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Doctor Faustus, the Harrowing of Hell,
and the Problem of Satisfaction in Reformation England

What happens if we read Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as a harrowing of hell play? Although almost uniformly accepted as Marlowe's breakthrough revision of the conventions of the medieval *morality* play,¹ the "form of Faustus' fortunes," I suggest, has much in common with the *cycle* drama – or at least the special pageant of Christ's descent to the underworld, where he challenges the devil for the souls of the righteous dead. The substance of that form, of course, has been significantly altered, reconfigured by Marlowe under the pressure of competing reformulations during the Reformation of Christ's sacrificial economy. These reformulations, articulated at all levels of early modern English doctrine and practice, took on a particular vividness in a set of disputes concerned specifically with Christ's descent to the underworld, known as the *descensus ad inferos*. In what follows, I sketch the claims and implications of the Reformation "Descensus Controversy" (and try to hint at [while hoping for advice on!] the debate's relationship to a humanist literary tradition of underworld journeying which reaches back to Homeric epic and Lucianic satire), in order to read *Dr. Faustus* as a concentrated challenge to one of the medieval stage's most powerful representations of Jesus' triumphal efficacy.² Such a reading reframes the famous problem of Faustus's overreaching pride – his belief that "Though the serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus!" – in terms of a larger theological confrontation with the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.³ The question of Christ's sufficiency, in turn, is an element in my

broader project, which considers the ways in which Reformation challenges to earlier penitential economies gave rise to a “problem of satisfaction” – a problem of doing, making, and feeling enough in matters of sin and atonement.

In the dedication to his 1592 treatise on the creedal position, maintained in the articles of the Edwardian and Elizabethan churches, that Christ descended to hell after the crucifixion, the Anglican minister Adam Hill warned that “there is like to be . . . great strife about the true vnderstanding of this Article in England.”⁴ The strife to which he refers represents what the religious historian Dewey Wallace calls “one of the lesser but vigorous controversies of the Reformation era” in England,⁵ and it makes strikingly visible the doctrinal flashpoints in the Protestant treatment of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. In its exacting, at times seemingly scholastic, disagreements about whether or not Christ’s soul literally went down to hell to deliver the righteous dead, the controversy reveals Reformers’ competing ideas about what was necessary or essential to Christ’s perfectly efficacious sacrifice. Its manifest subject was hell, but the latent content of the debate was a preoccupation with what was *enough* for Christ to do to redeem an infinite number of Christian souls.

Debate about the descent was not, of course, a phenomenon particular to the Reformation. Exegetical differences were built into the tenet from its inception, in the earliest centuries of the church, when various Greek and Latin fathers articulated the general premise that between the crucifixion and the resurrection Christ went to the place of dead souls. As Bengt Lindstrom explains, “Despite, or perhaps because of, the scant scriptural evidence, the tradition of Christ’s visit to the underworld was eagerly seized

upon by the fathers of the Church and other early theologians,” who continued to differ in their understandings of its sources, its narrative thrust and its theological implications, particularly the specific role of Christ in dealing with Satan as well as the dead.⁶ The tenet’s first appearance in a creed appears to have been that of Sirmium in 359, and by the eighth century it was “part of the universally accepted Apostles’ Creed”; but its most influential formulation – and certainly its most dramatic – was in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, whose beginnings scholars locate in the second century and whose existence is documented by the end of the fourth.⁷ “One of the most successfully and culturally pregnant” of the early retellings of the Passion, the Gospel of Nicodemus was widely disseminated after the fifth century in Latin translations and then in European vernaculars, thus “manag[ing] to penetrate into a variety of literary, theological, devotional, and liturgical discourses.”⁸ C.W. Marx’s account of the apocryphon in England traces its inclusion in eleventh-century Old English collections of gospel narratives, in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Middle English instructional literature and devotional literature as well as lives of Christ, and in the medieval civic drama, where a harrowing of Hell pageant appears in all four extant cycles.⁹ These distinct versions and redactions record not only the story’s popular appeal but also its interpretive and ideological flexibility: it was used and understood in multiple ways and for multiple theological purposes. Marx makes this case most clearly when he discusses the development of harrowing of Hell literature in England in the later middle ages as a response both to changes in the doctrine of the redemption after Anselm and to the emergence of the literature and practice of affective piety: the various forms “are essentially reinterpretations of the harrowing of Hell. They reflect a new reading of the

Gospel of Nicodemus and a new response to the issues raised by the text in the light of theological and didactic concerns.”¹⁰ As Karl Tamburr suggests, medieval harrowing of Hell narratives and exegeses display the period’s “shift in emphasis from Christ’s divinity to his dual nature as God and man” in their focus on “Christ’s physical pains.”¹¹

