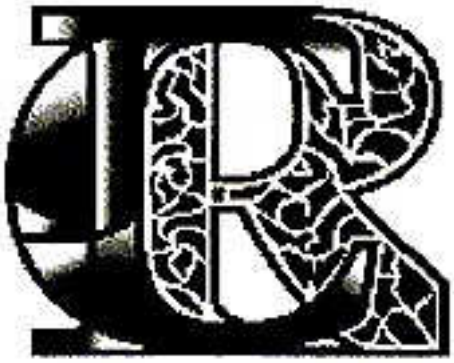

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Augustine and Dante's *Inferno*: Depicting Hell

REX D. BARNES III

INTRODUCTION

Augustine of Hippo began writing *On Christian Doctrine* around the turn of the fifth century, completing his book in 427. At his time, Augustine witnessed nascent Christianity as a widespread phenomenon within the Roman Empire and labored to produce a standardized framework for interpreting biblical scripture in order to unite the variety of Christian sects developing competing methods of exegesis (Hill 2003, 81-82). *On Christian Doctrine*, along with the hermeneutical principles employed in Augustine's earlier work, *Confessions*, served as responses to questions of appropriate scriptural interpretation but also addressed issues that arose later of attributing religious value to iconographic representations of Christ and holy figures. The Augustinian interpretation, as we shall see below, emphasized religious iconography as scripturally unfounded and a conventionally inappropriate institution. According to Augustine, images—understood as signs—held little religious significance. This original theory of language and signs is foundational for biblical interpretation within Western Christianity, yet I argue it cannot contain currents of cultural and linguistic change that produce uncountable new conceptions of textual and visual meaning over time.

One fascinating example of the limitations of Augustine's theory of signs comes almost a millennium after his lifetime. The critical philosopher and writer, Dante Alighieri, was an Italian Christian whose gift with poetic literature presents a problematic scenario when considering Augustine's organization of language, text, and symbols. This is because Dante's famous poem, *The Divine Comedy,*[1] re-appropriates canonical scripture by creatively interpreting the ambiguity of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and Roman Catholic Doctrine in such a way as to re-present conceptions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven through textual imagery and rhetorical ability. In this way, Dante maneuvers his authorial authority without the luxury of accessing scholastic theological or clerical power *per se*. This essay thus considers to what extent Augustine would have praised Dante for his artistic talent as a poet, while

[1] *The Divine Comedy* is a poem consisting of three poems (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*). I will focus primarily on *Inferno* and Dante's depictions of Hell, although the entire *Divine Comedy* relates to the issue of a literary text conjuring iconic imagery.

critically questioning Dante's poem for creating subversive images that signify a nonexistent domain within Christian canon. In other words, I am interested in a fictional meeting of two of Christianity's most prominent thinkers. I wish to explore Augustine's theory of signs in order to compare and contrast Hell in Dante's *Inferno* with a potential Augustinian response to the infernal imagery that arose thereafter. Put another way, if Augustine rejected veneration of religious images, or religious education through iconography, then I wish to consider: how would Augustine have responded to Dante's poem and would he have blamed Dante for the literal implications Hell would come to designate?

This comparison is suffused in the interpretations that followed Dante's *Inferno*. Approximately 900 years (Augustine in 400 and Dante in 1300, roughly) separate the two writers, and therefore, their historical contexts differ in terms of theological ideas and understandings. Augustine's concern, in this regard, was for unifying Christians and engendering common exegetical practice. The medieval context of Dante, conversely, was increasingly saturated with depictions of eternal torment, purgatorial penance, and mystical experience. While Dante fomented progressive infernal imagery and symbols—continued initially by reproductions in San Gimignano and Florence churches and then later by famous artists such as Sandro Botticelli and Gustav Dore—his poem can also be properly interpreted as a metaphor for Christian morality, not a literal location of eternal torment. From these perspectives, it is possible to argue that Dante adhered to Augustine's theory in relation to iconography, but stretched the multifaceted nature of textual interpretation by destabilizing Augustine's linguistic program and enhancing the reader's interface with texts.

