The Gladiatorial Spectacle in the
*Confessions* and the *Inferno*

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One of the most critical and engrossing moments of the *Confessions* describes the temptation of Augustine's companion, Alypius, when he attends an amphitheatre showing a gladiatorial spectacle. So potent is the effect of the spectacle that Alypius' resulting spiritual fall into bloodlust is said to outweigh the physical fall of the gladiator: 'He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body' (VI.viii.13). While critics have hinted at a link between the distinctive imagery of this scene and the experience of the Pilgrim in Dante's *Inferno*, the hidden workings of the gladiatorial spectacle in the *Inferno* have so far (to my knowledge) escaped comment. This is not necessarily surprising – there is no explicit mention of gladiators or the arena at any point in the *Inferno*, and furthermore Dante lived well after these spectacles had passed into history, and thus had no direct experience of them. However, I suggest that the gladiatorial spectacle is important in the *Inferno* as one aspect by which Dante both visualises sequences of his Poem and also reflects on the psychology of fixation, primarily that of the Pilgrim, but also of the reader and implicitly of the Poet himself.

This movement of the gladiatorial spectacle within aspects of the imagery, literary references and emotional structure of the *Inferno* necessitates a recognition of the complexities of the Pilgrim's, and our, experience of the Poem, beyond earlier readings that only go so far as to depict the Pilgrim as implicated in the sins he witnesses (Durling 458). Thomas Peterson asserts the emphatic *detachment* of the Pilgrim from scenes of horror such as in *Inferno* XXVIII, in which the Pilgrim gazes upon and converses with a number of gruesomely disfigured sinners. With the spectacle of the gladiator laced into the economy of these scenes, however, we can see something beyond categories of immersion and detachment as defining the conflicted state of the Pilgrim: the Pilgrim's captivation is mobilised by a fixated *bloodlust*, a 'lust for the shedding of blood' or erotised desire for blood and wounds, which is intrinsic to any 'detached' and spiritually charged critique he can draw from his experience. Virgil's rhetorical advice to him at *Inferno* XX, 28-30:

> Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta;  
> chi è più scellerato che colui  
> che al giudizio divin passion comporta?
now appears both literal and ironic – the Pilgrim is ‘wicked’ because, and to the extent that, he brings passion, pity and wonderment, to the horrors he confronts.

The gladiatorial episode of the \textit{Confessions} is presented as a pivotal moment of spiritual estrangement for Alypius, Augustine’s ‘alter-ego’ in conversion to Christianity. Initially, Alypius abhors the games, and when encouraged to attend by the ‘friendly violence’ of friends, he relents, thinking himself able to prove his individual, reasoned fortitude against the lust of the mob and the lure of the spectacle:

He kept his eyes shut and forbade his mind to think about such fearful evils. Would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome by curiosity (\textit{curiositas}). Supposing himself strong enough to despise what he saw and to conquer it, he opened his eyes. He was struck in the soul… (\textit{Confessions} VI.viii.13)

Augustine’s moralising on the psychology of temptation here is manifest: he emphasises the limits of human resistance to temptation, ‘a mind still more bold than strong, and the weaker for the reason that he presumed on himself when he ought to have relied on you (God)’ (\textit{ibid.}). Augustine is careful to establish the sensory and psychological particulars of how Alypius falls for the illicit desires of \textit{curiositas}:

The shouting entered by his ears and forced open his eyes […] As soon as he saw the blood (\textit{sanguinem}), he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness (\textit{haurebat furius}). (VI.viii.13)

This process is an ironic echo of narratives of conversion in the \textit{Confessions}: temptation is portrayed as perversion, as a sinfully twisted echo of conversionary, enlightened experience, especially of the famous sermon of Ambrose so significant in Augustine’s spiritual progress. Just as Alypius does, Augustine goes along to the ‘spectacle’ of the sermon confident that he can resist, shut his eyes to, the Christian content, for his interest is only in the rhetorical form. However, just as Alypius is overcome, Augustine too is overwhelmed, and his ear for rhetoric becomes the conduit to the opening of an inner vision: ‘together with the words which I was enjoying, the subject matter, in which I was unconcerned, came to make an entry into my mind. I could not separate them’ (V.xiv.24). Yet despite this doubled critique of the games, explicitly as moral decay and implicitly as perversion of spiritual progress, the sensory and psychological similarities of the two ‘opposed’ consequences posit these two experiences as closer than their moralised presentation suggests. Moreover, notwithstanding Augustine’s critique of the \textit{gladiatorii spectacula} as ironic inversion, Carlin Barton makes the important argument that the enthusiasm of the crowd for the violence, as depicted in Roman literature, itself ‘adds another and inverted element to the disgrace’. He continues, ‘This is the “rehonoring”, the vindication of the defeated, the sacralization of the man reduced to dirt. This is not the replication but the reflection of a glorious act – a brilliant sun mirrored on the surface of a dark and squalid pool’ (\textit{Savage Miracles} 43).

versus temptation, wavers and reinforces this flux by mirroring the arena. Barton’s analysis of the mirroring is a fundamental aspect of the relationship that paradigmatically integrates ‘Christian’ pity and ‘pagan’ passion.