English Reformers subjected the narrative to similar reinterpretations based on contemporary theological exigencies. They did not simply quash, in the spirit of scriptural purity, the notion of the descent; rather, they scrutinized its literal and metaphorical resonances in their efforts to shape a Christology distinct from that of Rome. Their approaches reflect the variety of interpretations offered by Continental reformers, particularly a significant split between German theologians, who maintained the necessity of a real, physical descent by Christ’s human soul to a localized hell over which he was victorious, and the Swiss. Melanchthon, Wallace recounts, insisted on “a real local descent and above all made that descent part of the triumph of Christ.”¹² The Formula of Concord (1580), trying to find a relative middle way, maintained a literal descent to a manifest hell, but tried to stall further interpretation: “It is enough to know that Christ went to hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and has redeemed them from the power of death, of the devil, and of the eternal damnation of the hellish jaws.”¹³ Swiss theologians offered distinctly different exegeses that worked to spiritualize or allegorize the descent: Zanchius explained the doctrine as a way of recognizing that Christ, in his human nature, was truly dead, while Bullinger stressed “the spiritual effects of Christ’s death which extended into hell.”¹⁴ Wallace sees glimmers of these spiritualizing readings in the late medieval mystics, who believed that the “hell” of resignation and denial was

the way to heavenly union with God, but the Reformers readings, I suggest, were more grimly juridical.

Part of the approach of these readings was to condemn belief in a real descent to a local hell as smacking of papistry, as “nothing but a story” which endorsed the idea of Purgatory.¹⁵ Indeed, the axes of the Descent Controversy can be connected to the intense Reformation rejection, so effectively chronicled by Stephen Greenblatt, of this third otherworldly realm, and numerous English writers pursued this line of argument.¹⁶ But the central concern behind these arguments about Purgatory, and one for which there was no simple Protestant consensus, involved the nature of Christ’s sacrificial enterprise. The debate over the descent was at heart a debate over what was necessary for Christ to do – what was enough for Christ to do -- in order to make a full expiation for man’s sin. Did he have to encounter a localized realm of the dead? Did he have to battle, by words or by deeds, Satan? Did he have to suffer even after the pains of the cross? Calvin answered these questions by turning inward. As he explains in the *Institutes*, full expiation involved soul-suffering, the equivalent to the pangs of hell, so that Christ was not so much the conqueror of Satan and hell but his psyche:

If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No — it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgment. For this reason, he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death. . . . The point is that the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God in order that we might know not only that Christ’s body was given as the price of our redemption, but that he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.¹⁷

Against those who suggest that spiritual suffering would be impossible for Christ, Calvin endorses the glory, rather than the despair, of Christ’s pain and estrangement from God.

To detractors who claimed that it was “incongruous for [Christ] to fear for the salvation of his soul,” Calvin responded that, “we must with assurance, therefore, confess Christ’s sorrow, as Ambrose rightly teaches, unless we are ashamed of the cross. Unless his soul shared in the punishment, he would have been the Redeemer of bodies alone.”¹⁸

English divines inherited the polemical axes of the continental debate. Wallace’s indispensable chronological account documents the persistence in Anglican writings, well into James’s reign, of a fundamentally Lutheran approach to a real descent, but he chronicles the advent of the Calvinist interpretation by the middle of the sixteenth century, when the tenet was debated in Cambridge. By the 1580s, Wallace summarizes, “Calvin’s nonliteral interpretation of this article [had] gained ground in the Elizabethan Church and was widely accepted.”¹⁹ Accepted, but debated, and debated with the sense of impending “strife” over which Hill fretted. In the early 1560s, for instance, Bishop William Alley drew up a paper for Convocation, during the preparation of the 1563 Articles of Faith, requesting clarification on the tenet:

There have been in my Dioces great Invectives between the Preachers, one against the other, . . . some holding, that the going down of Christ his Soul to Hell, was nothing else but the Vertue and Strength of Christ his Death, to be made manifest and known to them that were dead before. Others say that *Descendit ad Inferna*, is nothing else but that Christ did sustain upon the Cross the infernal Pains of Hell . . . Finally, others preach, that this Article is not contained in other Symbols, neither in the Symbol of *Cyprian*, or rather *Rufine*. And all these sayings they ground upon *Erasmus* and the *Germans*, and especially upon the authority of Mr *Calvin* and Mr *Bullinger*. The contrary side bring for them the Universal Consent, and all the Fathers of both Churches, both of the *Greeks* and the *Latines*. . . . Thus, my Right Honourable good Lords, your Wisdoms may perceive, *what Tragedies* [emphasis mine] and Dissensions may arise for consenting to, or dissenting from this Article. Wherefore your Grave, Wise, and Godly Learning might do well and charitably, to set some Certainty concerning this Doctrine.²⁰

Alley fears the “tragedy” that results from doctrinal uncertainty, as it leads to fighting among ostensible Reformed allies (to the glee of Roman adversaries) and as it jeopardizes the faith and thus potentially the salvation of congregants. But the other source of the “tragedy” of this debate, the more “literary” one, is the very content of the controversy: the definition of Christ’s expiatory suffering and the determination of its sufficiency and excess. It took Christopher Marlowe to dramatize the connection, but he was aided by the language of the competing sides themselves.