AUGUSTINE'S THEORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, SIGNS, AND LANGUAGE

In book two of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine,* he writes, "All doctrine concerns either things or signs" (1.2). Communication of what Augustine calls "Sacred Scripture" entails the usage of signs because words are signifiers of actual objects, actions, persons, ideas, etc., but there is a fundamental distinction Christians must witness. "Every sign is also a thing, for that which is not a thing is nothing at all: but not everything is a sign" (1.2). In the attempt to access the wisdom and knowledge of the Bible, certain "things" will appear as signs, but their function may not always be apparent. A door is a door, but the word "door", for example, signifies the actual thing. The signifier, in other words, does not reify the signified. Rather, the signified (the "thing") specifies the sign.

Augustine's differentiation between signs and things marshals the importance and merit in reading books, especially the Bible, through diligent means because all texts employ words as signs in order to convey meanings, mental associations, and concepts. At the same time, Augustine foresees difficulty in the reader's ability to notice the different categories of signs, in which case, the reader might confuse the signifier and the signified. Natural signs are those, "without any desire or intention of signifying, [they] make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire" (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* 2.1). Conventional signs, "are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying…something which they have sensed or understood" (*On Christian Doctrine,* 2.2). The signs of "Holy Scripture" are of the latter type, according to Augustine. In addition, images are signs (conventional) that produce meaning, although, "he is slave to a sign who worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies" (*On Christian Doctrine,* 3.9). Venerating a sign is redundant if the meaning of that which is signified is ignored. Therefore, Augustine believes Christian iconography is, "to be counted among the superfluous institutions of men" (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2.25). Iconographic Christian paintings and statues have little, if any, use for Augustine and should be avoided because understanding God will not come through interpreting images. It should be made clear, however, that Augustine was not against images as art. In *City of God,* Augustine marvels at God's gift of human nature, where the purposes may seem superfluous, perilous and pernicious, but nonetheless indicate God's omnipotence, which is exhibited in humankind's astonishing achievements (22.24). To name a few examples, Augustine asks us to, "think of the originality and range of what has been done by experts in ceramics, by sculptors and by painters; of the dramas and theatrical spectacles so stupendous" (*City of God,* 22.24). There is nothing wrong with art for its purposes, but we are called to recognize the difference between "the glory of this mortal life" and "of faith and the way of truth that leads to eternal life" (Augustine, *City of God,* 22.24). Art does not aid us in our salvation, and we must distinguish between glorified art and the ultimate function scripture fulfills in guiding us to our faith.

Augustine's theory of signs emphasizes scripture, as opposed to iconography, as the most pertinent source of religious significance. Thomas Williams explains that this is partially a result of the fact that the, "unknowable past are truths that, Augustine believes, [we] desperately need to be aware of; the most important of course, is that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'" (2001, 66). Our senses aid in comprehending truths in our present, but in the distant past—the time of the Gospels, etc.—our senses are of no avail. Therefore, scripture informs us of things which neither reason nor sense can reveal to us in the present. This is why images of Christ and holy figures are

superfluous for Augustine; the Bible's authority informs us of truths, but visual depictions of such characters are unknowable because the Bible does not contain such illustrations. In this sense, we see a fear of Augustine's that iconography will induce a false relationship to the object of faith. Augustine worries Christians will interpret images as a truth that cannot be represented. Christians should not then waste their time on icons or paintings, but should interpret texts for instruction on salvation.

Comprehending scripture, however, is a formidable task in view of the various languages and translations derived from the original writings, along with the various obscurities and ambiguities within the text (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.5-6). Augustine advises education in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew when interpreting the Bible, if possible, but also tenacious attention when reading texts for deciphering literal and metaphorical meanings. Alleviating the problem of literal versus metaphorical disentanglement further involves a moral dimension to Augustine's exegesis: charity.[2] He writes, "Whoever thinks he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them in such a way that his understanding does not build up the twin love of God and neighbor has not yet understood them at all" (*On Christian Doctrine*, 1.36). Biblical exegesis is not an end in itself for Augustine. It is to be used for bringing Christians ultimately to God and their faith. Concerning the Christian reader, "charity should call you to beneficence, so that you understand the coals of fire to be burning sighs of penitence that heal the pride of one who grieves that he was an enemy of a man who relieved suffering" (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.16). Augustine's passage here speaks to the verse from Proverbs 25:21-22. The interpreter who takes the verse literally would not be acting in a charitable fashion because heaping hot coals on another's head is a malevolent act. Nevertheless, charity in interpretation does not blind the reader to evil deeds or even Hell. For example, Augustine's conception of Hell—as taken from scripture—allows for both a literal and figurative reading of eternal damnation. Specifically, in *City of God* Augustine considers Hell to be both a real place of infernal pain and a metaphor for anguish of the soul (21.9). Both interpretations suffice in his view, and the interpreter is allowed a choice between a metaphorical or literal reading, in this case, as long as the reader understands the notion of punishment for sins where charity was ignored.

