

CHAPTER 10

The Origins of Religion

Richard K. Fenn

A Hypothesis Concerning the Sources of the Religious Imagination

What is it that keeps generating religious interest and even enthusiasm from one generation to the next, even in fairly large and complex, relatively open and democratic societies? In all the vast changes in the way modern societies are organized, in what they stand for, in the peoples they include, and in the way they go about understanding and seeking to control their social and natural environments, religion continues to find new forms, new ways of appealing even to a disenchanted and skeptical populace, and new ways of guiding individuals in their encounters with finitude and death. Just as Durkheim made it clear that he was examining not the origins *per se* but only the proximate causes of religion, I wish to point out that our inquiry here is only into some of the conditions and the contingencies that enable people to discover new sources of inspiration and authority in old traditions or to generate new practices and beliefs out of the remnants of old disciplines.

In this chapter I inquire into the origins of religious beliefs and practices by putting forward a hypothesis about the sources of the religious imagination. I will argue that religious imagery reflects an experience of primitive and irrevocable loss. Further, I will suggest that the experience of that loss overwhelms the mind's capacity to reconcile contradictions between desire and reality. Thus religious illusions form a sort of unhappy compromise between the necessary and the possible. This is not a novel hypothesis. Indeed it is in keeping with general notions about the function of religious myth and ritual: that they restore order and harmony to natural and social relationships that have been broken and plunged into chaos. Thus they make up for lost time and give individuals and societies a new lease, as it were, on time itself. No wonder, then, that myth and

ritual embody themes of death and regeneration, loss and recovery. However, my thesis assumes that beneath the surfaces of ritual and myth there are other motives at work. As Catherine Bell puts it:

Methodologically, psychoanalytic ethnographers might begin with the ritual, but they must work backward, even past the etiologic myth, to uncover what is thought to be the 'real' story of desire and repression, fear, and projection that is at the root. Unconscious motives are the profoundest and most explanative; the unconscious myth is the true one. (Bell 1997:15)

Catherine Bell gives us a masterful summary of the early ethnographic literature that argued for an original relationship between myths of death and resurrection and certain rituals: for example those of the king renewing the social and natural orders at critical points in the seasons or during crises of succession. These studies purported to show that the associated myth also was the original source of comparable themes of death and resurrection in art, drama, and literature (Bell 1997:5–7). In many of the myths the king is thought to have descended into hell and returned triumphant over chaos and death. In others the myth merely describes an attempt to recover associations with the departed whose souls had gone to an underworld, but who were still of vital importance to the living (p. 4).

In both sets of myths, however, the focus is on the recovery of lost souls. Even in the myths that portray a slain king descending to the underworld, the journey is the same: an effort heroically to make up for lost time and thus renew the hold of the living on life itself.¹ The perennial nature of these myths is due, I would argue, to the fact that individuals in every generation do tend to seek to rescue and recover the presence of the dead, affection or hatred for whom lingers long after their departure. What is essential is the attachment of the living to the souls of the departed.

Thus the search for the origins of religion takes us into the realm of what is true of every generation, rather than to some hypothetical departure in antiquity. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, as Freud argued, every generation renews a "primitive" experience of helplessness before the forces of nature and of fate itself. Furthermore, societies that become large and complex in order to defend individuals from the sudden onslaught of disease and death, of enemies and intrusions, themselves can make an individual feel helpless and small. Even within the shelter of the family, the child may feel overwhelmed by the powerful presence of parents who are crucial to the survival of the child but also both potent and threatening. They are threatening in part because they are rivals in the child's eyes: competitors for the scarce resources of affection and particularly for the possession of the parent on whom the child has set his or her primary affections. Thus Oedipal conflicts, rivalry with siblings, and rebellion against the imposition of limitations, can drive the child into longings for a return to the safety and permanence of the womb.

What then do these infantile longings have to do with the descent of a mythical king into the underworld? Among these longings is the desire of the

infant to own and control all the sources of life, including those represented by the parents. Alongside these desires is the infant's sense of entitlement: the fantasy that the infant is entitled to the pleasures normally reserved for royalty. It is this assumption of a right to royalties, so to speak, that allows infants to imagine that they can indeed usurp the father's authority or possess the mother; after all, Oedipus was a young king. The king therefore must die for two reasons. First, such a punishment indeed fits the imaginary crime of being a royal pretender. Secondly, the illusion of such entitlements itself must die as the child grows older, discovers his or her mortality, and seeks to live life more or less on its own terms.

The Descent into Hell

For illustration of such original fantasies and beliefs, let us turn to poetic and mythological notions of a descent into hell. They are among the earliest and also among the more sophisticated and imaginative sources for our inquiry into the sources of religious imagery, idiom, and illusion. Later in this discussion we will turn to Homer, Augustine, Dante, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and finally to Freud and Heidegger in an effort to document the persistence of the desire to go to hell and back, as it were, to rescue and recover lost loves, to satisfy old grievances, and to rebel against the passage of time. Here we begin with perhaps the earliest known descent into hell, that of Gilgamesh, and I will draw on that epic here to suggest what may well be the basic structure of all later descents. (In this account I will be relying heavily on what is probably the best secondary source, Alan Bernstein's 1993 discussion of *The Formation of Hell*.) What is essential to the myth is the attachment of the living to the souls of the departed.

