistic imagination, and even as evidence of divine beauty. Many of us, perhaps from personal experience, have long suspected that the real rationale for Hell is its usefulness as a tool of behavior modification. The fear of Hell provides a powerful means of manipulation, and as long as hells have been available, they have been employed for this purpose. The priceless example of a hellfire sermon in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is only a small example of the way Hell could become "hot" in the cause of furthering the spiritual life. In the late Middle Ages, for example, preoccupation with Hell became a salutary mental activity. The *Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln* tells us of an exchange between the saintly bishop and King John as they stood before a sculpture of the Last Judgment:

...the bishop turned to his companion and said, 'A man's conscience ought continually to remind him of the lamentations and interminable torments of these wretches. One should keep the thought of these eternal pains before one's mind at all times...Let the memory of these pains remind you how severe will be the charge against those who are set up for a short time to rule others in this world, but fail to govern themselves.'¹³

The grotesquery of sundry visions of Hell informed the enterprise of filling the minds of the faithful with sobering images. Dionysius the Carthusian (1403-71), ever trying to lead souls on the path to deeper contemplation, gave his hearers this bracing account:

There seemed to me to be something like a chain fastened on the head of the spirit of each dead sinner, in the manner of a crown, and it was so tightly drawn that the forehead and the back of the spirit's head were joined together. The eyes too had fallen from their places, hanging by their roots down to the cheeks. The brain was bursting and flowed from the nostrils and ears; the tongue, moreover, was stretched, the teeth squashed, the bones in the arms broken and

¹³ Cited in Paul Binski, *Medieval Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 179-80.

twisted like ropes, the hands, flayed, were tied to the neck, the breast and belly were so strongly linked to the back that the ribs were broken; the heart soon burst out, in company with all the outer parts.

And so on.

The use of Hell as a motivator for spiritual growth was a part of the spirituality of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola. The fifth exercise of the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a meditation on Hell. I quote:

The first point will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the huge fires and, so to speak, the souls within the bodies full of fire. The second point: in my imagination I will hear the wailing, the shrieking, the cries, and the blasphemies against our Lord and all his saints. The third point: by my sense of smell I will perceive the smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and the rotting things. The fourth point: by my sense of taste I will experience the bitter flavors of hell: tears, sadness, and the worm of conscience. The fifth point: by my sense of touch, I will feel how the flames touch the souls and burn them.

This same imagery carried beyond the quiet and reflective world of the exercitant into the pulpit. Infernal imaginings could give pause to the nobility. Piero Camporesi speaks of a Hell “designed to make the loathsome and disgusting smells of the tomb waft up those large refined noses.”¹⁴ Louis XIV was urged by his court preacher to

imagine that in this deep vortex or sewer, into which are dumped all the filth and the most insupportable fetor of all the rubbish that has existed since the beginning of the world and that will be until the end of all centuries [...] all the damned sinners will be submerged into this sewer without mercy and, like bricks piled up in a furnace, they will stay there for all eternity.¹⁵

One can imagine the effect of such preaching on the notoriously perfumed and powdered French court.

¹⁴ *Fear of Hell*, 61.

¹⁵ J. L. de Fromentière, *Quaresimale*, cited in Camporesi, *Fear of Hell*, 61.

IV. The Disappearance of Hell

The dawn of the Enlightenment spelled the end of Hell, at least in intellectual circles; it faded from ideational radar as attacks on its possibility, hesitantly and anonymously begun in the seventeenth century, became overt by the middle of the eighteenth. It had long been *de rigueur* in Christian thinking to suppose that if the horizon of Hell were removed, human society would sink into an orgy of licentiousness. Who but the worst sinner could have a motive to eliminate Hell? But thinkers of the Enlightenment—Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire, Hume, Gibbon—regarded such crass argumentation as a vestige of an era of superstition and the coercive nature of religious authority, which in its turn often buttressed political authority. Hell--and heaven for that matter--were unnecessary, deleterious shackles placed on human nature. Diderot's massive *Encyclopédie* used logic to demolish the notion of an eternal Hell, arguing from the disproportion between any possible sin and eternal punishment, and the irreconcilability of eternal Hell with a loving God. Voltaire followed suit.