This theory of language from Augustine, while fundamentally emphasizing the necessity of interpreting scripture through signs, presents considerable dilemmas. The rule of charity, in tandem with scripture's aid in perceiving the unknowable past, cannot easily reconcile provocative themes such as Hell. According to Augustine's

[2] This is a Pauline point, best exemplified in the Letters to the Corinthians.

theory, Hell is a subject within Christian canon; it is not necessarily charitable, although it encourages the reader to engage in charity so as to strive towards salvation. Moreover, Hell is spoken of in the distant past. So what are biblical exegetes to make of the topic? As discussed above, Augustine allows the interpreter to take a literal or figurative stance on the issue. Augustine contends that textual metaphors enrich opaque scriptural concepts, as seen with the example of burning coals calling Christians to penitence. Figurative signs are thus enacted through tropes, metaphors, and even irony to this end. One's rhetorical ability with adroit literary devices helps to clarify otherwise difficult verses. In his view, Hell can also be a figurative idea constructively encouraging others to strive towards charity. Augustine, however, does not consider the possibility of literary mechanisms outside of canon obscuring scriptural passages. He believes images do precisely that kind of detriment: obscuring Scripture. Yet his confidence in theological discourse does not exactly predict idioms that would change biblical exegesis.

WHAT IS HELL?

The concept of Hell is a stunning tenet of Christian theology, perpetuating almost infinite portrayals for the antithesis of God's domain. Demons, fallen angels, torture, rape, sodomy, and Satan, the ruler of the underworld, are usual encounters (among many others depending on the era), encompassing a vast array of various infernal understandings. Most significantly, Hell is a place in which damned souls reside after death. However, a detailed description of location, shape, and sensuous attributes in such a horrific setting—with its nefarious adherents—is notably lacking from Christian canonical scripture. The book of Job in the Hebrew Bible speaks of the Leviathan's Hellmouth (Job 41:1), for example, just as the books of Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah conceive of a place called *sheol*, filled with darkness and consuming fire. In the New Testament, there similarly exist the hellish locations: Hades and *Gehenna,* among a large number of other references.[3] Augustine's own view of Hell and the language he uses to interpret this place of horror are quite vague and mirror the ambiguity of Hell existing in canonical scripture. Augustine's ultimate concern with Hell is that it serves to dismay sinners, thereby encouraging them to adhere to a charitable method of exegesis. The notion of Hell is, nonetheless, troubling because it denotes the assurance of a tormented location for the unworthy.

Augustine's view, however, should not be interpreted as dismal. James Wetzel interprets, "Hell [for Augustine] is not what you find in a God-forsaken life; it is what

[3] For a detailed account of scriptural texts on Hell see Himmelfarb (1983).

you find on the way there" (2001, 56). Wetzel's interpretation of an Augustinian Hell indicates a conflict between wanting to lead a pious Christian life, yet still struggling with carnal desires of the body. Hell is part of the journey of a physical and spiritual life. Henry Chadwick similarly asserts, "'Hell' Augustine thought not so much a physical place as a condition of the soul in blindness and alienation from God" (1986, 114). God, for Augustine, is never completely absent from the soul, and if God were to leave, there would be no soul to punish, or if there is a Hell-location, God is with you and there is always hope of redemption if the sinner repents (Wetzel 2001, 56). From these perspectives, Hell is understood figuratively as a lived or personal experience (although remember that, for Augustine, the reader is allowed his or her own interpretation). If the reader interprets Hell literally, Augustine does not accept it with complete finality. In other words, he would never preach for Christians to abandon all hope.