We do well to begin with the clergyman Christopher Carlisle, who spoke against the article of the descent in the public disputation at Cambridge of the early 1550s.²¹ Carlisle represents that brand of English Protestant polemic aimed directly at Catholic theology rather than at competing Protestant denominations. In refuting the position that Christ’s soul actually descended to hell to free the souls of the patriarchs and prophets, he aims at what he sees as the particularly Romish implications of the creed: It endorses the possibility of multiple levels of hell, including a *limbus patrum* and Purgatory; and it also promiscuously mixes pagan and Christian concepts of the afterlife. “Perhaps we should make the pope, *Pluto*, y^e Cardinalle his iudges *Rodomanthus*, *Aecus*, *Minos*, and *Triptolomus*, and his *Curtesanes*, *Tisiphone*, *Megara*, *Alecto*, *Erynies*, and *Furies*, his fery man *Charon*, and his porter, *Cerbrus* [sic].”²² Returning to arguments from the third and fourth centuries and relying on humanist scholarship that translated the Hebrew *sheol* as “grave,” Carlisle maintained that the “hell” of the article should be taken literally, as the place where Christ was buried. But despite the florid display of philological exactitude – which reached its peak with the Hebraist Hugh Broughton at the turn of the century -- the heart of Carlisle’s brand of literalism was his emphasis on the absolute

sufficiency of the crucifixion for redemption, which rendered belief in any other approach to salvation unscriptural and excessive. As he writes, “If the price was paid on the crosse, was it not superfluous to be paid againe in hell?”²³

This attack on the superfluity of the literal descent is echoed in John Northbrooke’s 1571 treatise *Spiritus Est Vicarious Christi in Terra*, which reiterates that “Christes soule should not neede to goe downe thither” to rescue the souls of the righteous dead.²⁴ But Northbrooke, unlike Carlile some twenty years before, does not dispense with the idea of the descent entirely. Rather, he adopts a Calvinist hermeneutic, endorsing a metaphoric descent. Suffering, Northbrooke makes clear, was essential to redemption and had real effects in and on Hell: “the efficacie, virtue, and power of his death and passion, did pearce through and into the verie hell it self, by his diuine power and godheade: that all the damned soules, felt their full paine, and iuste damnation for their infidelitie: and Sathan hym self, felt all the power, and strength of his tyrannie, and darknesse, was weakened, vanquished, and fallen.”²⁵ Thus it was not necessary for Christ’s soul to descend to hell literally, but it was necessary for him to suffer hell metaphorically, in his soul. Christ’s death and passion, insofar as they involve an agony comparable to the experience of hell, are the “omnisufficiente Sacrifice vnto God his father.” John Baker, in his *Lectures of I.B. Upon the XII Articles* (1581), offers a similar Calvinist reading of the juridical necessity of a real, inward suffering identical to the experience of a local hell:

The meaning therefore of this his descension, is this: that Christ our sauour, to redeeme vs both in body and soule, which had offended God, suffered the tormentes of hell, the wrath infinite of his father for the time, not onely in body, but also in soule, and did abide the most bitter and vnspeakeable sorowes of death in his minde and conscience, pressed downe with the burden of all our sinnes, as if hee had bene forsaken of God his father. . . . This hell was so great vnto him, . .

. he was compelled for the very anguish and griefe of heart and soule, to say and cry out: *O my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* So that all the things that Christ suffered before, were nothing to this, y^l now he suffered, when he cried out for very payne, & extreme sorowe of minde. For we must remember, that Christ vpon y^e crosse, did not only suffer paines in body, (as they did which were crucified w^l him, which were y^e paines that y^e Iewes did put him to) but farther, he suffered y^e extreme wrath of God his father, hanging vpon him, heauier then heauen and earth, which no angel was able to endure And was not this an hell (trowe you) vnto our Sauour, to abide in his bodie and soule, all these torments, which can not be vttered with any eloquence or tongue of man? Nothing had bene done for vs, if Christ had dyed the common death of the body onely, as other dyd. It was necessarie therefore and very expedient, that we might be perfectly redeemed in both partes both body and soule, that hee shoule feele the seuer punishment of the vengeance of God.²⁶