While Dante appears to subvert all aspects of the gladiatorial complexities that reflect this dual inheritance in earlier representations of the games, his Poem’s construction. The ‘pagan’ support of whose power is more manifest even though these properties are more latent.

As mentioned above, the \textit{Allegory of the Court of Love} refers to the Pilgrim in Canto XXII in the \textit{Confessions VI.viii.13} (Dante’s approach of the Medusa are that his own eyes to avert the gaze of the Hollander (\textit{Allegory 24.9-11}). \textit{Confessions} anticipates the presence of ‘furies’ (literally, ‘consequent loss of self’) and suggest that there are further spectacles in the \textit{Inferno} that echoes the fate of many. In Canto XVIII points to the use by the Romans to Roman writings about the presence of an author and methodical display of the scenes in the \textit{Inferno} which Pilgrimage literature more directly. The Pilgrim are on a higher level in physical or verbal content and the spectacle provided a plot, a consequence of his own spiritual motivation on the part of the bloody spectacle.
(‘Savage Miracles’ 43). Augustine presents Alypius in a dialectic of fortitude versus temptation, wavering between spirit and letter, holiness and bloodlust, and reinforces this flux by mirroring conversionary sequences in the decadence of the arena. Barton’s analysis suggests by contrast that this wavering and ironic mirroring is a fundamental and explicit feature of the experience of the games. The spectator subject and the gladiators who perform are in a reciprocal relationship that paradoxically blurs values of honour and degradation, of ‘Christian’ pity and ‘pagan’ bloodlust.

While Dante appears to rely on Augustine for some of the dramatic and moral aspects of the gladiatorial spectacle, the *Inferno* also includes structural complexities that reflect this reciprocity and mutuality, complexities flowing from earlier representations of the arena that form, consciously or not, part of the Poem’s construction. These implications from past literature offer the Poem a ‘support’ of whose material properties the Poet may not be entirely aware, although these properties add an integral element to our experience of the Poem.

As mentioned above, critics have touched briefly on the relation between *Confessions* VI.viii.13 and the *Inferno*. Durling notes that the ‘inebriated gaze’ of the Pilgrim in Canto XXIX (1-3) of the *Inferno* echoes Alypius’ inebriated gaze in *Confessions* VI.viii.13 (Durling 458). The covering of the Pilgrim’s eyes at the approach of the Medusa in Canto IX is highly reminiscent of Alypius’ covering of his own eyes to avert the spectacle of horror, a resonance that does not escape Hollander (Allegory 241). Hollander suggests further that the passage in the *Confessions* anticipates the Medusa episode in similarities of imagery, in the presence of ‘furies’ (literal or otherwise), and in the petrifying fixed gaze with a consequent loss of self (242-44). Yet beyond these direct critical correlations, I suggest that there are further indications of the functioning of the gladiatorial spectacle in the *Inferno*. The decapitation of Medusa and of Bertran de Born echoes the fate of many Christian martyrs in the Roman arena. Curio’s presence in Canto XVIII points to an important literary link to gladiators and martyrs in the Poem, a link that is examined later in this paper. Dante’s address to the reader in Canto XXII refers to the barrator’s escape from the devils as a *ludo*, a Latin term used by the Romans to refer to athletic and gladiatorial contests (Durling 345). Roman writings about the *gladiatorii spectaculi*, for us as for Dante, are documentary evidence of a precedent for the horrors of the *Inferno* – organised, licit and methodical displays of violence to an audience. At a purely visual level, many of the scenes in the *Inferno* feature a gladiatorial-type arena where Virgil and the Pilgrim are on a higher, wider ring looking down into a ‘pit’ in which sinners are in physical or verbal conflict. It is not difficult to conceive that the gladiatorial spectacle provided a powerful image for Dante in painting a backdrop to sequences of his own Poem. With this in mind, we can illuminate a key motivation on the part of the Pilgrim in the *Inferno* – his passion and desire for the bloody spectacle.
We can claim, therefore, that Dante, at least for Cantos IX and XXVIII, draws on the gladiatorial spectacle and its literary rendering, and suggest further that it is influential in Dante's imaging of physical horror as a spectacle throughout the *Inferno*. Moreover, the gladiatorial arena provides, for Dante, an example *par excellence* of the spectacle as the garish surface or overt literal meaning that mesmerises spectators to the point of blinding their ability to penetrate to deeper moral or spiritual meanings. To be sure, there is a distinction between the experiences of the Pilgrim, often susceptible to immersion, and the Poet who manages these experiences so as to reflect on the psychology of fixation and on the notion of the spectacle. Yet Dante's recasting of the spectacle, by its very hallucinated seductiveness, provokes a reflection on the process of self-loss not merely as an experience for the Pilgrim but also for the reader, a point he makes clear in Canto IX. Implicitly, Dante also considers the dangers of fixation in his own poetic practice through adopting the sort of violent, decadent language that characterised Roman writing on the arena, a language that Dante sees as potentially threatening his Poem's moral force.

