

The Duration of Hell

Hell has become, over the years, a wearisome speculation. Even its proselytizers have neglected it, abandoning the poor, but serviceable, human allusion which the ecclesiastic fires of the Holy Office once had in this world: a temporal torment, of course, but one that was not unworthy, within its terrestrial limitations, of being a metaphor for the immortal, for the perfect pain without destruction that the objects of divine wrath will forever endure. Whether or not this hypothesis is satisfactory, an increasing lassitude in the propaganda of the institution is indisputable. (Do not be alarmed; I use *propaganda* here not in its commercial but rather its Catholic genealogy: a congregation of cardinals.) In the second century A.D., the Carthaginian Tertullian could imagine Hell and its proceedings with these words:

You who are fond of spectacles, expect the greatest of all spectacles, the last and eternal judgment of the universe. How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot flames with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians, more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers . . . (*De spectaculis*, 30; Gibbon's version.)

Dante himself, in his great effort to foresee, in an anecdotal way, some of the decisions of Divine Justice regarding northern Italy, did not know such enthusiasm. Later, the literary infernos of Quevedo—a mere opportunity for gossipy anachronisms—and of Torres Villarroel—a mere opportunity for

metaphors—would only prove the increasing usury of dogma. The decline of Hell is in their works, as it is in Baudelaire, who was so skeptical about the perpetual torments that he pretended to adore them. (In a significant etymology, the innocuous French verb *gêner* [to bother] derives from that powerful Scriptural word, *Gehenna*.)

Let us consider Hell. The careless article on the subject in the *Hispano-American Encyclopedic Dictionary* is useful reading, not for its sparse information or terrified sacristan's theology but rather for the bewilderment it discloses. It begins by observing that the notion of Hell is not particular to the Catholic Church, a precaution whose intrinsic meaning is, *Don't let the Masons say the Church introduced these atrocities*; but this is immediately followed by the statement that Hell is dogma, and it quickly adds: "The unwithering glory of Christianity is that it brings to itself all the truths to be found scattered among the false religions." Whether Hell is a fact of natural religion, or only of revealed religion, I find no other theological assumption as fascinating or as powerful. I am not referring to the simplistic mythology of manure, roasting spits, fires, and tongs, which have gone on proliferating in the depths, and which all writers have repeated, to the dishonor of their imaginations and their decency.¹ I am speaking of the strict notion—a *place of eternal punishment for the wicked*—constituted by the dogma with no other obligation than placing it *in loco real*, in a precise spot, and a *beatorum sede distincto*, different from the place of the chosen. To imagine anything else would be sinister. In the fiftieth chapter of his *History*, Gibbon tries to diminish Hell's wonders and writes that the two populist ingredients of fire and darkness are enough to create a sensation of pain, which can then be infinitely aggravated by the idea of endless duration. This disgruntled objection proves perhaps that it is easy to design hell, but it does not mitigate the admirable terror of its invention. The attribute of eternity is what is horrible. The continuity—the fact that divine persecution knows no pause, that there is no sleep in Hell—is unimaginable. The eternity of that pain, however, is debatable.

There are two important and beautiful arguments that invalidate that eternity. The oldest is that of conditional immortality or annihilation.

¹Nevertheless, the *amateur* of hells would do well not to ignore these honorable infractions: the Sabian hell, whose four superimposed halls admit threads of dirty water on the floor, but whose principal room is vast, dusty, and deserted; Swedenborg's hell, whose gloom is not perceived by the damned who have rejected heaven; Bernard Shaw's hell, in *Man and Superman*, which attempts to distract its inhabitants from eternity with the artifices of luxury, art, eroticism, and fame.

Immortality, according to its comprehensive logic, is not an attribute of fallen human nature, but of God's gift in Christ. It therefore cannot be used against the same individual upon whom it has been bestowed. It is not a curse but a gift. Whoever merits it, merits heaven; whoever proves unworthy of receiving it, "dies in death," as Bunyan wrote, dies without remains. Hell, according to this pious theory, is the blasphemous human name for the denial of God. One of its propounders was Whately, the author of that oft-remembered booklet *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte*.