Wallace documents a “counter-attack” to this decidedly Puritan interpretation in the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign, when “a vigorous dispute burst forth over the interpretation of the descent, as a group of conformist Anglican theologians, goaded by Puritan and Separatist attacks . . . and also because they were at odds with the version of the doctrine of the atonement with which the Calvinist interpretation was joined, counter-attacked to halt the Genevan offensive. This counter-attack affirmed a literal descent of Christ to hell, not to release captives from limbo . . . but in triumph.”²⁷ Again at the heart of the debate was the necessary status of Christ’s spiritual suffering, which Baker and Northbrooke, like Carlisle and Calvin before them, had taken as absolutely essential to the work of the cross. But for a set of more conservative divines this notion was untenable, and they found themselves arguing in favor of a real descent in order to avoid the implications of a metaphorical one. As Hill says, “If hell here should be taken metaphorically as some wil haue it, so may you allegorise the whole creed as doo the heretiques.”²⁸ Here Hill’s concern about the hermeneutical threat of allegorizing serves a larger fear: that the metaphoric approach does not accommodate the juridical demands that would allow for the complete redemption of human sinfulness. According to Hill’s

expiatory calculus, the real descent is necessary while the metaphoric descent is insufficient.²⁹ According to Hill, “man being seperate [sic] from God by the desert of sinne had fallen [into hell],” so that “it remained for the full effecting of our redemption, that man assumed to God [i.e., Christ] should descend thither.”³⁰ Following a similar logic Hill insists that the resurrection would be incomplete and inefficacious if Jesus did not literally go down to hell: “Christs resurrection is not a full resurrection, unlesse both partes did arise.”³¹ Most important to him is the nearly compulsory role of the literal descent in satisfying the demands of God’s justice: “the Sonne of God by the efficacy and nature of the divinity had tarried in hell *fulfilling all things marueilouslye*.”³² For Hill, Christ’s ability to complete the full redemption of man depended upon his going down to hell.

A number of Anglican theologians agreed with Hill in the decade to follow, repeating his arguments while embellishing particular aspects of them. The Oxford poet and linguist John Higgins, for instance, criticized the Calvinist position that Christ experienced hell in his soul as the result of estrangement from God. Such a stance, according to Higgins, is a diminishment of the idea of the godhead and a threat to basic principles of the Incarnation. As he writes: “We must hold that, Iesus Christ the sonne of God, dying vpon the crosse, could neither feele nor suffer the pangs of hel, nor the ful wrath of God seazing vpon his soule; because it was neither seperated [sic] from the godhead; nor subiect vnto sin.” For Higgins, it is precisely sufficient that Christ suffer in his body; and it is too much – heretically so – that he suffer the pains of hell in his soul. Such an argument was formulated similarly by the learned Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, who insists that “we are sufficientlie redeemed by the death and bloud of

Christ Iesus (without adding of hell paines to bee suffered in the soule of Christ).”³³

Certainly Christ’s soul suffered, according to Bilson, only the suffering was a “pained sorrow” for human sin rather than the experience of hell, for “hell is a *totall* and *finall* *exclusion* of the sinfull *from* enjoying the *presence* or *patience* of God,” and Christ could not experience such exclusion.³⁴

Bilson’s treatise is explicitly concerned with defining and explaining the principles of Christian satisfaction, the theological bases of Christ’s “making enough” to redeem mankind: “the death and bloud of Christ Iesus we . . . set downe . . . as the sufficient prince of our Redemption, and true meane of our reconciliation to God.”³⁵

These definitions and explanations were countered by more Puritan thinkers who prescribed Calvin’s metaphoric reading. The semi-separatist minister Henry Jacob, who had attended the Bishop’s Paul’s Cross sermons, attacked Bilson directly, insisting on a sacrificial equation that demanded soul-suffering from Christ that would preserve a direct ratio – a “proportion” -- between the Messiah and mankind: “He hath borne our sinnes, as we haue receyued his righteousnes. But we attaine the righteousnes of *God* by him both in our soules and bodyes: So likewise then, He was made sinne for vs, both in his soule & body. Otherwise this similitude or comparison were vneven, and namely short on his parte, whiche ought not to be. . . . We know by Gods worde, and doe affirme, that God in his iustice regarded this proportion, that as we haue sinned both in our Bodyes & Soules, so he that was made our propitiation did purposlie and aunswerably suffer both in his Body and Soul.”³⁶ That suffering was the suffering of hell, if not “hell torments in the verie place & condition of the damned,” nevertheless the wrath, vengeance and distance from God “which we affirme is equal to Hell itselfe.”³⁷ Or as the Scottish Presbyterian

Alexander Hume said, a real or local descent operated “contrary to the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice,” which “paid a full ransom for our sinnes before, and left nothing behinde to be done in Hell.”³⁸

The controversy over Christ’s descent was part of the broader articulation during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a coherent Reformed Christology, and it exposes the ways in which the working out of various Protestant doctrinal commitments entailed, even demanded, a thorough-going re-negotiation of, in Hume’s words, the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice”: of what was *enough*, as well as what was *too much*, for Christ to do to meet the demands of divine justice on behalf of sinful humanity.³⁹ Such a demand, I suggest, is the result of a Reformation anthropology which not only stressed mankind’s essential depravity but had also so clearly eliminated from its penitential program the role of man’s participation in atoning or satisfying for sin.⁴⁰ For the debate about the descent to hell transposes the problem of human satisfaction, the problem of expiatory agency, the role of the subject in compensating for sin, *back onto* Christ. Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* is acutely attuned the ironies and implications of the transposition, and the play dramatizes them in its protagonist’s own harrowing commerce, against the backdrop of Christ’s streaming blood, with hell.