Frecceo has identified the eroticism that is laced into the Medusa episode, a 'sensual fascination' that is 'specifically erotic and literary' for Dante and for the reader; yet with the gladiatorial spectacle operating also as part of Dante's underlying construction here, this eroticism appears to conflate with, is even consumed within, the Pilgrim's bloodthirsty passion. At both a visual and a moral level, the episode of the Medusa certainly seems to re-enact, consciously or not, the gladiatorial sequence of the *Confessions*. Just as Alypius 'imbibed madness' (*hauriebat furias*) when fixated by the blood (*sanguinem*), so the Pilgrim is startled by 'tre furie infernali di sangue tinto' (IX, 38). Virgil responds to the threat of the Medusa by guiding the Pilgrim in both words and physical control:

'Volgiti 'n dietro e tien lo viso chiuso;
ché se 'l Gorgôn si mostra e tu 'l vedessi,
nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso.'
Così disse 'l maestro; ed elli stessi
mi volse, e non si tenne a le mie mani,
ché con le sue ancor non mi chiusessi. (55-60)

His is an external aid to fortitude, both a covering of the eyes against the sight of horror and a verbal cautioning that distrusts the Pilgrim from the terrible shrieks, the sort of external aid that Alypius lacks. Augustine maintains the necessity for us to see the spirit in the letter, that which is 'really going on' with Alypius when he attempts to prove himself, and likewise the 'blinding' of the Pilgrim is replicated in the reader's experience of the text. Just as the Pilgrim's eyes are averted from seeing the Medusa, so the following three lines, where a description of the Gorgon would follow had the Pilgrim been watching, are replaced by Dante's apostrophe to the reader, a covering of our own eyes from the horrific vision:
O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, 
mirate la dottrina che s'asconde 
sotto 'l velame de li versi strani. (61-63)

As readers, Dante warns, we should be wary of becoming fixated in the literary spectacle as Alypius is in the physical spectacle. Yet despite the contrasting of spirit and letter, holiness and horror, the basic thematic link here, the spectacle of the gladiator, blurs these categories so as to ground the horrific in these spiritual critiques. Dante's advice to 'gaze on the teaching' adopts a term for gazing, mirate, that has a deliberate etymological and conceptual closeness to mirroring in the Inferno. Augustine's spiritual mirroring at the sermon of Ambrose issues from an intoxicated 'gazing' at the Christian content that bears a marked similarity to the inebriated starring of Alypius at horror; similarly, mirate operates in Canto IX not only in spiritual replication of la dottrina, but also in a replication of violence within, a petrifying gaze at the gladiatorial spectacle that one 'mirrors'. This 'mirroring' of the gaze by which subject and object reciprocate each other is indeed an essential feature of the gladiatorial spectacle, one of the 'signals of voluntarism' (along with demonstrated pleasure, self-violence, verbal oath), by which the gladiator asserts an element of agency and mutuality with an audience (Barton, 'Savage Miracles' 48). The mutuality of gladiator and spectator that is embodied in the gaze is clearly at work in the Confessions — once Alypius' eyes become riveted, he is no longer the pious individual who entered the arena, but is immersed into the lustful mob, 'just one of the crowd' (VI.viii.13). Similarly, Virgil warns the Pilgrim that to gaze at the Gorgon would result in petrification, that one would remain trapped among the community of the damned.

The inscription of eroticism into the horror of the Medusa is also visible in that the Medusa and the Erinyes are both inescapably beautiful and horrific, and thus the Pilgrim's fascination with gladiatorial horror flows over into erotic fascination. The passage thus suggests another 'mirroring', a reflection back on the Roman amor mortis by highlighting the spectator's quasi-erotic fixation on bloody displays. In the Confessions, Alypius is exemplary in his chastity, a trait that impresses Augustine, whose primary obstacle to Christian conversion is his lustfulness. On the other hand, Alypius becomes obsessed by the games; it is his own particular vice or 'Medusa' that blocks his spiritual path. The two vices, lust and bloodlust, are complementary and of the same order, performing the same 'blocking' function in Augustine's narrative. For the Pilgrim, erotic and horrific fixations are integrated in the image of the Furies and the notion of the Medusa, a blurring that recurs in Canto XXVIII. In the latter canto however, Pilgrim, reader, and even writer are exposed to precisely the sort of violent spectacle and danger of fixation that is averted in Canto IX.

The Pilgrim's first direct encounter with a sinner in Canto XXVIII is with Mohammed, a schismatic who, cut open down the front, responds to the Pilgrim's gaze with a somewhat ambiguous performance:
Mentre che tutto in lui veder mi 'attacco,
guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,
dicendo: 'Or vedi com'io mi dilacco!
vedi come storiato è Maometto!' (28-31)