On the other end of the spectrum, Dante's *Inferno* depicts Hell as the ultimate domain of excruciating pain and suffering in eternal punishment. Upon entrance into the *Inferno*, Dante passes through an archway with the words "Abandon all hope, you who enter here" (3.9). Lucy Beckett notes, "What is shocking, of course, about Dante's hell is its finality…nothing here will ever change. Here there is no love for the loveless…no mercy for the eternally condemned" (2006, 200-201). Beckett's interpretation of the *Inferno* highlights the difference between Dantean and Augustinian portrayals and exegesis of Hell; "he [Dante] has arrogated to himself knowledge of God's hidden justice that no one can possess" (2006, 200-201). The ambivalent Augustinian connotation of Hell does not assume the type of divine knowledge permeating Dante's poem. The reader of Dante witnesses a seemingly endless barrage of details concerning historical figures relentlessly persecuted throughout the *Inferno*.[4] Dante's literary ability in which he plays with biblical metaphors and historical characters, along with the ambiguous silence concerning Hell's tenants in the Bible, relate directly to Augustine's fear of misinterpreting signs. The figurative nature of complex notions such as Hell should not lead to laborious interpretation of an infernal location, inhabitants, or formation for Augustine. He would argue that the framework

[4] A brief example shows demons carrying out their task in the second chasm of the eighth circle of scourging panderers for walking around aimlessly, "On this side, on that, along the hideous stone, I saw horned demons with large scourges, who smote them fiercely from behind." Similarly, in Dante's ninth chasm their job is to split down the middles those who have divided Christianity, "one I saw, ripped from the chin down to the part that utters vilest sound; between his legs the entrails hung; the pluck appeared, and the wretched sack that makes excrement of what it swallowed. Whilst I stood all occupied in seeing him, he looked at me, and with his hands opened his breast saying, 'Now see how I dilacerate myself, see how Mahomet is mangled! Before me Ali weeping goes, cleft in the face from chin to forelock." See *Inferno* 18. 34 and 28. 31.

of Hell Dante proposes is faulty, unfounded information, and therefore, of absolutely no religious significance, except possibly as a figurative understanding for Dante's experiences. With Dante's idea of the *Inferno*, a physical conception of eternal damnation was imbued with an earthly dimension in Dante's own time.[5] Many medieval readers understood Hell to be positioned at the center of the earth with Purgatory consequently on the opposite side of the globe. Augustine would question and criticize Dante for contributing to such a myth because there is no foundation for such claims within scripture. The figurative and literal dimensions of Augustine's interpretation of Hell, as he discusses in *City of God,* have been replaced with a much more literal existence of eternal punishment on earth from Dante. Moreover, as a result of Dante's poem, artists have since created numerous portrayals of his writings.

HELLISH ART AND DEPICTIONS

The Dante Encyclopedia offers several examples of Italian artists who, immediately following Dante's death—and the completion of *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1309-1321), borrowed imagery from the *Inferno* specifically (s.v. "illustrations, medieval and renaissance"). Taddeo di Bartolo's *Hell* fresco in the Collegiate Church of San Gimignano (1396) explicitly compartmentalizes Hell with different forms of torture mirroring Dante's poem. Particularly, Lucifer sits in the arch with his three heads eating the arch-traitor, Judas, along with Brutus and Cassius, reflecting Dante's unholy parody of the Trinity (Hughes 1968, 32).[6] Nardo di Cione's *The Inferno* fresco in Sta. Maria Novella, Florence (approx. 1350) is also the only major fresco of Hell that minutely followed Dante's program of Hell. It contains Dante's nine circles of Hell with precise depictions of the torments illustrated in Dante's writings. Cione's and Bartolo's renditions are significantly illustrated inside of Italian churches, thus adding to infernal imagery within the medieval and Renaissance religious conscience (*The Dante Encyclopedia* 1996, 498).