Certainly Marlowe inherited his demons and devils, his good and bad angels, from the morality play tradition as well as from contemporary occult philosophy. And certainly Marlowe, as well as his contemporaries, routinely invoked hell in ways that had very little to do with issues of Christ’s descent. But Faustus’ unusual fixation on the possibility of *going to or touching* the underworld betrays a unique longing for contact

with hell that not only fuels Faustus' image of himself as a kind of epic hero, following the footsteps of Ulysses or Aeneas, but also recalls the resources of the harrowing of hell narrative and its theatrical transformation in medieval cycle plays.⁴¹ Before his conjuring Faustus identifies himself with "sweet Musaeus," to whom the infernal spirits "swarm[ed] . . . when he came to hell."⁴² And once he's begun, the practice of necromancy gives Faustus a kind of hydraulic access to infernal realms. He summons Mephistopheles only to dismiss him ("I charge thee to return and change thy shape./Thou art too ugly to attend on me./Go, and return an old Franciscan friar;/That holy shape becomes a devil best") (1.3.25-8); he conjures Alexander to entertain the holy Roman Emperor; at the end of play he calls the spirit of Helen to appear for his students and then, in an exquisite moment of poetic transport, for himself. After signing the infernal contract, Faustus' initial questions concern hell, which is the first locale he proclaims a wish to visit: "O might I see hell, and return again, how happy were I then!" (2.2.180-81) In one of the play's most caustic scenes, Faustus himself is accused of being part of otherworldly commuting, when the Archbishop of Rheims suggests that the pranks being played on the Pope are the fault of "some ghost crept out of purgatory and now is come unto your Holiness for his pardon" (3.2.81-82). Greenblatt has addressed the persistence of – as well as hostility to – the notion of Purgatory in Reformation England, and the play seems, at least on the surface, to appeal here to anti-Catholic sentiment.⁴³ But Purgatory is simply a distraction, or a prelude, to Faustus's most pressing concern: when the Pope damns "his soul forever," Faustus is prepared: "Bell, book, and candle; candle, book, and bell/Forward and backward, to curse Faustus to hell!" (3.2.94-95).

Faustus's delighted embrace of hell can certainly be read as the dramatic enactment of a moral fall that the prologue attributes to pride. It can also be seen as the psychological effect of a Calvinist understanding of predestination, so that Faustus becomes a stunning example of what happens in a "theological culture so repressive that it create[s] the rebel state of mind it reprobate[s]."44 Faustus, according to this reading, propels himself into hell before God can do it, in a spurious gesture of free choice that ironically confirms his predestined fate. But when Faustus traffics with hell he does so not only to prove or deny his damnation but because it puts him, in an obviously contorted way, in the role of Christ in the *descensus* tradition. From his very first appearance Faustus expressed his desire not just to gain a deity but, in his wish to "make men to live eternally/Or being dead raise them to life again" (1.1.23-4), to imitate Christ's most capacious salvific function. In his later conversation with Mephistopheles he announces a more specific desire to imitate the descending Christ: he claims jubilantly that he "confounds Hell in Elysium," meaning not only that he confuses or combines the two -- or, as Nashe scorned about Kyd, that he "thrusts" one into the other -- but that he also "defeats [it] utterly, brings [it] to ruin, destroys, overthrows, brings [it] to nought" (the first OED entry for the term). Such a promise, the blasphemous effect of his complicated psychic mix of despair and pride, shows Faustus' twisted version of imitatio Christi to be aimed in the direction of harrowing, perhaps even a humanist harrowing, where the pagan underworld defeats the Christian one. Only here that special drama is inflected -- or even infected -- by the questions of human and divine sufficiency inherent in the Reform descent debate.

This inflection may be most apparent, of course, in the decidedly un-triumphant trajectory of Faustus' descent. (Where the Calvinist reading of the descent turned Christ's literal and local victory over Satan into a scene of heroic psychic misery, Marlowe turns Faustus' intellectual desires and strife into a degraded contract and, finally, physical torment.) But it is also evident in the way that all Faustus' discussions about hell focus on counting and quantifying. Such discussions raise implicitly the questions attached to the descent debate: what exactly – and how much, exactly -- does Faustus have to do “confound Hell”? Mephistopheles inaugurates this fixation in his opening exchange with Faustus, when he answers the protagonist's query about hell's location:

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
Think'st thou that I, that saw the face of God
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss? (1.3.74-80)