The varying motivations that can be ascribed to this action - performativeness, belligerence, eroticism - are given some clarification in noting that the term dilaccco, 'spread', as Durling points out, 'was used idiomatically for the spreading of the thighs' (Durling 442). This clue, coupled with the reiteration of key terms throughout the canto, sangue and vermiciglia, piaiage, riguardar, maraviglia, give the canto an overall effect of bloodiness and an intoxicated, quasi-erotic desire for horror. The gaping wounds, implicitly, echo the Pilgrim's wide-eyed amazement: the wounds stare back and mirror the observer, and the eyes thus 'project' the blood (as Bertran's head is a 'lantern', his eyes no longer receiving but rather projecting light). There is indeed an explicit tone of performativeness in the canto, for as the Pilgrim stands still, the sinners parade past to display, visually and verbally, their gruesome appearance. For example, like all the other schismatics of the canto, Mohammed is eager both to display his wounds to the Pilgrim's eyes and to verbalise the particulars of his punishment for him to hear: seeing and hearing are blended in the Pilgrim's experience of the horrific, as it is for Alypius, and this characteristic of 'display' bears all the hallmarks of gladiatorial voluntarism - pleasure, self-mutilation, gaze, and verbal commitment. Like the paradox of the gladiator, whose claim to honour is tied to depravity, Mohammed and the other schismatics remain parodies of true redemption. If Mohammed's display is parodic of the iconography of Christ's wounds, then the reference deepens Mohammed's contrapasso, in that he sacrifices or 'martyrs' himself for religious schism against Christianity; imitating yet parodying the original and ultimate Christian martyrdom. He sacrifices and displays a literal severance of himself as an attempt to restore a unity of spirit, but this gesture is inevitably abortive as Mohammed, like all the schismatics, circles 'through the suffering road' (40) of the arena of the ninth bolgia, an endless Promethean cycle of punishment and healing.

The performativeness visible throughout the canto adds further indications of and significance to the role of bloodlust and gladiatorial display. Curio's silent presence (his tongue being cut out) points to a specific literary reference to the gladiator and a desire for blood. Dante's source for Curio is Lucan's Pharsalia, a text in which Curio compares his troops to gladiators when encouraging them to enter a civil war (Barton, Scandal of the Arena' 17). Again there is a doubleness to the contrapasso: the speaker who urged on the bloody spectacle of civil war is now the object of such speech, his identity explained by another sinner, and is also the object of the Pilgrim's bloodlust. The significance of the gladiatorial display is in a sense conspicuous by its absence: Curio is singularly denied expression, 'dismayed' in the title page's expressiveness: 'Oh quarters', do giunte persone, / patrizii, / dopo, / Mohammed, he also pares / after decapitation carries / rest. And like Mohammed, through his severed head to the true molesta' (130). In the word's / grotesque appearance is / confidence and 'touch of the / consistently explicit / Mohammed, through Pilgrim / plays that, as for Alypius, / auditory experience. As for / his violent poetry, has not / the Pilgrim's inebriated / bloodlust...and - contrapasso / necessarily / corpse-strewn battle / like contemplation' (18) / bloodlust as intrinsic to / onto their own counter-upon the gladiatorial display / gladiatorial spectacle is / 'infected here, but Dante's / bloodlust in his use of / literary influence of Berioli / subtext for the canto' (Durling) / example in the Poem's context / also disposes his own / usage, replicating the self / Whereas the construction with the gladiatorial spectacle and its depiction of the ninth bolgia / approach an arena-like setting / quei che scommettendo / slight trepidation at the / beginning of the next canto, begins /
expression, 'dismayed' both at his physical anguish and at the denial of expressiveness: 'Oh quanto mi pareva sbigottito / con la lingua tagliata ne la strozza' (XXVIII, 100-101).

Bertran de Born also adds a highly similar, albeit more overt, sense of gladiatorial display and of a contrapasso doubled by the Pilgrim's bloodied desire. Not only does Bertran consciously acknowledge his counter-punishment, 'Perch' io parti' cosi giunte persone, / partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!' (139-140), but, like Mohammed, he also parodies a type of Christian martyr, the cephalophore who after decapitation carries his or her own head around, often to a place of final rest. And like Mohammed, Bertran also finds no such rest, locked in the endless cycle of punishment. Bertran's penchant for display is made patent when he raises his severed head to the travellers to both show and utter his state: 'Or vedi la pena molesta' (130). In the words of Bergin, Bertran is 'quite aware of the effect his grotesque appearance is creating', a trait 'very much in keeping with the self-confidence and touch of exhibitionism' of his war poetry. His display concludes the consistently explicit sensory blending that characterises the canto, from Mohammed, through Pier di Medicina, Curio, Mosca and Bertran himself, displays that, as for Alypius, integrate comprehensively the Pilgrim's visual and auditory experience. As with Curio, Bertran's desire for blood in life, embodied in his violent poetry, has now been mirrored back onto himself: he is the object of the Pilgrim's inebriated gaze. As Bergin notes, the Pilgrim is 'infected by Bertran's bloodlust...and - contrapasso within contrapasso - Bertran who had surveyed so many corpse-strewn battlefields with something close to delight is now the object of like contemplation'(18). These three sinners, taken together, not only establish bloodlust as intrinsic to the episode - a passion in life that is now reflected back onto their own counter-punishments - but also establish a need for performance, the gladiatorial display, as fundamental to the sinner as bloodlust in the gladiatorial spectacle is for the Pilgrim and the reader. Yet not only is the Pilgrim 'infected' here, but Dante-poet also exhibits or plays with a similar sense of 'bloodlust' in his use of lurid and violent language, in particular through the literary influence of Bertran, 'allusions to whose poetry have provided a kind of subtext for the canto' (Durling 446). In rehearsing Bertran not only as a visual example in the Poem's content but also as a source for schismatic language, Dante also disposes his own capacity as poet to 'lose himself' in the spectacle of language, replicating the self-loss of the Pilgrim or Alypius in bloodlust and violence.