But outside the realm of what George Wallace might call “pointy-head intellectuals,” Hell continued to feature prominently. Romantics like William Blake (1757-1827), John Keats (1795-1821), Lord Byron (1788-1824), and in a different way Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), rediscovered Hell in the squalid conditions of the urban poor, or in the dark depths of the human soul. As to the more traditional Hell, Jesuits continued their robust preaching tradition, and were joined by a new order, the Redemptorists, founded in 1732 by Alphonso de Liguori to place more hellfire preachers in Catholic pulpits. In the colonies, the revival called the Great Awakening swept New England in the 1730s, spearheaded by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, preacher of one of the most famous sermons of all time, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The founding fathers of the nascent United States were distinctly unimpressed by all this—indeed, found it distasteful—and the founding documents stay well clear of the sort of God who might be inclined to send folks to Hell. America is decidedly a child of the modern world, despite revisionist assertions.

V. Visual Images of Hell

The course that Hell has taken through history might also be traced through its visual symbols. A brief visual tour would reveal a gradual change in atmosphere: the terror evoked by medieval images of Hell gradually migrates from a Hell imaged as “down there” to more proximate locations. From the twelfth-century Last Judgment scene from the St.-Lazare cathedral in Autun, France, where even an unlettered visitor could “read” Hell and be chastened, through the dark renderings of a Giotto (1304/5), through the spectacular infernos of Flemish masters like Jan van Eyck (c. 1440) or Dieric Bouts, we see that although the patent horror increases, so too does the evident artifice. Images that had once been horrific in their simplicity and agony become more detailed and jarring, but clearly imaginary; meant to transfix and delight rather than to instruct. As with Dante, who knew Giotto’s images, the Hell being elaborated visually was becoming a set piece that could be held up and admired, but set aside.

The triptych “Garden of Earthly Delights” of Hieronymus Bosch (c.1460-1516), surely one of the strangest paintings encountered in any art-history syllabus, assembles materials and symbols from folklore, visions, folk humor, and anticlericalism (many have yet to be deciphered by art historians). It was done for a private patron, not for ecclesiastical usage. The Hell portion of the tryptich is a burning nightscape whose foreground is frozen; odd features abound: the Tree-Man monster, frozen in a lake of ice, bearing an obscene bagpipe for headgear, upon which nude sinners are led around in circles; its open torso reveals a darkened tavern or brothel. Satan, a birdlike devourer, cooking pot on his head, sits on a toilet eating and excreting sinners. The effect is fascination; the thoughts turn to any number of things, but exhortation to avoid the torments of Hell is not among them.

Michelangelo Buonarroti’s (1475-1564) Last Judgment, newly restored, adorns the wall of the Sistine Chapel. The work was commissioned when he was nearly sixty, tired and not

enthused about the job; instead of placing his self-portrait among the saved, he figures himself in the skin of St. Bartholomew, who was martyred by being flayed alive. Classicizing features abound in the work

It seems clear that the quality of mortal terror gradually migrated away from artistic depictions of Hell and final judgment; they became, instead, entertaining. If we skip ahead a few hundred years and ask “where are the works that express real dread?” We find ourselves in a world without Heaven or Hell, a world of autonomous humans and unnamed dread, as seen in Edvard Munch’s 1893 “The Scream”. Adrift in a sea of other atomized beings, one can find earth lonely; indeed, as a character in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Huis Clos* says, “Hell is other people”. Both profound loneliness and the fear of other people show themselves in the visual arts in works like Emil Nolde’s “Still Life of Masks” (1911) and James Ensor’s “Self-Portrait” (1899). Traditional notions of Judgment and Hell, having lost their semiotic power, can only be represented abstractly; witness for example the “Angel of the Last Judgment” of Wassily Kandinsky (1911).

Hell is no longer out there or down there. But it does visit earth. Bombs rain down on a Spanish village called Guernica; its anguish, expressed in Picasso’s “Guernica” (1937) is the anguish of Hell. The inmates of Hell are also to be found among those who in other times were thought demon-possessed; now they reside in the state hospital; the stark images of Edward Kienholz’s “The State Hospital” (1966) are no less chilling than the Hell carved into medieval stone. And of course hellfire has rained down upon the earth in real-life scenes unimagined by Hell’s most fervid promoters. No imagination is needed—only the clear lens of a photographer’s camera—to appreciate Hiroshima, or Auschwitz.

V. The Current Temperature

The “temperature” of Hell—by which I really have intended the level of seriousness with which people take it—seems to have varied historically for any number of reasons, including its adequacy as an expression of the desire to smite the unrighteous (i.e., one’s enemies), its usefulness in marking out the boundaries between the faith community and the world, its foundational function in the spiritual architecture of the universe, its aptitude as a tool of social and spiritual control, and its appropriateness as a metaphor. That is a partial list, and others could no doubt fill it out.