Mephistopheles' speech is a watershed moment in the canonical literature of hell: it articulates a vision of it as a place of spiritual torment, as a state of mind rather than a geographic place.⁴⁵ But Mephistopheles' plaint is also linked to a distinct numerical impulse. Such mathematical gestures were commonplace in medieval and Renaissance accounts of the punishments of hell, where they served the impossible goal of representing unrepresentable, endless pain. Here, however, Mephistopheles' complaint gives a twist to the commonplace, as he multiplies not just punishment but the place itself: “ten thousand hells” in his effort to convey an internal, rather than an external, experience of damnation. Faustus picks up almost immediately on this impulse when he tries to assign a precise, if non-numeric, value to hell. “Had I as many souls as there be stars,/I'd give them all for Mephistopheles,” he announces (1.3.100-101). Later Faustus

will provide numerical terms to conceptualize the exchange he's making: "There's enough for a thousand souls," he says when Mephistopheles promises him magical power (2.1.87). The irony here, of course, is that Faustus imagines enough only in the most exaggerated terms; it is easier for him to augment damned souls to one thousand than to imagine enough grace for the salvation of one.

The characters' numerical excess is opposed in the following scene by the legalistic details of the demonic contract, in which Faustus trades his soul to Lucifer for twenty-four years of "living in all voluptuousness." The duration of the contract is not original to Marlowe (he gets it from his source in *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* [1592]), but the juxtaposition of its specificity with surrounding moments of computational plenitude speaks directly to this dilemma of determining the strictly adequate and the purely superfluous in matters of salvation and damnation. According to the contract, hell is the precise return on the exchange of a single soul for a comprehensible period of years.⁴⁶ But the specificity and comprehensibility of twenty-four, as well as the number's connection to the hours in the day and thus the dramatic unities, is thrown into stunning relief against hell's temporal and punitive vastness. The Bad Angel describes this vastness in the B-text with particular force:

Now, Faustus, let thine eyes with horror stare
Into that vast perpetual torture house.
There are the Furies tossing damned souls
On burning forks. Their bodies boil in lead.
There are live quarters broiling on the coals,
That ne'er can die. . . .
. . . .
But yet all these are nothing. Thou shall see
Ten thousand tortures that more horrid be. (5.2.116-27, B-text)

Between the poles of the definite and infinite, the Bad Angel has singled out a space of exorbitant numeracy: the “ten thousand tortures” with which he threatens Faustus.

Faustus himself repeats this kind of thinking at the close of the play, when, in the throes of death, he continues to bargain for his soul:

O, if my soul must suffer for my sin
Impose some end to my incessant pain.
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be saved. (5.3.161-65)

Faustus comes near to transforming hell into purgatory, where souls were purified by a strictly determined schedule of suffering and from which they were eventually released. But Faustus’s plea has less to do with a rigorous calculus of purgatorial cleansing and spiritual rebirth and more to do with what happens in the absence of such a calculus and its concomitant promise. If pre- and Counter-Reformation theology depended, in matters of penitential exercise, on the possibility that assigned quantities of suffering resulted in efficacious atonement, then Faustus’s hollow, impotent negotiations serve as reminders that human repentance is not and never will be satisfactory or sufficient in the face of Calvinist fixity. It is not surprising, then, that Faustus’ use of numbers here is not in the service of multiplying souls and internal suffering but in articulating physical punishment. As Cecile Williamson Cary remarks, “Calvinist determinism leads Doctor Faustus to a medieval hell.”⁴⁷ Or, I would argue, Calvinist soul-suffering leads Faustus to the localized, material hell of the Lutheran-Conformist side of the descent debates. But for Faustus neither model offers any consolation. According to Baker’s *Lectures*, Christ’s “descension into hell, is made our ascension into heaven.”⁴⁸ Such a premise is impossible for Faustus.

This impossibility, I am suggesting, can be linked to the way in which the play pushes the problem of sufficiency *back on to Christ*, making the very work of the Passion indeterminate. It is this indeterminacy that drives Faustus's stunning utterance: "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!/One drop would save my soul, half a drop. Ah, my Christ!" (5.2.74-75, A-text). One drop or half a drop? Charles Clay Doyle connects this passage to medieval theories of Christ's superabundant merit, particularly to Pope Clement's bull of 1343, which rationalized indulgences on the basis of a surplus of Christ's suffering: "not a meager drop of blood, which would have sufficed for the redemption of all mankind; but rather it poured forth copiously like a stream." Doyle suggests that "Lutheran, Anglican, and Catholic would all concur as to the efficacy of Christ's blood; the dispute was over the means of obtaining its benefits."⁴⁹ But the debate about the descent makes clear that in early modern England different confessions did not at all agree on the efficacy of Christ's bloodshed, and that they were willing to argue with one another about its effects in terms of wholes and fractions. Faustus' computational hesitancy in this scene has been seen as yet another indication of his religious failure, of his inability to believe truly in the saving force of Christ's death on his own behalf. But as an attempt to calculate what is necessary *not for him but for Christ*, the desperate appeal actually repeats contemporary debates about Christ's relation to hell, and thus about what precisely was required of -- and what was extraneous to -- Christ's satisfaction for human sin. The effect of this kind of debate, as Marlowe dramatizes it for us, is that Christ cannot suffice to get Faustus out of hell.