Whereas the construction of the Medusa episode suggests correspondences with the gladiatorial spectacle, this spectacle becomes more prominent in the depiction of the ninth bolgia. At the conclusion of Canto XXVII, the travellers approach an arena-like setting, an arch 'che cuoone 'l foso in che si paga il fio / a quei che scommettendo acquistano carco' (134-136): reader and Pilgrim experience slight trepidation at the ensuing scene. The suddenness of violence at the outset of the next canto, beginning with Dante's reflection on the ineffability of the
setting, followed by the parade of references to bloody battles that accumulate and then exceed a collective memory of war, enacts for the reader the effect of walking through an archway into a pit seething 'with the most monstrous delight in ... cruelty' (Confessions VI.viii.13). Like the 'theatre of cruelty' of the Colosseum, in which famous battles and tortures are recreated for a paying public, the pit of the ninth bolgia collates yet surpasses the histories of the bloodiest wars:

Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolté
dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno
chi 'o era vidi, per narrar più volte?
Ogni lingua per certo verità meno
per lo nostro sermone e per la mente
c'hanno a tanto comprendi poco seno. (XXVIII, 1-6)

This dramatic 'carry-over' between the cantos is repeated from XXVIII-XXIX; Bertran's speech ends Canto XXVIII with the introduction of the term contrapasso, and the Pilgrim's implicit wide-eyed silence during this speech is emphasised in the opening of Canto XXIX:

La molta gente e le diverse piaghe
avean le luci mie si inebriate,
che de lo stare a piangere eran vaghe. (1-3)

Virgil's warning in Canto IX against the mirroring gaze that petrifies the spectator returns here as an admonishment: the Pilgrim, rooted to the spot, stares in wonderment and pity at the horrific scene, and only by a lengthy rebuke and essentially by walking off is Virgil eventually able to wrench him away. The Pilgrim is now in precisely the mirroring, fixed gaze that the Medusa episode should have warned him against, a desire for blood from which he cannot tear his eyes without the forceful rebuke of his guide.

Yet the appearance of the Pilgrim offers the sinners a paradoxical and fleeting moment of release from the endless round of debasement and punishment, a release achieved through display (albeit parodic). It is a deeply complex moment in the text, which appears conflicted between a general moral statement about schismatic language, that we recognise as doctrine, and a psychological insight through literary echo or interpretation that 'cuts against the grain' of this moral structure, a complexity that is difficult to ignore in the hallucinated tone of the episode. The gaze of the Pilgrim, which renders him transfixed and thus in part-communion with the souls, becomes the very object on which the sinners become fixated and mirror by their wounds and their gazing, allowing them to enter, in a very restricted sense, the human community that their placement in Hell would seem to deny them outright. Dante's 'gladiatorial' souls seem to be in a flux between condemnation in a Christian universe and a parody of pagan 'redemption' suggested by Dante's literary influences:

The calm and steady return to the surest indications of his vision (48); in this instance, the sinners' staring, emphasising the notion that these sinners may 'face' their paradoxical claim to their own sinfulness despite the mind of the observer benefitting from his drunken Pilgrim's inebriation brought to his own limits: 'The truth of the editor, the and of his own limits: 'The Dis is in a sense something to unlock the dangers of the amoral concealment of the, and Dante allows us to depict, multitude of horrors, and

In light of the speculations about Canto XXIX by Thomas Peterson, for example the attitude of the Pilgrim and the setting, and that Dante the amoral aesthetics of the Schism' 375). The 'distances' to Peterson, 'relaxes' on his cousin Giuseppe di Bellori, as by 'the multitude of persons that he says he saw in language, to conceal his Bertran to notice his own fascination with the blood, 'spirito del mio sangue' transforming from a statement of emphasis on the Pilgrim that XXIX (1-3) is very sudden shift in attitude of the course of the Inferno.
The calm and steady returned gaze of the gladiator, Barton states, is one of the surest indications of his voluntariness, of wilful self-destruction ('Savage Miracles' 48); in this instance, the sinners reciprocate the Pilgrim's inebriation as well as his staring, emphasising the mutual blending of the two communities. Furthermore, that these sinners may ‘forget their suffering’ emphasises that their audience is key to their paradoxical claim to honour: ‘The criminal’s redemption was effected in the mind of the observer’ (ibid. 53). And as Alypius is ultimately able to take benefit from his drunken revelry in violence, learning from his mistake, so the Pilgrim’s inebriation brought on by the graphic performances of the gladiator-sinners may offer him some instruction about the inner significance of the sins and of his own limits: ‘The criminal, like the gladiator, redeemed himself, the editor, and the audience with his own blood – but only if he had their sympathy – only if they acknowledged his “gift”’ (ibid.). The danger averted at the gates of Dis is in a sense something that has to be experienced for the Pilgrim to proceed, to unlock the dangers and intoxications of his own gazing. Similarly, the moralising concealment of the apostrophe in Canto IX is now significantly absent, and Dante allows us to experience that which the Pilgrim experiences, the multitude of horrors, and to reflect on its significance for ourselves.