Dante, however, was not necessarily concerned with producing a realistic discourse on Hell. As Hans Urs von Balthasar distinguishes, while scholastic theology has promoted and discussed disturbing issues concerning the Christian afterlife—the rise of Purgatory, Limbo, and Hell as potential punishments for sinful actions in the Middle Ages—Dante, "does not hesitate to transform its [scholastic theology's]

[5] Interestingly, the Academy of Florence, in 1588, commissioned the famous scientist Galileo Galilei to interpret the size, location, and formation of Dante's *Inferno*. Galileo gave a detailed account of Hell's attributes (all rendered from *Inferno)*, some of which were so minute, such as the exact size of Lucifer in relation to man, showing the medieval concern of iconographic and textual depictions of Hell. See Reston Jr. (1995, 25-27).

[6] For similarity with the *Inferno* see canto 34.

paradoxes into lived reality" (1983, 3.85). Jeffrey Russell also argues, "For Dante…the ultimate meaning of the cosmos is ethical, not physical, although as a careful artist, he wished his ethical world to be as closely analogous to the physical universe as possible" (1984, 216). According to Russell, Dante's physical Hell is a metaphor for the real ethical world, not the other way around. From these perspectives, Dante would have been surprised to find Lucifer at the center of the Earth, just as he would have been shocked to learn of horrific demons actually torturing individuals in various levels of Hell.

At Dante's time, Hell was arising as a visual image through mystical language, church mosaics, sculptures, and theological doctrines. Dante reflects upon these hellish contributors in order to present his moral understanding of the cosmos. These depictions were significantly both textual and visual. On the visual side, Romanesque churches such as in southwestern France in Conques show the Last Judgment of Christ including graphic torture scenes for those sinners condemned to Hell (Fau 1973, 65-66). This scene of judgment also appears in France in many of the gothic cathedrals, such as in Autun (Grivot 1965, 70-72). Notably in Dante's region, scholars contend that the Florence Baptistery mosaics—completed between 1270 and 1300—most likely influenced Dante's textual depictions of *Inferno* (Hughes 1968, 274).[7] The Florence Baptistery illustrates Satan with three heads chewing sinners, though without specific sinners as in Dante's version.[8]

These brief examples exhibit artistic and cultural trends and beliefs different from those at Augustine's time, as well as immediately after his passing. There is a significant tilt in concern for Christ's Last Judgment in the Middle Ages that dominated the medieval perspectives. Also, the early medieval pope Pope Gregory I (540-604) reformed the Augustinian view of iconography by stating, "images are the books of the laity" (Lindberg 2010, 56). Visual imagery was encouraged as an educational source for Christian laity concerning religious issues. It is not altogether surprising then that, "belief in the monstrous Antipodes was practically universal among Europeans of the Middle Ages, cultivated and illiterate alike" (Hughes 1968, 215). We see in what ways an iconography of Hell had developed, in full force, since the writings of Augustine. The theory of signs Augustine promoted almost predicts this happening, if one posits that Christians cannot distinguish between the thing and the sign. In addition, mysticism in the early Middle Ages contributed to the expansion of alternative outlooks concerning the afterlife—other than scholastic theology and Church doctrines—through

[7] This is not to say that there were no other influential sources, such as Islamic literature, canonical and apocryphal texts, and other writings, but it is significant that the church in which Dante was baptized contained hellish mosaics.

[8] For reference to the *Inferno* see 34. 61-67. This is where Lucifer chews the three biggest traitors: Judas, Cassius, and Brutus.

various visionary experiences in the netherworld. In order to properly assess the influence of medieval mysticism and the extent to which Dante possibly accessed this discourse, a brief overview of its meaning and influence is needed.

Bernard McGinn explains mysticism in the Middle Ages as adherent to an alternative and subversive strand of medieval theology: vernacular theology (1994, 6). The significance of McGinn's discussion accentuates the vernacular theological tradition as a true theology reaching a different and wider audience than scholastic or monastic theologies through vernacular languages instead of Latin, the language of the elite. Furthermore, vernacular theology and mysticism importantly included visionary accounts (McGinn 1994, 8-10). Steven Ozment distinguishes medieval mystics as those men and women claiming to have experienced God through visions or dreams (1980, 115).[9] Medieval mystics, such as Christina of Mirabilis (1150-1224), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297), and Mechthilde of Hackeborn (1240-1298), for example, wrote and expressed multiple theological themes traditionally limited to clerical authority, including Hell and Purgatory. Mechthild, Mechthilde, and Christina, like Dante, who similarly wrote in vernacular Italian, reported mystical visions including explicit depictions of Hell further influencing the medieval conscious towards a belief of Hell as a location that souls visit.[10]