Marlowe, who was accused of calling Jesus a bastard who "used [St. John the Evangelist] as the sinners of Sodom," is too theologically and psychologically honest to

lay this burden on Christ.⁵⁰ But he does not, contrary to some didactic approaches to the play, blame his protagonist. Neither Faustus' limited achievements in magic nor his tormented ending – his failure, in short, to harrow hell – should be read in the conventional, accusatory terms which the epilogue of the B-text presents, or even in the terms Faustus uses on himself at one point: “No Faustus, curse thy self.” For if, over the course of the play, hell has harrowed Faustus rather than vice versa, it is because this model of Christian triumph has disintegrated in contemporary Christian polemic. Faustus' last dying speech gives form to this disintegration in terms that are entirely consistent with both the language and the implications of the descent debates. It is a speech of compulsive calculation and measurement, of trying to compare “one bare hour” against “perpetual” damnation, of trying to turn “this hour” into “A year, a month, a week, a natural day,” of trying to transform the self into “little water drops,” so that they might, in keeping with the ineffectual drop of Christ's blood, not be found. It is also a frenzied speech of multiple addressees – first Christ, then Lucifer, then God -- as if Faustus, channeling the problems of the descent narrative, is searching for the appropriate judge of what he must do to be saved. Perhaps the most telling moment of salvific confusion comes in Faustus's pleas to earth and to hell: the former he asks to open up and consume him, the latter he asks not to. Insofar as holes or gaps in the landscape were portrayed, in both classical and Christian iconography, as openings into the underworld, Faustus shows that, even in his final paroxysm of fear –“Ugly hell gape not” -- he is still puzzled by the question he posed to Mephistopheles in their perverse catechistical interview: “where is the place that men call hell?” (5.2.115, 2.1.113).

This same puzzlement, though in a very different register, is part of Faustus' famous address to Helen, when he observes the "face that launched a thousand ships/And burned the topless towers of Ilium" (5.1.90-91). Here again is the instinct to numerical extravagance; the reference to the thousand ships, like the following reference to "the beauty of a thousand stars," reflects Faustus' effort to determine how much Helen is worth and to reconcile that worth with his own soul. This calculation involves a mixing of heaven and hell that, as Neil Forsyth among others has pointed out, is suggested in the femme fatale's very name, Hell-en: "Terms as essentially different as *heaven* and *hell* blur together in the figure of the play's 'Heavenly Helen.'"⁵¹ But it is also the relationship between Faustus' project of *harrowing* and his humanist desire for contact with the classical past that blurs heaven and hell together, as he proposes to "be Paris, and for love of thee,/Instead of Troy shall Wurttemberg be sacked;/And I will combat with weak Menelaus/And wear thy colors on my plumed crest./Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel/And then return to Helen for a kiss" (5.1.97-102). This fantastic scenario is Marlowe's most distinctive revision of the harrowing of hell, provocative precisely for its formal consistency with, but material divergence from, the traditional Christian narrative: Faustus would bring the figures of the Trojan War out of Hades and to Wurttemberg in order to fight with them on earth (rather than with the devil in hell) before returning to Helen. Certainly an aspect of Marlowe's imaginative encounter with classical literature, the alteration also dramatizes Faustus' lingering puzzlement with the stakes of Christ's descent, of how it counted in the work of Christian satisfaction. My point is that this lingering puzzlement is not Faustus' problem alone, not the problem of an individual's moral failure; it is given a local habitation and a name by the descent debates in particular

and by broader doctrinal contestations over what was enough for both man and Christ in matters of expiation.

NOTES

¹ See David Bevington's seminal rehearsal of the connection in *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 245-65.

² Rosemary Woolf praises the Harrowing of Hell plays specifically for their "potentialities for debate, comedy, and lyrical expression of joy and reconciliation" (*The English Mystery Cycles*, [California, 1972, 274]).

³ For the classic position on Faustus as overreacher, see

⁴ Adam Hill, *Defence of the Article: Christ Descended into Hell* (London, 1592), A3.

⁵ Dewey Wallace, "Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ's Descent into Hell in Elizabethan Theology," *Archiv fur Reformationgeschichte* 69 (1978): 248-87, quote on 248.

⁶ Bengt Lindstrom, "Introduction," *A Late Middle English Version of The Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. Lindstrom (Uppsala, Sweden, 1974), 9. The most frequently cited scriptural passages in support of the descent include: Ps. 23:7, Hos. 13: 14, Acts 2: 24, Rom. 10:7, Eph. 4: 8-10; Phil. 2:10. Col. 1: 18. 1 Pet. 3: 18, 4: 6, Rev. 1:18. See also Remi Gounelle, *La Descente du Christ aux Enfers* (Institut d'Etudes Augustiniennes, 2000); R.V. Turner, "Discendit ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 173-94; and J.A. MacCullough, *Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1930). In a helpful summary Lindstrom suggests that the primary distinction between early interpreters was whether Christ went "to preach the gospel and offer salvation to the just Jews and pagans who died before the Incarnation" or "to 'harrow hell', i.e. to bind Satan and set free only those prophets and patriarchs who had had foreknowledge of his coming" (9).