In light of the spectacle of the gladiator, a number of observations and conclusions about Canto XXVIII arise that suggest a departure from earlier readings. Thomas Peterson, for example, maintains that the tone of the canto and the attitude of the Pilgrim are marked by an ‘affective suspension’ from the horrors of the setting, and that Dante constructs the scene as a whole to distinguish between the amoral aesthetics of a poetry of war and his own ethical poetry (‘Scandal and Schism’ 375).23 The ‘disinterestedness’ of both the Poet and the Pilgrim, according to Peterson, ‘relaxes’ only at the opening of Canto XXIX when the Pilgrim ‘sees’ his cousin Geri del Bello (ibid.). Yet Dante recalls that in fact he was intoxicated by ‘the multitude of people and their strange wounds’; while the Pilgrim states that he thinks he saw his cousin (possibly attempting, through schismatic language, to conceal his fixation), Virgil points out that he was too busy staring at Bertran to notice his own relation, a mistake that Dante the author has learned: fascination with the blood blinds the Pilgrim to a supposedly closer concern, the ‘spírito del mio sangue’ (XXIX, 20). It is difficult to imagine Dante suddenly transforming from a state of utter detachment to one of inebriation, in light of the emphasis on the Pilgrim’s staring throughout Canto XXVIII, and the impression that XXIX (1-3) is very much a continuation of Canto XXVIII. Furthermore, a sudden shift in attitude conflicts with the blurred responses of the Pilgrim over the course of the Inferno, where intoxicated pity results in sensory detachment.
such as fainting (e.g. V, 140), while violent ‘critiques’ of sinners partially replicates the sin itself (XXXII, 97). This flux between the Pilgrim as detached critic and as drunken spectator, the inscription of each extreme in the other state, emphasises that the Pilgrim is forced to descend, physically and psychologically, into the depths in order to ascend. More fundamentally, the immersion of the Pilgrim in the scene before him, in contrast to a tone of ‘disinterestedness’, is replicated by Dante’s similar reflection on the dangers of fixation that he faces as Poet, and by the dangers of the literary spectacle we face as readers, the potential for fixation on the letter Dante warns us against at Canto IX (55-63). No doubt, Dante seeks in his poetic language and in the spiritual progress of the Pilgrim a ‘detached elevation’ from horror, to be able to observe, depict and learn from the spectacle without becoming ‘scandalized’ (Peterson 375-76). By imagining the spectacle in terms of the gladiator, however, Dante emphasises the continued potential for fixation and self-loss in seeking this spiritual elevation.

With the image of the gladiator at the background of certain sequences of the *Inferno*, we are pressed beyond these moments as a parade of moral lessons and experiences, each embodied in a *contrapasso*, towards recognising them as posing a more dramatic descent into a pit of cathartic drama, an intimate relation of audience (Pilgrim and reader) and gladiator (sinners) that offers a theatrical climax and release, a release achieved for reader and Pilgrim, but ultimately abortive for the sinner. Although I have limited my discussion in this article to Cantos IX and XXVIII (for reasons of space), other passages of interest, such as Cantos XXII, XXV and XXXII, invite further discussion of the hidden movements of this drama surrounding the gladiatorial spectacle. While Dante relies heavily on Augustine’s moralising of the arena, in Canto IX especially, there is a broader concern where the gladiatorial spectacle in the *Inferno* implicates the spectator in a drama that conflates pity and judgement, horrific and erotic fixation, immersion and detachment. By exacerbating both their debasement and their anguish, the schismatics attempt to reclaim some sort of equivalent of Roman ‘honour’, a need beyond the concern for ‘prestige’ among the life of the living. The physical gestures of the schismatics, verbal and visual, are explicit displays, ‘penance’, aimed at restoring some sort of unity with the human community that their sins have severed them from. By returning the mirroring gaze of the Pilgrim, the sinners ‘ascend’ some distance toward his state, while his intoxication indicates his partial descent to their level. Clearly there is no ‘escape’ possible for the sinners yet the partiality of these spectacles, the parody inherent in the ‘martyrdoms’, is a conscious feature, as Barton maintains:

The fascination of Roman society [...] with the gladiatorial games is not simply a matter of an idiosyncratic inclination to sadomasochism but a response to an intense and excruciating feeling of humiliation and insecurity and an attempt to find compensation, even exaltation, within a feeling of inescapable degradation. (The Scandal of the Arena’ 23).

Whereas Alypius is presented narrates himself as experienced with the opening of Canto XXIX entering the Pilgrim’s eyes such that ‘the sight that is both intoxicated by joined to bloodthirstiness in the conception of empathy, as the traditional in these texts. Barton traces away for the gladiator was seldom the case. While implicit in the *Conclusio* of the *Inferno*,

Qui vien, che l’ingan d’una non chi à piu morse che all’altra.