The myth begins with a sudden and tragic loss. Gilgamesh, perhaps a Babylonian King (of Uruk) nearly three thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era, loses his dear friend Enkidu. I mention this here as something more than incidental to the descent into hell. Such a loss, I will suggest, is the very beginning of that descent, since it plunges the individual into the experience of time and mortality. Later in this chapter we will see that it was the loss of Augustine's most intimate friend that plunged the fourth century theologian into a contemplation of the passage of time. Certainly it was just such a loss that prodded Freud into contemplating his conscious and unconscious ways of avoiding the fact of death and the experience that it is too late to fulfill one's deepest desires. Augustine took his consolation from contemplating his friendships under the aspect of eternity; his soul took refuge in the timeless presence of God and there found its rest. Freud demythologized his own psyche. Gilgamesh, like Augustine and Freud, associated the death of his friend with their own mortality: "How can I be still? My friend, who I loved, has turned to clay! Must I, too, like him, lay me down, not to rise again for ever and ever?" (Bernstein 1993:4).²

At the very beginning of the descent into hell, then, we find two steps, very closely related to one another: the experience of irrevocable loss, and the realization that one is mortal. "Uruk's king [i.e., Gilgamesh] then understood that he too would die and he determined to seek a remedy" (Bernstein 1993:4). Thus the descent begins with an implicit awareness that part of the self has perished with the friend.

It is this awareness, perhaps, that prompts the question of whether I, "like him," must die, "not to rise again for ever and ever?" The possibility of recovering the part of the self that seems to have accompanied the friend into death is a real one; the slow withdrawal of emotion and identity from the departed is part of the perennial and universal task of those who mourn. This self-recovery, however, may be accompanied by another wish that is not to be fulfilled: the wish never to die. Augustine, as I will note later in this discussion, took comfort in his belief that friendships held in and through the mind of God would not come to an end, and thus the basis was laid for a rejection of the experience of mortality. Freud found that it was his unfinished, and often unconscious business, not God, that refused to allow the dead to die.

Thus I will be tracking two descents into hell: one complete, in its acceptance of the irreversibility of time and the finality of death; the other magical or romantic, in its advance knowledge that the experience of time and death is temporary and reversible. One descent is undertaken in faith, that is, with the knowledge that there is no rescue from death, and if there is more life to come it is wholly beyond one's knowledge and control and may well not come at all. The other descent is undertaken under the auspices of religion and is characterized by the magical thought that one can overcome death through some mental or emotional activity or symbolic gesture. As I will point out later in this discussion, even the early Christian views of hell were colored by these two images: the one that leads into the darkness where there is no vision of rescue and only blind hope in the mercies of God; the other that leads into the underworld with some hope of a rescue and return or, at the very least, a predictable calculus of pains and rewards in the afterlife. Like Gilgamesh, one seeks "a remedy." For Gilgamesh, the penultimate remedy was magical: a root that he fetched from the depth of the ocean, only to lose it again in a moment of inadvertence. For Augustine, the remedy was to see all friendships under the aspect of eternity. For Freud, the remedy was to accept the passage of time and to seize time itself. In the end, for both Gilgamesh and Freud, magic has failed. Gilgamesh ultimately returns home, accepting his mortality; there he dies. Freud leaves his home for exile in Britain, where he dies.

The descent into hell, then, begins with an experience of losing someone who was both an intimate friend and whose death was not expected or imagined. One seeks to recover oneself through a period of testing in which one is tempted by the impossible. Having tried magic only to find it wanting, in the end one returns from the descent to face and accept the particularity of one's own being; one can only be who one is, where one is. That being, finally, is temporary at best and wholly subject to the passage of time. One finally then accepts one's inevitable death.

It would be hard to find a more acute awareness of hopeless desire than is contained in the following passage describing the descent of Odysseus into "The Kingdom of the Dead." Here he waits for his mother to come to him, and when she does her first words sound a knell of anguish across the distance that separates them still:

She knew me at once and wailed out in grief
and her words came winging toward me, flying home:
"Oh my son – what brings you down to the world
of death and darkness? You are still alive!
It's hard for the living to catch a glimpse of this . . .
Great rivers flow between us, terrible waters,
The Ocean first of all – no one could ever ford
That stream on foot, only aboard some sturdy craft. . . ."
(Homer 1996:254, II.177–85)

Those winged words flew like arrows; it is not only the mother's heart that is pierced with grief. Odysseus's own sorrow is intensified by the irrevocable lapse of time between them: a time span depicted in terms of space. It is a river, that is, nature, that separates the living from the dead and makes life hell for both.

I mention Odysseus because the invention of hell as a place of intense and hopeless longing did not lose its classical roots in the process of becoming Christian. There is no tendency in Dante, for instance, to treat earlier work as "mythic, archaic, and false," as did Virgil with Homer (Pike 1997). Whereas in Dante's *Inferno*, however, it is the dead who inquire of the living for news of family and friends on the surface of the earth, for Homer it is the living who inquire of the dead. Odysseus asks his mother for word of the fate of his wife, his father, and son, and he assumes that his mother is aware of his wife's "turn of mind, her thoughts" (Homer 1996:255, II. 201–2). The association between wife and mother is intimate indeed.

