The Gospel of Nicodemus in Medieval Italian Literature

The Evangelium Nicodemi consists of two rather loosely conjoined parts: the first gives an account of Christ’s trial, passion, and resurrection with the story of Joseph of Arimathea woven into the narrative (Gesta Pilati); the second relates Christ’s descent into the underworld (Descensus Christi ad inferos). Although the work never gained the status of a canonical gospel, it enjoyed great authority and prestige in the Middle Ages. For instance, in the early thirteenth century, Vincent of Beauvais justified his summary of it in his widely read Speculum by stating that “some works are considered apocrypha because they are contrary to truth, others simply because their authors are unknown, although they contain pure truth” (Speculum naturale, Prologus, col. 8). The Evangelium Nicodemi, Vincent suggests, belongs to the latter category.

The pseudo-gospel’s immense popularity stemmed precisely from the fact that it added further information to the canonical accounts of Christ’s death and resurrection, and spilled out in great detail a story — Christ’s harrowing of hell — which was only vaguely alluded to in the Old and New Testaments. The story of Christ’s descent into hell and defeat of the forces of evil captivated the medieval mind. Although the Evangelium Nicodemi was not the only source of the harrowing story, it was certainly the most dramatic and influential version of it.

The harrowing of hell has, of course, long been an object of intense study, yet its major source, the Evangelium Nicodemi, has only recently begun to attract sustained scholarly interest. Much of the attention has focused on the origin, dissemination and textual characteristics of the Latin version, or rather versions, of the apocryphon (Izydorczyk, “The Unfamiliar” and Manuscripts). In addition, its interaction with various medieval European literatures has not been entirely neglected. (See the essays in the forthcoming volume, The Gospel of Nicodemus in Medieval Europe: Some Vernacular Perspectives, edited by Z. Izydorczyk.) Moreover, new medieval translations have recently been discovered and some have been published (Ford; Marx and Drennan; Masser; Masser and Siller).

Despite lively critical discussion of the Evangelium Nicodemi, its presence in and impact on medieval Italian literature remain almost completely unexplored. My preliminary research on the subject indicates that the apocryphon was widely known in Italy, not only in its Latin versions, but also in several Italian translations. The manuscript tradition testifies to this. Moreover, from the second half of

QUADERNI d'italianistica Volume XIV, No. 2, 1993
the thirteenth century on its influence is seen repeatedly in longer literary and quasi-literary works and echoed in countless shorter compositions. In this essay I shall provide a preliminary assessment of the situation, indicating areas which deserve further exploration.

Because of a dearth of critical literature on the subject, research must be based almost exclusively on primary sources, many of which are unpublished. This is certainly true of the Italian translations of the Evangelium. Of the dozen or more known to me, only two have actually been published, both in rare nineteenth century editions with little or no critical apparatus. There are probably more early Italian translations waiting to be discovered. One of the problems in tracking them down is that the Italian versions of the apocryphon, like the Latin, appear under different names. In addition to the many variations on Il vangelo di Nicodemo, they can be called Storia della passione di Yhesu Christo, La passion del nostro Signor Giesu Christo, and Passio di Nicodemo, just to name a few examples. These translations must be carefully studied to ascertain the date and place of composition, and, if possible, the identity of the translator and/or scribe, in order to reconstruct the cultural context in which each translation was executed, and to determine its sphere of influence. It appears that most of the translations are in Tuscan, but at least two were rendered into Venetian. One of these, contained in a rather late manuscript, written by a certain “Dominicus filius nobilis viri Nicolai de Cartrano” in 1465, seems to have been made from a Tuscan original (Porro 190; Santoro 123).

It is also important to establish which Latin form of the text each Italian translation is based on. As is well known, there are two major manuscript traditions of the Latin text, which scholars refer to as Evangelium A and B. The two diverge in many ways. For instance, the Descensus Christi ad inferos of the B text is somewhat shorter and differs from its more common counterpart in selection, arrangement, and wording. The B text also has no meeting with Enoch and Elias, an episode which occupies Chapter 25 of the A text. Of the two published Italian versions, one is based on the Latin text A, the other on B. Il Passo o Vangelo di Nicodemo was published in 1862 by Cesare Guasti in the “Scelta di curiosità letterarie inedite o rare” series from a fifteenth century manuscript owned by Giuseppe Ceppi of Prato. It closely follows Evangelium A until Chapter 20, when it breaks off abruptly in the middle of the speech in which Hell points out to Satan the special nature of Christ’s salvific power. The man who is about to descend into hell has, through the power of His Word, already rescued several souls from his realm, including Lazarus. Indeed, the text ends just before the mention of the revival of Lazarus’ lifeless body.

Some twenty years later, in 1883, Hermann Suchier published El Vangielo di Nicchodemo from Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 1362, formerly P. III. 14, as an appendix in Denkmäler Provenzalischer Literatur und Sprache (573-88). This translation in prose contains the last five chapters (12 to 16) of the Gesta Pilati and all eleven chapters (17 to 27) of the B text of the Descensus
Christi ad inferos, although this material has been condensed somewhat. In other words, it focuses on the story of Joseph of Arimathea, which unfolds principally in the last chapters of the Gesta, and the harrowing of hell. Suchier associates this Italian translation with several Provençal and Catalan prose versions of the Evangelium Nicodemi, which are similarly abridged (387-461). Moreover, he suggests that these may in turn depend on a complete Provençal verse translation of the apocryphon (1-84; notes on 481-515). Whatever the case, there is absolutely no doubt that the ultimate source for all these vernacular renderings is Evangelium B.

The cluster of texts published by Suchier — Provençal, Catalan, and Italian — illustrates the dynamic and productive quality of the Evangelium Nicodemi. Neither geography nor language could constrain it, nor could its status as a quasi-sacred text prevent it from being altered in its passage from one language to another. The Italian translation differs from the B text, and, in some cases, from its Provençal and Catalan counterparts in a couple of interesting ways.

The Archangel Gabriel replaces Michael as the “keeper of paradise” in the episode (Chapter 20 in the B text) in which Adam sends his son Seth to ask for “oil of mercy” to anoint his sick body. This seems an odd substitution. Michael’s role in casting out the great dragon, “he whom we call the devil or Satan,” from heaven (Apoc. 12.7-9) would seem to make him a more appropriate choice. Indeed, in the A text Michael is given an even more prominent role: in addition to this episode (Chapter 19.1), he also appears in several other scenes (25.1; 27.1-2; 28.3-4, etc.). Perhaps the change was suggested by the prophetic nature of the angelic words spoken to Seth. I quote from the Italian translation: “L’angiolo Gabriello allora mi disse: Set, tu adomandi olio di misericordia per ugniere tuo padre, e ancora non è tenpo, ma verrà tenpo ch’egli n’arà” (20.3). It is worth noting that of the texts published by Suchier, the Italian is the only one which puts forward Gabriel. The Provençal verse translation remains completely faithful to the B text and retains Michael. In the shorter Provençal and Catalan prose versions, the heavenly figure is unnamed, referred to simply as “l’angel” or “l’angel Cherubin.”

The second deviation is even more intriguing, and may actually be an attempt to make the work conform more closely to the canonical account. It deals with the two non-Biblical figures who are freed from hell by Christ along with the patriarchs and who are entrusted with the important task of bearing witness to the event. Each writes his own account, independent of the other. The two stories match perfectly. Their textual adventure is not quite as seamless.

In the Greek Descensus, these two figures are not named; they are simply identified as the sons of Simeon. The Simeon in question is the one in Luke 2.25-35, who received the child Jesus in his arms in the temple. There is no indication in this passage or elsewhere that he had sons. Elements of the Luke episode and Simeon himself are also recalled in the last chapter of all the various versions of the Gesta Pilati. In the Latin A text of the Descensus the sons of Simeon are
given the names of Karinus and Leucius. In the B text they are also called Karinus and Leucius, but are no longer linked to Simeon, who is not mentioned. Commentators are uncertain about the origin of these names, but usually conclude that they "are somehow connected with Leukios Charinos, the Gnostic author of the Acts of John" (Scheidweiler 476; cf. James 95 and Erbeta 237).

In our Italian text, Karinus and Leucius became "Allexandro e Ruffo, figliuoli di Simone Cireneo" (17.1). The Simeon of Luke 2.25-35 is still present in Chapter 16.1 (i.e. the last chapter of the Gesta), but in the very next chapter (the first of the Descensus) his place is usurped by Simon of Cyrene, the man who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross, according to several Gospel passages (Luke 23.26, Matthew 27.32, and Mark 15.21). In the passage from Mark, he is identified as "the father of Alexander and Rufus." Simon of Cyrene and his sons do not normally figure as characters in the Latin versions of the apocryphon, but they do make a brief appearance in the expanded Chapter 10 of the Greek B recension of the Gesta Pilati. It is interesting to note that the Greek Descensus always follows this version of the Gesta, which is rather late, no manuscript containing it being older than the fifteenth century (Tischendorf LXXIII). Chapter 10 deals with Christ's crucifixion and death, and in the longer Greek version, Mark 15-21 is simply appropriated, without altering in any way the roles of the characters. How Alexander and Rufus came to supplant Karinus and Leucius in our Italian text is an interesting question but one which is impossible to answer definitively on the basis of the evidence at hand. On the other hand, their presence does seem to confirm the close affiliation between our Italian text and the abridged prose Provençal and Catalan versions of the apocryphon in which Alexander and Rufus also prevail. In this case too the Provençal verse translation remains faithful to the Latin B text. I have lingered over these two peculiar details because traces of them can be seen in some Italian adaptations of the work, which I shall discuss in a moment.

The diffusion of these translations remains to be determined, but one thing is certain: the Evangelium, whether in Latin or in Italian, left its mark on a wide range of Italian texts from laude and sacre rappresentazioni to religious cantari and sermons. To be sure, this mark is sometimes faint, discernible only through the filter of a number of other texts: it is not always possible in brief allusions to an Evangelium theme to cite the apocryphon as the immediate or sole source. Much of the Gesta Pilati is a reworking of materials in the canonical gospels. As for the Descensus Christi ad inferos, although it was the most influential source for the harrowing theme, there were other accounts, such as the pseudo-Augustine sermon "De pascha II," which also circulated freely in the Middle Ages. Moreover, in the early thirteenth century, Vincent of Beauvais summarized the Evangelium in his widely read Speculum historiale (Book 7, Chapters 40-63). Later in that century, Jacobus de Voragine epitomizes the apocryphon in his equally successful Legenda aurea (Chapter 54). Some of the Evangelium's content also found its way in a less systematic fashion into the extremely popular
early fourteenth century Meditationes Vitae Christi (esp. Chapters 80-89), once attributed to Saint Bonaventure. In this light, it is obvious that unless there is a specific verbal echo, philologically demonstrable, or unless the structural imprint of the apocryphon is sufficiently clear, many passages from medieval Italian texts evoking characters, images, or scenes from the Evangelium cannot definitively be attributed to it. What can be said of these passages with a degree of certainty is that their authors were probably familiar with a constellation of texts which, in addition to the Evangelium, included the Legenda aurea and later the pseudo-Bonaventurian Meditationes vitae Christi. The latter work was especially influential: quickly translated into Italian, it circulated widely. Indeed, one of the oldest manuscripts (second half of the fourteenth century) containing the Italian Meditationes, also includes, immediately following, an Italian version of the Evangelium Nicodemi (Florence, Biblioteca Ricardiana, Ms. 1286; see Morpurgo 345-46; Levasti 997-99). With this caveat in mind, let us now turn to some medieval Italian texts which were, directly or indirectly, touched by the Evangelium.

As I have already indicated, the Gesta Pilati retells, and in some cases expands, several episodes in the canonical gospels dealing with the trial, passion, and resurrection of Christ. The most important of the amplified episodes is that of Joseph of Arimathea, whose story comes to the fore in the last chapters of the Gesta. But there are other such altered episodes which also proved to be extremely popular. Among them are the episode of the two thieves (10.1-2; cf. Matt. 27.38, Mark 15.27, but especially Luke 23.32-44) and that of the soldier who pierces Christ’s side with a spear (16.4; cf. John 19.34). In both these cases the Gesta’s major elaboration consists in naming the characters, who are left anonymous in the canonical gospels. Jacobus de Voragine specifically notes this fact with reference to the two thieves: “. . . unus conversus, scilicet Dismas, qui erat a dextris, sicut dicitur in evangelio Nicodemi, et alius damnatus, scilicet Gesmas, qui erat a sinistris” (Legenda aurea, Chapter 53).

The soldier who wounds Christ on the cross seems also to have been identified for the first time in the Gesta. He is called Longinus. Erbetta notes “Il nome Longino, noto pure dalla lettera di Pilato a Erode, deriva forse dall’assenzanza con il greco lonché = lancia” (255, n. 76). The episode is recalled fleetingly in the last chapter of the Gesta (16.4): “et lancea latus eius perforavit Longinus miles,” but in some Latin manuscripts it is also referred to earlier, in Chapter 10.1: “Accipiens autem Longinus miles lanceam aperuit latus eius, et continuo exivit sanguis et aqua” (Tischendorf 362). However, Longinus’ adventures do not end here. Apparently he repented of his deed, converted to Christianity, and died a saint. His full story is told by Jacobus de Voragine in the Legenda aurea (Chapter 47; cf. Vincent of Beauvais, Speculum historiale, Book 7, Chapter 47). A capsule version of it also appears in the Meditationes vitae Christi: “Unus autem, Longinus nomine, tunc impius et superbus, sed post conversus, et martyr et sanctus, porrigens lanceam de longe, eorum preces et rogamina contemnens, latus
Domini Jesu dextrum vulnere grandi aperuit, et exivit sanguis et aqua” (Chapter 80).

References to Longinus abound in medieval Italian literature, in both religious and non-religious texts. For example, he manages to make his way into such diverse texts as a canzone by the Florentine poet Pacino Angiolieri lamenting the death of his beloved (Contini 389-92), an entertaining parody of the passion by Ruggieri Apugliese in which he represents himself as being falsely accused and crucified by the Sienese ecclesiastical authorities (Contini 402-06), and Uguccioni da Lodi’s Il Libro (vv. 219-21), a long didactic poem about sin, punishment, and repentance (Contini 597-624). His cruel act is also recalled in the Passione lombarda (vv. 164-65), a significant early lauda, a genre of religious poetry which I shall return to in a moment (Varanini, Laude dugentesche 107-20). I have purposely limited myself to thirteenth century texts. Longinus’ presence in subsequent centuries is so pervasive, especially in laude, that to track him further would be pointless. Just one more example, this one from a fourteenth century collection of laude from Cortona, a small city in Umbria which produced a large number of them, including some of the earliest examples of the genre. There are no traces of the Evangelium in the earliest of these, contained in a thirteenth century manuscript, but several in the later collection mentioned above (Ceruti Burgio). The Longinus episode is evoked in five separate laude (3.99-102; 15.23; 26.23-26; 31.11-14; 32.59-62), and on two occasions his name is actually mentioned (31.11; 32.59). The difference here is that the Meditations has come into play as a subtext and references to Longinus are filtered through it. This is especially obvious in Lauda 32: “Un fel Giudeo, che Longino è chiamato . . .” (cf. Meditations 80). But the Gesta Pilati continues to lurk in the background, and is recalled in at least one other lauda. Verse 60 of Lauda 28, “ed è un vero maguo (mago) et rio,” echoes several passages in the Gesta Pilati (1.1; 2.1; 2.5) where the Jews accuse Christ of being a sorcerer, a magus (Ceruti Burgio). One lauda — number 4 — also alludes to the harrowing of hell: “gyitto n’è em Lenbo a ffare aquisto, / a i sancti padri trar di presgione” (vv. 9-10). Although the reference is too general to indicate the Descensus Christi ad inferos as the specific source, it seems very likely that the author or authors of these laude from Cortona were familiar with both parts of the Evangelium Nicodemi. The same may be said of Uguccioni da Lodi and the author of the Passione lombarda.

In Il Libro, Uguccioni da Lodi briefly evokes Christ’s descent into hell (vv. 227-29) immediately after his reference to the Longinus episode (vv. 219-21). Despite its name, the Passione lombarda narrates all the major events of Christ’s life from the annunciation to the resurrection, including, in two short verses, His harrowing of hell: “per nu descende Cristo a l’inferno, / per trar nui de tenebria” (vv. 177-78). As in the laude cortonesi and Il Libro, there is not enough here to claim the Descensus as the unique point of reference. Indeed, in this particular case we have little more than the clause from the Apostles’ Creed “descendit ad inferos.” On the other hand, there is absolutely no doubt of the provenance of a
harrowing passage in another significant lauda from the Duecento, this one from the Abruzzi region in south central Italy. This archaic lauda, usually called the Lamentatio beate Marie de filio, is composed of thirty mono-rhythmic quatrains, six of which are dedicated to the harrowing of hell (Ugolini 8-50). The sequence focuses on the binding of Satan and the release of the patriarchs from hell, in other words, the material of Chapters 24 and 25 of Descensus B, which the author of this important lauda must have had before his eyes:

Poy ke na croce Christo spirao,
Bivaçamente a lu fernu annao.
Da poy ke gio, dentro n’entrao
Et lu Malignu sci ’ncatenao.

Da poy ke il’ abe strictu legatu,
E mmultu forte l’ay menacçatu:
“Jammay non fay lo teu usatu!
Ore te sta co- sci ’ncatenatu.”

Lu gran Siniore sci prese a ffare:
Tuctu lu fernu prese a ccercare,
Li soy fedili prese a ciamare
E ttucti quanti li fa ’dunare.

Gionne ad Adam k’ ipsu creao;
Levase Adam, sci favellao:
“Ecco le mani ke mme plasmaru,
Lu gran Siniore ke mme creao.”

Ore favella l’altu Siniore
A ttuti sancti con grande amore:
“Pro vuy sostinni la passione:
Venite a ’rrcepere le gran corone.”

En paradisu ne l’ay menati
E ttuti quanti l’ay coronati:
“Co lo meu sangue vv’aioc accattati;
Ore vedete k’ i’ vv’aioc amati.”

(vv. 65-88)

Verse 79 (“Ecco le mani ke mme plasmaru”) translates exactly Adam’s words to Christ in chapter 25 of Descensus B (“Ecce manus quae plasmaverunt me”). According to Ugolini, this lauda is the most ancient example of the “literary type” of the “Pianto per la passione di Cristo” (10), which flourished in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Poems belonging to this well-defined group, like the noted Il Pianto delle Marie (vv. 243-47) [Ugolini 116-40], often call up
the harrowing, but never as explicitly as their prototype. In the universally recognized masterpiece of the type, Jacopone da Todi’s *Donna de Paradiso* (Mancini 201-06), also known as *Il Pianto della Madonna*, there is no mention of it. Indeed, I could detect no clear reference to the *Evangelium Nicodemi* in any of Jacopone’s poems.

The most famous composer of *laude* seems to have shunned our apocryphon, but other less celebrated, mostly anonymous writers of *laude* used it as one of their favourite source books. The religious poems known as *laude* could take either a dramatic or non-dramatic form, and were sung by lay confraternities in cities throughout Italy, starting in the second half of the thirteenth century. Most of the *laude* that I have referred to so far are of the non-dramatic type, often referred to as “lyrical” *laude*, even though they could be quite long and narrative in character, like the *Passione lombarda* and the *Lamentatio abruzzese*. The lyrical type developed earlier and eventually adopted the metrical scheme of the profane love ballad. However, the imprint of the apocryphon can best be seen in the *laude* of the dramatic sort. Although there is some controversy concerning the lyrical type, there is general agreement that the dramatic kind first flourished among the *Disciplinati* of Perugia (Baldelli), a lay religious movement which traces its beginnings to the great spiritual upheaval of 1260 led by Raniero Fasani. The movement quickly spread outside of Perugia into the rest of Umbria, and it was not long before confraternities of *Disciplinati* were established in cities throughout central and northern Italy. The *Disciplinati* combined self-flagellation with the singing of *laude*. In Perugia, probably under the influence of the Dominicans, the singing of *laude* was organized around the liturgical calendar, and soon became an integral part of their “liturgy” as De Bartholomaeis explains:

*Nel margine della liturgia ufficiale, venne a formarsi una liturgia nuova, con un ceri-moniale suo proprio, con una sua propria melodia; la quale, in origine, era stata la melodia popolare della canzone da ballo, ora rielaborata da’ nuovi contrappuntisti che i Disciplinati assoldarono. (Origini 220)*

Some days were dedicated to the singing of lyrical *laude*, others to dramatic ones, also referred to as *devozioni*. Initially, the *laude*, whether lyrical or dramatic, were simply sung in the oratory. Later dramatic representations of the passion and other sacred episodes were performed for the people in church and eventually in public squares. The dramatic form seems to have come into its own as a genre during the first half of the fourteenth century (Terruggia).

The *laude* of the *Disciplinati* of Perugia are preserved in two fourteenth century collections, discovered by Monaci in the 1870’s. They both contain about 160 *laude*, half of which are of the dramatic variety. There is no critical edition of the *laudario perugino*. However, a good selection of Perugian dramatic *laude* can be found in volume one of Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis’ *Laude drammatiche e rappresentazioni sacre*, still the most extensive anthology of early Italian drama. In De Bartholomaeis’ collection there are several *devozioni* which clearly
draw on the *Evangelium Nicodemi*. For the Perugian passion *lauda* De Bartholomaeis (*Laude* 1: 232-43) cites the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (Chapters 75-83) as the sole source (cf. Toschi 1: 153-70), but the *Gesta Pilati* seems also to be present, even if somewhat further removed. The fact that the very next *lauda*, the one for Holy Saturday, is fashioned on the *Descensus* supports this claim. I shall deal with this important *lauda* in a moment. First, I would like to discuss briefly another *lauda* also drawn from the *Descensus*. It is the short *devozione* — 56 verses in all — for the third Sunday of Advent (*De Bartholomaeis*, *Laude* 1: 53-55). Set in Limbo, it recreates the patriarchs’ sense of expectation before the arrival of Christ. The *lauda* begins with David’s prophecy in Chapter 21 of the A text (22 in the B):

\begin{verbatim}
Presso è l’avenimento
de quil signore de cuie io profetaie:
trarrane d’este guaie
e serim fuor de tanta tenebria.
\end{verbatim}

(vv. 1-4)

and ends with Adam and Eve announcing their imminent release from hell and ascent into paradise:

\begin{verbatim}
Noie che l’antico pasto
mangiammo prima, prendiamo conforto,
puoia che sem presso al porto
d’andare en Cielo a quilla gerargia.
\end{verbatim}

(vv. 53-56)

In between Isaías, Geremia and Abel have speaking parts. Of these, Abel appears in neither the A nor the B text, and Eve is present only in the B text, but there is no doubt that the *lauda* takes its point of departure from the *Descensus*. However, it develops no further than the prophet’s talk of redemption. The event — Christ’s harrowing of hell — alluded to in the conversation of the patriarchs never takes place in this *lauda*. To be sure, the harrowing motif is evoked in another Perugian *lauda* from the Advent period, not included in De Bartholomaeis’ collection. It is published by Giuseppe Galli in *Laude inedite dei Disciplinati umbri* (105-07). It is a curious *lauda*, also quite short (78 verses). The sinners of hell plead with Christ to have compassion on them. However, cross in hand, He rebuffs them. Then He turns to the just and leads them out of hell:

\begin{verbatim}
Figluogle micie, meco venite
Benedecte dal mio Pate;
El regno mio possederite
Tucte quante ensiememente,
El quale a voie fo ordenato
Puoie ch’el mondo fo ’dificato.
\end{verbatim}

(vv. 73-78)
The content of these two devozioni was probably suggested by the liturgy, which, during Advent, reverberates with allusions to Descensus themes. Within the laudario perugino they anticipate the Holy Week lauda in which the material of the Descensus is given full expression.

The orthodox view, upheld by the majority of theologians, including Aquinas in the Summa Theologicae (3a, q.52, a.3), was that Christ descended into hell immediately upon His death, while His body was still suspended on the cross. There was, however, another popular tradition which maintained that Christ did not descend into hell until the night before His resurrection. This view was sustained by the many actions and words recalling the descent in the liturgy for Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. The “Elevatio crucis” ceremony celebrated before Matins on Easter Sunday often included a dramatic representation, based on the Vulgate Psalm 23, of the harrowing. I mention all of this because the Perugian harrowing lauda was in the beginning probably two separate laude (Toschi 1: 200; De Bartholomaeis, Origini 305). The first, performed on Holy Saturday, focused on the patriarchs in Limbo. The second, for Easter, represented their release from hell and the ascent into paradise where they met Enoch and Elias, and the good thief. Later, the two were combined and assigned to Holy Saturday. The resultant devozione is considered to be one of the masterpieces of early Italian drama (Bonfantini 69; Baldelli 364), and has been published several times (Galli 60-71; Toschi 1: 181-200; De Bartholomaeis, Laude 1: 242-58; Bonfantini 69-87; Faccioli 1: 90-112).

In its simplicity and linearity it does have a certain charm and power. As the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets wait in Limbo, a ray of light suddenly pierces the engulfing darkness and fills them with hope. The long-awaited Messiah has finally come to liberate them from their infernal prison:

Quisto lume mo venute
procedon da quilla fontana
che ne promise la salute
de tutta quanta gente umana;
però ciascuno aggia buon cuore
ché quisto è l’alto suo splendore.

(vv. 1-6)

Satan boasts to Hell of his previous victories over Christ (vv. 67-72) but at the same time warns Hell to prepare for a struggle against the Son of God:

Tosto t’apparecchia, Enferno,
per quillo che s’è già gloriato
ché figliuol de Dio Eterno
ed hanne el popol mio turbato,
e fese tristo molto forte
vedendo appressare la morte.

(vv. 43-48)
Recalling the wounds it suffered when Christ resurrected Lazarus from the dead (vv. 97-102), Hell at once rebuffs Satan and urges him to harness the forces of darkness in order to secure the gates against assault:

Or Satan, or te departe
tosto da la sedia mia,
e combatte con tuoie arte
ch’el re de gloria qui non sia,
ed alcuno chiude quille porte
quanto se può far forte.

(vv. 109-14)

The pace of the action quickens. Satan orders his troops of demons to station themselves for combat:

O dilette miei legione,
contraste a quisto passo;
ciascun piglie el suo cantone
chi più alto e chi più basso.

(vv. 115-18)

Tension builds quickly as the Hebrew fathers demand repeatedly that Hell open its gates, adapting the “Attolite portas” formula from Psalm 23.7 as in Descensus A 5:

Aprite tosto e non chiudete,
ché mo venire lo vedrete!

Apre, Enferno, ché se’ vinto!

(vv. 119-20; 127)

True to the script, Hell responds by reformulating the “Quis est iste rex gloriae?” passage:

Chi è l’uom cusì fervente,
qual’è re de gloria ditto?

(vv. 145-46)

At this point, an angel’s voice cries out to Hell:

O voie, principe de male,
aprile quiste vostre porte!
Comando a voie, porte eternale,
che levare siate acorte,
che quell’Alto gloria Rene
per entrare qua entro viene.

(vv. 157-62)
Then suddenly Christ, bearing the cross, arrives and smashes Hell’s gates. Stunned, Hell shrieks a series of desperate questions (cf. *Descensus A 6*):

> Chi se’ tu che me desciogie,
> quil che el mortal peccato lega?
> Chi se’ tu, ch’el Limbo spoglie,
> enverso te ciascun si prega?
> Chi se’ tu tal combattetore,
> ch’haie vento el nostro gran furore?

(vv. 205-10)

Christ overpowers Satan, binds him, and banishes him to the furthest reaches of hell:

> Satan, tu haie data nulla pena
> a l’uom molto temporale,
> legar te voie con mia catena
> che tu non faccia a lor più male!
> Enfin al novissimo dine
> per mia virtù starai cusine.

(vv. 229-34)

Then He extends His hand to the just of the Old Testament, starting with Adam, and takes them out of hell:

> E voie, sante miei, venite,
> quil ch’a mia ’magene fatte sete!

*JESUS ad sanctos:*
> Voie sarete recomparate
> per lo legno cruciato,
> ch’eravate prima dannate
> per lo legno già vetato.
> O Adam, mo pace sia
> a te colla tua compagnia!

*Iterum:*
> E voie, che foste el primo pate,
> vien de fuore emprimamente,
> e voie, figliuoglie, el seguitate;
> Abel, Abeth, buon servente,
> David, Aronne, e Moises,
> Isaià cogli altri quagiiù messe.

(vv. 251-64)
At this climactic point (v. 265) with the transition from tristitia to gaudium, the solemn passionale mode gives way to the celebratory pasquale manner (De Bartholomaeis, Origini 223-24):

Alleluià cantiamo
ché noie andiam con Cristo Salvatore!
Tutte te confessiamo
che se’ encarnato per noie Redentore;
o benegno Signore,
ché per le peccator sangue haie versato,
al mondo quisto canto
tu fa’ sentir, che tanto t’è costato.

(vv. 297-304)

The scene now shifts to paradise: Christ hands the just to the Archangel Gabriel (and not Michael as in the Descensus) to be led into “l’alto regno.” There they meet Enoch and Elias and then Dysmas, the good thief. The lauda ends with Christ announcing His imminent visit to His mother, who along with Mary Magdalene has been weeping for Him at the sepulchre. The two Perugian resurrection laude (De Bartholomaeis, Laude 1: 259-69) both begin with Mary in tears at Christ’s tomb. The second of the two ends with a reference to Christ’s triumph in Limbo (vv. 75-76).

As this brief summary indicates, this devozione closely follows Descensus A, chapters 2 to 10 (i.e. Evangelium A 18-26). It deviates from the chronology of this text on two occasions only. It does away completely with the Seth episode (chapter 3) and introduces a new scene (vv. 163-98) involving the good and bad thieves immediately before Christ’s descent into Limbo. There is no such scene in Descensus A. In Descensus B (chapter 7) the good thief precedes Christ into hell and announces His imminent arrival. However, the new scene in our lauda has little to do with the episode in Descensus B. Rather it seems to be an imaginative elaboration of Chapter 10 of the Gesta Pilati. In the lauda it is the bad thief, Gestas, identified by name, who precedes Christ into hell. Lamenting his fate, he is led by demons to Satan, who greets him ironically (“Ben venga Gestas, el mio deletto! / voie che tu gode del mio regno,” vv. 181-82). The scene shifts to Christ on the cross, who sends the good thief, Dysmas, to paradise. He is met there by the Archangel Gabriel, who admits him into the heavenly realm (“Volentier t’apro e sta’ en buon cuore,” v. 197). At the very end of the lauda (vv. 345-60) the just find the good thief in paradise and converse with him. This final sequence follows Descensus A 10 and is in the right chronological slot. Nonetheless, there seems to be considerable confusion as to how the good thief got to paradise, since in verses 289-96 he is harrowed out of hell along with the Hebrew fathers. The fusion of two separate laude may account for the presence in this devozione of two versions of the good thief’s assumption into heaven. Despite these anomalies, the devozione is remarkably faithful to Descensus A, which
seems to be its only source. De Bartholomaeis makes the odd suggestion that the authors of this devozione used Jacobus de Voragine’s summary in the Legenda aurea as a guide for the exclusion of episodes in their dramatization of the apocryphon (Origini 305). The only substantial portion of the Descensus that the Perugian devozione excludes is the Seth episode, which the Legenda aurea includes.

I have devoted some time to the laudario perugino because of its acknowledged position at the head of the Italian religious dramatic tradition and because of its enormous influence on the laudari of other cities. Also, as we have seen, it did much to popularize the Evangelium Nicodemi, the Descensus portion in particular. The Perugian Holy Saturday lauda became a source for subsequent harrowing laude and harrowing sequences in passion and resurrection plays. At least two other major collections of laude containing separate harrowing plays have come down to us: one from Orvieto (Tenneroni 57-60), the other from L’Aquila in the Abruzzi. In 1405 Tramo Da Lonardo put together an anthology of laude of the Disciplinati of Orvieto, referred to as ripresentationi or devotioni. The descent into hell was presented on Easter. Unfortunately, the first part of this devozione is missing, but its dependence on the Perugian lauda is obvious. For instance, at the moment of the liberation of the patriarchs from hell, the meter changes from the passionale to the pasquale mode, as it does in the Perugian lauda (De Bartholomaeis, Origini 258). The next devozione for Easter Monday on the apparition of Christ to the Virgin also resonates with echoes of the harrowing (Tenneroni 60-65; Toschi 1: 201-15). The theme was obviously an important one in Orvieto.

The laudario of the Disciplinati of San Tommaso of L’Aquila was compiled during the second half of the fifteenth century, but contains pieces which are much earlier. One of these is a harrowing lauda, “La Devotione della festa de Pasqua,” which probably dates from the end of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth (De Bartholomaeis, Teatro abruzzese 32-40). The Perugian lauda’s influence on it is less pronounced, and certainly not of a metrical order. The Disciplinati of San Tommaso did away completely with the pasquale mode. They also altered the verse form of the sestina, discarding the octosyllabic verse in favour of the hendecasyllable. These metrical changes facilitated the speaking of parts. In L’Aquila the devozione was no longer a ritual, closely tied to the liturgy, as it was in Perugia, but a spectacle, spoken more than sung, for special feast days. Consequently, the staging became more elaborate, and the performance in due course moved out of the Church and into the square.

The Disciplinati of San Tommaso’s attitude toward sources was also quite different. A comparison between the Perugian harrowing lauda and the L’Aquila devozione for Easter will bring this into focus. As I have already noted, the Perugian lauda depends almost exclusively on Descensus A, from which it rarely strays. It is a dramatic verse adaptation, sometimes almost a translation, of a single text. Moreover, the sequence of scenes, except for the spurious scene (vv. 163-68) involving the two thieves, follows exactly the narrative of Descensus A.
On the other hand, the devozione from L’Aquila is sustained by many texts, the most important of which is almost certainly an abridged Italian translation of Evangelium B, very similar to one found in the Riccardiana manuscript published by Suchier. For instance, Adam’s words in stanza 44 clearly echo the B text: “Questa è la mani del mio Criatore / che è venuto al Limbo ad liberarne!” (cf. Descensus B 9.1). Moreover, in the Easter devozione from the Abruzzi as in the Riccardiana Evangelium Karinus and Leucius become Alexander and Rufus. However, in the devozione, the role of the mute narrators of the Descensus is expanded: they become characters in the action with speaking parts.

The subject matter of the Descensus dominates the devozione (51 of 74 stanzas), but this material is framed by the last chapters (12 to 15 in particular) of the Gesta Pilati, which deals with the various other (indirect) accounts of Christ’s resurrection (that of the three rabbis from Galilee, that of the soldiers guarding the sepulchre, and that of Joseph of Arimathea). The devozione begins with the arrest and imprisonment of Joseph of Arimathea (stanzas 1-5). Then the scene shifts abruptly to the arrival of the good thief in paradise, where he is greeted by an angel (stanzas 6-9). Next we are plunged into Limbo, where, we are told by Adam, the patriarchs have been in a state of high expectation ever since John the Baptist announced to them the coming of Christ (stanzas 10-12). Several patriarchs and prophets (Isaiah, Simeon, John the Baptist, Noah, Seth, Moses, David, Aaron, and Joshua), not all of whom appear in the Descensus, step forward and recall the words with which they prophesied this event (stanzas 13-33). Next a messenger arrives and warns Satanasso of Christ’s approach (stanzas 34-36):

Quisto sci è quillo che Laçaro suscitòne:
Verrà quaggiù lo Limbo a despogliare,
Se tu no fay bona provisione;
Lu Limbo et lu Inferno fa bene inserrare;
Se non te providi, vi che tte llo dico,
Serray legato chomo sou inimicho.

(stanza 35)

The Descensus figures of Satan and Hell (Inferus) are somewhat blurred in this passage. However, it is clear that Satanasso in the devozione is Hell. The Satan of the Descensus, on the other hand, is referred to as Luciferu, but he does not speak. He is present only to be bound. Needless to say, the dispute between the two infernal princes which precedes Christ’s arrival in hell in the Descensus is absent from the devozione.

In the next scene Christ arrives and binds Lucifer (stanzas 37-42). The patriarchs are then freed, starting with Adam (stanzas 43-45). As Christ instructs an angel to take the patriarchs into heaven, Rufus moves forward and begs that he and his brother, “figlioly del devoto tuo Simone,” be released. Christ obliges and commands them to make his deed known to the world (stanzas 46-47):
Per quella carità c'abbe Simone,
Voglio che nel mondo ritornete;
Dentro nel Templo ne fayte mentione,
Ad tuto el populo parlete:
"El Limbo delly boni à spolliatu,
In eterno Lucibello à incatenatu!"

(stanza 47)

A stage direction explains that Rufus and Alexander remain in their tomb until Joseph of Arimathea is freed. This happens next (stanzas 48-50), and Rufus and Alexander go to the Hebrew authorities to tell their story (stanzas 51-54). Rufus’ account of the harrowing echoes Dante’s brief evocation of the event in *Inferno* 4 (vv. 55-63):

Trassene Adamo el primo parente,
Abraam, Aaron, David et Zaccharia,
Moyses che fó tanto hobediente,
Simone, Sette, Johanni et Jsaya;

Et Patriarcha con altri Beati
Tucti io li vidi insemi liberati.

(stanza 54)

Caiaphas and Annas accuse the two brothers of heresy and have them arrested. A series of short scenes now follows in quick succession. Caiaphas and Annas order that Joseph be brought before them to be punished, but Joseph, his house still under lock and key, has disappeared (stanzas 55-60). Some pilgrims arrive in Jerusalem, and are brought to Caiaphas and Annas to be questioned. The pilgrims, whose role recalls that of the three rabbis in *Gesta Pilati* 14, declare that Christ has risen from the dead and is now among his disciples in Galilee (stanzas 61-65). As Annas refutes their claim, the soldiers guarding Christ’s sepulchre (cf. *Gesta Pilati* 13) enter and confirm Christ’s resurrection (stanzas 66-69). On hearing this, Caiaphas and Annas decide that it would be undesirable for this news to be spread. They bribe the soldiers and the pilgrims to keep quiet (stanzas 70-72; cf. *Gesta Pilati* 13 and 14). The final two stanzas deal with the release of Rufus and Alexander from prison by an angel. Christ’s words in the last stanza (74) are identical to those He pronounced in stanza 47 after freeing the two from Limbo. This may indicate that these stanzas are misplaced in the manuscript (De Bartholomaeis, *Origini* 306), but at this point in the *devozione* the two brothers are, in fact, in prison (cf. stanza 56). Whatever the case, the action seems to be incomplete, although the *devozione* is duly concluded, as is typical in this collection, with a lyrical *lauda*. 
With reference to the play’s sources, we are far from the simple intertextuality of the Perugian lauda with its uncompromising fidelity to Descensus A. Here the scope has been widened to include the last chapters of the Gesta Pilati, but this material has been dismantled and redistributed. Large portions have been eliminated. Other texts have come into play to contaminate the primary source, which is almost certainly, as I have indicated, an abridged B text of the Evangelium Nicodemi, even though the order of the Descensus sequences sometimes suggests the A text. This is probably due to the influence of the Perugian harrowing lauda. Interestingly, however, the Perugian lauda’s presence is strongest in the good thief episode, which is out of place. In addition to Dante’s Commedia, another probable source is the Lamentatio abruzzese.

In the lyrical lauda (stanzas 75-82) that concludes the devozione, the freeing of the patriarchs from hell becomes a metaphor for the redemption:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Laudemo tucti el Criator Superno, } \\
&\text{Oggi ci liberòne dallo Inferno; } \\
&\text{In Paradiso menonci. } \\
&\text{...} \\
&\text{O summo Dio, eterno Redemptore, } \\
&\text{De questa terra caccia via lu errore! } \\
&\text{O Signor, perdonancy!}
\end{align*}
\]

(stanzas 75, 82)

Given the triumphal nature of the harrowing theme, this association was not uncommon (Monnier), but here it is expressed in rather simple terms. On the other hand, in a late fourteenth or early fifteenth century Florentine play, entitled Il contrasto di Belzabù e Satanasso, the idea takes on a theological dimension. This is a significant play from several perspectives, including the history of medieval Italian theatre, once identified exclusively with the Florentine sacra rappresentazione which flourished in the second half of the fifteenth century. Written in sestine of hendecasyllables, like the devozione from L’Aquila, it stands midway between the Perugian laude and the Florentine sacre rappresentazioni in ottava rima.

Despite its title, we are dealing essentially with a descent into hell play, drawn from Descensus B and perhaps other harrowing plays like those from Perugia and L’Aquila. What distinguishes the Florentine play is that the Descensus has come into contact with the genre of the piato or dispute, and, in particular, with Il Piatò ch’ebbe Dio col Nemico (35-48), published by Roediger along with Il contrasto di Belzabù e Satanasso (49-72) in Contrasti antichi: Cristo e Satana. Il Piatò takes its cue from the Descensus. The opening scene has Christ dying on the cross and descending into Limbo where he remains until Easter morning, 40 hours later, at which time he delivers the patriarchs out of hell (31-33). The devil (lo dimonio) is present throughout the passion monitoring events, moving back and forth from Limbo several times:
Essendo Christo crocifixo in su la croce, lo nimico ne facea grande allegressa; andando et tornando molto spesso dal limbo, vide l’alegressa de li santi: incontenente congnoue la sua confuxione. (lines 4-7)

The rest — the work is 261 lines long — consists of an animated theological discussion between God and the devil concerning the justice of the redemption. The devil argues that with original sin he has acquired legal rights over man:

Disse lo dimonio: Io prouo che l’omo de’ essere mio per legge vsata et anticata che non mi de’ mai essere tolto. (lines 22-24)

The *Descensus*, of course, does not concern itself explicitly with theological issues. It is principally a glorification of Christ, who descends into hell and defeats the forces of evil. These submit to His power; they do not argue the legality of His action (Roediger 55).

More than the content, *Il Piato* determines the shape of *Il contrasto*. The play begins with a debate between Belzabù and Satanasso, who correspond to Satan and Hell (*Inferus*) respectively in the *Descensus*. This scene is based on the episode in the *Descensus* where the two infernal princes argue about what action is to be taken in preparation for Christ’s arrival in hell. However, this episode, completely suppressed in the *devozione* from L’Aquila, is here greatly expanded and moved to a position of prominence, at the beginning of the play (stanzas 1-18). Belzabù, like *lo dimonio* in *Il Piato*, moves back and forth between Earth and Limbo, reporting on Christ’s trial, crucifixion, and death. This technique of reporting events rather than representing them is highly effective, and allows the author to contextualize quickly the situation by bringing into the picture events narrated in the *Gesta*. The next 16 stanzas (19-34) deal with the prophecies of the patriarchs, the opening of the gate, and the liberation of the just. The triumphant element is understated: there is, for instance, no binding of Belzabù. Rather the focus is on the significance of the passion. Christ’s death on the cross is seen as the ransom price to be paid for the redemption of man, who with original sin had fallen under the devil’s control:

*Io son Giesù per nome chiamato,*
*morto so’stato in sulla dura crocie*
*per riconp(e)rare d’Adamo il peccato:*
*(ché) tu-llo ingannasti, nimo fericie.*
*Ronpete le porti et gittatele via,*
*sicchè entri dentro il figliuol(o) di Maria!*

(stanza 31)

It is the so-called Latin or “juridical” theory of the redemption which is being put forward here (Aulén 81-100). In this context, it is not surprising that Adam and Eve are given more attention than in other harrowing plays:
O Adamo che da me fusti creato
et detti tì Eva per tua compagnia,
poi commettesti qvel tale peccato,
ch’io ne sono oggi morto in qvesta dia,
la vostra colpa è oggi rimessa,
orì venite alla patria promessa.

(stanza 32)

In the last part of the play (stanzas 35-50), the influence of Il Piato is strongest. Adam and Eve and the other patriarchs have been delivered (stanza 34), but Christ is detained in hell by Satanasso, who insists that a great injustice is being committed against him:

Tu-ssai ben, Yesù, ch’io guadagniai
Adamo, primo vom(o), per mio sapere.
Lasciato posseder(e) tu si me l’ài,
Sanza niuna lite o qvistione avere:
Adamo con costoro ò posseduto,
et mai a-tte non renderon(o) trebuto.

(stanza 37)

Christ refutes this claim:

Non per saper(e) gli auesti; (ma) per inganni
Adamo ed Eva, anzi gl’ingannasti;
promettendo lor ben(e) desti lor danni,
del paradiso cacciar(e gli) procurasti.
Chi vuole ragione altrui la faccia
et non riciev(e)rà cosa che (gl)i dispiaccia.

(stanza 38)

The tone of the debate soon drops: the juridical gives way to the comical. Realizing that he has no chance of prevailing, Satanasso stoops to bargain. Christ can have the souls of Limbo, but he is to keep the living: “qve(gl)i del mondo lasciami possedere” (stanza 41). The offer is promptly rejected. Satanasso now becomes more and more pathetic and ridiculous. One final, absurd, proposal: take the men but leave the women in hell (stanza 49). Christ will have none of this: “Nè femmina nè vomo aver potresti / di qvesta giente ch’aueui serrate” (stanza 50). Soon afterward, in mid-stanza, the play breaks off incomplete, but my impression is that the anonymous author had come to the end of his inspiration.

There are documents recording representations of other harrowing plays now lost. For instance, we know that a representation “di Cristo quando spogliò l’Inferno” (D’Ancona, Origini 1: 289) was performed in Rome in 1473, and that among the edifizi or stage settings that circulated in Florence during the festival
of John the Baptist there was one for Limbo (D’Ancona, Origini 1: 217-44). Another index of the harrowing’s enormous popularity was that it often made its way into passion and resurrection plays. Of course, these same plays often also echoed, directly or indirectly, the Gesta Pilati. However, as I have already noted, it is more difficult to pinpoint the Gesta’s presence in these texts, since so much of it is drawn from the canonical gospels. In this sense it is much easier to track the Descensus and the themes associated with it.

I shall now move on to some passion and resurrection plays where the harrowing of hell is either recalled or actually represented. This list is not intended to be complete (see Cioni’s bibliography); it includes only those plays which are immediately accessible to me.

In the laudari we have discussed the descent into hell was represented either on Holy Saturday (Perugia) or on Easter day (Orvieto, L’Aquila). In other words, it was associated more with the resurrection than with the passion. I am aware of only one major Good Friday devozione in which the harrowing theme is pervasive. To be sure, the descent into hell is not represented directly; rather the details of the event are recounted in the speeches of various characters. The devozione, along with one for Maundy Thursday, is contained in a Venetian manuscript from the last quarter of the fourteenth century (D’Ancona, “Le devozioni,” Origini 1: 184-207; Toschi 2: 315-67). The language is shot through with Venetian, but the two devozioni may be Umbrian in origin. The Good Friday devozione begins with the flagellation and ends with the placement of Christ’s body in the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. It also includes a moving lament of the Virgin, consoled by the Archangel Gabriel. The harrowing dominates two important scenes. In the earlier scene (vv. 201-44), two souls are resuscitated from the dead through the power of the passion. One of them addresses Christ on the cross and tells him in language reminiscent of Dante (Inf. 4.55-63) that the patriarchs anxiously await his arrival in Limbo:

Adamo primo nostro parente
Sta appareciato te aspetando;
Abel, Noè, e Abraam obediente,
Isaac e Iacob con ipso stando,
Isai, Ieremia e David fervente,
Elia e altri profete mercè chiamando,
Et Moises legistro con lo vostro precursore
Stano aspectando a vui, dolce Signore.

(vv. 233-40)

The other scene is more elaborate (vv. 362-428). As Christ is about to expire, Satanas (lo Demonio) arrives and places himself on the right arm of the cross. He has come for Christ’s soul, but first attempts to bargain with his foe (vv. 387-88). Christ rejects the proposal, and an animated debate ensues between the two, dur-
ing which the main elements of the harrowing (the storming of the gates, the binding of Satan, and the liberation of the just) are summarized (vv. 389-428).

In the course of the fifteenth century the ritual of performing devozioni throughout the liturgical year was gradually abandoned. Confraternities concentrated their efforts on a few major productions, at least one of which inevitably focused on the dramatic events of Easter week. This gave rise to the great Italian passion plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, from the Abruzzi, Rome, and Florence. Indeed, according to the statutes of the Confraternity of the Gonfalone, one of its principal functions was to “represent the passion of Christ” (De Bartholomaeis, Origini 365). Founded in 1486, the Arciconfraternita del Gonfalone combined several Roman associations of Disciplinati. In addition to the passion play elaborately staged at the Colosseum on Good Friday, the Roman Confraternity put on a resurrection play at Saint John Lateran or Saint Peter’s. Later, in the sixteenth century, the resurrection play too was staged at the Colosseum. These plays usually compressed and combined several existing shorter dramas treating episodes leading up to and following the passion. By far the most famous of the Italian passion plays was La passione del Colosseo. In its early versions this play contained a scene set in Limbo, but this episode was excised in later versions. It does not appear, for instance, in the version in octaves which bears the names of Giuliano Dati and others. First printed in 1496, this version was republished several times during the sixteenth century (Cruciani 263-70; Amati). Unfortunately, the Limbo scene is also missing from the archaic version in sestine, published by De Bartholomaeis (Laude 2: 154-83). However, here its absence is due simply to the fact that the only surviving copy of an early popular edition of the play used by De Bartholomaeis is mutilated.

The Dati version of La passione del Colosseo is 179 stanzas; the Abruzzese passione is over 300 stanzas. The longest of the Italian passion plays at 600 octaves is a highly derivative Florentine play contained in a late fifteenth century compilation (De Bartholomaeis, Origini 404-08). This passion play should not be confused with the more modest (85 stanzas) La rappresentazione della cena e passione by Castellano Castellani, which has been published several times (Banfi 325-72). These plays are huge if compared with the devozioni of the fourteenth century, which averaged 300 to 400 verses, but they are insignificant if measured against La passione di Revello, which stands in a category by itself (Cornaglotti). It is as close as Italy comes to the massive French mystery plays. Presented over a three-day period in 1490, the Revello passion spans some 13,000 verses. Despite its name, the play covers the whole history of man’s redemption through to the resurrection. A certain Fra Simone seems to have been entrusted with the drafting of the text. Well-versed in theology if not in poetry, Fra Simone taps a large number of sources to realize his vision (Cornaglotti xxxiv-xlvii). One of these is the Evangelium Nicodemi. The Gesta Pilati is extensively used in Day Two from verse 1282 on, and a condensed Descensus A, complete with a scene in paradise with Enoch and Elias, is reenacted on Day Three (vv. 1936-2051)
near the end of the play, i.e. within the context of the resurrection. The position of the harrowing sequence in *La Passione di Revello* underscores the fact that the descent into hell is more easily absorbed into resurrection than passion plays.

There is a short but interesting harrowing sequence (vv. 781-834) in the Roman resurrection play (*De Bartholomaeis, Laude 2*: 183-96). It begins with the holy fathers in Limbo singing a song in praise of God. As soon as their song ends Christ appears and knocks on the infernal gates. Satan arrogantly rebukes Him, demanding to know who it is that has come to disturb his realm. Christ exclaims:

Che tardi tu, Satan perché non apri
A me che voglio il Limbo dispogliato?

(vv. 799-800)

Satan remains defiant. At this point the apocryphon is pushed to the side and the words of Psalm 23.9-10 in Latin are called forth and dramatized:

*CRISTO batte un'altra volta e dice:*

Attollite portas, Principes, vestras, et elevamini, portae aeternales,
et introibit Rex gloriae.

*SATAN risponde:*

Quis est iste Rex gloriae?

*CRISTO risponde:*

Dominus fortis est in praelio, ipse est Rex gloriae!

(vv. 803-05)

Then quickly Christ forces the gates open, chains Satan, and frees the holy fathers. “Vien fuora” He cries repeatedly as He leads them out of hell. Freed from the abyss, the holy fathers kneel and sing “Adoramus te.” The *Festum Resurrectionis* (*De Bartholomaeis, Laude 2*: 297-302), a short (120 verses in all) fifteenth century resurrection play from Pordenone in the Veneto region, similarly appropriates Psalm 23. The action in the 13 verse harrowing sequence with which the play begins is reduced to its bare essentials. It takes its cue from Chapter 2 of *Descensus* A. A light pierces the engulfing darkness of Limbo, and Adam exclaims:

Quest’è la luce del Segnore mio,
quest’è lo lume del Figliuol de Dio!
Noi te avemo pur chiamato tanto,
che hai udito il nostro amaro pianto.
O Redentore de l’umana carne,
tu se’ venuto pur a liberarne.

(vv. 1-6)

Isaiah relates his prophecy concerning this light by quoting Isaiah 9.2. Here Italian gives way to Latin, preparing the way for the dramatic exchange between Christ
The harrowing episode in an anonymous fifteenth century Florentine resurrection play (Banfi 373-422) is almost as long as the whole of the *Festum Resurrectionis*. It occupies 15 of 106 octaves (stanzas 10 to 24). The episodic structure of this *sacra rappresentazione* indicates that it is a reworking of several shorter plays or *laude*. The harrowing episode is clearly indebted to the Perugian Holy Saturday *devozione* or one very similar to it. The original model — *Descensus A* — is further in the background. The anonymous author may not even have known the apocryphon directly. The narrative has been shortened, but some new details have been added for dramatic effect. Christ carrying a banner figuring the cross and flanked by two angels appears suddenly, and announces his intention to free the souls of Limbo. Then he descends into hell and ties Satanasso. Unlike the Roman Satan, the Florentine Satanasso is not defiant. He acknowledges the power of Christ and acquiesces:

\[\text{Dapoi che tanto onore t'è concesso,} \]
\[\text{per forza tremo, e te Signor confesso.} \]

(stanza 14)

*He seems* to be a conflation of the figures of Satan and Inferus in the *Descensus*. Christ calls the patriarchs to Him and leads them to freedom.

\[\text{Adam, vien fuor del limbo e di prigione,} \]
\[\text{e tu, Abram, principal patriarca,} \]
\[\text{ancor tu Josùè, cor di leone,} \]
\[\text{e tu, Noè, che fabricasti l'arca.} \]
\[\text{Esca qua fuor il forte Gedeone,} \]
\[\text{e David, re de' profeti, monarca.} \]
\[\text{E tutti gli altri con gran festa e riso} \]
\[\text{venitene al terrestre paradiso.} \]

(stanza 15)

Adam thanks Him on behalf of them all. Next several of the patriarchs step forward and speak. Each bears in hand an object which identifies him. Noah, for example, carries an ark. Turning to the others he says:

\[\text{Questo legno de l'arca sublimato} \]
\[\text{dimostra nostra grande esaltazione.} \]

(stanza 17)

David, holding a psalter, says:

\[\text{Questo saltér letifica il cor mio;} \]
\[\text{sonando io canterò le laude a Dio.} \]

(stanza 17)
And then begins to sing “Misericordias domini in eternum cantabo.” The others join in as they proceed to the Earthly Paradise. A stage direction tells us that it is located on top of a mountain and is guarded by an angel with sword in hand. This details betrays the influence of Dante, visible elsewhere in the play. There they meet the good thief and then Enoch and Elias. Like the Umbrian lauda the episode ends with Christ announcing His intention to visit and console His mother.

Restate ch’i’ vo’ prima visitare
mia madre santa, e quella consolare.

(stanza 24)

There is no doubt that the Evangelium Nicodemi’s impact — and that of the Descensus in particular — was greatest in drama, but the work, as I have already indicated, also left its mark on other areas of medieval Italian literature. Federico Frezzi, for example, dedicates a chapter to “Limbo and original sin” with a harrowing sequence in Il Quadrirregio 2.4, an uninspired imitation of Dante’s Commedia. However, with the exception of Dante, whom I shall discuss in a moment, the most ambitious and complex adaptation of the Descensus belongs to the fourteenth century Sienese poet, Niccolò Ciccheria. The first part or cantare (85 octaves) of his long narrative poem entitled La Risurrezione is an imaginative amplification of Descensus A, which he probably knew in an Italian translation. The second part, which deals more specifically with the events of the resurrection proper, adapts portions of the Gesta Pilati — Chapter 12 (stanzas 3-15) and Chapter 15 (stanzas 120-26) in particular — but its major sources are the canonical gospels and the ubiquitous Meditationes. La Risurrezione was written sometime after 1364, the date of composition of La Passione, Ciccheria’s other, more fortunate narrative poem in ottava rima. It too taps the Gesta Pilati (see stanza 107, for instance), but not as extensively or as obviously. La Passione’s enormous popularity during the Renaissance was due, in part, to the fact that it was attributed during this period to either Petrarch or Boccaccio. Some work has been done on Ciccheria’s sources, in particular by Varanini (542-51) in his edition of La Passione and La Risurrezione (Cantari religiosi 307-447), but the Sienese poet’s complex appropriations from the Evangelium Nicodemi need to be investigated further.

Themes from the Evangelium, especially the harrowing, were also summoned up in sermons. Franco Sacchetti, for instance, better known to literary historians for his Trecentonovelle, dedicates the sermon for Holy Saturday to the descent into hell in his Sermoni evangelici (Number 46). The presence of the apocryphon is even more frequent in what De Bartholomaeis (Origini 325-35) aptly calls “sermoni semidrammatici.” In this genre, which evolved in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the preacher punctuated his sermon with dramatic laude and at times with other forms of poetry. This kind of preaching was especially used by the Franciscans in the remote mountainous regions of the Abruzzi. Alessandro de Ritiis was a proficient practitioner of the genre, as the selection from his
Sermonale in the appendix to De Bartholomaeis’ Il teatro abruzzese del medio evo (317-28) illustrates. His sermons are punctuated by dramatic laude and dramatizations of passages from Cicerchia’s poems, which de Ritiis believed to be by Petrarch. However, this practice is by no means limited to the Abruzzi. The Passione di Revello incorporates sermons by Fra Simone. Perhaps the best example of this procedure from our perspective is the Venetian devozione for Good Friday, in which there are several indications in the text that the action is suspended to give way to preaching: “Dito questo, lo Predicatore predica.” This particular interruption comes in the midst of the animated debate between Christ and Satanas which I referred to earlier.

There is no doubt that the Evangelium Nicodemi was a very dynamic and productive text in the Italy of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Both the A and the B text were translated several times, it would appear. Moreover, it was repeatedly adapted, especially in dramatic form. Sometimes great care was taken not to deviate from the original too much; at other times, it was elaborately reworked, bringing other sources into play or redefining the material in relation to another genre. It was amplified, and it was compressed to be inserted into a longer work. But no one used the material more imaginatively and boldly than Dante.

Dante knew the content of the Evangelium Nicodemi from various sources. He had probably read Vincent of Beauvais and Jacobus de Voragine’s summaries of the work, and was certainly familiar with theological accounts of the descent into hell like that of Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae (3a, q.52, a.3). He may also have come into contact with a version of the original text. Several details point in this direction. For instance, in Limbo he describes Christ at the harrowing as “un possente, / con segno di vittoria coronato” (Inf. 4.53-54). The phrase “segno di vittoria” seems to echo “signum victoriae,” used in both Descensus A (8.1) and Descensus B (10.1) to refer to Christ’s cross. The souls of Limbo plead with Christ to leave it in hell as a sign of his victory over the forces of evil and death. The reference to the blessed as “bianche stole” in Paradiso 30.129 recalls two passages in the Apocalypse in which St. John speaks of the “white garments” of the elect (Apoc. 3.5 and 7.13; cf. Par. 25.95), but the metaphor may also have been suggested by the “stolas albas” of Descensus A 11.1, i.e. the white robes that the souls harrowed by Christ from hell receive after being baptized in the River Jordan. In some versions of Descensus A 7.1 Beelzebub is described as having three heads (Tischendorf 400; Moraldi 633). Dante’s Lucifer, whom he also calls Beelzebub in Inferno 34.127 is, of course, tri-headed. More generally, Dante’s representation of Lucifer as a grotesque, ice-bound creature banished to the bottom of hell’s pit may have been influenced, in part, by the Satan of the Descensus who after his defeat is chained and thrust into the abyss.

Traces of the Gesta Pilati are more difficult to discover. However, I would like to propose that the mysterious “colui / che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto” (Inf. 3.59-60), usually identified as Celestine V by the commentators (Mazzoni 390-415), may be a reference to Pilate and his vile act of washing his hands of
Christ’s fate. To be sure, Pilate’s candidature has been put forward before (see Mazzoni again for a summary of the criticism), but not on the grounds that at this point in the poem Dante’s major subtext, along with *Aeneid* 6, is the *Evangelium Nicodemi*. In other words, the intertextual context of *Inferno* 3 and 4 strongly suggests Pilate as the unnamed soul who committed the “great refusal.” The intertextual link between the *Commedia* and the apocryphon functions not only at the level of details, but also in a wider structural sense. I have argued elsewhere (“Dottrina e allegoria”) that Dante’s two major narrative models in the *Inferno* are Book 6 of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the *Descensus Christi ad inferos*. The canonical gospels offered no clear narrative pattern for him to follow in constructing his *poema sacro*. The *Descensus* was the closest thing to a Christian narrative epic that Dante could find. Thus Dante appropriated the harrowing story, with its powerful dramatic imagery, artfully combined it with his classical narrative model, and generally used it to pattern his own descent into hell. He also turned to it to define structurally three of his most important episodes in the first *cantica*.

The structure of Dante’s *Commedia* could not, of course, accommodate a direct representation of the harrowing. Nevertheless, the most logical place to stage the descent into hell, using all the stock images available in the *Descensus* and other traditional accounts, would be *Inferno* 4. Dante’s treatment of Limbo, however, is unique. Taken as a whole, it departs completely from the preceding tradition, both theological and poetic. By creating the *nobile castello*, which contains the virtuous pagans, Dante breaks with the concept of Limbo that had evolved in the West from the New Testament through St. Augustine and Gregory the Great to St. Thomas. Dante also overturns the usual poetic representation of Limbo by shifting the emphasis from the harrowing of hell to the *nobile castello*.

In his representation of Limbo Dante is interested in neither the *limbus puero-rum* nor the *limbus patrum* and the harrowing of hell. He is concerned rather with the *limbus paganorum integrorum* or the *nobile castello* which he created to dramatize the tragic consequences of the fall in that unredeemed period of time between Adam and Christ. Dante’s stark evocation of the harrowing in *Inferno* 4 is stripped of the bold agonistic imagery which vivifies traditional representations:

> quando ci vidi venire un possente,  
> con segno di vittoria coronato.  
> Trassei l’ombra del primo parente,  
> d’Abèl suo figlio e quella di Noè,  
> di Moisè legista e ubidente;  
> Abra'am patriarca e Davide re,  
> Israèl con lo padre e co' suoi nati  
> e con Rachele, per cui tanto fé,  
> e altri molti, e feceli beati.  
> E vo' che sappi che, dinanzi ad essi,  
> spiriti umani non eran salvati.”

(vv. 52-63)
The harrowing is no longer the focal point of Dante’s Limbo. Its primary function is to set in dramatic relief the tragedy of the virtuous pagans. In its new context the harrowing announces not so much victory as defeat, for in his representation of Limbo Dante transfers the poetic axis from those whom Christ released from the prison of hell to those who were left behind. By shifting the focus from comedy to tragedy, he succeeds in creating in his Limbo one of the most gripping and poignant episodes in the entire Commedia.

The poetic power of Dante’s Limbo lies precisely in the unexpected juxtaposition of two images — the harrowing of hell and the nobile castello — one an image of release and fulfillment, the other of confinement and melancholy, one of comedy and the other of tragedy. In order to emphasize the tragedy of unredeemed time, Dante deliberately dramatizes it in a context traditionally used by poets and theologians alike to represent the “comic” turning-point in history. Dante’s Limbo is a place not of jubilation but of sadness and the melancholy which results from the knowledge that one can never attain spiritual fulfillment: “sanzia speme vivemo in disio” (Inf. 4.42). In short, in Inferno 4 Dante downplays the imagery connected with the descent into hell because he wants to depict not the fulness of time — plenitudo temporis — but the emptiness of time (Iannucci, “Limbo”).

Dante is too alert to the dramatic possibilities of the imagery traditionally associated with the harrowing of hell to abandon it altogether. Instead he reworks it, blending Christian elements with pagan ones, and presents them in a new setting. Dante gives the revitalized imagery full play in the terrifying drama which takes place in front of the walls of the City of Dis (Inf. 8.67-9.105). Demons try to prevent Dante’s and Virgil’s entry into the city, and are supported by the three Furies and indeed the Medusa herself, who lurks menacingly in the background. Virgil, i.e., Reason, is unable to overcome the forces of evil unaided. But soon a divine being, an obvious analogue of Christ, descends from heaven to help them. He puts the devils and the Furies to flight, and then forces open the gate of the city (Inf. 9.88-90). The messo compares his mission to that of Hercules, who overpowered Cerberus when he rescued Theseus from Hades (Inf. 9.91-99). But obviously the pagan archetype is fused with the Christian one, for the messo’s action also recalls that of Christ, who 1266 years earlier had unlocked that “less secret door” at the mouth of hell’s pit:

Questa lor tracotanza non è nova;  
ché già l’usaro a men segreta porta,  
là qual sanza serrame ancor si trova.  
Sovr’ essa vedestù la scritta morta.  

(Inf. 8.124-27)

The whole episode is an original and powerful stylistic reworking of the harrowing of hell, governed by the laws of Dante’s cultural syncretism. Nonetheless,
the inner meaning of the episode remains the same as that of the harrowing. This adaptation of the descent, like the traditional version, celebrates the victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil, and man’s release from the slavery of sin. Here it is Dante, and hence everyman, who is “harrowed” from hell. Actually, the divine messenger intervenes to make it possible for the pilgrim to descend into lower hell, into the mosqued City of Dis, as he must do if he is to ascend Mount Purgatory and rise into Paradise (Iannucci, “Dottrina e allegoria”).

The little sacra rappresentazione before the City of Dis illustrates how Dante injects new life into the familiar story simply by recasting it and presenting it in a new and unexpected context. In Inferno 2 Dante taps the motif if not the imagery of the harrowing in a more subtle manner. In this episode Beatrice is not just a figure of her earthly self, or an allegory of revelation; rather she fulfills the role of Christ-figure she assumed in the Vita Nuova. Christ’s last act in His first coming was to harrow hell. Beatrice’s descent into Limbo completes the analogy to Christ in His first coming established in the Vita Nuova. It should be noted that there is complete temporal (within the liturgical time frame of the poem) and spatial correspondence between Beatrice’s descent into hell and Christ’s. But in Inferno 2 the underlying structural model — the harrowing of hell — is not reinforced with the dramatic imagery usually associated with the theme. Instead, Beatrice’s descent into Limbo is presented in lyrical terms reminiscent of the dolce stil nuovo, which Dante used to describe her in the Vita Nuova. Nonetheless, Beatrice too enters hell triumphantly, although the imagery surrounding her descent is very subdued. Beatrice, like Christ, is not subject to the devil’s power or hell’s torment (Inf. 2.88-93). Moreover, Beatrice too “harrows” hell. She frees Dante and, by extension, mankind from the constraints of their self-made terrestrial hell, objectified in the metaphor of the selva oscura. After all, it is she who overcomes the three beasts which collectively embody the sins of hell, and in particular the lupa, which was let loose by Satan himself (Inf. 1.111).

One more point. In traditional harrowings, as we have seen, Christ liberates Adam from hell first. This symbolic gesture emphasizes Christ’s redemptive power and establishes a clear link between the man who first cast mankind into sin and the man who released us from it. Here it is Dante, who at one level of the prologue’s allegory is an Adamic figure and at another everyman, who is set free by Beatrice (Iannucci, “Beatrice in Limbo”).

Despite the Commedia’s immense influence and prestige, Dante’s treatment of the apocryphon is so unique that it leaves few traces on the subsequent literature, except for the verbal echoes which I have signalled in the course of this essay. Post-dantesque representations of Limbo remain, for the most part, tied to the Evangelium Nicodemi, and in Italy they never quite surpass the simple and naive beauty of the Perugian Holy Saturday lauda.
WORKS CITED


Amati, Girolamo, ed. La passione di Cristo in rima volgare secondo che recita e rappresenta da parola a parola la dignissima compagnia del Gonfalone di Roma il venerdì santo in luogo detto il Colosseo. Roma: Sinibemghi, 1866.


Terruggia, Angela Maria. "In quale momento i Disciplinati hanno dato origine al loro teatro?" Il movimento dei Disciplinati. 434-59.