A more curious speculation was presented by the evangelical theologian Rothe, in 1869. His argument—also ennobled by the secret mercy of denying infinite punishment for the damned—states that to eternalize punishment is to eternalize Evil. God, he asserts, does not want *that* eternity for His universe. He insists that it is scandalous to imagine that the sinful man and the Devil would forever mock God's benevolent intentions. (For theology, the creation of the world is an act of love. It uses the term *predestination* to mean "predestined to glory"; condemnation is merely the opposite, a non-choice translated into infernal torment that does not constitute a special act of divine goodness.) He advocates, finally, a declining, dwindling life for sinners. He foresees them roaming the banks of Creation, or the voids of infinite space, barely sustaining themselves with the leftovers of life. He concludes: As the devils are unconditionally distant from God and are unconditionally His enemies, their activity is against the kingdom of God, and they have organized themselves into a diabolical kingdom, which naturally must choose a leader. The head of that demoniacal government—the Devil—must be imagined as changing. The individuals who assume the throne of that kingdom eventually succumb to the ghostliness of their being, but they are succeeded by their diabolical descendants (*Dogmatik I*, 248).

I now reach the most incredible part of my task, the reasons contrived by humanity in favor of an eternal Hell. I will review them in ascending order of significance. The first is of a disciplinary nature: it postulates that the fearfulness of punishment lies precisely in its eternity, and that to place this in doubt undermines the efficacy of the dogma and plays into the Devil's hands. This argument pertains to the police and does not deserve to be refuted. The second argument is written thus: *Suffering should be infinite because so is the sin of offending the majesty of the Lord, an infinite Being*. It has been observed that this evidence proves so much that we can infer that it proves nothing: it proves that there are no venial sins and that all sins are unpardonable. I would like to add that this is a perfect case of Scholastic

frivolity and that its trick is the plurality of meanings of the word *infinite*, which applied to the Lord means “unconditional,” and to suffering means “perpetual,” and to guilt means nothing that I can understand. Moreover, arguing that an error against God is infinite because He is infinite is like arguing that it is holy because God is, or like thinking that the injuries attributed to a tiger must be striped.

Now the third argument looms over me. It may, perhaps, be written thus: *Heaven and Hell are eternal because the dignity of free will requires them to be so; either our deeds transcend time, or the “I” is a delusion.* The virtue of this argument is not logic, it is much more: it is entirely dramatic. It imposes a terrible game on us: we are given the terrifying right to perdition, to persist in evil, to reject all access to grace, to fuel the eternal flames, to make God fail in our destiny, to be forever a shadow, *detestabile cum cacodæmonibus consortium* [in the detestable company of the devil]. Your destiny is real, it tells us; eternal damnation and eternal salvation are in your hands: this responsibility is your honor. A sentiment similar to Bunyan’s: “God did not play in convincing me; the Devil did not play in tempting me; neither did I play when I sunk as into the bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me; neither do I play in relating of them” (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, preface).

I believe that in our unthinkable destiny, ruled by such infamies as bodily pain, every bizarre thing is possible, even the perpetuity of a Hell, but that it is sacrilegious to believe in it.

Postscript. On this page filled with mere information, I can also report a dream. I dreamed I was awakening from another dream—an uproar of chaos and cataclysms—into an unrecognizable room. Day was dawning: light suffused the room, outlining the foot of the wrought-iron bed, the upright chair, the closed door and windows, the bare table. I thought fearfully, “Where am I?” and I realized I didn’t know. I thought, “Who am I?” and I couldn’t recognize myself. My fear grew. I thought: This desolate awakening is in Hell, this eternal vigil will be my destiny. Then I really woke up, trembling.

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[SJL/EW]