The bond between Odysseus and his mother is one of grief, and it is a passion that can be lethal. First it is Odysseus's mother who acknowledges that it was her sorrow over his long absence that had killed her:

No, it was my longing for you, my shining Odysseus –
you and your quickness, you and your gentle ways –
that tore away my life that had been sweet.
(Homer 1996:256, II.230–2)

It is also Odysseus who is suffering in anguish and heartbreak:

And I, my mind in turmoil, how I longed
to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was!
Three times I rushed toward her, desperate to hold her,
Three times she fluttered through my fingers, sifting away
like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time the grief cut

to the heart, sharper, yes, and I,
 I cried out to her, words winging into the darkness:
 "Mother – why not wait for me? How I long to hold you! "
 (Homer 1996:256, II.233–40)

This is mortal grief, capable of causing the heart to break. Homer portrays the oneness of mother and son in ways that are not only poignant but that make him almost our contemporary. The close succession of the narrative of heart-break, first the mother's and then the son's, points not only to the closest of emotional identifications between the two but to the reciprocity of crime and punishment. If the son's departure had caused his mother's heart to fail, it is only fitting that the son's heart, too, should fail him precisely at the moment that he realizes his irrevocable separation from her. Hell is indeed the experience of longings that are intense enough to fill one's entire being and are yet known at the moment of passion to be hopeless.

For the living, however, there is still time to experience life as a form of deathly suspense. Waiting is the lot of the living. Indeed, Odysseus begs his mother to wait, and his mother assures him that his wife is:

. . . still waiting
 There in your halls, poor woman, suffering so,
 Her life an endless hardship like your own . . .
 Wasting away the nights, weeping away the days.
 (Homer 1996:255, II.207–10)

His wife's life of endless waiting, then, is as his mother says, like his own. The chain of suffering continues. His wife must be punished for the mother's crime of keeping him forever waiting; his wife, too, must be kept waiting. Sons whose affections are tied to their mothers are not ready to go home to their wives, and thus their marriages are in a sort of emotional limbo until the final separation between the son and mother occurs. No wonder that Odysseus recognizes among the dead the mother of Oedipus, "beautiful Epicaste," who went down to Death who guards the massive gates.

Lashing a noose to a steep rafter, there she hanged aloft,
 strangling in all her anguish, leaving her son to bear
 the world of horror a mother's Furies bring to life.
 (p. 258, II.307, 314–17)

An inordinate affection of a son for a mother or of a mother for a son can become a hopeless and fatal desire that brings condemnation to both the living and the dead.

There is, in psychoanalytic terms, a conflict between what the individual feels is necessary and yet knows to be impossible. Nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in the loss of someone who was deeply loved and was never fully imagined to be mortal. Let us now return to Augustine of Hippo, who like Gilgamesh mourned the death of a friend and found himself grieving for the loss of a

secular eternity. Instead of speaking of unconscious fantasies, however, he faulted himself for having believed in “one huge fable, one long lie” (Augustine 1963:78, Book IV, 8). The lie, of course, was that his friendship could go on forever. As Augustine put it, “For the reason why that great sorrow of mine had pierced into me so easily and so deeply was simply this; I had poured out my soul like water on to sand by loving a man who was bound to die just as if he were an immortal” (p. 78, Book IV, 9).

Along with the fantasy that a relationship can go on forever, however, was another delusion: Augustine’s belief that he and his friend were merged in a single consciousness:

For I felt that my soul and my friend’s had been one soul in two bodies, and that was why I had a horror of living, because I did not want to live as a half being, and perhaps that was why I feared to die, because I did not want him, whom I had loved so much, to die wholly and completely. (p. 76, Book IV, 6)

Not only does Augustine recognize a belief in a timeless relationship as a “lie” or a “fable.” He has traced the origin of that experience of timelessness to an imaginary merging of two psyches: “one soul in two bodies.” Although he did not argue the psychoanalytic point that such an imaginary fusion is a desperate attempt to recover the feeling of timelessness associated with the womb, Augustine did insist that this attempt to find a perfect accord of two souls in a “timeless” relationship was an abortive effort to recapture and recapitulate eternity itself. It took some time for Augustine to trace his loathing of death to the fear that his dying would complete, and make irrevocable, the death of his deceased friend.

What is lost when one imagines that one is fused with another? Augustine answers that question quite simply: one’s own soul. In her perceptive discussion of Augustine’s grief, Genevieve Lloyd goes on to argue that “The loss of a friend loved as another self makes the soul a burden to itself. But this loss only makes visible a wretched state of separation from himself which was already there, fuelled by the attachment to something external” (Lloyd 1993:17).

It is just such an attachment that Augustine had in mind when he talked about pouring out his soul like water onto sand. The soul is thus dissipated; Augustine speaks of the “distension” of the soul as one confuses one’s own psyche with that of another. Thus “. . . for Augustine . . . time itself is to be understood in terms of the distension of the soul” (Lloyd 1993:36). To project the self forward into the future, into an indefinite present, or backward into the past thus ensures that one will experience time itself as serious, fateful, yet perhaps under one’s control.