The Pilgrim’s sympathetic understanding of the sinners’ gladiatorial-type descent in the *Inferno*, then, offers something by definition needs both a certain kind of honour, the sinner ‘benefits’ is clear, but no redemption is possible. As the gladiator’s claim to honour, of a kind of ‘pagan’ honour, & a falseness’ (Barton, ‘Scandal of the Arena’, blurring of gaze and compound reader) to ignore the graphic the symbolic significance of gladiators to express their state, to death there is none. By drawing reference to the gladiator, in the experiences of the Pilgrim’s cultural background. The method by which the Poet is able to self-loss fitted into a broader make a visible consequence. Yet it renders the continued self-loss reader and even writer of
Whereas Alypius is presented in two distinct states, piety and bloodlust, Dante narrates himself as experiencing a blended combination of these states. Thus the opening of Canto XXIX establishes that the horror of the scene inebriates the Pilgrim's eyes such that 'they longed to stay and weep'; significantly it is the eyes that are both intoxicated by the violence and that shed the tears: pity is literally joined to bloodthirstiness in terms of bodily location. This blurring calls for a new conception of empathy, as opposed to pietà or passion, when considering violence in these texts. Barton traces this distinction in the Roman sensibility: 'Compassion for the gladiator was seldom sympathy with the victim' ('Scandal of the Arena' 9). While implicit in the Confessions, by the Inferno it becomes an equally complicated and paradoxical theme:

Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta;
chi è più scellerato che colui
che al giudicio divin passion comporta? (XX, 28-30)

The Pilgrim's sympathetic identification with the sinners, his mirroring, forms part of his spiritual progress, as well as providing an empathetic reflection of the sinners' gladiatorial-type display. The functionality of the gladiatorial spectacle in the Inferno, then, offers something both to sinner and to Pilgrim: it is a theatre that by definition needs both audience and performer for either party to benefit. That the sinner 'benefits' is clearly controversial, and the 'benefit' is certainly limited: no redemption is possible in Dante's Hell; however, like the paradox of the Roman gladiator's claim to honour, the therapeutic performances of the sinners offer a kind of 'pagan' honour, a response to hopelessness without denying the hopelessness (Barton, 'Scandal of the Arena' 23). These sequences therefore effect a blurring of gaze and community, of pity and bloodlust, for were the Pilgrim (or reader) to ignore the graphic particulars of each punishment, he would also miss the symbolic significance of the contrapasso, as well as the chance for the sinners to express their state, to seek the paradoxical 'hope' and 'honour' where clearly there is none. By drawing on the idea of bloodlust and the spectacle through reference to the gladiator, Dante offers a psychological insight into the conflicted experiences of the Pilgrim by giving those experiences a complex literary and cultural background. The gladiatorial spectacle, therefore, poses a means through which the Poet is able to explore the psychological complexities of fixation and self-loss fitted into a broader analysis of moral violence, of which the spectacle is a visible consequence. Yet the means by which Dante conducts this analysis renders the continued seductiveness posed by such spectacles for the Pilgrim, reader and even writer of the Inferno.
Notes


5. As Auerbach states, 'For in the fight against magical intoxication, Christianity commands other weapons than those of rational and individualistic ideals of antique culture; it is, after all, a movement from the depths, from the depths of the multitude as from the depths of immediate emotion; it can fight the enemy with its own weapons. Its magic is no less a magic than is bloodlust' (Mimesis, pp. 69-70).


7. 'The greater the benefit, indeed the pleasure, that the gladiator could find (or appear to his audience to find) in his condition the more complete was his miraculous transformation into an ideal type of soldier/philosopher. Now the relationship between the master and slave, executioner and victim was not of mutual status but of mutual aid; they provided each other with mutual pleasure, mutual satisfaction, mutual empowerment' (cf. Carlin A. Barton, 'The Scandal of the Arena' in <em>Representations</em> 27, Summer (1989), 1-36, at 6.)

8. For an important review of Roman writings about the gladiator, see Barton, 'Scandal of the Arena' and 'Savage Miracles'. For examples of these writings, such as those of Seneca and Lucan, in the <em>Inferno</em>, see Durling, <em>Inferno</em>, pp. 614-54.


10. Drawing a visual connection between this episode and <em>Confessions</em> VI.viii.13, Hollander concludes that there is a moral connection also, that 'Stoic restraint is not enough' (Allegory, p. 241).

11. As Freccero notes: ‘Dante fulfills the role of a Virgil to the reader, sufficient to the task of averting his pupils glance’ (The Poetics of Conversion, p. 123).

12. See Durling (<em>Inferno</em>, pp. 480, 509). For other examples of mirroring, see Canto XXX, 130-32, where the pilgrim observes a childish quarrel between two sinners, and, intent to 'listen to them', is rebuked by Virgil, 'Now keep looking (mira)', for I am not far from quarrelling with you!' (my emphasis - note the conflation of seeing and hearing). That the gaze of the pilgrim is etymologically associated with reciprocal mirroring here is reinforced by the verbal threat of Virgil – the two would also fight argumentatively and thus 'mirror' the sinners. Similarly, the Pilgrim is asked by a soul

13. Indeed this 'reflecting back' of the episode as well. The 'look' appears on a tower of three, 'looking and shouting at' (prigionieri, 70)...