⁷ For the "drama" of the gospel, Zbigniew Izydorczyk, "Introduction," in *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe*, ed. Zbigniew Izydorczyk (Tempe, Az.: MRTS, 1997), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ C.W. Marx, "Gospel of Nicodemus in Old English and Middle English," in *The Medieval Gospel*, 210-59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹¹ Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (DS Brewer, 2007), 102, 114.

¹² Wallace, 253.

¹³ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 492.

¹⁴ Wallace, 253.

¹⁵ For the ironic tendency of Reformers to allegorize, despite their commitment to *sola scriptura*, see James Simpson, *Burning to Read* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Peter Marhsall, "'The Map of God's Word': Geographies of the Afterlife in Tudor and Early Stuart England," in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110-30.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1: 515-16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 517-18.

¹⁹ Wallace, 284.

²⁰ John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation* (London, 1735), 1: 348. Wallace quotes this document (260) but does not include the telling fear of "Tragedies and Dissensions." Wallace explains that "The drafters of the article, however, did not heed the Bishop's appeal for clarity; instead they heeded what he said about the

variety of interpretations then current and chose a bare affirmation of the descent without explanation” (260).

²¹ Carlisle’s positions were not published until 1582, when they appeared as a rebuttal to a treatise printed at Louvain 20 years prior by the Catholic and former Oxford scholar Richard Smith.

²² Carlisle, *A Discourse Concerning Two Diuine Positions* (London, 1582), O7-7v.

²³ *Ibid.*, N5v-N6.

²⁴ John Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarious Christi in Terra* (London, 1571), B4v, A3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, B4v.

²⁶ John Baker, *Lectures of I.B. Upon the XII Articles* (London, 1581), F8v-G1v.

²⁷ Wallace, 269.

²⁸ Hill, *Defence of the Article*, Giv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, B2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, B4v.

³¹ *Ibid.*, C3v.

³² *Ibid.*, B2, emphasis mine.

³³ *Ibid.*, B1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, H1v.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, A2.

³⁶ Henry Jacob, *A Treatise of the Sufferings and Victory of Christ, in the Work of Our Redemption* (London, 1598), A8, B4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, C1.

³⁸ Alexander Hume, *A Reioynder to Doctor Hil Concerning the Descense of Christ into Hell* (Edinburgh, 1594), B8v.

³⁹ For the creation of, and differences between, distinct Reformed Christologies see Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, 1558-1603* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 1: 67-69; Elizabeth K. Hudson, “English Protestants and the *imitation Christi*, 1580-1620,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* (1988): 541-558.

⁴⁰ John Bossy observes that Reformers “g[o]t rid of satisfaction altogether . . . Or perhaps we should say that where the old Church had shifted the responsibility on to Purgatory, the Reformers shifted it on to Christ” (“Practices of Satisfaction, 1215-1700,” in *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation: Papers Read at the 2002 Summer Meeting and 2003 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* [Boydell, 2004], 109). N.B.: The articulation of this argument is the fundamental work of the project, and will span a preface and introduction.

⁴¹ Patrick Cheney explores Faustus’s connection to an Ovidian heroism that would “filter Christian glory back through classical fame to produce a new and striking version of . . . *eternal life within time*” (*Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997], 206. For the contemporary literature of journeys to the underworld, part of a usually satiric genre of the “fantastic voyage,” see Benjamin Boyce, “News from Hell: Satiric Communications with the Netherworld in English Writing of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *PMLA* 58 (1943): 402-37; Anne Lake Prescott, “Intertextual Topology: English Writers and Pantagruel’s Hell,” *ELR* 23 (1993): 244-66.

⁴² Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Signet, 1969), 1.1.109, 110. All references are to the A-text unless specifically cited.

⁴³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001), esp. 10-102.

⁴⁴ John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 10.

⁴⁵ See Adrian Streete, “Calvinist Conceptions of Hell in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*,” *Notes & Queries* 47 (2000), 430-32.

⁴⁶ For the existential appeal of the contract, see Christopher Ricks, “Faustus and Hell on Earth,” *Essays in Criticism* 35 (1985): 101-120.

⁴⁷ Cecile Williamson Cary, “‘It circumscribes us here’: Hell on the Renaissance Stage,” in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 189-90.

⁴⁸ Baker, *Lectures*, F7v.

⁴⁹ Charles Clay Doyle, "One Drop of Christ's Streaming Blood: A Gloss on *Doctor Faustus*" *Cahiers Elisabethains* 17 (1980): 85-87.

⁵⁰ From the famous Baines Note, reprinted in Constance Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 221.

⁵¹ Neil Forsyth, "Heavenly Helen," *Etudes de Lettres* 4 (1987): 19.