The danger of such a “distension” of the soul, of course, is that the soul will be encased in – and thus confused with – its trappings. If the inner self becomes fused with another person, the memory of that person displaces the individual’s own experience of the self and becomes its surrogate. To be a lost soul is precisely to be forced to search for oneself, whether by retracing one’s journey or by

seeking to recover the immediacies of childhood. Mourning becomes a perpetual attempt to recover one's own inner self. Thus there is indeed a large element of self-loss in such relationships as a result of the imaginary fusion of the self with another. Augustine goes on to report that he looked everywhere for his dead friend, in all the familiar places where he used to be found, but he looked in vain.

To recover the soul, however, it is necessary to realize that one cannot preserve attachments over time or complete unfinished loves, once death intervenes. Thus there is an original tendency to self-mortification underlying the desire for the fusion of one's soul with another's. Although, for the libido, as Freud might have put it, it is never too late to complete the partial gestures of love, time being a stranger to the id, after death of the beloved, however, it is in fact always too late to complete and fulfill old loves, no matter what lies one tells oneself, and no matter what delusions one entertains. Those who refuse to accept the fact that death has broken an intimate relationship thus hold on to the residues of the dead within themselves: harboring in their psyches the presence of the past. As Freud noted in his reflections on dreams in which dead friends and colleagues reappeared, it was he, himself, who felt that he was too "late." He, too, was not only tardy but a mere ghost of his former self.

The notion that one is in a timeless relationship feeds on an illusion of spiritual unity that originated in the womb and may have survived into the first weeks of infancy. In the womb, of course, two hearts did indeed beat as one: hence the fantasy of a merger of selves like that between the mother and child prior to birth. The wish to restore that unmediated unity, moreover, lies at the root of the desire for self-mortification and for access to eternity, because only an obliteration of one's separateness, uniqueness, and autonomy could restore such a primitive union. For Augustine, therefore, the problem is that he is looking for the eternal where it cannot be found; he is seeking to find in a friendship with a mortal the everlasting joys that can only be found in a relationship that is literally selfless. The memory of the lost attachment can then be subsumed within a belief that one was once in an unmediated relationship to the divine: the problem thus becomes one's separation from God. Perpetual mourning is then transformed into a longing for eternity. To sublimate grief into religious strivings for eternity, however, only encourages a this-worldly experience of hell. As Genevieve Lloyd puts it, in her discussion of Augustine: "Reflection on the idea of eternity serves to focus and intensify the experience of incompleteness and fragmentation that goes with being in time" (Lloyd 1993:39). Earlier, I mentioned an alternative, less exhaustive and more authoritarian, calculated, punitive view of hell as a place where one gets what one perhaps unfortunately deserves. Thus Dante's descent into hell reveals the punishments of those whose desires became transgressions of the ordinances of the church. The descent into hell has lost some of its existential character of a journey to recover lost elements of the self, however, and has been mixed with the ideology of religious intellectuals and professionals. These status groups, as Weber called them, have a vested interest in providing reasons for torment and suffering that reinforce their own authority. Even there, however, one can find the more primitive

and existential elements of grief and mourning, and of the attempt to recover the soul from its earlier attachments.

For Dante, hell is the “realm of grief,” whose “emperor” is Lucifer, Satan himself (Dante 1996:297, Canto XXXIV.31). There is no forgetting in hell, despite the knowledge that it is too late to fulfill one’s obligations: too late either to undo the damage that one has done, to take revenge for old injuries, or to fulfill old longings and recover lost loves. Forgetting, as Dante reminds us, is allowed only those who, being in Purgatory, are well away from the abyss of hell: “There where, repented guilt removed, souls gather/To cleanse themselves” (Dante 1996:117, Canto XIV.117–18). Hell simultaneously exposes the naked soul to the ravages of time and of unfulfilled passion.

Dante’s hell is a reminder that passions may be undying, but that the objects of such passions are usually mortal. Mourners are therefore left with their unsatisfied affections, divided loyalties, and unfulfilled sense of duty. Hell is a place of negatives, as we shall soon see. It is too late to satisfy these passions or discharge these old obligations, but the debts and passions remain unforgotten as well as unfulfilled. To be in hell is thus to be “too late.”

Although Dante himself as pilgrim has the hope of a final restoration, those he meets in Hell have no such prospects. Take, for example, the first circle in hell; it is the Limbo that contains the souls of all those who died before the time of Christ and who were not among those rescued by Christ in his descent into hell. Some indeed were taken captive then: notables of past revelation like Abel and Abraham, Moses, and David. The remainder became an abandoned remnant with no hope of salvation; as Virgil, who belongs in this Limbo, explains it to Dante:

We are lost, afflicted only this one way:
That having no hope, we live in longing.
(Dante 1996:29, Canto IV.31–2)

That is precisely the point of hell. There the damned know that it is too late for them; there will be no other life, no other possibilities, no restoration to an “encompassing state” of eternal communion with the source of life. On the other hand, they do not cease to long for such a redemption. For those in Purgatory, as Dante later argues, there is yet hope; they have time, and in Purgatory time itself is registered on the face of various clocks: the calendar there being the same as the one that orders the life of the living. In hell, however, there is no time at all. Dante speaks more than once of the “timeless air” that the souls breathe who constitute “the population of loss” (pp. 19, 27, Cantos IV.21, III.3).