15. As Hollander observes, both losing one's soul forever is only remedied by Gray.


17. Barton quotes, for example, in which criminals are ritually coming from his burning to others. The same sense nose with dreadful vengeful 'Miracles', p. 41).


19. Peterson argues that their love of the power of fragmented bodies, that becomes an emblem of innocence and emptiness by the simple actions of mere embittered gladiatorial performances.


22. See also Charles S. Singleton and Alighieri, Princeton, Nj. language performs the same role as well as echoing Betrayal.

23. See Barton (Scandal of 19).

24. Teodolinda Barolini notes must make us readers believe, but instead a source of duty who must believe. Not only a spectator but also serving mirroring our reading process. (The Undivine Comedy: 91).
‘Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi?’, which Durling translates as ‘Why do you mirror yourself in us?’ (XXII, 53-54).

13. Indeed this ‘reflecting back’ of the horrific onto the spectator is embodied in the setting of the episode as well. The Pilgrim is ‘spectacle’ as well as spectator in that the Furies appear on a tower of the gates of Dis, ‘looking down’, and one can visualise them staring and shouting at him while his back is turned – they become the audience looking down and clamouring at the display in the lower ‘pit’.

14. By displaying various indications of voluntarism, Barton argues, gladiators, as well as Christian martyrs, affirm their debasement but simultaneously enter into an intimacy with their audience: ‘the murder is changed to an act of mutual complicity, a conspiracy between victim and executioner, gladiator and spectator’ (‘Scandal of the Arena’, p. 4).

15. As Hollander observes, both passages address ‘the common and central potentiality of losing one’s soul forever if the gaze becomes fixed, a situation which in both cases can only be remedied by Grace’ (Allegory, p. 243).

16. See Durling (Inferno, p. 150) for the varying interpretations and myths of the Medusa.

17. Barton quotes, for example, from Prudentius’ depiction of the ‘theatre of cruelty’ in which criminals are ritually tortured, in this case burned: ‘The very nature of the odor coming from his burning flesh in diverse ways stirred both: a stench to some, a nectar to others. The same sensation is transformed differently, either an odor wounding the nose with dreadful vengeance or a sweet smell that caresses with delight’ (Savage Miracles’, p. 41).

18. See Durling (Inferno, p. 442) for a comment on this.

19. Peterson argues that the physical and verbal gestures of the sinners are hangovers of their love of the power of speech in life which are abortively undercut by their fragmented bodies, that Mohammed re-enacts his disposition to divide and thus becomes an emblem of it (Scandal and Schism’, pp. 369, 372). Although the ignorance of sinfulness by the sinners no doubt remains here, there is more agency to their actions than mere emblematic recreations, especially if we view them in light of a gladiatorial performance.


21. Ibid., 18. Durling notes that Betram influences Dante at a textual level also, his poetry being echoed by Dante throughout Canto XXVIII.

22. See also Charles S. Singleton (trans., with a commentary, The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1977, p. 502), who notes that Dante’s language performs the sort of bodily rending it describes through broken construction, as well as echoing Betram’s war poetry.

23. See Barton (‘Scandal of the Arena’, pp. 41-42) for a discussion of this practice.

24. Teodolinda Barolini notes a role reversal here, in that Dante is no longer a poet that must make us readers believe the wonder (‘maraviglia’) as in the opening of the canto, but instead is a source of wonder, and thus the sinners become ‘akin to us, the readers who must believe’. Not only does this emphasise the Pilgrim as spectacle as well as spectator, but also serves to assign us ‘hidden roles within his text’, conflating and mirroring our reading practice with the experience of the sinner as well as the Pilgrim (The Undivine Comedy: Dethelogizing Dante, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992, pp. 90-91).
25. See also the argument made by Giuseppe Mazzotta in Dante’s Vision and the Circle of Knowledge, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993, p. 79.
26. Hollander (p. 301) argues that a significant means of progression in the *Inferno* is Dante’s record of his own development, a record, Hollander argues, that resembles but complicates the idea of catharsis from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. While the Pilgrim is characterised by a progressive staunchness against other sinners as he moves deeper into Hell, it is important to note that the development is cyclic, a flux between fear, pity, and fortitude.
27. Barton traces this paradox of honour performed amidst degradation as pervading Roman literature on the arena: ‘The debased gladiator’s love of death (amor mortis), his enthusiastic cooperation in his own death, redeemed both himself and his audience’ (Scandal of the Arena’, p. 8).

**Works Cited**


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**Echoes of Inferno**

(the Figure of Envy)

‘For God created man, and made him in likeness he made him, in the likeness of God he created him; male and female made he him’ (Gen 1:27).

‘There are some intolerable vices; baseness, e.g. [.]’ (Moral. 3.2.12).

Mindful of envy’s cyclic schema of the seven deadly sins, avarice, gluttony, lust, pride, and anger, the poet, who is envious of the glory of Heaven, identifies, are present, and indeed, ‘envy: They shall meet with the night’ (Job 5:14) and after darkness, and knoweth nothing. ‘No. 140. His eyes!’ (1 John 2:11). The circle assigned to it, and indeed, its origins in envy, ‘la superbia, invidia e aviditatem’ (‘gent’ è avara, invidiosa).