Looking briefly at a few examples, Mechthild of Magdeburg's writings in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* are very descriptive of a supernatural geography of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. In one vivid account of Purgatory, Mechthild warns wicked and hypocritical clerics that their souls shall swim in fiery metallic water as demonic fishermen use their claws to catch and fillet them so that they are ultimately devoured by the demons' beaks (Magdeburg 1998, 191). As for Christina of Mirabilis, Andrea Dickens writes, "the *Life* [of Christina] starts with her descent into purgatory, hell and paradise and her choice to return to life to help Christ win souls" (2009, 41). Similarly, Mechthilde of Hackeborn's hagiographer wrote, "she [Mechthilde] saw hell open under the earth and much painfulness and horribleness as there had been serpents and toads, lions and hounds" (Dickens 2009, 91).[11] The examples of medieval mystics above exemplify trends in which Hell took on graphic and evocative images of a real location

[9] Ozment (1980, 115) indicates that while medieval mystics were rare, they were, nevertheless, considered to have, "reached the summit of piety, the highest possible goal of earthly life."

[10] I am not suggesting Dante was a mystic. Rather that he employed a subversive literary tool similar to the mystics by writing in the vernacular and describing Hell through depictions that could have been understood as mystical and, therefore, authentic. See Magdeburg (1998, 191) and Dickens (2009, 40) for references and examples of such subversive authority.

[11] Moreover, Dickens importantly likens Mechtilde's descriptions to those in Dante's *Inferno*.

in the Middle Ages.[12] These mystical experiences, recorded through hagiographers, derive their authority from unorthodox positions, without requiring theological training. Dante employs a very similar tactic of artistic cunning by grounding his poem in earthly reality in the fourteenth-century without the status of an approved scholastic theologian. Moreover, he positions his poem in such a way that a mystical component is implied. The poem is seemingly visionary, experiential, and happens, "midway upon the journey of our life," thereby implying that it actually occurred on earth to him in his lifetime (Dantes, *Inferno*, 1.1).

There is also the possible recognition of Dante's knowledge of contemporaneous mystics which perhaps he intentionally placed within *The Divine Comedy*. In this case, Edmund Gardner investigates the character "Matelda" within Dante's *Purgatorio*.[13] Matelda does not play a large role in Dante's second part of the poem, but she does guide and instruct Dante in his journey out of Purgatory. Gardner plays with the theory that Matelda could represent either Mechthild of Magdeburg or Mechthilde of Hackeborn. Without interpreting too deeply into Gardner's lengthy discussion, it suffices to recognize that both mystics were contemporary with Dante, although in Germany, not Italy. It is rather difficult to definitively state that Dante knew of either mystic. Yet, both mystics deal with the topics of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with some vague similarities to Dante. Gardner points out Mechthild of Magdeburg's revelations in which "Hell is 'the city whose name is Eternal Hatred,' built in the abyss…it resembles Dante's *Inferno* only in the superficial fashion of the earlier visions" (1968, 280). Gardner admits that his theory is speculative but asserts it is possible that Matelda represents one of the Mechthild's (1968, 297). In view of Gardner's argument, the reader should acknowledge that Gardner is analyzing Dante as a potential mystic. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am interested in Dante's rhetorical use of vernacular theology as a literary tool in acquiring subversive authority and the idea that Dante understood the unconventional authority occupied by mystics. Stated another way, Dante utilizes his literary self-consciousness in order to acquire a type of authorial authority through mystical tenets in his poem (Barolini 2006, 130). This in turn provides the advantage of a visionary vocation congruent with his poetic talent that perpetuated belief in theological relevance within the *Inferno*.

[12] Note that not all mystics wrote or spoke about the afterlife, including Heaven, Hell or Purgatory. Some spoke about union with God, suffering through a life-style similar to Christ's or their experiences with holy figures. I am only using examples that relate directly to Dante's writings on the afterlife.