There is a form of suffering, then, peculiar to hell. It is not as if the past is forgotten; on the contrary, the past can be a source of memories of bliss as well as a prod to shame and remorse. One adulterous lover therefore explains to Dante that “No sadness/ Is greater than in misery to rehearse/Memories of joy, as your teacher well can witness” (Dante 1999:43, Canto V.107–9). This rehearsal would not be sad, of course, if there were any hope of restoration or reunion,

but in Hell there is no such possibility. It is "too late," although longings do not cease and perhaps even intensify.

There is nothing that more concentrates the mind than the knowledge that one's most heartfelt desire will remain forever unassuaged and undiminished. As Erich Auerbach put it in his discussion of Dante's *Inferno*,

And still more: from the fact that earthly life has ceased so that it cannot change or grow, whereas the passions and inclinations which animated it still persist without ever being released into action, there results as it were a tremendous concentration. (Auerbach 1953:192)

Those in hell therefore have no time; the past eclipses the present. One might think that the souls in hell have only the present, but – as Auerbach notes – they do not have any sense of real time as it is on earth: ". . . they are passionately interested in the present state of things on earth, which is hidden from them" (Auerbach 1953:193). Remember that Odysseus's mother had no such difficulty in knowing what was happening on earth. Under the auspices of the church and of the clergy, a new torment has been added to the experience of being late: the hell of being totally shut off from the land of the living. It may be a particularly monastic punishment devised by those who know what it means to be unable to see and imagine what is happening on earth.

Dante offers us one more image of hell as a "realm of grief": an image that combines these complex themes into a single explanation for hell itself. The rivers of hell, that drain into a blood-red stream seething with passion, are simply the end result of a "rain of tears." Somewhere within a mountain on the island of Crete, Dante reminds us, stands an Old Man, made from gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay from head to right foot: an allegorical depiction of various themes culled by Dante from classical and scriptural sources and suggesting the passage of time from one kingdom or civilization to the next (Dante 1996:237, note to Canto XIV.86–98). From cracks in this inanimate Old Man flow the tears that become the torrents of hell: grief turning sour and bloody-minded before being spent in forgetfulness.

Clearly social systems and civilizations are no proof against the passage and ravages of time. Dante therefore goes on to have Virgil describe Crete as a "waste land," "like some worn thing by time decayed" (Dante 1996:115, Canto XIV.78,82). For Dante, hell is a place of "naked souls, all of whom mourned/ Most miserably." Mourning, furthermore, is a state in which life itself seems suspended. In confronting the city of Satan, for instance, Dante reported that he "neither died nor kept alive . . ." but that he was "denuded of death and life" (p. 295, Canto XXXIV.28,30).

The source of mourning, however, and of the rage that accompanies it, is love for one's place of birth. As if to make the point more baldly, Dante describes the island of Crete as the place where Rhea hid her son, Jove, in a mountain away from the wrath of Saturn. Just as Mars threatens Florence for abandoning him, Saturn seeks to take his fury out on Rhea by seeking to kill their son, whom she

hides in Mt. Ida (p. 327, note to Canto XIV.78-85). There, too, is the statue of the Old Man, from whose cracks flow the tears of mourning for a lost birth place. For that loss no civilization can provide redemption, just as no kingdom can transcend the passage of time. It is as if there were a fatal contradiction, the perennial warfare between father and son: the son seeking to recover the maternal space from which he came, while the father stands guard to ensure that no one returns through the maternal gates from which, as Dante reminds us, all once have passed on their way into life and into their own encounter with time.

The descent into hell, then, is at the very least an anticipation of one's own death. It entails a conscious apprehension of the time when it is too late to fulfill old desires or satisfy ancient animosities. At that time there is indeed no future; one's character and identity are forever fixed, and there is no possibility of further development. The passage of time is itself suspended, and there is no present, just as one in hell is weightless and without substance. It is a dangerous descent, since those who are tempted to predict their future or flee from that certain prospect have their character fixed forever in the form of one who is constantly looking backwards and seeking to make up for lost time. This descent requires more, therefore, than a *memento mori*; it requires a guide into the depths of one's own suppressed or forgotten passions, that burn unassuaged by the passage of time. Along with the experience of unmitigated desire, however, comes the simultaneous experience that such longing is forever hopeless. One lives on the cusp of despair.

I have further suggested that this descent not only into the limits of one's existence but into the realms of the libido requires a secular guide, one who like Virgil is no longer distracted or confused by the fantasy of rescue, because hell has been harrowed once and for all. For the pilgrim, however, there is always the hope of being returned to the temporal without the burden of the past and of one's character. That is why the Christian pilgrim, even one like Dante, cannot really undertake this spiritual descent. For the poet, moreover, the end is never out of sight, and it is one of ecstatic reunion with one whose love transcends the passage of time.

Thus Dante's descent into hell is only figurative: a foreshadowing of a later ascent at the end of which he is transported by joy and reunited in ecstasy with the objects of his adoration. At first he is touched by the suffering of others, but under Virgil's direction he learns to curb his pity. Therefore other souls suffering in hell are not recognized as shades of himself, nor is he ever subject to the infernal regime of time in which it is too late to satisfy soul-destroying passions. On the contrary, for Dante as for Virgil, the temporal regimen of the world above still exercises its constraints, and they are both under pressure to pursue their journey without staying overlong in the very place to which these unhappy souls are consigned forever. That is why I cannot agree with Freccero's assessment that

The descent into hell, whether metaphorical as in the *Confessions* [of Augustine], or dramatically real as in Dante's poem, is the first step on the journey to the truth.

It has the effect of shattering the inverted values of this life (which is death, according to Christian rhetoric) and transforming death into authentic life. (Freccero 1986:4)

Unavoidably, then, there is a certain “as if” quality to the Dantean descent into hell, just as Augustine reminisces in the sort of tranquility that comes from seeing things under the aspect of eternity. Neither Augustine nor Dante have renounced the transcendence of the soul that lives in God and thus experiences all loss as merely provisional: contained, as it were, within the reach of everlasting arms. Their search for that transcendence has indeed taken a roundabout route through the depths of vicarious despair, but they are still a long way from the depths of the unconscious and from the acceptance of an existential point of no return.

I am arguing that one can find the perennial origins of religion in the existential refusal to submit to unbearable loss; religion begins with a conscious rebellion against the passage of time. Thus the poet, philosopher, and convert all short-circuit their descent into hell by viewing it from the vantage-point of eternity or at least from a point of transcendence over the passage of time. They may regard it as a pilgrimage whose end is never in doubt. They may allow old passions to endure in a compartment of the psyche, or they may turn the descent itself into a dramatic or liturgical performance. Thus the journey of the pilgrim becomes a substitute for the actual descent, a mere “dramatization,” to use Freccero’s apt term. The journey becomes a substitute, as it were, for arriving at the destination. So long as one is on such a spiritual trek, one is allowed to postpone the act of will that consigns certain longings and parts of the self to the past; one can keep potentiality alive without a radical confrontation with one’s limits and limitations. Thus the journey keeps one in a condition of being delayed or arrested in one’s development: a chronic supplicant or arriviste.

Neither convert nor poet therefore truly leave the past behind. Just as Augustine in his *Confessions* spoke of a “maimed and half-divided will, struggling, with one part sinking as another rose,” Dante spoke of an arduous journey up the mountain, with his left foot lower than his right: the left foot standing for a spirit that lacks animation from the heart and guidance from the intellect (Freccero 1986:43–4). Hampered in his journey, then, by a fear that hinders the directives of the will, Dante the pilgrim proceeds like one who is only partly converted and who drags with him the burden of the past.

However, he also walks with the certainty and hope of the poet whose guide, also a poet, is sure to find the way out of hell and lead him to the threshold of the beatific vision. That is why pilgrims are always in danger of running late, not only because the past impedes their progress, but because each footstep is a reminder of their distance from the everlasting. Until they have renounced their desire for a taste of the infinite, they will not have really undertaken the descent into temporality. Both the poet and the convert hold on to a hope for the recovery of timeless love. The decision to consign such a longing, along with the moribund parts of the self, to the past is yet to be made. Their descent into hell is only

metaphoric. For those who have truly undertaken the descent into hell, it is already too late to satisfy those longings.

The road to hell is not always paved with good intentions. No wonder that the experience of the poet, as a pilgrim through hell, differs from the experience of those in hell itself. Poets, being on a pilgrimage, are privileged to witness and even to have pity for those suffering from these passions without fully recognizing themselves in those unhappy shades. A demythologized descent into hell will expose the self to its own passions: emotions so intense that they may previously have been numbed or attributed to others, and the day for their fulfillment, if ever there was one, has long passed. Furthermore, murderous affections and rivalries of childhood may leave a legacy of guilt for imaginary crimes and of nostalgia for a grandiose selfhood that was never realized. In the process of experiencing the passions that have no hope of fulfillment, or that have led to real or imagined disaster and loss, one may experience the self as being a shade – shadowy – because one had been mortified, whether by humiliation, rejection, or the loss of love. The self may also seem to be moribund because one is still attached to those toward whom one has had murderous feelings and fantasies.

The shades in hell are often crucial parts of the self, and their recovery may therefore be essential. Like veterans of combat, the survivors of disasters, or children who have been abused, these shades may represent the deadening of fundamental elements of the self. Perhaps the deadened self may simply have been mortified by verbal aggression. It is nonetheless crucial to recognize and express those parts of the self that have been numbed or deadened, whether because they were too painful or merely too shameful to acknowledge.

In the lives of most persons, however, there are often little psychic deaths along the way that cannot later be undone: mortifications of the self that are beyond redemption. It is important to be able to accept these irreversible losses of the self as preparation for the final act of renouncing outdated attachment and emotion; otherwise the attempt to recover the lost self may lead to a perennial pilgrimage through hell rather than to a descent and, later, to a genuine termination of the past. Without such a termination, one goes through life seeking to reestablish primitive and primordial ties of imaginary mutuality: a communion of the spirit that defies the facts and logic of difference, separation, and loss. If one is ever to ascend from such a descent into hell, therefore, one eventually will necessarily allow earlier and outdated, but not yet outgrown, aspects of the self to wither and die.

The origins of religion in every generation are thus to be found in the inability of the psyche to accomplish two feats. One is to place certain desires and aspirations firmly in the past: to finish old quarrels, abandon old ambitions, part with old loves. The other is to allow these desires to die a slow death: not to split them off from the psyche but to deprive them of the nourishment that comes from a sense of possibility. One feat requires the soul to give the devil of time its due: to acknowledge the passage and irreversibility of time itself. The other requires the soul to let a cherished part of itself atrophy and perish in a slow but determined renunciation of desire. Otherwise the soul is anchored in the past. Old loves still

demand satisfaction, as do old grievances. The past, however, remains to be created. The soul lives as though it were not too late, even though it knows that there is no hope whatsoever for these longings to be fulfilled. On the horns of this dilemma, so to speak, the soul is impaled, unable to move forward and yet unwilling to part with the past.

Among the perennial and proximate causes of religious interest and enthusiasm are the mind's strategies for playing games with the passage of time. Religion helps the psyche to live with the legacy of traumatic experience by attenuating suffering rather than enduring and resolving acute and unavoidable anguish. In a delaying reaction to psychic pain, the self seeks to 'buy time' by thinning out traumatic experience, but in so doing the psyche goes into debt once again to the temporal reservoirs of the unconscious. Only a descent into the actual experience, however long delayed, in the full recognition that it is too late to do anything but suffer for the time being, sets the stage for the creation of the past as that which has been truly superseded.

It is, after all, the earlier stages of the self that seek to keep opportunities and possibilities wide open, whereas the later and more adult stages inevitably face the limits and end of time. However, in Christianity the individual is asked to convert, in the sense of leaving behind old loves and attachments, unassuaged grief and hopeless longings, in order to undertake a new life under the auspices of the Christian spirit. Nonetheless, the "old Adam," we understand from the Pauline epistles, remains, and so does the conflict between the earlier and later self. Sometimes it is the elder self that condemns the younger; sometimes it is the younger that seeks to convince the elder that the latter is a fraud and has not yet graduated or arrived. Other sources of temporal anxiety emerge from parts of the self that are split off and are beginning to die in solitary confinement, as it were. These parts of the self also send out desperate messages about time running out and seek to convince the dominant self that it is moribund. Conversion is no antidote to the legacy of infancy or to the trauma of loss.

A Secular Descent: Psychoanalysis

In contrast to Christianity, psychoanalysis places the full responsibility on individuals for saving their own souls from psychic death. The individual's will must be strong enough to confront and reject the passions and forces that wound the "inward self." Hell is the experience of passions so intense that in self-defense individuals numb, mortify, and deaden part of themselves; for such people, who have undergone a partial psychic death, it is indeed too late to feel, let alone to satisfy, those old longings. The Freudian demand that the obscurity and complexity of mixed and negative feelings be articulated in analysis, so that they can become parts once again of a more integrated and therefore more vital self, is itself closely related to the romantic tradition's embrace of all that is human.

That is one danger of the descent into hell; one can seem permanently alienated from oneself; the death agony of the soul becomes a way of life.

A masochistic journey into night, so to speak, is a perennial danger; it poses the threat of self-destruction. The tendency of the individual to dissolve the self in the milieu of infancy is what Freud came to understand as a primary form of masochism. Formerly Freud had thought that the masochist was a person who took aggression that was initially directed outward and turned it inward. Later, however, Freud came to the conclusion that sadism was initially directed toward the self and only later came to be directed outward in a move toward self-protection. Thus Freud preferred to speak of a "primary masochism" that is ". . . still strange to us" and went on to ask:

But how can the sadistic instinct, whose aim it is to injure the object, be derived from Eros, the preserver of life? Is it not plausible to suppose that this sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego and has consequently only emerged in relation to the object? It now enters the service of the sexual function. (Freud 1961:48)

Thus the path to the development of the self requires that the self-destructive impulse be turned outward, and that one become aggressive toward objects. The oral sadism of infants is crucial to their freedom from primary masochism. Augustine's oral sadism in the courts of law, which was so horrifying to him later, was simply part of his development: the price others had to pay for his freedom from primary masochism. It was a short-lived freedom, as he turned his aggression inward into techniques of self-examination that were lacerating and destructive. (Witness his ending his life weeping as he examined himself according to the penitential psalms.)

Freud earlier was at some pains to separate instincts that were self-destructive (the ego-instincts) from the sexual instincts, which seemed free from the need to repeat and to reproduce the past (1961:38–9). In Freud's constant splitting and resplitting of the self into ego and sexual instincts, or into life and death instincts, or into love and hate instincts, we find him wrestling with a need to purify the self or the organism of some form of internal opposition that he is loathe to confront directly. Nonetheless, in the end he was forced to suggest that the most primitive of all tendencies was one toward self-destruction: the dissolution of the self into the elements of inanimate nature.

That is why the descent into hell may be so dangerous. It is not only because one may get into an internal struggle between one's earlier and emerging self, or because one can waste one's life in such infernal preoccupations; there is in the nether regions of the psyche itself a wish to self-destruct. Until and unless one emerges from this descent, one can live, like the shades, in a wholly insubstantial and tormented half-life. Such a permanent descent is indeed self-destructive, and it is therefore important at least to be warned in advance against undertaking such a descent without the presence of a guide. In *The New Introductory Lectures*, Freud suggests that self-destructiveness itself is entirely primitive:

Let us go back to the special problem presented to us by masochism. If for a moment we leave its erotic components on one side, it affords us a guarantee of the existence of a trend that has self-destruction as its aim. If it is true of the destructive instinct as well [as of the libido] that the ego – but what we have in mind here is rather the id, the whole person – originally includes all the instinctual impulses, we are led to the view that masochism is older than sadism, and that sadism is the destructive instinct turned outwards, thus acquiring the characteristic of aggressiveness. . . . It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order not to destroy ourselves, in order to guard against the impulsion to self-destruction. A sad disclosure indeed for the moralist! (Freud 1965:105)

In the midst of this passage Freud goes on to mention that this tendency toward self-destruction is visible when it appears as sexual masochism or as aggressiveness toward others. Once the impulse to self-destruct has been combined with the more pleasurable pursuits of sexuality, masochism takes the familiar form of finding pleasure in what to an observer would seem unpleasant or painful. This characteristic, which for some commentators defines masochism, is for Freud merely one of its side-effects: a later development of the original impulse to dissolve the self. Later Freud goes on to trace this impulse to a universal desire to return to inanimate nature, that is, to a death instinct.

Freud's notion of a primitive masochism is more radical than Ferenczi's observation that some individuals seem to dissolve in the presence of others, but both are directed toward understanding a fundamental tendency toward self-obliteration. Ferenczi notes that a certain "narcissism . . . is indispensable as the basis for personality," and without it "the individual tends to explode, to dissolve itself in the universe, perhaps to die" (Ferenczi 1995:129). He argues that the "environment" of the individual should provide a "counterpressure," perhaps in the form of a "positive interest" in the individual that will keep the individual's love and attention from being dissipated into the world. This would seem to suggest that narcissism may emerge as a defense against primitive masochism and that self-love is a far more fragile plant than self-hatred. In this regard, Freud makes a telling, even a radical comment:

Theoretically we are in fact in doubt whether we should suppose that all the aggressiveness that has returned from the external world is bound by the super-ego and accordingly turned against the ego, or that a part of it is carrying on its mute and uncanny activity as a free destructive instinct in the ego and the id. *A distribution of the latter kind is the more probable; but we know nothing more about it.* (Freud 1965:109)

Freud's argument is radical because, pursued to its conclusion, there is an inner tendency toward masochism which is exceedingly self-destructive and yet hard to locate: "mute and uncanny."³

But there is no difference in principle between an instinct turning from an object to the ego and its turning from the ego to an object – which is the new point now

under discussion. Masochism, the turning round of the instinct upon the subject's own ego, would in that case be a return to an earlier phase of the instinct's history, a regression. The account that was formerly given of masochism requires emendation as being too sweeping in one respect: there *might* be such a thing as primary masochism – a possibility which I had contested at the time. (Freud 1961:48–9)

Notes

- 1 Unfortunately the historical evidence for an underlying rite is lacking, which leaves us looking elsewhere for rituals in which the noblest, most potent and representative individual must make a journey to the place of departed souls.
- 2 Bernstein is quoting from Pritchard 1969; the Assyrian Version, tab.X, ii, lines 13–16, and iii, lines 29–32.
- 3 It may not be possible to observe the primary masochistic tendency but only to see it embodied in what the psychoanalyst, Jill Montgomery, calls imaginary “archaic torturers” (Montgomery 1989:29–36). Given a mind that is host to these images, it is difficult for such a person to be at peace or in solitude; they need internal sources of benign support and protection. Thus when the psychoanalyst goes on vacation, these “archaic torturers” pose a renewed threat to the psyche of the patient. Indeed, Montgomery notes that a masochistic individual may seek time and again to return to infantile states of mind: e.g. a timeless association with the mother, and yet also struggle, as though in a womb, for space and freedom of movement.

References

- Auerbach, E. 1953. *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Transl. W.R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Augustine 1963. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Transl. R. Warner. New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library.
- Bell, C. 1997. *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, A.E. 1993. *The Formation of Hell. Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Dante 1996. *The Inferno*, Transl. R. Pinsky. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Ferenczi, S. 1995. *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*, Ed. J. Dupont, Transl. M. Balint, and V. Zarday Jackson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freccero 1986. *Dante. The Poetics of Conversion*.
- Freud, S. 1961. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Ed. and transl. J. Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud, S. 1965. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Ed. and transl. J. Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Goethe, J.W. von 1994. *Faust*, in *Goethe. The Collected Works*, Ed. and Transl. S. Atkins. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Homer 1996. “The Kingdom of the Dead,” Book II of *The Odyssey*, Transl. R. Fagles, introduction and notes by B. Knox. New York: Penguin.
- Lloyd, G. 1993. *Being in Time. Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*. London and New York: Routledge.