One can, of course, ask to what particular use Hell is being put now. The desire to smite enemies and repay injustices still wells up in all of us, to be sure. But we tend, if we think of it at all, to reserve Hell for a few obvious cases. Hitler? Charles Manson? Pol Pot? Of course. But the guy who cut me off in traffic yesterday? I hesitate there, because frankly I suspect he’s a lot like me. And what of those markedly not like me, i.e. Western and Christian? As an expression of the fate of those beyond the embrace of Christianity, as a tool to demarcate the boundaries of the faith community, Hell is decidedly outmoded—in serious theology, if not in every radio pulpit.

Perhaps there is a meaning of Hell deeper than simply the uses to which it has been put. The answer why Hell should be “hot” just now might be given in subtler and broader terms. Recall the distinct absence of interest in Hell, and for that matter in the Antichrist and other similarly shady characters, roughly coinciding with the rise of the rational and scientific mindset of Enlightenment. A generally shared optimism about the human enterprise among rationalist intellectuals led to a pronounced “cooling” of Hell in art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is noteworthy that the few outstanding representations of Hell from the modern period were from those Romantics and visionaries who most rebelled against what they took to be reductive, scientific modes of thought.

But meanwhile, and ironically, the shadow aspect of optimistic, rational, scientific humanity was laying the ideological and technological foundations of a coming series of earthly hells whose names were the Somme, Guernica, Auschwitz, Dachau, Hamburg, Dresden, Hiroshima, and more recently Cambodia and Bosnia. By the twentieth century, representations of Hell no longer required dredging from the imagination, for they had become patent on the surface of life. Renderings of the infernal, whether abstract or representational, whether Picasso's Guernica or the stark black and white photographs of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, could draw upon reifications of human suffering utterly unimaginable to even the most perversely creative artists of the Middle Ages or Renaissance. We have discovered a Hell not so much inserted as imbedded in human existence.

And so it may well be the case that the cry "My life is hell," heard from teenagers and from undergraduates just before final examinations, is not what we commonly take it to be, namely a wildly inappropriate exaggeration. Perhaps life in its dimensions of deep and chaotic terror *is* Hell, or rather, is that reality that is imaged and externalized as Hell; so portraits and doctrines of Hell are metaphors or symbols. As Paul Ricouer has said, "...the consciousness of self seems to constitute itself at its lowest level by means of symbolism and to work out an abstract language only subsequently, by means of a spontaneous hermeneutics of its primary symbols."¹⁶ Hell is, it seems, an artifact of this constitutive process, and as such reveals an inescapable datum of human consciousness, namely what Jung would call the "shadow."

Thus the attempt to style a world of effortless, inexorable human spiritual evolution—currently going like gangbusters—founders not simply on the rocks of a history of human evil. After all, apparent evil can be explained away, however implausibly, as simply a minor bump in the path to human perfection. But more fundamentally, this unilateral optimism fails to reflect the deep inner structures of the human self, whence first arose the underworld, and by this failure shows itself false. True enough, Hell is a construct, a map and not a territory in

¹⁶ Paul Ricouer, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 9.

the conventional sense. But it is a map whose lineaments are first drawn in our own self-awareness, and that which the various maps of an otherworldly Hell portray is not *less* than a territory, but *more*: the reality of Hell is the shadow self within each of us and all of us, the shadow humanity that counterbalances our Promethian aspirations.

Numb to both the most proximate Hell of our own inner disquiet and, thanks to media overload, to the Hells actualized in our history, we find ourselves ready buyers when superficial merchants of religion or self-actualization retail the myth of human progress and perfectability, aided here by angels, there by aliens. But Hell will not be ignored; it must be posited, its contours described, its torments felt. Perhaps what we see in the rising temperature of Hell, as I have called it, is the collective human psyche again being driven to figure Hell, to map it out. Perhaps a kind of architectonic symmetry exists in the human psyche; we see it in the mythic tendency to locate earth precisely halfway between Ouranos and Tartarus. We see it in Plato's notion of humans existing in a metaxy; and in theologians like St. Anselm, whose beautiful universe necessarily entails the punishment of Hell.

The temperature of Hell remains constant. It is always hot. Our experience of a fluctuating temperature is a function of distance: what varies from age to age is the degree of Hell's alterity, that is, the extent to which we style Hell as Other. We may find it in a distant underworld, or in our own worldly anguish, but find it we will. The depiction of Hell mirrors, though not always exactly, the terrifying awareness of our own inner dimension of the tragic and the chaotic. It is not mere happenstance, but exactly to the point, that perhaps the earliest Christian liturgical prayer is a brief, achingly poignant two-word cry that one expects to hear from a soul in Hell: *kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy.