

Infernal Archive

After beginning with an ending in the form of Judgment Day, and then moving chronologically through episodes of sacred history, from divine creation through fall and flood, this book finishes with two chapters on the Harrowing of Hell, an event associated more with its function as a central pivot – a hinging moment in a narrative middle – than with any kind of salvific finality. There are several reasons for this, beyond, admittedly, a vague reluctance to feel one's own research ushered along by the aggressive momentum of sacred history. First of all, the archive resists an ending, or, rather, the ending of the archive – its completion, fulfillment, and final wholeness – signals the end of history. Such completion opens onto an eternity that obviates the need for inventory, appraisal, or organization; even the fever for origins subsides, as all times are one. One might say that time has ended, and without time, we are without either need or capacity for the archive. The complete inventory of Judgment Day, with which this book began, offers a limit case; this is the moment of full accounting before all records and worlds dissolve into something else, a new heaven and earth, and the end of time as we know it.

The episode of the Harrowing of Hell, however, is weighted with time. It almost seems to have too much of it, and part of Christ's salvific work, I argue, is to disentangle and set into a clear hierarchy the temporalities competing for value in the vexed space between hell and earth. This is salvific *work*, an endeavor toward prophetic fulfillment, and not full salvation itself. The Harrowing is situated still in the messy middle of things, balanced between a look backward toward the beginning of time, variously anxious and yearning, and the anticipation of the culmination of time. In the *meantime*, or in that middle time, attempts to narrate and perform this central episode can be understood to comment on the struggle to assemble history and then look back at it without being temporally overwhelmed. The Harrowing presents a continual chronological push and pull, the effort to move toward the end of a story and the need to look

backward as that culmination looms, and to draw a specific authorizing past forward into the future.

The chapter on the earthly paradise investigated desires bound up with the fever for origins, and the chapters on the ark concentrated on issues of inventory selection and narrative authority. These chapters on hell turn on the problem of archival access and the temporal complexities understood to inhere in recording the past and then revisiting that record. They ask how one opens the archive without being toppled by it, or without sensing the importance of one's own historical present becoming superseded by the always-increasing material and narrative bulk of the past. To address these questions, I turn to stories of infernal descent, centrally though not exclusively those concerning the Harrowing of Hell, and investigate how representations of that underground space comment upon imagined access to the past and the dangers that attend such chronologically disruptive contact.

Such underground space – whether termed hell, the under- or otherworld – consistently is equated with the past and figured as a realm of capacious, almost overflowing history. For while representations of Noah's archive emphasize tragic undercurrents of selection and exclusion, looking into the classical otherworld or medieval hell, at least up until a specific moment in Christian sacred history, reveals a realm into which *everything* eventually descends, into death and into record, accumulating as the centuries pass. There resides the entire past, shades from every century, sometimes organized in exacting circles, sometimes jumbled, and sometimes trying to get out. The desire associated with such infernal inventory thus has a different trajectory than that attending the inventory Noah compiles; infernal inventory yearns for escape, not for the kind of salvific collection afforded by the ark.

And, as we will see, infernal escape occurs. Hell frequently is exposed as having problematic leaks out of which its records seep. In some images of the Harrowing, hell is depicted as a kind of architectural vault – several plays refer to it as a “logge” – intimating a storage space much like representations of the ark, but also with the features of a formidable fortress; the infernal threshold takes form as a kind of grand entranceway, with armed guards at the ramparts (see Figure 3). But even with this imposing architecture, the inventory of hell still manages escape; the architectural threshold frames Christ pulling Adam and Eve through a collapsing doorway, flaunting the weakness of such stately, ineffective fortifications. “Helle logge,” announces Abraham in part two of the N-Town Harrowing, “lyth vnlokyn” (l.39). Whether represented as majestic, crumbling gates or merely as a burning gap in the surface of the earth, hell “logge” struggles to maintain that which it

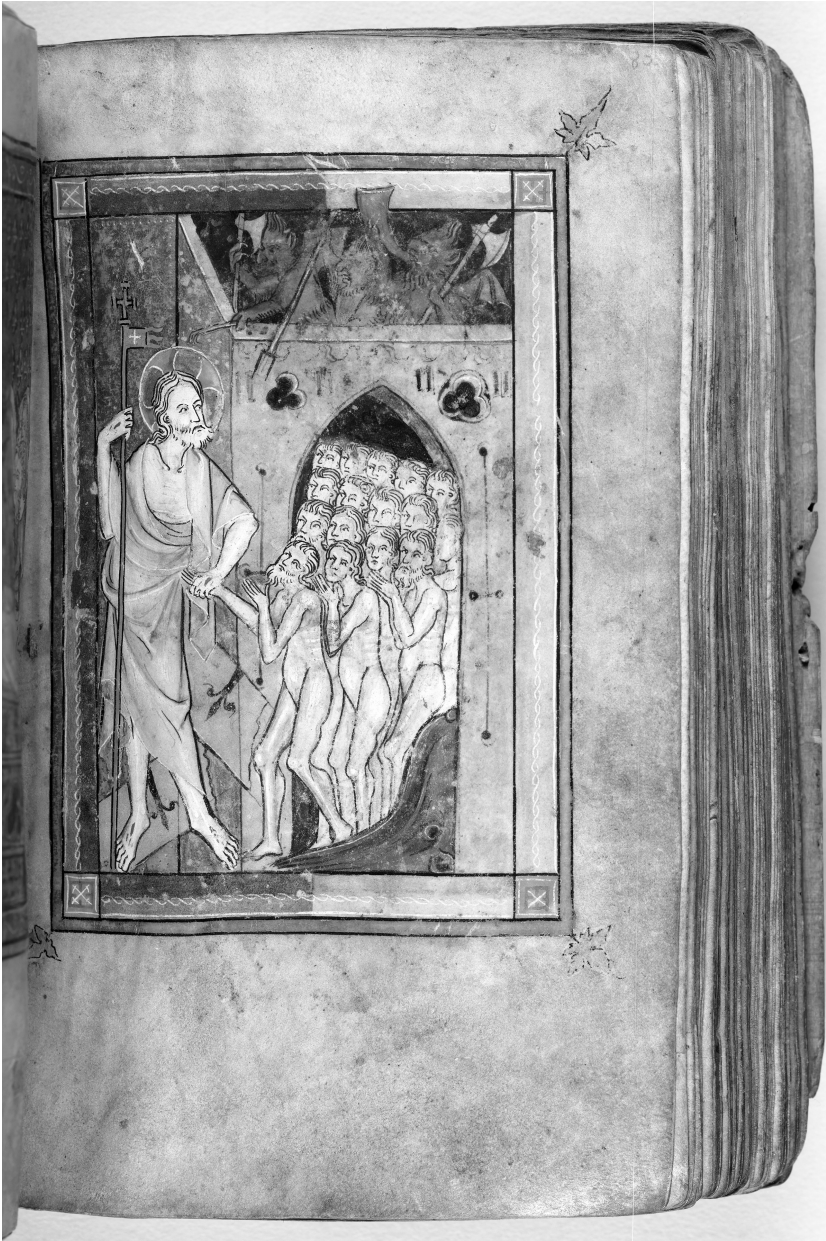


Figure 3. The *Harrowing of Hell*. From the *De Lisle Hours*. England, 1316–1331, MS G.50, fol. 080 r, at the Morgan Library.

houses, especially when those in the present (Christ, reaching for Adam) gaze back into it.

As other examples will demonstrate, cosmic voyagers frequently put pressure on the borders between hell and earth, and the permeable condition of these borders spreads beyond that singular, central moment of the Harrowing. The porous nature of the partition between hell and earth suggests not only the redemptive power of Christ, who can overturn the crises of history, but also the tendency for cosmic realms consistently to intrude upon one another, and for their associated temporalities to interpenetrate. Geographic breaches between hell and earth, whether taking form as stately, yet broken doors, holes in the terrestrial crust, a gaping infernal maw, or secret portals adorned with breakable locks, indicate the difficulty of containing the ever growing past and of relegating it as separate – geographically, chronologically, ontologically – from the present.

The growing importance of purgatory, moreover, whose status as a “third place” the church made doctrine in the thirteenth century, also weakens the physical borders of a punishing otherworld by softening perceptions of perpetual damnation; the introduction of a realm of suffering from which the dead eventually might depart alters understandings of both time and cosmic geography.¹ This in-between realm, whose very design encourages movement and solicits intervention from both heaven and earth, prevents one from thinking of the past as over and done with, or as definitively sealed off. Instead, embodied by the shades that wait and work in a vast purgatorial in-between, the past continually shifts, as parts of it are remembered or absolved. Despite the doctrine that attempted to clarify ideas of purgatory, long-standing geographic and conceptual confusion about the nature of perpetual and temporary punishment persisted in the medieval period;² this confusion sometimes made it seem as though one could languish in purgatory as in hell, and emerge eventually from either.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the episode of the Harrowing of Hell through its various versions in Middle English poetry; I then move on to other narratives explicitly describing infernal descent or more obliquely evoking it, in genres ranging from romance and visionary poetry to biblical paraphrase, in order to sketch out more broadly the verbose and crowded nature of the medieval underworld and the permeability of the partition between that world and earth. Chapter 5 then will investigate the episode of the Harrowing as it takes form in the mystery plays. That said, it is difficult fully to divide poetic and performance versions of the

Harrowing, in part because it is not always clear from textual records which works were performed or thought of as suitable for different kinds of performance. A poetic Middle English version of the Harrowing – the Middle English *Harrowing of Hell* – sometimes assigns parts to speakers, for instance, but there remains uncertainty about what kind of performance tradition it might have belonged to.³ Rather than making strong claims about how to go about separating these works according to their form and function – rather, that is, than making the argument about whether a work is a play or a poem – I instead want to focus on the different strategies for accessing and regulating the past that might be discerned in the texts and performance records that we have, including those we think might have been associated with actual productions.

Harrowing episodes situated in long Middle English poetic translations of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, or the standalone *Harrowing of Hell*, both a poem and apparently a dramatic dialogue, reveal poetic strategies for corraling and taming the particular past that they conjure forth. This chapter considers those strategies, as well as the moments in which they are shown to falter. I look at how narrative framing, ostentatious revision, and syntax intimate the ways in which infernal inventories – the voices and bodies of the past – variously are enclosed, willingly released, or lost. When, in Chapter 5, I turn to the mystery plays of the Harrowing, which belong to the same performance tradition as the plays of the fall and flood, I investigate how the medium of performance and the resources of medieval staging additionally complicate this endeavor to summon forth a usable past in a manner that does not overwhelm the present.

1 The Harrowing of Hell

Much of the basic plot of the Harrowing of Hell is concise enough to fit within the Apostle's creed, where it is initiated and concluded within the space of nine words: "Credo . . . descendit ad inferos, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis" [I believe [Christ] descended into hell, [and] rose from death on the third day]. But the feat of descent accumulates a number of important additional details as it passes through the centuries, and a more full-bodied narrative takes shape around the handful of allusions to descent and underground shadows thought of as encoded in the Vulgate, the great source text which in fact offers an even vaguer notion of Christ's Harrowing than it does of hell itself. According to the logic of Christian sacred history, before the Harrowing of Hell, an infernal collection grows in steady proportion to death in the world above. The fall of Adam and Eve

prevents human access to paradise, both terrestrial and celestial, and so the infernal cavern, created by the fall of Lucifer, begins to fill. This great underground gradually compiles a complete record of earth's erstwhile population, just as classical models of the underworld collect the dead.⁴ And though some parts of hell are more comfortable than others, again as in classical models, all of the dead, even those apparently in the "bosom of Abraham," are denied the kind of joy proximity to God affords.

The event of the Harrowing changes that. When he breaks down the gates of hell and wins the debate with Satan (or, in some poetry, Satan and Lucifer) over who has better rights to the dead,⁵ Christ not only liberates the patriarchs and prophets imprisoned there, but also opens up new possibilities for all of humankind who will die between that moment and Judgment Day. Virgil describes the event and its consequences to Dante in the fourth canto of the *Inferno*, one of the most famous medieval poems of infernal descent, adding that he, Virgil, also belongs to those unfortunate shades who lived before Christ and thus before the possibility of salvation.⁶ Right after he took up residence among the other poets in limbo, Virgil explains, a momentous change occurred:

". . . I beheld a Great Lord enter here;
the crown he wore, a sign of victory.
He carried off the shade of our first father,
of his son Abel, and the shade of Noah,
of Moses, the obedient legislator,
of father Abraham, David the king,
of Israel, his father, and his sons,
and Rachel, she for whom he worked so long,
and many others – and He made them blessed;
and I should have you know that, before them,
there were no human souls that had been saved." (4.53–63)⁷

Virgil offers an eyewitness account of the Harrowing that saves certain souls; the rest of the poem makes it clear that after that moment of select redemption, hell continues to function as a repository for unrepentant sinners. However, those who, like Dante and unlike Virgil, are born *after* this pivotal episode of descent and redemption might hope to find space in paradise or purgatory. Dante figures the latter realm as a terraced mountain around whose winding paths the shades slowly climb, their gradual progress indicating a crucial difference from the stasis of hell, which imprisons the dead perpetually within its circles of punishment.

The Harrowing finds its most important source in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, whose Latin translation dates from the fifth century.⁸ Though

widespread and well known during the medieval period, the episode, unlike the fall and the flood, is not canonized as a component of official scripture. It is an interesting difference, especially since one of the meanings this episode offers has to do with the instability of the past, and the idea that even written history might be made to shift around. The extrabiblical episode, which gets translated and transformed across multiple centuries and through numerous vernaculars and media, supplies the crucial pivot point for sacred history, opening up new possibilities for the Christian afterlife. In late medieval English and earlier iterations, the story's key elements are as follows: the crucified Christ rises from his grave and descends to the underworld, calling "attollite portas" [lift up your gates], a line lifted from the twenty-third psalm. He argues with Satan over a set population of the dead, crucially including Adam, Eve, Moses, Isaiah, David, Jacob, and Rachel, and implicitly the other worthy patriarchs, wives, and prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as John the Baptist. The prophets joyfully confirm Christ's presence as the fulfillment of their own scriptural prophecies and fall down on their knees to worship him. Then Christ takes Adam by the hand or, in much of the iconography, by the wrist. According to a fifteenth-century, Middle English poetic version of *The Gospel of Nicodemus*:

By þe hand our lord has Adam hent,
 with Michael he bad him ga;
 þai toke þe way with gud entent
 vntyll Paradyse full thra.
 Michael resayued þam sone
 þat war to him bikend,
 In blys he has þam done
 þat lastes withouten end.⁹

By the hand our lord has taken Adam, with Michael he bade him go; they took the way with good intention, all the way to Paradise. Michael received them right away, those that were promised to him. He has taken them to a bliss that lasts without end.

The major figures of the Hebrew Scriptures, refigured as the Old Testament by supercessionary, typological practice, at last are admitted to paradise. Chaperoned by the archangel Michael, they leave their savior behind on earth, in some versions for as long as forty days, a wait that parallels his sojourn in the wilderness.

Medieval poetry, visual art, and the mystery plays revel in these elements of the Harrowing: the broken gates; Christ and Satan shouting questions and answers across the cavernous wastes of hell; the prophets' verbal

confirmation of fulfillment; and Adam's hand in Christ's, the linking of testaments and the blurring of temporalities as the one pulls the other across the threshold dividing hell and earth, past and present, and across religious narrative traditions.¹⁰ These engagements with Christian sacred history celebrate the pivotal event of descent and redemption, its suggestion of mercy, its depiction of triumph, and its poetic balance. The symmetrical perfection of the poetic economy takes form as an assurance that the descent and redemption occur exactly as they should. "Qui per lignum et diabolum et mortem damnati fuistis, modo uidete per lignum damnatum diabolum et mortem," narrates a Latin *Nicodemus*, describing the neat reversal that vernacular translations and other poetry will poetically delight in.¹¹ The tree that connects transgression and the cross will take form, in the liturgies and the mystery plays, as the staff with which Christ bangs on the doors of hell when he demands access to the infernal collection of the dead. His presence, armed outside the soon-to-be-crashed gates, becomes a mechanism of reversal, tricking Satan, who long ago tricked Adam and Eve in the garden. In versions of *Nicodemus* and in the Middle English plays of the Harrowing, the prophets and patriarchs offer recitations and new exegesis of the Old Law with which they are associated, affirming that their liberation by Christ has been foretold by their own prophetic writings and lauding the descent of the redeemer and the reversal he initiates: "laus tibi cum Gloria" [Praise be to you, with glory], sings Adam at the close of the York play.

Just as frequently as the fortified, turreted threshold, a pair of monstrous jaws frames the infernal portal through which Christ passes, widening as he leads the patriarchs, prophets, and many others ("e altri molti," in Dante's words) out of the inferno. The iconographic tradition suggests a number of things that will be important to this chapter and the next. Like the broken door, the open mouth implies that the partition between hell and earth is permeable; the mouth becomes a breach, opening wide to permit movement in either direction; the lost go in, and the saved come out. This fanged rupture between hell and earth invites the viewer to think of time in spatial terms. To be drawn or swallowed into hell is to be relegated to historical record, to the past; to emerge from hell is to undergo a different temporal transition by crossing physically from one realm into another: to move, in the manner of ghosts, from an underground past into an above-ground, ephemeral present. This possibility of resurrection, redemption, or infernal escape presented by the Harrowing unsettles the idea of the static past and the security of historical record. If an infernal inventory can shift around, be lost, or redeemed (rejudged, reconsidered), then the past

cannot be held in place: it is spoken out anew, and perhaps differently, between the parted teeth.

How, then, do we know what is past? If Christ can descend into hell, in which the voices of the Old Testament prophets, long dead, still resound, then it would seem that the “past” cannot be separated definitively from the present. Not only confusion, but also a certain ethical slipperiness inheres in the idea of the past as I am using it to describe that which Christ releases from the infernal archive. This is because the idea of “pastness” works on several levels. The texts with which the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets are associated predate the gospels by almost a millennium, but the episode of the Harrowing of Hell also endeavors to depict Jewishness and Judaism, the cultural and religious traditions associated with those texts, as finished. When Christ fulfills the prophecies of those in hell, an act that includes the redemption of their souls, he ushers their narrative toward closure. Older scripture is represented as finished, not because the patriarchs and prophets are in hell, but because they are *let out*, their prophecies completed and their resurrected bodies spirited away to the silent eternity of heaven. The Old Testament is represented as encountering its own completion and obsolescence at the moment of Christ’s act of redemption. In this way, Judaism, too, becomes relegated to a hermetically sealed and superseded past, a phase of history that has ended.¹² Kathleen Biddick describes this medieval Christian “temporal logic” as dividing a “Jewish ‘that was then’ from a Christian ‘this is now,’” a schema that reduces understandings of temporality into the reductive “binary of past and present.”¹³ Such an interpretive maneuver, she suggests, worked to deny historicity, and thus the promise of futurity, to medieval Jews.¹⁴ They have only a past, and it is firmly concluded. They *are* past.

I turn to a fuller exploration of how the Harrowing of Hell uses super-sessionary typology to frame the relationship between these two religious traditions in Chapter 5, but I want to clarify here that, by examining representations of past and present in various versions of the episode, I do not want to perpetuate the reductive temporality that Biddick describes. Rather, I want to examine the representation of that reductive temporality in the Harrowing and to show how a focus on repetition and time, in both poetry and performance, foregrounds its insufficiency by complicating the relationship between past and present. I will continue to use the word “past” because that is how the patriarchs and prophets are represented in the Harrowing, as belonging to another, almost or about to be superseded time. But at its root, the story of the Harrowing of Hell

suggests the impossibility of sealing that past off from the present and the anticipated future in any lasting or meaningful way.

Versions of the Harrowing present this always-imperfect attempt to seal off one time or space from another in a variety of ways. They emphasize ideas of uneasy confinement in geographic, temporal, and narrative terms, as well as both a desire for and an anxiety about possibilities of infernal escape. A vocabulary of locking and unlocking, binding and rupture, breaking loose from and maintaining contracts permeates the plays and poetry. All three closely related versions of the Middle English *Harrowing of Hell* consistently employ the language of imprisonment, in which the corralling of physical space and the binding of bodies happens in two stages.¹⁵ First, Satan keeps all of the prominent Old Testament figures infernally imprisoned, and then, upon their release, Christ in turn binds Satan. When the prince of hell seeks to prevent the loss of his most valuable souls, he protests, in the Auchinleck manuscript, that he is meant to “haue & hald” them forever:

“Par ma fay! ich hald mine
 al þat ben hereinne;
 wiþ resoun wil y telle þe
 Þat þer ogain may þou nouzt be,
 Þat me bihoueþ haue & hald
 & wiþouten ende wald”¹⁶

By my faith, I hold as mine all those who are in here; I will explain to you with reason, and you cannot be against it; it falls to me to have and hold and to rule over them without end.

Satan repeats the sentiment a few lines later: “lat me haue þat ich halde” [Let me have what I hold] (l.111), doubling up his verbs of maintaining as if to ensure his capacity to keep the dead. But the Harrowing inevitably permits that privileged segment of Satan’s population to escape, while he in turn is secured in place, even more tightly: “so fast schal y binde þe” [I shall bind you fast] Christ threatens him (l.133). And once past the broken gates, Christ does just that, announcing: “fare þou seþþen whare þou may, / fare þou seþþen ware þou fare [fare from now on where you may; fare from now on where you fare] (ll.154–5). Even the verses describing Satan’s new restriction twist back upon themselves, fastening down words that otherwise indicate roaming. Satan will “fare” nowhere at all; he will “fare” where he “fares” and “haue” what he has: right here, in a new stillness where even language coils back upon itself, seþþen and forever. Such infernal binding, locking, and holding also takes form as a “holding off,” a dynamic in which the confinement of bodies corresponds to territorial restriction. In the

same poem, when explaining his rights to the dead, whom he believes are contractually given to him to keep, Satan articulates a desire to keep the realms and populations of hell and earth strictly separate. He says to Christ: “heuen & erþe weld þou þe, / þe soules in helle lat þou be” [Heaven and earth you take charge of; let the souls in hell be] (ll.81–3). Satan wants to divide hell and earth along with their populations, and he asks that there be no confusion about where one kingdom ends and the other begins.

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* also indicates a desire to keep these realms clearly divided, but here the desire is not only articulated by Satan, but also enacted through the structure of the narrative. Instead of physical chains, the *Gospel* creates a narrative frame to partition hell from earth, and to hold in place, paradoxically, the very souls who are released. A narrative frame literally circumscribes what otherwise threatens to emerge as uncontrollable history, reinforcing the geographical borders of hell with a formal device and locking in place the older story with which the redeemed Old Testament figures are associated. The strategy works as an attempt to contain what goes on underground and to neutralize the intensity of infernal narrative when eventually it gains an earthly audience.

In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the event of the Harrowing filters through the testimony of two witnesses, the brothers Carinus and Leucius, sons of Simeon, the man who receives Christ in the temple in the Gospel of Luke (2:25). Carinus and Leucius, whose redemption Christ secures, remain on earth after the Harrowing in order to describe and then write down the miraculous event they have witnessed. The *Gospel* thus describes the process of its own inscription, shifting the audience away from hell itself and its celebrated Old Testament speakers – men such as King David, who composes and sings, and Isaiah, who prophesizes – by foregrounding two new narrators in the form of Simeon’s sons. The brothers’ testimony frames the events that occur in hell: listeners inside the text, gathered around the brothers, and readers *of* the text are held off from the infernal site of action; both groups are made dependent upon the words of Carinus and Leucius. The brothers provide the details of the descent and redemption to a small gathering of witnesses, in front of whom they also write their experiences down on parchment. In a Middle English translation of *Nicodemus*, the brothers request their writing materials:

“Lordynges,” þai said withouten lyte,
 “Tak vs parchemyn & pen;
 þe preueteſe we ſall yhow wryte
 þat we for ſothfaſt ken.”

(ll.1153–6)

“Lords,” they said without pause, “get us parchment and pen. These secrets we shall write for you, the ones that we truthfully know.”

At the end of their account, having related the speeches of the patriarchs and prophets, the debate between Christ and Satan, and the ascension of the redeemed, the brothers conclude their testimony:

Pat Caryn wrate he it bitoke
 Till Nichodeme and Annas,
 And Lentyn allso gaf his boke
 Tyll Ioseph and tyll Cayphas;
 Togyder þan þai gan þam luke
 þat serely wryten was,
 And þat one wrate noght a letter note,
 Bot euen als þat other has.
 when þe Iewes had of þam tane
 þa rolles þat wryten ware,
 þai vanyst oway onane,
 Of þam þai saw no mare. (ll.1633–44)

What Caryn (Carinus) wrote, he took to Nicodemus and Annas, and Lentyn (Leucius) also gave his book to Joseph and to Caiaphas. Together, then, they began to look at them, those that individually were written, and what one wrote not a letter differed, but was just as the other one had it. When the Jews had taken from them those rolls that were written, they vanished away at once. They saw no more of them.

Each brother records the event of the Harrowing in a separate book, and Nicodemus and his small company see that the accounts coincide exactly. They receive the new text and the scribes vanish, making their delayed ascent to paradise.

The framing device of the scribal Carinus and Leucius means that the patriarchs and prophets deliver their speeches from within a double enclosure. David, Isaiah, and the others speak from within the geographic confines of hell, as well as from within the framing device of the narrating brothers. The narrative frame works to shore up the uncertain, leaky container of hell, as the voices of the redeemed are placed into a text about to become the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. The nature of this narrative transmission, in which Christ’s scribes relate the familiar, prophetic speeches of David and Isaiah, enclosing their words in the new gospel written on earth, increases the control that the voices of the present are afforded over those of the past. Carinus and Leucius, narrating the new gospel to the still-living men assembled around them, introduce any number of modifications and adjustments upon the scripture the infernal

prisoners recite. The words of the dead are altered both by the linguistic pressures of Middle English poetry and by the demands of the Christian project of typological, supersessionary interpretation. The process of the brothers' narration and inscription frames the words spoken by the patriarchs and prophets, and also appropriates them in a way that partially recalls Harold Bloom's description of *apophrades*, or "the return of the dead," in which later poets seem to usurp the voices that precede them. Carinus and Leucius "station the precursor," David or Isaiah, so that:

particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices.¹⁷

Of course, the earlier prophets *also* are understood to presage the advent of Christ, but in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the Harrowing plays, they reannounce such prophecy from within a frame of Middle English Christian poetics, their words purportedly subsumed by its greater splendor. The brothers speak out the prophets' words, which we might imagine as sounding, deep in hell, already like a haunting echo of an original scriptural quotation. Isaiah or David speaks through the mouthpieces of Simeon's sons and the meter of our medieval poet; the prophets' voices filter through new mouths to new ends, and into a new religion. The words the brothers speak seem almost to shed their association with past texts, their initial source of authority, by gaining new traction in the gospel given to Nicodemus.

The poetry of *Nicodemus* encloses, displays, interprets, and controls the voices of its "strong poets" and precursor dead, lest, perhaps, those voices sound louder, too insistent, alluring, or hauntingly familiar. The aggressive vocabulary of confinement in the poetic *Harrowing of Hell* and the strategic device of the brothers' testimony in the *Gospel* acknowledge and attempt to counter the potential of resounding, infernal voices; they work to keep listeners at a safe distance from hell and its speakers. Such efforts suggest the uneasy acknowledgement that one cannot release the past without risking it overwhelming the present. Treatments of the Harrowing offer a moment of redemptive triumph, but they also present hell as a dangerously imperfect and impermanent container, with its many infernally archived narratives capable of bursting out through the gates of the underground storehouse to spill onto the shared ground of the present. The threat is that this "past" will not stay in place, and that it will arrive, like a ghost story, to filter onto the earth, the many ruptures between

cosmic geographies wearing away the ordering of temporal divisions, inviting past and present to collide.

2 Poems of Descent

The rest of this chapter looks at moments of poetic confusion between past and present as well as the physical porousness between those categories when they are spatialized as hell, purgatory, and earth. Despite the importance of the Harrowing of Hell, I do not want to suggest that this fraught and anxiously mediated relationship between past and present is exclusive to the extrabiblical episode, or that the Harrowing presents a unique conception of a hell out of which the past might escape. Other medieval narratives also contribute to the notion of the otherworld as a crowded but easily compromised container, a realm filled with important inventory, yet with open doors and porous borders. In this section, I look at Dante's *Inferno*, the medieval lai *Sir Orfeo*, and the legend of Saint Patrick's Purgatory, all works that also treat ideas of stored history, divulged stories, and the relationships between the present and the past, or between the living and the dead. Ultimately, I want to trace out a context for understanding the temporal dynamics of the Harrowing episode and the tendency for hell and purgatory to be seen as holding pens of an unstable past. I am interested in how the extrabiblical fulcrum of sacred history both informs and is informed by other instances of cosmic travel between the otherworld and the earth, whether this takes form as redemption from sin, escape, a kind of didactic, infernal tourism, or as visionary experience.

Medieval vernacular literature contributes to a tradition, established far earlier in classical works and in patristic writings, which emphasizes the facility with which one might negotiate the geographic divide between the living and the dead. In the *Dialogues* (c.593), Gregory the Great proposes that sinners might acquire visual proof of hell through volcanoes, suggesting that, in select portions of the world, the inferno is so close that those still capable of repentance might gaze into its fiery landscape. Gregory even suggests that the portals between hell and earth are widening, inviting passage and revealing evidence of other worlds.¹⁸ Centuries later, Mandeville will report on these impressive "swalghes in þe erthe alleyway brynnand" [always-burning swallows or gaps in the earth] which some say are "þe entreez and þe zates of helle" [the entrance and the gates of hell] (31). But of course, those who believe in hell long have known how effortless such a descent into it might be; "easy – / the way that leads

into Avernus,” the sybil warns Aeneas, who follows in the steps of Ulysses, “But to recall your steps . . . that is the labor.”¹⁹

The round-trip voyage to the otherworld perhaps better indicates the permeability of the partition between hell and earth; one must be able not only to descend into that place, but also to get out again. Orpheus, the poet who, in classical literature, goes down to Hades to retrieve Eurydice, only to lose her again before gaining a foothold on solid ground, functions as one of these travelers. The classical myth undergoes its own metamorphosis in Middle English romance in ways that suggest the influence of Christ’s descent in the Harrowing.²⁰ In the late medieval version of the story, the musician-king Sir Orfeo actually *succeeds* in bringing his dead wife back from the otherworld, and both are permitted to depart from the land of the shades in order to return to their kingdom. The poem suggests that the barrier existing between worlds might be rendered entirely traversable through the desire of an earnest husband or through his careful music.

Orfeo first enters the otherworld by following Heurodis/Eurydice and her unearthly companions through a cleft in a rock. This ghostly host apparently makes the cosmic journey often, crossing from the kingdom of the dead into a more earthly wilderness whenever they want to, and even on horseback. The poem never explicitly calls this otherworld “hell” – in fact, it compares it once to paradise – but the confusing space is filled with bodies, some of them holding uncomfortable positions that recall their violent deaths. Orfeo enters a kingdom that seems like a museum of the dead, even though its inhabitants might not all, in fact, be dead:

þan he gan bihold about al
 & seiȝe liggeand wiþ-in þe wal
 Of folk þat were þider y-brouȝt,
 & þouȝt dede, & nare nouȝt.²¹

Then he began to behold all about and saw, lying within the wall, folks that had been brought thither, and were thought dead, and were not.

Some bodies are frozen in positions of drowning, others in their childbirth beds. Time has stopped, and given way to static record, though it would appear that time stops at a *different* moment in the case of each of these statue-like bodies, some of whom are indeed dead (“Sum ded & sum awedde [mad]”) (l.400). The frozen figures, garish in their stricken immobility, testify to the once fluid passage of time that has left them as its victims, depositing them here in this kingdom. But if they are not all dead, the stasis cannot be complete. Some just might begin to move again, and what time would it be then?

Orfeo plays his harp for the king of this underworld, who, disgruntled but fair, grants him his boon and allows him to take back Heurodis, no notorious strings attached:

Take hir bi þe hond & go:
 Of hir ichil þatow be bliþe!
 He kneled adoun & þonked him swiþe.
 His wiif he tok bi þe hond
 & dede him swiþe out of þat lond,
 & went him out of that þede;
 Riȝt as he come þe wey he zede. (ll.470–6)

“Take her by the hand, and go – I wish you to be glad of her!” He knelt down and quickly thanked him. His wife he took by the hand, and betook himself quickly out of that land, and went out of that place; right as he came, that way he went.

Orfeo departs from the otherworld kingdom the same way he entered it, that is, rather effortlessly. He takes his wife’s hand in his, a visual echo, perhaps, of images of Christ grabbing Adam’s wrist and pulling him out of the hell mouth. The punishment for looking backward, so central to Ovid’s version, never gets mentioned; in this poem, Hades permits, if begrudgingly, the turning back of time and the waking of the dead. The medieval romance sanctions and even rewards the mourning that Ovid’s version of Orpheus characterizes as debilitating and doomed, and for which the angry, neglected Maenads eventually tear the mythic poet to pieces. The *Metamorphoses* seems to suggest that onward, in the physical, historical, or narrative sense, is the correct direction; it is the path upon which the poem progresses, from Eden to Caesar; the way mourners move on from loss; and how poets are supposed to look ahead to new subjects. In Ovid’s poem, Orpheus, like Lot’s doomed wife, suffers for turning around. But in the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, the sense of moving forward is not necessarily in contradiction to looking back. The return to the past, in which Heurodis still lived, and the return of the dead to the world of the living, gets superimposed upon the forward passage of time and the metrical path of poetry. The journey to the otherworld authorizes Orfeo’s return, from the wilderness and from his madness, and back to his kingdom, harp and wife in hand.

Sir Orfeo announces itself as a lai toward its beginning, explaining that it belongs to the genre performed by those who “token an harp in gle & game” [took up the harp in entertainment and in game] (l.19).²² The very first lines of the poem begin with a description of how such songs became written poems: “We redeþ ofte & findeþ [y-write,] / . . . Layes þat ben in

harping . . .” (ll.1, 2). A few lines into *Sir Orfeo*, the narrator announces that he or she also will “tel” one of these “aentours” if the lords gathered round will “herkneþ” (ll.21–3); the narrator then immediately introduces the hero, who “mest of ani þing / Louede þe gle of harping” [most out of anything, loved the entertainment of harping] (ll.25–6). A thread runs through these three intimations of music, all present within the song of the poem: there are the *lais* performed long ago, in some past, Breton world; the one about to be reanimated by our narrator, sung as coterminous with the fictive frame of the written poem; and the kind of music in which Orfeo so excels that earth seems like paradise and hell relaxes its grip on the dead.²³ The songs and music are split into separate registers of reality, weaving the different ontologies of the *lai* into a haunting kind of harmony, offering a narrative record of what was, even as they endeavor to unsettle it. To put it another way: the song of the poem offers a record of what has happened, but the music within the poem – the harping by which Orfeo makes the king of the underworld relent – demonstrates how what happens is never irreparable.

When Orfeo returns from his long exile and his trip to the otherworld, he enters his own kingdom disguised by what the years have done to him. To test his steward, who fails to recognize him, Orfeo says the familiar harp he carries belongs to a man who has died. Grieving for his dead king, the steward falls to the floor, and the assembled barons hasten to revive him, reminding him “it nis no bot of mannes deþ [there is no remedy for the death of man]” (l.552). But this statement is precisely contrary to the truth the poem offers.²⁴ Though Orfeo’s harping sometimes creates the effect of ethereal stillness (among the courtiers who experience it as they would the “ioies of Paradis” [l.37] and among the birds and beasts that gather around in the wilderness), the music *also* manages to unstick Heurodis, one of the sort-of dead, from her frozen posture of repose. In this sense, Orfeo’s harp-song *is* the “bot” or cure for “deth,” or at least it reanimates the curious in-between: Heurodis, who perhaps is only sleeping, and Orfeo himself, thought dead, whose familiar face emerges from its ravaged features, eventually recognized as the owner of the harp.

James Simpson argues that the medieval *lai* “*Sir Orfeo*” models a theory of recognitional reading. Our interpretive process, he suggests, depends upon looking for the familiar (typically in the sense of generic convention) and recognizing it anew: we turn back and see a dearly known face, but as if for the first time. “*Sir Orfeo*,” Simpson argues, is conservative in that it brings everyone home again (to a reconfirmed aristocratic marriage no less), but it is also reformist, as opposed to reactionary or revolutionary.

This reformist quality comes from the “as if for the first time” force of recognition that then propels one into the future.²⁵ Simpson writes:

Understanding text is dependent on recognition of the text’s long prehistory, compacted into the deep coding of genre. At the heart of our reading practice, that is, stands not the revolutionary discovery of the never before known, but rather the reformist recovery of the somehow already known.²⁶

Simpson describes several moments of recognizing the “already known”: recognition in terms of generic convention, but also the moving exchange of glances as the ghostly Heurodis rides with her host through Orfeo’s wilderness, or the steward’s eyes falling upon the harp in the hands of his disguised king.²⁷ This last example, the steward’s recognition of the harp, would seem to work in a slightly different manner than the initial moment of mute recognition shared by Orfeo and Heurodis. On one hand, it corresponds to our own crucial act of recognition as readers in a very practical way. We, too, recognize the harp; it means that, despite the changed place names and ever so slightly altered personal names, the addition of a court and parliament, and even a wife who makes it out of hell, this indeed is Orpheus, the mythic musician, divinely gifted and associated, however variously, with a sad story about the underworld. But unlike the recognition of a familiar, beloved face, whom one might recuperate and return with to the way things were, newly committed to the familiar, the harp is an instrument capable of making more and different music, and so of extending and altering a tale. This powerful instrument, which can resurrect the dead, also can make a new work of art, and change even an old story made legendary in the past.²⁸

Orfeo’s music unseals what seems like irreparable past, the state from which there is no “bot” or “amendement” (l.200). But at the same time, the lai that contains that music also is inscribed as lines of poetry, etched in adamant, as Chaucer might write, and so unchanging.²⁹ It is as if two different forms, superimposed one upon another, offer competing conceptions of the past: a song sings of a past that can be altered by music, and the inscribed version of that song (the poem) insists, through the permanence of its ink, that some things cannot change. Inscribed text contains disruptive music, holding it still, even while it displays as its central plot point the disruptive force of that music. The layered time of composition – purportedly song, then poem – reflects the temporal dynamic encased in the work that is *Sir Orfeo*, in which past and present work upon each other, that is, in which the living intrude into the realm of the shades, and a shade returns to the realm of the living.³⁰ This poetic revision of a much older tale

suggests that other pasts, too, might be revised, and that those imprisoned in the otherworld, “sum ded & sum awedde,” might get out. The past cannot be kept in place, no more than Hades can hold onto Heurodis as she leaves with her husband and his harp.

In the Auchinleck manuscript, in which “Sir Orfeo” and a poetic, Middle English *Harrowing of Hell* appear, a poem about Saint Patrick’s Purgatory describes another portal, this time to a Christian otherworld that one might visit and then depart from.³¹ Henry of Sawtry composed the frequently copied *Tractatus de purgatorio Sancti Patricii* in the late twelfth-century; three Middle English versions of the story, including *Owayne Miles*, the poem in the Auchinleck, take the *Tractatus* as their source. The story describes a hole or ditch in the east wall of an abbey founded by Saint Patrick in Ireland, through which living beings might journey to the otherworld and then come back again:

In þe est ende of þe abbay
 Þer is þat hole, forsoþe to say,
 Pat griseliche is of sizt
 With gode ston wal al abouten,
 Wiþ locke and keye þe gate to louken,
 Patrike lete it digte.
 Þat ich stede, siker ze be,
 Is yclepyd þe rizt entre
 Of Patrikes Purgatorie:
 For in þat time þat þis bifelle,
 Mani a man went in to helle,
 As it seyt in þe storie,
 And suffred pein for her trespas,
 And com ozain þurth Godes gras³²

In the east end of the abbey, there is that hole, to tell the truth, that is fully dreadful to see; Patrick made it ready with good stone walls all around, with lock and key to lock the gates. That same place, assuredly, is called the very entrance of Patrick’s Purgatory. For in the time that this befell, many men went into hell, as the stories say, and suffered there for their trespasses, and came back again through God’s grace.

The vision of such traffic – the “mani” who visit hell and then return – contributes to the wearing away of the partition between cosmic realms, confirming and marking points of porosity. Saint Patrick is anxious that the portal be carefully guarded and regulated by ecclesiastical authority, and a strong hint of bureaucratic procedure hovers about the careful rules he makes:

Seynt Patryke lette make ryght well
 A dore bow[n]den wyth iren and stele;
 Lokke and key he made þerto,
 That no mon shulde þe dore vndo.
 The key he betoke þe pryour
 And badde hym lokke hyt as tresour,
 And euer close þe entre so,
 That no man myȝth þeryn go.
 But ȝyf hyt were þorow þe assente
 Of þe pryour and þe couente;
 Of þe bysschop he most haue a lettur,
 Elles hym were neuur þe better.³³

Saint Patrick had it well made, a door bound with iron and steel; lock and key he made for it, so that no man should undo the door. The key he took to the prior and bade him lock it up as if it were a treasure, and always close the entrance so that no man might go in there unless it were by assent of the prior and the convent. He must have a letter from the bishop, or else it would avail him nothing.

Patrick has the door physically secured and invests the ecclesiastical establishment with the authority to supervise it. When, centuries later, the knight Owayne Miles arrives in Ireland to test out the passage, the saint's rules still stand, and the knight requires a letter from the bishop, who "seled hyt wyth hys owne sele" [sealed it with his own seal].³⁴ A procession of clerics escort Owayne to the door, and he ducks inside "a pryue entre; / Hyt was yn a depe dyches ende" [a private entry; it was at the end of a deep ditch].³⁵ *The Vision of William of Stranton*, a fifteenth-century prose work that narrates another trip through this same portal, suggests a similar amount of clerical supervision and the initial, slightly awkward passivity of the traveler: "I was," writes William, "put in by þe prior of Seint Mathew."³⁶ Beyond the locked door of the abbey, Owayne Miles (and later, William) will encounter a realm filled with the dead, who suffer various punishments and are divided into sections according to their sins, as they are in Dante's *Inferno*.

But unlike in the *Comedy*, the departure scenes described in accounts of Saint Patrick's Purgatory are concerned with physical logistics and bureaucratic procedures; they lack the stately beginning of that more famous trip to hell, when Dante, single file behind his legendary guide, embarks on the "steep and savage path" (2.142). They also lack the clarity of the infernal road map Dante provides, with its clear and ominous warning inscription on the gates. In the *Comedy*, the pilgrim knows when he has entered hell and when he has gotten out of it. Hell and purgatory are less easily

demarcated in accounts of Saint Patrick's Purgatory, despite the name. For instance, some of the sinners Owayne encounters seem to be in a realm of punishment for perpetuity, but others appear to be in the process of the kind of painful, spiritual cleansing associated with purgatory, one with a promised efficacy and bent toward paradise. Owayne and William (like Dante) both make it to the earthly paradise after passing through these uncertain regions of punishment, and when it is time to go back to earth, both pilgrims turn with difficulty away from that place of pleasure. In the Cotton version, Owayne's reemergence takes form in a rather matter of fact way, as if he merely were returning to England from Ireland: "A redy way anon he fonde / Ryȝth ynto hys owene londe" [a ready way he soon found, right into his own land].³⁷ The Auchinleck puts it a bit more spectacularly; the prior of the abbey comes to the portal with his procession to see a light: "And riȝt amiddes þat ich liȝt / Com vp Owain, Godes kniȝt" [and right in the midst of that same light, up came Owain, God's knight].³⁸

Despite the gleam of light in which Owayne reemerges from the ditch and door, and despite the miraculous visions of demons, the dead, and the earthly paradise, what I find most intriguing about descriptions of Saint Patrick's Purgatory is its comparative ordinariness. The pilgrimage that becomes the *Comedy* could only happen to Dante; although he is neither Aeneas nor Paul, Beatrice chooses *him* specifically, and he quickly senses his own privileged place among the great poets of limbo. Sir Orfeo, too, is rewarded for being able to produce the kind of music that makes even the wild animals gather around him and hold still, listening. But it appears that anyone might go through the door in the east end of Saint Patrick's abbey, as long as they have the right paperwork and carefully follow stringent bureaucratic, ecclesiastical procedure. The locks on the door and the need for correct documentation evoke the sense of secrecy that Isidore attributes to the "arca," linguistic root of the archive: part of its meaning, he suggests, derives from the fact that it prevents easy disclosure, holding secrets "from which other people are fended off" ("unde ceteri arcentur") (XX.ix.2). Owain does not need to be an exemplary harpist or poet, but he does need a letter of recommendation to gain entrance to this place where he will learn about the past, in the hope that it will change his future.

The bureaucracy around the door in the wall is in place for a more communal reason as well: the infernal visits, when well reported, redound beneficially upon the church and increase its flock. In the beginning of the poem, Patrick has a revelatory dream in which Christ reveals the portal to the saint as a resource for his doubtful parishioners. Their initial spiritual reluctance requires a spectacular remedy, as they themselves note:

And al þai seyð commounliche,
 Þat non of hem wold sikerliche
 Do bi his techeing,
 Bot ȝif he dede þat [sum] man
 Into helle went þan,
 To bring hem tiding

Of þe pain and of þe wo
 Þe soulen suffri euermo,
 Þei þat ben þerinne³⁹

And they all said in common that none of them truly would adhere to his teaching, unless he made it so that some man went into hell to bring them tidings of the pain and woe that souls, those that were in there, suffer forevermore.

In Patrick's vision, Christ suggests a way in which one pilgrim's very physical journey, complete with iron locks and awkward crouching into ditches, might assure those who stay behind about the otherworld whose presence they doubt. The voyager who discloses the record of the dead educates the living. Even though Owayne journeys alone, and even though the clerics carefully rebolt the door behind him, the otherworld revealed to him finds a large audience in the congregation who gather around him when he returns, looking upon the one who looked upon the dead, ready for the stories he will tell, and ready to commit them to poetry. The infernal visit produces narrative for the living.

Visionary experience also permits pilgrims to embark on different kinds of otherworld visits in order to produce persuasive, didactic narrative. The entrance to hell might be down a volcano, past a locked gate in Ireland, or through a cave with the help of the sybil, but it also might take form through visionary ecstasy, dreams, or rapture, a method perhaps most influentially modeled by Saint Paul, whose experience occurs "whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not."⁴⁰ The *Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*, for instance, a twelfth-century Latin account of a vision of purgatory and paradise, translated into Middle English prose in the fifteenth-century, suggests that the eponymous monk lies prostrate on the floor of his chapter-house *while* visiting the otherworld. That journey, the monk clarifies, occurs while he is "[r]apte in spyryte" [raptured in spirit].⁴¹ With Dante's dark wood in mind, we also might consider how these methods of travel sometimes are represented as working in combination, or how a passage between hell and earth can exist somewhere in between the categories of geographic trek and ecstatic dream, particularly in the case of those writers who eschew framing the

experience as merely one or the other.⁴² Both kinds of cosmic travel produce an account of that which is seen and experienced, offered up as proof of the otherworld briefly encountered.

But, as I have suggested in the section on the Harrowing of Hell, the under- or otherworld also is well stocked with its *own* stories, the ones belonging to the dead it houses. Cosmic travelers bring back tales not only of their own miraculous experiences, but also reports suggesting that the infernal archive already is packed with words, images, and voices, stories that might be transported and translated *out*. The often-verbose dead are only too eager to share their stories with the living pilgrims who manage to descend, and these stories, like the repeated prophecies of David and Isaiah, then seep out to the land of the living, back into the present, as it were. In the organized compartments of Dante's inferno, the shades are laden with personal histories and animated with frantic protestations; the underground space fills with their voices. When the poet-pilgrim enters through the infernal gates, he encounters resounding noise:

Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries . . .
 Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,
 accents of anger, words of suffering,
 and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands – (3.22, 25–27)⁴³

Hell pulsates with noise that wants to get out. The closer to these gates, and so the closer to the border between infernal and earthly worlds, the louder the voices are; the shades seem to want not only Dante to hear them, but to be heard by an aboveground audience as well.

The cacophony that first greets Dante issues from the shades whose names are lost to the world above; this earthly silence, the absence of fame or memory of any sort, is the very thing they so loudly lament. Next come the poets, who cluster in stark opposition to this reputationless state: “the honor of their name,” Virgil explains to Dante, “echoes up above within your life” (4.76–77).⁴⁴ Across the circles, hordes of sinners enthusiastically offer up their biographies, passionate feuds, self-justifications, and ardent memories. They are desperate to have the passing poets listen; many of them, like the Florentine Ciaccio, want Dante to carry word of them back to earth: “I pray,” he pleads, “recall me to men’s memory” (6.89).⁴⁵ It is only deep down in hell, toward the frozen epicenter, where sinners begin to disdain the prospect of their fame spreading up and out. In circle nine, when Dante promises the uncooperative Bocca degli Abbati, named by another, to put “your name among my other notes,”⁴⁶ the half-frozen

shade claims to want “the contrary” (“contrario”); he would rather be left alone to lapse into silence (32.93–4).

The shades of *Inferno*, locked in their circles and repetitive patterns of punishment, note the disruption of Dante’s corporeal presence with keen interest, listening to his words, asking for news, noting the way his body disturbs their infernal terrain. He embodies a potential for change, for difference: a new plot twist for the dead. His descent and passionate interactions with different shades threaten the stasis of infernal record, unsettling the stories the dead remember and *how* they remember, just as his body shifts the infernal geography that the incorporeal wraiths apparently leave untouched. Dante’s encounters with the shades he knew permit further conversation, more questions and answers, new perspectives and regrets, inviting one to ask: what if infernal descriptions take a form different from the earthly events they sometimes memorialize? What if not only Dante learns something, but also the dead themselves begin to change, to speak differently? What if this place offers not only record, but also the potential for counterfactual history? Dante often seems to foreclose this possibility by making the dead stubborn, still blind to their sin and what they have lost. But conversation can be a tricky thing, hard to keep safely in place, particularly when driven by tercets and shaped by words put into the mouths of the angry dead and somber poets.

It is, moreover, important to remember that poets themselves – figures indicating the potential for proliferating infernal narrative – inhabit the underworld. Aeneas discovers Orpheus plucking at his lyre; Dante encounters that ring of limbo poets; and in Milton’s hell the fallen angels extricate themselves from the lake of fire in order to begin composing the epic of their own exploits. In the Harrowing of Hell stories, the prophets and patriarchs speak as writers and poets, as composers of prophetic scripture and as psalmists. David and Isaiah recall their own textual history, repeating fragments of their prophecies in language passing through Hebrew, Latin, vernacular poetry, and, in the plays, Latin and Middle English woven together. A bustling realm of narrative, translation, and transformation exists just beneath the surface of the earth: on the other side of the cave, across the river, beyond the wood, past the gates, down the ditch, through the mouth of hell. In these texts, the underworld collects and stores narrative to create an infernal repository that operates as an alternate world humming just below or beyond the world we know. This is a world of record, but, in the manner of the Garden of Eden discussed in Chapter 1, it is also a space that challenges neat divisions between record and reality, archive and world. If the past is not static, if the infernal poets continue to

make poetry, if figures reperform and renarrate their legendary deeds but one day make a misstep, then the infernal realm of narrative might overflow its archival frame and archival status, might spread out, gain ground, and become a dynamic reality that rivals the one playing out on the stage of the earth above. The stories of the dead might begin to shift, like those upon the spiraling terraces of Dante's purgatory, slowly winding toward redemption. The divide between hell and earth, which textual and iconographic traditions suggest might be transgressed with or without a golden bough or accommodating guide, effects a scenario in which the voices of the dead might leak out of their imperfect infernal containment to resound in the world above, where other, newer narratives unfold upon the surface of the earth.

3 Looking Back

There are, then, a number of ways in which the past might be released from its status as record in hell, and ways in which what is thought to be over and done might become reanimated or made susceptible to change. Sometimes the dead resurface to inhabit the earth in the flesh, as in the Harrowing or with the medieval Eurydice; sometimes more ordinary retrospection makes them loom. The latter does not necessarily require pilgrim-poets or messiahs, but occurs in more quotidian ways, such as by turning back the page, or by using memory to write the book that will remember in turn. Retelling a story is a form of looking backward, of opening a portal between temporal realms, one that *might* permit traffic in either direction. This kind of retrospection continually invites us to reconsider the past, but it also invites the past to intrude upon the present, that always-moving moment in time continually losing ground to history and memory on the one side, and prophecy and anticipation on the other. Both those who literally descend to hell and then reascend, and those who look back onto hell from the vantage point of the earth and the present, negotiate space and time, traveling back and forth on history's timeline, encountering the past, and then returning to the present that endeavors to replace it.

Looking back upon the past is not identical to descending into the otherworld, of course; only one requires keys and ditches. But the actions carry different degrees of similar risks; sometimes it is hard to distinguish one from the other, and sometimes one is used as a figure for the other. Ovid's Orpheus fatally turns to see a disappearing wife, dissipating again into the gloom of hell; Lot's Wife gazes upon the ashes of her city in the moment before turning to salt; and even Noah's Wife is chastised by her

husband for looking back upon a sinking world. A sense of danger attends the act of remembering, of looking backward, even when the physical descent into hell is not required for it. In the *Historia Scholastica* (c.1169–1173), Peter Comestor suggests the risk even of sacred historical paraphrase. Comestor links literal and figurative backward glances – the gaze into hell and the gaze into history – in his recapitulation of the biblical past. Telling the story of Lot’s Wife, who dared disobey God and look backward upon the destruction of her city, he writes: “And Lot’s Wife, looking back behind her, was turned into a pillar of salt, which Josephus says he saw and which still remains now.”⁴⁷ Comestor characterizes the nature of the first-century writer Josephus’ labor – his research and composition of *The Antiquities of the Jews* – alongside the biblical transgression of Lot’s Wife. Josephus and *Uxor Lot* converge in a tableau of backward gazes focused upon destruction and punishment; the crystallized wife twists toward the burnt-out cities, and Josephus, looking upon that tragic, still-standing pillar, takes up a posture of risky retrospection that matches hers. Comestor’s insertion of Josephus’ testimony links the early historian with the biblical transgressor, and the dangerousness of the wife’s venture momentarily permeates Josephus’ project of recording; the subversion of the one act of memorialization bleeds into the other. Comestor, of course, also implicates himself in this chain of history, drawing as he does upon Josephus, looking backward upon that source text. The danger understood as attending an iconic look into the past and into a kind of hell seeps into the act of looking backward as it relates to narrative recapitulation more generally.

In this danger, however, also resides considerable power and narrative authority. Looking into the otherworld of the past or of the inferno precedes and underpins the action of narrating that past. “To narrate,” Carlo Ginzburg writes, “means to speak here and now with an authority that derives from having been (literally or metaphorically) there and then,” to have been to the beyond and returned, or to have gone to hell and back.⁴⁸ This is the narrative authority that Saint Patrick’s parishioners crave in their spiritual guides; that inflects Sir Orfeo’s music when he passes across that otherworldly threshold and into earth again; and that produces the *Divine Comedy*, whose lines Dante swears by as he would swear by scripture, in part because his poem is underpinned and confirmed by knowledge of the otherworld.

The next and final chapter returns to the story of the Harrowing of Hell to investigate how the medium of performance and the cosmic symbolism of the stage might further illuminate competing kinds of authority:

between old and new, dead and living, and past and present, all of which merge between the bared teeth of the mouth of hell as it opens onto the mystery play stages. Augmenting poetic strategies, the architecture of the stage helps to realize physically the permeability between earth and underworld, and the bodies of the players demonstrate how one realm might spectrally haunt the other.