[13] See *Purgatorio* cantos 28.88-144; 29.1-15; 31.91-105; 33.118-135.

THE AUGUSTINIAN CRITIQUE

We have seen how Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* proffers a systematic framework for language, signs, and biblical interpretation. This particular work importantly exhibits Augustine's hope for bringing Christianity into a unified body where scriptural exegesis will serve as the foundation for promoting Christian piety. Dante's *Inferno* within *The Divine Comedy*, on the other hand, is a literary masterpiece critically challenging the imbued morality of theological authority and doctrines which detrimentally imposed eschatological anxiety, political instability, and ecclesiastical hypocrisy (Beckett 2006, 185-187).[14] Dante's Hell considerably changed the theological landscape of eternal punishment through its meticulous descriptions, symbolic metaphors, and rhetorical persuasiveness. So what would Augustine have thought of the *Inferno* and its reception?

For one, Augustine would have admired Dante for his gift with writing. In *City of God,* Augustine marvels at, "the arts of rhetoric and poetry [that] have brought delight to men's spirits by their ornaments of style and varieties of verse" (22.24). For Augustine, Dante has mastered his craft as a fully utilized, God-given gift. Also, Dante's poem shows a deeply personal quality, demonstrating a strong similarity with Augustine's *Confessions* in particular.[15] Balthazar quotes Dante as having said, "[Augustine] speaks of himself 'because his assessment of himself was a lesson for other and so of great benefit'" (1983, 3.29). From this perspective, Dante, like Augustine, wrote in order to illuminate his own experiences with his troubled Christianity. Understanding Dante's *Inferno* has more to do with Dante's life and experiences than discovering the intricacies and location of Hell. Moreover, the words Dante employs are symbolically powerful, yet adherent to Augustine's theory of signs and language. Technically, Dante did not use visual images to portray his poetry, although his text evokes mental and visual imagery through his descriptive ability. Nevertheless, his poem highlights the uncharitable doctrines of theological discourse at his time. Dante's poem, therefore, also corresponds with the Augustinian exegetical premise of charity. There are not explicit or implicit instructions for his readers to malevolently hurt or damage Christian spirituality or the Church. Rather, his writings allegorically convey

[14] Beckett discusses political, theological, and social events surrounding Dante's life that aided in constructing the framework of Hell in the *Inferno*. This is important in understanding the complexity of Dante's writing. I have only grazed the moral dimensions of *The Divine Comedy* but hope to have conveyed the rich metaphors to be sought after in his work.

[15] I considered examining the exact similarities of both *Confessions* and *The Divine Comedy*. However, this could be an article all unto itself. I only mention it here in order to emphasize the personal character of the *Inferno* which resembles Augustine's own style in *Confessions*; that is, they both reflect each author's own experiences with their Christianities.

his own critical examination of papal doctrines and theological decrees that were inconsistent with what it meant to be a 14th century Italian Christian.

It is difficult to gauge, on the other hand, any disapproval Augustine may have had for the *Inferno*. Perhaps the interpretations and literal understandings that came out of the poem would have troubled him, as I have alluded to throughout this paper. The details of infernal punishment would have been trivial to Augustine. Dante presents a mode of writing, rich with visual idioms, tropes, and expressions that Augustine would not have been aware of or able to control. In this way, the cultural thrust towards iconographic depictions of Hell and its meanings drifted in a direction Augustine could not have foreseen. By Dante's Middle Ages, there was no modern equivalent to "fiction" as we would describe it today, concerning theological issues. The poetic skill of Dante dabbles in a new mode of expression barely conceivable by Dante's contemporaries, much less Augustine 900 years earlier. In this way, Augustine calls for diligent and reflexive examination of scripture, texts, and the meanings derived from interpretation. Readers of Dante require a careful eye in order to catch sight of Dante's life within the poem, not literal explanations of infernal or otherworldly locations.[16] We are able to perceive Augustine calling for responsible readership without obstructing artistic creativity, as long as the artist is not rhetorically manipulating his or her audience; if the author is, the reader must recognize the thing from the sign.

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[16] Dante's poem was named *The Divine Comedy* after all, indicating the dramatic impetus of the text.

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